

Caring for solidarity? The intimate politics of grandmother childcare and neoliberal conservatism in urban Turkey

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Abstract

The number of grandmothers who provide regular care for their grandchildren and do housework for their daughters or daughters-in-law is increasing in Turkey. While perpetuating traditional gender roles for themselves as a surrogate daughter, wife, or daughter-in-law, these women nonetheless enable younger women to distance themselves from obligatory care work at home. The sociocultural concepts of kinship ties, economic need, or love for grandchildren do not fully explain why grandmothers assume the role of caregiver for their grandchildren. Drawing on interviews with 25 grandmothers from middle-class families in urban Turkey, this article shows, first, that these women's gendered subjectivity is formed by both habitual and intentional actions that defying the oppression and resistance duality within patriarchal Turkish society. Second, in dialogue with the scholarship on the "classic patriarchal bargain"¹ and feminist analyses of neoliberal social policy, the article suggests that these grandmothers' inarticulate desire to live in solidarity with the younger generation of women may be turned into a government instrument in the context of Turkey's increasingly family-centered neoliberal social policy environment.

Keywords: Gender; caregiving; childcare; grandmothers; motherhood; patriarchal bargain; subjectivity; neoliberal conservatism

Ziynet is 56 years old and has been her grandson's daily caregiver for five years. Discussing her relationship with her daughter-in-law during this period, she says:

I've never looked at her as a daughter-in-law. My family and relatives would criticize me for this. They would say, "You should sit down and let her do things for you" or "Why are you the one who serves the tea, not her

1 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 1988): 274–290.

(i.e., her daughter-in-law)?” I am not that kind of person, and I hope I never will be.

Why does she say that she doesn't see her daughter-in-law as a daughter-in-law? Why does her family criticize her for this? What does she mean by “that kind of person”? Ziynet, it should be pointed out, is not economically dependent on her adult son's family. Although grandmothers have blood ties to their grandchildren, these ties do not require them to provide care for their grandchildren. On the contrary, being older, Ziynet would customarily assume the role of a care recipient in the family: the dominant cultural expectation is to see the daughter-in-law caring for and doing work for the mother-in-law, not vice versa. And yet Ziynet is her grandson's caregiver, in addition to caring for her daughter-in-law by helping her with housework, such as cleaning, washing, and cooking.

In the Turkish context, the most pervasive normative framework for assessing intergenerational relations among women posits that there is an irreconcilable conflict of interest between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. This conflict is a theme constantly elaborated on in popular cultural products, such as television series, YouTube videos, and Instagram accounts. There is a widespread expectation that women should evaluate themselves and their relations with their close kin through the lens of this intergenerational conflict. Ziynet, however, has developed an intimate relationship with her daughter-in-law partly by becoming her grandchild's regular caregiver. Her relationship with her daughter-in-law thus goes beyond gendered cultural expectations.

The scholarship on family and gender in Turkey has highlighted the gradual and steady increase in grandmother care and its repercussions.² However, most of this existing qualitative research on intergenerational relations among women has focused on motherhood or the work experiences of young or middle-aged women in urban Turkey,³ without addressing the marginalized perspectives and voices of elderly women. This paper draws upon the

2 Alan Duben, “Generations of Istanbul Families, the Elderly, and the Social Economy of Welfare,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 48 (April 2013): 5–54; Hale Cihan Bolak, “When Wives Are Major Providers: Culture, Gender, and Family Work,” *Gender & Society* 11, no. 4 (August 1, 1997): 409–433. doi:10.1177/089124397011004003; and Ferhunde Özbay, *Dünden Bugüne: Aile, Kent ve Nüfus* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015).

3 Sevi Bayraktar, *Makbul Anneler, Müstakbel Vatandaşlar: Neoliberal Beden Politikalarında Annelik* (İstanbul: Ayizi Yayınları, 2011); Saniye Dedeoğlu, “Garment Ateliers and Women Workers in Istanbul: Wives, Daughters and Azerbaijani Immigrants,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 4 (2011): 663–674; Saniye Dedeoğlu, “Visible Hands–Invisible Women: Garment Production in Turkey,” *Feminist Economics* 16, no. 4 (2010): 1–32; Saniye Dedeoğlu, “Working for Family: The Role of Women's Informal Labor in the Survival of Family-Owned Garment Ateliers in Istanbul, Turkey,” Working Paper #281 (May 2004). <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.203.3920&rep=rep1&type=pdf>; Aksu Bora, *Kadınların Sınıfı: Ücretli Ev Emeli ve Kadın Öznelliğinin İnşası* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008); Aksu Bora, “Türk Modernleşme Sürecinde Annelik Kimliğinin Dönüşümü,” in *Yerli Bir Feminizme Doğru*, ed. Aynur İlyasoğlu and Necla Akgökçe (İstanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2001): 77–107; and Bolak, “When Wives Are Major Providers.”

care experiences of grandmothers in urban Turkey in order to shed light on, first, changes in women's expectations and practices of care during their life cycle, and second, how these changes have impacted the neoliberal and conservative social policy agenda of the Turkish government.

My interviews with grandmothers who are the regular caregivers of their grandchildren and have a close relationship with the families of their adult children indicate that grandmothers situate their caregiving practices within the broader trajectory of the sacrificial care work that they have undertaken for their families throughout their lives. In discussing their care histories, they compare themselves to the older generation of women; i.e., to their own mothers and mothers-in-law. Both paternal and maternal grandmothers make statements to the effect that they want to support and be useful to the younger generation of women. These women are helping the families of the younger generation to cope with economic hardship by providing them with free childcare and domestic labor, and their narratives point to an inarticulate desire to live in solidarity with the younger generation of women who are also kin. When, in 2017, the government of Turkey decided to make small payments to grandmothers for their childcare work, rather than supporting institutional care, I argue that it was essentially a way of capitalizing on this desire.

Care crisis and grandmothers

Intergenerational encounters between women in Turkey are often analyzed in terms of which type of care will be provided for whom, and for how long. Examining women's lives in terms of the type of care they provide allows us to trace how women are valued differently as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives, mothers, and mothers-in-law at different stages of their lives. Turkey is historically characterized by a strong patriarchal culture, where women's gendered subjectivities are expected to be determined by male-dominant values. According to Kandiyoti, women internalize the patriarchal values of the system, which promises that they will have control and authority over subservient daughters-in-law, but only when they are older.⁴ In other words, women can finally empower themselves in their old age, but only at the expense of younger women. This intergenerational patriarchal bargain is still very relevant to an understanding of female kin relations in contemporary Turkey. At the same time, a strong sense of filial obligation in Turkey informs the behavior of adult daughters

4 Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy."

toward their mothers.⁵ In short, younger women—whether daughters or daughters-in-law—are expected to show care and respect to the older generation of women in Turkey. However, as will be detailed below, this system has become increasingly difficult to sustain since the beginning of the 1980s: factors such as rural-to-urban migration, the dissolution of patrilocal living forms, the neoliberalization of the economy, and women's increased participation in the labor force have led to a gradual deterioration of the expectations embedded in the classic patriarchal system in Turkey, as elsewhere.⁶

Furthermore, since the 1970s, increased participation by women in the labor force, the gradual dissolution of gender roles, and the resulting decline of informal care provided by mothers, daughters, and wives have resulted in what scholars call a “care crisis.”⁷ With the retrenchment of institutionalized care provision as a response to neoliberal restructuring during the same time period, familial relations as a form of social protection and a support mechanism have become increasingly central for the provision of care.⁸

This increased reliance on various forms of home and family care can be observed not only in Turkey, but in other countries as well, both those with a high and those with a middle income.⁹ It is within this global context that grandmother childcare, as an intergenerational and interfemale mechanism

5 Duben, “Generations of Istanbul Families”; Sanem Aliçlı Mottram and Nuran Hortaçsu, “Adult Daughter Aging Mother Relationship over the Life Cycle: The Turkish Case,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 19, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 471–488.

6 Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy”; Deniz Kandiyoti, “Gender, Power and Contestation: Rethinking ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy,’” in *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy*, ed. Ruth Pearson and Cecile Jackson (London: Routledge, 1998): 135–152; Julia Chuang, “Factory Girls after the Factory: Female Return Migrations in Rural China,” *Gender & Society* 30, no. 3 (June 1, 2016): 467–489.

7 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Lise Widding Isaksen, Sambasivan Uma Devi, and Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Global Care Crisis: A Problem of Capital, Care Chain, or Commons?” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 3 (November 1, 2008): 405–425; Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, “The Reproductive Labour of Migrant Workers,” *Global Networks* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 269–275.

8 Gosta Esping-Andersen, *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9 Glenn, *Forced to Care*; Laura L. Heinemann, “Accommodating Care: Transplant Caregiving and the Melding of Health Care with Home Life in the United States,” *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 2, no. 1 (2015): 32–56; Duben, “Generations of Istanbul Families”; Cheryl Mattingly, Lone Grøn, and Lotte Meinert, “Chronic Homework in Emerging Borderlands of Healthcare,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 347–375; Carolyn Cartier, “From Home to Hospital and Back Again: Economic Restructuring, End of Life, and the Gendered Problems of Place-Switching Health Services,” *Social Science & Medicine* 56, no. 11 (June 2003): 2289–2301.

of care transfer, has emerged as a formal and informal solution to the care crisis in diverse settings. In other words, as more women have come to participate in the labor force in both the global north and the global south, the demand for grandmother caregiving has also increased.¹⁰ At the same time, female migration to the global north has given rise to a care deficit in the global south: women's labor force participation in wealthy countries relies on care labor performed by women from the developing world, who leave their children behind with their grandmothers. Even in countries with relatively advanced formal childcare services, the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren has intensified with increased life expectancies and lower fertility rates.¹¹

Reliance on social solidarity values and familial networks as primary care providers has always been strong in Turkey.¹² It has been further documented that the neoliberal social welfare policies put in place in Turkey over the last two decades take for granted the dominant role of women as

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- 10 Merrill Silverstein, Roseann Giarrusso, and Vern L. Bengtson, "Grandparents and Grandchildren in Family Systems: A Social-Developmental Perspective," in *Global Aging and Its Challenge to Families*, ed. Vern L. Bengtson and Ariela Lowenstein (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2003): 75–102; Valeria Bordone, Bruno Arpino, and Arnstein Aassve, "Patterns of Grandparental Child Care across Europe: The Role of the Policy Context and Working Mothers' Need," *Ageing & Society* 37, no. 4 (February 2016): 1–29; Simone Ghezzi, "Parenthood and the Structuring of Time among Urban Households in Northern Italy," *Ethnologie Française* 42, no. 1 (December 20, 2011): 37–44; Andreas Hoff, "Patterns of Intergenerational Support in Grandparent-Grandchild and Parent-Child Relationships in Germany," *Ageing & Society* 27, no. 5 (September 2007): 643–665; Jaerim Lee and Jean W. Bauer, "Motivations for Providing and Utilizing Child Care by Grandmothers in South Korea," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 75, no. 2 (April 2013): 381–402; and Madonna Harrington Meyer, *Grandmothers at Work: Juggling Families and Jobs* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).
- 11 Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003); Arlie Hochschild, "The Nanny Chain," *The American Prospect*, December 19, 2001, <http://prospect.org/article/nanny-chain>; Parreñas, "The Reproductive Labour of Migrant Workers"; Kristin Elizabeth Yarris, *Care across Generations: Solidarity and Sacrifice in Transnational Families* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Corinne Igel and Marc Szydlik, "Grandchild Care and Welfare State Arrangements in Europe," *Journal of European Social Policy* 21, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 210–224; Agnes Blome, *Family and the Welfare State in Europe: Intergenerational Relations in Ageing Societies* (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2009); and Duben, "Generations of Istanbul Families."
- 12 Ayhan Kaya, "Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP Rule: Empowering Family, Faith and Charity," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 47–69; Berna Yazıcı, "The Return to the Family: Welfare, State, and Politics of the Family in Turkey," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (February 25, 2012): 103–140; Ayşe Buğra and Ayşen Candaş, "Change and Continuity under an Eclectic Social Security Regime: The Case of Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 1, 2011): 515–528; and Duben, "Generations of Istanbul Families."

wives and mothers,¹³ and the government has institutionalized dependent caregiving roles through contemporary social policy measures.¹⁴ In the absence of public childcare facilities, and as a result of husbands' reluctance to share childcare responsibility, the extent to which women can distance themselves from motherly obligations of care in Turkey depends primarily on the social relations and material resources surrounding them.¹⁵ Even middle- and upper-class women fail to mount a challenge to the traditional division of labor at home in Turkey.¹⁶ As a result, women who participate in the labor force either hire domestic workers for housecleaning and daily chores,¹⁷ or else ask for help from their neighbors and/or relatives, and especially from their own mothers.¹⁸ In short, in the absence of childcare facilities provided by the state, and as long as the patriarchal division of labor at home has remained intact, women's ability to participate in the labor force has become dependent on other women, such as paid domestic workers or female kin. It is within this sociocultural context that grandmother childcare has increased in Turkey, from 3 percent in 2006 to 6 percent in 2016.¹⁹ Although this percentage is not especially high, it still highlights the trend of grandmother

13 Feride Acar and Gülbanu Altunok, "The 'Politics of Intimate' at the Intersection of Neo-Liberalism and Neo-Conservatism in Contemporary Turkey," *Women's Studies International Forum* 41 (November 2013): 14–23. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2012.10.001; Buğra and Candaş, "Change and Continuity"; Ayşe Buğra and Burcu Yakut-Cakar, "Structural Change, the Social Policy Environment and Female Employment in Turkey," *Development and Change* 41, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 517–538; Simten Coşar and Metin Yeğenoğlu, "New Grounds for Patriarchy in Turkey? Gender Policy in the Age of AKP," *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 555–573; Kaya, "Islamisation of Turkey"; Şemsa Özar and Burcu Yakut-Cakar, "Unfolding the Invisibility of Women without Men in the Case of Turkey," *Women's Studies International Forum* 41 (November 2013): 24–34; Özbay, *Dünden Bugüne*; Gülay Toksöz, "Neoliberal Piyasa, Özel ve Kamusal Patriarka Çıkmazında Kadın Emeği," in *Türkiye'de Refah Devleti ve Kadın*, ed. Saniye Dedeoğlu and Adem Y. Elveren (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2012): 103–126; and Yazıcı, "The Return to the Family."

14 For example, women who assume the responsibility of caring for elderly or disabled members of the family at home are paid for their care work. See Özbay, *Dünden Bugüne*; Yıldız Ecevit, "Türkiye'de Sosyal Politika Çalışmalarının Toplumsal Cinsiyet Bakış Açısıyla Gelişimi," in *Türkiye'de Refah Devleti ve Kadın*, ed. Saniye Dedeoğlu and Adem Y. Elveren (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2012): 11–28; Ayşe Buğra, "Türkiye'nin Değişen Refah Rejimi: Neoliberalizm, Kültürel Muhafazakarlık ve Yeniden Tanımlanan Toplumsal Dayanışma," in *Türkiye'de Refah Devleti ve Kadın*, ed. Saniye Dedeoğlu and Adem Y. Elveren (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2012): 47–70.

15 Bora, "Türk Modernleşme Sürecinde Annelik Kimliğinin Dönüşümü."

16 Ibid. and Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy."

17 Bora, *Kadınların Sınıfı*; Gül Özyegün, *Başkalarının Kiri: Kapıcılar, Gündelikçiler ve Kadınlıklar*, trans. Suğra Öncü (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005).

18 Bolak, "When Wives Are Major Providers."

19 According to research conducted by the Turkish Statistical Institute (*Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu*, TÜİK), the mother is the primary caregiver of children between the ages of 0 and 5 in 86 percent of families in Turkey; see TÜİK, "Aile Yapısı Araştırması, 2016," <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=21869>.

childcare becoming more common, particularly in families where the mother holds a regular job.

Grandmother childcare existed as a kind of informal arrangement between women until January 2017, when the state intervened. The Minister of Family and Social Policy announced a pilot project to financially support grandmothers (notably, *not* grandfathers) in exchange for their contribution to daily childcare, as a means of fighting extremely low rates of female employment. The full title of the project is the Grandmother Project to Support Female Employment (*Kadın İstihdamının Desteklenmesi İçin Büyükanne Projesi*), and its description reads: "The support given to grandmothers who take care of grandchildren under three years old aims to prevent women's withdrawal from the labor market and to maintain cultural transmission by providing children with the opportunity to be raised by their grandmothers."²⁰ This government policy is likely to increase even further the already rising percentage of grandmothers providing daily and intensive care for their grandchildren. But how do these grandmothers experience and negotiate this increase at the everyday level? Who are these women? How do they make sense of their "new" caregiver roles as elderly women? How do they negotiate the contradictions between their experiences and the dominant gender expectations in society?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted life story interviews²¹ with 25 grandmothers who functioned as the primary caregiver for their grandchildren for more than a year. 15 were maternal grandmothers, while 10 were paternal grandmothers. I recruited the research participants from among grandmothers dropping off or picking up their grandchildren from one particular kindergarten, located in a middle-class neighborhood of İzmir most of whose residents migrated there from the city's hinterland. The kindergarten selected is a small and modest neighborhood one located among high-rise buildings. Many of its students live nearby and walk to the kindergarten together with their family. I secured access to the grandmothers via the kindergarten's owners.

All of the interviewed grandmothers were providing daily care for their grandchildren before the latter were old enough to attend kindergarten. Even after the grandchildren began kindergarten, the majority of the grandmothers continued to provide them with regular care, taking care of the child before and after school, during emergencies, and whenever the parents were busy. None of the interviewed grandmothers lived in the same house as their daughters or daughters-in-law, though they did live in close

20 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Aile, Çalışma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı, "Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü Tamamlanan Projeler." https://www.ailevecalisma.gov.tr/KSGM/PDF/ksgb_tamamlanan_projeler_ekim_2018.pdf, 12.

21 Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

proximity. Using the snowball sampling method to recruit new participants ensured that all of the participants were from lower and middle-income families, with none of the grandmothers being economically dependent on their adult children's family. They were all house owners and had sufficient income for living.

Throughout the course of the study, meeting with the grandmothers who were willing to speak to me proved relatively easy. As a young woman close to the age of the interviewees' daughters and daughters-in-law, I was able to build relationships of trust and empathy relatively quickly. The interviewee grandmothers introduced me to other grandmothers whom they knew from the kindergarten or from the neighborhood. While I visited some of the participants in their homes, others preferred to meet at cafés for interviews; we sometimes used an empty room in the kindergarten for the interviews as well. I began the interviews with open-ended questions that invited them to tell their life stories. I also, however, occasionally intervened in order to ask directed questions about their childcare practices and about their relations with their husbands, daughters, daughters-in-law, sons, and sons-in-law. As housewives, in their youth these women had provided all sorts of care work for their families as a mother, a wife, and a daughter-in-law. Because I was mainly interested in understanding how they see themselves *vis-à-vis* their caregiving roles at different stages of their lives, I also asked questions about their experiences with their own mothers and mothers-in-law. However, my research and analysis do not include the experiences of daughters, daughters-in-law, or the mothers of the grandmothers interviewed. Inspired by the work of certain feminist ethnographers,²² I aimed to develop analytical frames that would be congruent with the grandmothers' lived experiences.

Being a mother-in-law then and now: Familial sacrifice and patriarchal bargain

İzmir is Turkey's third largest city, with a population of 4.2 million people. Most residents of the neighborhood where I conducted research, including the research participants, had moved here from İzmir's rural hinterland, having been born in rural towns and cities surrounding İzmir during the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, they all had traditional families as defined

22 Marjorie L. Devault, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis," *Social Problems* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 1990): 96–116. doi:[10.2307/800797](https://doi.org/10.2307/800797) and Catherine Kohler Riessman, "When Gender Is Not Enough: Women Interviewing Women," *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (June 1, 1987): 172–207.

by a gendered division of labor in their natal and conjugal families. All of the participants had married at a very early age and had their first child when they were under 20 years old. These families had moved to İzmir in the last two decades because of marriage, the husband's occupation, or childcare needs. Almost all of the participants had received very little formal education, with most of them having completed only middle school, through the age of 14. Only three of the research participants were high school graduates, while none of them had undertaken tertiary education. All except two, who were retired from jobs in the public sector, were housewives and had never worked in a formal job. Growing up in rural patriarchal families, the lives of the interviewed grandmothers had many common features both before and after marriage. For these women, not getting married was not an option. They raised their children and undertook all housework duties on their own. Most of them lived far away from their natal families, having moved to cities or towns close to their husband's family, with some of them even living in the same house as their husband's family. Even in cases where they lived close to their natal families, their mothers were too busy with their own domestic duties and thus not available to help them, as they are do with their own adult children now.

One of the central themes in their life stories is the lack of support they received from their mothers or mothers-in-law as they raised their children. Sevim is a 50-year-old maternal grandmother. She moved to İzmir after she got married in 1986. She was the daily caregiver for her granddaughter for three years before the girl was sent to kindergarten at age four. For the last two years, Sevim has been dropping off and picking up her granddaughter from the kindergarten and taking care of her till her parents arrive. She is the only woman among the research participants whose mother helped her with childcare for a year when she decided to take up a paid job. When she started to talk about this experience, she immediately recalled how her mother would "leave dirty baby diapers in front of the door" for her to pick up and wash when she returned home from work. Her mother would not invite Sevim to dinner when she came to pick up her daughter after work. She tells these stories to emphasized how limited her mother's support of her was, especially when compared with what she does for her daughter now. She adds, "we are helping the younger generation a lot." Far from receiving help from their mothers, the interviewed grandmothers in fact remembered how they had always helped their mothers with housework from early childhood on. Havva is a 53-year-old paternal grandmother. She moved to İzmir with her natal family when she was a child. Raised in a very conservative family, she was forced to marry a man from the same town, which they left behind immediately after high school, when Havva gave birth to two sons. After she said that her youth had been

spent doing housework and helping her mother, I asked about how she had felt at this time, and Havva replied:

I felt tired. I used to help my mom when I was a kid. My mom used to call me even when I was doing my homework. "Havva, come prepare the dinner table," "Havva, help me clean the windows" and so on. Nowadays moms don't have their daughters do things. Maybe my mom was right. She had to take care of three men. If I had a daughter, I might have asked her to do the same. That's how my life passed: serving men here and serving men there.

Like Havva, Ziyne (56 years old) was also the regular caregiver for her grandson for three years before he was sent to kindergarten. Although her natal family was not especially religious or conservative, she nevertheless did not continue her education after high school, marrying her husband when she was 18. Domestic work and serving men are the key elements in her narrative as well. She says that she was alone throughout most of her marriage because her husband was the owner of a coffeehouse and used to work until late. She was living in the same apartment as her mother-in-law and had to wash, by hand, all the family members' clothes, prepare food, and then wait for her husband to come home for dinner, after which he would leave for the coffeehouse. Instead of receiving care, she was *providing* care for all the members of her husband's family. Her story suggests that, once she had transitioned from girlhood into marriage, it was the family of her husband, specifically her mother-in-law, who had the right to benefit from her domestic labor. Mürüvvet (60 years old) is another woman who lives with her mother-in-law, in her case for 22 years. She describes her mother-in-law as a very dominant figure who never takes any responsibility for childcare or domestic work. Her relation to cooking is restricted to checking the salt. She does not feed, clean, or put her grandchildren to bed; she just "loves" them. Mürüvvet, throughout her narrative, compares her grandparenthood to that of her mother-in-law: "She [i.e., her mother-in-law] was self-indulgent [...]. Now I think that my maternal grandparenthood (*annaneliğim*) and my mother-in-law's paternal grandparenthood (*babaneliğim*) are as different as chalk and cheese."

Even in cases where they did not share the same house, the mother-in-law emerges as a dominant and frequently unpleasant figure in these women's narratives. Hatice (53 years old), who got married when she was 17 years old, is the mother of three children and currently her granddaughter's caregiver. From a critical distance, she describes her relation with her mother-in-law in the early years of her marriage, when they were living in the village:

In the village, families are more authoritarian. Mothers-in-law did not use to be as tolerant then as they are now. Mine would imbue even the father-in-law with certain ideas about me—I mean, not explicitly or with words, but tactfully. He had an attitude against me. Your husband would always become unhappy, too, saying, “My mom isn’t happy.” Getting along with your husband is one thing, with his family another. You’re very little then, and don’t know how to handle them. Always some attitude from your husband here, your mother-in-law there. If one doesn’t get a divorce in the first three years, one would never get a divorce, ever.

Although she lived away from her mother-in-law at the time of her second birth, her mother-in-law and father-in-law had visited them at home in order to name the baby after she had given birth to her first child. This encounter becomes another example of the traditional division of gender, and it remains as a sad memory for her:

I gave a normal delivery at home. The next day, there was a bunch of dirty clothes and pajamas everywhere [. . .] No washing machine then. I didn’t get to rest for even a day after giving birth. Instead, I cooked for them. I’m telling you this so that you can understand the difference between mothers-in-law then and now. She (i.e., her mother-in-law) didn’t cook. I had given birth the day before. Even so, she said, “Bride, make us dinner so we can catch the bus.” I got out of bed and cooked dinner. They ate dinner, named the baby, and left. I took care of everything.

Hatice’s mother-in-law apparently thought that she had the right to expect care and service from her daughter-in-law and that it was appropriate to ask her to cook despite the fact that she had just given birth. There was perhaps a naïve expectation on the part of Hatice, as a young woman, that her mother-in-law might show her affection and care by cooking dinner because she had just given birth.

Such naïve expectations abound in the women’s narratives. Nihal (70 years old) had to quit work after marrying a bad-tempered farmer, and she had to share a garden with her mother-in-law during the early years of her marriage. When asked about her relationship with her mother-in-law, she said: “My mother-in-law acted like a real *mother-in-law*. She would say negative things about me to my husband and send him over to me [. . .] She would never take care of my child, not even for half an hour, if we were to go, say, to a wedding. That’s how I raised my child.” Her mother-in-law acted in accordance with gendered normative expectations by acting “like a real mother-in-law.” Just like Hatice’s mother-in-law, she also wanted to benefit to the fullest from the promises of the patriarchal system: her daughter-in-law

was there to serve her. As such examples show, these women did not receive emotional or practical support from either their mothers or their mothers-in-law when they were young. Moreover, most had conflictual relationships with their mothers-in-law, who did not treat them well or criticized them for the way they did housework or took care of their children. Neither they nor the older generation of women questioned the hierarchical and conflictual relationship between older and younger women at the time, which indicates the presence of strong classical patriarchal relations.

All of the grandmothers I interviewed paid the heavy price of the patriarchal system without fully enjoying the benefits traditionally provided to older women, mainly because they were in the caregiving position *vis-à-vis* the younger generation of women. Kandiyoti, in her discussion of the potential implications of the breakdown of classic patriarchy in Turkey, drew attention to women who “have paid the heavy price of an earlier patriarchal bargain, but are not able to cash in on its promised benefits.”²³ There is a rich literature showing how older women deal with the erosion of the benefits promised to them by classic patriarchal arrangements in diverse settings. For example, threatened by the dissolution of patrilocal forms of living and seeing that their survival depends on male migrant remittances, older village women in China encourage young married women to consent to domesticity as a way to guarantee the flow of remittances from male members of the family.²⁴ Mothers-in-law “work more and say less” because they are economically dependent on the younger generation. In other cases, older and younger generations of women might develop diverse forms of interdependency by changing their expectations of care. For example, older women in Ireland of middle and higher socioeconomic status tell their adult children that they do not want to take care of their grandchildren. A new reciprocal relationship is thus maintained between younger and older generations of women through mutual withholding of expectations and demands for care.²⁵

Even though the grandmothers I interviewed suppress their *own* customary expectations and demands for care, they nevertheless continue to provide childcare and housework for younger women, even without any traditional expectations to compel them. They have neither an explicit intention of empowering the younger generation nor the necessity for survival that would force them to provide care. Through these narratives, grandmothers reflect on their past and compare their experiences with that of the older and younger generation

23 Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” 282.

24 Shen Yifei, “China in the ‘Post-Patriarchal Era,’” *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 43, no. 4 (July 1, 2011): 5–23.

25 Catherine Conlon et al., “Women (Re)Negotiating Care across Family Generations: Intersections of Gender and Socioeconomic Status,” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 5 (October 1, 2014): 729–751.

of women in such a way as to highlight the sacrifices they make. However, a closer look into the women's narratives reveal that these sacrifices are complex acts requiring the women to constantly negotiate diverse societal and individual expectations. For example, when I asked grandmothers how they feel about the fact that they worked hard in their youth and continue to do so for the families of their adult children, their response was often a mix of regret and gratitude regarding what they had experienced and where they were now. In recalling the sacrifices they made and the sufferings they went through when they were newly married and afterwards, they noted that they had begun to reflect on how they should not have worked so hard in order to make others happy, nor should they have cared so much about what their mothers-in-law said about them. They regret that they took these familial roles far too seriously, at the expense of enjoying life. Their stories thus suggest that the sacrifices they made for the sake of the older generation were not inevitable, as they could have acted differently. However, it was also precisely these sacrifices that taught them to be patient and to deal with their own problems, as opposed to the younger generation, whom they see as dependent on others.

Despite their sense of resentment regarding past sacrifices, many of the interviewees stated that they were not going to let the same things happen to their own daughters and daughters-in-law. It seems, then, that they want to make it possible for their daughters and daughters-in-law to be able to distance themselves from domestic and childcare responsibilities in order to hold full-time jobs. In other words, these women have called into question the patriarchal expectations for the younger generation of women in contemporary Turkey via an extension of their own motherhood practices.

Taking care of two generations: Extending motherhood

All of the grandmothers whom I interviewed fundamentally reorganized their lives in accordance with the daily rhythms of their grandchildren and adult children. They moved to neighborhoods and apartments close to their adult children in order to connect with each other both physically and emotionally. Every day for the past five years, Sevim (50 old) has woken up at 6 am to take care of her granddaughter until 7 pm. When asked how she maintains this work schedule, she said, "I do everything for my grandchildren and children." She not only feeds her granddaughter breakfast and lunch every weekday in her own home, but also prepares dinner for her adult daughter and her son-in-law so that they can eat before eventually returning to their own home with the child. Though her daughter never actually asks her to prepare food for them, Sevim said, "You have to put food on the table in the evening." It is something that she

cannot not do. Most grandmothers confirmed that they prepare food for their adult children and their partners so that they can eat when they return from work. However, the extra work they undertake is by no means limited to cooking. Every morning at 8 am, for instance, Ziyet goes to her son's apartment, where she spends the whole day, and on a typical day with her grandson she cooks, cleans the house, vacuums the carpets, and does the dusting while the grandson takes his afternoon nap.

In short, all of the grandmothers I interviewed, whether paternal or maternal, do a great deal of housework for their adult children in addition to childcare.²⁶ A new division of labor thus emerged within these extended families, with grandmothers undertaking a series of household tasks for their adult children in addition to assuming the role of caregiver for the grandchildren.

But how do these women feel about extending their motherhood practices to their grandchildren and adult children? When I asked if they do not get tired and bored by all the work they do for their adult children, Alime (65 years old) said:

The most important thing for me is to see them happy, to see them get along. If I'm doing something for them, I never get lazy and do whatever is necessary. It is not a grind for me as long as they like it. This is how I get happy, too.

In a similar vein, Ziyet said:

We, as parents, are doing our best so that our son and daughter-in-law can spend time together. I always do my best to support them no matter how tired I am. I don't have the heart to ask her [i.e., her daughter-in-law] to do anything (*kıyamıyorum*).

Both Ziyet and Alime challenge public norms concerning what they should expect of their daughters-in-law (i.e., that they should serve their mother-in-law). They would rather do things *for them* so that the younger couple can spend time together. Women in female kinship networks grow up learning publicly expressed norms about how the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law or mothers and daughters

26 Childcare support by grandfathers, however, is very limited. Half of the grandfathers have full-time jobs, and so they do not spend much time at home. Those who are not working are unhappy with the fact that their wife now has much less time to do the things that he wants her to do. Nevertheless, some of them are aware of how difficult it is to spend a day with young children, and so they help the grandmothers by going shopping, taking the grandchild to the park, or temporarily entertaining the grandchild while the grandmother prepares food.

should be.²⁷ When grandmothers offer voluntary care labor for their adult children, they are always in conversation with social perceptions about what they should be doing as mothers and mothers-in-law. The normative ideas associated with the classic patriarchal system still provide the dominant paradigm for interpreting the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in these women's narratives, with the former considered to have a right to ask for service and care from the latter.

Havva is a grandmother who has looked after her granddaughter for three years and who does not expect her daughter-in-law to fulfill any patriarchal expectations of care, despite the fact that her husband and his family never in fact wanted her to become the primary caregiver for her granddaughter. Havva's mother-in-law criticizes her, saying, "You have a husband, you have a family, what is it to you that you're taking care of her [i.e., her granddaughter]?" By saying this, she implies that her primary responsibility should be toward her husband and his family, not to her daughter-in-law. Her husband also criticized Havva by saying, "You couldn't be like my mother, you couldn't do what she did. You didn't say, 'I cannot take care of her.'" As the traditional beneficiaries of the age and gender hierarchies of the classic patriarchal system, both her mother-in-law and her husband thus criticize Havva for not adhering to the system's normative expectations of care. Havva's desire to provide care becomes a very implicit form of resistance against these figures. When I asked if she ever had any arguments with her daughter-in-law about childcare, she said:

I am like a maid who does everything but never gets involved in their business. I said to my daughter-in-law I can take care of her [i.e., the granddaughter] until I die, until she goes to school. I'll keep taking care of my granddaughter because her mother works. I see her as my daughter.

There is an affectionate solidarity that underlines these women's narratives toward their daughters and their daughters-in-law. Having suffered when they were young from the classic patriarchal system controlled by husbands and mothers-in-law, they do not want to have this type of relationship with their own daughters or daughters-in-law. These grandmothers do not expect to be surrounded by subservient daughters-in-law. By willingly taking up caregiving roles and helping their daughters-in-law and daughters with domestic work, they are refusing to perpetuate patriarchal expectations. Having long since become accustomed to the role of caregiver, these women then expand this role

27 Wendy Mitchell and Eileen Green, "I Don't Know What I'd Do without Our Mam': Motherhood, Identity and Support Networks," *The Sociological Review* 50, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 1–22.

to the families of their adult children. In other words, they continue to perform their own subservient daughter-in-law and subservient mother roles by providing an unconditional sacrificial labor of love and care for their adult children and grandchildren. The women do not complain of all the time and labor that they invest in the families of their adult children. Instead, when talking about all the housework that they do for their daughters and daughters-in-law, for example, they say things like: “I cook dinner anyways, I’d just add two more plates on the table”; “I just cannot sit idle, I like to do work”; “Instead of sitting around, I vacuum the carpets or do some ironing while watching TV. There’s nothing to it.” In this way, they downgrade and trivialize the work they do for their adult children by describing housework as simply part of their daily routine. The trivialization of the work undertaken by these women might be a way of deflecting any criticism on the part of those around them who adhere to traditional patriarchal norms. At the same time, however, it also has to do with the way that they see the care work in general. While the societal disparagement of domestic and care work is definitely reflected in the women’s narratives, there were also moments when the interviewed grandmothers indicated that their seemingly habitual and routine daily work was also on some level a deliberate, intentional choice, and that their contribution to childcare and housework could be suspended at any moment.

Grandmothers’ subjectivities and everyday negotiations

The interviewed grandmothers realize that their care and support is taken for granted and seen by their adult children as a natural extension of their motherhood. For example, when elaborating on how they ended up becoming their grandchildren’s regular caregivers, many of the women said that their adult children had sensed that they were willing to take up such a role and had jumped at the opportunity. Rahsan (65 years old) said that, “They in fact knew that I was willing to provide childcare, and they dropped the child off without even asking a thing.” Her daughter asked her if she could take care of her granddaughter because she had some errands to run, and that is how she ended up becoming the granddaughter’s regular caregiver. Ziynet tells how her son and daughter-in-law found an apartment near hers and then said, “Mom, we live close by, you would take care of him, right?” In many cases, the adult children do not explicitly ask their mothers or mothers-in-law if they want to provide daily care for the grandchildren for an indefinite period of time. This may be because those grandmothers who are *not* willing to take up this kind of responsibility are usually very vocal about it from the very beginning of the pregnancy. If grandmothers voice no such reluctance, though,

and if they in fact show some interest in caregiving, then it seems to be regarded as a golden opportunity for an aspiring middle-class family to have a trustworthy yet free caregiver for the children. Although grandmother childcare is thus usually taken for granted, there are nonetheless a series of negotiations lying behind the provision of this care, because most grandmothers have more than one grandchild. Which grandchild or grandchildren they take care of depends on multiple factors, such as whether the other grandmother is offering childcare, where the adult children live, and so on. Grandmothers are usually very explicit about the reasoning behind their choice of grandchild, a choice that often reflects their desire to treat all their children equally. They send their adult children direct or indirect messages regarding which grandchild they are willing to take care of.

If the parents work full time, the grandmothers continue to provide occasional care for the grandchildren even after the latter have started at school. Gül (61 years old) sends her granddaughter to school every morning after preparing her breakfast, and then runs to her mother's house, where she cooks for her parents. She also helps her mother shower, washes her clothes, and cleans the house until 4 pm, after which she picks her granddaughter up from school at 5:15 pm. When I commented that she had a full schedule, she responded that, "This is sacrifice. But I don't find it difficult. [. . .] My neighbors hang out, but I can't go anywhere because I'm waiting for my grandson—yet I do not envy them. I am much happier when I see my grandson." When I asked Nihal about how her life had changed after assuming the responsibility of caregiving, she stated:

I withdrew from active life. I've made many sacrifices. I've left my acquaintances behind. Before my granddaughter was born, I used to go on tours, visiting many touristic sites with my friends. Now—nothing. I used to wear make-up all the time; it's been two years now that I haven't worn make-up [. . .] But I've done all those things willingly, no one forced me. I love taking care of the children, feeding them, giving them a bath, and so on.

Occasionally, however, the grandmothers would remind their adult children that their labor should not be taken for granted. Despite their love for their grandchildren, they make it clear that their dutiful sacrifice for their adult children is very fragile, and can be suspended at any time. After an argument over a trivial matter regarding childcare, Hatice's daughter grew angry and yelled at her mother, "I'll find a nanny." Hatice, knowing how essential her support for the family of her adult children was, responded: "Go ahead. It's a very difficult thing to take care of children after a certain age. Why would God give us children when we're younger?" Hatice said that her daughter

and son-in-law were frightened when faced with the possibility that Hatice might stop taking care of their child. She also said, “I wouldn’t let them down, but I would still have been relieved if they had come up with a nanny.” This reveals Hatice’s resentment at serving as a regular caregiver for grandchildren at an advanced age. It is usually very difficult, though, to get these women to talk about the hardships of what they are doing.

When asked if they get tired or if they have any age-related illnesses, a recurring theme that emerges is that all is forgiven for the love of the grandchildren, who are the “sweet, joyous fruit of the family tree” and “sweeter than honey.” As Tomris put it, “One word from your grandchild takes away all your exhaustion. What I get as a response to my labor is love. And I do it with love.” Yet, at the same time, many women talked about how difficult it can get for them to run after a two-year-old in a house all day long and how relieved they feel when the grandchild leaves with his/her family in the evening. They acknowledged that childcare is usually very tiring at their age, both physically and mentally, but often only in passing or with reference to hypothetical situations.

The women’s resentment about the sacrifices they are making for their adult children emerges most clearly in their relationship to their natal families, especially if their parents are in need of care. As members of the “sandwich generation,”²⁸ they complain about how they cannot spend much time with their natal families due to their new childcare responsibilities. For example, Havva—who says she can take care of her grandchild “until she dies”—was angry with her son’s mother-in-law for refusing to provide childcare for her grandchild. Havva’s ailing parents expect her to help them, but she cannot visit them as much as she would like, even though they live in the same building. In defining her relationship to her natal parents, Mürüvvet (60 years old) said that it is her natural right to be with her parents and provide care when they need it, yet she argued that she was being deprived of this right due to taking care of her grandchildren. She said, “This is the worst [aspect of the situation]. I would have liked to help them [. . .] A daughter would like to be with her mother and father. They took away my most natural right.” The women, especially those with ill parents, were vocal about the sacrifices they were making for their grandchildren. This is an indicator that these older women still feel a deep sense of filial obligation, particularly when this obligation is compromised by new childcare responsibilities.

As these examples show, the narratives of these caregiving grandmothers are fraught with ambivalent feelings of sacrifice and being overwhelmed with

28 Alexa Smith-Osborne and Brandi Felderhoff, “Veterans’ Informal Caregivers in the ‘Sandwich Generation’: A Systematic Review toward a Resilience Model,” *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 57, no. 6–7 (2014): 556–584.

childcare and housework. These ambivalent emotions are always mediated through the women's desire to take up multiple gendered subject positions: loving grandmother, sacrificial mother, filial daughter. They love taking care of their grandchildren, yet they feel tired. They are happy to help their adult children's families with housework, but they also feel regret that they do not have the time to help their ailing parents. Feminist scholars have long shown how processes of domination and resistance can intermingle in women's actions, and how certain acts of resistance can provide relief within the patriarchal system rather than directly and completely challenging it.²⁹ Actors' subjectivities are "bound but choosing, constrained but transforming, both strategically manipulating and unconscious of the frames within which they move."³⁰ In order to develop an embodied understanding of the gendered subjectivities of grandmothers, I have focused in particular on their laboring practices and bodily experiences *vis-à-vis* signifying practices and cultural norms.³¹ The way that grandmothers take up caregiving roles and come to terms with gendered cultural expectations draws on the concrete, everyday, and bodily dimensions of their life experiences as daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. Some retrospectively criticize the older generation for "acting" in ways that meet all normative gendered expectations. Some remind their adult daughters that there is nothing natural about assuming responsibility for a child at an advanced age. Some worry that they cannot help their own ailing mothers as much as they would like. And some also lament how tired they get and how their social lives have been ruined. All of these findings indicate that these grandmothers' love for their grandchildren is not unconditional: it is daily, routinized, physical labor that they choose to undertake with an awareness that the sacrifices they thus make are for the sake not only of their grandchildren, but of their daughters and daughters-in-law as well.

Conclusion: Neoliberal conservatism through the lens of care work

Intergenerational relations among women are informed by "conventional understandings of who gets what through what sort of work,"³² and these conventions are always subject to bargaining and negotiation due to the fact that one's position within the family and one's access to social, cultural, and

29 Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation"; Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

30 T. M. Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 3 (September 1, 2006), 346.

31 Kathi Weeks, "Subject for a Feminist Standpoint," in *Marxism beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca Karl (New York: Routledge, 1996): 89–118; Iris Marion Young, "Lived Body vs Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," *Ratio* 15, no. 4 (2002): 410–428.

32 Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation," 137.

economic capital change throughout one's lifetime. Grandmothers who grew up within the constraints of the classic patriarchal system continue to act as subservient daughters and provide unpaid domestic and childcare work for their adult children's family. It was within the context of the dismantling of the social relations sustaining the patriarchal bargain that I conducted interviews with maternal and paternal grandmothers who define themselves primarily through their roles within the family. While maintaining traditional gender roles for themselves, they also help their daughters and daughters-in-law challenge the patriarchal script. On the one hand, in this way the younger generation are able to go back to their full-time jobs and distance themselves from obligatory care work after giving birth, but on the other hand they are dependent on their mothers and mothers-in-law.

My analysis of grandmother childcare among middle-class families reveals the critical moments at which locally entrenched patriarchal and generational expectations are challenged in and through intrafemale micropolitical interaction at the household level throughout the course of women's lives in urban Turkey. Paternal grandmothers, who are expected to reproduce normative gender roles, do not want to be surrounded by subservient daughters-in-law, yet they continue to act as subservient caregivers themselves. Despite societal pressures from their neighbors and family members, the interviewed grandmothers actively refuse to reproduce normative expectations. They extend their motherhood roles to their grandchildren, and rather than expect their daughters to reproduce filial obligations toward them, these maternal grandmothers want them to have the freedom to work and enjoy their lives.

The government of Turkey has recently developed a one-year pilot project to pay such caregiving grandmothers one-third of the minimum wage. This project was introduced a few months after my research was completed, and as such I was unable to interview the grandmothers about what they thought of the project and whether or not they would be willing to enroll in it. My research nevertheless demonstrates that such policies unfold against the backdrop of complex intergenerational negotiations among women. By monetizing grandmothers' unpaid care work, the government aims to introduce a cost-efficient and non-institutional solution to the very low rate of female employment. However, there is a fundamental contradiction between the stated purpose of the project (i.e., increasing female employment) and how it is implemented. By inherently excluding fathers and grandfathers from taking responsibility for childcare, the project reproduces the traditional division of childcare labor, which is thereby presented as the sole responsibility of women, with the government project proposing to "solve" the problem by simply designating another group of women as the new caregivers. While this might be seen as a way of valuing women's naturalized unpaid care work in

the home, it also reproduces conservative gender roles and gender inequality through social policy. A pilot project implemented in only ten of Turkey's provinces in 2017, the project was not further extended in 2018. It might thus be interpreted as being one of several controversial official policies implemented in relation to female employment. Although, in official documents, the aim of increasing the female employment rate is always openly declared, almost no initiative has been undertaken in regards to reducing the care burden, and thus care work is left largely to women's unpaid work as mothers or grandmothers.

Care can serve as a powerful analytical framework for discussing the life stories of such grandmothers as these. It is in the light of their own past sacrificial care work for the whole family that these women do "support" the younger generation of women. These women alter the traditional direction of care transfer from younger women to older women by continuing to sacrifice themselves. Grandmother care work is thus potentially empowering for younger women who might thereby feel less burdened by patriarchal and filial expectations. However, the decision by such older women to support the younger generation can also potentially become institutionalized into a conservative social policy tool by the neoliberal conservative government. This rather unexpected feedback mechanism³³ between social policy instruments, gendered expectations, and affective familial interactions around unpaid care deserves further scholarly attention.

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