THE DARK FACES OF POVERTY, PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION AND SOCIAL CHANGE:

FEMALE SUICIDES IN BATMAN, TURKEY

Aysan Sev’er (University of Toronto)
Rüstem Erkan (Dicle University)

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Please forward all communication to: Aysan Sev’er, Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto at Scarborough, 1265 Military Trail, Scarborough, ON. Canada. M1C 1A4
(sever@utsc.utoronto.ca)
Aysan Sev’er (Ph.D.) Is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto. She teaches sociology of gender and family and writes extensively on sexual harassment, intimate partner abuse of women, link between separation and violence, cross-cultural forms of wife abuse and extreme violence against women such as “honour killings”. Her latest book on women who have left their abusive partners (Fleeing the House of Horrors, University of Toronto Press) is nominated for Canadian Women’s Studies Book Award. She is also the founder and the general editor of Women’s Health & Urban Life journal.

Rüstem Erkan (Ph.D.) Is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Dicle University, Diyarbakir, Turkey. He has numerous published works on class and ethnic inequalities.
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CHANGE: FEMALE SUICIDES IN BATMAN, TURKEY

ABSTRACT

The paper first discusses the traditional theories of suicide and then reports the findings of an exploratory study of suicides and attempted suicides in Batman, Turkey. In the year 2000, many more women than men killed themselves in Batman. Of the 31 suicides 22 (71%), and of the 99 attempted suicides, 85 (86%) were women. Effects of Batman’s anomic urbanization, ensuing poverty and patriarchal social conditions are discussed. It is concluded that the traditional theories of suicide are not capable of accounting for high rates of female suicides, and the feminist literature on patriarchy has a lot to offer in both understanding and suggesting changes in order to remedy self-destruction proclivities of girls/women.
Suicide is known in all human societies. However, most societies have approached suicide as a personal pathology or a sinful act rather than as a social, structural or genderized phenomenon. The first sociologist who systematically studied suicide as a social problem was Durkheim (1951[1887]). He claimed that suicide resulted from social turmoil and change. Moreover, Durkheim’s interest was in understanding why men kill themselves although he recognized the fact that women attempt suicide more frequently than men. After Durkheim’s original efforts, the sociological interest in the studies of suicide has declined, maybe with the exception of the studies pertaining to aboriginal youth and the elderly (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Denov & Campbell, 2002; LaFromboise & Howard-Pitney, 1995).

We believe that there are at least two noteworthy changes which again deem suicide an important area for sociological study. The first is that suicide rates, especially in highly developed as well as newly developing parts of the world may be on the rise (Schmidtke et al., 1999). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) reports, approximately one million people in the world die as a result of suicide annually (2000). In fact, suicide is reported within the top 10 causes for death for the whole world, with a rate of 16 suicides per 100,000 population. For younger groups (15-24), suicide ranks as one of the top five causes of death (WHO, 2000). China is a unique case where suicide rates for girls/women are higher than the rates for men. Another unique example is the Batman region in southeastern Turkey, where suicides by women have outnumbered men’s (Erkan, 2001). The latter is the focus of our analysis.

In the current paper, we will first discuss the suicide rates across the world. Then, we will focus on the unique circumstances surrounding south-eastern Turkey and report findings
from interviews with guardians of 31 suicide victims and 99 men and women who attempted suicide in 2000. We will argue that although the economic hardships are similar for men and women, the patriarchal forces in women’s lives make the latter more vulnerable in this region. Thus, we will review the existing theoretical models of suicide, and attempt to expand these models through feminist insights. We will end by making suggestions about how more traditional theories of suicide can be revised through the integration of class and gender into the analysis. Such an improved approach will also suggest new ways to reduce or reverse the undesirable trends.

Review of the Literature: Facts about Suicide Rates

According to the WHO report (WHO, 2000), approximately one million people take their own lives each year. In addition, suicide rates have shown a 60% increase in the last 45 years. Another way to state these numbers is to say that every 40 seconds, someone in the world will commit suicide, and every three seconds, someone will attempt suicide.

Table 1 around here

As Table I shows, developed nations have much higher suicide rates than developing nations (WHO, 2002). Moreover, men complete suicides three or four times more often than women do. This universal pattern has two notable exceptions: First: suicide rates in the newly formed republics of the former USSR have surpassed the rates of even the most developed countries. In the former Soviet Block countries, men are about seven times more likely to kill themselves than women do. The second notable deviation from the above-stated generalizations is China (as a country) where female suicide rates are a few percentage points higher than those for men (14.3 vs. 17.9). However, a more striking pattern exists in Batman region of Turkey.
As a developing country, Turkey has much lower suicide rates than most developed countries (Icli, 1993; Schmidtke, 1999). Although Turkey is a secular republic, the vast majority of its population is Muslim (99%). Contrary to western misconceptions and the ongoing suicidal violence in the Middle East, Islam strongly condemns taking one’s own life (Eskin, 1992; 1995; Ibrahim, 1995; Kocturk, 1992; Zein, 2002). Thus, it is not surprising that Turkey’s suicide rates are only a fraction of its western counterparts, albeit they have slightly risen across time (Sahin, Batigul, Sahin, 1998). In 1998, male and female rates were 3.5 vs. 2.4 per 100,000 population, which place Turkey amongst countries with low suicide rates. In the Batman region, however, a problematic anomaly exists. In 2000, male and female suicide rates for Batman was 4 and 9.9 respectively, and the highest proportion of these suicides were committed by very young girls/women (15-24 age category, Erkan, 2001). Females were also much more likely to attempt suicide.

**Facts about Batman**

Batman’s history dates back to 546 BC (Batman, 1998). Currently, Batman is a rural region surrounding the Batman city. It is located in the socioeconomically deprived, south-eastern Turkey, close to the Iraqi and Syrian borders. According to the 1935 unofficial census, Batman’s total population was 319 (Batman, 1998). In 1945, Batman had a total of 90 households (443 people, see Erkan, 2001). Amazingly, in slightly over 50 years, Batman city’s population has grown more than 2325% to 427,000 (Akyildirim, 2001:19). This growth is the by-product of two developments: First, finding (modest) oil reserves in the area has served as a magnet to attract the excess rural population into the Batman centre. Scattered farming/herding communities from dry and inhospitable lands have migrated to the city, hoping to get in on the
oil wealth. Sadly, most have joined the army of the unemployed, since oil profits have been marginal and concentrated in the hands of a few. The region lacks peace and comfort due to the accelerated rate of urbanization and the ensuing crisis in municipal services like education and healthcare. For example, according to 1995 Turkish census results, the official unemployment rate in Batman is 58% (Erkan, 2001), and the literacy rate is only 69% (Batman, 1998:53). Within its 282 schools, 61% of students are male. After the elementary education, the numbers for the two sexes drastically diverge and higher education remains a dream for the vast majority (Batman, 1998, Erkan, 2001).

A serious problem in the Batman region relates to the heightened illegal activities of outlawed groups. The political unrest has been fuelled by the two Gulf Wars taking place just south of its political borders. The region’s remoteness has served as a convenient cover for the divisive, illegal and even terrorist activities of groups like the PKK and the Hezbollah. The first is an internationally outlawed, violent terrorist group, terrorizing both the peaceful Kurds and the Turks in the region. The second is an outlawed, ultrareligious network with a long list of terrorist activities in the Middle East. Both groups have exploited the general economic and social insecurity of people, creating dangerous ethnic and religious fissures. One outcome of these developments has been an unprecedented internal migration. Another outcome has been bloodshed outside the city borders (Akyildirim, 2001). Currently, Batman region has one of the lowest life expectancy for women (62.2 years) and men (58.0 years). Corresponding expectancies for Turkey are 71.5 and 66.9 (Akyildirim, 2001:28). Again, it is not surprising that the region has one of the worst infant mortality rates in Turkey (68.9 per 1000 live births for Batman while 35.3 for Turkey, see Akyildirim, 2001:2). Female children’s fate may be worse.
For example, Batman’s demographic data reveals that in the 0-4 year-old category, there are 38,400 male but only 34,000 female children recorded (Akyildirim, 2001). In all of the above discussed aspects, Batman region can serve as a text-book example of anomie and the social turmoil it engenders. Batman can also serve as a text-book candidate for Durkheim’s anomic suicide category for men. However, we need to probe further in order to gain insights into why two-and-a-half times more Batman women than men are killing themselves.

**Traditional Theories of Suicide and Gendered Implications:**

Due to its emotionally laden nature, identifying the causal factors behind suicides has been difficult and controversial. Although many competing theoretical approaches exist, the most common ones can be classified as intra-personal, social/sociological, criminological and bio-medical in nature. Since our interest is on the structural and gendered differences rather than bio-medical and crimogenic aspects, we are going to focus on the first two types.

One of the most influential theorists of the 20th century (Sigmund Freud, 1963), approached suicide as an intra-personal pathology. For Freud, suicide was one possible outcome of severe manic depression, and the ambivalence of being caught between feelings of intense love and intense hate. Freud (1963) saw suicide as an outcome of the unresolved Oedipal conflict and the extremely fearful feelings about one’s own sexuality that may ensue. Some men, Freud claimed, were not able to resolve the tug-of-war between the raw and animalistic part of their personality (ID) and their moral and ethical selves (SUPEREGO). Such men, he reasoned, were not capable of developing a functional, rational personality structure (EGO). It is in these cases, he argued, the death-wish overwhelmed them, and catapulted them toward self-destruction (Gectan, 1988; Greenwald, 1959; Kagitcibasi, 1983; also see Rattray, 1968, Ch. 1 for
“thanatos”). According to Freud, then, suicide is uniquely personal, and is a product of unresolved conflicts amongst the subconscious, semiconscious and conscious components of personality.

More current intrapersonal theories of suicide employ “psychological autopsy” methods and an emphasis on life events (Vijayakumar & Rajkumar, 1999). Mood disorders, adjustment disorders, early onset of alcoholism, depression and schizophrenia are seen as the culprits behind self-destructive behaviour (Viyajakumar & Rajkumar, 1999). Almost none of these orientations make gendered assertions.

In contrast, macro theories focus on the link between social and structural determinants of suicide. In his seminal work (Suicide, 1951[1887]) Durkheim boldly asserts that anomie causes suicide by creating powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness and isolation. Although Durkheim’s theory was not centered on economic conditions of the society per se, his meticulously calculated statistical correlations between absolute poverty that arose in highly uncertain economic times in Vienna (in 1873), Frankfurt (during 1872-74) and Paris (in 1882, see Durkheim, 1951[1887]), and the rise in corresponding suicide rates attest to the power of economic forces.

Durkheim (1951[1887]) categorized suicides into: Egoistic, Anomic and Altruistic types.² The first, he reasoned, is a product of loose ties between the individuals and the social groups to which they belong. In altruistic suicides, an extraordinary level of solidarity was seen to diminish individuality and freedom of choice, and replace them by the decision-making power of the group. Suicides in cults/armies etc., were the examples Durkheim used to exemplify the altruistic type.³
The third category, anomic suicide, is the jewel of Durkheim’s theory. This type was seen to rise during times of change and upheaval. Abrupt social change, Durkheim argued, reduces the efficacy individuals feel, and increases their perceived helplessness. Such a change was seen to create extreme poverty for many and riches for a few. Yet, Durkheim (1951[1887]) took pains to show that the cause of suicides was not poverty itself, but the anomie (powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, hopelessness etc.) that the social conditions unleashed.

In Marx, the “alienation” concept replaces Durkheim’s “anomie” (Marx, 1978a[1844]: 66). Marx saw the roots of social troubles in industrialized societies (including self-directed troubles), within the exploitation of workers by the capitalists. During transition to industrialization, workers and those who cannot even find work (the reserve army) realize that their misery benefits the capitalist classes (Marx, 1978b [1867]:375, 413). If the adverse conditions persist, Marx theorised that the workers of the world would develop a class consciousness and overthrow their oppressors. Yet, he saw at least two hurdles against the rise in class consciousness: one, that workers will lose their resolve during the process of exploitation, and two, that they may also become alienated from the products of their own labour (Marx, 1978a,c,d,e[1845]: 70 , 150, 160, 203, 253; Tolan, 1983). In either case, their inability to deal with their exploitation would be self-destructive.

Thus, the link between socioeconomic conditions of work life and the subjective and personal reactions to it are more clearly intertwined in Marx’s alienation than they are in Durkheim’s anomie concepts. Nevertheless, what neither theoretical orientation asks is if women and men are affected by and/or react to the conditions of their lives in identical or different ways. Durkheim (1951[1887]) did observe the lower suicide rates for women, and used
this information to dispel the myth that suicides have genetic or biological causes. He also observed that married women were equally or more likely to commit suicide than unattached women whilst married men were much less likely to take their own lives than their unattached counterparts. Yet, Durkheim (1951[1887]) advocated marriage as a protection against suicides, dismissing his own findings that marriage may even increase the propensity of female suicides. Ironically, none of the gender-based observations Durkheim made led him to inquire about the differential reasons why women commit suicide. Likewise, in Marxian theory’s Don Quixoteian protectionism of labourers against the bourgeoisie, women’s unique needs as paid/unpaid workers were neglected.

So if anything, what may differentiate or reverse the suicide rates for women in comparison to men? Neither Durkheim’s anomie, nor Marx’s alienation concepts answer this question. We need to seek answers within the feminist literature (Canetto & Lester, 1995). Two sources that will be appropriate for the topic at hand will be women’s work for pay/without pay, and the workings of patriarchy, especially (not exclusively) in less developed pockets of the world that are experiencing social change (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kelly & Radford, 1998). According to Ibrahim (1995), dramatic social change is strongly linked to suicidal behaviour in women.

**Feminist Analysis of Stressors Associated with Women’s Paid and Unpaid Work**

In North America, women undertake the vast majority of housework and childcare (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1984; Hamilton, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; 1997; Luxton, 1980; Lupri, 1991). Unlike most paid workers, homemakers lack well-defined work schedules, coffee-breaks, vacation times, sick-leaves. They are deprived of the possibility of advancement and promotions and lack objective standards of performance. Moreover, childcare and housework tasks are on a
24-hour, stand-by basis. Thus, the feminist literature suggests, the amorphous and endless nature of these tasks are very stressful for women, and even the leisure moments they may have are tainted by the “on-call” demands of their duties (Hochschild, 1989; 1997).

Paid work also presents adverse conditions for female workers. For example, in general, women get less pay than men, even when the formal education and length of experience are held constant for the two groups (Nelson & Robinson, 2002, Ch. 6). Women are much more vulnerable to sexual harassment in the workplace than men are (Sev’er, 1999). Women’s concentration in service and secretarial jobs assures that they will do a lot of work with very little decision making-power, authority or prestige (Nelson & Robinson, 2002). They are also the first to lose their jobs in economic slumps. However, the worst matrix for women is when they work for pay, and still have to carry the major responsibility for the household and childcare (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1984: Hochschild, 1989; 1997; Luxton, 1988).

Generalization of the North American findings to the developing world with different social, political, cultural and religious characteristics, needs to be done with extreme caution. In a secular country like Turkey where about 99% of the population is Moslem, for example, the participation of women in the labour force is much lower than the participation rates in the west (Arat, 1996; Kiz Cocuklarinin, 2000). Nevertheless, women, especially poor, rural women do work outside of the home as well as within it (Kirsal Alan, 2000). They may work in family owned fields, or they may work as farm labourers, usually under the most adverse/unsafe conditions. In Batman, these conditions often involve cotton-picking in scorching fields or working in one of the gruelling shifts of the cotton industry. Women may work as cleaners in people’s homes or toil in marginal, outdated industries, where the conditions of work may not be
regulated by government standards. The minimum wage in 2002 was 5,000,000 Lira a day (approximately $3.00 US or $5.00 Can.). To complicate the matters, women in the Batman region have very high birth rates (38.3 per 1,000 population), which means they have many children to raise (Batman, 1998; Akyildirim, 2001:2). They are also likely to be the sole caregivers in marriage since the patriarchal tradition ostracises husbands who engage in housework or childcare. Indeed, pressures in Batman women’s lives are exponentially higher than the concerns their western sisters face.

Thus, the axis that neither the anomie nor the alienation concepts has captured is patriarchy. Even the least powerful men and the most exploited male workers in the capitalist system have a private world within which they rule (Dworkin, 1974). Moreover, legal, moral, familial and political systems of patriarchal regions allow even the most disadvantaged men to dominate and control the women and children in their lives. In small pockets of the world, men’s domination over women (and children) is absolute. Men decide whether women will go to school, if they will work or when or to whom they can marry (Carroll, 2000). Violence against women is also rampant (Aile Ici Siddet, 1995; Kandiyoti, 1988; Kelly & Radford, 1998), and in extreme cases, women are killed in the name of family honour (Duzkan & Kocali, 2000; Sev’er & Yurdakul, 2001; Yirmibesoglu, 2000).

The fear these patriarchal relations create in girls/women’s lives needs to be configured in understanding their suicidal behaviour. Patriarchal societies are obsessed with controlling female sexuality (Accad, 2000; Mernissi, 2000; Narasimhan, 1994; Saigol, 2000). Although the control tactics vary, they all serve as a form of subjugation (i.e., clothing restrictions, withholding resources from female children in impoverished parts of the world, forced virginity
tests for girls, bloody sheet or underwear tests after the first night of marriage, genital mutilation of girls and women, arranged childhood marriages, sati (wife burning), and honour killings). There are officially established links between virginity tests/implied threats of physical harm and suicides of young girls (Cindoglu, 2000:221). In a study of attributions, Sahin et al. (1994) observed that both loss of virginity out of wedlock and being a victim of rape were considered to be sufficient reasons for Turkish girls to want to kill themselves.

Female sexuality is still exclusively tied to marital obligation and legitimate reproduction, not to individual choice, preference, experience or freedom (Carroll, 2000). Girls are taught that any deviation from taboos against pre-marital sex will end in extreme forms of punishment, possibly including death. Yet, patriarchal societies also make these same girls/women particularly vulnerable to either random violence of unrelated men or advances of men who are closely related to them (i.e., incestual rape, see Arin, 1997; Sezgin, 1997). Poverty and patriarchy form a dangerous matrix in women’s lives. According to Duzkan and Kocali “[h]ere the girls give their lives for doing what in other cities girls would only be scolded or beaten for. There are so few options... insults, violence or death” (2000:387). For example, a government sponsored study into violence against Turkish wives found that out of a randomly selected sample of 4287 women, only 738 (17.2%) reported no violence in their homes. The rest reported mild (25.6%), usual (19.6%), and more than usual (20.7%) violence. Moreover, the percentage of women who reported severe and very severe violence was 13.2% and 3.7% respectively (Aile Ici Siddet, 1995, p.174). Violence in the home was inversely correlated with socioeconomic status and directly correlated with household density.

Thus, this paper explores the economic circumstances and the living conditions of
women within this mostly rural and extremely patriarchal region of Turkey in order to gain insights into why women’s suicide rates are three times higher than the average for Turkey, and why they are four times higher than the Turkish average for women. We are particularly interested in shedding light on why the suicide rate for Batman women is almost two-and-a-half times higher than men’s rate in this region.

**Methods**

The current study is based on face-to-face interviews with 30 surviving guardians of the 31 suicide victims and with the 99 men and women who attempted suicide in Batman, in year 2000. This is not an experimental study, since many aspects of the interviews (duration, place, language (Kurdish or Turkish), and mostly open ended questions) were not stringently controlled. Neither are we in a position to test hypotheses. However, the uniqueness of the sample and the uniqueness of the region make our observations particularly valuable to observe complex links between extreme forms of patriarchy, poverty and suicides. The study was undertaken by numerous academics from the sociology, psychology and psychiatry departments of Dicle University (Diyarbakir, Turkey) with the encouragement of Batman City’s Mayoral Office. All interviews were carried out by carefully trained graduate students from the departments of psychology and sociology. The mother-tongue of some of the victims and some interviewers was Kurdish, but all responses were recorded in Turkish.

The focus is on the year 2000 where suicides reached a peak in Batman’s history (31 completed and 99 attempted cases which respectively translate into 7.3% and 23.2% per 100,000 population according to our calculations. However, Batman government documents report the rates as 6.9% and 20.81% for the year 2000, and the official rates are the ones we use throughout
The observations we report are based on interviews with a surviving parent, an older sibling or a mate of 30 of 31 Batman men and girls/women who committed suicide in 2000. These guardians were asked about the age, gender, education, rural/urban residence patterns, income, employment, marital status and refugee/migratory status of the suicide victims. Whether victims had alcohol dependencies were also asked. An expanded version of the same questionnaire was administered to 99 men and girls/women who survived a suicide attempt in the same year. Our intent is to evaluate the harsh conditions of Batman for both men and women, but even the harsher conditions in the female victims’ lives.

Victims’ perceived social support systems, trouble with work (if applicable), verbalization of problems before the suicide or attempted suicide, existence of earlier suicide attempts, therapy/medication history, tolerance for contact with the opposite sex, trouble with family members and complaints about parental control were also asked. Again, 30 guardians for suicide cases, and the 99 survivors of suicide attempts were interviewed. We wanted to gain insights into the social conditions of the victims’ lives, and more specifically, insights into the patriarchal forces that control the female victims. For a few of the demographic variables (age, marital status, etc.) we report the completed and attempted suicide groups separately. For the rest of the analysis, we report our observations on the combined group.

Ethics: The study was conducted according to the ethical requirements of the Dicle University (Diyarbakir) for human participants. Because of the involvement of the psychology, psychiatry and sociology departments of a prestigious local university as well as Batman’s Mayoral Office in the project, the participation rate is almost 100% (only one guardian of the 31 suicide cases
was not reached). The length of the interviews were determined by the willingness of the respondents, and interviews took anywhere from one to two hours. At the beginning of each interview, respondents were told that the data were to be used for only academic and clinical teaching/publication purposes. Respondents received no monetary compensation for their participation in the study, but most expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk to a professional about their loss/problems. Six guardians who were experiencing continued issues with their loss were directed to counselling. Hospital personnel and/or local social agencies were already in contact with the attempted suicide cases.

Given the fact that most participants are illiterate or semi-literate, only the verbal consent of the participants was required. Verbally, they were assured that their refusal to answer questions will have no negative consequence for them. However, readers need to be reminded that the cultural milieu of Batman is very different than North America. When there is an opportunity to talk to a professional (any professional), people often line up and try to bring other family members and friends to tell their stories. In the present study, the challenge was to pick only one guardian among many others who also wanted to be interviewed. The choices were confined to a surviving parent, older sibling or mate of a suicide victim.

**Results**

*Findings Relating to Socio-Demographic Conditions*

In Batman city and its surrounding villages, there were 31 completed suicides and 99 suicide attempts in 2000. This is the highest number of suicides in Batman’s history. Twenty-two of the 31 (71%) and 85 of the 99 (86%) were girls/women.

Sixteen (52%) of the 31 completed suicides were in the Batman city, and eight (25%) in
the adjoining villages. A higher proportion of the attempted suicides (65%) were in the city and a smaller proportion in the villages (19%).

Of the 22 female suicide victims, 13 (59%) were single and 9 (41%) were married. Of the nine men, seven (78%) were single, and two (22%) were married, closely replicating Durkheim’s observations about the protective effects of marriage for men. We also have information on the marital status of 89 (of the 99) attempted suicide cases. Of the 76 women, 40 (53%) were single, 36 (46%) married and one (less than 1%) divorced. Of the 13 men, nine (69%) were single and four (31%) were married, again giving support to Durkheim’s assertions about marriage and lower suicide propensity for men. According to the numbers, protective effects of marriage on women was marginal.

The largest group of victims of completed suicides (20/31 or 65%) was between 15 and 24 years of age. The youngest victim was 12 years old (a girl). There were five additional suicides (16%) in the 25-34 bracket. The mean age of suicide victims was 23.19, and the range was 12-61. Amongst the suicide attempts, the pattern was similar. Sixty-two (63%) were between 15 and 24 years of age, and an additional 22 (22%) were in the 25-34 bracket. The mean age of the attempted suicide group was 22.66, and the range was 13 to 56.

Attempted and completed suicide groups were almost identical in formal education. In both groups, approximately 40% were illiterate or barely literate, without any formal training. Two fifths had completed primary school (20%) or high school (20%). The proportion of those who had gone beyond high school was less than 20%.

The majority (86.7%) of the families had a monthly income of less than $100.00 US. Given the fact that 53% were classified as girls/women without paid work, and an additional
20% of men reporting unemployment, we conclude that close to three quarters of those who attempted or completed suicides were outside of the workforce.

Sixty-seven percent of the families of the attempted or completed suicide victims lived in substandard housing which is locally referred to as “gece-kondu.” The literal translation of the term is “perched on a single night” which quite accurately reflects the haphazard, shanty and illegal nature of these structures. Only 23% of the victims’ families stated that they lived in apartments, some of which may also pose less than desirable conditions. These findings take on even more serious implications when we consider the fact that 93% of the victims had more than three siblings, and 73% of the families had five or more people residing together. We have additional information on the number of siblings the 22 female suicide victims had. Three victims had three, two victims had four, two had five, two had six, three had seven, three had eight, and another three had 10 siblings each. One victim had nine and another, 11 siblings. In sum, the lack of privacy in these girls’/women’s lives was astounding, even according to the modest Turkish standards of living (average family size = 5, average number of rooms = 3).

Of the completed suicides of the nine men, four (44%) hung themselves, three (33%) used fire-arms, and one each either jumped (11%) or used drugs (11%). Of the 22 female victims, 10 (45%) hung themselves, seven (32%) used fire-arms, three (14%) jumped, and one each took drugs (.5%) or burned themselves to death (.5%). Of the 99 attempted suicides, 14 were men and 85 were girls/women. Of the 14 men, 10 (71%) used drugs, four (29%) hung themselves, two (14.5%) jumped, and one (.7%) burned himself. One method was not identified. Of the 85 women who attempted suicide, the vast majority (69 or 81%) used drugs, four (4.5%) hung themselves, and one (slightly over 1%) jumped. We were not able to confirm the method
used in the remaining 11 female suicide attempts.

Alcohol dependency was reported in only one of the 129 interviews (30 completed and
99 attempted suicide cases). This finding is completely contrary to other findings in the literature
and will be discussed later.

Findings Relating to Social and Patriarchal Pressures

Sixty women (70%) who attempted suicide (data not available for the 22 who died),
expressed a yearning for living at a different time and place than in Batman. Yet, 80% of the
women who committed or attempted suicide has never been outside of the Batman city, and 90%
had never been outside Batman or the surrounding towns or villages. This geographic isolation is
compounded by a social isolation as the following observations depict: As far as the guardians
knew, only two (10%) of the girls/women who died had ever talked about their desperation with
someone else, 90% had not. Only three women (14%) had left a suicide note. According to the
recollections of the polled guardians, 52% of the female suicide victims had expressed no hope
about improvement in the conditions of their lives while they were still alive.

Of the females who either attempted or completed suicides, only 70% were allowed to go
out for shopping on their own (68% for attempted, 72% for completed suicide group). Thirty
percent were not allowed to go out without being accompanied by a chaperone (32% for
attempted, 28% for completed suicide group). What is more striking than the above figures is
that 80% of the girls/women who attempted or completed suicides were not allowed to go to a
park, a movie theatre or participate in a social gathering without the permission or
accompaniment of their older kin (76% for attempted, 84% for completed suicide group).

Controls over women’s opposite sex relations were intense. Two thirds of the guardians
polled (16/22 of the suicide group) were totally opposed to allowing their female children/sisters/wives in mixed-sex groups. A substantial proportion of the interviewees opposed (or reported opposition) to having male friends or boyfriends (opposition was 84% for attempted, 90% for completed suicide groups). Only five (22%) said that such friendships were acceptable. Eleven (50%) of the guardians of the female suicide victims admitted that all major decisions about the family were made by fathers, and another sizeable proportion admitted that elders (20%) or mothers (20%) made the decisions.

Sixty-six percent (20/30) of the polled guardians said that marital partners for daughters are better selected by family, kin or matchmakers. Only 27% (8/30) said that sisters or daughters could have a say in the matter. Exactly 50% of the polled female and an additional 23% of the polled male guardians of the suicide victims said that they will completely oppose their daughters’ marriage with someone they personally disapproved whereas only 21% claimed that they would completely oppose their son’s choice of a mate. More than half the females who had survived a suicide attempt (44/85) also talked about the restrictions on their mate choices. These traditional patterns in censuring mates for the younger generation, especially for girls/women is not surprising given that 92% of the guardians themselves had gotten married through matchmakers.

It is also interesting to note that female guardians are more strict executioners of patriarchal rules than fathers/brothers seem to be, at least at the verbal response level. Both Brown (1997) and Kandiyoti (1988) write about older women’s control of younger women in patriarchal societies. Kandiyoti summarizes this process under her “patriarchal bargain” concept. Basically, women of all ages in patriarchal societies are powerless. However, older women who
have led all of their own lives observing patriarchal rules, carve out a space in the pecking order for themselves by becoming the eyes and ears of the same patriarchal rules that have subjugated them. Thus, what little power may be available to older women is at the expense of younger women’s freedom.

**Summary and Discussion**

The speed of urbanization in the Batman region has not been adequately matched by developments in the infrastructure or health, education or social safety networks. Recently discovered oil reserves in the region has not translated into the expected jobs. On the contrary, what little wealth is generated has been concentration in the hands of companies/families/tribes.

Another undesirable outcome of the unchecked urbanization is the volatility of the whole region. The rural void created by farmers/herders who have emigrated out of their traditional lands have been filled with cells of outlawed organizations such as the PKK and Hezbollah. Due to legitimate fears of terrorist mayhem, local and regional governments were also eager to encourage rural people’s migration into the relative safety of the cities. As a result of these econo-political dynamics, the city of Batman has buckled under the surge of unemployment. Inadequate numbers of hospitals and health-care staff, inadequacy of schools have compounded the problems. Police and military forces are overstretched between property (poverty?) crimes on the one hand and terrorist activities on the other. Although Turkey is a quickly modernizing state by all accounts, Batman region is a throwback to almost third world conditions in its socio-demographic indexes. Even diseases which were thought to be wiped out (such as tuberculosis, malaria, etc.), are making their comeback in the region (Batman, 1998).

The listed factors of deprivation indeed form a ripe condition for anomie, Durkheim’s
explanatory factor for suicides. Indeed, Batman’s overall rates have climbed to more than twice the rate for the rest of Turkey (6.9 vs 3). Yet, men’s committed/attempted suicides are only marginally higher for Batman than the overall Turkish rate for men (4 for Batman vs 3.5 for Turkey). Moreover, with the exception of one case, alcoholism is not at all a factor in this group, which is totally different from the established suicide literature (Vijayakumar & Rajkumar, 1999). However, our findings are not surprising in a highly religious Islamic region where alcohol consumption is equated with sin. There remains the possibility that some victims may have consumed alcohol without making their behaviour public, but this is a small possibility.

In the present paper, the real discrepancy is in the women’s rates of suicide (9.9 for Batman vs 2.4 for Turkey). Thus, we argued that the anomie producing conditions in the region cannot provide a satisfactory answer for why Batman women are killing themselves at such a high rate. After all, Durkheim never claimed that women are more likely to be affected by anomie than men. On the contrary, Durkheim always argued (and for most of the world, rightly so), that women are less likely to commit suicide. Thus, the anomaly in Batman brings us back to the socio-cultural and patriarchal controls on women’s lives.

Our findings show that more than 75% of the victims are under 25 years of age. Obviously, gender-based conditions for young women are detrimental to their physical/mental health. Moreover, Batman’s victims lived under intolerable congestion. Victims came from crowded families (more than three and up to 11 siblings, more than five family members living under the same roof). According to Cetin’s (2001) findings, Turkish females living in crowded homes with many siblings have an increased propensity to kill themselves. Cetin does not report the same pattern for boys/men.
Victims had very little income, when compared to the rest of Turkish society (almost 90% of the families reported living on less than $100 U.S. per month). Moreover, in patriarchal societies, it is almost always the girls/women who end up getting less than their fair share of the already overstretched resources (Kagitcibasi, 1993). For example, in the responses we received, the percentage of guardians who would totally support formal education for their sons was 90%. In contrast, only 20% of the respondents stated similar aspirations for their female children. In terms of personal leisure and freedoms, girls/women’s circumstances were even more dire. As our overall findings indicate, 53% of the female victims did not work and thus lacked a personal source of income. At least 67% lived in shanty houses (gece-kondu) with 73% reporting to share these intolerable circumstances with more than five members of their household. More than 93% of the victims had three or more siblings.

The unequal treatment Batman girls receive may lead to additional tensions in their family relations. In Cetin’s (2001), Sahin, Batigun and Sahin’s (1998) and Sahin, Sahin and Tumer’s (1994) studies with Turkish girls, problems in family relations were consistently identified as a correlate in suicide attempts or suicide ideation. Sahin et al. (1998) did not find family problems to be a factor in males’ suicidal thoughts or behaviour. This difference may be due to the fact that confining conditions of the residences and low income are particularly disheartening for girls/women. In patriarchal societies, men spend the majority of their waking hours at work (if they have work), or in the company of other men. Male children spend all their awake hours in the company of other male children (on the streets). Adult men find their all-male support groups in open-air coffee houses (kahvehane). Indeed, Batman city has many hundreds of coffee houses that cater to all male clients who drink Turkish tea and play cards or
checkers, from early in the morning until late at night. This cheap method of entertainment is favoured by unemployed as well as employed men.

Girls/women have almost no options to escape the disheartening circumstances of day-to-day life. As our data reflect, only 70% of the women were allowed to shop on their own, even when shopping was necessary for family needs (i.e., groceries). A whopping 80% of these women (84% of the completed suicide group) had to get special permission or arrange for a chaperone to go to a park, or to attend a social event. Two thirds of the victims’ families we polled were totally opposed to their female children’s dating. Studying the suicidal behaviour of Asian-American women, Ibrahim (1995) concludes that frustration and anger about not having power over one’s life can lead young women to suicide. In such cases “suicide may be viewed as a way to gain some power” (1995: 145).

Indeed, young women in the region lack power. Although Turkish laws prohibit it, the tribal traditions of the area sometimes force girls as young as 13 to marry sexagenerians (Fraser, 2000). For example, a 17-year-old locked herself in a room and threatened to shoot herself with a gun if her father continued to insist on marrying her to her cousin. She said she loved someone else, and she would rather die than become the wife of her cousin (Fraser, 2000). In our study, 90% of the guardians of those who died (84% of the attempted group) were opposed to having their daughters/sisters to date. According to Eskin’s (1995) work on suicidal behaviour and attitudes of Turkish adolescents, opposite sex-problems were rated as one of the most crucial factors in female suicides. Given the extraordinary controls over Batman girls, forbidden cross-sex attractions may turn out to be fatal.

According to a national report, Turkish women and girls suffer from parental, spousal
and sibling violence (Aile Ici Siddet, 1995). In the southeastern region, many women receive severe beatings and some even lose their lives in the name of “family honour” (Sever & Yurdakul, 2001; Tezcan, 1981). Although these extreme cases are small in number, the publicity they receive is sufficient to make girls/women live in fear. Ilkkaracan (1998; 1999) reports that 66.6% of the 599 women respondents from eastern Turkey feared that their husbands would kill them if they suspected an extra-marital affair. A larger majority expressed fears about being severely beaten up. Younger women’s experimentation with sex may induce enough fear to take one’s own life (Ibrahim, 1995).

Many of the victims were regional migrants. These girls/women may have experienced restrictions in their lives even before coming to Batman. However, their deprivation may have been less obvious in the context of their rural lives. In Batman, despite the surface level of openness to the rest of the world (access to television), parents and kin continue to enforce the unforgiving norms and taboos of a feudal/patriarchal era. In shanty towns, most families live with countless deprivations such as lack of running water, no adequate heat and lack of clothing or nutrition. Lack of freedom of movement may add fuel to the fire. Yet, the irony of globalization is that 85% of the victims (completed and attempted combined) had television in their homes. Young women who either killed or tried to kill themselves may have seen for the first time, the material luxuries and personal freedoms (including freedom of sexual relations) other girls/women of their age enjoy. Batman girls/women can never hope to have such luxuries, freedoms or choice. Indeed, the “pathologies” these women have exhibited through attempting or committing suicide may not be a pathology at all. Instead, their actions may reflect a rational choice to break the chains of their structural/cultural and gendered oppressions. Canetto &
Lester (1995) arrive at a similar conclusion when they urge us to look at the social and cultural conditions of suicide victims’ lives.

**Conclusions**

We need to acknowledge the many shortcomings of our study, such as the small size of the sample, lack of comparison groups, and the lower class skew in the observations. We fully acknowledge the fact that the unique and sensitive substance of our work does not allow many of the desirable methodological luxuries. In that sense, our observations are not generalizable to all suicides, but maybe generalizable to suicides under similar conditions. For example, Vijayakumar and Rajkumar (1999) have used a similar methodology to ours (key informants) in their exploration of suicides in Madras, India. We are convinced that our ability to interview all but one of the victims of completed and attempted suicides in the year 2000 make our work pioneer some new theoretical insights.

Our analysis of victims’ lives shows that the root causes go beyond “individual pathology” or “anomie” or “alienation” or “alcoholism.” Instead, the specific limitations and cultural controls over women’s (and young people’s) lives must be understood in order to dismantle and reverse the conditions leading to their desperation. Our observations identify the suffocating conditions as economic deprivation (both absolute and relative), social turmoil and patriarchal controls on women’s lives and freedoms. These girls/women seem to be severely isolated in the midst of poverty stricken, over-crowded homes, with very little hope of breaking the cycle. Deprivations they may have felt before moving to an urban city may have grown even more unbearable once they found a window into how other people, in other parts of the world live (media exposure). Our observations indicate that these women/girls lack family support
which can buffer against self-destructive behaviour. Although our data cannot directly speak to the issue of violence, other research in the region clearly indicates that violence against girls/women is severe and common (Ilkkaracan, 1998; 1999). If our interpretation of these findings are correct, then the way to remedy the conditions that give rise to the desperate acts by young women are clear: reduced control of their personal lives, reduced control of their physical bodies, decreased punitiveness against sexualized experience, and increased opportunities for education, paid work, meaningful social activities and more choices in selecting friends, companions and mates. This may sound like a tall order, and probably it is, in a very patriarchal region such as Batman. However, the very first step to such a positive change lies in educational opportunities and paid work with decent wages, safe working standards and presence of national and international watch groups over women’s physical and psychological health. It is then and only then that girls/women may see a light (albeit a small light at first) at the end of an otherwise all black, confining, genderized web which traps them for life.
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Table 1: Suicide Rates for Men and Women in Selected Countries in 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Male Rates/100,000</th>
<th>Female Rates/100,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selected Countries:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland:</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France:</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republics of former USSR:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Normative Gender Rates:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batman/Turkey</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the graduate students from the Psychology and Sociology Departments of Dicle University who conducted the interviews. We also thank the Mayoral office in Batman for their support. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided insightful comments on the earlier version of this paper. Questions can be directed to: Aysan Sev’er, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 1265 Military Trail, Scarborough, ON. Canada (sever@utsc.utoronto.ca).
Notes
1. In 1997, a total of 471 oil wells produced eight million barrels of oil (Batman, 1998:99).

2. In a footnote, Durkheim also mentioned a fourth category: fatalistic suicide. However, this type never received much attention in his writings. We thank the anonymous reviewer who reminded us about this additional category.

3. For the altruistic example, Durkheim also used women who kill themselves after the death of their husbands (like Indian sati) and slaves who kill themselves after the death of their masters. From a feminist perspective, there are at least two glaring counter-points to his example: One is the implied equivalence between “slaves” and “wives,” an equivalence that Engels also underscores in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1972[1942]). His assumption about the free will/choice of women in “willingly” jumping into the funeral pyre of their husbands is naive. As violence against women literature confirms, there may be immense social pressures on these women in pockets of India which still practice “sati” (see Narasimhan, 1994). Patriarchal societies may also exert indirect pressures on widows by disallowing any legitimate role outside of motherhood and wifery.

4. Slight variations of Durkheim’s anomic suicide type is still used to understand the high suicide rates amongst First Nations people in Canadian (see, Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Jarvis & Boldt, 1982)

5. If they did, boys and girls from the same family would be equally likely to kill themselves whereas, universally, men’s rates are much higher than women’s.

6. There are numerous explorations of the continuum of control on women’s bodies, behaviour and even life chances. For spousal violence, see Aile Ici Siddet (1995); for virginity tests, see Altinay, 2000; Cindoglu, 2000; Seral, 2000; for bloody sheet or underwear tests after the first night of marriage, see: Cindoglu, 2000; Memissi, 2000; for bride price and bride exchange, see Duzkan & Kocali, 2000; Yirmibesoglu, 2000; for genital mutilation, see Al-Dawla, 2000; Boddy, 1998; Toubia, 2000; for stoning to death of women for adultery, see Al Canada, 2002; for sex selection, sati and sex-determination, see Anand, 1989; Narasimhan, 1994; for honour killings and bride-burnings, see Abu-Odeh, 2000; Duzkan & Kocali, 2000; Sev’er & Yurdakul, 2001; Shah, 1990; Yirmibesoglu, 2000.

7. From this point on, the surviving parent/older sibling or mate of the suicide victims who served as respondents in this study will be referred to as “guardians.”

8. Because of the fragility of the survivors of attempted suicides and the guardians who have lost a daughter/sister or wife to suicide, we refrained from asking direct questions about whether the victims were subjected to family violence or threats of violence. In our study, the presence of violence against women is not directly tested, but assumed on the basis of regional statistics.
9. Turkish media prints/publishes/broadcasts bloody images of the victims. It is not uncommon to see grossly mutilated victims/bodies or their blood-covered perpetrators as front-page news.