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'I am here': women workers' experiences at the former Cibali Tekel Tobacco and Cigarette Factory in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

This study presents oral history research which investigated the experiences of surviving women workers from the former Cibali Tekel Tobacco and Cigarette Factory in Istanbul, Turkey. For most of its history, the factory was home to thousands of workers, many of who were women and, at times, outnumbered men two to one. While the site is now known for the university that it houses, photographs and archival records from the early twentieth century reveal the centrality of women in the process and production of tobacco and cigarettes until the factory completely shut down in 1995. Using oral history methods, we recorded the memories of 17 women who worked in the factory. A multi-faceted analysis reveals the gendered nature of the space at the time as well as the importance of the factory as a place in the lives of these women.

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Introduction

The former Cibali Tekel Tobacco and Cigarette Factory is a place steeped in the history of Istanbul, Turkey. In 1884, the French founded the factory on the shores of the Golden Horn and ran it until 1924. In the early Republican era, the Turkish government nationalized tobacco production under Tekel [monopoly] and controlled the factory until it ceased production in the 1990s and fell into disrepair. After a period of restoration, the building once again returned to service as the home of Kadir Has University.

While the site is now known for the university that it houses, for most of its history, the factory was home to thousands of workers, many of whom were women. At times, women in the factory outnumbered men by as many as two to one. Over the roughly 100 years of the factory, the space became central in the worker's lives. Not only did these women work at a time when few women did, but they also identified themselves as workers with a great sense of accomplishment and

pride. Their work at the factory became an aspect of who they are and a way to identify themselves even long after their retirement.

This study relates our research in which we investigated the experiences of surviving women workers from the former Cibali Tekel Tobacco and Cigarette Factory in Istanbul (Cibali-Tekel, hereafter). Using oral history methods, we recorded the experiences of 17 women from when they were employed at Cibali-Tekel. Our primary objective is to amplify the voices of the women who worked in the factory and we focus on presenting a multi-faceted narrative and analysis of women's labor and their life based on their memory of the factory.

In her chapter 'Telling Our Stories,' Joan Sangster asserts:

[a]sking why and how women explain, rationalize and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture. (1998, 88)

Similarly, we present evidence of women's active inclusion into and performance of labor within a workplace which transformed that place into a space where women could benefit from further empowerment. These women's stories offer some insight into the lives of working women at the time as well as providing an example of a nurturing workplace environment which has remained remarkably memorable for those that we interviewed.

Following Henri Lefebvre's tripartite differential of social space – spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces – we observed how the interrelations of work, worker, and production of space contributed to the making of the factory into a 'perceived – conceived – lived' space (1992, 40) for these women. According to Lefebvre space is socially produced, which also

serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make us of it. (1992, 26)

To address the idea of production of space occurring from all sides of societal relations, we concentrated on women's narrative of the space of the factory and its significance in their labor and lives in line with Lefebvre's contextualization of 'biological reproduction,' 'reproduction of labor power' and 'the reproduction of the social relations of production' (1992, 32).

Throughout our research, our objective was to unearth the actual voices of women and their experiences of obtaining, performing and even leaving work. We explore these issues through three interrelated questions: (1) How did the work of these women contribute to the transformation of place (factory) into a space which was a nurturing workplace environment; (2) How did these women negotiate work/life balance during their employment; (3) Did women's numerical superiority in the factory have any impact on workplace hierarchies and/or empowerment? To begin to address these questions, we asked our interviewees how and why they began to work at Cibali-Tekel? What kind of work did they perform and under what conditions? What was their experience of work? What kind of opportunities

and difficulties did they face in their work lives? What importance did they give to their work? Did they identify as workers? Where did they live? The historical records documents that during the early years of factory women workers came primarily from the neighborhoods that surround the factory, but did this tradition continue throughout the life of the factory?

In preparation for the interviews, we conducted extensive archival research and examined photographic documentations to bring the most recent history of this place to life. Four photographs (Berggren ca. 1890; Kösemen 1996; Library of Congress ca. 1950; 1935 and ca. 1947) are included in our analysis, which seemed significant in documenting gender-spatial, cultural, and historical continuities of the factory as a work space. We held semi-structured topical and biographical interviews which lasted from 1 to 5 h with an average of 3 h. Consent for recording, transcribing and use of material for academic purposes was received through a signed consent form from all interviewees. All respondents authorized the use of their real names and gave permission to recount their stories in full. As authors we conducted all interviews, transcribed them in Turkish, and then translated them into English.

The women we interviewed ranged in age from their 50s to their 70s; many had retired from the factory while others left work to start a family. They were employed at varying ages from 1964 until production ceased in 1995. While many of these women entered work in their late teens, a few began working as early as age 13, which until more recently were not unusual in Turkey. Nearly all of the interviews (thirteen of seventeen) took place at Kadir Has University, the former site of the factory. This generated no small amount of emotion for many of the women. All of the women we spoke with, including those whose interviews were held elsewhere, claimed that they had visited the current site previously and followed the transformation of the factory into the university. Many spoke with great emotion even breaking into tears during the interviews.

Despite the extensive renovation, most of the interviewees could still identify the areas where they had worked. Many described various aspects of the factory in detail: from the sound of the whistle that signaled the start of a shift, to the ever-present tobacco dust on the production floor as well as the placement of machines or desks in the offices where they worked. It was quite clear that these women were enormously attached to their place of work. At Cibali-Tekel women dominated work in nearly all areas with men acting as supervisors, engaging in heavy labor and ensuring that the production machines continued to run. Some women entered the factory as clerks while a great many transitioned into office positions after working in production, although several retired directly from the production line.

A history of the former Cibali Tekel Tobacco and Cigarette Factory

When tobacco production began in the Ottoman Empire in the 1600s, it quickly became a prized commodity. Recognizing the economic potential of tobacco,

the first tobacco monopoly [*Tütün Tekeli*] was established under the Ottoman rule in 1861 (Bozdemir 2011). The monopoly remained under the regulation of the Ottomans until 1883 and later to compensate for the Empire's debt, it was relinquished to a predominantly European controlled Régie management and hence the factory's name: Cibali Régie Factory. Under Régie administration tobacco production continued until the newly established Republic of Turkey took control of the output and sale of tobacco in 1925.

A survey of historical and cultural sources pinpoints the importance of the Cibali-Tekel and its environs in the history of culture, economy, industry and labor in Turkey. (Alioğlu and Alper 1990; Balsöy 2009; Bozdemir 2011; Doğu 2014, 2015; Şenesen and Akduran 2005). For much of the history of the factory, workers lived within easy traveling distance, and this included several of the women we spoke with who lived in the immediate neighborhood. The factory was initially designed by the architects Alexandre Vallauray and Hovsep Aznavur for the Régie Management in 1884, and later Eugene Battari remodeled the spaces for production. The site was spread over ten-thousand-square meters and was essentially a city unto itself with its own police force, fire department, medical unit, canteen, and daycare center (Bozdemir 2011).

With approximately 2000 workers in its prime, the factory's first shift began promptly at 7:30 am, and tardiness was not tolerated. At its peak, there were three shifts (7:30 am–3:30 pm; 3:30 pm–11:30 pm and 11:30 pm–7:30 am). The factory operated 24 h a day, six days a week. As production declined throughout the 1980s, the number of shifts was reduced to two and eventually to one until operation ceased altogether and the factory doors were locked in 1995. Zeynep who lived directly behind the factory recalled: '[m]ost people were living around here. When the factory shut down, maybe 3000 people were hurt. When the workers left, all the shops went out of business. It wasn't like this. There was so much activity.' (Interview with Zeynep İlhan, 28 November 2013, Istanbul, Turkey). Of the women in this study, only one remains in the neighborhood today. While the district has been experiencing extensive gentrification alongside the University, the women claim that it has still not recovered to its prior state.

Considering the historical transformation of the factory, Cibali-Tekel should be identified both as a space based on the capitalistic relations of the market and a representational space. From its past (factory) and into the present (private university), the space has always been associated with and served capitalist modes of production. However, Cibali-Tekel as a space is also formed by social production and reproduction which is differentiated from a Marxist understanding of production. Lefebvre claims that 'the producers of space have always acted in accordance with a representation, while the 'users' passively experienced whatever was imposed upon them in as much as it was more or less thoroughly inserted into, or justified by, their representational space' (1992, 43–44). The Cibali-Tekel factory is nonetheless perceived – conceived – lived as 'frontal' relation of space, however,

not without registering an identification with its brand, which also represents its workers' by that name: 'Tekel Workers.'

In 1997, the property was leased to Kadir Has University. Following a full restoration of the property and buildings, the University took up residence in 2000 where it continues today. While Tekel maintains an archive of documentations, photographs, and paraphernalia from the factory, the University also acknowledges the history of the factory. Numerous site-specific installations of artifacts from the factory such as tobacco dryer units, machinery, and office settings are exhibited in the historical sections of the university. The fully functional lift, which provided service between the main entrance and the management floor is still in regular use. Additionally, the reproductions of the French master Guillaume Berggren's photographs, which the Régie management commissioned to document a panorama of life and labor in the factory in the late nineteenth century, are on permanent display throughout the public spaces of the campus (Figure 1).

In her innovative article Gülhan Balsöy (2009) examines Berggren's photographs employing a much-needed gendered historical analysis. She explicitly utilizes gender as a lens to depict the history of the sexual division of labor, the social conditions within the factory and the way that power functioned. Berggren's photographs, according to Balsöy, reveal critical facts about the reality of life and labor in the factory. First and foremost, they document that the majority of workers in the factory were women who outnumbered men even before the factory came



Figure 1. Guillaume Berggren, 'Main Area for Cigarette Production,' ca. 1890. Courtesy of Kadir Has University, Istanbul.

under Tekel's management. Moreover, some of the women worked with their heads uncovered, which at the time signifies them as non-Muslim. Balsöy's analysis is also consistent with other archival sources that substantiate the cosmopolitan mixture of Muslims, Jews, and Greeks which constituted the workforce at the factory and the domination of cigarette production by non-Muslims in other areas of the Empire. (Balsöy 2009).

While the factory labor force consisted of a mix of men and women from different ethnic and religious groups, their work was strictly divided by gender. Tasks were classified male and female and distributed as such. Not only were factory activities arranged by gender, but the factory space itself was also constructed along gender lines (Figure 2). Women worked in exclusively female areas except for male supervisors. Work given to women was considered unskilled with skilled labor and supervisory activities remaining in the hands of men. This same gendered organizational/spatial pattern seen in most of the Regie controlled tobacco factories throughout the Ottoman and post Ottoman periods (Betas 2016; Hadar 2007; Nacar 2014).

Although Balsöy provides us with a previously unseen view of life for women inside one of the many factories in Istanbul, she herself admits the limitations of her study: '[w]hat the photographs present is a de-contextualized setting, which tells us nothing about questions relating to those women's daily lives, their families, the neighborhoods they came from, their houses, whether they were tired or sick' (66). Moreover, Balsöy's study ends in the early part of the twentieth century. There is little of more recent history and the women themselves. Since that time, several



Figure 2. Sıtkı Kösemen, 'Women of Cibali-Tekel,' 1996. Courtesy of artist.

generations of women worked in the factory. Therefore, we build upon Balsöy's work, to showcase women's contribution to the more recent history of labor in Turkey and the ways in which the women who worked in Cibali-Tekel constructed their identities as workers.

A partial history of labor in Turkey

In 2009, Touraj Atabaki and Gavin D. Brockett edited a supplement for the *International Review of Social History* which acknowledges the extent to which issues of gender had been overlooked in labor history, and Turkey is no exception. Since at least the 1970s, feminists have attempted to remedy the general disregard that history has had the experiences of women workers (Hanson and Pratt 1995; Massey 1984; McDowell 1997, 2004, 2006, 2014; Pearson 1994, 1998; Tjandraningsih 2000).

In labor history, feminist scholars introduced the importance of such concepts as the family, the division of labor, leisure, and hierarchy into our understanding of work (Davidoff and Hall 1987; Tilly and Scott 1987). The work of these historians is crucial to our research; it centered on making women visible within existing categories recognized within labor history, particularly, women's presence in labor unions, strikes, and political action. More recently, feminist scholars of history, labor, and geography have focused on the limits of the workspace and the need to supplement our understanding with the ways that labor intersects with race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality (Balsöy 2009; O'Neil and Bilgin 2013; Ruwanpura and Hughes 2016; Tjandraningsih 2000).

Turkish labor history, in many respects, has followed international trends in that it has been dominated by the modernization thesis which assumed that with modernization, westernization, and secularism, a healthy working class would follow (Atabaki and Brockett 2009). This tradition has led to an emphasis on the development of the working class into groups capable of political action and the evolution of a working-class identity. Some have even posited that the state advanced the status of the worker rather than any organic growth from the workers themselves (Atabaki and Brockett 2009). Feroz Ahmad (1994) counters this idea claiming that an independent worker's consciousness existed although it was the target of repeated attempts to co-opt it in service to the state and the newly emerging national identity. Once again, here, there is a decided lack of any focus on gender; rather the assumption is that the identity of the worker is one that subsumes gender. Turkish labor history has also tended to concentrate on the links between labor and left-leaning parties (Ayata and Ayata 2007; Shishmanov 1965). Again, the focus on large institutional structures such as political parties tends to obscure gender. Perhaps more than anything, Turkish labor history lacks any real attention to the actual lives of workers and women workers in particular (Atabaki and Brockett 2009).

Our work attempts to intervene here and ask the question whether the women who worked in Cibali-Tekel viewed themselves as workers. Work by Jenny White

(2004) and İpek İlkkaracan (2000) has examined this issue, and many women see their income producing activities in the context of the prevailing gender ideology which often defines women by their roles as wives and mothers rather than as workers (Beşpınar 2010; İlkkaracan 2000; White 2004). White's work makes clear that some women embed their understanding of their work in a set of social meanings that allows them to essentially negate that they are working while claiming that they were helping to support their families (White 2004). In direct contrast, the women we spoke with clearly identified as workers while, at the same time, viewed their work as vital to supporting their families. In no way, did they try to obfuscate their identity as workers.

Despite a long history of working women in Turkey including the pioneering workers of Cibali-Tekel, the country now has the lowest female labor force participation rates in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries with just 35% for women aged between 15 and 64 in 2015 in comparison to an OECD average of 63%. (OECD Stat 2017). This rate is even lower for urban women. Despite rising education rates, the number of women working for pay in Turkey has continued to decline in recent decades plunging from 72% in 1955 to its current rate (O'Neil and Bilgin 2013; Tansel 2002). One primary factor has been massive rural to urban migration where women who were once engaged in agricultural work 'drop out' of the labor force and engage mainly in housework (Tansel 2002). Although rates have been on the rise over the past decade, Turkey has only been able to reach 35% female labor force participation. (OECD Stat 2017). Dedeoğlu (2010) makes clear that one reason for this is the invisibility of women in the Turkish workforce. Particularly in the garment industry, one of Turkey's most important, women provide largely informal labor which renders them invisible and undervalued.

There have been numerous explanations offered for the lack of women participating in the labor force in Turkey. (See O'Neil and Bilgin 2013). Kardam and Toksöz (2014) assert that women are prevented from entering the labor force by prevailing cultural attitudes which continue to define women primarily concerning their domestic role. When women can enter the paid labor force, they face gender-based discrimination in the workplace (Kardam and Toksöz 2014). Female labor force participation rates are relatively low in Middle Eastern countries when compared to European Union (EU) and OECD countries (Ruwanpura and Hughes 2016), and Bilgin and Kılıçarslan (2008) attribute this to both cultural and religious factors including an unequal division of labor in the home (İlkkaracan 2000), childcare responsibilities and the reluctance of many married women to work while their children are young (Acar 2008).

Workplace as a space of Solidarity: the gendered, but not sexualized space of the factory

Even though photographs cannot fully recreate the nuance of women's actual experiences, the workplace they captured was in many ways similar to that

captured in Berggren's photographs and later in an Istanbul-based photographer Sitki Kösemen's documentation of the factory (Figure 2). Showing female workers sifting tobacco from dust and then loading it into machines, Kösemen's vivid, colorful and lifelike representation of the factory centered on women's work showcasing a parallel narrative to that of our interviewees. Hanife elaborates on the difficulties of working with the unprocessed tobacco at the entrance of the factory:

I had severe nose bleeds because of the poor health conditions in the workspace. There were times when I only realized my nose was bleeding upon seeing bloody lumps of tobacco while I was working on the machine. I worked 15 years in that dust. (Interview with Hanife Kalkan, 9 January 2014, Istanbul)

Despite the physical or psychological hardship of the work that women described, it became very apparent that for the women who worked in Cibali-Tekel, the factory as space held a central place in their lives. Their words were pregnant with meaning and their voices often thick with emotion as they described how, for them, this workplace was somehow different and extraordinary. Ayşe puts it quite succinctly when she said, 'this was a different institution' (Interview with Ayşe Kalem, 30 November 2013, Istanbul). She adds, 'when I started work in Cibali, they said it was a university. My mother-in-law still says it. At that time, it was a *Hayat Üniversitesi* [Life University]'. Hanife also elaborates what many others repeated that Cibali-Tekel was a kind of university:

Among ourselves, we use to call this place a university. Look, now, it became one. At university people, just study in an area, but if you could only know what we experienced, what we lived and what we saw. Sweet, joy, sorrow, if only you could know ...

Hüsniye adds that the factory was a 'hope. Not just for us. It was a hope for Turkey. Turkey's first university, I mean a 'Worker's University' (Interview with Hüsniye Şimşek, 26 December 2013, Istanbul). Perhaps it is not surprising that these women describe the factory as such given that many were in their teens when they started work there. For many, it was their first job, the place where they experienced their first taste of independence, met their husbands and made life-long friends. Additionally, the women repeatedly refer to this place, as such; there is little doubt that many lessons were learned. In this respect, the factory may very well have resembled a university as Senem point outs:

I have completed Cibali University. You gain so much experience; you learn so much. The work life in this place was like a university for me. (Interview with Senem Gül, 19 December 2013, Istanbul)

Gürsel recalls, 'we spent our best years here. We always said to each other. We studied at Life University' (Interview with Gürsel Düzgüner, 28 November 2013, Istanbul). Without doubt, there is no small amount of nostalgia that informs these recollections, yet it is these women's perception of the space and their experiences which also transformed it into a space that is lived, that remains so meaningful.

One of the most significant aspects of the factory's work culture centered on solidarity and the ways in which it was cultivated. All of the women reported a

level of respect in the working environment and this extended to relations with men. Hüsniye describes:

Our relationships [with male workers] were excellent. Because if you had an ache, all your friends [both male and female] felt it. If you had pain, all your friends felt it. For example, let's say today you had a bill due, for instance, 2000 lira. That day we would gather that money among ourselves right away, and that money would see to your needs. On a different day, another friend's needs would be seen too. There was a nurturing dialogue between workers. You drew strength from your friends and then without fear you could get on top of your work.

For these women, the uniqueness of this conceived space stems, at least in part, from the solidarity that existed among workers. Celebrations of holidays, weddings and births were a regular occurrence in their everyday lives, which set the tone of social relations in the workplace. Within the walls of the factory there existed a work culture based on respect, sharing, and friendship which yielded an unusual degree of camaraderie. Most of the women we interviewed have maintained close friendships with the women they met in the factory. Aysel says, '[w]e shared things, which we wouldn't be able to share with our siblings' (Interview with Aysel Aydın, 28 November 2013, Istanbul). Gürsel echoed the sentiment: 'You can't find the kind of friendship we had in any other workplace.' In fact, she attributes her recovery from a blood disease in part to the support she received from her co-workers in Cibali.

Although all the interviewees reported that social relations within the factory were good, several remarked on the difficulties of being a woman worker in the 1980s in Turkey. Hatice who was a labor union leader of Cibali-Tekel recognized the intersection between gender, ethnicity, and religion:

Women were working at the factory since the beginning, but not Muslim women, Armenian women. Later Muslim women started to work. [...] It was a factory where the women's labor was a dominant presence. (Interview with Hatice Görgü, 30 March 2013, Istanbul)

Ayşe adds, 'there were those who were embarrassed to admit that they worked at Tekel. Women at Tekel and Tekel workers were looked at in that way.' Despite the negative perceptions of women workers that were present at that time none of the women we interviewed recalled any instances of sexual harassment. In fact, they were quite emphatic about the absence of abuse in the workplace. Oya quickly responded to our question: 'no, no. Never' (Interview with Oya Sevin, 20 Aralık 2013, Istanbul). Hanife elaborates: 'I had no trouble. I am still in contact with my brothers from Tekel. We were like siblings; they were always proud of me.'

Hüsniye points to the segregated nature of the work which may have offered some amount of protection to the often very young women working in the factory. She tells us that 'the male workers were the supervisors, mechanics, or porters. You only saw them in the cafeteria and at the machines. You couldn't see them otherwise, but there was nothing but a cordiality.' Mukaddes remembers the funeral of their chief whom she referred to as *Rana Bey* [Mr Rana]: 'there were five hundred of

us in our aprons. He was like a father to many of us; he was our marriage witness.' (Interview with Mukaddes Tülay, 27 February 2014, Istanbul). Mübiye tells us that even when a light bulb needed changing the male workers requested permission to enter into the female dominated workspaces. She claims, 'there were curtains to separate, we weren't being seen, as there were many single young men employed in the factory' (Interview with Mübiye Altaş, 27 February 2014, Istanbul). According to Sabriye and some of the women we interviewed, the enforced distance between men and women seems to have helped to prevent abuse in the working and, at the same time, allowed for a respectful atmosphere characterized by sibling like relations (Interview with Fikret Sabriye Güngör. 27 February 2014, Istanbul). Hüsniye continues:

No. I never came across or experienced that other kind. They could go outside and do whatever they want. Inside never, I never saw anything like that or heard anything.

Although none of the women reported any harassment, this does not mean that relationships did not emerge from this workplace. In fact, any number of women, including several in this study, met and married their husbands at Cibali-Tekel. Male and female relations at the factory also included those not sanctioned by society at the time. Ayşe explains:

The romantic relationships that we heard about were also mutual. I never heard of [sexual] harassment. [...] We heard there were relationships, but the number wouldn't have passed the fingers on your hand. These are the people who gave our institution a bad name.

Ayşe's comments reflect a certain amount of anxiety considering the complex dynamics of sexual harassment in the workplace. As Kessler-Harris reminds us '[g]ender also participates in class formation by setting normative standards for appropriate behavior, education, and aspirations in ways that further influence class relations, structures, and values' (2007, 6–7). We see this in the narratives about women who worked at the factory as being seen as 'certain kinds of women.' However, the important distinction that Ayşe and other women made focuses on what they believed was the consensual aspect of these relationships. Despite the apparent consent of these relationships, Ayşe's disapproval is evident as she blames these women for giving the institution and the women who worked there a bad reputation.

Workplace hierarchies and the significance of women's work

Nearly all the women state that there was a family like atmosphere in the factory, yet this does not mean that there was no hierarchy. Women dominated factory life in overall numbers, but it was men who remained in charge. Despite the positive ways in which these women remember their work and workplace, there were occurrences when power and position were used in anything but a friendly manner. Ayşe describes one instance:

I had just started work. There was an older man in accounting. That man was saying something about an incident. I don't remember the incident, but I remember what he told me: 'You are brand new here and why are you even speaking?' And, I shut my mouth. [...] You were required to keep your silence. There was dominance from the elders.

Ayşe's experience with her boss is a significant depiction of the patriarchal hierarchy of work relationships not only in terms of gender but also of age and status. Zehra's account of her work as a cook's aid illustrates the sameness of gender-based hierarchy in the factory: 'The main cook was a man; I was his aid. I was doing most of the prepping, cooking and cleaning with the directions of the cook' (Interview with Zehra Yalçın, 15 March 2013, Istanbul).

One distinctive photograph from the factory's time under Tekel management indicates that the factory was always managed and controlled by men while women worked collectively and mostly in production (Figure 3). Parallel to our interviewees' narrative, the first photograph shows a large room full of women wearing white headscarves, for protection and uniform like white dresses. Seated at long tables women are sifting tobacco leaves in the boxes in front of them. One man is standing in the center, presumably overseeing them. Dated between 1935 and ca.1947, the second photograph shows three young women with two of them



Figure 3. 'Women workers in a tobacco plant' (The title devised by Library staff). Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-10141. ca. 1950. Print; 28 × 34 cm. On back: "Basın ve Yayın Genel Müdürlüğü, Tekel Tütün Fabrikası, İstanbul [Directorate General of Press and Information, Tobacco Factory, Istanbul]. The photograph also lists a name, Naci Serez.

facing the camera (Figure 4). The photo was shot, perhaps, as the women were called out to pose for the camera amidst piles of boxes that are visible in the frame. These visual documentations demonstrate that the gender and spatial arrangements of women's labor in the factory remained largely unchanged since 1884.

For the women of Cibali-Tekel, their work was enormously important. In part, this is due to the unique atmosphere that the women repeatedly claimed existed at the factory, but work also proved symbolically important. Hüsniye put it succinctly when she stated, 'my job was more important than everything. My work came before my housework, my husband, and my relatives. My work came before everything.' For these women, the factory was a place to earn, but it also provided the identity claim of worker and these women were/are very proud of the work that they did. Many even refused the opportunity to become civil servants although much of this had to do with the fact that workers earned more and had more rights at that time.

In defining the importance of work, some women emphasized the potential for independence that having an income could provide. Oya explains:

To have a job means to be able to stand on one's own feet. It means to have economic freedom. At least as a woman, you do not have to be dependent on your spouse.



Figure 4. 'Cibâli tütün fabrikasında işçi kızlar, İstanbul' [Worker girls at Cibali Tobacco Factory, Istanbul] Basın ve Yayın Genel Müdürlüğü, [Directorate General of Press and Information, Ankara, Turkey]. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-10140. 1935 and ca. 1947. Gelatin silver print: 12 × 17 cm. Donated to the Library of Congress in 1948 by Dr Perihan Çambel. On back: Arşiv No. 2020. Basın ve Yayın Genel Müdürlüğü, Tütün Fabrikası, İstanbul [Archive No. 2020 Directorate General of Press and Information, Tobacco Factory, Istanbul].

This kind of independence was hard won at a time when few women were in the paid labor force. For Solmaz it was her buying power that proved to be essential:

I could bring my children a piece of bread. I could buy my baby's formula. I was getting extra money for my kid. I was able to hire a nanny to take care of my child. I purchased a refrigerator. I bought a television. I could travel. I could go out with my friends. I worked twenty years, and I bought this [referring to her house], and I now live here. (Interview with Solmaz Kurtay, 26 December 2013, Istanbul)

Hüsniye adds that the work was not just important for what it brought in the present but also for what it meant for the future: '[w]e felt we have a future here. We thought our children would work here, next to us in our circle.' Finally, for Senem she felt she owed her employers: 'if I am taking the money then, I need to give something. I need to give its rightful due. I ought to be deserving of the money that I am receiving.'

While work proved both symbolically important and economically necessary, the burden of work and family life at times proved overwhelming, and the conditions that existed in Turkey during the 1970s and 1980s contributed to this Senem recalls:

At home, we had to light the heating stove. I used to haul coal from downstairs. At that time, there were no disposable diapers. I would come home from work after midnight. [...] When we clock out at 12:00 am, there were no buses running. When we had 7:30 shift in the morning there was no shuttles. The buses were always very crowded, packed with workers. Many were passing me by while I had the baby in one arm and other necessities on the other. On the bus, no one would give you a seat.

Similar to Senem, many related the challenge of being a working mother. In particular, the added burden of cloth diapers. Solmaz puts it quite succinctly:

I had to use cloth diapers which needed to be hand washed, starched and ironed. It was brutal. Now everything is easy [referring to disposable diapers]. I had to bring clean diapers to the child care center. I was making baby food at home.

Most claim they had to work because their families needed the money, and this meant that they could often not afford to take time off, even when they needed to. Solmaz elaborates:

Our salaries were not that high at that point. We had a lot of bills, so I never took leave and went on a vacation. I didn't have a social life. I had to pay those bills. If I took leave, my salary would go down; I couldn't get any overtime. I would not be able to pay my bills that month.

Another challenging aspect in the lives of these women was the lack of adequate time off after the birth of children. It left a mark on several of the women. There is a sense that they feel they failed their children somehow. Oya says,

I am still sad for my son mostly because when he was born, I didn't have anyone who could look after him. My sister-in-law looked after him a bit. When the day care center opened, I took him there. The day care was a significant advantage for us.

When we asked Oya about maternity leave, she explains:

I only took forty days of maternity leave, and it took its toll, economically. We were living in a rental, and I had one month of paid leave. Yes, my son was forty days old when I

went back to work. After that, I took him to my brother's wife. I would leave him in the morning. For a year, I had two hours of *süt izni* (daily leave for breastfeeding). Instead of clocking out at 4:00 pm, I left work around 2:00 pm.

Clearly, the fact that she needed to return to work so soon after her son's birth remained a source of pain for her. Similarly, Solmaz also regretted having to be separated so early from her children and its consequences:

My oldest daughter couldn't even finish the fifth grade because she had to take care of her sister. [...] I had to stop breastfeeding my child when she was three months old. This one's mother [pointing to her granddaughter] I took her to the daycare. At the nursery, there were caretakers. My child didn't know me the way she knew of her caretakers because I was unable to look after my kid the way they did.

Long before the idea of having it all or being superwoman, these women experienced this challenging reality and the too often subsequent realization that no one can do it all, at least not without some consequences. For Solmaz and Oya, the economic necessity of having to work to support their families left lingering doubts about the job they did as mothers.

For the women who were mothers, the importance of the daycare within the premises of the factory proved pivotal. They referred to the daycare as a godsend and it allowed them to earn a living without the worry of leaving their children behind. The presence of the center within the factory allowed women to better balance their identities as working mothers. These women brought their children to work and during their shift the daycare center was also a place where these women could resume their roles as mothers. Many reported visiting the children during work hours to check in, feed and play with their children. The presence of an on-site day care center allowed many of these women to be both workers and mothers.

Interestingly, even though many of the challenges that these women described stemmed from the fact that they were women, and expected to maintain the culturally dominant domestic roles – as wives and as mothers – in addition to their paid work, these women did not employ a gender lens when recounting their working lives. Not one of the women we interviewed discussed their hardships in terms of gender and/or sexuality or the gendered expectations of society. For them, it appears that the role was 'natural' although they were all very clear about the difficulty of trying to be all things to all people. Pembe explains:

With kids, you experience a lot of challenges. As a woman, of course, you have housework, to attend the needs of your child. For example, in the mornings my husband would get mad. He would get up and say I wasn't getting ready quick enough. I was always late for work because I had to take the kids to the daycare and I was the only one getting them ready to go out. There was a whistle of the factory. The kids would say 'hurry up mom, the whistle is blowing.' My daughter would run ahead of me as the factory door was closing to hold the door, saying 'my mom is coming.' (Interview with Pembe Berberoğlu, 5 December 2013, Istanbul)

In spite of any number of hardships and a social environment that did not look favorably upon women working outside the home, these women were and still

are very proud of their status as workers. Their memories are no doubt laced with nostalgia. However, they still claim the title of the worker. Many had the chance to become civil servants [*memur*] but rejected this move. At that time, civil servants enjoyed the respect that the status brought, but they often received lower wages which made a move into the civil service less appealing. Senem elaborates:

I had more compensation as a worker, but regarding the position, you could advance further in your career if you were a civil servant and gave orders, but your salary will always be lower. You cannot have all the compensation that the workers have. So, I remained a worker. [*işçi*]

While we recognize that civil servants are also workers, we have chosen to keep the terms civil servant and worker rather than replace them with the terms white collar and blue collar workers in order to keep faith with the Turkish that was used in the original interviews. For example, when we asked about the distinction between civil servants and workers Nursel replies:

There was a big difference. [...] I worked in the accounting department as a worker. When Tekel announced that the whole department could be civil servants, none of us wanted that. We always thought it was better to go downstairs to work on the production line than becoming civil servants. [...] There was always solidarity, unity among workers. If you were a civil servant, then you fell on the other side of that. (Interview with Nursel İnan, 29 November 2013, Istanbul)

Nursel's choice to remain a worker was motivated, in part, by the culture of solidarity that she found among workers. Her evaluation of the different positions of employers' hints at a Marxist understanding of workers' consciousness, work culture and the conditions of production at that time. She is also very clear about the dividing line between workers and civil servants, and that crossing those lines had repercussions. Largely for economic but also for reasons of camaraderie many of these women were not willing to give up their status as workers. The women gave the same answer almost verbatim when we asked for their assessment of the transformation of the space of the factory into a university, a place for education. Zeynep summarized how all the women felt:

Imagine, now, 3000 people ... not all of them lost their jobs, at least not immediately, but, still ... Tekel distributed the Cibali workers to its other facilities or factories all around the country. However, I am content that the space is now a place for education. (Interview with Zeynep İlhan, 28 November 2013, Istanbul, Turkey)

Conclusion

This study presents the findings of our oral history research with women who worked at the former Cibali Tekel Tobacco and Cigarette Factory. The factory was a space occupied mostly by women, but it was still a controlled space run by men, which might have further entrenched patriarchy or at least sustained the status quo. Despite the presence of gendered concerns none of the women in this study employed the language of feminism in the telling of their stories. Moreover, they

did not identify themselves as women workers, but as workers, although they all related that being a woman and a worker was challenging because of the need to balance work with overwhelming domestic responsibilities. Aside from the epic solidarity, we found that it was the on-site day care center that most alleviated their burden. While almost all of these women were cognizant and proud of their roles in advancing worker's rights in Turkey only a few women acknowledge their experiences as a manifestation of the advancement of women's rights. These women employed a myriad of 'work-place strategies' which yielded a sense of empowerment, however, these 'tactics' did little to 'question or change the existing patriarchal value system. [...] They are far from creating new gender-egalitarian rules or empowering women collectively' (Beşpınar 2010, 530–531).

Although these women workers from Cibali-Tekel, related positive experiences from the workplace, the factory did not function as a women's space. Spatially, they mostly worked in a segregated rather than a diverse workforce. However limited, these women felt empowered. For the most part, they were/are concerned with survival, keeping a job while maintaining their duties in the family. Their narration of Cibali Tekel speaks volumes regarding how they valued each other and the solidarity they created, which formulated their experiences in the workplace and forged the factory as space. They all pinpoint in one way or another the significance in working, not the work itself. They took pride in their accomplishments, and dignity was derived from a job well-done. What they perceived as the distinct place was Cibali-Tekel, a Life University, was, after all, a conceived space.

For the women in this study, working at Cibali-Tekel was not the culmination of an educational journey or, for some, even a choice, rather it was the work available at the time, and it allowed these women to sustain themselves and their families. Fatma speaks for many of the women who interviewed when she makes clear the importance of their time at the factory. She states: 'I am here, because of my work in Cibali-Tekel.' (Interview with Fatma Aslan. 31 Mart 2014, Istanbul).

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