WHERE BEAST MEETS WEST

On the tourist beaches of Turkey, young women flirt and frolic — but go further inland, and a mere glance in the direction of a man can mean death. As Turkey edges towards membership of Europe and western equal rights, Christine Toomey reports on the violent clash of East and West, and the deadly social divide it is leaving in its wake. Photographs: Lynsey Addario

Bikini-clad women relax at Burc beach in Istanbul. Above left: the grave of El Fatiha Semse Allak, the victim of an 'honour killing' in Diyarbakir, southeast Turkey

The room the father ushers me into is small and bare. In one corner stands a tall wooden wardrobe; in another, a television concealed beneath an embroidered cloth. The floor is covered with a carpet that is ragged but clean. It must have taken his wife many hours to wash it of their daughter's blood. For an hour before the father arrives home, his wife has been describing events on the morning 14-year-old Berruan died. As difficult as it is to comprehend any such death, the more she talks about what happened, the less what she says makes sense.

Snow lay thick on the ground that day last January. Her husband and 15-year-old son had left the house. She was tending to domestic chores outside when she heard a gunshot. She immediately thought it must be a hunter shooting birds, she says. "But then my little boy ran outside screaming, 'Come quickly! Come quickly! My sister has killed herself!'"

The mother ran inside and saw her daughter's body lying on the floor of the cramped room that the father later shows me. "At first I thought she must have fallen and hit her head. But then I saw the gun. There was no reason for her to do that," Berruan's mother insists. "She was so happy with us. She had no problems – no problems at all."

As she talks, we sit on the doorstep of the family's dilapidated home in a small village near Batman in Turkey's southeastern Anatolia. This area has become notorious in recent years for the high number of suicides, particularly of girls and young women whose despair is said to stem from their severely restricted lives. But women's groups and human-rights workers believe a more sinister explanation lies behind many of the deaths. They're convinced a growing number of girls and women are being locked in rooms by their families, with a gun, poison or a noose, and left there until they kill themselves.

Such deaths are referred to here as "forced suicides" – murder by any other name. Whether Berruan was one of those pressured by her family to take her own life is impossible to know. But such suspicion now surrounds any such death in the community that, shortly after she died, one local Batman newspaper reporting her death carried the headline "Was it suicide or murder?"

Yet those who expose domestic violence risk being rapidly silenced in this country. In recent months, three national TV talk shows have been pulled off the air after two women appearing as guests were shot shortly afterwards – one by her son, another by her husband – for denouncing domestic abuse and so "tainting" their family's honour. Turkey is not a country where the concept of free expression has as yet sunk deep. Those in the media who touch on other subjects considered too sensitive also risk breaking the law – 33 journalists and writers currently face trial on charges of "insulting Turkey's national character". For, as far as many are concerned, Turkey is a country on a knife edge.

That this vast, mainly Muslim country of 71m is where East meets – and often clashes violently with – West, has become a hoary adage. But rarely since Kemal Ataturk founded this republic in the ashes of the Ottoman empire in 1923 and ordered it to "face west" has this been truer than now. As the country battles to balance its aspirations to continue to modernise, and so improve its chance of becoming a member of the EU, with the desire of many to maintain conservative and often religious tradition, many subjects are thought best swept under the carpet. In recent years it has been Turkish women who have been at the forefront of this battle.

As Berruan's mother speaks, her grandmother kneels close by and mutters: "It was her destiny." Berruan's mother nods. "What can you do if God writes on your forehead that it is time to die?" When I ask them to describe what sort of girl Berruan was, they use words like "beautiful", "strong" and "fearless". They say she did well at school until she left when she was 11, as most girls in this area do – if they go to school at all.

They insist again and again that she was "a good girl" who "never cast her eyes outside the home". But to be born strong-willed or beautiful or clever can be a curse for a girl in parts of Turkey such as this. To attract attention can be a death sentence. Once the words "*adi cikmis*" – translated roughly as "her name is known" or "she has become notorious" – are uttered, the girl or woman of whom they are said stands little chance of survival. A "family council", or kangaroo court, is convened at which it is decided how she who is "notorious" should die. Such ritualised deaths are deemed by those responsible to be an honour killings and blood feuds. According to a recent Turkish police report, the true figure is believed to be three or four times higher.

Such wholesale blood-letting, believed by many to be on the increase, appears to be of little concern to more than a third of the population. A Turkish parliamentary commission set up last year to investigate honour killings found that 37% of those surveyed thought a woman should be killed for committing adultery, while many others supported punishments such as facial disfigurement, with 64% thinking the husband should be the one to carry out such punishments.

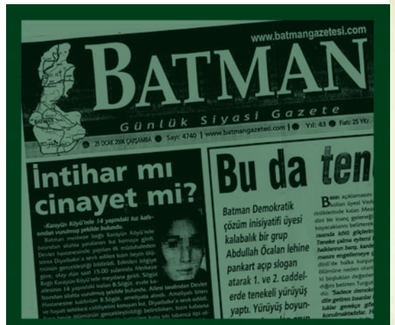
In communities such as Batman, and where Berruan died, it is enough for a girl to glance for a few seconds too long where men are gathered to cause lethal offence. Or to request a love song on the radio, or wear jeans, or a skirt that is a little too short. Or, however unwittingly, to catch the eye of boy or man who then flirts with, seduces or rapes her. Death sentences have been imposed here on daughters, wives and sisters for all of the above. The "guilty" have been shot, strangled, stoned, had their throats slit or been buried alive.

Nobody in the small village will say if young Berruan's "name became known". But this is not a place where strangers are welcome. Life here, as in many other rural areas of Turkey, is run along feudal lines little changed for centuries. It is also a predominantly Kurdish area and the heartland of the Kurdish separatist PKK guerrilla movement. Berruan's father, he later mentions in passing, was imprisoned for 10 years as a terrorist. So, as a foreign woman asking awkward questions, my presence on his doorstep triggers alarm.

"What are they doing here?" he shouts at his wife when he returns to find my male interpreter and I in front of the family home. For us to have gone inside would have exposed his wife to the risk of being "talked about"; only he is permitted to show us into the three-room dwelling, which he does, eventually, to point to the room where his daughter died. He eyes us suspiciously, but then decides to adopt a more conciliatory stance. He eventually takes pictures of his daughter as a young girl from his pocket. "How sweet she was then," he says. "She used to talk about wanting to join the police and even about becoming a lawyer. I told her, 'You are free to do what you want.' But then she decided to stay at home, watch television, help with the cleaning," he says. "Maybe it was from the cleaning that she learnt that I kept my gun on top of the wardrobe."

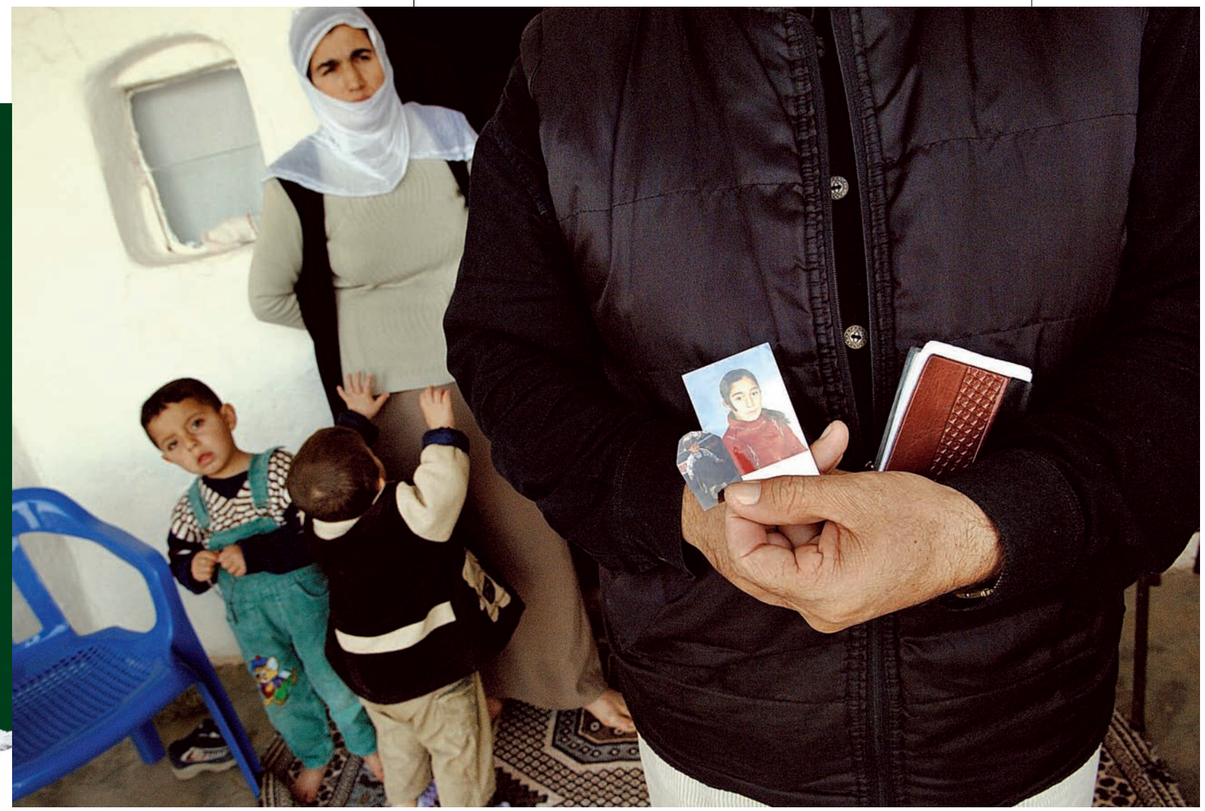
When I ask if he has any recent photographs of his daughter, he says every trace of her has been removed from the house. "We put everything that could remind us of her in a bag, including her Koran, and gave it to the poor." When I ask his reaction to the newspaper headline raising questions about her death, he swats the air with his hand, as if batting a fly. The interview comes to a swift conclusion after that.

During the past five years, 281 girls and women have attempted suicide in Batman (population approximately 250,000) – three times the number of attempts by men – and ⟩⟩→



Above: 'Was it suicide or murder?' asks a local paper after 14-year-old Berruan's death

Women's groups believe girls are being locked in rooms, with a gun, poison or a noose, and left there until they kill themselves



Above: Berruan's father holds up pictures of her as a child, a few weeks after she shot herself. Below: a more relaxed side of Turkey – the Reina club in Istanbul. Left: schoolgirls in Batman

"honour killing" – a deadly oxymoron meaning her behaviour has offended the "*namus*", or honour, of male members of the family. Only by killing her, they believe, can the family's honour be restored and its "slate be cleaned".

Turkey is not, of course, the only country where honour killings take place. The United Nations states – and it is believed to be a great underestimate – that more than 5,000 women are killed across the world every year by relatives who accuse them of bringing shame on their families. The majority occur in the Middle East. But British police are currently investigating more than a hundred such suspected crimes among minority communities in this country. In Turkey over the past six years, an average of one or two women have died every week owing to

PHOTOGRAPHS: LYNSEY ADDARIO/CORBIS


Yasemin Bozkurt
Heykeli dikilecek kadınım

The TV hosts Aysenur Yazici (above) and Yasemin Bozkurt (inset) had their shows pulled off air for exposing domestic violence

43 succeeded, the youngest being a 12-year-old girl. "Every suicide of a girl or woman should be looked at with suspicious eyes," argues Nebahat Akkoc, the director of a women's support organisation called Ka-Mer in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir. Just how many suicides are "forced", Akkoc and other human-rights workers admit, is impossible to say. "One girl who survived told us how her family stood watching as she cut her wrists. They then silently closed the door on her and walked away." Akkoc also talks of other survivors, who have made it to the shelter her organisation runs, describing how their families have told them: "You are going to die anyway, so why let your brother go to prison for killing you? Why not do it yourself?"

In the twisted minds of those who would force a wife, daughter or sister to end her own life, there is a lethal logic. Tragically, it has to do with EU demands for Turkey to improve its record on human rights if it is to stand a chance of being admitted as a member in the next 10 years. (Accession talks formally began in October 2005.) In response to EU demands to crack down on the widespread problem of honour killings in Turkey, punishments for such crimes have been increased. In the past a male relative could argue he had been "provoked" into killing a female relative because she had offended family honour. This would be enough to diminish the severity of his sentence to little more than a small fine or short prison sentence or, in the case of a minor, usually a matter of a few months – a legal get-out that often resulted in a young brother or cousin being ordered by his family to become the one to carry out the murder. But since Turkey reformed its penal code in the past two years, minors are no longer entitled to a reduction in sentence for committing such crimes. The conditions under which "provocation" can be entered as a plea in mitigation have also been severely reduced – though not abolished entirely. On March 3, for instance, a brother convicted of killing his sister by stoning her in a small community near Diyarbakir had his sentence of life imprisonment reduced to 13 years on the grounds that he had been "provoked". His sister, Semse Allak, had been raped by one of her father's friends. It took Semse months to die of her injuries. Her family refused to give her a burial; her body was claimed and buried by a women's organisation.

That those who give voice to women, exposing such atrocities, together with those who dare to speak out on other subjects long considered taboo in Turkey, should be silenced, both by the state and private enterprise, is a damning condemnation of a modern democracy.

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Ayse Ozgun drinks coffee in an elegant Istanbul restaurant as she rages against the cancellation of her TV programme Every Day last year. "There is a volcano of women's screams building up in this country, and we were one of the only ways this pent-up anger could be vented," says Ozgun. "They've pulled the shows that looked at the serious problems women face in our society and replaced them with a lot of music and dancing. Ha! Much easier," she laughs bitterly.

'Men in Turkey are simply not ready to see women talk about such problems'

Ozgun says she was warned more than 20 years ago, when she was the first to host a talk show aimed at women, that her job was to "entertain, not educate". After just three months the state TV show, considered too controversial, was cancelled. After four years abroad, Ozgun moved back to Turkey and began hosting her new show, Every Day – again aimed at a largely female audience – this time on a private channel. But following a lengthy run, this show was again cancelled in November, after a woman who appeared on the show to discuss how her family had forced her into a marriage was shot dead by her father. "You've ruined the reputation and honour of our family in front of millions of viewers," the father shouted at his 32-year-old daughter, a mother of two, before killing her.

"You cannot change such a sick mentality by expecting rapid change of men, but rather by educating women, informing them of their rights, giving them a voice," says Ozgun. "What we did was go to the nucleus of society, that of the mother and child. Tell people what was going on… This country will only develop if women are allowed to develop, and I won't shut up about that until they shut me up completely," says the feisty 61-year-old, who is now planning to start another programme for women – this time on the radio. "Where can girls and women go if they have a problem? They have nowhere. I believe there should be a social worker in every mosque in this country," she says, while stressing it's not in the teachings of Islam that the fault lies, but in many of the country's outdated customs that regard women as subservient.

Yet Aysenur Yazici, host of one of the other cancelled shows, believes it was partly because she exposed the custom of religious marriages that her programme You Are Not Alone was pulled by managers who claimed it had become "a social problem". This custom, where marriages are sealed with an unofficial religious ceremony and are not registered as civil unions, affords women no marital rights or protection. They can be instantly dissolved by the man, but not the women. "Nobody was killed as a result of my show," says Yazici, for 20 years one of Turkey's most respected news anchorwomen. "But I kept talking about these religious marriages. I kept telling women, 'You don't have to put up with the way you are being treated. You can go to the police, to a lawyer. You can fight!' And many did."

She cites one 15-year-old girl who came on the show who had been sold by her father as a bride to a man in his early sixties for 38 gold coins. "We phoned the gendarme where she lived and her father, husband and the imam who married them illegally were arrested and jailed for six months. We gave girls like her a voice. Now they have no voice again… Maybe I talked too much about democracy and this made a lot of people in the government feel very uncomfortable."

Since 2002 the government of this secular republic has been led by the charismatic ex-mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his Islamic Justice and Development party. While Erdogan's government is moderate and pro-western, he presides over a complex country increasingly torn between conservative, often religious, tradition and modern western ⟶

values. The conflict this creates is visible in the contrast between the lives of the metropolitan middle classes, where there is genuine equality between the sexes, and the rest of the country, where the majority are forced to scratch a living in feudal poverty, and where illiteracy – particularly among women – is entrenched.

Since taking power, Erdogan has focused on such uneven development. But he has also made moves to increase religious freedom. His efforts to end the ban on women wearing headscarves in schools and state offices has caused furious debate, as has his unsuccessful attempt two years ago to re-criminalise adultery; in a country where polygamy, though illegal, is practised by about 25% of the population, it was widely believed the latter would mostly be used to prosecute women. Such moves have fuelled accusations that the government is seeking to steer Turkey, the only predominantly Muslim country with strict separation between state and religion, towards Islamic rule.

In addition to highlighting the problems of this sexual battleground, Yazici says her show operated as an informal support network, with viewers offering women refuge and financial help. "Those women have been silenced now. Shows like mine have been replaced with dating games and light entertainment."

This appears to be the fate of Yasemin Bozkurt, the host of the third TV programme recently cancelled, Women's Voice. The show was pulled off air after a mother of five appeared to complain about being forced to marry an abusive husband. When she went home she was shot five times in the head and chest by her 14-year-old son, yelling at her that she'd "disgraced the family". Bozkurt's show has since been resurrected on a smaller private channel. But the day we arrive to speak to her, its content consists of an ageing actress reminiscing, a 77-year-old retired sea captain wanting a new wife, and a man looking for his sister. "Of course, I am very embarrassed murder is committed in the name of honour in my country, and many women here are seen merely as possessions," Bozkurt says defensively. "But men in Turkey are simply not ready to see women talk about such problems. And people had to learn that television is not a court where you can solve your problems."

Critics of the cancelled shows, including members of Turkey's parliament, condemned them for discussing domestic problems "in an indecently open way". But one of Turkey's leading columnists, Haluk Sahin, also a respected academic, has compared watching the original version of Bozkurt's show to "reading Emile Zola or Charles Dickens". Sahin is among the 33 journalists and writers who face up to 10 years in jail for speaking too openly on matters that "denigrate Turkishness". In Sahin's case, this meant daring to write about the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians during the first world war – the same taboo subject that saw the prominent author Orhan Pamuk facing similar charges, until EU pressure led them to be dropped. Up to the late 1990s, only China had more writers and journalists in jail than Turkey.

Two women stop to read a poster put up as part of a campaign against domestic violence

Regarding the cancelled shows, Sahin argues that it was the "sincerity" of the Turkish shows that was so striking, even "suffocating", he says, in the extent to which they showed the "degree of helplessness of the participants". Part of the reason for this helplessness is that Turkey has just two dozen shelters for battered women. "There is a desperate need for more shelters – if we were to follow EU standards, there should be one per 10,000 head of population," says Hulya Gulbahar, a lawyer defending victims of domestic abuse. There are signs of hope. In addition to tightening its penal code to increase punishment for honour killing, Turkey is one of the few countries where sustained domestic abuse is now legally defined as torture. But in many conservative communities, neither the police nor the judiciary show signs of upholding the new laws. "The key to closing that gap is education, letting men and women know things are changing, and that they must change," says Gulbahar.

In communities such as Diyarbakir and Batman, it is a long haul. Last autumn the British Council helped fund a poster campaign in the area to highlight the problems of domestic abuse, and encourage victims and those who witness it to seek help. While the campaign showed some signs of altering opinion, many of the posters were torn down by those who considered even the mention of such a problem shameful.

More recently, Amnesty International has run a nationwide letter-writing competition in Turkey to raise awareness of honour killings, entitled Talking to Guldunya – Guldunya Toren being the country's most notorious victim of such a crime. The 24-year-old fled her town in the region of Diyarbakir after being raped by a cousin and discovering she was pregnant. When she defied her family's order to marry the cousin, she was given a rope by one of her brothers and told to hang herself. Instead, Guldunya made the long journey to Istanbul to seek refuge with a sympathetic uncle. When she gave birth to a son in early 2004 she named him Hope, believing neither he nor she might have long to live. Weeks later her brothers tracked her down and shot and wounded her. In hospital, she made a heart-rending plea for the state to protect her. "Why do they shoot me? They should shoot the one who raped me," she told a newspaper. "I want to live with my baby. But I know they won't want me to live. I'm scared." Soon afterwards her brothers entered her unguarded hospital room and shot her in the head. Her baby was taken into care for fear they would kill the child too.

Sermons delivered in mosques are written by the state, and Guldunya's murder was strongly condemned shortly afterwards at Friday prayers nationwide. Her two brothers were sentenced to life imprisonment. Yet even though the killing received wide attention, a song written about Guldunya by one of the country's well-known singers was banned from state-run TV and radio.

But against the odds, women in Turkey whose expectation of life has been little more than that of a domestic chattel, are learning to stand up for themselves. Even in such conservative regions as the southeast – with a little help.

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The fortress-like building that houses one of Turkey's few women's refuges is patrolled by 16 armed guards. The safety of the eight women it shelters is considered so precarious, we have to swear to keep the location a secret before talking to them. It is here that we meet Zozan, 22, from a small community near Batman. Zozan talks nervously of how she was passed from the hands of one man to another after her mother died. She was first pressed into a religious marriage by her father, who threatened to kill her if she dared to disobey him. But when he failed to provide her with the expected dowry, even though she was by then pregnant, her husband beat her, divorced her on the spot and threw her out. After a period of sleeping rough, during which she lost the baby, Zozan entered into a second religious marriage with a total stranger, because she thought this would restore her "honour" in the eyes of her father. He, too, quickly became violent.

"My father told me I was an embarrassment, and in his eyes I was already dead: it would be better if I killed myself, and if I tried to go home he would kill me." These were not idle threats. When Zozan was growing up, one of her neighbours, a teenage girl, was buried alive by her family after "the word went out" that she had a boyfriend and was pregnant. An autopsy later revealed that the girl was still a virgin.

Zozan eventually went to the police for help. Instead of returning her to the house of her violent husband, as would have traditionally been the case, a sympathetic police officer took her to the refuge where we meet.

Despite the hardships, Zozan is optimistic. During the few months she will be given shelter, she hopes to learn a skill so that she can support herself. "I don't intend looking back. I don't even blame my father, I blame the traditions he grew up with," she says. When asked what she most looks forward to, she does not hesitate. "For the first time I'm going to celebrate July 2," she says, smiling broadly. "That day is my birthday." ■

Some names have been changed