

The shocking murder of trans activist Hande Kader says much about Turkey today

Wednesday 24 August 2016, by [SHAFAK Elif](#) (Date first published: 23 August 2016).

The death of the LGBT activist is not a side issue to the dark and turbulent times the country is living through - it is a symptom of them.

In the course of only a couple of months, citizens of Turkey have endured rising political tension, a series of terror attacks, and a horrific coup attempt that traumatised the entire nation and left nearly 300 dead. This week a Kurdish wedding in Gaziantep was attacked by Isis and many of the victims were children [1]. The suicide bomber who ruthlessly slaughtered innocents was himself a child of around 12-14, recruited and brainwashed by Islamic extremists. It feels as if every week something new and darker happens. There is no time to stop and contemplate, even less to digest; from one tragedy to the next, we citizens are being thrust like pebbles into a gushing river that has lost its way.

In a country situated in a turbulent region, a country where politics remains heavy and divisive, one of the most difficult subjects to bring up is sexuality. Not even the most liberal segments of society have the will to talk about gender politics as there are apparently more urgent issues to deal with. Thus women's rights and LGBT rights are being postponed, again and again, under the pretext that, "now is not the right time". But that much-awaited "right time" never arrives. Meanwhile, domestic violence escalates, honour killings continue, and the laws remain ineffective in dealing with rising femicide. In its 2016 report, Human Rights Watch stated: "Despite Turkey's ratification of the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, violence against women remains a significant concern."

This month a mutilated and burned body was found in an upmarket residential area in Istanbul. It was revealed to be Hande Kader, a 23-year-old transgender woman and well-known LGBT activist. She had been repeatedly raped and tortured by a gang. Kader was familiar to millions of Turks due to the fact that last year when the Istanbul Pride parade was suppressed with rubber bullets, water cannons and pepper spray, she was at the forefront of the resistance against police force, making her a figurehead for LGBT rights in Turkey.

Like many others in Turkey's trans community, Kader was a sex worker because she had no other choice. She needed money to pay for gender reassignment surgery; she needed money to live. "They don't give us any jobs, they don't even let us rent a house or a flat in a decent neighbourhood. So we have to go and look for places in crime-ridden neighbourhoods," explains Michelle Demishevich, a trans journalist and activist, over email. "Every day I wonder who among us will die next," she adds. "I can't even remember the number of funerals I attended in the last years."

Turkey has a higher rate of trans murders than anywhere in Europe. For those who manage to stay alive, every day is a new ordeal. As I was writing this article it emerged that Azize Ömrüm, a trans sex worker in İzmir, had taken her own life. Last year, Eylül Cansın did the same. They both said in their last statements that they could not deal with the oppression and discrimination any longer.

But the hate crime against Hande Kader has created a wave of shock and awareness even in parts of society that have hitherto turned a blind eye to the struggles of trans individuals. Despite the state of emergency in the country, hundreds have gathered in numerous cities to commemorate Kader and to ask for an urgent improvement in laws. One of the banners that was carried during the protests read: "Every day we are losing yet another one of us."

But neither women's rights nor LGBT rights are side issues. Not even in a country with deep political, international and social problems and conflicts. Rising machismo, nationalism and political tension are all inextricably related.

Istanbul has major significance for not only Turkey's LGBT community but for multiple sexual minorities across the Middle East. It is important to create safe spaces that celebrate and welcome diversity. As Demishevich tells me: "We women, we trans women, despite the hypocrisy prevalent in this country, we continue to exist, we continue to defend love against their hatred." Turkey may be a country of suppressed sorrows and untold stories but unless we talk about our traumas, openly and freely, these wounds of ours won't ever heal.

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P.S.

* The Guardian. Tuesday 23 August 2016 16.29 BST Last modified on Tuesday 23 August 2016 23.27 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/23/murder-transgender-lgbt-hande-kader-turkey>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/22/asia/turkey-gaziantep-blast/index.html>