Authorities claim that more than half

of the Kurdish population of the Turkish Rèpublic has migrated to the west of the country. As mother tongue or ethnic origin has not been recorded in Turkish population censuses since 1965 one can only go on estimates for the total number of Kurds in Turkey, and figures available from various sources are very different.

Servet Mutlu, an associate professor working with the GAP Regional Development Administration, estimates from censuses made between 1935 and 1965 that the 1990 population of those with Kurdish origin amounted to just seven million people, two thirds of whom still lived in the east or south east of Turkey. According to Mutlu, just over eight per cent of Istanbul's population or nearly 600.000 people were Kurds, compared with the 1.5 million usually claimed. At the other end of the scale, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes three million Kurds live in Istanbul alone.

By quoting high figures for the number of Kurds in the west of the country Turkish authorities argue that the so-called Kurdish problem will dissolve in the urban melting pot through intermarriage and migration. A political restructuring of the Republic will neither be necessary nor feasible. According to Mutlu, federalism, autonomy and independence "have the potential of being ethnically based (solutions) with the eventuality of massive population movements. There would be tremendous public pressure on the Kurds to leave the west and

similarly on the Turks and other ethnic groups in the east to move to the west. This, however insufferable, is not a mere prospect but a real posssibility given the experiences and exodus of the Greeks and Armenians during the unhappy events between 1915 and 1922".

Similarly, the German government states that Kurds are able to live in the west of the Republic in "peaceful assimilation". This argument is used to back deportation of rejected Kurdish asylum seekers from Germany to Istanbul.

In the absence of reliable official figures it is impossible to generalise about Kurdish assimilation issues in Istanbul. My research concentrated on two *gecekondu* settlements, Güzeltepe and Kızılköy. Gecekondus, literally "build over night" settlements, are illegally constructed without land title, planning permission or building permit. Their importance to the city cannot be overstated. It was estimated in 1995 that 65 per cent of Istanbul's population was made up of migrants, and in 1992 that half of the whole city's population lived in gekondus.

During the first years of settlement gecekondu dwellers lack any security of tenure, and have no services or basic infrastructure. Any help is provided by collective action, though as time goes by the local authorities tend to legalise de facto settlements. Until then residents are socially, economically and politically marginalised.

Güzeltepe consists of four ethnically homogeneous quarters, three of them inhabited by Sunni Turks from the Black Sea and one by Alevi Kurds. Kızılköy was created by left-wing activists who occupied the land in 1976 and distributed it to migrant families. Inhabitants come from a variety of regions, but they are overwhelmingly Alevi and about two thirds are thought to be Kurds.

In 1983 both settlements received the formal status of *mahalle* (neighbourhood) represented by a *muhtar* (neighbourhood official). Gradually, the local authorities began to install electricity, running water, sewerage and paved streets although such services remain inadequate.

The economic progress of the 1980s tended to accentuate social differences in the settlements. Some squatters became smallscale entrepreneurs, eager to improve their housing

conditions and willing to fight for land titles or services. Many others, however, have remained casual labourers at best. It's estimated that in Güzeltepe threequarters of the male population is unemployed or casually employed without social security. These people are unlikely to be able to buy land titles or pay for services. Such economic divisions work against collective action and create new social boundaries. Inflation has meant that the poorest families only exist by scraping a living. Men tend to have more than one job, and women try to eke out the budget by finding work wherever they can.

Most men work outside the gecekondus and can escape their surroundings, but women have to put up with conditions 24 hours a day. A very low percentage of them actually obtain regular jobs. According to the Turkish State Planning Organisation's publication Squatter Settlement Research published in 1991 only six per cent of household head wives had found work in Istanbul. One reason for this is their low level of formal education. Most middle-aged women in the settlements have little formal education; many are illiterate. Kurdish women tend to have poor Turkish, which also denies them access to proper jobs.

Rationalisation, which took place during the 1980s in industries like tobacco, hit jobs in factories employing unskilled labour. To cut costs homeworking was introduced. Those who still found jobs in factories tended to be unmarried women, willing to work longer hours and not demand benefits. Married women with children have no choice but to take on homeworking, with no security of employment and at very low wages.

Female piece-workers can see such activities as an extension of traditional roles like trousseau preparation and as an expression of group identity and solidarity. They are morally and socially acceptable in the neighbourhood. The husband's role as breadwinner is not openly challenged. But, by the same token, women's productivity is devalued and exploitation concealed.

There are exceptions. An Alevi Kurdish woman stressed the social role as head of a carpet workshop. She saw herself as the teacher of the sunni Turkish girls working for her and said she intended to introduce them to "modern" behaviour and values.

With her Alevi Kurdish neighbours she demanded a women's workshop for the neighbourhood as a meeting place as well as a focus for enterprise. When the local authority declined, the women created their own temporary workshop.

Men's activities usually offer contacts with other ethnic, religious and regional groups around the city. The world of female squatters is, however, circumscribed by tradition. Some women and girls are still forbidden by male relatives to leave the neighbourhood or even the house. Only in the last year or two have women begun to visit their district centre (*ilce*) as part of a slow urban integration spurred on by their educated children. But women suffer from a lack of public space in squatter settlements. The teahouses where public meetings take place are exclusively male preserves, and those women who brave them are seeen as invaders and improper (*ayıp*). To counter this, women's groups from the political parties organise small meetings in private homes. But these are unlikely to broaden social networks or breach ethnic and social boundaries.

So squatter women's ties in the settlement are limited to family or *hemsehri*, people from the same village or district. When they use the term *mahallemiz* (our neighbourhood) the Kurdish women of Güzeltepe mean three streets whose inhabitants have all migrated to Istanbul from the same district in Malatya province. All Black Sea Turks in the neighbourhood are referred to as "Laz" even though none of the main three groups are Laz speakers.

These Kurdish women have few friends among the Turkish women of Güzeltepe. Even after two decades in the same settlement Sunni Turks and Alevi Kurds still mistrust each other. Kurdish women tend to refer to their relations with Turkish women hierarchically in phrases like "we buy agricultural produce from them" or "we teach them sewing and carpet weaving". They frequently claim that their way of life is superior, more modern, more educated and pure (*temiz*) whilst Turks are dirty (*pis*). Poverty reinforces ethnic and religious divides, although there is some contact between Kurdish and Turkish women traders.

Political allegiances also come up against ethnic boundaries. Collective action to improve urban services is usually carried out

by small groups of close neighbours. Only when they see a fundamental threat to their existence do women from different ethnic groups join forces.

In Güzeltepe during the late 1970s the left-wing Alevi identity dominated, but activists who used to organise meetings "disappeared" after the 1980 military coup. They were denounced by Sunni Turkish neighbours and taken into custody-an early source of mistrust in the neighbourhood.

During the 1980s ethnic identity became the dominant force. Today, Kurds tend to talk about themselves in ethnic terms even when actually describing an Alevi trait. One reason for this is the breakdown of the Turkish Left and the growing influence of the Kurdish nationalist PKK party in their region of origin. When the Turkish Left could no longer offer help and protection the Kurdish national movement stepped in.

Male Alevi Kurds maintain political contact with the small group of Sunni Kurds they meet in the teahouses. During the 1980s both groups supported the Social Democrat Populist Party, the SHP. Under the conservative government of the Motherland Party, ANAP, Kurds, left-wingers and Alevis voted for the SHP as the most "democratic" legal opposition party. But, as a member of the coalition governments between 1991-95, the SHP did not fulfill its promises. SHP involvement in increasingly fierce military repression disillusioned many Kurds. Kurdish migrants in Güzeltepe see repression in Kurdistan as directly targeted at their people. They are eager for any news they can obtain on the situation in Kurdish villages.

Female Kurdish migrants tend not to read newspapers either because they are illiterate or don't speak Turkish, so television is their main source of information. Even though tv news and current affairs programmes are under close state control, migrant women use what they see and hear to form their own, often dissident, opinions.

As a result of the Turkish government's Kurdistan policy Sunni Kurds in Güzeltepe began to support the Refah Party, the RP. A Sunni Kurdish woman and former member of the SHP was said to be among the most aggressive activists in the RP election campaign. In the presence of a mixed group of Sunni, Alevi, Turkish and Kurdish neighbours she spoke spontaneously and

forcefully on repression of the Kurds, stating repeatedly that they were denied human rights. The government, she claimed, clamped down on education in Kurdistan to prevent "extraordinarily clever" Kurds from "opening their eyes". Kurdish youth would "go to the mountains" to join the PKK as a reaction to the disastrous economic situation. When government forces took all they possessed, the displaced Kurds arrived penniless in Istanbul where they were discriminated against in the jobs and housing markets. To explain her support for the RP she argued that she opposed the pro-Kurdish Democratic Party DEP because the DEP demanded an independent Kurdish state.

Alevi Kurds in Güzeltepe are no less aware of the national repression suffered by the Kurds but prefer to keep criticism of government policy and sympathy for Kurdish militancy to themselves. They feel particularly threatened because they belong to both an ethnic and religious minority. Women fear they could be a target of Islamists, Turkish nationalists, or political and economic repression-a perception reinforced by widespread and arbitary repression against any manifestation of communal Kurdish association. So Alevi squatter women tend to keep their heads down and accept their fate.

Kurdish collective identity showed itself in the winter of 1993 when a group of Kurdish migrant families settled in tents on waste land close to Güzeltepe. Shocked by the poor state of the refugee women and children, the squatter women brought milk and warm clothing. They later translated for voluntary doctors. But their missions were misunderstood and mistrusted by Turkish neighbours. Though the "Kurds in the tents" as they called them spoke a different dialect and were, in fact, Shafi sunnis, the Kurdish migrants felt a strong sense of ethnic solidarity. Relations only broke down when the squatters heard that the refugees had apparently given their votes to the RP.

Fear of the RP was the principal reason for Alevi Kurdish migrant women to continue voting for the SHP despite its Kurdistan policy. In private groups women argued against the men that boycotting elections would only benefit right-wingers and Islamists. They showed a strong civic consciousness by the weight they assigned to local elections and their own vote.

Alevi Kurdish women in Güzeltepe are well aware of the way

Kurds are repressed. They follow political developments, attack government policy and on occasion show approval for PKK actions. During the local elections of 1994 their fundamental dislike of the parties led to abstention from party politics. They voted in line with their Alevi identity and their fear of the Refah Party.

In the general election of December 1995 the Kurdish issue proved more decisive. A shift to the pro-Kurdish HADEP took place, explained again by security and protection needs. The RP was seen as less threatening but the ultra-nationalist MHP gained support among Turkish inhabitants of Güzeltepe. The social democrat party, now called the CHP, dwindled to the point where it was no longer expected to provide protection. HADEP established a district office nearby and started to organise the neighbourhood, inviting both sexes to meetings. It gained the support of almost half the Kurdish voters in Güzeltepe and emerged as a serious alternative for both Alevi and Sunni Kurds. The migrants' political alienation from the mainstream was underlined.

With the continuing displacement of villagers from Kurdistan, marginalisation of Kurds in Istanbul grows all the time. The Turkish Human Rights Association IHD claimed in June 1996 that 2,489 Kurdish villages had been set on fire and partially or wholly evacuated since 1993, with some three million people made homeless. Many of these ended up in Istanbul. An IHD survey of displaced families in 1994 noted that only three families from the 341 interviewed said they wished to remain Turkish citizens. Most hoped to return to their villages in Kurdistan once peace was restored and security guaranteed.

Unless a political settlement of the armed conflict puts an end to displacement, and while integration of Kurds in the west of the country is impeded, the dilemmas facing Istanbul and other urban centres will only increase. Migration does not solve the "Kurdish problem", but merely spreads it.

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