Zigzag Paths to Social Integration

A significant tension exists between discourses shaping integration policies in the West, with the increasing emphasis on the securitization of immigrant polices post-9/11 and the demands on women by their own communities to protect their local culture and heritage by keeping their traditional roles intact. In the context of the UK, Kofman and Vacchelli (2012) show that the main political discourse of social integration is built on problems related to the lack of integration. Social exclusion of minorities, ghettoization into segregated societies and lack of integration have resulted from the poor acquisition of the fundamentals of British culture, i.e. its language and lifestyle. In particular, lack of integration and social exclusion have been mostly ascribed to women who have joined their husbands through family reunification, who usually do not speak English and hence put economic strain on existing social services. For this reason, policymakers advocate an urgent need for pre-entry tests, to ensure better economic integration through a better knowledge of language and life in the UK (Kofman and Vacchelli 2012). Therefore, this approach treats ethnic minority women as scapegoats for non-integration and the representatives of non-Western values.

While the national discourse of social integration of immigrants has been shifting towards restricting ‘uneducated’ and ‘unskilled’ women whose entry into the UK undermines the British way of life, the Turkish immigrant community in Britain has been focusing more on revitalization of women’s traditional roles, through the demands put on women by the ethnic economy and community. Women’s own families and ethnic communities require women to carry out their traditional duties and fulfil their roles as representatives of their culture and ethnicity. While women are drawn into maintaining their traditional roles as mothers and wives through the demands of the ethnic economy, they are also
asked to strip themselves of these roles, which are seen to be preventing immigrant communities’ integration by generating a vicious circle of ghettoization and exclusion. This is a major stress placed on immigrant women and there is no easy policy formula to solve this tension.

Moving beyond this impasse requires consideration of how first generation female migrants see their integration and how they give it meaning in their own world. This chapter aims to introduce Turkish women’s views on integration. Women’s integration to the host society follows a zigzag path in London’s Turkish community. The Turkish ethnic economy is the only way for the Turkish community to construct their contribution to British society and women’s work in the ethnic economy is therefore the most visible method of social contribution and integration. Thus, women’s integration is not an individual affair, but paves the way for integration for the whole community as they are unseen contributors to the survival and business success of their communities through their roles as mothers and wives as well as workers in the Turkish ethnic economy. Women not only contribute to the ethnic economy through their labour, but they also have a major role in the construction and reproduction of national ideologies and identities. Since women are seen as the symbolic figuration of nation values and culture, they have an important role in constructing and reproducing particular notions of their specific culture. This can be done through women’s involvement in rearing children, and in social and religious practices. Because of the increasing emphasis on how women fulfil their motherhood roles in the community, women not only care for their children, but also are representatives of their national and cultural identities. In fact, these identities seem to set the foundation of national culture on which the Turkish ethnic economy is built.

There are barriers that block women’s efforts to integrate and generate their isolation in the Turkish community. In London, the expansion of the ethnic economy has resulted in women’s withdrawal from the labour market to focus on their domestic roles as wives and mothers. There are many women who are unemployed and concerned more with raising children because the community has suffered the consequences of losing its second generation into gang culture. This is a new injury for the Turkish/Kurdish community in Britain, and women are generally blamed for not being ‘proper mothers’ and not paying sufficient attention to their children, which is seen to be the result of their work in the textile industry. Now, mothering has become a full-time occupation for many women. In fact, women see their motherhood and future prospects of their children as the only way of integrating into British