

Violence against Women and the Role of Teacher Education in Turkey

Introduction

Violence against women (henceforth abbreviated as VAW) is one of the most significant human rights violations globally, and its prevalence and visibility in Turkey have increased in recent years. As a multifaceted issue, addressing VAW necessitates comprehensive and multi-dimensional solutions. One such solution lies in the realm of teacher education, recognizing that combating VAW requires a collective effort across various sectors and institutions. This research aims to investigate the phenomenon of VAW in Turkey and to evaluate the role of teacher education in this case. To achieve this aim, the following subject contexts were included in the study, respectively: (1) The current state of VAW, (2) Factors playing a role in experiencing VAW, (3) The solution of VAW, (4) The importance of teacher education in VAW, (5) The situation of VAW in teacher education curricula, (6) Recommendations for teacher education in the context of VAW.

1 The Current State of VAW in Turkey

Turkey has become a country that confronts the increasing rates of VAW, including domestic violence and femicide (Günes & Ezikoğlu, 2023). In recent years, women have become more concerned about their right to life, perhaps more than any other. According to the statistics from the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu) (WWSFP, 2023), while 80 women were killed in 2008 in Turkey, the number increased and in 2021 and 2022 614 women were killed by men and 462 women were found dead in suspicious circumstances. The Turkish government has stopped releasing statistics on VAW due to the high numbers (Kerman & Betrus, 2020).

According to the results of the latest comprehensive research on VAW conducted nationwide¹ (Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies [HUIPS], 2015), 38% of female participants reported having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives. 44% of women have experienced psychological violence, and 30% have experienced economic violence. In Turkey, 26% of women who were married before the age of 18, 9% were exposed to sexual abuse before the age of 15, 32% were prevented from attending school, and approximately 3 out of 10 women were stalked at least once. These data indicate that VAW in all its forms is prevalent in Turkey.

The government of Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention² on March 20, 2021, despite the alarmingly high rates of VAW in the country. Turkish government and a portion of its voter base take an opposing stance, endorsing traditional gender roles for women and perceiving the acceptance of women's individual identities as a threat to the patriarchal family structure. The withdrawal from the convention was justified on the grounds that it was seen as a threat to traditional Turkish family values, driven by lobbying efforts from conservative groups and demands from the voter base (Günes & Ezikoğlu, 2023). When considering the reasons for initially signing the convention, this withdrawal raises concerns about the preservation of women's rights and efforts to combat VAW in Turkey. The withdrawal has the potential to weaken the effectiveness of measures and mechanisms implemented to address VAW (Günes & Ezikoğlu, 2023). Subsequent research conducted after the withdrawal (e.g., Ziya, 2022; Güneş & Ezikoğlu, 2023) has indicated an increase in misogyny in Turkey, particularly through the amplification of conservative and polarizing discourse on social media normalizing VAW. When we consider Turkey's withdrawal from the Convention in light of Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment³, in the experiment, ordinary psychology students believed that if the 'authority' figure didn't intervene in violence, they thought the authority approved of violence and then increased the level of violence. The government's withdrawal from a convention aimed at combatting VAW can be seen as implicit approval and may contribute to an increase in VAW.

- 1 In the sample design of the research, which includes data from every region of Turkey, a weighted, stratified and multi-stage cluster sampling approach was used. The criteria for the forms of violence used in this research are the criteria of the World Health Organisation.
- 2 The Istanbul Convention primarily focuses on individual autonomy rights and the protection of one's physical and moral well-being, emphasizing the significance of valuing a woman as an autonomous individual rather than solely in the context of the 'family'. For detailed information on the Istanbul Convention, see: Council of Europe [CE], 2011. CE. (2011). Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>
- 3 For detailed information on The Stanford Prison Experiment, see: Zimbardo et al., 1971; Zimbardo, P. G., Haney, C., Banks, W. C., & Jaffe, D. (1971). *The Stanford Prison Experiment*. Zimbardo, Incorporated.

2 Factors playing a part in VAW

Risk factors for VAW are multidimensional and the Social Ecological Model (SEM), which encompasses individual, relational, community, and societal levels, provides a useful framework for analyzing these risk factors comprehensively (White et al., 2021). This model recognizes that VAW is influenced by a complex interplay of factors at multiple levels, and it helps to understand the various contexts in which violence occurs. According to the SEM, the *societal level* refers to the broad set of cultural values, norms, and beliefs that permeate and inform the other three layers of social ecology (Heise, 1998). In Turkey, the societal-level risk factors for VAW include women considered inferior or the property of men (1), the notion of masculinity linked to anger, dominance, and honor (2), conflict between modern and traditional values (3), weak enforcement of laws and lack of deterrent sanctions (4), and low awareness of VAW (5).

- (1) Turkish society adheres to a patriarchal structure that defines different roles for men and women, considering women as inferior or the property of men (Alkan et al., 2021). Due to such a cultural environment, some women may accept the superiority of men. This value system idealizes women conforming to the desires and needs of men and legitimizes violence when they do not comply (White et al., 2021).
- (2) In a study conducted in Turkey by Sakallı et al. (2021), masculinity was associated with characteristics such as being the protector of family honor and women's chastity, emotionally reserved, authoritative, possessive, and quick to anger. On the other hand, femininity was linked to qualities such as being self-sacrificing, emotional, well-intentioned, and dependent. Teaching masculinity and femininity in this manner may normalize anger and violence for men while expecting women to tolerate this hostile environment. In Turkey, the culture of honor, which is a significant part of the society, views men's control over women within the family as an essential aspect of masculinity. As a result, men often attempt to maintain their dominance over women through consent or violence, considering it an integral part of their manhood (Alkan et al., 2021).
- (3) In Turkey, women are not often recognized as individual, independent, and autonomous beings, and their capacity to make decisions and be competent may be questioned. Making decisions about their lives and seeking divorce are the most frequently cited reasons for perpetrators to kill women, seen as acts of defiance against male authority. Men seek to maintain their dominance over women by threatening their lives or the lives of their families, and when unable to do so, resort to violence, even against themselves (Afşar, 2016). Unlike in the past, women today want to be independent by

adopting modern values, while men who adopt traditional values hinder women's individualisation efforts.

- (4) In cases of femicides, wherein men tend to claim that women provoke them or appearing well dressed in court during a hearing and showing 'good behaviour', the court usually recognizes exceptions and to reduces their sentences accordingly (Ziya, 2022). For example, in 2022, 23 women were killed despite protection orders in place against the perpetrators (WWSFP, 2023). The sentences given to perpetrators are seen as inadequate, and people do not trust the judicial decisions (Ziya, 2022).
- (5) Women often do not know how to assert their rights and cope with violence and are sometimes advised to be patient when seeking help (Alkan et al., 2021). Women who experience violence may respond to it by crying, remaining unresponsive, withdrawing, or verbally engaging (Çifçi & Açık, 2022). Another contributing factor to the perpetuation of violence is the inadequate integration of effective anti-violence measures into education. Even prospective teachers, who will be responsible for educating future generations, have been observed to justify VAW in certain situations; such as in cases when women defy their husbands or speak assertively (Erdol et al., 2022).

The *community level* encompasses both formal and informal settings where social interactions occur, such as schools, workplaces, etc. (Heise, 1998). In Turkey, prominent community level risk factors include lack of social support (1) and limited income or employment opportunities (2).

- (1) It is very difficult for women to cope with the effects of violence without the support of their family or community. In Turkey women's shelters, which are considered as a last resort by victims, have insufficient funds and capacities to meet the increasing demand, and services aimed at empowering women and their children in these shelters prove inadequate (Yalçın, 2021). Consequently, women face challenges in adapting to a self-determined life and are at risk of returning to an abusive environment due to these limitations.
- (2) One of the primary reasons why women experiencing domestic violence continue their relationships is economic dependence. According to research by Çifçi and Açık (2022), 40% of women who experience violence stated that they continued their marriages because they had no income. In Turkey, the employment rate for men is 65.9%, whereas for women, it is only 31.2% (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023).

The *relational level* refers to the domain where a person engages in direct interactions with others (Heise, 1998). In Turkey, key relational risk factors for VAW include involuntary marriages or marriages with bride price (1), and male dominance within the family (2).

- (1) Çiftçi and Açık (2020) found that involuntary marriages increase the risk of experiencing violence by 1.4 times. Additionally, their research indicates a higher prevalence of VAW in marriages involving the payment of a bride price.
- (2) The authority of men in making decisions and controlling wealth within the family is one of the strongest relational determinants of VAW (Heise, 1998). The frequency of violence is higher among women who are not consulted in family decision-making compared to those who are always consulted (Çiftçi & Açık, 2020).

Biological and personal background factors that can increase an individual's risk of being a victim or perpetrator of violence constitute the *individual level* of the SEM (Kerman & Betrus, 2020). Prominent factors in Turkey include experiencing or witnessing violence in childhood (1), and the low educational level of either the spouse or the woman (2), ranking at the top of the list.

- (1) Women who experienced or witnessed domestic violence during childhood have a 2.6 times higher risk of experiencing violence in later life, while male counterparts have a 3 times higher risk of perpetrating violence against their partners (Çiftçi & Açık, 2020).
- (2) As the educational level of women and/or their spouses decreases, the likelihood of women experiencing violence tends to increase (Çiftçi & Açık, 2020). When women are more educated than their spouses, their probability of experiencing violence is lower (Kerman & Betrus, 2020).

3 In the solution of VAW

Addressing VAW requires a multifaceted approach due to the multidimensional factors involved, necessitating a comprehensive strategy and a united, determined effort involving all segments of society. Therefore, initiatives should operate at societal, communal, relational, and individual levels, with coordination and collaboration among all institutions and organizations playing a crucial role. Teacher education faculties also bear responsibility in the combat against VAW. However, efforts in teacher training constitute just one step in the broader context. Effective combating of VAW demands coordinated involvement from other influential societal actors, such as government, institutions, civil society organizations, legal systems, and media, in prevention, protection, punishment, and policy processes.

4 The importance of teacher education in VAW

Eradicating the culture rooted in gender inequality, which is one of the fundamental sources leading to the emergence and perpetuation of VAW (Başar & Demirci, 2015), is a long-term goal achievable primarily through education. Therefore, the importance of schools and curricula based on gender equality is increasingly recognized. Schools often possess hidden curricula that have a significant impact despite not being explicitly written, and these curricula play a crucial role in fostering awareness of gender equality. The sources of hidden curricula encompass a school's rules, social structure, provided role models, textbooks, and many other features (Martin, 2002). These curricula manifest as a set of norms, traditions, beliefs, and linguistic forms embedded in the school's structure and functioning as well as influencing not only students but all stakeholders in education. Hidden curricula serve as a source of informal learning for everyone in school, shaping personal development within cultural contexts. They unconsciously transmit and embed gender roles, responsibilities, and societal expectations, which in turn shape cultural conditions for personal growth. Given their embedded nature, they unconsciously impart concepts, values, and pathways to accessing knowledge, and sustain a discourse that establishes itself as a form of authority (Hernández et al., 2013).

The country's social agenda regarding gender can affect not only hidden curriculum but also formal curriculum in schools. For example, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention may lead to the continuation of the dominant patriarchal view towards women. Withdrawing from such international agreements could potentially legitimize practices within the framework of the dominant patriarchal view towards women. Such a dominant view can enable like minded employees such as teachers and administrators to easily carry out their thoughts and actions. Therefore, with the change in the official vision and mission of the country, school curricula cause the dominant idea about gender to emerge openly rather than implicitly. Consequently, educational authority figures that have important functions in the formation and change of everyone's (teacher, administrator, student, indirectly family) views on gender and in learning and experiencing gender equality or inequality. One of the key actors perpetuating gender inequality in schools is teachers, whose awareness of gender inequality is limited. Teachers who do not critically approach values, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to gender inequality in the teaching-learning process hinder students' personal growth and in a broader sense societal transformation. Particularly, prevailing ideological beliefs and textbooks based on these beliefs tend to reinforce existing stereotypes rather than fostering an environment that stimulates transformation through education. Conversely, teachers can instill critical self-awareness in students regarding the knowledge and values they encounter through their active role in the classroom, enabling

them to undergo self-transformation. The language teachers use, the rules they set, and the examples they provide can form the cornerstone of social transformation that contributes to solving the desired societal issues. However, studies conducted with teachers and teacher candidates in Turkey indicate that they hold certain stereotypes related to gender roles (Erdol, 2017), some male teacher candidates do not genuinely believe in gender equality (Şahin et al., 2016), and teachers acknowledge the need for gender equality education that can change their perspectives and put an end to the ‘male-dominant understanding’ (Şanlı & Karakuş, 2023). If teachers find themselves in such a situation, education cannot serve as a tool for creating a collective spirit, challenging dominant social norms, or transforming society to prevent VAW. Therefore, it is imperative to educate teachers first. In this regard, like Giroux (2011), who was influenced by Freire, we think that teachers can play a role as “public intellectuals” in shaping more egalitarian and democratic societies, serving as essential activists capable of addressing societal problems and to promote political progress.

5 The situation of VAW in teacher education curricula in Turkey

In Turkey, teacher education curricula are conducted by universities under the umbrella of the Council of Higher Education (CHE), making this institution a pivotal authority in the implementation of teacher education policies. Courses in education faculty curricula consist of three groups: teaching professional knowledge, subject area, and general culture courses (CHE, 2018). These courses do not include any courses on VAW, women’s studies or gender issues. Although practices aimed at addressing these issues in courses are not the goal of education faculties, the placement of the topics in the programs is left to the wishes and skills of faculty members. VAW is included in domestic violence only in teacher training programs in the field of guidance and psychological counseling in education faculties.

A significant development in the context of women’s studies within higher education was the ‘Gender Equality Attitude Document’ sent to universities by the CHE (CHE, 2015). This document was regarded as an important step towards establishing the academic foundation required to address numerous women’s issues including the prevention of VAW. In education faculties, faculty members who are experts in gender or women’s studies have started their educational practices on these issues. However, over time, debates arose regarding the document’s compatibility with societal values, and in 2019, CHE announced its discontinuation, stating a shift from ‘gender studies’ to ‘justice-

based women's studies'. Nonetheless, this step backward has resulted in deterioration of academic research related to gender in universities and a weakening of women's studies (Şener et al., 2022). Such withdrawals, which are among attempts that encourage actionable academic moves, will potentially cause the desired competencies to remain on paper. In a report assessing gender studies at universities (Göker & Polatdemir, 2019), experts emphasized the need to enhance the perception of gender equality in the combat against VAW. They pointed out that despite some steps taken towards gender equality, there is no national action plan, the initiatives lack institutionalization, they operate independently without coordination, and there are no centralized archives or databases. Additionally, the experts noted that achieving a shift in perception is a long-term process. Therefore, reversing such initiatives has caused many ongoing efforts to halt and, consequently, the cessation of improvements in this field.

6 Recommendations for teacher education in the context of VAW

Practices relating to VAW should enable the development of procedures that aim to change social norms and develop awareness of people regarding the acceptability of violence at both personal and social level. Recommendations for this purpose are provided below:

a. Increasing awareness – changing social norms – challenging stereotypes – altering perceptions:

a.1. Establish Violence Networks in Universities: To Bring together female students who have experienced violence within the university environment. In Turkey, for example, collaboration and communication networks addressing sexual harassment and assault have become new forms of institutionalization within the women's movement, particularly in combating gender-based violence, sexual harassment and assault, in some universities (Kalem, 2021). These networks have provided an active space for universities to reach out to women who have experienced these situations, share their needs and problems, and determine necessary strategies to solve their issues. This institutionalization has encouraged university administrators and experts to take responsibility within the university and identify mechanisms to address the problems. Therefore, the widespread implementation of these networks in all universities would be an important step.

a.2. Developing and implementing violence prevention and gender equality curriculums in universities: Studies have shown that curricula aimed at preventing VAW have had positive outcomes in increasing participants' awareness. For example, the implementation of a violence prevention program resulted in male students experiencing an increased awareness of the prevalence of verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse against women. It also showed that they gained increased self-efficacy in understanding gender and violence-related concepts and their ability to intervene in potentially violent situations (Northeastern University Center for the Study of Sport in Society [NUCSSS], 2007). Similarly, courses on sex education have been found to make a significant impact on students' attitudes and awareness toward date rape, with male participants beginning to exhibit more liberal attitudes toward women (Currier & Carlson, 2009). Gender equality courses have also been effective in raising awareness among teacher candidates regarding gender stereotypes and roles, and sexist language. These courses have influenced changes in their behavior and attitudes, motivating them to avoid these factors and to have the desire to combat them after taking the courses (Erdol, 2017).

a.3. Integrating VAW topics into teacher education curricula: Developing teachers' skills to integrate VAW topics into their subject area knowledge (e.g., mathematics, literature, etc.) can provide them with the knowledge and skills to both transmit academic knowledge and combat social problems. In particular, it is important to teach teacher candidates how to integrate these topics into their lesson plans and practices. For example, lesson plans can be developed for analyzing statistical data on gender equality in mathematics class, discussing texts on VAW in literature class, and evaluating the effects of violence in science class. This approach can contribute to teachers' active role in the VAW movement and their approach to their future careers with a sense of social responsibility. It also provides a more holistic education approach by establishing the relationship between subject area knowledge and social issues.

a.4. Training teachers to create a field of struggle: Training teachers, raising awareness and making them activists can be an important area of struggle in reducing and preventing VAW. Teachers can carry out awareness raising activities for people in their area of influence (students, parents, school environment) to reduce VAW in the region where they work. For example, they can investigate the situation of VAW occurring in their region and organize regional action plans and activities together with the school and the school environment. In order to help implement these action plans, existing non-governmental organizations can create areas where they can work jointly with the provincial administration, security and justice units of the province.

b. Masculinity:

Unfortunately, the dominant patriarchal structure in Turkey continuously reinforces the notion of masculinity. All economic, social, cultural, and legal structures have been designed in line with patriarchy and developed to reproduce it (Çelik, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to challenge the structural elements that construct masculinity with patriarchal and sexist emphasis (Bozok, 2015). However, this struggle is both arduous and long-lasting. The first step in this struggle is to change the ‘language’ of the culture that encompasses all conceptualizations related to gender equality. This is why gender equality education, starting from childhood, is crucial. All stakeholders responsible for a child’s education should be trained in this regard, and schools, classrooms, and textbooks should be approached within this framework, prohibiting any discourse or action that exacerbates inequality. Only through a long-term, multi-faceted effort from all angles can this culture of masculinity, which contributes to VAW, be eradicated.

c. Women’s empowerment – economic level:

In Turkey, although female teachers are abundant, their representation in school management is notably low. Research indicates that factors such as societal structures, familial reasons, school and environment, and gender roles influence the career development of female teachers (Gündüz, 2010). It is recommended that special empowerment initiatives targeting the career development of female students in teacher education be carried out.

d. Strengthening healthy communication:

Among the root causes of VAW lies the lack of communication between women and men. Therefore, VAW prevention programs should support the development of new skills for communication and conflict resolution through critical thinking (Ellsberg et al., 2015). The integration of communication and conflict resolution programs based on critical thinking into teacher education can be recommended.

Conclusion

VAW in Turkey is a grave concern, with high rates of femicide and various forms of violence persisting to this day. The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention raises questions about commitment to women’s rights. The multifaceted nature of VAW in Turkey is evident through the SEM’s lens. Risk factors at societal, community, relational, and individual levels interact to perpetuate

VAW. In Turkey, there are more societal risk factors for VAW compared to other levels. Addressing this complex issue requires comprehensive efforts that challenge cultural norms, improve economic opportunities for women, strengthen legal enforcement, promote awareness, and critically, integrate effective anti-violence measures into education, including teacher training. It is crucial to recognize that combating VAW necessitates a multi-level approach that encompasses education to create lasting change and ensure the safety and dignity of all women in Turkish society.

In conclusion, it is observed that there is no sustainable and systematic curriculum in teacher education for effective combat against VAW in Turkey. The discontinuation of gender-related initiatives in Turkish teacher education curricula presents challenges. To combat VAW effectively, we should establish violence networks in universities, develop violence prevention and gender equality curricula, and focus on early trauma detection and challenging traditional concepts of masculinity. Empowering women, especially in their career development, should be a priority. In addition to necessary social and political improvement, teacher education is a key avenue for addressing VAW. By enhancing teacher training and curriculum development, we can work towards a more equitable and violence-free society.

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