



# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN TURKEY AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN PHYSICIANS

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Violence against women is a serious problem in Turkey. The Women and Ethics Commission of the Turkish Physicians' Association (Ankara Physicians' Chamber) has undertaken significant work to counteract this. This article gives some indications of the sources of violence and discusses its social and health care implications. The Commission is pivotal in the education of women physicians and in heightening awareness of the situation. An outline is given of this work and recommendations are made on how violence against women can be tackled and eliminated.

## Introduction

Research has shown that violence against women is a universal problem.<sup>1,2</sup> According to the United Nations Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women, it is defined as 'any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'.<sup>2</sup>

Violence against women is a serious problem in Turkey. The social tolerance for violence in police stations, public prosecutor offices, courts and health care facilities is widespread. In particular, 'virginity control'<sup>3</sup> and 'honor murders' are practices that are peculiar to Turkish society, which appraises social ethics and social honor by a woman's body.

In Turkey, the gender roles attributed to women are unquestionably accepted and internalized by our society as well as in other similar societies. The health status of women depends on women's social status. Although women in Turkey have relatively equal legal rights, they face inequalities in both public and private spheres. Violence against women creates situations that interfere with, violate or devalue women's human rights and their ability to benefit from their basic freedoms. Protecting these rights and freedoms has not been successful in the past and the need to do so is

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becoming more widespread,<sup>4</sup> so it is an issue that requires confrontation by the entire government. Women and girls, in small or large measure, are exposed to limited income and suffer from class,<sup>5</sup> cultural, physical, sexual and psychological harassment. The low social and economic status of women can be both a reason for and a result of violence against them.

## The organization of women in Turkey

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Turkey went through radical reform under its charismatic leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and women won many important rights in areas such as education, dress, voting and running for government office.<sup>6,7</sup> The women's movement, which could address only a limited urban population under the socioeconomic structure of Turkey in the 1920s, changed in scale and content with the help of the project for creating the 'modern Turkey' envisaged by Mustafa Kemal and his associates. The women's movement that was a product of civil society gave place to 'state feminism'. With the establishment of the Republic, women tried to be equal to men in terms of education, learning a profession and working in the public sector.<sup>8</sup>

On 29 October 1923 the Turkish Republic was proclaimed. At the same time there was acceleration of the legal and structural reforms that enabled women's involvement in the public sphere. On 3 March 1924 the Unification of Education and Training Law was enacted. Accordingly, education was secularized and all educational institutions came under the Ministry of National Education. Girls and boys started to be educated equally. On 17 February 1926, Turkish Civil Law was adopted. Regulations on polygamy and unilateral divorce by men as per law were abolished, women were granted rights to divorce, child custody and property. The law was published in the Official Gazette on 4 April 1926 and entered into force in the same year on 4 October.<sup>9</sup>

However, these rights and opportunities are still limited. In general, the limitations take the form of obstacles to women with strong personalities. Women were historically prevented from forming a women's political party but they managed to turn themselves into the Turkish Women's Association. All the same, women continue to take second place.

A new women's movement began in the 1980s with the purpose of fighting violence and increasing the awareness of women's issues.<sup>10</sup>

The growth of the women's movement accelerated, mainly after the 1980s. Women wanted to become free. They questioned the equality gained earlier of simply trying to become equal with men and trying to modernize Turkish society. During that time, topics such as gender and violence were again considered. Independent organizations were established that placed the problems of women on their agendas. Some of these developments will now be described.

In 1985 Turkey signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Kinds of Discrimination Against Women, which entered into force in 1986. Also, in 1985, women's issues were for the first time included as an item in the Five-Year Development Plan, which has been part of the Turkish government's strategies since 1923, and new policies on this issue were established. In 1989 the first Research and Implementation Center on Women's Issues was founded in an Istanbul University; there are now 13 such centers. At a meeting of the United Nations International

Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women in February 1992, the Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women was identified as the focal point for women's issues in Turkey. The National Program for the Enhancement of Women's Integration in Development Project was initiated in 1993 by the government of the Turkish Republic and the United Nations Development Program. Under this project, training programs, research projects, pilot projects and statistical/publication activities were carried out by the Directorate. Numerous training programs and pilot projects were supported, as well as 16 research projects. In addition, some of the research projects and brief reports on various gender issues were published. Moreover, a Social Structure and Women Statistics Branch was established at the State Institute of Statistics to design a database on gender. In 1993 the first Women's Research Department was established at Istanbul University and a postgraduate program was initiated. Currently, four universities are offering postgraduate programs in women's studies.<sup>9</sup>

Today there are 364 women's organizations in our country, founded for various purposes. Some are professional, some are political, some are aid organizations, and some are university based. On examining the aims and objectives of all these organizations, only the Hacettepe University Research and Implementation Center on Women's Issues (HUWIRC) approaches the issues of women's health and gender-related issues, and gives a place to gender in higher education curricula.<sup>11,12</sup>

Many of our universities have centers for women's issues and research. However, because its founders are primarily physicians, unlike other similar centers that include different disciplines, HUWIRC takes on more issues related to women's health and presents essential approaches within the framework of the concept of gender. We think that this is the important difference that sets this organization apart from the others and makes it worthy of mention.

## **Turkey as a patriarchal society and the perception of violence**

When we question where the strength of the violence comes from, how it is nourished from a societal base, and why it has not been overcome over thousands of years, we encounter the concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy, which became established over a long period of time, is fed by various kinds of power and, in renewing itself today, is strengthened and still evident in our society. It is defined as a powerful and violent, culturally-based system of social, political, intellectual and cultural domination that passes from one person to another together with other kinds of power, and results in female-male inequality that has been unresolved for thousands of years. Patriarchy in social, political and cultural life can collapse as a result of movements against violence and domination occurring in every area every day.<sup>13</sup> Political power struggles organize and direct desire and violence. In this context violence does not exist when a boy is born. Manhood is a role that is developed over time owing to the influence of systems and cultures. Turkish society is thus a 'male' society. Men learn violence from the violence that is practiced against them. In our country every Turkish male must spend one-and-a-half years of the most productive years of his young life in compulsory military service. The whole society has many practices that have become militarized.

It can be said that a society has become militarized when it has come to the point where images, conceptions and feelings based on violence are disseminated throughout that society, yet conflict cannot be solved by relying on weapon power. A husband who rapes his wife, a father who hits his daughter, an older brother who murders his sister for the sake of honor are the fruit of this process of militarization. From the men's point of view in this society, it would seem to be very difficult, if not impossible, to be able to resist the urge to violence and therefore resist the cultural norms of manhood and militarization.<sup>14</sup>

Although patriarchal structures include cultural differences according to historical period and specific societies, it is possible to witness the similarities in various societies, institutions and relationships. Medical science, which has existed for centuries as an institutional structure more than an occupation, had also perpetuated patriarchy. Feminist literature explained that women prefer to live in domestic settings because of the biological structure of women. Women who wanted to be doctors, nurses or engage in other occupations were blocked by society because of their sex. However, in the nineteenth century, those in medicine, and society in general, believed that women could not be physicians or have other occupations because of patriarchal ideas. This gradually changed at the beginning of twentieth century. Inside the institutional structure of medical sciences, we can use the concept of patriarchy in general to explain the late appearance of women in the field of medical science and to explain the relationships between doctors and nurses. The behavior and attitudes of doctors towards patients through the process of diagnosis and treatment can also be viewed from the standpoint of patriarchy.

## **Women physicians in Turkey**

Women are now able to be in medical occupations, but achieving this has been a tiring and difficult process for them. At the beginning of the 1920s female students who wanted to study medicine met significant resistance. Nevertheless, in 1928 the first six female students graduated.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, women were accepted only within certain 'female' branches of medicine with close ties to women or motherhood (such as basic medicine, dermatology and pediatrics) and that have regular hours of work without night shifts.<sup>16</sup>

This situation changed significantly when a medical specialties entrance examination was introduced. As a result, women physicians have been accepted as specialists in medical faculties since 1987. This examination created a more equal environment for entry of men and women into every medical specialty. Although in 1986 there were no female physicians in orthopedics or ear-nose-throat specialties, in the year 2002 the percentages were 7.6% and 6.6% respectively, and those in general surgery, urology, and radiology increased, respectively, from 4% to 9.8%, from 5.5% to 10%, and from 19.5% to 41.1%.<sup>17</sup> This examination therefore ensured that there was more equality between male and female physicians.

## **The Women and Ethics Commission**

The Turkish Medical Association (Ankara Chamber) Women and Ethics Commission is a 'first' in our country from the point of view of this Commission's purpose and

activities, which are to ensure that the medical profession and societal problems have a gender perspective and approach. In 1994 the Ethics Bureau was established as a subcommittee of the Ankara Medical Society by a group of physicians who, with medical ethicists, were interested in medical ethics problems and their solutions. This bureau organized many meetings related to its own area and took the lead in producing publications for physicians. In 2001, commission members who were also members of the Ethics Bureau changed their name to Women and Ethics Commission.

The Women and Ethics Commission organized a symposium in November 2002 under the title 'Violence against women and the medical profession', during which the history, causes and recommended solutions for violence against women were discussed. Violence was examined from health and legal perspectives. The psychological aspects of sexual violence and legal, medical and organizational approaches to the subject were addressed. Women shared with each other their organizational and individual experiences with their struggle against violence.

The declaration at the end of the symposium contained the following items:

- According to known records, 58% of women in Turkey are subjected to beating. Every kind of violence within the family – beatings, belittling, exploitation and rape – should be opposed.
- The attitude of health care workers towards violence against women is important. In particular, in the specialty areas of emergency medicine, forensic medicine, and obstetrics and gynecology, it is necessary to restructure educational content on this subject. It is important that physicians be taught before and after graduation about women who suffer domestic and sexual violence.
- Violence towards women is a widespread and common public health problem. Health care domains are in strategic positions to intervene in violence and can achieve important gains for women on this issue.
- The language used by physicians in dealing with violence is crucial. It is important not to use words that will increase the oppression of women in this way and this should be made widely known.
- Because examination of the hymen (to determine whether or not virginity has been maintained) is not carried out for health reasons and, because it disturbs a woman's emotional and physical integrity, it is an unethical practice and should not be done. (In 2004 the Turkish Penal Code was changed and examination of the hymen by physicians was made illegal.)

The Ankara Chamber of the Turkish Medical Association agreed to make physicians more aware of violence against women. Preparations are still under way for a research project on 'Establishment of the knowledge, opinions and behaviors of some physicians who work in Ankara province about the treatment of women who have suffered violence.'

The Women and Ethics Commission met together approximately twice a week for three hours between September 2002 and April 2004. In these meetings the group members learned about women's viewpoints and planned the research about physicians' treatment of women who have suffered violence. The group took part in a 2-day course related to the concept of gender and gave a consciousness raising series of talks on feminism and feminist ethics.

In our country violence against women can be sexual, physical or emotional. It can be practiced by the woman's husband/partner, boss, teacher, or even those of the same

sex, her mother-in-law or sister-in-law. According to families research carried out in 2001 by the Prime Ministry Women's Status General Directorate,<sup>18</sup> violence occurs in 86% of Turkish families. The researchers stated that 30% of women's husbands practice violence against them, in general commencing in the first years of marriage, and that 52% of women say that their husband is verbally violent toward them. A large number of suicides and murders of women are classed as 'honor cases'.<sup>18</sup> Although it seems incredible in a prestigious profession, women physicians experience violence at home and in the workplace. A research study showed that approximately 75% of women physicians in our country are victims of sexual harassment.<sup>17</sup>

Research and documentation of violence against women and girls in society (including in the workplace and in their private lives, and sexual abuse and violence in the home) is incomplete or insufficient. This situation is an obstacle to the development of specific action strategies.

## **Health care workers' approach to violence against women**

The patriarchal structure of medical practice still reflects the attitudes held concerning violence against women. The only significant agencies that deal with violence against women in our country are the mother-child health services. When women are mentioned, the concepts of birth and motherhood come immediately to mind. However, women are individuals, but their many health problems remain unsolved when they are not looked upon as such.

When violence against women is discussed in health care situations, the first thing that comes to mind is the access to health care facilities of women who have met violence and how health care personnel should behave towards them. A number of issues pose themselves as questions that may not have immediate answers:

- In our country, should we have physicians responsible for treating only women who have met violence, or should health care professionals working in facilities that those women can easily access have additional responsibilities?
- What is the attitude of physicians and health care workers who encounter a woman who has experienced violence and what should it be?
- Sometimes health care workers can inflict more hurt on women who have experienced violence by not asking relevant questions, by not taking an appropriate history about rape and sexual violence, by not creating an examination environment that is supportive, and by practicing virginity control.

Physicians and other health care workers in our country mostly work like machines that carry out daily routines. The number of people per physician in Turkey is much lower than in countries in the European Union. According to the latest data from the government statistics institute<sup>19</sup> there are 86 800 physicians in Turkey, which is 825 people for every physician. This average is 300 for countries in the European Union. There are 79 100 nurses in Turkey, or 882 people per nurse, whereas in the European Union the average is 200. If, in addition to these striking data, we add the educational deficiencies of those who provide and receive care, the inadequacies of the physical environments, the lack of time, the security problems and the loss of motivation, the

gravity of the situation becomes clear. The economic policies practiced in Turkey in recent years have deepened the inequalities in health care in our country, especially between rural and city areas; differences between regions have also increased. There is also similar inequality in maternal education. However, at the root of this situation is economic inequality.

It is very encouraging that the Turkish Physicians' Association and other medical societies have begun to include important agenda items for their meetings on the attitude of physicians towards violence against women. It is necessary for the medical profession to acquire an attitude to care that is gender sensitive and to recognize the importance of the approach taken by health care workers to violence against women.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, in specialties such as emergency services, forensic medicine, and obstetrics and gynecology, it is necessary to update continuing education on this subject. It is necessary to educate physicians before and after graduation about their approach to women who have experienced sexual violence. The patient's history, physical examination and treatment process should be evaluated again so that care that strengthens the woman is given, and psychological support must not be forgotten. Violence against women is a widespread and frequent public health problem. However, the interest that physicians and other health care workers take towards this carries importance that is beyond other public health problems because the health care area is strategically placed to achieve gains for women and social movements concerning violence. Health care workers acting in this knowledge and political perspective will have an important part to play in resolving this societal health care problem and also in the freedom of women from oppression at every level.

It is important for health care personnel to give priority to work that will positively affect individuals' health and present a united approach. For this reason it is necessary for them to educate themselves and raise their level of consciousness on this matter. Health care personnel who are knowledgeable on this subject should also be responsible for educating the public. The Ankara Physicians' Association and the Women and Ethics Commission have begun projects for the purpose of educating physicians about this subject and increasing the awareness of health care personnel in general.

## **Conclusion**

Within the Ankara Chamber of the Turkish Medical Association the coming together of female physicians to discuss medical interventions for dealing with violence against women and the implementation of continuous medical education on this subject is a very appropriate development for women's rights. This is also consistent with the work being done by other women's organizations in our country.

Decisions have been made by professional medical organizations to develop a viewpoint that is gender sensitive. The first small steps have been taken to educate health care professionals and increase their awareness on this issue. Steps have also been taken to ensure that the subjects of gender and women and violence will be addressed at future medical symposia and conferences.

It is very important that sensitivity should be raised on the subject of violence against women in our country, beginning with health care personnel and including the security forces, members of the judicial system and the legal system itself, and civilian

social organizations. These professionals must respect human rights in particular and they need to have the ability to evaluate events from a woman's viewpoint. To avoid opening the way for violence against women by misuse of their authority it is important that educational programs directed towards judicial, legal system, medical, social and educational personnel be created in an appropriate manner, and be organized, developed and financed. In addition, to guarantee that women victims are treated in a just manner, it is necessary to create sensitivity in allied personnel about sexual behaviors and threats of violence. In particular, personnel in health care facilities that are the only institution that a woman who experiences violence can access should receive special education to enable them to reveal the truth that is usually masked or hidden in their work. It is necessary to avoid promoting any custom, tradition or religious thinking that fosters violence against women. From this viewpoint there is benefit in examining the practice of virginity control.

Women who are exposed to violence feel helpless and do not know what to do. For this reason it is necessary for them to have a relationship with relevant institutions, which will start the process of women who are exposed to violence to seek their rights. Women's support centers, women's shelters and the Bar's women's information centers should follow up rights abuses, make documentation of violence mandatory, and support women when they apply to legal channels for help. It is necessary for there to be provision for information, documentation and experience to flow between women's institutions that are fighting for violence against women, creating a common language, preparing and carrying out education programs, and speeding up and establishing permanent communication channels.

It should be the responsibility of the government to accept and/or implement laws for the elimination of violence against women by emphasizing the prevention of violence and the legal follow up of those found guilty. It is important to observe and inspect women who are exposed to violence regularly, protect those who are exposed to violence, ensure they receive speedy and effective compensation, damages and treatment, and provide rehabilitation for those who use violence. In the present state of our current laws there is no punishment for police, security forces or any government personnel who use violent actions against women while carrying out their duty. It is very important to establish laws that will sanction against those who use this type of violence.

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