

**The Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence & It's Unfulfilled Governmental Counter  
Measures in Turkey**

**Seerat Saeed**

**Department of International Relations, Altinbaş University**

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**Prof. Banu Kavakli**

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## **Introduction**

Gender-based violence is an issue that affects primarily women across various geographical and demographical regions. While the issue covers violence based on gender for both males and females, it has been reported that majority of the cases are women and girls. According to the NCADV, 1 in 4 women experience severe violence, compared to statistic of 1 in 9 men (National Statistics, 2023). The number of gender-based violence against women has increased significantly with time and has become an alarming problem throughout various societies around the globe. This paper will primarily focus on gender-based violence with regards to its implications on women in Turkey. The issue of gender-based violence delves into various abusive behaviours that might include psychological, physical, sexual, and economic harm. These behaviours can be based on perceived gender roles and represent the violation of human rights, dignity, and safety of the individual. According to the WHO, violence against women can be defined as certain acts that result in sexual, physical, and mental harm to women. Moreover, it also includes the threats of performing such acts, depriving women of their liberty in private or public life as well as coercion (World Health Organization, 2023).

The significance of Gender-based violence (GBV) lies in the complexities of its implications. These implications are not limited to specific countries or regions; but affects the entirety of the gender that has to become subject to this issue. Victims of GBV go through severe physical and mental health challenges. These challenges can include anxiety, depression, trauma, and injuries in very extreme cases. It is important to note that all gender-based violence is physical. Psychological abuse is a very common aspect of GBV which has become far more common with time. Psychological abuse involves control over freedom, coercion of various kinds, emotional abuse, and many other factors. Moreover, GBV also has significant negative outcomes with regards to a society's economic and social structures; sustaining cycles of poverty and inequality as well. This is due to the barriers GBV generates between women and their contribution in a society's development. This specifically applies to women who experience GBV by their partners as limits to financial and work freedom is one of the most common ways their partners control them into being reliant on them and their abuse. This subsequently leads to barriers between women integrating into the workforce and this is one of the reasons countries with high statistics of GBV often have a lower percentage of women within its workforce overall.

The gravity of GBV has been a topic of global concern. It has been acknowledged by international communities on the basis of its detrimental impacts on women and their role in the society. Various forms of commitments have been put in place in attempts to prevent and respond to this issue globally. However, the said strategies fail to combat GBV as a global issue and it continues to grow; even in societies that are deemed to be 'progressive'. Perhaps this is because GBV is one of the most complex problems faced within societies today and due to its multi-faceted nature, there is no one clear solution. Within this paper, the scope of GBV, its prevalence and the possible solutions to this problem put forward along with their success rate will be thoroughly evaluated.

### **Gender-Based Violence in Turkey**

It can be said without a doubt that GBV is a worldwide problem. Statistics have shown that GBV is a global and extremely complex issue. For the sake of this paper, we will be focusing on the prevalence of GBV within Turkey. Looking into the studies that have been conducted within Turkey to understand the gravity of GBV within the nation, a study conducted by Sen & Bolsoy (2017) showed that the percentage of GBV within women in Turkey was between 40% and 80%. While this does not mean that Turkey is the country with the highest percentage of GBV, this figure in itself can be alarming when we take into account the percentage of the population this covers. A closer examination of the statistics reveals that there are many types of GBV that are prevalent within societies. As such, within Turkey, it was reported that 43.4% of the women within the population have reported experience with at least one type of GBV during their life. According to the responses by the women participating in the study, the categorization of the types of GBV faced were as follows: 68.7% reported to have experienced verbal violence, 41.8% had to face physical violence, 20.2% were subject to financial/economic violence, 29.5% emotional, and 15.3% sexual. (Yanik et al., 2015).

Due to the nature of GBV, the motives behind it are perhaps the most difficult to conclude. While research has been conducted to conclude the scope of GBV, much of that research also aims to find a reason behind the GBV that is prevalent across time. Delving deeper into the motives for subjecting women to violence in Turkey, we will examine it from multiple lenses. Firstly, at the individual level, young age has been seen to be a risk factor; both with regards to the victim and the perpetrator. The reason young age proves to be a risk

factor has to do with the laws surrounding the legal ages for marriage. According to the Turkish Penal Code, the minimum age for marriage is 15, while as per the Turkish Civil Code, the minimum age for marriage is 17 for both males and females. Compared to this, as per the Child Protection Act, the legal age for marriage is set to be 18 (Güler & Küçüker, 2010). While the age for marriage itself poses a threat to the safety of young girls, there is a deep-rooted problem of documentation of these marriages. Determining the exact number of child marriages is difficult in Turkey since a huge number of young women are married off through a religious ceremony; a tactic which is specifically employed to avoid any legal documentation. This leads to many of the child marriages going unreported and thus, no authorities can have any power to intervene and protect the rights of the girls. In case of young marriages, women tend to have no authority or say as this decision belongs to their families; associating marriage with dynamic of power in families. This eventually leads to an increased risk of violence as the husbands place themselves to be superior over their wives. In cases of child marriages, the primary form of GBV which takes place is the financial aspect of it. As the girls are too young to make their decisions, the husbands take complete control over their finances which further allows them to control their lives. This has a rather snow-ball effect as control grows into various other kinds of GBV as time passes. While it cannot be said with surety why child marriages are so prevalent, some factors that result in early marriages include the death of a father, financial circumstances, and/or large number of children (mostly daughters) alongside overall illiteracy and lack of exposure.

In line with this, another study was able to find a correlation between certain factors such as income, educational level, age, family structures and the prevalence of gender-based violence. This study by Malik et al. (2016) was able to conclude that GBV was associated with low education levels. This can also be considered as one of the factors contributing to GBV in Turkey. Education can be seen as a way to empower women as it is directly linked to employment. GBV was seen to be more prevalent among females who had not completed higher levels of education. Hence, living in family structures where the patriarchal and hierarchal family patterns are followed, women tend to be at a higher risk of abuse.

Addressing the motives surrounding the prevalence of GBV in Turkey, it is crucial to mention the use of alcohol as a risk factor. The relationship that lies between GBV and alcohol is complex. While the act of consuming alcohol itself does not do any harm, it can be seen as a factor that contributes to the escalation of situations. Increased aggression, impaired

judgement, lower inhibition, and vulnerability can be lead to outcomes that result in violence. Alcohol is widely consumed in Turkey and is very common among men as well. Various studies have indicated that the use and abuse of alcohol has resulted in an increased frequency of domestic and non-domestic violence against women in Turkey. This can be perhaps linked back to the patriarchal ideology of power and dominance that is set deeply within the society and men often believe themselves to have more power over women. As mentioned, while alcohol does not have a causal relationship to GBV, it is often seen as an aid and evidence has shown that there is a very strong link between alcohol consumption and domestic violence (Gadd et al., 2019).

Additionally, the issue of arranged and forced marriages also plays a significant role in the prevalence of GBV in Turkey. The problem of forced marriages is also an issue that is correlated to GBV. Women in Turkey that were subject to forced or arranged marriages have been more likely to face violence by the hands of their partners. In arranged marriages, the individual getting married holds the choice of agreeing or disagreeing to a marriage proposal, due to the traditional and cultural norms, majority of arranged marriages in Turkey are determined by the elders of the families. Hence, women tend to be deprived of freedom of choice when it comes to choosing a partner; subsequently leading to a forced marriage under societal pressure. This creates an uneven power dynamic before the marriage even begins and ultimately causes the chances of the women within arranged marriages being victims of GBV to be higher than love or chosen marriages. Moreover, issues such as having multiple partners and marital conflicts have also been seen as constituents of GBV in Turkey. As per the culture, majority of the families in Turkey are close-knit together and the involvement of in-laws in the lives of married couples is deemed to be normal and accepted. The 'elders' are expected to be involved in the important decisions with regards to a couple's private life. These decisions could be related to social life, housework, childcare, business decisions etc. Interference of this increases the chances of conflicts between couples; which subsequently leads to a higher risk of violence against women.

Generally, men are expected to be the authoritative figures and rulers of the family in the Turkish family. As for husbands, they are seen as the ruling figures of a family whom the women (wife) as well as the children should obey. Although such rules are unwritten and more of traditional/cultural practices, men feel entitled to control their partners. They do so by putting restrictions that can be seen in the forms of bad habits, undesirable friends, and

inappropriate attire. Hence, to impose their opinions on their partners, men in Turkey have been reported to resort to violence due to the inequality that exists between the couple.

It is crucial to note that despite the alarming statistics GBV demonstrates, there are various structural and socio-cultural barriers that prevent Turkey from being studied in depth with regards to this issue. One of the most prominent socio-cultural factors that come into play when addressing the issue of GBV are the deep-rooted patriarchal practices and cultural stigmas surrounding violence against women in the Turkish society. It is crucial to note that because there are so many cultural stigmas attached to the issue, violence is normalized against women in the Turkish society. Women tend to feel reluctant and pressurized to remain silent with regards to their experiences surrounding violence of any nature. This leads to the cases of GBV remaining under-reported as well. Many women do not even realize that what they experience is a form of GBV and due to this, never reach out to any authorities or institutions to get help. Additionally, the way the society responds to the severity of the issue also discourages victims from coming forward. An example to emphasize on this would be how women are expected to 'have a strong faith', 'keep silent', being patient and forgiving', 'praying to God' as a way to emotionally cope with the violence inflicted upon them (Babacan Gümüş, 2020) This is why many NGO's, feminist organizations and institutions have aimed to create more awareness within the Turkish society regarding GBV. These organizations' main aims are to educate people regarding the various kinds of GBV, its impact on the victims and society as a whole, while also trying to advocate for long-term changes to be made in order to protect women and their rights.

### **Partner vs. Non-Partner Violence Against Women in Turkey**

GBV is generally rooted in male-dominant societies. Such societies, where men are considered to be the only dominant figures in familial, economic, social, and political structures, violence against women seems to be more prevalent. Their dominance and control inhibits women from finding an escape from such situations. In societies such as Turkey, the traditional social norms, legal systems, economic disparities, political structures, and belief systems further aggravate the issue of violence against women.

GBV has further categorizations in the form of partner violence and non-partner violence. Speaking of the latter, partner violence includes any form of violence between

intimate partners. The partners could be married, dating or in a cohabitated relationship. The term 'domestic violence' is commonly used to imply partner violence. Control or violence that is exerted by current or former partners can fall under this category. Beyond the physical aspects of domestic violence, it can be carried out in the form of various other dimensions as well. The perpetration of such violence can be in the form of emotional, economic, and sexual violence. It can also be imposed in the forms of threats, use of children against the woman, and intimidation. As per the findings of a review that was conducted to identify the most common and prevailing studies regarding forms of domestic violence in Turkey, the most common findings indicated physical violence that was reported by six studies. Following physical violence, seven studies reported emotional violence, two of the studies reported economic violence (Altınay & Arat, 2009). One of the studies reported sexual violence to be the most common one among intimate partners.

Correspondingly, violence that is inflicted upon an individual outside of an intimate relationship is referred to as non-partner violence. The perpetrators of non-partner violence can be strangers, acquaintances, family members, and other individuals who may or may not be directly related to the victim. This category of violence can occur in a variety of settings such as public spaces, workplace, and other settings within a community. One of the most prevailing forms of non-partner violence is stalking. There are figures that indicate the percentages of women who had to face violence by the hands of an unknown perpetrator. Most of the times, the motives behind such form of violence include denial to re-unite with a former partner whom they broke up with. Women in Turkey who are generally looked down upon as 'home-makers' have had to face violence by the hands of non-intimate partners as well. Due to the traditional gender roles in the Turkish society, women have to come face-to-face with issues such as harassment in workplaces, stalking, and physical assault.

### **Counter Measures and Strategies to Prevent Gender-Based Violence in Turkey**

Due to the prevalence of GBV against women within Turkey, and the subsequent problems it brings along with it, there have been many attempts to try to combat this issue. As the cases from GBV grew, the Istanbul Convention (IC) declared the problem as a public policy problem and thus should be solved via public policies (Sevinç & Salman, 2023). After continued struggle by institutions advocating for women's rights and other activist groups, the problem of GBV against women was termed to be a priority under the third Yılmaz

Government. Following this began the counter measures provided by the Turkish government to try to provide solutions for the complex problem of GBV.

To start, the General Directorate of Women's Status was introduced within the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services in the 1990s in Turkey in an attempt to provide a structural method for women to have equal rights and opportunities (Sevinç & Salman, 2023). One of the most significant counter measures against GBV were the amendments made to the constitution in regard to women's rights and equality. These changes emphasized on the problem itself and ensured the various municipalities within Turkey ensured GBV as a crucial problem. The amendments to the constitution also allowed women to apply cases to the Turkish Constitutional Court in cases where they faced gender discrimination (Koçoğlu, S. (2019). While some of the amendments to the constitution were made in the 1990's, these changes have been continued to be made in the later 2000's as well. Additions to the Turkish Criminal Code were of the gravity of around 30 amendments that were directly related to the safety of the sexual rights of women. Crimes of sexual nature against women and their freedom were given higher penalties as a part of these amendments.

The Turkish government also commissioned a research group in the late 2000's with the aim of understanding the reasons behind honor killings, a growing problem within the society. This research group, known as the Grand National Assembly, aimed to not only find the reasons behind honor killings, but also the problems in the aid provided to women who were the victims of threats, honor killings or domestic violence. The research ultimately provided possible solutions to these problems and the report was published, following which many local municipalities were encouraged to take a more active part in the rehabilitation of GBV victims in terms of shelters and interventions by authorities. This commission can be seen as one of the primary public policy measures taken by the government to understand the depth of the problem that is GBV, and then provide possible solutions to be implemented in order to prevent GBV. For this, the local municipalities with populations of more than 50,000 were allowed to open homes for the protection of women and children within the Law on Municipalities (Koçoğlu, S., 2019).

As mentioned prior, in order for GBV to become an issue for the public agenda and ultimately public policy, the various women rights institutions and NGOs played a major role. Participation in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW) was one of the main objectives of the institutions as it was an international treaty through which the women within Turkey could benefit greatly from. The people within these feminist groups fought for Turkey's government to adopt CEDAW's policies and they did this by producing films and books that shed light on the horrors of GBV that women had to go through, such as 'Scream that Everyone Can Hear' and 'The Fairy Tale of Home', 'We Will Stop Femicides' etc. (Altan Arslan et al., 2021). Several NGO's and feminist groups continue to strive for equal rights, protection of women who have been victims of GBV and freedom for women in all aspects of society. While these are not direct counter measures, the pressure these organizations put onto the policy makers are what led to the subsequent counter measures, some of which we discussed previously.

### **Challenges in the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence in Turkey**

As we discussed throughout the paper, GBV has many facets and is not an easy issue to solve. While the counter measures utilized by the policy makers, institutions and other feminist groups have been helpful in raising awareness, increasing support and protection for victims, the issue of GBV is far from being solved. While the government and policy makers have tried to put in many counter measures in practice, the growing numbers of GBV and femicides within Turkey clearly show that these measures have been unfulfilled. While we look at the counter measures, it is important to note that there are many obstacles that arise when trying to prevent GBV within the country. To understand the reasoning behind why the governmental counter measures, seem to fall short in preventing the problem and remain unfulfilled, we need to understand the various challenges that come with preventing GBV in Turkey.

One of the main challenges when it comes to preventing GBV can be social norms or general attitude of the public towards the issue itself. As discussed earlier within the paper, the issue of GBV and its various forms is yet to be recognized by many people. Due to the deep-rooted patriarchy that exists within Turkish culture, it can be very difficult for people to change their outlook towards the abuse women face and ultimately on how these women are treated post abuse. Many people within Turkey are still unaware of the extent to which gender-based violence exists within the country and therefore, add to the stigma women suffering from abuse face. While the government and other institutions create safe houses and authorities where women can get help from, many women shy away from contacting these

authorities due to the social stigma that revolves around GBV. The social structure of the country is an aspect that cannot be changed in the span of years and may take a very long time for the society to shift to a more safer space for women who face abuse and violence.

The concept of inherent biases within the economic sector of the country may also be a major obstacle when it comes to preventing the financial or economic form of GBV. The economic sector of many societies, including Turkey is said to have a bias for men. This is reflected in the wage gap, distribution of workloads and the overall percentage of male vs female employees overall. It has also been seen that women are often preferred to be let go before men and thus, they are most vulnerable to unemployment during economic crisis. Another aspect to this bias to be considered is the lack of recognition surrounding the household work conducted by women on a daily basis. As mentioned prior, Turkey has a more traditional family system, one where the duty of maintaining a household and kids falls upon the 'wife' or the woman of the household. This means that the woman has to take care of the household, children, all the while also trying to actively work within a career field. This unidentified labor conducted by women also includes the labor women conduct in terms of reproduction, such as childbearing, birth and other important aspects of pregnancy and childbirth (Sahin, 2021). Since this form of labor that women conduct is unrecognized, it inherently puts women at a disadvantage within the economic world and favors the men due to the hierarchies that develop due to this inequality.

To give an example of the unfulfillment of governmental counter measures to GBV, we can use the Istanbul Convention to understand. With the pandemic of Covid-19, the entire world faced unprecedented obstacles. In Turkey, one of the biggest obstacles was the increased rate of GBV during lockdown. It was reported by the Turkish Federation of Women's Association that during the Covid-19 lockdown, an 80% increase was seen in the cases of physical domestic violence (Güllü, C., 2020). This led to immense outcry from groups protecting women's rights and due to the increasing number of femicides across the country, a campaign with the name 'We Don't Want To Die' was started. Protests were conducted to try to pressurize the current AKP government to implement laws against GBV, such as the Istanbul Convention (IC). The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention is an international treaty which holds the state responsible of preventing, prosecuting, and protecting women from all kinds of GBV (Sahin, 2021). While the

government had signed to be a part of this international treaty in 2011, against the overall public opinion, the current president of Turkey, Erdoğan withdrew from the Istanbul Convention in March 2021. While 64% of the Turkish population were against the withdrawal (Euronews,, 2020), the decision made by the president was an attempt to garner votes and support from the conservative population. This withdrawal led to various protests, and it can be considered to be a major failure of the government when it comes to the protection and freedom of women and their rights. When the IC was signed, it was seen as a great win for women's rights and thus, the withdrawal from it clearly shows that the priorities of the sitting government seemed to have changed.

Taking the example of the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention into account, it can be seen that the political issues of a country may indirectly impact the rights of women suffering from GBV. The decision of withdrawal was primarily made in an attempt to increase support from conservatives, and this directly impacted the women whose rights would otherwise be protected under the conditions of this treaty. So, it can be said that the government seems to be failing to fulfil the counter measures they put into practice previously. From this we can also conclude that aside from the social obstacles of preventing GBV, the political sphere of countries can also be a major obstacle in the prevention of GBV.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, GBV continues to be a complex and pervasive issue that holds its roots in the structural inequalities, societal attitudes, and cultural norms within Turkey. The impacts of the issue are not just limited to the individual and familial levels but, also on the society at a broader level. The fear of reprisal, cultural stigmas, and lack of trust in the justice systems of the country altogether play a crucial role in augmenting the issue at interest. Moreover, the allocation of resources to organizations and prevention programs are often deemed insufficient to tackle the issue and fall up to the needs of the victims. The seeds of patriarchy and conservatism continue to grant perpetrators a social setting where they find themselves entitled to such nefarious mindsets. This further makes it difficult to promote gender equality and hinders whatever progression societies are trying to make to achieve a balance between the genders.

Thus, for the Turkish government, it is crucial to embrace approaches that are more survivor-centered and holistic while addressing the issue of GBV. These approaches can be in the form of increasing public awareness, providing support, and further exacerbating the legal frameworks so that the perpetrators can be held accountable. Moreover, cultural initiatives need to take place that promote gender equality and protection of rights.

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