

# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

## NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

**Country:** Turkey

**Researcher:** Nurseli Yeşim Sünbuloğlu

**Date:** 14/05/2021

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Turkey, there is currently no national legislation specifically addressing gender-based violence in universities and research institutions. In the absence of national legislation, individual and collective efforts of academics, as well as administrative staff and students, played an important role in dealing with GBV at universities.

The foundation of the Women Studies Centres at major universities, as well as the opening of MA programmes in Women's Studies in the 1990s and the increase in the number of these centres in the 2000s, set the background for more systematic work towards prevention of sexual harassment and sexual violence in mid-2000s. These efforts have been consolidated recently with the work carried out as part of EU-funded gender projects. Efforts to target GBV has generally been preceded by the foundation of Women's Studies Centres, which has allowed for the institutionalisation of addressing gender issues and provision of human and material resources, however limited. It is observed that, especially during the 1990s and early 2000s, it was a handful of female academics who produced academic work on gender and carried out work to prevent GBV at universities (Göker & Polatdemir, 2019). The establishment of GBV units and other similar mechanisms at universities as well as the Network Across Universities Against Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence (CTS Ağı) is largely the result of these efforts.

The last five years have been marked by contrasting developments within the broader sociopolitical context of increasing authoritarianism. On the one hand, the introduction of the gender equality project at schools by the Ministry of Education and the Gender Equality Document of Stance by the Higher Education Council in 2016 became crucially important official grounds on which action is taken towards gender equality and prevention of GBV. On the other hand, with the cancellation of this project and the document in 2019, along with the decision to withdraw from the İstanbul Convention in March 2021, hard-won gains have begun to reverse.

### 2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS



Currently, there is no national-level law, policy or strategy document dealing specifically with the prevention of GBV at universities in Turkey. The existing disciplinary regulations for university students and staff do not adequately address the issue.

Students at higher education institutions are bound by the Student Discipline Regulation proffered by Higher Education Council in Turkey. The regulation states that those who commit sexual harassment are to be suspended for two academic semesters (Article 8, Clause E). In cases of sexual assault, the regulation stipulates that those who commit sexual assault are expelled from the institutions.

Faculty and staff in higher education institutions are bound by the Higher Education Discipline Regulation for Managers, Instructors, and Officers of the Higher Education Council. This regulation stipulates that those charged with assault are dismissed from their positions (Article 11, Clause B). Although it is not specified, this would include sexual assault as well (<https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.2547.pdf>). However, Higher Education Discipline Regulation does not specify what actions and behaviours constitute such offences and crimes. Beyond this, the regulation for faculty and staff does not actually mention sexual harassment but only focuses on (possibly sexual) assault (Kadir Has University Report, 2017).

The Higher Education Council Gender Equality Document of Stance, which was issued in March 2016, was a landmark attempt in addressing GBV at universities. The Higher Education Council is officially the highest national authority that supervises universities and regulates higher education in Turkey. Therefore, the Document was officially binding for all the universities. What initiated the issuing of this document was the murder of a university student, Özgecan Aslan, in February 2015 because she resisted a sexual assault attempt. This incident triggered a heated public discussion on violence against women and its prevention with widespread media coverage. In response to public demand for action, the Commission of Women Studies and Problems, which had been established in 2015 under the auspices of the Higher Education Council, released several recommendations, including those related to GBV in the Document of Stance. The overall aim of the Document was to raise awareness of and monitor gender equality in higher education institutions. The recommendations included training and education on sexual and gender-based harassment and assault, but not the enactment of specific policies that seek to prohibit such actions. This was an issue that women's studies centres and groups on university campuses took upon themselves in recognition of the severity of the problem (Kadir Has University Report, 2017). Nevertheless, the Document provided a strong official background and justification for initiating and accelerating the establishment of GBV units and the development of gender equality policies at universities (Göker & Polatdemir, 2019, p. 22). However, the Document of Stance proved to be short-lived, and it was cancelled in 2019 due to opposition from conservative circles. The Higher Education Council Chair Yekta Saraç stated that the Document was incompatible with the values of Turkish society, and it had not been embraced by the society. The cancellation of the Document occurred simultaneously with the cancellation of the Improving Gender Equality Project (ETCEP) carried out in schools by the Ministry of Education, which was also under attack by conservative groups claiming that the project aims to de-gender children and promote homosexuality.



The existing mechanisms to address GBV at universities are considered inadequate, as revealed in a report by Kadir Has University (2017) entitled “Mapping Policies on Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Assault”. This mapping is among several reports prepared by Kadir Has University Gender and Women’s Studies Research Centre as part of their regular research on gender issues in Turkey. The report shows that only 18 universities out of a total of 177 have some form of mechanism and/or a document of commitment to preventing sexual harassment and GBV in their institution. Of these 18 universities, 13 of them are state universities (out of a total of 112), and 5 of them (out of 64) are private universities. The majority of these 18 universities are located in Istanbul and Ankara, the two metropolitan cities in Turkey. Of the 18 universities, 11 have a dedicated centre or unit dealing with cases of SH & GBV. Eight of the 11 universities have a clear procedure regarding the selection and roles of individuals in these units/centres and investigation committees.

Of the 18 universities, 14 institutions have developed policies to deal with SH & GBV, and 4 of them have stated that they are against SH & GBV in their documents of ethical principles. The composition of the documents related to SH & GBV of these 18 universities is 7 directives, 4 policy documents, 3 guides, 2 ethical principles documents, 1 regulation and 1 support principles document. The significance of this composition is that only regulations and directives (a total of 8 documents out of 18) are legally binding for universities, although other forms of documents are also important in showing institutional commitment to address GBV.

In terms of defining GBV and addressing different forms of GBV, 13 policies define what constitutes sexual harassment actions and behaviours (e.g. unwanted touching and sexually suggestive comments) while 5 of them do not. Significantly, none of the documents addresses harassment perpetrated by a significant other. Of the 18 universities, only 1 includes online harassment in their policies. Similarly, stalking is generally not included in these policies as a form of GBV. Half of the universities (9/18) recognise retaliatory actions against a SH & GVB victim who have filed a complaint (or intends to file a complaint) as a form of SH & GBV. A further significant feature of the existing policies is that although all of them acknowledge GBV, none specifically address harassment or forms of GBV that LGBTI+ individuals are exposed to. It is important to note that this omission is not related to the lack of recognition of harassment and GBV that LGBTI+ individuals are exposed to. On the contrary, the report by Göker and Polatdemir (2019) states that their interviewees specifically mentioned not involving LGBTI+ issues and experiences in their current efforts as a significant shortcoming (p. 25). They explain the reason for this omission is that they have to “auto-censor these issues” due to the enormous challenges and resistance that the discussion of LGBTI+ bring about in the current sociopolitical climate.

Network Across Universities Against Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence (CTS Ağı), an umbrella organisation bringing together those who work against GBV in universities, contributes significantly to the sustainability of the efforts taking place within universities. The Network was established in 2012 and has held biannual meetings with members ever since. The network provides a platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience in dealing with GBV and, more broadly, improving gender equality at universities. The Network also offers solidarity to members who face challenges in their efforts to prevent GBV at their institutions. Through this network, it becomes possible to have up-to-date information about the situation at universities



regarding GBV policies and implications. An important outcome of this Network is an edited book compiling narratives of academics involved in the establishment of GBV units at 12 different universities (Uygur & Şimga, 2018). The website of the Network brings together policy documents and directives of GBV units, providing a repository of documents for institutions planning to establish similar mechanisms (<https://ctsuni.wordpress.com/cts-birimi-olan-universiteler/>).

The national RFO in Turkey, TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey), currently has no mechanism to address GBV in universities and research institutions. Neither does GBV at universities and research institutions seem to be a priority topic for research, considering no research addressing GBV has been funded by TÜBİTAK in the last five years. However, it is important to note that TÜBİTAK issued Policy Principles for Increasing the Participation of Women Researchers in TÜBİTAK Processes on 24 December 2019. Within the framework of inclusiveness and with reference to the Turkish Constitution Article 10, ERA Priority 4 and Article 16 of Horizon 2020 Programme legislation, the document includes nine actions to improve gender balance in all research and development as well as innovation activities. The document states that the implementation of these policy principles will be monitored and evaluated. The document does not, however, refer to the prevention of GBV as an aspect of ensuring women's participation in research, development and innovation activities.

It is important to note that TÜBİTAK operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Industry and Technology, so it is not an autonomous institution, but rather its functioning (including policies in place and the topics of the research projects to be funded) is in line with the dominant political climate in the country. Accordingly, as the ruling party AKP (Justice and Development Party) became more authoritarian and adopted a stricter position against gender equality, this reflected on decisions and policies in TÜBİTAK. Academics have observed that feminist and dissenting scholars have not been assigned to research project review committees, especially since the Academics for Peace signatories were expelled from universities. This has an important bearing on the topics of research projects to be funded, which explains why research on GVB is not considered a priority topic. In 2019 a collaboration of three universities yielded a draft proposal informally submitted to the Director of TÜBİTAK, which involved a mentoring scheme for the universities without Gender Equality Plans. In parallel to the submission of this draft proposal, TÜBİTAK started to collect gender-disaggregated data within the institution (e.g. gender make-up of TÜBİTAK committees, project coordinators, etc.) These two lines of work were very promising, and they were going to be further developed, but they were suspended as they coincided with the cancellation of the Higher Education Council Gender Equality Document of Stance. Nevertheless, TÜBİTAK managed to publish the Policy Principles Document. Under the circumstances, TÜBİTAK cannot adequately address gender equality issues and, by extension, the prevention of GBV.

The units/centres against GBV and academics in the Network Across Universities carry out several activities to address GBV and help create a gender-equal environment in the universities. Some universities have prepared manuals or brochures with information on what constitutes SH & GBV and contact information of institutions (including the police, the Bar Association, NGOs, etc.) that provide assistance in the cases of GBV. Some have also integrated a session on GBV in the orientation programmes for new students. Training sessions have also been



organised for university staff to promote gender equality and discuss the prevention of GBV in universities. A further effort has been to offer compulsory or elective gender courses to students to raise their awareness. All these activities act as preventative measures against GBV in universities.

The limited number of universities with a formal unit dealing with GBV incidents and issues is indicative of the inadequacy of policies and practices in this area. In the absence of specific GBV units, incidents are dealt with by committees under varying names - e.g. Ethics Board or Board of Discipline. A common difficulty in the efforts against GBV is that universities do not allocate a budget or personnel for the existing units dealing with GBV incidents. Also, students and other components of universities (e.g. administrative staff or contract-based staff) are generally excluded from participating in these efforts, and it becomes the responsibility of a very limited number of feminist academics without resources to handle all the incidents. These academics cannot receive any support, although they deal with traumatic cases. Also, in many cases, university administrations refrain from the establishment of a specific unit dealing with GBV, fearing that with these units, GBV will gain visibility at these universities, creating a defamatory effect for universities. These difficulties experienced in universities are part of a broader problem in Turkey regarding the inadequacy of addressing GBV. Cancellation of Higher Education Council's Gender Equality Document of Stance only three years after it was issued and the decision about withdrawal from Istanbul Convention demonstrates the links between the higher education and the national contexts as well as the inadequacy in addressing GBV in Turkey.

### **3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION**

MeToo Movement and, to a larger extent, İstanbul Convention have had relevance for the efforts to prevent GBV in universities. The MeToo Movement set the background for a manifesto entitled "A Different Academia Against the Sexist Culture is Possible" written in 2019 by a small group of academics who call for action to prevent GBV at universities and highlights the importance of the issue to become a public debate (Gazete Duvar, 2019). Similarly, İstanbul Convention was a significant reference point in the policy documents of GBV units at universities. The decision to withdraw from the Convention, unlawfully in the form of a decree without the approval of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, has had particular consequences for the universities since the announcement of the decision in March 2021. Some examples include a lawsuit filed against a course entitled "Gender Equality" by the Administration of the Health Sciences University on the grounds that it compromised religious and national values (KİH-YÇ Chronology, 2021); the forcing of the only employee of the GBV unit at Boğaziçi University to take unpaid leave, thus effectively suspending the activities of the unit; and removal of policy documents and directives of GBV unit at Dokuz Eylül University. These examples demonstrate that the possible withdrawal from the İstanbul Convention has encouraged some university administrations to take measures against gender equality and GBV prevention efforts.

### **4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV**

Gender-based violence and women's murders (femicides) have been higher on the agenda in public debates, especially since the murder of the university student Özgecan Arslan in 2015 (We Will Stop Femicide Platform website). The public has become more sensitive and more reactionary in the cases of murdered women, including Şule Çet in 2018, Emine Bulut in 2019



and Pınar Gültekin in 2020. The debates around Istanbul Convention that became more heated in 2019 led the GBV issues to be more of public concern. The public opinion survey on Istanbul Convention carried out by KONDA in August 2020 when the government had a strong intention to withdraw from the Convention is helpful to understand what the public thinks about the issue. The survey finds out that 35% of the population has knowledge about what the Convention is concerned with. Of this population, only 16% thinks that Turkey should withdraw from the Convention, and 84% is against Turkey's withdrawal. More significantly, the survey shows that there has been considerable improvement in awareness about GBV in Turkey over the last five years. To compare the public opinion about violence against women, the 2020 survey repeated some of the questions of the earlier survey in 2015. The percentage of those who think it could be acceptable that a male partner uses physical violence dropped from 20% to 6%, and those who think this is absolutely unacceptable rose from 37% to 63%. Similarly, the percentage of those who believe women should be careful about what they wear to avoid harassment decreased from 80% in 2015 to 32% in 2000. These figures imply a move away from a victim-blaming approach to one that does not justify GBV.

## 5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

In line with the global trends, the major surveys carried out in Turkey on the impact of Covid-19 on women suggest an increase in the cases of domestic and digital violence (SosyoPolitik Saha Araştırmaları Survey, 2020; ENKAD Report, 2021). However, importantly, the report by Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways (KİH-YÇ) points out that the state is not transparently sharing data regarding the applications received by the national helpline dealing with cases of violence against women; therefore, it is not possible to know the full-scale impact of the pandemic on the number of domestic violence cases (KİH-YÇ Report, 2021). Also, as the report by the Disabled Women's Association indicates, access to support mechanisms in cases of violence was particularly difficult for disabled women (ENKAD Report, 2021). In terms of the impact of the pandemic on GBV in higher education, certain challenges were discussed in the first virtual pandemic meeting on 16th May 2020 of the Network Across Universities, including how to deal with complaints filed to GBV units while the incidents do not take place in physical campuses but online. However, GVB in higher education during the pandemic has not been addressed in public discussions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In line with the global trends, the major surveys carried out in Turkey on the impact of Covid-19 on women suggest an increase in the cases of domestic and digital violence (SosyoPolitik Saha Araştırmaları Survey, 2020; ENKAD Report, 2021). However, importantly, the report by Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways (KİH-YÇ) points out that the state is not transparently sharing data regarding the applications received by the national helpline dealing with cases of violence against women; therefore, it is not possible to know the full-scale impact of the pandemic on the number of domestic violence cases (KİH-YÇ Report, 2021). Also, as the report by the Disabled Women's Association indicates, access to support mechanisms in cases of violence was particularly difficult for disabled women (ENKAD Report, 2021). In terms of the impact of the pandemic on GBV in higher education, certain challenges were discussed in the first virtual pandemic meeting on 16th May 2020 of the Network Across Universities, including how to deal with complaints filed to GBV units while the incidents do not take place in



physical campuses but online. However, GVB in higher education during the pandemic has not been addressed in public discussions.

## 7. REFERENCES

- CTS Ağı [Network Across Universities Against Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence]. (n.d.). Homepage. <https://ctsuni.wordpress.com/cts-birimi-olan-universiteler/>
- ENKAD. (2021). *Human Rights of Women with Disabilities during the Covid-19 Pandemic Monitoring Report*. [http://engellikadin.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/engkad\\_twitter-post.jpg](http://engellikadin.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/engkad_twitter-post.jpg)
- Gazete Duvar. (2019, February 1). *A Different Academia Against the Sexist Culture is Possible*. <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/turkiye/2019/02/01/akademisyenlerden-cinsiyetci-kulture-karsi-baska-bir-akademi-mumkun-kampanyasi>
- Göker, Z. G., & Polatdemir, A. (2019). *Gender Equality Mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions in Turkey*. [https://sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/sites/sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/files/univ\\_toplumsal\\_cinsiyet\\_raporu\\_30nisan.pdf](https://sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/sites/sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/files/univ_toplumsal_cinsiyet_raporu_30nisan.pdf)
- Kadir Has University Gender and Women's Studies Research Centre. (2017). *Mapping Policies on Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Assault: Toolkit for Universities in Turkey*. <https://gender.khas.edu.tr/en/mapping-policies-sexual-and-gender-based-harassment-and-assault-toolkit-universities-turkey>
- KİH-YÇ [Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways]. (2021). *Being Women During the Pandemic Report*. <https://kadinininsanhaklari.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Salg%C4%B1nda-Kad%C4%B1n-Olmak-Uzun-Rapor-Final.pdf>
- KİH-YÇ [Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways]. (2021). *Day-to-Day Chronology of What Has Happened Regarding Istanbul Convention since 20 March?*. <https://istanbulsozlesmesi.org/english/>
- KONDA. (2020). *Public Opinion Survey on Istanbul Convention*. [https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Barometre\\_111\\_IstanbulSozlesmesi.pdf](https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Barometre_111_IstanbulSozlesmesi.pdf)
- SosyoPolitik Saha Araştırmaları. (2020). *The Survey of the Impact of Covid-19 on Women and on Violence Against Women and Children*. <https://sahamerkezi.org/covid-19-karantinasindan-kadinin-etkilenimi-ile-kadin-ve-cocuğa-yonelik-siddete-iliskin-turkiye-arastirma-raporu/>
- TÜBİTAK. (2019). *Policy Principles for Increasing the Participation of Women Researchers in TÜBİTAK Processes*. <https://www.tubitak.gov.tr/en/news/policy-principles-for-increasing-the-participation-of-women-researchers-in-tubitak-processes-are>
- Uygun, G., & Şimga, H. (2018). *Gender-Based Violence Units in Universities*. Eastern Mediterranean University Printing House.



We Will Stop Femicide Platform. (n.d.). *Homepage.*  
<http://kadincinayetlerininidurduracagiz.net/for-english>



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101006261.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union.