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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN TURKEY: BELIEFS AND TRADITIONS

Introduction

Thank you for the honour of addressing you this morning. According to the first item of the United Nation's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women the term «violence against women» denotes any act of gender-based 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 in private life.

Violence against women, being a complicated issue, can be defined as an oppressive act against a woman's personality and being. Violence against women comprises the major part of violence in society. The main aim of violence against women is to control the behavior of women through fear. In cases of violence, males tend to have the upper hand. The problem of violence against women, having dimensions such as beating, sexual harassment, and psychological exploitation, cannot be determined easily since it is a hidden issue, especially in Turkey.

Domestic violence is the most frequent sort and often includes physical violence against females. Being physically strong, men can employ violence as a means of establishing authority on their weaker female counterparts in order to make them accept the male's authority and power. In many societies, violence is permissible and it is even sometimes accepted as a fundamental necessity to maintain the patriarchal authority. Thus, violence is permitted in order for parents to control their children and for men to control women. In some societies, domestic violence is even supported by law. In other words, violence against women is accepted or tolerated 'in certain prescribed forms and given contexts' by Turkish society.

Violence against women among the Turkish population engenders serious problems. The results of a study conducted by the Prime Ministry Family Research Institute of Turkey in 2002 showed that in 34% of Turkish families there was evidence of physical violence, and in 53% there were cases of verbal violence of a severe intensity. Thus, almost one out of every two Turkish women living in Turkey is exposed to violence. This issue concerns millions of women and their families. It is striking that domestic violence is considered an internal family problem; consequently, inappropriate treatment against women can manifest as a perfunctory result of religious or traditional practices that interestingly, may remain absent within other families.

Based on this point of departure, this study aims to answer two main questions:

First- What is the overall picture of violence against women in Turkey and what possible paths and measures can be taken to decrease its incidence?

Second- From a more general perspective- What is The Effect of Islam on Society in terms of Violence against women? Do the tenets of Islam, as followed by Turks, concede or encourage the murder of women in the name of honor? In short,



is there a significant relationship between the Turkish variety of Islam and honor killings? Does gender discrimination against women, as an instigator of violence, have any religious foundations?

In regards to the present state of violence against women it is indisputable that violence against women has triggered tangible and psychological problems and dangers in both national and international arenas. As for the significance of this for Turkey, although many harmful traditions have disappeared over the past years of societal change, violence against women remains a persistent problem. This study is ultimately an attempt to germinate healthy and permanent solutions to promote basic rights and freedoms. Turkey should take deterrent precautions regarding violence against women while composing future policies that promote international interaction. The reason thereof is that in recent times international mutual dependencies have gained importance; it is thus impossible for Turkey to develop effective and healthy policies by ignoring the advances in other countries. Serious analysis should be implemented to determine the status of Turkey in a globalizing world during the adoption process of the European Union criteria.

Recently, there have been several changes at the legal and institutional level which positively affect women's role and status in Turkey. The norms of European Union and United Nations (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) have already been ratified and adopted. Although most of the regulations and changes have strengthened women's status and role, domestic violence and other forms of violence against women remain widespread in Turkey, according to recent research and studies.

Turkey's International Obligations related to Violence against Women

In these efforts to globalize women's rights, Turkey has embraced several international obligations related to violence against women. Turkey ratified the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment on 2 August 1988. Upon ratification Turkey recognized the competence of the Committee against Torture to receive and process individual communications under articles 21 and 22 of the Convention against Torture.

Turkey is a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In General Recommendation 19, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women concluded that gender-based violence, including torture, is a form of discrimination against women as defined under article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Turkey ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women on 29 October 2002.

Additionally, Turkey ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 9 September 1994. On 15 August 2000, Turkey signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; neither Convention has yet been ratified. Under article 90 of the Turkish Constitution, international treaties duly ratified, have the force of law, and can be invoked in Turkish courts.

At the regional level, Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe, ratified the European Convention on Human Rights in 1954. In order to fulfill the commitments incumbent on members of the Council of Europe, Turkey has ratified a number of regional human rights treaties including the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

At the national level, Article 17 of the Turkish Constitution prohibits "torture and ill-treatment incompatible with human dignity." Article 243 of Turkey's Penal Code criminalizes torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment by state officials. On November 22, 2001 the Turkish legislature passed comprehensive legislative bill designed to promote gender equality in civil legislation.

Adaptation Process of Turkey to European Union regarding Violence against Women

The Adaptation Process of Turkey to European Union criteria has brought with it further commitments to inhibit VAW. Turkey has demonstrated an interest in joining the European Union for a long time; however, it was considered improbable until the recent negotiations. Turkey is waiting for the European Union to decide to set a date for talks about its possible entry into the EU. With the advent of the negotiations of 2004, the European Union demanded that Turkey improve human rights and living standards throughout the country for possible accession. The Turkish government has adopted an accelerated democratization process that has triggered a change mechanism vis-à-vis violence against women. Law amendments to improve women's rights, the increase in the number of women's rights organizations and

their functions are among the important improvements concerning this issue.

However, in Turkey, this remains a divisive issue between those that resist or have opposing attitudes towards change and those that are affected positively by this change process or support it. The important finding that surrounds these polarized groups is that the recent changes have compelled both sides to take a more active role in politics. The continuation of this process is crucial in order to moderate the effects of violence against women at least to the standards of EU countries.

In Turkey, women experience relatively more problems in the issues of divorce, polygamy, inheritance, education, acquisition of property and participating in administration than in EU countries. As is known, one of the main aims of the EU is to enable male-female equality, especially the abolition of oppression and violence against women by increasing their participation in social, financial and political life. The results of recent research indicate that violence against women is prevalent in Turkey and among Turkish people living in Europe.

The Effect of Islam on Society in terms of Violence against women

Having general idea of Turkey's current struggles to abate domestic violence we may now turn our eyes to the effect of culture and religion as possible causes of VAW. Primarily, I seek to address the relation of Islam to Violence against women.

Islamic Perspective on Violence against Women

Approaching from a broad theological perspective how Islam views Violence against Women. As you know, the issue of women in Islam is highly controversial. Any materials on this subject, whether in print or online, should be used with caution because of the lack of objectivity. While it is generally agreed that the rights granted to women in the Qur'an and by the prophet Muhammad were a vast improvement in comparison to the situation of women in Arabia prior to the advent of Islam, after the Prophet's death the condition of women in Islamic countries began to decline and revert back to pre-Islamic norms.

Upon the death of the Prophet, the restriction of women's rights began to increase with the course of history. The pre-Islamic societies of Turks, Arabs, Persians, Indians and others were patriarchal societies. They had their own cultures, customs, and belief systems. The rapid expansion of Islam did not leave the new converts enough time to obtain sufficient Islamic education. This led to disagreements between the new converts and the process of Islamization, that is, Islamic education and acculturation. These factors, in conjunction with growing wealth, leisure activities, and sensuality combined with the corrupt morality of royalty that influenced the upper class, stirred fear in all classes of urban groups for the chastity of their women. The socio-historical causes, which led to the worsening in the position, status, and role of Muslim women, are many. The effect of these causes on the position of women was grave and led to their severe oppression. Her social, economic and political rights were violated. The above brief discussion shows the equal status of men and women in Islam. However, in practice, these rights have been violated and the position of Muslim women has undergone dramatic changes for the worst since early Islamic era (Bilgin, 1997).

Taking into consideration the circumstances of Turkish society, violence, perhaps, is one of the most delicate of subjects. Severe gender discrimination against women is prevalent and women's social, economic, cultural and political freedoms are restricted in practice, although several recent legal reforms in Turkey have now ensured gender equality in the legal sphere. Within Islam, there may exist various denominations, movements or traditions, with their own distinct institutions, cultures and teachings. A comprehensive exploration of the relationship between religion and violence against women is beyond the scope of this paper. While women in many parts of the world have made advances in areas previously closed to them, the problem of violence against women remains pervasive. Unfortunately, this violence takes many forms and occurs across national, cultural, racial, and religious borders. Islam and other religions like Christianity and Judaism basically condemn all forms of violence against women.

The significant relationship between violence against women and religion, or how people's religious perceptions affect their violent tendencies, still remains unclear. Thus, reviewing the literature about this issue from a religious perspective will not only offer a new perspective, but it will also enable the production of healthy and permanent solutions to the problem, since it will clarify the established perceptions of society and the factors that trigger violence. The issue, violence against women should be elucidated to curb the acts of abuse that continue to plague Turkey. Unfortunately there are a very small number



of studies related to violence against women and its reasons in Turkey. Most importantly, there is a lack of empirical research concerning the relationship between Islam and violence against women. General theories for the perpetuation of violence against women tend to emphasize the inferior position women retain in Turkish society.

The occurrence of honor killings, among the most sensational acts of violence in Turkey, has drawn much international attention. Honor killing, or the murder of women whose so-called disgraceful behavior tarnishes the family honor, is not the only kind of violence that Turkish women confront, but it is one of the most cruel and severe human rights violations. Although homicides of this kind take place in all regions of Turkey, public attention has focused mainly on Southeastern and Eastern Anatolia. However, to be able to evaluate the issue via in-depth interdisciplinary analysis, the overall concept of honor killings and its relationship with religion needs to be analyzed throughout the country. The socio-economic, cultural and political environments that encourage, support, and protect the perpetrators of honor killings place women in an inferior position. Thus, analysis of this issue and the swift restriction of these severe human rights violations is a priority for Turkey (Faraç, 1998).

Honor killings stem from the concept of honor, or *namus* in Turkish. Males in Turkey learn from childhood the importance of *namus* and consequences of its loss. According to the concept of *namus*, a woman's sexuality determines the status of the men who are closely related to her. Therefore, the men feel responsible to control their women's sexuality. When a woman is unchaste, the male members of her family are shamed and cannot look other members of the community in the eyes. The woman is expected to commit suicide, restoring honor to her and her family. Sometimes her family may cause her to commit suicide by imprisoning her, neglecting her, or poisoning her, until she finally kills herself by some means, such as hitting her head against the wall (Dalay, 1996). However, if she chooses not to perform this deed, she will die in shame. In order for the family to regain its honor, one of its members must kill the woman who has brought them shame.

Honor killings are the result of interactions among many factors. The following is a discussion of some of the most important factors of honor killings in Turkey (Kardam, 2005; Turkish Grand National Assembly Special Investigation Commission Report/ Research for Specific Measures against Honor Killings and Violence against Women and Children, 2006). Perhaps the first noticeable factor surrounding the issue of honor killings in Turkey is the tribal culture of the region itself. One definition of culture describes it as the organization of a society based on common expressions of shared religion and values (Yalçın, 1991). In a tribal culture, men control women in many aspects of life, including sexuality. Loyalty to family outweighs individual desires. In many cases, the oldest living male is the family leader and acts as a judge of family members' actions. He may choose to punish a family member who is disloyal or does not follow family customs (Gilmore, 1987, 90 - 91). In this patriarchal family system, the responsibilities of family members are not equally distributed. Men are only controlled by their fathers until they mature, while women are controlled by males throughout their lives. The man gives the woman support and safety while the woman gives the man sexual and household service (Lerner, 1986, 217 - 218).

Honor killings are rooted in the deep traditions of the Middle East and have little to do with religion itself. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam first emerged in this region, and all promote the chastity of men and women through similar principles (Berkday, 1996, 211 - 212). Islam has emphasized this principle more than many other religions. However, the Koran itself does not promote killing women in response to adultery, other forms of infidelity, or rape (Light 24 / 2; the Night Journey, 17 / 32; Women, 4 / 15).

Gender based violence thus takes many different forms and there may be distinctive patterns or manifestations of gender violence associated with particular cultures or regions. However, gender violence is present in all societies; it is a structural phenomenon embedded in the context of cultural, socio-economic and political power relations. Societies organized around gendered, hierarchical power relations give legitimacy to violence against women (Schuler, 1992). Gender inequality, leading to gender violence, is deeply embedded in the Turkish social structure; some Turkish social institutions permit, even encourage the demonstration of unequal power relations between the sexes.

There are serious problems in gender perceptions among Turks. Gender issues relate to how society differentiates between women and men, how it perceives the male-female dichotomy, and what expectations it holds regarding appropriate male and female behavior. It also involves men and women's socially and culturally determined roles and responsibilities. Women encounter gender discrimination in many areas of life, primarily in their family, work, academic and social lives.

In Turkey, gender discrimination is most especially prominent in education. Inequality of opportunity in education is mainly the result of gender discrimination, along with socio-economic differences. Especially in the Eastern and Southeastern regions of the country, there is a general reluctance for the education of girls based on religious and traditional factors. According to the 2003 Turkey Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS), 85% of men and 61% of women in Eastern Turkey have had some schooling compared to 95% of men and 85% of women in the Western Turkey. In Turkey, female children's and adolescents' right to education is often considered unnecessary, and hence, girls lack the opportunity to construct their futures through education. This discrepancy in equality of opportunity is the reason why women's participation in employment remains very low (24.9 %) in Turkey, which is the lowest among the EU and OECD countries (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2005). While, on the one hand, employment opportunities of women have been limited, on the other, the idea that women are cheap workers like children has become prevalent. The reasons for these restrictions may be to prevent women from being economically independent individuals, and from spending more time outside their homes. By analyzing this issue, the proposed research will shed light on how gender roles, especially the constructions of masculinity, affect the perception of honor and indicate the correlation between constructions of honor and violence against women.

Sociological Background of Violence against Women

In the socio-cultural structure of Turkey, during the socialization period, the male children are frequently taught to despise women, to be authoritarian and to use violence against women. According to the data of the Turkish Prime Ministry Family Research Institution more than 96 % of the people using violence against women are men, and more than 90% of the people being exposed to violence are women and children. The belief "If a man beats his woman, that woman must deserve it" strengthens the unequal power between the genders and sustains men's superiority over women in the socialization process. Violence does not exist in the biological nature of a human being, but it is taught to individuals systematically and developed as a part of the socialization process. This proves that violence is an acceptable social behavior. Patriarchal culture fosters the belief that women are secondary and weak, and it also causes women to doubt their own self-worth. Women exposed to such behaviors cannot develop their power and abilities. In other words, women are victimized by the social structure and in turn are prevented from actualizing their own potentials.

In Turkey, the uttering "he is your husband; he can both beat and love" is often heard. This demonstrates that violence is also a kind of training. This belief facilitates violence and perpetuates its occurrence. As is known, violence in the family is experienced in almost every country. In society, behaviors including violence are perceived as a kind of training distinct to every culture and religion. Even if violence against women is known by family, neighbor or relatives, it can be perceived as a normal behavior. As the violence is applied in special areas, it is often not thought to bother public conscience (Walby, 1990; Subasi / Akın, 2003; Schiffauer, 1983; Mernissi, 2000b; Koçtürk, 1992; Kehl / Pfluger, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1996; Faraç, 1998; Özbay, 1995; Toprak, 2007b).

Many of the studies and articles scrutinized indicate that most of the women exposed to violence want help from friends, neighbors and relatives; as a last resort; however, they may search out legal assistance. The number of women who go to doctor, call police or apply to a social institution is very low. Generally women in Turkey do not attempt to go to authorities for violence against them. Violence against women cannot be prevented by changing the laws. The most important reason for the failure of the existing laws is neither their properties nor their lack of enforcement but cultural resistance to their implementation. Victims, attackers, families and public officials retain a respect for the secrecy of family relations and collude in its protection from outside interference. Nonetheless, the ratio of Turkish women living in European countries benefiting from these rights is higher than women living in Turkey. The most important reason for this disparity seems to be a general cultural tendency among police officials in Turkey to disregard the complaints of women accepting this violence as a special family problem and encouraging the female plaintiffs to reconcile their differences with their partners (Kulalı, 1999; Abu-Odeh, 2000; Ali, 2000; Halis, 2001; Anıl / Arın / Hacımiraoglu / Bingöllü / İlkaracan, 2002; Ates, 2002; Kalthegener, 2007; Mavili, 1997).

Much attention has been devoted to the enduring problem of violence against women and it has elicited various approaches. The first one can be classified as the sociological approach. This approach renders the causes of violence as societal facts. According to this theory, a socialization process that stems from the learning of gender roles promotes a stronger and superior role for males in society. The other is a socio-psychological approach. The socio-psychological approach claims that males behave violently as a process of learned experience.



Today sociologists and anthropologists connect violence and terror in society to the styles of child rearing, or, in other words, the ideas and beliefs about the socialization of children. We should accept that a man who witnessed the physical abuse of his mother at the hands of his father, or was himself exposed to violence in his childhood, plays an important role in the perpetuation of violence. In psychology, the social learning theory accepts that generally both positive and negative behaviors are learnt. Thus, it claims that violence and aggressiveness are acquired behaviors.

According to an approach placed in this paper, then, violence against women arises from patriarchal society and culture reinforced by some wrong religious beliefs. Religions that establish male ownership of women and cause women to forfeit their physical, mental and sexual freedom depict women as secondary and sinful creatures and accept violence against disobedient women. Description and perception of violence against women in societies are shaped by the beliefs of individuals. Therefore, when violence appears for a reason that is accepted by society, individuals will rarely perceive it as dissolute but rather as sanctioned measures sustained by the religious beliefs or cultural mores of the populace.

Contained within this approach is the assumption that the basis of this belief is rooted in the family. This dominant family form occurs when patriarchal society and culture combine with religion. Violence in incredible amounts occurs in families that support male superior attitudes. Family which is described with concepts like “order”, “harmony”, and “holy” may become a place of violence for women and children. Furthermore, female children grow up experiencing and internalizing (these images of male superiority which in turn is incorporated into their own identities. Girls have to be dependent, passive, weak and insecure; male children have to be aggressive authoritarian, despotic, active and strong (Waddy, 1980; Yalcın-Heckmann, 1991; Mernissi, 2000a; Kardam, 2005; Lutz, 1991).

Much research supports the view that, in a patriarchal society, violence, based on inequality between the genders, is a behavior taught and adopted by individuals during the socialization process. Such patriarchal societies teach males to be powerful and decision-making. Men believe that they have the right to control women’s lives. They don’t accept women as equals and consider it a duty to keep woman under pressure. Men beat women in order to gain power and ownership of their spouses and to fulfill their desires for authority and power. In patriarchal societies, males learn to be despotic; females must then be kept under pressure. As a result of that, men express their rights to interfere with a woman’s desire from freedom from violence.

Women perceive themselves as responsible for the negative situations in family life; and devote themselves to their husbands and children. Unequal power between males and females perpetuates violence against women in society. Women accept violence as a way of life and learn how to live with violence. In addition to that they think that violence is normal and occurs in all marriages. Although they are exposed to different varieties of violence, they do not accept their husbands’ behaviors as violent. According to them, if these behaviors are not extreme, they are normal. This description causes violence to be accepted as normal. Some Turkish women believe that pushing, slapping, shouting, controlling relations should be welcomed patiently.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Violence against women remains a complicated and debilitating issue for the Turkish Republic. In many instances, its persistence can be attributed to gender inequality stemming from a strongly patriarchal society. It has been legitimated by culture and to some degree, by laissez-faire attitude of public officials. Recent international pressure and Turkey’s aspirations to measure up to European and global norms have encouraged the adoption of laws to discourage its occurrence. Nevertheless, Turkey lags behind its Western counterparts.

This dissimilarity can therefore be attributed to its socio-cultural structure. During the socialization period, boys are inculcated with a belief in male superiority fostered by the patriarchal attitudes of Turkish society. Thus, violence remains culturally permissible and even prescriptive in some instances to preserve male authority.

These attitudes may not be theologically sound when evaluated by the principles of the Qur’an, but they persist in Muslim nations. If Islam, from a canonical perspective, dissuades gender inequality and violence, it may be an effective agent for cultural change in Turkey as well as other nations. Religion remains a powerful force, especially in more traditional societies, it should therefore be considered as a possible ally in the fight against domestic violence.