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‘Femicide does not recognize viruses’:¹ violence against women increases in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have led to an increase in violence against women in Turkey, as victims and perpetrators are locked down together and access to protection grows more difficult. Furthermore, those convicted of violence against women have been released from prisons and sent back to their homes.

Keywords

Turkey, COVID-19, femicide, violence against women, prison release

Theme

Mobility events, Domestic Violence

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¹ Karakaş, Burcu. 25 March 2020. Kadın cinayetleri virüs tanımıyor [Femicide does not recognize viruses]. *1+1 Forum*. Available online at: <https://www.birartibir.org/siyaset/633-kadin-cinayetleri-virus-tanimiyor>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

According to several studies, lockdowns have caused an increase in violence against women in Turkey, and other countries worldwide.² Starting on 14 April 2020, Turkey released almost a hundred thousand prisoners to serve their sentences at home, in order to limit the spread of the virus.³ This helped contribute to an increase in violence against women. “The number of domestic violence complaints has spiked in the 20 days following a bill that allowed the release of some 90,000 arrestees and convicts from prisons as part of the measures adopted against the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic,” according to one report.⁴ Releasing these prisoners, some of whom were convicted of violence against women, and sending them back to their homes put their wives and/or children’s lives in danger even more than the virus, because they were locked down. Furthermore, women were not informed of the releases.⁵ Within 20 days since the release, 2,506 applications for protection were filed to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, including for violence against women.⁶

The perpetrators of violence were sent back to their homes under a law passed by Parliament on 13 April 2020 to amend the law on the execution of sentences. With the new amendments, all prisoners – except for political convicts who are currently serving their sentences in open prisons – were put on leave until 31 May 2020, with a potential extension until 30 November 2020. Due to this amendment, 75% of those sentenced to a prison term for sexual assault, sexual assault against minors, and sexual harassment, as well as those who were convicted of crimes against sexual inviolability, returned to the crime scenes, that is, their homes.⁷ Even though the legislation defines it as a temporary ‘leave’, there is a risk that this could turn into an absolute release, since by the end of the seven-month release period their sentences might be over, and no penal sanction is contemplated for non-returnees.⁸ Women’s shelter foundation Mor Çatı (‘Purple Roof’) also denounces the lack of institutional resources and

² Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı. 2020. Koronavirüs Salgını Süresince Kadına Yönelik Şiddetle Mücadele İzleme Raporu [Combating violence against women during the coronavirus pandemic. Monitoring report]. Available online at: <https://morcati.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/koronavirus-salgini-suresince-kys-rapor.pdf>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

³ Kuru, Ahmet T. 23 April 2020. Turkey releasing murderers – but not political opponents – from prison amid coronavirus pandemic. *The Conversation*. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/turkey-releasing-murderers-but-not-political-opponents-from-prison-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-136466>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

⁴ *Duvar English*. 31 May 2020. Domestic violence complaints spiked in Turkey within 20 days of mass prisoner release. Available online at: <https://www.duvarenglish.com/women/2020/05/31/domestic-violence-complaints-spiked-in-turkey-within-20-days-of-mass-prisoner-release/>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

⁵ Pelin Ünker. 23 April 2020. Tahliyeler şiddet mağduru kadınlara bildirilmiyor [Releases are not reported to women victims of violence]. *DW*. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/tr/tahliyeler-siddet-magduru-kadınlara-bildirilmiyor/a-53226031>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

⁶ T24. 28 May 2020. İnfaz düzenlemesi sonrası Alo 183’e 2 bin 506 şiddet gören kadın başvuruda bulundu [After the execution arrangement, 2,506 women subjected to violence called to Alo 183]. Available online at: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/infaz-duzenlemesi-sonrasi-alo-183-e-2-bin-506-siddet-goren-kadin-basvuruda-bulundu.881013>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

⁷ Zemo Ağgöz. 18 June 2020. Kadınlar salgında neler yaşadı? [What have women experienced during the pandemic?] *Evrensel*. Available online at: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/407380/kadinlar-salgında-neler-yasadi>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

⁸ *Bianet*. 17 April 2020. 156 Kadın Örgütünden Tek Ses: İnfaz Paketi Sonrası Erkek Şiddetini Önlemek İçin Acil Tedbir Alın [A call from 156 women’s organizations: Take emergency action to prevent male violence after the execution package.]. Available online at: <https://bianet.org/bianet/print/223134-156-kadin-orgutunden-tek-ses-infaz-paketi-sonrasi-erkek-siddetini-onlemek-icin-acil-tedbir-alin>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

attention necessary to protect the women put at risk by these releases, even when they seek help from the police.⁹

According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Socio-Political Field Research, violence against women has increased by 27.8% during the pandemic in Turkey.¹⁰ This increase has also been highlighted by professional chambers and NGOs in Turkey.^{11,12} According to the *We Will End Femicide* platform, the number of women calling the telephone support lines increased by 55% in April and 78% in May 2020 compared to the previous months.¹³ The main reasons were sexual violence in April and psychological violence in May; and husbands were the main perpetrators.¹⁴ A report by the Women's Federation of Associations in Turkey showed that psychological violence increased by 93%, physical violence by 80%, and the demand for shelter by 78% in March 2020, compared to the previous year.¹⁵ There have also been concerns about an increase in violence against children,¹⁶ although we do not yet have enough research on the topic.

Besides the release of convicts, another key problem is that official support mechanisms have been negatively affected by the epidemic. Around the world and in Turkey, women's organisations report that it has become difficult to reach women's shelters.¹⁷ Previous experiences elsewhere also show that violence against women increases during epidemics and natural disasters, while protective and

⁹ Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı. 2020. Koronavirüs Salgını ve Kadına Yönelik Şiddet / Mor Çatı Nisan 2020 Raporu [The coronavirus pandemic and violence against women / Mor Çatı April 2020 Report.]. Available online at: <https://morcati.org.tr/izleme-raporlari/koronavirus-salgini-ve-kadina-yonelik-siddet-mor-cati-nisan-2020-raporu/?fbclid=IwAR0erpfXYQiy3p79I6vafgOCxZRCyJoiZLgsAOMIFEnyJefsS6yUfc07URY>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹⁰ Sosyo Politik. April 2020. COVID-19 karantinasından kadının etkilenimi ile kadın ve çocuğa yönelik şiddete ilişkin Türkiye araştırma raporu [Turkey research report on the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on women and violence against women and children]. Available online at: <https://sahamerkezi.org/covid-19-karantinasindan-kadinin-etkilenimi-ile-kadin-ve-cocuga-yonelik-siddete-iliskin-turkiye-arastirma-raporu/>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹¹ We Will End Femicide Platform. 12 May 2020. 2020 April Report. Available online at: <http://kadincinayetlerininidurduracagiz.net/veriler/2913/2020-april-report-of-we-will-end-femicide-platform>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹² *Evrensel*. 27 April 2020. Tahliyelerden sonra kadına şiddet arttı [Violence against women increased after the releases]. Available online at: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/403217/tahliyelerden-sonra-kadina-siddet-artti>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹³ DW. 5 May 2020. Korona döneminde kadına şiddet başvuruları arttı [Calls related to violence against women increased under coronavirus]. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/tr/korona-doneminde-kadina-siddet-basvurulari-artti/a-53341440>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹⁴ We Will End Femicide Platform. 4 June 2020. 2020 May Report. Available online at: <http://kadincinayetlerininidurduracagiz.net/veriler/2917/2020-may-report-of-we-will-end-femicide-platform>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹⁵ *Evrensel*. 9 April 2020. TKDF'den vahim tablo: Koronavirüs günlerinde kadına yönelik şiddet yüzde 80 arttı [Dreadful picture from TKDF: Violence against women increased by 80% under coronavirus]. Available online at: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/401726/tkdfden-vahim-tablo-koronavirus-gunlerinde-kadina-yonelik-siddet-yuzde-80-artti>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹⁶ *Arti Gerçek*. 2 May 2020. 'Çocukların hangi şiddet türlerine maruz kaldığı bilinmiyor' ['We do not know what forms of violence children are subjected to']. Available online at: <https://artigercek.com/haberler/cocuklarin-hangi-siddet-turlerine-maruz-kaldigi-bilinmiyor>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021;

Çocuk Hakları Merkezi. 30 March 2020. Salgın döneminde çocuklar için acil çocuk koruma politikası [Emergency child protection policy during the pandemic]. Available online at: <https://chm.fisa.org.tr/salgin-doneminde-cocuklar-icin-acil-cocuk-koruma-politikasi-olusturulmalidir/>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.

¹⁷ Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı. 2020a. *ibid*.

preventive activities decrease.¹⁸ Furthermore, this trend of increased violence might still continue for a year after this crisis comes to an end.

¹⁸ UN Women. May 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls and service provision: UN Women rapid assessment and findings. Available online at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf?la=en&vs=0>. Last accessed on 19 February 2021.