



## WOMEN'S HEALTH ON THE ASPECT OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN TURKEY<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Today, the different roles of men and women and the fact that each gender is seen as conforming to certain behavioral patterns have paved the way for the formation of gender inequality. Gender inequality in Turkey poses important problems, especially in terms of women's right to education, working life and health. Women's health is one of the areas most affected by gender inequality. It is possible to see the effects of gender inequality in the access of women with health problems to health services. Reproductive health services are the type of service that women have the most difficulty accessing and benefiting from. Women who are influenced by society's gender stereotypes are not able to benefit from these services to the extent and time necessary, which brings with them diseases that are delayed or impossible to treat. In this study, it is aimed to examine the effects of gender inequality on women's health in Turkey by focusing on the main factors affecting women's health. In the conclusion part of the study, recommendations are made to positively change the thoughts and upbringings that cause gender inequality.

**Key Words:** Gender, Gender Inequality, Women's Health, Health, Society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Individuals are classified as men and women in biological terms depending on their innate characteristics and thus the concept of gender is formed. Society's perspectives and value judgments expect each gender to display different types of behavior over time, and these behaviors to be appropriate for their gender.

One of the most basic classifications in society, gender (Demirel,2009:8), is defined as the genetic, biological and physiological characteristics exhibited by the individual as male or female (Akın,2007:2). While sex means something about biology; gender indicates the social and economic roles and responsibilities assigned by society and families to men and women (WHO,2005:1).

Gender, which relates to the individual, institutional, structural and cultural differences that arise between men and women (Atalay and Dinç, 2020:605), consists of roles determined by their culture to individuals born biologically male or female (Akkaş,2020:58). In other words, gender refers to non-biological social and cultural distinctions between the sexes (Broughton et al., 2017:1294).

Gender roles, a group of gender-related expectations defined by society and expected to be fulfilled by individuals (Dökmen,2015:29), are divided differently within the family, and while men are often seen as eligible for the role of making money and supporting the home, women are more likely to be responsible for ensuring strong family ties and doing care-related work (Flynn,2011:65). In shaping gender roles, the effect of social norms and values continues throughout life starting from the prenatal period (Gürsoy, 2017: 82).

Gender stereotypes defined by society as behaviors expected by men and women towards their own gender (Çelik, 2008:20), include psychological characteristics and appear at different rates in two gender groups (Best,2003:11).

Gender equality refers to the absence/non-discrimination of the individual depending on their gender in taking advantage of opportunities, allocating and using resources, and benefiting from services (Akın,2007:2). Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of men and women, shaping their own lives with equal potential and contributing to society (Gender Equality Policy and Strategy, 2016:5).

In the definition of gender inequality, which emerges from various social sciences literature, including economics; hierarchical gender relationships, men's superiority over women and women being considered lower and less valuable simply because of their gender (Mikkola and Miles, 2007:6). By another definition, gender inequality means socially shaped differences between men and women, separated by traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, where women continue to see unequal practices (Khoreva,2012:16). According to Ridgeway (2011:3), gender inequality can be thought of as a hierarchy-based ranking between men and women in economic resources, power and status.

Gender inequality is not only a very big problem both nationally and internationally, but it is a serious issue that causes men and women to experience problems caused by their gender in many areas and their lives to be negatively affected. Although men and women have been exposed to examples of gender inequality throughout their lives, women are often more affected and health is one of the areas where they have problems based on inequality. When it comes to women's health,



the perspectives and judgments of the society to which they belong have a very important effect on women.

Every individual in the community should have the right to healthy living and full use of health services. Perceptions created by society for the genders of individuals create some inequalities between men and women, which negatively affect both the physical and psychological health of women. In this study, it is aimed to examine the effects of gender inequality on women's health in Turkey by focusing on the main factors affecting women's health.

## 2. HEALTH AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

Health, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of complete well-being in terms of physical, cognitive and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 2014:1), is a broad concept that directly or indirectly affects every area of individuals' lives, shapes their social relationships, increases or limits their participation in the workforce. Women's health covers the process that continues from the beginning of the woman's birth to the end of her life and all activities in this process. These activities include health activities in every sense, including physical, cognitive, psychological and biological. Men and women are born with certain characteristics specific to their gender in physical and spiritual terms. These traits make men stronger and more physically resilient, while making women naiver and more sensitive.

Differences in health status between men and women and various diseases and health problems are a mixture of gender, sociocultural factors and physiological differences between men and women (Kronenfeld,2006:459). Women are more prone to diseases caused by gender characteristics due to their creation. While having an emotional and fragile mood has a more debilitating effect psychologically, menstruation periods and fertility characteristics also pave the way for them to be physically weaker.

## 3. FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S HEALTH

It is possible to talk about not only physiological and psychological factors on women's health, but also the impact of environmental and cultural judgments. Many restrictions, such as unequal inheritance laws, religious-based family law, dowry, early marriage, responsibility for girls' housework and the care of younger siblings, male choice, stalking and sexual harassment, living under unsafe conditions in certain countries and regions, have a detrimental effect on women (Banu,2016:24).

The fact that women are born in a physically and personally sensitive nature, makes them more vulnerable to the problems they experience in their health from time to time due to social and familial factors. Some of these factors are classified as biologically and psychologically personal effects, while others are grouped environmentally, such as family, education level, participation in business life and access to health services in the following years.

### 3.1. Biological and Psychological Characteristics

Women are naiver and more prone to diseases than men. The fact that they are sensitive suggests that women carry some disease risks more than men. According to Günler (2017:39), women's predisposition to infection-related diseases compared to men can cause them to suffer from infectious diseases more frequently.



Considering that women's life expectancy is also longer than that of men, it is inevitable that they will struggle with more diseases during this period. Women's conditions such as menopause and pregnancy cause women to wear out physically and catch diseases in a shorter time.

Women are more spiritually fragile and have a greater sense of empathy, which can also make them more vulnerable. Some scientists believe that women's orientation due to interest in other people's problems and efforts to help has become a constant emotional burden in their lives (Verbrugge,1985:165). The fact that women are in the background of society compared to men, not having enough roles in decision-making and generally in a lower position than men causes more psychological problems such as depression in women.

### 3.2. Family Structure

The family is a community of people who are connected to marriage, childbirth, kinship or legal adoption, who regularly share a common kitchen and financial resources (Sharma,2013:307). In another definition, family is defined as the environment in which men and women develop physically, psychologically and socially from infancy to childhood and from adolescence to adulthood (WHO, 1978:7).

The family that forms the smallest building block of society constitutes the first and most important elements in the development of each individual. From the moment individuals are born, they are influenced by the way their parents raised them and the way they viewed life. Parents who do not have sufficient sensitivity or awareness about health can be negligent about their children's health problems, which leads to prolonged recovery processes for children.

As a result of girls being raised in a dominant environment with a sense of privacy, some health problems are ignored and the perception of receiving health care as a shameful or shameful situation has implications for many issues, including the choice of physicians of girls in later years.

### 3.3. Education Level

Education can be defined as a teaching, education, learning process to improve knowledge and skills, especially in schools or colleges, as well as an interesting experience that teaches you something (Thangeda et al., 2016:10). A powerful agent of social transformation and human development, and also a matter of equality, education empowers people and helps develop knowledge, skills and skills to act as a full-fledged person and live with self-respect and dignity (Banu,2016:23).

Gender inequality at the point of access to education and resources can prevent the reduction of child mortality, unconscious reproduction and the development of the education of the new generation (Klasen,2000:2). The low value given to women by society negatively affects the level of education of women. Women who do not have enough education remain in the background in many ways and face different problems. In a study conducted by Altıparmak and Eser (2007), it was concluded that among women aged 15-49, women with higher education levels were in a better position in physical, spiritual, social and environmental terms than women with a higher education level. This is a big problem for women to get the health care they want because women with low education do not have enough information about what health care is and how to access it.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute 2019 data, the total illiterate population of 6 years and older is 2.8%, and men make up 0.8% of this rate and women 4.7% (TUIK, 2019). When we look at the results of Hacettepe University Population Studies Institute's Population and Health Survey of Turkey 2018, the proportion of women who never went to school or did not finish primary school was 25%, compared to 14% for men (TNSA, 2018). From the shared statistical data, it is



concluded that the equality of men and women in terms of education has not yet been adequately achieved. Inequality in terms of education also negatively affects women's participation in the labor market in the following years.

### 3.4. Economic Factors

Girls who do not benefit sufficiently from equal opportunities in education have difficulty getting into work due to low levels of education or can find jobs in sectors with low wages and heavy workloads. This leads to an increase in the number of women with low socio-economic status. According to the 2018 TNSA results in Turkey, 64% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 have not worked or participated in the last 12 months (TNSA, 2018). The high proportion of women who do not work also leads to women being dependent on their spouses in terms of income and not gaining their own freedom financially. This causes women to stay in the background socially and to act according to their spouse's income level when it comes to receiving health care. Therefore, in an environment where there is a shortage of livelihoods, it is seen that the woman is not able to solve her health problems adequately.

The labor force participation rate in Turkey is 72% for men and 34.4% for women (TUIK, 2019). In a patriarchal society, the working potential of women is trivialized and ignored by male members of the family and the elders of the house (Bordoloi,2017:3).

In the labor market, women are employed on lower wages and for less time than men, are employed without social security for jobs that can be considered low in status, and earn less income (Demirbilek, 2007:21). The low participation rates of women in the labor market prevent conditions that will make them economically independent, causing gender inequalities to become deeper and more persistent (Uguz and Topbaş,2014:488). While women's pregnancy and childbirth processes bring with them the risk of being unemployed (Özvarış,2015:38), similarly, the idea that the responsibility of supporting the house by society belongs to the man also causes women to be selected as a priority when it comes to dismissal.

Women who are economically deprived of the labor market or who do their low-income and status work in this market are exposed to health problems caused by working conditions or environment and cannot solve these problems to the extent they want because they do not earn enough. According to Anastasia et al. (2013:389), it is very important that the great efforts to achieve gender equality are related to the economic strengthening of the position of women, ensuring equal rights for both men and women and equal benefits from economic activities.

### 3.5. Access to Health Care

Millions of women worldwide continue to be deprived of basic health care as a result of poverty and discrimination (Doyal,2001:1062). Factors such as women's educational status and working life in society play a very important role in determining how to proceed in some subjects. In particular, women who have problems with their health do not know which institution to apply to or which department to benefit from. At the same time, the development of women's places of residence affects the quality and accessibility of health services.

Some inequalities between individuals in terms of income level, education level, status, living conditions determine their health status, health care and the quality of these services. While an individual with a low level of education does not know how to access health care, the low-income segment lags behind in terms of benefiting from these services. The aforementioned inequalities may also be gender-related in some cases.

Inequality resulting from gender-based ideas deprives women of some human rights and creates inequality in areas such as access to information on health, adequate nutrition, access to health



services and benefiting from these services (Sezgin,2015:159). Access to services for women's health problems is prevented by the community due to negative views about the gender of health care service officers or for women to receive health care alone. At this point, women are not able to benefit sufficiently from some services due to the inadequate education they receive and the negative perspectives of their society in terms of receiving services for health problems.

#### 4. EFFECTS OF SOCIAL GENDER INEQUALITY ON WOMEN'S HEALTH

Gender inequality in many areas of life has physical, spiritual and social effects on individuals. The fact that women are more affected by gender inequality has consequences that will greatly prevent them from living in a healthy environment. Behaviors such as having the perfect physical appearance expected of them by society, being able to bring children into the world, being more in the background in some areas than men, wear women down both physically and psychologically and leave them struggling with difficult-to-treat health problems in the long run.

Some of the effects of gender inequality on women's health are negative perceptions of body image, problems in reproductive health and violence against women, while others are the result of socio-cultural influences that are closely related to the society to which they belong.

##### 4.1. Body Image

Body image is defined as part of the concept of self, which expresses perceptions, attitudes and feelings towards the body (Beach,1993:5). Gender inequality assigns different roles to men and women, while also creating some criteria for ideal men and women. It is emphasized by the society that the body sizes should be in accordance with certain standards as well as the fact that the woman is well-groomed at all times.

Especially when it comes to the ideal body image for the woman, most women are influenced by these comments, which brings with problems such as unhealthy diet lists or unconscious drug use. As a result of all these situations, the already sensitive female body wears out in a short time and loses its health by unconscious methods.

Having a negative perception of the body creates negative effects in human life, causing self-isolation from society, problems in different areas of life, depression and unnecessary aesthetic interventions (Oğuz,2005:32). Women who think that society does not fit the image of the perfect woman are isolating themselves from social life by experiencing a lack of self-confidence over time, which causes the woman who does not physically consider herself to be suitable for the characteristics idealized by society to move away from society psychologically.

##### 4.2. Reproductive Health

Congenital gender-related traits greatly affect the health of men and women and the types of diseases they encounter. Women's menstrual periods trigger problems such as anemia, while pregnancy and subsequent processes have lasting negative effects in some women, both physically and psychologically. Due to their physical and biological characteristics, diseases such as HPV infection and uterine cancer are seen in women for their reproductive systems, while men have some diseases such as prostate cancer and testicular infection.

Cultural norms often deny women the right to make decisions about their sexuality and reproduction, and the lack of contraception and the underlying cause of common pregnancies (WHO,2010:16). This situation paves the way for involuntary pregnancies or unhealthy pregnancy processes and therefore permanent health problems in women.

One of the most important characteristics of society that makes women different from men is that they have fertility characteristics. Although reproductive health is very important for both men and women and affects their status and perception in society, problems related to women's reproductive health attract more attention from society. At this point, the fact that a woman is considered fully healthy is also considered by society to be related to the birth of a child. Therefore, the majority of women who have problems with reproduction have difficulty overcoming these problems due to the role of being the mother that society or their close circles expect of them. In this sense, women cause any reproductive problems that already exist to become even more negative.

### 4.3. Violence

Violence; it is a form of aggression whose purpose is to cause extreme harm (Anderson and Bushman, 2002:29). In other words, violence is defined as the response of the dominant power (Şahbaz,2020:9). The problem of violence was obvious at all times and existed in the foreground or in the background and in a subtle way (Kaeuper,1999:7).

Violence against women which points out that men are superior to women and emerges as part of their gender relations (Khatri and Pandey,2013:13), is a violation of fundamental rights and freedoms and a major problem that arises as a result of unequal power relations between men and women (Akkaş and Uyanık,2016:36). According to Oktay (2015:59), in Turkey women are especially exposed to domestic violence and they often keep this violence secret because they are ashamed.

Violence against women is an important problem that arises regardless of the level of development of countries and can be seen in different ways in each country. According to the World Health Organization Violence and Health Report (WHO,2002:16), in various parts of the world, cultural differences and traditions are cited as justifications for certain social practices that perpetuate violence.

Some norms and beliefs created by society that further strengthen male dominance over women create a climate that tries to make violence seem acceptable (WHO,2002:13). Although violence against women has no logical basis in any way, it is seen that the rate of violence in some situations increases. For example, as a result of marriages at a young age, people with different perspectives and upbringings experience conflict of opinion more frequently, negative socio-cultural perceptions or low level of education can increase the rate of violence.

According to the Domestic Violence Against Women Survey conducted by Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies (HUNEE) in Turkey in 2014; the increased level of education reduces the rates of physical or sexual violence. For example, while 43% of women who have never received an education/ have never finished primary school experience physical or sexual violence, in women with undergraduate and postgraduate education this rate falls to %21 (HUNEE,2015:85). According to the research data, although the rate of violence decreases as the level of education increases, women's exposure to violence is still remarkably high. This situation shows that education alone is not enough to reduce the rate of violence, that perceptions and perspectives towards women should also be improved, and that prejudices arising from gender inequality should be eliminated.

The fact that violence against women is not limited to physical violence according to national and international legislation, but can also occur sexually, economically or psychologically is stated. In this context, violence against women is generally categorized as physical, sexual, economic and psychological violence (General Directorate of Women's Status, 2016:4).



Violence against women, which is often grouped physically, sexually, economically and psychologically, is the type of violence that women are more exposed to. This type of violence covers behaviors that target a woman's body and cause bodily harm. In the type of sexual violence, behaviors involving the inclusion of women in sexual activities by force and coercion are found. The results of the HUNEE survey conducted in Turkey in 2014 show that exposure to physical and sexual violence together is common, that 36% of women in Turkey have experienced physical violence, 12% have experienced sexual violence, and that 38% of women have seen at least one of the two forms of violence, mostly sexual and physical violence together (HUNEE,2015:83). Economic violence, prevents the economic independence of women and involves forcibly taking away their earnings. Finally, psychological violence is defined as the humiliation of the woman in public or the exposure to behaviors that will cause her to feel worthless and to damage her self-esteem.

Violence against women, which has become a social problem, not only has negative effects on the physical and mental health of the woman, but also prepares the ground for the weakening of interpersonal communication and the distancing of women from society. The self-esteem of the woman who is subjected to violence decreases and reaches the point of disconnection from social life.

#### 4.4. Socio-Cultural Factors

Gender inequality caused by social beliefs and judgments has an impact on women's lives, starting from the period before birth and until the end of their lives. One of the most important problems arising from gender inequality is that it brings with it a system in which women are in the background, in a passive position and, accordingly, devalued.

As a result of leaving women in a passive situation, there are situations such as making important decisions about their own lives under the shadow of individuals and cultural judgments other than themselves, and this situation brings problems such as their marriage at an early age or unconsciously. In a study conducted by Kahraman (2010), it was concluded that 72% of women were married by arranged.

Social norms regarding responsibility sharing state that many women have very heavy workloads, along with domestic tasks, pregnancy and childbirth (Doyal,2001:1061). As a result of this situation, an environment in which women are restricted from going out too much, deprived of activities aimed at self-improvement and allowed to be active only in matters concerning the home and family has a negative effect on the woman. This situation causes women to leave problems related to their health in the background and to shape their lives according to the wishes and needs of other individuals in the family.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women have been subjected to all forms of gender inequality and discrimination in every period from the past to the present. Compared to men, they were left with lower status and less valuable status. Although many studies have been carried out on the subject over the years, equality has not yet been achieved at the desired level. While gender inequality is a concept that negatively affects men and women in many areas of their lives, it is seen that women are more affected. Many important decisions that shape the turning points of her life, including the right to education, marriage decision and participation in business life, are overshadowed by gender inequality in the childhood, youth and adult stages of her life starting from birth.





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The norms and rules that are deemed appropriate for women by society and are expected to be followed throughout their lives limit women's lives, leave them far from the areas where they can improve and cause them not to use their potential adequately. Due to the inequalities experienced by women, problems such as improper marriages at an early age and inability to be sufficiently active in the job market due to low level of education affect the health of women both physically and psychologically. The elimination of gender inequality, which is one of the barriers to women's health, is seen as a social issue, not just an individual issue, since it will not be possible for an unhealthy woman to start a healthy family or raise healthy individuals physically, mentally and psychologically.

The attitudes faced by women in working life, which is one of the areas most affected by the inequalities experienced by women, significantly affects women's economic activities. Considering that married women expect the most support from their spouses in this regard, it is a fact that having a spouse who supports her in participating in working life will positively affect the woman both mentally and economically. The fact that the spouses show the necessary support to each other in this regard is largely related to having a positive view of each other's participation in working life, and this is largely related to the level of education. In Çıtak's (2008) study, it was stated that as the education level of the spouses of married women and men participants increased, their attitudes towards working women also increased in a positive way.

Eliminating gender inequality, which has been fed by the ideas and beliefs that have been molded over the years, does not seem possible, as cultural changes cannot be radical and will take many years, but it is possible to reduce the effect of this concept with changes that can be made in the field of education or in policies. The most important thing that can be done to create awareness about gender is to create public awareness and to organize studies to prevent unequal practices that are made with or without awareness. Considering that the living spaces of individuals are very effective in the emergence of gender-oriented ideas, it may be suggested to work towards informing the individuals in rural settlements at a sufficient level about gender. In schools, it may be an important step to add studies and subjects to the curriculum that include the necessary emphasis on equality and respect for individuals other than their own gender from the first years of their education. In addition, awareness-raising trainings can be organized by health institutions on activities to improve women's health. Providing women with equal opportunities in all areas, especially in education, can be considered a good start for these changes. Subsequently, by updating the laws and policies regarding inequality, it is possible for women to participate in economic life and to work in high-status jobs.

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## ULUSLARARASI SAĞLIK YÖNETİMİ VE STRATEJİLERİ ARAŞTIRMA DERGİSİ

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