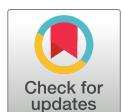


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## Experiences of Dating Violence in Gender Discussions: A Qualitative Study with University Students in Eskişehir

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### Abstract

Mainstream studies and official data address violence against women as domestic violence and generally ignore the violence experienced in extramarital relationships. For this reason, there is a need for a special academic and institutional focus on dating violence, which can harm the psychological/physical integrity of individuals. In this regard, this study aims to reveal the social and structural origins of dating violence and how the patriarchal social structure is reflected in the narratives of university students in Eskişehir within the framework of the hermeneutic approach. In other words, the patriarchal patterns behind the participants' experiences of dating violence and their approaches to dating violence were revealed through an interpretative analysis. In line with this goal, qualitative research methods were used in the study, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 students studying in Eskişehir in the 2020-2021 Spring semester. As a result, it was concluded that the participants had a high awareness of gender equality and were aware of the implicit patriarchal patterns in their daily life experiences and their impact on their daily lives. However, when they retrospectively evaluated their experience of violence, the participants also mentioned that they normalized it during their relationships.

### Keywords

Dating violence · gender · patriarchy · university students · Eskişehir

### Author Note

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## Experiences of Dating Violence in Gender Discussions: A Qualitative Study with University Students in Eskişehir

This article mainly focuses on the dating violence experiences of university students living in Eskişehir. In this context, the individual experiences of the students, their perceptions of violence and how they evaluate dating and dating violence were examined.

Being a student city and having a young population are among the key components of Eskişehir's social structure. According to the 2024 data from the Turkish Institute of Statistics (TÜİK), the number of young people aged 15-29 in Eskişehir is 199,694, while the total city population is 921,630 (TÜİK, 2025). As can be seen, nearly a quarter of Eskişehir's population falls within the 15-29 age range, and the city hosted 70,301 university students during the 2023-2024 academic year (YÖK, 2025).

Considering Eskişehir's significant young and student population, the city's social opportunities make it an attractive place for young people.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is considered that Eskişehir constitutes a meaningful research universe for youth studies, including topics such as dating violence.

University students were chosen as the target group for this study because premarital relationships are most commonly experienced in this age group, where individuals are considered adults. Another reason for working with university students is that, especially those coming from outside the city, they can experience their romantic relationships as independent individuals with relatively less family and close relative support or supervision.

Considering their education level and their status as independent adults, it can be assumed that they have the maturity to evaluate their experiences and perceptions on certain issues in a healthy manner. On the other hand, since dating violence occurs outside the formal framework of marriage, it is an issue that lacks official visibility. Young women, in particular, may hesitate to speak up due to traditional structures and may be reluctant to seek support from official institutions or their families.

Therefore, dating violence experienced among university youth can be seen as an invisible phenomenon that individuals have to cope with on their own. To bring visibility to violence during dating, academic studies conducted with university students' evaluations, perceptions, and experiences on the issue become crucial.

Dating violence can be defined as gendered violence that is generally observed in high school and later age groups. Dating violence, which young women mostly experience, is categorized under different types of physical, psychological, and sexual violence (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Price & Byers, 1999; Makepeace, 1981; Foshee, Linder & Wilcher 2007; Yumuşak & Şahin, 2014).

In this study, the radical feminist approach together with Heise's ecological model, incorporating the gender dimension and the social background of violence, forms the theoretical framework. Radical feminist theory, emphasizing patriarchy, provides a broad framework for this study as it combines male violence, women's reactions, and the social context that shapes them (Walby, 2016; Taşdemir Afşar, 2015, p.734). It is acknowledged that this approach, which defines male violence as a form of social control exercised by men in patriarchal societies, explains the social factors that shape the participants' experiences and perceptions

<sup>1</sup>For an empirical basis, see University-Friendly Cities data from the Turkey University Satisfaction Survey, by Karadağ and Yücel. Since the beginning of this study series in 2017, Eskişehir has ranked first in student satisfaction every year ([https://www.uniar.net/\\_files/ugd/779fe1\\_e7e2826309d14ce686419da8c4f822a0.pdf](https://www.uniar.net/_files/ugd/779fe1_e7e2826309d14ce686419da8c4f822a0.pdf), accessed on March 18, 2025).

of violence against women in a certain way in the context of dating violence. It is assumed that the ways of experiencing and reacting to dating violence and the coping strategies developed by the students regarding dating violence are related to their gender perceptions. This assumption is based on Rosen and Stith's (1993, p.427) arguments that women's socialization process and internalization of patriarchal definitions of roles and responsibilities manifest themselves in the fact that they accept the responsibility and maintenance of abusive and violent relationships.

This study is shaped around the questions "How do university students in Eskişehir perceive and experience dating violence?" "How can their perceptions and experiences be evaluated within the framework of gender discussions?" grounds dating violence on two levels. While the radical feminist approach provides a theoretical framework for revealing the social and structural roots of dating violence, the hermeneutic approach reveals how the patriarchal social structure is internalized, especially in the narratives of the participants. In other words, the patriarchal patterns behind the participants' experiences of dating violence and their approaches toward dating violence were examined through an interpretive analysis. In line with this goal, qualitative research techniques were used in the study.

## Revisiting dating violence within the prism of gender theories

In the socialization process that starts in the family where traditional patriarchal patterns are dominant, individuals learn to be men and women. Meanwhile, men learn to have a strong control and to be in a position to control women's lives. Women also consent to this control and believe that they should take responsibility for the problems in the relationship (Yıldırım, 1998, p.29). While gender refers to a socio-cultural situation that creates a specific feminine and masculine structure, it is related to how society perceives the individual as a woman or a man and how it expects them to behave (Sünetci et al., 2016, p. 60).

Within the feminist paradigm, especially radical feminists emphasize unequal patriarchal gender relations and state that women become the 'other' in binary gendered understanding. In this respect, the primary determinant of social relations in the radical feminist perspective is patriarchy. From this perspective, the heterosexual normative concept put forward by Elizabeth Stanko suggests that in a society where masculine domination and feminine powerlessness exist, physically aggressive behavior is considered normal for men, while women's experience of this aggression is normalized (as cited in Messerschmidt, 2012, pp. 13-14). According to Stanko, the concept of normative heterosexuality refers to the social norms determined by the behavioral patterns of women's sexual purity and innocence and men's assertiveness. In such societies, women do not see their sexuality as their own, and men's autonomy takes precedence over women's (Messerschmidt, 2012, p. 15). In this social perspective and according to the heterosexual normative, women should tolerate men's aggression due to the nature of femininity and masculinity. Concerning all these, the phenomenon of violence can be considered the most extreme form of a domination relationship between men, who are rendered powerful and dominant by gender perceptions, and women, who are rendered submissive (Messerschmidt, 2012, pp. 15-16).

Heise (2011, p. vi), who developed the Ecological Model to explain abuse and violence in close relationships in a multidimensional way, states that partner violence can be explained by a wide range of factors including life stories, traumas, personality traits that women and men bring to the relationship, structural and contextual conditions affecting their daily lives, messages conveyed by friends and family members, and acceptable/unacceptable behavior patterns imposed by social structures on women and men. Heise (2011) has built his model under six main headings: macro-social dimension, community dimension, risk factors for

men to commit violence, risk factors for women to be victims of violence, conflict areas, situational factors of violence, and structural factors. The conflict area and its subcategories of patriarchal triggers are relevant to this study as they explain the factors leading to violence such as women's challenging attitudes toward male authority, failure to meet gendered behavioral expectations, and women's demands for autonomy (Heise, 2011, p. 7). The subcategory expressed as patriarchal triggers should be considered together with the gender concept of the feminist theory. This theory, which explains the unequal relationship between women and men with the roles and responsibilities socially and culturally attributed to both sexes, also deals with violence in the context of social roles. Individuals' beliefs, acceptance, and coping strategies toward violence in close emotional relationships are largely shaped by the structural factors defined in the Ecological Model. This model constitutes the conceptual perspective of this study since it allows dating violence to be analyzed in the context of gender along with both individual characteristics and structural factors that shape these characteristics.

Sexism produced by patriarchal structures (Sakallı, 2001, p. 601) can be briefly defined as a reflection of hostility and prejudice toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491). Glick and Fiske (1996) present two basic categories when conceptualizing sexism: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism includes thoughts and beliefs that, based on prejudices, suggest that women are inadequate and powerless, that they do not deserve to take part in political, economic, political, etc. fields, that devalue women and make them the target of anger (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p.492; Sakallı, 2001, p. 601). Benevolent sexism explains the restriction of women in the private sphere and their inability to gain a place in the public sphere with assumptions about women's fragility and emphasizes that women should be protected due to this powerlessness (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Related to this, hostile sexist attitudes and behaviors are exhibited toward women who do not comply with traditional roles, while benevolent sexist attitudes and behaviors are exhibited toward women who conform to them (Glick, et al., 1997). Therefore, it can be stated that the legitimization degree of hostile sexism and benevolent sexism and patriarchy, in general, determines the acceptance level of violence against women and the tendency to blame those who are subjected to violence (Kaşdarma, 2018, p. 2448).

The importance of addressing patriarchal structures, especially in the issue of violence against women, is evident in the findings of the field studies. For example, Sakallı (2001, p. 609), in her study conducted with university students in which she evaluated attitudes toward domestic violence against women, revealed that participants with a high level of patriarchal acceptance also have a high level of acceptance of domestic violence and a high tendency to hold women responsible for the violence they are exposed to. Therefore, it seems necessary to deconstruct the patriarchal patterns of these structural factors, especially in terms of revealing the structural background of violence against women.

Similarly, Rosen and Stith (1993, p. 427) in their qualitative research with 11 female university students revealed that the participants acted by taking responsibility or denial of the violence they faced as a coping strategy to maintain their relationships (Rosen&Stith, 1993, p. 428). As stated by Rosen and Stith (1993, p. 427), the fact that women feel the responsibility for abusive and violent relationships themselves and that the strategies they use are in the direction of maintaining the existing relationship is an indication of how the roles and responsibilities that patriarchy as a social phenomenon imposes on women in relationships are internalized and reflected.

Recent findings published by Kadir Has University, Gender, and Perception of Women in Turkey Survey in 2021-2022 support the fact that violence against women is a social problem. In this study, 68 percent of

the 2499 participants, both male and female, from 23 provinces stated that the main problem for women is violence. When we look at the percentages of the responses to the same question in 2016-2017-2018, it is significant that the percentage increased from 53% in 2016 to 68% in 2022. While 70 percent of the female participants identified violence as the most important problem, it is also noteworthy that there is a clear difference between 'violence' and other problems such as 'unemployment', 'lack of education', 'family pressure', 'harassment on the street', 'inequality between women and men' and 'neighborhood pressure' (ranging from 7 percent to 2 percent) in the results (Kadir Has University Women's Research Center, 2022).

The Research on Domestic Violence Against Women in Turkey, published in 2015 in cooperation with the MoFSP (Ministry of Family and Social Policies) and Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, was conducted nationwide among women who had been married at least once. The research is also a source of official statistics. According to this research, 38 percent of women have been subjected to physical and sexual violence. In the 15-24 age group, 28 percent of women, and in the 25-34 age group 34 percent of women have been subjected to physical and sexual violence. According to this report, at least one-quarter of women with a high school education or higher and at least one-fifth of women with a university education or higher have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence (Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, 2015, p. 86).

The Report on Violence against Women in Turkey by Altınay and Arat (2008) also sheds light on the dimensions of the problem of violence against women with a particular focus on domestic violence. According to this report, one in three women in Türkiye has experienced physical violence at the hands of her husband at least once in her life. This report also shows that one in two women who have experienced violence do not share it with anyone and try to fight it alone (Altınay and Arat, 2008, p.79-80). According to the same study, one in six men with higher education perpetrates violence against his wife, and women with higher education are more discreet about sharing the violence they experience (Altınay & Arat, 2008, p. 110). Both reports provide an extremely valuable perspective on the issue of domestic violence against women in Türkiye and support our study with a comprehensive framework for the issue of violence against women across the country. However, a significant proportion of the data, particularly on the issue of exposure to violence, only covers women who have been married at least once. These studies highlight the lack of regular and comprehensive data and studies on intimate partner violence. Furthermore, experiences of violence and warning signals in processes such as dating and courtship provide important clues for preventing domestic violence.

Another important issue raised in the literature on experience is that women exposed to violence show 'un'responsiveness despite this experience. This 'un'responsiveness manifests itself in the form of women continuing their abusive relationships. In this context, the qualitative study conducted by Few and Rosen (2005) provides important insights into the motivations of the battered party to stay in the relationship. Based on in-depth interviews with 28 women who had been subjected to ongoing violence and harassment by their male partners, the disadvantaged situations and vulnerabilities that determined their decisions to stay in the relationship were analyzed. Because of the research, an answer was sought to the question of what empowerment policies should be designed to enable women to see themselves as decision-makers and independent individuals. The women participating in the study had in common that they had been subjected to violence since the first two months of the relationship and that they had returned to the relationship despite the decision to separate. As a result of the analysis, the desire for recognition, past experiences, witnessing violence, especially in the family and educational environment, being the caregiver

in the family, cultural norms, and being in a stressful life period were found to be the main reasons that pushed women to stay in a violent relationship (Few & Rosen, 2005, p. 271).

The research conducted by Yıldırım (1998) with 112 women in women's shelters in İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Bursa, and Antalya revealed a similar problem. It was found that almost 70% of the women participating in the study did not care about the first violence, were indifferent to the first violence they experienced or remained silent (54 percent), and were exposed to violence for a long time (1998, p. 96-97). Furthermore 37.5 percent of the women had been exposed to violence for more than 11 years and 28.6 percent for 6-10 years. After a decade, Altınay and Arat (2008, p.93-94) surveyed Türkiye and found that 24 percent of women responded that they would do nothing in response to the question 'What would you do if your husband were to beat you today?'. Although the rate appears to have decreased, it should be borne in mind that the first study was conducted only among women who had experienced violence and were therefore in shelters, whereas the second study was conducted with a large sample group of women who had experienced violence and those who had not, and the responses were based on assumptions. In this respect, it is thought that if only the actual reactions of the women who had experienced violence had been asked, the proportion of those who did not respond might have been higher.

As the existing studies in the literature show, dating violence does not have short-term effects that are limited only to the relationship. It can have serious traumatic physical and psychological consequences in the medium and long term as its effects may continue in the later stages of adulthood and in the marriage process (Rosen & Stith, 1993, p. 428; Aslan, Vefikuluçay, Zeyneloğlu, Erdost, & Temel, 2008). In addition, further studies show the harm that affects children growing up in families where domestic violence occurs, especially since it is strongly emphasized that exposure to childhood violence affects partner abuse and/or victimhood in later life (Taşdemir Afşar, 2019, p.187; Heise, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to focus on dating violence, especially among young age groups, as the long-term effects carry the risk of continuation into the marriage process and family formation. Although short-term interventions are sufficient to change attitudes and perceptions, long-term and comprehensive programs are needed to change violent behaviors. It is of critical importance to carefully address the issue, especially starting in educational institutions, where this social problem can be identified and intervened, and to show that young people do not have to feel alone and silent (Karabulut & Öztürk, 2017).

A review of empirical studies conducted on the subject in national databases over the past six years reveals that most research has been conducted within the disciplines of health sciences, psychology, and psychological counseling and guidance, with a special focus on scale development.<sup>2</sup> From both a methodological and disciplinary perspective, this study fills a significant gap by adopting a sociological perspective and incorporating a qualitative research design.

Presenting a comprehensive framework on students' experiences and perceptions of dating violence, particularly through the lens of gender, is possible through a qualitative study. In this regard, qualitative methods provide a deeper understanding of the motivations, meaning-making processes, and dynamics of violent relationships. In many cases, applying qualitative methods alongside quantitative techniques can offer insights that may be more suitable for specific research objectives than a purely quantitative approach.

Qualitative research techniques are crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of gender-based violence issues (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005, p. 73). Within the discipline of sociology, this research—through its

<sup>2</sup>As an example of the quantitative research on dating violence attitudes conducted with university students in Türkiye, see Yumuşak & Şahin, Çoban et. al (2020), Iftar & Guler (2020), Karatay et al (2018), Sünetçi et. al. (2016), Polat et. al (2016).

depth in qualitative techniques—will raise awareness for efforts aimed at preventing dating violence and empowering affected individuals. Additionally, it will serve as a valuable resource for studies investigating the causes and various dimensions of university students' experiences with dating violence.

## Methodology

The data presented in this article were collected during the field research conducted in the spring semester of 2020-2021, as part of the Scientific Research Project of Anadolu University. An ethics committee certificate dated 30.10.2019 number 66428 was obtained from Anadolu University for the field research. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 participants, 8 females, and 4 males. The in-depth interviews were conducted online due to the pandemic situation and the fact that the students were in different cities. To ensure confidentiality, participants were warned to speak in a way that would not reveal their identity information during the interviews. The interviews were conducted with the participants' informed consent. Again, to protect the confidentiality of the participants, coding was done using the name of their city, age, and gender instead of their names or artificial nicknames. For example, a 21-year-old woman participant from İstanbul is coded as İstanbul21W.

The project from which this article's data is derived was conducted using a sequential mixed-methods design with a quantitative priority. The data presented in this article were obtained from the qualitative phase of the study, which was carried out to support and deepen the quantitative research examining the relationship between university students' perceptions of dating violence attitudes and their gendered beliefs.

The study group consisted of 12 students who had experienced dating violence, were part of the quantitative sample group, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the interviews. Given that discussing experiences related to a sensitive issue must be based on voluntary participation for ethical reasons, the sample size was limited to 12 participants, considering the project timeline, pandemic conditions, time constraints, and data saturation criteria.

The focus on university students' experiences in this study is due to several factors: premarital romantic relationships are more common in this group, serious relationships leading to marriage are frequently formed at this age, and individuals in this age group are more likely to live independently, away from their families' supervision and control, particularly in different cities. As young adults, university students establish and maintain their relationships with greater autonomy. However, being away from family can make it more challenging to seek the necessary support when dealing with issues such as dating violence.

The interviews, which were conducted according to a 60-question interview form, proceeded flexibly according to the topics that the participant wanted and/or did not want to talk about through his/her biography, views, and experiences on the topic. In this respect, the interviews can be characterized as semi-structured. The interviews lasted on average between 90 minutes to 3 hours.

Despite the general length of the interviews, the fact that the participants were eager to answer the questions and showed full interest in the topic, that they answered each question with the same meticulousness without showing any signs of boredom or desire to cut the interviews short, that the interviews were conducted in a conversational rather than a question and an answer mode, and that they were aware of gender and dating violence are important observations that should be highlighted both in terms of the quality of the interviews and the richness of the data provided by the participants.

## Findings

The audio recordings of the interviews conducted both face-to-face and online were transcribed and revealed that the data can be grouped into three main categories: the participants' views on gender equality, their opinions on dating relationships and violence experienced during the dating process, and finally their personal experiences.

### Views on gender equality

The participants' views on gender equality, gendered division of labor, and gender-based violence showed that they were aware of and informed about gender equality. Participants who criticized the sexist and essentialist approach, which bases the distinction between women and men on biological grounds, emphasized the idea that these categories are constructed by culture.

*Roles should definitely not be divided based on gender; there should be a shared responsibility in a family. "A woman should do this, a man should do that"—no. Both a woman and a man can do it. But what I've noticed around me is that the woman is always at home while the man is at work, and the man has to be the one who brings money into the house. Unfortunately, I often see this around me, among my neighbors and relatives. (Tokat20W)<sup>3</sup>*

*I think the biggest difference comes from cultural differences. To be a woman, I think, is to manage all tasks behind the scenes. Even if a house seems to revolve around a man from a worldly perspective, the inner workings of that house revolve around a woman's mindset and the people she raises. I think the man's role is somewhat superficial here, while the woman's role is often overlooked in our society. Having said that, I don't like to draw sharp lines saying that men do this and women do that in any area, especially not in such a sensitive subject. I believe that beyond the natural differences between what men and women do, there are no other points of difference. (Sivas22M)*

The participants advocating for equality completely reject the view that compares men and women based on physical strength, material productivity, and rationality and that positions women as dependent. The radical feminist approach, which examines the mechanisms of control and domination that subjugate women in relation to broader social structures, provides a theoretical foundation for these empirical data. Radical feminist theory focuses on the structural roots of the unequal relationship between men and women, in other words, its social and cultural background. As seen in the responses, the participants argued that gender-based distinctions originate from culture, indicating a certain level of awareness in this regard. However, the lack of support for this egalitarian perspective from society or their close circles significantly impacts their identity and the image of women in their minds. In particular, the statements made by some of the interviewees about what being a woman means to them and how they experience being a woman reflect traces of the sexist perspective prevalent in society. In particular, İstanbul19W's emphasis on the headscarf and her reluctance to speak out in public reflects the existing benevolent sexism of how society expects women with traditional/conservative outlooks to behave and how people react when they tend to behave outside of society's expectations.

<sup>3</sup>The interviews were conducted in Turkish, and then the quoted sections were translated into English with careful care to protect the participants' original language use and wording.

*For me, being a woman means, as I recently found out, not being able to walk comfortably in the street. I constantly check people walking behind me; it means living a little more uncomfortably. Being a man, on the other hand, if it were a word, I think it would be "comfort" for me. (Uşak21W)*

*Being a woman today means trying to stand out to protect yourself and, at the same time, trying to protect yourself from the outside. (...) We should stand on our own feet, but there should also be love... When we want to make sacrifices for love, it becomes another form of pressure. By saying things like "he's jealous, he loves her," we end up going beyond our limits. We overlook certain things for love, for affection. Gradually, it becomes more pressure; we are manipulated. I have seen this with my friends and me. (Muğla26W)*

*Even when I'm on the bus and there's an argument, I want to speak up, but I hesitate; I stand back a bit, even though I don't want to. They might tell me, 'Don't get involved.' I can get a lot of criticism just for wearing a headscarf. (...) So, it's not just about being male or female. And like I said, whenever there's the smallest incident, I pull back, or I can never go out at the time I want. (İstanbul19W)*

Some participants believe that despite the dominant sexist approach in Türkiye, which holds women back and makes their work invisible, there is a resilient and strong female identity. From this perspective, an egalitarian approach to the concept of gender does not contradict the acceptance of identity differences between men and women. Within their own mental constructs, the participants ascribed positive meaning to the female identity and, despite prevailing societal tendencies, saw women as stronger and superior to men, facing more obstacles and bearing more responsibilities than men in both private and public life.

*In my opinion, the one who runs the household, the real head of the household, is not the man, but the woman. (...) I see the woman as having a precious position within the household. Sometimes she manages the father, sometimes she manages the child. Sometimes she is the breadwinner for the family, she works outside and is economically independent. That's why, I see the woman as an incredibly strong being. (Tekirdağ20W)*

*In my own life, in my family life, and in my relationships, I see being a woman as a struggle; I encode it as being stronger. I encode the woman as stronger, as better. Honestly, I see the man as a secondary character, as if he's more in the background in life. (Eskişehir24W)*

The concept of gender is important in explaining gender inequality in general and violence against women in particular, as it refers to the process of learning and internalizing the roles assigned to women and men through socialization. Feminist theories analyze violence in intimate relationships by focusing on gender inequality and patriarchal structures. Patriarchal structures are based on male dominance and female dependence (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999, p. 444). In the socialization process, where gender roles are learned and reproduced, roles such as caregiving are attributed to women and internalized by them. On the other hand, authoritarian, controlling, and restrictive behaviors that legitimize exerting pressure are associated with men and internalized by them.

Feminist theories examining intimate partner violence place this power imbalance at the center of the issue. These approaches suggest that men resort to violence when they feel inadequate in terms of material resources and power and when their low status in society contradicts accepted masculine norms (Dardis et al., 2015, p. 140). Within this conceptual and theoretical framework, it is important to address participants' perspectives on gender in order to contextualize their interpretations of dating violence.

## Views on dating and dating violence

### Defining a safe and respectful relationship

In evaluating dating relationships, which they see as a necessary stage for people to get to know each other and resolve conflicts through negotiation rather than resorting to violence before marriage, participants seemed to share a common acceptance of basic relationship issues. Participants were found to particularly value relationships based on mutual respect, where both parties respect each other's personal boundaries and personality traits, and where mutual understanding and trust are prioritized. The participants were also found to be sensitive to all forms of violence.

Similar responses were received when participants were asked to describe a relationship in which they would feel safe. For female participants, a safe relationship is one in which they can express themselves openly, act freely without worrying about their partner's reaction, and do not live in fear of experiencing violence.

*A relationship where I can express myself, for example. Furthermore, one where there is mutual understanding—where I understand him, and he understands me. Only in a relationship where I do not experience any form of violence can I feel safe. Furthermore, not just physical violence; there can be many forms of violence... I need to feel free in every area of my life. (Eskişehir22W)*

*If the person next to me is my friend, if he is my close friend, I feel safe. If he doesn't lie to me if he sometimes approaches me like a father when I need him. When he doesn't restrict me and instead tries to help me. If he tries to overcome problems with me, in these situations, I honestly feel safe. (İstanbul21W)*

*If I have a thought and I ask myself, "What would he thinks?" I would pull away. I don't want to think twice. I want to feel comfortable. (Tokat20W)*

Female participants also expressed that a safe relationship means being with someone who helps you grow, "takes you a step further," and "lifts you up". Male students, on the other hand, emphasized honesty and mutual communication when describing a safe relationship.

*Honesty is very important, then sharing things together is very important, and it's also important that we enjoy the things we do together. (Eskişehir24M)*

*As I said before, trust... I'm not someone who likes to be lied to, no matter what. There might be something she doesn't like, she wants me to change about me—I'd want her to talk to me about it. I want someone who can communicate with me. I don't understand the idea of hiding things or trying to solve them alone. (Eskişehir21M)*

Female participants also stated that they considered abusive language and restrictive and intrusive attitudes as a sign of future violence and that they would stop communicating with the person who engaged in these behaviors. Both male and female participants believe that if marriage is planned at the end of a relationship, they should spend at least two years together and live in the same house for a while to get to know each other.

## Defining dating violence

In the interviews, participants were asked to define dating violence in their own words. All participants, including those who were hearing the term for the first time, defined this concept by giving examples of some of the violent behaviors they had experienced in dating. For example, one female student stated that behaviors such as jealousy, asking for passwords to social media accounts, isolating the person from their social environment, and making them dependent on themselves were all part of dating violence. Similarly, male participants generally defined the concept in terms of behaviors that would cause self-limitation and self-doubt through manipulation. It is striking that the students emphasized examples of dating violence in their definitions such as jealousy, overprotection, patronization, and devoting one's life completely to one person. In the participants' definitions, acts of psychological violence stand out from visible forms of violence such as physical and sexual violence.

*Dating violence is when a man or woman who wants an object of their own exerts pressure on the other person from a position of higher authority. This is what dating violence means to me. (Sivas22M)*

*I think that dating violence can happen in any situation where one person expects the other to behave according to their way of thinking. For me, this is the basis. (Uşak21W)*

*Now that everything revolves around social media. Of course, I'm not talking about physical or sexual violence, but let me see your phone, what's your password, let me take a picture, and browse the gallery. Yes, you can look at my phone, but only if I allow you to. I think anything that goes beyond that permission is dating violence. (Eskişehir24W)*

*The first thing that comes to mind is verbal violence. In general, I think of the sub-categories of verbal violence. In some things, not caring, manipulating, lying, indifference, silent treatment, using slang words, using do-it-or-do-it imperative moods. All these are violence for me. (Muğla26W)*

*This can be psychological violence, economic violence, or violence through social media. I don't know, I think there are too many definitions of violence. It doesn't have to be just physical or sexual violence. (Eskişehir22W)*

*I think dating violence is trying to put pressure on the other person... I mostly observe this I think it is done by people who are not self-sufficient. I think it is done by people who lack self-confidence, people who feel that they are dependent on the other person. (Eskişehir24M)*

Participants mentioned having to ask permission to go somewhere, having their personal belongings and social media accounts searched, having people they meet checked, and having their outfits controlled as examples of dating violence. According to Aslan et al. (2008), gender-based violence is not merely an individual issue but rather a structural problem, as it reflects the inability to meet gender-based social roles and socially constructed expectations. However, the Feminist Approach generally considers socioeconomic status, lack of authority, or the expectation of respect in social life as secondary causes of violence. As highlighted by Radical Feminists, the primary determinants in the systematic perpetration of violence are patriarchal domination and sexism. Accordingly, patriarchy is the most fundamental social system that constructs and reproduces social inequalities. Although the participants did not emphasize gender in their definitions of dating violence, based on their awareness of gender equality, it can be said that they are conscious of the power imbalance between genders in their experiences of dating violence.

## Past relationships and experiences of dating violence

The most significant finding regarding individual experiences was that both male and female participants were subjected to psychological violence. For some participants, this psychological violence was also bilateral, i.e., participants were both subjected to psychological violence and admitted to inflicting psychological abuse. For example, one female participant was self-critical in that although she emphasized the importance of individual space and mutual respect in their relationship, she also engaged in behaviors that she considered to be psychological violence, such as persistent phone calls and text messages. In particular, examples of psychological violence behaviors include frequent calls, constant control, jealousy, restrictions, unilaterally deciding the course of the relationship and imposing it on the other party, ghosting, silent treatment, insisting on continuing the relationship when the participant wants to end it, stalking, and trying to reach the person in a way that disturbs family members and friends are some of the experiences.

*I'm not just informing my mom and dad, I'm telling my girlfriend. There's no problem in letting her know, but I'm asking for permission. "Can I go?", "Okay, go, but don't stay longer than two hours." I'm either going to play OKEY in a café, there are twenty men there. I'm going to the Astroturf to play football. You could have spent the time you were going to the Astroturf with me, but I don't want you to go again. I am a person who likes to play soccer. I look and realize that I haven't been to the Astroturf for a year and a half. (Adana21M)*

*We fight like crazy, I keep my distance from him, and I don't answer his calls. This time he is harassing my friends, 'Let her answer my calls, I'm very sorry, let us sit down'. Then we sit in the cafe, sobbing, crying, disturbing my friends. Then I said, I cannot do it, but when it comes to separation, I remember, for example, it affected me very badly. We were sitting at home, we are on the 4th floor. He came to the window and said, 'OK, let us not break up, but let us jump out of here'. 'Let's either continue our relationship or die together'. (Eskişehir24W)*

*We were sitting on the beach, drinking. He was out of control. When it came to relationships, he exploded, he couldn't take it and hit me. So I pushed him away from me, and then I left. He didn't follow me, he controlled himself. But what's done is done, he hit me once. (Muğla26W)*

The feminist paradigm tells us that not only women who experience violence in their relationships but all women, in a broader social context, are disempowered. Patriarchy assigns different roles to men and women during dating: while men are expected to exert control, women are given a dependent role. The above-mentioned responses of the participants also reveal that men use violence to maintain control in their relationships. In these responses, it is revealed that the male partners of the participants go to the extreme, resorting to physical violence. The importance of a patriarchal social analysis becomes evident in understanding the societal roots of violence against women, which is often superficially explained through individual causes, considered to have limited consequences, and addressed in terms of personal trauma (Walby, 2014, p. 201).

## ***Experiences of the normalization and justification of violence***

An important common point in the participants' experiences of violence is that the violence in their previous relationships occurred during their high school years. This is a time when they are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, when they both develop their personalities and make decisions about important issues in their lives such as university education. Participants who reported experiencing violence in

their first dating relationship usually attributed their continuation of the relationship despite the violence to their inexperience and their inability to act rationally at a time when emotions were very intense.

*You know, taking charge. I honestly didn't know at the beginning of my relationship, I was young. I was behaving the way my family taught me to behave, so I assume I was a bit controlled. But now, that I'm opening my eyes, I am changing, my behavior is also changing, I think he is doing this (restrictive psychological abuse)<sup>4</sup> because of my change. (Tokat20W)*

*It was the university application period. He wanted to go to the same city for university with me. I said, 'I'm not go to write where he writes.' I wanted to be out of town on the day the results were announced, I wanted to say that we won different cities and we wouldn't be able to meet, and I wanted to use that as an excuse (to break up a problematic relationship). (Eskişehir24W)*

*It was also a time in my life when I had difficulties. So it's a very strategic thing for him. I'm having difficulties in my life. I'm 17 years old or something. It was a time when I was incredibly open to anything that could come from outside. He took advantage of that situation (sexual abuse through manipulation). (Eskişehir22W)*

Understanding the social background of the acts of dating violence and threats narrated by female participants in these experiential accounts finds its theoretical foundation in the core claim of Radical Feminism: "The problems stemming from gender and encountered by women in their daily lives are not personal issues or specific to certain situations. All of these are the result of a system—the patriarchal system." (Mansbridge & Okin, 1995, p. 269, as cited in Çakır, 2007, p. 436). While radical feminism provides a conceptual framework for understanding the foundations of oppression against women, it emphasizes men's power over women through the concept of patriarchy (Çakır, 2007, p. 448). Issues such as violence, sexuality, and women's bodies—traditionally considered private and intimate—should be matters of politics because accepting them as confined to the private sphere both conceals these problems and leads to women losing control over their own bodies (Çakır, 2007, p. 452). This debate within radical feminism can also be evaluated in the context of the experiences narrated by Eskişehir22W, as quoted below. The participant stated that in her first relationship, she experienced sexual violence from her boyfriend, who was nine years older than her and that she realized later that what she experienced was an act of violence because she was made to believe that the problem was with her. She also expressed the questioning process she experienced:

*My first boyfriend was older than me, much older. I didn't think that way back then, but now when I look back, it was an abusive relationship from start to finish. Because I experienced many firsts with him. Unfortunately, because I'm a woman... Since these things were not taught in my family, I had to experience them for the first time with him, I had to learn from him, and actually, I see that many things he told me were wrong. He made me believe the problem was with me. Later, I was already being subjected to violence for other reasons as well (Eskişehir22W).*

### ***Taking the blame and normalizing the violence as coping strategies***

As seen in the participant's experience, women in abusive and violent relationships tend to feel the burden of finding solutions and taking responsibility upon themselves. The strategies they employ are

<sup>4</sup>The information in brackets is inserted by the authors for further explanation.

often aimed at maintaining the existing relationship. This phenomenon was also revealed in the findings of Rosen and Stith's (1993, p. 427) psychological study conducted with 11 women interviewees. Their research demonstrated that the participants adopted strategies for maintaining their relationships and coping with violence by taking responsibility for the situation themselves (Rosen & Stith, 1993, p. 428).

Some participants who had normalized some aggressive behavior toward other people/objects during the relationship, such as using abusive language toward others or hitting and breaking objects, stated that they realized over time that what they were experiencing was violence.

It was also found that both male and female participants had similar experiences of psychological violence in the form of jealousy and excessive control. It is a striking finding that the participants questioned themselves within the dynamics of the relationship, even though they were the party subjected to violence, after self-blaming, only realizing after a while that what they were experiencing was violence. This is a common behavior of perpetrators of psychological violence. The perpetrator, who makes the partner feel worthless and guilty, also prevents them from ending the relationship by making them doubt themselves (Direk, 2020).

### ***Breaking the cycle or remaining in the relationship***

In this context, Few and Rosen's (2005) qualitative study provides significant findings regarding the motivations of abused individuals to remain in their relationships. Through in-depth interviews with 28 women who had experienced violence and harassment, it was revealed that these women had been subjected to violence as early as the first two months of their relationships. Despite deciding to leave, they eventually returned to their partners. The analysis identified key factors that contributed to women staying in abusive relationships, including the desire for validation, past experiences (particularly witnessing violence in family and educational environments), taking on caregiving roles within the family, cultural norms, and experiencing a stressful period in their lives (Few & Rosen, 2005, p. 271).

Similar findings emerged in Yıldırım's (1998) quantitative study conducted with 112 women in shelters across İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Bursa, and Antalya. The study revealed that these women had endured violence for long periods before seeking refuge in shelters. Specifically, 37.5% of the women had been subjected to violence for more than 11 years, while 28.6% had endured it for 6 to 10 years. Additionally, nearly 70% of the women did not initially take the violence seriously, remained indifferent, or stayed silent about their first experiences of abuse, with 54% choosing to remain passive (Yıldırım, 1998, pp. 96-97). As Yıldırım (1998, p. 87) states, these findings indicate that "women do not leave a violent home or partner until they reach a breaking point."

This explanation is also relevant to the participants' experiences, as they reported a tendency to continue their relationships despite experiencing violence during the dating period—whether due to threats, feelings of guilt, or a distorted perception of love and relationships. As previously mentioned, traditional patriarchal norms dictate that women must endure and submit to the violence they experience, reinforcing societal beliefs that they are responsible for the abuse they suffer. It is not surprising that individuals socialized in families and societal structures that internalize these beliefs expect women to conform to these behavioral patterns.

*His behavior took the form of distancing himself from me and constantly disciplining me through ghosting and silent treatment. He couldn't force anything on me, he couldn't insist on anything. He*

*tended to go there, and he always tried to make me feel guilty. Not in the form of defending his views, but in the form of disappearing. That's why we always took a break. It was like taking a break, maybe it helped to keep the relationship alive a little bit at the time, but later, in the videos I watched for the gender class last year, I saw it as a form of psychological violence. Furthermore, that's when it hit me more clearly. (Uşak21W)*

*I blamed myself for a while, I blamed myself a lot. Did I make a mistake or did I do something unintentionally? I asked her if I had done something to bother you. I didn't get an answer. So I blamed myself for a long time (...) I have no idea why it happened, I'm very much in the mood to determine if I'm doing something wrong unintentionally. I did a lot of searching to find the fault in myself. It was not excellent. I lost about 7 kilos at that time. (Eskişehir21M)*

Although most of the participants who experienced emotional or physical violence in their relationships (9 out of 12 participants) reported that they had ended their relationships, some preferred to stay in the relationship. For example, one participant who often experienced her boyfriend's jealousy-based restrictive behavior in their relationship stated that they had heated arguments as a result, that she could not concentrate on her daily life and education, and that she was receiving psychological treatment, but she preferred to continue the relationship.

*I decided to break up about a month ago because of the pressure. He cried, and I couldn't bear it. Right now, we're on the path to fixing things. But let's see how it goes (laughs). I mean, we cannot help it, professor. We think everything will get better with just two smiles. We get a little emotional. (Tokat20W)*

### ***'Doing Gender' in dating violence: the impact of socially constructed norms***

Some participants who decided to end the relationship reported that they also experienced acts of violence during the separation process. Participants who chose to separate reported that they cut off all communication with their violent ex-partner.

*He was very resistant, he said, 'Let's not finish it'. Then I had to block him or something. Because he kept bothering me. I was scared for a while. He came to my door. Yes, he came to my door and kept calling. I blocked him on one number and he called another number. I was terrified when he came to my door. I said, 'Don't do that I will have to go to the police.' That's how it ended. (İstanbul21W)*

*(During the relationship)I was distant from other people. I didn't enjoy anything, I wasn't happy. It (breaking up) just came to me. He even threw things behind my back, I mean because I broke up with him. Then I didn't see him at all. Furthermore, I started to see my feminist friends, and it was excellent for me. (Eskişehir22W)*

To evaluate the participants' above-mentioned experiences of violence in the context of gender, it can be referred to the concept of "doing gender" by West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 127). The term "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) signifies how individuals enact gender norms in their daily interactions and recognize similar patterns in others. According to Goffman (1976, p. 76), gendered depictions are an interactional portrayal of what we wish to convey about our genders (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 130). In the specific context of romantic relationships, both men and women assume that they are maintaining a successful relationship as long as they conform to the gender norms expected by society. This is where

patriarchal attitudes and behaviors emerge—women who have been socialized within a traditional patriarchal structure tend to affirm protective sexist behaviors as long as they act according to these roles. On the other hand, women who deviate from these patterns face hostile sexist reactions.

The experiences shared by female participants regarding the separation process also demonstrate how culturally constructed gendered depictions are internalized and shape interactions within their relationships. Woman participants who emphasized gendered attitudes, such as being forgiving and emotional—qualities traditionally attributed to women—exhibited a tendency to maintain relationships in which they felt pressured. However, those woman participants who stepped outside these norms, took control in the relationship, and decided to end it, faced physical and psychological violence within the framework of hostile sexist reactions.

### ***Bystander reactions and social support***

Most of the participants reported that they often witnessed violence perpetrated by their friends, neighbors, acquaintances, or strangers they met on the street. For example, the participants who witnessed a close friend being physically abused stated that if the abused person was a woman, they tended to warn the person and give advice and support to end the violent relationship. One female participant (İstanbul19W) eventually ended her relationship with her friend who was in a violent relationship and who did not listen to her and continued the relationship despite the participant's constant warnings and advice. A male participant (Sivas22M) explained that when a girl in their group of friends was physically abused and had her nose broken, they confronted her boyfriend, gave him a 'stern warning' and ensured that this relationship ended. On the other hand, in cases of domestic violence in neighbors, distant acquaintances, or strangers, participants preferred to develop strategies such as doing nothing or calling the police and following them from a distance.

## **Discussions and Conclusions**

In the field research on violence against women in Türkiye, two main themes emerged: experiences of violence and perceptions and attitudes toward violence. Academic studies, which have gained momentum especially in the last two decades and address violence against women in different dimensions and contexts, have shown that an important step in preventing domestic violence is the identification of risk factors in the premarital dating process (Karatay et al., 2018; Afşar, 2015; Altınay & Arat, 2008; İftar & Güler, 2020; Aslan, et al., 2008; Yıldırım, 1998).

In parallel with Yıldırım's findings (1998), almost all of the participants in the qualitative study had a romantic relationship in high school before completing the age of 20. They stated being exposed to violence in these relationships. However, in contrast to Yıldırım's findings, where women continued their abusive relationships into marriage, it was found that most of the participants ended their abusive relationships. The fact that gender-based violence as a social problem starts at an early age during the dating phase and continues in the later stages of life in families indicates that studies with young people are crucial.

The literature shows that the awareness of psychological violence, which has a profound effect on individuals, is lower than the awareness of physical violence. In line with the findings of Karatay's (2018), participants in this study reported similar experiences of psychological abuse to stay in the relationship, control, and humiliation. In this regard, there is a need to raise awareness of psychologically violent behaviors, which also carry a risk of developing into physical violence in the future.

The participants used strategies to normalize and rationalize these violent behaviors over a long period. In this study, which supports the findings of Yıldırım (1998) and Altınay and Arat (2008) in the dimension of psychological violence, the participants stated that they evaluated behaviors such as jealousy, restriction and stalking as a sign of love in the natural course of the relationship and did not show strong reactions. However, when these behaviors became unbearable and the participants chose a different path for themselves, such as going out of town to university, they stated that they came to the point of ending their problematic relationships. As emphasized earlier, traditional patriarchal stereotypes suggest that women should tolerate and submit to the violence to which they are subjected and for which they are held responsible. Not surprisingly, individuals socialized in families and social structures where these assumptions are internalized expect women to behave accordingly.

In relation to this discussion, it has been noted that an important finding in the literature on women exposed to violence is 'un'responsiveness (Yıldırım, 1998; Few & Rosen, 2005). This 'un'responsiveness manifests itself in the form of women continuing their violent relationships. In this study, it was found that many participants were exposed to psychological violence and continued their relationships for a long time despite feeling uncomfortable. How the participants expressed their excuses for continuing the abusive relationships and the retrospective regrets they expressed also revealed the importance of the issue.

As Abowitz, Knox, and Zusman (2010, p.130) point out, female students who can evaluate the warning signs and cues of violence in a healthy way in the early stages of their relationships can end these relationships before they reach the stage of marriage and family formation. It is therefore important to raise the awareness of students at the university level during the dating phase and to raise general awareness in order to prevent them from being exposed to violence and abuse in the marriages they form later in life (Gagne et al., 2005 as cited in Abowitz et al., 2010, p. 131).

When dating violence is examined through the lens of the radical feminist approach, the societal norms that contribute to this violence, their socio-cultural background, and the patriarchal structure that sustains them form the foundation for the construction, perpetuation, and reproduction of violence in relationships. In this context, examining the underlying dynamics of dating violence requires a focus on key concepts outlined by radical feminist theory, such as gender, patriarchy, sexism, violence, gender-based violence, and violence against women. In particular, in the social legitimization of violence within emotional relationships, the deeply ingrained gender norms shaped by patriarchal structures play a crucial role. In fact, one of the most significant risk factors in both gender-based violence broadly and dating violence specifically is the perpetuation of sexism and gender inequality through traditional patriarchal norms (Aslan et al., 2008; Sünetçi et al., 2016). Accordingly, the findings of this study are analyzed through the lens of gender as a concept and its intersection with patriarchy and violence. Therefore, in order to reveal the structural background of violence against women, it is deemed necessary to dismantle the patriarchal patterns of these structural factors.

This study adopts the premise that gendered attitudes and gender discrimination lie at the core of violence in romantic relationships. Additionally, it acknowledges that dating violence is not symmetrical, as men tend to exhibit greater tendencies toward violence in order to exert dominance and control.

Finally, this research adds a qualitative design to the quantitative studies conducted in Türkiye. From the perspective of feminist theory and the social constructionist paradigm, an in-depth cross-section of the issue is presented with a qualitative method that would reveal the social and structural factors behind individual narratives about dating violence. It was found that participants were sensitive to the issue of

gender equality and were aware of the impact of implicit patriarchal patterns in social structures on their lives. When they retrospectively evaluated the different types of violence they had experienced in their previous relationships, it was found that they were able to relate the patterns of violence to general patriarchal assumptions that they had not been aware of at the time.



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