



## An examination on the perception of violence and its relation to self-esteem among Turkish women\*

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### Abstract

Violence is a type of behavior that takes different forms and is also directed at different groups. This is one of the major societal problems. The main objective of the present study is to examine the relationship between the perception of violence and self-esteem levels in Turkish women. The Personal Information Form asked some questions concerning Turkish women's perception of violence, the kinds of violence they are exposed to; the frequency of violence they are exposed to and their reactions to the violent behavior. This was administered to 212 Turkish women, using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Scale. The findings revealed that most of the women (70%) perceive violence most intensely as physical violence. Another significant finding of this study revealed that when the self-esteem of women increases, the sensitivity to the kinds of violence also increases. The findings have also been discussed in the light of similar research findings and finally some suggestions have been made.

**Key Words:** Domestic violence, perception of violence, self-esteem, violence against women.

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## Türk kadınlarında şiddet algısı ve benlik saygısı arasındaki ilişki\*

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### Özet

Şiddet, değişik biçimlerde açığa çıkan ve aynı zamanda toplumda değişik gruplara yöneltilen bir davranış biçimidir. Bu haliyle, başlıca sosyal problemlerden biri olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu araştırmanın temel amacı, Türk kadınlarının şiddet algısı ve benlik saygıları arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesidir. Araştırma 212 kadın üzerinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcılara benlik saygısını değerlendirmek üzere Coopersmith Benlik Saygısı Ölçeği ve araştırmacılar tarafından oluşturulan Kişisel Bilgi Formu uygulanmıştır. Kişisel Bilgi Formu Türk kadınlarının şiddet algısı, maruz kalınan şiddet türleri, şiddete maruz kalma sıklığı ve şiddet davranışı karşısındaki tepkilerini belirlemeyi hedefleyen sorulardan oluşmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, kadınların büyük bir çoğunluğunun (%70) şiddeti ağırlıklı olarak fiziksel şiddet olarak algıladıklarını göstermiştir. Araştırmada tespit edilen bir başka önemli bulguya göre ise, kadınların benlik saygıları arttıkça şiddet türlerine karşı duyarlılıklarında da artış olmaktadır. Çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular, yurt içi ve yurt dışında yapılmış benzer araştırma bulguları ışığında tartışılmış ve son olarak konu ile ilgili öneriler sunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Aile içi şiddet, şiddet algısı, benlik saygısı, kadına yönelik şiddet.

### Introduction

In the literature, it is widely reported that domestic violence is a significant social and health problem all over the world and it has been studied from a variety of perspectives, including interpersonal, intrapersonal, demographic, cultural and feminist theory (Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart, 1994; Perilla *et al.*, 1994), but researchers emphasized that we have very little understanding of the root causes of violent behavior (Gortner *et al.*, 1997). The violent

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behaviors are generally defined as acts of *physical violence* performed against women by current or former intimate partners (CDC, 1998), but violence against women also has *verbal, psychological, sexual* and *economic* dimensions. According to statistics, over 2 million women are abused by their partner every year and 50% of all women will be victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives (Walker, 1994). Current findings, from research carried out on 24.000 women from 10 different countries by the World Health Organization (2005) revealed that the percentage of women who experienced physical violence ranged from 13% to 61% whereas the percentage of women exposed to sexual violence ranged from 6 % to 59%. The percentages of women exposed to both physical and sexual violence ranged from 15% to 71%. According to the American Health and Gender Equity Center's research findings, obtained from 140.000 women in 50 different countries, Turkey was ranked in the first order in terms of domestic violence, especially beating, with 58% (Sevil and Yanikkerem, 2006). A study by the Prime Ministry Family Research Institute revealed that, of the women, 34% experienced physical violence and 53% experienced verbal violence within the Turkish family (The Turkish Republic Prime Ministry Family Research Institute, 1995). In another study conducted on students at a School of Medicine in Turkey, 68.3% of the students reported that their mothers are exposed to physical and verbal violence (Güneş, Kaya and Pehlivan, 2000). According to the findings of the study conducted by Akyüz *et al.* (2002), the rate of women who receive therapy in psychiatric clinics and are exposed to physical violence from their husbands is 57%. The findings of a closely related study are also very dramatic. The study was made with clinic interviews in a psychiatric clinic and, of the female patients, only 17% stated that they had never been exposed to violence (Vahip and Doğanavşargil, 2006). Findings acquired from different sampling groups point to the severity of the violence towards women. Besides, it was reported that psychological problems such as drug and alcohol usage, depression, having nightmares, distrust, insomnia, suicide attempts, social isolation, complicated headaches, feelings of guilt and embarrassment, alienation and chronic fatigue are frequent in women who are exposed to violence and self-esteem is low in these women (Onat-Bayram, 2009; Muslu and Erdem 2002; Naeem *et al.*, 2008; Peterson *et al.*, 2001; Yanikkerem *et al.*, 2007). When we look into the research in terms of self-esteem which is one of the main variables of this study, having a lower level of self-esteem can cause exposure to violence whereas; being exposed to violence in the long term can cause a decrease in self-esteem, as well. This situation can bring about a vicious circle and prevent

women from leaving the violent environment as a result of desperation. At this point, it is highly clear that there is an urgent need for psycho-educational studies raising consciousness in women about violent behaviors and giving information about the ways of protection to be widely generalized and for the societal sensibility about violence to be risen. Throughout these studies, one of the most significant points is to know the women's point of view about violence and which behaviors are generally defined as violent. As it is going to be determinant for these studies, it is believed that especially the connection between the women's perception of violence and self-esteem is worth studying on. Although there have been empiric studies separately researching the self-esteem of women exposed to violence (Onat-Bayram, 2009; Muslu and Erdem 2002) and the women's point of view on violence (Güler *et al.*, 2005; İçli *et al.*, 1995), there hasn't been a study investigating the connection between them. Setting off from the point that culture has a determinant role on the perception of violence (Rittersberger- Tılıç, 1998), this research has been carried out to determine whether the perception of violence of Turkish women, the type of violence they are exposed to, its frequency and their reactions against violent behavior changes according to the level of self-esteem or not.

### **Aim of the Study**

The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the relationship between women's perception of violence and their self-esteem. To achieve this aim, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What is the distribution of behaviors perceived as violence by women?
2. What is the prevalence of the different kinds of violence to which the women are exposed?
3. What is the frequency of the violence which Turkish women are exposed to?
4. How do you women react when they are exposed to/if they are exposed to violence?
5. Do the self-esteem levels of women significantly vary according to their perception of violence?
6. Do the self-esteem levels of women significantly vary according to the dimensions of violence to which they are exposed?
7. Do the self-esteem levels of women significantly differ with respect to the frequency of their being exposed to violence?

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8. Do the self-esteem levels of women significantly differ with respect to how they react to violent behavior?

## Method

### Sample

The population of the research consists of women who, out of many variable reasons, have applied to a non-governmental organization (NGO) which sustains women and children in the Fener-Balat district of Istanbul and who take advantage of the projects that are run voluntarily by that organization. The sampling consists of 212 women over the age of 18 among these who have voluntarily accepted to take part in this research. The reason why the Fener-Balat district has been chosen for the study is that this region has received a great amount of internal migration and nestles different educational, cultural and social identities in it. The ages of the participants range from 20 to 55. The group was predominantly married (81%). Of the participants, 38% had completed primary education, 6% completed secondary education, 26% completed high school, 25% completed higher education. A smaller number of women (6%) had not received an education. Almost half of the women hadn't been working (46%). Most of the women had been working in unqualified jobs (31%). The rest of the women were working as a factory worker or as a hospital employee.

### Measures

Two different instruments were used to collect data in the present study. They are the Personal Information Form and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. *The Personal Information Form* prepared by the researchers for this study, consisted of some questions, such as questions on the Turkish women's perception of violence, the dimensions of violence to which they are exposed, the frequency of violent behavior and the women's reaction to violent behavior. Additionally, this form was also used to gather some demographical information such as gender, age, education level and marital status. The *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* which was developed by Coopersmith (1975), was adapted to Turkish culture by Turan and Tufan (1987) and was here used to obtain the data related to the self-esteem of women. This scale consists of 25 items. Responses to all items are made on a two point scale: "acceptable for me", "not acceptable for me". High scores obtained from this scale indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The retest reliability coefficient was found to be .76.

## Results

The first objective of the study is to determine which behaviors are perceived by the women as violence. In the study, some typical behaviors which were identified in the literature as violence were listed in the Personal Information Form by means of this question: “Which of the following behaviors do you perceive as violence?”

In this study, typical violent behaviors were classified under five main categories. They are: Physical violence, verbal violence, social violence, economic violence, and sexual violence.

The aforementioned categories of violence involve the following behavioral characteristics (Watts and Zimmerman, 2002:1233; KA-DER, 2003:3-4; Kranz *et al.*, 2005:1051-1052; Watts *et al.*, 2008:58-59); <http://www.scribd.com/doc/16090007/domestic-violence-and-abuse>, 2009):

- ✓ Physical violence - including using physical power with slapping, beating, choking.
- ✓ Verbal violence - including swearing, humiliation, constant blaming and criticism, to make women feel incompetent and guilty.
- ✓ Social violence - including public humiliation, forced isolation from family members and friends.
- ✓ Economic violence - including being prevented from going to work, and not given available support money.
- ✓ Sexual violence-including forced sexual intercourse.

**Table 1** *Participants' definitions of violence*

Dimensions of violence		f	%
Physical Violence	Yes	148	69.80
	No	64	30.20
Verbal Violence	Yes	72	34.00
	No	140	66.00
Social Violence	Yes	81	38.00
	No	131	62.00
Sexual Violence	Yes	77	36.30
	No	135	63.70
Economic Violence	Yes	67	31.60
	No	145	68.40

According to the results, 70% of the women defined “using physical power with slapping, beating, choking” etc. as violence. Interestingly, in terms of verbal violence; swearing, humiliation, constant blaming and criticism, to make women feel incompetent and

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guilty were not perceived as violence by 66% of the women. Public humiliation, forced isolation from family members and friends, in other words constant restraint in family and social life classified in social violence were identified as violence by only 38% of the women. Besides, almost 64% of the women didn't defined "using force to have sexual intercourse" as violence. And finally, being prevented from going to work, and not given available support money that are classified in economic violence were not perceived as violence by most of the women (68%).

The second objective of the study is to determine the prevalence of the different dimensions of violence to be exposed.

**Table 2** *Prevalence of violence to be exposed*

Dimensions of violence		f	%
Physical Violence	Yes	23	10.80
	No	189	89.20
Verbal Violence	Yes	25	12.00
	No	187	88.00
Social Violence	Yes	18	8.50
	No	194	91.50
Sexual Violence	Yes	6	2.80
	No	206	97.20
Economic Violence	Yes	19	9.00
	No	193	91.00
To be exposed to all dimensions of violence	Yes	6	2.80
	No	206	97.20

Almost 11% of the participants reported that they were exposed to physical violence that consists of the behavior as aforementioned. On the other hand, findings indicated that 12% of the women experienced verbal violence characterized with behaviors such as swearing, humiliation, constant blaming and criticism, to make women feel incompetent and guilty. Of the participants, nine percent of the women stated that they were exposed to economic violence whereas 6% of them experienced sexual violence. However, only 2.8% of participants reported that they experienced all dimensions of violence mentioned above in their lifetime.

The third objective of the present study is to determine the frequency of being exposed to violence.

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**Table 3** *Frequency of being exposed to violence*

Being exposed to violence	f	%
Never exposed	113	53.30
Rarely exposed	56	26.40
Frequently exposed	43	20.30
Total	212	100.00

The findings indicated that 53% of the women were never exposed to any forms of violence. Of the participants, twenty six percent of the women reported that they rarely experienced violence, but 20% of them were frequently exposed to violence. According to these results, almost half of the women (46.7% in total) were exposed to one form of violence.

The fourth objective of the study is to determine the reactions of participants against the violent behavior.

**Table 4** *Distribution of the women's reaction to violence*

Women's reaction to violence	f	%
I do not react	17	8.00
I react in the same way and intimidate him.	38	17.90
I leave home/I get divorced	66	31.10
I express the effects of violence on myself, and I try to convince him not to repeat the behavior.	91	42.90
Total	212	100.00

Of the women, only 8% stated that they prefer not to react to violent behavior.

Another objective of this study is to determine whether the women's self-esteem levels differ in respect of their perceptions of what constitutes violence. The results of t-test analyses and their significances are summarized in Table 4.



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**Table 5** Comparisons of self-esteem levels with respect to the women's definitions of violence

Dimensions of violence		N	x	ss	t
Physical Violence	Yes	148	70.54	13.71	4.09**
	No	64	62.13	13.87	
Sexual Violence	Yes	77	73.77	12.54	4.64**
	No	135	64.71	14.18	
Economic Violence	Yes	67	72.60	14.38	3.26**
	No	145	65.88	13.74	

\*\*p<.01

According to the results, the self-esteem levels of the women who identified the typical behaviors given in the Personal Information Form as mentioned before, as physical, sexual and economic violence are significantly higher than the self-esteem levels of the women who don't perceive those behaviors as violence.

The self-esteem levels of Turkish women were also examined in relation to the extent of the violence they encountered and the results are given in Table 6.

**Table 6** Comparisons of self-esteem levels of women with respect to the extent of the violence

Dimensions of Violence		N	x	ss	t
Physical Violence	Yes	23	56.00	18.92	4.46**
	No	189	69.46	12.91	
Economic Violence	Yes	19	60.21	18.78	2.53**
	No	193	68.77	13.56	

\*\*p<.01

The women who were exposed to physical and economic violence have significantly lower self-esteem than that of others who had not experienced these two dimensions of violence. It can be said that being exposed to physical and economic violence affects the self-esteem of women negatively (Table 6).

As the seventh objective of the study, in order to examine the self-esteem levels of women with respect to the frequency of their being exposed to violence, One-Way ANOVA was conducted and significant differences were found among groups ( $F= 13.69$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The origin of differences was analyzed by Scheffe Test and the results are summarized in Table 7.

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**Table 7** Comparisons of self-esteem levels of women with respect to the frequency of being exposed to violence

Frequency of being exposed to violence	Never exposed	Rarely exposed	Frequently exposed
Never exposed	$x = 72.18$		
Rarely exposed	$p < .001$	$x = 65.64$	
Frequently exposed	$p < .001$	-	$x = 60.09$

The self-esteem levels of women who have never experienced any dimensions of violence are higher than that of others who were exposed to violence rarely or frequently ( $p < .001$ ).

The last sub-problem of the study is to examine the self-esteem levels of women with respect to how women react to violent behavior. One-Way ANOVA was performed and significant differences were found among groups ( $F = 9.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The origins of the differences were analyzed by Scheffe Test. The results are summarized in Table 8.

**Table 8** Comparisons of the self-esteem levels of women with respect to how they react to violence

Women's reaction to violence	I do not react	I react in the same way and intimidate him.	I leave home/I get divorced.	I express the effects of violence on myself; and I try to convince him not to repeat the behavior.
I do not react	$x = 52.94$			
I react in the same way and intimidate him.	$p < .001$	$x = 66.32$		
I leave home/I get divorced.	$p < .001$	-	$x = 72.06$	

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I express the effects of violence on myself; and I try to convince him not to repeat the behavior.	p<.001	x=68.57
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The self-esteem levels of women who prefer to remain passive in the face of violent situations are lower than that of others who prefer to react to violence in some way (p<.001).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In the present study, the findings revealed that the majority of the women (70%) perceive violence intensely as physical violence. However, behaviors including verbal, economic, social and sexual violence were not perceived by most of the women as violence (Table 1). According to these results, it can be said that the awareness level of women who participated in this study is quite low in relation to the definition and scope of violence. In a study by Güler *et al.* (2005) more than half of the women (59.7%) define violence as physical, 47.4% define it as verbal and 21.4% define it as emotional violence. None of the women define the sexual and economic violence as violence. The findings of the studies by İçli *et al.* (1995) revealed that women do not evaluate sexual constraint as rape in marriage. The aforementioned findings are compatible with the findings of the present study. In Turkish culture, assumption of male dominance over females in terms of the sexual and economic aspects in marriage might explain the findings.

The findings of the study evidence that nearly half of the women are exposed to violence of one kind or another (Table 2). The finding is compatible with the findings of studies conducted either in Turkey or other countries (Güler *et al.*, 2005; Vahip and Doğanavşargil, 2006; Watts *et al.*, 1998, the World Health Organization, 2005; Walker, 1994). Accordingly, the findings of this study confirm the severity of violence to women.

According to another interesting finding, only 8% of the women stated that they do not react to violence (Table 4). It can be evaluated as promising that many of the women react to violence in the sample group rather than remaining passive.

Another significant finding of this study revealed that when the self-esteem of the women increases, the sensitivity to the different dimensions of violence also increases (Table

5). According to the findings, it can be said that women who have high levels of self-esteem are sensitive to physical and psychological threats and they can easily perceive behaviors containing violence. The finding is an predicted result.

The results of the study revealed that being exposed to physical and economic violence affects self-esteem in a negative way (Table 6). Studies conducted in Turkey and in other countries support this finding (Muslu and Erdem 2002; Naeem *et al.*, 2008; Peterson *et al.*, 2001). A woman's dependence on her husband, especially economically, can result in her acceptance of the situation even if she is exposed to violence. In the present study, nearly half of the participants (46%) reported that they hadn't been working. It can be said that this situation brings about feelings of impotence and insufficiency. Besides, in the literature, it is stated that women are prone to meet the needs and expectations of their husbands because of the traditional gender roles of women as well as economic factors. Therefore, women being exposed to violence are prone to blame themselves for this situation (İçli, 1990, p.20-21).

It can be evaluated as a predicted result that the frequency of exposure to violence affects self-esteem in a negative way (Table 7). Women who have a low level of self-esteem can pave the way for violence by remaining passive because they feel desperately unable to control the events and to leave the violent environment. Hence the importance of reinforcing the sense of self in a positive way is evident.

Consequently, the level of self-esteem is lower in women who prefer not to react against violence than the women who react in any way (Table 8). The finding may result from the idea that women who have high levels of self-esteem are entrepreneurs and sufficient in expressing themselves.

In terms of the research findings, the following suggestions can be made:

1. Educational programs should be devised with the aim of increasing the awareness of women on the issue of violence and especially different kinds of violence.

2. Psycho-educational workshops or group and individual counseling services should be planned in order to enable women aware of their own potential and capabilities, and to increase their self-esteem.

3. More projects should be introduced for the prevention of violence against women, in addition to those which are being carried out, and especially the collaboration and support

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of mass media, non-governmental organizations and municipalities on the issue should be increased.

4. The present study limited to quantitative data. Qualitative studies which are based on face to face interview with women could provide deeper information on the subject.

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