



Rape in Turkey: between incitement, complicity and silence

Sertaç Sehlukoğlu, 18th March 2011

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The debates triggered by a 14-fold increase in violent crimes against women in Turkey in the last seven years have pitted Islamic male scholars and journalists against Islamic women writers, reports Sertaç Sehlukoğlu

About the author

Sertaç Sehlukoğlu is a women's rights activist and owner of the Muslim Women in Sports blog. She is studying for a PhD in social anthropology at Cambridge University.

There has been a rise in public debates about rape and sexual assaults in Turkey, since the broadcast of the new soap opera, [What is Fatmagül's Fault?](#) [9]. This TV drama covers the tragic story of a young woman raped by four men and forced to marry one of them. In the last seven years, violence and sex crimes against women have increased by 1400% in Turkey; the soap opera merely reflects public discomfort regarding this trend. According to the report [Bianet News](#) [10] compiled from the press, last year 217 women were murdered and 164 women were injured at the hands of their male relatives. Over a quarter of these women were murdered by spouses they were trying to reject or divorce. 207 women and children were raped, while 381 were sexually abused; in total 90% were abused by men they knew closely, such as their relatives, friends and teachers.

The legal and governmental cautions against sex crimes are not effective enough to respond to the scale and gravity of the problem. Yet, women are continuously facing resistance from society which creates a hostile environment for the victims. When a group of women from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) suggested the use of chemical castration for abusers as part of a larger proposal to act against sex crimes, they faced criticisms from theologians urging them to evaluate the cases of rape carefully. According to the head of the Department of Theology at Selçuk University, Prof. Orhan Çeker, "women are at the center of the problem of sexual assault"; women's low-cut dress - *decollete* - is the reason for men's sexual arousal and it is a factor that lawmakers should not underestimate. Although his words earned him an investigation by the Council of Higher Education and the Public Prosecutor (Savcılık), and he received an immediate disclaimer from the Presidency of Religious Affairs to the effect that his opinions had no religious basis, this enabled us to hear the voices in support of Prof Çeker and to analyse their archaic perceptions more closely.

The public debates unleashed by Çeker's pronouncements mapped out different positions regarding sex crimes. A vocal group of Islamic women strongly opposed to Çeker argued that it is men, not women, who are at the center of the problem. Their main argument rested on the Quranic warning to men to lower their gaze if exposed to a sexually arousing scene, body or image. Theology scholar Dr. Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, pointed to women's [harassment](#) [11] during the *Hajj* - pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina - as an extreme example of men's sex crimes. Women writers from Islamic media like [Nazife Şişman](#) [12], [Fatma Barbarosoğlu](#) [13], [Özlem Albayrak](#) [14] and [Elif Şafak](#) [15] warned about the impact of discourses linking women's public sexuality to harassment. They pointed out that Çeker could be held indirectly responsible for legitimizing sexual assault if his words incited any man to abuse a woman on account of her clothing, or make a man think that a revealing dress makes a



woman deserve sexual assault.

A second group that participated in these discussions were several journalists from the Islamic press with a highly masculinist tone, such as [Ali Bulaç](#) [16], [Ali Ünal](#) [17] and [Serdar Arseven](#) [18]. They accused the Islamic female writers who criticized Çeker's views of being unable to fully comprehend Islam as they were "afflicted" by western ideas, and were pandering to *feminism* which, in their view, was clearly incompatible with Islamic practice. Ali Bulaç from [Daily Zaman](#) [16] wrote an article entitled "Reactions of the Organism" in which he used discourses of modern psychology - 'western ideas' which apparently did not diminish or impair his comprehension of Islam - to argue that a male organism is automatically aroused by women's public display of her sexuality, and that therefore nudity constitutes grounds for provoking rape or harassment.

What these authors preferred to ignore was the erroneous link between sexual assault and women's dress, since over 90 percent of the victims were harassed by their male acquaintances, rather than random men sexually aroused by their attire. Indeed, sexual assault and rape is not an 'automatic' result of men's arousal, rather, it is a pathology and a crime linked with desire for power, anger, sadistic behaviour and similar motives. The writers in question still seem to be in the grip of archaic and noxious assumptions that account for the fact that many victims of rape cannot report their abuse in Turkey, since they fear that officers of the law, their family, friends and the attorney will question them about whether they did anything to 'invite' assaulters and rapists. The way in which people like Çeker and Bulaç present sexual harassment does nothing more than intensify the trauma of rape and sexual assault victims.

In an era of democracy, Bulaç also expressed concerns over Islamists not being able to discuss the rules of Islam which, he purports, would allow/condone such violations. It would be a mystery to anyone who knows the basics of Islamic *fiqh* how linking nudity to rape or harassment can have a place in religion. Similarly, other authors who wrote in favour of Çeker's stance seem to be more concerned about their own freedom of speech than women's freedom of public visibility. For instance, in his article "[Our values have never been so vulnerable](#) [17]" Ali Ünal problematized the condemnation campaign against the views of Prof Çeker, arguing that Çeker should be able to express his 'religious' opinions about women's appropriate dress.

While there have been a couple men from the Islamic media who have countered the prevailing claim that abused women 'ask for it', the common tendency among Islamic writers and columnists towards issues related to sexual assault has been a disturbing silence. Even on the March 8th, International Women's Day, news items and reports highlighting the urgency of dealing with violence and sex crimes against women were visibly absent from these men's columns compared to other, more secular media. This silence can be interpreted as a reflection of the Islamic alarm about gender issues, which is always coloured by fears concerning the collapse of the family, the rise of homosexuality, etc. It is incomprehensible, however, that they refuse to inform their readers about the frightening turn in violence against women in the last decade, despite the outcry from practicing women who [do wear the hijab](#) [19] and who are nonetheless faced with sexual harassment in public.

As an inevitable result, it is only Islamic women, not men, who show awareness and sensitivity about sexual harassment and abuse, since they are the ones who have access to first-hand information regarding these incidents through individual experiences or the experiences of their friends. The tone with which the issue of sexual violence is being dealt with leads practising women to feel more and more frustrated with the rising masculinist voices - and silences - in their own communities.

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