PARTICIPATORY ACTION (PAR) RESERCH ON GENDER INEQUALITY: INSIGHTS FROM FEJUST STUDENT PROJECTS

POL2332-GENDER İN INTERNATİONAL DEVELOPMENT

2022-2023 FALL

Executive Summary

Between 2022 and 2024, students of the FEJUST Gender in International Development course engaged in a series of Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects. Working in groups, they produced videos or photovoice artefacts and accompanying reports on different aspects of gender inequality in Turkey, situating these within both national and international development debates.

The process was designed not only as an academic exercise but as a way to practice feminist epistemic justice: to treat lived experience as evidence, to challenge silencing practices, and to build plural forms of knowledge. What emerged were diverse projects—on marriage traditions, femicide, girls' education, the beauty industry, unpaid care, and women's political participation—that together offer a rich map of how gender inequality is experienced, narrated, and contested in contemporary Turkey.

The 2022–2024 cohort exemplifies the ethos of the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST). Through PAR, students learned to see whose knowledge is dismissed, whose experience is erased, and how alternative epistemologies can resist silencing. They produced counter-narratives that connect the intimate and the structural, showing how gender inequality in Turkey is not only a local problem but part of global patterns of epistemic injustice.

These outputs are more than classroom assignments—they are artefacts of feminist epistemic resistance, contributing to the FEJUST agenda of pluralising knowledge, amplifying silenced voices, and linking academic learning to public and policy debates.

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1. About the 2022-2023 Cohort

The participatory action research presented in this brief was undertaken by the 2022–2023 cohort of the Gender in International Development course, taught within the framework of the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST). The class brought together a diverse group of undergraduate students, many of whom were engaging systematically with feminist and development theory for the first time. In total, the cohort comprised over two dozen students, working collaboratively in small groups to produce their short films or photovoice projects.

The demographic profile of the cohort reflected both the strengths and the challenges of gender studies in Turkey today. Female students formed the clear majority, a pattern consistent with broader enrolment trends in gender-focused courses, while male students were present in smaller numbers. This imbalance is itself instructive: it points to the uneven social distribution of interest and responsibility for addressing gender equality, which remains too often framed as a "women's issue." Yet it also made visible the opportunities that arise when men do engage—mixed groups fostered dialogue across experiences, while women-only groups often created safe and supportive spaces for more candid reflections.

The cohort also represented a cross-section of Turkish youth, with names and backgrounds signalling both local rootedness and international experience. Several students explicitly drew upon their bilingual or transnational identities in shaping their analysis of gender inequalities. Others situated their work firmly in local traditions, highlighting issues such as marriage rituals or family-based gender expectations. Together, this created a tapestry of perspectives that enriched the outputs well beyond what could be achieved in a standard classroom essay.

The students themselves were acutely aware of the political climate. Many expressed hesitation about exhibiting their work in public fora, citing concerns about misinterpretation, online backlash, or the instrumentalisation of their voices in polarised debates. Instead, the classroom functioned as a deliberately constructed safe space for sharing and critique. Those who wished to reach wider audiences chose to circulate their projects selectively on their own social media channels. This choice not only underscored the risks of speaking out about gender issues in contemporary Turkey, but also highlighted the importance of pedagogical environments that prioritise care, safety, and agency.

By foregrounding these youth voices, the 2022–2023 cohort demonstrated that students are not merely learners but co-producers of knowledge. Their artefacts, reflections, and recommendations show how gendered inequalities are lived and perceived by young people, and why their perspectives are indispensable to any serious discussion of feminist epistemic justice.

2. Themes and Topics Chosen

The range of topics selected by the student groups reveals both the breadth of gender inequality and the acuity of youth perspectives in tracing its everyday manifestations. Rather than focusing only on abstract policy debates, students grounded their work in lived experiences, cultural practices, and pressing social issues that are highly visible in Turkey but resonate globally. Marriage traditions, femicides, women's education, beauty norms, care work, and political representation emerged as recurring focal points. Together, these topics provide a mosaic of how patriarchy, nationalism, neoliberalism, and conservative populism intersect in shaping women's lives.

Marriage traditions offered one of the most vivid entry points into these dynamics. Students critically examined customs such as the red virginity belt, *kız isteme* (a cultural practice of asking permission from the girl's parents to marry her) and bride price, practices that appear celebratory but function to regulate women's sexuality and autonomy. These rituals were not treated as isolated remnants of the past, but as adaptive tools through which patriarchy renews itself in the present. Students observed that such traditions persist even in modern urban settings, defended under the guise of cultural heritage. In their analysis, the private sphere of family life becomes a site where national identity and patriarchal control converge, making the regulation of women central to the reproduction of community and state alike.

Femicides and gender-based violence constituted another urgent cluster of projects. Students engaged deeply with Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and highlighted how this political decision was both symbolic and material: it signaled the state's willingness to treat women's safety as negotiable,

while simultaneously undermining international norms. Students argued that femicide is not only a crisis of violence but a crisis of recognition. The state's denial, its refusal to classify murders as systemic or to support feminist organisations, represents a form of epistemic injustice in which women's testimonies are dismissed and their deaths depoliticised. Through their films and photovoice projects, students insisted on naming femicide as political violence, an argument that aligned them with transnational feminist networks while asserting their own generational urgency.

Education, particularly the challenges faced by girls, was a theme that allowed students to interrogate the development discourse itself. Campaigns such as *Haydi Kızlar Okula* were acknowledged as important but critiqued as insufficient. Students drew attention to the rural–urban divide, economic barriers, and persistent gender norms that push girls out of school or into early marriage. Their reflections questioned whether education systems are designed to challenge inequality or simply to channel women into limited, socially sanctioned roles. In linking local experiences with global debates, students underscored that education is not automatically emancipatory but must be embedded in broader transformations of social norms, labour markets, and political representation.

Another group of projects illuminated the beauty industry and its pervasive role in shaping women's identities and economic opportunities. Students revealed how neoliberal capitalism commodifies women's bodies, making beauty both a product and a discipline. From advertising campaigns to workplace dress codes, they traced how appearance becomes a condition of employability and social mobility. Importantly, they emphasised that the industry operates not simply as an individual burden but as a structural system that naturalises inequality while profiting from it. Their work shows how consumer culture sustains gender hierarchies under the guise of choice and empowerment.

3. Link to Development and International Dimensions

A striking feature of the 2022–2023 participatory action research projects is that students did not treat gender inequalities as purely national concerns. Their reflections consistently linked Turkey's challenges to wider questions of development, international norms, and global justice. This broadened perspective reveals the sophistication of youth analysis: students recognised that while gender inequality takes specific forms within national contexts, it is also shaped by transnational flows of ideas, institutions, and economic pressures.

When discussing marriage rituals such as bride price or the red virginity belt, students were quick to frame them not simply as cultural curiosities but as barriers to development. They argued that these practices curtail women's agency, limit access to education and employment, and reproduce cycles of poverty. By doing so, they connected intimate cultural practices to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on reducing inequalities. Their work underscored the point that gendered traditions are not only private matters but have measurable consequences for economic and social development.

The projects on femicide and the Istanbul Convention highlighted the international dimension even more explicitly. Students pointed out that Turkey's withdrawal was not an isolated event but part of a global backlash against gender rights, with parallels in Poland and Hungary and echoes far beyond Europe. They engaged critically with international human rights instruments, noting that while conventions such as CEDAW or the Istanbul Convention provide crucial normative frameworks, their effectiveness depends on political will at the national level. For students, the absence of implementation signaled not the failure of these instruments themselves, but the deliberate rejection of global commitments in the service of nationalist agendas. This interpretation reflects a nuanced understanding of how international law and domestic politics intersect.

Projects on girls' education also carried strong international resonances. Students drew comparisons with global campaigns supported by UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank, observing that Turkey's struggles mirror broader patterns in the Global South. Yet they also resisted uncritical adoption of development orthodoxy, questioning whether international campaigns that emphasise enrolment truly deliver on empowerment. Their analysis aligned with feminist critiques of development that warn against instrumentalising girls' education as a tool for growth while ignoring deeper structural inequalities. This demonstrates how students were not only recipients of international discourses but also active critics, able to situate Turkey's case within global debates on the limits of development practice.

The exploration of beauty standards and the commodification of the female body further connected the local with the global. Students noted that the pressures they observed in Turkish advertising and workplaces were part of a global neoliberal economy that profits from women's insecurity. They made links to international media flows, global beauty brands, and social media platforms that export homogenised ideals of femininity across borders. In this way, they showed how economic globalisation amplifies gender inequalities, making the politics of beauty both a development issue and a transnational one.

Even the projects on political representation situated Turkey's democratic deficit within a wider comparative frame. Students reflected on how women remain underrepresented in parliaments across the world, including in established democracies. They cited international benchmarks, such as the UN target of 30% female representation in political decision-making bodies, to highlight Turkey's lag but also to argue that this is not only a Turkish problem. Their work illustrates a keen awareness that gender equality in politics is both a national responsibility and a global aspiration, and that young people must push for accountability at both levels.

Taken together, these projects demonstrate how youth voices grasp the development relevance of gender inequality. They refused to treat issues such as femicide, education, beauty, or political exclusion as isolated national concerns. Instead, they showed how these are embedded in international systems of law, economy, and culture. This dual vision—rooted in local realities but attentive to global connections—is what gives the projects their international resonance. It is also what aligns them with FEJUST's commitment to feminist epistemic justice: making visible how knowledge from the margins speaks directly to debates at the centre of international politics.

In this sense, the 2022–2023 cohort did not only engage with development debates; they actively expanded them. Their work suggests that development cannot be disentangled from the politics of knowledge, from whose voices are heard and whose experiences are treated as valid. By linking their local findings to international instruments and global campaigns, these students positioned themselves not as passive learners but as participants in transnational struggles for gender justice.

Political representation was also a major concern, with students highlighting women's exclusion from parliaments, councils, and leadership positions. In Turkey, the strikingly low figures—only 18% of MPs and just 1% of local councillors—were taken as evidence of systemic barriers rather than individual failings. Students connected these patterns to broader issues of resource inequality, discriminatory norms, and institutionalised sexism. Yet their projects were not only diagnostic; they also pointed to the role of feminist activism, EU frameworks such as CEDAW, and international initiatives that have pressured governments to increase women's participation. Their analysis reveals both frustration at the slow pace of change and a conviction that inclusion is indispensable for democratic legitimacy.

Finally, several projects brought attention to unpaid care work and its invisibility in both policy and society. Students discussed how women's disproportionate responsibility for domestic labour not only restricts their economic opportunities but also entrenches stereotypes about natural gender roles. The COVID-19 pandemic was cited as a moment that exacerbated these burdens, showing how crises are used to reinforce rather than alleviate gendered inequalities. This focus on care work reflects a generational shift: students see not only violence and exclusion as problems but also the subtler, structural forms of inequality that undermine women's participation in public life.

Across these diverse topics, what stands out is the students' ability to locate gender inequality at the nexus of culture, politics, and economics. They chose issues that touch daily life yet also reveal broader structures of power, thereby linking the micro with the macro. Their collective body of work demonstrates the pedagogical and political value of participatory action research: by producing knowledge that is at once critical and situated, students do not just describe gender inequality—they show how it is lived, contested, and potentially transformed.

4. The PAR Process and Epistemic Transformation

The participatory action research process was not simply a method of assessment; it was itself a transformative experience for the students. By engaging with photovoice and participatory video, students were pushed beyond the comfort of traditional essays into forms of knowledge-making that demanded creativity, collaboration, and public engagement. This shift destabilised hierarchies of expertise, positioning

students not only as learners but as producers of situated knowledge whose perspectives carry political weight.

At the heart of this transformation was the experience of collaboration. Students described how working in groups to select topics, plan videos, and construct narratives required negotiation and mutual recognition. These interactions mirrored, in microcosm, the democratic challenges of inclusive knowledge production. In deciding how to represent marriage rituals, femicide, or women's political underrepresentation, they confronted questions of voice: whose story should be told, whose images should be used, and how to balance sensitivity with the need for impact. In grappling with these dilemmas, students enacted epistemic justice in practice, acknowledging that knowledge is not neutral but relational, and that producing it requires attentiveness to power dynamics even within small teams.

Equally important was the way the process unsettled students' prior assumptions. Several groups noted that at the beginning they saw their chosen topics—such as education inequality or beauty standards—as straightforward problems with obvious solutions. But through the PAR process they came to see these issues as deeply entangled with structures of power, history, and ideology. For instance, one group exploring girls' education realised that campaigns to increase enrolment, which they initially celebrated as unequivocal successes, often reproduce gender hierarchies by channeling women into limited professional roles. Another group focusing on femicide admitted that they had underestimated the extent of state denial until their research made visible the systematic silencing of feminist organisations. In both cases, the process created what students described as "new eyes" for looking at familiar problems—an epistemic shift that resonates with FEJUST's commitment to exposing how injustice operates not only through outcomes but through knowledge itself.

The affective dimension of the process was equally transformative. Students repeatedly spoke of the emotional challenges of researching sensitive issues, particularly violence and discrimination. For some, encountering testimonies of femicide victims was overwhelming; for others, reflecting on their own experiences of discrimination in education or employment surfaced painful memories. Yet rather than paralysing them, this emotional labour became a source of solidarity. Group work created space to process emotions collectively, transforming vulnerability into a resource for political commitment. This echoes feminist insights that emotions are not distractions from knowledge but constitutive of it, shaping how people perceive injustice and mobilise against it.

Moreover, the public orientation of the artefacts shifted students' sense of responsibility. Unlike an essay read only by a lecturer, a video or photovoice project demanded an audience and carried the implicit question of impact. Students imagined how their work would be received not only by classmates but by policymakers, activists, or peers outside the classroom. This awareness sharpened their arguments, compelled them to craft narratives that were accessible without being simplistic, and instilled a sense that their voices could matter in public debates. In their reflections, many described this as the first time they felt themselves "part of the conversation" on gender inequality rather than passive observers of it.

The epistemic transformation brought about by the PAR process is thus twofold. On one level, it changed what students knew: they discovered new dimensions of gender inequality, saw connections across scales, and recognised the systemic nature of problems they once perceived as individual. On another level, it changed how they knew: they experienced knowledge as relational, embodied, and contested, and they came to understand themselves as epistemic actors rather than mere consumers of established expertise. This dual transformation—of content and of capacity—reflects the very aims of feminist epistemic justice, which seeks not only to amplify marginalised voices but to reshape the conditions under which knowledge is produced and valued.

In this way, the 2022–2023 cohort's engagement with participatory action research embodies the pedagogical vision of FEJUST. It demonstrates that when students are invited to create knowledge collaboratively, to foreground lived experience, and to take their findings into public debate, they do not simply learn about gender and development; they practice it. They enact justice in epistemic form, showing that who speaks, how they speak, and whether they are heard are themselves political questions.

5. Messages and Audiences

If there was one thing the 2022–2023 cohort refused to do, it was stay quiet. Their projects pulsed with urgency, each crafted to deliver a message that could not be ignored. Unlike essays destined for the eyes of a lecturer, these films and photovoice projects were made to travel—to reach friends scrolling through Instagram, families steeped in tradition, and policymakers who too often look away.

The groups tackling marriage rituals made their audience confront an uncomfortable truth: that what is wrapped in the language of heritage often hides the policing of women's lives. By filming or photographing the red virginity belt, the kız isteme ceremony, or bride price practices, they flipped the script. These were not quaint customs but instruments of control, and the students' message was blunt—tradition cannot be a shield for inequality.

Those working on femicide wanted shock to turn into recognition. Their message was stark: these killings are not private misfortunes but political crimes. They demanded that the public stop treating femicide as background noise and that policymakers stop excusing their own inaction by calling it "culture." To peers, the projects whispered a different kind of solidarity: naming violence, even when it is denied, is itself an act of resistance.

Education-focused groups pressed a different but equally sharp point. They reminded their audiences that getting girls through the school gates is not enough if poverty, harassment, or early marriage push them out again. Their videos asked classmates to look around and notice which peers are missing, and they called on policymakers to stop measuring success in enrolment numbers alone. The underlying message was unmistakable: equality cannot be achieved with half-measures.

The projects on beauty culture hit audiences where they live—on their phones, in the mirror, at work. Their films and images exposed the hidden costs of a billion-dollar industry that thrives on women's insecurity. To their peers, they asked: are your choices really free, or are they shaped by a system profiting from your doubt? To employers and regulators, the call was even sharper: stop dressing exploitation up as "professionalism" or "empowerment."

Finally, those who took on political representation pulled no punches. Their message to fellow youth was rallying: politics does not belong to men alone, and silence is complicity. To the public, they framed exclusion as a crisis of democracy, not just a women's issue. To policymakers, their demand was direct: quotas, resources, and reform, not tomorrow but now.

What made these projects so powerful was not just the content of their messages but their reach. Students understood that social change does not happen in one arena alone. They crafted artefacts that could spark a conversation in a classroom, unsettle a family dinner, or land as critique in the halls of parliament. They treated knowledge as something that circulates, that provokes, that insists on being heard.

In doing so, they enacted feminist epistemic justice in its purest sense. They refused the silences imposed on youth and women, and instead filled public space with their own counter-knowledge. The result was not just a set of assignments but a chorus of voices insisting that the fight against gender inequality is everyone's fight—and that it starts by listening to those who live it.

6. Challenges Faced

No project about gender inequality in today's Turkey could unfold without friction, and the students felt this acutely. The challenges they encountered were not only technical—how to film, edit, or narrate—but political and personal, shaped by a climate where speaking about gender is itself risky. What they learned, and what they shared, tells us as much about the conditions of knowledge production as it does about the inequalities they studied.

One of the most visible challenges was the question of visibility itself. In principle, participatory action research is designed to circulate—videos to be screened, photos to be exhibited, messages to be shared. But students quickly realised that putting their artefacts into the public domain was not a neutral act. Talking openly about femicide, virginity rituals, or women's political exclusion could attract backlash, ridicule, or worse. The fear was not hypothetical; it was grounded in their everyday experience of being dismissed, silenced, or attacked for speaking up. In this climate, they made a collective decision: the classroom would be their safe space. Here, they could screen and discuss their work without fear of being targeted, and the knowledge they created would not be diluted by defensive reactions or hostile interference.

This refusal of public exhibition is not a failure—it is a political statement in itself. It highlights how unsafe the public sphere can feel for young people trying to articulate feminist perspectives, and it underlines why safe spaces matter for epistemic justice. By insisting on controlled circulation, students claimed the right to decide how and where their voices would be heard. They showed that agency in knowledge production is not only about what you say, but about when, how, and to whom you say it.

That does not mean their projects disappeared into private archives. Some students, confident in their networks and audiences, chose to share their videos or photo series on their own social media. These acts of selective publication created micro-publics where their work could resonate with peers, spark conversations, and generate solidarity. The mix of caution and courage here is telling: youth are not silent, but they are careful; they are not absent from the public sphere, but they navigate it strategically, balancing visibility with vulnerability.

Other challenges were more mundane but no less significant. Students spoke of struggling with resources—limited equipment, uneven technical skills, difficulties coordinating group work in the middle of demanding academic schedules. Yet even here, the challenges fed into the process. Learning to work with what they had, to improvise with mobile phones instead of professional cameras, or to negotiate group disagreements became part of the story. In their reflections, many acknowledged that these obstacles made the projects more authentic. They reminded them that research and activism are rarely polished, but often messy, improvised, and precarious.

Perhaps the deepest challenge, however, was emotional. Grappling with femicide, discrimination, or experiences of exclusion was painful, and some students admitted to moments of despair. Yet they also recognised this emotional labour as central to the process. In their words, anger, sadness, and frustration were not distractions from knowledge but part of what made it real. They came to see that feeling the weight of injustice is what makes the demand for justice urgent.

The 2022–2023 cohort's reflections on challenges reveal that participatory action research is never neutral. It is entangled with the risks of the political moment, the material limits of resources, and the emotional intensity of lived experience. By choosing safe spaces, by circulating selectively, by acknowledging both their vulnerabilities and their agency, students demonstrated what epistemic justice looks like in practice: not the absence of obstacles, but the courage to navigate them on their own terms.

7. Policy and Practice Recommendations: Youth as Epistemic Agents

The most important outcome of the 2022–2023 participatory action research projects is not only the artefacts themselves but the voices behind them. These students are not passive observers of inequality, nor are they empty vessels to be filled with expert knowledge. They are epistemic agents: young people who produce knowledge grounded in lived reality, who connect everyday struggles to global frameworks, and who refuse to let silence dictate the terms of debate.

Their projects remind us that youth see clearly what others often choose not to: that "tradition" can be a mask for control, that femicide is a political act, that education without empowerment is a hollow promise, that beauty culture profits from inequality, that parliaments without women are democracies in name only. They spoke with urgency because they live in the contradictions. They attend schools where girls still drop out too soon, scroll through feeds saturated with impossible ideals, watch governments justify retreat from international conventions, and grow up in a political landscape where the corridors of power remain overwhelmingly male. Their knowledge is not theoretical—it is immediate, embodied, and pressing.

Yet these students also revealed something more: that producing knowledge under conditions of constraint is itself an act of resistance. Their refusal to exhibit publicly, choosing instead the safety of the classroom, was not a retreat but a strategy. It was a declaration that safe spaces matter, that knowledge cannot flourish in climates of fear, and that youth have the right to decide when and how their voices circulate. At the same time, those who chose to share their work on personal social media channels showed that even within restricted spaces, messages can find audiences, spark conversations, and travel in unexpected ways. Together, these choices tell us that epistemic justice is not only about amplifying voices but about respecting agency in deciding when and where to speak.

The recommendations they offered—from reimagining girls' education, to reinstating the Istanbul Convention, to recognising care as infrastructure, to enforcing quotas in politics—were not add-ons to

their projects but central to them. These were not the tidy conclusions of a school assignment; they were demands forged out of frustration, hope, and lived experience. They show us that youth do not need to be taught what justice looks like; they already know. What they need is to be recognised as participants in shaping it.

The lesson for policymakers, educators, and civil society is therefore clear. Youth must not be confined to consultation exercises or token representation. Their knowledge is indispensable, their creativity irrepressible, their critiques sharp. When students map the politics of tradition, dissect the commodification of bodies, or name the denial behind femicide, they are not merely echoing adult debates—they are reframing them, insisting that the world be seen differently. To ignore their voices is not only to perpetuate injustice but to squander the chance for renewal.

This is why FEJUST frames these projects as more than coursework. They are acts of epistemic resistance, interventions into the politics of who gets to know, who gets to speak, and who gets to be heard. They demonstrate that feminist epistemic justice is not a future aspiration but a practice already alive in classrooms, in WhatsApp groups, in improvised videos, and in youth conversations across Turkey and beyond.

The 2022–2023 cohort leaves us with a challenge and a promise. The challenge is to break down the structures that silence them—patriarchal traditions, hostile publics, dismissive policymakers. The promise is that when youth voices are recognised, supported, and allowed to flourish, they can transform not only knowledge but the very terms of justice. Their work insists that development is not only about GDP or enrolment figures but about who gets to define what matters. It insists that democracy is not only about elections but about whose voices count. It insists that equality is not a slogan but a practice measured in classrooms, homes, workplaces, and parliaments.

In the end, their projects form a collective manifesto: we will not be silent, we will not be erased, we will not be treated as secondary. We are here, we are speaking, and our knowledge is evidence. To listen is not charity—it is justice.

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