

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

POL2332-GENDER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

2024-2025 FALL

Executive Summary

The 2024 -2025 Gender in International Development cohort conducted its third cycle of Participatory Action Research (PAR) within the framework of the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST). Twenty-four undergraduate students – the most internationally diverse cohort to date – worked collaboratively to investigate how gender inequality shapes development outcomes in Turkey and across the Middle East, Europe, and the Global South. Through photovoice and film-based methodologies, students examined urgent and interlocking themes: domestic violence and femicide, child marriage, gender inequality in education, workplace discrimination and the “glass ceiling,” the Pink Tax and the commodification of women’s bodies, self-sexualisation, and restrictions on freedom of clothing. Their work demonstrated how gender inequality is not a discrete issue but a systemic developmental barrier rooted in the political economy of patriarchy. They linked each topic directly to global frameworks – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and EU equality strategies – highlighting development as a process of ensuring safety, autonomy, and recognition.

The 2024 -2025 cohort also contributed new epistemic insights. They showed how violence in private spaces reduces women’s labour-force participation and mental health; how pricing systems and neoliberal markets extract disproportionate value from women; and how restrictive norms around dress, sexuality, and career limit women’s political and economic agency. PAR enabled students to become not only observers of inequality but co-producers of knowledge – experiencing firsthand the emotional labour, risk navigation, and ethical decision-making required to challenge injustice.

What emerges is a powerful generational narrative: development cannot be claimed while women remain unsafe, unheard, and economically devalued. The projects in this brief represent feminist epistemic resistance – transforming personal experiences into collective knowledge, shaping spaces where previously silenced voices can not only speak but be protected, believed, and recognised.

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1. About the 2024-2025 Cohort

The participatory action research (PAR) projects showcased in this brief were produced by the 2024-2025 cohort of the Gender in International Development course, delivered under the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST). As the third group to undertake this project, the cohort benefitted from – and further expanded – the reflexive, student-driven tradition established by their predecessors.

This year's class consisted of 24 undergraduate students, forming the most internationally diverse group to date. Turkish students were joined by peers from across the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe, creating a genuinely transnational learning environment. These diverse positionalities became an analytic resource: students consistently situated Turkish cases within wider regional and global structures of inequality, drawing attention to shared patterns in patriarchy, capitalism, and state power.

The cohort also included a notable rise in male participation. While women continued to form the majority, male students took on visible and active roles – not only as observers or allies, but as researchers confronting their own social privilege and complicity. This shift marked an important development in classroom dynamics. Mixed-gender collaboration produced richer reflections on masculinity, labour hierarchies, and the social construction of risk, while women-only groups remained crucial spaces for unfiltered testimony and political intimacy.

What set this cohort apart was their focus on the political economy of gender. Moving beyond solely rights-based framings, students interrogated the economic mechanisms – pricing systems, market logics, branding practices, labour segregation – through which inequality is reproduced in everyday life. Their work showed a heightened awareness of how neoliberal development models commodify women's bodies, emotions, and consumption patterns. Through PAR, students traced these processes not as abstractions but as structures shaping their own budgets, wardrobes, safety, and aspirations.

Like the previous year, concerns around visibility and vulnerability were negotiated collectively. Students again refused the assumption that public circulation is inherently empowering. Instead, they determined levels of exposure according to comfort, context, and risk. For some, sharing their artefacts in closed classroom environments was essential to maintaining psychological safety. Others opted for controlled, peer-based dissemination, leveraging familiar networks where their voices would not be misappropriated. These decisions reflected a maturing sense of epistemic self-governance: the right not only to speak, but to shape the conditions under which speaking becomes just.

Ultimately, the 2024 - 2025 cohort demonstrated how youth can be both subjects and shapers of development debates. Their projects did not merely document inequality – they challenged the infrastructures that normalise it. Through collaborative inquiry, critical storytelling, and strategic circulation, students enacted the core promise of feminist epistemic justice: knowledge production that is situated, protected, and accountable to those who create it.

2. Themes and Topics Chosen

Several projects, especially *Silent Walls: Invisible Barriers* and the more general essays on women's rights, foregrounded domestic violence, femicide and everyday harassment as core obstacles to development. Students showed how abusive partners, normalised control and the trivialisation of violence in family and community settings keep women trapped in relationships where leaving means economic precarity, social stigma or homelessness. They linked these dynamics directly to development by showing how violence reduces women's labour-force participation, productivity and mental health, framing domestic violence as a drain on human capital, not just a "private" tragedy and connecting Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention to a wider politics of de-democratisation and policy backsliding. The PAR process – especially re-enacting abuse scenes in video – led many students to a new, embodied understanding of violence as "an inescapable nightmare" rather than a distant news item. They argue that a society that cannot guarantee women's physical security cannot credibly speak of progress.

Two projects focused specifically on child brides and child marriage, treating them as among the most extreme forms of gendered underdevelopment. Students defined early marriage as a violation of basic human rights and traced its developmental consequences such as loss of education and skills, early and high-risk pregnancies, long-term poverty and dependence, and intergenerational cycles of low schooling and poor health. They underlined that child marriage is not a “rural curiosity” but a structural practice sustained by poverty, patriarchal honour norms and weak enforcement of legal age limits. Both groups contextualised Turkey within global patterns using UNICEF and UNFPA data and explicitly linked their work to SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 4 (quality education). Crucially, they reframed child marriage as a development issue rather than a “cultural problem”: ending it, they argued, would yield measurable gains in GDP, health indicators and democratic participation.

One group concentrated on gender inequality in education, especially in rural Turkey and low-income settings. Drawing on UNICEF, UNESCO and Turkish Statistical Institute data, they showed that girls’ enrolment and completion rates lag behind boys’ in many regions and underlined that early marriage, poverty and conservative norms still push girls out of school. They also demonstrated that lack of schooling narrows women’s life chances and undermines the country’s human capital base.

Through PAR, they connected macro-data to personal experience: friends forced to quit school, local stories of girls married off instead of being sent to secondary education. They argued that without equal access to education, sustainable development is impossible, since education is the gateway to skilled labour, political voice and health literacy. This project makes a clear case that education policy is development policy, and that gendered drop-out rates should be treated as an urgent development indicator, not a marginal “women’s issue”.

Several projects converged on the theme of gender discrimination in work life: hiring bias, the gender pay gap, unpaid care work, and the “glass ceiling”. *The Silent Walls* video paired domestic violence with a woman worker systematically denied promotion despite her dedication, showing how fear at home and undervaluation at work mutually reinforce each other. The Gender Discrimination in Work-Life photovoice project documented discriminatory interview questions about motherhood, the habitual undervaluing of women’s ideas, and pervasive pay gaps, supported with TÜİK statistics.

The final group’s documentary on breaking gender stereotypes highlighted women in male-dominated professions and men in feminised jobs, and reflected on the stubbornness of wage gaps and credit-stealing in STEM and other sectors.

Collectively, these projects framed labour-market discrimination as a misallocation of talent that suppresses innovation and productivity and a source of economic dependence that keeps women vulnerable to violence and a clear violation of SDG 5 and EU equality norms that Turkey aspires to. Students linked everyday workplace sexism – jokes in meetings, assumptions about “emotional” women – to macro-level outcomes such as low female labour-force participation, limited female leadership and slower, more fragile development.

Another cluster focused on how markets commodify and monetise women’s bodies. The self-sexualisation project traced how women internalise media and advertising imagery, coming to see themselves as mannequins or objects whose value lies in sex appeal. Interviews revealed how some women in Turkey adopt explicitly sexualised self-presentation as a form of resistance against conservative state discourses, yet, often slide into harmful self-objectification and mental distress. The group drew on Council of Europe work on sexism and over-sexualisation and proposed media literacy, sex education and mental-health support as key development interventions. The Pink Tax project examined gendered price discrimination in everyday consumer goods – razors, hygiene products, clothing – and connected this directly to economic development and social justice as higher prices for women undermine financial independence and savings, gendered pricing erodes trust in markets and deepens inequality while treating menstruation products as “luxury goods” entrenches economic violence.

By interviewing young consumers who had never heard of the Pink Tax, the group exposed a striking awareness gap even among politically engaged Gen-Z students. They proposed action at three levels: informed consumer behaviour, corporate responsibility for gender-neutral pricing, and state regulation aligned with UN and EU standards. Both projects show that development is also about fair markets: when

commodification and exploitation are gendered, they reproduce the very inequalities that development policy claims to address.

The project on freedom of clothing in the Middle East brought together images and testimonies from Iran and Turkey to analyse how dress codes function as a site of struggle over gender, religion, nation and modernity. The group treated clothing freedom as a dimension of human security—affecting mobility, mental health, labour-market access and political participation showed how state-imposed modesty laws and social pressure both restrict women's autonomy and situated Turkey's headscarf battles and Iran's protest movements within global human-rights frameworks and SDGs. They connected this directly to development by arguing that when women's appearance is policed, their access to education, work and public life is also constrained. Clothing regulations thus act as an informal but powerful barrier to inclusive development, even where formal legal rights exist.

Across all projects — whether addressing child marriage, the Pink Tax, self-sexualisation, or workplace discrimination — students converged on a central task: to name, visualise, and unlearn the stereotypes that quietly structure gendered lives. These included deeply rooted assumptions that girls are destined for marriage rather than education, that men are the “natural” breadwinners and household decision-makers, and that women must shoulder care work and domestic labour even when they hold paid jobs. They also challenged the moral codes that position “modest” women as respectable while marking “visible” women as blameworthy, as well as the persistent belief that male genius is the default engine of scientific and social progress. By exposing these normative scripts, the cohort sought to make visible how gender inequality is reproduced not only through institutions and laws but through the everyday rules of what is considered normal, valuable, and possible.

Students used PAR methods not just to document these stereotypes, but to see their own complicity and vulnerability: a group member who recognised her own self-sexualisation; actors who felt genuine fear while staging a slap; young men who realised they had benefitted from being taken more seriously in mixed workplaces. This reflexivity is itself a development practice: it builds the critical consciousness necessary for any sustainable transformation of institutions.

3. The PAR Process and Epistemic Transformation

In its third cycle, the Participatory Action Research (PAR) process in the Gender in International Development course continued to function not only as a method of assessment but as a catalyst for political learning and epistemic transformation. The 2024–2025 cohort inherited a pedagogical tradition shaped by the previous two years, yet their work unfolded in distinct ways — reflecting a changing generation, shifting global concerns, and new sensitivities around risk, identity, and voice.

As in earlier cohorts, students moved beyond text-based assignments into embodied, visual, and collective artefact-making. But this year's group was smaller — twenty-four students — and proportionally more international, representing not only Turkey but multiple Middle Eastern, African, and European contexts. This diversity was not incidental: it reshaped how knowledge emerged. Students used their own biographies as comparative lenses, situating Turkish experiences within global economies of gender inequality — whether discussing dress codes in Iran, workplace discrimination in Europe, or child marriage in South Asia.

The PAR process again unsettled conventional hierarchies of expertise. Through photovoice, documentary production, interviews and story-work, students became co-researchers whose insights were grounded in lived realities rather than abstract theorising. They confronted domestic violence, harassment, early marriage, media-driven body politics, workplace exclusion, and discriminatory pricing in everyday markets. The emotional labour of engagement was evident: anger, fear, shock, and a sense of urgency threaded through group discussions. Yet emotions were treated not as distractions, but as feminist resources — shaping how students recognised harm, imagined alternatives, and built solidarity.

What also distinguishes this cohort is how clearly they articulated development not as GDP growth or market expansion, but as:

- safety — freedom from violence and coercion
- autonomy — the right to education, mobility, work, sexuality, and self-expression
- recognition — the valuing of women's labour, voices, and identities

Their projects made visible that human development collapses when women are unsafe, unheard, and economically constrained. Domestic violence was framed as not only a crime but a developmental barrier. The Pink Tax was exposed as an everyday economic injustice limiting women's financial futures. Clothing restrictions were analysed as threats to human security. Education inequalities were shown to jeopardise entire communities.

Across disparate themes, students converged around the labour of challenging implicit gender scripts: girls as destined for marriage rather than schooling; men as the unquestioned breadwinners and decision-makers; women as responsible for care work even when employed; "visible" women marked as blameworthy while "modest" women are rewarded; male genius assumed as the default in science and innovation. By naming and visualising these stereotypes, they sought to unlearn them and expose how inequality is reproduced through the ordinary.

As in previous years, decisions about circulation mattered deeply. Students were acutely aware of the risks of being misinterpreted or targeted online – particularly when dealing with contentious issues such as the Istanbul Convention, harassment, or conservative gender norms. They opted again for classroom-based circulation, framing this choice not as withdrawal but as strategic feminist agency: knowledge should be shared where it can be heard with care, not consumed without context.

Through this process, students increasingly recognised themselves as epistemic agents: capable of diagnosing injustice, crafting evidence, and envisioning change. They deepened their grasp of SDGs, CEDAW, EU gender equality strategies and Council of Europe frameworks – not as distant declarations, but as tools (sometimes honoured, often betrayed) shaping daily life.

Taken together, the projects generated a dense and multi-layered map of gendered underdevelopment in Turkey and beyond. They reveal what is required for transformation: not only legal reforms, but structural, cultural and affective shifts grounded in feminist, intersectional, rights-based approaches.

In short, the 2024–2025 cohort advanced the PAR tradition by defining development as safety, autonomy and recognition – and by insisting that young people are not passive learners but co-producers of knowledge who can imagine and demand a more just future.

4. Challenges Faced

Across the 2024–2025 projects, students did not simply document gender inequality – they experienced the constraints that sustain it. Their assignments explicitly reveal how conducting research on gender injustice is itself shaped by power, silence, and institutional limits.

Students working on domestic violence and child marriage discovered how deeply silence protects these practices. Interviewees were afraid to speak openly, particularly women still dependent on their families or partners. One group explained that even asking questions about abuse could trigger fear, shame, or denial – especially when women had been socialised to interpret violence as love or discipline. In some cases, students had to stop interviews early because respondents became visibly uncomfortable.

Those working on child marriage, whether through Turkish or global lenses, highlighted how cultural justifications – honour, financial stability, family pressure – make the issue appear too sensitive to touch, even when everyone knows it exists. Several groups concluded that the taboo is part of the violence: silence does not only hide harm, it enables it.

Students repeatedly described the emotional cost of portraying violence, harassment or discrimination. In the film on domestic abuse, actors struggled simply to perform the slap – one student could barely lift his hand to simulate harm, while the student playing the survivor felt fear despite knowing it was staged. Editing these scenes left them shaken.

Similarly, projects on self-sexualisation revealed not only interview data but the group members' own lived insecurities; the research turned into a confrontation with themselves. They recognised how beauty norms are internalised – and how unlearning them is painful. Here, students learned a deeply feminist lesson: emotion is not a distraction from knowledge – it is how injustice becomes visible.

Groups focusing on workplace discrimination and street harassment found that the most important inequalities were the hardest to record. A sexist remark in a business meeting, a woman ignored during a presentation, the anxiety of walking alone – these experiences rarely leave photographic traces.

Students noted that workplace inequality survives because it is subtle: jokes, exclusion from leadership, hiring biases masked as concerns about “future motherhood.” Accessing professional environments also required caution – they could not endanger colleagues or provoke employer retaliation.

Meanwhile, groups researching public harassment and clothing freedom recognised risk directly. Taking photographs in busy streets or conservative neighbourhoods drew hostile looks, comments, even mild threats. They learned that public space is gendered not only through design – but through intimidation.

On topics such as Pink Tax and education inequality, students quickly realised that official data is incomplete or hidden. Price discrimination is rarely documented by authorities, and when statistics exist, they often lack regional or socioeconomic breakdowns. The students concluded that what is not counted is easier to deny, reinforcing gendered underdevelopment.

5. Policy and Practice Recommendations: Youth as Epistemic Agents

Every group was asked not only to analyse a problem but to propose change. Their recommendations reveal a shared belief: development is impossible without women’s safety, autonomy, and recognition.

Students focused on domestic abuse and child marriage insist that Turkey cannot develop while women are unsafe in their own homes. They call for the full institutionalisation of comprehensive protections – including legal enforcement, accessible shelters, confidential support services – grounded in the Istanbul Convention and global human rights commitments.

They emphasise that preventing violence is not only a moral responsibility but an economic one: abuse restricts women’s labour force participation and drains public resources. Their conclusion: “There can be no development until women are safe.”

Groups studying discrimination in education, the workplace, pricing, and clothing norms demand structural change:

- Keep girls in school, through economic assistance and community outreach
- Guarantee equal hiring and fair promotion, eliminating pregnancy-based and aesthetic discrimination
- Remove gendered pricing and redefine menstrual products as basic necessities
- Respect clothing freedom so that dignity is not conditioned on appearance

Their collective argument: women’s ability to build their futures must not depend on men’s approval, state control, or market exploitation.

Projects that addressed undervaluation – whether of women’s opinions in companies or their self-worth in digital culture – highlight that inequality persists even where legal equality exists. They insist that gender equality is not simply the right to be present, but the right to be heard, credited, and respected. This requires:

- cultural shifts seeded in media and schooling
- representation in leadership
- workplace accountability mechanisms
- body-positive and consent-based communication norms

Students frame recognition as a measure of democratic health. A society is not equal if women must work twice as hard to be believed. Through these challenges and demands, the 2024–2025 cohort demonstrate a powerful political and pedagogical truth: Participatory action research did not just teach them about inequality – it taught them that they have the authority to contest it. Their work shows that addressing gender injustice is not only about passing laws but changing how society values and listens to women. In doing so, they reaffirm a central insight of feminist development: true progress is measured not in GDP, but in freedom.

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