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FEJUST
Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond

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When Youth Refuse Silence: Safe Spaces and the Politics of Voice

Executive Summary

Speaking about gender in Turkey today is rarely neutral. It can be risky, politicised, even dangerous. In this climate, youth participating in the FEJUST Gender in International Development course (2022–2023) created participatory action research (PAR) projects through video and photovoice. Their first concern was not only what to say, but where their voices could safely be heard. Choosing not to stage a public exhibition, students instead transformed the classroom into a safe space for critical dialogue. Some shared their projects privately on social media, while others kept them within trusted circles. This refusal of public spectacle was not withdrawal but resistance — a claim to epistemic justice, ensuring that knowledge circulates on their own terms.

The student projects produced a striking body of analysis on femicide, marriage rituals, education inequality, beauty culture, unpaid care, and women's political exclusion. They combined lived experience with creative methods to make inequality visible and undeniable. Their work offers urgent lessons for policymakers: femicide must be recognised as systemic violence; education policies must go beyond access to address harassment and poverty; care must be treated as development infrastructure; and youth voices must be included in policymaking.

From Classroom to Collective Voice

The 2022–2023 FEJUST Gender in International Development course set out to do more than teach theory. It asked students to step into the role of co-researchers through participatory action research (PAR). Over two dozen undergraduates—predominantly women, with a smaller number of men—collaborated in groups to create short films and photovoice projects that turned abstract ideas about gender and development into tangible artefacts of knowledge.

This gender imbalance in the cohort itself was telling. Women's overwhelming presence reflected the broader reality that gender studies still tends to be seen as "women's business," while men remain underrepresented. Yet the men who did engage enriched conversations, and the women-only groups created safe spaces for candid storytelling and critique. Together, the classroom became a microcosm of what inclusive knowledge production looks like when diversity of experience is taken seriously.

But the political climate was always in the room. Speaking about femicide, virginity rituals, or exclusion from politics in today's Turkey is not without risk. Students weighed carefully the potential consequences of making their work public. Their collective decision not to stage an exhibition was not an act of timidity but one of strategy. Instead, they treated the classroom as a deliberately cultivated safe space where they could screen, critique, and refine their projects without fear of misinterpretation, trolling, or appropriation. For some, this meant stopping at classroom circulation. For others, it meant carefully curated sharing on personal social media channels, where conversations could unfold among trusted audiences.

This choice—who to address, when, and under what conditions—was itself a form of epistemic resistance. It demonstrated that agency in knowledge production is not only about what is said but also about controlling the terms of its circulation. In refusing the pressure to equate publicness with legitimacy, students redefined what counts as participation. They showed that safe spaces are not a retreat from politics but a vital infrastructure for feminist epistemic justice, where voice can grow without being drowned out by hostility.

What Youth See: The Architecture of Inequality

The students' projects drew a vivid map of how gender inequality is woven into daily life, exposing the intersections of culture, politics, and economics. Their work insisted that these are not separate spheres but overlapping arenas where patriarchy renews itself.

Tradition as control. Marriage rituals were a recurring theme, with students scrutinising practices such as the red virginity belt, the payment of a bride price, and kız isteme—the ritual of asking the girl's hand in marriage. On the surface, these customs are celebrated as heritage, yet students showed how they operate as tools to regulate women's sexuality and autonomy. Importantly, they highlighted that such practices are not confined to rural villages or conservative households but persist in urban, modern settings, defended under the guise of cultural pride even as they perpetuate inequality.

Violence denied. Femicide was reframed as political violence rather than private tragedy. Students argued that Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was not only a policy shift but a symbolic act of denial—an official erasure that makes the silencing of victims and activists part of the violence itself. They pointed to gaps in data collection, muted institutions, and hostile rhetoric as evidence that denial is systemic, and insisted that recognition of femicide as political crime is the first step to ending it.

Education's false promise. Campaigns like Haydi Kızlar Okula ("Girls to School") were acknowledged as significant but sharply critiqued. Students argued that enrolment does not equal empowerment if poverty, early marriage, or harassment still drive girls out of classrooms. Their projects questioned whether education policies dismantle patriarchal barriers or simply shift them, warning that "access" without transformation risks reproducing the very inequalities it claims to solve.

Beauty as discipline. The beauty industry emerged as another site of inequality, where advertising, workplace expectations, and social media transform appearance into both a product and a form of discipline. Students revealed how global consumer capitalism profits from women's insecurity, turning beauty into a condition for employability and social legitimacy. What looks like empowerment, they argued, is often exploitation repackaged.

Politics without women. Students also turned their gaze to political life, highlighting that with women making up only 18% of parliament and about 1% of local councils, Turkish democracy is structurally incomplete. They framed exclusion not as a women's issue but as a democratic deficit, insisting that a parliament without women is a parliament without legitimacy.

By linking these issues to global frameworks—the Sustainable Development Goals, CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and critiques of neoliberal consumer culture—students underscored that Turkey's inequalities are embedded in transnational dynamics. Their message was simple but powerful: gender inequality is not parochial or cultural alone, but political and global in scope.

From Insight to Action: A Youth Agenda for Policy

What makes these projects matter for policymakers and practitioners is not only their diagnosis but their demands. Students were clear: symbolic gestures are not enough, and silence cannot be mistaken for consent.

On violence, they called for Turkey to rejoin and implement the Istanbul Convention, to recognise femicide as systemic rather than cultural, and to fund shelters, survivor services, and preventive programmes. On education, they urged a shift from enrolment statistics to addressing the drivers of dropout—economic barriers, early marriage, gendered harassment—and demanded curricula that prepare girls not just to attend school but to thrive as full citizens. On care, they asked for recognition of unpaid labour as infrastructure, with investments in childcare and eldercare that redistribute responsibility across society rather than placing it solely on women. On representation, they demanded enforceable quotas, public financing, and mentorship programmes that would create pipelines for women, especially young women, into political life. And on appearance-based discrimination, they insisted on regulation of advertising and workplace standards that exploit beauty norms, arguing that equal opportunity cannot exist if employability remains tied to appearance.

Equally, their insistence on safe spaces is a recommendation in itself. For educators, NGOs, and international organisations, the message is clear: youth engagement must be built on conditions of care and trust, not exposure and risk. Creating safe arenas for dialogue is not indulgence but a prerequisite for authentic participation.

Above all, students demanded recognition of their role as epistemic agents. They do not want tokenistic consultation or symbolic seats at the table. They have shown that they are already diagnosing systemic failures and proposing alternatives. Their recommendations are not hypothetical—they are grounded in lived frustrations and community-based observations. To ignore them is to waste a critical source of insight and to perpetuate epistemic injustice.

The bottom line is simple: youth are not waiting to be invited into the conversation on gender and development. They are already producing knowledge, already mobilising, already speaking. The task for policymakers, international organisations, and educators is to listen—and to act.

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