

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

## POL2332-GENDER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### 2023-2024 FALL

#### **Executive Summary**

*The 2023–2024 cohort of the Gender in International Development course completed the second cycle of Participatory Action Research (PAR) under the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST). With more than thirty students working across nine groups, this cohort deepened the PAR tradition by expanding both the thematic and political horizons of student-led feminist inquiry.*

*Building on the pioneering work of the first cohort, students selected issues grounded in their own everyday experiences: women's political representation, gendered urban mobility, labour-market segregation, family-based restrictions, street harassment, and education inequalities. Their projects demonstrated how gender inequality in Turkey—and in their own transnational contexts—functions not as isolated incidents but as a pervasive system shaping bodies, movement, safety, and political power. They connected these lived realities to international frameworks including the SDGs, CEDAW, EU gender equality principles, and global feminist scholarship.*

*The PAR process again became a space of epistemic transformation. Students confronted emotional and political risks tied to researching violence and discrimination, while learning to visualise inequality in ways that demand recognition. Conscious of hostile public climates, they collectively chose controlled circulation of their work—treating the classroom and trusted peer networks as safe spaces where their voice could be protected rather than exposed. This decision affirmed their agency not only over what knowledge is produced, but how and under what conditions it can be shared.*

*Through these projects, students positioned themselves as co-producers of development knowledge—linking local struggles to global debates and insisting that meaningful progress requires women's safety, mobility, economic autonomy, and political representation. The 2023–2024 cohort expanded the FEJUST PAR tradition by demonstrating that feminist development is not abstract policy rhetoric; it is lived daily, negotiated in families and cities, and reshaped when youth refuse silence.*

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## 1. About the 2023-2024 Cohort

The participatory action research (PAR) projects presented in this brief were undertaken by the 2023–2024 cohort of the Gender in International Development course, taught under the framework of the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST). Building on the pioneering work of the previous year, this cohort engaged even more deeply with the possibilities and limits of youth voice in a challenging political environment.

The class brought together over thirty undergraduate students, with women again forming the clear majority but with a slightly higher number of men compared to the previous year. This gender profile is itself instructive: while women continue to carry the bulk of interest and responsibility in gender studies, the increased male participation suggested that the language of equality is gradually becoming less marginal for men. In mixed groups, this often-produced moments of genuine dialogue across gendered experiences, while women-only groups remained important safe havens for frank, unfiltered reflection.

The cohort also reflected the growing diversity of Turkish higher education. Alongside Turkish students from urban and rural backgrounds were international students who brought comparative perspectives, drawing parallels with their own societies in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. This diversity enriched the projects with a transnational awareness, underscoring how gender inequality is never purely local but always linked to broader global structures. Students with bilingual and bicultural identities frequently acted as bridges in their groups, situating Turkish realities within wider global currents of inequality and resistance.

Yet what defined the 2023–2024 cohort most was their acute awareness of the risks of voice. From the beginning, students debated not only what to research but also where and how their work should circulate. The decision taken collectively echoed the previous year but with sharper articulation: no public exhibition, no high-profile showcase. The classroom would serve as the safe space in which their work could be screened, critiqued, and debated without fear of misinterpretation, trolling, or political backlash. Some students chose to go further, sharing their artefacts selectively on personal social media channels, where conversations could unfold in trusted networks. Others preferred to stop at classroom circulation, emphasising safety overreach.

This insistence on safe space was not timidity but strategy. It was a claim to epistemic agency: to decide not only what to say but on what terms, in which venues, and under what conditions. In refusing the assumption that publicness is the only path to legitimacy, students enacted feminist epistemic justice in practice. They demonstrated that protecting voice is not about retreat but about cultivating the conditions in which it can grow.

Above all, the 2023–2024 cohort made visible that youth are not passive recipients of knowledge but co-producers of it. Their films and photovoice projects, rooted in lived experiences and linked to international debates, speak to the urgency of their generation. By choosing safe circulation, they refused silence on one hand and forced exposure on the other. In doing so, they carved out a third path: strategic, situated, and deeply political.

## 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. When 25 students in Gender in International Development were invited to design their own Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects, they were given only a broad frame: work in small groups, choose an issue that matters to you, and make it visible through images, stories, and encounters. Everything else – the themes, the questions, the locations, the emotional tone – came from them. They did not rush to “big” policy questions first. Instead, they started from where gender is felt: at the family dinner table, in school, in the metro, on a dark street, at a shop counter, in job interviews, on social media.

As their projects unfolded, nine clusters of concern emerged, together drawing a dense map of how gendered power organises everyday life in Turkey and beyond.

One group worked on gender inequalities in politics, tracing how women are systematically under-represented in parliaments, local governments, and decision-making posts – in Turkey, in the wider Middle East, and globally. For them, development was not just about GDP, but about who is seen as capable of

representing the public. They showed how “national interest” is still imagined in male terms, how women’s political participation is constrained by stereotypes, limited access to networks, and lack of resources, and how this produces a democracy that is only partial. Their PAR work insisted that political underrepresentation is not a side issue: it shapes laws on education, social policy, sexuality, violence, and economic life.

Another group explored the glass ceiling and horizontal/vertical segregation in Turkey. They began from a familiar paradox: women are increasingly educated, but the labour market still channels them into “feminised” sectors (teaching, care, clerical work) and keeps leadership positions largely male. Through their analysis, they distinguished: Horizontal segregation – women clustered in certain occupations judged as “appropriate”, often lower paid and undervalued; Vertical segregation – barriers preventing women from advancing into management and decision-making roles. They linked these patterns to deeply rooted norms about what counts as “women’s work”, to hiring and promotion biases, and to the persistent idea that women’s labour is secondary to men’s. For this group, gender inequality in the labour market was not just unfair to individual women; it was a development problem, wasting skills and constraining economic growth.

A third group took a more cultural route, asking: how do gender stereotypes get under the skin? They selected five highly visual sites: The red bridal belt and virginity expectations, Gendered children’s literature that codes girls as passive carers and boys as active doers, Women working in security – a field still seen as “too tough” for them, Men with long hair, and how they are policed as “not masculine enough”, Men’s makeup, and how quickly it is framed as deviant or ridiculous. Using photovoice and short analyses, they showed how these stereotypes regulate bodies and desires, limit choices, and punish transgression. They also connected them to intersectional debates in feminism, pointing out how ideas of “purity”, “respectability” and “proper masculinity” are used to control both women and men. Their project made a simple but powerful point: development cannot be separated from the intimate politics of bodies and appearance. The same norms that shame a girl for her hymen or a boy for wearing makeup shape access to education, jobs, and safety.

One PAR project zoomed in on a seemingly ordinary scene: a daughter and a son asking (or not asking) to go out at night. In their short film, the daughter politely requests permission to attend a friend’s birthday; she is questioned, scolded, and sent to her room. The son simply announces that he is going to a celebration and is encouraged – even offered the car. The group unpacked this as more than “double standards”: It is a training in obedience for girls and entitlement for boys, It normalises the idea that women’s safety depends on restriction, not on changing public space. Furthermore, it installs epistemic injustice: girls’ knowledge of their own situation, capacities, and limits is dismissed; the father’s assumptions count as “truth”. The students linked this micro-scene to larger patterns: victim-blaming in cases of harassment or femicide; the socialisation of boys into authority; and the way families unintentionally reproduce the very culture of insecurity they claim to fear.

Another group took as its starting point the question: how safe do women feel in Turkey? Working with statistics that show high levels of fear, domestic violence and harassment, they produced a visual narrative about the “invisible burden” women carry. Their video used everyday scenes – walking home, using public transport, entering a workplace – to show how precaution, self-surveillance and constant calculation of risk become part of women’s daily mental load. They reflected on the discomfort of asking friends to act out harassment and on the reluctance of some participants to be seen on camera as the “perpetrator”. This, in itself, became data: no one wants to be associated with violence, yet everyone can identify spaces and situations where women do not feel safe. Their project framed women’s safety not as an individual problem (“be careful”) but as a collective development indicator: a society cannot call itself developed if half its population moves through public and private spaces with fear as a constant companion.

One of the more politically sensitive PAR projects involved street interviews in Kadıköy. The group asked three questions: 1) Would it be a problem if your spouse earned more than you?, 2) What do you think about abortion? 3) How would you react if your child came out as queer? They chose Kadıköy precisely because it is perceived as one of Istanbul’s “most open-minded” districts. Even there, responses revealed conditional acceptance: support for women’s rights or LGBTQ+ people often came with caveats, religious justifications, or fear of social pressure. The group situated these attitudes in a broader context: Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, restrictions on pride marches, and online censorship of feminist and queer content. They noted how state-level hostility trickles down into everyday opinions, making it

harder for people to express solidarity even when they feel it privately. Their project showed how gender and sexuality are actively depoliticised – turned into moral or family issues rather than questions of rights and justice.

Two of the groups converged on urban space and transport, producing a rich picture of how the city is gendered. They documented manspreading, armrest battles and the quiet displacement of women in public transport, handrails and infrastructure designed for “average male bodies” rather than diverse heights, ages and abilities, men-only cafés and gender-segregated dorms that normalise male social spaces while confining women’s leisure and mobility, male-dominated sectors selling “women’s goods” and the discomfort of intimate measurements by male staff. They also underlined the issues related to sidewalks blocked by cars and shop displays, making urban mobility with prams or children an exhausting negotiation. Through these photos and field notes, students concluded that the city is not neutral: it is built around male patterns of movement and comfort. Women, especially as carers, are forced to adapt to an infrastructure that was not designed with them in mind. For them, gender-sensitive urban planning was not a luxury. It was a precondition for inclusive development: a city that takes women’s mobility seriously supports education, work, care, and safety all at once.

Another group tackled gender inequality in education, from global statistics on girls out of school to subtle stereotypes in subject choice. Their interviews and desk research highlighted that families and communities that still treat girls’ schooling as optional or secondary. The way stereotypes about “male” and “female” subjects (STEM vs care/humanities) are reproduced in classrooms and guidance practices. They show that persistent assumptions that women’s education matters only up to the point of marriage. They framed education as both a right and a site of struggle. Access alone is not enough if curricula, teacher expectations, peer cultures and labour markets continue to direct girls towards limited life paths. PAR helped them see schools not just as institutions that transmit knowledge, but as places where gendered futures are negotiated, narrowed or expanded.

Finally, two projects focused directly on women’s economic lives in urban Turkey. One group used Photovoice to follow women working in male-dominated professions – a sailor, a security manager, an iron-casting engineer. They showed how these women simultaneously carry the burden of being “exceptions” and the hope of breaking stereotypes for younger girls. They also revealed how numerically small these breakthroughs still are. Another group examined women’s economic opportunities in Istanbul during and after COVID-19. Through images and testimonies they traced how school closures and job losses pushed more unpaid care onto women, employers’ assumptions about motherhood and availability limited hiring and promotion and financial institutions and business networks treated women as less credible borrowers and entrepreneurs. Together, these projects argued that women’s economic exclusion is structural, not accidental. It is woven from cultural expectations, institutional biases and policy gaps – and it has been sharpened, not eased, by crisis.

Across the 9 PAR projects and 25 students, some common threads became visible:

- Gender inequality is multi-sited – in law, infrastructure, family norms, markets, and bodies.
- Development failures show up first in the micropolitics of daily life: who feels safe, who is listened to, who moves freely, who is believed.
- Students’ own experiences are not “anecdotal”; they are valid sources of knowledge when systematically documented and critically analysed.
- PAR turned the classroom into a community of practice. Students became co-researchers, co-authors and, in some cases, reluctant activists. They did what feminist epistemologies ask of us:
  - make power visible where it is naturalised,
  - listen to silenced experiences,
  - and imagine institutions – schools, cities, workplaces, families – organised on more equal terms.

In that sense, the 2023–2024 POL2332 cohort did not just learn about “gender in international development”; they practised it, starting from their own lives and cities.

### 3. Link to Development and International Dimensions

The 2023–2024 cohort demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of development as a multidimensional process — not merely economic growth or policy reform, but the expansion of freedoms, the redistribution of power, and the recognition of those whose lives are most affected by inequality. Their PAR projects treated development as a justice-oriented transformation grounded in daily life. A consistent argument ran through all nine projects: development fails when women's lives remain constrained in their homes, schools, workplaces, streets, and parliaments. Rather than viewing inequality as a series of disconnected problems, students uncovered how the structures that suppress women's autonomy are systemic, adaptive, and deeply institutionalised.

***Development Begins in the Intimate Spaces of Life:*** Groups working on family norms, education, and safety showed that development is compromised long before labour markets or political systems intervene. When girls must ask for permission to exist in public spaces, when fear shapes every journey home, when stereotypes push students out of STEM pathways — a nation loses the capacity, creativity, and citizenship of half its population. For these students, the home became visible as the first political institution, and safety as a development indicator: societies that cannot guarantee basic security cannot claim progress.

***Cities as Engines or Barriers to Development:*** Students exploring urban mobility and gendered infrastructure drew direct lines between public space and development outcomes. If sidewalks cannot accommodate prams, if buses are hostile, if the city is designed for those who drive cars and not those who care for others — then women's access to education, employment, and social participation is structurally blocked. They argued that a city that enables only men's movement produces gendered economies, reinforcing dependence and limiting growth. Development, therefore, requires infrastructures of dignity: safe transport, accessible streets, non-exclusionary public spaces.

***Work, Wealth, and Who Is Allowed to Participate:*** Projects on glass ceilings, entrepreneurship, and COVID-era job losses emphasised that development must be measured by who gets to shape the economy, not just by aggregate growth. Students insisted that women's exclusion from secure jobs and business ownership represents not only discrimination but inefficiency: A country cannot call itself developed if it wastes the labour, skills and ambitions of half its population. By documenting structural biases in hiring, finance, and workplace culture, they showed that economic empowerment is both a tool for development and a measure of it.

***Governance, Law, and the Democratic Deficit:*** Students who focused on political participation and legal protections framed gender equality as a requirement for legitimate governance: When women are absent from parliaments, policies ignore their needs. When harassment and stalking are dismissed, rights remain theoretical. When international conventions are withdrawn, progress becomes reversible. They treated legal frameworks — from CEDAW to SDGs — not as external pressures, but as benchmarks for democratic integrity and social accountability.

***Cultural Industries and the Global Market of Inequality:*** A distinct contribution from this cohort was the attention to globalised practices of control: beauty norms, consumer aesthetics, labour market stereotypes. Students traced how global markets and digital cultures profit from women's insecurities, shaping aspirations and self-worth while restricting professional possibilities. By doing so, they re-positioned gender inequality within a global political economy rather than a local cultural issue — making development an international responsibility.

***Development as Recognition:*** Across projects, students returned to a central insight aligned with feminist epistemic justice: inequality persists when women's experiences are dismissed or rendered invisible. Their PAR approach — visual, participatory, embodied — countered that invisibility by making marginalised knowledge impossible to ignore. Visibility itself became development: Women seen in spaces where they are erased, Voices heard where silence is demanded, Bodies affirmed where discipline is imposed, Fear acknowledged where it is normalised. In their work, development meant the expansion of recognition, not only of rights.

The 2023–2024 cohort ultimately argued that development does not happen around women. It happens with them — or it does not happen at all. By situating everyday inequalities within global frameworks — SDGs, Istanbul Convention principles, and EU Gender Equality Strategy — they demonstrated that Turkey's



challenges are neither unique nor isolated. They are part of a global architecture of gendered power that must be dismantled simultaneously from the bottom up and the top down. Through PAR, students did not simply analyse development; they practised the kind of development they want to see critical, participatory, justice-driven, and grounded in lived experience.

#### 4. The PAR Process and Epistemic Transformation

For the second year of the Gender in International Development course, participatory action research (PAR) once again proved to be more than an assessment tool. It was a catalyst for epistemic transformation, turning students into co-researchers whose knowledge mattered not only within the classroom but as contributions to broader struggles for gender justice. Yet while the 2023–2024 cohort built on the pioneering work of their predecessors, their experience unfolded in distinct ways, shaped by the size, diversity, and political climate that defined this year group.

As with the 2022–2023 cohort, the PAR process disrupted traditional hierarchies of learning. Students moved away from essays and exams into collective artefact-making, where knowledge had to be visualised, narrated, and shared. But this year's cohort was larger and more demographically diverse, with a notable presence of international students and a slightly higher participation of men. This diversity mattered. It created richer conversations across gendered and cultural experiences: in some groups, male students were challenged to confront perspectives they had never previously considered, while international students drew comparisons with gender inequalities in their own societies, situating Turkey's challenges within global debates. At the same time, women-only groups retained their importance as safe havens where candid reflection could flourish, unencumbered by the pressures of mixed-gender settings.

The process was again emotionally charged. Students confronted femicide, marriage rituals, harassment, and exclusion—topics that touched not only on policy but on their lived and familial realities. They described moments of anger, grief, and exhaustion when engaging with testimonies of murdered women or recalling stories of friends forced to leave school early. Yet, rather than paralysing them, these emotions became resources for solidarity. In their groups, students processed these emotions collectively, discovering that vulnerability could strengthen bonds and sharpen critique. This echoes a feminist epistemological insight: that emotions are not distractions from knowledge but integral to how injustice is recognised and resisted.

One of the most striking innovations of the 2023–2024 cohort was their introduction of new thematic lenses through PAR. While the previous year had concentrated heavily on traditions, femicide, and education, this year's projects added an entirely fresh dimension by interrogating urban mobility and the gendered city. Students revealed how transport planning privileges male commuting patterns, while women's everyday mobility—short, care-related trips—remains invisible in data and budgets. This expansion of themes demonstrated that PAR was not confined to reiterating well-known issues but could break new ground, exposing how inequality is embedded in physical infrastructures as much as in cultural norms.

The question of circulation—the “where” and “how” of sharing knowledge—was also approached differently this year. Like their predecessors, students declined to stage a public exhibition, citing the risks of backlash and misinterpretation in Turkey's polarised climate. But whereas the 2022–2023 cohort largely framed this decision in terms of safety, the 2023–2024 cohort went further. They theorised it as a form of epistemic resistance: a refusal to accept that visibility in hostile spaces is the only marker of legitimacy. By choosing the classroom as their primary venue and selectively sharing work on personal social media feeds, they claimed agency over the terms of circulation. This move reframed the relationship between knowledge and publicity, showing that safe spaces are not retreats but infrastructures of justice where voices can be nurtured without being drowned out.

The students' reflections also revealed sharper awareness of political risk. In many groups, significant time was devoted not only to choosing a topic but to debating the potential consequences of representing it. Could a photovoice project on femicide attract online harassment? Would a video critiquing marriage rituals be misused or misread in ways that harmed participants or their families? These deliberations underscored how deeply the political climate shaped the process of research itself. For students, producing knowledge was not only about analysing inequality but about navigating risk, negotiating consent, and exercising strategic restraint.

By the end of the semester, students described themselves in transformed terms. They no longer saw themselves as learners confined to the classroom but as epistemic actors capable of diagnosing social problems and proposing solutions. The PAR process had changed both what they knew and how they knew it. On the one hand, they deepened their understanding of gender inequality across domains—from the politics of violence to the economics of beauty and the infrastructures of mobility. On the other, they came to see knowledge as relational, contested, embodied, and political. This dual transformation—of content and of capacity—was central to their journey.

In short, the 2023–2024 cohort extended the legacy of the first year but made it their own. They built on established themes while introducing new ones, reaffirmed the need for safe spaces while reframing them as sites of epistemic resistance, and engaged with the risks of visibility in a more deliberate, strategic manner. Their projects demonstrate that feminist epistemic justice is not static but evolving, constantly reshaped by the contexts and voices of those who enact it. Theirs was not a simple repetition of the previous year's achievements but a renewal, proof that each generation of students can open new paths for seeing, knowing, and resisting inequality.

## **5. Messages and Audiences**

If there was one thing the 2023–2024 cohort refused to do, it was to remain quiet. Their projects pulsed with urgency, carefully crafted not just to describe inequality but to confront audiences with it. Each film and photovoice series carried a deliberate message: that what is too often treated as normal, private, or inevitable is in fact political, unjust, and open to change. While the classroom remained the primary site of exchange, students shaped their work with multiple audiences in mind—peers, families, policymakers, and the wider society.

### ***Confronting tradition as control***

The groups working on marriage rituals designed their projects as interventions into everyday family life. Their message was clear: customs such as *kız isteme* ( “asking for the girl’s hand” ), bride price, or the red virginity belt cannot be dismissed as quaint heritage. They are instruments of control that police women’s choices, sexualities, and futures. By filming and photographing these rituals, students aimed their message first at their peers—asking them to rethink practices many had taken for granted—and then at older generations, challenging the idea that “tradition” is immune from critique. Their underlying demand was that cultural pride cannot come at the expense of women’s autonomy.

### ***Naming femicide as political violence***

The groups tackling femicide set their sights on both the public and policymakers. Their message was blunt: femicide is not a series of isolated tragedies but a systemic form of political violence, sustained by the state’s denial and withdrawal from international commitments. By combining testimonies, data, and stark imagery, they sought to shock audiences out of complacency. To classmates and friends, the projects whispered solidarity—acknowledging the shared fear and anger of living in a society where gender-based violence is routine. To policymakers, the message was more confrontational: that inaction and denial make them complicit, and that justice requires recognition, accountability, and the re-establishment of robust protections.

### ***Rethinking education***

Projects on girls’ schooling addressed their message to both peers and development policymakers. To fellow students, they posed unsettling questions: who has disappeared from your classroom, and why? To families and communities, their message was that access is meaningless without retention, safety, and freedom from early marriage. And to policymakers, they insisted that success cannot be measured in enrolment statistics alone but must address structural inequalities that prevent education from becoming truly transformative. Their work resonated far beyond Turkey, echoing critiques of global development campaigns that instrumentalise girls’ education while neglecting its deeper political context.

### ***Exposing the beauty industry***

The groups who studied beauty norms crafted their message for multiple audiences at once. To peers scrolling through social media, they asked: are your choices truly your own, or are they shaped by a system profiting from your insecurity? To employers, they demanded an end to discriminatory dress codes and grooming expectations that treat conformity to narrow aesthetics as professionalism. And to regulators and policymakers, their call was for accountability: restrictions on harmful products, transparency in advertising, and policies that address the structural exploitation hidden behind “empowerment” slogans. Their work sought not only to critique but to spark everyday conversations in spaces where beauty culture silently governs behaviour.

### ***Making cities work for women***

Perhaps the most innovative messaging came from groups focusing on urban mobility. Their projects exposed how transport and infrastructure planning silently exclude women by ignoring the trip-chaining realities of care. Their message was aimed at both local authorities and international development actors: what is not counted in data is not funded in budgets, and the result is a city that works for cars but not for caregivers. To peers, they made the politics of everyday movement visible, showing how something as mundane as a bus stop or a sidewalk reflects gendered assumptions about whose mobility matters.

### ***Politics without women is not democracy***

Finally, groups addressing political exclusion spoke with a voice at once critical and hopeful. To their peers, the message was mobilising: politics does not belong to men alone, and silence is complicity. To the wider public, they framed women’s absence from parliament and councils as a democratic crisis, not merely a gender issue. And to policymakers, they demanded concrete reforms: quotas, resources, and serious measures to dismantle the systemic barriers keeping women out of decision-making roles. Their projects positioned inclusion not as optional but as a precondition for democratic legitimacy.

What tied these projects together was the recognition that messages travel differently depending on the audience. Some artefacts were designed to spark uncomfortable conversations at family dinner tables, others to reach policymakers through the language of international benchmarks, and still others to provoke dialogue on social media. This layered strategy reflected the students’ understanding of activism in a constrained environment: when the public sphere feels unsafe, change can still begin in classrooms, peer groups, and online micro-publics.

The refusal of a public exhibition also shaped the way audiences were conceived. By choosing to keep their work within safe spaces or circulate it selectively, students demonstrated that impact does not require exposure to hostile publics. In fact, they redefined participation itself, showing that knowledge can be powerful when it is strategic, relational, and carefully targeted. This reframing of audience was itself an epistemic act—an insistence that voice matters not because it is loud but because it is intentional.

The cohort’s projects reveal a chorus of youth voices speaking to different audiences in different registers but united by a refusal of silence. Their work challenged peers to recognise inequality in their own lives, families to rethink cherished traditions, policymakers to act with urgency, and publics to see that justice is everyone’s responsibility. In doing so, they modelled what feminist epistemic justice looks like in practice: knowledge that is situated, deliberate, and unafraid to speak back, even when it must choose its audiences carefully.

## **6. Challenges Faced**

No project that seeks to expose gender inequalities in contemporary Turkey can unfold without obstacles, and the 2023–2024 cohort encountered these at multiple levels: personal, political, and practical. Their reflections reveal not only the weight of the topics they engaged with but also the structural barriers that shape knowledge production under precarious conditions.

The first and most striking challenge was once again visibility. While participatory action research is premised on circulation—photovoice exhibitions, public screenings, or social media outreach—students quickly recognised that making their projects visible beyond the classroom was far from neutral. This year’s cohort expressed even sharper hesitations than their predecessors, shaped by a deepening sense of political fatigue and risk. Speaking openly about issues such as femicide, harassment, or the gendered burden of care work was felt to carry the potential for misinterpretation, online trolling, or even hostile targeting. The



choice to keep their artefacts within the classroom, or to share only in carefully curated digital spaces, was thus not an act of withdrawal but of resistance. By controlling the conditions under which their work circulated, students claimed agency over their voices. Safe spaces—whether physical in the seminar room or virtual in private social media channels—were understood not as retreats from politics but as preconditions for feminist epistemic justice.

Practical challenges also loomed large. As in previous years, students struggled with the uneven availability of technical resources. Some groups worked only with mobile phones and improvised editing software, while others faced difficulties aligning schedules in a semester marked by hybrid teaching and busy academic calendars. Coordination itself became a pedagogical lesson: negotiating creative differences, balancing workloads, and ensuring that all voices were heard required patience and mutual recognition. What might have seemed like logistical friction was in fact formative, teaching students that collaborative knowledge production is necessarily messy and requires the same attentiveness to power and inclusion as the issues they were documenting.

Perhaps the most profound challenge, however, lay in the emotional terrain of the projects. Engaging with stories of femicide victims, reflecting on their own encounters with harassment, or revisiting discriminatory practices in education was painful and, at times, overwhelming. Several students spoke of the emotional labour of sitting with testimonies or visual material that made injustice starkly visible. Yet rather than paralysing them, these emotions became part of the process. Working in groups allowed for collective processing: anger, grief, and frustration were transformed into solidarity and commitment. Students recognised that affect was not a distraction from knowledge but a constitutive element of it. Their emotional engagement mirrored feminist epistemologies that insist that the way we feel is inseparable from how we know.

In this way, the challenges faced by the 2023–2024 cohort were not simply obstacles to overcome but integral to the epistemic transformation they underwent. The political climate heightened their sensitivity to the risks of voice; limited resources underscored the creativity required for grassroots knowledge production; emotional strain revealed the depth of their investment in justice. Each challenge became, paradoxically, part of the evidence of why participatory methodologies matter: they expose not only inequalities in society but also the inequalities in the very conditions under which knowledge is made.

## **7. Policy and Practice Recommendations: Youth as Epistemic Agents**

The most striking lesson of the 2023–2024 participatory action research projects is that youth are not simply learning about gender inequality; they are actively generating new knowledge and new strategies for resistance. Their artefacts, reflections, and recommendations reveal a generation unwilling to remain passive in the face of persistent injustices. Instead, they positioned themselves as epistemic agents—producers of grounded, situated, and politically charged knowledge that speaks directly to policymakers, educators, and civil society.

Across their projects, students articulated a series of urgent recommendations that stemmed not from abstract theorising but from lived realities. On the issue of femicide, they called for recognition of these killings not as isolated crimes of passion but as systemic political violence requiring structural responses. Their demand was clear: reinstate the Istanbul Convention, strengthen national data collection, and fund feminist organisations that provide critical support for survivors and families. For students, justice begins with naming violence as political and refusing its depoliticisation.

In the area of education, students urged a shift away from a narrow focus on enrolment figures toward addressing the structural conditions that push girls and young women out of school. They recommended policy interventions that tackle harassment in educational spaces, alleviate the economic pressures that lead to early marriage, and challenge the cultural norms that normalise women's withdrawal from public life. Their insights align with international frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals but add the vital reminder that access without empowerment is hollow.

Students working on beauty norms and commodification pointed policymakers toward the regulation of advertising practices and workplace dress codes that reinforce gendered inequalities. They highlighted the

urgent need for media literacy programmes that equip young people to resist toxic beauty ideals and the exploitation of women's insecurities by global corporations. For them, addressing gender inequality means recognising that neoliberal economies profit from perpetuating women's subordination under the guise of empowerment.

On political representation, the message was direct and uncompromising: without women in decision-making, democracy itself is diminished. Students called for legally binding gender quotas, dedicated resources for women candidates, and mechanisms to dismantle the informal male-dominated networks that currently govern access to power. Their perspective reframed women's representation not as a symbolic goal but as a necessary condition for the legitimacy of democratic governance.

Perhaps most importantly, students emphasised the role of safe spaces as infrastructures of justice. Their refusal to stage a public exhibition and their insistence on controlling the circulation of their projects revealed a sophisticated political critique: voice without safety is another form of silencing. They urged educators, policymakers, and international organisations to recognise the importance of environments where young people can articulate their perspectives without fear of backlash. This insight has direct policy implications, pointing to the need for institutional practices that prioritise care, protection, and agency in participatory initiatives.

These recommendations amount to more than a list of reforms; they form a youth manifesto for gender equality that is sensitive to epistemic injustices. They insist that tradition cannot be used to justify control, that violence must be recognised as political, that education must be transformative, that beauty should not be commodified, and that politics without women is illegitimate. Above all, they demand recognition of young people as co-producers of knowledge whose voices are indispensable to policymaking.

For FEJUST, these projects demonstrate that participatory methodologies can do more than teach—they can transform. By amplifying youth voices, they enact feminist epistemic justice in practice, showing that the struggle for equality is not only about redistributing opportunities but also about redistributing epistemic authority. Youth are not the audience of reforms; they are already shaping the agenda. To ignore their insights is to forfeit the chance for genuine transformation.



### **Funding Acknowledgement:**

This work was supported by the European Commission's Jean Monnet Programme (Jean Monnet Chair: Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond—FEJUST, Project 101085368) and Bahçeşehir University co-funding. The European Commission's support for this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors. The Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

