

**P E N
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Women Journalists & the judiciary – the experience of a court reporter

PEN Norway Turkey Indictment Project

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About the Author

Canan Coşkun worked as a journalist with Turkey's Cumhuriyet newspaper from 2012 until 2018. Whilst at Cumhuriyet she was their court reporter, covering corruption investigation cases, alleged membership of terror organisation cases, cases involving violence against women as well as media and freedom of expression-related cases. Following her term with Cumhuriyet she moved to the award-winning independent media platform Medyascope where her work garnered a number of prizes, and in addition, resulted in a series of court cases against her. Since February 2020 Coşkun has been working as a journalist for the digital news platform Diken.

In September 2021, 61 women journalists in Turkey were subjected to violence, threats and abuse. How has this situation, which is just one part of the physical and psychological violence directed at women, been reflected in the courtroom? What is behind such violence, that reaches even as far as the rooms and corridors of an institution designated to deliver justice?

I was a court reporter for Cumhuriyet newspaper from 2012 to 2018. During that time, I covered hundreds of hearings, including corruption charges against government officials, the attempted coup, freedom of thought and expression, the right of defence, violence against women, hate crimes and police violence. As you might guess, the motivations behind nearly all these cases were political, as were their outcomes.

It was 23 February 2016. At the time, Turkey had experienced successive terror attacks from ISIS and a group called the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK). I had gone to the Istanbul Court to follow the trial of a suspect, who had been detained almost a year ago on the charge of being an ISIS member. He was on trial together with his followers.

The room had a maximum capacity of 25 people. Due to the large number of defendants, some had to be seated in the audience rows. The room was full of male defendants with round beards, skullcaps and baggy shalwar trousers. Apart from the defendants, there were also journalists standing up to watch the trial as there were no seats left.

While noting down the defendant statements, I noticed one of the people in the audience seats standing up. As I was tired of standing, I sat down in the empty seat. The defendant next to me was muttering something, but I didn't know if it was meant for me as he couldn't look at my face. I heard him say, "Get away from me, it's inappropriate."

Perhaps the Istanbul Court has always been synonymous with injustices to various sections of society, ever since the first day it was built. We might start this list of injustices with the woman who was killed by her son in the middle of a court on the instigation of her divorced partner. While the child who committed the murder was arrested, the father, who had incited him to take action, was released. The first hearing took place three months after the murder, and I was enraged by the sight of the woman's former partner arriving dressed in body armour. Some of the trials I have covered have left me in a dilemma between my professional identity as a journalist and my non-journalistic self. This was one of those occasions.

I felt the same way as I got up from the seat next to the suspected ISIS member who didn't want me to sit there as 'It was inappropriate.' To make sure I could stay in the

room to witness the proceedings, I got up in the face of this gendered humiliation and moved elsewhere. It didn't even occur to me to inform the judge; he was also a man and seemed unlikely to respond reasonably.

The Rules of the Court

There is a prohibition in court: sitting with crossed legs is forbidden. Although it does not only apply to women, it is enforced particularly on women. While this rule seeks to uphold respect for the judiciary, and therefore justice itself, it is mostly women who are warned to comply. Women are also forced to think about how they should dress in court - a subject that shouldn't concern anyone but the person wearing the clothes - because the way you dress might offend a member of the judiciary, a court employee or a defendant, which could prevent you from doing your job.

As a female journalist, it is not just physical harassment you are open to, but also harassment from the judiciary. This is another part of the policy of silencing critical and investigative journalism. While working at Cumhuriyet newspaper, I was tried on numerous occasions for the act of reporting on cases and investigations. There were times when I was tried during a trial I was covering and came back to continue my job. I can honestly say that this strange situation has nullified any feelings of shock and subsequently destroyed my trust in the justice system.

The AKP's Misogynist Tirades

So, how did the life of women, little by little, become more difficult in every aspect? What is the reason? Let me answer this by recalling some statements from Erdoğan, AKP MPs and the regime's advisors:

"Is that woman a little virgin or a real woman?" (Then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 11 June 2011)

"Would a mother and father who care about values want their daughter to sit on someone's lap? From my office in Dolmabahçe, I can see the state of people from Kadıköy. When I see what goes on, it's not really something in keeping with my own values." (Then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, June 2012)

“If I took a picture of your crotch and published it in a newspaper, saying well that’s how it is, I’d be immoral wouldn’t I?” (Then AKP MP for Tokat, Zeyid Aslan - July 2013)

“A working woman destroys the home.” (Ömer Tuğrul İnançer, lawyer and advocate of Turkish mysticism - 21 September 2013)

“A militant disguised as a journalist turned up there, a shameless women.” (Then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - 2014).

“As for women, they should be chaste as well. They should know when to be intimate and when to be coy. They shouldn’t laugh in public. They shouldn’t always be seductive.” (Then deputy prime minister, Bülent Arınç, 28 July 2014)

“Mothers should not focus on any other career apart from motherhood,” (Then minister of health, Mehmet Müezzinoğlu, 2 January 2015)

In fact, this archival collection of sexist remarks is also a summary of how we got to this point. Politicians who use marginalising language, with no regard for religion, language, race, gender, sexual orientation or ethnic roots, dramatically expand their sphere of influence as their words find a ready echo chamber in the public arena.

Misogynist language and behaviour is certainly not limited to the AKP regime. The practice of interfering in women’s lives under the auspices of religious or cultural codes is boundless. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see that misogyny now has such a wide catchment area that it leaves a president and a suspected member of ISIS on common ground. Female journalists practising their profession in the social environment and relations shaped by such statements face serious obstacles and ultimately feel in danger.

Reporting from the Mosque

When I wasn’t covering hearings as a court reporter, I spent my days covering news from the streets. On 25 September 2015, I was assigned to the funeral of a prominent businessperson. The news agencies had received information that Erdoğan would be attending.

As the starting time of the funeral ceremony approached, a line of men formed behind the body. There were no women at the front of the line, nor in the rows behind. Of

course, this could have been the preference of the deceased's family, but in any case, it was fairly rare to see women in the front row.

All the journalists were facing the group of men behind the body. Before the ceremony began, there was some commotion as a silhouette appeared, like a general among an army of men: it was Erdoğan. He took his place in the front row behind the body. For the first time, I came face to face with the person whose announcements at any given time determined the course of our lives and our whole agenda. Our eyes met once and I looked away in fear.

Before the imam of the mosque began the ceremony, one of Erdoğan's security guards came over and said, "The congregation don't want to see women. Stand somewhere else." I replied that if I stood elsewhere, I would be unable to follow the funeral proceedings and therefore unable to do my job. Obviously, my words were of no value to the man who had come to banish me out of sight. If I didn't go to the back, there might be a scene, and being the news itself was not one of my intentions when out covering other people's stories. The worst aspect to the whole thing was that the male colleagues around me gave no reaction to this prejudice at all. To avoid being removed from the funeral, I grudgingly moved. After arriving at the back, I looked right into the eyes of Erdoğan, the man whose gaze I had just avoided out of fear. If it had been today, I would have said, "If the congregation don't want to see women, they should close their eyes."