



Original communication

Violence against women: A series of autopsy studies from Istanbul, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Death is the most severe consequence of violence against women. The purpose of this study was to determine the frequency of violence-related deaths among women and the general characteristics of fatal violence cases against women in Istanbul, Turkey.

A total of 20,486 forensic autopsies performed between 2006 and 2010, in Istanbul, were retrospectively analyzed. Of these, 537 violence-related deaths among women were included in the study. The victims were investigated in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, exposed type of violence, and autopsy findings.

Out of all female deaths ($n = 4165$), 12.9% were due to violence against women, which comprised 2.6% of all autopsies ($n = 20,456$) performed during the study period in Istanbul. The median age of the victims was 43 years, and a significant proportion of victims (49.7%) were between the ages of 21 and 40 years. The deaths occurred most commonly in private residences (51.2%, $n = 275$), whereas the street was the crime scene for 14.5% ($n = 78$) of cases. Firearm injuries (50.1%, $n = 269$) were the most common cause of death, followed by stab wounds (28.3%, $n = 152$) and strangulation (8.4%, $n = 45$). Among the identified perpetrators, 52.3% were victims' spouses or boyfriends. The perpetrators were female in 4.4% ($n = 16$) of cases.

Istanbul is the most important and cosmopolitan city of Turkey, representing the country's cultural characteristics. Therefore, the data obtained in this study may be strong indicators of violence against women in Turkey.

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1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as the deliberate use of physical force or power against oneself, another person, a group, or a community, resulting in mutilation, death, psychological harm, failure to thrive, or deprivation.¹ Conversely, violence against women is defined as physical, sexual, psychological, or any other action that harms females, based on gender discrimination.² At present, violence against women is an important and well-recognized form of human rights violation. However, the magnitude and nature of violence against women must be understood in depth.³ The characteristics and related consequences

of violence against women may vary across countries or within the same country over time. In this respect, the characteristics of this pressing issue must be investigated and determined for every country. Different types of violence against women show different clinical presentation and consequences. Women may sustain serious injuries and even die due to physical violence, which accounts for the most adverse outcomes of violence against women.^{3,4}

Istanbul, which comprises 18% of the total population of Turkey, is the most important and cosmopolitan city representing the country's cultural characteristics. Therefore, the data obtained in this study are considered strong indicators of deaths due to violence against women in Turkey. In this respect, this study aimed to determine the general characteristics of deaths due to violence against women in Istanbul, Turkey, thereby contributing to the related literature with its large case series.

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2. Materials and methods

Autopsies performed between 2006 and 2010 at the morgue of the Council of Forensic Medicine (CFM), in Istanbul, Turkey, were retrospectively analyzed. CFM is the leading expertise organ of Turkey with headquarters at Istanbul. In Istanbul, all autopsies are performed in the morgue of the CFM. Standardized forms are used during the autopsies. A total of 20,486 autopsies were performed during the study period, of which 4165 were cases of female deaths by any means. Of these, 537 deaths involving violence against women, with no age limitation, were included in the study. The autopsy reports and crime/death scene investigation records were analyzed for each case. The studied cases were investigated in terms of the sociodemographic characteristics, crime/death scene investigation findings, autopsy findings, toxicological analyses, and forensic genetic examination results. All data were recorded from the autopsy reports and crime scene investigation reports.

3. Results

Out of all autopsies ($n = 20,486$) performed between 2006 and 2010, 537 (2.6%) cases involved female victims of violence. The annual distribution of autopsies of violence-related female deaths is shown in Table 1.

The victims ranged from infants to elderly women as old as 90 years. The mean age of the victims was 43 years. Almost half (49.7%) of the victims ranged in age from 21 to 40 years. The distribution of cases in terms of their ages is shown in Fig. 1.

The distribution of cases according to their nationality showed that victims of 493 (91.8%) cases were Turkish nationals, whereas 31 (5.8%) were of foreign nationality. The victims could not be identified in 13 (2.4%) cases and their nationality remained unknown.

Private residence was the most common place of such incidents (275 cases, 51.2%). However, 14.5% ($n = 78$) of the cases involved violence on the streets. The remaining 6.7% of cases occurred in vacant lots and buildings, whereas 4.3% occurred at the workplace. Unfortunately, the location of 23.3% of cases remained unknown.

Overall, 76.35% ($n = 410$) of the victims were found dead or died instantaneously at the scene of the crime, whereas 15.46% ($n = 83$) died en route to the hospital or within the same day in the hospital. However, only 8.19% ($n = 44$) of the cases died after several days during the treatment period.

According to autopsy findings, firearm injuries were the most common cause of death (50.1%, $n = 269$), followed by stab wounds (28.3%, $n = 152$) and strangulation (8.4%, $n = 45$). Table 2 lists the causes of death in cases of violence.

Firearm injuries were implicated in a total of 276 cases. Of the cases involving the use of firearms, handguns were used in 84% ($n = 230$) of cases, followed by shotguns (13%, $n = 35$) and blank guns (2%, $n = 6$). Both handguns and shotguns were used in 1% ($n = 4$) of the cases. In one case, the type of gun could not be

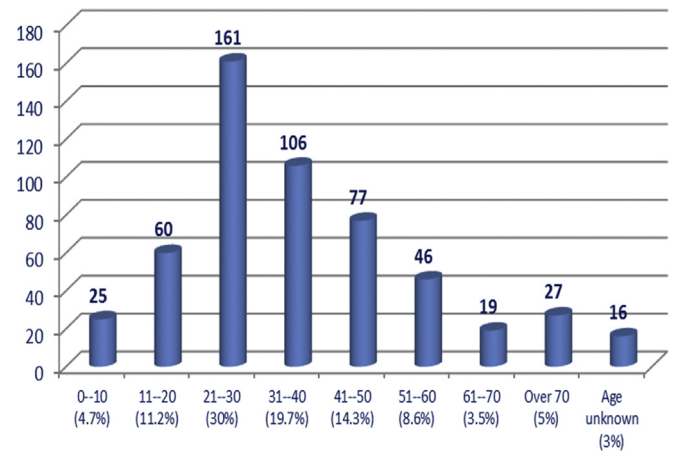


Fig. 1. Distribution of women according to age.

Table 2

Causes of death in victims of violence.

	(n)	(%)
Firearm injuries	269	50.1
Stab wounds	152	28.3
Strangulation	45	8.4
Blunt injury	27	5
Strangulation + Stab wounds	10	1.9
Various diseases	6	1.1
Blunt injury + Stab wounds	5	0.9
Firearm injury + Stab wounds	5	0.9
Strangulation + Blunt injury	5	0.9
Intoxication	2	0.4
Strangulation + Firearm injury	2	0.4
Genital Trauma	1	0.2
Drowning	1	0.2
Undefined	7	1.3
Total	537	100

identified due to the postmortem changes and decomposition. A significant proportion of deaths (37.6%, $n = 103$) were caused by gunshot wounds to the head. The shots were at close range in 17.8% ($n = 49$) of cases.

Defense wounds were noted in 42.7% ($n = 73$) of 172 cases, wherein stabbing was the cause of death. Among asphyxia-related deaths, the cause of death was manual strangulation in 53.2% ($n = 62$) cases and ligature strangulations in 46.8% ($n = 29$).

In a considerable number of cases (25.7%), external traumatic lesions were reported apart from fatal wounds.

Overall, two victims (0.4%) were decapitated and another two (0.4%) were amputated at their extremities. Twelve victims were pregnant during the incident. The perpetrators in the cases of five pregnant victims were not known. However, the husband was the

Table 1

Annual distribution of autopsies of violence-related female deaths.

Years	Autopsy (n)	Female autopsy (n)		Female autopsy (%)		
		Total	Due to violence	Total	Due to violence	Total/Violence
2006	4186	820	128	19.6%	3.1%	15.6%
2007	4196	812	112	19.4%	2.7%	13.8%
2008	4122	853	90	20.7%	2.2%	10.6%
2009	4059	870	112	21.4%	2.8%	12.9%
2010	3923	810	95	20.6%	2.4%	11.7%
Total	20,486	4165	537	20.3%	2.6%	12.9%

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