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Views of Women Doctoral Students and Dropouts on Doctoral Education in Türkiye

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Abstract

Countries must adapt their higher education systems to address the demands of 21st-century knowledge societies. Türkiye, a developing country (OECD, 2025), ranks 48th in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). Despite improvements, gender inequality remains a significant issue in Türkiye, with women often dropping out of educational programs due to household and caregiving responsibilities (Conger & Long, 2010; Gür & Bozgöz, 2022; Quinn, 2013). This study explores the experiences and challenges of women in doctoral education, highlighting their roles as change agents in higher education. It presents the views of ten current women doctoral students and ten dropouts from various programs of public universities in Türkiye. The study's qualitative research captures diverse perspectives by including voluntary participants who were single, married, or divorced; with or without children; and employed outside academia. Data collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions. Two themes were identified through IPA: (a) challenges, which include the imposition of traditional roles, financial constraints, and unconstructive relationships with faculty members or advisors, and (b) the need for constructive relationships, defined by support from faculty, advisors, and peers. Suggestions for support mechanisms are also discussed.

Keywords

doctoral student agency; gender gap; higher education transformation; inclusive doctoral education

1. Introduction

The multidimensional transformation of higher education (HE) is critical for meeting the needs of 21st-century knowledge societies. To achieve this, countries must improve different aspects of their HE systems in the face of growing demands (Olo et al., 2021). One key aspect is doctoral education, which contributes to empowering doctoral students who can effectively meet the country's needs for development (Sarrico, 2022) while fulfilling their own potential. Countries emphasize doctoral education to ensure sustainable development through a professional population (Chaló et al., 2023).

Türkiye is classified as a developing country (OECD, 2025) and ranks 48th out of 191 countries and territories in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). While its position is improving, there is still a significant gap between Türkiye and developed countries regarding achievement as measured by certain indicators such as gender inequality (Encinas-Martín & Cherian, 2023). The World Bank stated that the Covid-19 pandemic widened gender disparities and raised the potential for inequality in Türkiye (Gunes & Chang, 2023). According to national data, doctoral education is nearly equally accessible to both genders in Türkiye (TÜİK, 2023a). However, women perceive more challenges and tend to drop out more often compared to men (Karaduman, 2024).

Although increasing numbers of women have earned doctoral degrees in recent years worldwide (European Commission, 2019), feminist research continues to identify gendered patterns reflected in academia that perpetuate historical hierarchies (Ivancheva et al., 2019). A combination of different factors maintains gender inequality (Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023), significantly affecting the attrition and retention of doctoral students. In particular, women are viewed as having a higher likelihood of leaving educational programs because of their roles as caregivers and housewives in patriarchal societies like Türkiye (Conger & Long, 2010; Gür & Bozgöz, 2022; Quinn, 2013). Women students, especially those married or divorced with/without children, often face more challenges than their male counterparts in the domestic sphere (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011). Research indicates that women enrolled in programs that are predominantly male-populated tend to have a decreased sense of academic worth, receive less support from their departments when facing family-related challenges, and show lower levels of commitment to their careers (Ülkü-Steiner et al., 2000). Furthermore, women, especially mothers, face severe disadvantages in the labor market (Correll et al., 2007). Even those who complete their doctoral studies and procure academic employment suffer additional challenges due to insufficient academic representation of women (Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023). Gendered challenges have increased further in Turkish academia since the Covid-19 pandemic (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021; Parlak et al., 2021).

According to Savigny (2014, p. 798), "giving voice to experience is a key mechanism through which feminist and critical theories seek to challenge existing power structures." Thus, amplifying the voices of these relatively less-heard women students in Türkiye will contribute to improving doctoral education and transforming HE. Recognizing these students as active change agents will help in achieving more inclusive, diverse, and equitable doctoral education in diverse settings. Accordingly, this study explores the voices of the diverse experiences of single and married women with or without children who were currently enrolled in or had dropped out of a doctoral program. The study aimed to identify and analyze the personal, institutional, and academic factors that shaped their experiences and the specific challenges they encountered throughout their doctoral journeys. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the personal, social, and economic experiences of women doctoral students throughout their educational journeys? Do these experiences influence their education, and if so, in what ways?
2. What are the experiences of women doctoral students within their universities, departments, or programs throughout their educational journeys? Do these experiences influence their education, and if so, in what ways?
3. What strategies and mechanisms do women doctoral students recommend for overcoming challenges and supporting persistence in doctoral education?

2. Literature Review

Doctoral education plays a vital role in developing research capacity in HE. The doctorate is considered the highest academic qualification, and its completion is often a challenging process characterized by complex academic and institutional dynamics. Common problems include long timelines, student attrition, and inadequate academic integration (Altbach, 2007; Lin & Cranton, 2005). While structures vary across countries, a number of common concerns intersect, such as pressure to publish, limited access to supervision, and financial constraints (Horta & Mok, 2020). Although some of these issues are discussed in the international literature, this study focuses on doctoral education in Türkiye. The following subsection outlines the key features of the Turkish doctoral education system to situate the participants' experiences in a specific context.

2.1. Doctoral Education in Türkiye

Doctoral education in Türkiye has recently evolved, influenced by rising enrollment and global academic trends, to align more with the American model (Shin et al., 2018). The number of universities has also increased under the Eleventh Development Plan (Presidency of Strategy and Budget of Turkey, 2019). That plan led to the rapid expansion of doctoral programs, with the number of doctoral students nearly tripling and requirements adjusted to accommodate the expansion (YÖK, 2024). Systemic challenges persist, however, despite the increase in the number of institutions and students. The demand for doctoral education has exceeded the capacity of faculty and institutional support (Deniz, 2022; Kavak, 2011). The growing number of students combined with limited resources has had a negative impact on academic performance and the overall quality of graduate education (Nidup, 2022). Current data show 13,583 PhD graduates and 108,933 registered PhD students in Türkiye. Only 15,931 of them are new entrants (YÖK, 2024), suggesting that many students remain in the system longer than expected.

International comparisons in the literature suggest similar pressures in some other countries. For example, Iran has expanded its doctoral sector with stringent output expectations, leading to concerns about research quality and oversight (Keykha et al., 2024). In contrast, countries with long traditions of doctoral studies, such as Germany and Japan, maintain higher completion rates while also facing academic pressures and demographic changes (Yamamoto, 2023). Despite efforts to expand doctoral education, Türkiye still lags behind: Germany graduates 29,000 doctoral students and Japan 16,000 yearly, while Türkiye produces about 8,000 annual PhD graduates (YÖK, 2022). Gendered patterns are particularly concerning. Women in graduate programs are more likely than men to leave academia before graduation (Schwartz et al., 2021). Some may decide not to pursue a doctorate due to structural and societal barriers. Although no official statistics on dropout rates exist, research highlights a significant increase (Gür & Bozgöz, 2022). Recognizing

this problem, the Turkish Council of Higher Education organized a national workshop in 2022 where experts emphasized the need for targeted studies on doctoral dropouts (YÖK, 2022, p. 16). Recommendations included flexible scheduling for working adults and reduced supervisory burdens to facilitate completion, especially for women students (TÜBA, 2006). Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring equal access, retention, and success in doctoral education.

2.2. Turkish Women in Doctoral Education

Women entered universities in the Ottoman Empire in 1914 and began working as academics in the 1930s, following the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye (Zubarioglu, 2024). Their early presence in high-status roles such as educators, judges, and medical professionals reflected the Republic's modernizing reforms, including women's suffrage in 1934, before many European countries (Öztürkmen, 2007). Despite this progressive history, recent comparative analyses suggested that Türkiye lags behind many other countries regarding gender equality at the societal level (Sart, 2022). In the context of HE, structural reforms driven by EU harmonization efforts have promoted gender equality since the early 2000s and significantly increased female enrollment in doctoral programs (YÖK, 2024). As of 2024, women constituted 46% of doctoral students in Türkiye (TÜİK, 2023b). They often choose academia to gain social acceptance (Öztan & Doğan, 2015).

Turkish women face significant challenges in their PhD journeys, including traditional gender roles, limited institutional support, and domestic responsibilities that impede academic progress (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Karaduman, 2024). Despite women constituting nearly half of all PhD students, only 33.2% of the professors in Türkiye are women (Günsan, 2024), reflecting ongoing structural barriers and a "glass ceiling" in academia (Karaman et al., 2022). In addition to the challenges of cultural norms and patriarchal expectations, married and/or mothering doctoral students in particular report emotional difficulties (Alkan & Kamasak, 2024; Schwartz et al., 2021). Even successful women continue to face barriers to publication, recognition, and advancement in male-dominated fields (Trapido, 2022).

In particular, women's intersecting identities, such as marital status, economic background, and caring roles, create complex challenges to persistence and success. Feminist institutionalist research highlights how formal structures can ignore or reinforce gender inequalities in doctoral education (Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Krook & Mackay, 2011). These systemic patterns are evident in dropout trends and in the lack of targeted academic and emotional support from supervisors, departments, and institutions (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021). While national reforms have improved access, the literature and the voices of this study's participants indicate an urgent need for inclusive policies and empowering campus climates (Verge, 2021).

3. Conceptual Framework

Emerging as a result of the struggles experienced by particular marginalized groups regarding education inequalities, social inclusion aims "[to improve] the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights" (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, 2016, p. 20). Although social inclusion was historically considered in connection with social exclusion, the relevant literature proposes models of possibility (Gidley, Wheeler, &

Bereded-Samuel, 2010, p. 5). Social inclusion accordingly encompasses three dimensions supported by various ideological frameworks: access, participation, and empowerment (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010).

Access, the first dimension of social inclusion, is related to improving human capital due to the primary concern of global economic competitiveness and is predominantly ingrained in neoliberal ideologies. The central assumption of the access dimension of social inclusion is the financial benefit of education, as individuals will have more employment opportunities with high-level schooling (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010; Raffo & Gunter, 2008). This dimension generally involves HE through increased enrollment rates with little or no attention to the complexities of such initiatives on a deeper level, such as power inequalities (Gidley, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). Seeking profitability and competitiveness (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010), HE policies focused on access frequently result in deficit-based interventions such as financial support, counseling support for students with health difficulties, or support for students with disabilities (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014).

Participation, the second dimension of social inclusion, is considered more inclusive as it is promoted by social justice theory focused on diversity, human rights, and egalitarianism (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010). Drawing from critical pedagogy, partnership theory, and feminist theories, the participation approach to social inclusion takes the access dimension as a starting point but also recognizes the value of community engagement (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014). Social inclusion practices in HE aimed at participation can facilitate university-community collaborations to build settings where students can meaningfully participate and develop confidence and a sense of belongingness, allowing diverse populations to develop meaningful relationships with others and experience artistic and cultural ways of being and doing (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010; Grinblat & Kershaw, 2008; Raffo & Gunter, 2008; Simplican et al., 2015).

Empowerment, the final dimension of social inclusion, draws from theories on human potential and seeks to maximize the potential of individuals. This entails considering that, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, individuals are multidimensional beings with unique needs and interests (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010). Consequently, social inclusion policy and practice must extend beyond neoliberal-oriented access and justice- and human rights-oriented participation to address power issues and structural factors resulting in social exclusion. The empowerment approach to social inclusion accordingly emphasizes diversity, dialogue, and different voices as sources of social transformation (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010; Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014). HE institutions employing social inclusion as empowerment draw from pedagogies of hope and postcolonial theories and aim to create institutional climates prioritizing the voices of marginalized groups and facilitating critical dialogue among different cultural groups (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010).

Discourses of inclusive campuses and diversity have led to various HE policies that are yet to be efficiently practiced in real life (Hughes, 2014) as institutional culture, curricula, and access in HE remain unequal in terms of gender as well as race, socioeconomic status, and class (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019). Similarly, as discussed in the previous section, the increased enrollment of women in doctoral programs in Türkiye has not meant inclusive institutional, academic, and employment conditions for women doctoral students, especially for those with multiple minority identities such as single, divorced, or married mothers and women of lower socioeconomic groups (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Ülkü-Steiner et al., 2000). In exploring such complexities, intersectionality theory (e.g., Crenshaw,

1989) allows more refined insight into the complexities of the challenges women experience as doctoral students in the patriarchal structure of HE settings. Related research has revealed structural and political inequalities resulting in normalized and multilayered forms of discrimination that impact women with multiple and mostly overlapping identities (e.g., single women of color with children; see Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Furthermore, feminist institutionalism has built on the substantial feminist and institutionalist research of the last three decades to explore the "chronic minority of women" in diverse settings (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 2; see also Clavero & Galligan, 2020). These perspectives can help in examining how institutional structures and gendered power dynamics influence women's progression in doctoral education, providing valuable insight into the unique and layered challenges women face in doctoral programs in Türkiye.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted in line with the objectives stated above. In doing so, the aim was not to generalize the results to the overall population but to explore participants' perceptions and experiences to provide a deeper understanding of a social issue (Creswell, 2013). The study sample consisted of 20 participants, including 10 current women doctoral students and 10 dropouts from various programs of public universities in Türkiye, to explore the perceptions and experiences of the research participants regarding their doctoral programs. The study focused on public universities because, out of approximately 7 million students in 208 Turkish HE institutions, more than 6.2 million students were enrolled in 129 public universities, representing about 90% of the university student body, according to statistics from the Turkish Council of Higher Education for the 2023–2024 academic year.

The study employs phenomenology (Creswell, 2013) as the research design to understand different aspects of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon of doctoral education and how they reflected on and made meaning from those experiences. Such a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and characteristics of a small group of individuals significantly enhances the interpretive depth and social context of a study (Creswell, 2013) and can deepen our comprehension of the various challenges related to women's academic journeys and the reasons behind their decisions regarding the (non)pursuit of doctoral degrees (Smith et al., 2021).

There were two groups of research participants. One group included 10 women who were continuing in their doctoral programs. Their ages ranged from 25 to 45. They worked in different fields including education, psychological counseling, medicine, and the corporate world. Seven were married, four had one or two children ranging in age from 10 months to 11 years, and three were single. The husbands were all at least university graduates with jobs in engineering, the aviation industry, education, academia, and business. These participants started their doctoral programs between 2019 and 2024, mainly in the fall term. They were enrolled in various faculties, including education, medicine, business administration, science, and social sciences, and were at different stages of their doctoral programs. Specifically, seven students were taking courses, one was preparing for her qualifying exam, and two were writing their dissertations.

The other group included 10 women who had dropped out of their doctoral programs. Their ages ranged from 30 to 48 and they worked in different fields including teaching, architecture, counseling, civil service, nursing, archaeology, and NGO management, or were self-employed. Two were married and one had three children.

Their husbands were both graduates of HE institutions. These participants had started their doctoral programs between 2008 and 2021 and dropped out between 2021 and 2023. They had been enrolled in different fields including education, architecture, business administration, science, and social sciences. Three dropped out in the stage of dissertation writing, two dropped out before that, and three dropped out after the qualifying exam. Two failed the qualifying exam and then dropped out.

This comparative approach was essential for identifying the challenges women doctoral students face and the factors contributing to persistence or dropout. The decision to include these two groups allowed us to explore (a) common experiences and differences between those who persisted and those who dropped out, (b) key challenges (e.g., personal, financial, academic, institutional) that influence doctoral persistence, and (c) effective support strategies and coping mechanisms from the perspective of those who successfully persisted.

The sample size of 20 was determined based on the principles of qualitative research, where the goal is to achieve data saturation, the point at which additional data collection will not yield new insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selecting 20 participants ensured diversity of experience and a balance between depth and breadth, allowing for rich in-depth narratives while maintaining a manageable scope of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, previous qualitative research on doctoral students' experiences showed that 20 participants were sufficient for capturing patterns, themes, and variations (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This sampling also allowed us to explore how family dynamics and external responsibilities influence doctoral education.

For data collection, we developed an interview protocol to capture the participants' demographic data and their perceptions and experiences regarding their doctoral programs. During the interviews, participants shared their reasons for enrolling in a PhD program, their expectations, how doctoral education had impacted their lives (personally, socially, and professionally), their relationships with their professors and advisors, their support mechanisms, and their challenges. Dropouts were also asked to describe their reasons for dropping out. The interviews were concluded with suggestions on how doctoral programs could be improved, particularly to support women students. To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative research, after the institutional ethical approval process was completed, a pilot study was conducted with two women to finalize the interview protocol and improve the overall effectiveness of the study (Van Teijlingen et al., 2001). Subsequently, data were collected by one researcher, transcribed by another researcher, and analyzed by another researcher.

In the data collection process, a researcher gathered data through in-depth semi-structured interviews, employing a purposeful sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to ensure rich variation in demographic variables. Participants were recruited via social media announcements and the researchers' networks. The online interviews conducted with Zoom lasted between 50 and 100 minutes and were recorded with the interviewees' consent. After the data collection, the interviews were transcribed and the data were anonymized with a pseudonym assigned to each participant. The 20 participants were deemed sufficient for data saturation.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Eatough & Smith, 2017) was used to analyze the data and determine the emergent themes. Robinson and Williams (2024) described IPA as one of the most popular

approaches for interpreting data, especially in educational fields. In this way, the study participants are given agency and the researchers reveal educational, psychological, and even conceptual meanings of their experiences (Conroy & de Visser, 2015; Nizza et al., 2021). Using IPA, we gained valuable insights into the factors influencing persistence and dropout in doctoral studies.

5. Findings

The data analysis revealed two themes related to the experiences and perceptions of women doctoral students and dropouts in Türkiye. The first theme highlighted their challenges, which could be divided into three sub-themes: the imposition of traditional roles, financial constraints, and unconstructive relationships with faculty members or advisors. The second theme highlighted the importance of constructive relationships with three sub-themes: support from faculty members or advisors, support from doctoral peers, and suggestions for support mechanisms that could enhance the educational experiences of women doctoral students.

5.1. Challenges

5.1.1. Traditional Role Imposition: A Sense of Division and Insufficiency While Managing Multiple Roles

Pursuing a doctoral degree is a challenging and demanding long-term process for all students, regardless of gender. Both the women who were continuing their studies and those who had dropped out reported significant difficulties, with married women who were working and raising children often experiencing the most challenges. Guilt, insufficiency, and being torn apart were feelings frequently mentioned by these women. For instance, Zuhal and Şule, who had dropped out of their doctoral programs, shared their frustrations as follows:

> You have the role of a wife, and you have the role of a mother. You have the role of a student doing a PhD. You're being torn apart….You feel half in each of them. You think you can't care for your child very well, and your conscience gets pricked. At the same time, your doctoral study is a child for you….You can't actually take care of it. You can't give yourself [fully], and that's another feeling of guilt, a sense of incompleteness from every angle. (Zuhal)

> When I was doing my PhD and sparing time for studying, there was also such a thing as a guilty conscience. I can't keep up with my child, I can't keep up with my house, or fulfill my responsibilities. How many pieces should it be divided into? You know, I was putting pressure on myself because I couldn't do this job. Frankly, it wore me out a little, and I even had to get psychological support during the period when I was trying to study for the qualifying exam. (Şule)

The women who expressed exhaustion and negative feelings attributed them to traditional roles that imposed demanding domestic responsibilities on them. Zuhal, for example, explained this as follows: "It is seen as my duty…to take care of the children at home, or the order of the house is seen as my responsibility…cooking, cleaning."

The challenges posed by traditional roles were also described by the students currently pursuing their doctorate degrees, including Aslı and Nevin:

> Under the conditions I mentioned, I would still pursue a professional career and have a child if I were a male student. I'm guessing it could have been a little easier. Maybe a little bit of traditional code is having an effect as well. You take on more responsibility even if someone doesn't impose it. (Aslı)

> What society expects from you is that you are a very good mother, a very good wife, and a very good doctoral student. You have to be very good at all of them. (Nevin)

One participant discussed the imposition of these roles while sharing her frustrations about her husband, who was also pursuing a doctorate:

> He is currently working on his dissertation. For example, he steps aside after breakfast and focuses on his studies. However, I must do the laundry and other chores. Once I finish those tasks, I can sit down to study. As a woman, I feel that we are not as relaxed as men are, and that's quite evident. (Rana)

Consequently, these challenges made it difficult for her to have a child:

> There is always a barrier in front of me to having a child. I couldn't see what I would do if I had a child….We think in much more detail than men. My husband doesn't think about such a thing in detail. (Rana)

All of these difficulties and impositions led some to avoid marriage. A participant who had dropped out of her doctoral program explained:

> Being a mother and being a woman in academia—those feminine roles are not easy in terms of the expected feminine roles. I preferred a different kind of womanhood, single womanhood, and childless womanhood. You know, to be able to do what I want to do there more comfortably. (Didem)

5.1.2. Financial Problems: "If You Don't Have a Rich Husband, It's Challenging to Get a PhD"

In addition to the challenges posed by traditional gender roles, financial difficulties were described as a significant obstacle for women doctoral students and a primary reason for decisions to drop out of their programs. This challenge was particularly prevalent among single women doctoral students:

> You will be a strong woman; you will have had economic freedom imposed on you since you were a child. But you can't do that, and you're approaching thirty….I was leaving class and going to give private lessons….So getting a doctorate is challenging if you don't have a rich husband to sponsor you, because the scholarships given are limited, nothing supports you as a woman. (İpek)

A participant who had dropped out of her doctoral program due to financial difficulties expressed similar feelings:

> Coming from a lower social class, the lack of economic resources is a problem at the doctoral level. Therefore, my financial condition was essential to my mental departure from the [doctoral program]. To concentrate and do what you want to do in the PhD, you should not be thinking about the rent or the bills while studying. For me, it was all a problem. Therefore, I had little chance to focus only on my academic work. (Didem)

Although she stated that she had not preferred to marry due to the difficulties imposed by traditional feminine roles, Didem also recognized that marriage could be a financial advantage: "You know, it's a man or a woman. They support each other in marriage, and maybe it may have been an advantage." Gökçe, married with no children, shared this view: "Being married can be a plus….When you're married, it's two incomes."

Financial issues can also be problematic for married mothers with children who have to work. For example, a participant who dropped out of her doctoral program stated that if she had financial support, she would have been able to fulfill her responsibilities at home more easily:

> If I could have gotten seventy percent of my salary for six months and the remaining six months at work, and then if I had the right to unpaid leave for a year, for example, or six months, I could have raised my child very well and done [the PhD] very comfortably during that period. (Zuhal)

5.1.3. Unconstructive Relationships With Faculty Members or Advisors: "I Don't Want to Invest in Vain"

Several participants reported feeling less supported and facing more negative attitudes than their male counterparts. For example, Hande, currently pursuing her doctorate while managing the responsibilities of being married with children, stated that male students received more encouragement in their courses. She also shared her experience of seeking an advisor, noting that she received a dismissive response from a male professor she had approached:

> Women students receive much less praise, if I think about it personally, because I am married with two children and older. For example, when I asked one of my instructors to be my advisor, he replied, "I don't want to make investments in vain." I understood that men and women who do not have children and are not married would be preferable [as advisees]. (Hande)

Zuhal, married with children, expressed her frustration with some faculty members' harsh words and dismissive attitudes. She highlighted the emotional impact of her experiences and her decision to drop out:

> Some instructors make fun of it by saying: "Well, we don't want anyone with children anymore. Doing a doctorate is very difficult. I mean, how are you going to study?...You're a mother. Just enjoy your motherhood." I can't deal with this mentality, you know. I said that it would be beyond me to get over these walls, and I said it's okay if it doesn't work, just let it go. (Zuhal)

5.2. Constructive Relationships

5.2.1. Support From Faculty Members and Advisors

Our analyses revealed that women doctoral students, especially those continuing their doctoral programs, have mechanisms that support and contribute to their educational processes. The most important sources of support are faculty members, advisors, and peers.

In contrast to Zuhal, Aslı enjoyed positive relationships with her professors and advisor, beginning from her interview for the program:

> Yes, when I applied there, I was five months pregnant when I went to the university for interviews. My professor, whom I am about to work with on the dissertation now, welcomed this very well and made positive comments. We had a female professor on the interview team [who said]: "If it will encourage you, I was pregnant with my first child during the coursework period and my second child during the dissertation period, and I went through this process with them." She shared her own experience. Thankfully, my professors, whether men or women, made it very easy in this regard. (Aslı)

A participant who was married with children and continuing her doctoral education similarly explained how the support of instructors and advisors positively affected her:

> In this respect, I was immensely relieved that my advisor supported me in both my academic and private life. I remember her saying something to me, that she was translating while rocking her baby and telling her these things and so on, that's how it was settled in my mind. Frankly, she provided my motivation. (Selin)

5.2.2. Support From Peers

The participants of this study indicated that the doctoral process harms the social lives of women doctoral students. However, they also noted that many women derived primary motivation from supporting one another in the groups they formed with fellow doctoral students. Participants who were continuing their education found value in providing solidarity and encouragement to other women students:

> I can have lunch with people who have experiences or with similar backgrounds, and I think that the doctoral process has improved my social relations by easing some thoughts in my head. (Hande)

> We have a group for studying. For example, we send messages between us: "I'm going to the library this weekend. Would you like to come too?" We communicate with each other like that….There are such motivational speeches, and support is provided. (Nur)

5.2.3. Suggestions for Support Mechanisms: "We Need All Kinds of Support"

Whether they had dropped out or were still enrolled, and whether they were single or married and with or without children, participants consistently emphasized the need for more significant support than their male counterparts. They argued that women do not have equal conditions while pursuing their degrees:

> Why don't women become philosophers? I don't know why women can't be. Could it be that [men don't] have the responsibility of cleaning up after you? So we're not competing on equal circumstances with men. We need support in every way. (Zuhal)

As a result, this participant suggested support from the government, particularly regarding childcare issues:

> It doesn't matter if they are married or single, but especially for women with children and women who are trying to do something in academia, substantial support mechanisms must be given, both as a society and at the state level….The child support package, the empowerment policies for the mother and the woman involved, and daycare are essential. (Zuhal)

This study revealed that financial challenges are often more pronounced among single women than their married counterparts. In light of this finding, Nevin, an unmarried doctoral student, suggested the following method of financial support for women doctoral candidates: "Supporting women can be done through projects for women, such as postdoc positions, since it is more difficult for women to continue with financial independence in Türkiye. I would love to have such support."

An unmarried doctoral dropout described the difficulties of traveling to another city to attend classes at a university there and suggested accommodation support to help alleviate such financial burdens:

> A great deal of support can be provided regarding accommodation and housing, especially for women. As a doctoral student, I should be able to stay in the university dormitory for a day or two [if I travel to another school]. I couldn't stay there. I was staying at a hotel, spending from my own pocket. (Belma)

In addition to financial support, psychological support was one of the most important needs described by the participants, stemming from their disadvantaged positions and feelings of loneliness:

> Women should be provided with psychological support in this doctoral process….I think it would be very nice when I think about it. We are a little disadvantaged. Morale and psychological support are needed for women trying to do a doctorate, not to be alone, and to know they are not alone. (Belma)

Support from other women as academics and mentors was one suggested way to receive guidance and find role models. Hande, continuing her education, stated: "At the very least, women academics should provide more support to women doctoral students." Nevin, also continuing her education, shared a similar view: "I think there are points where our women academics should guide us more while setting an example."

One final suggestion made by the participants was that informal solidarity groups formed by women students should be established officially within programs, departments, or universities. This was explained by Hayal, a doctoral dropout, as follows: "There are clubs like that, and we have student clubs. It would be nice if we could do it again in such a social environment, as support for both studies and social life."

6. Discussion

This study's data analyses revealed that many women doctoral students experience extensive difficulties across several dimensions of doctoral programs, resulting in some dropping out. Our findings cut across various dimensions of our participants' personal experiences and observations in their social, cultural, and educational lives and their development and educational persistence as single, married, or divorced women with or without children in doctoral programs. As our findings for the three research questions overlapped, we discuss them below in two sub-sections. The first sub-section presents findings related to the first (personal, social, and economic experiences of women doctoral students and dropouts) and second (institutional and departmental experiences) research questions of the study, focusing on the struggles our participants experienced and observed during their doctoral studies. The second sub-section addresses the third research question and presents implications for empowering inclusive practices in light of the participants' struggles.

6.1. Womanhood and Doctorates: When Two Worlds Collide

Drawing broadly from their own experiences and observations, our participants shared their perceptions of two distinctive and inherently distant collective identities (Goodman, 2006; Rorty, 1989). On the one hand, they had a strong connection to womanhood as a collective identity formed historically by society, while on the other hand, they were trying to belong to the collective identity of doctoral students constructed over time in the context of HE. Due to this shared sense of belonging to womanhood as a collective identity, our participants felt that they needed to comply with particular norms. As women, several of our participants emphasized that most of their time and energy must be devoted to responsibilities related to pregnancy and giving birth, childrearing, and physical domestic work such as cleaning and cooking. Because of these socioculturally constructed roles and responsibilities, they could not focus on duties related to their intellectual identity as doctoral students, such as reading, writing, and doing research. In relation to their collective identity of womanhood, several of our participants also noted that women doctoral students are more prone to have more financial struggles than men, as they are frequently the ones dealing with domestic matters and childcare, while men tend to be the ones supporting the family financially. This becomes a particularly complex struggle for single and divorced women in doctoral programs, leading a considerable number of them to drop out.

Considering gender as a manifestation of collective identity is particularly relevant in womanhood as it is not a biological construct but has rather been formed by society through social and cultural expectations and norms over the course of centuries (Acker, 1990; Azari & Smith, 2012). As members of this collective gender identity, women have historically been considered to have certain ways of being and doing due to the sociocultural construct of womanhood. They are expected to fulfill various feminine roles and responsibilities such as "life-giver," "nurturer," and "housekeeper." Because they are inherently members of the collective gender identity, a much stronger identity than their intellectual identity, they have no choice. In other words, they cannot *not* be women; among other patriarchal dimensions of society, they must comply with the appropriate ways of being and doing as "women," which frequently results in the sacrifice of their ambitions as doctoral students, leading them to drop out of their programs (Conger & Long, 2010; Gür & Bozgöz, 2022; Quinn, 2013).

Our findings are in line with other studies emphasizing that traditional gender roles pose similar challenges for women in other patriarchal societies (e.g., Barthwal, 2024; Evans et al., 2022; Kurian, 2024; Zadeh, 2024). These findings make visible how single, divorced, and married women with children struggle as doctoral students in HE programs in Türkiye and provide explanations regarding the underlying reasons and complexities of the persistent gender inequality in academia, despite the recent increase in enrollment rates as explained above. These struggles of women once again show that the recent changes in Turkish HE are insufficient as they have targeted only the access and participation levels of social inclusion (Gidley, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). The literature emphasizes women's systemic oppression and struggles against patriarchy (Afacan Findikli et al., 2021; Sultana, 2010). As feminist scholars' studies indicate, women have dual roles as citizens and workers in the public sphere and as mothers and caregivers in the private sphere (Chiva, 2009; Lister, 2003). While in developed countries these dual roles are relatively reconciled by support for women's participation and empowerment in many areas of economic life through regulations and incentives provided by legislators, in developing countries such as Türkiye, despite all structural practices and regulations, difficulties remain due to the influence of gendered cultural norms. These conflicting roles are deeply embedded in the sociocultural norms that influence perceptions of women's roles within the domestic sphere.

Our findings indicate that women in doctoral programs in Türkiye face struggles of being "divided" due to conflicting roles, as explained above, rooted in social and cultural dynamics. Predominant issues such as work/life imbalance or traditional gender expectations within family contexts continue to hinder the academic progression of women in Türkiye's doctoral education system. These findings point to enduring societal norms and patriarchal frameworks that shape collective beliefs about "appropriate" roles and behaviors for women, adding significant barriers (Uzgoren, 2020) to their educational attainment and career prospects. The persistence of patriarchal values within Turkish society, reflected in both social and economic structures, reveals an underlying tension between traditional domestic norms and the aspirations of women in HE, particularly in doctoral education.

Research has demonstrated that sociocultural norms have the potential to conflict, compete with, or support and reinforce decisions made by formal institutions (Azari & Smith, 2012; Grzymala-Busse, 2010). This is particularly pertinent for women doctoral students who are pursuing or are compelled to suspend their doctoral studies in Türkiye, where gender inequality is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and political structures (Afacan Findikli et al., 2021; Bugra, 2014). In this context, the internalized expectations pertaining to family obligations and gender roles lead to increased cognitive and emotional burdens for women pursuing doctoral degrees, making the educational process more challenging.

6.2. Toward an Empowering Campus Climate

Research shows that PhD students' study habits and confidence are linked to the quality of supervision, peer support, and sense of belonging (Matheka et al., 2025). In line with this, our findings highlight that among the array of struggles women face in achieving equality with men during their doctoral studies, one of the primary reasons for the inability to complete the doctoral program is the lack of academic and emotional support from their academic advisors, faculty members, and peers. The absence of such support can lead to a loss of motivation and discouragement to continue with one's studies alongside the numerous responsibilities arising from one's identity as a woman and the overlapping identities discussed above

(Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Krook & Mackay, 2011). One recurrent theme seen in our analyses is that doctoral students who receive adequate academic and social support from their academic advisors are more likely to complete their doctoral education successfully. Those who do not receive such support are more likely to drop out. This study has demonstrated that non-supportive attitudes from academic advisors and faculty members negatively impact the role and identity conflicts experienced by women doctoral students. Insensitive or inadequate behaviors from academic advisors and faculty members, such as a lack of support or a perceived lack of appreciation, potentially accompanied by negative conduct, contribute to a decline in students' personal resources on multiple levels, marginalizing women doctoral students. This decline includes decreases in motivation and emotional and psychological well-being, making it more challenging to complete the doctoral program.

Likewise, the related international literature stresses current norms and structures in HE that perpetuate the marginalization and mistreatment of women scholars. Perez et al. (2020) found that equity, diversity, and inclusion were rarely integrated into discussions in academic departments, resulting in tokenized and marginalized graduate students with minoritized identities. Similarly, Douglas et al. (2024) reported negative experiences of marginalized early-career women scholars at the research, department, and professional field levels. They emphasized the existence of "less psychological safety and greater intragroup conflict at the research group level, more negative diversity climate at the department level, and diminished professional climate of scholarly inclusion at the professional field level" (Douglas et al., 2024, p. 11). Others have stressed that women in HE institutions, both academics and doctoral students, experience more academic and family stress and inequalities and receive less support for work/life balance from peers and colleagues than men (Acker, 1990; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Reggiani et al., 2024; Zimmerman et al., 2016).

The literature provides extensive evidence of the inequality women face in HE institutions, and there is a need for empowering campus climates considering the recent intersectionality, feminist, and institutional research (Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Krook & Mackay, 2011). Creating sources of support for women through courses, programs, and centers provides intentional social and emotional support (Douglas et al., 2024; Perez et al., 2020; Reggiani et al., 2024; Zimmerman et al., 2016). Our participants particularly emphasized clubs and informal solidarity groups as promising in the Turkish context.

Another significant finding is that in order to guarantee that underrepresented groups like women continue their education and graduate, universities must consciously work to foster an inclusive campus environment (Palmer & Williams, 2023) without leaving behind or excluding men (Barone et al., 2007). Although there is rising awareness of the issues of equity and inclusion worldwide on paper (Linder & Cooper, 2016), universities—including those in Türkiye—need more concrete action and support for creating gender-inclusive campuses and practices (Beemyn & Rankin, 2016; Marine et al., 2017). Such support mechanisms are not unprecedented, and the literature offers examples of how to provide women students and scholars with much-needed resources (e.g., Byrne, 2000; Davie, 2001; Kasper, 2004; Thomas & Hughes, 2025).

7. Conclusion

A significant amount of research has highlighted the inequalities women experience in HE institutions. This study also shows that Turkish women pursuing doctoral degrees often face many challenges throughout that complex and demanding journey. It illustrates various aspects of their lived experiences and insights within

their social, cultural, and educational contexts. The gender norms with which they are expected to comply inherently cause Turkish women to struggle in academia, masking their academic qualifications and knowledge. As a result, Turkish women often struggle to balance the demands of academic and domestic life, leading to a form of maternal invisibility within academic settings and intellectual invisibility within the family sphere. These women need recognition of their academic achievements and greater flexibility in addressing challenges stemming from traditional gender roles. They must be empowered to perceive themselves as equal to their male counterparts throughout all stages of their doctoral journeys within inclusive and supportive academic environments.

Our findings have both theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical implications encompass the insufficiency of pursuing only the access and participation dimensions of social inclusion theory in a developing country where marginalized individuals are not empowered, considering the structural factors and power issues leading to social exclusion. Supported by significant evidence from the literature on the inequality experienced by women in HE institutions, our findings emphasize the need to empower campus climates in the country. Hence, scholars in the field should reconsider the theory and focus more exclusively on the empowerment dimension instead of addressing access and participation as the first two dimensions. As discussed above, structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and feminist institutionalism (Krook & Mackay, 2011) provide relevant insights.

In line with the theoretical implications, this study's practical implications provide insights to advance social inclusion policy and practice in HE by demonstrating how neoliberal or merely human rights-oriented practices contribute to the process of marginalization for many women. One of the most noteworthy implications of this study is the need to focus on the multiple roles and responsibilities of women doctoral students as multidimensional individuals in a developing country. Policymakers, leaders in HE, and NGOs should collaborate to establish frameworks that empower and stabilize women pursuing doctoral studies. Another significant practical implication of this study is the importance of equipping university academic and administrative staff with valuable insights, knowledge, and tools regarding the struggles that marginalized women doctoral students might experience and potential ways to support them successfully. Furthermore, Turkish universities and policymakers should take actions such as implementing flexible timelines, establishing formal peer support networks and resource centers, and providing supervisor training on gender sensitivity to maximize the potential of women students.

Overall, this study sheds important light on the experiences of women doctoral students in Türkiye and the complex factors that may contribute to decisions to drop out. While it offers valuable insights, certain limitations should also be acknowledged. The small sample size and the focus solely on public universities limit the generalizability of the findings, which may not fully reflect women's experiences across diverse institutional contexts. Including perspectives from both public and private universities could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, the research findings may not align with global trends, which underlines the need for more cross-cultural research to better understand the broader challenges in doctoral education. Without longitudinal data, tracking how students' experiences and decisions evolve is difficult. Although this study focused on women, it did not compare their experiences with those of men. A comparative analysis could yield deeper insights into the roles of gender in doctoral education. Finally, incorporating faculty perspectives, and particularly those of academic advisors, and employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods could significantly enrich future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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