

Condemnation to Stigma and Social Death: The Deprivation of Employment Opportunities for Decree-Law Victims

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Abstract

Background: Decree Laws (KHK), introduced in Turkey particularly after the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, have deprived many individuals of their jobs, social rights, and reputations. This process has led to social exclusion, stigmatization, and economic hardships affecting not only individuals but also their families. KHK practices are associated with the concept of "civil and social death" in social sciences, as they systematically exclude individuals from social life. Combined with economic challenges, this situation has resulted in psychological collapse and, tragically, suicides.

Objective: This study aims to understand the impact of social exclusion and stigmatization on the job-seeking and employment experiences of individuals affected by KHK and their families, and to analyze how these processes contribute to critical outcomes such as suicide.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 KHK-affected individuals who contemplated but did not attempt suicide, as well as with relatives of 18 individuals who died by suicide due to KHK. The data were analyzed using content analysis.

Findings: The findings reveal that stigma not only drives individuals into economic, social, and psychological collapse but also extends these effects to their families. Social isolation and stigmatization were found to strengthen individuals' tendencies toward suicide.

Conclusion: To address this process, justice must first be restored, followed by comprehensive programs aimed at raising societal awareness. Psychological support and economic integration programs should be implemented to reintegrate KHK victims into social life. Beyond the case of Turkey, this study provides valuable insights into the global impact of social exclusion, stigmatization, and economic discrimination on individuals.

Keywords: Decree Laws (KHK); Suicide; Stigma; Social Exclusion; Economic Violence; Unemployment; Content Analysis

Introduction

Stigma refers to a process through which individuals are discredited in society and perceived as abnormal [1]. This process is reinforced through mechanisms such as negative

stereotyping, linguistic discrimination, and asymmetrical power distribution [2]. The societal acceptance of this marginalization [3] and labeling behaviors [4,5] subjects individuals to inhumane treatment and symbolic violence [6,7]. These dynamics contribute to the entrenchment of

authoritarian regimes [8], becoming more systematic and leading to the complete exclusion of individuals from social life [9].

Historically, stigma has emerged for various reasons [1,10]. Key causes of stigma include mental health disorders [11,12], race or disability [13], sexual orientation, diseases such as HIV/AIDS [14], refugee status [15], being a relative of individuals accused of terrorism [16] and suicide [3,4,17-20]. While there is extensive discussion in the literature on the impacts of stigma on individuals and society, studies focusing on Turkey's Decree Laws (KHK) are remarkably limited.

This study focuses on the effects of social exclusion and stigmatization experienced by individuals and families labeled as terrorists under KHK. It aims to examine how these processes contribute to critical outcomes such as economic collapse, social isolation, and suicide, particularly during the job search process.

Following the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, Turkey underwent a significant political, social, and economic transformation [21,22]. Shortly after the issuance of Decree Laws (KHK), 152,000 individuals were dismissed from their jobs. The total number of dismissals is estimated to have reached 300,000 to date. The practices implemented since 2016 have entered the social sciences literature under terms such as genocide and civil and social death. Individuals affected by KHK, who were excluded from all spheres of society, have faced a total of 153 different types of human rights violations. Acts that were not previously considered crimes under Turkish law were retroactively criminalized, resulting in tens of thousands of people being imprisoned. Hundreds of individuals have lost their lives due to unlawful and inhumane practices in prisons. Thousands of deaths due to illnesses emerging post-KHK, a divorce rate 30 times higher than Turkey's average, and approximately 130 suicides have been recorded [23].

These practices bear similarities to the 'Red Scare' era in the United States following the Soviet Union's nuclear attack in 1949. During the McCarthy era, under the guise of anti-communist propaganda [24], thousands of individuals were blacklisted [25], unlawfully dismissed from their jobs, and subjected to various sanctions. The Turkish example, surpassing the intensity of these U.S. practices [26] can be explained within the framework of Durkheim [27] theory of suicide. According to this theory, individuals' weakening social integration and the experience of normlessness (anomie) play a significant role. Legal norms that regulate and support family and social relationships constitute the holistic conditions for an individual to feel secure [27]. Considering that the absence of any of these conditions

leads to chaos that may drive an individual to suicide [28], the conditions that push KHK-affected individuals toward suicide become clear: being excluded by family and society and deprived of their social rights through the legalization of illegality [29]. Particularly, the inability of professionals to find re-employment and the stigmatization preventing their job-seeking efforts have led to their complete isolation from social life and suicide.

Unemployment is a global issue [30,31] that deeply affects both individual [32-34] and family life [35,36]. Factors such as disability [37], mental health issues [38,39], lack of education [40], professional inadequacies, labor market imbalances, economic stagnation [41], nepotism [42], and pandemics [43] contribute to unemployment. Long-term unemployment [44], health problems [45,46], low-prestige or undesirable jobs [47-50], and incarceration [51] further exacerbate stigma, harm mental health [52,53], lead to social isolation [54] and negatively impact quality of life [55].

Although the effects of stigma and exclusion on individuals and society are global concerns, this study focuses on the KHK practices in Turkey to shed light on the national and international implications of stigma. The findings of this research can serve as a valuable resource for developing strategies grounded in human rights and social justice principles.

Participants

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 individuals dismissed under Decree Laws (KHK) who contemplated suicide, decided on a method, but ultimately refrained from carrying out their plans. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 18 relatives of individuals who died by suicide after being accused of terrorism and dismissed from their jobs.

Among the participants who refrained from suicide, three were women and eight were men, aged between 21 and 45. One participant was a high school graduate, one was a university student, and nine were university graduates. Six participants were married, four were single, and one was divorced.

Among the relatives of individuals who died by suicide, six were men and 12 were women. Eight were university graduates, eight had completed secondary education, and two were university students. Twelve participants were married, three were single, one was divorced, and two were widowed. The ages of this group ranged from 19 to 62.

Interviews

During the initial meetings, participants were provided with information about the study. A semi-structured

interview guide consisting of open-ended questions [56,57] was prepared by an expert researcher. Three participants declined face-to-face interviews and provided written responses instead. Contrary to common assumptions, written responses can be beneficial as they help organize scattered thoughts during discussions.

The interviews explored two main questions: 1-What were your or your relative's experiences during the job search and employment process after being dismissed? 2- How did these experiences affect you? Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was transcribed by the researcher. The data were analyzed using the content analysis method.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews involve a semi-structured conversation between the researcher and participants on a specific research topic, allowing the researcher to enter the participant's lived world [57]. This method, which includes questions varying in structure, content, and purpose [58], can have a therapeutic effect on participants, especially when dealing with sensitive issues [59]. Interviews provide a framework for systematically comparing similarities and differences among participants, enabling the creation of concepts, classifications, and typologies while maintaining emotional sensitivity [59].

Content Analysis Method

Content analysis seeks to determine the textual meaning of unstructured data, such as texts, images, symbols, or audio recordings Gheyle and Jacobs [60]. It is one of the most significant methods for deriving valid inferences in the context of data use [61]. The content of communication, representing the participant's intent, must be analyzed accordingly Drisko & Maschi [62]. The analysis process consists of four stages: Coding the data, identifying themes, organizing data according to these codes and themes, interpreting the data [63,64]. This comprehensive approach ensures a detailed understanding of participants' experiences and the meanings derived from their narratives.

Content Analysis of the Data

The majority (99.1%) of individuals dismissed under Decree Laws (KHK) are university graduates [65]. After being removed from their specialized positions, these individuals sought alternative means of earning an income. All participants reported facing significant difficulties in finding employment.

1. Economic Challenges, Inadequacy and Unemployment

The first challenge faced by KHK-affected individuals is their lack of proficiency in jobs outside their areas of expertise.

(To myself) I say, at this age, I can't make something of myself. If I became an apprentice and went to the industry, no one would hire me.' (Participant G-VIII).

This participant, a religious official with 17 years of experience, began their journey of seeking employment in a new field with hesitation, stemming from a lack of self-confidence. Consequently, they applied for jobs that required minimal skills and expertise. However, even in these areas, stigma and exclusion were prevalent.

'I used to be a highly respected person, but afterward, people didn't offer me jobs. In our area, greenhouse work is common—lemons, plums, that kind of thing. Agricultural labor, in other words. But there were even those who refused to take me to the fields—imagine, to the fields...' (Participant G-VII).

This participant highlights how economic difficulties eroded their self-esteem, beginning with the statement, 'I used to be a highly respected person.' After working as a teacher for many years and gaining a respected status within their social circle, they found themselves excluded even from jobs in agricultural labor-positions typically accessible even to individuals without formal education.

This shift from a socially respected status to exclusion and rejection in job opportunities particularly in low-skilled labor- demonstrates the profound effects of stigma on the economic and psychological well-being of KHK-affected individuals. The narratives underscore how stigma not only impacts employment opportunities but also deteriorates individuals' sense of self-worth and identity.

- **Exclusion from Job Opportunities Negatively Impacts Mental Health**

Being excluded even from non-specialized job opportunities has had a significant negative effect on the mental health of KHK-affected individuals.

'Wherever I applied, they wouldn't hire me... I was about to get a job as a gas station attendant. They asked, 'What kind of work did you do before?' When they heard I was a KHK-affiliated individual, the color drained from their face. Then they said, 'Sorry, there's a company policy; we can't hire you.' That was my breaking point. After that, there was nothing left... When that happened, I detached completely—mentally, emotionally. When you detach from life, everything becomes interconnected in a chain reaction.' (Participant G-VIII).

This participant, who lost the respect and recognition gained over 17 years of professional life in a single night, highlights the multifaceted factors influencing their job interview experience. The emphasis on the employer's facial expression (the color drained from their face when they heard I was a

KHK-affiliated individual) illustrates how stigma has been internalized by society Wu E, et al. and the profound impact this has on individuals.

The experience of Participant G-VIII exemplifies the direct effect of stigma-driven hostility on the labor market [66]. In this scenario, the individual loses both their resilience against stigma [67] and their mental health. The rejection not only denied the participant economic opportunities but also deeply disrupted their psychological and emotional well-being.

This account underscores how deeply internalized stigma permeates societal interactions and institutions, exacerbating the psychological distress and social isolation of affected individuals.

2. Families of KHK-Affected Individuals are Also Stigmatized and Excluded from Work Opportunities

The stigma and exclusion imposed by the state do not only affect individuals dismissed under Decree Laws (KHK). Family members of these individuals also face societal rejection and discrimination, a situation that persists in Turkey.

'Even though they were very satisfied with my cleaning, I know people who refused to rehire me just because my husband was dismissed. They would say things like, 'She's incredible at her job what takes others two days, she finishes in one. But because of her husband... we can't hire her anymore.' (Participant G-E).

The efforts of G-E, the wife of a dismissed police officer, to sustain her family clash with the societal stigma rooted in the collective consciousness. This serves as concrete evidence of the civil and social death and systematic marginalization inflicted upon KHK-affected individuals and their families [65]. The suicide of participant G-E's 19-year-old son cannot be viewed in isolation from these experiences.

• Is There a Double Stigma?

Participant G-F, the wife of a police officer who committed suicide following his dismissal under KHK, was a respected individual before the coup attempt (e.g., 'Imagine, I was the daughter of one of the most prominent families in our town.'). For G-F, who had no prior work experience, entering the workforce was a significant challenge (e.g., 'That first year was very hard—you don't know anyone, you have no work experience...'). Her initial inexperience in the workplace was later replaced by stigma and exclusion.

'After my husband's dismissal, I applied to work at a hazelnut factory, and they hired me... But later on (after my husband's suicide), the factory dismissed us' (Participant G-F).

G-F did not disclose her husband's dismissal during her hiring process (I would say, 'My husband is a construction worker; he's not working right now.'). However, following her husband's suicide, the truth emerged.

In this scenario, G-F may have been subjected to a compounded stigma, both as the wife of a dismissed KHK-affiliated individual and as the relative of someone who died by suicide [68]. However, G-F reported not feeling stigmatized or excluded due to her husband's suicide (But being judged or excluded because of the suicide—I didn't feel that.).

• Being Stigmatized as a Relative of a KHK-Affiliated Individual Who Died by Suicide Impairs Mental Health

The unlawful political practices of the state have severely impacted the mental health of family members of KHK-affected individuals.

'I remember crying and screaming... My friends there would console me. Meanwhile, we were under medical treatment—what was the name of that medicine? I'm taking Deprex, and it gives me this strange feeling of lightheadedness.' (Participant G-F)

Participant G-F's account highlights the emotional toll on her and her family. Two of her three children witnessed their father's suicide, and the entire family required psychiatric treatment afterward.

Based on the data, it can be concluded that the unlawful policies of the Erdogan regime have condemned individuals and their family members to civil and social death [65] and driven them toward suicide.

Findings

- **Unemployment and Stigmatization:** Individuals dismissed under Decree Laws (KHK) and their family members have been stigmatized by society and excluded from economic life. All participants reported significant difficulties in finding employment. For example, one participant shared that they were rejected even for simple jobs like agricultural labor. Another participant explained that their recruitment process was terminated upon the employer learning of their KHK status.
- **Discrimination Against Family Members:** Family members of KHK-affected individuals also faced similar stigmatization. The job-seeking efforts of spouses were particularly impacted by the stigma attached to the individual's KHK identity. Examples include one spouse being dismissed from a cleaning job and another being terminated from a factory position, reflecting the tangible effects of discrimination.

- **Social Genocide:** Participants reported not only economic exclusion but also psychological and social breakdown caused by stigmatization and isolation within their communities. This aligns with the concepts of 'social genocide' and 'civil and social death' described by Erzurumluoglu B [65].

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that KHK-affected individuals and their families face severe hardships not only economically but also socially and psychologically. The research supports previous studies indicating that unemployment leads to social isolation [33,54] and adversely affects quality of life Dancker.

However, participants in this study encountered compounded challenges due to the stigma associated with both their KHK status and unemployment.

The data corroborates findings that stigma-driven hostility impacts labor markets [66] and undermines resilience against stigma [67].

The study examined the multifaceted effects of unemployment on individuals and their families, leading to the following conclusions:

- **Economic Vulnerability:** KHK-affected individuals and their families have been economically marginalized, deprived of income sources, and rendered financially fragile. The inability to find employment even in the agricultural and service sectors reveals the pervasive nature of economic discrimination.
- **Social Isolation:** Stigmatization affects not only individuals but also their families, creating a chain of social exclusion. This demonstrates a systemic tendency to ostracize a segment of society.
- **Psychological Breakdown and Suicide:** The exclusionary process has caused severe psychological effects on some individuals, leading to tragic outcomes like suicide. Participant testimonies reveal that feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and stigmatization are significant contributing factors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The challenges faced by KHK-affected individuals and their families constitute a systematic issue that must be addressed not only at the individual level but also at societal and political levels. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Ensuring Justice:** A fair and transparent legal system should restore the rights of KHK-affected individuals and facilitate their reintegration into society.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Psychological support programs

and community-based rehabilitation services should be established for KHK-affected individuals and their families.

- **Raising Social Awareness:** Comprehensive social awareness campaigns should be conducted to combat stigma. The public should be informed about the injustices experienced by KHK-affected individuals and their families.
- **Economic Integration Programs:** Targeted employment policies should be developed to integrate KHK-affected individuals into the workforce. Legal measures and sanctions should be implemented to prevent discrimination.

In conclusion, addressing the grievances of KHK-affected individuals requires comprehensive policies aimed at restoring their participation not only in economic life but also in social and community life. This process presents an opportunity to re-establish social justice.

Limitations of the Study

The data collected from 29 participants provide sufficient insights for a qualitative study. However, the primary limitation of this research is the lack of quantitative data obtained from a broader sample.

Directions for Future Research

- **Mixed-Methods Studies:** Future studies could integrate qualitative insights with quantitative research to explore suicidal tendencies and challenges in employment through more diverse and comprehensive questions.
- **Economic Adaptation:** Research on the ways KHK-affected individuals generate income and develop new skills or specializations should be prioritized.
- **Women's Poverty and Survival Strategies:** Studies must focus on the unique experiences of KHK-affected women, particularly in relation to poverty, survival strategies, and maintaining livelihoods.

Authors' Contribution

This pioneering study significantly contributes to understanding the local and global impacts of social exclusion, stigmatization, and economic discrimination. As the first and only study of its kind, it sheds light on a critical yet underexplored area.

Key Message

The duty of a social state governed by the rule of law is not to drive its citizens to despair or death but to ensure their survival, well-being, and healing.

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