Structural Change, the Social Policy Environment and Female Employment in Turkey

Ayşe Buğra and Burcu Yakut-Cakar

ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, a series of demand and supply related changes have led to significant labour market transformations which have brought about a sustained increase in female employment throughout the world. While similar transformations have also been underway in Turkey, the country appears to be one of the rare exceptions to worldwide trends. During the last two decades both female labour force participation and female employment rates have declined at national level. In this article, two sets of questions are posed to explore the factors likely to influence female labour force participation. One set of questions pertains to the society-specific dynamics of structural change in employment patterns in Turkey, with particular reference to the level and composition of employment in the service sector. A second set of questions is posed to examine labour market relations and the social policy environment in Turkey, and their impact on the demand for and supply of female labour. Current changes in the prevailing policy environment are considered to highlight a certain contradiction in the attitudes of decision makers who seem to be faced with a trade-off between continuing adherence to conservative patriarchal values and the objectives of increasing labour force participation and combating poverty.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, we have witnessed the development of an extensive body of literature on female employment highlighting the significant increase in women’s labour force participation throughout the world since the 1970s. One stream of analysis within this literature uses the term ‘feminization of employment’ to highlight a series of processes with gender outcomes in labour markets. These processes include the growth in the share of international trade in goods and services in national incomes and the ensuing emphasis on national competitiveness. In parallel, flexible production has allowed firms to engage in subcontracting and outsourcing at national or global level, and enabled the relocation of production to low cost areas. At the same time, enterprises around the world have been introducing
techniques of production that have changed skill structures in a way that generates a large number of jobs where craft skills are not so important. Many of these jobs were created in the informal sector, with the boundaries between informal and formal sectors becoming increasingly blurred through subcontracting relations.

Although these developments have changed working life in a way that affects the entire labour force, they have been instrumental in increasing female employment in two distinct ways. First, jobs generally associated with core male workers have in part been replaced by more precarious or atypical jobs that could be filled by women who possess lesser craft skills but have other attributes such as docility and subordination. Second, insecurity of employment and declining incomes for male workers have forced women to enter the labour market in order to maintain family income levels. In other words, both demand and supply related changes have led to labour market transformations which are described as feminization of work (Beneria, 2001; Elson, 1995; Mehra and Gammage, 1999; Standing, 1989, 1999; Wood, 1991, 1994).

These transformations have also been underway in Turkey and several studies on the specific case of this country have drawn attention to the rise in female employment in export manufacturing and presented different analyses of the changing forms of female employment in the post-1980 period ( Başlevent and Onaran, 2004; Çağatay and Berik, 1991; Çağatay and Özler, 1995; Cinar, 1994; Ozler 2000). However, Turkey represents a rare exception to the worldwide increase in female employment in that during the last two decades, the overall female employment rate has declined in the country as a whole, from 33.1 per cent in 1988 to 23 per cent in 2007 (see Table 1a). According to the most recent statistics provided by the UNDP, there are only six countries where female economic activity remains lower than in Turkey (namely Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Oman and Saudi Arabia) (UNDP, 2007: 339–41).1

These comparative statistics, which situate Turkey in the same cluster as Arab countries with large Muslim populations, tend to suggest that attitudes informed by Islamic culture might be a factor affecting the decisions concerning supply of and demand for female labour. This observation would be in accordance with studies that point to the significance of religion as a cultural variable that can explain cross-country variations in female employment (Tzannatos, 1999) and it appears plausible in the Turkish case where Islamic identity has appeared as an increasingly salient element in society and politics during the last few decades.2 Islamic references are important

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1. The later Human Development Reports of UNDP do not include more recent comparable statistics.

2. In the 1990s these developments brought to power the Welfare Party, whose ideological outlook and strategic orientation were formed by Islamic references, first in the municipal and then in the general elections. While the ‘moderate Islamism’ of the currently ruling
in the formation of the conservative liberal outlook of the ruling Justice and Development Party whose social policy choices reflect a patriarchal value system in which the traditional gender division of labour within the family is taken for granted and used as a point of reference in the conceptualization of socio-economic relations. In this value system, female employment might be accepted on the grounds of economic expediency but does not appear as a desirable objective in its emancipatory potential. It is possible to see a reflection of this attitude in the current social policy environment in Turkey.

The objective of this article is not to analyse this particular value system but to explore the factors which sustain and shape its influence on the patterns of female employment. In this investigation, the article raises two sets of questions concerning the historical context which determines the choices economic actors and policy makers make. One set of questions pertains to the society-specific dynamics of structural change in employment patterns in Turkey, with particular reference to the level and composition of employment in the service sector. We then raise a second set of questions to examine labour market relations and the social policy environment in Turkey and their impact on the demand and supply of female labour.

The changes that have taken place in the structure of employment in Turkey during the last two decades were such that the female labour released from agriculture as result of de-ruralization could not be absorbed by industry and services. To explain this state of affairs, it might be useful to remember Elson’s argument that employment decisions against hiring women might actually be economically rational in a setting where employers do not necessarily stand to gain by employing women rather than men. In this article we discuss the legal and institutional framework of labour market relations in Turkey in the light of this observation and argue that in this framework patriarchal attitudes limiting both the demand for and the supply of female labour remain unchallenged by the dynamics of structural change. Like labour markets, welfare regimes, too, are gendered institutions which both reflect and influence the attitudes that determine female employment. From this perspective, we consider the nature of Turkey’s welfare regime, especially the currently implemented social assistance measures and the role they play in shaping female labour supply decisions.

The discussion presented in the article draws on different streams of research in which female employment patterns have been analysed with reference to the interface between the changes taking place in the economy, family life and the politics of social policy in post-industrial societies. As Castells (1997) observes, in many settings a correlation exists between tertiarization and female employment. In other words, with the increasing share

Justice and Development Party manifests certain differences compared to the more radical ideological orientation of the Welfare Party, the majority governments formed by the JDP after the general elections of 2002 and 2007 constitute the last stage in the same process of Islamic resurgence.
of services in total employment, labour market participation of women also increases. Esping-Andersen (2002) analyses the ‘new gender contract’ that has emerged in post-industrial societies with reference to two-way causalities between the disappearance of housewifery and the institutional developments in labour market regulation and social policy. He argues that the standard patriarchal attitudes towards the distribution of care work between the sexes both reflect and influence the level of female employment through public provision of care. In this regard, many comparative studies indicate that deliberate policy intervention could play an important role in modifying attitudes through its impact on institutional arrangements characterizing labour markets and welfare regimes (Bettio and Plantega, 2004; Knijin and Kremer, 1997; Lister, 2004; Orloff, 1996, 2002; Stier et al., 2001; Sundström, 2003). The relationship between the provision of care and female employment is a two-way one also because increasing labour force participation of women creates demand for care services, which in turn appears as a source of demand for female workers (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Orloff, 2002). These relationships have been extensively explored in an OECD study on female labour force participation (Jaumotte, 2003).

Not only policies of social care, but also social assistance policies appear to be important in determining the level and the nature of female employment. As Pateman (1988) problematized in her seminal criticism of the welfare state as a gendered institution, social policy environments shaped according to the received views on gender roles might become instrumental in consolidating the exclusion of women from the workforce and create a situation in which their citizenship status comes to be defined basically in the realm of social assistance. When they are not dependent on formally employed male relatives, women become the recipients of welfare. In Turkey and elsewhere, we currently see the proliferation of social assistance measures, Conditional Cash Transfers and microcredit programmes in particular, that specifically target women. While these might play a role in empowering women (Cheston and Kuhn, 2002; Hashemi et al., 1996; Mayoux, 2000; Molyneux, 2006, 2007), they might also act in a way to justify Pateman’s concerns about the citizenship status of women as beneficiaries of welfare rather than labour market participants — especially in their ability to find decent work.

This article investigates female employment patterns in Turkey against the analytical backdrop set by these contributions. In the first section, we start with the observation that in 1988 the rate of female employment in Turkey was comparable to that in certain southern European countries, namely Greece, Italy and Spain. Another similarity between Turkey and these countries is found in some comparative analyses of welfare regime types where Turkey was classified with southern European countries (Eardley et al., 1996; Gough, 1996, 2001; Saraceno, 2002). However, the developments of the last two decades have brought about significant differences in the social policy environment and female employment patterns of Turkey on the one hand, and of southern European countries on the other. An investigation of
these developments can highlight the specificity of Turkish patterns of employment in a comparative perspective. Since Turkey is an OECD member, available data allow such a comparison both with regard to the level and the characteristics of female employment. During the last two decades female employment in Turkey has declined while it has increased considerably in the OECD region, especially in the above-mentioned southern European countries. Currently, not only the level but also the sectoral and sub-sectoral distribution of female employment in Turkey presents interesting characteristics revealing the ways in which the relationship between tertiarization and the employment of women is manifested through the de-ruralization process.

In the second section we discuss the nature of labour market relations in Turkey as a determining factor in the availability of cheap male labour and, consequently, employers’ preference for hiring male rather than female workers. The third section deals with the gendered nature of the country’s welfare regime in its recent transformation. Through this transformation, which coincided with the rise of Islamic conservatism in the country, the Turkish welfare regime has been challenged by factors which are different from the ones affecting the social policy environment of southern European Union member states. While social security reforms in Turkey involved some attempt at expanding social security coverage and aimed at a more egalitarian distribution of benefits, the existing gender contract was hardly challenged through the reform process. This is especially clear in the case of women in poverty who currently appear mainly as recipients of social assistance rather than actual or potential members of the workforce. We will see how the conservative outlook of the current Turkish government coincides with the global social policy environment and shapes the mechanisms of social assistance that affect the citizenship status of women in a way that makes the above-mentioned concerns of Pateman especially valid in the Turkish context.

**DYNAMICS OF FEMALE EMPLOYMENT IN A CHANGING ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT**

In the 1980s Turkey abandoned an import-substituting industrialization strategy with heavy state intervention for an outward-looking, market-oriented economic model. Economic deregulation, privatization and labour shedding in State Economic Enterprises (SEEs) occurred along with the liberalization of trade and investment. International trade has become increasingly important and exports, which constituted just 6.6 per cent of national income in 1981, reached 21.4 per cent in 2006 (TURKSTAT, 2007: 435). Although flexible employment practices were not important in the 1980s, in the 1990s

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3. For the institutional and cognitive aspects of Europeanization as it affects the welfare regimes of Greece and Spain, see Sotiropoulos (2004) and Guillen and Alvarez (2004).
they made their appearance with the increasing use of subcontracting and outsourcing practices (Senses, 1994). This strategic reorientation has taken place in a setting characterized by rapid urbanization, after a fairly long history in which peasant agriculture had survived through economic development and industrialization.4 In the mid-1980s the urban and rural population became equal and in 2007 the former reached 70.5 per cent of the total population (TURKSTAT, 2008a). Rapid urbanization was in large part related to the market-oriented changes in agricultural policy associated with trade liberalization and the elimination of state subsidies to the sector. However, armed conflict between the military and the Kurdish separatist forces in the east and the southeast has also been instrumental in massive waves of emigration due the loss of security and livelihood.

With urbanization, there was naturally a decline in agricultural employment, whose share in total employment fell from 46.5 per cent in 1988 to 23.5 per cent in 2007. Tables 1a and 1b show that the decline in agricultural employment was accompanied by a decline in employment rates for both women and men, from 32.1 to 23 per cent for women and from 77.3 to 65 per cent for men. However, female employment in Turkey declined whilst it was increasing in most other countries. In this regard, comparing Turkish trends in female employment with that of certain southern European countries is particularly interesting. In 1988, the rate of female employment in Turkey was comparable to that of Spain (29.1 per cent), Greece (38.1 per cent) and Italy (35.6 per cent). The 2007 figures for these three countries were 54.9 per cent for Spain, 47.3 per cent for Greece and 47 per cent for Italy, compared to 23 per cent for Turkey. In fact, the rate of female economic activity in Turkey is lower than the average in most regions of the world (see Table 2).

4. In his Age of Extremes, Hobsbawm (1995: 291) refers to Turkey as an exceptional case where peasant agriculture has remained important through economic development and industrialization.
Table 1b. Historical Trends in Sectoral Distribution of Employment in Turkey in Comparison with Selected OECD Countries (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Share of Agricultural Employment in Total Employment</th>
<th>Share of Services Employment in Total Employment</th>
<th>Share of Industrial Employment in Total Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD Total</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Share of Agricultural Employment in Total Female Employment</th>
<th>Share of Services Employment in Total Female Employment</th>
<th>Share of Industrial Employment in Total Female Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: OECD (2008b, 2009a).

In Table 2, we see that female economic activity in Turkey is mostly comparable to that in Arab countries with large Muslim populations. This raises the question of whether this correlation between Islamic identity and the exclusion of women from economic life reflects a causal relationship that could explain the Turkish patterns of female employment. However, the attitudes informed by religious culture do not appear to be the only factor that could account for the specificity of the Turkish case as compared, for example, to the rest of the OECD region.

The peculiarities of Turkey as an OECD country are related to the nature of the changes in the structure of employment during the last two decades. In Turkey there was a significant decline in agricultural employment, which nevertheless remains very high both for men and women. In the post-1988 period, employment in non-agricultural sectors increased. Employment in industry increased slightly in Turkey (from 22.3 to 25.5 per cent) while it declined in the OECD region as a whole. However, neither this increase in industrial employment nor the more significant growth of employment in services (from 31.2 to 49.8 per cent) could compensate the impact of de-ruralization. Currently, the share of services in total employment still remains much lower than that in the OECD region (70.2 per cent). In this
context, female economic activity in the urban setting has remained lower than in the rural areas (Table 3) in spite of the falling rate of fertility, which has declined from 2.37 to 2 in the urban regions, and from 3 to 2.15 in the country as a whole between 1993 and 2008 (HUNEE, 2009: 11–12).  

The distribution of employment within the service sector presents another set of differences between Turkey and the OECD region. These differences pertain to the shares of certain sub-sectors in total employment and in total female employment. In this regard, a comparative overview of employment in business services and social services, two sub-sectors where women are likely to find decent work, reveals a particularly interesting picture. In both cases, but especially that of business services, we see that the sub-sectors’ share in total employment remains quite low in Turkey (4.8 per cent for business services and 9.8 per cent for social services). This compares with 9 and 16.2 per cent in Greece, 14 and 18.9 per cent in Italy and 18.8 and 23.8 per cent in Spain, respectively (calculated using OECD, 2008b). As far as these sub-sectors’ shares in total female employment are concerned,

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**Table 2. Female Economic Activity Rates (Regional)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Classification</th>
<th>Female Economic Activity Rates (2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arab States</strong></td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Developed</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major World Classification</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing countries</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-income OECD</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HDR Classification</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Human Development</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Human Development</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Human Development</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income Classification (WB)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-income</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-income</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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5. The fertility rate data are from the latest report of Turkish Demographic and Health Surveys (TNSA), conducted every five years (since 1968) to provide data on population, health and nutrition of women and children. However, the rural–urban breakdown was provided only after 1993. We justify the use of these numbers for our argument since fertility rates cited in TNSA 1993 and TNSA 2008 refer to 1992 and 2005 respectively, as noted in the report (HUNEE, 2009: 12).
Table 3. Historical Trends in Rural and Urban Rates of Employment and Labour Force Participation, Gender Breakdown (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Employment Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male Employment Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Labour Force Participation Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male Labour Force Participation Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Employment rate refers to the ratio of employed to the non-institutional working age population and labour force participation rate refers to the ratio of labour force to the non-institutional working age population.


the pattern in Turkey appears similar to that of the three other countries. In all four countries, the share of business services and social services in total female employment is higher than their share in total male employment. In the Turkish case, however, given the low level of employment in business services, the employment that the sector provides to women is also low at 5 per cent, compared to 15.2 per cent in Italy, 14.9 per cent in Spain and 10.7 per cent in Greece. The same pattern is repeated in the case of social services whose share in total female employment is only 13.7 per cent in Turkey, compared to 31.5 per cent for Italy, 25.1 per cent for Spain and 24.9 per cent for Greece (calculated using OECD, 2008b).

Jobs in business services or in social services would be accessible only for women with a certain level of education. In Turkey, the rate of female employment appears to be higher than average for women with a university degree as we will see in the following section. For others, domestic work appears to be an alternative, albeit with low wages and often without social security. However, this sub-sector does not appear to be an important provider of employment for women and its share in total female employment remains at 2.6 per cent. In fact, the results of a study conducted in eight provinces located in different regions of Turkey indicate that in five of these provinces female employment is lower than the country-wide average in poor households (see Table 4).  

6. Three provinces, Salihli, Lüleburgaz and Zile, where the female employment rate in poor neighbourhoods is slightly above the provincial average, deviate from the general trend. In Salihli and Zile, female employment in agricultural activities on peripheral agricultural land is especially important. In other words, agricultural employment remains important in
Table 4. Total and Female Urban Employment Rates in Selected Provinces in Turkey (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Rate: Urban</th>
<th>Provincial Average&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Poor Neighbourhoods&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>İstanbul</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konya</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>İçel</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erzurum</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muş</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samsun</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salihli</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lüleburgaz</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zile</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Official data on regional and provincial employment patterns according to gender are based on the 2000 census results, as more recent figures are not available.

Sources:
a: Authors’ own calculations from TURKSTAT (2002).

Household income surveys in Turkey do not provide gender-differentiated data on the rates of employment according to different income deciles. The research cited above was specifically designed to investigate formal and informal employment patterns among poor households and the data were classified according to gender (Buğra and Keyder, 2008). Research findings indicate that both men and women in these poor households mostly work without social security, but women’s access to informal sector jobs remains more limited than men’s. This suggests that the male breadwinner model seems to prevail even in situations where household poverty could be expected to stimulate the labour force participation of women to maintain family income levels.

This general overview draws attention to the relationship between tertiarization and the level and composition of non-agricultural female employment. In Turkey the share of the service sector in total employment is still relatively low especially in business services and social services which have the potential to create decent work for women. This dynamics of tertiarization, accompanied with a limited increase in the share of industry in total employment, constitutes one factor that explains the patterns of female employment in Turkey.

Against this background, the economic interests of employers who could stand to gain from employing female workers and the incentive for women urban female employment. In Lüleburgaz, the poor neighbourhoods in our sample turned out to be mostly Roma neighbourhoods where there is no stigma attached to female labour force participation.
to participate in the labour force to maintain family income levels could still be expected to lead to an increase in female employment. However, the increasing gap between male and female rates of employment indicates the presence of other factors affecting the decisions of employers and employees in a manner that limits women’s labour force participation. In the following section, we will examine the societal setting of labour market relations as an area where some of these factors could be investigated.

**Societal Context of Labour Market Relations in Their Gender Dimension**

As already mentioned, the economic and societal developments that took place in Turkey after 1980 generated a large pool of cheap unskilled labour. Some of these developments, particularly privatization and shedding of labour in SEEs, have had a greater impact on female employment than on male employment. Between 1990 and 2008 employment in SEEs declined substantially in absolute terms, from 595,794 to 145,340 (Undersecretariat of Treasury, 2009). This has affected women much more than men since the remaining public enterprises are mainly located in sectors such as energy and mining which typically employ male workers. Currently, women represent only 8.3 per cent of the employees of the non-privatized public enterprises (Undersecretariat of Treasury, 2008: 29).

However, as Table 1a shows, in the post-1980 period not only female but also male employment rates declined, with labour released from the agricultural sector unable to find wage employment in the urban setting. Informal employment has increased significantly and it is estimated that in 2006, 42.3 per cent of employed men and 66 per cent of employed women fell outside the social security system (TURKSTAT, 2008b; also cited in TUSIAD, 2008: 156).

Apart from the conditions of labour supply in a particular context of structural change, legislative changes introduced after the military intervention of 1980 were also instrumental in the emergence of a buyer’s market for labour. Labour union legislation, in particular, has rendered organized resistance by workers practically impossible. Especially after the Helsinki

7. MPs have debated the low level of female employment in SEEs and this was part of the response of the Minister of Women and Family Affairs to a parliamentary question on the issue (http://www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/7/7-0135c.pdf).

8. The military regime introduced three particularly important changes in labour union legislation. First, sympathy strikes and strikes over issues other than wages were forbidden and it was made possible for the authorities to postpone permitted strikes in the interest of ‘national security’, very loosely defined to include national economic interest in, for example, the maintenance of export revenues. Second, ‘threshold requirements’ were introduced, whereby the collective bargaining rights of a union are made conditional upon its ability to organize at least 10 per cent of all workers in the relevant sector and 50 per cent of those
summit of 1999 where Turkey formally acquired the status of European Union candidate, some changes favourable to organized interest representation were introduced. For example, the Labour Law of 2003 has certain provisions against arbitrary dismissal, including dismissal on the grounds of union membership, but its scope of application remains limited. The new labour law does not apply to small enterprises employing less than thirty workers in industry and less than fifty workers in agriculture. In a country where approximately 85 per cent of the labour force work for enterprises employing less than fifty workers, the limitations of this piece of legislation to support workers in their relations with employers are evident (Adaman et al., 2009). Moreover, the restrictive clauses of labour union legislation introduced by the military regime have remained in place. While reliable statistics on union density and coverage are quite scarce in Turkey, it has been estimated that the percentage of formal sector employees that benefit from collective agreements was 18.3 in 2004, down from 46.9 in 1985 (Çelik and Lordoğlu, 2006). Given the significant role of the informal sector in providing employment, these figures show how marginalized organized labour is in Turkey.

In the light of these characteristics of Turkish labour markets, it is not surprising that the economic interests of employers and employees have had little impact on culturally informed attitudes towards the employment of women. With a large supply of unskilled and non-unionized male workers, employers are unlikely to deviate from the traditional patriarchal view of gender roles that underlie their reluctance to employ female workers.

Apart from such discriminatory attitudes, which can easily remain unchanged in the current context of labour market relations, there is another factor which might be relevant in analysing the low demand for female labour. Female literacy and education — especially at secondary and tertiary level — still remain fairly low in Turkey. The ratio of female to male adult literacy rates is 0.84 in Turkey, as compared to the world average of 0.92. For the gross secondary education enrolment rate, the female to male ratio is 0.82 in Turkey. This is by far the lowest among OECD countries, well below the average figure for the world (0.95), for high-income (0.99), middle-income (0.97) and even low-income (0.91) countries. The ratio of female to male enrolment rates in tertiary education in Turkey (0.79) is also much lower than the average for the OECD region (1.20), for middle-income countries (1.09) and for the world (1.05) (UNDP, 2007: 335–8). These gender differences in educational attainment may play a role in the level of female economic activity, especially in services. In fact, official statistics indicate that female labour force participation rates increase significantly with
an increase in educational level, reaching 71 per cent for university graduates and 34.3 per cent for those with secondary school degrees (TURKSTAT, 2009a). This suggests that policy measures adequately addressing the problems of female education could make an important contribution to female labour force participation.

Moreover, apart from patriarchal attitudes towards the employment of women, the working conditions that characterize the buyer’s market for labour in Turkey are hardly accommodating towards women. In particular, working hours are extremely long — 52 hours on average according to a 2006 World Bank study, reaching up to 59 hours for informal workers who often cannot refuse to work overtime without the risk of being laid off (Adaman et al., 2009). These circumstances make it extremely difficult for women to combine employment with family responsibilities, especially given the inadequacy of public care services, which will be discussed in the next section. Therefore, the characteristics of working life in Turkey both limit the supply of female labour and inform the likely decision of employers against hiring a woman should a woman apply for a job with long and loosely defined working hours.

The patterns of female employment generated by this particular set of labour market relations are also shaped and sustained by particular characteristics of the country’s welfare regime which will be analysed next to determine their impact on decisions pertaining to the labour force participation of women.

THE SOCIAL POLICY ENVIRONMENT AND THE CITIZENSHIP STATUS OF WOMEN

Under the former social security system of Turkey introduced after the Second World War, three separate welfare organizations provided combined health and old age benefits to civil servants, private sector employees and, from the 1970s, to the self-employed. There were significant differences in the health and old age benefits of the groups covered by the different organizations, and the system excluded large segments of the working population employed in the informal sector. The whole system of social protection, in its formal and informal components, was family-centred. In conformity with other corporatist welfare regimes, it was of a patriarchal character resting on the assumptions of the male breadwinner model. Women were expected to stay at home and provide care to family members. Publicly provided care for children, the elderly and the disabled, as well as pre-school education facilities, remained very limited. Moreover, in the absence of a safety net for the informally employed, the family remained an important pillar of the welfare regime. As such, the latter displayed many of the characteristics of the southern European welfare regime.
Southern European welfare regimes have undergone significant transformations during the last two decades. The changes in Turkey, however, were of a different nature from those observed in the EU member states. Although fiscal pressures were important in both contexts, the European prioritization of the social inclusion perspective was not shared by Turkey. What was central to the international institutional context of welfare reform in Turkey was not the influence of the European Union, but that of international financial organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF. It is also important that the reforms took place in an ideological setting marked by the rise of Islamic conservatism where the potential for an effective questioning of the existing ‘gender contract’ has remained limited. Moreover, one observes a certain harmony between the mechanisms of poverty alleviation of the current government and popular international policy instruments, which also contributes to a situation where socio-economic gender equality does not appear to be a likely outcome of social policy intervention.

In this context, women’s access to social security was through formally employed male relatives. Perceived as dependants of working males, they benefited from a series of paternalist legal arrangements designed to provide special protection to them. For example, daughters of workers under social security coverage could benefit from health insurance as long as they were not married or formally employed, while age limits applied to sons in similar situations. Recent social security reforms have changed some of these gender differentiated legal provisions (Kılıç, 2008). While these reforms indicate at least a partial change in the patriarchal character of the formal social security system, it would be unrealistic to expect a thorough transformation of the mentality inherent in the former system in the near future.10 In fact, some aspects of the ongoing welfare regime transformation consolidate the dependent status of women which is informed by the perception of women as natural care providers. The current tendency in social care policy is clearly towards the replacement of institutional care by family care for children in need of protection, as well as for the disabled and the elderly (Yazıcı, 2008). Hence, cash transfers are offered to the family to undertake care functions, and in the case of children in need of protection, foster parenting is also encouraged. In all these cases, supporting family income through transfers appears to be a substitute for publicly provided care, which also involves the substitution of provision of care for labour market participation as the way women contribute to the family budget.

Public statements by the representatives of the current Justice and Development Party (JDP) government reflect a mentality that is clearly in line with this policy orientation. One such statement, still vividly remembered by Turkish feminists, was made in 2003 by the Minister of the Economy during the first JDP government who said that he was happy to announce that the

10. Southern EU member states also voiced criticism over the gender implications of welfare reform. See, for example, Trifiletti (1999).
economic crisis of 2001 was over and that women no longer needed to work to support their families.\textsuperscript{11} A more recent example came from the Prime Minister who expressed his desire — not once, but on several occasions — to see all Turkish families have at least three children.\textsuperscript{12} This coincided with the systematic rejection of the demand of women’s associations to make the opening of day-care centres compulsory for all enterprises of a certain size, independent of the gender composition of the workforce (KEIG, 2008).

Even before the last global economic crisis that affected Turkey severely, it was clear that poverty had become an undeniable problem in a social setting where traditional mechanisms of social protection largely dependent on kinship ties had ceased to be effective due to demographic and cultural changes associated with rapid urbanization (Buğra and Keyder, 2006). The importance of social assistance measures, especially after the economic crisis of 2001, reflects the realities of this societal context where the incidence of poverty is very high.\textsuperscript{13} These measures are frequently designed with reference to traditional Islamic charity. However, the government’s approach to poverty alleviation is largely in conformity with the contemporary international social policy environment in which the involvement of philanthropists and NGOs in the provision of social care and assistance, or microcredit schemes to foster entrepreneurship among the poor, are promoted by international organizations such as the World Bank.

A strong reluctance to introduce a formal, rights-based minimum income policy remains an important feature of Turkish policy makers’ approach to poverty alleviation. Consequently, the social assistance scene is characterized by a number of institutions and practices that involve the central government, municipal governments, voluntary associations and benevolent individuals that provide mostly in-kind assistance. Entitlement criteria often lack transparency, the level of benefits is very low and they are rarely provided on a regular basis. In 2007 the total share of state-provided social assistance expenditures was only 0.36 per cent of GDP.\textsuperscript{14}

Still, the myriad of in-kind benefits provided in an ad-hoc manner reach quite a large number of people and their significance to the poor is not negligible.\textsuperscript{15} As such, they play a role in the trade-off between employment

\textsuperscript{11} Hurriyet, 20 December 2003.
\textsuperscript{12} There are several examples in the press, including Yeni Safak, 7 March 2008; Zaman, 5 April 2008; Evrensel, 31 August 2008; Milliyet, 4 January 2009.
\textsuperscript{13} According to recent official estimates, 25.2 per cent of people have incomes below 60 per cent of the country’s median equivalized disposable income for the year 2007 (TURKSTAT, 2009c).
\textsuperscript{14} Authors’ own calculations based on SYDGM (2008).
\textsuperscript{15} Latest official figures reveal that 14.6 per cent of households receive some kind of assistance and 29.8 per cent of assistance received by the households is provided by the state (both cash and in-kind) (TURKSTAT, 2009b: 72–3). Evidence pertaining to the significance of the benefits to poor households could be found in a policy assessment report (IFPRI, 2007: 79) and in TESEV (2006).
and social assistance that women in poverty face in that they clearly manifest the citizenship status of women in Turkey. Almost all of these benefit schemes exclude able-bodied men and basically target women who are not expected to participate in the labour market (Buğra and Keyder, 2006, 2008). Another reason for targeting women is related to the belief that assistance provided to women is better used to meet the basic needs of the family. Hence, even the relatively regular and systematically administrated schemes such as Conditional Cash Transfers are given to women.

Despite this privileged position of women as ‘deserving poor’, policies targeting children at risk of poverty remain clearly inadequate, as highlighted by a recent World Bank report (World Bank, 2009a). This report, and another World Bank study (2009b) that focuses on female employment, draw attention to the lack of access to public child care and early school facilities and their combined impact on child well-being outcomes and labour force participation of women. In this setting, the exclusionary characteristics of labour markets as gendered institutions are reinforced in the realm of social assistance. As a result, women tend to remain outside the workforce in situations where the household income is below the poverty threshold, as discussed earlier.

It is important to note, however, that the current Turkish government seems to be faced with a dilemma that leads to contradictory policy choices in the fields of social care and assistance on the one hand, and employment policy on the other. While the conservative outlook of the government — which is consistent with patriarchal attitudes towards gender roles — is reflected in the developments in social care and social assistance, the existing dimensions of poverty have brought the income-earning potential of women to the attention of policy makers. Hence, certain steps are being taken to encourage employers to hire more women. For example, a recent employment policy package approved by parliament includes a temporary measure to reduce the burden of social security premiums on employers for newly hired female workers. Some poverty alleviation measures have also been taken by the central government or voluntary associations that explicitly aim at female employment creation (Buğra, 2008: 245). However, these measures often take a form which seems to be directed at reconciling respect for conservative religious sensibilities with the increasing labour force participation of women, through contributing to the family income without necessarily working outside their homes.

16. CCT expenditures, which are conditional upon school attendance of school age children and the vaccination of younger ones, comprise approximately one fourth of the total state-provided social assistance (authors’ own calculations based on SYDGM, 2008).
17. In Turkey, the incidence of child poverty (24.6 per cent) — measured as the proportion of households with children living on an equivalized income below 50 per cent of the national median income for the year 2005 — ranks the highest among all OECD countries (OECD, 2009b: 35).
In this regard, the proliferation of different microfinance schemes designed to encourage female entrepreneurship — which constitutes a salient trend in contemporary global approaches to poverty alleviation — articulates well with Islamic conservatism in Turkey. Some, such as the Grameen Bank type schemes, involve fairly high interest rates, while others are provided without interest by voluntary associations and central government administrations. Notwithstanding these differences, the common objective generally appears to be the self-employment of women in traditional female activities such as carpet weaving, care giving or cooking. Since most of these activities do not require women to work outside their homes, policies that encourage women to undertake them do not conflict with culturally informed patriarchal attitudes (Buğra, 2008: 245). The fact that self-employment in these areas hardly lifts women out of poverty is easily overlooked, even in the presence of very clear statistical evidence on the significance of poverty rates among the self-employed, and self-employed women in particular.19

It is important, therefore, to evaluate policy measures not only with respect to their potential to increase the level of female employment, but also with respect to the kind of employment they are likely to generate for women. In this regard, not only microcredit schemes, but also the recent legislative changes introduced to formalize female work at home have dubious implications for women’s position in the labour market. The changes in question are designed to integrate women doing piecework at home into the labour market as self-employed workers. The self-employed pieceworkers would then be in a position to pay their own taxes and social security premiums.20 This policy decision is highly beneficial to the enterprises that employ these women to the extent that it legalizes the practice and enables the enterprise to include the payments for piecework in its overall costs of production. It is also clear that the statistics concerning female employment would be improved without much challenge to conservative sensibilities against women having a social life outside the confines of the household. However, income that women would derive from this type of work is likely to be very low while the division of labour within the family would remain unchanged. The end result could well be an increased workload for women with a larger disparity between male and female incomes from work. In terms of the social status of women, there is good reason to doubt the emancipatory potential of these policies.

19. TURKSTAT (2008c) estimates the incidence of poverty among the self-employed as 23 per cent, without giving a gender breakdown. According to the latest (2003) EUROSTAT data available for Turkey on relative poverty rates, 27 per cent of the self-employed are at risk of poverty, while this figure is 32 per cent for self-employed females (EUROSTAT, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The exceptionally low level of female employment in Turkey constitutes an example of the ways in which global economic changes that affect all countries might produce different outcomes in different societal contexts. In this article we explored the society-specific patterns of female employment in Turkey at three levels. At the first level, we presented a comparative analysis of structural change through the de-ruralization process by emphasizing the dynamics of tertiarization which limit the chances of women finding employment especially in those sub-sectors that are likely to provide decent jobs. At the second level, the legal and institutional frameworks of labour market relations were considered. Given the availability of cheap male labour in a setting where unions are marginalized, it does not seem economically irrational for employers to continue to discriminate against female workers. Moreover, in this buyers’ market for labour, working conditions make it practically impossible for women to reconcile work and family life. Finally, we examined the role of welfare institutions in keeping women out of the workforce. The Turkish welfare regime has a distinctly gendered character. The institutional setting of social assistance in particular reflects a certain view on poverty whereby women occupy a highly privileged position among those considered to be the deserving poor. Women appear to be the beneficiaries of many different types of very limited, often in-kind, irregularly distributed transfers which nevertheless are important for families trying to survive near the subsistence level. As a result, the role women assume in contributing to household income is defined in the realm of social assistance and not in the labour market. The patriarchal attitudes inherent in the conservative outlook of the current government are not particularly conducive to the introduction of policies that could bring about a major change in the existing gender division of labour within the family. However, a contradiction can be discerned in the prevailing policy environment where decision makers seem to be faced with a trade-off between continuing adherence to patriarchal values, and the objectives of increasing labour force participation and combating poverty. The choices made to resolve this dilemma by encouraging female entrepreneurship especially through microcredit mechanisms might eventually lead to an improvement in female employment statistics although there is little reason to be optimistic about their likely impact on the socio-economic status of women.

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