Social and Economic Benefits of More and Better Job Opportunities for Women in Turkey

By Turkey’s State Planning Organization (SPO) and the World Bank

One of the salient features of the labor market in Turkey is the low share of women holding or looking for jobs. As of 2008, this share was below 22 percent as compared to an average of 62 percent in OECD countries and to an average of 33 percent in a group of selected comparison countries with similar levels of economic development (Figure 1). A new report: “Female Labor Force Participation in Turkey: Trends, Determinants, and Policy Framework,” prepared jointly by Turkey’s State Planning Organization and the World Bank, aims to contribute to the public debate on women’s employment in Turkey – and to identify ways to provide more and better work opportunities for women.

Figure 1: Female Participation Rates [International Context]

The Report finds that many women in Turkey would like to work, but they face a number of difficulties that prevent them from doing so. Women without university education, especially in urban areas, generally have access to jobs that offer low wages, require long and hard working hours, and do not provide social security. This situation was described by a young woman in Istanbul who was interviewed for this Report and who recently quit her job: “I didn’t like the working conditions and decided to quit. I was working from 8 am to 9 pm and was earning 650 Turkish Liras (TL) per month. I thought it would be better and more comfortable to stay at home.” On top of that, the high cost of hiring someone else to help working women with childcare and domestic work is an important barrier for women to seek jobs. In the words of a married woman who attained secondary education, “I thought about working. However, then I got pregnant…and now, my kids are small and I need to stay with them”. Women in Istanbul interviewed for this report stated that they would have to pay between 500 and 600 TL per month for childcare only if they decided to work, and more for other extra costs of additional household help. These costs would use up most of their additional earnings.

HELPING TURKISH WOMEN GET JOBS IS A GOOD SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INVESTMENT

The Turkish Government in the 9th development plan has set goals to increase the number of women who are actively employed. The National Action Plan for Gender Equality emphasizes that using women’s talents and skills in the labor market not only provides families with more economic independence, but also increases women’s self confidence and social respectability:

(a) Higher female employment is instrumental in building capacity for economic growth and poverty reduction. International experience indicates that getting women into jobs is associated with poverty reduction, higher economic growth, and better governance. Estimations in the report suggest that reaching the female labor force participation target of the 9th Development Plan will reduce poverty by around 15 percent.

(b) Higher levels of female employment allow government investments in education to be used more efficiently as women use their acquired talents productively in the economy. In countries with low levels of female employment, families often under-invest in girl’s education. On the contrary, working women generally are more involved than non-working women in making decisions in relation to their children’s education and health, which are externalities that positively affect the welfare of future generations.

THE PUZZLE OF LOW FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY

Turkey has experienced important structural and social changes that would be expected to facilitate women to seek jobs:
(a) The social attitude toward working women has changed in recent years. Part of this may reflect long-term shifts in the values and views of Turkish families. Another part may be pragmatic: with changing economic conditions, it has become harder for some households to make ends meet with a single income.

(b) Women are becoming more educated. In the past two decades, the proportion of illiterate women dropped from 33.9 percent to 19.6 percent, while the proportion of women with more than primary school education more than doubled. Furthermore, the share of women with a university education increased from 1.8 percent in 1988 to 5.8 percent in 2006. A more educated female population is likely to have positive effect on their employment since more education is associated with more participation in the labor force.

(c) Women are getting married at a later age. Compared to earlier generations, women are postponing marriage, which would allow them to study and/or participate in the labor force.

(d) Fertility rates are declining. In 2008, women were expected to give birth to 1.9 children, on average, compared to 5.7 children in 1968 and 3 children in 1988.

It is surprising that despite these factors, the share of women having or seeking jobs in Turkey has been decreasing (from 34.3 percent in 1988 to 22 percent in 2008). By contrast, this share has been increasing in most OECD countries (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Female Participation Rates over Time

![Figure 2: Female Participation Rates over Time](image)

Source: TÜİK. OECD Stat Extracts.

**WHY HAS FEMALE PARTICIPATION DECREASED?**

Urbanization and the decline in agricultural employment are the two main factors that have contributed to decrease the share of women having or seeking jobs in Turkey. Because of urbanization, women migrated from a high-participation rural environment (where they engage in unpaid agriculture) to a low-participation urban environment (where many of them stay at home). Furthermore, women’s participation in the labor market in rural areas has been decreasing in the past 20 years – from 50.7 percent in 1988 to 33 percent in 2006 (Figure 3). This decrease is explained by the fact that young men are becoming more educated and thus move away from agricultural employment into better-paid jobs in manufacturing and services. In many cases, shifts in family activities away from subsistence agriculture (and especially in cases where the husband and/or household head move away from agriculture) cause a withdrawal of women from the labor force.

Figure 3: Female Participation Rates by Area

![Figure 3: Female Participation Rates by Area](image)

Source: TÜİK.

However, for those women who do work, urbanization seems to have contributed to improvements in the quality of female employment. In the 1980s, the majority of all working women in Turkey were employed as unpaid family workers in the agricultural sector. Today, unpaid employment among women is below 38 percent while the share of women employed as wage earners is approximately 43 percent (almost twice as much as in the 1980s).

**CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS**

As part of the study, a total of 50 inactive women with low levels of education were interviewed in Istanbul in February 2009. The main purpose of the interviews was to understand the social and economic constraints that urban women with poor levels of education face to enter the labor market.

Most participants indicated that they face complex cultural and economic barriers that restrict their participation in the labor force. Economic barriers mainly relate to the poor quality of working conditions (high likelihood of working in the grey economy, low salaries, lack of affordable
childcare, and long working hours, among others), while cultural barriers mainly relate to women’s role as caregivers and to family/social demands for women to remain at home. Indeed, family pressure (from husbands, parents, and in-laws) is an important constraint to employment faced by poorly educated women. Women participating in the interviews shared their concern that, a working wife may be interpreted by society as a signal that her husband may not able to provide for his family. In the words of a woman who has never worked “I always wanted to work. However, my family did not let me work. Likewise, they did not let me continue my education”.

Pregnancy and childcare are also important constraints to employment. Most women indicated that their children are young and they would not want to leave them alone or unattended (although some of them argue that other family members and/or friends could help care for their children if they had to work). Most of the husbands of the female participants, however, feel that providing care for their children is the women’s responsibility. Also, the women were aware that they could not afford a private daycare center or a paid babysitter with the wages they could earn if they worked. Participants mentioned they would need to pay at least 500 TL per month to hire somebody to take care of their children. To afford this, they would need to find a job that would pay them more than 1,500 TL, which was beyond what they could earn given their skills and education level. Some women shared that they had to quit their jobs right after pregnancy: “I worked in a market for 3 years. When I got pregnant, I gave up working”.

Part of the reasons why families are so protective is the quality of available jobs for low-skilled women, who are generally employed in the textile industry, in the retail business, and/or in house-domestic work. In the words of young women who participated in the interviews, “with my qualifications, I can only get a job as cook, let’s say. And this is what my husband wouldn’t let me do. He would say that it is not worth it to put up with other people’s caprices for a very low wage”.

HOW CAN TURKEY PROVIDE MORE AND BETTER JOBS FOR WOMEN?

Policies that can help improve women’s opportunities for more and better jobs in Turkey include:

(a) Creating job opportunities for first time job seekers: Interventions should aim at promoting formal employment for women with low levels of education, and especially for those transitioning from school to work. More flexible labor market regulation may reduce the barriers of businesses hiring women. For instance, the Government of Turkey has introduced recently a program that subsidizes employers’ social security contributions for new hired women for up to 5 years. Programs like this are likely to contribute to increase the rate of employment for women, especially in times of healthy economic performance.

(b) Affordable childcare: Many women could be encouraged to work by having access to affordable care for their children. This could be achieved by promoting early childhood development programs (ECD), such as preschool education and public/subsidized childcare programs. A forthcoming World Bank report on Equality of Opportunities in Turkey highlights that ECD interventions may contribute to break intergenerational transmissions of poverty and inequality.

(c) Sustaining investments on education: Higher education attainment is associated with higher levels of female participation. Investment in Vocational Education and Training (VET) are likely to prepare women, and especially young women, with the skills needed to qualify for good jobs in the labor market. International evidence indicates that investments on VET help women to get formal jobs, and promotes gender equality in earnings and labor market opportunities.

THE REPORT

This report by Turkey’s State Planning Organization and the World Bank aims to contribute to the lively debate on women’s job opportunities. The main report and the background paper will be soon available in the World Bank’s website at http://www.worldbank.org.tr.