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Religion as a Factor Influencing Turkish Women's Decisions to Work

By Mary Lou O'Neil¹ and Mehmet Huseyin Bilgin²

Abstract

This article uses survey data collected from more than 500 women in Istanbul to examine whether or not religion exerts an influence on women's decisions to work or not. Our work revealed that religion does not appear to have a direct impact on whether or not Turkish women choose to work. Rather the expectation that women fulfill their traditional roles as caregivers proves a greater obstacle for women who wish to enter the labor market. Religion, in the case of Turkey, Islam, can only be seen as an influence on Turkish women's work decisions to the extent that it supports "patriarchal mentalities" which define women first and foremost as mothers and caregivers.

Keywords: Turkish women, Religious beliefs; labor force; working decisions, survey

Introduction

Turkey has the lowest female labor force participation rates in OECD countries with just 26.6 percent for women aged 15-64 in 2007. This rate is even lower for urban women. Moreover, the female civilian employment rate of Turkey was 26.1 percent as a percentage of civilian employment in 2007 (OECD 2008). The low female labor force participation rates of Turkey compare rather unfavorably with some other OECD countries that have female participation rates around 80 percent. The female labor force participation rates of OECD countries are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Female Labor Force Participation Rates in OECD Countries*

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006	2007
Canada	68.4	67.8	70.4	73.1	73.5	74.3
Mexico	-	39.5	41	43.2	44.5	45.3
United States	67.8	69.7	70.7	69.2	69.3	69.1
Australia	61.8	64.2	65.4	68.4	68.9	69.4
Japan	57.1	58.4	59.6	60.8	61.3	61.9
Korea	49.9	51.4	52	54.5	54.8	54.8
New Zealand	63.2	65.9	67.5	70.8	71.4	71.8
Austria	-	61.6	61.8	65.6	67	67.8

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Belgium	46.1	51.7	56.6	59.5	58.9	60.2
Czech Republic	-	64.1	63.7	62.4	62.3	61.5
Denmark	77.6	73.3	75.9	75.1	76.7	76.4
Finland	73.4	69.5	72.1	72.9	73.2	73.9
France	57.2	59.9	61.7	64.3	64.5	65
Germany	55.5	61.1	63.3	66.9	68.5	69.4
Greece	42.6	44.3	49.7	54.6	55	55.1
Hungary	-	50.3	52.6	55.1	55.5	55.1
Iceland	-	80.9	83.3	83.4	84.2	83.6
Ireland	42.6	47.3	55.7	60.2	61.3	63
Italy	44	42.3	46.3	50.4	50.8	50.7
Luxembourg	42.4	44.1	51.7	57	58.2	55.4
Netherlands	53.1	59.1	65.2	68.6	69.4	71.1
Norway	70.7	72.1	76.5	75.4	75.6	76.5
Poland	-	61	59.9	58.3	56.8	56.5
Portugal	59.6	59.9	63.8	67.9	68.4	68.8
Slovak Republic	-	61.4	63.2	61.5	60.9	60.7
Spain	42.2	47.1	52.9	59.1	61.1	62.3
Sweden	82.5	77.3	76.4	77.7	77.7	78.2
Switzerland	-	68.3	71.7	74.3	74.7	75
Turkey	36	32.7	28	26.5	26.7	26.6
United Kingdom	67.3	67.1	68.9	69.6	70.3	69.8

* Women aged between 15-64 years.

Source: OECD, Labour Force Statistics 1987-2007, 2008.

Despite rising education rates, the number of women working for pay in Turkey has continued to decline in recent decades plunging from 72 percent in 1955 to the current rate which hovers in the low twenties (Aysit Tansel 2002). Furthermore, female labor force participation rates have been declining over the past decades. It was 36 percent in 1990 and declined to 26.6 percent in 2007. However, the female labor force participation rates have increased in most OECD countries (and also in most developed countries) in this same period, except in Sweden, Denmark, and three former-Communist countries (Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovak Republic). Despite the small decrease observed in female labor force participation rates in Sweden and Denmark, the current rates in these countries still remain high.

The question remains what has caused such a precipitous decline and what is it that continues to keep women in Turkey from entering the labor force. Our research focuses on whether or not religion, in this case Islam, is a factor influencing women's choice to work or not. Based on survey data, the results indicate that religion appears to exert little or no influence on women's decisions not to work, at the same time, overall, the women we surveyed overwhelmingly support the idea of women working.

Religion and Economics

Since Weber (1905) asserted the importance of religion to social change and economic growth, there has been an interest in trying to determine the effects of religion on economics. Iannoccone (1998) writing early in the development of the subfield of religion and economics divided the literature in this area into three main categories: the interpretation of religion from an economic perspective which applies economics in an attempt to explain religious behavior; research which explores the economic implications of religion, and finally the work of those who use various sacred texts and scripture to evaluate economic policies. While many scholars are unwilling to draw a direct causal link between religion and economic achievement, there are a number of studies which trace links between religious attitudes and factors that contribute to a positive economic environment. On the large scale, Putnam traced the lack of development in southern Italy to a culture where trust between individuals is replaced by faith in the Catholic Church (1993). Landes (1998) and Stulz and Williamson (2003) also attribute lagging developing and prosperity in Catholic countries to the Catholic Church's culture of intolerance and tradition against money lending. At the level of the individual, Tomes (1983) followed by Meng and Sentence (1984) found that among Canadian men "religion appears to be an important dimension of family culture influencing earnings and the rate of return to human capital" with Jews fairsing the best followed by Protestants and then Catholics (Tomes 1983: 136) Chiswick has also confirmed the affect of religion on wages (1983). Others have found links between religion and economic important behavior relating to school attendance (Richard Freeman 1986), criminal activity (David Evans, Francis Cullen, Gregory Dunaway, Velmer Burton 1995) and health (Christopher Ellison 1991). Despite the growing literature on the ways that religion intersects with economics, there is a decided absence of much work on the affect of religion on women's economic behavior. With the exception of Amin and Alam's work which examines the effect of religion on women's paid employment decisions in Malaysia, there are no known studies of women's labor activities in developing and or Middle Eastern countries, and Turkey is no exception (2008).

More recently there seems to be a resurgence of interest in mapping the intersection of religion and economics particularly large cross cultural studies. Inglehart and Baker using data from the World Values Survey (WVS) which covers 66 countries, assert that "a history of Protestant or Orthodox or Islamic or Confucian traditions gives rise to cultural zones with distinctive value systems that persist after controlling for the effects of economic development (2000: 49)". Cultural values of which religion are a constitutive aspect continue to effect economic development. Guiso et al. (2003) also working with WVS data examined the relationship between religion and a variety of economic attitudes including views toward government, cooperation, working women and laws. Generally they found that religious beliefs are connected to positive economic attitudes where positive is defined in terms of higher income and growth and Christian religions tend to buttress attitudes that are supportive economic growth. Of specific relation to our work, they also identified that "all religious are associated with a more conservative attitude toward women. However, that effect is twice as strong for Muslims than for any other religion" (Guiso 2003:264). Feldmann (2007) in his examination of the effect of Protestantism on labor outcomes lends some support to this idea. His work found that in countries where Protestantism is the dominant religion labor force participation overall was higher and among women was difference was even more pronounced (Feldman 2007). Feldmann attributes these differences in part to religions impact on culture: "countries dominated by other religions (e.g., Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism) are likely to have developed a national

culture that does not put a high value on hard and diligent work and may be hostile toward paid employment of women(Feldman 2007: 808)”.

Given the findings in this literature, one would expect Islam in particular, to exert a decidedly negative influence on women’s economic choices. In fact, Amin and Alam’s (2008) study of women in Malaysia provides a much more nuanced portrait of the effect of religion. Their study demonstrates that while religion does have an influence it varies rather widely for rural and urban women. The effect of religion is felt most heavily by single rural women in Malaysia. While single women earned less than their married counterparts overall, it is rural Buddhist single women who earn the least and married Muslim women who earn the most (Amin and Alam 2008). Undoubtedly, religion plays an important role in women’s labor markets choices, but the role is not uniformly negative or positive for all women of a particular group. Rather religion and its role in economics is deeply cultural contingent. Part of the difficulty with large cross cultural surveys, such as those by Inglehart and Barker, Guiso et al. and Feldmann, is that they do not adequately distinguish between countries and their practice of a given religion. There is great diversity within the religions and their application in a given cultural context.

Turkey and Female Labor Force Participation

Turkey has the lowest female labor force participation rates of OECD member countries and the numbers of women engaged in the paid labor force has decreased dramatically over the past few decades. Rising urbanization and the decline in agricultural work have left the vast majority of women in Turkey outside the labor market. Beside the low female labor force participation rates, the rates of paid employment for women are also low. Just 53 percent of total female employment in 2008 was in paid labor activities. Moreover, in 2008, 34 percent of all women employed were as unpaid family workers (Turkish Statistical Institute 2008). Those women who do find work are largely still confined to the agricultural sector while their urban sisters are relegated to low paid, low-skill employment (Cem Başlevent, and Özlem Onaran 2004). Unemployment is also far higher among urban women than it is for their male counterparts (Başlevent and Onaran). In discussions of women and work in Turkey it is also of vital importance to examine the informal economy. A focus that is strictly trained on income producing work outside the home may mask the actual numbers of women who work for pay (Mine Cınar 1994; İpek İlkkaracan 2000; Jenny White 2004). Some estimate the rate of informal employment outside of agriculture to be as high as 41 percent (Hacer Ansal and others 2000). Further masking the numbers of actual working women is the fact that many who do piecework at home or in small family run shops often do not view themselves as working (White 2004). Instead, they see their income producing activities in the context of the reigning gender ideology which often defines women by their roles as wives and mothers (İlkkaracan 2000; White 2004).

There have been numerous explanations offered for the lack of women participating in the labor force in Turkey. Perhaps more than anything the transition from an economy dominated by agricultural to one dominated by markets has eliminated many jobs that women once performed (Tansel 2002). Moreover, low rates of education for women in Turkey further hinder their search for jobs (Meltem İnce and M. Hulusi Demir 2006). In her exploration of married women’s decisions to work, Kızılırmak (2008) found that women enter paid employment primarily to compensate for their husband’s unemployment. At the same time, she observed that fertility decreases married women’s likelihood to work when children are young. Additionally, Acar (2008) points to the lack of child care as an obstacle for women returning to work while

İlkkaracan (2000) and Moghadam (1997) emphasize the unequal division of labor in the home as preventing women from entering the labor market.

Moreover, Kardam and Toksöz (2004) assert that women are prevented from entering the labor force by prevailing cultural attitudes which continue to define women in terms of their domestic role. When women are able to enter the labor force they face gender based discrimination in the workplace (Kardam and Toksöz 2004). Female labor force participation rates are relatively low in Middle Eastern countries when compared to European Union (EU) and OECD countries and Bilgin and Kilicarslan (2008) attribute this to both cultural and religious factors.

Despite this extensive literature on female labor force participation, we are aware of no study on Turkey which directly examines religion as a factor in this aspect of women's lives. Goksel, however, in an interesting study, attempts to measure the impact of conservatism on female labor force participation (2009). Asserting the women are not alone in their decisions to work or not she used data from the Turkish Household Budget and the Turkish Household Labor Force Surveys to examine the impact of tradition and social norms on mothers' work decisions. In line with the existing literature she observed that the shift away from a rural agricultural based economy, paired with low education rates and a lack of childcare negatively impacted women's ability to locate paid work (Göksel 2009). She attributes these disadvantages to conservative social attitudes that subscribe to traditional gender roles (Göksel 2009). Despite her attempt to examine conservatism and its effect on women's decisions to work, nowhere does she address the issue of religion. Religion continues to be an unexplored piece of the puzzle in issues related to women and work.

Turkey, Religion and Secularism

Since its earliest days, the Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, has been a secular state. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey abolished the caliphate in 1924 and then proceeded to oversee the replacement of an Islamic system of laws with a secular legal system modeled after legal codes in Europe at that time. To this day, the population of Turkey is overwhelmingly Muslim, but there is no state religion and the state is strictly secular. Despite the state's commitment to secularism, the last several decades in Turkey have witnessed a resurgence in Islam. Since 2002, the government has been dominated by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has its roots in Islam. The success of AKP is unprecedented in a country which has seen numerous religious minded political parties closed by the courts for violations of the principle of secularism. In 2008, AKP itself barely survived an attempt to ban the party from politics. Alongside the political victories of AKP, perhaps the most visible sign of the resurgence of Islam is the increased presence of women wearing the headscarf and making demands for the lifting of ban on headscarves in public spaces.

Secularism in Turkey does not merely attempt to separate religion from the state but seeks to control virtually all religious activities. This includes bans on the Islamic headscarf and other religious clothing in public spaces such as schools, courts, and government offices. Moreover, there is an attempt to rid the public sphere of all signs of religion. Nilüfer Göle goes so far as to argue that "the public sphere (in Turkey) is institutionalized and imagined as a site for the implementation of a secular and progressive way of life (2002: 176)". This renders the public sphere a site of enormous contestation over the role of religion in Turkish life. The workplace is also a potential site for this struggle as more women in Turkey, both religiously observant and

not, covered and not, seek to enter the public space of the workforce. Specifically, our study seeks to examine whether religion impacts women's decisions not to work.

While there is diversity in the practice of Islam in Turkey, the vast majority of Turks are adherents of Sunni Islam. Within this tradition, albeit not exclusive to it, are five requirements: the recognition of Allah as the one true god; prayer five times a day; keeping the fast during the month of Ramadan; the giving of alms; and the performance of the Hajj. Some of the practicalities of these requirements such as prayer five times a day and keeping the fast may make work more difficult particularly if the workplace is not sympathetic or unwilling to accommodate a worker's religious practice. Although the wearing of the headscarf is not considered one of the basic tenets of Islam, some women feel it is their religious duty. Given the restriction on the headscarf in many public spaces, this clearly may present a difficulty for women who cover and wish to work. For those women who cannot find a workplace that is tolerant of their religious practice, the decision not to work may represent an unwillingness to sacrifice their belief rather than a lack of desire not to work.

Procedure

This study is based on a survey conducted of 518 non-working women. The survey was conducted during the summer months of 2009. Although many of the women that we surveyed had worked at one time, at the time we contacted them they were not employed. In attempt to gather as diverse a sample as possible the surveys were administered in 10 different districts of Istanbul (Bağcılar, Bakırköy, Başakşehir, Beşiktaş, Kadıköy, Pendik, Sultanbeyli, Şişli, Ümraniye, and Zeytinburnu). It is believed that each district has different income and welfare levels. The districts chosen are divided between the European and the Asian side of the city and these neighborhoods are home to various different groups of people.

In our attempt to ascertain whether or not religion prevents women from working, we specifically chose women who were not engaged in paid work at the time of our data collection. However, women who work as unpaid family workers were excluded. We also excluded from the sample women who were retired or physically unable to work. As Islam is by far the most prevalent religion in Turkey, our survey focuses exclusively on Muslim women. The women in the sample range in age from 18-55. The majority of the women were married and more than three quarters of them had children.

The surveys were administered in two different ways: by telephone and in person. Two hundred eleven women were given the survey by telephone while the remaining 307 were interviewed face to face. The data collected was then evaluated on the basis of frequency and cross-tabulation and the statistical significance of the cross-tabulations was measured using the Chi-square test. While the sample is not representative it is diverse although, the results are admittedly limited by the fact that the survey was only administered in Istanbul. Without doubt further work needs to be done not only outside Istanbul but outside the major metropolitan areas. However, the diversity of the survey still provides some insight in the interplay of religion and work in women's lives. Moreover, we view this research not as a final stopping point but as an attempt to begin a discussion of the role religion plays in women's economic decisions.

Results

Due to the somewhat sensitive nature of the subject of religion in Turkey, our survey asked women a wide ranging set of questions about their general attitudes toward work as well as their attitudes toward Islam and their practice of it. We employed this strategy in part to assuage peoples fears or difficulties in discussing religion and also to tease out what effect, if any, religion, being one of many cultural factors at play, may have on women and their attempts to work. Applying relatively simple statistical methods, we attempted to trace the effects of religion on women's decisions not to work while also considering the importance of education and marriage, two factors widely accepted as impacting women's choices particularly in the area of work. We found that when deciding whether to work or not religion had little or no effect on their decision making.

In our sample, women were relatively even divided between those who had worked at one time and those who had never worked. Forty-five percent had worked while fifty-five percent had not which once again points to Turkey's low numbers regarding the number of women in the labor force. Interestingly, despite the fact that nearly 85 percent of the women we interviewed were married, it was single women who accounted for 36 percent of those who had at one time worked. Marriage appears to have some effect on women and their work decisions. At the same time, there was overwhelming support for women to work. Ninety-five percent of the respondents though women thought it was necessary for women to work. When explicitly asked if married women with children should work, 86 percent stated yes. This coincides with other survey work which demonstrates large support among women for women to work (Mary Lou O'Neil and Fazıl Güler 2009). And yet, among the women we interviewed nearly half said that even if there was paid work they would not do it. However, this picture changes considerably when the women were asked if they had to work would they to which 85 percent replied yes. Somewhat surprisingly, nearly 15 percent of the respondents would still rather not work even if they were in a situation which forced them to do so.

Despite large support for women working in Turkey, our sample indicates there may be pockets of women who also resist work for pay. This resistance may exist for a number of reasons. As discussed earlier, the work of White (2004) and İlkkaracan (2000) attests to the enduring power of traditional gender roles and the need for many women to view themselves within that context. This may prevent some women from working at all while others who do indeed work do not view their labor as such.

Among the women that were interviewed for this research roughly 77 percent identified themselves as religious or very religious while the same numbers reported that they perform their religious duties at least some of the time if not very often. In contrast to this, as can be seen in Table 2 only slightly more than 1 percent claimed that religion or moral factors had any impact on their decision not to work. This speaks rather clearly to how little religion in Turkey appears to influence women's lack of participation in the labor force. At the very least, the women we spoke with did not identify religion as the reason they were not working.

Table 2. *I don't want to work for religious or moral reasons*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
No influence at all	412	79,5	79,5	79,5
Not much influence	28	5,4	5,4	84,9
Neutral	13	2,5	2,5	87,5
Some influence	33	6,4	6,4	93,8
Large influence	31	6,0	6,0	99,8
99 FY-CY	1	,2	,2	100,0
Total	518	100,0	100,0	100,0

However, 37 percent of respondents did relate that either their husband or families would not want them to work. This includes women who once worked which means that the experience of having entered the paid labor market does not reduce family resistance for all. In addition to family resistance, 35 percent of the women reported that the largest influence on their decision not to work derived from the need for them to care for someone at home. It appears that the expectation that women fulfill their traditional role as caretaker takes precedence over religion as a driving factor for women in this study not to work as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. *Responsibility for childcare or care of another*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
No influence at all	201	38,8	38,8	38,8
Not much influence	36	6,9	6,9	45,8
Neutral	20	3,9	3,9	49,6
Some influence	80	15,4	15,4	65,1
Large influence	179	34,6	34,6	99,6
99 FY-CY	2	,4	,4	100,0
Total	518	100,0	100,0	100,0

Lending further support to the lack of religion's overt influence is the fact that 31 percent of the women in this sample who identified themselves as religious or very religious worked at one time while roughly the same number of women who actively practice their religion have worked as well. Although these women are outnumbered by those who have never worked this still represents a significant number. This gives some indication that women can practice Islam and still participate in the labor force. Furthermore, 65 percent of this same group (religious or very religious) claimed they would work if it was necessary and the same for those who perform their religious rites with some regularity. The fact that those women who identify themselves as religious as well as those who regularly practice their religion have both worked and would work if necessary casts further doubt about the directly negative influence of Islam on women and labor force participation in Turkey. The vast majority of women that we surveyed do not appear

to view religion as an obstacle to their entry into the workplace.

Conclusions

Although Turkey has a deplorably low rate of women engaged in the labor force, our research does not indicate that religion, in this case Islam, is an outright obstacle blocking women's entry into the labor market. Despite this there still exists an effective ban on the headscarf in schools, government offices and other public spaces. Only recently has the ban been lifted in universities. The public sector is one of the largest providers of reliable employment in Turkey. The ban, of course, has the effect of preventing many women who cover their heads from working. Either they cannot achieve the levels of education necessary for employment or they are outright refused due to the fact that they cover their head. The impact of the headscarf ban on the economic future of women who cover is another area that requires further investigation.

While we did not find religion as a major obstacle for the women we surveyed, it appears that the existence of a continued gendered division of labor at home which dictates women as the primary caretakers operates to prevent many women from entering the labor market. This parallels findings in Chile of a "negative correlation between cultural values upholding traditional gender roles and a woman's decision to participation in the labor market Dante Contreres and Gonzolo Plazo 2010: 39)". Despite the lack of evidence of a direct link between religion and women not working in urban Turkey, the low labor force participation rates of women can be explained at least in part by what Kardam and Toksöz term "existing patriarchal mentalities which are unfavorable to women's work (2004: 6)". Many women have dropped out of the labor force due to limited job opportunities and family reasons. The fact is that women tend to stay at home rather than join the labor market.

Furthermore, the historic belief, in some ways supported by Islam, that women's primary role is that of mother and caretaker certainly exerts a heavy influence. As Inglehart and Baker assert "The broad cultural heritage of a society-Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Confucian, or Communist-leaves an imprint on values that endures despite modernization (2000: 19)". In the case of Turkey, the legacy of Islam endures regardless of the religiosity of the inhabitants as the religious traditions shape "the national culture of a given societies but...today their impact is transmitted mainly through nationwide institutions, to the population of that society as a whole-even to those who have little or no contact with religious institutions (Inglehart and Baker 2000: 36). Despite Turkey's secularism today, the tradition of women as the primary caretakers of home and hearth remains. Working women bear primary responsibility for housework and for children (O'Neil and Güler 2009). Many of the women in this survey reported their duties at home prevented them from entering paid employment while others reported that their families would not approve of their working. Although the direct effect of religion on women's choices not to work seems negligible, the cultural effect of a belief system that continues to largely define women first and foremost as mothers remains intact.

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