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Women in Turkish workforce in decline, but efforts under way to reverse the trend

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Story by Michele Richinick // Photos by Catherine Strong and Michele Richinick

ISTANBUL, Turkey – With increasing urbanization and deeply-rooted patriarchal views that permit gender discrimination, at least 78 percent of women are unemployed in Turkey.

Since 1990, women’s participation in the workforce has declined from 34 percent to 21.6 percent, according to Turkey’s General Directorate on the Status of Women, or KSGM. The rate includes women who work for free in family businesses, so representation in the corporate sector is even lower.



Sinem Sahin, 20, works toward gaining rights for young women at high schools and universities around the country. (Photo by Catherine Strong)

“There is no exact reason because there are invisible obstacles. Gender segregation is crucial in Turkey, and one of the main reasons women don’t enter into the workforce. It is total gender discrimination because the thought is women can’t think rational like men,” said Ozgur Kaymak, a research assistant at the Istanbul University Women’s Research and Education Center.

“[Women] rarely reach to the top positions. It happens everywhere in the world, but in Turkey it is more specific.”

Researchers assign the decline to a rising migration of women among Turkey's 78 million people from the countryside to cities such as Istanbul and Ankara, which began extensively in the mid-1980s.

Women from rural areas are at lower education levels than individuals living in cities, so their job opportunities are limited. They are often confined to their homes because of cultural implications, Kaymak said.

"The government prioritizes creating jobs for men rather than women, who are supposed to sit at home and bear three kids, at least," said Ilke Civelekoglu, an assistant professor of international relations at Dogus University in Istanbul.

Women account for 43 percent of students at public and private universities in Turkey. After graduation, they are employed mainly in academia and the service and banking sectors.

Experts agree many women don't work because their environment doesn't encourage them to seek employment, or actively discourages them. Finding affordable childcare is also a major challenge for many working women, and traditional families still object to women working outside the home, said Nicole Pope, a freelance journalist in Turkey who researches women's issues.

"The man is still supposed to be the provider. ... Women can only move forward if men don't expect to put their feet on the table when they come home," said Pope, who co-authored the 2004 book "Turkey Unveiled." "When you have those kinds of responsibilities on your shoulders, any hope of having a decent job is gone."

Turkey ranked 126th out of 134 countries in the 2010 Global Gender Gap Index that assesses countries on how they divide resources and opportunities between males and females. Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Mali, Pakistan, Chad and Yemen are among the eight countries with ranks lower than Turkey.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) promises to raise the enrollment of women in Turkey's workforce to 35 percent by 2023. The Republican People's Party (CHP) targets the rate to increase to 40 percent by the same year, which marks the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey, said Aysit Tansel, an economics professor at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara.

Both parties have promised to pay women's social security premiums and the nursery school education for children of working women. CHP also promises a monthly family benefit of 600 Turkish lira – which is about \$380 - to families in need, Kaymak said.

"Obstacles still remain," Kaymak added. [But] Turkey is very lucky because there is a young educated community coming from the bottom."



A sign hanging in the office of the Istanbul University Women's Research and Education Center notes women's struggle with traditional family values in Turkey, which discourage them from seeking employment outside the home. (Photo by Michele Richinick)

Polarization lingers between women maintaining traditional lifestyles and individuals wanting independence from the home, Kaymak said. Social and cultural politics in Turkey accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s when activist women aimed to eliminate unbalanced gender dynamics. A 1980 coup d'état brought rise to women's groups forming movements and expressing responses to rising Islamic traditions.

"But we are not so powerful. The men see us as second-class people," said Sinem Sahin, 20, a member of Revolutionary Young Women. "There is no safety for women in Turkey. We're trying for change."

Fusun Ergul, a widow with one son, has worked at Cennet Turkish Pancake in the Sultanahmet District, or Old Istanbul, for two years.

"I feel lucky to work, and free," she said. "I think women must work in restaurants because they are more clean than men, and kind."

But Sevket Aksoz, an employee at the Sultan House in Istanbul, said he believes many professions are for males, not females.

"Women are not good sellers. They are lazy, most of them," he said outside the clothing store. "For cleaning, ladies are better. Women make delicious dinners, clean carpets. Men are lazy about cleaning. ... If [a wife] says, 'I want to work,' and there is no baby, she should. But if there is a baby, then she should care for it."

The average European Union participation of women in the workforce is 60 percent. In the United States, women account for 65 percent of the labor force, according to KSGM.

“When you consider the geographic location, we are in the middle of chaos so we have to deal with millions of things. But we deserve better,” Kaymak said. “Everywhere, people want change, women want change. But I don’t think they want that here.”