

Impact of Early Childhood Education and Care on Women's Labor Market Participation

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A recent study titled "Gendered familialism in a Mediterranean context: women's labor market participation and early childhood education and care in Turkey", interprets the relationship between early childhood education and care (ECEC) and women's participation in the labor market in Türkiye by taking into account the changes in Türkiye over the years (Akkan et al, 2023). As part of this study, Türkiye is compared to Greece, Israel, Italy, and Spain regarding the variables examined. Specifically, this comparison covers a period of more than 30 years from 1990 to 2022, especially in women's participation in the labor market. However, it lacks to explain the whole story about ECEC in Türkiye, and so to interpret the relation between ECEC and women employability in Türkiye. Therefore, here we comment on it by mentioning the recent improvements of ECEC in Türkiye.

ECEC has many social benefits that extend beyond the field of education (Lynch and Vaghul 2015). It has the potential to promote equal opportunities in education in the long run (Morgan 2021; OECD 2020), facilitate the transition to employment (OECD 2020, van Belle 2016), improve academic achievement (Barnett 1998; Suna and Özer 2022), and reduce crime rates (Garcia et al 2019) and increasing social welfare (OECD 2006). ECEC has excelled in the education agenda of many countries for many years due to the multifaceted benefits (OECD 2006, 2020; Özer et al 2021).

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Dissemination of ECEC contributes to women's participation in the labor market. Especially, young mothers are seeking to continue their education and transition to the workplace (Waldfogel 2002). Therefore, the spread of ECEC can facilitate the transition of women into both education and the labor market. On the other hand, ECEC has also been shown to be significant in reducing the number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Özer and Suna 2023a).

There is a significant relationship between women's transition to the labor market and their employability and access to ECEC, as described in various parts of the study. Although there are several factors that affect women's participation in the labor market, it is important to remember that the relationship between ECEC and women's transition to the labor market is not causal. In the section entitled "Conclusion," the authors of the study also stated that the relationship between the two variables could not be considered causal. Concluded from the diverse parts of the manuscript, the relationship in question is based on macro indicators of both variables, which only allows an estimation.

It is particularly important to highlight that the sections entitled "Transformations in early childhood education and care" and "Developments in preschool education in Turkey" do not appear to reflect substantial steps taken by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in recent years. The aforementioned sections examine ECEC participation in Türkiye against the countries cited earlier by comparing schooling rates at different ages (0-2, 3, 4, and 5) and discuss the change of participation in Türkiye in a long term. In order to conduct this study effectively, a thorough assessment of the current state of ECEC in Türkiye is essential. Recent and accurate data about the ECEC in Türkiye are also vital for a comprehensive evaluation. Although current efforts of the MoNE to universalize ECEC are subjected to academic resources, it is evident that these initiatives and their results are not reflected adequately in that study.

Although the study contains indicators regarding the first outputs of the "Early Childhood Education Campaign," these results are not associated with these developments. When Table 5 is carefully examined, it is evident that the enrollment rate for 5-year-olds reached 92.2% by the end of the 2021- 2022 academic year in Türkiye, an increase of approximately 30% over the previous year. As expected, ECEC, which has seen a partial decrease in comparison with previous years due to the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic, tends to increase again over the next few years, however, the increase in question is well above the previous years.

It should be noted that although not included in the study, the "Early Childhood Education Campaign" organized by the MoNE in 2021 may also account for this great increase (Özer et al 2023). The key objective of this mobilization is to ensure

that each child receives at least one year of ECEC, which has been a long-term goal for many years. This campaign resulted in the opening of 6.700 new kindergartens in just one and a half years, more than doubling the current 2.782 kindergartens before the campaign. Mobile kindergarten projects have been intensified in regions with low populations, and ECEC services have been provided through Village Life Centers since 2022 (OECD 2023; Özer 2022a; Özer et al 2023). A program of ECEC has been initiated in Science and Art Centers (BILSEM), which are used in available time intervals. ECEC has also been prioritized in the use of idle buildings (Özer 2022b, 2023a). Within a period of one and a half years, all of these steps contributed to the establishment of 6.700 new kindergartens.

The protocol signed in 2022 between the MoNE and the Ministry of Family and Social Services enabled the government to cover kindergarten fees for children aged 3 to 5 living in households that are low socioeconomic and receive social assistance (OECD 2023; Özer et al 2023). As a result, the participation of disadvantaged student groups with the lowest levels of participation in ECEC has been maximized. In addition, all students participating in ECEC are provided with one free meal of school lunch per week. In terms of social policy, this step contributes significantly to ensuring that ECEC is accessible to all students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

At the end of these steps, universalization in early childhood education is achieved especially at the age of 5, and reached 99.9%. Furthermore, this mobilization contributed to the increase in this percentage from 16% to 42% at the age of 4 and from 9% to 21% at the age of 3 (Özer, 2023b; 2023c; Özer et al 2023; Özer and Suna 2023b). Another consequence is that the schooling rate for 3-5 years has increased from 44.7% to 51% in just one and half year, and the schooling rate for 4-5 years has increased from 56.8% to 68.2%. This represents the highest level of access to ECEC through the Republican history of Türkiye. Therefore, schooling rates for 5-year-olds, 3-4 year olds and 3-5 year olds exceeded these rates were reported in that study.

A key finding of the study was that ECEC participation is strongly influenced by the socioeconomic status of families in Türkiye. The study highlighted the relationship between early childhood education and women labor market participation with “As a result, socio-economic status plays a crucial role in determining access to preschool education for children aged 3–5 years. Socio-economic inequalities in terms of access to preschool education are also exacerbated by the expansion of preschool education through market mechanisms” (p. 11) and “According to the OECD (2017), Turkey, along with Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, and the United States, exhibits one of the largest disparities in preschool education enrolment between economically advantaged

and disadvantaged families. Access to preschool education is primarily determined by socio-economic status in Turkey” (p. 11). However, these expressions do not reflect the current situation in Türkiye. As we highlighted above, access to ECEC for the age of 5 is independent of socioeconomic status of families in Türkiye now after MoNE’s ambitious works on the ECEC campaign. Therefore, the expressions in that study do not cover the current status in Türkiye resulted from MoNE policies aimed at disseminating ECEC and promoting the participation of all students regardless of their socioeconomic status.

In sum, we kindly emphasize the opportunity to make a significant contribution by considering the current measures of MoNE on ECEC, which has been identified as one of the articles key variables. These steps were also discussed in a recent country-based report by OECD (OECD 2023). This report include and reflect foundational aspects which led to a comprehensive transformation of the education. The report covers the improvements in schooling of ECEC and intensives for universalization of ECEC in Türkiye, Türkiye’s resilience during crisis including Covid-19 and 2008 global economic recession through educational and labor-market related indicators, the performance of Türkiye in gender equality in educational context, the improvements in vocational education and training (VET system), and recent projects to improve the integration of migrant students (OECD 2023). The report particularly emphasized that “additional OECD data of enrolment rates for 3-5 year-olds in pre-primary education show an increase for Türkiye of 10 percentage points between 2014 and 2020, possibly driven by an increase in the enrolment rates of 5-year-olds” (p.4) and highlighted the Türkiye’s strong effort to increase schooling rates in diverse levels of education. The report also reviews that ECEC Campaign in 2021 as a mechanism for educational equality and mentions “various projects sought to increase access to the early childhood education in areas of lower population, or to reduce gaps in access connected to low socio-economic status. One such project involves the renovation and reopening of disused school buildings as “Village Life Centres”. Over 2 400 centres have been established in the first year of implementation. Furthermore, the associated Supporting Children with Pre-School Education project (2022) provided TRY 500 million (roughly). Moreover, the results of the comprehensive steps taken by MoNE in the last two years will provide a comprehensive assessment of the relationship that is the subject of this study as well as an up-to-date assessment of early childhood education in Türkiye” (p. 10). Therefore giving a further information about how MoNE achieved a significant increase in ECEC schooling and supported ECEC through social and financial projects will be enhance the review of ECEC policies in Türkiye.

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