

WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN TURKEY: DISCURSIVE BASIS AND POLICY FRAMEWORK UNDER JDP RULE*

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Abstract

This article aims to dissect the discursive basis and policy orientations of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule towards women's employment in Turkey. JDP's commitment to neoliberal economic policy on the one hand and political Islam on the other creates a discursive paradox, most expressive in their gender perspective, particularly regarding women's employment, also reflecting on policy making. While there have been significant legal institutional undertakings to promote women's labor force participation and grant stronger benefits and social rights for working women, there have been limited returns towards the economic empowerment of women. The most important reason for this is the excessive focus on social policy instruments rather than industrial or labor market policy alternatives. The first section will provide an overview of the political economy of JDP rule, more specifically its impact on the labor market and women's access to the labor market. The second section will present the major arguments and aspirations of the strategy papers and action plans of various government offices. The third section will focus on major policy areas towards improving labor market access of women. The fourth section will present a comparative analysis of the discourse analysis and the policy applications with the structural outcomes regarding women in the labor market.

Keywords: Women's employment, Gender policy, Justice and Development Party, Gender inequality

Türkiye'de Kadın İstihdamı: AKP Yönetiminin Söylemsel Temelleri ve Politika Çerçevesi

Öz

Bu makale, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) iktidarının Türkiye'de kadın istihdamına yönelik söylemsel temellerini ve politika yönelimlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. AKP'nin bir taraftan neoliberal ekonomi politikalarına, diğer taraftan siyasal İslam'a bağlılığı söylemsel bir paradoks yaratırken, bu paradoks, en çok toplumsal cinsiyete yönelik bakış açılarına, özellikle de kadın istihdamına ve politika yapımına yansımaktadır. Kadınların işgücüne katılımını teşvik etmek ve çalışan kadınlara daha güçlü destekler ve sosyal haklar sağlamak için önemli yasal kurumsal girişimler olsa da kadınların ekonomik olarak güçlendirilmesine yönelik getiriler sınırlı oldu. Bunun en önemli nedeni sanayi veya işgücü piyasası politika seçeneklerinden çok sosyal politika araçlarına odaklanılmasıdır. Birinci bölümde, AKP iktidarının ekonomi politikası, daha özel olarak işgücü piyasası ve kadınların işgücü piyasasına katılımına etkisi genel bir çerçevede sunulacaktır. İkinci bölümde çeşitli devlet kurumlarının strateji belgeleri ve eylem planlarındaki temel argümanlar ve beklentiler ortaya konacaktır. Üçüncü bölüm kadınların işgücü piyasasına erişimini iyileştirmeye yönelik temel politika alanlarına odaklanacaktır. Dördüncü bölümde söylem analizi ve politika uygulamalarının karşılaştırmalı analizi ve bunun işgücü piyasasındaki kadınlara ilişkin yapısal sonuçları sunulacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kadın istihdamı, Toplumsal cinsiyet Politikaları, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği

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Women's Employment in Turkey: Discursive Basis and Policy Framework Under JDP Rule

Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (JDP), under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to power following two severe economic crises in 1999 and 2001, benefiting from a single-party rule after a decade of coalition governments. The crisis dynamics in the economy left little room for maneuvering, JDP undertook the austerity program imposed by the IMF. Commitment to neoliberal economic policy continued full scale, the democratic outlook and intensifying efforts towards European Union membership have been promising dynamics for foreign investors. Beyond this façade of neoliberalism and self-acclaimed conservative democracy of JDP lay deeper paradoxes of ideology and policy making. This paradox displayed itself in multiple policy areas including foreign policy, migration, and international trade, however, it has been most vividly observed in terms of gender policy.

Turkish politics in the new millennium have been uninterruptedly dominated by JDP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. What characterized JDP rule in general is its strong commitment to neoliberalism and political Islam (Yükselbaba, 2000, p. 70). They have differentiated their commitment in these principles from their precedents with their efforts in global economic integration and establishing stronger ties with not only Western countries but also with alternative partners such as China and Russia, also extending trade relations with African and Middle Eastern countries. Kutlay and Öniş argue that Turkey's search for alternative alliances, multilayered construction of diplomatic relations suggests a framework of "strategic autonomy" but also warns of increasing dependency in foreign affairs (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p. 1088). In addition, JDP also distinguished itself from previous versions of political Islam, holding a more moderate understanding, calling it moderate Islam or conservative democracy. The essential dilemma regarding JDP's take on gender policy emerges immediately with the establishment of its ideological stance based on these two pillars. Commitment to neoliberalism necessitates integration to global markets,

by way of production and consumption. Given Turkey's limited investment capacity, Turkey integrates with the global economy based on locational advantages, cheap, flexible labor and sustained demand in a sizeable market (İlkkaracan, 2012, p. 8). Women comprise a major portion of cheap, flexible labor. There is a significant feminization of the global labor force with neoliberal globalization, as women are more flexible in employment, and cheaper due to gender wage gap (Çağatay & Özler, 1995, p. 1885). Granted that this feminization intensified income inequality and caused other structural problems of gender inequality, there has been an increasing access of women to the labor market. In the Turkish context, neoliberalism is accompanied by a strong commitment to Islamist ideology, therefore instead of feminization of the labor force, there's de-feminization of the labor force, of political life, and of the public sphere in general. Islamist conservatism, often quoted in the speeches of the ruling cadres, is a justification for this de-feminization process, as the difference between men and women are attributed to creation, the primary role assigned to women in society is fertility and motherhood, and a specific female role model is socially constructed by the government through political discourse, media, and in other social domains (Güneş-Ayata & Doğançün, 2017, p. 611, 616). This role model is a heavily domesticated, submissive figure that needs to be protected, therefore has to stay at home, off the streets, within a certain dress code, and educated according to religious teaching. As a result, 22-year long reign of Erdogan's JDP created a unique and compromising trajectory for women in Turkey. What was initially described as a moderate version of political Islam evolved into a competitive authoritarian rule, and what was portrayed as a progressive agenda of empowerment and liberation turned out to be nothing but an oppressive patriarchal domination (Doğdu, 2022, p. 83-86).

1. Working Under JDP Rule: Labor Market Dynamics and Women's Employment

This section will present and analyze some macro-level indicators regarding women in the labor market. Women's access to the labor market is an important indicator of gender development in two respects. First, employment gives women agency and enables them to not only improve their material means but also their decision-making capacity. Second, the availability of employment opportunities for women improves the chances of children in general and daughters in particular for skill-formation and upward mobility, therefore potentially holds intergenerational outcomes.

Table 1 presents the changes in the labor force participation rates (LFP) for both genders in the last five decades. 1980 was a turning point in the Turkish

political economy in two respects, the first being the adoption of the IMF-initiated structural adjustment program (SAP), commonly called the January 24th decisions, and the second being the military intervention of September 12th that has radically altered the political scene afterward. The SAP promoted neoliberal economic policies of financial deregulation, trade liberalization, and privatization, in the hope that liberalization of the economy would gradually lead to growth and improve the life standards in general. This has not been the case, especially for women's economic status and employment (Buğra and Yakut-Cakar, 2010, p. 518). Table 1 clearly proves otherwise, as LFP for both genders declined by 15%, and the gap between men and women has consolidated. The decline in LFP suggests a decline in not only employment but also in the hopes of finding a job. The already low LFP for women further declined in the last 50 years. The decline in the last 20 years suggests that JDP rule has not initiated the necessary policies to reverse the downward trend.

Table 1. Labor Force Participation in Turkey

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Women	46,23	34,15	41,81	27,61	30,88
Men	84,55	79,70	75,90	70,76	68,18
Total	65,47	56,61	58,93	48,80	49,33

Source: World Bank Databank.

The gender gap in LFP does not necessarily improve with education. Table 2 presents the changes in LFP by education level. LFP increases together with higher education levels for both genders, however, the increase in women's educational attainment does not help overcome the gender gap in LFP, suggesting that the policy instruments undertaken in education and labor do not address the structural limitations in women's access to the labor market. Ayta and Şen provide a comparative analysis of educational level and employment, where they compare Turkey with the European Union average, only to find out that working-age women in the EU, for all education levels, have higher rates of employment than the same group of women in Turkey. The same is also true for working-age men, except for working-age men in Turkey with the lowest level of education having higher employment rates than those in the EU (Ayta & Şen, 2023, p. 428).

Table 2. Labor Force Participation Ratio by Education Level

	Illiterate	Below high-school	High-school	Vocational or technical high-school	Higher education
Women	13,9	27,1	36,1	43	68,8
Men	30,6	65,9	72,1	81,5	85,1

Source: TÜİK, 2024.

Sectoral distribution of the labor force is generally regarded as a developmental indicator. As labor markets are more services oriented the amount of value-added generated seems to be increasing. However, services embody a diverse set of employment areas, ranging from business services, IT industry to more menial segments such as personal services or care work. Therefore, while the former set does generate greater value-added and contribute to the primary labor market, the latter includes more low-skill, low-value jobs that are generally informal, and casual with high turnover rates. Table 3 displays the sectoral distribution of female labor in Turkey in the last two decades, which falls under JDP rule. While there is a slight increase of female workers in the industry, there seems to be a radical change in agriculture and services concomitantly, with female labor in agriculture falling from 62.7% to 22.7%, and in services rising from 25.2% to 60.5%. This is a massive change that needs to be analyzed beyond face value. The fact that 60% of women employed in Turkey are working in services does not necessarily imply they are in the primary labor market. In fact, most of the services women work in are domestic services, care work, and home-based work that are casual and highly flexible, providing limited job security or income security. One reason for the increase in services employment has to do with government programs which promote self-financed pension plans, where housewives have the option of paying their own premiums irrespective of the employment status. A second reason behind this increase is due to the government program that pays women a care allowance for taking care of disabled or elderly family members, hence statistically, they are counted as part of the service sector. Third, women employed daily are allowed to seek employment insurance for single days that they are working, which is also reflected upon employment statistics. Therefore, the decline in agrarian employment and the rise in services is not a progressive transition, as women in services remain in low-skill, low-income, insecure segments of the labor market.

Table 3. Sectoral Distribution of Female Labor in Turkey

	2000	2010	2020
Agriculture	62,66	39,49	22,74
Industry	12,09	15,83	16,77
Services	25,25	44,68	60,49

Source: World Bank Databank.

A fourth major issue pertaining to the Turkish labor market is the high rates of youth unemployment. Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) is an important indicator that combines status in education and in the labor market and is instrumental in shaping both education policy and labor policy. According to 2022 data presented in Table 4, Turkey has the highest value of NEET among OECD countries at 33.29% for the age group 20-24. The same rate for women in the same age group is 45.25%, once again the highest among OECD countries. The gender gap in the labor market affects not only those participating in the labor market but also the newer generations expected to enter the labor market.

Table 4. NEET in Turkey vs OECD (20-24 Age Group) (2022)

	Türkiye	OECD
Women	45.25	15.33
Men	21.59	13.31
Total	33.29	14.31

Source: OECD, 2024.

In sum, women's access to the labor market suffers from long-term structural problems of the labor market as well as more conjunctural factors emanating from inefficient/incongruent policymaking. Long-term structural problems of the Turkish labor market include inequalities in the labor market, low rates of LFP, gender inequalities in the household division of labor, the persistence of informal employment and unpaid family labor, low levels of labor productivity in general, and the delinking of educational attainment and employment. Several conjunctural factors affect women's access to the labor market. First, the high rate of NEET for young women undermines their capacity and agency to enter the labor market. Second, regional disparities in accessing

education and labor market opportunities, further exacerbated by internal migration and displacement, result in social exclusion and discrimination in the urban context. Third, the gender ideology of the government reflects upon policy making, with limited capacity to control for domestic violence, female poverty and gender discrimination in all spheres of life. A fourth and final factor that needs addressing is the massive refugee influx in Turkey in the last 13 years, further complicating labor market dynamics, increasing competition for all sorts of jobs and hence creating a race to the bottom for workers, especially in the lower segments of the labor market. The absence of an efficient integration policy increases the vulnerability of not just the refugee groups but also the local labor force, as increasing competition among these groups in the labor market decreases their cooperation and hence, bargaining power against the employers.

Macrolevel indicators of women's employment patterns, labor force participation and work experiences underline the need for a shift in policy instruments, re-orientation of policies towards a different set of target groups, and the policy framework that addresses both structural problems and conjunctural developments simultaneously. The legal institutional interventions and strategizing efforts of the government are noteworthy, yet they need to be complemented with employment generating processes that directly target vulnerable and/or disadvantaged groups. In addition, new policy instruments need to be developed for a qualitative improvement for women's employment, so that more women can access jobs that generate more value-added, hence increasing overall productivity.

2. The Political Discourse towards Women's Employment

Buğra, in her research on the impact of cultural conservatism and economic neo-liberalism on women's employment in Turkey, argues that "the cultural and economic obstacles to gender equality operate through a particular imagination of socioeconomic relations, where traditional gender roles and the prevailing labor relations are accepted as natural." (Buğra, 2014, p. 150). The imagination Buğra argues is in fact concretized by a certain political discourse, through government institutions, party branches, supporting media and even with commercials and TV series and particular forms of art. The political discourse on gender in general and women's empowerment through employment in particular develops through multiple channels. First, five-year development plans, National Employment Strategy Action Plan and other policy papers provide a national-level framework for labor policy. Second, more specific documents such as Gender Equality National Action Plan 2008-2013, Decree on Increasing

Women's Employment and Establishment of Equal Opportunity in 2010, National Action Plan for the Empowerment of Women in Rural Areas 2012-2016 and lately another five-year plan, The Strategy Document and Action Plan for Women's Empowerment 2024-2028 directly focus on women, seeks to establish a framework for women's empowerment (Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı, 2024b). In addition to legal institutional frameworks at the governmental level, there are also party level contributions to JDP's gender discourse. These conventionally include the party program, electoral campaigns and activities of the women's branch of the party. In 2022, the party held a Women's Labor Summit, representative of its gender ideology and take on women's employment. Last but not least, multiple speeches, press releases, parliamentary discussions by the president, ministers and party members serve as complementary components of JDP's gender ideology and political discourse on women's employment. While an in-depth discourse analysis of all these components is beyond the analytical scope of this research, some outstanding headlines will be presented here as representative of political discourse of women's employment.

The 2010 Decree on Increasing Women's Employment and Ensuring Equal Opportunity is one of the earlier documents released by the JDP government on gender equality at work. The document underlines institutional restructuring, legal amendments, inclusion of gender equality in strategic plans, performance programs and activity reports (Resmi Gazete, 2010). While the decree enlists the legal, institutional and bureaucratic steps to be taken towards an enhanced understanding of gender equality, it has no direct goal that practically seeks to increase women's employment. Urhan argues that many of the policies introduced in the document claim to be novel while refusing more concrete steps such as public funding of childcare and reiterating the idea that women are solely responsible for childcare (Urhan, 2011, p. 324). Gender related issues are mentioned at multiple instances in the most recent five-year Development Program covering 2024-2028. Greater emphasis is put on equal opportunity rather than equality between men and women. Policies towards women's participation in education, employment and decision making are based on quotas, supporting mechanisms and in general "temporary special measures". In addition, projects and programs to be implemented for improving women's access to education and employment will be facilitated from a governance perspectives by integrating government, municipalities, private sector and civil society (Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı, 2024, p. 172). While there's numerous mentioning of special programs geared towards training, skill formation and capacity building, no clear statement is provided as to how these will be instigated. Along similar lines, National Employment Strategy (2014-2023) and Action Plan (2017-2019) are the most recent document available from the Ministry of Work and Social Security. The policy document focuses on four

major themes: linking education and employment, provision of security and flexibility in the labor market, increasing employment of target groups, and finally strengthening the relationship between employment and social security. In addition, the action plan has sector specific strategies defined towards enhancing employment, mainly focusing on information technologies, finance, construction, health, agriculture, tourism, and textiles (Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı, 2017, p. 21-22). Although the focus on information technologies and finance indicates a critical intervention in terms of employment, the emphasis is by large on the strongholds of the Turkish economy, sectors traditionally known to be major sources of employment, such as tourism, textiles and agriculture. As such, the program is inclined towards maintaining the status quo, using the readily available premises as opposed to supporting new sectors, start-ups or alternative entrepreneurial models. Women are defined as the main target group in employment related policy making, measures to be undertaken include data collection, adjustment programs for vulnerable women, expansion of childcare facilities, promotion of female entrepreneurship and subsidies towards formal employment of women. Women's cooperatives are another policy instrument promoted by the government to increase women's LFP. All these programs are based on inter-agency partnerships among public offices and legal amendments. Once again, policies towards women's LFP are oriented towards a quantitative increase in employment, enhancing the outreach of government programs and facilities, yet with limited qualitative transformation in employment areas, skills and productivity.

Other than documents that focus on employment issues in general, there are also action plans that are directly targeting gender equality and women's empowerment. The National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2008-2013, a five-year national action plan on gender equality included eight major action areas to improve gender equality, including education, economy, poverty, decision making, health, environment, media and human rights and violence (Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü, 2008). Once again, strategies towards increasing women's LFP focus on similar mechanisms of educating women, generating public awareness towards women at work, formalizing informal work of women, making the necessary legal changes for better and inclusive childcare (Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü, 2008, p. 40-41). Although the document openly states the needs for alternative mechanisms to promote women's employment (Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü, 2008, p. 29), the goals targeted, and strategies proposed remain to be conventional. A separate document on rural women, The National Action Plan on Women's Empowerment in Rural Areas 2012-2016 came into effect in 2012. The challenges women encounter in rural areas are significantly different from those in urban settings. The document addresses poverty, education and health related problems of women, and presents a

multitasking action plan including research, data collection, counseling of target groups, training programs on organic farming, fisheries, beekeeping, and forestry. A second objective of the action plan is women's employment and social security. Women in farming need to be promoted to register in the Farmer Registry System, which is known to be predominantly male. The two areas that will cater to this objective are agrarian production, entrepreneurship and marketing and the use, preservation and management of natural resources (Gıda, Tarım ve Hayvancılık Bakanlığı, 2012). In 2018, another five-year action plan, Women's Empowerment Strategy Paper and Action Plan, came into effect. A renewed version of it was issued in 2024 to be in effect until 2028 (Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı, 2024b). The common themes within these action plans remained the same, in which employment, re-establishment of the relationship between education and employment, extending of employment and investment opportunities for women have been reiterated multiple times. Monitoring and evaluation meetings were held at due intervals, in cooperation with related parties.

In addition to official documents, discursive contributions come from JDP branches themselves, such as statements of high rank party officials, party members and press releases. In 2022, women's branch of JDP held a women's labor summit (AKP, 2022). The summit was organized around three main titles: Breaking the glass ceiling, competing with female entrepreneur, and women's footsteps in a changing world. Leading participants in the summit were all women, yet mainly CEOs and other high rank managers of prominent Turkish firms. The organization of the summit represented the commitment of JDP to neoliberal economic principles and the priority given to private sector in Turkey. The exclusion of working women, blue collar women, the disregard for informal employment of women and ignorance towards structural problems women face in the labor market characterize the positive yet illusionary attitude of the party towards women's economic status.

3. Policies Promoting Women's Employment (or not)

There are five major policy areas that directly or indirectly contribute to women's economic empowerment through employment. First and foremost, gender equality as a policy area tackles with structural problems including gender division of labor, gender wage gap, discrimination at work and more specific issues such as mobbing, sexual harassment and violence. Policies range from various legal institutional statements and strategies to affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, in certain cases quotas for women and other

mechanisms of positive discrimination. Second, education policy is also central for women's economic empowerment, by way of re-establishing the ties between education and employment, reforming vocational studies with respect to the needs of a changing labor market and overcoming gender inequality by extending educational opportunities for women. Not only the amount of schooling but also the specific areas of schooling are important in tackling with gender inequality. There is an increasing effort to direct younger generations into science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education, partly for the aim of giving women better working opportunities in the primary labor market. Third, industrial policy, state planning towards increasing productive capacity in the real economy is central for women's empowerment. Programs towards supporting female entrepreneurs, training for women's start-ups, microcrediting and promotion of cooperatives, as well as developing the necessary physical and web-based infrastructure for trade are central for business development. However, it is also central for women to be involved in the decision-making process of policy circles for target-oriented policy making. Research and development investments and channeling technology transfer would also work towards opening room for women to invest, trade and work. Fourth, labor policy not only regulates the labor market but also aims to secure employment for all, promotes integration of different segments in society into the labor market and to improve labor productivity in line with macroeconomic goals. While there has been greater reliance on active labor market policies, training services and lifelong learning programs for adult training in the neoliberal era, labor policy also includes instruments such as skill formation and capacity building, employment quotas for vulnerable groups, formalizing informal employment and getting unpaid family labor in record. Finally, social policy is an integral component of the policy set towards women's economic empowerment through employment. In addition to more general elements such as social security premiums, pension plans, social benefits such as health care, sick leave and paid holidays, gender based social policy focuses on maternal leave, child support, availability of childcare at work, formalization of domestic work and reflection of its value in the tax system. In sum, there are multiple policy areas that have an impact on women's employment, hence empowerment. The unique combination of these policy instruments by different governments indicates to what extent a government prioritizes women in the labor market. It is in this context that the policy set employed by the JDP government needs to be analyzed.

Gender Policy

The agenda of gender policy is not limited to women's economic status, employment issues or wage inequality. Gender policy cover a wide array of

issues ranging from violence against women to child brides, women's political participation to accessing health care, or from economic participation to educational gaps. These issues do not preside over each other and are closely linked, hence requiring a full-scale attack on all problem areas. Gender inequality as a structural problem needs to be addressed by employing several policy instruments simultaneously. Multiple steps have been initiated towards gender equality and gender related social problems under JDP rule. In 2004, Articles 9 and 10 of the constitution were amended to improve gender equality in accordance with the international treaties that were ratified. In 2009, Equal Opportunity Commission for Men and Women was established by Law No. 5840 (Resmi Gazete, 2009). In 2010, further legal improvements were made on Article 10 of the constitution, underlining equality of precautionary measures taken by the state. In 2011, the name of the ministry responsible for gender policy changed from "Ministry of State Responsible from Women and the Family" to "Ministry of Family and Social Policy", with a deliberate attempt to erase women from the institutional discourse.

Gender policy has to generate practical outcomes in order to overcome structural inequalities. Legal institutional changes without enforcement serve to keep the status quo. Rather than providing for women, handing them social benefits without having to work, without having to leave the house, it has to open up room for women in the public sphere where they can socialize, interact and learn from each other. Job placement needs to be an integral part of gender policy, where women, especially those with dire economic need, can experience work and its returns. Linking education and labor is important, however, without job placement, there will be no actual benefits for women or the labor market. Adult education and lifelong learning programs are also important to integrate women who are at a later age to the empowerment process. Finally, giving women a voice in organized activity, in civil society, in political parties and in education will increase their agency at work and in life. Organizing women of all backgrounds, irrespective of their social and economic status or educational attainment is important for opening up room for their agency.

Education Policy

Gender inequality in education and schooling is another structural problem that directly impacts women's access to the labor market. A very basic indicator is the literacy rate, where 87% of the illiterate individuals in Turkey are women. Since JDP came to power there have been multiple attempts through public-private partnerships to overcome gender inequality in education, Baba Beni Okula Gönder (Daddy, send me to school), Kardelenler (Snowdrops), Eđitime %100 Destek (100% Support for Education), Haydi Kızlar Okula (Girls Go to

School). Most importantly, government provided 100% tax exemption to charities supporting or investing in education. In addition, the quotas for the Open Education System at both high school and higher education levels increased considerably to include students from lower income levels. The enrollments in these programs increased drastically in the last few years as the country is going through a hyperinflationist economic crisis. Finally, Council of Higher Education allocated free slots for women over 34 to enroll in the university without taking the university entrance exam. The five areas in which they can enroll are Child Development, Turkish Language and Literature, Philosophy, Sociology and History (YÖK, 2023).

Industrial Policy

The most extended policy instrument towards women in industry is operated by Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization (KOSGEB), providing financial and technical assistance to female entrepreneurs. Financial credits have long-term payment plans with low interest rates, giving business to become resilient and sustainable. In an official statement in January 2024, Minister of Industry and Technology stated that 56,654 women have been employed, 49,500 micro and small size businesses have been supported in the last two years, with a funding of 14 billion TL (Sanayi ve Teknoloji Bakanlığı, 2024). KOSGEB has been the most important agent in facilitating industrial policy towards women. It has supported women not just financially but also with technical support, through training programs and by monitoring and evaluation activities and field research. Several local projects have been supported in cooperation with regional development agencies, municipalities and other public and private partnerships. In addition, multiple projects facilitated by public-private partnerships supported female entrepreneurs and working women. One such project, Annemin İşi Benim Geleceğim (My Mother's Job is My Future), facilitated by Ministry of Family and Social Security, Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology and Borusan Holding in 2019, established kindergartens in 10 industrial districts in four cities to promote employment of women (Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı, 2024a). Filli Boya, a national paint company worked together with Turkish Employer Agency (İŞKUR) in 2016 to train women between the ages of 20 and 50 to become painters and work in the industry. Ministry of Family and Social Security partnered with The Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey (KAGIDER) to help young women between the ages of 18 and 30 to develop their entrepreneurship ideas (KAGIDER, 2024). More recently, Ministry of Family and Social Security worked together with Limak Association, a civil society initiative of Limak Holding, to promote STEM education among young women, under the project

Türkiye'nin Mühendis Kızları (Engineer Girls of Turkey) (Türkiye'nin Mühendis Kızları, 2024). Project based partnerships are not limited to the national level or to public-private partnerships, in other cases European Union (EU), The World Bank (WB), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have also worked with multiple government agents to promote women's employment.

There has been a flourishing of cooperatives in general and women's cooperatives in particular in the last two decades. Cooperativism in Turkey has traditionally been more state centric, as cooperatives were established by the state in the early republican era as part of the national developmental strategy. As Turkey moved from etatism towards a more liberal economic orientation, cooperativism was labelled as a communist endeavor and lost its popularity. However, in the last two decades there has been a revival of the cooperative ideal, mainly because of disguised unemployment in the rural economy, second because the neoliberal state lost its capacity to incorporate marginalized segments of the labor force into formal employment. Cooperatives are now regarded as a lifeline for rural population, women, refugees and other groups. In the case of women, both the central government and municipal governments support the establishment of women's cooperatives, support them with technical expertise, training programs, allocation of space and public procurement of produce. Some such cooperatives have been established with external funding from the WB, EU or the UNDP. While there are multiple successful women's cooperatives, there are also many others that fail in short time, cannot grow as expected or cannot provide economic benefits to its partners. Especially project-based cooperatives established by external funding have limited autonomy in their operations, decision making and production processes. Some structural problems regarding women's cooperatives in Turkey include reproduction of patriarchal relations through cooperatives, the use of regional biases in discourses of civil society organizations supporting cooperatives, and the diversity of civil society initiatives in their approach towards women's agency (Kurtege Sefer, 2024, p. 118-119).

Labor Policy

Women's economic empowerment requires policies that directly and deliberately increase women's access to the labor market and employment opportunities. This means not just skill formation or capacity building but also a follow up process of job placement and monitoring. Employment quotas for businesses over a certain size, employment quotas in the public sector could be other alternatives that directly increase women's employment. In the Turkish context, labor policy, employment generation and job placement are the least

sought policy alternative. Within labor policy framework, legal amendments have precedence over practical changes. In 2007, home based production using non-industrial home appliances was given tax exemption to promote women producing at home. In addition, an action plan for empowering women in the rural areas was put in effect in 2012. Third, an amendment on Law No. 657 on civil servants in 2013 extended the duration of evening working hours exemption for women. Therefore, labor policy changes remain limited and only focus on certain legal improvements without directly increasing the number of women accessing the labor market. Also, legal improvements do not necessarily contribute to skill formation, production of more value-added or labor productivity.

Social Policy

Social policy instruments are incentives that support and/or complement women's empowerment through employment, yet they do not directly generate employment. The extended use of social policy instruments rather than labor policy or industrial policy options suggests that the objective of policy makers is not employment generation but providing women social benefits to maintain their wellbeing. One of the first policies initiated under JDP rule in 2003 was the inclusion of female farmers in employment insurance, whether they were heads of their households or not. This was followed by a more extended social security reform and general health insurance scheme in 2008, which was a complete redesigning of the social security system, including days required for retirement, age limits in retirement and matching pension plans and premiums. The social security reforms of 2008 were by far the most overextended transformations in the system, gradually extending retirement age and decreasing the percentage share of income during retirement. Further social policy changes aimed to contribute to women's social rights. E-government system enabled a user-friendly entry of social security premiums for dayworkers. Social Security Institution enabled the Additional Employment Incentive brought by Law No. 6111; employers were provided with a government incentive covering the social security premiums of new employees. However, the incentive was conditional based on highly selective criteria. In addition, a special arrangement came into effect which provided an optional retirement plan for those who have not completed the required number of workdays for retirement, giving them a chance to pay the premium for their missing days and hence qualify for a pension. In all these arrangements, there are various sorts of conditionalities, exceptionalisms, special arrangements and laborious bureaucratic load.

A considerable part of gender-related social policy focus on motherhood. JDP employs gender-related social policy in a way to compensate for the time dedicated to maternal responsibilities rather than keeping women in the labor market and promoting employment during and after motherhood. As such, the design of gender-related social policy prioritizes motherhood over women's employment, in line with the conservative ideology of state patriarchy. A prime example of this is what is called maternity leave related premium debt, according to which a woman who has employment before giving birth and has already paid social security premiums qualifies for a chance to pay premiums for the days spent on maternity leave. A woman can qualify for 720 workdays for each birth, up three births, totaling a sum of 2160 workdays. At face value, it looks like a nice gesture for women falling out of employment due to motherhood, it in fact imposes a self-paid premium package and 40% of the workdays required for retirement, without even having to work. In real terms, however, women have to finance a sizeable lump sum amount to cover the premium debt, and retirement without having to work full term has detrimental social implications for women's autonomy, economic independence, socialization and empowerment. Granting women rights in a top-down manner rips off the agency they would normally have by participating in society, engaging in productive schemes in the labor market, and accessing the public domain. A similar policy instrument used towards women has been care work and care allowance for women taking care of elderly or disabled family members. The eligibility criteria seek severe disability of a family member requiring permanent care and a household income level lower than 30% of the minimum wage. As of 2024, care allowance is 9.077 TL, slightly more than 50% of the minimum wage and approximately 550.000 people qualify for it. Once again, while it seems to be a positive contribution to the needy households, the eligibility criteria together with the low level of care allowance prevents women and their households from seeking better employment options, pushing many household members into informal employment in order not to lose the care allowance, and keeping these households in the lower income levels. If many of these women were given access to the labor market to seek full-time jobs, they would at least qualify for the minimum wage, which is twice the care allowance. Other social policy plans that prioritize motherhood include government funding for IVF treatment for couples that have exhausted all other medical treatments of infertility. Although this is a rather costly treatment and not successful in all cases, Turkish government covers treatment costs up to two trials. In addition, maternity leave is also granted for those families opting for adoption, given that they are adopting an infant younger than the age of three. Two other programs were initiated by the Ministry of Family and Social Security for the purpose of supporting women at home. First, Operation to Support Women's Formal Employment through Home-

Based Child Care Services, a European Union funded project put into operation in İzmir, Bursa and Antalya between 2015 and 2017 targeted 5000 mother and 5000 childcare workers, where mothers were granted 300 euros with which they would employ child care on a formal basis, a mechanism aiming a win-win situation for mothers to return to formal employment and for caretakers to access formal education (SGK, 2024). Second, the EDU-CARE project, funded 85% by the EU and 15% by the Turkish government, became operational between 2019 and 2022, targeting formal employment of 3700 mothers and 3700 childcare providers. The project granted a monthly allowance for mothers to be used towards employment of childcare on a formal basis, in addition, granted a one-time 200-euro allowance to care providers to receive and education to become a certified childcare provider (SGK, 2022). Both projects promote formal employment of women, yet the limited scope of such projects suggest that they are only pilot studies that would at best increase public awareness and serve as a learning process. However, a long-term structural transformation requires full scale government involvement as opposed to external sources of funding, and the employment of not just financial resources but human resources and institutional capacity to expand the outreach of similar programs, in the form of an intensified effort to formalize the informal labor of women.

4. When all is said but not done: Persistent Inequalities for Women in the Labor Market

The political discourse towards women's empowerment in general and employment in particular represents an awareness, and a recognition of the persistent inequalities women encounter and of the structural problems in the labor market limiting chances of women in accessing decent jobs. Conventional wisdom on increasing schooling, reestablishing a link between education and labor market or simply increasing women's labor force participation is present in the discursive representation of JDP rule, however, there is a lack of innovative strategies to diversify policy instruments, an absence of job placement, job creation or work sharing schemes that may open up room for women in the labor market or alternative business models such as social and solidarity economy (SSE) or employee stock option plans (ESOP). Strategy papers and action plans simply reiterate existing policies and hardly aim for transcending the status quo.

Political discourse is not limited to the official documents and the policy objectives presented here. Presidential speeches, party programs and social campaigns also expose the gender perspective of JDP. As early as 2008, President Erdoğan advised women to have three children for the sake of a strong economy and a strong nation, on multiple occasions (Hürriyet, 2008). In 2014, President

Erdoğan openly stated that gender equality is against creation, and “What women need is not equality but being of equal value.” (BBC, 2014). In a meeting with the muftis in 2022, Erdoğan clearly stated that the strength of a nation was directly associated with strong families, and religious clergy had direct responsibility to promote familial values during religious ceremonies and in everyday life: “Stating that the Presidency of Religious Affairs has a great responsibility regarding the institution of family, President Erdoğan said that the issue of family should be discussed every Friday not only from the altar in the mosque but also from the pulpit.” (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2022). With strong opposition to LGBT identity and rights in Turkey, Erdoğan also underlined that it posed a serious threat against the Turkish family structure, and that “It has shown how important is our call for three children at every occasion.” 2025 has been declared as “the Year of the Family” in Turkey, in order to promote family values and reverse declining fertility rates in the country (Euronews, 2025). Overall, women have been incorporated in the political discourse of the government mainly within the context of the family and not as equal members of society as men. LGBT individuals have also been ostracized as delinquents, used as evidence to support the centrality of the family as an institution. Hence women’s empowerment through employment has become a derivative outcome of governments gender perspective, which prioritizes the family and its role in maintaining the nation.

The first defining feature of policy making on women’s empowerment through employment is the absence of universal coverage. In all policy areas projects based on public-private partnerships and external funding dominate agendas. Projects become operational in select locations, on a conditional basis and with strict eligibility criteria. As a result, the outreach is limited to a select group of beneficiaries, for a certain duration, rarely with a follow up scheme for long term sustainability. A second common feature of policies is the heavy reliance of government on partnerships with international governmental organizations or non-governmental organizations. There has been a massive erosion of state capacity under neoliberalism, partly because of the retreat of the state from multiple policy areas for the sake of a free-market economy and partly because the state has lost significant extents of revenue due to deregulation. The state has now limited resources, both material and human, to invest in policy making. Hence the universal provision of rights and benefits by the state has been heavily undermined. This brings forth a third common feature of policy making, namely that the state, given its limited resources and declining capacity, mainly engages in legal institutional changes rather than structural transformations. There has been a mass production of reports, strategy documents, action plans by government agencies and their partners over the last two decades. Endless meetings, conferences, workshops have been held, in the name of inclusiveness

and partnerships under a governance framework. Despite the intense efforts of experts and technocrats, little has changed in practice. The transformation in policy making suggests that building a discourse to legitimize government action and dominant ideology held precedence over policy outcomes and generating change. Fourth and final limitation of policy making is the heavy emphasis on quantitative changes in women's LFP and an overall neglect of qualitative transformations in women's employment. A simple nominal increase in women's access to the labor market may generate some empowerment due to material returns, however, it will be limited when women are employed in sectors traditionally associated with gender division of labor, such as textiles, tourism and agriculture.

This research has presented what has been done by JDP government towards women's economic empowerment through employment. First, the aggregate data on women's employment suggests a transfer of employment from agriculture to services. However, as overall LFP remains around 30%, such a transfer only suggests formalization of informal employment rather than a structural increase. Second, women with higher education degrees have the highest LFP rate, however, they only make up 20% of the total female population. In the middle and the long run, educational goals should exceed schooling but focus on high quality higher education to achieve better LFP rates for women. Third, social policy instruments have been more widely used than industrial or labor policy instruments, indicating that the ultimate objective of JDP rule has not been increasing employment or empowering women, but protecting women in their immediate circumstances. Fourth, multiple projects have been initiated through public-private partnerships or through civil society initiatives and international funding opportunities, for example in microcrediting or cooperative activities. While such efforts serve to be a learning experience, create public awareness towards women's employment and generate employment opportunities in certain economic sectors, they suffer from exceptionalism, pre-determined selection criteria and lack of sustainability. Especially the flourishing of the last ten years women's cooperatives has been hailed for its empowering impact, however, it has also been criticized for encapsulating women in their traditional roles and limiting economic diversity and growth for women.

Conclusion

Globalization and the widespread adoption of neoliberal political economy led to the feminization of the global labor force, however, the trend in Turkey has been in the opposite direction and resulted in the exclusion of women from the labor market and the persistence of structural inequalities. This research has

shown that the JDP rule suffers from a discursive paradox between its commitment to neoliberalism and political Islam at the same time. This paradox, by focusing on protectionist and inclusive instruments conserves the status quo regarding gender relations, yet it does not promote women's participation in the labor market or their economic empowerment. Along similar lines, heavy reliance on legal and institutional transformations as opposed to direct, target-oriented, universal policy instruments undermines the across-the-board impact of policy changes and releases limited outcomes for those qualifying for rather selective criteria. The policy framework in its current form only seeks a quantitative improvement in women's employment, without any qualitative transformations in skill formation, value-added generation, or overall productivity. The outcome of such a policy orientation reiterates the conservative dominant ideology by promoting economic protection instead of economic empowerment. The genuine economic empowerment of women of all backgrounds requires a paradigmatic shift in discourse, a pluralist, inclusive, and participatory decision-making process that will give agency to women, as well as practical changes in productive capacity in the real economy.

In terms of gender policy, women have to be regarded as individuals outside the domain of the family, free from traditional gender roles and household division of labor. The political discourse depicting the family as a shield against the delinquent LGBT, treating women as pawns has to be replaced by one based on equal rights for equal citizens. In industrial policy, giving voice and agency to female entrepreneurs, promoting business partnerships, developing industrial incubators for start-ups, and promoting regional clusters towards inter-sectoral alliances may generate innovative capacity for more women to access the market. Employment policies may focus on new sectors, study future prospects, and alternative scenarios for job creation. To back this up, school curricula may be reformed to incorporate skills that are more responsive to the green economy, technological developments, and demographic changes. Finally, social policy and safety networks need not serve as a compensation for the preservation of the family, gender roles, and traditional patriarchy. Social policy and associated instruments must promote women's active participation in social life, in economic production, and in political decision-making. Tax incentives for women's household tasks, childcare instead of child support, flexible employment terms for working mothers, temporal arrangements for mothers returning to work are some social policy alternatives. Job placements for young women, premium incentives for first-time employees, and training cost coverage to promote skill formation among young women are other social policy instruments that might make a difference. All these and other policy alternatives may only become a reality with a changing perspective towards women and their place in society.

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