

Patriarchal Norms, Religion, and Female Labor Supply: Evidence from Turkey

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Summary. — Despite significant structural and social change, the share of women working or seeking jobs in Turkey has declined. This paper focuses on the role of social conservatism as a constraint for women’s labor force participation using 2008 Demographic and Health Survey data. In analyzing labor supply model, I incorporate cultural constraints, specifically the sexual division of labor in the household and broader gender ideology into the analysis. I find that both patriarchal norms and religiosity are negatively associated with female labor force participation, and that the impact of patriarchal norms is statistically significant after controlling for endogeneity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Turkey has experienced important structural and social changes that would be expected to facilitate women’s participation in market work. Social attitudes toward working women at a job have changed in recent years¹; women are becoming more educated²; they are getting married at a later age³; and fertility rates are declining.⁴ Despite these factors, the participation of women in the labor force—that is, working or seeking jobs including informal sector jobs—has fallen from more than 50% in the 1960s to 30% today, according to household labor force survey statistics.

In the development economics literature, a U-shaped trend in the female labor force participation rate during the course of development is widely accepted as a stylized fact (Durand, 1975; Goldin, 1994; Psaropoulos & Tzannatos, 1989; Schultz, 1990). As the economy moves from an agrarian society in which housework and fieldwork can be handled together to an industrial and service-based formal economy where housework and market work are spatially separated, female labor force participation rates initially fall. But in the later stages of development, as fertility declines and the education level of women increases, their labor force participation rises. The trend in Turkey does not conform to this picture: Turkish women are still at the bottom of the ‘U’ despite significant demographic and structural changes in the economy.

Urbanization and agricultural labor shedding are seen as the main factors that result in low female labor force participation in Turkey (World Bank, 2009). One of every three women has become an internal migrant. Most women who have migrated from rural to urban areas formerly worked in the agricultural sector, but many withdrew from the labor force once they moved to the urban areas. Plausible explanations for their withdrawal include lack of affordable childcare, cultural pressures, and lack of necessary skills and education. In surveys, women also cite getting married and not finding the proper jobs as reasons for withdrawal from the labor market (Turkey Demographic and Health Survey, 2003, 2008). Women’s reservation wage remains high in the cities given lack of subsidized childcare and subsidized pre-school education. Moreover, the Turkish labor market has a significant informal sector in which women are disproportionately

concentrated.⁵ The informal sector generally does not offer decent pay and working conditions, which further discourages women to enter or stay in the labor force.

Many researchers focusing on the supply-side determinants of women’s participation have emphasized the importance of education (Baslevant & Onaran, 2003; Gündüz-Hosgör & Smits, 2008; Kaşnakoglu & Dayioğlu, 1997; Tansel, 2002a; Taymaz, 2010; Özar & Günlük-Şenesen, 1998). Others have argued that education cannot explain the Turkish female employment puzzle on its own, noting that men with similar levels of education do not have low participation rates, instead maintaining that low levels of participation can be better explained by social and cultural values (Göksel, 2013; Gündüz-Hosgör & Smits, 2008; Güner & Uysal, 2014; Uraz, Aran, Hüsamoğlu, Şanalımış, & Çapar, 2010). One important cultural factor influencing women’s labor force participation decision in Turkey may be patriarchy. Turkey is part of what Caldwell (1978) calls the “patriarchal belt” and Kandiyoti (1988) calls the “belt of classic patriarchy” which includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey and Iran), and South and East Asia (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Northern India, and rural China) (Moghadam, 1998). In these countries, there is typically a strict separation between the male and female domains, with men operating in the public sphere and women more restricted to the private sphere. Modernization has challenged this strict public–private division in Turkey, but there are strong remnants of patriarchal relations in society.

This paper focuses on the role of social conservatism as a constraint for women’s labor force participation in Turkey. I examine the correlates of women’s labor force participation

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using probit regression analysis with a recent dataset compiled by Hacettepe University based on Turkey Demographic and Health Surveys (TDHS). Different from household labor force survey data, this dataset allows me to analyze social and cultural determinants together with the traditional supply side variables. I include an “internalization of patriarchal norms” variable created out of women’s answers to nine opinion questions. These questions capture different aspects of patriarchal relations such as gender division of labor in the household, women’s mobility in the public domain, decision making in the family, and control over sexuality. Moreover, I incorporate the role of religion using a religiosity variable based on the frequency of religious practices of women, prayer (*namaz*), and fasting.

This analysis reveals the correlation between gender-role attitudes and labor force participation, but it does not allow me to make causal claims, due to potential endogeneity. It is possible that the direction of causation runs from labor force participation to more progressive attitudes, rather than vice versa. Or the direction of causality may run in both directions: from having progressive values to participation in the labor market, and from working outside the home to being less mindful of patriarchal norms. To address the potential problem of endogeneity, I use instrumental variable estimation. The literature on the long-run effects of family structure on gender-role attitudes emphasizes the importance of pre-adult socialization in the formation of these attitudes. I therefore use a scale of family conservatism as an instrument for patriarchal norms.

2. HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE TRENDS IN WOMEN’S LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

The women’s labor force participation rate in Turkey is very low in comparison to the countries at a similar development stage. Moreover, it has been steadily declining since the 1960s, which makes it a matter of concern not only for academics but also for international organizations as a deteriorating development indicator. The women’s labor force participation rate declined from 65.4% in 1960, to 26% in 2009 and showed a small increase to 30.8% in 2013. The increase after 2009 global economic crisis may be explained by the added worker effect⁶ and the incentives given to women’s employment.⁷ In fact, there has been a decline in men’s labor force participation, from 93.6% in 1960 to 70.5% in 2009, during the same period as well (Table 1). By 2013, men’s participation rate (71.5%) is still in line with averages in the OECD (69.5%) and Europe and Central Asia (67.3%). However, women’s participation rate (30.8%) is substantially lower than the averages in OECD (50.9%) and Europe and Central Asia (50.4%).⁸

Turkey had the lowest female labor force participation rate among OECD countries in 2010 (Figure 1). However, it has one of the lowest GDP per capita among OECD countries as well. A comparison among countries in the income group to which Turkey belongs is more revealing. When we look at the upper-middle income countries, Turkey emerges again as an outlier along with a few Middle Eastern countries (Figure 2). It is clear that there are other social, cultural, and institutional determinants of women’s labor force participation in addition to the per capita GDP level. OECD or upper-middle income country groups may not be the right benchmark to make comparisons for Turkey. Since Turkey shares some socio-cultural properties of Middle Eastern countries, the MENA region is a better benchmark. When we look at the

female labor force participation in Middle Eastern and African countries, Turkey seems to be conforming to the trends in the region (Figure 3). It is not an outlier among MENA countries. However, even in the MENA region the average female labor force participation rate has been increasing in the recent two decades, from 18.2% in 1990 to 21.1% in 2011.⁹ On the contrary, Turkey has seen a declining trend during the same period, from 34.5% in 1990 to 28.1% in 2011.

The level of education is frequently cited in the literature as the main determinant of women’s labor force participation. It is argued that women lack the necessary qualifications to participate in the labor force. Statistics show that this claim is valid only to a certain extent in Turkey. Table 2 presents the labor force participation rates for men and women by education level. It shows that literacy or having a degree below high school does not significantly increase women’s participation, whereas the highest participation rates for men are seen among primary school graduates. In other words, returns to education appear to differ for men and women. Explaining women’s low participation rates by lack of education does not reflect the whole reality.

Moreover, Turkey did not go through the feminization of the labor force that was seen in many developing countries

Table 1. Labor force participation rates by gender, 1960–2013 Source: 1960–90: Census of Population, TURKSTAT, Tansel (2002a), p. 29, 1988–2013: Household Labor Force Surveys, TURKSTAT, www.tuik.gov.tr

Labor force participation rate by gender		
Year	Men	Women
<i>Census of population</i>		
1960	93.6	65.4
1965	91.8	56.6
1970	79.5	50.3
1975	80.9	47.3
1980	79.8	45.8
1985	78.3	43.6
1990	78.2	42.8
<i>Household labor force surveys</i>		
1988	81.2	34.3
1989	80.6	36.1
1990	79.7	34.1
1991	80.2	34.1
1992	79.6	32.7
1993	78	26.8
1994	78.5	31.3
1995	77.8	30.9
1996	77.1	30.6
1997	76.7	28.8
1998	76.7	29.3
1999	75.8	30
2000	73.7	26.6
2001	72.9	27.1
2002	68.7	27.9
2003	70.4	26.6
2004	70.3	23.3
2005	70.6	23.3
2006	69.9	23.6
2007	69.8	23.6
2008	70.1	23.5
2009	70.5	26
2010	70.8	26.6
2011	70.7	28.2
2012	71	29.5
2013	71.5	30.8

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