

Chapter 6

Women's Participation in the Labor Market: A Comparative Analysis Between Turkey and the Europe and Central Asia Region

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ABSTRACT

The issue of gender disparity regarding women's participation in the labor force has generally been lower than that of men all around the world. While the rates of labor force participation have been on the rise for many Western European countries due to their longstanding policies, the rates remain lower, with a much slower increase, in the Europe and Central Asia region, which Turkey is considered to be a part of, according to the regional categorization of the World Bank. The issues of institutional and socio-cultural dynamics need to be taken into consideration to explain the comparatively lower female labor force participation rate (LFPR) in the ECA Region, including Turkey, which, in fact, falls behind the ECA countries. Drawing on available data pertaining to women's LFPR, this chapter aims to provide integrated institutional and socio-cultural explanations regarding women's access to education, family policies, participation in unpaid work, and child care.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender disparity against women has always been a serious matter in all facets of society, mainly regarding economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political participation, health and survival, the indexes of which have been presented by the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2017). Constituting half of the world population, women have been one of the least benefited and valued resources. Nevertheless, complete utilization of women's skills and qualifications by increasing their participation in the labor force can help boost economic growth and sustainable development in all countries (Karaalp-Orhan, 2017). Participation of women in the labor force - the proportion of working age population (aged from 15 to 64) in the economy currently employed or seeking employment – which, in general, has been on the rise for many Western-European countries, in particular, Scandinavian ones (Pfau-Effinger, 2012). Nevertheless, the rates have remained lower and with only a gradual rise in the Eastern Europe, Turkey and Central Asia regions (World Economic Forum, 2017; OECD, 2018a).

The labor force participation rate (LFPR)¹ of women is deemed important here as the labor market position of women plays a salient role in determining their status in society (Tinker, 1990; Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits, 2008). Many factors can account for the lower rates of women's participation in the labor force. In the literature, many researchers have emphasized the importance of education (Gündüz-Hoşgör & Smits, 2008, Göksel, 2013). Others have focused on the well-established link between education, skill development, fertility and the LFPR (Spierings, Smits, & Verloo, 2010; Göksel, 2013).

As abovementioned, a higher LFPR of women implies an advancement in economic growth and development (Kızılırmak, 2008; Kinoshita & Guo, 2015). According to the McKinsey & Company (2016), an increase in the women's participation in the labor force to the OECD average could boost the Turkish economic output by 20 percent by the year 2025. In the meantime, the labor market in Turkey is characterized by its lower level of LFPR for women than for men. Considering the fact that the nation has gone through significant structural and social transformations, one would expect to see a notable increase in their involvement in the labor market. In fact, during this course of development, the rates reflect a downward trend in recent decades.

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