

IMPLICATIONS OF ISLAMIST RULE FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN TURKEY*

By Gamze Cavdar

Do Islamist governments harm women's educational and professional opportunities? Previous scholarship suggests no consistent trend when it comes to the impacts of Islamist rule on women. For instance, Lisa Blaydes finds that an urban neighborhood run by the Islamic Group (*al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*) in Egypt produced better health outcomes for women compared to another neighborhood that shared many characteristics except for the Islamist rule.¹²⁹ But elsewhere Blaydes and Drew Linzer argue that "fundamentalist ideologies" favor "men over women in employment and education opportunities".¹³⁰ Erik Meyersson notes that "Islamic mayors led to higher female participation in both education as well as politics".¹³¹ Lindsay Benstead demonstrates that female citizens in Algeria are more likely to approach Islamist politicians than non-Islamist ones—especially at the local level.¹³²

Islamist movements and parties show great variation among themselves and their ideology evolves over time resulting in no single "Islamist position" on gender. Janine Clark and Jillian Schwedler demonstrate that the largest Islamist groups in Jordan and Yemen, despite their initial opposition to women's full and equal participation, ended up having women representatives in their highest decision-making bodies more than any other parties in their respective countries.¹³³ Thus, determining whether Islamist governance impacts women's employment requires a highly-contextualized examination of employment trends by gender in a particular case and at a particular time.

This essay examines the employment trends for both women and men under the Party of Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) rule in Turkey since 2002. The case of AKP is significant because of its long experience in government, which allows researchers to examine trends over time. In the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, examples of Islamist political parties winning the national elections and forming majority governments are limited: Islamists are either active at the local level, as in the case of Hezbollah of Lebanon, or when they come to power at the national level, their experience is short-lived, as in the cases of *al-Nahda* of Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) of Egypt.¹³⁴ The AKP is unique as it has remained in government since 2002 by winning all national and local elections and forming majority governments.

My book, *Women in Turkey: Silent Consensus between Neoliberalism and Islamic Conservatism* (co-authored with Yavuz Yaşar) examines the trends in employment, education and health care by gender in Turkey since the early 2000s by using both quantitative and qualitative data collected during the fieldwork.¹³⁵ This essay focuses on the employment trends by utilizing the micro-data with over half a million people based on the Household Surveys conducted by the Turkish Statistical Institute (*Türk İstatistik Enstitüsü—TÜİK*) between 2003 and 2016. The micro-data I obtained during my fieldwork in Ankara, Turkey, not typically available to the public, enabled me to disaggregate categories and make new analyses. As an analytical framework, the analysis relies on the theoretical insights of the feminist political economy (FPE). Apart from having a normative commitment to gender equality, Feminist Political Economy typically focuses on the material that directly

affects the lives of men and women, and emphasizes both the production that mainly takes place in the market and the reproduction that occur at home. The latter refers to care giving and domestic activities, such as cooking, cleaning, caring for children, elderly, and the sick and disabled, etc.; the type of unrecognized and unappreciated activities mostly performed by women—either through paid or unpaid labor.

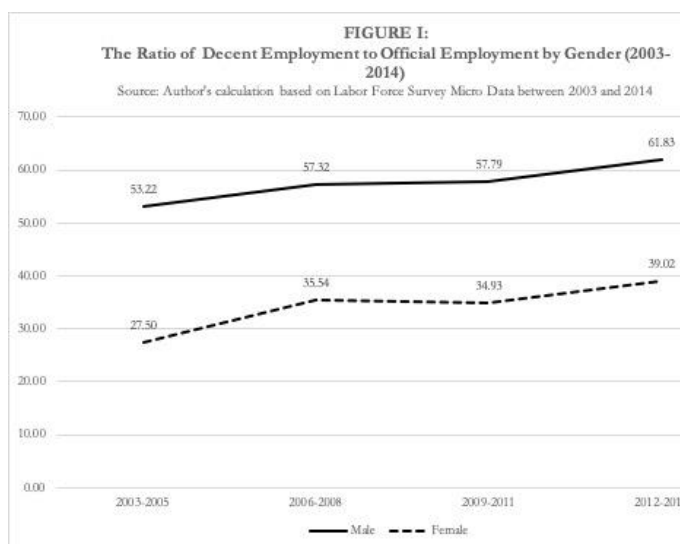
This micro-data shows that women’s overall employment figures increased during the period of AKP rule under examination, an objective pursued by the AKP from its early years. The types of jobs created, however, mostly fall under the category of informal, part-time and unpaid family work as opposed to the full-time employment with benefits. These jobs are often irregular, seasonal, low-paying, and they often come with no benefits or job security. The government policies behind these trends were primarily shaped by neoliberalism and Islamic conservatism. While deepening, expanding and institutionalizing neoliberalism, the AKP pursued a two-folded policy regarding employment; they encouraged female employment while also calling to preserve women’s traditional roles as housewives and domestic caregivers. These two contradictory objectives were made possible through the implementation of neoliberal principles, such as the promotion of female entrepreneurship and flexible market conditions. Thus, women might bake in their own kitchens to sell their products in the farmer’s market or work part-time online, neither of which disrupts their “primary” roles as caregivers and homemakers.¹³⁶ The implications of these findings are significant because these trends worsen the wage gap, gender segregation and female poverty, while also leaving women reliant on public and private welfare transfers at a much faster rate than men,

which makes them vulnerable for clientelist relations in return of political support.

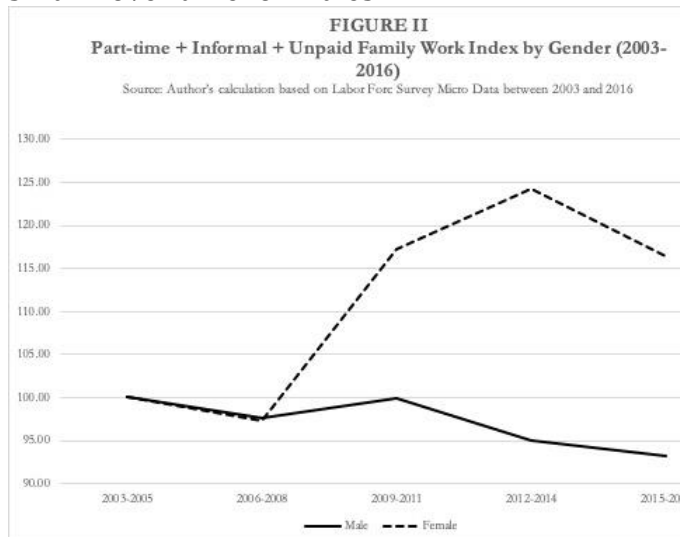
EMPLOYMENT BY GENDER: QUALITY MATTERS

Female employment patters in Turkey follow the general trends in the broader MENA region:¹³⁷ The female employment rate has declined since the 1950s—Turkey’s female employment percentage is the lowest among the OECD countries—with rising education levels not resulting in higher labor force participation.¹³⁸ Under intense international pressure especially from the EU, the AKP laid out a plan¹³⁹ to increase female employment at the outset of its first government in 2002, and, to its credit, managed to increase it over time.¹⁴⁰

The micro-data of TÜİK allow me to disaggregate the statistics that are typically available to the public in their aggregated forms. I disaggregated the employment data by first creating a category of full time employment with benefits, which I call “decent employment”. The data show that decent employment numbers for males were significantly higher (about five times) than that of females for the 2003-2005 period. As an improvement, the difference got smaller over time—dropping to 3.7 times for the 2012-2014 period. FIGURE I reports the ratio of decent employment trends to official employment trends by gender. As FIGURE I demonstrates, between 2003 and 2014, the ratio of decent-to-official employment for males shrunk by about 3 percent per year, whereas the same ratio for females grew by about 3 percent per year. Nevertheless, the male advantage in decent employment continues to be the case today: The data show that out of the total official employment for males, 62 percent is decent, while out of total official employment for females, only 39 percent belongs to this category as of 2014.

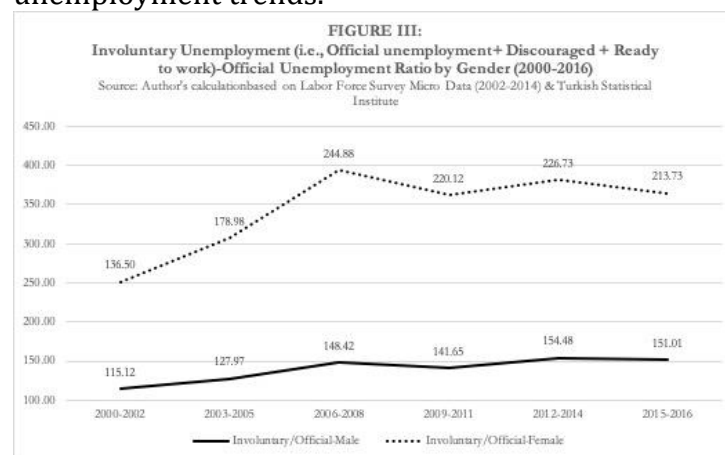


As a second step in my analysis, I examined the remaining part of the “employed” category, which consists of part-time, informal and unpaid family work,¹⁴¹ shown in FIGURE II. This category shows a significant jump for females. It is not only that the female employment in this type of low-paying, irregular and insecure jobs have grown exponentially, it is also that this exponential growth is unique to females—in fact, the number of this type of work has shrank over time for males.



UNEMPLOYMENT BY GENDER: MORE WOMEN WISH TO BE EMPLOYED

I also examined the unemployment data by gender. Official unemployment data exclude these two groups of people: 1) those who state that they are not actively searching for jobs but they are “ready to work”; 2) “discouraged workers”, who gave up on searching for jobs and left the labor market. I added these two to the official unemployment category and call them “involuntary unemployment”.¹⁴² As shown in FIGURE III, I have examined both official unemployment and the involuntary unemployment trends.



As FIGURE III demonstrates, the official unemployment numbers significantly underestimate the number of women who wish to be employed—much higher than that of males. In other words, more women than men who wish to work are not currently counted as “unemployed”. Furthermore, the involuntary unemployment has another gender dimension, which is that the figures have grown faster for women during the period under examination increasing the gap between the male and female unemployment. In other words, the percentage of females who wish to work is significantly higher now than it was in the 2000-2002 period while the increase in the male percentage is much smaller.

KEY QUESTION: WHO DOES THE DOMESTIC WORK?

The employment and unemployment trends above cannot be discussed without addressing the gender division of labor at home. This obvious relationship comes up in the surveys as well when women are asked why they are not seeking employment outside home. In the Household Budget Surveys by TÜİK, women who are identified as “housewives” typically respond that the main reason why they are not employed is because of the household responsibilities, such as raising children, and all other domestic work. While the belief that women belong home has deep socio-cultural roots and domestic work mostly being done by women is a global phenomenon,¹⁴³ public policies play a key role in reinforcing and legitimizing these beliefs or undermining and invalidating them. The government policies by the AKP mostly belongs to the former category.

The AKP aimed to promote women’s employment and was successful to some degree. It is not that the AKP calls for women to go back home or declares that women should not work outside the home. Rather, the government promotes women’s employment through legislative and administrative measures—mostly based on neoliberalism¹⁴⁴—so that women’s traditional roles are preserved. The government makes frequent references to Islam to legitimize its position. How the AKP has blended neoliberalism and Islamic conservatism regarding female employment can be seen in specific policies since 2002: 1) the legislative changes to adopt neoliberal principles, such as the promotion of flexible jobs; 2) the promotion of female entrepreneurship through training programs and low-interest loans; 3) the promotion of

vocational training; and 4) the emphasis on the primacy of family with references to Islam and national heritage.¹⁴⁵ Given that the first three policies are based on neoliberalism and the last one relies on Islamic conservatism, the AKP has left women’s employment to the mercy of the market and the patriarchal family structure.

Thus, for instance, women are openly encouraged to have “at least three children”¹⁴⁶ while no affordable childcare is provided for the working women. Given the highly patriarchal family structure, the childcare—let alone all other domestic work and care activities, such as the care of the elderly, the sick, the disabled, as well as the house maintenance—almost entirely falls on the shoulders of women. This makes working full time outside the home virtually impossible for lower class women—especially those with small children—while women from the higher classes subcontract the domestic work to other women through paid labor. Despite intense pressure from the women’s and LGBTQIA organizations that a separate ministry must be founded to commit to gender equity, the government resisted the idea and founded the Ministry of Family and Social Policy instead.¹⁴⁷ This further institutionalized the primacy of family and made women a subcategory of it.

The government rejects the possibility that the interest of the family and women might be different—let alone conflicting. The party leadership claims that their solution to female unemployment—that the women should do “double work”—is in fact a brilliant invention. Fatma Şahin, former Ministry of Family and Social Policy (2011-2013), proudly declares that “We pursue family-based policies for the children, disabled and women” and that this approach was unique to Turkey, a virtue lacking in the West.¹⁴⁸ Family values are lost during the

process of modernizing, and as a result Western societies face serious social problems, Şahin argues.¹⁴⁹ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strongly disagrees with the suggestion that women’s interests might be different from those of the family. He argues that implying that they might be separate “does not belong to our culture” nor can “the intention of this mentality” be considered “innocent.”¹⁵⁰

The net result is that women’s employment is often concentrated in certain sectors, such as textile and service; that women work either at home or somewhere nearby; that the workplace is often gender-segregated; that the work does not demand long hours so that their “primary roles” as wives and mothers are not disrupted; and that female poverty has increased. The types of jobs described here are typically low-paying and low-status jobs with little or no job security, and, as the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us again, these are also the jobs that are easily eliminated. We do not know the full impacts of the pandemic on female employment yet—it is too early to tell. However, another crucial trend that stands out in the data is that female poverty levels have skyrocketed during the period under examination: Female poverty, measured by using in-kind and cash welfare transfers as a proxy, grew 8 percent per year between 2003 and 2016—as opposed to 2.4 percent for males. For the poorest of the population—measured as those whose personal income consisted of more than 50 percent welfare transfers—the picture gets even more unpleasant: While the percentage of females and males in this poorest segment of the population were close to each other in 2003, the percentage of poorest females grew twice as much compared to that of males.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are significant implications of this research for the broader MENA region. One implication is that the findings highlight the significance of social policy, ranging from childcare to poverty elimination measures to job creation for achieving some resemblance of gender equity. The pandemic’s long term impacts remain unknown. However, what is unequivocally clear is that the pandemic has created unprecedented demands on the domestic work that is disproportionately performed by women, such as childcare, homeschooling, caring for the sick, etc. Funding programs that provide social services in these areas is of utmost significance to women’s lives, especially now under the COVID-19 conditions and cannot be left at the mercy of the market or non-governmental organizations—religious or not. Future research should examine the impacts of the pandemic on women’s employment trends as well as the time use by gender in the MENA region.

Another implication of this research relates to the relationship between female poverty and clientelism. Scholarship has already demonstrated that poverty feeds clientelism especially in non-democratic settings and where informal networks are predominant. Islamists disproportionately benefit from these networks through which they approach women and build relationship based on trust and friendship. Indeed, the micro-data show that women have received public welfare transfers more than men during the same period.¹⁵¹ Future research should examine the relationship between voting patterns and welfare transfers and explore to what extent, if any, these transfers played a role in the women’s support for the AKP in the elections.

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<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/women-s-rights-in-morocco-balancing-domestic-and-international-law>.

Gamze Cavdar Notes

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¹²⁹ Lisa Blaydes. “How Does Islamist Local Governance Affect the Lives of Women?” *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* Vol. 27, Issue 3 (2013), pp.489-509.

¹³⁰ Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer. “The Political Economy of Women’s Support for Fundamentalist Islam,” *World Politics*, Vol.60, No.4 (2008), pp.576.

¹³¹ Erik Meyersson. “Islamic Rule and the Empowerment of the Poor and Pious”. *Econometrica*, Vol: 82, No:1 (2014), pp.267.

¹³² Lindsay Benstead. “A Local Islamist Advantage? Toward a Theory of National and Local Service Provision in Algeria,” *Local Politics and Islamist Movements* (POMEPS Studies #27). (2017), pp. 41-46.

¹³³ Janine A. Clark & and Jillian Schwedler. “Who Opened the Window? Women’s Activism in Islamist Parties,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol.35, No.3 (2003), pp.293-312.

¹³⁴ As a recent exception, Morocco’s Justice and Development Party (*Hizb Al-Adala wa At-tanmia*) has formed coalitions with two other parties since 2011.

¹³⁵ Gamze Çavdar & Yavuz Yaşar. *Women in Turkey: Silent Consensus Between Neoliberalism and Islamic Conservatism*. New York: Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics (2019).

¹³⁶ Not all conservatives share these ideas. The conservative Islamic ideology expressed by the top leadership are at times criticized, especially by some female columnists, who are connected to the same conservative circles. No such criticism has been expressed by the MPs of the AKP nor by the party’s own women’s branches.

¹³⁷ For a comprehensive analysis of women’s economic participation in the MENA, see Valentine Moghadam. “Women’s Economic Participation in the Middle East,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2005): 110-146.

¹³⁸ Marwa Shalaby. “The Paradox of Female Economic Participation in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Rice University’s Baker Institute Issue Brief* (2014): 1-4.

¹³⁹ Five-year development plans and the party programs are good examples of these plans.

¹⁴⁰ The female labor force participation rate for 2005–2015 increased from about 23 percent to 35 percent while the same rate increased from about 71 percent to 77 percent for males.

¹⁴¹ An example of this would be working for a family-owned business without pay.

¹⁴² These two categories are typically excluded in typical unemployment calculations; I have included them in the calculation to demonstrate the gendered aspects of the official unemployment numbers.

¹⁴³ Time-use surveys typically measure the time males and females spend on unpaid labor on housework and it is well-established that females spend more time on these activities than males across the globe.

¹⁴⁴ As an economic philosophy, neoliberalism refers to the belief that free-market capitalism is the answer to almost all economic and political problems. With respect to employment, neoliberalism advocates such policies as economic liberalization, privatization of public enterprises, entrepreneurship, bigger role for the private sector, and reduction in government expenditures. See David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press (2005).

¹⁴⁵ In the book, we have argued that neoliberalism and Islamic conservatism agree on gender roles not only at the policy-level but also by assuming that 1) men and women are fundamentally different 2) that women’s primary domain of activity should be home; and 3) there exist a natural order between men and women, and attempts to change it might be detrimental. The discussion also examined the theoretical origin of neoliberalism, which includes the writings by Francis Y. Edgeworth (1845-1926), Alfred Marshall (1842-1924), and W. Stanley Jevons (1835-1882) and the discourses by the top AKP leadership for Islamic conservatism. These assumptions are shared by many other socially conservative religious groups and by no means unique to Islamic conservatism.

¹⁴⁶ Recommended number varies from “at least three” to “four and beyond”.

¹⁴⁷ Women’s organizations long demanded that the General Directorate of Woman’s Status, founded in 1990, turn into a ministry. The AKP rejected the demand and instead founded the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in “Aile Üniversitesi Açıldı” *Aile Bülteni* (Publication of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy) Vol.1, No.7 (2013), p.3.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ‘Çalışmak Kadının Aile İçindeki Önemi Ortadan Kaldırmaz’”, *Haberler* (Turkish Daily), December 11, 2019, available at <https://www.haberler.com/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-calismak-kadinin-aile-12708359-haberi/> (accessed on 9/24/2020)

¹⁵¹ For the poorest of the population, defined as those whose personal income consisted of more than 50 percent welfare transfers, the percentages of males and females who received public transfers were close to each other in 2003 while the percentage of females grew twice as much compared to that of males by 2016.

Marwa Shalaby Notes