

# Paradigmatic Change in Gendered Labor Market Policies in Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the question of how gender-related labor policy in Turkey has changed during the AKP government since the early 2000s. The focus is primarily on understanding the changing direction of public policies and institutional amendments in Turkey under the AKP government from 2002 to 2017. The findings reveal a paradigmatic change in the labor policies targeted at women. New policies are characterized by protecting and prioritizing the family, while introducing precarious flexible female labor to the market. The research contributes to the literature by providing a link between policy studies and gender research.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender is a crucial policy area for understanding changes to state-society relationships. Governments actively promote policies to regulate women's relationships with public and private spheres of life. Traditional liberal political theories separate public and private realms of social life and argue that public space includes the rational and political part of the social life, while private space is associated with personal and intimate matters.<sup>1</sup> However, feminist scholars argue against the strict distinction between these two spheres of social life by showing that they are interrelated. On the one hand, labor market policies which provide incentives for women to participate in the public space can strengthen their position in the private space.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, care policies designate the responsibilities of women in

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1 *Okin, 1998.*

2 *Fraser/Gordon, 1994.*

the family, or the private space, while directly affecting their labor market participation.<sup>3</sup>

The gendered structure and the interrelatedness of public and the private spaces led scholars to establish a link between state regulation and gendered beliefs and norms.<sup>4</sup> It is crucial to analyze the ideational frameworks of policies influencing women's relationships with public and private spheres of life. This paper is influenced by this feminist literature and focuses on the changes to policies and institutions targeted at women at the intersection of the labor market and social care.<sup>5</sup> It takes a closer look at Turkey in order to provide a comparative understanding of changes to gender policy in different social contexts.

In terms of policy change, new public policies and programs with "women" in the title have proliferated in Turkey since the beginning of 2000s, when the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. During this era, the policy developments associated with women have covered several areas of gender, such as sexual reproduction, violence against women, labor market integration of women, and care responsibilities. Gender has been an active policy area, encompassing regulations and institutional restructurings. Active regulation of the government's policies targeting women makes Turkey a suitable case for investigating the direction and the ideational frameworks of change in policies.

The AKP has implemented various laws and policies to regulate both women's engagement with the labor market and women's position in the family. In terms of the labor market, when the AKP first came to power at the start of the new millennium, it implemented institutional amendments to ensure status equality and equal opportunities for women and men in the labor market. These amendments included incentives to increase women's participation in the labor market and legislative changes granting equal labor market status to women and men. Employer incentives for women's employment, active labor market policies and women's entrepreneurship were the major policy instruments used. Women's organizations and Turkey's accession process to the European Union (EU) were the main drivers behind the government amending its gender equality legislation to ensure higher participation of women in the labor market.<sup>6</sup> However, these amendments were far from being substantive since they

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3 *Sainsbury*, 1999.

4 *Lewis*, 2001; *Orloff*, 1993.

5 *Orloff*, 2002.

6 *Muftuler-Bac*, 2012.

represent an understanding of gender equality with reference to status equality and equality of opportunities. The policies aimed to amend the inequality rooted in the clauses of laws and legal scripts, and ensure the equal treatment of women and men in the labor market. Therefore, they did not have a significant structural impact on ensuring gender equality in the labor market.

In the second decade of 2000s, the new line of policies became increasingly market-oriented and family-centered when compared to the previous period. The objectives of the policies were to increase the commodification and flexibility of women and mothers, while at the same time prioritizing their family duties. Even though active labor market policies and incentives for women's employment and entrepreneurship were still used, flexibility and familialism became prominent policy targets. In that sense, the beginning of 2010s represents a critical juncture in policies. Neoliberal and familialist policies became significant from this date, while policies targeting gender equality were put aside.

As authoritarianism has increased over time, policies have become less equality-oriented,<sup>7</sup> and become more market-oriented and family-centered.<sup>8</sup> This shift has had an impact on women's positioning in the sphere of political economy. It should be noted that there are still policies, regulations and institutions which are geared towards status equality and equal opportunities. However, the dominant idea that influences the public agenda and public action has changed. These developments in the AKP era make Turkey an interesting case for examining policy change at the intersection of gender and employment.

This research project looks at a range of topics as part of its analysis of developments in the interaction between gender and the labor market, including processes for policy-making and shaping institutions, as well as the major players in the public and private sectors who influence these processes. However, this chapter limits its scope to the main question of: "How have gender related labor market policies changed in the AKP era?" The research question requires an investigation of policy papers in the gendered labor policy area. The doctoral dissertation project draws majorly on qualitative content analysis of public policy papers and agenda papers. However, this short chapter only presents the brief outlook of the literature on policy change and illustrates the preliminary findings of qualitative content analysis.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaya, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Akkan, 2018.

By describing the changes in policies over time, the focus is on government regulations and the underlying characteristics of these policies and institutional amendments. The analysis identifies key public stakeholders and examines policy papers referring to gendered labor market policies and agendas. The research contributes to the discussion on changing policy paradigms of gender in case of labor, since the gender reform in Turkey reveals a deep-seated shift in policies and institutions.

#### LITERATURE ON POLICY CHANGE: PETER HALL AND PARADIGMATIC POLICY CHANGE

Intellectual frameworks are key domains to understanding a societal transformation. In any policy domain, conceptualization of a policy problem is affected by the ideas of the policymaker, and their perception of current contexts and interests. In the existing political science literature, the main factors used to investigate transformation periods are interests and institutions. However, starting from the cultural shift in the 1980s, an increasing number of scholars have studied the central role that ideas play in policy-making procedures.<sup>9</sup> These studies show the importance of investigating the ideational frameworks which influence policymaking procedures in order to understand how policies change over a certain period of time.

Peter Hall uses the word “paradigm” in his seminal article<sup>10</sup> as an intellectual framework that makes research possible. The use of “paradigm” is both episodic and periodic in meaning, which reflects distinct periods with different characterizations. Hall’s definition of “policy paradigm” refers to an interpretive framework of ideas and standards “*that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing*”.<sup>11</sup> Similar to Thomas Kuhn,<sup>12</sup> Hall’s framing of paradigms is episodic and process oriented. A policy paradigm reflects a set of coherent policy ideas and policy measures to concretize these ideas.<sup>13</sup> Paradigmatic shifts in intellectual frameworks and the way policies represent certain frame-

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9 Skocpol, 1985; Baumgartner, 2013; Hall, 1993; Blyth, 2003; Beland, 2009; Beland/Cox, 2011.

10 Hall, 1993.

11 Hall, 1993.

12 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th Edition, Chicago 2012.

13 Hogan/Howlett, *Policy Paradigms in Theory and Practice: Discourses, Ideas and Anomalies in Public Policy Dynamics*, Houndsmills 2015.

works for forming ideas are vital for explaining new policies and institutional components.

Hall conceptualizes policymaking as a process that involves three central variables: overarching goals, policy instruments and settings/calibration of these instruments.<sup>14</sup> Third order change (or paradigmatic change) simultaneously transforms all three components of policy, since this involves a change to the hierarchy of goals behind a policy. In the case of paradigmatic change, the change is radical because the core policy idea behind a policy realm changes and this affects the policy instruments and policy settings. Overarching goals that guide policy in a particular field, or paradigms in his interpretation, are key to understanding policy change and distinguishing between periods. In such a profound change, the authority of actors over policy also changes and there are positional/hegemonic changes of competing arguments within a broader institutional framework over time.<sup>15</sup> In that sense, paradigmatic change is revealing the adjustment in power of actors over a policy sphere, in which new powerful actors define the recent paradigmatic framework.

The next section argues that this paradigmatic change is evident in the transformation of policies. It is possible to periodize two distinct eras of the AKP's gendered labor policies, and categorize policies into three different groups, namely equality-oriented, conservative family-oriented and neoliberal. Since 2012, there has been a paradigm shift which has seen the dominant ideas that influence gendered labor market policies and institutions changing, distancing from gender equality principle and becoming more market-oriented and family-oriented.

The chapter focuses on the descriptive nature of policy change. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the main driver of this policy change is the changing authority of competing actors and their ideas. New actors—with different ideas on ideal gender relations—become influential in the policymaking field and influence the change in policies. For example, a new government-organized NGO was established in 2013, which became influential in policymaking processes following their new definition of ideal gender relationships. However, this is beyond the limits of this chapter.

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14 Hall, 1993, p. 278.

15 Hall, 1993, p. 280.

GENDER POLICY CHANGE IN TURKEY IN THE AKP ERA: BUNDLING LABOR MARKET POLICIES

Background

Historically, the family has always been an important pillar of the Turkish welfare system.<sup>16</sup> The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 and promoted women's rights as part of the process of nation-building and modernization.<sup>17</sup> The Republican era is defined as a "state feminist era" by scholars, in which the reforms aimed at expanding the role of women in public were primarily imposed top-down from the state authority.<sup>18</sup> Even though the state played the prominent role in advancing the status of women in the public sphere, the women's movement was also a very significant force from the very beginning of the Republic, and women activists played a key role in achieving fundamental rights—even in the Ottoman era.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of global capitalism, the Turkish welfare state underwent a structural transformation in the 1980s. The military coup in 1980, and the new constitution that came into effect after the coup, led to the dominance of a neoliberal agenda in economic and social domains.<sup>20</sup> During this period, social policy in Turkey was shaped by the emergence of market-fundamentalism.<sup>21</sup> Since the 1980s, the share of women holding or seeking jobs in Turkey has been low compared to other OECD countries, and even compared to certain Middle Eastern countries, according to the World Bank Report in 2009. There are various supply and demand side factors behind this trend. However, the inability of policies to absorb female labor flow from agricultural sector to service and industry sector due to the de-ruralization is pointed out as the main reason explaining the low levels of women's labor market participation from the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> The comparatively low participation rate of women in the labor force has perpetuated women's position in the private boundaries of the household and limited their presence in the public sphere.

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16 *Bugra/Keyder*, 2006.

17 *Zihnioglu*, 2003.

18 *Tekeli*, 1986; *White*, 2003.

19 *Tekeli*, 2010.

20 *Boratav/Ozugurlu*, 2006.

21 *Bugra/Keyder*, 2006.

22 *Bugra/Yakut-Cakar*, 2010.

After the 1980s, the influence of international organizations became significant in the social policy environment.<sup>23</sup> When the AKP came to power in 2002, the party had a pro-European Union agenda. In parallel to the positive developments in the negotiations over Turkey's EU membership, the government took steps to harmonize its laws with the EU. Thus, the EU process was a positive step towards implementing reforms that seek gender equality.<sup>24</sup> Previous commitments to international organizations (such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, *CEDAW*) and the influence of women's organizations were also effective in implementing equality-oriented policies. Turkey's aspirations for EU membership influenced many reforms targeting democratization<sup>25</sup> and gender equality. However, the attempts were far from sufficient to substantially improve gender equality or to challenge traditional gender roles in Turkish society.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Policy analysis*

The policy analysis starts in 2002, when the AKP first came into government, and ends in 2017, when Turkey adopted a new presidential system following the referendum on 16 April 2017. Starting from the second decade of 2000s, policies became even more market-oriented, as well as family-centered. However, this turning point does not reflect a sharp divide between two distinct periods. Instead, it is a meaningful reference point for making a distinction between policy paradigms.

Equality-oriented policies are policies and practices that support women's labor market participation and enhance gender equality in the labor market. However, equality in the labor market could refer to status equality, equality of opportunities or substantive equality, which challenge traditional gender roles and use gender mainstreaming as a strategy to continuously question the gendered implications of policies.<sup>27</sup> The policies that the AKP implemented at the start of the 2000s were focused on providing status equality and equality of opportunities between women and men in the labor market. The amendments defined women as equal to men in legal texts, and they promoted policies to ensure equal opportunities in the labor market. It should be noted that policies targeting equality of opportunities among sexes in the labor market do not focus on the policy outcomes. Their aim is to provide the same conditions and opportunities.

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23 *Kilic*, 2008.

24 *Cosar/Ozkan-Kerestecioglu*, 2017.

25 *Onis*, 2013.

26 *Kilic*, 2008; *Dedeoglu*, 2012.

27 *Verloo/Lombardo*, 2007.

However, if the inequalities are deeply rooted and structural, then giving the same conditions and opportunities to men and women could end up ignoring the differences and not eliminating gender inequalities.

At the start of the 2000s, the party made several amendments to the constitution, labor law and civil law.<sup>28</sup> The aim of these amendments was to implement gender equality as status equality among citizens and to ensure equal opportunities for both women and men in the labor market. For example, in 2002, amendments to the civil law removed the notion of men as “breadwinners” and introduced the “common sharing of goods, which are acquired during marriage”. However, as Elveren<sup>29</sup> argued, these provisions, which were designed to equalize the status of husbands and wives, were not supported by a social insurance system which could provide social assistance and compensate women for their unpaid domestic labor. In 2003, amendments to the labor law and constitution granted equal status to women and men in the labor market. Similarly, in 2004, the Law on Equality in Public Employee Recruitment was enacted to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in public employment recruitment.

The government established new institutions in line with gender equality targets, such as The Ministry of Women and Family Affairs, and The National Women Employment Monitoring and Coordination Board. In the first decade of the 2000s, the Directorate General on the Status of Women (which was originally established in 1990), headed by the Minister of Women and Family Affairs, was established. The Directorate worked on gender issues with the participation of representatives from various ministries, feminist academics and independent NGOs. Similarly, The Parliamentary Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men produced important commission reports on issues such as women’s employment, gender equality at work, and mobbing in the workplace between 2009 and 2013. These institutions were mandatory for entry to the EU and harmonization with EU laws. Since the objective was to achieve status equality, these amendments had a very limited direct impact on removing inequalities in the labor market.

Women’s integration into the labor market was one of the government’s strategic goals because it recognized that the government could not

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28 Constitution Article 10, inclusion of “Men and women have equal rights. The state is obliged to provide this equality” in 2004. Labor Law No. 4857, inclusion of “equal treatment to men and women” in 22 May 2003; amendments in Civil Law No. 4721. Turkey made several legislative changes and regulations, in the framework of harmonization with the EU acquis and the Copenhagen Criteria.

29 *Elveren*, 2013.



achieve high growth unless it integrated more women into the economy.<sup>30</sup> Official documents<sup>31</sup> state that one of the targets of the government is to integrate women more into the paid economy. This is underscored by development plans<sup>32</sup> and parliamentary reports.<sup>33</sup> Women's entrepreneurship was one of the main measures introduced by the government to achieve this goal. The Turkish Employment Agency (ISKUR) and The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization (KOSGEB) provided financial support and training in order to increase women's entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, active labor market programs are initiated, which include vocational training courses, job-trainings and public work programs, to prevent long term unemployment. However, these measures were far from being sufficient to increase formal employment of women and provide sustainable and secure jobs. The current policy solution of the government has evolved to a mix of non-contractual, flexible employment practices and familial cash assistance.<sup>34</sup> Although increasing women's employment remains an important target in strategical documents, such as development plans, it is no longer prioritized. Also, the formulation of causality behind this target has changed. In the first decade, this target was seen crucial to achieve better economic outcomes and to improve human capacity, while later it is demonstrated as a target to have stronger families (e.g. Women's Empowerment Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2023).

In 2011, with the introduction of Omnibus Bill No 6111, the government introduced several types of flexible employment options, specific to women and mothers. Following an amendment to Turkey's labor law in 2016, the government started regulating the establishment of private employment agencies to popularize temporary casual employment and flexible employment opportunities. The private employment agencies played a key role in the institutionalization of recruitment and termination practices. This also positioned women as low-cost, part-time labor in the labor market and unpaid full-time labor in the household. The amendments made to Law No 6663 in 2016 introduced special part-time work options

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30 President Erdogan: "We are going through a period that we need high growth rates. Women's participation in the workforce is the most important criteria, to achieve the growth we need" (10 Oct 2015).

31 "Political Vision of Justice and Development Party 2023: Politics, Society and the World" [www.akparti.org.tr/english/akparti/2023-political-vision](http://www.akparti.org.tr/english/akparti/2023-political-vision).

32 *Turkish Grand National Assembly*, 2006.

33 *Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men*, 2013.

34 *Bugra*, 2020, p. 453.

for working mothers. Considering the structural characteristics of the Turkish labor market, such as long working hours, high levels of unemployment and informal employment,<sup>35</sup> more flexibility for women in the labor market increases their precarious situation<sup>36</sup> and perpetuates their primary caregiver role in the family.

Employment is no longer the first priority of these policies, having been overshadowed by policies related to the family. Conservative policies and discourses became significant in the second decade of the 2000s. According to data provided by the General Directorate of Social Assistance,<sup>37</sup> the distribution of cash for home-care benefits (number of persons benefiting from home care assistance by years) is increasing annually. The number of people benefiting from cash for homecare when these programs were first initiated in 2007 was 30,638; however, this number increased more than 15-fold to 499,737 by 2017. The total amount of money allocated to cash for homecare by the Ministry was less than 1 billion Turkish Lira<sup>38</sup> before 2010. However, since 2010, the amount allocated has gradually increased from 2.2 billion Lira in 2011 to 6.5 billion Lira in 2018. Since the majority of caregivers are women, and since cash for home-care is paid to relatives according to the law, the growing amount of money paid to home caregivers could be seen as perpetuating the traditional caregiving role of women. It is also notable that the government prioritized social assistance programs as a policy solution for issues that could also be addressed with public social service programs.<sup>39</sup>

In the second decade of the 2000s, the government introduced market-oriented policies, as well as pronatalist and maternalist policies. In 2011, the abolishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs and its replacement with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies meant that the word “women” was no longer in the name of the ministry that is in charge of making policies for women. In 2012, family counseling centers were established to prevent divorces and strengthen families. In 2015, the Law on the Protection of Family and Dynamic Population was introduced, which aims to increase fertility as a means of protecting the family and the population but endangers women’s participation in social and economic life. In 2013, ISKUR initiated public work programs and vocational training

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35 *Saydam*, 2017.

36 *Ermis-Mert*, 2018.

37 <https://www.ailevecalisma.gov.tr/media/5428/bueltlen-nisan2019.pdf>.

38 In 2009, GDP per capita in Turkey was 9,036.27 US Dollars and 1 USD was approx. 1.5 Turkish Lira.

39 *Yilmaz*, 2018, p. 111.

which reinforce the gendered division of labor and made it more difficult for women to transition from training to employment than men.<sup>40</sup> Beyond these developments, ever increasing conservatism and the stronger emphasis on motherhood were not limited to just policies. The official discourse of the government defines the role of the women primarily in the domain of family with cultural and religious references.<sup>41</sup>

It should also be mentioned that the ministry is not using gender equality as a goal in its recent publications. Abandoning “gender equality” in the policy papers signals a shift in the dominant public vision on ideal gender relations. Policy documents on ensuring and advocating gender equality are the ones that are published in the 2000s and the beginning of 2010s (e.g., National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2008-2013 published by the General Directorate on the Status of Women in 2008; and the Commission Report for Increasing Women’s Employment and Solution Proposals prepared by the Parliamentary Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men in 2013). However, in the recently published documents, the concept of gender equality is not used as a concept and a desirable goal (e.g., Women’s Empowerment Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2023 published by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, in 2018).

## CONCLUSION

This article puts forward that there has been a paradigmatic shift in gendered labor market policies during the AKP period. This shift can be seen in three spheres: policy priorities, policy instruments and institutional settings. In the first decade of the 2000s, policy priorities included granting women equal status to men in the labor market and equality of opportunities to increase women’s participation in the labor market. To achieve these targets, the government made legislative changes and introduced incentives to encourage women’s employment and entrepreneurship. The government established new institutions to help achieve these targets, such as the Parliamentary Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men, and The General Directorate on the Status of Women.

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40 *Goksen/Olcay/Alniacik/Deniz*, 2015, p. 78.

41 President Erdogan rejected gender equality in 2014 and claimed that motherhood must be women’s priority (2016): “Women are not equal to men.” (November 24, 2014), link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/24/turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-women-not-equal-men> ; “A woman who rejects motherhood, however successful her working life is deficient and incomplete.” (2016).

However, when we scrutinize the changes in policies and institutions, there is a remarkable shift in the second decade of the 2000s. As Peter Hall states: “*the overarching goals that guide policy*” have changed. Protecting and prioritizing the family, while providing flexible female labor to the market, characterize new policies. Accordingly, the government now gives preference to new policy tools which reflect these priorities, such as cash for home-care schemes and precarious, flexible employment opportunities. The institutional framework of gender policies has significantly changed and some institutions, such as parliamentary committees and boards working on women’s employment and gender equality, have been decommissioned or stripped of their power. The most prominent example is replacing The Ministry of Women and Family Affairs with The Ministry of Family and Social Policies, thus removing the word “women” from the name of the ministry. Furthermore, the institutions that were established to improve women’s labor market status (such as the Parliamentary Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men) have been dismantled since 2012.

The brief analysis reveals a paradigmatic shift in labor market policies targeted at women by exemplifying the recent two decades of Turkey under the AKP rule. It also contributes to the literature by providing a link between policy studies and gender research. However, the scope of this chapter is limited to descriptive changes in policies and policy related institutions. The reasons behind this change would be addressed in future research.

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*ABOUT THE INSTITUTE*

*The International Max Planck Research School on the Social and Political Constitution of the Economy (IMPRS-SPCE), Cologne, Germany.*

The IMPRS-SPCE doctoral program is offered jointly by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies and the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics at the University of Cologne. It is an interdisciplinary program investigating the complex links between economics, politics and society. The program develops new approaches in economic sociology, comparative and international political economy, and organizational studies.

This doctoral research project focuses on changes to the policy-making processes related to gender, as well as changes to the gendered labor market and care policies under the conservative Justice and Development Party since 2000. The project envisions policymaking as a set of complex processes, in which multiple actors interact. It examines how different actors, such as public institutions, civil society organizations, experts and international organizations, interact in gender policy-making processes with their ideas. The research uses content analysis to understand the changing nature of

policies. Furthermore, the research examines the mechanisms that influence policy change by conducting process tracing.

Exploring social, political and economic foundations of gender policies aligns well with the research agenda of the institute. The focus of this doctoral project lies at the nexus of gender and political economy. Within the historically specific social and political context of Turkey, the research examines the influence of governmental and non-governmental actors on policymaking processes. Gender is an important policy realm for understanding changes in state-society relations. The research sheds light on the transformation in societal relations by providing an understanding of gendered policy changes in the paid and unpaid realms of labor.