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Determinants of professional career of women in Turkey

Introduction

The possibility to follow professional career by women is a subject of many surveys within the framework of the *gender studies*, particularly in highly developed countries. In Turkey, it is a relatively new phenomenon, as a group of women who may be said to be climbing a career ladder has appeared only recently. The presented article is devoted to the analysis of both: the factors that facilitate professional success of Turkish women, as well as those that make their way to the top of professional career more difficult than it is in case of men. It is worth to observe how specific cultural, social and economic Turkish conditions determine occupational positions of women.

Countries where Islam is the main religion are often perceived as a homogeneous group, where all women are discriminated against, they must not work, move unescorted outside home or show their face in public. In reality, the situation of women in each Muslim country is different, depending on its history, culture, political system, and the level of socio-economic development. Turkey is a Muslim country, but with a secular, democratic system. The constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, irrespective of their sex. Women can participate in education, work outside home, assert their rights in court, and actively participate in political life. However, it does not mean that all Turkish women exercise these possibilities.

Only 14% women completed secondary school, while 6% – tertiary school (in case of men the respective figures are: 22% and 10%)¹. A low level of education is caused by lack of real possibility to participate in education. In the poor, rural regions of Turkey (eastern and south-eastern), the school network is underdeveloped, while parents cannot afford financing their children's education in towns situated within a distance of a few hundred kilometres. Moreover, the number of places at the state, free universities is limited, while paid studies are only available to the

well-off families, which are still not so many in Turkey. Beside economic issues, there is also a cultural aspect. Traditional families believe that a man is to provide for his wife, while a woman should look after home and children instead of studying and working. However, increasingly more people, particularly from large cities, cease to perceive the role of a woman in such way. Ensuring good education for their daughters is becoming a priority for well-off parents, as they realize that in contemporary Turkey it is the passport to well paid work.

Patriarchal culture characterising the Middle Eastern countries, plays a key role in women's participation in the labour market. The average rate of economic activity of women in Arabic countries is 26%, while in Turkey – 27% (for men 71%)². When comparing to the European countries, or even the South American ones, where this rate comprises 40–50%, it may be said that the number of women in employment in Turkey is still rather low. The surveys show that beside women who prefer home and children over work, there is almost as large group of women who cannot take up employment because of their husband's or family's objection³. Moreover, the majority of not working Turkish women, particularly the ones without education and of low material status believe that a woman needs her husband consent for taking up work, thus accepting the patriarchal system⁴.

Almost a half of the economically active women are employed in agriculture, which derives from the traditional way of farming. It is hard work; nevertheless, it does not bring wages or guarantees the rights to social benefits. Women help on family farms, but men manage the income from this activity. The similar situation is in the field of economic activity of women working at home or adjacent workshops, hand making carpets, laces, embroideries, pottery, etc. Their employers are their husbands, relatives, or neighbours, while women themselves consider such work not as a source

of personal income but as a duty for the sake of their families. The situation of low qualified female workers employed in clothing and textile establishments, who are often employed in informal sector and receive minimal wages is also unfavourable⁵.

The sector that should offer great employment opportunities to women is service sector. In Turkey, only 36% of economically active women are employed there; almost a half of them provide simple service for individual people (e.g. hairdressing, tailoring). A positive phenomenon is a double increase in employment in such branches as tourism, hotels, catering, and retail trade, which in Turkey are perceived as reserved for men. 13% of women are employed in the sector of finances, insurance, real estate, and business services. It is assumed that this rate will be increasing following a rapid development of this sector in Turkey⁶.

Entrepreneurship of women in Turkey

In Turkey, women entrepreneurs are not very numerous. According to the 2006 data, only 8% of women in non-agricultural sector were working as self-employed, while 2% conducted their own businesses employing workers (for comparison, in case of men the respective figures are: 26% and 5%)⁷. A low level of entrepreneurship of Turkish women may be caused by patriarchal relationships dominant in the society and families – a role of a woman comes down to being a housewife and a mother, while all business activities belong to men.

The survey carried out in a group of women entrepreneurs indicates that they comprise women at different age (between 22 and 55 years), mainly with primary and secondary education, married, with two children. Regarding the kind of conducted activity, the most often it concerned: retail of clothing (25%), tailoring services (17%), hairdressing services and beauty parlours (14%)⁸. Women launch micro or small businesses (almost 90% did not employ more than three employees), financed mainly from their own savings. Most women of the surveyed group had worked before they launched their own businesses, as paid employees in the same branch or as home-based (handcraft) workers. Among the most important reasons for starting their business, women declared:

- the necessity to satisfy the family material needs,
- desire for more contacts with other people,
- self-realization.

The decided majority of women did not experience any negative reactions from their environment concerning their decision; on the contrary, they received support of their husband and family. The difficulties they had to face were of financial and institutional

character: obtaining the starting capital, bureaucratic procedures, and lack of experience. During the course of maintaining their businesses, 88% of women noticed the occurrence of such problems as: insufficient demand on the market, the necessity to pay back liabilities due to creditors and taxes. Therefore, any entrepreneur may suffer these problems irrespective of their sex.

The surveyed women believe that they are good entrepreneurs. They attribute their success to such features as: communicative skills, confidence and courage, patience and modesty. It is interesting, that among the three most important features were modesty and patience, which did not appear in the surveys in other countries. It is possible that entrepreneurship of women in Turkey focuses on a stable activity, which will provide them with the source of maintenance, rather than market expansion. Such conclusion are confirmed by the fact that over a half of the surveyed women allocate earned money for family maintenance, while only 17% for the further development of their business.

Women see the need for development of their knowledge and skills within the scope of running own business. 63% of them expressed the wish to participate in entrepreneurship training, which according to them should include: the knowledge within the scope of conducted activity, ways of communication, microeconomics, marketing strategies, methods of combining professional and family life, new technologies, and the rudiments of management. Surprising is the fact that the surveyed women declared the need for training that would facilitate reconciliation of work and home-bound responsibilities.

A woman as a „valuable employee”

When analysing the possibilities of occupational development of women in Turkey, it should be noticed that it concerns only a selected group of economically active women, namely salaried workers (26%)⁹. Professional career means climbing successive steps of organizational hierarchy, improving qualifications, developing skills; therefore, it requires some independent activity and the space where this development is possible. Turkish women without qualifications and performing simple tasks in agriculture or industry do not have such opportunities.

In a group of highly qualified staff (*professionals*) women constitute 32%, which is a result comparable to the Arab countries irrespective of the level of their economic development, e.g. in the much higher developed United Arab Emirates, the respective share comprises 25%, while in Oman 33%¹⁰. It is much lower than in European countries or even in South America, however on the background of

overall low economic activity of women in Muslim countries, such result is a positive phenomenon. It shows that when women decide to start paid work, it is in occupations enjoying high social prestige. This is caused by more than in other countries attention paid to the character of performed work, its stability and social image. Lawyers, doctors, scientific workers are universally respected because they possess knowledge and skills, which are meant to serve other people. Therefore, it is presumed that the reputation of women will not suffer because of performing these professions; on the contrary, it will enhance their social and economic status.

On the other hand, each developing economy needs increasingly more highly qualified staff. Potential economic advantages push the gender issue to the background, and cultural requirements may be combined with the labour market needs, in order to enable employment of highly qualified women¹¹. In the conservative Arab countries the system of work is organized in accordance with the principles of Islam, e.g. women work in separate rooms than men; they deal only with female customers. Turkey has applied the western model where the working environment is shared by both genders.

Women, if only their material situation allows, take advantage of opportunities to obtain good education and qualifications. It is confirmed by their relative high share among tertiary students (43%). There are more women than men in branches such as linguistics, artistic, and medical studies. Women constitute 35% of management students, whereas in technical sciences – 23%, which is a result higher than the average rate in the European Union (14%)¹². University degree, particularly in such fields as law, finances, management, marketing, guarantees finding a good job, as the intensively developing private sector shows a huge demand for such specialists. In legal professions, the share of women amounts to 34%, while in the finance sector it comprises 42%¹³.

The main indicator of opportunities of professional career of women is their participation in the managerial staff. The UN indicates that women in Turkey hold 7% of managerial positions, similarly to the Arabic countries¹⁴. The surveys carried out in Turkish companies showed that women's representation drops at the top levels of hierarchy. In over a half of all banks and insurance companies operating in Turkey women constituted 43% of the staff. However, their share in the intermediate management level comprised 26%, whereas they constituted only 4% of the top executive managers¹⁵. The survey carried out in 100 Turkish companies, showed that among women employed there 20–25% were managers of the lowest rank, 10–15% – intermediate level managers, 5–10% – deputy directors, 1–5% – main directors. Most women

managers were employed in the finance sector and in companies dealing in media and fashion¹⁶.

Social perception of women managers

The universal factor hindering women career advancement is functioning of gender stereotypes. The Turkish studies indicate that men are described as: ambitious, analytical, enterprising, strong, confident, ready to take risk (socially desirable traits), and dominant, jealous, autonomous (socially undesirable traits). Whereas women are believed to be: dependent, loving children, elegant, provident (socially desirable traits), and docile, timid, weak, unsure, naive (socially undesirable traits)¹⁷. There results indicate that among female traits prevail negative ones connected with passiveness and weakness, while male traits are mainly positive, they indicate activeness and high competences.

Stereotypical female traits do not match characteristics of a good manager, which confirm the surveys carried out among the management students of one of Turkish universities. The respondents were asked to choose among the given traits the ones characterising: an ideal manager, an ideal man, an ideal woman, an ideal male manager, and an ideal female manager. It turned out that the traits of an ideal manager matched those of an ideal men and an ideal male manager, whereas they were entirely different than the traits of an ideal women and an ideal female manager. Moreover, there were no matching traits in the descriptions of an ideal woman and an ideal woman manager¹⁸. It shows that a manager is associated with a man; whereas, women holding managerial positions must assume male traits, therefore they may be perceived as less feminine.

Gender stereotypes significantly influence a positive or negative attitude toward professional career of women. The surveys carried out among Turkish students shows that the more traditional is someone's outlook on life, the less approving are their attitudes toward women managers. People, who believe that the women's place is at home, do not support their professional careers. More often it is men who think so¹⁹, as they are used to the fact that a woman cooks, cleans, brings up children; they would be very reluctant to share these responsibilities in order to facilitate her career development.

The surprising results provided the survey carried out among scientific workers of Turkish universities, which were to present their opinions concerning various statements about women in management. Both women and men expressed negative attitudes toward women managers, while women's attitude was more negative²⁰. The explanation of such attitude may be

found in the way of women's socialization of in Turkey. Most girls are socialized for the role of wife, mother and housekeeper. They internalise very strong societal requirements of themselves; thus, in their adult life they apply their own norms to other women, negatively assessing these who choose professional career.

These results also seem to confirm the occurrence of a phenomenon called the Queen Bee Syndrome in Turkey, which *inter alia* manifests itself in female misogyny and jealousy of women who managed to advance to the higher levels on the hierarchy ladder²¹. Women generally face more difficulties in their career advancement, therefore, they tend to assume that other women succeeded not because of their hard work, skills and knowledge, but because of skilful manipulation and the use of their personal charm and physical attractiveness. Such way of thinking is connected to the fact that many women struggle with the internal conflict between their social role to which they were nurtured and which they internalised, and the emerging desire for self-realization in other domains, stimulated *inter alia* by the observation of professional success of other women. If such realization is impossible, the way to cope with the conflict is devaluation of women whose high position at work reminds of unfulfilled ambitions.

The phenomenon of female jealousy is little recognized in Turkey. Its existence is confirmed by the interviews carried out with 37 women employed in the finance sector (of which 30 held managerial positions). 86% of the interviewed women declared that they experienced jealousy of their female colleagues at work. They also claimed that establishment of friendly relationships with other women at work, particularly subordinate, is impossible, even though they realize that cooperation is more profitable than rivalry. The problem voices one of the female managers:

I have been working in the banking sector for 16 years, I have worked in three banks, and I can say with full conviction women do not help each other at work. In private life, they have close relationships, but regarding work, they do not tolerate each other's promotions and achievements. There is intense jealousy. I met it personally when I became a manager. I received more appreciation from my male colleagues than female ones ²².

It is a worrying phenomenon, as women themselves cause new obstacles to career advancement of their own gender representatives. Its manifestation is also the fact that Turkish women generally prefer men as supervisors and colleagues. In the survey carried out among women employed in 100 different companies in Turkey, 5% of the respondents would prefer a woman as a supervisor, for 15% the supervisor's sex was insignificant, however, as many as 80% preferred a man. Then, asked about the preferred sex of their subor-

dinate, 50% women choose a man, while only 15% a woman. When asked whom they would fire, most women chose a woman²³.

On the other hand, the survey carried out among the employees of the private companies in Istanbul showed that women present more positive attitudes toward professional career of women than men²⁴. At the same time, they also accept the view that a woman is responsible for maintaining a household and rearing children, which shows how deeply the traditional way of thinking is rooted in women themselves. We face some paradox here: on the one hand, women identify with their stereotypical role; while on the other hand, they support women's occupational aspirations. It may be caused by the fact, that both family and work are equally important for women. Even if family hinders their career, they still believe that women can be equally good managers as men. It reflects the perceived by women discrepancy between the actual state and an ideal one, where having family would not interfere with career advancement.

Personal policy of companies toward women

The share of women in managerial structures varies depending on a country, which shows that organizational culture characterising a particular country is not without significance. According to the Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Turkey belongs among the collectivist, with large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance cultures ²⁵. Employees are expected to be loyal and ready for sacrifices on behalf of the company, e.g. by working longer hours. Relationships between subordinates and supervisors are determined by the hierarchic structure, where each member occupies a well-defined position. Turkish managers prefer autocratic leadership style, centralized decision making and indirect way of communication with employees. On the other hand, the subordinate employees value strong and determined leaders, they focus on obeying instructions of their supervisors, instead of showing their own initiative²⁶.

It is also worth to remember, that the majority of Turkish enterprises started their activity as family businesses with the oldest man as the boss. In this way was shaped the belief that men should occupy managerial positions. Women have more problems with following the autocratic managerial style because men are not used to take orders from a woman. It is unheard of for a woman to raise her voice at a man, even the one on a lower level of hierarchy, as she would hurt his pride. Women are perceived as gentle, sensitive, and indecisive, which weakens their authority among their subordinates, who often expect to be treated leniently (e.g. they get

a leave more easily)²⁷. On the other hand, a positive for women of aspect Turkish organizational culture is paying great attention to human relationships, taking care about mental well being of the employees and their family needs²⁸.

Organizational culture shapes personal policy of the management toward the employees of both sexes in respect to recruitment, evaluation, training, promotion, remuneration, and dismissals. Most surveys within the scope of this subject were carried out in the finance sector, because female representation there almost equals male one. 94% of the questioned employees stated that there are no differences in treating women and men in their place of work, while 86% added that women do not experience any obstacles during the recruitment process²⁹. Women who encountered unequal treatment in the recruitment process, pointed out questions concerning their marital status and plans regarding family. This problem Turkey, as in every country employment of a woman generates extra costs when she has children and takes maternity leave.

Women may also face difficulties when applying for some job positions. The surveyed women-managers responsible for the company human resources, admitted that they prefer not to employ women in jobs requiring physical strength, endurance, and frequent travelling³⁰. Women are rarely employed in audit units in banks, as it requires business trips. Moreover, men with traditional attitudes are averse to women controlling their units, some even refuse to cooperate with a female controller³¹.

Women are very often employed as elementary workers, who perform routine tasks, as they are believed to be more patient than men. Attractive women are placed on the so-called front positions where the contacts with clients are made and which are the company showcase. Even in advertising banks use the image of a pretty, smiling girl serving the clients because most of them comprise men³². Such practices disclose the perception of a woman in the context of her physical attractiveness instead of her competences. At the same time, the fact that they are employed on lower, less important positions may lead to women needing more time and efforts than men to reach the top managerial positions.

The interviews with women managers indicate that companies do not carry out any particular actions supporting women in their advancement to higher positions; on the other hand, there are no regular hindrances. 13% women admitted that their supervisors (mainly men) openly encourage them to greater participation in management, but these accidental actions are not a part of the purposeful company policy. 10% of women experienced obstacles to their career advancement because of their gender. The

problems resulted mainly from lack of development opportunities:

Training programmes are the core element in occupational career, not many opportunities to participate in training are created for us [women], particularly concerning the training programmes for the top executive managers that are held abroad. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it is assumed that a woman will not be able to participate in such training because of family responsibilities; because of that, they are not even asked about their opinion. Secondly, there is some concern that the costs of the woman's retraining will be spent in vain, as she will probably get married, have a child and resign from work³³.

In corporate culture of many companies, male values are dominant, which is obvious in the way that the ideal candidates for a job are presented by human resources units. Persons who dynamic, ambitious, effective, target oriented are sought. One of the banks used in its recruitment folder the pictures of young men and women exercising in the gym and doing extreme sports³⁴. Therefore, women must adjust to the "male" way of thinking and acting if they are to have equal chances with men when applying for higher positions in the organization:

Men create closed networks, which are very difficult to penetrate by a woman. If a woman cannot communicate with them the way they do it among themselves, she will be ignored. Exclusion from a male communication network has two effects. First, you are not getting critical information about what is going on in the company, e.g. position openings. Second, men prefer to work with people whom they can easily and efficiently communicate with, so when there is an opening for a position, it is often taken by a man³⁵.

Differences in communication styles and difficulties with understanding each other may lead to inadequate assessment of women's work by men. 23% of the surveyed women experienced discrimination regarding the evaluation of their achievements, particularly if there were no clearly defined objective evaluation criteria and the evaluator was a man³⁶. Lack of the formalized personnel's evaluation instruments may also lead to subjective distribution of gratifications:

There is no difference between the net wages of men and women. But there are differences in the compensations we receive. For example there is a compensation you receive when you earn points depending on your aptitudes. But there are some points that are totally left up to the decision of the manager. Even if you, as a woman, have better qualifications, men always get higher points. They favor men. They say 'He's a man, he supports a family'. My assistant director once expressed this to me by

saying 'come on, what do you need the money for?' Both male and female managers believe a woman has some material support anyway. There is no gender gap in net earnings of women and men, but there are differences in additional payments³⁷.

The above statement illustrates the stereotypical way of thinking justifying establishment of lower remuneration for women. Men should earn more because they are responsible for family maintenance. The statistics show that women holding managerial positions in the private sector earn 84% of men's salaries³⁸.

The influence of individual factors on professional career of women

The existence of external barrier to occupational development of women does not have to compromise their chances for career advancement, providing that they have the right attitude and are ready to overcome difficulties. The surveys show that women who succeeded in business characterise high efficiency, success orientation, and mobility³⁹. The same situation is observed in Turkey, where women managers of intermediate and top managerial ranks as the factors of their success name traits such as: decisiveness, awareness of own goals, commitment, determination, readiness for sacrifices, high self-evaluation, as well as drawing joy and satisfaction from the performed work. The significance of the women's own attitude indicates one of the surveyed female managers:

The greatest of all barriers against women is their low self-confidence. At the first sight of the first disappointment or a problem, the ones with low self-confidence are the ones who give up and use children and husband as an excuse. First, a woman should believe that she deserves to hold a particular position. If she does not believe it herself, it will be even more impossible to convince other people⁴⁰.

Paid work has been always very important in the lives of these women, they perceive following career path as something natural. 95% started paid work to fulfil their occupational aspirations, while only 5% because of economic reasons. Paid work allows women feeling of freedom, independence, self-dependence. One of the female managers expresses her opinion concerning advantages of paid work: *I could consider a divorce but never giving up my work, because a husband cannot replace the feeling of security that my work provides⁴¹.*

Such attitude strongly depends on the woman's background. Children start shaping their life ambitions and attitudes to work through imitating their parents in early childhood; the parents' opinions are first to influence children's choices. Very important is the mother's outlook on life, as she provides the role

model for a young girl. Even if a mother herself has not graduated from university, or has not worked, but she wanted to do this and believes that women have equal rights to fulfil their aspirations outside home, she will certainly support her daughter in her work-related ambitions. According to 94% of the surveyed women who succeeded in their occupational life, mother played a very important role in their career advancement. Mothers who worked provided role models, whereas those who took care of home provided greatest support for their daughters.

Professional career versus family

Because of biological determinants, the first role attributed to a woman is having children and bringing them up. As was mentioned before, Turkish organizational culture is family-friendly. 96% of the surveyed women employed on higher positions admitted that their family responsibilities meet with their supervisors' understanding. They did not have any problems with getting maternity leave, or a childcare leave in case of the child's illness, etc. Nevertheless, the share of women who feel discriminated against because of their societal role is the same⁴². The problem is that a woman shoulder the responsibility of looking after her family and she has to resign from participation in trainings, business trips, or temporarily leave work if family situation requires it:

The organization understands our family responsibilities, but we have to pay the price. A woman taking maternity leave temporarily loses contact with work; therefore, she misses many occasions for promotion. Every 3–4 years there are exams in the bank which passing facilitates promotion. Unfortunately, many women could not take the exam because of pregnancy or having a child and their chances for promotion are much weaker⁴³.

The solution to this problem would be greater participation of men in taking care of the children. The General Directorate for the Status of Women (KSGM), appointed by the Turkish government in order to improve the situation of women, prepared a few years ago a project to introduce 6-month child-care leaves for both parents; however, the project has not been heard by the parliament yet⁴⁴. Other solution is setting up childcare facilities where women could leave their children during working hours. There is a provision in the Labour Code that employers with 100 to 150 women are obliged to organize nursing rooms, while those who employ over 150 women – additionally "establishment crèches and kindergartens". However, in reality only about 40–50% of the employers fulfils this obligation⁴⁵. The state does not guarantee a sufficient support for women. By the year 2013, the Ministry of education

is planning to provide childcare only for 50% of children aged 4–5 years⁴⁶.

Not all women holding top managerial positions feel disadvantaged because of children. An interviewed female bank director stated that even though she had had a break in work of 2.5 years when her children had been small, she never regretted or believed that it could negatively affect her career. Another questioned female manager declared that she did not want to be promoted, as she would have less time for her family. At present, she has a satisfying job and happy family life⁴⁷. Also advantaged are women who manage their own company, because they are able to decide the amount of time they devote to their children or career. They are able to take their children to work, or even on business trips, so they can stay close to them without neglecting their companies.

While it is difficult to convince men into taking care of small children, it is much easier to get them used to help with housework, which the women managers pointed out. Among 96% of the surveyed household chores are responsibilities of all household members (husband, older children), they are also assisted by housekeepers. Most women made clear to their husbands at the beginning of their marriages that they wanted to work and follow their career, therefore they expected support of their husbands. 82% of the surveyed declared that they could depend on their husbands' support, while 66% could expect help in housework. When answering the question "Why does your husband help you?" women gave the following answers:⁴⁸

- My husband was taught as a child to respect equality of women's rights
- My husband's help is determined by his personality
- My husband had been made used before to performing housework
- I "socialized" my husband to help me.

Most of these women can cook, and clean because their mothers brought them up in this way, but neither of them considers dedication to these activities as their priority in life. Their declarations present the need to oppose the traditional way of thinking:

*First, we have to change our mentality and start believing that responsibilities respective to starting a family should be equally shared by a husband and wife. Being excessively grateful to your husband for his help in household denies the true idea of partnership in marriage*⁴⁹.

Recapitulation

The presented surveys results showed that occupational position of Turkish women is the result of

both types of determinants: external (culture organizational, stereotypes concerning women functioning in the society), and internal (attitudes of women and their close environment). On the one hand, Turkish companies present understanding of women's family related needs, but on the other hand, traditional way of thinking favours men in advancement to higher positions. Women worldwide share many problems faced by Turkish women. They are often perceived through the lenses of physical attractiveness, instead of competences or required assumption of the "masculine" way of functioning in the organization.

The existence of difficulties does not mean though that women cannot succeed in their professional careers. Increasingly more Turkish women hold high, responsible positions. Worth to notice is the fact that their mutual characteristic features are self-confidence, self-dependence, and determination in achieving assumed goals. If a woman believes in her capabilities, she will easily win over her subordinates, superiors and business partners. The attitudes of the successful Turkish women go beyond stereotypical beliefs, they show that it is possible to combine family life with professional career, be a good wife, mother and businesswoman.

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