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# Gendering the NEET category: young NEET women in Turkey

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## ABSTRACT



Turkey has the highest proportion of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) among OECD countries, standing at 26 percent of all those aged 15–29 years. Notably, however, a young woman in Turkey is three times more likely to be out of education and employment than a young man. Based on statistical data on the NEET category and qualitative research drawing on experiences of young NEET women in six large cities in Turkey, this article discusses the gendered characteristics of this category. This article aims to reconcile competing perspectives in youth studies, namely transition and cultural perspectives, and argues for the importance of introducing cultural elements and gender perspective in the NEET literature, for which the Turkish case offers an important case study.

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## Introduction

Turkey has a young population, with almost 13 million young people between 15 and 24 years of age, which comprised 15.6 percent of the population in 2019. However, there is much debate about how this potential is used in Turkey. A report by the Turkish Social Democrat Foundation (SODEV)<sup>1</sup> is the latest Turkish youth study to highlight the high percentage of unemployed Turkish youth, and those who were not in employment, education, or training (NEET). In 2008, the United Nations Development Program published a report that started a public debate, pointing out that ‘Turkey has a 15-year window of demographic opportunity to prepare today’s youth for the challenges of 2023 and beyond;’<sup>2</sup> however, ‘this window of opportunity will close soon, as the young population began to decrease after 2010.’<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the share of youth in the total population was reported as 19.4 percent in 2000 and 17 percent in 2010, showing that

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the population has gradually started to age as a result of increasing life expectancy and decreasing total fertility rate.<sup>4</sup> Although Turkey is the youngest country in Europe, the demographics of Turkey has been a hot political debate that has led the Turkish government under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) to adopt conservative policies that encourage citizens to have larger families. These policies favor early marriages with at least three children, and have produced discourses and practices against abortion. It has been referred to as neoliberalism with a Muslim face by some scholars,<sup>5</sup> or as Kandiyoti called it, 'the marriage of convenience between neo-liberal welfare and employment policies with a neo-conservative familism that cements ideals of female domesticity.'<sup>6</sup>

One of the consequences of these policies is encouraging more women to withdraw from education and the labor market and become NEET, since early marriages had been the norm in society, and even more and more educated women have been encouraged to stay at home to look after their children (and the elderly). It must be highlighted that despite gradual improvements, Turkey has a high number of individuals who have left school early, commonly discontinuing their education after lower secondary school. The percentage of these individuals among those between 18 and 24 years of age was reported as 28.7 percent in 2019, which had actually decreased from 43.1 percent in 2010.<sup>7</sup> Turkey also has the highest proportion of young people NEET among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, standing at 26 percent of young people between 15 and 29 years of age.<sup>8</sup> The pool of young people NEET is heavily gendered, as it was reported that 46 percent of the young women in Turkey were NEET when compared to 17 percent of the young men in 2019. Thus, a young woman in Turkey is three times more likely to be NEET than a young man.

This paper argues that the NEET category cannot be analyzed without taking into consideration the gender dimension. Even though there is rich academic literature on the NEET category, the literature lacks the gender perspective, and the Turkish case demonstrates that this dimension is vital. For exploring the gender dimension of the NEET category in Turkey, this paper employs a mixed method, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and uses the statistics on youth, as well as the findings of qualitative research conducted in six cities. This mixture is also used from theoretical perspective, as the paper aims to reconcile two dominant perspectives in the sociology of youth: transition and cultural perspectives.

The article starts with a review of the NEET literature, arguing that this literature has mainly adopted a transition perspective in the sociology of youth and analyses NEET in a gender-neutral manner. Next, the article gives an overview of the characteristics of the NEET category in Turkey

based on the NEET statistics. The article then draws on qualitative research and sheds light on the reasons for the exclusion of young women NEET from formal education and the labor market, and the gendered nature of the NEET category in Turkey, followed by a discussion on these findings.

### **The literature on young people NEET: transcending the gender-neutral transition perspective**

There have been two dominant sociological perspectives in the sociology of youth, comprising transition and cultural perspectives.<sup>9</sup> The transition perspective discusses youth as a transitory stage and focuses on the transition from youth to adulthood, adopting a macro perspective and quantitative methodology, whereas the cultural perspective uses micro analysis and qualitative methodology to focus on youth cultures. There is a need in youth studies to reconcile these two perspectives,<sup>10</sup> which is the aim of this paper. The literature on the NEET category has been dominantly conducted using the transition perspective; hence, the aim herein is to introduce the cultural perspective into the discussion of the NEET category, based on the qualitative research conducted.

The school-to-work transition has been an important focus of the transition literature, since this transition has been seen as indispensable for the integration of young people into society. As the European Commission White Paper stated: 'To have a job means adult status, self-respect, money, independence, and the opportunity to broaden one's social contacts. Young people who are cut off from work are losing a vital chance to get new perspectives and integrate into wider society.'<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, however, it is accepted that such linear transitions from school to work are increasingly becoming diversified and individualized. As a result of increasing globalization and neo-liberal trends, the restructuring of labor markets, increasing demand for qualifications and flexibility in the workplace, and cuts in social benefits, have made the transition to economic independence for young people even more complex. At a global level, these changes have resulted in a major restructuring of how young people move from education into the labor market, replacing the descriptions of relatively straight forward and linear transitions, from adolescence and school to adulthood and secure employment.<sup>12</sup>

Traditional approaches to understanding the vulnerable position of young people in the labor market have become less effective, as many of these transitions are not recognized as conventional indicators of unemployment. In general, although the term NEET has crept into the policy vocabulary and those who are NEET are framed as the group most at risk, they are often viewed as problematic in relation to youth unemployment and their educational needs remain subliminal to a system within which their

participation is limited. Clearly, young people who are NEET and youth unemployment are related concepts, but there are important differences between the two.<sup>13</sup> The age definitions of the NEET indicator vary from place to place and among different organizations. Eurostat measures the NEET indicator that covers individuals between 15 and 24 years of age in member and candidate countries using micro-level data. Eurostat breaks down the indicator into three different age groups of young people, comprising those between 20 and 24, 25 and 29, and 30 and 34 years of age, to facilitate their analyses. The OECD also collects NEET statistics as an indicator of youth marginalization and disengagement under two age groups, comprising those between 15 and 19, and 20 and 24 years of age. Turkey has defined the NEET category as young people between 15 and 24 years of age who are NEET, and uses national data from the Labor Force Survey (LFS) to measure the phenomenon. In Europe, most countries define the NEET category in the same way that Turkey does.<sup>14</sup>

Internationally, however, different definitions are used. As a consequence of the lack of an internationally recognized definition of NEET, the characteristics of young people classified as NEET differ greatly from country to country.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, those who are NEET include a very heterogeneous population. Nevertheless, five main subgroups within the NEET population have been identified,<sup>16</sup> comprising (1) the conventionally unemployed, which is the largest subgroup and can be further subdivided into long-term and short-term unemployed; (2) the unavailable, which includes young careers, young people with family responsibilities, and young people who are sick or disabled; (3) the disengaged, comprising those young people who are not seeking jobs or education and are not constrained from doing so by other obligations or incapacities, which includes discouraged workers as well as other young people who are pursuing dangerous and a social lifestyles; (4) the opportunity-seekers, including young people who are actively seeking work or training, but are holding out for opportunities that they see as befitting their skills and status; and (5) those who are voluntarily NEET, such as those young people who are traveling or are constructively engaged in other activities such as art, music, and self-directed learning.

In summary, the NEET literature is a rich and developing literature that discusses the NEET category in a gender-neutral manner and lacks a gender perspective. Similarly, the literature dominantly uses the transition perspective and lacks cultural perspective. In this article, the aim is to respond to these two gaps in the research and introduce gender and cultural perspectives in the analysis of the NEET category in Turkey. The term cultural perspective refers to patriarchy and traditional gender roles, surrounded by its socio-cultural and political aspects.

## The NEET category in Turkey

The youth labor market in Turkey is characterized by high levels of inactivity or unemployment. In 2019, the youth activity rate stood at 44.3 percent and the employment rate was 33.1 percent, with wide gaps between young males and females (10 percent lower for females for both rates). Since 2010, the youth unemployment rate has been above the 20 percent threshold and reached 25.2 percent in 2019. In fact, the unemployment rate for young females exceeded 30.3 percent in 2019 (10 percent higher for females for young males), which indicates serious gender-specific problems in labor market transition. Although the unemployment rate is a good measure of the difficulties faced by young people in the labor market, it does not fully reflect the situation of inactive young people who are NEET. As the concept of NEET captures both unemployment and inactivity,<sup>17</sup> Turkey has also begun to use this indicator. In 2019, 26 percent of individuals between 15 and 24 years of age were NEET in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> This corresponds to about 3.4 million young individuals, with a decrease observed from 32.3 percent in 2010–26 percent in 2019. As mentioned previously, close to half of the young women (46 percent) in Turkey are NEET when compared to only 17 percent of the young men. Thus, it appears that young women between 15 and 24 years of age are deprived of their rights with regards to both education and employment in Turkey.

It seems that there is a high correlation for women between leaving school early, high unemployment, early marriage, and a high rate of those who are NEET. These inter-linkages negatively affect the education of women and reduce their ability to take part in the training-employment path, and limit their participation in economic and social life. Although there is an open education<sup>19</sup> alternative, more than half of the NEET group is composed of individuals who have not completed their high school education. When the NEET group of those between 15 and 29 years of age with under-secondary education was examined with regards to gender, three-fourths of the females were found to be NEET (75 percent), while this was slightly more than half for the males (54 percent). Hence, traditional gender roles are combined with the deficiencies of the education system and labor market, which become main the determinants toward becoming NEET in Turkey.

The education system in Turkey is held to suffer from three important and chronic problems, concerning quantity, quality, and equality, and Turkey has not made much progress in these areas.<sup>20</sup> First, the participation rate of young people in the education system tends to be low when compared to other OECD countries and there is also an important gender gap. The failure of the education system has been further evidenced by the low participation of women in the labor force.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, there is a high drop-out rate in Turkey (39.6 percent), which is higher than in the EU on average (12.7

percent). It also seems that gender plays an important role, since the rate of females dropping out of school (43 percent) is higher than that of males (36 percent), whereas in the EU, for example, males tend to drop-out more than females.<sup>22</sup> Aside from the gender of a child, there is also evidence that ethnicity, family income, the education attainments of the parents, and migration are significant factors that affect school attainment in Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

Second, 'In Turkey, education continues to be of relatively poor quality and millions of young people risk completing formal education without having achieved proficiency in fundamental areas.'<sup>24</sup> For example, according to the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, 15.5 percent of the 15-year-olds in Turkey lacked basic math proficiency in comparison with generally 8 percent in most of the OECD countries, where those with basic-levels or below in math accounted for almost half of the Turkish cohort, at 42 percent, and these rates were also high for reading (21.6 percent) and science (26.4 percent). In the period between 2009 and 2012, no improvements were seen in these results in Turkey.<sup>25</sup>

Third, inequality continues to exist within the education system, with significant differences in performance between schools. The PISA results also demonstrated the performance gaps between schools, 'In Turkey, the persistent inequalities in education are on the rise and the practice of grouping students into program types of differing quality in secondary education contributes to these inequalities.'<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the distribution of students in secondary education in Turkey is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status. This vicious cycle can only be broken via the application of successful education and youth policies, which are lacking. It seems that the government, who recently announced that they will create a pious and patriarchal generation, proved unable to produce solutions for these chronic problems.<sup>27</sup>

The conditions of the labor market do not look better. Labor force participation by women is very low in Turkey, reflecting a deep-rooted problem that is one of the most important differences between Turkey and other industrialized countries. According to 2019 data released by TURKSTAT, only 36 percent of women engaged in either formal or informal employment in 2019, compared to 74.3 percent of men. Of the limited supply of women in the labor market, more than one-third is unpaid family workers, mostly in the rural agricultural sector. Among married women, the participation rate drops to 20 percent. One document neatly reflecting this schism is the Global Gender Gap report. The findings of the 2016 report showed that throughout the world, women remain behind men in terms of economic participation, opportunities, education, politics, health, and survival. Therein, Turkey ranked 131st in the list of countries, behind many other developing countries in terms of the status of women.

The Ministry of Development announced that the main reason women in the NEET group does not participate in the work force is because these

women were engaged with housework and family care, stating that 67.5 percent of women in the NEET group in 2015 did not take part in working life because of housework, and 14 percent cited family and personal reasons. On the other hand, the actual characteristics of women NEET in terms of their education, income, qualifications, and the working intentions of women between 15 and 29 years of age are not known. According to TURKSTAT 2017 data, it was seen that the participation of women in the labor force changed according to their education level. While the labor force participation rates of illiterate and undereducated women were 16 and 25.8 percent, respectively, the same rate was 31.9 percent for women with high school education, and 71.3 percent for women with higher education. Clearly, a two-fold difference existed between the participation rate of female high school graduates, the closest grade to higher education, and female higher education graduates. For this reason, educational policies play a key role in the employment of women, including women in the NEET group.

Studies conducted on NEET categories have indicated that higher levels of education and a greater number of household members in employment are associated with a significantly lower likelihood of being NEET, and this is stronger for women. In addition, marriage seems to be a significant determinant of the NEET status for women. The majority of the NEET group is indeed inactive women. People tend to marry early in Turkey, where the average age of women at first marriage is below 25 and of men is below 28. Early marriage seems to reproduce a large family size, patriarchal cultural values, social gender roles, and gender inequality, and is accompanied in Turkey by a lack of accessible childcare and elderly care. Gender roles established on the basis of inequality and associated power relations lead to a similar hierarchy among women as well. Although controlled and restricted, marriage gives women economic security and social status. Delaney underlined this by saying that an 'unmarried woman is socially fully invisible.'<sup>28</sup> Married women enjoy a higher status than those who are unmarried. In the same hierarchy, women who have children have an even higher status.<sup>29</sup> In addition to their education level, fertility, and maternity conditions, it was also found that women who were raised in a traditional culture have a lower probability of participating in the labor force and finding jobs.<sup>30</sup>

Obtaining paid employment is an important step toward being independent and self-reliant, and thus, a transition from youth to adulthood. On the other hand, employment does not always guarantee economic independence for young people.<sup>31</sup> More than half of the working young people are working poor in precarious jobs, which increases the dependency of young people on their families. Gender socialization in educational institutions and in the family can cause young girls to return to their homes after their education



finishes, rather than moving on and participating in the labor force.<sup>32</sup> The NEET category is not just an economic problem. The dissociation rate from society and its alienation from political processes are very high for those who are NEET. Moreover, civic and political participation are very low.<sup>33</sup>

## Method

The authors of this article have been examining the lives of young women NEET since 2010.<sup>34</sup> This inquiry started with trying to understand the young female inactivity (unmarried, not in education or training). In their first study, this group was called 'house girls' and examined as a sociological category. The house girl, as a concept, was generally related to their labor market participation or unemployment. The qualitative research demonstrated that according to women who were NEET, women actively participating in education, as well as in working life, were more valued and respected in society than those in the 'house girl' category, and that many women who were NEET also had respect for these studying and working women. The existence of a hierarchy of women in Turkey with those categorized as house girls, who were thought of as less than the other categories, such as studying or working young women, was established, in addition to the importance of reconciling women's and youth studies for an in-depth understanding and analysis of this situation.

In 2016–2017, new research<sup>35</sup> was conducted on which this article draws, to expand the enquiry for a better understanding of the gender dimension of the subject, and similar and different reasons affecting young men and women who were categorized as NEET. A mixed method<sup>36</sup> was used, merging quantitative and qualitative methodologies, which started by analyzing the statistics of youth<sup>37</sup> and then continued with qualitative research. For the qualitative study, as 76 percent of the population in Turkey is urban and the majority of young people live in cities, it was aimed to conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups in six large cities of Turkey (İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana, Samsun, and Gaziantep). In this article, the results of the six focus group discussions and 60 in-depth interviews that were conducted with young women who were NEET in the six cities in Turkey (1 focus group and 10 in-depth interviews in each city) were highlighted. Only the results of women who reported that they did not want to continue their education and did not want to participate in the labor market were focused on. Therefore, the data from the men were excluded.

By conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups, it was aimed to gather information about both the individuality and agency of the interviewees, whereas in the focus groups, it was aimed to provide insight about the group dynamics.<sup>38</sup> To find interviewees in different cities, the aid of

sociologist colleagues and their student networks in these cities was attained, as well as the help of certain municipalities and the Ministry of Youth and Sports youth centers. The researchers met the respondents at cafes, in places where they attended training courses, and sometimes, in their homes, as it were not always possible for these women to get permission to go out and meet strangers (researchers). The increasing repetition of the information coming from the field was influential in determining the saturation point. The respondents were of different ages, domicile, and education backgrounds, but were united by being NEET. An interview form was developed and used to record the conversations, which were transcribed in a manner that maintained the privacy of the interviewees. The participants were asked several types of questions in the in-depth interviews, as well as in the focus groups, comprising their demographics (age, education, family size, numbers of siblings, marital status, etc.), reasons for being NEET, everyday life practices, and expectations from the state, their family, and themselves.

The textual data was analyzed in terms of the insights that were obtained from the thematic analysis. With the thematic analysis technique, categories identified by the findings were used rather than theory-driven categories. To depict the categories identified by the data, recorded interviews and focus groups were analyzed exactly as they were and then thoroughly read. In this reading process, the focus was placed on two main issues: 'Why are they not studying?' and 'Why are they not in the labor market?', and common elements determining the experiences of the young women were identified by considering the findings of every single interview and focus group.

### **Experiences of the young women NEET in Turkey**

In this part of the paper, the responses given by the participants to these two key questions, 'Why are these women not in the education system?' and 'Why are they not in the labor force?', will be focused on, which will help to shed light on the gender characteristics of the NEET issue in Turkey.

#### ***Why are they not studying?***

Based on the qualitative research conducted herein, young women gave three main reasons for not continuing their education: a lack of cultural capital (education level) in their family, which made it difficult for them to succeed at school; undesirable conditions at school, where they did not feel safe or secure; and the road to success in the education system was a long and painful one. It should also be noted, however, that the situation of the family was a prevalent factor, even if not formally mentioned.

Indeed, a complex series of factors, including the socioeconomic level, and size and composition of the family, as well as gendered decisions about education favoring the education of boys, affected the education of women more than that of men.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, previous research underlined that school resources and interactions (social capital) also affected academic attainment, and furthermore, girls respond more strongly to social capital interventions, wherein having positive relations with the teacher and parental involvement decreases the rate of girls dropping out more dramatically than it does for boys.<sup>40</sup> Thus, family plays an important role in school success, as well as the integration of pupils within the school. However, it was aimed here to focus on examples where women stated that they were not forced to quit school, but chose to do so, even though these decisions were also influenced by structural problems, as will be discussed further in the article.

First, it is important to note that the interviewees were young women who stated that they did not want to continue their education. Even though they described this as primarily a personal choice, this decision was very much related to problems they experienced when trying to succeed at school, as the result of insufficient parental assistance, problems in understanding course materials, and not feeling a sense of accomplishment or belonging at school. For example, one of the interviewees in İzmir stated that while her parents wanted her to be well-educated, and even forced her to continue her education (to high school), she wanted instead to continue with open education. She was denied this option and then began to encounter difficulties that she could not cope with, and ultimately, dropped out of high school. She stated, 'My family was forcing me to continue my education but I did not want that, it was me who did not want it'. When discussing the details of her school life, she stated that neither of her parents were fully literate and were thus incapable of helping her with her school work:

My family forced me to continue my education. I do not know how other families react or how their children feel, but it was me who did not want to continue my education. [...] But there was this ... I had too much homework and my parents were not fully literate people. My two sisters were already married and away from home. One of my sisters was at home, but she was working hard and I did not see her much. So now I felt like if there had been someone at home who could have helped me with my homework, it could have been easier for me to succeed at school. Think about it; you come home from school, you cannot do your homework, and the next day it is not so easy to go to school. (İzmir, 19 years old, high school dropout)

The interviewees also highlighted how much they wished that they had an inner feeling/willingness to study, which they lacked. They gave examples of relatives who had this motivation and how they envied and respected them. In an interview with an interviewee from İzmir (17 years old, open high school), when asked if she had anyone she looked up to as a role model,

she talked about her cousin who was studying law and said that she looked up to him and said ‘I wish that willingness to study would enter into me.’

- There is my aunt’s oldest son. He is very good; he is going to be a very good lawyer. He is studying law. Sometimes I say to myself I could also be a lawyer.

Researcher: So, you envy him. In which ways do you want to resemble him? Why do you take him as a role model?

- Because he does not go out much, he is at home studying. Sometimes I say, “I wish I could do that, too”. I wish that willingness to study would enter into me. (İzmir, 17 years old, open high school)

Second, the interviewees underlined how they experienced difficult conditions at school and how they did not feel at ease or secure in that environment. As already underlined, the Turkish education system is based on a hierarchy, and especially those young people who attended a disadvantaged school underlined how they felt insecure at school. One interviewee, a 17-year-old high school drop-out living in İzmir, described school-related violence, which made her parents, especially her father, scared, as well as herself:

Researcher: Why did you not continue your education?

- My father did not want that.

Researcher: Under what circumstances would you have continued your education?

- I do not know really ...

Researcher: For example, what if your father wanted you to ...

- If my father had wanted that or I could have tried harder to persuade him to continue school.

Researcher: So, you say you did not try hard ...

- Exactly. Yes, I almost immediately gave up.

Researcher: Why? Did you not like school?

- Fear. I had a fear inside of me towards school. I did not like going to school.

Researcher: Can you tell me the reason for that?

- There were incidents that had happened in front of me at school. That is why I had fears about school. I thought it was better to continue my education with open education. Since there were so many fights and pupils playing with knives at school. That is why I had fears. I did not want to continue my education. My father also thought the same; he told me to continue with open education and I said yes. (İzmir, 17 years old, high school drop-out)

Another interviewee from İstanbul, who was 21 years old, dropped out in the 1st year of high school. She was continuing with open high school and said that only needed to complete one more course to graduate. She also referred to bad conditions at her high school and the lack of adult help from the instructors:

My teachers never provided me with any support. They were not even coming to the courses in many cases, so they could not have provided support. Many of our courses were cancelled. [...] The pupils were also very bad. It was full of tramps, all good for nothing. It was like no one came to school to get an education. There was no reason to attend the lessons. (İstanbul, 21 years old, open high school)

Third, the interviewees discussed how the road to success in the education system, which would eventually lead to a good career, was a long, difficult, and painful one. It is important to underline here that a report by the Education Reform Initiative,<sup>41</sup> based on the PISA and TIMSS 2015 results, highlighted that girls expressed higher anxiety over their school success than boys. Keeping this anxiety in mind, it is important to understand how this anxiety could easily result in girls voluntary dropping out. It seems that this decision to not continue their education was justified by the traditional perception that the primary role of a woman is to be a mother and a good housewife. One of the interviewees from İstanbul (20 years old, high school drop-out taking private Quranic tutoring) stated that she did not like school and also underlined that having an education was not that important for women based on the experiences of her cousins, where they had continued their education, but then got married and have children, and do not work now.

I got an education till the 8th grade and then I applied for open education, but after some months, I froze it. I was bored and froze it.

Researcher: Why did you not continue your education?

- I did not like school.

Researcher: So, did you make this decision yourself or was it due to the conditions of your family?

- It was me who decided that. I applied for open education.

Researcher: Do you think that education is important?

- For some it is important, but for me it is not.

Researcher: Why do you think that it is not important?

- I talk for girls, not for boys. But for girls, you graduate, you get married, and then you do not work. Education does not serve much use if you ask me. You get married and have children.

Researcher: I understand, you say you get married and do not work anyway.

- Exactly. For example, my uncle's daughters ... they graduated, but now they are married, have children, and do not work. (İstanbul, 20 years old, grade 8 student, high school drop-out taking private Quranic tutoring)

### ***Why are not they in the labor market?***

During the discussions that were conducted with the young women who were NEET, two reasons were given for them not being in/choosing to stay out of the labor market, comprising (1) difficult working conditions and low-paid jobs with no social security, and (2) the risk/experiences of sexual harassment. From the perception of these young women, only certain jobs are suitable: working in the public sector, which provides for their social security and a safe place to work, or working in white collar jobs or careers suitable for women, such as health care or teaching.

There is indeed a major discrepancy between the dreams of a working woman: being financially independent and having a strong position at work and in society, and the actual working experiences of these young women and their close friends/relatives. Through observing the difficult working conditions experienced by other young women who lacked education or training, women NEET prefer not to work rather than accept to do so under conditions they consider unsatisfactory. For this reason, marriage was mentioned by women NEET as the only and unique way to achieve economic and social safety, and they hoped that they would never be forced to work under unsavory conditions in the future.

I don't want to work if I don't have to. Because, as I said, my intention is to find a good spouse, because when a girl finds a good one, I believe that she will be able to live her life properly. (Samsun, 19 years old, high school)

I want to have a happy, peaceful home in the future. When I get married, my husband will take care of me. (Samsun, 18 years old, secondary school)

As was observed in earlier studies on house girls, the women NEET that were interviewed expressed their wish to find husbands who would play the role of breadwinners for the family. Similarly, a study of young people in a low-income neighborhood in Ankara from disadvantaged ethnicities, such as Kurdish or Romani, observed that for young men, even though they seemed to be against the notion of their wives working, they 'admitted that they might consider the idea of their wives going into employment if the jobs were what they called nice jobs,'<sup>42</sup> with nice jobs meaning those such as bank clerks, civil servants, etc. Concerning women, the traditional gender roles were 'accepted and used as leverage by these young women to avoid limited, restricted, and especially harsh labor market opportunities

and conditions.<sup>43</sup> It is thus possible to question whether it is gender that is pushing women NEET towards unemployment and inactivity in the labor market or is it the harsh conditions these young women face with that push them to accept gender roles. The very few young working women that were interviewed in the scope of this project complained of harsh working conditions and wished for better wages and payment of social security premiums. When asked under what under conditions they would like to work, one of them answered ‘in a workplace where the workers are not exploited’, which indicated that she thought of these conditions as exploitative.

On the other hand, there is a causal relationship between patriarchal norms and the labor force participation of women. The internalization of patriarchal norms can lower the labor force participation of women by increasing their fertility or reducing their years of schooling.<sup>44</sup> Their place of residence becomes smaller, environmental pressure and social control increases, and all kinds of movements by the girls, such as dressing-up, leaving home, and the frequency of leaving are controlled. Especially for engaged young women, leaving home is undesirable, as it can lead to various rumors and doubts about them. Briefly educated young women who have to live under these conditions do not positively approach working, ‘without having to’.

For example, I can work in any job right now. It is suitable for women, suitable for me, but now it's late hours. Even if the hour is late, I cannot work at that job again when the place is far from me. I can't come home from the street alone. I will come, it is ok for me, but I am afraid of the outside. If a little something happens to me, if someone looks and looks like this or follows a little, I have such fear. (İzmir, age 20, studying in open education)

The decisions of women to not participate in the labor market are heavily shaped by the priority given to their roles as mothers and wives.<sup>45</sup> The reservation wage of women remains high in the cities given the 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. The informal sector generally does not offer decent pay or working conditions, which further discourages women from entering or staying in the labor force.<sup>46</sup> The difficulty in harmonizing working life and family life, is that organizing working life according to the wishes/approval of the men creates difficulties for young women, especially young women who have university education. There is also concern over the difficulty of wanting to work and fulfilling gender roles together.

The current conditions of working life are not very favorable because we have too many responsibilities as a woman. In other words, when you think forward, we become mothers, wives, housewives, and employees. So, we

have a lot of responsibility on us, but the working conditions are entirely designed for men. I often complain about this and many of my friends complain about it because you have to sacrifice something. Isn't that also unfair? That is what I think. I hope the conditions will improve a little more. Maybe the working hours for women can be reduced, we can work under better conditions, so we could do it all together, because I see that power in women, women could do all of it, we could handle all of it, but only if the conditions were a little more favorable. (İstanbul, age 24, University)

Low-educated women working in the private sector do not have the chance to become independent and stand on their own. As such, it is believed that it would be better to not work if she is not 'obliged' to do so. The jobs that low-educated young women find are difficult, low-paid jobs that do not offer career opportunities. In a group discussion in Samsun, a young woman working as a sales representative related how she worked 6 days a week from 8 AM to 8 PM and was paid only 500 TL per month, and received no contributions towards her social security insurance.

Women should work, but because business owners exploit women, when they see women in need, most of them pay just 350–400 Turkish liras and the women are uninsured in their workplaces. You have food, road money. There is nothing left for you, you just cannot get paid what you are worth there. (Samsun, age 20, open high school)

The women also underlined how, in many of the jobs being offered (especially in those small enterprises and small workshops, etc.), they were faced with sexual harassment. An interviewee, a 20-year-old young woman from İzmir and a high school drop-out, related that 'A 65-year-old man harassed me so I quit [the job.] Who can I trust?' It is interesting to highlight that even those women who did not have any work experience also underlined this perceived risk of sexual harassment, and when asked about what is considered good work, they considered that working in institutionalized public and private enterprises were areas safer from sexual harassment or considered more independent jobs, such as being a teacher, as a good job. In a focus group in Gaziantep, young women were discussing what was considered a good job and gave examples, like being a teacher or a nurse, which were jobs, according to them, that gave a certain status to women, where they could earn well and work under conditions where they were less likely to be exploited. One of the women underlined that all of these jobs indeed required an education and, in that sense, the education of women is important. She concluded by saying that, in fact, women are at risk of sexual harassment at the work place and there are indeed fewer job opportunities for women.

Many researchers focusing on the supply-side determinants of the participation of women have emphasized the importance of education. 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.<sup>47</sup> According to Ilkkaracan,<sup>48</sup> the cultural constraint in Turkey does not affect the labor market outcomes of women, by excluding them from the public sphere, but that it reinforces the gender ideology that defines the primary role of women as being good wives and mothers.

### **Discussion: reconciling transition and cultural perspectives and introducing gender in analyzing the NEET category**

The statistical data showed that: (1) young women in Turkey are more likely to be neither in employment nor in education and training; (2) as young women become older, they are more often neither in employment nor in education and training; and (3) young women NEET are more likely to be inactive, while young men NEET are more likely to be unemployed. These three results showed that gender is very significant in the NEET experience in Turkey.

The in-depth inquiry into the experiences of the young women NEET in Turkey revealed that their decisions to withdraw themselves from school or the workforce were related to the problems that they encountered in the education system and the difficult working conditions that they faced. However, the way that they tried to legitimize their choices was clearly related to traditional gender roles in society. Instead of recognizing and criticizing these chronic problems, these young women chose to stay out of these two spheres (education and working life), because they did not serve their aim to become 'married women' and 'mothers.' National population policies, the extent to which the economic category of housewife is common, and the status of women in the wage-earning labor force all help to reproduce the traditional/cultural discourse about marriage. Societies in which women are economically dependent on their husbands make marriage a norm by assigning the role of motherhood and homemaking to the women.<sup>49</sup> In addition to the negative effects of the patriarchal ideology, the economic structure, which provides limited employment opportunities for women<sup>50</sup> and the kind of jobs available to young women in cities due to their low educational levels (low-status and low-paid, usually without social security benefits), make paid work undesirable for them. These traditional/cultural discourses and ideologies impose upon women the choice of either being a mother and housewife or pursuing a career. Relatively limited employment opportunities, lower wages, and limited availability of protected employment continue to force women to get married. It is not so easy for young girls to think critically in a country where about 7 out of 10 women are housewives and, consequently, where the traditional gender role division is the norm.

The decision to leave school seems to be the reason that women NEET forego the opportunity of a nice job and then find themselves locked into a vicious cycle of diminished potential. Employment may provide the basis for greater independence, but whether it does so, depends on the context in which it occurs. In the discussions with women NEET, it was clearly expressed that due to their low education attainment, these women were manifestly disinclined from joining the workforce. They were aware that they would often be worse paid than men, forced to take part-time jobs, or made to make ends meet in the huge informal employment sector with little protection, and have fewer rights. Women NEET perceive the risks of taking up such work and only do so when driven by the necessity of family circumstances. If there is no necessity, they readily choose to stay at home. It was determined that the very real risks of exploitation of their NEET status and gender has led the majority of these women to place their health and future well-being in jeopardy, by seeing early marriage as their only opportunity going forward. Such difficulty was described very well by a young woman who was interviewed in İstanbul, who had a five-year-old daughter. Her marriage was like torture for her, but she felt unable to obtain a divorce since she lacked her the support of her parents, and the education and work that would make her financially independent; thus, remaining essentially entrapped by the fear of losing the status of her marriage, even though it was failing to nourish and protect her and her daughter. In this example, it was observed how marriage is seen as a remedy for transition to adulthood. While Walby<sup>51</sup> suggested that marriage was the lesser of the evils in the limited options open to most women, it was contended herein that the experience of women NEET in Turkey was that marriage cannot be completely regarded as the lesser of the evils. Once young women choose to stay out of the education system, there are few choices and chances offered to them. In his seminal work of cultural studies, Willis<sup>52</sup> argued that, based on the participant observation of 12 working class boys at school, whom he called lads, these boys resist the school culture and adopt working class masculinity, and end up with their acceptance of future. In a similar manner, it was argued in this paper that the young women interviewed also adopted a traditional role of femininity centered around motherhood and familial care, which led them into a vicious circle and to their exclusion, entrapping them into the NEET category.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that defining the NEET category as a gender-neutral category masks an important problem of social exclusion of women in Turkey and it is vital to introduce the gender aspect into the analysis. The

young women NEET interviewed were in fact suffering from the important education and employment problems of Turkey, and they chose to stay outside of these two spheres, of education and workforce. The findings also demonstrated the heavy costs of the ineffective education and employment policies in Turkey on young women, leading to vulnerability and social exclusion. Being a young woman NEET is not only the result of a personal choice, it is the outcome of the structural determinants of the education and employment policies, and reflects the predominance of traditional gender roles given to women around domestic work. These systemic deficiencies need to be addressed so that these women can be included in the education and employment systems. Even though the prevalent neoconservative familism seems to offer these young women the alternative of becoming adults through marriage and staying at home to provide unpaid services, in fact, these women are deprived of choices and alternatives. However, the very internalization of these traditional and patriarchal values leads these young women NEET to aspire to transit into adulthood, not through work, but through marriage. This nuance cannot be explained by the transition perspective, which focuses on the transition from school to work, as it needs the cultural perspective as well, which focuses on the cultural rites of passage into adulthood. In conclusion, the analysis of those NEET in Turkey requires a gender-sensitive holistic approach towards these young women, thus, reconciling the transition and cultural perspectives.

## Notes

1. SODEV, *Türkiye'nin Gençliği Araştırması Raporu*.
2. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 87.
3. Ibid., 88.
4. Ibid.; TUIK, *İstatistiklerle Gençlik*.
5. Coşar and Özman, "Center-Right Politics," and Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, "New Grounds," 561.
6. Kandiyoti, "Locating the Politics of Gender," 111.
7. ETF, *Unlocking Youth Potential*.
8. OECD, *Education at a Glance*.
9. Geldens, Lincoln and Hodkinson, "Youth: Identities, Transitions, Cultures."
10. For a discussion, see Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, "Changing Times, Changing Perspectives."
11. European Commission White Paper, "A New Impetus," 49.
12. Banks et al., *Careers and Identities*; Bynner, Chisholm, and Furlong, *Youth, Citizenship and Social Change*; Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*; and Jones and Wallace, *Youth, Family and Citizenship*.
13. European Foundation, "Young People and NEETs in Europe," 19.
14. Quintini, Martin and Martin, "The Changing Nature."
15. Nudzor, "Depicting Young People," 17.
16. Bardak et al., *Young People*, 10.

17. Dildar, "Patriarchal Norms."
18. For a discussion, see Erdoğan et al., *Being a NEET in Turkey*.
19. An open high school or higher education high school recruits those who have not been able to attend formal education for any reason to complete their education. The open high school system was established in 1992. Students receive their education through print, TV, and radio broadcasts. Today, high school is undertaken in 4 years and open high school is also available for completion in 4 years, over a total of 8 semesters. Approximately 2 million young people are in basic and high school education under this system.
20. ERG, *Education Monitoring Report*.
21. For more on gender inequality in the Turkish education system, see, among others, Rankin and Aytç, "Gender Inequality in Schooling."
22. Eurostat, "Harmonized Unemployment Rate."
23. Gökşen, Cemalcılar and Gürlesel, "School Enrolment and Drop-Out Problem."
24. ERG, *Education Monitoring Report*, 6.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 9.
27. For a discussion, see Lüküslü, "Creating a Pious Generation."
28. Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil*, 42.
29. Kandiyoti, "Emancipated," and Bora, *Kadınların Sınıfı*.
30. Atasoy, "Female Labour Force."
31. ILO, *Global Employment Trends*.
32. Çelik and Lüküslü, "Spotlighting a Silent Category," and Lüküslü et al., *Aile, Piyasa ve Devlet Üçgeninde*.
33. Gökşen, Öker and Kuz, "Policy Performance," and Erdoğan et al., *Being a NEET in Turkey*.
34. Çelik and Lüküslü, "Spotlighting a Silent Category," and Lüküslü et al., *Aile, Piyasa ve Devlet Üçgeninde*.
35. Six large cities (Ankara, İstanbul, İzmir, Samsun, Gaziantep, and Adana) in Turkey comprised the field of the project. Ten young women and ten young men from each city were interviewed in-depth and a total of 120 young people participated in the study. *Two focus group* studies were conducted in each of the six cities (1 each for the males and females, a total of 12 focus group discussions). Therefore, the data used in this article were collected in the context of this project.
36. Brannen, *Mixing Methods*, and Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods*.
37. Four main data sets were used in this process: (1) Labour Force Statistics, TÜİK, 2012, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y6fy5jxm>; (2) Time Use Survey, TÜİK, 2006, available at <https://catalog.ihsn.org/index.php/catalog/4765>; (3) Life Satisfaction Survey, 2012 <https://turkstatweb.tuik.gov.tr/HbPrint.do?id=13445>; and (4) World Values Survey, 2011, <https://www.worldvaluesurvey.org>. For this article, however, more recent data sets were also used, such as OECD, "Science performance (PISA)" (indicator). <https://doi.org/10.1787/91952204-en> [18 September 2019]; ISKUR (Turkish Employment Agency) (2017) Annual Report <https://bit.ly/ISKUR2017>; and TURKSTAT, Labour Force Statistics, 2017, available at [www.tuik.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab\\_id=60](http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=60).
38. For guides on focus groups, see Greenbaum, *The Handbook of Focus Group*, and Krueger and Casey, *Focus Groups*.

39. Rankin and Aytaç, "Gender Inequality in Schooling."
40. Cemalcılar and Gökşen, "Inequality in Social Capital," 111.
41. ERG, "PISA 2015 ve TIMSS 2015."
42. Enneli and Enneli, "Reinforcement and Erosion," 359.
43. Ibid., 359.
44. Dildar, "Patriarchal Norms."
45. Dedeoğlu, "Visible Hands–Invisible Women"; İlkaracan, "Why so Few Women?"
46. Dildar, "Patriarchal Norms," 40.
47. Ibid.
48. İlkaracan, "Uzlaştırma Politikalarının Yokluğunda."
49. Dedeoğlu, "Visible Hands–Invisible Women," and İlkaracan, "Why so Few Women?"
50. Ecevit, "Aile, kadın ve devlet."
51. Walby, "Theorising Patriarchy," 22.
52. Willis, *Learning to Labour*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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