

Gendered Choices in Turkish Higher Education Institutions

Türk Yükseköğretiminde Kadın Akademisyenlerin Liderlik Tercihleri

ID Özlem ATAY*

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Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye'deki Yükseköğretim Kurumlarında kadın akademisyenlerin liderlik pozisyonlarına yönelik tercihlerini araştırmaktır. Araştırmada, Türk üniversitelerindeki kadın akademisyenlerin durumu incelenmiştir. Türkiye yirminci yüzyılın sonunda rejim değişikliğine uğramıştır. Neoliberal reformlar 1980 darbesini takip etmiştir. Bu reformlar, yükseköğretim sistemi ve araştırmaları etkilemiştir. Reformlar, üniversitelere yönelik kamu fonlarının azaltulmasını, özel üniversitelerin kurulmasını, yükseköğretimin kitleselleşmesini, araştırma fonlarının rekabetçi dağılımının artmasını, üniversite harçlarının uygulanmasına yönelik girişimleri, metrik temelli değerlendirme sistemlerinin getirilmesini ve üniversitelerin hizmet sağlayıcıları haline gelmesiyle üniversitelerin toplumsal rolünün değişmesini gerektirmiştir (Aslan, 2014; İnal & Akkaymak, 2012; Linkova, Atay & Zulu, 2021). Bu değişikliklerle birlikte, özellikle etki faktörü yüksek yayınlar yoluyla araştırma değerlendirmesi ve performansına vurgu yapılması, araştırma kariyerinin öneminin artması, temel kurumsal fonlamadan hibe fonları yoluyla projelendirmeye geçiş ve uluslararası akademik hareketliliğin bir mükemmellik göstergesi olarak sunulması gündeme gelmiştir. Tüm bu faktörler, annelik, doğum ve çocuk bakımı rollerinin akademik kariyerin bu yeni özellikleriyle güçlü bir şekilde çatışmasına neden olmuştur. Araştırma kariyerleriyle ilgili yeni talepler, kadınların birincil çocuk bakımı sağlayıcısı olduğu varsayımına dayanan aile politikası, üç yaşından küçük çocuklar için çocuk bakımevlerinin eksikliği ve çocuk bakımı ile ev işlerinin eşler arasında adaletsiz dağılımı, kadınların ve erkeklerin akademideki kariyer istekleri ve seçimleri için çok farklı koşullar yaratmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, ön görüşmelerden, mülakatlardan ve Başarılı Örnekolay Yöntemi (bkz. Yin, 2018) kullanılarak elde edilen nitel veriler kullanılmıştır. Ayrıntılı literatür tarama, doküman analizi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Örnekolay üniversitesi, eğitim, araştırma ve öğretimde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği konusunda büyük ilerleme kaydettiği için araştırma evreni olarak seçilmiştir. Veriler, kadın ve erkek üniversite üst düzey yöneticileri üzerinde deneysel bir çalışma yapılarak toplanmıştır. Araştırmacı üniversite etik onay kontrol listesini tamamlayarak Etik Kurula sunmuştur. Etik Kurul Onay Raporu alındıktan sonra temel ve uygulamalı bilimler ile sosyal bilimler alanlarında altı kadın ve on altı erkek üst düzey yöneticiyle (Rektör, beş Rektör Yardımcısı, yedi Dekan ve dokuz Dekan Yardımcısı) derinlemesine mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiştir. Örnekolay üniversitesi, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği politikası için destekleyici bir kurumsal iklime sahiptir. Daha fazla kadının üst düzey görevlere gelmesini teşvik etmek için kurum toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği planının yanısıra yönetsel becerilerin geliştirilmesine yönelik çeşitli destek programları, mentorluk ve koçluk programları ya da rol modeller sağlanması gereklidir. Bu araştırmada sonuç olarak Türk üniversitelerinde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği kültürünü etkileyen başlıca girişimler ayrıntılı açıklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kadın Akademisyenler, Türk Yükseköğretim Kurumları, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore academic women's choice towards leadership positions in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Turkey. First, the situation of academic women in Turkish universities is examined. Turkey underwent regime change at the end of the twentieth century. Neoliberal reforms followed 1980 Turkish coup d'état. These reforms affected higher education and research, and entailed reduction in public funding for universities, introduction of private universities, massification of higher education, a rise in competitive distribution of research funding, attempts to introduce university tuition fees, introduction of metric-based assessment systems and change in the societal role of universities and research, with universities becoming service providers (Aslan, 2014; İnal & Akkaymak, 2012; Linkova, Atay & Zulu, 2021, 75). With these changes came a stress on research assessment and performance, especially through impact factor publications, linearisation of the research career, a shift from core institutional funding to projectification through grant funding and introduction of international academic mobility as a sign of excellence. All these factors are gendered in the sense that childbirth and childcare commitments strongly conflict with these new features of academic careers. The new demands related to research careers, family policy predicated on the assumption that women are the primary childcare provider, the lack of childcare facilities for children under three and the continued unequal distribution of childcare and housework between partners all combine to create very different conditions for women's and men's career aspirations and choices in academia. In exploring the issue of choice, qualitative data from pre-interviews, interviews and document analysis using the Success Case Method (SCM) (see Yin, 2018) are undertaken in this study. The Case Study University (CSU) is chosen as the research site because it had made great progress in gender equality in education, research and training. The data entails an empirical study of female and male university senior managers. The researcher had to complete her university ethics approval checklist and submit it to the Ethics Advisory Committee. Ethics approval is secured before conducting in-depth interviews with six female and sixteen male senior managers in fundamental and applied sciences as well as social sciences (Rector, five Vice-Rectors, seven Deans and nine Deputy-Deans). The case study university has a supportive organizational climate for its gender equity policy. In order to encourage more women into senior roles, several support programmes to build managerial skills, mentoring and coaching programmes or providing role models, even when an institution implements a gender equality plan can be considered. As a conclusion, major initiatives that affect the gendered culture of the Turkish universities are explained.

Keywords: Academic women, Turkish higher education institutions, Gender equality

*Ankara University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Management, Fakülteler, 56 A, Cemal Gürsel Caddesi, 06590 Çankaya/Ankara - Türkiye, ozkanli@politics.ankara.edu.tr
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Introduction

Turkey, geographically and culturally a blend of East and West, is a secular country in the world where approximately 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Turkey has created its own framework for gender mainstreaming. The rise in Turkish women's social and political rights often attributed it to secular ideology and Westernizing reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Since the foundation of the Republic, effective policies were implemented towards achieving this target. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founded the state of the Turkish Republic in 1923, gave women equal social and political rights with men. Turkish women were donated with equal rights and opportunities as men by Atatürk.

Turkish women entered education, employment and other public domains of life increasing numbers since then (Atay & Çetin, 2015). In the following years, women's social and political rights were gradually put into practice. Abrogation of sultan rule in 1924, adoption of secularism, unification of education, acceptance of the principle of equality by the constitution have constructed the infrastructure for improving women rights. Abolition of veil under the dress reform in 1925 and the adoption of Civil Code in 1926 reinforced the egalitarian legal framework. In line with that, women were included in the first census in 1927. On the other hand, women were donated with equal rights and opportunities as men, in education and employment after the adoption of the new Turkish alphabet and the new education campaign. They participated to the first municipality elections in 1930 and gained the right of representation in the parliament in 1934 elections. Thus, concrete steps were taken in providing social and political rights to women, as men, for ameliorating their status in the society.

The secular ideology and Westernizing reforms enabled the rise in women's education and senior management in Turkey. There is a positive correlation between women's education and their employment (Özkanlı 2001, 131).

The General Directorate on the Status and Problems of Turkey (KSSGM) was created as part of the executive branch of government in 1990. It is a bridge between the Turkish state and civil society on matters related to women's issues as outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

KSSGM experts prepared the National Gender Equality Action Plan (2008-2013), which includes promoting gender equality in education, health, economy/ poverty, the environment and media, and calls for full inclusion of women in power and decision-making mechanisms. Currently, Women's Empowerment Strategy Document and Action Plan (2018-2023) is also in force.

Another important step for gender equality in Turkey was the foundation of the Equal Opportunities Commission (KEFEK) in the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 2009.

Article 41 (2001) and the New Civil Code (2002) both reinforced gender equality within the family.

In May 2004, Article 10 of Turkey's Constitution was amended to give supremacy to international conventions related to basic rights and freedoms over national law.

The Law on the Protection of the Family passed in 2013. Currently, Combating Violence against Women IV. National Action Plan (2021-2025) is in force.

1. Academic Women in Turkish Universities

Currently Turkey has 208 Higher Education Institutions - 129 Public Universities, 75 Foundation Universities and 4 Foundation Vocational Schools.

Since 1993, there has been a significant increase in the number and share of women teaching staff (Özkanlı 2007).

Currently women comprise 46.2% of academics in Turkey. Their representation as full professors is 33.9%, associate professors 40.8%, assistant professors 46.6% and research assistants 53.2% in 2023.

There has also been an increase in research and publications on gender (Arslan 2014). Historical, social and cultural factors explain the relatively high representation of Turkish women in professorial positions, and the support to advance to senior academia (Özkanlı & White 2008).

Table 1: Percentage of female teaching staff by academic title in Turkey, 2023

Academic title	Percentage (%)
Professors	33.9
Associate professors	40.8
Assistant professors	46.6
Instructors	39.7
Language instructors	58.3
Specialists	48.6
Research assistants	53.2
Translators	66.7
Total	46.2

Source: YÖK, 2023, Turkish Higher Education Council Statistics.

However, there are disciplinary differences, with a higher representation of women in language-based studies at almost every level and a lower representation in engineering and technology. The number of women academics varies by discipline. For example, in medical sciences and literature women comprise over 40% of staff, and in engineering and architecture 30%. These percentages are impressive because in areas like natural sciences, medicine and engineering, women are generally under-represented academically.

Despite the high representation of women in the professoriate in Turkey, women are under-represented in senior management, especially at Rector/Vice-Rector and at Dean Levels (Neale and Özkanlı 2010, 550). The academic career path into higher education senior management in Turkey is assistant professor, associate professor, professor, dean. Being a full professor is a prerequisite for senior management positions.

The percentage of female rectors was 5.3% in 2007 and increased to 9% in 2023, while the ratio of female Vice-Rectors is 4% and female deans is 17% in 2023 (Turkish Higher Education Management Information System 2023).

Table 2: Percentage of female rectors and deans in Turkish Public and Foundation Universities (2023)

Type of University	Number of rectors			Proportion of	Proportion of female deans (%)
	Female	Male	Total	female rectors (%)	
Public	5	123	128	4	15
Foundation	14	60	74	19	20
Total	19	183	202	9	17

Source: Turkish Higher Education Management Information System 2023

The literature indicates that discipline base, career mobility, other care responsibilities, experience outside academia, the process of appointment to senior management and gender stereotyping may impact on the chances of women becoming senior university managers (for an overview see White and Özkanlı 2011; Husu 2000; Özkanlı 2007; Carrington and Pratt 2003; Neale and Özkanlı 2010; Van Den Brink 2007; Bagilhole and White 2005, 2006, 2008;

Thanacoody et al. 2006; OECD 2006; Özkanlı et al. 2009; Woodward 2007, Machado-Taylor and Özkanlı 2013, Özkanlı and White, 2009; Atay, 2023).

2. Methodology

Qualitative data analysis from interviews and document analysis using the “Success Case Method” (Yin, 2018) were undertaken in this case study. Ethics approval was secured before conducting in-depth interviews with six female and sixteen male senior managers in fundamental and applied sciences as well as social sciences (Rector, five Vice-Rectors, seven Deans and nine Deputy-Deans). Each interview took up to two and a half hours. The confidentiality of the interviewees has been maintained in all references to the interviews. The participants are identified only by interview number. These interviews in Turkish were recorded with a digital voice recorder. After the interviews, the notes were transcribed for analysis and translated into English. This analysis focused on success factors contributing to the university’s gender strategy.

The case study university has 19 faculties, 15 graduate schools, 13 technical training and vocational schools, 45 research centers, 15 institutes, 1 public conservatory and 1 preparatory school with a total of 85000 students (47.8% female, 52.2% male students) and 4301 academics (43% female in faculties, 54% in technical training and vocational schools). There are 108 undergraduate, 110 graduate and 43 vocational programmes in the university. It has been a leader in gender equality in Turkey.

The rector and the senior management encourage academic women to apply for promotion to full professors and apply for senior academic management positions. Currently, there is a female Vice Rector who is responsible for gender equity policy, and six of the 19 faculties have women deans (31.5 %), five of the 13 vocational schools have women directors (38.5%) and ten of the 15 graduate schools have women directors (66.7%).

Since the university was established in the mid-twentieth century, it has had one female rector, six female vice-rectors and 30 female deans. Currently, 41.9% of academics are women and 40.8% of all associate and full professors are women. The proportion of women in the professoriate has increased over the last years. In some academic fields and faculties, the representation of women as teaching staff is high: in the Faculty of Health Sciences women comprise 85.3% of teaching staff, in the Faculty of Pharmacy 76.4%, in the Faculty of Communication 67.2% and in the Faculty of Educational Sciences 65.5%. Teaching, health and care services are perceived as appropriate female jobs in Turkey.

The university strategic plan 2014-2018 and 2019-2023 includes gender equality as a fundamental principle. Gender Equality Action Plan came into force in 2014. The university Activity Reports includes gender equality activities. The university has a Women’s Platform (WP) Coordinatorship, a Women’s Studies Centre, a University Sexual Harassment and Assault Support Unit, a Family (Indoor) Counselling Unit and Anti-Mobbing Support Unit. These units all have women directors. WP Coordinatorship was established in 2013 and a female professor have been appointed by the rector as coordinator.

The case study university has demonstrated a commitment to improve gender equality. The university Strategic Plans 2014-2018 and 2019-2023 include gender equality as a fundamental principle. Gender Action Plan is the first gender equality plan executed in any Turkish university. In addition, the case study university is the only university in Turkey which has a Woman Platform Coordinator. The Women’s Studies Centre is a change agent across the university and ensures increased gender equity awareness.

The Rector and senior management are leaders in implementing structural and cultural change for gender equality. Several major initiatives have impacted on the gendered culture of the university. There is an elective undergraduate gender equity course and presentations at various faculties by academic staff of the Women’s Studies Centre to increase gender awareness.

University mentoring and management development programmes will begin to support academic women to take on management and leadership responsibilities. Scholarships, research support, grants, research funds and other incentives have been developed to increase gender research. The number of academic foreign exchange programmes for women will be increased.

3. Findings

Choice is regarded as the ultimate goal for emancipatory projects. This paper uses the the notion of “choice” to examine the conflicting combination of motherhood and research / career commitments. Academic women have to make choices regarding family and work.

Academic women with children navigate their careers as already circumscribed by the hyper-visibility of motherhood, while for men academics with children fatherhood often remains invisible and does not affect their career aspirations or progress unless they actually decide to act as caring fathers (Linkova, Atay & Zulu, 2021, 86).

Findings related to the perceived barriers to women’s career progression and particularly the uptake of leadership and managerial roles are as follows:

Gender Discrimination, Work-Life Balance and Role Conflict - Gendered Expectations of Leadership

3.1. Gender Discrimination, Work-Life Balance and Role Conflict

Academic women did not often identify the existence of gender discrimination in academic hiring, promotion and management, and were the opinion that obstacles to leadership had been largely overcome. Furthermore, academic institutions as offering equal opportunities to women and men to aspire to leadership.

The most common issue emerging from the data was family responsibilities and the related intense role conflict academic women experinced. The only obstacle that came clearly to the fore was the difficulty of combining an academic career and childcare:

The greatest obstacle to achieve work/life balance is my marriage and motherhood. Time and role conflict are my priority stress factors (Interviewee 5, female, Deputy Dean).

Academia and family were both identified as “greedy institutions”(Burkinshaw&White, 2017) for women, with a total grasp on the individual, academic women experienced an intense conflict of being between a rock and a hard place of two value systems of family and academia.

On the one hand, women were faced with the demands of the conservative ideology of motherhood with responsibility for childcare (with the concomitant refusal on the part of many spouses to contribute their share and support their partner’s career aspirations, or the situation of single parenthood).

On the other hand, there was the extremely competitive research system with its expectation of linear career progression and strong research output.

The conflict was succinctly described by the following interviewee:

Classical family roles, giving birth, taking care of babies/old parents and worst of all being wives of terribly tained, over expecting and over demanding husbands are barriers for academic women in attaining senior management (Interviewee 8, male, Vice-Rector).

However, academic women rarely considered the conflicting demands of these two social institutions and the disadvantage this created specifically for them. Instead, they internalised their own responsibility for managing the conflict and navigating the difficult terrain of making the right choice.

This role conflict has been exacerbated as a result of the change in the neoliberal governance of research and higher education.

Importantly, role conflict affected not only the actual decisions that academic women made; they also felt that they should or would have to reduce or even give up the pace of work in anticipation of childcare and their role as mothers. Family and children were inseparable from their consideration of a scientific career (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014, p.1579).

Hence, they did not make decisions as autonomous individuals but rather in relation to their real as well as prospective family commitments. These commitments also limited their career ambitions, as this interviewee explained:

In Turkey, childcare and domestic responsibilities are considered primarily a woman's duty and women seek administrative positions less because of role conflict (Interviewee 4, Female, Vice Rector)

In contrast, single, childfree men in early career stages did not raise family concerns in their future plans.

A male Deputy Dean (Interviewee 20) explained that "I could not undertake the position if I had a young family".

Additional constraints were also evident in relation to international mobility, which has become an important feature of academic careers. Children and family responsibilities directly conflicted with the ability to be mobile.

Being single or married without children or one child may be an advantage for women in accepting managerial positions because the requirement for mobility, long business trips and national /international networking is then possible (Interviewee 1, female, Dean).

3.2. Gendered Expectations of Leadership

The lack of progression to leadership and managerial positions is not, however, only due to the role conflict that academic women experience. Another factor is the masculine gendering of leadership and the perceived role incongruity between femininity and leadership (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Morley, 2013). This manifests in two ways:

Firstly, women internalise leadership as masculine (Zulu, 2003), which then hampers their choices due to feelings of insufficiency. This was related to the organisational culture of leadership often being based on strength and dominance. Women, however, often prefer different leadership styles that are more participative, empathetic and caring (Ramohai & Marumo, 2016, pp.144-146).

Family responsibilities which also affect how women see their ability to reach managerial positions may lead women to renegotiate what they consider to be success. In contrast to formal measures of success (such as impact factor papers, membership in scientific societies, professorships), on which leadership positions have often become contingent, women reframe success in terms of the ability to achieve some degree of work-life balance.

The second way leadership manifests as masculine is in the perceptions of some current leaders in academic institutions. They regard motherhood and academic careers to be in sharp position, as two mutually exclusive systems. Leaders as deficient regarded women: "women lack motivation to be in managerial positions, particularly in the early phase of their career and when they have young children" (Interviewee 2, female, Dean).

Several academic women asserted that women could create their own barriers: "there are no barriers to promotion for women in the case study university. However, women may create

their own barriers because of role conflict and they prefer not to be a manager” (Interviewee 2, female, Dean).

The respondents identified role conflict and the difficulties of combining work and family commitments as a crucial obstacle to leadership positions. Some managers recognized that active support was necessary to create change. For example, this female Vice Rector (Interviewee 4) mentioned that “senior management planned to increase support for women in management by offering mentoring for leadership roles, improved childcare/elder care facilities and quotas for women managers”.

Some managers included the structural nature of gender inequality and the need to address it through structural measures at the institutional level.

A male Deputy Dean (Interviewee 16) mentioned the dominant academic culture “the work-life imbalance. That absolutely comes with the job. You have to expect that”.

The total dedication and absolute availability form core values on which higher education and research are built. Generally academic mothers juggle work-life balance.

A female Dean (Interviewee 1) claimed that: “male managers are lucky because their wives do all the housework, childcare responsibilities and prepare their luggage for business trips”. These provide an eloquent expression of what often remains invisible (men ignoring childcare) as well as the mutually exclusionary cultural imaginaries of academic work and parenting, both of which allegedly require 100% of a person.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, choice has a structuring power. In Turkish higher education institutions, the responsibility of managing work and family duties placed on women. Individual choice is used as a legitimating discourse for the lack of women in leadership and decision-making. While gender equality policy in research and higher education has been addressed at national and institutional levels, in order to encourage more women into senior management the initiatives to support gender equality in academia should focus on empowerment. Gender Action Plan should be implemented to improve the working lives of academic women and to balance career / family commitments. The introduction of support programmes to build managerial skills, mentoring and coaching programmes or providing role models are important for gender equality. While currently there is a nursery at the case study university, a day care centre for children under three and a playhouse to leave children for a few hours should also be available. Support for academic mobility (e.g. international/national conferences, exchange programmes, scholarships) should be increased. However; the continued dominance of individualizing discourses limits ongoing attempts to foster gender equality and affects the type of action taken.

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