



Taksim Square, Istanbul, Turkey.
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Masculinities and Transition in Turkey: Country Brief

“The main thing in Turkey, is that the system is designed for men, both the economic and the social system.”

(PRINCIPAL MANAGER, ADVICE TO SMALL BUSINESSES, EBRD, TURKEY)

This brief is based on a larger study (Edström *et al.* 2019) (that also includes Egypt, Kazakhstan and Ukraine), which explores how transition in different countries has been experienced by different groups of men, and its impacts on gender relations. It aims to assist the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other stakeholders to consider ways of engaging men as agents of positive change for gender equality – alongside women and girls – as well as to complement women-focused projects and investments to enhance both the resilience of transitions and equality of opportunity.

Turkey has transformed from a military dictatorship into a maturing democracy and rapidly growing economy. Reforms following the 2000 and 2001 financial crises have redefined the relationship between the state and the financial sector, opened the economy to foreign direct investment and included other reforms modelled on the European Union (EU). The economy has subsequently boomed, but several challenges persist and new ones have emerged.

Barriers to women’s economic advancement remain, despite significant institutional and legal improvements in earlier decades and an active feminist movement.

Turkey continues to rank low on various indices for women’s economic participation and opportunity. For example, women’s rate of labour force participation was 33.5 per cent in 2017, compared to 72 per cent for men (ILO 2017). Research points to a general lack of gender-sensitive macroeconomic policies, or specific policies to stimulate demand for women’s labour (Dedeoğlu 2009) and policies such as maternity leave and other mandated benefits have not brought substantive gender equality into the labour market, as implementation lags far behind (*ibid.*). Women’s entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a solution to female underemployment, as well as for their individual ‘empowerment’ (Ecevit 2007).

An emerging body of research is revealing men's changing expectations and experiences of shifting gender relations. Traditional Ottoman hegemonic masculinity evolved through the nation/state-building of the twentieth century as a dominant ideal defining masculinity in the public sphere, focused on hierarchy and power (Şimşek and Öner 2015). While less authoritarian ideals of masculinity have also evolved among certain groups of Turkish men in recent decades, many remain conflicted and unable to let go of the comforts and benefits of deeply embedded male privileges (*ibid.*). Some groups of young men are turning to a consumerist lifestyle as a way to construct a meaningful masculine identity in a time of rapid social change (Yavuz 2015), but more traditional masculinity is still being reproduced in many masculine social contexts, and many men struggle with social change.

Policy context and study methods

Despite a progressive legal framework and social and human resources policies aimed at benefiting women in Turkey, their labour force participation has remained low. International partners and financial institutions have increasingly focused on promoting an equal opportunities approach to employment and the economy, with a proactive focus on women's inclusion and advancement. As noted, female entrepreneurship has become seen as a solution to increasing women's role in the economy, whilst the role of men has typically not been factored into this. Policies are often characterised by exclusive provisions or arrangements for female entrepreneurs, but many still face resilient structural and regional gendered challenges. Whilst there is little systematic analysis of the broader impact of female entrepreneurship on gender equality (Ecevit 2007), the current political context has also seen a revalorisation of traditional gender roles in the sphere of social policies.

Using EBRD's operations in Turkey to provide sources, three sectors were selected for this study: (1) the Women in Business programme for female entrepreneurs; (2) a manufacturing sector loan; and (3) an energy sector electricity distribution partner. Twenty-seven participants were interviewed in 20 individual interviews and three focus group discussions. Participants included staff from EBRD, staff from the chosen investments, along with female clients of the Women in Business programme, and one academic. In total, 15 women and 12 men were interviewed. One limitation of the study approach was that the sites visited are located in the country's more economically dynamic regions.

Findings

'Masculinities-blind' understanding of gender and stereotypes limiting progress

Increased female entrepreneurship and women's greater participation in male-dominated sectors of the economy are clear signs that EBRD's efforts are making a contribution. For example, one of our source companies is implementing an ambitious range of gender projects and has significantly expanded women's presence in this traditionally male-dominated firm, though some more physically demanding tasks remain primarily performed by men. There are signs too that some men are supportive of such progress. A male manager at a manufacturing plant compared failure to make full use of women in the labour force to 'flying a plane that has two engines... [and not] using the second one'.

But many gender stereotypes persist. Narratives of 'natural' gender differences were often used by respondents to justify gender strategies, referring to notions that men behave better at work when women are present, that women are better managers or team leaders as they can 'care for people', or that women and men have 'complementary qualities' – as expressed by one interviewee, a female HR manager: 'We [also] need feminine energy in the electricity sector.'

Men's responses to women's empowerment vary

Men's reactions to increasing gender equality are at times resistant or ambivalent, but at other times men appear to support such change. Most male respondents approved of women and men working together. Yet, most fell back on the idea that childcare is more natural for women and remains 'women's work'. Differences of opinion among men may partially correlate with political leanings (e.g. secularist or traditionalist/Islamist) and regional differences (Western/dynamic regions or Eastern/poorer ones). Both sets of attitudes could be found in middle management, while floor workers, Women in Business entrepreneurs and higher-level managers more often presented themselves as 'progressive secularists' and questioned the legitimacy of a perceived hardening of the patriarchal gender order. Such differences play out in complex ways, as beliefs in equality also coexisted alongside a sense of male entitlement to supremacy in some cases. One male HR team leader presented his approach using language of paternalistic protectionism: 'I am very protective of women... in my family... and this applies to the women I work with, especially those under me.'

Street scene in Istanbul,
Turkey. CC BY-NC-ND
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Women's burden of unpaid care work remains the greatest obstacle to progress on equality

The defining challenge in terms of equal opportunities at work lies in women's perceived natural role in childcare. Corporate policies to address this are centred on providing additional benefits for women, such as extra leave and payments for childcare. While many male employees regard this as unjust, most managers defended it as 'positive discrimination' in the absence of satisfactory socialised provision of childcare (whether public or private), and the perceived unaffordability of commensurate policies and programmes for increasing the role of fathers in childcare. Without effective social provision of care or a stronger regulatory policy framework, these standalone approaches face a structural challenge in terms of cost, sustainability and scalability.

Many respondents also noted problems in the area of education, such as declining quality, failing to attract girls into more 'professional' streams, or a perceived re-gendering of curricula. There was also a deeper sense of conflict between tradition and Islamic identity versus a more 'modern' one. Yet, many pointed out the complexity of historical changes and how women have 'come too far' to reverse these gains.

Men need to be more actively involved in building sustainable gender equality

Many respondents felt that highlighting successful examples of women's progress in business and corporate careers would help to overcome persistent negative gender stereotypes. Several people also suggested that there is a need for more direct engagement of men in strategies for gender equality; for example, corporate equal opportunities strategies or the Women in Business programme. Suggestions included encouraging men to become more supportive in business, at work or in the family, with some highlighting the need to challenge stereotypes both in the home and at work. Some respondents also identified a need to engage men in efforts to address gender-based violence, in the workplace and more broadly.

Some respondents suggested exploring opportunities to build capacity along the value chain, including looking at the gender dynamics in senior management of major holding companies. A few respondents highlighted the need to address deeper structural challenges through national dialogues for policy implementation and reforms. Two key informants suggested (separately) that one strategy could be to explore promoting crèches as a female-friendly business sector. However, some caution was raised over complicated regulation accreditation and poorly developed professional education pathways for professional carers.

Strategic implications and recommendations

The overarching narrative of progress on gender equality was one of advancement for individual women in changing the reality of the workplace 'by numbers', even if aided by positive discrimination in the face of structural and cultural obstacles. Another significant theme was that change can only happen 'over generations' and involves education and care-sharing practices, even if there was less widespread support for the idea of men getting more heavily (or substantively) involved in childcare. The roles of the EBRD and partners is seen as having a positive influence on HR policies and practices, though several male workers perceived women-only benefits as unjust, which prevented their positive engagement with gender equality. International financial institutions could strengthen their contributions to a more equitable and sustainable transition by addressing the following:

- **Internal capacity:** Make men's roles and issues of masculinity more visible in their internal work. Build and democratise a shared understanding of men and masculinity within gender and inclusion strategies, while challenging gender stereotypes. That would include integrating gender relations between men and women into problem analyses as well as into strategies for investment and institutional change. This needs to make visible the contradictions between structurally embedded inequalities and individuals' incentives, beliefs and capacities in ways that do not demonise men, while still holding them to account.
- **Investments:** Together with national financial partners, consider the potential role of masculinities in strategically investing in sectors and strategies to minimise key structural constraints to gender equality (for example, exploring the feasibility of investment and technical support for gender-equitable crèche businesses).
- **Technical advice:** Build on its positive engagement with key personnel along the value chain of its investments and integrate masculinities into these collaborations to build greater capacity for developing inclusive gender equality solutions in HR management and development. This could include within childcare solutions, recruitment and career progression, with considerations of 'positive discrimination' in relation to equity and sustainability.
- **Policy dialogues:** Make a positive contribution, alongside other stakeholders, to addressing the lack of socialised childcare and encouraging reforms towards gender equality in areas such as parental benefits, as well as more gender-equal educational streaming towards technical and caring professions, to challenge gendered stereotypes. Efforts to encourage men to engage with childcare could be leveraged with combinations of dialogue, policy and social changes, including campaigns, and drawing on the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For example, the NGO ACEV (Mother Child Education Foundation) works with women on childcare and reaches out to men on this topic.

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