

The Leadership Choices of Turkish Academic Women: History, Status and Gender Action Plans

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Abstract : *The purpose of this article is to explore academic women's choice towards leadership positions in Turkish Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The situation of academic women in Turkish universities is examined to show the necessity of preventive actions by Turkish universities (Atay, 2023).*

In exploring the issue of choice, rational and intuitive decision-making literature (Launer & Cetin, 2025), 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) was chosen as the research site because it has made significant progress in gender equality in education, research and training. The data entails an empirical study of female and male university senior managers. Ethics Approval checklist has been completed and submitted to the Ankara University 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, social sciences (Rector, five Vice-Rectors, seven Deans, and nine Deputy-Deans). An external foreign expert interview was also conducted to compare the Turkish results with other European countries. 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 programs to build managerial skills, mentoring and coaching programs, or providing role models, even when an institution implements a gender equality plan, can be considered. As a conclusion, we state that the status of Turkish academic women is better than the status of European academic women. However, preventive actions are required to keep and foster the early support and boost by the policies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the strong family ties.

Key Words: *Academic women, Leadership choices, Turkish higher education institutions, Gender equality.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

Türkiye, geographically and culturally a blend of East and West, is a secular country where approximately 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Türkiye has created its own framework for gender mainstreaming (Işık -Güler & Erdoğan-Öztürk, 2022)

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 entered education, employment and other public domains of life increasing numbers since then (Atay & Çetin, 2015).

These words of Atatürk in his speech in 1923 prove the determination of these gender awareness policies (Atatürk, 1969:700):

“One must believe that, everything we see on the world is a work of woman...If a society satisfies with the fulfilment of one of its components’ contemporaneous needs, and then it is more likely that it weakens. Thus, a society must consider this as a starting point if it wants to develop and modernize...Our women will be scientists and pass through all education steps as well as men. Then, walking together with men in social life, they will help and support each other”.

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 earlier than most of the European countries. Thus, concrete steps were taken in providing social and political rights to women, as men, for ameliorating their status in the society.

2. Historical Background of Gender Equality in Türkiye

Atatürk donated Turkish women with equal rights and opportunities as men. The secular ideology and Westernizing reforms enabled the rise in women’s education and senior management in Türkiye. There is a positive correlation between women’s education and their employment (Özkanlı 2001, 131).

Türkiye underwent regime change at the end of the twentieth century. Neoliberal reforms followed 1980 Turkish coup d’état. These reforms affected higher education/ research and entailed a reduction in public funding for universities, introduction of private universities, massification of higher education, a rise in the 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). With these changes came stress on research assessment and performance, primarily through impact factor publications, the linearisation of the research career, a shift from core institutional funding to objectification through grant funding, and the 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. In sum, 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 ((Atay, 2024).

The General Directorate on the Status and Problems of Türkiye (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. Women’s Empowerment Strategy Document and Action Plan (2018-2023) is also still in force. Another important step for gender equality in Türkiye 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 Türkiye’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.

3. Literature Review

One of the earliest studies is conducted by Acar (1993) and highlighted that Turkish women have made significant progress in securing positions across all levels of higher education institutions, particularly in fields like medicine, science and engineering—areas where women are often underrepresented globally. Acar attributes this advancement to several key factors: the influence of the Republican ideology following the foundation of modern Türkiye in 1923, which promoted women's education and professional participation; the alignment of elite women's ambitions with the

country's developmental needs; the support provided by non-elite women through domestic labor; and the strength of family solidarity networks, which helped facilitate women's career development (Acar, 1993).

Unlike many countries that rely heavily on formal equal opportunity laws, Türkiye has made notable strides in increasing the presence of women in academic leadership, particularly in professorial roles (Özkanlı, 2001). Türkiye upholds several legal frameworks that support gender equality. Key provisions within the Labour Code address gender-related issues, and the Turkish Constitution clearly affirms the principle that men and women are equal under the law and entitled to the same rights and protections. These broader legal safeguards, while not always enforced through targeted policies, provide a foundational basis for advancing gender parity across professional sectors (Özkanlı & White, 2008). Özbilgin & Healy (2004) explored how gender shapes the academic careers of Turkish university professors, where women make up 23% of the professoriate. They note that this figure is relatively high when compared to Western Europe and the United States, positioning Türkiye as a significant context for examining gender dynamics in academia. Drawing from original documentary evidence and qualitative interviews with Turkish professors, their study highlights how state policies and prevailing family ideologies have both supported and limited career development for women and men—though in distinct ways. The authors also caution that recent changes within Turkish university sector could pose a threat to the progress achieved toward greater gender equality in academic leadership (Özbilgin & Healy, 2004). Yenilmez (2016) examines the status of Turkish women, noting that, despite generally low labor market participation compared to European standards, Turkish women have made notable advances in academia. Her research seeks to uncover the underlying reasons for the relatively high number of female academicians in Türkiye. An analysis of disciplinary distribution shows that women are more prevalent in fields traditionally viewed as feminine. Although many women enter academia at early career stages, few reach the highest ranks, suggesting that gender discrimination remains a barrier, even for those with the highest qualifications. Yenilmez points out those female academics often face subtle forms of gender inequality and stereotyping, particularly in promotions and career advancement choices, rooted in the broader patriarchal structure of academic institutions. These barriers, while often socially normalized and invisible, influence not only women's specialization choices but also their decisions about whether to pursue senior academic positions. Nonetheless, her findings also indicate a steady and encouraging rise in the number of female academicians and professors across a range of disciplines (Yenilmez, 2016). Bakioğlu and Ülker (2018) examined the career barriers experienced by Turkish academic women, identifying three major themes: "Support," "Career Breaks," and "Social Factors," which included issues such as self-confidence, societal prejudice, and role conflict. Their study was grounded in qualitative data, with participant quotations used to illustrate each theme and provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced (Bakioğlu & Ülker, 2018).

4. The Status of Academic Women in Turkish Universities

Türkiye 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 Türkiye. 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 been an increase in research and publications on gender. 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 Türkiye, 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: Turkish Higher Education Management Information System (2023). <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr>

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.

Despite the high representation of women in the professoriate in Türkiye, women are under-represented in senior management, especially at Rector/Vice-Rector and Dean Levels (Neale and Özkanlı 2010). The academic career path into higher education senior management in Türkiye 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 female rectors (%)	Proportion of female deans (%)
	Female	Male	Total		
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). <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr>

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 (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).

5. 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. Only interview number identifies the participants. These Turkish interviews 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. An external foreign expert interview was also conducted to compare the Turkish results with other European countries.

5.1. The Case Study University

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.

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 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 Türkiye.

The university strategic plans 2014-2018, 2019-2023 and 2024-2028 include gender equality as a fundamental principle. Gender Equality Action Plan came into force in 2014. The university Activity Reports include 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 the Rector has appointed a female professor as coordinator.

The case study university has demonstrated a commitment to improve gender equality. Gender Action Plan is the first gender equality plan executed in Turkish universities. In addition, the case study university is the only university in Türkiye, which has a Woman Platform Coordinatorship. 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 affected the gendered culture of the university. There is an elective undergraduate "Gender Equity" course. The presentations at various Faculties by academic staff of the Women's Studies Centre 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.

5. 2. Findings

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.

5.2.1. 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 of the opinion that obstacles to leadership had been 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 experienced. 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 (Vohlidalova, 2014).

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 tainted, 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 because 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 Türkiye, 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 and men without children in early career stages did not raise family concerns in their 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).

5.2.2. 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 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. Interviewee 2 mentioned: «Women lack motivation to be in managerial positions, particularly in the early phase of their career and when they have young children. 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, the female Vice Rector (Interviewee 4) mentioned, «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 of higher education and research. Generally, academic mothers juggle work-life balance. A female Dean (Interviewee 1, female, Dean) 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.

5.2.3 Personal Limitations

An external foreign expert interview was also conducted to compare the Turkish results with other European countries. The expert stated that many women lack of personal support in the family in Europe due to free love marriages that does not fit the female career plans. The different Turkish family life style is a big support that European women do not have. Women often marry men that want to follow a career themselves and do not want to step back back. The expert recommended for academic women to marry a supportive man. However, according to his experience there is a limited interest for supportive husband by the European academic women. According to the foreign expert in Türkiye families hold together much better, couples better complement each other and give more stability.

He added that “another limitation for many European academic women is to have children very late usually after 30 years old. Therefore, the children are young when academic women are 40 years old. However, they have generally the chance to reach high-level senior management positions at about 40 years old. These positions require long working hours and a high flexibility for national and international travels. This might be difficult with young children at home, if there is not any support in the family. In Türkiye, the birth of children seems to be a priority early in life. By the age of 40, most Turkish women have almost children in an age they can take care of themselves.”

The expert also mentioned, “the support of academic women also might come from their parents. Historically, this was very much the case when the parents lived with their kids. Today however, European academic women very often follow a career outside their hometown far away from their parents. This is different to Türkiye, where family ties are much closer and stronger. Besides, the biggest achievement of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was to give Turkish women a first boost to foster their careers. Academic women might need a good career plan and timing, the right husband and support by their parents. In Türkiye, these values are much stronger compared to European countries.”

The international online Conference on Contemporary Studies in Management has examined “Women Empowerment” (for detailed information: Launer (2022, 2023, 2024). In addition, Heubischl et al (2007) researched the European networks of top managers in Europe.

5. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, Turkish academic women seem to have more family support compared to European academic women. In order to encourage more Turkish academic women into senior management, the initiatives below could be considered:

The implementation of Gender Action Plans and the working conditions of academic women should be improved. When academic women can balance career/ family commitments, they can accept the senior management promotion offers easily. The introduction of support programmes to build managerial skills, mentoring and coaching programmes or providing role models are important for gender equality. To open up more nurseries, day care centres for children under three and playhouses to leave children for a few hours with discounted fees are needed. Support for academic mobility (e.g. international/national conferences, exchange programmes, scholarships) should be increased. To ensure international career opportunities and comparable scientific results, the university senior managers need to support the researchers with higher budgets. The European universities have also Gender Action Plans. For future studies, the researchers plan to compare the implementations of Turkish and European universities' Gender Action Plans.

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