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Gendered Dynamics of Rural Livelihood Diversification: Tea Farmers in the Black Sea Region of Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gendered dynamics of rural livelihood diversification in tea farming communities in Rize, Turkey, with the onset of neo-liberal policies. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the research explores how migration, access to education, and land ownership intersect with the unique characteristics of tea farming, such as its seasonal harvest cycle and labour-intensity, to shape gendered labour division. It highlights how migration intensifies the feminisation of agriculture by increasing women's agricultural and domestic responsibilities. Additionally, education, while a potential pathway for mobility, often reinforces traditional gender roles for female students balancing household duties, agricultural work, and studies. Finally, the study underscores how patriarchal norms in land ownership, marginalise women and consolidate male control over land, perpetuating structural inequalities. By situating these findings within the specific socio-economic and ecological context of tea farming, this study contributes to broader debates on rural livelihood diversification, gender inequalities, and the intersection of agricultural practices with neo-liberal economic policies.

KEY WORDS

feminisation of agriculture; rural development; rural livelihood diversification; tea; Turkey

Neo-liberal agricultural policies have reshaped rural economies across the globe through deregulation, market liberalisation, and privatisation. Rural livelihood diversification and the intensification of women's domestic workload and unpaid work in agriculture are two key aspects of these shifts. The former encompasses not only cash income but also in-kind benefits and access to means of social reproduction, including public and social services such as education and healthcare, as well as natural resources (see Ellis 1998). Neo-liberal rural transformation, especially the patterns of dispossession, leads to the specific gendered division of household labour and intra-household access to the means of production and social reproduction. As Razavi (2003) and Das and Mahanta (2023) have shown, women in rural areas frequently face additional challenges because of gender norms and limited access to resources,

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education, and land as a means of social reproduction. Despite their central role in rural economies through paid and unpaid labour, women's contributions are often under-valued and overlooked.

The literature on rural livelihood diversification has extensively explored economic outcomes and strategies; however, there is still only limited attention to the gendered impacts of these processes, including work by Razavi (2003) and Çelik (2024). This dearth persists despite the diversity of experiences shaped by factors such as geography, crop-specific qualities, socio-economic conditions, and cultural norms. This study addresses this gap by examining tea farming in Rize, a mountainous region in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea area.[1] Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the research explores how migration and access to education and land ownership shape rural livelihoods in gendered ways. While migration and education are key strategies used by households to cope with the declining incomes from tea farming, land ownership represents a structural domain where gender inequality is deeply embedded. These three aspects emerged during the first phase of this study as particularly significant to understanding gendered livelihood dynamics. It examines how these domains intersect with the distinctive characteristics of tea cultivation, particularly its seasonal harvest cycle and labour-intensive nature, to reinforce gendered divisions of labour.

In the case of tea cultivation in Rize, the region's mountainous geography and distinct climate result in seasonal harvests, contrasting with the year-round production in other tea-producing countries. The specific growth cycle of tea – with its concentrated harvest periods – shapes labour patterns in ways that reinforce gendered dynamics in rural livelihood diversification. This study demonstrates how these crop-specific and spatial dynamics intersect with broader socio-economic factors to intensify existing inequalities. First, it reveals that migration, often used as a strategy to diversify livelihoods, disproportionately burdens women by leaving them to manage both agricultural and domestic responsibilities in the absence of male household members.

Second, the study highlights how access to education, while offering opportunities for upward mobility, often reproduces traditional gender roles in this context. Female students in Rize, for instance, are expected to contribute their labour during harvest seasons while also managing their studies and household duties. The seasonal demands of tea cultivation directly influence this dynamic, creating a cycle where education becomes a tool for maintaining, rather than challenging, traditional labour divisions. While access to education may eventually allow some women to leave agricultural labour, the gendered burdens they shoulder during the education process itself remain largely overlooked in the relevant literature.

Finally, this study examines how different forms and degrees of access to land perpetuate gender inequalities in tea farming. While no formal legal barriers prevent women from inheriting or owning land in Turkey, patriarchal practices often marginalise women in inheritance processes, effectively excluding them from land control. This exclusion, whether arising from disputes within extended or core families or reinforcing a gendered division of labour, with men retaining authority over land and benefiting from the economic value produced by women's agricultural contributions.

By situating these findings within the context of tea farming in Rize, this study contributes to broader debates on rural livelihood diversification and gendered labour regimes. It underscores how the ecological and social specificities of certain agricultural commodities interact with migration, access to education, and land ownership to shape rural economies and perpetuate gendered inequalities.

The study begins with an analytical framework for a holistic analysis of women's central role in the patterns of proletarianisation and rural livelihood diversification. The next section outlines the gendered patterns of neo-liberal shifts and labour dynamics in Turkey's agriculture. This is followed by a section that discusses the historical background of the introduction of tea to Turkey and the consequent gendered changes in rural livelihoods. This leads to an analysis of migration and the diversification of labour processes, the role of access to education in shaping rural livelihood strategies, and patriarchal property relations. A final section summarises the key contributions of this study.

Rural Livelihood Diversification Through Gender Division of Work

The development of capitalism transforms the social character of small-scale farming in two key respects. First, it leads to the commodification of subsistence and the integration of small-scale farmers into the broader social divisions of labour and markets, indicating a shift from subsistence peasant production to petty commodity production. Second, it drives class differentiation among small-scale farmers, resulting in the formation of the small-scale capitalist farmers, petty commodity producers, and wage workers (Bernstein 2010, 4). Under neo-liberalism, the deepening of commodity relations through global enclosures, dispossession, and displacement has given rise to under-reproduced labour power.

In other words, the massive expropriations of small-scale farmers under neo-liberalism increased market dependency in their access to the means of subsistence, which led to the forced under-reproduction of labour power under the market imperatives (Araghi 2009, 126). These expropriations resulted from agricultural reforms towards globalisation, such as trade liberalisation, financialisation, removal of state support for small-scale farmers, and increasing concentration of global corporations in agri-input and agro-food industries (Bernstein 2014, 3). Yet, it would be misleading to view this transformation as a straightforward process, as it may not fully capture the varied and dynamic ways state intervention continues to influence agricultural practices and outcomes (see Karaçimen and Değirmenci 2025). Furthermore, in much of the relatively poor world rural life and small-scale farmer families still play a significant role in rural class relations (Gürel, Küçük, and Taş 2019, 458). In this respect, it is essential to pay attention to the patterns of rural livelihood diversification, which indicate sets of survival strategies and coping mechanisms developed by the rural labouring populations to cope with the precarious conditions of production and social reproduction. Rural livelihood diversification indicates a process beyond income diversification and includes several waged and unwaged activities combined for the under-reproduced labour within rural households (Ellis 1998, 5; 2000, 291). Analysis of rural livelihood diversification under neo-

liberalism necessitates attention to the complexity of rural structure in terms of different patterns of production and social reproduction, reproduction of gendered inequalities through the further commodification of agriculture and different patterns of land ownership (see O'Laughlin 1996; Pattenden 2018; Çelik 2024).

First, rural livelihood diversification is inherently gendered; women assume a central role in household survival strategies based on a combination of different works and services. By definition, this diversification is a strategy adopted by households that cannot meet the conditions of social reproduction (Razavi 2003, 20). While the majority of the political economy frameworks considered the domestic structures taken for granted, feminist political economy frameworks have sought to unveil how households are organised and disorganised both internally and in relation to broader political, social, and economic structures (Elson 1998, 189). In doing so, they open the household black box with analysis that pays attention to the unequal distribution of resources and power as well as the moments of cooperation and conflict within the household, and unpack the ways in which global capitalism has historically integrated women within the patriarchal households into the global market economy (Razavi 2009, 200; Federici 2012, 85). As Mezzadri (2021, 1189) explains, drawing on the work of Maria Mies, capitalism structures patriarchy by constructing women as housewives and/or subordinate workers of reproduction, and in turn, as subordinate workers of the labour markets. Accordingly, women constitute the optimal labour force for agriculture in forms such as: workers in large-scale cash crop production for export (such as fruits and vegetables); workers of plantations (such as tea and coffee); unpaid family workers in small peasant units, which produce independently on a contract basis for agribusiness firms; unpaid family labour within co-operatives, which produce for export; and casual workers in commercial agriculture. As a result of the changes in the gender division of labour along with the integration of agriculture of late developing capitalist countries into the global market economy, "men gain access to money, new skills, technology, wage labour, productive property. Women … are increasingly defined as 'dependents'" (Mies 2014, 115). Overall, through this housewife ideology capitalist patriarchy considers women's unpaid work in agriculture as an activity, not as work, and this mystification deems women's unpaid work invisible (Çelik 2024, 18).

Therefore, a focus on households necessitates attention to "who does what job, under what conditions and trajectories" (Baglioni 2022, 446). Under neo-liberal capitalism, rural households supply labour to global production networks, rural industries, capitalist farms, small-scale family farming, subsistence farming, and reproductive work for the daily and generational reproduction of labour power. The crisis of social reproduction due to the commodification of farming pushes male members of rural households to seek livelihood options outside agriculture and migrate (seasonally or permanently) to urban centres in search of wage income, while women's migration from rural areas and agricultural work is relatively slower. This contemporary form of feminisation of agriculture indicates an intensification of the exploitation of women's paid and unpaid work while lacking decision-making power within the household or in agricultural affairs (Deere 2005, 38; Pattnaik et al. 2018, 139–140; Çelik 2024, 5). Women simultaneously handle labour-intensive tasks of farming, such as

weeding, harvesting, post-harvesting, and more, as wage agricultural workers, unpaid family farmers, and subsistence farmers, also assuming responsibility for daily and generational reproduction of labour power within their diversified households (Coyle and Kwong 2000, 501). Therefore, along with intensification of agricultural work, women assume a central role in the production and social reproduction of rural labour power.

Second, for the analysis of rural livelihood diversification, intra-household inequalities and conflicts in terms of property relations and degree of access to the means of production and social reproduction need to be considered.[2] For the purpose of this article, inequalities in accessing two means of social reproduction, land and education, are primarily important. In most parts of the world, women's exclusion from land ownership goes hand in hand with the exploitation of their unpaid work as family farmers (see Kocabıçak 2022). It is important to differentiate between access to and ownership of land, as women who have access to land may not have control over the land due to gender inequalities in landownership (Doss et al. 2015, 405). Women's exclusion from land ownership stimulates the gender division of labour and feminisation of agriculture. Whereas men, as owners of land, tend to have decision-making power in commercial and bureaucratic tasks, women are responsible for labour-intensive tasks due to their fallback position as feminist theory proposes. Consequently, asset ownership is a crucial aspect of women's economic empowerment, as it enhances their involvement in household decision-making, expands their range of choices, and strengthens their ability to seize opportunities and develop their capabilities (Deere, Alvarado, and Twyman 2012, 509). Furthermore, the intensification of the exploitation of women's paid and unpaid work in agriculture constitutes a main survival strategy of small- and medium-scale farms under neo-liberalism, limiting women's access to education. As argued earlier, neither proletarianisation nor urbanisation can be regarded as straightforward processes. Urbanisation of a rural household may not lead to complete detachment from land and agriculture. Whereas younger men in rural households are encouraged to migrate to urban areas to obtain education, women are expected to maintain agricultural responsibilities as unpaid family workers.

Finally, it is essential to pay attention to the relationship between the natural peculiarities of specific crops, geographic specificities (such as the roughness, altitude, or fertility of farmlands), and patterns of agrarian change. The "materiality and territoriality" of commodities, mentioned by Bridge (2008, 389), along with the way rural populations are embedded in the economic landscape, shape agricultural production processes and livelihood diversification patterns. As detailed in the literature on ecology and labour processes, how nature sets limits to capital accumulation and labour processes should also be considered (see Baglioni and Campling 2017, 2446). A focus on the material aspects of labour includes the conception of the labour process as a combination of forces and materials of nature – labour, raw materials, and instruments and conditions of production (Baglioni 2022, 26–27). In the case of food and agriculture, "distance and durability" of crops constitute significant natural restrictions for the interlinks between the processes of production, circulation, distribution, and consumption (Friedmann 1992). Even though food and agriculture have been

globalised to a significant extent under the corporate food regime of neo-liberalism, the bio-physical nature that acts upon food directly or indirectly has affected the circulation and trade of certain crops (Friedberg 2001, 361). Therefore, there is a need to consider how the nature of crops, along with regional natural specificities, inform not only the production, circulation, and consumption of crops but also the dynamics of livelihood diversification.

Neo-Liberal Shifts and Labour Dynamics in Turkey's Agriculture and Tea Farming

Between the late 1940s and 1980s, small-scale farmers in Turkey benefited significantly from strong state support and remained substantially immune from market fluctuations (Keyder and Yenal 2011, 64). In the early 1980s, structural adjustment reforms initiated the state's retreat from its protective role in input subsidies, minimum price implementation, and procurement guarantees. These restructuring efforts in the early 1980s aimed to shift the control of production and marketing processes from small-scale farmers to agribusiness capital.[3]

The main neo-liberal transformation in the countryside of Turkey corresponds to the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis and the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP or Justice and Development Party) governments from 2002. In this context, a shift from floor price practices and input subsidies to direct income support, a form of support disconnected from the production process, has been a significant transformation. Moreover, the prices of both agricultural inputs and agricultural products in the national economy have become dependent on the global price system (Günaydın 2009, 178). On the one hand, this left the production, circulation, distribution, and consumption processes of agricultural products at the mercy of the market and to the immediate impacts of the global economic crises; on the other hand, it has paved the way for the dispossession, impoverishment, and semi-proletarianisation of small-scale farmers due to increasing production costs. Consequently, since the 2000s, agricultural production lost its ability to sustain rural households' livelihoods and they began seeking waged employment (Bahçe and Köse 2017, 578). Despite the decline in share of agriculture in GDP, this period has not marked a complete de-agrarianisation. The main transformation was a shift from a small-holder-dominated form to an agribusiness-dominated agricultural structure (Gürel, Küçük, and Taş 2019). Despite the rapid wave of urbanisation, 17.3% of the population still live in rural areas (TURKSTAT 2023). In this context, when agricultural production could no longer provide sufficient economic activity for the survival of small-scale rural households, sustainable rural development plans that prioritised the development of off-farm investments in rural areas and diversification of rural livelihoods gained significance. Thus, a significant proportion of rural populations have maintained their livelihood through various combinations of agricultural and non-agricultural activities and the existence of unpaid work of women is pivotal in this mode of sustainability (see Yaman-Öztürk and Akduran 2010).

Livelihood diversification in rural Turkey is characterised by the gender division of labour both within the rural labour markets and in rural households (see Morvaridi

1992; Çelik 2024; Eren-Benlisoy 2024).[4] Several interrelated factors limit women's participation in paid employment within rural areas. First, women's roles as family members – whether mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters – keep them tied to unpaid agricultural labour, while men are more likely to inherit land, access education, or migrate to cities for wage labour. Second, girls in rural areas often face more restricted access to education than boys, with many leaving rural areas only through marriage and subsequently becoming dependent on their husbands' wages. Third, rural women who migrate often maintain seasonal agricultural production on family-owned land, such as that of their fathers or in-laws. Finally, many rural migrants relocate to agrarian or semi-agrarian regions, where the limited public roles available to women contribute to their exclusion from paid employment opportunities (Kocabıçak 2022, 92).

Structural barriers shaping gendered labour regimes in rural Turkey are particularly evident in tea cultivation, which exemplifies these dynamics. Tea farming is marked by labour-intensive tasks and limited technological advancement, often concealing the harsh conditions women face in tea picking.[5] In Turkey, the nature of women's labour varies by socio-economic and spatial contexts in two ways. First, tea farming has historically been supported by government policies favouring small-scale producers. Unlike export-driven tea economies, Turkey's tea production in the Black Sea region began as an import-substitution strategy to prevent migration and foster livelihoods in mountainous areas.[6] The establishment of ÇAYKUR (General Directorate of Tea Enterprises) in 1971 solidified state control, reinforced this domestic focus, and supported high per capita tea consumption with steep import tariffs.[7] Second, tea cultivation in Turkey is highly seasonal and is shaped by the geographical and climatic conditions of the region. The Kaçkar Mountains, an extension of the Caucasus, create a shield that fosters a mild and rainy climate, making the Eastern Black Sea region suitable for tea cultivation (see Zihnioğlu 2008). Even so, the region does not have an ideal climate for tea production compared with major tea-producing countries. In countries such as China, India, and Sri Lanka, where tea farming is intense, the climate offers a combination of monsoon rains and sunny weather, optimal for tea growth. In contrast, in the Eastern Black Sea region, tea is harvested in three or four cycles between May and October. This seasonal rhythm, combined with sub-optimal climatic conditions, further highlights the unique character of tea farming, shaped by the region's specific geographical and environmental features and affects gender roles.

Tracing Gender in Tea-Farming Households

This research was initially designed to gain insight into the evolving dynamics of tea cultivation in Rize and to understand how tea farming has adapted to shifting policies and economic pressures. The original focus was not specifically gender, with the exploration of gendered labour patterns in tea farming emerging as a critical area of inquiry during follow-up research (see below).

The choice of Rize as the primary field was strategic, given its importance as Turkey's leading tea-producing region. The distinctive socio-economic and socio-

spatial conditions provide an ideal context for examining the interplay between state interventions, market forces, and agricultural practices.

Between 2017 and 2018, multiple rounds of surveys and interviews were conducted. At the household level, both male and female tea farmers were interviewed to capture gendered dynamics within tea production. In addition, interviews were conducted with private tea factory owners and officials from ÇAYKUR to understand the broader framework of the tea industry and the early effects of state economic policies on local tea farming practices. Conducting the research during the peak tea harvest seasons allowed observation of the production processes in real time, offering a detailed analysis of how commodity traits and social class dynamics interact to shape sectoral outcomes. A total of 236 surveys were conducted across 10 districts in Rize – Ardeşen, Çayeli, Derepazarı, Fındıklı, Güneysu, Hemşin, İkizdere, Kalkandere, Kendirli, and Pazar – gathering detailed information on the experiences and conditions of tea-farming households. Of the respondents, 78 were women and 158 were men, enabling us to capture gendered perspectives within tea production. Additionally, 41 in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders, including tea farmers, government officials, and private company owners. Specifically, 20 tea farmers – an equal number of men and women – were interviewed using the life story method to explore how their involvement in tea cultivation has shaped their economic and social lives over time, offering a historical perspective on their relationship with tea farming. These interviews provided diverse experiences and insights into the evolving labour dynamics driven by state economic pressures. Participants across different phases of the research were identified using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. This approach allowed us to reach individuals with relevant experience while also responding flexibly to new themes as they emerged in the field.

The gendered labour patterns became a focus during follow-up fieldwork conducted in 2024 and 2025, which aimed to delve into how gendered divisions of labour have evolved in response to economic pressures, particularly as declining incomes from tea farming have led to increasing off-farm employment. For this follow-up study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 women from tea-farming households from different districts in Rize. All interviewees were directly involved in tea production primarily through their substantial and often under-recognised contributions to household-level farming activities. The objective of this phase was to examine how rural livelihood diversification has influenced gendered labour patterns, both in agricultural production and off-farm activities.

As part of this follow-up research, interviews were also conducted with 10 university students (seven women and three men) from Rize tea-farming households. These interviews were designed to understand how access to education, as a form of rural livelihood diversification – often encouraged by parents as a strategy for rural livelihood diversification – intersects with the gendered organisation of labour in both agricultural and domestic spheres. The accounts of these students revealed how educational participation does not necessarily displace gender-based roles but often deepens and reshapes them in new ways. Together, these two sets of follow-up interviews

allowed an examination of the shifting contours of rural labour and gender relations under changing economic conditions.

From Subsistence to Market: Gendered Changes in Rural Livelihoods in Tea Cultivation

Before tea, women in the Eastern Black Sea region generally met the basic needs of the household by selling the surplus of their subsistence crops in the market, while men engaged in seasonal or long-term construction work in other parts of Turkey and also in coastal fishing and small-scale maritime activities, either for subsistence or commercial purposes. In Rize, where land was limited and migration was common, the introduction of a labour-intensive crop like tea was promoted by the state to prevent migration by enabling cultivation within a small-scale ownership system (Tekeli and İlkin 1988, 67). From the outset, tea was treated as an industrial product, and itspromotion radically transformed the social structure through both agriculture and the manufacturing sector.

This transformation mirrored broader processes of agrarian change in contexts marked by smallholder agriculture and limited rural industrialisation. It involved not only a shift from subsistence peasant production to petty commodity production – a form of production based on unpaid family labour for the market – but also rural class differentiation, as households started to combine agricultural/non-agricultural and waged/non-waged work (Rao 2018, 964; Stevano 2022, 1852). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the durability of crops directly affects the processes of production, circulation, distribution, and consumption. Tea, as a low-resilience crop, needs to be delivered to the factory for processing immediately after the harvest. This feature of tea made the establishment of tea factories in the region essential. In this way, tea has led to rural livelihood diversification by transforming subsistence peasants both into both petty commodity producers and factory workers in their villages.

The case of Rize also reveals the inherently gendered nature of rural livelihood diversification. While many men – especially those with prior experience as expatriate workers – have transitioned into factory jobs, women have remained primarily responsible for agricultural work. During the interviews, women mentioned that even while engaging in subsistence farming, they were responsible for both household chores and external tasks such as livestock farming and agriculture, because men in the region, who could not find local employment, worked in other cities. For instance, an elderly woman from a village in the Güneysu district described her daily life before tea as follows:

> In winter, with the days being short and the nights long, we would wake up three to four hours before dawn. We spent the early hours baking bread until daybreak. There was no option of buying from a store. We would crumble the grains by hand, grind them at the mill, bring the flour home, and finally, we could eat the bread – if there was any left for us (Interview, July 2018).

During this period, before deepening market relations, households primarily relied on locally grown agricultural products such as corn, cabbage, and beans, as well as milk, cheese, and butter for subsistence. Any surplus was sold in district markets to

meet additional basic needs. In the 1940s, the encouragement of state-controlled tea production led women to engage with tea farming while men were still away from Rize. Interviewees often mentioned that even after men's return, they avoided tea farming as it was considered a "female task." Therefore, the introduction of tea to the region deepened the distinctions between women's and men's work. For example, the filling and emptying of tea baskets became associated with women's reproductive functions, and men often avoided carrying tea baskets (Bellér-Hann and Hann 2000, 113). Men's involvement in the tea industry was mostly through working in tea processing factories or becoming officials in ÇAYKUR.

Additionally, this division of labour extended to the perceived "quality" of tasks. For instance, in animal husbandry, women were responsible for milking, while men were responsible for slaughtering. This division of labour was closely related to the historical associations of purity and motherhood with milk, and violence, power, and masculinity with blood (Bramwell 2008, 89). Women were responsible for selling small quantities of vegetables and fruits in district or village markets, while men were responsible for selling livestock. Even today, in the centre of Rize, women sell agricultural products such as black cabbage and tangerines grown in their gardens or animal products such as milk and butter. The fact that women handle the sales of such small quantities of products is closely related to the perception that selling products derived from the work of a few animals or grown in the garden is not considered a "serious" business but rather a "low-quality" job. Bellér-Hann and Hann (2000, 118) state that the activity performed by women is not seen as a proper job, as expressed in the following statement: "Women 'make' tea, wood, and grass; men work in the factory."

The shift from subsistence farming to market-oriented production was deeply influenced by the unique characteristics of tea as a crop, which play a crucial role in shaping local social relations and labour dynamics. When participants were asked how tea differs from other agricultural products, notable gender-based differences appeared. Male respondents often described tea cultivation as relatively simple, with some dismissively calling tea a "stupid plant" that requires minimal effort – unlike wheat farming in Anatolia, which demands more labour. They noted that tea produces harvests annually once it is fertilised and pruned. In stark contrast, nearly all women characterised tea picking as highly labour-intensive and demanding.[8] These contrasting perspectives highlight the gendered structure of the regional labour force and reveal how the stereotypical image of the hardworking Black Sea woman often carries a patronising undertone.[9] While women sometimes embraced this stereotype, they frequently expressed frustration over their unrecognised labour and sought acknowledgement for the challenges of their work. By doing so, they contested the perception of their efforts as "low-quality" or "unserious." This reflects the naturalisation of women's agricultural work through patriarchy and housewife ideology, and therefore, its definition as an activity (not work) outside of capitalist relations (Mies 2014, 119–120).

Women from different generations offered distinct perspectives on tea farming, reflecting both continuity and change in labour practices. Women aged over 70 who were engaged in farming before tea's introduction and initially harvested it manually highlighted the labour-intensive nature of their work, especially by noting the shift to scissor harvesting in the 1980s. They frequently remarked that tea is now "cut easily

with scissors," contrasting it with their earlier experiences of hand-picking, which left their palms split open. A striking observation was the prevalence of back problems among elderly women, attributed to years of carrying heavy tea baskets over long distances. At tea buying stations, women were observed hauling up to 100 kg bags of tea, while their male relatives waited, often smoking or chatting with other men.

Gender Dynamics in Tea Farming: Adaptation and Challenges

Migration, Rural Livelihood Diversification, and Feminisation

In Rize, rural livelihood diversification is not a current phenomenon but rather an ongoing process, accelerating or decelerating according to the income-generating potential of agriculture since the 1920s. Income received from tea has decreased since the late 1970s and is now insufficient for the vast majority of households to sustain themselves without additional income. As outlined earlier, rural households – particularly those reliant on a single crop such as tea – are often unable to meet the conditions of social reproduction and tend to diversify their livelihoods along gendered lines of labour. Many smallholder farmers have progressively diversified by engaging in off-farm activities and migrating to urban centres. Only 5% of the households participating in the survey stated that they made a living solely with tea. While men in the remaining households had other regular sources of income – such as construction work, trade, or public sector employment – women took on labour typically associated with care and informal services. The declining income-generating potential of tea was perfectly summarised by one of the male interviewees as: "Apartment buildings used to be built with tea money [when times were good]; now it barely covers emergencies" (Interview, July 2018).

As men increasingly seek off-farm employment, women are left to shoulder multiple layers of responsibility spanning agricultural, domestic, and emotional labour – much of it unpaid and unrecognised. As one of the female participants put it: "Women work even on their days off, when they should be resting at home. They say, 'Let me get this tea done, let me take care of that, let me find time for this …'. In the end, everything falls on women" (Interview, September 2024). This statement vividly captures how rural livelihood diversification often deepens, rather than alleviates, the labour burden placed on women in tea-producing households.

One of the central drivers of this shift away from tea as a primary livelihood has been the rising need for cash – market-dependent forms of social reproduction that place additional strain on rural households. These dynamics are compounded by structural factors such as the division of land through inheritance and the growing commodification of everyday life. Together, they have not only reduced tea farming's role as a primary livelihood activity for most households in Rize, but have also contributed to accelerating outmigration from the region – with significant gendered implications.

In many of the villages, interviewees stated that the number of families remaining in the village during winter had decreased significantly, with approximately 70% of the families surveyed having migrated to other provinces and districts. Still, the seasonal nature of tea cultivation, with concentrated harvest periods, drives cyclical

migration and increases reliance on female labour.[10] Therefore, they return to their villages during the tea harvest season and then go back to their primary jobs in big cities. An interviewee described a harvest-specific journey that is organised by a private company, from Ankara, the Turkish capital, located approximately 800 km from Rize, during the tea season to Güneyce village in İkizdere, which is 40 km inland from the coastal road and typically sees migration to Ankara:

> A bus full of people comes from Ankara. They get off, and instead of going for breakfast, they head straight to the tea fields. In two to three days, they will finish picking the tea. The children are there too; it's school time during the first harvest. They will start school after the third harvest. During the second harvest, the husband works in construction and comes home tired in the evening (Interview, July 2018).[11]

This reflects the intensification of women's work, as they must commute to their village for tea picking and quickly finish their work to return to the city for household chores and childcare. This demonstrates how the ecological and socio-economic specificities of tea farming shape gendered labour dynamics, embedding women's labour as a critical component of household survival. Such embeddedness highlights the resilience of tea farming in contrast to other agricultural practices, such as tobacco cultivation. In tobacco-producing villages, as Suzuki-Him and Gündüz-Hoşgör (2019) describe, agricultural abandonment has shifted women's roles toward off-farm wage labour. By contrast, in Rize, tea farming continues to dominate – not because it ensures sustainable livelihoods, but due to its relative viability compared with tobacco, with ecological compatibility, seasonality, and cultural factors reinforcing the centrality of women's labour in agricultural production despite mounting economic pressures. Furthermore, once they get back to the village for tea picking, some of these women must also undertake additional tasks traditionally performed by men, such as transporting the harvested tea and managing its sale. Overall, the labour-intensive, time-sensitive nature of tea, requiring manual work in steep terrains, intensifies the feminisation of agricultural labour.

A particularly revealing pattern in Rize's rural livelihood diversification is the growing reliance on migrant wage labour. While the majority of waged agricultural workers used to be from nearby provinces such as Ordu and Giresun, the first survey results indicated that 85% of the hired wage workers are Georgian men. According to the survey, 54% of tea farmers hire wage workers for various tasks such as picking tea, pruning tea bushes, spreading fertiliser. or taking tea leaves to the factory. By the time of the follow-up interviews, this pattern had shifted again. Georgian workers were no longer the dominant group. Instead, a growing presence of Afghan and Syrian male labourers was observed. This transition appears to be driven in part by economic factors – particularly the depreciation of the Turkish Lira against the Georgian Lari. As a result, farmers began turning to more vulnerable and often undocumented migrant groups to fill the labour gap, marking a significant transformation in the labour composition of tea production in the region.

Migrant workers typically perform the most labour-intensive tasks, and their presence has introduced gendered shifts in the division of labour. While unpaid family workers in tea cultivation are predominantly women, nearly all migrant wage workers are men. Despite the increased reliance on wage labour, various forms of labour

arrangements continue to co-exist. More than half of the participants reported hiring wage workers, while sharecropping is rarely used (6%) and mainly by families unable to be in Rize during the tea season. The decision to hire wage workers is typically made by male household members, yet women shoulder most of the associated domestic responsibilities, such as preparing meals, arranging accommodation, and cleaning for the workers during the harvest (Yilmaz-Uzun 2019, 87). These dynamics illustrate how gendered labour patterns persist, even as shifts in labour processes occur within tea cultivation.

Additionally, while wage labour has become more prominent, unpaid family labour remains integral as a coping strategy amid declining income. That 43% of participants reported their sole reliance on unpaid family labour for tea harvesting, with an additional 18% utilizing both wage and family labour, underscores the complexity of agrarian change in Turkey. In particular, activities such as pruning (53%), fertilising (62%), and transporting tea (81%) heavily rely on family labour, further emphasising its integral role in the broader labour dynamics of tea cultivation. These findings suggest that despite ongoing transformations in labour processes and increasing reliance on wage labour, unpaid family labour – especially that of women – remains central to tea cultivation. This persistent reliance challenges simplified narratives of de-agrarianisation in Turkey and reveals the complex, gendered nature of agrarian change, where traditional forms of labour are not simply replaced but reconfigured under shifting economic pressures.

Shaping Rural Livelihood Choices: Access to Education

Although the number of households directly involved in tea farming has decreased, it is still an important economic activity in Rize. However, it is noteworthy that 64% of interviewees did not anticipate their children engaging in tea farming. In a study by Yilmaz-Uzun (2019, 79), when the participants were asked whether they would like their daughters to be involved in agricultural production, all responded negatively. The predominant explanation is the perceived labour-intensive nature of agricultural production and the lack of societal esteem associated with it. Field observations regarding the increasing emphasis placed by parents on their children's education align with findings well-established in the literature. Access to education is identified as a significant facilitator of rural diversification (Ellis, 1998, 19). Yet, as one woman poignantly remarked in an interview, "My father didn't let me study, but I made sure my daughter did. Still, a girl ends up picking tea" (Interview, September 2024). This statement reflects the tension between shifting aspirations and the structural persistence of gendered labour expectations. There is a more complex reality at work, particularly for university students living in Rize, where tea farming remains a significant economic activity. Participation in education does not necessarily eliminate gender-based roles. Instead, it deepens and reproduces these roles in different ways during the education process.

Two of the female students interviewed stated that they worked in tea picking with their mothers between June and August. Interestingly, both also worked in their fathers' businesses – one a sports equipment shop and the other a restaurant – after

school and on weekends. Balancing academic studies and family demands was undoubtedly challenging for both. When one was asked for a mobile number, her response revealed how burdensome the situation was. She said she did not repair her broken phone due to her father's frequent calls summoning her to the store. In this context, the broken phone gave her a sense of freedom. Another female student spoke about the physically demanding nature of organic tea farming.[12] Unlike conventional methods using chemical fertilisers, organic farming demands labour-intensive practices such as transporting and spreading tea waste obtained from ÇAYKUR. Tellingly, during the first phase of the fieldwork, many male participants explained the ease of organic farming as it does not require fertilisers, although they did attribute a decrease in yield to the transition to organic farming. However, the female student explained that hauling tea waste up the hill was extremely difficult – one truckload was only sufficient for 200 square metres. Throughout field research, as in this example, it was evident that accurate information about tea farming can only be obtained by listening to women's voices; they are directly engaged in the daily labour of tea farming.

In the case of these two women students, the family's gender-based division of labour was revealing. Neither of their fathers participated in tea picking. In addition, both had younger brothers who were about to finish high school, and neither had yet entered the tea fields. However, the young women were both working in their fathers' businesses, attending university, and picking tea.

One of the most compelling accounts came from a 52-year-old woman who had returned to university later in life. She explained that she had to leave school years ago to help her mother with the tea harvest. After spending years carrying the burden of her entire family, she eventually decided to do something for herself. She completed her high school education externally and enrolled in university. However, while pursuing her education, she continued to bear the full weight of her household responsibilities. This example underscores how tea cultivation sometimes disrupts women's education and reveals the persistence of gendered labour expectations, at all stages of their life.

In addition to these cases, it is noteworthy that even female students in Rize who are not directly involved in agricultural work are still expected to take on the majority of household responsibilities. Although these students may not be working in tea fields or family businesses, they are subject to the gendered division of labour within their homes. When their mothers engage in tea farming, the daughters are expected to handle the remaining domestic chores, reinforcing traditional gender roles and further entrenching gender inequality. This expectation places a significant burden on young women who must balance household duties with their academic commitments, demonstrating that education does not alleviate gender-based labour divisions but instead reproduces them in new forms.

Meanwhile, male students in tea farming families explained that their family and household responsibilities were only to manage labour and ensure the transportation and sale of tea. For instance, one student stated that he hired tea-picking labourers, while another said he sold the tea harvested by the women in his family. The gender division is further illustrated by the fact that when they encountered any issues

related to sales, they would consult either their fathers or grandfathers. This reflects a deeply ingrained societal norm where men are more likely to handle management and financial aspects, whereas women are expected to engage in physically demanding tasks. Such dynamics illuminate significant issues related to workload disparities, economic dependency, and restricted access to resources that affect young individuals' life choices in rural agricultural settings.

While the younger generation is generally less interested in tea farming than the older generation, the observations obtained from those still engaged in tea farming indicated that, in cases where there was no breakdown in the social structure due to migration, gender-based division of labour in tea production was continuously reproduced, deepening over time.

Patriarchal property relations

Fragmented land holdings are recognised as a push factor that may compel rural households to seek additional livelihood activities both on and off the farm (see Loison, 2015). In the Black Sea region, the gradual division of land through inheritance – predominantly to sons – leads to the sub-division of tea fields into smaller, less economically viable plots over successive generations. As land is customarily distributed equally among male heirs, each generation inherits smaller portions, reducing the overall income-generating potential of tea farming for individual households. For example, a tea producer in his 50s who works as a permanent civil servant at ÇAYKUR explained that his father lived entirely on tea, and that tea was an important supplementary income for himself, but as the land has been divided, tea revenue will lose its importance for his son.

This process is also deeply gendered. As noted earlier, women are often excluded from land inheritance, which reinforces their positioning as unpaid agricultural labourers rather than landowners. Gendered property relations thus shape who has access to productive assets and who assumes labour-intensive, lower-status roles. In tea farming, this division is upheld by local perceptions of tea picking as "women's work," assigning them physically demanding tasks while men retain decision-making authority and land-based income.

It may be asked whether this observed pattern results from deficiencies in the legislative framework or from prevailing cultural norms. As Kocabıçak (2018) shows, although the 2001 Civil Code formally removed explicit gender discrimination, it introduced vague eligibility criteria that continue to disadvantage women in practice due to persistent structural and institutional biases. However, no interviewee explicitly referred to legal barriers during fieldwork. Instead, gendered property relations are primarily shaped by patriarchal social structures and traditions. In this respect, inheritance gains significance: whereas ownership is transmitted from fathers to sons, girls are considered to be members of the families of their (future) husbands. Patriarchal property relations have historically shaped the Eastern Black Sea region and the widespread privatisation of land due to capitalist development had profound implications for patriarchal relations. The capitalist system, which allows those who own the means of production to claim the right to surplus value, also nourishes patriarchal

relations through men's ownership of the means of production. In agriculture, the exclusion of women from land ownership allows men to enforce gender-based divisions of labour and seize the value produced by women. As Henin (2002) highlights in broader agrarian contexts, such structural inequalities in land access not only marginalise women but also hinder households' capacity to adapt to economic pressures by excluding half of their potential workforce This pattern is particularly visible in the Eastern Black Sea Region, where women are typically excluded from inheriting tea fields. In the rare instances where they claim inheritance rights, they often face strong societal disapproval, which reinforces the persistence of male-dominated land ownership.

One local woman recalled in an interview: "In the village, a woman sued her brothers for her inheritance. She was heavily criticised in the village. It was considered a disgrace. Even now, when she comes back to her village she faces embarrassment and shame" (Interview, September 2024). Due to this societal disapproval or the threat of it, women often relinquish their rights. Another interviewee explained: "My grandfather secretly transferred the tea fields to my uncles without informing my aunts. My uncles took possession of the land without their knowledge. Although my aunts are displeased, they didn't say anything to avoid creating conflict." These narratives reveal how patriarchal norms discourage women from asserting their inheritance rights, sustaining gendered patterns of exclusion in land ownership.

Men legitimise women's exclusion from family inheritance by asserting that they benefit from their husbands' property when they get married. Interestingly, however, they can easily deny the religious and nationalist values when it suits them. A male interviewee from Kalkandere, in the first phase of the fieldwork, illustrates this contradiction by simultaneously rejecting both religious and legal inheritance principles when they would diminish his own share:

> I'm not talking to my sisters right now because of the property dispute involving their husbands. I'm not talking to my uncles either because of the property issue. My wife came to this family; is she going to bring land from her father's house with her? If she married me, she took my possessions as well. God says she's entitled to one-third … The state says half and half … I don't accept God's laws or the state's (Interview, July 2018).

In addition, the dominance of patriarchal codes in intra-family sharing has hindered the execution of inheritance procedures. Over time, the failure of legal heirs to carry out inheritance procedures has contributed to increasingly complex and unresolved land ownership issues in the regions. Lack of a legal transfer process has made land sharing a highly conflicted issue, as the number of heirs has increased over generations. In addition, many land plots in Rize do not have title deeds.

Yet, despite the enduring influence of patriarchal inheritance norms, an increasing number of women are asserting their inheritance rights in tea farming areas (Değirmenci et al. 2022, 10). This trend is reflected in the number of court cases related to contested inheritances. These include tactics by male relatives to avoid transferring property to women – for example, by transferring land informally to other male family members, concealing ownership records, or pressuring women not to claim their legal inheritance. However, as explained by a lawyer in Rize interviewed during the follow-up fieldwork, it is often not the women themselves but their husbands who take legal action

to claim the wife's share of family land. In a context of declining household income from tea farming, the husband's decision to pursue legal cases can be seen as a way for the household to improve its economic situation by securing land that rightfully belongs to their wife.

Interestingly, even when women are granted property rights – typically by male family members – they are often not granted land. In some cases, women are instead given assets such as homes, cash, or other property, often located outside the family's ancestral lands, as a symbolic form of compensation. While this seemingly provides a form of equality, it simultaneously deprives women of control over productive resources such as tea fields, thus maintaining their exclusion from agricultural means of production. In a few exceptional cases, men may transfer property titles to women due to external pressures, such as gambling debts or court-ordered seizures. However, these transfers are often symbolic rather than functional, as women remain excluded from real control over productive resources such as tea fields.

Conclusion

This article has examined the gendered dynamics of rural livelihood diversification in tea farming communities in Rize, Turkey. It highlights how migration, education, and land ownership intersect with tea farming's characteristics, such as its seasonal nature and labour-intensive processes, to shape gendered divisions of labour. The findings underscore the deepening feminisation of agriculture, with women being allocated increasing agricultural and domestic responsibilities as men migrate or engage in non-farm activities. Education, rather than challenging traditional roles, often reinforces them, with female students balancing household duties, agricultural work, and studies. Additionally, legal insufficiencies combined with the patriarchal norms in land ownership perpetuate structural inequalities and marginalise women. These dynamics align with broader challenges highlighted by Jayasuriya (2025), who underscores that unresolved tensions between capital accumulation and social welfare intensify crises of social reproduction. In Turkey's tea farming sector, these tensions manifest through the gendered burdens placed on women, who disproportionately shoulder agricultural and domestic responsibilities. Addressing these issues requires targeted policy interventions, such as ensuring equitable land ownership, recognising and supporting unpaid labour, and empowering women through access to education and resources. By acknowledging the critical role of women's labour and implementing these measures, policymakers could alleviate the challenges women face and foster more equitable opportunities for livelihood diversification.

While this study's insights are specific to Turkey, they provide valuable perspectives on the gender dimensions of rural livelihood diversification in other places. The case of Turkey and Rize reveals that small-scale family farms largely survive through: (i) diversifying their income sources in and outside of agriculture; (ii) excluding women from landownership; and (iii) exploiting the unpaid work of women both in agriculture and in the reproduction of the household labour reserve, which are all possible through the co-constitution of capitalist and patriarchal relations of exploitation and domination. Future research could build on these findings to explore the

interplay between gender, migration, and agricultural policy in different rural contexts.

That said, while this study primarily focuses on the structural and gendered constraints embedded in migration, access to education, and land ownership, it does not offer a systematic analysis of women's counter-strategies or forms of agency. Although previous research has shown that migration can sometimes have empowering effects for women (Demirkol 2011), the findings here highlight how such structural dynamics more often exacerbate gendered burdens. This underscores the need for further research that examines how women navigate, negotiate, or challenge these inequalities in everyday life. Attending more closely to the embodied experiences and strategies of rural women – particularly in relation to their interactions with land, education, and mobility – can enrich one's understanding of how gendered power relations are both reproduced and contested within agrarian change.

Notes

1. Rize is responsible for 65% of Turkey's tea production. This region is particularly significant because by 2016, Turkey had globally ranked first in per capita tea consumption, with an average of 4 kg per person per year (FAO 2018, 7). Notably, the majority of tea produced in Turkey is consumed domestically, with 2% being exported as of 2022/23 (TEPGE 2024, 10).
2. Here, the term social reproduction refers to "daily and intergenerational processes involved in producing, maintaining and reproducing labouring populations, such as the provision of food, clothing, housing, healthcare, education, and basic safety" (Bezanson and Luxton 2006, 3).
3. The neo-liberal transformation of agriculture in Turkey was a protracted process, as the high number of political parties in the 1980s and 1990s and coalition governments often reinstated previous support mechanisms for political purposes (see Aydın 2010). This process led to a significant decrease in the share of agriculture in GDP, from 23.8% in 1978 to 6.4% in 2019 (TURKSTAT 2020).
4. According to the 2022 data, the share of agriculture in total employment was 15.8%: 13.6% of men's and 20.6% of women's (TURKSTAT 2022). Additionally, 88% of the agricultural work is done by self-employed, unpaid family farmers, 76% of whom are women (TURKSTAT 2023).
5. Studies from several countries show this pattern, including India (Bhadra 2004; Gurung and Mukherjee 2018), Japan (Corbett 2018), and China (Ma 2024).
6. The Tea Law of 1924 was the first legal framework for implementing tea cultivation in and around Rize was enacted just three months after the Republic was established. However, the second Tea Law (1940), truly transformed the region's economy and social structure. This law designated specific areas for tea cultivation and established state-supervised enterprises responsible for processing, packaging, and selling tea leaves.
7. The share of private sector companies in the tea industry has steadily increased since its initial entry into the sector in 1984, with its prominence significantly expanding in the 2000s. However, ÇAYKUR is still responsible for 48% of tea leaf procurement, with the rest handled by the private sector.
8. This variation in perceptions is also evident in other crops, such as tobacco and sugar beet. Women are often valued for their dexterity during tobacco picking, while men generally take over harvesting tasks, particularly after mechanisation reduced the labour intensity. This pattern shows how gender roles shift based on the perceived difficulty of tasks, reflecting how different crops shape labour dynamics in distinct ways (see Morvaridi 1992; Yaman-Öztürk and Akduran 2010).

9. Due to the patriarchal organisation of social life, the phenomenon of physically strong, proud and hardworking Eastern Black Sea women, while culturally welcome, does not ease women's access to equal ownership and economic rights – a contradiction also explored by Yaka (2017).
10. Kavak (2024, 698) defined this mode of de-peasantisation as "urban middle class with peasant characteristics" characterising households that reside in urban areas for the majority of the year and engage in tea cultivation during the summer season to diversify their income sources. She underscores that the commodity-specific attributes of tea as a cash crop facilitate this pattern of income diversification.
11. This harvest-specific journey is organised by a private company, from Ankara, the capital city located approximately 800 km from Rize, during the tea season to Güneyce village in İkizdere, which is 40 km inland from the coastal road and typically sees migration to Ankara. It could be possible to explore more specific routes between other cities and Rize, due to the extent of the field research.
12. In Rize, organic tea farming was initiated by the state-owned company ÇAYKUR. Although a full transition to organic farming was officially planned for completion by 2018, the expansion of organic cultivation areas had stalled at the time of fieldwork. By 2023, organic tea accounted for only 6.3% of ÇAYKUR's total procurement (ÇAYKUR 2023).

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Ethics Approval

The study adhered to ethical standards and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, approval number 2018/15 and 2024/334. All participants provided written informed consent, having been informed about the study's purpose, procedures, their right to withdraw without consequences, and the confidentiality of their data, ensuring full understanding of their rights and participation scope.

AI Disclosure

Generative AI assistance (OpenAI's ChatGPT, Version 4.0) was used to enhance language clarity and streamline specific sections of the manuscript. All AI-generated content was critically reviewed and edited by the authors.

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