

Political Climate and the Headscarf Issue in Turkey: A Perspective from the Labor Market

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ABSTRACT *This article focuses on the relationship between the socioeconomic rights of headscarved women and the political attitude of governments towards the headscarf in Turkey. Taking the 2013 removal of bans against the headscarf in the public sphere as the reference point, we attempt to provide a before-and-after comparison of the status of headscarved professionals in the Turkish labor market, based on factors in the political climate. While focusing mainly on the changing outlook in the public sector, we also examine the consequences of this liberalizing move on the private sector and explore the likely futures of the headscarf issue from a labor market perspective. Findings from the qualitative research reveal the strong influence political attitude has on the headscarf issue, as evident in the employment of headscarved women in white-collar occupations. We discovered that the political climate is still expected to be the key dynamic in Turkey that shapes the future for professionals wearing the headscarf, primarily through the channel of the state job market. This study contributes to the vast literature on women's social and economic rights by addressing a decades-long, divisive issue that concerns a substantial segment of Turkish society.*

Keywords: Headscarf, Women, Labor Market, Political Climate, Discrimination, Turkey

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Introduction

The headscarf has functioned as a major factor in discrimination against Turkish women throughout the history of the Republic. The beginning of the prohibitions against headscarved women dates back to the 1960s when an increasing number of young women wearing headscarves attended universities. These women were prevented from attending classes during their studies and were denied work in the public sector and state offices. This discrimination was officially sanctioned by the state in the first comprehensive legislative ban against them, which took effect after the coup d'état in 1980. The military regime that took power right after the coup imposed a ban on headscarves at Turkish universities, some of which fully implemented it. In addition, women working at public institutions and schools were ordered not to cover their hair. Although the civil government that later took office, headed by Prime Minister Turgut Özal, made some efforts to remove the restrictions, President Kenan Evren, who was also the leader of the 1980 coup, vetoed the changes to the regulations. While Özal's democratization efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s helped mitigate the prohibitive practices at universities to some extent, the later, 'postmodern' coup of February 28, 1997, brought all the bans back even stronger. On the path to the postmodern coup, a chaotic climate was created in Turkish society through the so-called 'Struggle against the Islamic Reactionism' initiative.¹ Accordingly, in the period following the coup, headscarved women were strictly banned from universities and all state institutions, including schools and hospitals.² As an indirect effect, the bans also caused the private sector to hesitate in offering employment to these women, or to exploit them by offering substandard conditions and very low wages.³ The bans in the public sector were thus reflected in the private sector as a spillover effect,⁴ and the job opportunities provided by private companies for this cohort were extremely limited or undesirable. Moreover, particularly in metropolitan areas, the practices of the state had serious consequences on the social status of women wearing the headscarf, often leading to mistreatment and hostility. As a signifier of religion, the headscarf was used as a means of discrimination across Turkey.⁵ The secular segments of society reproduced the official state ideology against women wearing religious attire by declaring the headscarf as anti-secular, anti-modern, and oppressive.⁶

The sharp restrictions and discrimination in Turkey against women wearing the headscarf continued in the 2000s as well. Although the Justice and Development Party (AK Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), which took office in late 2002 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, initiated a reform and democratization process,⁷ the headscarf issue was not effectively placed on the political agenda until 2008, when the first important step was taken; the AK Party collaborated with two other political parties and brought a bill to the Parliament to lift the headscarf ban at universities. Although the bill was ap-

proved by a majority in the Parliament, the Republican People's Party (CHP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) had it canceled by the Supreme Court. Thus, the headscarf issue reached a point of deadlock once again, because of the reactions of the secular sections of the country.⁸

Nonetheless, the quest by the government and the religious segments of the society for justice for headscarved women in Turkey continued. Finally, in 2013, the bans on headscarves for public employees were removed by the AK Party government with an amendment made as part of the dress code regulation.⁹ Based on a Cabinet decree dated October 8, 2013, the phrase in Article 5 of the relevant regulation requiring female public officials to have uncovered hair in the workplace was removed. This amendment gave women with headscarves the right to be employed in the public sector. With the disappearance of the policy prohibiting the wearing of the headscarf in public and state spheres, private firms were also implicitly encouraged to employ headscarved professionals. These efforts aimed to provide socioeconomic equality for the women throughout the country who chose to wear the headscarf.

In this context, we propose to explore the effects of political endeavors to allow the participation of headscarved women in the labor market. While this investigation concentrates primarily on the recent improvement in public/state sector employment, we also note any changes in the private sector since 2013. Furthermore, we question the outlook for the headscarf issue from a labor market perspective, contingent on the political atmosphere. Thus, our research question is "What degree of impact does the political climate in Turkey have on the employment of headscarved professionals?" We hypothesize that the integration of headscarved professionals into the public sector is closely associated with the political atmosphere created recently in their favor. Accordingly, we argue that the status of these women in the public sector is vulnerable to future changes in the political climate. As for the private sector, we expect to find limited political influence, assuming that corporate policies are primarily built from Turkey's ideologically shaped cultural structures.

The literature on discrimination against headscarved professionals primarily includes cases in several Western and non-Muslim majority countries and needs to be diversified with an international perspective. It especially lacks sufficient research from Muslim-majority societies. Thus, Turkey is an important case to analyze, particularly about outcomes in the labor market since 2013. By investigating pertinent developments within this relevant time period, we aim

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to demonstrate the extent to which headscarved professionals have been accepted into the labor force and explore their prospects for the future. Therefore, this study is expected to make a meaningful contribution to the literature by analyzing a noteworthy social, economic and political issue in Turkey that concerns a large segment of the female population.

About this Study

This study is part of a body of comprehensive qualitative research investigating the position of headscarved, white-collar employees in the Turkish labor market through a semi-ethnographic method. The research was obtained through face-to-face, in-depth interviews¹⁰ with 30 professionals from the financial sector in Turkey. The core of our sample consists of 22 headscarved women at various levels of seniority, who also had experience in sectors other than finance. The headscarved professionals in the financial sector worked in state-owned commercial banks and private Islamic finance (participation) banks, as we –expectedly– could not detect any headscarved professionals at private commercial banks. The remaining interviews were conducted with male and non-headscarved female managers and executives from all types of banks, i.e., private and public commercial banks, and Islamic finance banks. A key criterion for the selection of participants was having experience and/or observations related to the headscarf issue in the Turkish labor market.

The fieldwork was carried out in 2021. The financial sector is a major and female-intensive industry in the Turkish economy; analyzing the workplace treatment of headscarved professionals there should provide insight into the wider market. While we explored the position of headscarved women in the financial sector specifically,¹¹ we also asked the participants questions regarding the general outlook in the wider labor market. This paper presents the outcomes obtained from the latter questions. The previous experiences and extensive business relations of the interviewees pertaining to other sectors provided a considerable advantage for us in extending the research beyond the financial sector.

During the interviews, we asked the participating professionals to evaluate the current employment policies and practices that affect headscarved professionals in the public and private sectors. In this regard, participants not only described the present situation but also made comparisons with the past, shed-

ding fresh light on relevant developments. Because the milestone in Turkey regarding the employment of women with the headscarf was the amendment made by the government in 2013, we particularly asked the interviewees to discuss the impact of political support on the increasing number of job opportunities for women with headscarves. In addition, we asked them to share their views and expectations on the prospects for headscarved professionals, depending on the future political context.

Findings and Discussion

We analyze our findings in two steps. In the first part, we attempt to identify the level of freedoms that headscarved professionals have obtained so far and the relationship of these freedoms to the political context. In the second part, we provide an assessment of future prospects by centering on the issue of the political climate. Our findings reveal important dimensions of the headscarf issue in today's Turkey by exploring the dynamics of the liberalization trend in detail.

From Past to Present: The Changing Status of Headscarved Professionals

Taking 2013 as the reference point for our research, we first examined the overall perception of the degree of participation of headscarved women in the Turkish labor market. All the participants agreed that the number of headscarved professionals in the economy has been increasing since the 2010s. They also mentioned the growing variety of sectors and business departments in which headscarved women are employed today. This was naturally associated with the increasing visibility of the headscarf in the labor market. For instance, a 26-year-old private sector professional said, "Our number in the job market is constantly increasing. And this is not restricted to a few sectors only. I know many people who work at other firms, and they observe this too. This makes me hopeful, and I believe the number will keep going up." The following statement by a 30-year-old female participant is indicative of this improvement: "Headscarved, white-collar employees used to be found mostly at ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) departments or at units where they were assigned paperwork. Now they can also work in sales departments. Moreover, although rare, they can be seen in managerial positions. We clearly see the progress." In this context, a woman professional (37) with the multi-sectoral experience described the changes she had observed, "When I graduated from university, I was not allowed to apply to most companies because of my headscarf. That is why I was not able to consider many options. Today, however, some of them are open to employees wearing a headscarf."

As implied by the excerpts above, interviewees referred to a 'restricted' acceptance/presence of the headscarved women within the economy. Participants found the number of white-collar employees wearing the headscarf to be lim-

On May 2, 1999, at the opening of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Merve Kavakçı, then Deputy of the Virtue Party for İstanbul, entered the parliament hall to take her oath wearing a headscarf. However, she had to leave the hall as a result of loud protests by the deputies of the Democratic Left Party (DSP).

HIKMET SAATÇI / AA



ited. Some participants drew attention to the effects of the bans in the last decades at universities and the job market to explain the relatively small presence of this group in the labor force. A 32-year-old woman stated that the involvement of women in the labor market was, in fact, a time-related issue: “After the coup d’état in 1997 (February 28), an enormous number of women wearing the headscarf could not graduate from their schools, whereas religious men did not face a severe restriction. So, there is a lost generation of Turkish women for the labor market.” Another female professional from the public sector (27) agreed, highlighting the ongoing need for more equal treatment: “The number of religious women who hold a university degree keeps rising. This has obviously required some time because of the university bans in the past. If equal opportunities are given to headscarved women in the labor market, the ratio will reach much better levels.”

Although all of the participants confirmed the growing involvement of headscarved professionals in business life, most of them pointed out the limited job opportunities available to this group of women. Their statements stressed the minority status of these women and the ongoing discrimination against them in the private sector. A 48-year-old woman working in a public bank stated clearly that widespread discrimination exists against headscarved women in recruitment in almost all sectors in Turkey. Another female professional from a private Islamic finance institution (35) described the situation as follows: “In fact, there is still a narrow window in the job market for women with the headscarf. In the

private sector, we can only apply to a restricted number of firms, which are ideologically close to the government.” All headscarved participants reported that, regardless of suitable qualifications, they would not be employed by certain enterprises in Turkey even today. Their statements included the names of some major

Turkish companies, which will be indicated here only by random letters. In the words of a woman public sector professional (37), “A bank belonging to Conglomerate A will seemingly never employ a headscarved professional. Certain other well-known Conglomerates won’t either. Neither in the banking nor another sector that they work in...” A 36-year-old female participant from a public bank made a similar statement, also linking the issue to the political context:

I have 11 years of experience in the Turkish job market, and I can clearly say that although the AK Party has been in power for years, we (those who voted for it) have not been powerful in the business world. I am saying this, especially for women with the headscarf. What we have experienced is heartbreaking. Why can’t I work at Conglomerates A and B? Why wouldn’t a headscarved professional like me be given a chance to work at these companies? I can honestly say that if they opened their doors to women like me, I would gladly work with them. It is ironic that I grew up abroad in a non-Muslim society and I had many non-Muslim friends and colleagues there. What we need here in Turkey is respect for each other. I do not care about the lifestyles of others, and mine should not interest anyone either.

Another woman professional (35) whom we interviewed described the limited nature of opportunities for women wearing a headscarf, based on various stories from her personal network:

Today, it is not like the past when women with headscarves were forbidden to enter university campuses. Now, many women with headscarves study at prestigious universities, not only in Turkey but also abroad. I know some women who have graduated from Harvard and Oxford. Yet, you see them working only at certain firms or participation banks (Islamic finance institutions). They deserve much more prestigious companies and positions, but the opportunities offered to them are still limited.

The interviewees who wore a headscarf predominantly addressed the covert discrimination against them when applying for positions in the private sector. They conveyed both their own experiences and other women’s stories about job applications and interviews. Although their *resumés* were accepted and given

Participants also shared stories of professionals who decided to wear a headscarf at some point during their career, and who were either mistreated or forced to leave the job

With regard to this widely observed discrimination, most of the headscarved interviewees pointed out the existence of two completely different cultures in the Turkish labor market. According to them, the dominant culture strongly discriminates against professionals with religious values and lifestyles

(30) defined these policies as the hidden recruitment rules of those companies, “When you send your *resumé* without a photo, you can pass certain stages of applications successfully, but when it comes to the interview and the employers learn that you cover your hair, they quickly reject you. And you are not even given a proper reason for rejection.” The personal story conveyed by a female professional (32) in human resources (HR) offers a good example of this practice:

Most of the big companies that I applied to rejected my application right away, despite my excellent qualifications and compatibility with the job requirements. Also, a few years ago, I was invited by Company C for a job interview. They had reached me via LinkedIn, where they had seen detailed information on my background (without a photo). A few weeks before the interview, they repeatedly called me, asking to send them my photo. And right after I sent it, they canceled the interview without mentioning a cause. What is more, I learned that they later hired a woman without a headscarf for that post, someone who had less experience than me.

Headscarved female professionals also talked about their negative experiences in the workplace. Some of these women had worked at several Turkish companies, where there were only a limited number of professionals wearing the headscarf. In other words, these companies were different from those that completely rejected headscarved women, but they recruited only a small number. Headscarved employees in these enterprises not only felt like a minority, but they were also exposed to hostile workplace treatment. The following description by a 37-year-old participant is representative of this mistreatment:

Conglomerate D has been a big disappointment for me. And this was all because of my attire. In normal circumstances, this business group loves hiring

consideration by employers, to begin with, these women were not able to proceed with further assessment at a number of companies. Although most of them were not told the reasons for the rejections, participating women described this practice by private firms as an unspoken policy of discrimination against headscarved applicants. A relatively senior professional (48) described this situation as a very troubling problem: “We are exposed to serious discrimination and polarization. I believe this is about the issue of political beliefs.”

A younger headscarved employee

people who graduate from my university, which is very prestigious. I guess this was the main reason why they considered my application in the first place. However, they started to mistreat me on my first day of work there. The manager of the Brand Management department, the unit for which my application had been accepted, objected to working with me. I heard him say to someone, “Where did they find her?” I was later transferred to the Foreign Trade department, where the manager was known to be a relatively moderate man. During my work at Conglomerate D, I always felt something like racial discrimination. And I also noticed very clearly that women like me did not have a chance to be promoted to prestigious positions at such companies.

Participants also shared stories of professionals who decided to wear a headscarf at some point during their career, and who were either mistreated or forced to leave the job. A woman with a multisectoral career (40) said that she was obliged to quit her job when she decided to wear the headscarf. The experience of a 32-year-old professional is an illustration:

I started my career at Conglomerate D in 2010. At that time, I was not wearing a headscarf. Everything was fine until I decided to cover my hair in 2014. After that point, I was treated like a totally different person by the very same company and the very same managers/colleagues. Despite my good work performance, I experienced unfair treatment and realized there was a formal bias against headscarved women.

Similarly, another woman (30) noted:

My friend was working in the IT department of Conglomerate E. She decided to change her lifestyle and cover her hair. Because of that decision, she was forced by the company to quit her job. Similarly, another friend of mine, who was working at a well-known multinational company (MNC) in Turkey, had to resign after starting to wear the headscarf. The weird thing here is that nobody, including the women themselves, questioned this situation. I guess it is all about perceptions created, and this discrimination seems to be internalized by headscarved women too. In such an environment, how can people talk about equality?

While the mistreatment of headscarved professionals mostly came from their managers and colleagues, headscarved interviewees also mentioned certain negative attitudes from clients. As an example, a banking professional (35) reported the following experience:

One day, I visited a client with my director. The client pointed at me and said to my director, “How can your employee wear a headscarf?” In another visit, another client spoke directly to me and said, “Look, my daughter is religious and prays but does not cover her hair. You think about it, too!” I faced many

similar situations like this. I always tried to be patient, but such behavior was not acceptable.

With regard to this widely observed discrimination, most of the headscarved interviewees pointed out the existence of two completely different cultures in the Turkish labor market. According to them, the dominant culture strongly discriminates against professionals with religious values and lifestyles.¹² The participants put a great deal of emphasis on this exclusionary ideology, which is widespread in Turkey. Most headscarved professionals also referred to some positive examples in Western countries and drew attention to the difference that exists in the Turkish private sector. For example, a female manager (49) pointed out the wide adoption of a diverse culture around the world at many MNCs and international institutions, where people from different nations and religions can easily work together: “In these companies, employees do not care about each other’s faith or lifestyle. In fact, this is a quality standard for companies. However, when you look at Turkish companies –and even the MNCs located in Turkey– you can find only a few enterprises that reach this standard.” This issue was addressed by a younger woman (26) as follows:

Many major firms in the U.S. employ Muslim and religious people, who can also be promoted to managerial positions. Those companies do not care about the clothing or lifestyle of their employees. However, this is not the case in Turkey. At the London branch of Company F, which is one of the leading consultancy firms in the world, headscarved professionals are employed. Ironically, the Turkish branch of the same company never hires a female professional wearing the headscarf.

A headscarved professional (48) with the multinational experience offered this criticism:

As a headscarved professional, I worked abroad at (the well-known) Company G for five years. I was working directly with C-level managers, and I was the only Muslim professional there. There was mutual respect. They respected my religious practices like daily prayers and Ramadan fasting. I was never exposed to discriminatory behavior during those years. However, it is completely different here in Turkey. I would not even be allowed to work at the same company in Turkey now.

Most participants emphasized that as long as headscarved professionals hold the required qualifications, they should be considered for jobs without reservations. A woman (40) said, “If the resumé of a headscarved woman is top quality, the company should be able to say without any reservations that ‘this is the employee I have been looking for, no matter what.’ However, this is not the case in the Turkish private sector.”

Another mid-career woman (37) agreed and touched upon the social impacts of business life: “If Turkish people from different backgrounds/cultures are given the chance to work together, they will eventually notice that they also have similarities. Prejudices can be broken down in time if people get in touch with each other in the workplace.”

While the majority of the headscarved interviewees confirmed the prevalence of discrimination in the private sector against white-collar professionals with the headscarf, they touched upon noteworthy progress in the public sector and in state-affiliated companies in this regard. A male director in HR (45) talked about the rights given to these women by making a comparison between the past and the present, “Today, headscarved professionals prefer to work at certain large state-affiliated companies such as H, I, J. In old Turkey, people with religious affiliations were not allowed to work at these firms. But now they are... And they really want to. They are proud to be a part of these important companies.” A female manager in the public financial sector (45) described the changes in regard to the employment of headscarved women as follows:

Once the ban in the public sector was removed, everything proceeded as it should have. We started to work with headscarved professionals. Some served customers directly and some dealt with operational transactions in the background. As the number of women with the headscarf increases in the workplace, people get used to seeing them and change their misperceptions in time. This was initiated only in the last decade in Turkey.

In describing these trends, participants particularly mentioned the positive influence of the AK Party governments on the promotion of rights for headscarved women and their status in the state labor market. A young professional (27) talked about her friends working at state-affiliated companies like I and K, “When I think about their presence at those firms, I find there has been quite a change, because of the freedom given by the AK Party governments to these women in terms of jobs.” A 35-year-old female participant concurred: “Several companies, including H and I, which are close to the government, employ white-collar professionals with the headscarf. The managers at these companies are comfortable with the headscarf issue.”

Despite this progress, the state’s efforts in the last decade have not been reciprocated in the private sector. The words of an early-career woman (29)

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wearing the headscarf for a white-collar position. This is about the secular corporate culture of such companies.” Several participants mentioned the reluctant recruitment practices (just for visibility purposes, or tokenism) that they observed at some private companies. A woman (37) who had experience in three different sectors noted:

The employment of women wearing the headscarf at state-owned or affiliated enterprises today is all about the political atmosphere. I notice that there are also some private companies that employ women with a headscarf for the purpose of looking good to the government. These firms hire only a few headscarved women but make them visible just for effect. In this respect, there is a group of employers in Turkey whose recruitment behavior varies with the political climate. They shut the doors (in the past) against headscarved women after February 28 and they can do it again in the future.

Stories shared by other participants supported this view. A young professional (28) offered a relevant example:

When I was recruited in 2017 by Company L, which is one of the major firms in its sector, I was the very first white-collar employee with a headscarf in the company’s history. I guess they thought it would be good to finally hire a headscarved professional in the new political climate (which promotes the working rights of religious women) and they decided to choose me because of my remarkable academic success.

Future Prospects for Headscarved Professionals

Considering the participants’ predominant views on (i) the impact of government encouragement on the status of headscarved women and (ii) the existence of an ongoing exclusionary ideology in the labor market, we asked participants about their expectations based on future political prospects. The following words of a 27-year-old professional from the public sector clearly expressed the ambiguity regarding the future status of women wearing the headscarf: “Today we can work, thanks to the current political support, but we



are worried about our future. People like me were not able to get these jobs ten years ago and it can be the case again after ten years.”

Given such concerns, we asked the participants what they foresee for the white-collar headscarved group in the labor force in the event of a political change in the country. Their answers indicated a strong concern among women with the headscarf for the future of their careers. A majority of them expressed negative expectations concerning the employment of headscarved professionals in the public sector, in the event of a change in political power in the country. The following excerpt quoted from a mid-career professional in a state bank (37) is quite indicative of this common view: “The current encouraging situation is supported by the ruling government. If the government changes in the future, everything in the labor market will be upside down for us.”

Headscarved participants linked their concerns to the traumas experienced in the past and the root cause of this mistreatment, which is the state’s secularist ideology that rejects this female segment. The statement of a public sector employee (28) briefly described the associated expectations: “A possible change in power will surely affect the status of headscarved women in the labor market. Just as in the past, the attitudes of governments will keep shaping the decisions regarding our participation. For example, such a scenario would affect all the state-owned banks.” Another young woman (26) expressed her expectation as follows: “In my opinion, the day this government changes, everything for us would change. At the present, we comfortably work in the public sector, but in case of a political change, the ruling ideology will shift. Accordingly, such a change will negatively affect our working status.” The words of a senior professional (58) revealed how strong the marks of the past are for these women:

In fact, my biggest concern is for the new generation. After all, I am a woman over 50. If the government changes one day, I believe that religious young

Among others, many Turkish headscarved teachers were not able to practice their profession due to the sharp restrictions and discrimination against women wearing the headscarf until 2013, when AK Party removed the ban on headscarves for public employees.

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women will have big troubles. What happened in the past will be repeated. We have a huge young female population and the job opportunities for them (headscarved women) will considerably narrow.

A 35-year-old interviewee particularly emphasized the potential outcomes that would be produced by a left-wing government, “If, for example, a leftist government comes into power one day, we will see a speedy change in terms of our rights and place at public institutions. Because they would appoint as managers the people who comply with their worldview and this will spread downward.” Likewise, a banker (34) and an HR professional (32), respectively, shared the following thoughts:

With a government change, I do not think that we (headscarved women) will be able to keep our jobs at state-affiliated institutions. Years ago, when I passed the exams with high scores and was appointed here, a woman colleague told me, “When the government changes, you will not be allowed to work here with your headscarf. Keep this in mind!” As long as such people exist, we will not be welcomed in the public sector without governmental support.

Yes, we will get aggrieved if political power changes one day. The tolerant attitude toward the headscarf today stems from the government’s positive view of our involvement in the labor force. The current government is impartial and does not create any obstacles based on religious values. On the contrary, if a left-wing government takes office, it will. It is quite possible for them to say, “Women covering their hair cannot work at public institutions any longer.”

Most of the managers that we interviewed agreed on the negative implications of a potential political change for the status of headscarved women in the public sector. Participating professionals referred to certain risks not only at state offices but also at public banks and state-affiliated enterprises. According to a 47-year-old male executive from the public banking sector, “Political climate significantly matters. After all, the managers that will be appointed to state-affiliated companies will be those who comply with the views of the government.” Another male director with experience in both public and private sectors (45) supported this opinion, noting that there could be an unfavorable effect on state-affiliated jobs: “In case of a political change, the situation for headscarved professionals would adversely change in the public sector. Things would mainly change at state-affiliated companies, not much at the private ones.” Similarly, a female executive (49) asserted that a different political setting would affect the position of headscarved professionals in the public sector, adding, “Women at relatively higher ranks can be expected to suffer in particular.”

While most interviewees mentioned their expectations about undesirable policies that could be implemented by a government led by another party, a

few participants conveyed additional thoughts. Although they agreed on the likely challenges that would be encountered by headscarved professionals, they thought that the social, educational, and economic rights given back to headscarved women by the AK Party governments could not be totally ignored in the future. They stated that disrespecting or excluding headscarved professionals would be

politically and socially costly after this point. A mid-career female professional (45) stated her thoughts as follows: “Considering that ruling governments appoint us (in the public sector), we would inevitably see some negative reflections. However, such a scenario would be damaging for society. Therefore, political parties would not dare to ban the headscarf again.”

A male manager (45) also talked about the undesirable consequences of such a change: “Yes, it could happen if a government with a stance against religious values comes into power, but if the state goes back to a prohibitive ideology again, it could be catastrophic.” In this context, a senior male executive from the private sector (63) stressed the need for a permanent transformation with regard to the rights of women wearing the headscarf.

As the excerpts above clearly show, the participants particularly emphasized prospects for state-affiliated jobs. For the private sector, expectations were primarily based on prevailing (discriminatory) corporate policies. Given that a sizable segment in the private sector still does not hire headscarved women for white-collar positions, participants evaluated the impact of a change in political climate only for companies that are currently open to employing women with the headscarf. Whereas some participants thought that these enterprises would not change their neutral or positive policies towards the headscarf in the future, others touched upon the possibility of intervention by the state. On the whole, the main finding obtained from this research is the general expectation of a loss of status for headscarved professionals, particularly in the state job market, in the absence of political support.

Conclusion

Prohibitions in Turkey against headscarved women at universities and state institutions have fluctuated over time based on the political climate. In fact, the long-standing headscarf issue is a significant example of how certain governments have utilized the law to unlawfully exclude an extremely large segment

While the liberalization efforts of the Erdoğan governments have improved the public sector job opportunities for headscarved women, progress in the private sector has remained limited

Unless political and economic agents in Turkey strongly support equal treatment for headscarved professionals, genuine diversity and integration in the labor market cannot be achieved sustainably

of society.¹³ Whereas military regimes and various coalition governments have taken action to prevent women with the headscarf from participating in the labor market and attending universities, only several right-wing governments/parties have attempted to restore the social, educational, and economic rights of these women. The prohibitive policies and practices lasted until 2013 when the AK Party government succeeded in making an amendment in the dress code regulation (for personnel in public institutions) that finally provided a way in for women wearing the headscarf to participate in higher education and more equitable employment opportunities. Accordingly, this large group was granted entry to white-collar jobs in the public sector, improving their participation in the labor market over the years. While the liberalization efforts of the Erdoğan governments have improved the public sector job opportunities for headscarved women, progress in the private sector has remained limited. Within this scope, we argue in this paper that the labor market status of Turkish women wearing the headscarf has recovered in the last decade mainly because of robust political support, and through state-affiliated jobs. Given this outlook, we attempted to shed light on prospects for headscarved professionals based on the dynamics of the political climate.

The findings of this study indicate that the workplace culture at public institutions in Turkey has long been shaped by the ideologies of ruling political parties. Consequently, it can be said that Turkish governments have played a critical role for decades in determining the level of integration of headscarved women into society and the economy. In this context, political power has been the principal factor for the restoration of the social and economic rights of headscarved women in the country during the 2010s. In contrast, the employment of these professionals in the private sector has been primarily dependent on the ideologies of the companies' shareholders, managers, and clients, which shape their corporate cultures. In such a setting, the positive political attitude toward the headscarf issue has not significantly affected the presence of these women in the private sector.

The in-depth interviews we carried out indicate that the political climate will continue to be the primary factor in shaping the future of headscarved professionals in the Turkish public sector. In this respect, we found a strong expectation among participants that headscarved women would lose their jobs and status in the public sector to a large extent in the event of a future change in political power. Participants voiced their concerns over a possible resurgence

of discrimination and mistreatment in such a scenario. As for the private sector, they did not forecast a significant change, noting the ongoing and extensive discriminatory practices that currently exist. Consequently, this study's findings imply that unless political and economic agents in Turkey strongly support equal treatment for headscarved professionals, genuine diversity and integration in the labor market cannot be achieved sustainably. This diagnosis sheds valuable insight into the future of social dynamics from the perspective of democratization, freedoms, and equality. ■

Endnotes

1. Hatice Karahan, "Postmodern Bir Finansal Darbe," in Abdurrahman Babacan (ed.), *Bin Yılın Sonu: 28 Şubat*, (İstanbul: Pınar Yayınları, 2012).
2. Women wearing a headscarf were allowed to work at blue-collar jobs in the past, but not white-collar jobs. Thus, this study focuses on the status of white-collar female employees only.
3. Bekir Berat Özipek, "İnsan Hakları ve İhlaller Ekseninde Bir Örnek: Türkiye'de Başörtüsü Yasağı Sorunu," in Neslihan Akbulut (ed.), *Örtülemeyen Sorun Başörtüsü: Temel Boyutları ile Türkiye'de Başörtüsü Yasağı Sorunu*, (İstanbul: AKDER Yayınları, 2008); Fatma Benli, *1964-2011 Türkiye'de ve Dünyada Başörtüsü Yasağı Kronolojisi*, (İstanbul, 2011).
4. Dilek Cindoğlu, *Headscarf Ban and Discrimination: Professional Headscarved Women in the Labor Market*, (İstanbul: TESEV Publications, 2011).
5. Ali Murat Yel, "Islamophobia as Cultural Racism: The Case of Islamic Attire in Turkey," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 169-189.
6. S. Sema Akboğa, "Turkish Civil Society Divided by the Headscarf Ban," *Democratization*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2014), pp. 610-633.
7. It should be underlined here that the AK Party governments not only dealt with the headscarf issue but also attempted to solve other deep-rooted social problems in Turkey. The National Unity and Fraternity Project initiated in 2009 (also known as the Demoratic Initiative Process) aimed to strengthen the status of ethnic and/or religious minority groups in the society, including Kurdish and Alevi citizens. Considering this broad initiative, the liberalization of the headscarf came at a relatively later stage. During this process, the increasing pressures exerted by headscarved women for their freedom played an important role. A noteworthy example is the 2011 campaign, "No Votes if No Headscarved Candidates (in the Parliament)."
8. Ayşe Saktanber and Gül Çorbacioğlu, "Veiling and Headscarf-Skepticism in Turkey," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2009), pp. 514-538.
9. An additional regulation published in the Official Gazette in August 2016 allowed policewomen to wear a headscarf, retrieved from <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/08/20160827-1.htm>.
10. Interviews conducted were approved by İstanbul Medipol University Ethical Committee, decision number: E-43037191-604.01.01-74436, (December 27, 2021).
11. Hatice Karahan and Nigar Tugsuz, "The Silent Discrimination against Headscarved Professionals in the Turkish Labor Market: The Case of Women in the Banking Sector," *Sustainability*, Vol. 13, No. 20 (2021), p.11324.
12. The dominant culture, which does not favor people with religious affiliations in the workplace, is referred to by most participants as "the secular culture."
13. Özge Genç and Ebru İlhan, *Başörtüsü Yasağına İlişkin Değerlendirme ve Öneriler*, (İstanbul: TESEV Publications, 2012).

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