



# Reconsidering girls' education in Turkey from a capabilities and feminist perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This paper re-considers girls' education in Turkey from both a capabilities and a feminist perspective. First, it critically looks at the policies, legislation, and NGO and government led campaigns aiming to increase girls' enrolment, and points out the lack of feminist perspectives and concerns in these initiatives. Then, drawing from 20 in-depth interviews with girls and 5 interviews with teachers in the most socio-economically deprived region of Turkey, the paper explores girls' schooling and educational opportunities in Eastern Turkey from a combined capabilities and feminist perspective, in order to generate a richer information basis than numbers alone for policy and evaluation. The findings tease out capabilities which are missing in the focus of policies and campaigns, and invite a re-design of educational policies and initiatives from a capabilities-focused praxis that is context and gender sensitive.

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## 1. Introduction

Gender parity in education is a challenge in Turkey. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has launched various measures to expand girls' education, with a particular interest in Eastern Turkey as the most disadvantaged region. Eastern Turkey differs from other regions in terms of ethnic origin, culture, economic development and languages spoken. Along with Turkish, Kurdish is the most commonly spoken language among people and in households (Sahin and Gulmez, 2000b). It is economically less developed; the unemployment rate in the district is high; polygamous marriages are quite common; and child marriage is a prevalent cultural practice to minimize the economic burden on families. Figures show that more than 20 per cent of girls were subject to child marriage in 2013 (TSNA, 2013).

Overall in Turkey, the focus has been on the expansion of primary schooling to increase the number of girls enrolled. This has largely been achieved: In 2014, the percentage of children in primary school was 97.10 per cent, 97.12 for girls and 97.12 per cent for boys (MEB, 2015a). However, these figures are somewhat deceptive since they do not indicate who is enrolled full-time, or who drops in and out of school, and figures do not monitor girls'

attendance once they are enrolled. There is only one report, prepared in 2011 in collaboration with UNICEF and Ministry of Education, that looks into nonattendance. This report shows that student absences are higher in Eastern Anatolia and girls have higher nonattendance rates than boys. The report relates lower attendance in these areas with seasonal farm work in which students are used as free labour, and argues that seasonal migration due to farm work leads to irregular attendance, including leaving school at an early age (Börkan et al., 2014). The report does not extensively focus on gender differentiation.

In light of these findings, the above figures do not necessarily demonstrate that Turkey has achieved full gender equality and equity in education, and more precisely in girls' education. The policy understanding of gender equality, which rests on gender parity and the gap between girls and boys in enrolment, is important but does not address structural problems girls face, such as how they engage with school, how they are treated at school, or what and how they learn at school (Unterhalter, 2005). An effective and meaningful understanding of gender equality in education should rather ensure equality of treatment and equality of opportunity beyond the numbers (Subrahmanian, 2005). Substantive gender equality would be concerned with conditions of being educated, gender discrimination related to learning, the impact of curriculum and textbooks on the reproduction of stereotypes about women and men, and gender inequalities between school and labour market, non-market settings, institutions and pedagogies (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). This, we propose, involves

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examining the nature of education valued by individuals, to see if they are able to achieve their 'valued beings and doings' and exercise their agency through having an education in schools (Sen, 1999). To this end, we propose that the capabilities approach offers a robust framework to argue for gender justice in education, one which can accommodate a diversity of identities, but which can also go beyond all of these to frame justice in an expansive way for girls' and women's choices, well-being and agency.

Therefore, this paper critically scrutinizes education initiatives promoting girls' schooling in Turkey and argues that these are limited to improving gender parity in enrolment numbers and a limited distributional justice through the focus on scholarships or cash transfers to reach the most disadvantaged. These measures are important but ultimately insufficient. Drawing from empirical evidence, the paper highlights the need to examine girls' schooling experiences to address wider gender inequity challenges in girls' education, such as participation and quality. On the basis of our findings, we suggest that the initiatives to promote girls' education in Turkey need a shift from the policy of measuring enrolment numbers, to creating girl-friendly schools and an education system and policies based on girls' capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) and their well-being and agency freedoms.

This requires a human development perspective in which girls are treated as full human beings. We build on the pioneering work of Unterhalter (2007) on schooling, gender and capabilities, and the work of Cin and Walker (2013) on gender and education in Turkey, as well as other Turkey-specific research, including the literature exploring girls' drop out from schooling in Turkey (Rankin and Aytac, 2006; Akkoyunlu-Wigley and Wigley, 2008; Smits and Gunduz-Hosgor, 2006). The article is innovative in its application to girls' schooling and girls' and teachers' voices in Turkey. It begins with the initiatives taken so far to promote girl' schooling and engages in a critique of the initiatives from a feminist perspective. Then, it analyses girls' experiences, and explores the capabilities girls have reason to value in their schooling and education, to inform education policies and initiatives.

## 2. Initiatives to improve access and retention

As noted above, the priority in Turkey for girls' education has been to increase the number of girls at secondary and primary schools and to achieve numerical equality in education. To this end, there have been a number of successful initiatives and campaigns in collaboration with international donors such as World Bank, UNICEF and EU to improve girls' access to education, supported also by powerful government educational policies and legislation. In this section, we will examine to what extent these campaigns and policies have been successful in enabling girls' access to education and addressing structural gender equalities in education.

Most of these initiatives aimed at improving the schooling of girls in Eastern Anatolia, as the enrolment rates were much lower compared to other parts of Turkey. Regarding the context of education in eastern Turkey, four important factors can be argued to play a role in both girls' and boys' participation in school and to shape their schooling experiences. Economic difficulties in families affect both girls and boys, particularly in Eastern Turkey where the agriculture sector is the main source of income and employment. Several studies (Tansel, 2002; Börkan et al., 2014) have argued that the low socio-economic status of a family affects students' participation in school and that children are forced to work outside the home to contribute to household subsistence (Alat and Alat, 2011). However, economic difficulties place girls' schooling more at risk than boys, since parents invest more in boys' education and/or force girls to marry at an early age in return for a dowry (Smits and Gunduz-Hosgor, 2006). Secondly, socio-cultural norms (Gökşen et al., 2009) also affect whether girls can stay in

education, whereas boys are not affected by such norms. Social norms regarding the honour of family (Rankin and Aytac, 2006; Smits and Gunduz-Hosgor, 2003), the low value attributed to girls and the headscarf ban in schools (Rankin and Aytac, 2008) set barriers to girls' access to education. In particular, fathers who are more conservative use the headscarf ban as a legitimate reason to keep their daughters at home. Thirdly, inaccessible schools, geographical features that make transportation and mobility difficult during winter, poor school conditions and insufficient infrastructure (Gökşen et al., 2009) increase students' possibilities of dropping out and discourage families from sending their children to school. This again affects girls more than boys as conservative families are reluctant to send their daughters to distant schools for fear of harassment and molestation on the way, and rumours about molestation can damage the family honour. Lastly, the issue of language of instruction in Kurdish populated areas is a contentious issue. To the best of our knowledge, no official document exists stating that not being able to speak Turkish is a reason for dropping out. However, some studies (Candas et al., 2010; Kaya, 2009; Kirdar, 2009) argue that Turkish medium instruction in Kurdish populated areas lowers the achievement of students or decreases their chances of furthering their education. Since girls' schooling is not prioritized and they are kept within the private sphere for domestic duties, little importance is attached to the benefits they will get from learning Turkish.

A Compulsory Education Program has expanded access to education, particularly for female students. Triggered by the global campaign 'Education For All (EFA)<sup>1</sup>', the Ministry of Education extended primary school education from five years to eight years to expand opportunities for all children to attend schools and to keep girls in the education system for another three years, especially in Eastern Turkey (Dulger, 2004). This programme, in collaboration with the World Bank, provided Turkey with \$600 million between 1997 and 2007 to support infrastructural and financial arrangements. An estimated \$3 billion dollars annually were spent on the project, while the government spent nearly \$2 billion (McClure, 2013). This rapid coverage of the Compulsory Education Programme was also Turkey's largest poverty alleviation program (Dulger, 2004) as it went hand in hand with social policies to improve conditions of the poor and has been supported by additional legislation. Free education, free health services for the poor, free meals to students coming from low-income families, and free transportation for students in rural areas were all important initiatives to encourage girls' schooling and enhance their schooling experiences (Engin-Demir and Cobanoglu, 2012). Additionally, fully state-funded female primary boarding schools (the majority of which are situated in Eastern Turkey) were established for poor female students to prevent them dropping out. However, these schools were closed down in 2013 when the current President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that it is pedagogically and psychologically more appropriate for children to stay with their families during their education years in order to be raised in a family environment (Radikal, 2013). Such a decision was taken with a concern for the social and psychological wellbeing and development of children. However, it was a regressive step for girls' education since the majority of girls in these schools are from economically and socially disadvantaged families where they have to do domestic work, provide child labour, and are deterred from attending school (TBMM, 2010).

Overall, the compulsory education program has been significant in that children, particularly girls living in poorer urban suburbs and rural areas, gained access to educational opportunities

<sup>1</sup> EFA was initiated by UNESCO in 1990 to promote education as a human right and to improve the quality of education across the world.

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