

Female domestic workers strategizing via commuting long distance: New challenges and negotiations in neoliberalizing Turkey

Tahire Erman*, Hilal Kara

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara 06800, Turkey

Introduction

This article is framed by the intersectionality of class, gender and space in the context of female domestic workers. We aim to investigate women's work and agency embedded in neoliberalism, with a focus on urban restructuring. We understand waged female domestic labor as a site where class and gender relations intersect (Gorbán & Tizziani, 2014). Women encounter each other in their class positions, reproducing social inequalities; women's responsibility of taking care of the home in the gendered division of labor in the patriarchal family is transferred from one class of women to the other in the commodification of domestic labor (McDowell, 2006). In our aim of bringing a nuanced understanding of waged domestic work, we investigate the labor story of female domestic workers commuting long hours to the homes of their employers to carry out domestic duties and back to their own homes again to carry out domestic duties. Taking a socio-spatial perspective, we locate long-distance travel to wealthy suburbs at the center of our study, both in physical terms and experienced ways, and we investigate how female domestic workers respond to the challenges of long-distance commuting as the city sprawls outwards to accommodate wealthy suburbs, and what its outcomes are in terms of their negotiations in the workplace, at home and in the neighborhood. Our approach to waged domestic work as a gendered class practice is embedded in the socio-spatial transformations of the city as the class gap between women deepens (McDowell, 2006) and the city becomes spatially more segregated (Haylett, 2003); urban neoliberalism as a gendered development has repercussions on the lives of women, especially those in poor families (Peake & Rieker, 2013). Below, we first provide a brief review of the literature on female domestic workers in the Turkish context, locating them vis-à-vis their (rural) families and (urban) employers. It is followed by the literature review in the international context.

Female domestic workers: informality, patriarchy, class

In Turkey, the majority of women who provide labor for house-keeping and childcare in better-off families are rural-to-urban

migrants.¹ Conservative values and the need for women's economic contributions work simultaneously in these families: while the former acts as a barrier for women's employment outside the home, the latter requires it (Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, & Rittersberger-Tılıç, 2002). Lacking education, many migrant women are employed in informal jobs that are the extension of their unpaid domestic labor at home. The male breadwinner model is still the cultural norm, symbolizing the family's good economic position (Erman, 2001). The monetary contributions of women to the family budget are devalued by defining them as “pocket money” to be used for daily needs (Erman et al., 2002). The common practice among rural migrant women is to find jobs through their relatives and neighbors, which works to assure that the workplace is not a threat to the family honor (*namus*). This reproduces social control over women.

The rural/urban hierarchy in Turkish modernization unfolds in the context of waged domestic workers as “ignorant peasants in the city” showing deference to their “cultured urban” counterparts. Today this cultural hierarchy is negotiated by domestic workers: on the one hand, due to the uncertainty of finding new employers and the difficulty in adapting to new homes, they accept the emotional burden of negative encounters with employers (Kalaycıoğlu & Tılıç-Rittersberger, 2000), and on the other hand, they attempt to improve their positions via “strategic intimacy,” using their common gender to create sisterhood-like relationships with their employers (Ozyegin, 2000). In a recent study, Bora (2012) theorizes the relationship of female domestic workers with their female employers as a site where both groups encounter each other with their own discourses and strategies; in their attempt to challenge their subordinated positions, domestic workers present themselves as Anatolian women known for their hard work and their employers as parasite women who get things done by others. By showing female domestic workers' strategizing positions in work relations, these studies acknowledge their agency.

Negotiation is central to waged domestic work which is characterized by informality. In Turkey, the rules of work are determined informally; and there is no formal labor contract, and the components of work (wage, workload, work hours) are not standardized (Kalaycıoğlu & Tılıç-Rittersberger, 2000). The unregulated nature of waged domestic

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: tahire@bilkent.edu.tr (T. Erman).

¹ In a study of female domestic workers in Turkey, 91% of respondents were first generation migrants from the countryside, whereas their employers had urban origin (Kalaycıoğlu & Tılıç-Rittersberger, 2000).

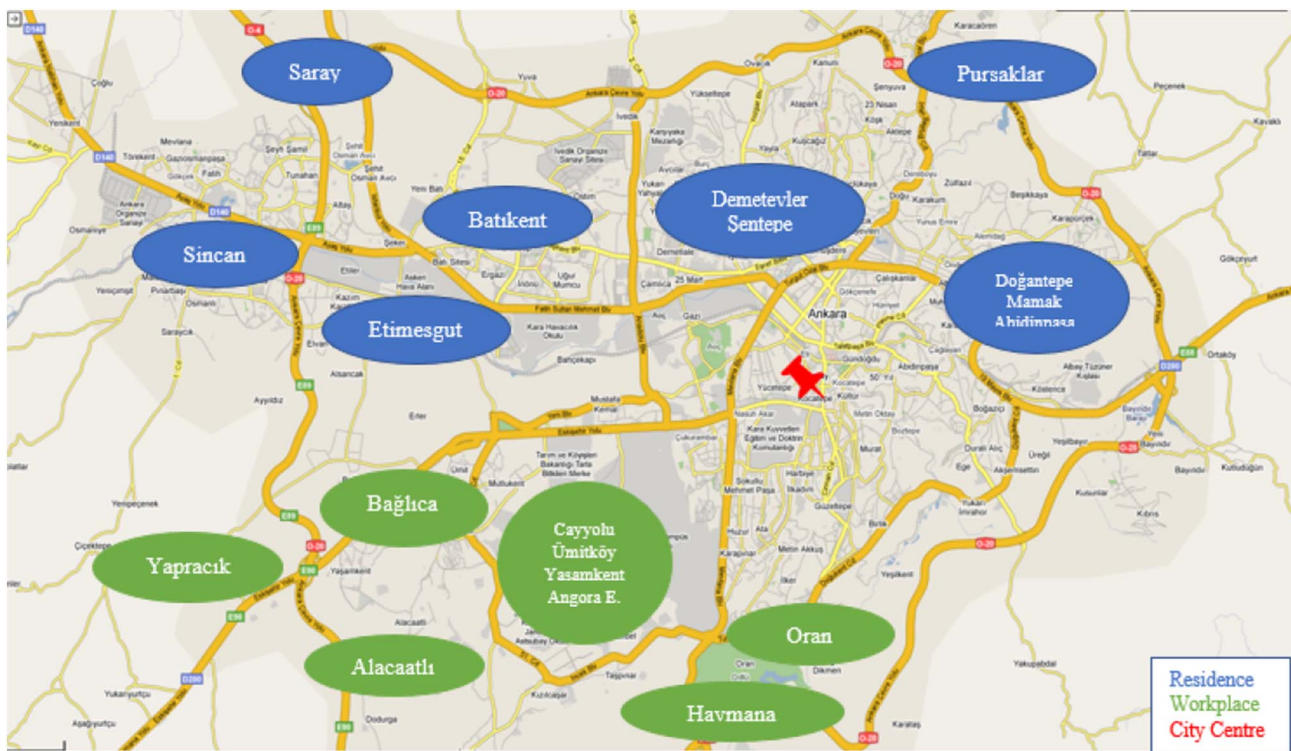


Fig. 1. The map of Ankara showing the locations of the workplaces and homes of the female domestic workers in the study.

work is negotiated through “patronage benefits,” that is, non-monetary rewards such as various kinds of gifts and assistance, and long-term social benefits such as family members placed in jobs and financial support provided for children's school expenses (hereafter “benefits”). Under the conditions of informality in which work conditions and payments are not controlled by the state, domestic workers cope with it by expecting to be treated as part of the family. Yet, such relations in the workplace render invisible the class dimension (Bora, 2012; Kalaycıoğlu & Tiliç-Rittesberger, 2000; Ozyegin, 2000). While informality in waged domestic work creates problems such as lack of social protection and low and unreliable payments, by providing some flexibility in work hours, it helps women in coping with their “double burden” (Erdoğan & Toksöz, 2013).

In sum, informality, patriarchy and rural/urban dichotomy structure the relationship of female domestic workers with their work in the Turkish context. Unregulated by the state, waged domestic work renders domestic workers vulnerable. They are subordinated vis-à-vis their employers in the rural/urban cultural hierarchy in Turkish modernity. In their treatment as part of the family and not as workers, they lose their bargaining power, yet they secure “benefits” from their employers, which downplays the class dimension. As their work is devalued as the extension of women’s housewifely tasks and their earnings are devalued as “pocket money,” female domestic workers also lose their negotiation with patriarchy in the family.

Studies conducted in other contexts support the literature on Turkish female domestic workers firstly, in recognizing the historical undervaluation of waged domestic work due to its definition as a female occupation linked to women's unpaid domestic work at home and secondly, in demonstrating domestic workers' subordination by the nature of their work shaped by the conditions of informality (Smith, 2011). In its definition as economically unproductive, waged domestic service is not counted in the statistics and is rendered largely invisible (Cock, 2011). Yet there are differences from the Turkish case. While in Turkey the class difference is diluted by the "big sister-little-sister" relationship framed in cultural terms, in the UK, the class dimension is a strong structuring factor in domestic workers' relationship with their

employers (Gregson & Lowe, 1994), which is deepened by ethnicity and race (Glenn, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). This literature also demonstrates that female domestic workers are not entirely passive recipients of their subordinated positions. The ways they respond to the unequal relations with their employers vary, ranging from trying to keep their positions by pretending to be unintelligent (Rollins, 1985), to developing coping mechanisms such as mockery (Cock, 1980), to putting strict boundaries between their work and personal lives (Dill, 1988).

In the literature, little attention is paid to the urban context, with few exceptions (e.g. [Peake & Rieker, 2013](#)). However, the changes in the spatial arrangements of cities as the outcome of neoliberal urban policies would affect the relations of female domestic workers with their workplaces, which would further affect their relations with patriarchal arrangements in the family. Under the patriarchal control over women in Turkey, rural migrant women may prefer home-based work ([Soytemel, 2013](#)) or to work in those places close to their homes, for instance in the textile workshops set up in their neighborhoods and in the apartments in their districts ([Erman, 2001](#)). However, the recent trend of better-off families moving to the suburbs has brought new challenges as well as new opportunities for female domestic workers, which is the subject of this article. Investigating female domestic workers' long-distance commuting is important both for political and academic reasons. We need to reveal how female domestic workers are affected by the changes in the city produced by a neoliberal logic, and their "travel stories" would tell us about neoliberal urbanism's taking tolls on one of the most disadvantaged groups in the city, that is, poor women working in the homes of the wealthy. The urban context, which has become the site of neoliberal interventions in the physical realm, offers the chance of understanding how spatial transformations are reflected on the lives of domestic workers.

Another gap in the literature is about the question of how female domestic workers respond to the new values engendered in the neoliberalization of society. It is important to investigate in what ways the neoliberal interventions in the social realm, which target to produce "governable subjects" (Dean, 1999) and to capture individual minds by

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6852528>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6852528>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)