



The Impact of Turkish Women's Migration to Europe

by Ayse Kudat

During the last two decades women from the Mediterranean countries have become a significant economic factor in the developed European labour markets. In Germany where there is the highest concentration of Turks, women constitute over a quarter of all migrant workers; Turkish outnumber those from other nationalities. As there is also sectoral concentration the share of women in the migrant population varies from region to region, reaching, as was the case in West Berlin, over 40% of all foreign workers.

There are cultural differences in the impact that migration has on the migrating women, on their families and on society. Yet, in many respects the observed differences in outcome are more a matter of degree than of kind.

Facts and trends

The Turkish migration into Western Germany has undergone four substantial phases. In the first phase, migrant workers were composed primarily of married men who left their wives behind upon migration. In the second phase, spouses were allowed to join under specified conditions. In the third phase, priorities were attached to female labour boosting both the incentives for spouses' reunion and the migration of women alone. In the last phase, which currently prevails, recruitment has been stopped and significant numbers have returned home.



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However, in many ways, migrant workers were better off than the female population who remained in Turkey: These migrant working women were much better educated than average Turkish females. A higher percentage of them were single and, relative to the Turkish female population, fewer had been employed previously in the agricultural sector. About a fifth of the migrant women in West Berlin had previous employment experiences in industry or in service occupations - a rate higher than that for women in Turkey.

Considering that 14% of all working women were single and that they also migrated alone, over half of all women have shown an initiative and independence - behaviour that is somewhat at variance with Turkish values concerning the role of women. Although the Turkish society has accepted and approved of the women working outside the home in times of utter necessity, it is only under the constant supervision of the family.

Main features of women's migration experience

Migration presents the Turkish woman with a totally unfamiliar experience, an experience that differs from her previous life in a variety of ways. What is perhaps even more important is the fact that this happens in an abrupt fashion. The novelties are imposed on her without any prior or proper introduction, without allowing any adequate preparation on her part. Therefore what such a transplanted person can absorb from the stream of events surrounding her is quite limited. Apparently, however, she manages to learn enough to enable her to survive, get along with others and do her job.



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However, of the skills she succeeds in acquiring and the personal changes she accomplishes, only some will be retained and carried back home as permanent. Even the gains from employment experience won't be lasting. For instance, the skills she learns at work will not remain with her for long since her status as a working woman will, in the majority of cases, terminate upon her return home, leaving no opportunity for them to be exercised. Of the newly formed



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attitudes and the accompanying changes in her perspectives and world view, a considerable portion will not have a chance for survival either.

Upon return, not only will some of the personal changes cease to be supported by outside circumstances, but others will be actively opposed by the people in her immediate surroundings. She will be coming back to her kin group and she will be subjected to their influence more now than was the case when she was abroad.

This will then start a process of adaptation in the reverse direction. In order to function comfortably and minimise friction with her



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environment in a traditionally-oriented kin-group network and the respective socio-cultural circumstances, she must now unlearn or suppress her newly-acquired habits and behavior - those which are regarded as deviant by the others around her - and she must reactivate the former, more acceptable ones. The net result of this process of change - forward and backward - can perhaps be described as 'some loss in gains'. Since, even if all the changes that occur in her do

cluster and takes effect abruptly. For many women, the trip to Europe is the first trip they have ever made out of their familiar community. For those women migrating alone, it is the very first time they are unchaperoned. The anxiety they must feel is probably unmatched by anything that has happened before - the fears associated with not being led along, not being able to understand what is said and done not knowing where the place of work is and how to get there. The feelings of frustration, subjugation and humiliation must be as oppressive as the foreign environment itself.

For the majority, waged-work itself is the new experience; however for about a quarter of these women, it is not employment that constitutes the newness of the experience, but the nature of it. That one works in shifts, sometimes at midnight, sometimes at a great distance from home, that the employer is usually not to be seen, are all part of this new way of life. As estrangement is inevitable in a work setting where little is comprehensible, only the wages earned have significance. It is this fact that is channelled into the consciousness of these women.

They live unaware of and uninterested in what is being produced, to what end or for whom. Whatever it is, it must be 'better' than what is made in their own country.

As many say, 'If you take something with you to Turkey during your *urlaub* (holiday) you only need to say that you bought it in Germany and you can sell it for ten times its original price because Germany is an advanced country in need of a labour force'.

Source: *Living in Two Cultures, The Sociocultural Situation of Migrant Workers and their Families*, UNESCO Press.



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not last, not all that has been gained will be lost either; part of it will continue its existence in some latent form even when not openly expressed.

Multi-faceted abruptness

The outstanding feature which characterises the phenomenon of migration of Turkish women to European labour markets can be referred to as the multi-faceted abruptness of their experience abroad. 'Changes in a variety of dimensions in their lives occur at unexpected speed. What normally develops in a slow dialectical thesis/antithesis relationship emerges almost simultaneously in the same



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