

A SWOT ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN TURKEY AND GLOBAL COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Women's employment is a critical driver of economic growth, social equity, and sustainable development. Despite significant progress over the years, global and regional labor markets continue to exhibit stark gender disparities, with women facing systemic barriers such as gender pay gaps, limited access to education, cultural norms, and caregiving burdens. This study examines the factors influencing women's labor force participation in Turkey, a country with one of the lowest female employment rates among OECD countries, while providing comparative insights from global trends. Employing the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis framework, the research identifies the economic benefits of women's employment, the structural barriers they face, and the emerging opportunities for gender-inclusive labor markets. The findings reveal that women's employment contributes significantly to household welfare, workplace innovation, and sustainable economic development. However, challenges such as cultural stereotypes, unequal pay, and inadequate childcare infrastructure hinder women's full participation. Opportunities arising from digital transformation, green economy jobs, and policy-driven solutions like microfinance programs provide pathways for enhancing women's workforce engagement. Threats such as automation and insufficient enforcement of gender equality laws further exacerbate inequalities. This study concludes that targeted interventions are essential to address systemic barriers and leverage emerging opportunities. Recommendations include investing in caregiving infrastructure, promoting STEM education for women, enforcing anti-discrimination laws, and supporting women entrepreneurs. By fostering gender-inclusive labor policies, Turkey and other countries can unlock the transformative potential of women's employment, achieving not only economic resilience but also greater social equity and sustainable development.

Key words: Women employment, SWOT Analysis, Turkish Labour

INTRODUCTION

Employment is a vital component of labor markets, directly contributing to economic growth, social stability, and sustainable development. Narrowly defined, employment involves the allocation of the labor force to production processes in exchange for wages or salaries, while more broadly, it refers to the inclusion of all production factors in economic activities (Ay, 2012). In this context, the equitable participation of both men and women in the labor force has been a key driver of economic and social progress throughout history. Women, in particular, have played significant roles in economic activities across various historical periods, adapting their participation to the social and economic structures of their time (Buyuknalbant, 2009). Education emerges as a critical determinant of women's employment outcomes. Women with higher education levels are more likely to secure formal employment and access higher-paying jobs, yet even in Turkey, highly educated women face systemic barriers, such as limited job opportunities aligned with their qualifications and discriminatory hiring practices (Kucuk, 2015).

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Furthermore, cultural expectations and patriarchal structures restrict women's career advancement, forcing them to balance caregiving responsibilities with professional roles. This dual burden significantly limits women's capacity to engage in full-time employment, particularly in male-dominated professions (Bulut & Akçacı, 2017). The global COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges. Women disproportionately experienced job losses, reductions in income, and increased caregiving burdens during this period, highlighting the fragile position of women in labor markets (Işık, 2020; Ilkkaracan & Memiş, 2020). As economies recover, there is a growing recognition that empowering women in the workforce is not only a matter of equity but also a critical driver of economic resilience and sustainable development.

Globally, women's participation in the labor force remains significantly lower than men's, with the global female labor force participation rate standing at 47.4% compared to 72.3% for men in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). This disparity is more pronounced in developing economies, where structural barriers, cultural norms, and systemic discrimination hinder women's economic participation (Demirtaş & Yayla, 2017). Women are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, informal, and unpaid roles—such as in agriculture and caregiving—which perpetuates cycles of inequality. However, countries with robust gender equality policies, such as those in Scandinavia, have successfully achieved higher rates of female labor force participation through education, flexible work arrangements, and caregiving infrastructure (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). In Turkey, the historical trajectory of women's employment reflects broader global trends. During the industrial revolution, women entered the workforce in large numbers, primarily as low-wage laborers in urban areas (Saka, 2004). In Turkey, women's participation in the labor market became more visible during the 1950s as agricultural mechanization and rural-to-urban migration shifted the economic focus from unpaid family labor to wage-based employment (Dirik, 2016). Despite these transitions, Turkey's female labor force participation rate has remained low, standing at 34.1% in 2022—well below the OECD average of 51.7% (OECD, 2022). This reflects persistent structural challenges, including limited access to education, weak caregiving support systems, and cultural norms that prioritize women's domestic roles over their professional aspirations (Ilkkaracan & Memiş, 2020).

Despite existing literature contributions, gender disparities in employment persist globally, creating barriers that undermine women's potential and hinder broader societal progress. This paper examines the women's employment in Turkey, focusing on the historical, structural, and socioeconomic factors that shape their participation in the labor force. Using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework, its applicability to women's employment lies in its ability to examine both internal factors (e.g., women's skills, education, and participation levels) and external factors (e.g., policy environments, cultural norms, and global economic trends). The Strengths section identifies the benefits of women's employment, such as increased household welfare, enhanced workplace innovation, and contributions to economic growth. Conversely, the Weaknesses section explores internal barriers, including unequal pay, the caregiving burden, and limited access to leadership positions. The Opportunities section highlights emerging trends, such as digital transformation, flexible work models, and green economy jobs, which can expand women's workforce participation. Finally, the Threats section examines external challenges, such as automation, cultural stereotypes, and weak enforcement of gender equality laws, which undermine women's employment outcomes.

The SWOT framework is particularly suited for this analysis because it bridges the gap between theoretical insights and practical solutions. While previous studies have extensively documented the barriers to women's employment, such as low wages, limited education, and systemic discrimination (Demirtaş & Yayla, 2017; Ilkkaracan & Memiş, 2020), fewer studies have systematically explored how emerging opportunities—such as digital platforms and green jobs—can reshape women's labor market participation. By integrating historical, structural, and contemporary insights, the SWOT analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the enablers and barriers of women's employment, offering actionable recommendations for stakeholders. In the context of Turkey, the SWOT framework highlights the interplay between cultural norms, economic transitions, and global trends that shape women's participation in the labor market. For instance, while Turkey faces persistent weaknesses, such as unequal pay and limited caregiving infrastructure, it also has significant opportunities to leverage, including expanding women's access to STEM education, supporting entrepreneurship through microfinance programs, and integrating women into emerging sectors such as renewable energy. The analysis underscores the importance of targeted policies to address structural inequalities, enforce gender equality laws, and promote a more inclusive labor market. Women's employment is a cornerstone of economic

development, social equity, and sustainable growth. However, persistent gender disparities in labor force participation undermine these goals, particularly in countries like Turkey, where structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's economic opportunities. By applying the SWOT framework, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors shaping women's employment outcomes and identify strategies to bridge the gender gap in labor markets. The insights generated from this analysis can inform policymakers, employers, and advocacy groups in their efforts to create more equitable and inclusive labor markets.

SWOT ANALYSIS ON WOMEN EMPLOYMENT

Strengths: Women's Employment as a Economic and Social Development

Women's participation in the workforce is a cornerstone of economic growth, social equity, and sustainable development. It not only fosters gender equality but also enhances family well-being and drives national economic performance. By diversifying the labor force, women contribute new perspectives, skills, and managerial capabilities that boost organizational innovation and productivity. Beyond economic benefits, women's workforce participation creates a ripple effect of social and psychological empowerment, challenging traditional gender roles and fostering greater inclusivity in society. This section explores the multifaceted strengths of women's employment, focusing on its contributions to economic growth, education's transformative role, the potential of Industry 4.0, and lessons from global policy innovations.

Economic Growth and Gender Equality: The economic significance of women's employment is well-documented. Studies consistently show that increasing women's participation in the labor market enhances national productivity, reduces poverty, and promotes sustainable development. Women's employment bolsters economic resilience by increasing household incomes and reducing dependency on patriarchal structures. For example, Tansel (2002) highlights that as women achieve economic independence, they simultaneously strengthen their social position and contribute to gender equality. Uyanık and Yeşilkaya (2021) further emphasize that integrating women into the workforce addresses income inequality, ultimately benefiting the broader economy. Globally, empirical research underscores these findings. Luci (2009), in a panel study of 184 countries, identified a strong positive correlation between women's labor market participation and GDP growth, particularly in developing nations. Similarly, Baloch et al. (2016), examining data from 110 countries, demonstrated that gender equality in employment significantly enhances economic performance. In the Turkish context, Pata (2018) found that women's employment contributes directly to the GDP generated in the service sector, though its effects in industrial and agricultural sectors remain limited. Turluoğlu (2018) identified a reciprocal relationship between women's employment and economic growth, suggesting that policies promoting women's workforce participation yield long-term macroeconomic benefits.

Education as a Catalyst for Workforce Inclusion: Education is one of the most critical drivers of women's employment. Women with higher levels of education are more likely to secure well-paying jobs, access leadership positions, and break free from systemic barriers to employment. Research by Bullough et al. (2012) indicates that education not only equips women with professional skills but also empowers them to participate actively in decision-making processes at work and in their households. Similarly, Boserup (1986) and Mehtap et al. (2016) show that educated women are more likely to develop innovative ideas, adapt to diverse professional environments, and contribute meaningfully to the knowledge economy. In Turkey, the transformative power of education is particularly evident. Bulutay (2000) and Erdoğan and Yaşar (2018) found that women with university degrees participate in the labor force at significantly higher rates than their less-educated counterparts, highlighting the direct link between education and employment outcomes. However, educational disparities in rural and underserved regions remain a barrier, underscoring the need for policies that expand access to quality education for girls and women.

Innovation, Diversity, and Leadership in Organizations: In addition to its economic and educational benefits, women's employment fosters innovation and organizational diversity. Studies show that diverse

teams perform better, and women's unique leadership styles contribute to inclusive decision-making and creative problem-solving. Catalyst (2020) highlights that organizations with greater gender diversity on executive teams achieve higher profitability and workplace innovation. For example, McKinsey & Company (2020) found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 25% more likely to outperform their peers in profitability. Eagly and Carli (2007) further explain that women leaders often adopt transformational leadership styles, emphasizing collaboration, mentoring, and team-building—approaches that enhance team morale and organizational success. Despite these strengths, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions globally. Proactive policies, such as gender quotas, have proven effective in addressing this gap. For instance, Norway introduced a mandate requiring at least 40% of corporate board seats to be occupied by women, increasing female representation on boards from 6% in 2002 to 42% in 2016 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Iceland's Equal Pay Certification System similarly demonstrates how government intervention can ensure wage parity and promote gender equity in the workplace (Government of Iceland, 2018).

Opportunities in Industry 4.0: The Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0) presents both opportunities and challenges for women's employment. Technological advancements in artificial intelligence, automation, and smart manufacturing are reshaping the global labor market, creating new professions in fields such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT). According to the OECD (2017) and Ansal (2018), these changes have the potential to increase women's participation in high-demand, high-paying professions. However, Frey and Osborne (2013) caution that automation may disproportionately impact women, as they are overrepresented in roles susceptible to mechanization, such as telemarketing, data entry, and clerical work. Addressing this risk requires targeted investments in digital literacy and STEM education for women, enabling them to access opportunities in emerging industries. Additionally, flexible work arrangements facilitated by digital transformation can help women balance caregiving responsibilities with professional aspirations, further supporting their workforce participation (Özer & Biçerli, 2000; Erdoğan & Yaşar, 2018).

Global Best Practices and Policy Lessons: Global policy innovations offer valuable lessons for fostering women's employment. Countries like Sweden, Iceland, and Norway have implemented progressive policies that address structural barriers and promote gender equity in labor markets. Sweden's shared parental leave policy, granting 480 days (16 months) of paid leave to both parents, ensures a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities while enabling women to continue their careers without disruption (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Iceland's Equal Pay Certification System mandates that companies with more than 25 employees prove wage parity, effectively narrowing the gender pay gap (Government of Iceland, 2018). Meanwhile, Finland combines equal pay laws with extensive childcare support systems, enabling women to pursue leadership positions and professional advancement. Turkey can draw inspiration from these global best practices. For instance, implementing pay transparency laws, introducing gender quotas for leadership roles, and expanding access to affordable childcare services would address some of the most pressing barriers to women's workforce participation. Additionally, targeted initiatives to promote women's digital literacy and entrepreneurship could help bridge the gender gap in emerging sectors.

Finally, women's workforce participation yields profound social and psychological benefits. Employment enhances women's self-confidence, independence, and decision-making power, improving their quality of life and enabling them to challenge traditional gender roles. Working women serve as role models for younger generations, inspiring societal progress toward greater gender equity (Bullough et al., 2012). This transformative effect extends beyond individual households to entire communities, fostering a culture of inclusion, innovation, and resilience.

Weaknesses: Persistent Barriers to Women's Workforce Participation

Despite the undeniable benefits of women's workforce participation for economic growth, social progress, and gender equality, significant structural, cultural, and systemic barriers persist. These weaknesses include gender-based pay gaps, workplace discrimination, unpaid caregiving burdens, education-employment mismatches, the prevalence of informal employment, exclusion from high-growth industries, and entrenched societal norms. Such challenges not only limit women's professional opportunities but also undermine broader efforts toward sustainable economic development. This section explores these barriers in depth, supported by empirical evidence and policy recommendations.

Gender Pay Gaps and Workplace Discrimination: It remains among the most significant barriers to women's participation in Turkey's labor market. Women continue to earn significantly less than men for performing the same roles, reflecting systemic inequities that persist despite existing legal frameworks meant to enforce equal pay. TÜİK (2022) reports that women are often excluded from leadership and managerial roles, while many face limited access to promotions, career development opportunities, and financial independence. Discriminatory hiring practices and implicit workplace biases perpetuate the perception of women as secondary earners, reinforcing structural inequality. Workplace harassment and psychological violence further undermine women's ability to thrive professionally. Although anti-discrimination policies exist, their enforcement is inconsistent due to weak oversight mechanisms. Employers often bypass regulations, exploiting loopholes to avoid compliance. To address these issues, Turkey must strengthen enforcement mechanisms for existing labor laws and create independent regulatory bodies to ensure compliance with equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation. Additional training programs for employers and labor inspectors are essential to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices, while public awareness campaigns can help challenge societal stereotypes about women's roles and leadership potential. Globally, Iceland's Equal Pay Certification System demonstrates how mandatory audits and transparency initiatives can effectively close wage gaps and promote gender equality in the workplace (Government of Iceland, 2018). Adopting similar frameworks in Turkey could ensure that women receive fair compensation for their contributions.

The Burden of Unpaid Care Work: Unpaid caregiving responsibilities, including childcare, eldercare, and household management, disproportionately fall on women, creating significant barriers to their workforce participation. Women in Turkey shoulder the majority of unpaid domestic work, which limits their availability for full-time employment and stifles their career advancement. This "double burden" forces many women into part-time or informal employment, which offers low wages, minimal job security, and limited pathways for professional growth. TÜİK (2022) underscores that this structural issue is rooted in cultural norms that designate caregiving as a woman's primary responsibility, leaving men largely exempt from such duties. Addressing unpaid care work requires comprehensive policy interventions. Expanding access to affordable and high-quality childcare services is a critical first step. Policymakers should prioritize investments in childcare infrastructure, particularly in underserved rural areas where formal employment opportunities for women are limited. Successful global models, such as Sweden's shared parental leave policies, offer valuable lessons for Turkey. Sweden's policy grants 480 days of paid leave to both parents, promoting shared caregiving responsibilities and enabling women to re-enter the workforce without jeopardizing their careers (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Similarly, subsidized childcare systems in Nordic countries have increased women's labor force participation by reducing the caregiving burden. Adopting such measures in Turkey, alongside employer incentives to provide workplace flexibility, could significantly enhance women's economic participation.

Education-Employment Mismatch: Although education is widely regarded as a key driver of workforce participation, Turkey faces a persistent mismatch between women's educational attainment and their employment opportunities. While the country has made significant progress in increasing women's access to higher education, this has not translated into proportional workforce inclusion. Highly educated women face disproportionately high unemployment rates. TÜİK (2022) reveals that the unemployment rate for university-educated women in Turkey reached 15.2% in 2022, compared to just 8.3% for men. This disparity reflects systemic inefficiencies in aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands. The disconnect between education and employment stems from several factors. University curricula often fail to equip graduates with skills relevant to high-demand sectors, particularly STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Many employers also prioritize candidates with prior work experience, placing women—especially those re-entering the workforce after caregiving breaks—at a disadvantage. Additionally, gender biases in hiring and promotion processes exacerbate these challenges, leaving many qualified women unemployed or underemployed. Addressing this mismatch requires targeted reforms, such as revising university curricula to align with market needs, establishing internship and apprenticeship programs for female students, and offering tax incentives to employers who hire first-time female job seekers. These initiatives can bridge the gap between education and employment, ensuring that women's qualifications are recognized and valued in the labor market.

Informal Employment and Precarious Work: A significant proportion of women in Turkey are employed in the informal economy, where they lack access to legal protections such as maternity leave,

social security benefits, and minimum wage standards. Informal employment is particularly common in sectors such as domestic work, seasonal agriculture, and street vending, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and economic insecurity. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) highlights that informal work often traps women in precarious conditions, preventing them from transitioning into formal employment. To reduce the prevalence of informal work, Turkey must implement legal frameworks that mandate formal contracts, social security contributions, and fair wage standards in sectors where women are overrepresented. For instance, Brazil's efforts to formalize domestic work through comprehensive labor laws have provided greater economic security for women, serving as a model for Turkey. Expanding unionization and collective bargaining rights for women in informal sectors can also empower them to advocate for better working conditions and protections, fostering greater equity in the labor market.

Exclusion from High-Growth Sectors and the Digital Divide: Women remain significantly underrepresented in high-growth sectors such as technology and engineering, where opportunities are expanding due to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0). Systemic biases, cultural stereotypes, and the digital gender divide limit women's access to emerging professions, preventing them from participating in some of the most lucrative and future-oriented industries. According to the OECD (2017), women in developing countries often lack the digital literacy and technical skills required to compete in the global economy, further marginalizing them from high-growth industries. Bridging the digital divide requires targeted investments in digital literacy programs for women, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Scholarships, mentorship programs, and STEM initiatives aimed at young women can encourage their participation in technology-driven fields. Policymakers should also integrate gender-sensitive policies into national digital transformation strategies to ensure equitable access to opportunities in Industry 4.0. Promoting successful female role models in STEM industries can further dismantle stereotypes and inspire greater involvement, fostering a more inclusive digital economy.

Cultural and Societal Norms: Deeply entrenched cultural norms and societal expectations continue to limit women's workforce participation in Turkey. Traditional gender roles position women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners, creating structural disadvantages for women seeking to balance professional aspirations with family responsibilities. Public stigma against working mothers further penalizes women, perpetuating biases among employers who often view women as less reliable employees due to caregiving responsibilities (TÜİK, 2022). Shifting these cultural perceptions requires long-term educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns. Incorporating gender equality education into school curricula can challenge stereotypes from an early age, while national media campaigns showcasing the achievements of working women can influence societal attitudes. Highlighting the success stories of female leaders in diverse industries can inspire broader societal change and normalize women's participation in the workforce.

Opportunities: Expanding Women's Workforce Participation

The evolving global economy presents a wealth of opportunities to enhance women's workforce participation through technological advancements, flexible work models, state-led gender equality policies, and the transition to green economies. However, capitalizing on these opportunities requires a forward-looking, intersectional approach that addresses systemic inequalities and empowers women across all sectors.

Technological Advancements and Digital Transformation: The rapid digitalization of economies and the adoption of Industry 4.0 technologies offer transformative potential for women's inclusion in the labor market. Digital platforms, e-commerce, and remote work models allow women to balance caregiving responsibilities with professional aspirations, particularly in societies where traditional gender norms prevail. Nikulin (2017) highlights how information and communication technologies (ICTs) have reduced barriers for marginalized groups, enabling women to access education, credit, and entrepreneurial networks remotely. For instance, online platforms like Etsy and Amazon Marketplace provide opportunities for rural women to generate income by selling handmade goods and services globally, bypassing traditional geographic and social constraints. However, existing challenges such as the digital divide and the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields limit the full realization of these benefits. UNESCO (2019) reports that women remain significantly underrepresented in emerging industries like artificial intelligence, robotics, and cybersecurity, largely due to gendered perceptions of

technology as a "masculine" field (Hilbert, 2011). To address these barriers, targeted investments in digital literacy programs, scholarships for STEM education, and mentorship initiatives are essential. Public-private partnerships can also play a critical role in funding digital infrastructure in underserved areas, ensuring equitable access to digital opportunities for women.

Flexible Work Models: The rise of flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, freelancing, and part-time employment, offers new pathways for women to enter and sustain their workforce participation. These models have proven particularly beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of digital workspaces and hybrid employment structures (Oktay Yılmaz, 2017). However, as Işık (2020) warns, flexible work models risk perpetuating wage disparities and job insecurity if not regulated effectively. Lessons from the Netherlands demonstrate how legal protections for part-time workers can mitigate these risks by ensuring proportional pay and benefits (OECD, 2021). Turkey could adopt similar measures by formalizing flexible work arrangements and guaranteeing equal benefits for women engaged in part-time or remote employment.

Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment: Entrepreneurship serves as a critical pathway for women to bypass traditional barriers in male-dominated industries. Soysal (2010) notes that entrepreneurial ventures provide women with economic independence, innovation opportunities, and social recognition. Emerging sectors such as fintech, e-commerce, and renewable energy offer particularly promising avenues for women entrepreneurs. Platforms like Kiva and microfinance programs have enabled women in underserved regions to access capital and grow their businesses efficiently (Kabeer & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2020). In Turkey, targeted incentives for women entrepreneurs—such as grants for renewable energy projects or training in sustainable agriculture—could align economic empowerment with national sustainability goals. Collaboration between governments, NGOs, and private-sector stakeholders is essential to address barriers like limited access to capital and role conflicts.

Green Economy and Sustainable Development: The global transition to green economies has created new opportunities for women, particularly in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and green technology. Budig et al. (2012) highlight that green jobs provide stable and well-paying employment, especially in rural areas where traditional industries are in decline. For example, Turkey's renewable energy sector, including solar panel installation and wind turbine maintenance, could serve as entry points for women into green jobs. However, as ILO (2022) cautions, targeted training programs and gender-sensitive hiring practices are necessary to ensure women's access to these opportunities. Public-private partnerships could fund training initiatives, while mentorship programs could help women transition into green industries.

Caregiving Infrastructure: Unpaid caregiving responsibilities remain a significant barrier to women's workforce participation. In Turkey, women disproportionately shoulder childcare and eldercare responsibilities, limiting their availability for full-time employment (Ilkcaracan & Memiş, 2020). Investments in affordable caregiving infrastructure, such as subsidized childcare centers and eldercare facilities, are essential for alleviating this burden. Global examples, such as Sweden's shared parental leave policies and Iceland's Equal Pay Certification system, demonstrate the transformative potential of caregiving support in enabling women's workforce participation (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022; Iceland Government, 2018). Adopting similar measures in Turkey could alleviate the caregiving burden on women and enable them to contribute more fully to the labor force.

Addressing Intersectional Needs: Opportunities for workforce participation must account for the diversity of women's experiences. Crenshaw (1991) emphasizes the importance of addressing overlapping forms of discrimination, such as those based on gender, disability, geography, or race. In Turkey, rural women often face limited internet connectivity, while women with disabilities encounter systemic exclusion. Targeted programs, such as internet subsidies for rural areas and accessible entrepreneurship hubs, can help bridge these gaps. Additionally, re-skilling initiatives for older women can ensure their competitiveness in a rapidly evolving labor market.

Threats: Barriers and Challenges Limiting Women's Workforce Participation

While significant progress has been made globally and in Turkey to promote women's workforce participation, persistent threats continue to undermine gender equality and economic inclusion. These

challenges stem from deeply entrenched cultural norms, systemic labor market inequalities, technological polarization, and the ongoing burden of caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, women face compounding vulnerabilities in times of economic instability, alongside intersectional barriers and mental health challenges. Addressing these threats requires targeted policy interventions, systemic reform, and cultural change. This section synthesizes key threats and their implications, providing evidence-based insights for addressing these issues effectively.

Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes: Cultural norms and societal expectations continue to play a significant role in limiting women's participation in the labor force. In Turkey, caregiving and domestic responsibilities are disproportionately assigned to women, restricting their ability to engage in paid employment or advance in their careers (Kızılgöl, 2012; Doğrul, 2007). These expectations are even more pronounced in rural areas, where traditional roles confine women to unpaid family labor or low-paying agricultural work (Kızılgöl, 2012). Globally, gendered stereotypes reinforce the association of leadership and technical expertise with men, perpetuating occupational segregation and the glass ceiling. For example, TÜİK (2020) reports that women occupy only 12.2% of managerial positions in Turkey, and their representation decreases at higher levels of organizational hierarchies. This reflects systemic biases that undermine women's career progression and leadership potential. International evidence demonstrates the potential of targeted interventions to address these issues. For instance, Norway's implementation of gender quotas has significantly increased women's representation in corporate leadership, from 6% in 2002 to 42% in 2016 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Similarly, Iceland's Equal Pay Certification system has helped close wage gaps while promoting cultural change (Government of Iceland, 2018). Adopting such policies in Turkey could challenge societal norms and create more inclusive labor markets.

Intersectionality and Marginalized Groups: Threats to women's workforce participation are further compounded by intersectional barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Crenshaw (1991) highlights how overlapping identities, such as rural women, women with disabilities, and older women, create unique vulnerabilities. In Turkey, rural women face limited access to education, transportation, and childcare services, significantly restricting their economic opportunities (World Bank, 2022). Women with disabilities encounter dual discrimination in hiring practices, while older women face compounded challenges of ageism and gender bias. To address these barriers, tailored solutions are essential. For example, rural employment initiatives, such as mobile childcare services and transportation subsidies, can support rural women's workforce participation. Disability-inclusive hiring practices and targeted re-skilling programs for older women can also help reduce exclusion. These measures should be integrated into broader labor market policies to ensure equitable access to opportunities for all women.

Economic Instability and Precarious Employment: Economic downturns and recessions pose a major threat to women's workforce participation. During times of crisis, women are often the first to lose their jobs or face reduced hours, as they are perceived as secondary earners within households. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated this vulnerability, with Işık (2020) reporting that nearly 50% of women surveyed in Turkey were either laid off or placed on unpaid leave, compared to 42% of men. Additionally, women's unpaid caregiving responsibilities increased significantly during the pandemic, from 2.9 hours to 4.5 hours daily, while their paid work hours declined (İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2020). Women in informal or flexible work arrangements were particularly affected, as these roles often lack job security and social protections. To mitigate these vulnerabilities, Turkey must strengthen social safety nets and expand family-friendly policies. Measures such as subsidized childcare, formalizing informal work sectors, and introducing protections for flexible work arrangements can reduce women's economic precarity. International comparisons reveal effective strategies, such as the Netherlands' legal protections for part-time workers, which ensure proportional pay and benefits (OECD, 2021). Adopting similar measures could safeguard women's employment during economic crises.

Technological Polarization and the Digital Divide: While technological advancements offer significant opportunities for women, they also present unique threats due to systemic biases and unequal access to resources. Societal perceptions that technology and technical fields are inherently masculine perpetuate gendered stereotypes, limiting women's participation in STEM and high-growth sectors (Hilbert, 2011; UNESCO, 2019). This exclusion is further exacerbated by the digital divide, particularly in rural and underserved areas where women have limited access to ICT (Freire, 1999). For example, Rodríguez and Wilson (2000) emphasize that the benefits of technological advancements are often concentrated among

privileged groups, marginalizing women in low-income communities. Algorithmic bias in AI tools also poses a significant threat to gender equality in the workplace. West et al. (2019) warn that recruitment and promotion algorithms often reinforce discriminatory practices, disproportionately disadvantaging women. Bridging these gaps requires targeted investments in digital literacy programs, scholarships for women in STEM, and public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes. Additionally, integrating gender-sensitive policies into national digital transformation strategies can ensure that women are not left behind in the evolving labor market.

Informal Employment and Exploitation: The overrepresentation of women in informal and precarious jobs remains a critical threat to their economic security. In Turkey, women are frequently employed as unpaid family laborers, domestic workers, or seasonal agricultural laborers—roles that lack legal protections, such as maternity leave or social security benefits (Bakırcı, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, informal workers were disproportionately affected, with many losing their jobs or incomes due to the absence of legal safeguards (İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2020). The lack of formal contracts and labor rights leaves women vulnerable to exploitation and economic dependency. Strengthening labor inspections, enforcing equal pay regulations, and formalizing sectors with high concentrations of women workers are essential steps toward addressing these challenges. Expanding access to unionization and collective bargaining rights can also empower women in informal jobs and improve their working conditions.

Caregiving Infrastructure: A Critical Gap: The lack of affordable and accessible caregiving infrastructure remains one of the most significant barriers to women's workforce participation. Studies show that caregiving responsibilities disproportionately fall on women, limiting their ability to pursue full-time employment (Budig et al., 2012). In Turkey, the absence of state-subsidized childcare and eldercare facilities forces many women to choose between caregiving and career advancement (İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2020). International models, such as Sweden's shared parental leave policies and subsidized childcare programs, demonstrate how family-friendly policies can redistribute caregiving responsibilities and enable women to engage more fully in the labor force (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). Turkey could adopt similar measures by investing in caregiving infrastructure and offering tax incentives to employers who provide caregiving support. These initiatives would not only promote gender equality but also enhance women's economic productivity.

Mental Health and Social Impacts: Workplace challenges, unpaid caregiving burdens, and societal discrimination have profound effects on women's mental health. The WHO (2022) notes that work-family conflict is a significant psychosocial risk, often leading to burnout and reduced economic productivity. Wiese & Baltes (2002) emphasize the importance of workplace policies that promote mental health, such as flexible schedules and access to counseling services. In Turkey, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, with many women reporting heightened stress due to increased caregiving demands and reduced economic stability (İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2020). Addressing these issues requires holistic approaches that integrate mental health support into workplace policies. Employers should prioritize work-life balance initiatives, while policymakers should ensure that mental health resources are accessible and inclusive.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Women's employment is a fundamental pillar for achieving sustainable development, economic growth, and gender equality. This study, using a SWOT analysis framework, has revealed the complex interplay of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that shape women's workforce participation in Turkey. While significant progress has been made, the findings underscore persistent barriers and emerging challenges that require urgent and multifaceted interventions. Addressing these issues is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic necessity to unlock the full potential of Turkey's workforce and foster societal resilience.

Strengths: The economic and social benefits of women's employment are undeniable. Women's participation in the workforce drives economic growth by increasing household incomes, enhancing workplace diversity, and reducing income inequality (Tansel, 2002; Uyanık & Yeşilkaya, 2021). Educated women contribute to a skilled labor force, strengthening organizational innovation and boosting

productivity (Malhotra et al., 2016). Furthermore, as global and local economies transition toward knowledge-based industries, women’s emotional intelligence, multitasking skills, and leadership styles are becoming increasingly valuable in service and technology sectors. International examples demonstrate the transformative potential of gender-inclusive policies. For instance, Iceland’s Equal Pay Certification System and Norway’s gender quotas for corporate boards have significantly advanced gender equality in leadership (Iceland Government, 2018; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Similarly, Sweden’s shared parental leave policies have redistributed caregiving responsibilities, enabling women to participate more fully in the labor market (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). These global practices serve as valuable models for Turkey, where strengthening women’s representation in decision-making roles remains a critical goal.

Weaknesses: Despite these strengths, systemic barriers continue to undermine women’s workforce participation. Gender-based pay gaps, workplace discrimination, and the glass ceiling prevent many women from advancing in their careers, especially in male-dominated fields such as STEM and high-level management (Hilbert, 2011; TÜİK, 2020). Cultural norms reinforce traditional gender roles, placing the burden of unpaid caregiving disproportionately on women and limiting their opportunities for paid employment (Ilkcaracan & Memiş, 2020). This dynamic not only restricts women’s economic independence but also perpetuates gender inequality within households and workplaces. The mismatch between education and employment further exacerbates these challenges. Highly educated women in Turkey face disproportionately high unemployment rates, with the unemployment rate for university-educated women reaching 15.2% in 2022 compared to 8.3% for men (TÜİK, 2022). This disparity reflects systemic issues, including discriminatory hiring practices, a lack of alignment between educational curricula and labor market demands, and employer biases favoring male candidates.

Table 2: A Swot Analysis of Women’s Employment

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Literature: Women’s participation drives economic growth and promotes gender equality (Tansel, 2002). Educated women contribute to a skilled workforce, reducing income inequality (Uyanık & Yeşilkaya, 2021). Workplace diversity enhances innovation and leadership (Malhotra et al., 2016).</p> <p>Global examples illustrate success: Iceland’s Equal Pay Certification has reduced gender wage gaps (Iceland Government, 2018). Norway’s board gender quotas have achieved 40% female representation (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Women’s representation in the service sector aligns with global shifts toward service-based economies (Koray et al., 2000).</p> <p>Recommendations: Leverage digital transformation to enable flexible work models that increase women’s participation. Highlight and encourage women’s emotional intelligence and multitasking abilities, which are valuable in service and tech roles. Promote vocational training and mentorship programs to prepare women for leadership positions.</p>	<p>Literature: Persistent gender pay gaps and workplace discrimination limit career progression (Hilbert, 2011). Women’s overrepresentation in unpaid caregiving roles hinders participation in paid work (Ilkcaracan & Memiş, 2020). Glass ceiling syndrome limits women’s representation in leadership (TÜİK, 2020).</p> <p>Intersectional challenges: Women with disabilities experience dual discrimination in hiring and career development (Crenshaw, 1991). Despite higher education rates, women face higher unemployment due to irrelevant curricula and employer biases (TÜİK,2022).</p> <p>Recommendations: Address caregiving challenges through state-subsidized childcare facilities and parental leave policies that promote shared responsibilities. Invest in re-skilling programs for older women and caregivers returning to work. Reform university curricula to align with labor market demands, particularly in high-growth sectors like STEM. Launch awareness campaigns to challenge traditional gender roles and encourage women to enter STEM and leadership positions.</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>Literature: Flexible work models, such as remote work, enable women to balance caregiving responsibilities (Oktay Yılmaz, 2017). Digital</p>	<p>Literature: Traditional cultural norms restrict women’s access to male-dominated professions (Doğrul, 2007). Economic downturns</p>

<p>platforms (e.g., Etsy, Amazon) expand entrepreneurial opportunities for women (Nikulin, 2017). Government-backed policies (e.g., microfinance programs) support women entrepreneurs (Soysal, 2010). Green economy jobs (e.g., renewable energy, sustainable agriculture) provide new career paths (ILO, 2022).</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <p>Expand public-private partnerships to upskill women in STEM, AI, robotics, and green technologies.</p> <p>Promote digital literacy programs for women in underserved rural areas to close the digital divide.</p> <p>Launch financial incentives for women entrepreneurs in green sectors, such as renewable energy startups and eco-friendly farming.</p>	<p>and crises, such as COVID-19, disproportionately affect women (Işık, 2020). Weak enforcement of gender equality laws perpetuates inequality (Bakırcı, 2007). Automation and AI disproportionately displace women in low-skill jobs, while algorithmic bias reinforces discrimination in recruitment tools (West et al., 2019; Hilbert, 2011).</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <p>Mitigate the threat of automation by investing in upskilling programs to prepare women for tech-intensive roles.</p> <p>Strengthen labor law enforcement to address wage disparities, workplace harassment, and other forms of discrimination. Provide mental health support programs to address the stress of caregiving and professional pressures.</p>
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Moreover, rural women face additional hurdles due to limited access to education, childcare services, and transportation (Kızılgöl, 2012). Addressing these barriers requires structural reforms, such as expanding access to affordable childcare, offering re-skilling programs for women returning to the workforce, and challenging cultural norms that discourage women from pursuing careers in STEM and high-growth industries.

Opportunities: The evolving economic and social landscape presents significant opportunities for increasing women's workforce participation. Digital transformation and the rise of flexible work models offer pathways for women to balance caregiving responsibilities with paid employment (Oktay Yılmaz, 2017). Remote work, freelancing, and digital entrepreneurship platforms such as Etsy and Amazon Marketplace have created new avenues for women to participate in the economy, particularly in rural areas where traditional employment options are limited (Nikulin, 2017). Public-private partnerships and targeted training programs can help women develop the digital literacy and technical skills needed to thrive in these emerging sectors. The global transition to a green economy offers another promising avenue. Renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and green technology sectors are rapidly expanding, creating new job opportunities for women (ILO, 2022). In Turkey, initiatives such as solar energy training programs and eco-friendly farming cooperatives could provide women with stable and well-paying jobs while aligning with national sustainability goals. Policies that incentivize women's participation in green industries, such as grants for renewable energy projects or vocational training in sustainable practices, could unlock significant economic and environmental benefits. Education remains a cornerstone for empowering women in the workforce. Promoting STEM education for girls and integrating digital literacy into school curricula can challenge stereotypes and prepare women for high-demand industries (Durmaz, 2016; UNESCO, 2019). Adult education and vocational training programs, particularly those focusing on emerging fields such as AI and cybersecurity, are also essential for enabling women to adapt to the rapidly evolving labor market.

Threats: Despite these opportunities, numerous threats continue to hinder progress. Cultural norms and societal expectations remain significant obstacles, reinforcing traditional gender roles that limit women's access to male-dominated professions and leadership positions (Doğrul, 2007; TÜİK, 2020). Economic downturns, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have disproportionately affected women, with many losing jobs or being forced into unpaid caregiving roles (Işık, 2020). Weak enforcement of gender equality laws and labor protections further perpetuates inequalities, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination (Bakırcı, 2007). Technological advancements, while offering opportunities, also pose significant risks. Automation and AI are expected to disproportionately displace women in low-skill roles, exacerbating gender inequalities in the labor market (West et al., 2019). Algorithmic biases in recruitment tools further reinforce systemic discrimination, while the digital divide prevents women in rural and underserved areas from accessing online education, remote work, and entrepreneurial opportunities (Hilbert, 2011). Mental health challenges stemming from caregiving burdens and workplace pressures also threaten women's productivity and long-term workforce retention (WHO, 2022; Wiese & Baltes, 2002). Addressing these threats requires a comprehensive strategy. Investments in caregiving infrastructure, such as state-subsidized childcare and eldercare facilities, are critical for enabling women to balance work and family responsibilities. Bridging the digital divide through targeted technology

initiatives and promoting digital literacy among women can ensure equitable access to future-oriented job markets. Additionally, enforcing anti-discrimination laws and addressing algorithmic biases in recruitment processes are essential for creating an inclusive and equitable labor market.

Policy Recommendations

To capitalize on the strengths and opportunities while addressing weaknesses and threats, the following policy recommendations emerge:

- **Invest in Care Infrastructure:** Expand affordable childcare and eldercare services to reduce women's unpaid caregiving burdens. Shared parental leave policies should be implemented to promote gender equality at home and in the workplace.
- **Promote Education and Skills Development:** Focus on STEM education, vocational training, and digital literacy programs for girls and women, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- **Support Women Entrepreneurs:** Provide microfinance programs, mentorship initiatives, and networking platforms to empower women in business and entrepreneurship.
- **Mitigate Automation Risks:** Invest in upskilling programs and incentives to encourage women's participation in high-growth sectors such as AI, renewable energy, and cybersecurity.
- **Raise Awareness:** Conduct public campaigns to challenge traditional gender roles, promote the value of women's labor, and encourage societal acceptance of shared caregiving responsibilities.

Empowering women in the workforce is not just a policy priority but a moral and economic necessity. When women are fully included in labor markets, societies benefit from increased innovation, improved health outcomes, and enhanced social cohesion. Moreover, gender equality in employment is essential for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to poverty reduction, quality education, and reduced inequalities. By addressing weaknesses, seizing opportunities, and mitigating threats, Turkey can unlock the transformative potential of its female workforce, fostering not only economic growth but also social equity and national development. Investing in women's participation in the labor market is an investment in a more equitable, prosperous, and sustainable future.

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