

FEMININE FACE OF AGING AND POVERTY IN THE URBAN CONTEXT OF TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Our planet is graying in terms of its population. Turkey is not out of this demographic transition in spite of its young and dynamic population. It is going through this change with its rural and urban settings. However, the structure of this demographic shift is gaining ground. Although aging is portrayed as a rural phenomenon in the current debates on rural-urban duality due to the visibility of the aged, its urban aspect has become increasingly apparent. A major focus of discussions on aging in Turkey is on the feminization of aging. Women have higher life expectancy compared to males. However, they also face a higher risk of poverty brought about by the urban feminization of aging. This article is based on research carried out on this new sociological problem. But it also offers parameters for a solution based on family-friendly development strategies. Further, this article comparatively examines the rise of the importance of major cities, as opposed to the decline of nation-states because of globalization. To do so, it employs a statistical comparison of the poverty levels in the U.S. and Turkey. This study will demonstrate how poverty has increasingly become a problem for the elderly female. Additionally, The Madrid International Plan on Ageing and Political Declaration will be referred to as a model in building a new perspective for eliminating poverty among elderly women.

Keywords: Feminization of Aging, Family-Friendly Development Strategies, Urban Poverty, Social Isolation, Migration.

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Although some countries have shown major progress in developing their economies, their older adults and children are facing increasingly severe poverty issues. Senior citizens, especially women, constitute a significant age group living under the poverty line due to their low socio-economic status (SES), age discrimination, and violence. This sad sociological trend has been brought to the attention of scholars in recent years. Although Turkey enjoys a relatively young and dynamic population, this debate is relevant.

In the age of globalization, cities have become the centers of human history again, whereas nation-states are in decline. The importance of urban life as the epicenter of our modern societies brings to the table a new set of discussions with their opportunities and challenges. Among the dilemmas urban societies face is poverty. This study provides a framework to better understand urban poverty in terms gender and aging.

The cases of the U.S. and Turkey are important to understand how urban poverty has become a global phenomenon. This article provides statistical data and analysis from both countries, which will also serve to compare the “western” and “eastern” world.

In the “age of migration,” many people have been uprooted and displaced from their hometowns and villages. In fact, cities are the most important arenas. Entire communities are being pulled in by a magnetic like force. However, accelerated urban migration places a heavy burden on these overpopulated cities. Moreover, this urbanization actually pushes elderly migrant women into a form of social isolation, which was not the case in the rural setting. Statistical analysis will highlight the major trends in the pauperization of urban elderly women. However, it is insufficient to explain the socio-psychological effects of poverty on them. Therefore, this article’s particular focus is on their social isolation in the urban environment, which is a substitution for the concept of poverty.

In the rural setting and even in small towns, the workplace and the home were often at the same location, but in today’s world, they are separated. As a result, the problem of caregivers for the aged and children has moved to the front burner in the urban context. Without a doubt, it brings extra cost to the family members facing poverty. That is why the subject of this study is so salient, as it aims to point to social problems that many ignore the marginalization of the aged women.

Health related problems that arise from aging make poverty unbearable for elderly women. This work will highlight the crucial importance pension-funds have after retirement and it will also show the role of social security in securing minimum standards of health and subsistence for elderly women. Because the loss of social security is one of the major factors that

put an elderly person under the poverty line. Although Turkey, for example, has some social support mechanisms to minimize this problem, it particularly affects aged women because many spent their lives performing heavy house-work and doing unpaid jobs. Therefore, an important part of the article is devoted to the problems of migrant elderly integration into cities.

Cities are a prototype of nation-states. Any problems that are part of the social fiber of nation-states show their real faces in their cities; they are actually magnified. It is hard for elderly migrant women to adopt new social norms and move to new geographical places. Although migration has the potential to help them escape from the poverty of rural life or politically unstable areas where they endure much hardship, moving into urban areas can be a sort of exile from their own societies and social protections. Once in the urban setting, their isolation can be felt through their lack of socialization, exacerbating their economic and psychological woes. In particular, those living in poverty stricken neighborhoods or shanty towns in urban areas need more social supports and services than they may have in their rural hometowns where they had support networks and were known among their local communities. This is, in part, because they are undocumented due to their housing situation, and therefore out of reach of the social services they would normally benefit from.

Elderly migrant women try to build a new identity in the cities by forming a new form of social solidarity. However, the decline in the traditional values in these new urban neighborhoods creates extremely difficult conditions for them to overcome. Turkey is now experiencing the fall out of rapid urban development, where high-rise apartment buildings are destroying the social fabric of neighborhood urban cultures.

There is also a decline in the filial and kinship relationship in the cities. The transformation from the extended family to the nuclear family has become the norm because of the modernization process. Therefore, many aspects of traditional family values are changing. Additionally, as some elderly migrant women were already widows and have no relatives to support them, they face a heightened risk of poverty. Three “family-friendly” strategies were developed to alleviate poverty for elderly women.

The concept of “family” is a nucleus or a small unit of societal structure. It is impossible for a society to be strong enough without keeping the family structure alive. That is why this paper focuses on the concept of a “family-friendly” society, as the basis for three policy development strategies, in the areas of education, media, and religion.

First of all, education is a strong force in the social mobility of an individual. Although

many older adults have already lost their chance to go through Turkey's new education system, the development of lifelong learning like programs can help them to socialize and remain active in cities. City universities and municipalities are responsible for developing such programs to help their older adult citizens stay socially involved. That is because active or successful aging is an essential way to reduce loneliness and social isolation of elderly migrant women facing poverty. It is now increasingly possible to create online platforms for the aged to continue their learning. For example, creating a social forum where older adults can learn from youths and exchange experiences with them can be an excellent way to reduce social isolation of the elderly and create new venues of communication between the generations. This type of structure must be distinguished with when grandparents find themselves as the caregivers of their grandchildren. This comes with a whole other set of social and educational problems. The needs of the older generation and the younger ones should be clearly assessed and developed in respect to finding the best solutions for each group.

Secondly, mass media has a strong role in breaking several stereotypes about aging. For example, in Turkish television series, the conflict of the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is a classic. And, it is always exaggerated. Instead, there should be a more realistic portrayal of intergeneration relationships between family members, without a hyper focus on the dynamics between the "older woman" and the "younger woman." This type of media-hyped stereotype portrays the elderly woman in a negative way. This negative portrayal of the elderly women contributes to ageism in Turkish society. In fact, one can easily see ageism in advertisements. For instance, there is a glorification of youth and the youthful body in commercial advertisements. The advertisements that focus on the "older body" or the "mature female body" deal with anti-aging commercial campaigns. It is about physical looks and appeal and has nothing to do with the solutions for the economic problems of the poor elderly or older women. These types of advertisements usually target the elite group in our societies.

In recent years, Turkey developed a decent welfare system and has laid out policies and programs to alleviate poverty. However, program funds have not always been directed to the most needed social issues in Turkish society today. That is why it is still hard to talk about a deliberative and complete welfare state system, although the Ministry of Family has incorporated a "social policies" concept to its programs and lately increased its welfare social policies.

Finally, religion can play a role in the spiritual wellbeing of the elderly migrant female. It is obvious that the fear of death and loss of loved one(s) affect the psychology of the aged.

In particular, since women live longer than men, they live through these problems in a more dramatic way. Religion addresses poverty and contains precepts and principles in helping the most disfavored in our societies, among them the elderly female. Turkey has a long religious tradition of helping the elderly, under the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdülhamid the Second built Darülaceze, which was a nursing home for Muslims and non-Muslims in the same complex. The presence of a mosque, a church, and a synagogue in the same place is reflective of the Ottoman tolerance towards religious diversity. It is interesting to note that Darülaceze originally came into being as a poorhouse or almshouse. Then it was transformed into a nursing home for the aged. However, it kept its doors opened to the poor and was employed under the original legislation (*nizamname*). It continued to recognize the rights of all Ottoman citizens, regardless their religion, gender, ethnic background, and social class.

The Madrid International Plan on Ageing and Political Declaration is an important document for alleviating the poverty of the elderly female. Articles 31, 46, and 108 pertain to a number of social issues that strongly impact elderly women, such as urban poverty, the decline of traditional family values, the feminization of aging, and violence against women, etc. Article 31, for example, addresses the issue of the decline of family values. As there is a decline in urban societies' traditional social values, what is salient would be to build a new social support system for the isolated elderly women whom are being marginalized by modern societies.

The underpinning social problem is that poverty not only impacts the elderly female, but their isolation reflects that the social fabric of our urban societies is being torn apart and harms families. It also means that the migration from rural areas to the urban areas does not always work to alleviate poverty for elderly women; it actually can make it worse. As mentioned previously, the lack of remunerated employment and the absence for them of a social security net turns their later years into a harsher form of poverty and increased loneliness.

I. FEMINIZATION OF AGING AND POVERTY IN THE CITY

Modernity was based on nation-states, but in the postmodern era they are in decline with a revival of cities. However, this revivalism doesn't mean cities are beyond the scope of various social problems. On the contrary, since they are the critical nexus where the social, economic, and political are polarized, urban problems are no longer localized but global. For example, the tragic face of aging and poverty, especially for women, is a global phenomenon. In particular, Istanbul is significant among Asian cities. In Western society of the 19th Century, poorhouses were the places populated by individuals from different age groups and both genders. However, after the building of orphanages, children were placed there. Also, male residents more readily found employment and left. As a result, it was often the elderly, solitary, and poor females who were left behind in these almshouses (Katz, 1984). Similarly, in Ottoman-Turkish society, poorhouses have a parallel development with Western ones. The Darülaceze of Istanbul, the almshouse built by Sultan Abdulhamid the Second in 1895, has a similar story (Esendemir and Ingman, 2011). Although there were elderly poor men and orphan residents, poor women represented a significant number despite the limited numbers of institutions for women in Turkey, as it ran counter to cultural norms.

Statistics show that the rate of poverty among women 65+ is almost double that of males. For example, whereas the rate of poverty is 7 percent among males 65+, it is 13 percent for females of the same age in the U.S. (Freilich, 2012). Although there is not much gender-based research on poverty in Turkey, one can infer that the rate of elderly females under the poverty line outnumbers the elderly males facing poverty (Tufan, 2007). However, it is not enough to explain the feminine face of aging and poverty with statistics. The impact of poverty on the elderly cuts deep and it is necessary to look its socio-psychological effects on older adults. That is why the concept of social exclusion or social isolation has been used instead of poverty in Europe since the 1980s. The concept of poverty is perceived to relate primarily to the economic aspect, but the concept of social exclusion is connected to lack of education and even the loss of rights.

The problems faced by women in cities, as a result of migration, are illustrative of examples for social exclusion because women are excluded from the production process and "locked" in their houses automatically after being uprooted from their original hometown if they are uneducated. Further, certain subcultures in shanty-towns do not respect the "working woman" and make it difficult for them to work in the public space. Instead, they do informal work at

home without any social security (Güneş, 2009). For women working in the public space, they face certain problems as well. For example, they have to do their house-work after working hours, with no outside help. If they have children and older adults to take care of, they are their primary caregivers. At the same time retired grandmothers are potential caregivers of their grandchildren. Although this creates a reciprocal relationship between working daughter-in-law or daughter and retired mother or mother-in-law, it makes them co-dependent.

Children can be a source of social security for their parents, but in modern societies they often tend to move to another place after their marriage (Uncu et al., 2002) instead of staying put and supporting their parents. This can push the aged into poverty and loneliness. In particular, this can be a greater hardship on women, as they are less likely than men are to remarry after becoming widows, thus more likely to be lonely and face social exclusion (Heslop and Gorman, 2002). Poverty creates a chronic situation since their advancing age comes with serious health problems and a greater need for medical assistance, which they cannot afford.

Although retirement means the loss of status and difficulties in adaptation to a new life for the aged, however, it can be bearable or even manageable if they have a pension. The problem for many retired women is that the level of their pension payments is insufficient, as they did not have the same type of pay while working nor did they have the same degree of coverage. Moreover, housework, childcare, and eldercare are not remunerated or compensated. Although the state has recently pushed upper income families to provide social security for their housekeepers and nannies, many avoid doing so even if it means violating the rights of these underpaid, lower income women.

Another problem in certain societies is that elderly women don't have access to as many public places to socialize as men in modern cities. Therefore, they have become "prisoners of space" due to limited places of socialization. For example, the fellow townsmen associations are not open to ladies although they can participate in their public festivals and picnics like activities. For the elderly who are handicapped the situation is even more limited.

II. PROBLEMS WITH URBAN SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Rapid urbanization brought about a host of problems. The problems based on the delicate relationship between urban areas and rural areas are well known. How migrants build new relationships with their new urban environment and how these new experiences teach them how to adapt can be the difference between integration and marginalization. The development of the “townsmen (hemşeri) identity” in the city is an important theme to be considered. Therefore, whether or not the migrant forms a new urban identity in the city can bring about either conflict or a new social consensus.

Although the modern city gives the impression of a standardized, coherent, and organized place – similar to the nation-state construct, shantytowns reveal the other face of cities. Since large cities were seen as a “melting pot,” it was believed that migrants could automatically complete social and economic integration. The underpinning theory was that by disregarding where they came from, the city became the new ideal and created a common city culture that would bring them happiness (i.e.: a better life). However, the shantytown phenomenon revealed this fairy tale to be untrue. Moreover, human nature is often selfish and citizens often behave in an “egocentric” manner, thus creating a segregated and fragmented city (Aksoy and Robins, 1999). However, let us not give way to overgeneralization in the association of poverty, the urban migrant, and shantytowns. Because many migrants are able to change their social and economic statuses and rapidly climb the socio-economic ladder. For example, even in certain shantytowns in Istanbul, the residents took control over the land and turned them into apartment buildings, such as in the Ümraniye district of Istanbul (Erder, 1999). The idea of organized ownership and social transformation can feel for some even more important than their political and cultural identities. However, the “fellow townsmen identity” creates unity among the people from the same regions. Therefore, such a sense of belonging becomes an informal reference among the “fellow townsmen” in defining their destiny in the city. This sense of community helps in their urban integration (Işık and Pınarcıoğlu, 1999).

Migrants have different societal and cultural backgrounds than the urban born. Even societies that appear homogeneous (i.e.: same language, religion, culture) may have differences. That is why we can talk about the relationship between different societal groups. In particular, there is the relationship between the people in the same neighborhood in comparison to relatives of an extended family. That is because neighborhood relationships are based on the inter-group system, whereas the relationships between relatives have an intra-group focus.

The most trusted institutions for migrants, in terms of social solidarity, are the family unit and neighbors, but research shows that although these social institutions keep their traditional aspects and nature in many ways, they have started to change in recent years. In other words, the relationships of both “the family” and “the neighborhood” are limited at the beginning, but after widening their scope they slightly change their characters and need new definitions. Therefore, these transformations impact neighborhoods as well as bureaucratic and employment structures. .

Migration from rural areas to urban areas brings about a certain definition of cultural identity. In the rural areas, cultures are defined in local terms. There is often not much interaction with many other cultures. However, once they arrive in the city, these same social groups broaden their horizons and levels of interaction with other social-cultural groups. It is interesting to note that whereas some cultures realize their differences once they arrive in the city, others can see how in fact they are similar to other groups. There is an acceptance of a higher or superseding identity.

Many people believe that the traditional values of the migrants will change in time. As a result, modern values become dominant ones even in the shantytown areas. This shows how the city becomes a lieu where identities are constructed. This is because an idea either garners or loses its power by interaction with others in the urban environment. That is why any ideas and thoughts not developing proper place morphologies are going to turn into abstract fantasies (Lefebvre, 1991).

III. FAMILY-FRIENDLY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Rural migration to urban settings brings about dramatic social changes. These changes are associated with modernization and globalization. The development of mass media, technological advances, global migration, and international trade all contribute to transforming the traditional order. Therefore, one should develop new strategies by considering these transforming agents of society. Education, media, and religion are three agents of transformation and can serve as the basis for family-friendly strategies that aim to alleviate poverty among the elderly woman.

Family is one of society’s cornerstones. That is why the relationship between family members shapes the nature of social relationships. It is hard to formulate a universal definition

of “the family” in our modern age. That is because “the family” has changed, as societies have changed. For the purpose of this article, I define “the family” as an institution through which there is population reproduction, support for the ideals of the national culture, socialization of children, and fulfillment of economic, biologic, and psychological needs (Erkal, 1995).

The change in “the family’s” structure is widely accepted by social scientists (Gökçe et al, 1993). The separation of the workplace and the home; the advent of the industrial revolution and the division of labor; the increase in number of women in the public workspace; migration from the rural areas to the urban areas; and transnational migration are among the key reasons for the new definition of what is a family.

The traditional extended family has given way to the nuclear family in Turkey although one can still see traditional families in the rural areas and shantytowns. However, even migrant extended families go through drastic social changes because of the gentrification process of the shantytowns. What is more important is the function of the family. First, it creates a legitimate platform for its members to connect. Second, it secures the renewal of new generations with common values. Third, it helps children learn how to socialize and integrate into their communities. Finally, it develops the sense of belonging and solidarity.

Education should form the basis of a family-friendly developmental strategy that would alleviate poverty among the elderly female. There is a strong relationship between family and education because family is the primary place where an individual receives his or her initial lessons in education and socialization. Although the role of schools increases in time for the individual, family still plays a crucial role and provides logistical support to the individual, especially elderly women.

In the information age, the role of education is even more obvious. Education is the pathway to technological developments, a growing economy, and upward mobility. Therefore, developed countries greatly invest in education. Turkey is following this pattern. For example, there is a dramatic increase in schools and universities in recent years. The largest segment of the state budget is always devoted to the Ministry of Education. However, there are still many problems in the educational system in Turkey owing to regional inequality and gender discrimination.

Education enriches the knowledge of a person. Therefore, he or she gets a chance to change his or her position in the society. Educated individuals increase the quality of the society in addition to helping improve the image of their countries. In general, education has two major functions. The primary one is the transformation of culture from one generation

to the next by having the opportunity to increase one’s knowledge. The latter one is to shape personality. Although the socialization process starts in the family, it is further developed through educational institutions.

In particular, life-long learning programs would give a second chance to elderly females “to complete” their education. Also, it would serve the function of keeping them active in society. For example, they could share their experiences with new a generation while learning new technologies from them. In addition, some elderly women are skilled in handicraft jobs or can learn new ones. The selling of these handmade products could be very beneficial by enhancing their sense of self-worth and improving their economic situation. .

The second way to develop a family-friendly strategy against the feminine face of aging and poverty would be the media. The media is known as the “fourth power.” Mass communication is an integral part of the globalization of our world. We have really turned into a “global village.” Also, it defines all aspects of our daily lives and leisure time. In other words, it doesn’t only entertain a person, but also it leads his or her behavior and creates his or her habits (Debord, 1996). In today’s world, even education and politics are done through the tools of mass media. As a result, many other institutions are “colonized” by it. Thus, it is a leading economic sector and part of our daily socialization.

Television, for example, causes a time-space “compression.” That is to say, it becomes possible to watch news from any part of world and see events as they occur shortly afterwards or in real time. As a result, our perception of time and space has changed. Everything and everybody seems closer. Most people today do not only identify with their place of birth, their village, their town, or even their city, but they feel like global citizens. This can be described as a new “state of being” where individuals have a broader vision of how they fit into their societies; there is a true sense of universalism. At the same time, people are rapidly aware of mass crimes in other places, violence, and terrorism (Schlesinger, 1994). Still, the most important role of the media is to educate and socialize a person by providing information to better inform their choices.

However, mass media can also be blamed for creating stereotypes about the elderly and poverty. It is a double edge blade. Many societies have misconceptions of the potential of life as one ages. But the media can help raise awareness of how life can be lived, as a senior citizen. For example, aging is often associated with a passive role. But successful role models and stories shown through the media can show how the years after retirement can be well spent and active.

Religion can be used as a family-friendly strategy against the feminine face of aging and poverty. Religion has always affected the knowledge and practices of human being. It plays a strong role for the spiritual well-being of the individual. It builds a cohesion and solidarity among the members of society. There are many religious orders that offer help to the poor in their communities. That is because society is seen a body in which each member forms a part. So, the approach to aging and poverty by religion is a holistic one.

Religious funds are often directed towards charity organizations to support the poor. In Ottoman-Turkish society, there used to be *vakıf* (charitable foundations), *imarethane* (almshouses), and *darülaceze* (poorhouses) to help the disabled, the elderly, and poor people, especially women. Still today, in modern Turkey, as in many other countries, charity organizations support people who live under the poverty line. They provide assistance for the most disfavored in our societies. But beyond the material well-being, religion can build solidarity, teaching the different segments of society to share and to reach out to those who feel isolated. Religion still has a role in our modern societies to provide a form of social security for the poor (Koyunoğlu, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The three agents of family-friendly strategies can help to alleviate poverty for elderly women. Although the traditional form of family has begun to change in Turkey, there is still a strong foundation that favors supporting the elderly, as part of Turkish culture. Although the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA, 2002) recognized that there was a weakening of the reciprocal relationship between the aged parents and other family members (Article 31), Turkish society's support system is still based on this reciprocal relationship. However, the migrant elderly are placed in a more dire and problematic situation, especially if they are faced with chronic diseases and risk becoming handicapped. Further, this particular group of the elderly is often confronted with social exclusion and poverty. Article 46 of the same plan focuses on the feminization of aging due to gender discrimination in the workplace. And article 108 speaks to elder abuse of females due to local customs. Solutions can be found through raising awareness by the media, increasing female education levels, and reviving religious values as agents of family friendly strategies to reduce discrimination against women in the workplace, abuse against them in the context of institutional care, and protecting them through inter-generational approaches in the family.

Elderly female poverty is not only a gender issue it damages the fabric of society as a whole. It has an impact on everybody regardless of age, gender, race, religion, and socio-economic class. Dependent social groups are more likely to be exposed to this abuse of rights. Since children and elderly women are mostly dependent on their families and societies, many scholars have been discussing the feminization of aging and poverty since the 1970s (Hardy and Hazelrigg, 1993). Therefore, the bottom line is that since aging and poverty have gained an urban character in recent years with migration, urban poverty will move to the top of social problems if governments and societies don't step up and develop sustainable social policies to reduce urban poverty of the elderly female.

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