

# A Qualitative Study of Parental Resistance to Girls' Schooling\*

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## Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the reasons for parental resistance to girls' schooling. The study was conducted in Ordu, Giresun, Gümüşhane, and Sinop provinces of Turkey where school enrollment rates for girls were among the lowest in the Black Sea Region. The results showed that obstacles for female education varied and measures should be taken according to each context. Lack of adequate accommodation facilities for girls was the most iterated factor. Transportation, poverty, concerns for girls' chastity, the need for girls' labor at home, conservatism, preference for Koran schools with boarding facilities, early marriages, and high unemployment rates among educated youth were detected as significant obstacles for female education. Effective strategies addressing to each factor should be adopted.

## Key Words

Gender, Schooling, Girls' Education, Black Sea Region, Turkey.

According to Arat (1998), education was always a top priority for the founders of Turkish Republic, who recognized the link between education and social and economic development. Free education was adopted at all levels and primary education was made mandatory for both sexes in 1923. The number of schools was increased drastically along with their quality. However, no matter what the common discourse tells about gender equality in terms of access to resources there is still much to do to improve the lives of Turkish women. Currently, 15 % of women are still illiterate comparing

the 4 % in male population (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu [TÜİK], 2010). One out of four women does not attend secondary school although it has been compulsory since 1997 (Dülger, 2004; Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2003; Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu [TÜİK], 2007; Türkiye Sanayici İş Adamları Derneği [TÜSİAD], 2008; Worldbank, 2002). Considering the disparities between the western and eastern regions of the country the average numbers given in the statistical database of Ministry of National Education [MEB] seem questionable (MEB, 2009). Yes, Turkey has achieved universal primary education, but only in the western part of the country. Therefore, any educational or social research needs to take into account the diversity within each subculture/s and regional differences among members of the same group.

What went wrong in the eighty seven years of Turkish Republic history that gender differentials in education have kept their existence despite mandatory primary education policies? Hill and King (1993) explain this with a costs and benefits model that proposes that when the educational costs exceed the return people would not want to invest in their daughters' education. Poverty and labor market conditions can make parents favor their sons in

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education. Free education usually does not mean absence of direct costs for students and their families. School expenses might be too much for some parents. Moreover, distance to schools can generate concerns about both physical and moral safety of their daughters for some parents. In addition to these direct costs, opportunity costs that vary from country to country are taken into account in decisions about girls' education. Schooling might impede a girl's help for her family or interfere with her training at home. Girls' help may be needed in the agricultural activities (Mete, 2005). Parents may find education irrelevant to women's lives. Their concerns about the quality of education might suppress their willingness to invest in education (Heward, 1999). Hill and King also talk about the role of "psychic" costs in female education. Parents, in some cultures, under the influence of their religion or socio-cultural factors, can find education a threat for women's upbringing and, thus, might avoid taking any risk that they learn things contrary to family values at school. Early marriages may be seen as a less costly option comparing to sending girls to school (Mete, 2005). Parental perceptions in this cost-benefit analysis are very important in that even if the costs for both genders are identical parents might perceive that there is a greater return in their sons' education. Provision of mandatory and free elementary and secondary education does not guarantee a change in parental attitudes (Bellew & King, 1993). Even free education is still perceived as a luxury for the poor (Tansel, 1998). Therefore, in order to understand the gender disparities in education, first, we need to understand parental perception of costs and benefits of female education.

The aim of this study was to explore the reasons for parental resistance towards girls' schooling in Ordu, Giresun, Gümüşhane, and Sinop provinces of Turkey, where school enrollment rates for girls were among the lowest in the Black Sea Region. The questions addressed in the study were:

1. What are the parental reasons for not sending their daughters to school?
2. What are the obstacles in front of girls' schooling?

## Method

### Participants

The participants were recruited from remote villages of Ordu, Giresun, Gümüşhane, and Sinop

provinces of Turkey where school enrollment rates for girls were among the lowest in the Black Sea Region. The sample included the mothers (n=84), fathers (n=39), and brothers (n=3) of girls who are not schooled; and the mukhtars (elected village heads, n=6), imams (n=6), teachers (n=3), the city governors (n=5), and the local authorities (n=21) from the Ministry of Education.

### Procedure

Semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted. The length of the interviews varied from participant to participant. Some were quite talkative and quite informed about the issue while some were reluctant to talk with different reasons. Interviews were transcribed by the members of the research team and coded by the theme (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006).

### Results

The results showed that obstacles for female education varied and measures should be taken according to each context.

#### Lack of Free Accommodation Facilities

If one thing the participants had in common, it was their agreement on the desperate need for free accommodation facilities for the girls as being the major obstacle for schooling of girls. Secondary schools in general are located in the city centers. People living in the villages or scattered around the hills sometimes with almost no access to the roads except a wire that they use to slide to the main road hanging onto a tire, and overwhelming transportation costs leave these parents with two choices: either move to the city center or pull their daughters out of school.

#### Poverty

Poverty and labor market conditions can make parents favor their sons in education. Free education usually does not mean absence of direct costs for students and their families. School expenses might be too much for some parents.

The reason why they do not let their children go to the school is not the culture. It's money.

A vice principal of a YİBO [Regional Primary Boarding School] had the same explanation:

Villagers in the rural area are poor. They don't let their children go to school because of lack of sources.

### Concerns for Girls' Chastity

Distance to schools can generate concerns about both physical and moral safety of their daughters for some parents. Parents, in some cultures, under the influence of their religion or socio-cultural factors, can find education a threat for women's upbringing and, thus, might avoid taking any risk that they learn things contrary to family values at school.

A father explained:

We didn't send our daughters to YIBO because there were rumors around girls getting pregnant there. What would we do if something like that happened to our kids? It is better for our girls not to go to school at all.

### Need for Girls' Labor

Schooling might impede a girl's help for her family at home. A man from a village stated:

One of the reasons they don't send their daughters to school is there are chores for the girls to do in the village.

A father from a village told a story about another father's resistance to send her daughter to school because of the need for her labor at home:

The governor put a lot of work into education sector. He arranged a face to face meeting with the children and asked them if they wanted to go to school. One of the girls said "I want to go to school". Then the governor talked to the girl's father. The father said "how can I send her to school when we have too much work to do in the village?"

### Need for Free Transportation

For some parents, girls should stay by their parents' side throughout their education and placing them in boarding schools is simply not an option. Those who are against the idea of girls living in the dorms expressed their desire for free transportation for their daughters so that girls would keep staying with their parents.

A mother stated this clearly:

We never let our girls stay at the dorm. We can't trust our daughters. If the transportation was

provided by the state, we all would send them to school. Transportation provided by the state is better for us, because, that way, our daughters would be before our eyes.

### Preference for Koran Schools

It was revealed that some parents who said their daughters continued with their education, in fact, chose to send their daughters to a Koran school with a boarding facility. For those parents, Koran schools were no different than formal ones, except Koran school graduates become more well-behaved and decent, and could find job opportunities once they memorize the entire Koran. Thus, Koran schools have become an alternative to vocational schools (Kilavuz, 2009).

A mother explained:

Participant: I want to send her to a Koran School now. It has a boarding facility. ... She can take care of herself there. ...

Researcher: Are there others who also have chosen Koran school in this village?

Participant: Yes, majority.

Researcher: How about those who are in high school?

Participant: Not many ... only a few.

### Early Marriages

Schooling meant for many parents delaying their plans for their daughters' marriage who, parents fear, would be a spinster by the time she finished her school. Also, society's condemnation of premarital sexual relations leaves no choice to teenagers but marry early to their sweethearts. An imam of a village sees early marriages as an impediment for girls' education:

Girls get married at a very young age. Upon completion of secondary education, they are made to marry by their parents. There are only a few single girls in their twenties. Also, running away with their boyfriends to get married is quite common.

### High Unemployment Rates

Parents would not invest in their daughter's education and favor their sons unless the labor market returns are gender equal (Tansel, 1998). Unfortunately, women's participation into the workforce is on the decline in Turkey and has dropped to its

lowest level, 25%, in the last few years during the ruling of a conservative party. A father's disappointment with his son's desperation over finding a job although he had a high school degree made him change his decision about sending her daughter to school. He explains:

I didn't send my daughter to school because my son graduated from high school and he hasn't found a job yet.

### Images of Boarding Schools

A teenage girl who dropped out of school stated that:

Boys abduct girls to marry them. They fell in love in YIBO. This year, many girls have run away with boys.

Another villager expressed the same concern:

Some people said there were some girls at YIBO who were engaging premarital sex. That's why parents didn't send their daughters to school.

These concerns put tremendous amount of pressure on the administrators and the teachers of YIBOs who, therefore, take strict measures to prevent any wrongdoings on girls' part in order to keep the images of their school high and parents satisfied. A YIBO principal provided details on his rigid surveillance system:

Only female staff members work at the dorm for girls. Girls are not allowed to talk to strangers. During the registration, parents give us a list of persons that would pick up their children from the school. Nobody else other than the ones on the list could pick up the children. We also have a camera system installed in school.

### Mandatory School Age

Because of the lack of any preventive measure for drop-outs in the compulsory schooling laws, some parents play around the regulations and enroll their daughters to school but withdraw early waiting for unexcused attendances to lead to expulsion from school and the mandatory school age to pass. There is nothing school authorities could do once a student passes the mandatory school age.

### Negative Comments of Educated Men

Mother's education level is positively correlated with girls' education, but not father's (Gökşen,

Cemalçılar, & Gürlelel, 2006). Education has not much positive impact on men's gendered position. In fact, educated elder brothers might sometimes engage in talks against girls' education.

### Discussion

The results of this study showed that obstacles for female education varied and measures should be taken according to each context. Free accommodation facilities and free transportation should be made available. For the most resistant parents, girls' only schools with female staff members could become a suitable choice. Free daycare located in school buildings would increase attendance of both girls who have to look after their younger siblings and those who become mothers at a young age. Bridges between schooling and labor market should be established. A gender reform agenda should be carried out both in schools and teacher education programs in which males would have a chance to question traditional gender norms (Helvacıoğlu, 1996). Koran schools should not be set as an alternative to formal education system. A more effective national plan to eliminate child marriage should be put forward.

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