

The Contrasting Perspectives of Turkish Women

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Survey research has a role to play in providing Muslim women with a public voice where custom and culture do not permit them their own. It can be used to inform and shape empowerment policies from the perspective of each population. The Women in Muslim Countries (WIMC) study¹ is designed to measure women's empowerment in actual daily practice, providing a deep look into the oft-perceived gap between current public policy and empowerment initiatives and actual practice on the personal and local level. The answers are intended to yield a metric for promoting excellence in public policy by informing policymakers on women's attitudes about the affects of policy initiatives, as well as a measure of the degree of effectiveness of those policies.

As part of a collective effort to understand the status of rights (in practice and beliefs) of Muslim women around the world, D3 Systems, Inc. sponsors and manages the 23 country WIMC. The nationwide Turkish survey, the focus of this report, consisted of 1,003 Muslim women. The respondents were interviewed in person, from June 12 to June 15, 2007. With 95% confidence, results from this survey can be expected to have a margin of error of +/- 3 percent. The Turkish survey was sponsored and completed by KA Research of Istanbul Turkey for D3 Systems, Inc. This report addresses results of the Turkish survey in the context of other Muslim majority countries. It looks at the rights, behaviors, and attitudes of Turkish women today.

Turkey is a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This convention states that women: have rights equal to men to vote and run for political office, have equal access to health care, education and employment, can make decisions about reproductive health, can change nationality or children's nationality, are protected from violence and human trafficking, and have access to a legal system that provides equal protection of all these rights under laws which provide for equal treatment.

¹ WIMC is sponsored and managed by D3 Systems (www.d3systems.com). It currently is comprised of data from 23 Muslim majority countries of the world. Turkish opinion throughout the report may be analyzed and compared against opinion from the other 22 countries: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Bangladesh, Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Sudan. Field dates for the 23 countries vary, and span a time frame of March 2007 to August 2009.



Although Turkey has an overwhelmingly Islamic religious identity, it operates under a secular government founded by Kemal Ataturk in 1923. In practice, religion is subordinate to state authority. A 2008 RAND report describes Turkey’s Islamist politics as “recessed” where religion is an “implicit rather than an explicit part of political discourse.” According to the report, Turkey’s form of secular government is truly distinct and quite possibly unique.²

Ataturk abolished shari’a law when the modern Turkish secular state was created. Since 1991 Turkish politics have been riddled with debates over the growing influence of Islamic parties. Attempts to return shari’a law to the Turkish legal system, whether real or imagined, have been used to shape the political debate.³

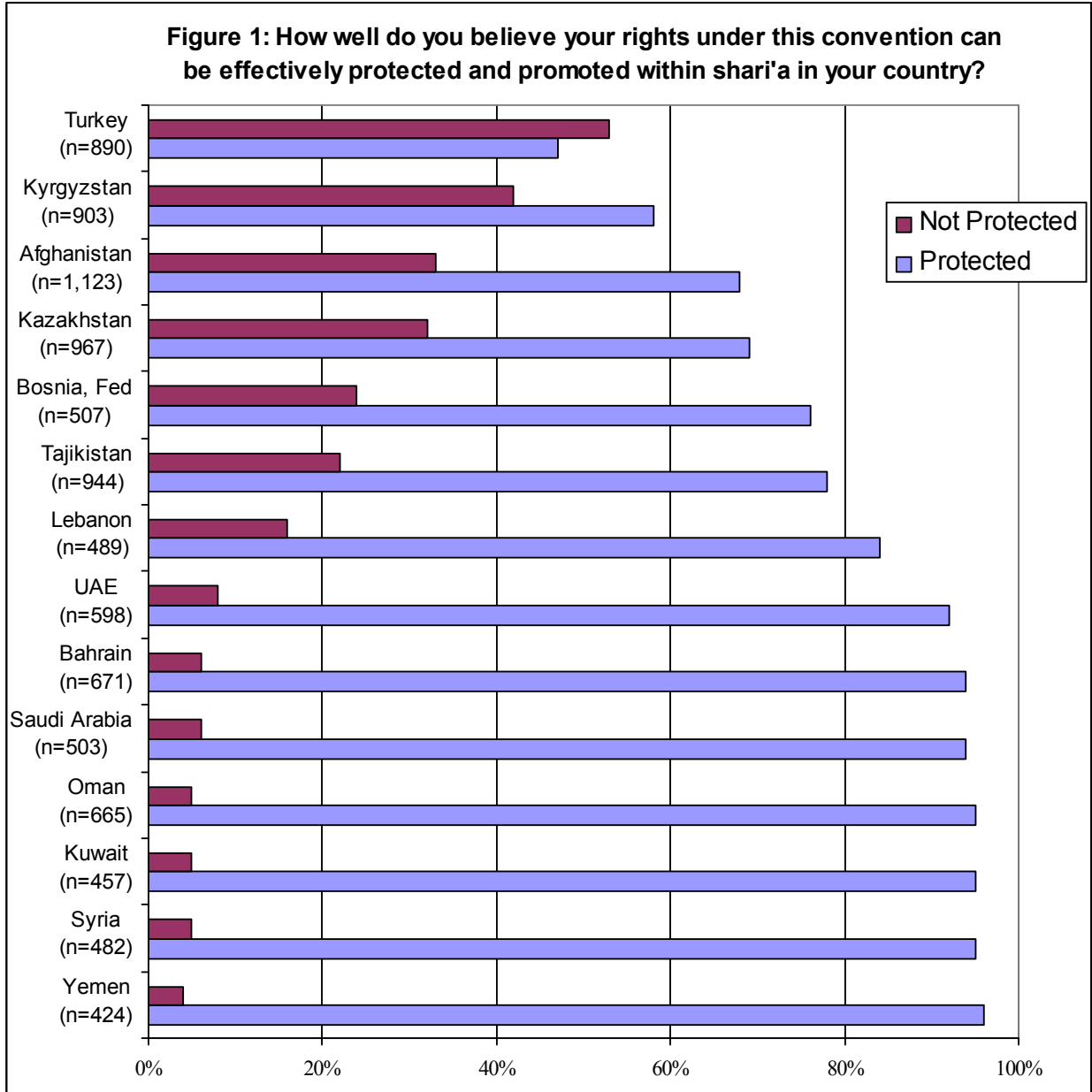
In his effort to modernize Turkey, Ataturk created equality of the sexes when he created his secular state. Today, just how well do Turkish women believe their rights under the CEDAW convention could effectively be protected and promoted within shari’a in Turkey? Of those who answered the question⁴, only 13% believe their rights could be “very well protected” within shari’a. This is the second lowest share across all countries where the question was asked (Kazakhstan has the lowest, with 12%). Combining “very well protected” and “somewhat protected” responses, we see a total of 47% -- the lowest of all countries in the aggregate. (Figure 1)

² Rabasa, A. and F. Stephen Larrabee. (2008) “The Rise of Political Islam In Turkey.” Santa Monica: Rand Corporation.

³http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displayStory.cfm?source=hptextfeature&story_id=11745570

⁴ Question was asked in 14 of the 23 countries: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey. Those who refused or responded “don’t know” are excluded from the analysis. This question was not asked in Qatar. Qatar ratified the CEDAW on April 26, 2009.





Over half of Turkish women (53% of those who answered / had an opinion) believe their CEDAW rights *cannot* be protected and promoted (“not well” or “not at all”) under shari’a, yielding the highest share of all countries asked in the WIMC study. This indicates there is a more pronounced rejection of shari’a in this context in Turkey than in any of the other countries in the study. It is important to stress, though, that shari’a law is not implemented in Turkey as it is in the other WIMC countries. Therefore answering the question of whether their rights can or cannot be protected and promoted under shari’a is more of an abstract inquiry for Turkish women, whereas it is an actuality for the women in the other countries. And yet, with 47% believing their rights can be protected within shari’a and 53% believing otherwise, a division in Turkish society appears to exist. It is important to understand differences between the two groups; and it appears as though educational, generational and modernity influences are at play.

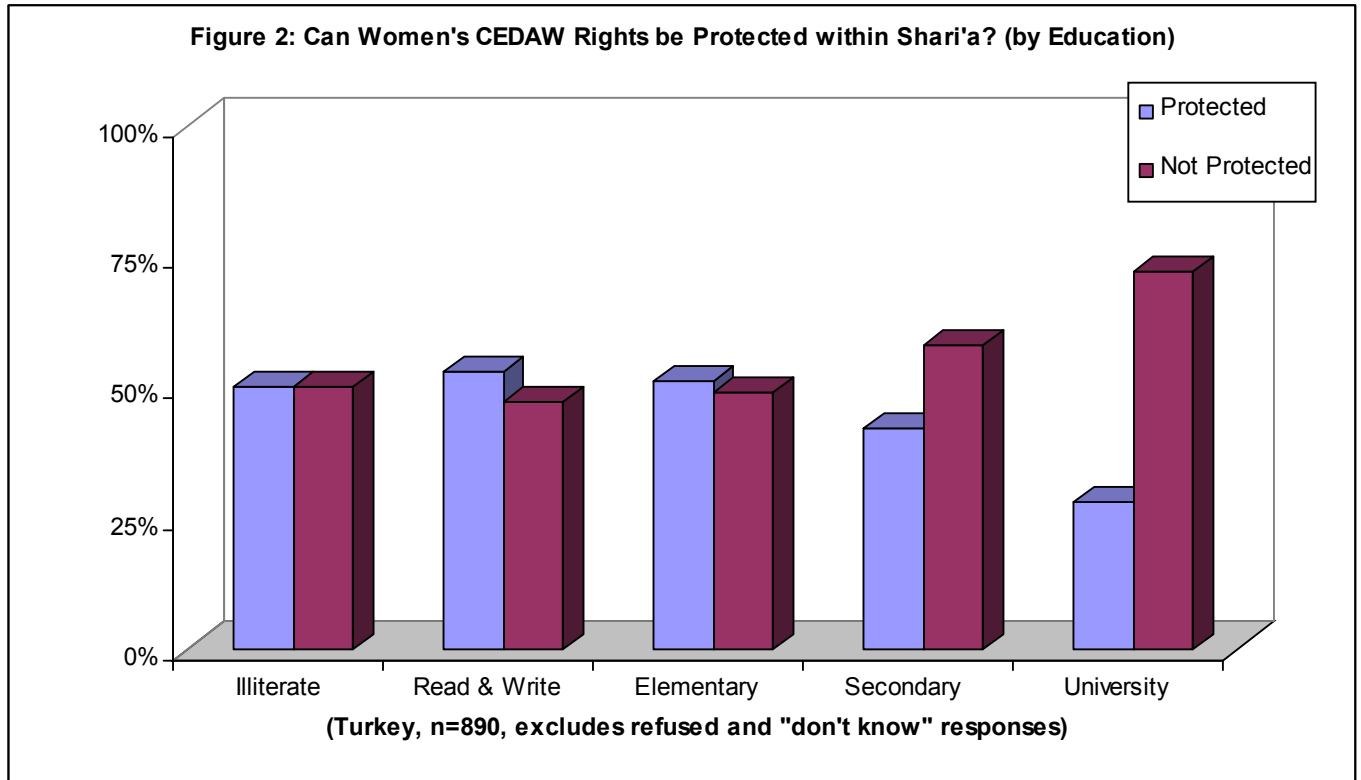
The more educated the Turkish woman, the more likely she is to believe her rights cannot be protected and promoted within shari’a. (Figure 2) This correlation does not exist in the other countries where educational attainment in general makes no difference⁵. In Turkey, however, it does.

One explanation for this correlation is that a more educated Turkish woman is more likely to be exercising her legal rights under the current secular system, and therefore is more likely to believe that Islamic law would not inherently protect and promote these otherwise guaranteed rights for women.⁶ The separation state and religious institutions in Turkey may also make it easier for Turkish women to voice an opinion that shari’a and the rights guaranteed by CEDAW are not consistent with one another than it is for women in other countries.

⁵ In the United Arab Emirates, Bosnia, Kazakhstan, and Lebanon, such a correlation is hinted at, but because certain cells within the crosstab have an n size of less than 5, the case cannot be made. Such a correlation is also hinted at in Tajikistan, However, the differences between the groups are not statistically significant. For each of these countries, a majority of the women believe their CEDAW rights can be protected under shari’a. It is not divided like it is in Turkey.

⁶ Field surveys carried out by Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) in 1993 and 1997, conducted through interviews with 754 women living in Ankara, Istanbul, East Anatolia and South-East Anatolia found that women living in Turkey were not aware of their human rights guaranteed through national and international laws. Furthermore, the number of independent women's organisations in Turkey was very limited. Women's daily lives were being shaped by patriarchal customs and traditions, the so called "verbal laws." The alarming gap between women's legal human rights and the reality of their everyday lives exposed the need for a comprehensive grassroots training programme, to increase women's knowledge and awareness of their rights, and to develop skills for realizing those rights. Evre Kaynak, “Educating for Women’s Rights in Turkey” http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/5050/16_days/education_turkey (June 2009).





Education, however, proves challenging for Turkish women. Of the countries in our study, Turkish women have the second highest level of disenrollment⁷ by the fifth grade (60% -- second only to Afghanistan at 77%).

⁷ According to women's activists, one important area where a concerted government-led effort could visibly improve the situation is education rights. 1 out of 5 women in Turkey is unable to read or write. There is a widespread drop-out of girls from school between the ages of 11-15. Nadira Artyk, "Right Time to Promote Turkish Women's Rights," [http://www.awid.org/eng/content/view/full/41870/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.awid.org/eng/content/view/full/41870/(language)/eng-GB) (June 2009).

Significant differences also exist in Turkey between marital and urban/rural status. Single women (62%) and those who are widowed or divorced⁸ (72%) are significantly more likely than married women (50%) to believe their rights could not be protected within shari'a. Urban women (55%) are significantly more likely than rural women (41%) to doubt the protection of women's rights within shari'a.

Differences exist between Turkish women who believe their CEDAW rights could be protected under shari'a (i.e. those who still accept or embrace shari'a to some degree: older, married, rural, less educated) and those who believe their rights cannot be protected. But, what rights are Turkish women actually exercising, given that Turkey is a secular nation-state, and is a signatory of the CEDAW?

Eighty-three percent of Turkish women say their working status is best described as "homemaker." Compared to the other 23 countries in the study, this is the third largest share of "homemakers" (Pakistan is 95%, and Bangladesh is 86%). Eight percent of the Turkish women describe themselves as currently unemployed, 7% are employed (paid by someone else), and 2% own their own business.

A strong correlation exists between education and employment. Those who are illiterate (97%) and those with read/write or elementary education (92%) are more likely to describe themselves as "homemakers," than those with secondary (63%), or university (42%) levels of education. With the high dropout rate mentioned earlier, it appears unlikely that high percentages of Turkish women will soon be following the "paid career path" rather than the homemaker path.

Of the unemployed, two-thirds (excluding "don't know" responses) say *if they had access to training and money to start a business now*, they would be interested and would be able to take advantage of the opportunity. Looking at the results by age, the youngest of the currently unemployed women are more likely to be able to take advantage of such an opportunity (77% of those aged 18-24, 67% of those aged 25-54, and 58% of those aged 55+).

Forty-seven percent of the Turkish women respondents say they are the ones in the household who make the daily household purchasing decisions. This is the third highest when compared to

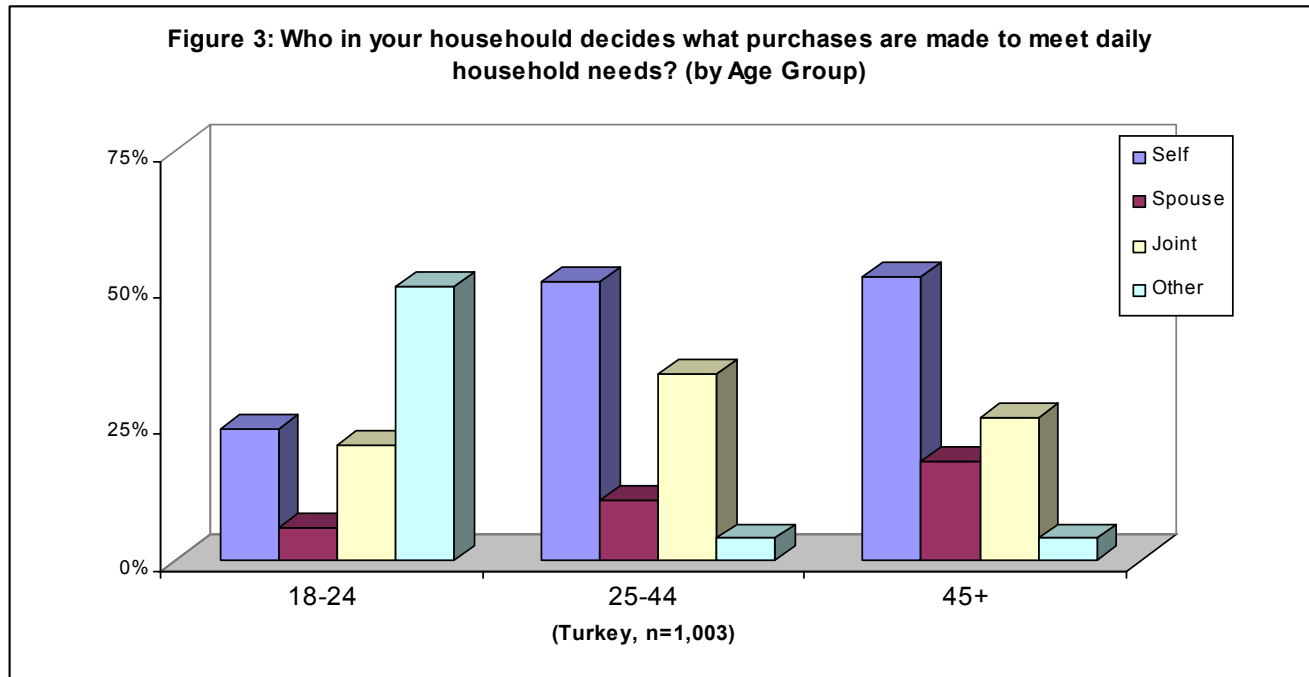
⁸ According to one source, majorities say divorced women are treated worse than other women in five nations: South Korea (82%), and in most of the largely Muslim nations polled--Egypt (80%), Turkey (72%), the Palestinian Territories (53%), Iran (51%), and Azerbaijan (54%). For more information see the March 5, 2009, "Poll: Across the World Many See Discrimination Against Widows and Divorced Women," http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/btjusticehuman_rightsra/494.php (June 2009).



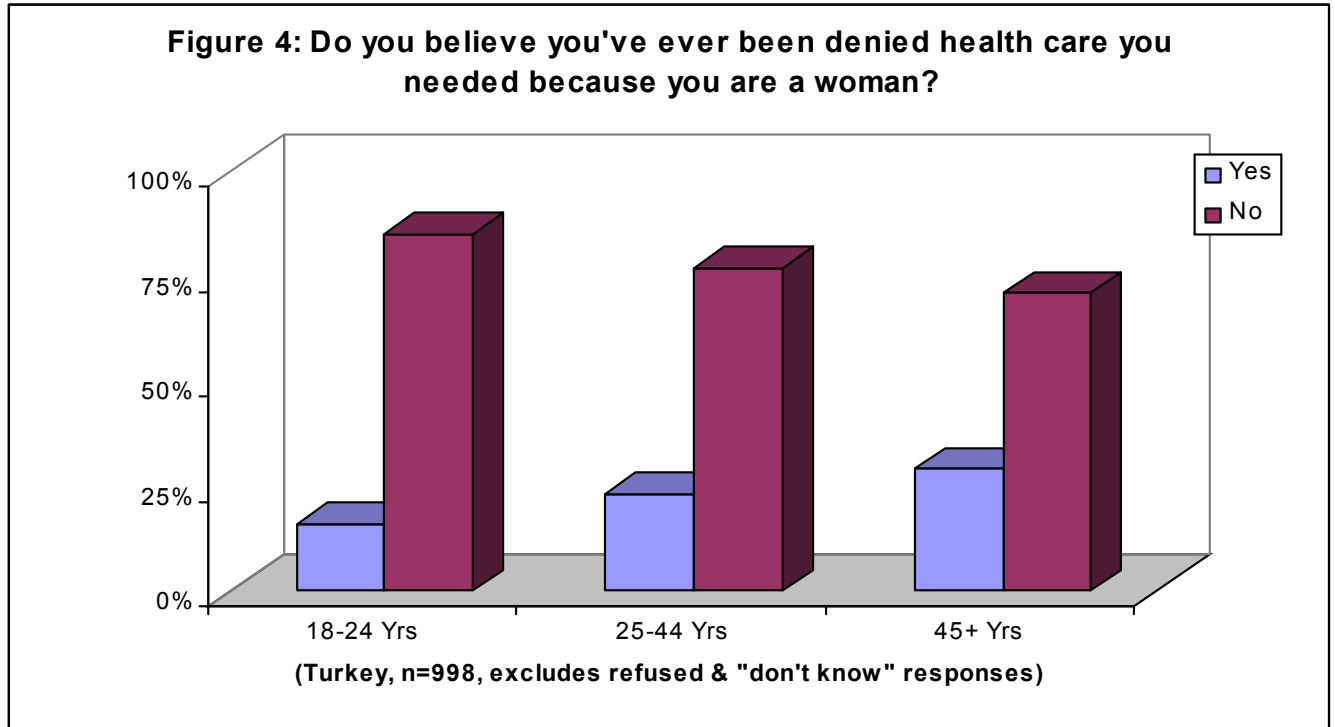
the other countries (Kazakhstan is highest with 56%, Qatar is the second highest with 48%; Bosnia comes in close with the Turkey at 46%). Twelve percent of the Turkish women say their husbands make all the purchasing decisions, and 29% say the decisions are made jointly.

The women who hold daily purchasing power...

- are widowed / divorced (80%), *or* are married (49%)
- span most age groups: approximately half or more of the Turkish women from each age group over the age of 24 are in charge of making the daily household purchasing decisions. (Figure 3)

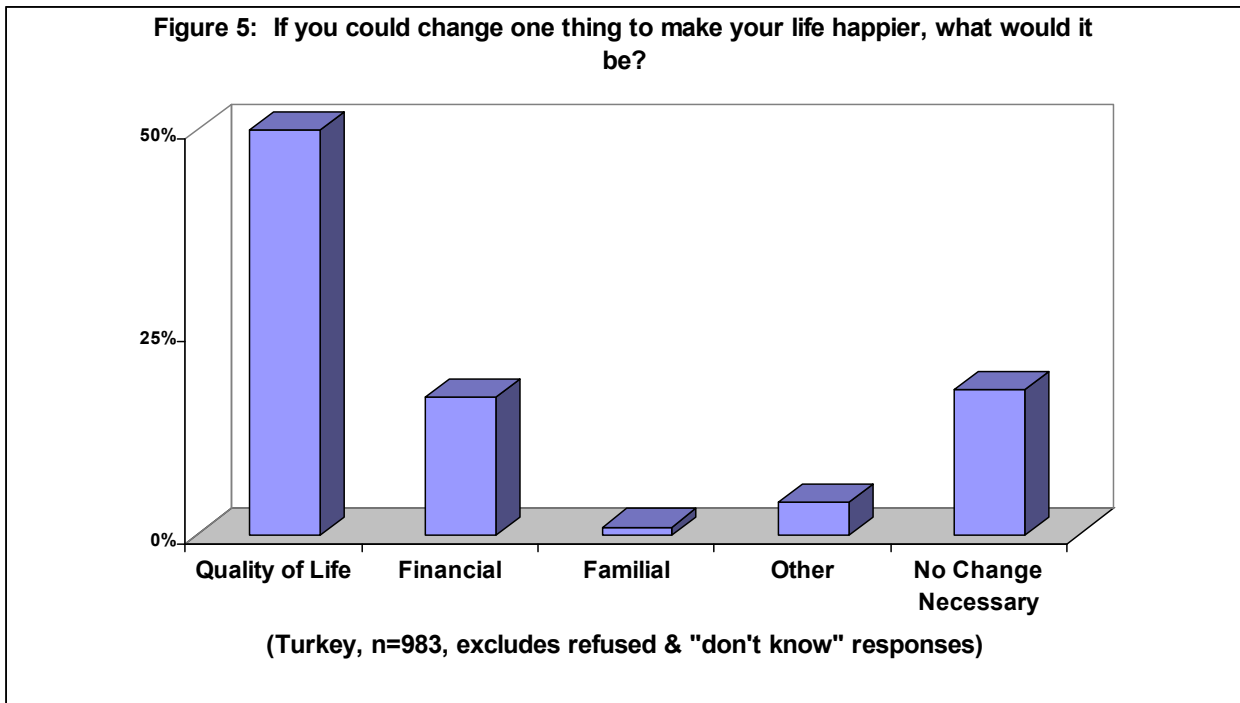


Nearly one-fourth of the Turkish women (23%) believe they have, at some point, been denied health care they needed because of their gender. This falls on the high end when compared to the other countries in the collective study, with only four countries (Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt) showing higher shares of women denied health care. Again, looking at the results by age, we see higher percentages of older women saying they have been denied necessary health care. (Figure 4) This could be a sign of changing times, or it may also just be reflective of chance (the older one is, the more likely one is to find oneself in a certain situation).



Turkish women are active voters. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents say they voted in the last national election or referendum. Only Jordan (89%) and Egypt (86%) exceed that level of female political involvement. Older women are significantly more likely to have voted than younger women: 93% of those aged 45+ and 86% of those aged 25 to 44, compared to only 28% of those under the age of 25.

If Turkish women could change one thing to make their lives happier, a majority (60%) would choose *quality of life* types of changes (health, education). Seventeen percent would choose to change a financial aspect of their lives (income, better house). Only 1% mention familial matters and 4% mention something else ('other'). Eighteen percent of Turkish women report no change is necessary. (Figure 5)



Quality of life changes are mentioned by significant pluralities in poor countries, as well as wealthy countries. Of the 23 countries included in the survey, 11 reveal that quality of life changes (health, education, and in some cases equality, independence, and women's rights) are the most sought after. Of these eleven countries, five (Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) are quite wealthy in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and five (Yemen, Bosnia,

Iran, Syria, and Turkey) fall on the lower end of the GDP scale. Kosovo is not yet ranked in the GDP scale, but is assumed to be on the lower end.⁹

The percentage of those who reject shari'a (based on the opinion that certain CEDAW guaranteed rights cannot be protected under shari'a) - is highest in Turkey compared to the other countries in the WIMC study. Opinion differs significantly according to education, marital status, and urban/rural. Today, Turkish women are enjoying some but not all rights as guaranteed under CEDAW. They are home-makers, but allowed to make decisions. They are sometimes denied healthcare, but they are active politically. Ataturk's Turkey appears to be on the path toward guaranteeing full rights for Turkish women, but some women have not yet arrived at that destination. Answers may rest in increased education and grassroots campaigns for awareness.

⁹ Turkey is ranked 99th on the GDP scale.

See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html> (February 2010).

