

## What is work? On the invisibility of women's paid work in the informal sector<sup>1</sup>

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The invisibility of women's paid work in the informal sector in official labor force data in both the global South and North has been widely acknowledged since the 1990s (Downing 1988; Rakodi 1995; Rocha and Latapí 2008; Pellissery and Walker 2007; Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala 1996; Kantor 2009). As Franck and Olsson (2014) noted, this shortcoming often stems from the way in which the concept of »work« is defined and operationalized for data collection (also see Standing 1999). Perceptions about what counts as work for statisticians, enumerators and survey respondents have important implications for understanding women's paid work in the informal sector, as these perceptions are shaped and reinforced by women's roles in the family and in society in general (Tzannatos 1999; Elson 1999).

This article explores the paradoxical fact that although women in the informal sector work full hours and get paid, they subjectively perceive of such activities as »non-work«, and hence do not report their remunerative activities as work. Previous studies have indeed appropriately emphasized how cultural norms about women's place and role in family and in society shape perceptions of women's participation in the

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labor market (Benería 1995; Elson 1999; Mies 1998; Wichterich 2000). Research conducted on women in informal employment in Turkey has also adopted a similar line of argument: that the global »race to the bottom« to decreasing production prices together with the impossibility of sustaining a household on one earner's wages has pushed many women into finding flexible work arrangements in the labor market that do not hinder them from fulfilling their culturally assigned roles as mother and housewife while yielding extra income for the household (White 2004; Dedeoglu 2004; Akalin 2007; Bora 2008; Cinar 1994; Erdogan 2012; Erman 1997; Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, and Rittersberger-Tiliç 2002).

The objective of this paper is not to argue with these findings, but rather to investigate women's subjective definitions of work to understand why they define their paid economic activities as non-work. Such discrepancies present important clues for comprehending ambivalent patterns of female identities within the gendered economy of the informal sector. These discrepancies also indicate that under-reporting or non-reporting of paid employment in the informal sector could be a deliberate choice (motivated by practical ends) for some women, or may result from the interaction between women's unpaid domestic duties at home and the qualities of informal sector work; i.e. irregular, low-paid, and invisible to public scrutiny.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, where women's informal employment has dramatically increased since the 1960s as a result of migration flows to the city from rural areas, and of labor market restructuring during the country's transition from an agricultural to an industrial and service economy (Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits 2008; İlkaracan 2012). It is currently estimated that 66 percent of women in Turkey are engaged in paid work in the informal sector (Özar 1998), despite the Turkish Statistical Institute's calculation that only 33 percent of women participate in the labor market (TurkStat 2014 Household Labor Force Survey). On the one hand, official female labor force participation (FLFP) rates situate Turkey at the bottom of all OECD and EU-member countries (Turkey is a member and a candidate respec-

tively), with an average FLFP of around 63 percent (OECD Labor Force Statistics 2013). On the other hand, estimations of the size of women's paid informal work situate Turkey as the 6<sup>th</sup> largest female informal economy in non-agricultural activities in the world, after Pakistan (73 percent), Philippines (72.5 percent), Mali (71.4 percent), Cote d'Ivoire (69.7 percent) and India (67.5 percent) (ILO 2012). Fifty-eight percent of women who are »outside the labor force«, i.e. »not classified as employed or unemployed« stated housework and family as their main reason for not participating in the labor force (TurkStat 2014 Household Labor Force Survey).<sup>2</sup> The percentage of men who gave the same answer was 0 percent. More specifically, while 1.1 million women noted housework as their primary reason (out of 2 million women surveyed), only 6 men gave the same reason (out of 8 million men) (ibid.).

It is highly unlikely however, that such a large proportion of women in Turkey would be »housewives« with no financial contribution to their households. Rather, as suggested by Dedeoğlu (2008) and Kümbetoğlu, User, and Akpınar (2012), a large number of women registered as housewives in official labor statistics can be found in the informal sector. This was also acknowledged in the recent World Bank report (2009) on female labor participation in Turkey. Despite the recognition of under-reporting among statisticians and enumerators of women's informal employment, more studies are needed to address the question of why women workers do not consider themselves as working when they engage in remunerative work in the informal sector. This article aims to contribute to this gap in the literature.

The main argument of this paper is that women in informal employment view themselves as contributing only to the household budget and consequently de-value their labor so as not to challenge traditional gender role dynamics in their households. The low skill level of the jobs they are engaged in, the irregularity of their job arrangements and the low pay they receive in return for their work contribute to their devaluation of

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2 All translations from the Turkish by the author.

their labor. However, I argue that this depreciation can be a pragmatic choice for women who otherwise could not access the labor market due to familial and patriarchal reasons, and not only due to factors specific to informal employment.

In the first part of this paper, I provide a brief introduction into the gendered social construction of meaning of work. I then show how these different meanings are interrelated in women's paid work in the informal sector. The second section explores women's informal work in the case of Turkey, where traditional gender roles and attitudes about women's role and place in society remain dominant in the governance of everyday life and in politics. The third section explains the methodological underpinnings of this study. The fourth section presents the main discussion of what counts as work and non-work for low-income women in the informal sector. In the fifth and final section of the paper, I summarize the main findings and present a preliminary conclusion.

### **»Work« as a social construct**

Although we all have a common-sense notion of what work is, the boundaries of what counts as work and what does not remain blurry. The traditional understanding of work in the literature focuses on activities you »have to do« in order to get paid (Beechey 1988). Thus seen, work is broadly defined as efforts resulting in some product or service that can be exchanged for payment or in-kind payment (Pahl 1984; Rosenfeld 2000). Not all researchers, however, would agree that the distinction between work and non-work is as simple as receiving payment in return, or the presence of an obligation to perform a certain act. For example, Benería (1995) argued (in connection with the conceptualization and visibility of women's work), that subsistence vs. market production dominated traditional economic analyses, in which women producing for subsistence were categorized as non-working, and men producing for the market as working. To elaborate: »women's economic activities were (and are) unvalued as a result of viewing the market as the central criterion for defining »economic« (ibid., 1843). Elson (1999, 614) similarly rejected the notion that work exists as a gender-

neutral category. For example, the fact that in official statistics »unpaid family labor« is particularly widespread among women might merely show that statisticians and enumerators consider »unpaid family labor in a family business« to be a continuation of women's gender role and hence non-work. In the same vein, previous studies have demonstrated that the reporting of women's work in official statistics is to a great degree subject to the interpretation of statisticians and enumerators; in some cases, even the same questions produced varying results due to gender biases (Chen et al. 1999; Hussmanns, Mehran, and Varmā 1990). The meaning of work is thus socially constructed, enacted, produced, and, accordingly, gendered. As Guba (1990, 89) argued: »All social realities are constructed and shared through well-understood processes. It is this socialized sharing that gives these constructions their apparent reality, for if everyone agrees on something, how can one argue that it does not exist?« In other words, if everyone agrees with the social constructions of what counts as work, and what does not, it is difficult to argue the contrary.

The social construction of the meaning of work has important consequences for understanding the gendered division of labor, the gendered segregation of labor markets, and women's increasing participation in the informal sector. In this regard, constructions of work and non-work can be traced to (1) gendered understandings and arrangements of labor, (2) the organization of the informal sector, and (3) the kinds of jobs available to and taken up by women.

The literature on women's economic activities demonstrates that women's reproductive work at home has been devalued, for it is both unpaid and considered to be done out of love rather than for economic gain (Hochschild 2003; England 2005). Other scholars have drawn attention to the abiding gender segregation of the labor market, where certain jobs are still categorized as women's work (Witkowska 2013; Arumpalam, Booth, and Bryan 2004; Ñopo, Daza, and Ramos 2012), perpetuating the general assumption that women need no additional skills or training for »female jobs,« and that women mainly engage in activities

that are a continuation of what they would do free of charge at home (Rakodi 1995). In other words, the categorization of women's unpaid reproductive work at home influences their productive paid work in the labor market; when the former is not considered to be work, the latter's position also becomes disputed. Accordingly, Rosenfeld (2000) argues for a more inclusive understanding of work:

A full understanding of individuals' lives in the context of social change requires a broad definition of work: effort resulting in some product or service for exchange or domestic consumption. Work can be done in the home (broadly defined) or outside it. It can be done for pay (such as a wage, a salary, or profit) or direct exchange or neither. (51)

In the same vein, Franck and Olsson (2014, 211) noted that the emphasis on *work*, *job*, and *main activity* (stress original) produces greater variations in female relative to male statistics owing to the fact that many women engaged in multiple income-earning activities, in informal and seasonal work, and in activities that were not directly remunerated. In the context of Turkey, Dedeoğlu (2008) emphasized that official surveys were generally conducted by male interviewers in majority-male establishments (e.g. coffee houses), which reinforced the gender biases of male respondents, interviewers, and enumerators. These persons were more likely to hold a preconceived idea of appropriate roles for women in the family (and in society), so they often reported female family members as economically inactive »housewives.«

But the blurry boundaries of gendered understandings of work do not end here. The fact that work in the informal sector is organized informally (or unorganized) further complicates the demarcation of what counts as work and what does not. For instance, Portes and Sassen-Koob (1987, 31) define informal employment as »all work situations characterized by the absence of (1) a clear separation between capital and labor; (2) a contractual relationship between both; and (3) a labor force that is paid wages and whose conditions of work and pay are not legally regulated [...] The informal sector is structurally heterogeneous and

comprises such activities as direct subsistence, small-scale production and trade, and subcontracting to semi-clandestine enterprises and home-workers.« Hence, the factors traditionally associated with »work« or »employment« such as a regulated work place, regular work hours, requirements defined and protected by law, occupational training or worker identity are less applicable or not at all applicable to work in the informal sector, which might take place in the privacy of homes with no carefully defined work contract and no distinct employer and employee relationship (Mayoux 2001). As Benería (1995, 1843) put it, »the problem with the informal sector is not conceptual—given that it consists of paid activities—but is due to its underground and unrecorded character«. Consequently, the »hidden« or »unregistered« nature of informal employment, combined with its irregular and flexible contractual arrangements, may make it difficult for women workers to categorize it as work, or encourage workers who view employment in the informal sector a »temporary refuge« or »contribution to the household budget,« rather than a long-term economic activity.

Moreover, informal employment often exhibits characteristics that are associated (exclusively) with women, further obscuring the boundaries between work and non-work for women workers. Paula Kantor (2009) explains these characteristics in terms of »constrained inclusion« and »adverse inclusion« in the labor market. She defines the former as the limits on the range of options open to women for engaging in various aspects of social and economic life, shaped by the social relations and norms defining women's labor participation (195). In societies where traditional gender norms are prevalent, constrained inclusion in the labor market would be associated with women's domestic and caretaking responsibilities, which should be fulfilled before they embark on paid work. These norms may come to mean that women who (want to) work face considerable resistance from male family members who conform to male breadwinning and female home-making gender ideologies. In such households, home-based work emerge as the only means of participating in the labor market for women (Carr and Chen 2002; Kabeer 2002). Thus often in the informal employment context, women's relationship to

work is shaped by what is considered a culturally *appropriate* job for women (Kantor 2009), as well as the flexibility of work arrangement so that workers can balance their paid economic activities with unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Adverse inclusion broadly refers to women's adverse conditions in the labor market (generally and especially during periods of financial downturn) as a result of receiving lower average earnings than men, and having a higher likelihood of engaging in temporary, ad hoc, and flexible jobs with no long-term job or financial security (see also Homes and Jones 2009). Indeed, Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala's (1996) global cross-sectional analysis of segmentation in the labor market revealed that women are usually engaged in jobs that are at the bottom of the informal employment hierarchy, such as casual day labor, home-based work, low-skill manufacturing, and domestic work. Additionally, even when women manage to enter the same types of work as men, they typically earn much less (Kantor 2009, 195). To the extent that women's occupational choices and their freedom and ability to fully participate in the labor market are influenced by norms concerning women's place and role in family and society, women's interpretations of which of their activities count as »work« and which they view as »non-work« become gendered in the informal sector.

In sum, women's subjective perceptions of what counts as work (and non-work) can be traced to the socio-cultural settings in which they live and the labor market context in which they seek work. In the next section, I shall look at the Turkish context in order to determine the underpinning norms and socio-cultural framework.

### **Turkish women as »mothers« or »mothers to be«**

In November 2014, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan noted that women are not equal to men, and that the primary position for women in Turkish society should be motherhood. The president's stance on gender equality resonates with the imminent contradiction related to women's labor market status in Turkey: an attempt to increase female

employment rates while strengthening women's traditional gender roles as mothers and home-makers. In order to understand the underpinnings of this contradiction, an overview of the country's recent political and socio-economic transformation is necessary.

The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 based on the ideals of the Kemalist modernization project. Kemalism aimed at curbing the influence of Islam in politics and society, and re-structuring the newly founded state on ideas imported from European liberalism and modernization. In this period, the state's role in regulating both economic and social life was acknowledged, especially concerning gender relations and private life (Kandiyoti 1997). Between 1923 and 1950, the single party rule of Mustafa Kemal's founding party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), took various measures to improve the status of women in society including universal suffrage, equal educational opportunities, and abolishment of *sharia*-based practices. However, this process of what I call »top-down secularism« began to change when Turkey entered its multi-party political era in 1945. Turkey's first opposition party, the Democrat Party (DP) was supported by a prevalently rural population that sought to restore the influence of Islam in the everyday life of citizens and in politics. Until the 1980s, the influence of Islam in politics continued to grow. After the military coup of 1980, however, Islam became an ever more important factor in politics and in the governance of gender relations and private life.

The military coup of 1980 was initiated in reaction to the growing power of the left. As a result, between 1980 and 1983, all trade unions were outlawed, wages were frozen, and the rights to strike, engage in collective action, and demonstrate were rescinded. Islam was introduced as a unifying factor in a society strongly divided into the right and left sides of the political spectrum (Sakallioğlu 1996; Onis 1997; Yavuz 1997). Although some attempts were made (by the military) to curb the growing influence of Islam in party politics and social life, after the 1980s Islam became a powerful factor in governance of the country. Since the mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the influ-

ence of patriarchy on policy-making—in line with the party's conservative worldview—has become stronger (Kandiyoti 2003).

At the same time, during this period Turkish female labor force participation (FLFP) decreased from 55 percent (1955) to 22 percent (2008), rising only to reach the current level of 30 percent (2014) (Turk-Stat Household Labor Force Surveys). Against the global trend of increasing FLFP rates, the declining labor participation of women in Turkey posed an important puzzle (Dayıoğlu and Kırdar 2009; Dayioğlu 2000). Two structural explanations have been put forth in the literature to account for this puzzling trend: (1) the transition from an agricultural to a service economy, (2) mass migration to urban areas following the erosion of work opportunities in the agricultural sector. The main argument stemming from these two interrelated explanations is that women who were previously employed in the agricultural sector as unpaid family workers found themselves unqualified for jobs in the urban labor market and hence left the labor market altogether to become housewives (*ibid.*). However, it is unlikely that all »discouraged« women workers left the labor market. Instead, a high rate of informalization has been estimated for the period during which economic liberalization of the Turkish economy took place (World Bank 2009; Başlevent and Onaran 2004; Ilkkaracan and Tunalı 2010; Karakoyun 2007). Reasons given are that women workers are more easily hired and fired (Temiz 2004) and accept lower levels of pay than men (Sapançalı 2005), since they are considered contributors to the household budget rather than main income earners. It has also been noted that women workers seek access to social security benefits less than men, as they are able to benefit from these rights through their husbands and fathers (Kumbetoglu, User, and Akpınar 2012).

Nevertheless, the invisibility of women in official labor statistics became a major concern for subsequent governments, and increasing female employment now constitutes one of the most important areas of policy making for the current majoritarian AKP government. However, government discourse on women's gender roles has so far demonstrated

a strong patriarchal stance. The following quotes from prominent AKP ministers demonstrate this point.

Why would women want to work? Do they not have enough to do at home? (Veysel Eroglu, Minister of Forest and Water Management, 2009)

The unemployment rate is increasing in Turkey because women also look for jobs (Mehmet Simsek, Minister of Economy, 2010).

The [economic] crisis is over. Women can stop working and go back to their homes (Ali Babacan, Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister, 2012).

This is my word to you young women. Get married immediately when you can, do not be too indecisive, and then have five children (Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 2014).

Recent social policy developments related to women's labor market participation perpetuate similarly gendered thinking on women's appropriate role in society. Four recent policies are particularly important. First, the AKP government introduced a policy in which the government would pay the social security premiums of female workers for up to five years if employers were willing to employ them. Women's training expenses were subsidized by the government in order to take the burden off employers' shoulders, and successful completion of these programs guaranteed a position (Öksüz 2007). Although the policy aimed at making it more »attractive« for employers to hire women workers (Labor Code-Article 5763<sup>3</sup>), in fact it gave mixed signals. Various women's rights organizations noted that the policy implied it was disadvantageous to employ women (hence the need for subsidies) and that women's labor was not as valuable as men's (TEPAV 2011, 47).

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3 The policy grants that the social security costs of the female employee will be covered by the state: 100% in the first year, 80% in the second year, 60% in the third year, 40% in the fourth year and 20% in the fifth and final year.

The second important policy change during the AKP period aimed at supporting women's part-time employment through the reconciliation of family and work life. Also known as the »Birth and Three Child Policy Package,« a new policy in 2013 proposed to extend the 16 weeks of paid maternity leave to 24 weeks and, for up to six months after this period, give women the right to work »flexible« hours or »part-time« with full-time payment.<sup>4</sup> Because the policy mainly targeted women, it was heavily criticized for reproducing patriarchal ideologies and cementing women's domestic roles in society, for it was only women who were assumed to need to balance their work and family life, an option for »paternity leave« did not even make it onto the government's agenda (KAGIDER 2013<sup>5</sup>). It was also noted that flexibilization of women's employment would only reinforce women's dependency on men, since the wages from part-time work would not be sufficient to afford a life on their own (ibid.).

The third policy related to women's labor market participation gave women the right to quit working in the first year of their marriages and seek severance payment if their husbands did not want them to work, or if they had difficulty balancing work and family life (Labor Code 1475-Article 14). The same entitlement, however, was not made available to men. This policy was evidently contradictory to the government's intentions to increase female employment, since it financially encouraged women to leave the labor force after marriage and become housewives instead.

The fourth policy allowed women to seek financial assistance from the government if they were the full-time caretakers of their disabled child or other relative in need of full-time care. The same policy also granted the right to early retirement in order to »enable women to devote their time to taking care of their disabled child or relative, rather than divide it

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4 Full-time payment is only for the first two months, afterwards the pay decreases according to the hours worked.

5 <http://www.kagider.org/?Dil=0&SID=1&HID=527>, accessed October 26, 2013.

between paid work and care responsibilities« (Labor Code 5510). Recently, this policy has been expanded to provide all women up to 4 years of early retirement, provided that they have at least two children. Currently it has been proposed to extend this policy to »two years early retirement per child, with no upper limit« meaning that a woman who had five children could seek 10 years of early retirement. These policies should be considered together with the fact that so far no attempt has been made to provide free or affordable care services (KEIG 2014<sup>6</sup>).

In sum, it can be argued that though the AKP government has taken up female employment as an issue that needs improvement, its discourse and recent policies seem rather to reinforce patriarchal family structures and view women as mothers and mothers-to-be. It is fair to assume that this view might influence women's subjective perceptions of work and non-work. Faced with structural constraints (e.g. lack of affordable care services and the welfare state structure) and the gender roles ascribed by the patriarchal norms and values embedded in society, it should come as no surprise that women are oriented towards alternative forms of participation in Turkey's economic life: informal employment.

### Methodology

This article is based on my ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation at Oxford University, which included in-depth interviews, participant observations, and focus groups with 90 women in two neighborhoods of Istanbul, Turkey in 2012: Kağıthane and Esenyurt. The focus of this study is on low-income and low-educated women, as these women typically engage in work in the informal sector (Dedeoğlu 2008; Dayioğlu 2000; İlkkaracan 2012; Kardam and Yuksel 2004). The respondents included women working as home-based workers (both own-account and for the manufacturing sector), domestic workers, subcontracted cleaning workers, casual day laborers, and informal employees in the manufacturing sector. All of the women interviewed

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6 <http://www.keig.org/content/ebulten/subat%202014%20web.pdf>, accessed on May 6, 2014.

were informal workers to the extent that their jobs had informal elements; either their work was completely unreported, or their income was underreported for tax purposes by their employers. I was not looking for a representative sample from which generalizations about women in informal employment could be made. Rather, I intended to give voice to different groups of women in the informal sector engaged in different sectors and jobs (Glaser, Strauss, and Strutzel 1968). At the same time I did not seek *especially* unrepresentative or unusual cases of women in informal employment. Each case was chosen as a lens through which women's invisibility in Istanbul in particular, and in the informal labor market in general, could be understood.

I aimed at tracing the everyday meaning of work for women workers engaged in informal labor, so the interview guide included both semi and unstructured questions about women's subjective perceptions of their paid-work in the informal sector. In addition to recording information about socio-economic and educational characteristics of women workers, I aimed at collecting as much information as possible about women's labor market and family histories, in order to understand the link between women's entry into the informal labor market and assigned gender roles/obligations.

I found my respondents through a variety of methods. I chose neighborhoods in which there is a high concentration of informal sector work to reach respondents in different types of informal work arrangements. I also visited factories and workplaces to reach women who had both formal and informal elements in their work contracts. Additionally, I reached some of my respondents via women's associations, unions for informal workers, municipalities and informal and formal employment bureaus. After making a few contracts through such channels, I used a snowball approach (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Sifaneck and Neaigus 2001), generating a unique type of social knowledge: »knowledge which is emergent, political and interactional« (Noy 2008, 327).

**Fig. 1: Respondents' employment status by age group**  
(Source: Author's own interview data)

	17–25	26–35	35–45	45+	Total
Home-based work	0	7	2	3	12
Domestic work and caretaking	1	5	6	4	16
Subcontracted and other cleaning jobs	2	3	14	1	20
Production sector (textile, food)	11	10	2	5	28
Other jobs	1	6	2	2	11
Housewife	1	2	0	0	3
Total	16	33	26	15	90

The ethnographic method, including work-life histories and participant observations with women at their workplaces or doing their work together with them at home helped me gather information on the subjective meaning of work for women and on how they constructed this meaning in their everyday lives. Such observations provided me a base which helped me to understand why some women in informal employment do not see themselves as working (or as housewives), despite receiving payment in return for their economic activities.

**»Work« and »non-work« for women workers in the informal sector**

All respondents were asked to state the title they would use to describe themselves to understand how they categorized their own work. While

this question differs slightly from those asked in the Turkish Household Labor Force Surveys (2014) (i.e. »Did you work one hour or more during the reference week or had a job but did not actually work during the reference week for some reason?«), 40 percent referred to themselves as »housewives« and another 25 percent stated that they were »both housewives and working.« It should be noted that this group of women included women of all ages, marital statuses and employment types. Regarding the latter, home-based workers tended to categorize themselves as »housewives«, although this categorization was also common among domestic workers and casual day laborers. Married women (with children) generally reported themselves as housewives, whereas unmarried women were more likely to report themselves as working.

Here the use of »work« in the Turkish language provides an interesting demarcation between work and non-work. The word for work in the Turkish language, *iş*, denotes not only employment and job, but also being engaged in some activity. For instance, you would say »işim yok« to mean »I am not occupied« although it more literally means »I don't have a job.« However, it is not possible to use *iş* as a verb, as you do in English. Instead, you would use another verb, *çalışmak*, which literally means to work, to labor (or to study). Interestingly, whereas *iş* might be used to describe any kind of activity that keeps one busy, or engaged in; *çalışmak* would only be used for work-related activities. Hence, this subtle difference between *iş* and *çalışmak* marks an intricate but paradoxical reason as to why women in informal employment do not consider themselves to be »working.« Accordingly, women who referred to themselves as working generally used *çalışmak* when referring to their paid labor in the informal sector, other women stressed that they did not have a job (*işim yok*).

Women's paradoxical categorization of themselves as »housewives« can be analyzed through (1) gender-reinforced definitions of work, (2) definitions of work reinforced by informality and (3) gender-specific notions of informality. I argue that a complex mix of these three types of social constructions of the meaning of work shapes many women's perception of their paid work in the informal sector as non-work.

### **Gender-reinforced definitions of why informal employment is not work**

As Franck and Olsson (2014, 217) noted, women express a wide variety of reasons for why they use the title »housewife« when they are engaged in paid economic activities in the informal sector. Some of these reasons reflected women's own perceptions of their gender roles and obligations, and of their »main purpose« for taking up employment. For low-income women, »economic survival« is the main reason for participating in any money-earning activity. In this regard, their labor participation is shaped by how much »additional« income is needed in their household, and whether working for this additional income *makes sense* economically if caretaking and housework services needed to be bought on the market and other hidden costs of employment (such as cost of transportation or professional clothing) were factored in. In this regard, a gainfully employed husband would decrease women's need to engage in paid work. Consequently, when women take up informal employment, initially (or longer) they tend to perceive it as a temporary measure to make ends meet and see their income as »additional« or merely »supplementary« to that of their husband or father even when their contribution is key for the survival of the household. Such social constructions of women's paid labor as a necessary continuation of their gender role as mothers and wives (or daughters) marks one of the ways in which women demarcate their informal employment as »non-work« as opposed to their husband's (or other male earner in the household) »work.« In other words, by perceiving their economic activities as »subsistence« and their male kin's as »market production« (Benería 1995), women shift the understanding of activities done in return for payment from »work« to »contribution to the family budget« or non-work. One way of exercising this practice is to spend the husband's income on rent, bills, and food—the so-called necessities for survival—and their additional income on »trivial« items such as new clothes for the children or new cookware for the kitchen. As Tayyibe, a 34 year-old mother of three, stated:

I do piecework whenever I can (pointing to the piecework on her knees). But my husband works. I am a housewife. I do piecework when he is unemployed, or when we have bills to pay.

### **Definitions of informal employment as »not work« related to informality**

For the majority of women workers, however, characteristics peculiar to informality also made it difficult to perceive their employment as work. More specifically, poor working conditions, temporary and ad hoc job arrangements, and lack of public scrutiny influenced their perception of their employment as non-work. As Derin, an 18-year old helper in a small shoemaking atelier explained:

Even if I work from 8:00 am in the morning to 9:00 pm at night, or if there is overtime, to midnight, or even until the morning comes, I do not think of my work as [proper] work. You see, I get 500 lira a month [approximately 170 GBP], but I give it all to my parents. When I do overtime, they [her employers] say you're an apprentice and do not pay my overtime. I work overtime, I work on Saturdays and Sundays, yet I never get anything for it. There is this idea that once I establish myself in the workplace, they will give it to me. But then I look around, who has established herself in this godforsaken hole? In my atelier, there is no running water; we carry water from the employer's husband's other atelier, which is 250 meters away from ours. If we want to have tea, or go to the toilet, we have to carry this water [...] There are 10 people in my atelier, two of them under the age of 18, all of them work informally. Informality has become ingrained in us to such an extent that not even the atelier itself exists on paper. When we hear inspectors or auditors will come from the neighborhood, we close the curtains, turn off the lights. Our atelier is on the ground floor of an apartment (*merdivenaltı*) you see, so from outside when you draw the curtains it looks like an ordinary house. Nobody would think it is a workplace. Nobody would have a clue that there is work going on inside. Our boss appears like a housewife on paper.

So, when you look at it, there is no workplace, there is no employer. What do I get, 1 lira (35 pence) daily as pocket money from my parents, I do not see the money I earn otherwise. How am I supposed to see this as work? I am just passing time.

Job benefits, regularity of employment, stable income, and a written contractual relationship between the employer and the employee are among the characteristics several women enumerated when defining what would count as [proper] work, adding that these features were all absent from their paid work in the informal sector. As Hayriye, a 29 year-old home-based worker put it:

This is not work. This is just to pass the time. And maybe make a little bit of money on the side, if I can. You cannot survive on this money. So, it is like, while I am watching over the kids, you know. It is nothing. This cannot be called work. Today we have it, tomorrow we don't. And even when we have it, nobody can tell whether there they will give us the money they promised us they would give [...]

Whereas some women argued that these job attributes were achievable only with a high school (or university) diploma, others challenged the notion that education would be sufficient for accessing stable employment in the formal sector. Zero-hour contracts, that is jobs in the formal sector with no stability of employment and limited access to benefits were frequently mentioned to stress that informality was spreading to the formal sector as well, and without work security and income stability, it was difficult to perceive one's job as work.

### **Gender-specific notions of informality**

So far I have tried to demonstrate the social construction, reinforced by gender and informality, of paid informal employment as »non-work« among women workers in the informal sector. However, the »interaction effect« between gender and informality also emerges as an important reason why a majority of women consider themselves as »housewives« in the informal sector, even when they engage in paid economic activities.

For some women who migrated to Istanbul from rural parts of Turkey, physical mobility outside the home was not possible or severely restricted by male members of the household. Consequently, traditional patriarchal values separating the public and private sphere, and limiting women's existence to the latter, combined with conservative religious beliefs about the appropriate role of women in family and in society played a large role in whether women participated in money-earning activities, and if they did, which activities would be considered suitable. Accordingly, women who faced particular resistance from their male kin chose physically invisible forms of economic activities, or activities they could hide from their male kin if need be. These activities were generally found in the informal sector. For instance, home-based work, ad hoc cleaning work or piecework emerged as possible options for these women to earn an income without directly challenging their male kin. However, because their work was often hidden, these women (perhaps strategically) referred to their paid labor as non-work in order to sustain their access to the informal sector.

Furthermore, to the extent that men's »breadwinner« status was not challenged, men tended to turn a blind-eye to women's money-earning activities in the informal sector, often calling it »distaff« or »women's activities to pass the time«. As Beşpınar (2010) has noted, the traditional gender role division in the family (husband as breadwinner and wife as caretaker) has two meanings: »his shouldering economic responsibilities and his being the authoritative figure that controls his wife's behavior« (525). Seen in this light, the irregular, ad hoc, and hidden nature of women's informal labor enabled some women to overcome patriarchal barriers to engaging in paid work, although this entailed that they indirectly agreed to socially construct their employment as non-work. Alev, a 38-year old subcontracted cleaning worker explained how the characteristics of her employment in the informal sector helped her relieve some of the gender-specific pressures she faced:

I was staying at home. I was staying at home with nothing to do for instance. I was doing bead-work [embroidery]. My husband

was against it, he was saying »don't bring this home, I'll burn it if you do.« I was doing it secretly, unbeknownst to him. [...] So, I was putting it away when he came home, and hiding it. I was thinking at least I get something we need with the money, a loaf of bread, if nothing. My husband thought that we were spending his money. He didn't realize, because he was giving me money for groceries. I was just adding what I made to that (*Ben de onun arasına kaynaştırıyordum işte*).

Several other women noted that home-based work made it easy for them to physically hide their employment from their husbands, due to the fact that they could do it »in the comfort of their homes.« But other women, who engaged in *ad hoc* cleaning jobs, casual textile work or domestic work, also mentioned that »if needed,« they could hide their employment thanks to its irregular and temporary nature.

Even when physically hiding their employment was not necessary, many women workers needed to hide it discursively or present it in a way that did not challenge their male kin's status as family breadwinner. One way of doing that was referring to informal employment as non-work; as a hobby, or an activity to pass the time (whilst making money on the side). To this end, some women presented their paid work as a continuation of their domestic roles. Gulin, a 32 year-old domestic worker, for instance, noted that as a woman, one is born with the skill to do domestic work and caretaking, and so she believed that domestic work was appropriate for women and could not be called work per se:

Domestic work is a good job (temiz iş). You are inside [the house] like you would be in your home. Your workplace is clean, and you are doing cleaning like you would do at home. So, it is a perfectly good job. It is just the right job for me as a woman.

Some women also underlined that much of women's informal work could not be considered to be [proper] work because women would not need any additional education, training or skills to be able to do them, but instead had these skills as part of their womanhood. Just like the domestic workers Cox (1997) interviewed for her study in London, the

participants of this study also emphasized that women do not need any other knowledge than common sense to undertake informal employment, as all women should have an understanding of basic hygiene, cleaning, tidying up around the house, childcare, and elderly care, but also of sewing, handicrafts or food preparation.

In addition to needing permission from husbands and fathers, for many women maintaining their »honor« or »reputation« in the general community played a pivotal role in gaining access to and retaining paid work. They emphasized the »very high« consequences of »dishonoring the family« including but not limited to domestic violence and a loss of family support, leading to social isolation. Consequently, women not only felt pressure to conform to the »appropriate« behaviors that were expected of them, but were also pushed to accept a heightened level of control in their neighborhoods and workplaces during their paid work time. Ensuring a »safe« (*temiz ortam*) workplace environment which would not harm their reputation emerged as the most important concern, and also as a strategy to enter and continue paid work. This was achieved through working together with kin (i.e. family members, friends, and neighbors) in order to have a shield against gossip and slander, as this provided them with a witness who could tell their side of the story. Women noted that working with kin ensured that they were not easily approachable for men, and hence their honor would be protected. Such »assurances« to the family often enabled women access to the labor market, albeit with varying levels of control exercised by the family members and friends with whom they worked together.

The number of gender-specific requirements limited many women's economic activities to the informal sector, where they could engage in ad hoc, temporary activities that could be considered a continuation of their unpaid domestic roles and would also allow them to work with people of their own (family's) choosing in places that were deemed appropriate for them. However, this interaction between the informal characteristics of their labor (i.e. temporary, ad hoc, unorganized) and their gendered access to the labor market meant that women often came to de-value

their labor as non-work so as not to challenge traditional gender role dynamics in their households.

### **Concluding remarks**

Women's labor force participation often remains under-reported in official statistics, especially in countries with large informal sectors. Based on fieldwork in Istanbul, Turkey, this article has explored why women engaged in paid work in the informal sector refer to themselves as »housewives« and »non-working«. In doing so, the paper has attempted to shed light on women's everyday subjective perceptions of the meaning of work. On the one hand, the findings presented in the paper illustrated the gender-specific, informality-specific reasons why women refer to their paid work in the informal sector as non-work. On the other hand, the paper also presented the theory that the interaction between gender-specific and informality-specific constraints (which I called gender-specific informality) was actually pragmatically utilized by many women to access the labor market. In so doing, the paper demonstrated that the discrepancies between women's paid work in the informal sector and their subjective interpretations of the same as non-work might be a deliberate choice (motivated by practical ends) for some women. Future research could further this theoretical understanding of women's work in the informal sector as a strategic choice in order to further develop theories of women's everyday definitions of »work« from a social constructivist perspective.

My fieldwork with low-educated, low-income women in Istanbul who were engaged in informal work suggests that women's accounts of what counted as [proper] »work« and »non-work« are marked by the value they attach to the conditions of employment and by the priority of paid work over their unpaid labor at home. In other words, women perceived their informal work as »not worthy of being called work« because it often lacked adequate benefits, did not provide regular and stable income, and there was no contractual relationship between employer and employee. My study also revealed however that such demarcation of work and non-work was shaped by gender ideologies which governed

women's role and status in family and in society. The inherently patriarchal »male breadwinner, female caretaker« family model entailed that men did not want to lose their status as the sole breadwinner in the family, and hence attempted to strictly control women's entry into the public sphere; in these cases, the labor market.

Against this background, constrained by limited labor market opportunities and patriarchal gender roles, women in informal employment tended to undervalue their paid labor as »non-work.« The low social status associated with informal employment, owing to its irregular, low pay and contingent characteristics, had an added effect in this devaluation, especially when combined with »female jobs« in the labor market. Such undervaluation of women's efforts implies their invisibility as financial contributors to their households, and to the labor market in general.

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