

The International Corner

Work-Family Interface in Turkey

by Zeynep Aycan



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Bio: Zeynep Aycan is a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Koç University. She is also the director of the Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities.

Aycan completed her doctoral studies at Queen's University, Canada, and conducted postdoctoral studies at McGill University. Trained as a cross-cultural psychologist, Aycan's research focuses on the impact of culture on various aspects of organizational processes, including leadership, human resource management, women's career development, and work-life balance.

She has published three books—*Expatriate Management: Theory and Research; Leadership, Management, Human Resource Practices in Turkey;* and *Life Balance*—and is currently preparing a textbook for publication: *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Organizational Behavior*. In addition, she has written more than 50 book chapters and research articles in a variety of journals, including *Annual Review of Psychology, Group and Organization Management, Applied Psychology: An International Review, Human Relations, Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology,* and *International Journal of Human Resource Management*.

Most recently, Aycan has been selected as an Outstanding Young Scientist by the World Economic Forum's Inter Academy Panel. She has also been selected as the Research Fellow to the Center for Global Workforce Strategy at Simon Fraser University in Canada.

“Remember that Turkey is primarily a Muslim country, so the vast majority of your business contacts will be male . . . Any business women you meet will probably be Greek or Armenian rather than Turkish.”

This is how American authors described Turkish society in a guide for Western business people published in the mid-1990s. Fortunately for educated, middle-class and urban Turkish women, such a cliché is now false—and already was at the time the “guide” was released.

As far as Turkish middle and upper classes are concerned, the published data at the beginning of the 2000s show that women represent, for example, a substantial proportion of pharmacists (60%), physicians (19%), dentists (30%), lawyers (34%), and professors (23%). With increasing numbers of women participating in all aspects of work life, work-family balance has become an issue of critical importance for both working people and organizations in Turkey.

Work-Family Conflict a “Mild” Problem

Studies conducted in Turkey reveal that work-family conflict is experienced mildly by middle-class working men and women. There may be two reasons for that.

- First, family is extremely important in Turkish culture, and organizations tend to be tolerant of their workers' family responsibilities. It is rare that organizations have formal policies and practices in place to help their employees balance work and family responsibilities, but they do so informally thanks to supportive midlevel managers and colleagues.
- Second, child-care services are relatively more affordable in Turkey than they are in the Western industrialized world. Women migrating to urban cities from rural areas often work as in-home nannies and helpers for a relatively low cost. Child-care support is also provided by members of the extended family, especially mothers, mothers-in-law, or aunties.

Women Experience More Work-to-Family Interference, More Guilt

Research conducted with Turkish dual-earner families with children (Aycan & Eskin, 2005) showed that both men and women allowed work to interfere with family more than they allowed family to interfere with work. The findings also showed that women experienced interference from work to family more than men did. Workload experienced by working people was the most important predictor of work-family conflict. These findings were in line with the published literature on Western industrialized samples.

Work-family conflict has been found to be associated with guilt, especially by women who feel that they cannot adequately fulfill their roles in the family as prescribed by the traditional gender roles in Turkish society.

In addition, younger-generation (Generation Y) women worry about balancing work and personal life (e.g., hobbies, activities for self-development) and tend to shy away from getting married and having children.

Informal Support Valuable, But Not Sustainable

Fierce competition at the global level and economic crises around the world have increased the workload for working men and women. Organizations must accordingly pay special attention to work-life balance.

Organizations in Turkey with more than 50 women employees are legally obliged by law to provide daycare,

but the majority of companies do not offer this service and instead choose to pay a fine. Companies claim that high cost and geographical dispersion among corporate branches preclude their offering such services.

In addition, maternity leave is short, and women are not guaranteed to return to the same job if they wish to extend their leave period. In general, working people rely on informal and social networks to help them establish work-life balance; without institutional support (e.g., organizational policies and practices monitored and enforced by the government), however, the system is not sustainable.

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