

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT GAP BETWEEN NATIVE SPEAKERS OF TURKISH AND KURDISH

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Executive Summary

In this research note, we study the educational attainment gap between native speakers of Turkish and Kurdish in Turkey. We use the data collected by Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies for the Turkish Health and Demographic Survey conducted in 2003. We show that the educational attainment of the population whose mother tongue is Kurdish is very low compared to the population whose mother tongue is Turkish. Despite the fact that younger age groups have higher education levels regardless of the mother tongue, the educational attainment gap between two populations remains still very large. A significant improvement is observed between cohorts, however it occurs very slowly.

The large educational attainment gap between two populations is mostly due to the differences between the female populations. The educational attainment gap between male native speakers of Turkish and Kurdish has been shrinking over time, and is significantly reduced across cohorts. Yet, the education attainment gap between female populations is huge and barely changes across cohorts. One out of every three female native speakers of Kurdish neither graduates from primary school nor speaks Turkish.¹

Demographic Characteristics

In this research note, we use the data from the Turkish Demographic and Health Survey conducted in 2003 (TDHS 2003) by Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies². According to TDHS 2003 data, native speakers of Turkish constitute 83 percent of the total population while native speakers of Kurdish make up 14 percent. The remaining 3 percent speak other languages as mother tongue.

Figure 1 shows that the regional distribution of the population, whose mother tongue is Kurdish, is not homogenous. While native speakers of Kurdish constitute 57percent of the population in the East, due to internal migration, the same group amounts up to 6 and 11 percent in the West and South regions, respectively.³

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¹ Primary school or primary education refers to 5 years of schooling. The compulsory years of schooling in Turkey was 5 years until 1997, and 8 years thereafter. However, most of the individuals in the data set were not affected by this policy change.

² For further information about the data see the information box at the end of the research note.

³ **West:** Aydın, Balıkesir, Bursa, Çanakkale, Denizli, Edirne, İstanbul, İzmir, Kırklareli, Kocaeli, Manisa, Muğla, Sakarya, Tekirdağ

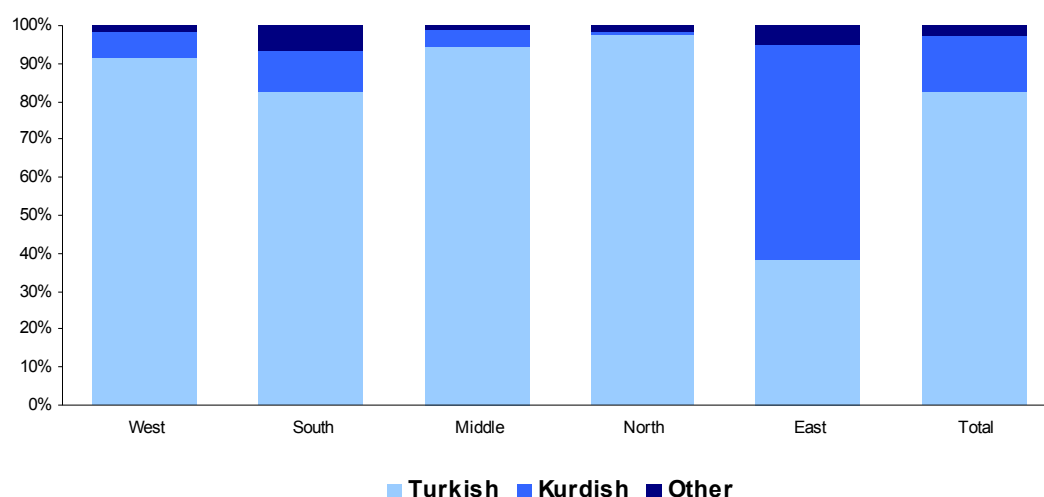
South: Adana, Antalya, Burdur, Hatay, Isparta, İçel, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye

Middle: Afyon, Amasya, Ankara, Bilecik, Bolu, Çankırı, Çorum, Eskişehir, Kayseri, Kırşehir, Konya, Kütahya, Nevşehir, Niğde, Sivas, Tokat, Uşak, Yozgat, Aksaray, Karaman, Kırıkkale, Düzce

North: Artvin, Giresun, Gümüşhane, Kastamonu, Ordu, Rize, Samsun, Sinop, Trabzon, Zonguldak, Bartın, Karabük

East: Adıyaman, Ağrı, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Erzincan, Gaziantep, Hakkari, Kars, Malatya, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Tunceli, Şanlıurfa, Van, Bayburt, Batman, Şırnak, Ardahan, Iğdır, Kilis

Figure 1 Regional distribution of the populations



Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

As for the distribution of the population across urban and rural areas, 35 percent of the native speakers of Kurdish live in rural areas whereas 29 percent of the total population in Turkey resides in rural areas. It can be argued that this inevitably affects access to the education.

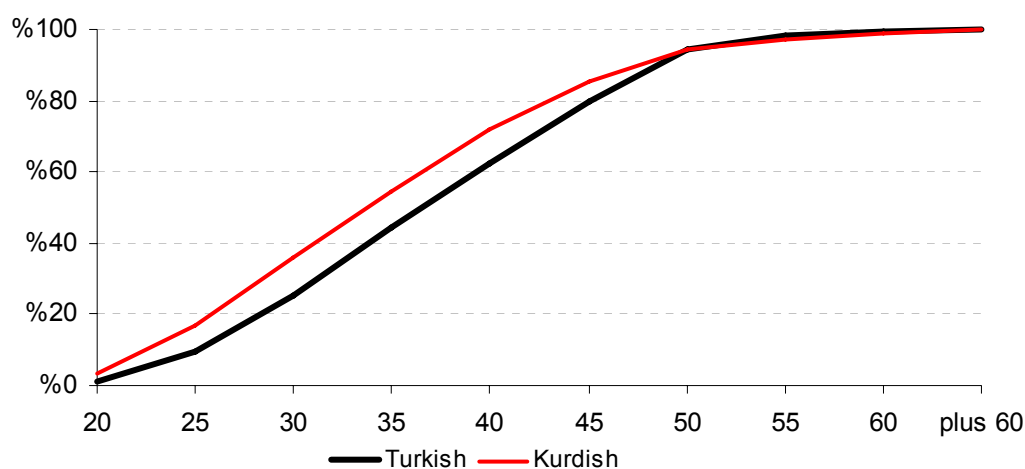
Table 1 Rural / Urban Distribution of the Populations

	Urban	Rural	Total
Turkish	72%	28%	100%
Kurdish	65%	35%	100%
Total (average)	71%	29%	100%

Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

Figure 2 depicts the cumulative age distribution of the native speakers of Kurdish and Turkish. Native speakers of Kurdish are significantly younger than those of Turkish. 36 percent of the native speakers of Kurdish are under the age of 30 while the same ratio falls to 25 percent among the native speakers of Turkish.

Figure 2 Cumulative Age Distribution



Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

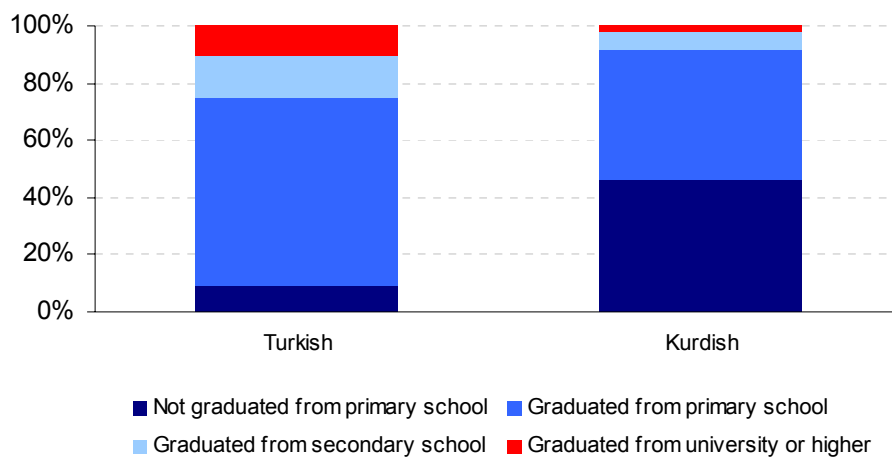
Almost Half of Native Speakers of Kurdish Have Not Graduated From Primary School

A closer look at the education attainment reveals a large gap between those whose mother tongue is Kurdish vs. Turkish. Regardless of age and gender, Figure 3 displays the educational attainment of

the two populations for the entire sample. The most prominent point is that 46 percent of those who speak Kurdish as their mother tongue have not graduated from primary school. Moreover, a large part of this group never attended school (37 percent). On the other hand, the number of people who are not primary school graduates represents only 9 percent of the native speakers of Turkish. It is probable that the large educational attainment gap between the two populations may be explained by the differences in age, cohort, gender or region.

In Figure 2, the age profile presents a counterintuitive result. It appears that the differences in age do not explain the educational attainment gap, but widen it. In Turkey, school enrollment rates of younger cohorts are higher. Hence comparing any two populations, *ceteris paribus*; one should expect the older population to have lower educational attainment. However, Figure 2 shows that native speakers of Turkish are both older and more educated. This leaves the regional disparities and the living area differences as the most important potential sources of the educational attainment gap.

Figure 3 Educational Attainment

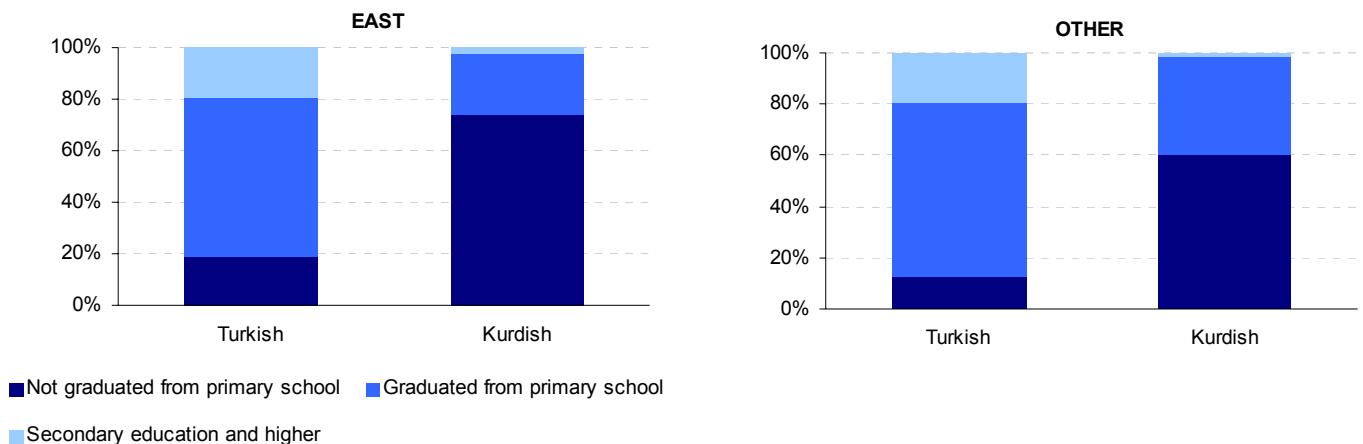


Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

Living in the East: How Much Does It Matter?

Figure 4 depicts the educational attainment for the East and the other regions. Although educational attainment is broadly lower in the East, the educational attainment gap between the two populations does not seem to exhibit geographical differences across the East vs. the other regions.

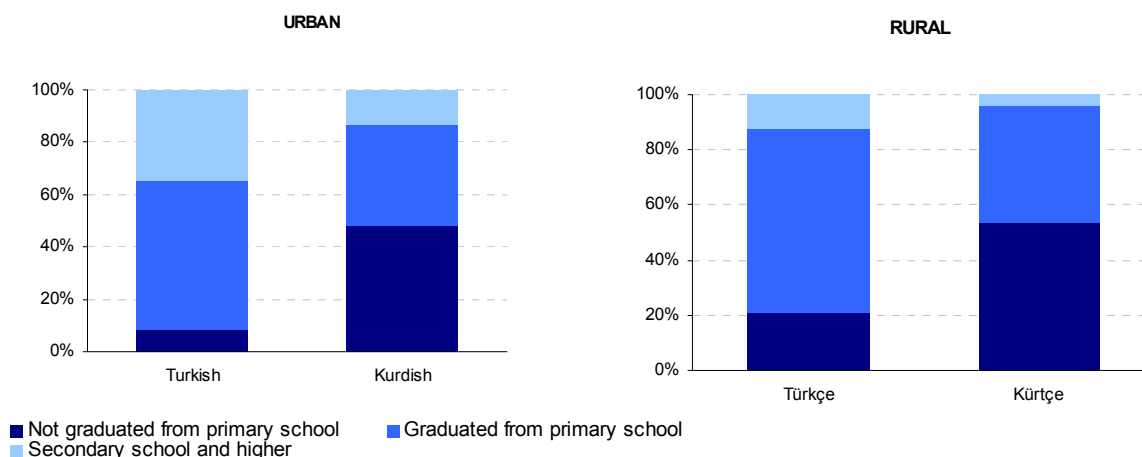
Figure 4 Educational Attainments in the East vs. the Other Regions



Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

Moreover, the urban - rural distinction does not change the main picture either. As shown in Table 1, native speakers of Kurdish are more likely to live in rural areas, mostly in villages. Considering the insufficient access to education, especially in the East, one may think that the large educational attainment gap between two populations can be explained by access to education. However, Figure 5 indicates that urban rural difference can only play a moderate role in explaining the large gap. Among those who speak Kurdish as their mother tongue, the number of the individuals without primary school graduation represents 52 percent in rural and 48 percent in urban areas. Nevertheless, the same numbers in the Turkish population show a sizeable difference between rural and urban areas at 21 and 9 percent, respectively.

Figure 5 Educational Attainments by Urban Rural Difference in the East



Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

It could be argued that the migration from rural to urban areas may explain this asymmetric effect. Yet, the migration from rural to urban areas is also present for the native speakers of Turkish though less intense. We think that the educational attainment gap between two populations would remain at a comparable level even after accounting for migration. Similarly, the income differences between two populations may have a limited explanatory role as well. Unfortunately, the data of TDHS 2003 does not allow us to quantify these effects.

Finally, we look into gender differences and observe that the large educational attainment gap between the two populations is mostly due to the vast difference in education levels between women who speak different mother tongues.

Large Educational Attainment Gap between Women

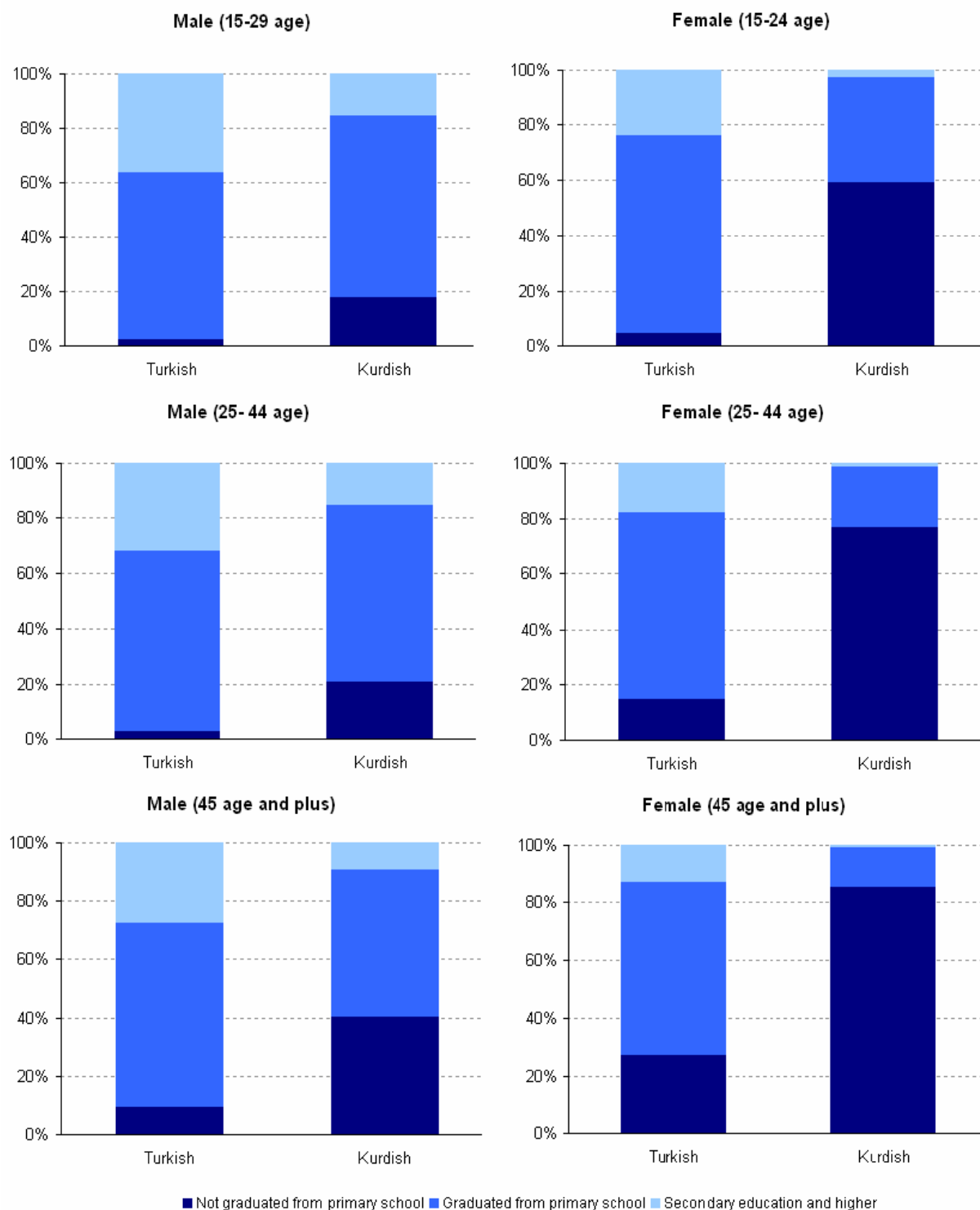
Important differences appear as we consider the education attainments within different age groups and gender. Figure 6 shows the education attainments in three cohorts by gender and mother tongue. The cohorts are formed in the following manner: 15-29 (individuals born between 1988 and 1974), 30-34 (individuals born between 1973 and 1959) and 35-39 (individuals born in 1958 and before). Note that the indicated ages are at 2003, the year of the survey.

Turkey has an increasing school enrolment rate thus one should expect the educational attainment of the younger cohorts to be higher. Regardless of the mother tongue and gender, the educational attainment is indeed higher for the 15-29 age group. For example, in the 45 and plus age group, 46 percent of the native speakers of Kurdish do not have primary school diplomas whereas this percentage falls to 33 in the 15-29 age group of the same population.

Even though there is an improvement over time, the educational attainment gap between the two populations is reduced for only males. The educational attainment gap between the females of different mother tongues increased during 1970s and started to decline in the 1980s. For instance, in the 45 and plus age group, 40 percent of the male native speakers of Kurdish did not graduate from primary school whereas the same ratio is only 9 percent for male native speakers of Turkish (31 points of difference). In the 15-29 age group, the same numbers fall to 18 and 2 percent for male native speakers of Kurdish and Turkish respectively (the gap being 16 points). Despite the recovery, labor

productivity is at an alarmingly low level given that 18 percent of the Kurdish native speaker males do not even have primary school diplomas.

Figure 6 Educational Attainments According to the Gender and Cohort



Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

The female educational attainment gap is even wider. For the 45 and plus age group, 27 percent of female native speakers of Turkish do not hold primary school diplomas while the same number increases to 85 percent for the female native speakers of Kurdish (58 points of difference). The gap increases to 65 points for 30-34 age group (15 to 77 percent) and decreases to 55 points for the 15-29 age group (4 to 59 percent). The educational attainment of females in the youngest adult generation points to a dire situation. While 59 percent of the female native speakers of Kurdish do not graduate from primary school, only 4 percent of female native speakers of Turkish do not. Additionally, the gap between primary school graduates is consistent across cohorts. In the 45 and plus age group, the

difference between female native speakers is 45 percentage points (59 to 14 percent). This reduces only to 34 points (72 percent to 38 percent) in the 15-29 age group, in almost half a century.

It would be fair to say that Turkey has failed in her mission to provide equal opportunities to all of her citizens, especially to female native speakers of Kurdish.

One out of Every Three Uneducated Native Speakers of Kurdish do not Speak Turkish

Speaking the language of instruction is a compulsory element of education. Therefore, the percentage of those who do not speak Turkish among the native speakers of Kurdish remains an important indicator. If we were to look at native speakers of Kurdish only, among those who did not receive any formal education, females constitute 76 percent. In other words, women make up an overwhelming part of this group. Moreover, 33 percent of the uneducated native speakers of Kurdish declare that they do not speak Turkish. This implies that 90 percent of the uneducated native speakers of Kurdish who do not speak Turkish are women.

Table 2 Turkish Speakers among the Uneducated Native Speakers of Kurdish

	Females	Males	Total
Speaks Turkish	46%	21%	67%
Do not speak Turkish	30%	3%	33%
Total	76%	24%	100%

Source: TDHS 2003 and **betam**

Note that there are two official ways to learn Turkish for those who do not speak it as a mother tongue: Compulsory education and compulsory military service. Compulsory military service is an opportunity for males who did or could not attend compulsory education but this is obviously not a track for females. Among all the Kurdish speaking females, 24 percent do not speak Turkish as a second language. This means that they can not fully participate in the political, social and in some ways the cultural life of Turkey.

Conclusion

2003 data indicates a large educational attainment gap between native speakers of Kurdish and Turkish. Even though this is partly due to the insufficient access to education in the East, the data implies that the large gap between females goes a long way in explaining the educational attainment gap. The educational attainment of female native speakers of Kurdish is far below than that of female native speakers of Turkish. Even though this gap is smaller in younger cohorts, the educational attainment gap between two populations still remains too wide. This opens a fertile ground for future research concerning the ways to reduce the educational attainment gap between two populations during the next decades. The cultural aspects of schooling decisions should be investigated in detail, given that the educational attainment of children born to native speakers of Kurdish seem to have extremely low educational attainment levels. To conclude, Turkey urgently needs an education plan which aims at reducing ethnic disparities in educational attainment.

Turkish Demographic and Health Survey 2003 (TDHS-2003)

TDHS is conducted by Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies and repeated every five years. In this research note, we use data from the 2003 wave, TDHS-2003. Even though TDHS was repeated in 2008, the micro data are not yet publicly available.

TDHS-2003 contains 10,836 household interviews and 47,894 individuals. The sample is representative of Turkey and five regions: East, West, North, South and Central. The survey has an additional module for women in the age group 15-49 who were ever married. In TDSH 2003, this module includes 8,075 women.

Since 1960, State statistic institutes do not collect data on ethnic background. The research papers on ethnic disparities usually use the data collected by social scientists and the sample sizes are generally restricted to 1000-3000 individuals. TDHS includes a “mother tongue” variable in a significantly larger sample.

The variable “mother tongue” is present in the additional module that was conducted on ever married women in the 15-49 age group. We also observe the mother tongue of the current husband in this particular module. In this reseach note, we used 14,408 individuals whose mother tongue variable is available. The sample consists of 15-49 year old women who participated in the ever married women module and their current husbands given that they were identifiable from the main data.

West: Aydın, Balıkesir, Bursa, Çanakkale, Denizli, Edirne, İstanbul, İzmir, Kırklareli, Kocaeli, Manisa, Muğla, Sakarya, Tekirdağ

South: Adana, Antalya, Burdur, Hatay, Isparta, İçel, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye

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