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4 MILLION 742 THOUSAND WOMEN ARE ILLITERATE

Gokce Uysal-Kolasin* and Duygu Guner**

Abstract

According to the Household Labor Force Survey data released by TURKSTAT, there are still 5 million 674 thousand people in Turkey over the age of 15, who are illiterate. 84 percent of them are women. Even though literacy is more widespread among the younger population, there are still 406 thousand people between the ages 15 to 24 who cannot read or write. Being illiterate is the unsurpassable obstacle to participation in the economic and social sphere. Given that the illiterate 5 million 674 thousand people have been left out of the educational system, state-led or state-supported literacy campaigns should be expedited immediately to combat illiteracy.

406 thousand people between the ages 15 to 24 are illiterate

According to the Household Labor Force Survey 2008 data, there are still 5 million 674 thousand people in Turkey over the age of 15 who do not know how to read or write. In other words, 11 percent of the population is still illiterate.¹ Table 1 presents the number of illiterate people across different age groups. The literacy rate for those of age 65 or older is 59 percent. This rate increases to 84 percent for the 45 to 64 age group, and up to 96 percent for younger age groups. Undoubtedly, the number of illiterate people has decreased considerably over time. However, using millions to express the number of illiterate people in Turkey is simply unacceptable in 2010. Of course, Turkey has progressed in decreasing the number of illiterate people over time, however, there is still a part of the adult population who need to learn how to read and write. Turkey has to concentrate on programs that target the adult population who are not in school anymore and who are not literate.

Table 1 Illiteracy by age groups

Age	Literate	Illiterate	Total
15-24	11,084,495 96%	405,858 4%	11,490,354 100%
25-44	20,555,572 94%	1,294,774 6%	21,850,345 100%
45-64	10,625,179 84%	1,997,326 16%	12,622,504 100%
65+	2,832,163 59%	1,976,347 41%	4,808,510 100%
Total	45,097,409 89%	5,674,304 11%	50,771,713 100%

Moreover, there are 406 thousand people between the ages 15 to 24 who are illiterate. Remember that the mandatory elementary education had been increased to 8 years from 5 years in 1997,

* Asst. Prof. Gokce Uysal-Kolasin, Betam, gokce.kolasin@bahcesehir.edu.tr

** Duygu Guner, Betam, Research Assistant, duygu.guner@bahcesehir.edu.tr

¹ Obviously, people who cannot read or write due mental disabilities are also included in these numbers. Unfortunately, Household Labor Surveys do not contain any information on mental disabilities. However, 794 thousand illiterate people have declared that they are not searching for a job because they are ill or disabled. When we consider that some of the 794 thousand are ill (339 thousand of the 794 thousand are at least 65 years old) and/or have physical disabilities, we can conclude that those who cannot learn how to read or write due to a mental disability constitute only a small part of the illiterate population.

when a majority of this 406 thousand were still of mandatory school age.² 406 thousand young people who are illiterate despite an 8-year mandatory elementary education indicate dire malfunctioning in the current education system in Turkey.

The number of illiterate people across different genders and age groups are presented in Table 2. The most striking observation is the fact that a large part of the illiterate people is women. 4 million 742 thousand out of 5 million 674 thousand people are women, and the remaining 932 thousand are men. What is more dismal is that women's relatively disadvantaged position has not changed much across different age groups. In other words, the education system in Turkey has succeeded in teaching more people how to read or write, however the literacy gender gap has not diminished across time. Even in the 15 to 24 year age group, 79 percent of illiterate people are women.

Table 2 Illiteracy by age groups and gender

Age	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
15-24	86,247 21%	319,611 79%	405,858 100%
25-44	192,151 15%	1,102,623 85%	1,294,774 100%
45-64	255,767 13%	1,741,559 87%	1,997,326 100%
65+	397,636 20%	1,578,711 80%	1,976,347 100%
Total	931,801 16%	4,742,504 84%	5,674,304 100%

Not knowing how to read or write is a major impediment in participating in economic and social life. An illiterate person needs help even in going about her daily life, running errands, opening a bank account, keeping track of how her children are doing in school, etc. Given that being illiterate is more widespread across women, it is clear that an illiterate woman's familial status will also be affected adversely. It has been proven that a woman's familial status has positive effects on the children's education and health expenses. In this respect, teaching illiterate women how to read and write becomes an exigency not only to ameliorate their respective status in familial, economic and social lives, but also to improve the lives of future generations.³

Labor market conditions for illiterates

Being illiterate makes it impossible for almost half a million young people of ages 15 to 24, to adapt to labor demand, which is driven by accelerating skill-biased technological change. Given that Turkey has not yet completed the structural transformation from the agricultural sectors to non-agricultural sectors, it is clear that it will only be harder for the illiterate young workers to find jobs in the future. Furthermore, these young people have a long life span, which implies that the returns to human capital investment will be higher. Given their age, they may still be included in the education system. Therefore, age-group-specific educational programs will yield high returns. Note that the education provided within the education system has been shown to be more efficient than training provided through active labor market policies. In other words, the most efficient policy would be to integrate the illiterate young in the existing education system.

As for the older part of the population, the early retirement options that were available to workers in the past couple of decades have caused retirement ages to decline considerably. Workers retire early in Turkey. Hence, the returns to literacy for 45 year or older illiterate population are going to be low.

² The 15 to 24 year olds in 2008 were between the ages of 4 to 13 in 1997, when the mandatory education was increased to 8 years.

³ Betam Policy Brief 09/2: Children of working mothers are more successful.

When studying the labor market outcomes of the illiterates, we choose to concentrate on the 25 to 44 year olds, who are of prime age in terms of labor market (Table 3). In this age group, there are 1 million 295 thousand illiterate people, again mostly women. 83 percent of the illiterate females are not participating in the labor market, and most of those who do, are employed as unpaid family workers. On the other hand, 57 percent of the illiterate males are either employed or seeking employment. The shares of paid, casual and self-employed work in illiterate male employment are almost equal.

Table 3 The labor market status 25 to 44 year old illiterates

	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Employed	88,377	175,692	264,069
	46%	16%	20%
Unemployed	21,549	9,772	31,321
	11%	1%	2%
Inactive	82,226	917,158	999,384
	43%	83%	77%
Total	192,151	1,102,623	1,294,774
	100%	100%	100%

The conditions that the illiterates face in the labor market are dire. A majority of women are driven out of the economic sphere; almost the entire tiny minority in employment is working informally, i.e. without any social security coverage (97 percent). Moreover, the majority of the illiterate working women are unpaid family workers, implying that they cannot benefit from the empowerment of paid work. The labor market conditions are only marginally better for men. Approximately one third of illiterate men in employment are self-employed, the rest face high unemployment risk.

Table 4 Employment status of 25 to 44 year old illiterates

	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Paid	31%	5%	14%
Casual worker	28%	12%	17%
Self-employed	35%	21%	26%
Unpaid family worker	6%	61%	43%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Southeast Anatolia needs a literacy campaign

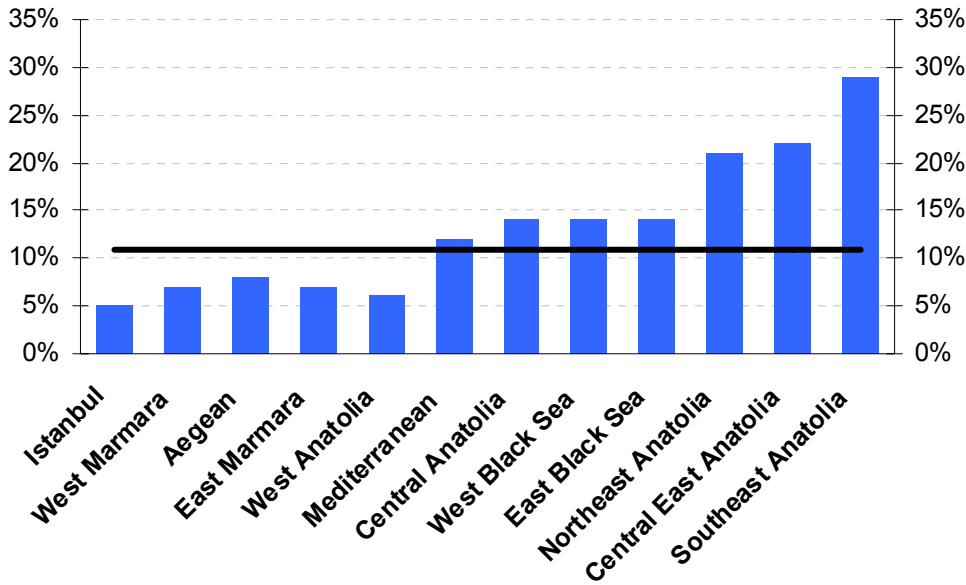
There are unacceptable differences across regions in terms of illiteracy. In Figure 1, the black solid line represents the average illiteracy rate in Turkey, which is 11 percent. Clearly, the illiteracy rates differ markedly on the east – west axis.⁴ Istanbul, Marmara, Aegean and West Anatolia have illiteracy rates below the national average. The Mediterranean and Central Anatolian regions have higher illiteracy rates, which may reflect higher migration into these areas from eastern regions. In Northeast and Central East Anatolia, the illiteracy rate is 20 percent, almost double the national average.

The illiteracy rates in the Southeast Anatolia are alarming to say the least. The illiteracy rate is 29 percent in this region. In other words, one out of three people over the age of 15 in Southeast Anatolia does not know how to read or write. Previous research by Betam concentrates on educational attainment differences between people who speak different mother tongues in Turkey. We find that among those whose mother tongue is Kurdish, half are not elementary school

⁴ The data shows that the gender gap in illiteracy rates is approximately the same across different regions. In almost all regions, females make up around 80 percent of the total illiterates.

graduates.⁵ Even though the Household Labor Force survey does not provide any information on the language spoken at home, we believe the extremely high illiteracy rates in the Southeast Anatolia to be a manifestation of the educational gap between different ethnic groups, as much as the latter are measured by differences in mother tongues. Given that literacy is a prerequisite in participation in the economic and social sphere, and that one out of every three adults are illiterate in this region, it is obvious that the Southeast Anatolia demands targeted policies to combat illiteracy urgently.

Figure 1 Illiteracy by Regions (NUTS 1)



Appendix 1: NUTS1

- TR1 **Istanbul:** İstanbul
- TR2 **West Marmara:** Edirne-Tekirdağ-Kırklareli-Balıkesir-Çanakkale
- TR3 **Aegean:** İzmir-Denizli-Aydın-Muğla-Manisa-Afyon-Kütahya-Uşak
- TR4 **East Marmara:** Bursa-Eskişehir-Bilecik-Kocaeli-Sakarya-Düzce-Bolu-Yalova
- TR5 **West Anatolia:** Ankara-Konya-Karaman
- TR6 **Mediterranean:** Antalya-Isparta-Burdur-Adana-Mersin-Hatay-Kahramanmaraş-Osmaniye
- TR7 **Central Anatolia:** Nevşehir-Aksaray-Niğde-Kırıkkale-Kırşehir-Kayseri-Sivas-Yozgat
- TR8 **West Black Sea:** Zonguldak-Karabük-Bartın-Kastamonu-Çankırı-Sinop-Samsun-Tokat-Çorum-Amasya
- TR9 **East Black Sea:** Trabzon-Ordu-Giresun-Rize-Artvin-Gümüşhane
- TRA **Northeast Anatolia:** Erzurum-Erzincan-Bayburt-Kars-Ağrı-Iğdır-Ardahan
- TRB **Central East Anatolia:** Malatya-Elazığ-Bingöl-Tunceli-Van-Muş-Bitlis-Hakkari
- TRC **Southeast Anatolia:** Gaziantep-Adıyaman-Kilis-Diyarbakır-Şanlıurfa-Siirt-Mardin-Batman-Şırnak

⁵ The illiteracy rates are even higher for women who speak Kurdish as their mother tongue. Betam Research Brief 09/49: Educational attainment gap between native speakers of Turkish and Kurdish