

More women to enter workforce if headscarf ban lifted, survey finds

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The vast majority of participants in a newly-released survey believe that the ban on the use of the Muslim headscarf on university campuses and in public and private businesses is unjust and that the number of women in the work force would increase if the ban were ended.

Over 72 percent said Turkey would witness an increase in women in the work place in such a case. The poll was conducted by the Ankara-based MetroPOLL Strategic and Social Research Center upon the request of the Turkish Businesswomen Association (TIKAD). It was presented at a press conference on Wednesday in Istanbul.

TIKAD was prompted to conduct a study on the headscarf ban as Turkey stands near the bottom on a list of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries — 136th among 140 countries — when it comes to women's employment, despite the fact that the Turkish economy has attained impressive levels of economic growth. In Turkey, the headscarf ban has been a matter of contention. Its use was banned on university campuses shortly after the 1997 post-modern coup on the grounds that it poses a threat to the secular order.

According to a new survey, over 72 percent of people believe that Turkey would witness an increase of women in the workplace if the notorious headscarf ban were to be lifted. In Turkey, state institutions will not hire headscarf-wearing women. They are also denied employment in most private companies

State institutions will not hire headscarf-wearing women. They are also denied employment in most private companies despite the lack of a law that prohibits the use of the headscarf in private businesses.

According to the poll, women who wear headscarves overwhelmingly want to be part of the workforce and their spouses concur. "There is a very positive message for employers here," Professor Ihsan Dagi said when interpreting the results. Dagi was also among those who conducted the survey.

The poll found that more than 50 percent of spouses of women who wear headscarves say they would like their wives to be employed and to pursue an education even if that means having to take off the headscarf. "So husbands no longer prefer to see their wives stay at home and take care of the children," Professor Dagi explained.

The professor also warned of potential conflict as women who wear headscarves will also demand the right to employment in the public sector. "We need to be prepared for conflict in that area. We need to determine who can give public services and what their qualifications should be. And people who serve in the public sector should accept those features," he said.

University students periodically hold demonstrations to denounce the ban on wearing headscarves on university campuses. YÖK recently moved to lift the notorious ban.

The respondents were also asked whether headscarved employees should enjoy equal rights with their non-covered peers in the work place. An overwhelming 90 percent said they supported equal rights for covered and non-covered employees. Only 8.5 percent said they were opposed.

'Politicians obstruct solution to headscarf problem, not society'

The poll has also revealed that the issue of the headscarf is an artificial fault line used as a political tool by mostly male politicians to create areas of conflict, whereas, in reality, people have no problem with headscarved women receiving a university education and being employed. Over 76 percent said yes when asked if politicians use the headscarf issue for political gains.

"Underestimating the problems that women face on the issue of the headscarf means using it as a tool for ideological and political polarization," said Nilüfer Bulut, TIKAD's chairwoman, yesterday during a press conference. "Why do fundamentalist religious males keep their places in the bureaucracy, universities or Parliament while women who wear a headscarf are ousted, and why are their rights to an education, a career and political participation taken away?" she asked. "This means that the problem is not the headscarf but a fight for political power through the headscarf issue by the ones called 'religious or traditional' and 'secular-modern'," Bulut added.

According to the poll, people — headscarf-wearing or not — said they felt empathy for each other and that they do not view those who do or do not wear a headscarf as "the other."

The respondents were also asked their opinion about the motive behind one's decision to wear the headscarf. Contrary to belief expressed by some, most headscarf-wearing women indicated that they choose to do so because of their beliefs not because of a political aim. A total of 85 percent said it is linked to religious beliefs, while only 0.7 percent thought women use the headscarf as a political symbol. Staunchly secular people believe that the headscarf is not a Muslim requirement and that it's worn by women as a political symbol.

The poll also showed that women who wear headscarves are not a homogenous group as more educated, professional and mid to high-income-level women who wear a headscarf feel more restricted in the society versus more traditional and less educated headscarved women.

When asked if women should wear the headscarf, 78 percent said women should be free to decide whether to do so or not.

In response to a question over whether headscarved students would pressure their peers into covering their head if the ban were abolished, more than 70 percent said "no." People who support the headscarf ban argue that uncovered students would be pressured into covering their hair if the ban were ended.

Another question directed at respondents concerned social compromise on the

freedom to wear a headscarf on university campuses. About 61 percent said ending the ban would contribute to a social compromise, while slightly more than 32 percent disagreed with this statement.

Majority sorry for headscarved women due to discrimination

Survey participants were also asked whether they feel sorry for headscarved women if they are either denied their right to a higher education or forced to drop out of university due to the ban, 75.9 percent said "yes." Only 19.6 percent said they do not feel sorry for them.

In response to a question on whether or not they would be disquieted to see headscarved women pursuing a career, 87.4 percent said they would by no means be bothered, while 11.4 percent said they would be. Asked whether they would be uncomfortable working with a woman who wore a headscarf, an overwhelming 89.1 percent responded "no."

The MetroPOLL survey also featured self-criticism by headscarf-wearing women. About 48 percent said covered women do not show the required solidarity for bringing about an end to the headscarf ban. Women's rights associations opposed to the ban often hold demonstrations protesting it, but such demonstrations have not proved really fruitful.

Professor Dagi said women should act together to overcome the problem. "Politicians interfere in culture too much. The state should not interfere with how people are dressed; instead, the state should be concerned with whether or not people are responsible citizens and are complying with laws."

More than 57 percent of headscarved women said they had been treated unjustly due to the headscarf ban, while 13.5 percent said they had not experienced unjust treatment.

When asked whether they would be opposed to their son or brother marrying a headscarf-wearing woman, 84 percent said "no." Only 13.6 percent said they would not consent to such a marriage. The survey also questioned male participants about their wives' headscarves. While 79.9 percent said their wives already wore the headscarf before they got married, 17.7 percent said their wives started wearing the headscarf after marriage of their own volition. Only 0.7 percent of the men surveyed said they had asked their wives to cover their hair after marriage.

The poll was conducted from Oct. 20-31 by telephone among a random national sampling of 3,052 adults residing in cities, towns and villages. The margin of error for the overall poll is 1.8 percentage points, at a 95 percent confidence level.

Sources

Source : TdZ, 25 November 2010, Thursday