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Problems and life satisfaction of older adults in Turkey

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Abstract

In Turkey, urbanization, industrialization, migration, new job opportunities, the widespread of communication networks, the tradition, the economic and the educational system, and the emerging differences in family structure revealed many changes in the social, cultural and demographic structure of the society. This situation has caused the change of the quantitative and semantic characteristics of old age. Further the problems of old age that have remained within the family boundaries in the past are still affecting the general population. In our country, older population experience social problems such as lack of education, labor market exclusion, poverty, abuse and neglect, diseases and lack of nursing care etc. The purpose of this study was to reveal the problems and life satisfaction of older adults in Turkey. As a result, the older population in Turkey naturally bears the highest level of the traditional community characteristics. This situation is the most important reason why younger and older generations differ in terms of lifestyle. The older population have had to live within the boundaries of insufficient income and poverty, had formal education that would never comply with the requirements of modern life, suffered from a disease, and become in a position to produce passive behavior against other generations because their knowledge is not suitable for modern life. This group consists of individuals who are increasingly exposed to negligent and abusive behaviors. Even the healthiest of them find it challenging to maintain their daily lives without their relatives. The majority of older adults remain distant to all “new” technologies. Rather than having a quality life, they explain their life satisfaction subjectively, with profound patience and trust mostly stemming from their beliefs and values.

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Introduction

Turkey was among the most developed countries until 2019, according to the development index of the United Nations Development Program. Despite its high position in the rank, Turkey does not reflect all the social characteristics of modernization. Therefore, it can be considered a country that goes through a transition period between traditional and modern, especially for older generations (Kalaycı & Özkul, 2017, p. 104). Ultimately, the majority of older adults in Turkey are the ones who have not had a chance for public education or only had average primary school level education (women have even lower levels of education) and have income with the poverty level. They have been characterized by traditional values but now have to live with more modern generations and in social environments that have changed with modernization (Kalaycı & Özkul, 2017, p. 105).

As the new form of Turkish society, emerged with modernization, is alienated from the simplicity of the traditional one, it has brought many uncertainties, obscurities, complexities, and disadvantages, as well as some benefits. The modernization process has weakened the bonds of traditional institutions and structures and opened up new areas for individuals to completely construct their self-identities. This process has been mostly shaped by the influence of the ideological attitudes and pressures of political administrations towards modernization; therefore, it has led to significant changes in the social life with the substantial effects of the inadequacy of economic conditions. Industrialization, urbanization caused by migration from rural to urban areas, differentiation of employment areas due to division of labor and occupational diversification, and the spread of mass communication networks and educational opportunities have led to the weakening of traditional values and the change of family structure. These have also caused changes in thoughts, attitudes, and relations in many areas, from production and consumption behaviors to daily life practices (Özkul & Kalaycı, 2020, p. 146). Such changes not only have affected the customs and traditions, and demographic, economic, social, and cultural characteristics that represent the traditional lifestyle but also influenced the traditional family structure and kinship relations. As an extension of this, they have also caused changes in both quantitative and semantic characteristics of old age. Therefore, while aging has become a category relatively and biologically attributed to older ages, the traditional status, roles, problems, and expectations of older adults have also changed (Özkul & Kalaycı, 2020: 149; Tuna Uysal & Eren, 2020, p. 1153).

Depending on changes in living conditions in Turkey, emphasis on a healthy diet and physical activity, improvement of working conditions, preventive measures against infectious diseases, and the spread of the use of preventive technologies thanks to other developments in the medical field have caused an increase in the number and proportion of older adults in the total population (Özkul & Kalaycı, 2020, p. 147). The older adult population, which was 6,192,962 in 2014, has increased by 21.9% in the

last five years. The share of older persons in the total population reached 7,550,727 in 2019 (9.1%). It is estimated that the older adult population will be 10.2% in 2023, and Turkey will be ranked among the countries with a “too old” population (TUIK, 2020a). As of 2019, the expected life expectancy of the older adult population was 78.3 years on average. It was determined as 75.6 years for males and 81 years for females. The 5.4-year difference between male and female older adults in terms of life expectancy at birth shows that females live longer (TUIK, 2020a). Marmara Region comes first among those regions with the highest elderly population in Turkey (30.60%). The reasons for it can be listed as the expanded infrastructure facilities that foster social life, employment diversity, and the range of employment areas. On the other hand, the Eastern Anatolia Region has the lowest proportion of the older population (5.88%) (TUIK, 2020b). This is due to the inadequacies in health infrastructure and services, problems in economic infrastructure and employment, low educational attainment and income, the dominance of traditional/feudal social organization forms in the region, and the high tendency to migrate to different regions due to terrorist acts.

Turkey has recently become a receiving country facing intense immigration from the neighboring countries, which results in the demographic and ethnic changes of the population. While the number of immigrants was approximately 466,333 in 2017, it increased by 23.8% in 2018 and reached 577,457. In 2019, it was 677,042 with an increase of 17.2%. Although a significant part of the total migrating population has been composed of young people in the last three years, about 7–8% of this population are individuals over the age of 60 (TUIK, 2019, 2020d). Although the immigrant population quantitatively contributes a little to the increase of the current older adult population, the data show that the main effect of such contribution will be revealed by the aging of the current immigrants. The international migration to Turkey in recent years is 43% higher than the migration from Turkey (TUIK, 2019). The potential of the older adult population to create a social problem is not only related to its relative size within the total population but also to its becoming dependent over time. Today, older adults live in 5,629,421 of 24,001,940 households in Turkey (23.5%). Furthermore, they maintain their lives on their own in 1,373,521 of these households. The proportion of older adults in the working population is 12.5%, and the poverty rate among them is 16.4% (TUIK, 2020a). This proportion of older adults, who consider themselves obliged to work and who are poor, reveals that about 29% of the total older adult population needs a regular income. However, the older adult population is theoretically regarded as the population not included in the labor force, therefore dependent on the working population. In this respect, while the old-age dependency ratio in Turkey was 11.8% in 2014, it increased to 13.4% in 2019. According to population projections, the old-age dependency ratio is predicted to be 15.2% in 2023, 25.3% in 2040, and 37.5% in 2060 (TUIK, 2020a). The reasons, such as the growth of the aging population, the increase in the rate of dependency, and – albeit a little – the increase in ethnic diversity through migration in recent years, lead to the weakening of the quality of social relations and

older adults to experience social and economic problems, such as loneliness, poverty, disability, low education level, need for care, and exploitation. Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to reveal the problems and life satisfaction of older adults in Turkey based on the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute and research in the relevant field.

Problems and Life Satisfaction of Older Adults

Lack of Education: Educational attainment is an essential variable in determining the position of older adults, and their life satisfaction. Considering the educational attainment of older adults in Turkey cumulatively from illiterate to university graduates, it is seen that those with primary school level education take the lead (45.0%). Among the illiterate older adults (18.3%), while male older adults are illiterate by 6.1% of all older adult males, illiterate females constitute 27.9% of all female older adults (General Directorate of Disabled and Elderly Services “EYHGM”, 2020a: 102). In addition, the older adults who are literate but have not attended any formal educational institution constitute 16.8% of the total older adult population. Therefore, 35% of the older population consists of individuals who have not been subject to formal education, while 45% have only attended a 5-year formal education. The total of those who have not received formal education and those who have only received primary school education constitute 80% of all older adults. The proportions of older adults who have had secondary (6.5%), high school (6.8%), and university (6.6%) education are close to each other (EYHGM, 2020b). The low level of education of older adults means that they lack the most important social capital element in adapting to the requirements of modern life since the quality of modern daily life is directly proportional to the use of information and technology for individuals of any age. Hence, in a period when the physical strength is weakened, older adults’ being illiterate or having low educational attainment increases their level of dependency on other individuals or institutions in psychological, social, and economic terms.

Non-inclusion in the Labor Market: Older adults in Turkey are not likely to be employed due to the low educational attainment, being unpaid family workers (child care, fulfilling domestic responsibilities, etc.), reluctance on the inclusion of them in working life, and high general unemployment rate (Emirgil, 2019: 405). While the employment rate among the general population is 53.2%, this rate is 12.5% for older adults. Older adults are generally employed in the agricultural sector (65.5%), the industrial sector (4.7%), and the construction sector (2.5%). The employment rate is 20.9% for males and 5.9% for females (TUIK, 2020a). Older individuals become disengaged from working life due to the physical, psychological, and social changes as they get older. In addition, it can be asserted that individuals in middle adulthood are unwilling to work due to various reasons and that such women are mostly housewives whose involvement with working life is limited to making handcrafted products, which makes them earn less. Older adults, who need to be included in the labor market but remain unemployed, suffer from poverty.

Poverty: Older adults are likely to face the problem of poverty due to reasons such as, inequality in the labor market, being ineligible with current employment conditions, insufficient inclusion of the social security system, working in informal and informal jobs, distribution of resources without considering the diversity of division of labor, injustice in income distribution, low pensions, and extra expenses on health and nutrition (Özkul & Kalaycı, 2020: 153; TUIK, 2020a). In addition, economic instability, decrease in purchasing power due to inflationary pressures, and increase in youth unemployment (15–24 years) over 24% in recent years (TUIK, 2020c) force older adults to share their incomes with unemployed family members, which causes the intensity of actual poverty to increase. The poverty rate in Turkey was 21.2% in 2018. This was 16.4% for the older adult population (EYHGM, 2020a: 105). In addition to economic problems, aging individuals experience social, psychological, and even cultural problems, such as disintegration with society, social exclusion, and loneliness (Ulusal, 2020: 247). In fact, “being contented” is adopted as a significant religious/cultural and attitudinal value in Turkey. Besides the pressure of ongoing and even increasing spending of older adults on the family budget (Kalıncara, 2011: 196), their social circles highly criticize their being “greedy” towards non-essential consumption expenditures. While the expectation of the social environment from older adults to be contented pushes them to settle for an already restricted lifestyle, it also makes the poverty, resulting from low income, a factor that reinforces adopting a lifestyle with poorer quality.

Abuse and Neglect: Older adults, who deal with social and economic problems during old age, also become vulnerable to abuse due to illness and poverty. The lack of data on older adult abuse and neglect in the web-database of the Turkish Statistical Institute, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Health is a significant barrier in understanding the importance of the subject and making it visible to public opinion (Kalaycı & Özkul, 2020: 355). On the other hand, there are various studies conducted on older adult abuse. These studies revealed that older adults had physical abuse (1.2% – 63%), psychological abuse (5.8 – 79%), economic abuse (0.89% – 33.4%), and sexual abuse (0.4% – 3.3%) and that they were neglected (5.4% – 81%) (Artan, 2016: 56; Tufan, 2011: 51,53). Considering the data of the studies, it was determined that family members and neighbors of older adults were responsible for such abuses and neglect (Kalaycı, Özbek Yazıcı, Özkul, & Küpeli, 2016: 236).

Diseases and Nursing Neediness: As the number of older adults increases within the population in Turkey, disability and health problems, which hinder older adults from taking care of themselves, also emerge. It is reported that older adults have at least one chronic disease, such as circulatory, respiratory, nervous, and endocrine system diseases and tumors, and 23% of the 65–69 age group, 31.9% of the 70–74 age group, and 46.5% of the 75+ age group have a disability affecting their quality of life (EYHGM, 2020b: 9, 107). Not only may older adults not be able to perform their life activities due to their health problems and/or disability, but also they may become in

need of the care of others. In Turkey, the care needs of older adults are satisfied by institutional care centers, differing depending on the duration and range of services. For example, daycare centers generally provide medical and social care services for older adults in working hours on weekdays (Zorlu & Onur, 2019: 423). Older adults are served in a total of 160 adult day care centers in Turkey, including 30 adult daycare centers affiliated to the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services, 127 affiliated to municipalities, and 3 affiliated to non-governmental organizations (EYHGM, 2020a: 97). Nursing homes are environments where lifelong care, supervision, and guidance services are provided and socialization opportunities are offered to older adults who have difficulty living alone through public or private institutions (Zorlu & Onur, 2019: 424). According to the data of 2020, approximately 36% of the total nursing homes (428) are operated by public institutions, and about 58% serve as private nursing homes. Among 27,219 older adults receiving caring services, 51% utilize such services in public nursing homes, and approximately 39% in private nursing homes (EYHGM, 2020a: 96–97). However, the family still plays the most influential role in the care of older adults due to the strong influences of traditional values (Arpacı, 2019: 121). In Turkish culture, family members' involvement in the care of older adults is both related to the older adults' preserving their traditional dignity to some extent and maintaining their family roles and about maintaining the importance of the family as an economic solidarity unit. For this reason, among the social policies generated by the public for increasing the care expenditures of older adults, relative importance has been attached to the regulations for more families to take part in older adult care. For example, one of the regulations made in this area is the cash/fee benefit for home care providers. According to the Regulation on Determination of Disabled People in Need of Care and Care Service Principles, the social benefit is unconditionally provided for the care of older adults with at least 50% severe disability. 153,893 (29.4%) of the 523,068 people benefiting from home care benefits in 2020 consist of individuals over 65 years (EYHGM, 2020a: 57). However, the findings of some studies suggest that older adults are not adequately cared for by those who are responsible for the care for them despite the monthly cash benefits (Arpacı, 2019: 121).

Relationships with Family Members: The transformation in the family structure, the increase in occupational diversity and residence opportunities in different places, the poor economic conditions, the obligation to participate in working life, and the differentiation of life experience between generations lead older adults to have to live mostly with their spouses and with their children (gradually decreasing) and to have sometimes to live alone (especially with the death of the spouse) (Bulduk, & Say Şahin, 2020: 157). In Turkey, older adults are reluctant to live with their adult children in the same home. However, they have the desire to have proximity and to spend any time of daily life together with their children both to help each other when needed and because of emotional attachments (Görgün Baran, 2005: 273; Arpacı & Şahin 2015: 236; Özkul, Kalaycı, & Atasoy, 2019: 89). This is related to the desire of older adults

to maintain traditional family ties and to create some mutually needed opportunities for solidarity, such as satisfying their care needs with the help of the family members, caring the child/grandchild assumed them, fulfilling domestic and non-domestic responsibilities, getting rid of loneliness, and satisfying the need to be in a peaceful and safe environment (Özkul & Kalaycı, 2020: 149).

Use of Technology: Technology facilitates the everyday life. As mentioned above, older adults represent the group with the lowest educational attainment and literacy level in Turkey, and female older adults suffer from the worst in this respect. General education level is a factor that determines lifestyle, quality of life, and technology literacy. Besides being related to the general education level, technology is also pertinent to objective opportunities or conditions, such as socialization practices, economic conditions, and the power of saving. On the other hand, older adults' attitudes towards technology or adherence to past life habits, perception of self-image, risk perception related to technology, the benefit of using technology products, and the required skills, power, and ease of use are among the factors that affect the use of technology (Özkan & Purutçuoğlu, 2010: 40–41). The use of almost all technological devices that facilitate chores, especially those that require a new form of use and knowledge, creates a problem for the older generation. For example, the proportion of all older adults in the 65–74 age group using the internet is only 19.8% (EYHGM, 2020a: 114), and older women use less internet than older men (15%). Internet use is an essential convenience for almost every age group. It can be considered a technology that provides a life convenience for the older adult generations, as it, for example, reduces the physical efforts in the payments of the bills. Therefore, not being able to use technology causes them to have difficulties in managing income and creates an environment for them to become dependent and vulnerable to others when their physical strength does not allow them to leave home. Likewise, older individuals become dependent on others in- or out-of-home in the use of many household items, devices, and equipment that are “new” or require technological knowledge (Tuna Uysal, 2020: 47).

Life Satisfaction of Older Adults: While the life satisfaction level of the general population in Turkey is 52.4%, this rate is 58.6% for older adults. It is reported that 29.2% of them feel moderately happy, and 12.2% feel unhappy. According to older adults, health takes first place among the sources of happiness (82.65%). The second most important source of happiness for them is family members (71.41%). Among the topics that older adults are satisfied with are primarily their health levels (43.6%). However, there are acute/chronic diseases and disability problems that cause dissatisfaction among older adults with their health conditions. Although older adults state that they are satisfied with the household income level by 46.6%, they indicate that their income has not increased since the last year (65.6%). On the other hand, older adults are affected by the changes in the annual inflation rates and become poor. Older adults are satisfied with their social lives (50.32%), social relationships (relationships with relatives (78.8%), friends (80.4%), neighbors (80.7%), and people they live with

(78.9%)), and marital relationships (75.31%). Moreover, 85.3% of them are satisfied with the district they live in and 79.97% with their homes. Considering the satisfaction levels of older adults with the institutions, it is understood that they are the least satisfied with the legal services (45.89%). On the other hand, transportation services (74.47%), security services (71.15%), general health services (70.69%), social security services (56.65%), and education services (51%, 6) are respectively the services that older adults are most satisfied with (TUIK, 2020e). Some robust detections about satisfaction with life reveal the need to investigate the topic with causality relations because the reason why older adults are highly satisfied with their lives may underlie the factors, such as the indoctrination of traditional and religious values advising ones to be contented and devoted, helplessness, the possibility, fear, and assumption of their relatives leaving them, and the compulsory or unintentional consent to the demands and influences from their environment, suppressing their real wishes and emotions, and forcing themselves to think positively and to appear congruent.

Conclusion

Turkey is a country that has accomplished significant macro-scale modern life improvements in recent years. However, there are substantial intergenerational differences regarding the conditions of daily life. The older population in Turkey naturally bears the highest level of the traditional community characteristics. This results in the intergenerational (the youth vs the old) differences in coping with life. The older population is the most deprived of many opportunities for modernization, as well as being the population that represents traditional values the most. The majority of them have acquired skills through manners in agricultural activities, migrated to urban environments at their youth, worked mostly in jobs requiring physical strength, and benefitted institutional social security mechanisms in adulthood at the lowest level. Accordingly, they have had to live within the boundaries of insufficient income and poverty, had formal education that would never comply with the requirements of modern life, suffered from a disease, and become in a position to produce passive behavior against other generations because their knowledge is not suitable for modern life. This group consists of individuals who are increasingly exposed to negligent and abusive behaviors, and even the healthiest of them find it challenging to maintain their daily lives without their relatives. The majority of older adults remain distant to all “new” technologies and are quite inadequate in mobile technologies. Rather than having a quality life, they explain their life satisfaction subjectively, with profound patience and trust mostly stemming from their beliefs and values. Moreover, they point out not experiencing worse health disorders and enjoying the interest of their relatives as the greatest source of satisfaction. Unfortunately, a widespread and effective institutional mechanism has not developed yet to respond to the challenge of the increase in the older adult population in Turkey. Hopefully, within the framework of

population projections and as synchronously as possible, relevant mechanisms related to improving the quality of life of the older adult population and solving their current and potential problems will be systematically established under the leadership of the public administration.

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