Unveiling the Veil of Discrimination in Türkiye's Private Education Sector

Bushra Türk

This article addresses a thriving discriminatory hiring policy against professional veiled teachers within the Turkish private education sector. The research presents findings based on 24 in-depth questionnaire-response type analyses completed by professional veiled teachers who have applied to private schools, in addition to several informal interviews held with recruitment agents and human resources administrators at well-known private schools in Türkiye. Part of the research includes a historical analysis on education in the creation of the Republic and thereafter. Taken together, these results overwhelmingly point to a deeply rooted ideological view that prevents some private schools from having fair, open-minded hiring policies. This marginalizing attitude by many private education institutions, alongside a general acceptance by veiled Turkish teachers of this reality, lead to what I term a "transformational paralysis" or a failure to reflect change within the Turkish private education system. This study suggests that the only way to balance the educational sphere in Türkiye and bring it up to par with the realities of Turkish society would be to bridge strong ideological divides using the most effective tool of all: education. By challenging stale viewpoints held by previous generations and by promoting equity and diversity within the educational sphere, a more equitable education would promote tolerance and foster respect for religious differences in a society with a history of religious divide.

Keywords: Turkish Private education sector, teachers, veiled women, discrimination, transformational paralysis

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> "All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom."
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> *—bell hooks*

PREFACE

Being a teacher is an identity, you carry it within yourself, and it becomes a part of your essence, the act of imparting knowledge being a true joy. After arriving in Türkiye and constantly being rejected for teaching positions when reaching the interview stage, I started feeling extremely confused. Here I was, a relatively well-respected teacher with good qualifications back home in South Africa, why was I constantly being accepted (telephonically) and then being rejected once the interviewer saw me? I met all their prerequisites, had the correct qualifications and had substantial experience teaching. There were always ads looking for teachers and I met the requirements, yet could not find a job. After a few encounters like this, I asked the recruiter why every job I applied for was being rejected at the interview stage? Why not telephonically or after checking my CV? That is when she awkwardly said, "it's not you, it's because of your scarf, if you took it off there wouldn't be a problem, if you wear a cap maybe that would be much better for you." The coin dropped. I remember thinking my teaching career was over, I would never find a job here. Coming from a Christian-majority country, where Muslims were free to dress and worship as they please, this was abhorrent to me. How could it be the case that a Muslim-majority country had these kinds of attitudes towards women who wore a mere scarf on their head? Was this discrimination true for most scarf-wearing or veiled teachers? Was there a divide between teachers who wore a scarf and those who did not? I had many questions and because most of the schools I could apply to as an English-speaking homeroom teacher were the private schools that rejected me, I was sitting with a problem. The reality was that I would only be accepted at an Arab owned International school or a Turkish Islamist school. I was disappointed to say the least that in the 21st century women were still being told what to wear, feminism clearly had not resolved anything for veiled Muslim women. So from these disappointed seeds, this study came into fruition.

INTRODUCTION

In this study I deal with the question of discrimination against veiled teachers at private schools in Türkiye. Does it happen? Why? I examine the mechanisms at play that have allowed this sort of discrimination to be acceptable until today. Pertinent to this conversation, I should explain what a veiled woman means in this context. In the Qur'an, the highest authority for all Muslims, there are two verses explaining the veil. In one it says to "tell the believing women that they should . . . draw their veils over their bosoms and not expose their beauty except to their husbands . . ." (Qur'an, 24:31). This is taken to mean covering the head and dressing modestly. Other popular terms for veiled Muslim females include, *hijabi* (a commonly used term which does not include women who wear a turban or loose scarf) and *başörtülu* meaning a scarf-wearing woman in Turkish. In this paper, the veil refers to any piece of cloth, particularly worn by Muslim females that covers all or most of the hair.

Based on an examination of the overall results of the answers given by teachers in this study, there appears to be deeply rooted ideological viewpoints against veiled women at some private educational institutes. This is not to say that non-veiled teachers do not face discrimination at Islamic schools. One could expect an Islamic school or an Islamic education course to prefer having veiled teachers, due to this being an Islamic requirement of the observing Muslim woman. The difference is that Islamic schools, as well as other religious schools, make it clear on their websites or mission statements that their teachings will be largely influenced by said religion. With the private schools in question, it is not clear whether a veiled teacher would be unwelcomed or not.

In Türkiye there has been plenty of research conducted on the effects of the headscarf (veil) ban and the turmoil felt by the affected women due to this long-standing discrimination. The headscarf ban was only officially lifted in 2013. (Karahan & Tugsuz, 2021, p. 1). Following the lifting of the ban, research within the private education sphere regarding discrimination against those who wear of the veil has been non-existent. Despite this, an attempt will be made here to try and understand the reasons for this continued marginalization in Turkish society. By firstly analysing the history of education and veiling bans in Türkiye and then examining contemporary views of veiled teachers who have had discriminatory encounters within the private education, it is hoped that this work brings to light a deeper understanding of the reasons why many schools in the private education sector still choose to marginalize veiled females.

The paper begins with a historical discussion of modernization in Türkiye, the socio-cultural role of education and the banning of religious symbols (like the veil) from the public sphere. The paper then discusses the subsequent effects of this ban on women in order to understand the perpetuation of these marginalizing views. The second half of the paper presents the reader with the study and its findings. This work intends to challenge conventionally held views about veiled teachers in private education in Türkiye, in addition to pointing out the need for veiled teachers to be treated fairly. This work highlights possible discrepancies between private and public education by bridging the ideological gaps between them. It is hoped that this study inspires more work in the field of education and shows the influence of education in shaping the prevailing attitudes of a society. If the powers-that-be were to recognize that public perception can be positively molded by an education that is maximally utilized to ensure benefits to everyone in society, then the research has been successful.

HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF A MOVE TOWARDS MODERNITY

One could be forgiven for assuming that hostility towards veiled women began with the advent of the official 1980 banning of the veil in the Republic of Turkey (Cindoğlu, 2011, p. 7). However, the roots of policing Islamic clothing actually go back much further, and is essentially the product of a long series of changes starting from an Ottoman Empire moving towards a European-inspired Modernity. After the French Revolution of 1789, Europeans advanced significantly due to their superiority in sea trade, military expeditions, and colonial expansion. The Ottoman Empire felt threatened by these advancements and began a process of modernization starting in 1797 with the *Nizam-i Cedid* (new order). This consisted of a European inspired re-training effort and literal re-dressing (in European military regalia) of the Janissaries (Hanioğlu, 2008, pp. 3–4). It is important to note that these reforms towards modernization were not solely due to a preoccupation with emulating Europeans. Rather, it was a dynamic process, almost naturally, in response to Enlightenment ideals like critical thinking and independence from tradition becoming widely accepted as the norm. The Ottoman administration at this time was moving towards modernization with the aim of having well trained, disciplined soldiers and effective bureaucrats, who had the ability to compete with this new way of thinking (Somel, 2001, pp. 63–64). These efforts produced intellectuals well versed in the European way of thinking.

The foundations for the education system that we find in Türkiye today has its roots in the *Tanzimat*, or 'reorganisation,' reforms that were a vision pioneered by these very intellectuals.

The *Tanzimat* reforms stemmed from a significant delay in literary and scientific developments in the Empire. By way of context, England, Germany, and France started mass book production with the printing press from the 14th century while the Ottoman administration only started mass printing books in 1727, a few hundred years later (Demirel, 2021, p. 120). In fact, in recently translated Ottoman manuscripts it was discovered that Sultan Mahmud II was deeply concerned about the declining state of education in the Empire. Many children were either sent to the local *medrese* or worked on their parents' land. In 1824, he issued a decree that not only made primary education compulsory but also placed education under the state's control. This was one of the first states in the world to do this, with Prussia leading, followed by Denmark and then the Ottoman Empire (Baysan, 2024, pp. 29–30).

Those close to the Sultan tried to prevent further weakening of the Ottoman Empire by reforming the administration politically, educationally and economically into a more bureaucratic system. In 1857 compulsory primary education was no longer a decree, it was now the law and in place of an official overseer of education, there was now a Ministry of Education (Demirel, 2021, p. 125). It was around this time the Ottoman state regularly began sending small groups of students to Europe, specifically for training in the military and naval sciences. These students were expected to learn and acquire the necessary knowledge but were also under official orders to not be "unduly influenced by the detrimental values of a foreign culture," indicating the Ottoman mindset to be wary of European ideals (Hanioğlu, 2008, p. 63).

The new education system kept developing. It now included European language learning and a much wider variety of courses such as law, geometry, medicine, forestry and commerce amongst others. Another important creation by the central administration of education was an additional school level, known as the *Rüşdiyye* (upper middle school). Successful students would get scholarships to continue their studies to the level of *muallim* or teacher (Sarıçelik, 2024, p. 153). After training at the *Darülmüallimin-i Rüşdiye* and becoming teachers, graduates became revered members of Ottoman society, this accessibility allowed many families upward social mobility. Scholarship programs successfully increased enrollment for males and females into these schools (Zaim, 2011, pp. 497–498).

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION DURING *TANZIMAT*

According to Turkish sociologist Nilufer Göle (2013, p. 30), the social position of women in Ottoman society began to be discussed at the start of the *Tanzimat* era. Intellectuals during that time were caught between the duality of modernization in line with the West and sticking to tradition. Discourses abounded with questions about which features of Islam would support modernising reforms and which would not. Fundamental to these discussions was whether or not there was any common ground between the two.

Some advisors close to the Sultan fully supported a change towards Westernization, which argued against polygamy and arranged marriages. The discontinuation of the *harem* (quarters of the home exclusive to the women and children) and the need to educate women were robustly discussed. There were also advisors who perceived the consequences of Western reforms as a threat to the traditional position of women in society and viewed change in tradition as detrimental to society (Göle, 2013, p. 30). As a result of this dual conundrum, two propositions emerged. One was that the future of women should be sought with regard to the past and the second was that traditions needed to be reinterpreted in order to fully modernise society (Göle, 2013, pp. 31–32). Many *Tanzimat* intellectual elites, like the influential Namık Kemal, often stressed the importance of women being educated. Kemal strongly believed that mothers had a very substantial role in their children's education and that uneducated mothers tended to rear ignorant children (Sanal, 2013, p. 328).

As the need for female teachers was rapidly growing, there was a shortage of teachers for the girls who had reached middle school (Sanal, 2013, p. 329). Males could not teach females because societal norms at the time were based on Islamic law and required strict separation between males and females. Due to this growing demand, Sultan Abdülmecid approved the first girl's middle school in 1859. In 1870 the first *Darulmuallimat* (Women's Teacher Training College) opened in Istanbul 1870 (Sanal, 2013, p. 329).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MINORITY AND FOREIGN SCHOOLS

It is important to note here, that the Ottoman Empire consisted of various ethnicities and religious minorities like Armenians, Greeks and Jews living within its borders and that these minorities were free to learn in their own languages and open independent minority schools (Akyüz, 2020, p. 173). Foreign schools were thus opened to meet the needs of the

mainly Western or other citizens living in the Empire. Their goals were often aligned with missionary services and they mainly served the interests of their home countries. Spreading ideas about Christianity and arousing admiration for the West was integral to states like France, England and Germany and it was much later when the Ottoman administration became aware of this (Gokce & Oğuz, 2010, p. 46). The demographic structure of the Empire with its huge territory and decentralized nature provided good conditions for foreign and minority schools to thrive (Gokce & Oğuz, 2010, p. 47). Due to their strength with European languages, modern sciences and experience with the western style of education, foreign and minority schools often attracted many upper-class Muslim Ottoman families. In many cases they became preffered to public schools. It was also the case that there simply wasn't enough state schools in the Empire to meet a growing public demand (Somel, 2001, pp. 98–99).

By the time the administration became aware of growing foreign educational entities and their suspected ideological indoctrination of Muslim and non-Muslim students with ideas that worked against the Empire, it was too late. These schools had proven themselves to be strong educational institutes (Gokce & Oğuz, 2010, pp. 46–47). Towards the end of the 19th century there were increased efforts in ending the popularity of foreign schools. The administration worked to ensure that no Muslim students attended foreign schools. Yet, a small number of wealthy families, mostly ex- or serving government officials, managed to evade detection and preffered sending their children to these schools (Somel, 2001, pp. 203–204). Another example of how the Ottoman administration tried to curb the influence of missionary styled schools can be found in various Education Acts like the *The Local Regulations Act for Eastern Rumelia* of 1879. The Act stated that students were not allowed to learn about other religions at schools, and this had to be monitored regularly by an education inspector in the area (Gokce & Oğuz, 2010, p. 49). It is argued by Turkish history education experts like Yahya Akyüz (2020, p. 242) that by then it was too late to enforce laws and regulations regarding foreign and minority schools, this was mainly due to late supervision, World War 1 and the declining power of the Sultanate.

Foreign and minority schools would later officially become recognized as private schools. Education academics often tout these schools as providing good education models for the late Ottoman education system in that they provided education philosophies according to the Western education system (Gokce & Oğuz, 2010, p. 52). Their presence increased the number of educational institutions, they lightened the burden of the Empire

by taking in orphans and educating them. They also increased access to learning for many girls, who were largely neglected and only able to access primary schooling. But the most important element that these foreign schools brought was that they played a catalysing role in the modernising process of Ottoman education (Gokce & Oğuz, 2010, pp. 52–53). During the late Ottoman period, more than 90% of the population was illiterate and the *mektebs* and *ruşdiyyes* did not impart a robust scientific education like foreign and minority schools. Their strong education structure was also likely due to the fact that they were sponsored by foreign states and had access to teachers who, because of their training in European institutions, were seen as a prosperous intellectual class. Whatever the case, foreign and minority schools or private schools created an overall higher standard of education in the Empire and the Republic.

MODERN REFORMS TO EDUCATION

The best way one could describe the ideological situation in Türkiye during the period of Ottoman decline, the aftermath of World War I, and the lead up to the founding of the new Republic would be to think of it as a rendition of Ziya Gökalp's work titled, *Turkicize, Islamicize and Modernize*. This tripartite ideological union formed the building blocks of the Young Turks, later known as the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), and their vision for a modern republic (Şaraplı, 2021, p. 45). Their aim was to construct a Turkish identity independent of the Ottoman legacy, while also appealing to the Muslim masses. Calling for a completely new modern nation state required a strong educational foundation, one that could mobilize the people of the former Empire around a new kind of national unity. For that to happen, education had to become secularized in line with Western education (Şaraplı, 2021, p. 46).

In July 1921 the CUP organized the first education congress for Türkiye. The congress was held amidst the Greco-Turkish War of Independence (Açikgöz, 2021, p. 159). In his opening speech Mustafa Kemal, the commander in chief, addressed the "national character" of teachers and said, "Teachers, the new generation will be your work. The value of the work will be proportional to your skill and the degree of your sacrifice." (Açikgöz, 2021, p. 159). The CUP was laying the groundwork for the task of educators in the new education system. Amidst the backdrop of war and reform, a series of stringent educational changes took place. This included the closing of all *medrese*s (Islamic schools). Arguably the biggest change of all was the

1928 Letter Reforms. These reforms changed the Turkish language from the Arabic script to Latin script. This change was presented as making the process of learning how to read easier, and it was hoped that this would help increase the low literacy rates across the country (Açikgöz, 2021, p. 178). Some Turkish academics have argued that this was in fact a symbolic way to distance the newly formed state from its Islamic predecessor (Açikgöz, 2021). It could have been a combination of reasons. However, literacy rates did increase to 40.3% in urban areas by 1935 (Zaim, 2011, p. 509).

At the 1923 *Heyet-i İlmiye* or first scientific committee, education was unified and new committees were established. Amongst the reforms was that primary education be made free and compulsory, and that women's role in education had to become more developed. Women would now be able to be part of scientific committees and become education ministry inspectors (Açikgöz, 2021, p. 167). Another relevant aim was to "raise the national elite," this would be done by taking talented students from impoverished families and sending them to cultural education centres in Europe (Açikgöz, 2021, p. 167). These students would return home and become a new elite alongside those educated at private schools (previously foreign and minority schools). For these students, being exposed to a different educational environment in comparison to the average Turkish student equipped them with a value judgement that was not only very Eurocentric, but also very disconnected from Turkish society (Akyüz, 2020, pp. 279–280). This evaluation rings true when one examines the attitudes of some of the well-established private schools towards veiled teachers.

KEMALISM AND THE REPUBLIC

Many of the CUP were educated abroad or at the modern western styled foreign (private) institutions available in the Empire. Thus, their *weltanschauung* or world view was likely shaped by positivism, social Darwinism and secularism, popular notions amongst intellectuals at the time (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 61). Collectively, the CUP held the belief that the state was critical in changing the socio-cultural norms and in achieving modernity. This does not imply that they were some kind of new intelligentsia trying to overhaul Turkish society. It would be better to think of the CUP as one of the products borne out of a long process towards modernization which started during the late Ottoman period mentioned earlier (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 63).

The CUP promoted a kind of Turkism which would evolve into Turkish nationalism. To achieve a nation-state that embraced all the different

ethnicities of the Empire meant forging a strong national identity (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 43). Mustafa Kemal or *Atatürk* (father of the Türks) as he came to be known, went on to achieve victory over the Allies in the Turkish War of Independence. This victory helped foster nationalist sentiments and, with his popularity running high, he renamed the CUP The Republican Peoples Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or CHP). The CHP was amongst the first political parties in the new Republic of Turkey (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 45). Atatürk became not only a revered hero, but also the first president of the Republic. The ruling class ideology hereafter would come to be known as *Kemalism*. It could be likened to the *laicite* ideology of France, but it was not entirely the same, in fact Atatürk never defined the ideology. He preffered to keep it ambiguous, which allowed it the flexibility it needed to suit different causes of the day (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 45).

Here, we recall Gökalp's work titled, *Turkicize, Islamicize and Modernize.* The goals of the then Young Turks had been mostly achieved, Turkification had been recognised, and modernization was well on the way. The only aspect left to control was Islam, which in essence, had the power to destroy both. For Kemalists, the correct management of Islam was essential and *laiklik* (secularism) would be the vehicle employed to do that. Secularism would be applied not only through separation of state and religion but would also be applied to the public arena by removing religious symbols and putting all mosques under state control (Tarhan, 2011, p. 14). The institute under which the government would control Islam, known as *Diyanet,* would ensure a Kemalist-approved Islam in Türkiye (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 47). Islamic symbols were considered to be an ideological antithesis to the state, and in 1925 men were required to wear hats instead of the *fes*. This was known as the Hat Law. After the Arabic script was abolished, in 1932 the five daily calls to prayer were also changed from Arabic to Turkish (Yel, 2021, p. 168). According to many scholars, these changes happened too swiftly. The reforms were often met with fierce opposition by the people and more often than not were violent. This environment created tension in society. A social rift was beginning to take shape between those who wanted modernity on their own terms and those did not want it imposed on them so assertively. Murat Yel (2021, p. 169) argues that these swift changes in society created "a kind of racism towards a large segment of the population," meaning one segment was deemed inferior to the other because of its adherence to Islamic fundamentals.

THE KEMALIST EFFECT ON WOMEN

Women who used to wear the *çarşaf* (a single-coloured covering from head to toe) were encouraged to wear more Western forms of clothing to suit the changing times. Atatürk's wife Latife, had also worn the *çarşaf* but took it off in favour of the fashions at the time. She often accompanied her husband in public, where he would proudly showcase her as a model for how a modern Turkish woman should look (Kavakcı, 2010, p. 20). The reasoning behind the changes in dress code for men and women, according to the CHP, was to ensure that the Turkish people were a civilization that was homogenous in both culture and dress. According to Merve Kavakci (2010, p. 18), women amongst the ruling elite were mostly content with these changes. It certainly is the case that this contentment extended beyond upper-class women, because with newer opportunities to work and the possility of climbing the social ladder through education, womens rights were experiencing a revival. Laws concerning women changed. Women now had equal rights in divorce cases, custody and inheritance cases. Polygamy, which is allowed by Islamic Law, was also made illegal (Kavakcı, 2010, p. 19). The women of the Empire who were previously confined to *harems* and covered from head to toe when they were out, were now able to frequent beaches, dancehalls and sportsclubs. For many women with no head covering, small scarves called *türbans* or French bonnets replaced the *çarşaf* (Kavakcı, 2010, p. 21). Women outside of large cities did not experience this change as rapidly since they were far from the urban scene and more focused on their homesteads. Most women however still wore some form of covering observing *tessetür*, which simply means an observance of the Islamic mandate on how women should dress. *Tessetür* is thus a critical part of Islamic faith and elicits recognition of a woman's status with her religion (Kavakcı, 2010, p.21).

The next President, Ismet Inönü continued ruling according to a Kemalist vision, openly disparaging *tesettür,* promoting "cleanliness of the heart" to citizens in lieu of religious obligations (Kavakcı, 2010, p. 33). These approaches by leaders of the Republic are amongst the leading factors that started a growing dichotomy between the women of Türkiye. The majority were on the periphery holding onto tradition while the small but growing urban bourgeoisie women distanced themselves from those who were not like them (Kavakcı, 2010, p. 34). The next President Adnan Menderes was more sympathetic to Islam. He changed the *athaan* back to Arabic and opened up Imam Hatip schools (public schools that provided religious

education). However, Kemalists in the military believed that he was not staying true to the cause of *laiklik* and he was hanged in 1961 (Kavakcı, 2010, p. 36). From then on the military would intervene in Turkish politics eight times, all claiming legitimacy by expressing that the principles of Kemalism were being disrupted (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 48). During the years following the execution of Menderes the situation of veiled women vacillated between acceptance and rejection. The clothing bans which started in 1934, targeted not only the headscarf but also clothing that would associate the citizen with Islam rather than the state. The total effect allowed for immense discrimination against men and women. But for the woman who was visible with her veil, targeting was easier (Göle, 2013, p. 5).

THE VEIL AND EDUCATION

According to Mahmut Ozer (2022, p. 167), an academic and the former minister of Education, a clear relationship between education and cultural power exists. But, an "oft-ignored point, is that the path to cultural power goes through education and, accordingly, any obstacle that bars access to education is intended to stop cultural power from changing hands." Cultural power, a concept coined by Bourdieu, is often held by the elites. They decide the norm in society, they decide who holds power. For decades Kemalist elites dictated the cultural norms of Türkiye. Bourdieu suggests that cultural roles are more dominant than economic forces in determining how hierarchies of power are reproduced in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 71–75). This is how the Evren Government in 1981 was allowed to officially ban the headscarf in a largely Muslim society. Evren declared "We will not let veiled women into the university. We are adamant about that . . . There is no such thing in religion anyway" (Kavakci, 2010, p. 51). The ban extended to all official offices. The *başörtüsü mağdurları* (the veil victims), a term the affected women called themselves, were determined to continue their education. They found out which universities and departments would turn a blind eye towards them and changed their majors accordingly. Some froze their studies, some went abroad, others wore hats and wigs. Others gave in to taking their scarves off at the gates upon entering and wearing them again upon exiting (Kavakci, 2010, pp. 49–50). The restrictions on veiled females continued, going beyond education and public office and reached private companies and work spaces.

In a large 2015 study, approximately 64% of women in Türkiye still covered their hair when leaving the house (Aksoy and Gurkan, 2015,

p. 15). However, the overall effect of the bans ensured that most veiled women, and thus the majority of women, were not allowed to work in any official position or attend universities (Aksoy and Gurkan, 2015, p. 16). Research on the effects of headscarf bans has shown interesting results. Dilek Cindoğlu's (2011) *The Headscarf Ban and Discrimination: Professional Headscarved women in the Labour Market* is one such study. The study concluded in 2011, whilst the ban was still in place. However, Cindoğlu is credited with discovering the "spillover effect" that these bans had from public institutions to private institutions. What this means is that although the headscarf ban was introduced for women attending universities and working in the public sphere, private businesses followed suit and also initiated headscarf bans. The women were often discriminated against in terms of "promotions, salaries and in terms of dismissals should the company decide to reduce its workforce" (Cindoğlu, 2011, p. 4). She also discovered that the mentality of Kemalists towards women who wore religious clothing was generally viewed from the premise that their clothing was an attack on secularism. It was never viewed from the premise that this was a manifestation of their religious rights. Consequently, the practice of violating religious freedom led to a deterioration of women's rights in many areas like education and the right to work (Cindoğlu, 2011). In 2013, the ban on religious clothing was lifted by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) headed by Tayyip Erdoğan and was replaced with protective laws against religious discrimination. Since then religious discrimination has mostly been eliminated in all government sectors, like public hospitals, schools and universities etc. (Albayrak, 2019, p. 2).

PRESENT-DAY DELIBERATIONS REGARDING THE HEADSCARF AND PRIVATE EDUCATION

In 2021 a study addressing veiled women being discriminated against in the private finance sector examined the widespread discriminatory policies against veiled professionals in the banking industry. The authors argue that significant ideological discrimination still exists today. Veiled women are often overlooked in terms of promotions despite there being no legal ban. It was found that policies remained deeply ideological. Veiled women were often excluded and subjected to inequality in the private finance sector because of these long-established discriminatory practices still standing in place (Karahan & Tugsuz, 2021, p. 2). Based on the literature above, it appears to hold true that private businesses in Türkiye, if run by a secular administration, would more than likely not hire an outwardly religious

person. But what about places of learning and education? The answer to this may lie with parents. Without understanding the needs of the parents it is impossible to understand the present situation of Turkish education.

Current studies like one recently published by Kolluoğlu and Dincer (2023, p. 362) have centred the growing Islamization in the Turkish education context. In their study looking at the parents' decisions at the intersections of religion, class and secularity in Turkish education, the authors claim that contemporary Türkiye is still highly characterized by religious division and that class consumerism might be the only uniting factor between the secular and the religious middle class-upper class (Kolluoğlu & Dincer, 2023, p. 371). But what about the subject of this study? The teachers. Could something as trivial as a teacher wearing a scarf on her head be a reason to not hire a perfectly qualified professional? What kinds of mechanisms are used to discriminate against veiled teachers within private education? And why do they continue to occur despite a lifting of the veil ban? These issues shall be discussed in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork section of this study was conducted independently by the author and was based on responses to an in-depth questionnaire and informal preliminary interviews. The interviews consisted of 7 responders including a teacher recruiter for private schools, a school manager who lived through the headscarf bans, 2 administrators and 3 veiled teachers. These interviews provided insightful details and are factored into the discussion. The actual study consisted of 24 veiled teachers who had applied to privately owned Turkish schools. They were all sent the same questionnaire. There were 12 Turkish teachers and 12 foreign teachers, all living in Türkiye. The main goal of the questionnaire was to determine with certainty whether there were any discriminatory hiring practices against veiled teachers by private schools. A secondary objective was to gain some insight into how such discrimination might occur. A holistic analysis of the responses was needed since this specific research had not been done before, thus grounded theory was used as a framework. This approach argues for developing hypotheses and concepts over the course of the research. The theory is developed out of the responses by participants and meaning is then built from the bottom up. A follow-on research question I sought to answer was, if discrimination was occurring against veiled teachers being hired by private schools, then why was this being allowed to happen to this very day? Since I had a good indication that some sort

of marginalization was happening against veiled teachers (from my own experience and informal interviews), I went about understanding 'why' by analysing the historical discourse of Turkish private education.

To find out with certainty however whether veiled teachers were being marginalized in certain private schools, I had to define the set of schools in this study. The schools in this sample were private schools located in Istanbul, covering students from Kindergarten to Grade 12. These schools offer English and/or another European language and are generally preferred by those who are 'comfortably' middle class (Kolluoğlu & Dincer, 2023, p. 363). I refer to these schools as 'elite' throughout the study, where 'elite schools' here implies well-established schools (not new), accessible to those with the means to pay the fees. The elite schools in question all met the following criteria. They had to be Turkish-owned non-religious schools, explicitly religious schools have legitimate reasons for hiring teachers with or without scarves. For example an Islamic school might prefer all teachers be veiled because wearing a veil is a fundamental value for Muslim women. Perhaps a Jewish school would prefer male teachers to wear the *kippah* because setting this example is important for their male students. Religious schools tend to also explicitly link their fundamental values to a religion sometimes it is in the name or displayed on their websites, for example, Al Noor International school or Ulus Jewish School. If not explicitly mentioned on the school's website, one could assume a standard private school encompassing various beliefs. Thus, for this study the schools not only had to be non-religious schools but also Turkish-owned private schools in question. The criteria for the teachers participating were that they had to be veiled during the time of their application and they had to have applied to and/or worked at private schools during their career. So even though some teachers were now working in government schools without a problem, during their career they would have had to have applied to a private school.

The first 5 questionnaires were distributed in October 2023 and concluded with a total of 32 completed questionnaires by February 2024. Those who did not meet the criteria are not used in the analysis, hence the number stands at 24 completed questionnaires. I relied on my existing social network of teaching colleagues and asked them to pass the questionnaire along to fellow veiled colleagues. This allowed me to reach a larger sample of veiled teachers. Some teachers were more than happy to call and send voice notes to explain what happened to them, these were saved and transcribed. Scholarship indicates that face to face interviews improve the quality of the data and rapport between interviewer and interviewee. The fact that

this research was conducted via a set questionnaire could thus be viewed as a limitation, perhaps face to face interviews would have provided more insights into the feelings of teachers who face this marginalization, perhaps too it would have given more insight than the historical analysis into the underlying societal reasons why this discrimination continues today. However, for the purposes of the main research question, which tries to see whether discrimination occurs or not, the questionnaire was sufficient.

Another limitation could be that this was in fact a small number of teachers. An even larger sample would have had more pronounced outcomes with regards to the extent of discrimination. There are 4480 registered private schools in Istanbul alone. A comprehensive study would require a much larger effort by a team of social scientists. A limitation imposed by sheer numbers. The teachers in this study however would have more than likely applied at one of the 155 international schools or one of the 3480 private Turkish schools, both of which include the middle-class sector due to the high fee structure (www.meb.gov.tr. 2023). So, despite a relatively small sample size in comparison to the number of schools, some indication that something was amiss could be found.

FINDINGS

The majority of participants in this study affirmed experiencing discrimination during the interview process at these schools. However, there were other results that gave insight into different areas that can be considered for further study. These are collated as the three main outcomes derived from the responses. The first and obvious one being the discrimination faced by veiled teachers. Of the 24 responders, 22 faced discrimination due to their headscarf during the hiring process. The second outcome from the questionnaire was that there were marked differences in the responses between Turkish and non-Turkish teachers. Turkish teachers had perfect knowledge about which schools they could apply to or not. Foreign teachers hardly knew which schools would be lenient with headscarves or not, and foreign teachers were often surprised at being asked questions about their headscarf. Turkish teachers on the other hand were not surprised, outraged or shocked. They "took their chances," as one respondent said. This points to a possible acceptance, if you will, by veiled Turkish women of the status quo. This tacit acceptance could be a contributary factor to the transformational paralysis in private schools around to update their educational policies in Türkiye. Finally, and this is a result every parent

and school administrator should hear about, is the importance of teacher intentionality. Most veiled teachers do not have underlying ideological goals when coming into a classroom to teach. Teachers are there to do their job, teach the maths, the science, the English etc. This notion is important for parents to understand because during preliminary interviews a recruiter said that the schools believed the parents did not want veiled teachers due to the possibility that their child might be ideologically influenced. If parents and school administrators understood that teachers' mostly aim to get through their assigned lessons for the day, then perhaps they would not have to fear their children being taught by a teacher wearing a scarf on her head. The following section details the outcomes of the questionnaire.

1) Discrimination still occurs against veiled teachers

A conclusion of this study was the affirmation that discrimination against veiled teachers occurs at most elite private schools. Teachers experienced either direct or indirect discrimination because of their headscarf. Indirect discrimination could be schools giving an excuse once they see the teacher and direct would be a straightforward "we do not hire veiled teachers." Of the two teachers who did not experience any discrimination, one had applied to a private school with 'Islamist' owners, and the other teacher never experienced any kind of discrimination for whatever reason. The vast majority of veiled teachers who responded in the questionnaire found the recruitment process and general attitude of schools discriminatory during recruitment or in other instances. As Habibe, a kindergarten and early primary school teacher recalls,

> . . . They gave me a phone call and told me that they had gone through my CV and that I was more than perfect for the position. It was a kindergarten and early learning centre. They asked me about the schools I worked at in Australia and if I wore a headscarf there because they seemed like schools (sic) were religious schools. They asked me if I wore a headscarf and I said yes. They asked me that if I accepted the position, would I be willing to take off my headscarf. I told them that I definitely will not take off my headscarf. I told them I worked in a non-Muslim country and I had no issues working at any school. I was actually shown a lot of respect and I am appalled that I am asked to remove my headscarf in a predominantly Muslim country.

In an informal interview, I asked administrative staff and a recruitment agent to give a possible reason why schools would not want to hire teachers who wear the hijab. This was the recruitment agent's response: "They do not want Islamic ideas to spread. Education is not important to them. What is important is the ideology. The ideology is that secularism is the

best and Islam will ruin things for Turkey." From the recruiter's interview, I understood the hiring agency to be acting as a kind of sieve for schools. Unwanted employees, like veiled teachers, do not make it to the interview stage. Administrators at schools also sift out unwanted teachers. When I asked an administrator at a well-known elite school in Istanbul how they manage to not hire teachers with a veil, she replied:

> In Turkish society, you know, we like to keep everything hidden and secret. It is in our culture, so we ask for photos, we ask for a cv with a photo and we know from there. Some teachers are asked to wear a turban-style scarf or simply to take it off, if they want the job . . . they told us specifically not to take hijabis.

School administrators and agencies know exactly what the schools want and simply tell the employee, "your application was rejected." When asked whether teachers had the right and the freedom to apply to any school they wish, every single teacher in the questionnaire answered in the affirmative. We can see from this response that veiled teachers want the same rights afforded to non-veiled teachers when applying for a job. When the latter applies to private schools, they do not face any kind of discrimination based off their physical appearance and attire. At some point one has to question, why the double standards? Veiled teachers, rightfully so, expect fair treatment.

The fact that this discrimination has been going on for years (as discussed in the historical, socio-cultural section) and that it perpetuates itself to this very day suggests that the behaviour of the private elite school system in Türkiye towards veiled teachers is likely to be a contributing factor towards the production of the same repetitive religious divisions witnessed throughout Turkish history. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, pp. 10–11) explore the ways in which education systems preserves inequalities in society by reproducing existing hierarchies. According to Bourdieu, the ones who hold cultural power often decided the cultural knowledge to be taught at schools and these are modelled by the elite schools first (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, pp. ix–xi). Throughout the history of the Turkish Republic religious presenting females (and males) have been marginalized by the cultural powers or elites (Aykol, 2019). In a similar vein to Bourdieu, Althusser (1971, pp. 23–24) would argue that through educational institutes, the ones in power are able to uphold and disseminate the ideology that they wish to be the dominant viewpoint. The dominant ideology of those who hold the cultural power, that is, the elite is ingrained into the children who go to these elite schools and these children then grow up to hold positions of power, where they maintain and uphold the viewpoints

they were taught at school. Since the elites hold the cultural power, they are the ones who decide what goes on in society. The same marginalization then gets repeated and another cycle of inequality is completed. The reason this work stresses that this is detrimental to society is because it upholds inequality. Instead of addressing the issues that they might have with religious seeming people, they marginalize them to the edge of society. The role education plays in forming the cultural ideology of a society cannot be undermined (Althusser, 1971, p. 26). If the cultural ideology of private education systems is largely secular in nature, unfortunately large parts of the society end up being demarcated as the 'other.' Hence, this marginalization by the elite schooling system in Türkiye only ends up feeding the already pronounced ideological divide.

2) Turkish teachers vs. Non-Turkish teachers

Another interesting outcome when analysing the responses was that when asked about whether they knew which school they could apply to or not as veiled teachers, all the Turkish teachers knew exactly which institutes would not accept them with a headscarf. Foreign teachers were more or less unaware. Only 5 of the foreign teachers had a vague idea about which schools they could apply to. This could be because Turkish citizens are well acquainted with their country, more so than foreign teachers. But that does not explain why they applied anyway. It also does not explain why they have never problematized this marginalization. To me, this is an indication that veiled Turkish teachers are more tolerant of this discrimination. The continual marginalization of veiled teachers at private elite schools and educational institutes has perhaps come to be accepted as normal within Turkish society. For example, a Turkish physics teacher said the following: "In fact, it is not difficult to guess the private schools where you cannot work with your head covered, I apply anyway despite the outcome being clear, they do not give the reasons for not accepting you but we know." Turkish teachers also had a resigned attitude towards this marginalization, with one teacher telling me, "*aman bu yine hiç bir şeyden iyi, biz neler çektik*"—"At least this is better than nothing, we've been through so much." This indicates a kind of compliance with this marginalization. When taken together with the perpetual, longstanding nature of biased behaviour towards veiled teachers in Türkiye, it is easy to see how the private education sector has conveniently slid under the changing-with-the-times radar.

The private education sector exhibits a stubborn transformational paralysis. The term, transformational paralysis is used here to indicate a lack of

incentive by well-established elite private institutions to change their socio-cultural norms, despite Türkiye's changed political demographic. These secular, private schools conveniently preserve their status quo when hiring female teachers, despite its discriminatory underpinnings. They appear unwilling to change their inner environments and their superfluous ideological goals, which unfortunately fail to reflect their society around them. Maryam, a science teacher from the United Kingdom, was shocked to discover that her headscarf was an issue. Here she recounts the interview process,

> I saw an advert for a British school looking for a native science teacher, so I applied, mind you my CV does not have a photo, because we've never needed that in the UK. When I passed the initial telephonic stage and came for the interview I just got a weird vibe from the secretary. Then someone came out from the office and said, they don't hire people who wear hats, he was rude too. I was genuinely confused. From the phone call I could tell they liked me. The money was way better than what the Arab schools were offering but I know now that if the money is too good, they're probably looking for a white person or something ridiculous like that.

By "British school" here, Maryam means an International school with a British curriculum. She wanted to tell her story because she felt dismayed by the fact that she was unable to work at this school, despite being British herself. The Basic National Education Law in the constitution clearly specifies that the Ministry of Education is in charge of regulating and supervising all educational activities in Türkiye. It also cites teachers as having the benefit of regulations that protect their professional autonomy. One aim of this is to have an environment that is free of undue influence and discriminatory practices (www.meb.gov.tr 2023). Yet, as many women have responded, this does seem to apply to veiled teachers.

3) Teacher Intentions

During my preliminary research administrators told me that parents were afraid that veiled teachers might try to impose their religious values onto students, hence the reluctance of school management in hiring veiled teachers. I was curious to know whether veiled teachers did indeed have covert aims, like religious conversion for example. According to administrators and a recruitment officer, this is a business and parents are paying customers who request non-religious looking teachers. To this I ask, when was the last time a large-scale survey done investigating the views of parents of children in private schools? Or is this what elite private education would like to continue with because it fits their ideology? Another teacher, prior to wearing a headscarf and whilst working at a renowned private school, recounts the following turn of events when she asked if she could pray during her lunch break,

> For some reason I really didn't think it was an issue at all being a Muslim country. However, I was so surprised to be met with "That's impossible, We can't allow it." This was just prayer . . . and I wasn't even a hijabi. When I asked why, I was told that "If we allow it for you, we have to allow for others as well" . . . After walking out of that meeting my decision was crystal clear, I wouldn't continue on with that employer and I gave my resignation shortly after. Mind you, I had a great rapport with the teachers, parents, my boss/owner (the one interviewing me), the kids. They had a difficult time trying to replace me.

The school in question chose to stick to their rigid ideology to the detriment of the school, the learners, the parents and the teachers. This is just one example of how these schools miss out on good teachers because of a fear of what might happen to a child being taught by an outwardly religious teacher. This is a trivial matter considering that one could not be wearing a scarf (like Saadet) and be religious, or one could be veiled and not be religious at all. When asked about whether a teacher enters a classroom with the intention of influencing the child's personal beliefs system or not, 20 out of 24 teachers answered that they did not come to teach with any intention besides getting through the curriculum. With 4 teachers saying it depended on whether the school explicitly asks this of a teacher or not. Merve, a primary school teacher answered as follows, "I can only speak for myself and no I don't think that teachers intend to influence students' beliefs. I haven't done this at any non-Muslim school. However, if I was working at a school that practices Islam, I would remind students to say their prayers before eating etc. only if the students were all Muslim." Another teacher, said, "No, I don't think so, the scarf is a commandment that a Muslim fulfils, it cannot be used to influence anyone."

The reasoning behind private schools' decisions to act in this way might be due to concerns from parents that teachers might impart religious ideologies onto learners, or it might be that religious teachers appear inept in some way. Whatever the reasoning, is it not time to re-evaluate this line of thinking? To my mind there can no real justification for the contemporary marginalization of such a large segment of female population.

CONCLUSION

Veiled women have enjoyed over a decade of liberating freedoms in the public work and study environments. Yet, a large portion of the private education sector has stubbornly persisted in holding onto outdated ideological values. The findings of this paper show that incidences of religious discrimination still occur towards veiled teachers. This is evidenced by the

responses of teachers on how schools use pictures on CVs, the offering of lower salaries to veiled teachers, and the usage of recruitment agencies to redirect applications away from the school. The theory elaborated upon in this paper points to a perpetual cycle of repetitive discriminatory behaviour, which serves a small elite class who actually deprive their children of a well-balanced, holistic education that would prepare them for their own society. This perpetuation further entrenches divisions as a new elite class grows up and continues the cycle. The reasons why this if you will, still occurs is because of an out-dated ideology a transformational paralysis, held towards education, veiled teachers and the possibility that they might influence a learners' personal or familial beliefs. This is despite the fact that most teachers in this study emphatically stated that they would never intend to impose their beliefs onto a learner. The research is a humble step toward uncovering the hidden realities behind private schooling and can be extended into the realm of other private educational institutes as well. I suspect that this phenomenon is not limited to Türkiye, and it is entirely possible that this model of private schooling affects other Muslim-majority states, still stuck in an outdated ideology about religious presenting teachers. The study opens the field of inequalities within the education sector's hiring systems. It shows the important role that the elite class has on private education, and it highlights the need for there to be constant updating of viewpoints for learners to be correctly socialized into their society. In education, we tend to get overly concerned about the curriculum, the outer appearance of the school, the behaviour of the children. But we often overlook the hidden curriculum. To assume that a child will not grow up and interact with a veiled woman in a country where the majority of women wear a headscarf (Cindoğlu, 2011, p. 9) is to deprive him of a very valuable life lesson of tolerance and respect for people of varying faiths. Inequalities against female teachers should not be existing in this day and age where separation and segregation has repeatedly proven itself to be an unworthy point of view. We certainly cannot keep producing the same inequalities in society. The ones who hold the power enact should do so swiftly to end this discrimination. Educational institutes ought to reflect the society around them, empowering young minds to be accepting of the many varieties of people they might find in an ever-connected world. Above acceptance and tolerance students at the finest schools should be instilled with a desire to be change makers and active transformers of their society.

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Addendum 1: Questionnaire

Hello fellow Teachers. My name is Bushra Türk, and I am a final year Master of Sociology student at Ibn Haldun University. First and foremost, however, I am a teacher with over seven years' experience. This questionnaire is set up to best help me understand the experiences of female teachers during the recruitment process in Turkey. Every single participant in this study will be treated as an anonymous contributor and no names will be used in the study. I appreciate your time and effort to answer as honestly as you can. My main goal is to improve employment opportunities and working conditions for female teachers across Türkiye. This cannot be achieved without your valuable contribution. You can simply type in your response, I can also call you if you so wish. I thank you deeply for being a part of the study and if you know any teacher who wears a headscarf, who would like to talk about their experiences please forward this questionnaire along. I would be most grateful.

Bushra Türk
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1. What subjects do you teach? And are you currently teaching?
2. Have you applied for a job at any private school in Turkey? Only if you can, could you recall the schools name/s?
3. What did you experience during the recruitment process? For example, did they ask you for a photo with your cv? Or have a change of heart when they saw you in person? Please elaborate the process.
4. Do think you (as a head scarved teacher) could apply at any private school in Turkey? Would you say there are certain schools that you cannot apply to? And why you think this is so?
5. Have you ever been told that your headscarf would be a problem towards employment? Or was it suggested to you to, to wear a turban or cap instead? (if this was answered in question 3, you can skip)

6. Should female teachers have the freedom to teach at any educational institute that they please? Yes or No
7. Do you think teachers come to the classroom and intend to influence students' religious perceptions? Should teachers be allowed to do this?

Thank you for your time and patience