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Book Review: Beyond Headscarf Culture in Turkey's Retail Sector

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***Beyond Headscarf Culture in Turkey's Retail Sector*, Feyda Sayan-Cengiz, Palgrave MacMillan City: New York, 2016. Total Number of Pages: 1-192, Illustrations: No Photographs: No Appendix: Yes. Price Hardcover: \$95.00**

Reviewed by Deniz Zeynep Leuenberger¹

The history of the headscarf in Turkey has been a complex one, with social, economic, and political impacts over centuries. As the wearing of the headscarf has experienced additional focus around the world, the lessons of the Turkish experience deserve increased consideration. That experience has been outlined in the *Beyond Headscarf Culture in Turkey's Retail Sector* with an emphasis on scholarly works that follow the headscarf through changes in Turkish politics.

The book has added another, previously unstudied, dimension to that important history. In addition to a careful literature review, this work provides a study of the economic and social impacts of the headscarf in small to large retail sectors, drawing out the evolving consequences for women who wear the hijab in urban settings. Interviews conducted with women in the retail sector provide deep insight into their motivations, understandings, and expectations. What we find is that there are significant implications for educational and economic access based on wearing or not wearing a veil in Turkey, with potential lessons in other national settings.

The discussion of the role of the headscarf in the retail sector builds on the longer history of political transformation in Turkey, with the pendulum swinging back and forth on the implications of wearing the scarf (p. 9). With the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the shift away from veiling was one of the dramatic changes under a new, secular system. The secular government eliminated the wearing of the headscarf by women in government positions. This Kemalist project seeks to exclude Islamic cultural difference from the public sphere and promotes a uniform identify for the "Turkish citizen". The homogenization is symbolized and measured by the wearing of the headscarf (pp. 4, 40, & 46). More recently, a decree has allowed hijab and headscarves in public institutions, although the law continues to support the ban. As recently as February of 2017, female army officers were given permission to wear the headscarf for the first time. The entire history is marked by unequal access to resources and to career opportunities, and varying expectations tied to wearing or not wearing the scarf. The history is marked with a distinction between "secular" and "Islamic" women, defined largely by the choice to wear or not wear hijab (p.4). These differences place behavioral, religious, and cultural expectations for women, many of which are introduced and explored in this work.

Beyond Headscarf Culture in Turkey's Retail Sector explores the negotiations tied to the headscarf for women from the lower-middle class and for non-university educated women, wherein previous studies were on urban, college educated women (pp. 6, 69). The study focuses on retail saleswomen in five urban centers in Istanbul, Ankara, Denizli, Gaziantep, and Kayseri. It considers the negotiations tied to patriarchy and democracy as religion moves to a more central place in social science research in Turkey, asking "how far social justice and diversity can prosper in a liberal democracy" (pp. 7, 25, & 27).

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The findings suggest that scarfed women are frequently excluded from employment in retail stores with globally or nationally reputable brands and that veiled women often receive minimum wage or receive lower wages than unveiled women because of the type of employment available to them (pp. 6, 45). Scarfed women often work in their own neighborhoods, within smaller shops, and in family businesses, instead of in larger malls (p. 91). The lack of opportunity for women wearing the headscarf reportedly results in women taking off the headscarf for certain prominent positions such as for government jobs, in some cases (p. 87).

In addition to economic consequences, there are also social implications of the headscarf. Even as working is encouraged, the modesty of women is a dominant theme and is especially expected of women in hijab (p.35). The study states that women wearing the headscarf report that there are higher expectations for religious piety and conservative behavior. They also state that while observers may suggest that wearing the headscarf is due to patriarchal pressure, that the choice is based on self-determination (pp. 50, 141). There is a perceived lack of trust in the motivations of women wearing hijab and the concept of choice by women is held in question, especially by non-Muslim observers (p.100). Women wearing the headscarf also suggest a difference between the modern meanings of the headscarf and the “grandmother’s headscarf” representing piety (p. 50). Not surprisingly, there are a number of reasons women choose to wear or not to wear the headscarf. There are as equally numerous social and religious interpretations, meanings, and symbols of the scarf.

The work is an important contribution to the research in the field, adding a window into social and economic outcomes for non-college educated, lower-middle class women that have not been available in the past. The interviews with women in the retail sector also provide narratives and themes that had not been explored at this depth in the past. The reader begins to understand the social justice and economic impacts of the headscarf on women in Turkey of socio-economic groups outside of the upper-middle class and of government workers. The author offers a new approach to the feminist narrative around veiling, wherein the issue of choice is dominant. This is in contrast with the Kemalist narrative, wherein the removing the veil is tied to feminist action and access to the workplace.

Beyond Headscarf Culture in Turkey’s Retail Sector is a careful study of the headscarf, its real impacts on the livelihood of women, and its social and religious symbolism. It suggests that women’s experiences with the headscarf differ based on socio-economic status. Additionally, wearing of the headscarf itself leads to socio-economic barriers and limits choice for women in the Turkish economy, wherein removing the scarf may be the only way to access higher paying, professionalized positions. This work would be an interesting addition to courses on women and gender studies, gender and politics, gender and economic equality, and secularization in politics. The author has truly expanded the socio-economic dimensions of the research on wearing or not wearing the scarf in Turkey. The research will be a strong model for related study in the future.