Inactive Women as a Result of the Gender-Based Division of Labor: The VirtualCall Project as a Possible Solution

By Ebru Işık

Abstract

Today, many women are excluded from the labor market despite having a good education. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this situation is the gender-based division of labor. Because of this division of labor, women are mostly considered to be responsible for domestic work and care work and it becomes difficult for them to go out of the house. Such women are not able to participate in the labor market due to their domestic responsibilities and are currently considered inactive. Economic inactivity, a huge problem for many European countries including Turkey, excludes a great potential human resource that will be productive for the economy if more women work.

Many countries offer different solutions to solve the inactivity problem. The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic has also led people to work more flexibly and at home. The VirtualCall Project, which received grant support from the European Union, is one of these solution proposals. This project aims to involve inactive women as home call center workers through simultaneous distance training in the listed countries with a consortium formed with the participation of partner institutions from Turkey, Spain, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, and Slovakia. The main purpose of this project is to diversify women’s employment in line with the needs of the labor market and to create new employment opportunities for women within the scope of a comprehensive training program. The aims of this study are to draw attention to the economic inactivity problem of women, which is the result of the gender-based division of labor, and to introduce the VirtualCall Project as a solution proposal. In line with this purpose, economic inactivity will be defined, then the division of labor based on gender will be discussed, and suggestions for solutions will be put forward.

Keywords: Gender-based division of labor, Economic inactivity of women, Turkey, VirtualCall Project, Feminist economics

Introduction

Compared to 50 years ago, the current unemployment rate for women seems to have decreased considerably, but the employment rate of women is still below an adequate level. This situation poses a major problem in terms of ensuring gender equality and equal representation of women with men in the public arena. This problem negatively affects the economic development practices of countries, so many countries have begun to develop various solution proposals. Encouraging women to take a greater role in the labor market and producing policies in this regard can be expressed as the common responsibility of all countries. In order to solve the employment problem of women, first of all, it is necessary to have an idea about the magnitude of the problem. Unemployment rate calculations used in this context are far from accurate, as they do not include...
workers who have given up looking for a job. In some cases, governments manipulate this data to support populist policies. As a result, unemployment rates are calculated below what they actually are and thus do not provide accurate information that is needed for policy recommendations.

“Economic inactivity,” a concept used by the International Labor Organization (ILO), refers to the population that does not participate in the workforce for certain reasons. Considering the labor force participation rate, unemployment rate, and the economic inactivity rate, the employment policies are designed to include inactive people in employment which will prevent the waste of workforce potential and increase productivity of the economy.

The aims of this study are to bring to the agenda the concept of economic inactivity, which has not been adequately covered in the relevant literature, and to introduce the VirtualCall project, which is presented as a solution to the economic inactivity problem of women, by investigating the reasons behind why women are economically inactive. In order to achieve these goals, the concept of economic inactivity and the associated gendered division of labor will be introduced, then EU countries and Turkey will be compared on the basis of women's economic inactivity by using statistics and graphics, the VirtualCall Project will be introduced as a solution proposal, and finally, results and evaluations will be given.

**Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Especially with the epidemic that affected the whole world at the end of 2019, working life and working styles have started to be among the subjects that both academics and policymakers are more interested in. The concept of economic inactivity can also be considered as one of the labor market components that have come to the fore in the wake of the pandemic.

Persons of working age (over the age of 15) can be evaluated in three statuses based on their position in the workforce. The first of these is employed, and persons in this status are those who have a job. The second status includes the unemployed, who are not currently employed but are considered ready to work immediately if they find a job. The last category includes people outside the workforce, who are not included in the labor supply but are in the working-age population. In other words, those in this last category are not actively included in the workforce, so they are also called “economically inactive.” According to the definition by the International Labor Organization (ILO), economic inactivity is used to describe people who are neither employed nor unemployed. The population not included in the labor force is also described as dependent. So, the existence of a group that cannot be included despite the potential to be included in the labor force increases the dependent population. The increase in the dependent population can be considered as one of the most important obstacles to economic growth. (ILO, 2019). For this reason, it is very important for all countries to define economic inactivity, reveal its causes, and find solutions for this problem. The existence of a group that has the potential to be included in the labor force but cannot be included in the labor force also shows that resources are not used effectively and therefore are wasted. The way to prevent this waste is primarily to investigate the causes of economic inactivity and to offer solutions for how to include these groups in the workforce.

When the relevant literature is examined, studies on the causes for economic inactivity stand out in different countries. For example, Kent (2007) examined how new questions added to Labor Force Statistics (LFS) affect economic inactivity. According to this study, which investigated new questions added in 2005 and the effect of these questions on the answers given regarding the reasons for economic inactivity in the UK, most people (72%) who could not participate in the labor force due to domestic work stated that they would like to join the labor
force in the future. This study is important in terms of revealing that people who are economically inactive due to family responsibilities are willing to participate in the workforce but cannot participate in the workforce due to their current personal conditions.

Leaker (2009), on the other hand, in her study focusing on the causes of economic inactivity, defines economically inactive people as potential labor supply. Leaker, based on the main reasons in LFS, stated the causes of economic inactivity for the UK in the year of 2008 as long-term sickness, retirement, studentship, family/home responsibilities, and others. According to Leaker, who also analyzes the causes of economic inactivity by gender, the biggest gap between the causes of economic inactivity between men and women arises due to family/home responsibilities (45.4% for women and 6.5% for men).

The work of Magill and McPeake (2016) is a report on the causes of economic inactivity in the Northern Ireland region with 2016 data. This study, which deals with the causes of economic inactivity as defined by the LFS, also tried to draw a profile of the current inactive population. Structures that determine the profile of the inactive population, such as family structure, health and disability status, skills, work history, duration of inactivity, ethnicity and nationality, and sub-regional variation, were examined in detail (Magill & McPeake, 2016). In connection with the causes of economic inactivity, this study presented solution proposals such as providing more government support in areas such as childcare, increasing the opportunities for youth to access jobs, and introducing various regulations for the participation of retired but work-age people.

Maguire (2018) examined economic inactivity specifically by selecting young women from the population not in education, employment, or training (NEET) as a specific group. Maguire (2018), who made a two-year survey, tried to determine why young women in England are economically inactive through in-depth interviews. In this study, which argues that young women feel isolated when they are economically inactive and are worried that this situation will be permanent, Maguire stated that young women are economically inactive due to the inadequacy of family and state support, domestic responsibilities such as childcare, and the work-education trade-off. Since this study examines economic inactivity specifically for young women, it is very important in terms of drawing attention to some points that are not included in the LFS. This study has a different place from other studies in the literature, especially since it covers the gender norms behind women’s economic inactivity, albeit implicitly.

Similar to other studies, Radziukiewicz (2020), who investigated the causes of economic inactivity in Poland based on LFS, found that people who retire at an early age are the most economically inactive. In this study, Radziukiewicz underlines that the high rate of economic inactivity imposes a great burden on the state and on families who are responsible for taking care of the unemployed. Thus, reducing the rate of economic inactivity will enable the extra funds to be transferred to more suitable areas.

In many of the above studies, the concept of economic inactivity was presented in parallel with ILO’s conception. In addition, in many studies in the related literature, the causes of economic inactivity are listed under certain headings in connection with the questions asked in LFS. In many of the studies investigating the reasons why women are economically inactive, it has been stated that the most important reason is women’s responsibilities at home and in the family. Compared to men, women must spare more time for domestic work and therefore cannot be included in the labor market. Therefore, the most important reason behind women’s insufficient participation in the labor market is the gender-based division of labor.³

³ It is possible to trace the origins of the gender-based division of labor back to early human history. It is known that especially in primitive hunter-gatherer societies, men hunted while women engaged in foraging activities and taking
Nowadays, although women participate in the labor market more than in the past, paid labor is nonetheless largely identified with men. Women often continue to take part in working life after they become mothers, so women also play an important role as breadwinners. On the other hand, the primary symbolic responsibility for income generation still rests with men (Coltrane & Shih, 2010, p. 401). For this reason, men can represent themselves more easily in the labor market compared to women, and they can earn more wages (Gerson, 1993; Townsend, 2002; Hochschild, 2003).

According to Becker’s (1993) human capital theory, which is frequently referenced in the economics literature, men can take place in the paid labor market more easily because they are in a more advantageous position than women in accumulating human capital. Gender-based division of labor also lies behind men’s higher human capital, especially for the labor market. While men, who are considered to be more productive workers in this division of labor, specialize to work in the labor market, it is argued that women specialize in domestic work on the grounds of their biological role in childbearing. Women can only participate in the labor market when they leave the domestic sphere, so they can work in paid jobs if they do not disrupt their domestic responsibilities (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2006). Mainstream economics uses the human capital model to explain why women are excluded from the labor market and why they are paid less than men, and uses the following arguments to reinforce this situation. Peterson and Lewis argue these points: women mostly invest in human capital in non-market areas while men prefer areas with higher wages when investing in human capital; leisure time is an important determinant for women; women are not very willing to invest in human capital in areas that require specialization; women’s human capital investments depreciate more quickly than men (1999, p. 443). These arguments clearly show that the labor market is gendered. On the other hand, the mainstream economics approach does not characterize this division of labor as gender-based, arguing that women are excluded from the labor market only because they have lower productivity.

Although different economic approaches have different perspectives on the gender-based division of labor, the most prominent among them is the feminist economics approach. Feminist economics explains the reason why women do not have enough presence in the labor market.

care of children. In agricultural societies, women dealt with gardening alongside men, and with the transition to industrial society, women have withdrawn from the public sphere and remained outside the labor market. Today, gender-based division of labor still exists, and the fact that patriarchal structures are still effective paves the way for the continued existence of gender-based division of labor (Giddens, 2008, p. 147).

4 Gender-based division of labor is generally discussed under the title of “discrimination theories” in the labor economics literature. The discrimination theories are evaluated from different perspectives by neo-classical, institutionalist, and Marxist economics approaches. The common point of all these approaches is that while emphasizing women’s lesser participation in the labor market, they do not touch on concepts such as gender or patriarchy. For more detailed information on this subject, see Mincer (1958), Schultz (1961), Cain (1976), Leontaridi (1998), Doeringer and Piore (1971), Dickens and Lang (1992), Reich, Gordon and Edward (1973), and Nikitin (2006).

5 “Feminist economics,” defined as the product of efforts to internalize gender awareness in economics, can also be described as an effort to demolish the foundations of mainstream economics, which are built with very solid walls (İşik & Serdaroğlu, 2021). Conceptualizations such as gender and feminism, along with the words “feminist economics,” were only spoken aloud for the first time in the session organized because of the decision to form the Committee on the Status of Women at the meeting of the American Economic Association in 1990. Subsequently, the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) was established in 1992. The organization, which continues with the same name today, organized a congress titled “Out of the Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics” in 1993 and then a periodical publication called “Feminist Economics” in 1995. It took these important steps to consolidate the position of Feminist Economics in economic literature (Serdaroğlu, 2010, p. 7; Feiner et al., 1995, pp. 1-2).
Feminist economic approaches aim to decipher the disadvantaged positions of women in a way to include the peculiarities of women’s paid work, to reveal the difficulties women face in the labor market, and to explain why they are excluded from the labor market or cannot be employed outside of certain occupations (İşık, 2020, p. 183).

The views of feminist economics on the gendered division of labor and the discrimination women face in the labor market can be exemplified by the theories of “relative attractiveness” and “dual rating process.” Although these theories have similar characteristics to the arguments of institutional economics, they differ from institutional economics in terms of their implications. According to the “relative attractiveness” model developed by Strober (1984), occupational stratification occurs because men have the opportunity to choose professions that are relatively attractive in terms of wages, prestige, and working conditions before women do. Occupations that are less attractive to men are left to women. The right to choose between professions has been given to men by social institutions, structures, and gendered divisions of labor. According to this model, the distribution of occupations in terms of gender is determined by labor supply and demand, as well as how the electoral dominance of men restricts and affects the opportunities open to women. Therefore, jobs that are considered to be more profitable are primarily preferred by men, and women are forced to turn to job opportunities left over from men. These include jobs such as teaching, nursing, and patient care, which have characteristics that are made specific to women as a result of the gendered distribution of roles and duties, as well as low-income levels.

According to the “dual rating process” developed by Reskin and Roos (1990) to reveal the gendered division of labor and the discrimination that women face in the labor market, processes in the labor market can be evaluated by workers depending on the order of their jobs or job rank. On the other hand, one can talk about the “labor force rating” by which employers rate workers. Thus, the distribution of women and men across different occupations depends on how the workforce rating fits into the job rating. According to the dual grading process model, women are in the lower ranks of the labor force rating for different reasons. These reasons sometimes arise from the discriminatory attitude of the employer and sometimes from the traditional motives as a result of the gendered distribution of roles and duties. According to Reskin and Roos (1990), who argue that professional stratification occurs in this way, in case of a change in the rating structure, the content and size of professional stratification will change. So, if certain occupations or industries experience growth or decline, if there is a differentiation in the gendered composition of the workforce, or if there is a change in the nature of work in different occupations, the distribution of men’s and women’s occupations and hence the gendered division of labor will also change.

As a result of the gendered division of labor, women must work in certain jobs deemed appropriate for them. This situation, which is also called “glass walls” in the relevant literature, is the situation encountered in practice, which is expressed by the dual rating process and relative attractiveness theories. Anker (1998) argues that the positive/negative characteristics attributed to women, which are thought to be a result of their gender, result in the formation of glass walls and occupational segregation. Supposedly, women work in jobs such as nurses, doctors, midwives, and teachers, claiming that they are inclined to care work; they work in jobs such as cleaning and waitressing because they are more experienced in housework compared to men; they work in jobs such as weaving, sewing-embroidery, secretarial, receptionist, and salesperson due to their delicate structure, delicate fingers, and physical appearance; due to their honesty, they are employed in jobs such as cashier and accountant. Women are more easily persuaded to work for a lower wage than men because they are seen as not needing income as much as men. They are believed to be
able to tolerate monotonous and repetitive jobs. Anker (1998) states that these listed characteristics are considered “positive” characteristics of women according to gender norms and stereotypes, while their reluctance to manage other people, lack of physical strength, and lack of interest in science and mathematics are seen as “negative characteristics.” According to Anker, due to these negative characteristics derived from a sexist perspective, women are not suitable to be executives, managers, authorized civil servants, engineers, or scientists within the framework of the gendered division of labor. Anker is critical of the distinction between women’s work and men’s work and argues that this distinction is artificially constructed according to gender norms.

The above-listed negative features attributed to women by sexist and gender-essentialist ways of thinking also place glass ceilings over women professionally. In economics literature, the “glass ceiling” refers to the inability of women to take place in managerial or decision-making positions in workplaces where men and women work together (Ellen-Guy & Newman, 2004). Studies on glass ceilings in the relevant literature have gathered the factors that prevent women from being in senior management positions under two headings: company policies and cultural and behavioral reasons (Oakley, 2000). Both reasons can actually be evaluated as the result of the gendered division of labor and patriarchy. So, it would not be wrong to say that behind the glass ceiling lies the gendered division of labor and gender norms.

In particular, the theories and concepts of feminist economics to explain the gendered division of labor also reveal why women cannot be included in the labor market and how they face difficulties if they do. The reasons put forward by feminist economic approaches can also be used to explain why women are economically inactive. Even if they are well educated, economically inactive women who are out of the labor market cannot work in a paid job mostly due to their responsibilities at home and care activities. The fact that care work is seen as the responsibility of women, just like domestic activities, is a result of both patriarchal and gendered norms which cause women to be excluded from the labor market and weaken women economically.

Methodology

In this study, in which the determinants of economic inactivity in terms of women are investigated, it is considered appropriate to use descriptive tables instead of econometric models. Since the descriptive tables are sufficient to draw a general framework regarding the causes of economic inactivity, it was not necessary to make a different application. Using Eurostat’s data, this study analyzed why women are economically inactive through tables and figures. The data was compiled from the labor statistics surveys carried out by Eurostat between 2011 and 2020. The economic inactivity data of Eurostat, prepared according to the results of the labor force surveys of the ILO, also contains information on the main causes of economic inactivity. For this reason, in the study, the reasons determined as a result of the labor force surveys as the main causes of economic inactivity are included, and the distribution of these reasons for the EU countries between 2011-2019 is presented with tables and figures.

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6 Although women are included in the labor market, they often work in low-secure and low-paid jobs, also known as precarious work. In addition, as the “Me Too” movement in social media openly disclosed, women of all ages and positions in the labor market work with the fear of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment not only makes it difficult for women to enter the labor market, but also makes the current working conditions and work atmosphere negative and even misogynistic for women (İşik, 2021). In addition, women are forced to work informally in many countries, as in Peru, and their working conditions are getting harder (Wilhoit, 2021).

7 Care work is an important component of unpaid women’s labor and even today, almost all unpaid care work is covered by women. For more detailed information on this subject, see Antonopoulos (2008), Folbre (2006), Himmelweit (2001), and Razavi (2007).
First of all, the data on the inactive population is summarized in Figure 1. The inactivity distributions of both the inactive total population and the men and women are presented by years using Figure 1. The data summarized in Figure 1 are used to compare women and men in terms of economic inactivity. In addition, these data generally cover the averages of the 28 EU countries. Thus, it has been possible to follow the different course of economic inactivity in EU countries comparing women and men over the years.

Table 1 shows the distribution of women’s reasons for being economically inactive. Each reason has been tabulated by considering the percentage shares in the total population according to the answers given in line with the labor force surveys. Table 1, prepared according to 28 EU country averages, lists nine main categories—Care of adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons, Lay-off, Other family or personal reasons, Education or training, Own illness or disability, Believing no job available, Care of adults with disabilities or children, Retirement, Other—regarding why women aged 15-64 are economically inactive.

The reasons for women being economically inactive for EU (28) countries in Table 1 are evaluated for Turkey in Table 2. On this basis, in Table 2, the share of each cause of inactivity in the women’s population is expressed as percentages, by means of the data obtained from Eurostat, in order to analyze why women are economically inactive in Turkey.

The causal reason for care of adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons, which has the highest share among the reasons for women’s being economically inactive especially for Turkey, is presented in Figure 2 to cover all the countries included in the analysis. So, Figure 2 shows the share of women who are economically inactive due to care of adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons in EU countries as a bar graph for each country. This study aimed to make a comparison of the reasons for economic inactivity of women for EU countries and Turkey through the tables and figures used.

**Reasons Why Women Are Economically Inactive in Turkey and the other EU Countries**

The reasons why women are economically inactive vary according to different countries. In this study, since it will be made in the European Union countries and Turkey, the reasons for women’s being economically inactive in the European Union countries (EU-28) have been handled as a whole, and the data for Turkey has been arranged separately. Before examining the reasons why women are economically inactive, it is possible to follow the share of the inactive population in EU countries. In Figure 1, the orange line represents the share of inactive men in the total population, the gray line represents the share of inactive women in the total population, and the blue line represents the share of inactive people of both genders in the total population as a percentage.
As can be seen in Figure 1, the rate of economic inactivity of women is higher every year in comparison to men. Although there is a decreasing trend from 2011 to 2020, the share of economically inactive women in the entire population is still quite high, with the rate of 32.5% in 2020. In Turkey, the rate of inactive women in the total population of women was calculated as 65% in 2020, while the rate of inactive men was 25.4% of all men. The ratio of economically inactive women to the total population in Turkey for 2020 was calculated to be almost twice the ratio in EU member countries in the same year. In order to analyze the reasons why women are economically inactive, we use the data summarized in Table 1.
Table 1: Reasons Why Inactive Women (15-64) in EU-28 Countries Do Not Seek Employment (% of total population of women)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Economic Inactivity</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay-off</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family or personal reasons</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education or training</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own illness or disability</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believing no job available</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care of adults with disabilities or children</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The author, based on Eurostat statistics

As can be seen from Table 1, education or training is the top reason why women are economically inactive in EU countries. This reason is closely followed by the need to care for adults with disabilities or children, and other family or personal reasons. The reasons why women are economically inactive specifically in Turkey are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Reasons Why Inactive Turkish Women (15-64) Do Not Seek Employment (% total population of women)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Economic Inactivity</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay-off</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family or personal reasons</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education or training</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own illness or disability</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believing no job available</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care of adults with disabilities or children</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The author, based on Eurostat statistics.
The need to care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons have been identified as the two most important reasons for women to be economically inactive in Turkey. As it is clearly seen in Table 2, care labor responsibility and family responsibilities are among the roles assigned to women in accordance with the gendered division of labor, as discussed in the previous section, and they are clearly the key reasons behind women’s economic inactivity in Turkey. The distribution of care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons, which is one of the causes of economic inactivity of women for EU member states and countries in the membership process, is shown with Figure 2. In the figure below, the vertical axis represents the percentage of women within the total inactive female population who are economically inactive due to care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons, and the horizontal axis represents the EU countries and Turkey.

**Figure 2:** Inactive Women (ages 15-64) Not Seeking Employment Because of Care for Adults with Disabilities or Children and other Family or Personal Reasons (\% of total inactive female population) (2020)

As can be seen in Figure 2, for many countries such as Turkey, care work plays a very important role in women being economically inactive. Countries with a similar structure urgently need to both solve the problem of inactivity and raise awareness to ensure gender equality.

**Results and Discussion**
When the tables in the previous section are examined carefully, the average values calculated for all EU (28) countries show that women are more economically inactive than men. In 2020, the economic inactivity rates of the population aged 15-64 for EU (28) countries were calculated as 21.8% for men and 32.5% for women (See Figure 1). These rates clearly indicate
that women are more economically inactive than men. In this case, the reasons behind women’s economic inactivity become important.

When examining the reasons why the population of women aged 15-64 is economically inactive in EU (28) countries, it is seen that the most important reason for the period between 2011 and 2019 is education or training. It is not surprising that this category, which has followed a steady course over the years, ranks first. Especially considering the young population, education is highly likely to be a cause of economic inactivity.

Considering the care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons as a general category, we see that this is the second most important reason behind women being economically inactive for all EU (28) countries. As mentioned in the theoretical background section, the most important reason for women’s participation in the labor market, apart from education, is the activities that include care work, which is considered specific to women according to the gendered distribution of duties. It is thought that the nationalization of care-related activities or the introduction of regulations that will enable women to participate in the labor market while performing these activities will seriously reduce the economic inactivity rate of women.

When we look at the situation in Turkey, it is seen in Table 2 that the activities related to care labor take the first place among the reasons for women’s economic inactivity. The education factor, which ranks first for EU (28) countries, has a similar rate in Turkey when compared to these countries. However, the rate of women who are economically inactive due to activities related to care work has the highest rate in Turkey (44.6% in 2019 and 43.7% in 2020). The country closest to Turkey is North Macedonia, where the proportion of women (23.2%) who are economically inactive due to care-related activities is almost half of Turkey’s. This rate clearly shows that care activities are the most important barrier to women’s participation in the labor market in Turkey. It is extremely important for policymakers to act more sensitively in this regard and to take measures to encourage Turkish women’s employment. Compared to EU (28) countries, women are excluded from the labor market due to activities involving care work, almost seven times higher in Turkey. Of course, this situation is closely related to gender equality. EU (28) countries distribute care labor more equally and have policies and practices that prioritize gender equality more so than Turkey.

Enabling women who are out of the labor market due to care activities to participate in employment is a very big step for the economic empowerment of women, as mentioned in the theoretical background section. For this reason, in Turkey and in countries with similar gender codes, it is very important to expand employment opportunities where women can work at least part-time or work at home so that they can participate more in the workforce and move from the economically inactive status to the active status.

**A Suggested Solution: The VirtualCall Project**

Over the years, increasing the employability of inactive women has been one of the main concerns of the EU and Turkey based on the statistics and graphs shared in the prior section. Finding and keeping a job for inactive women has been an important topic in parallel to combating discrimination, and many subventions have been introduced, especially in Turkey, to encourage women’s employment in enterprises.

So far, however, the general picture has not been improving. Inactive women represent around one-sixth of the overall EU working-age population, but their employment rate is still extremely low. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate of inactive women is much higher than what statistics state, because of the “discouraged worker effect,” which means many inactive women...
think or believe that they are very unlikely to get a job, so they do not even attempt to find employment.

In order to solve the problem of women being economically inactive, many countries have started to place this issue on their agendas through public policies. One of these solution proposals is The VirtualCall project, which was established with the participation of nine partners from six countries (Turkey, Spain, Slovakia, Lithuania, Romania, and Poland) and received a grant from the EU within the scope of Erasmus+. The concrete aim of this project is to e-train inactive women for their employment as call center representatives, so they can work from their homes. The training concept will also include e-Stage possibility for efficient and complete results. After such a program, individuals will be ready to start working, without any extra steps. So, the main objective is to increase employability of inactive women in a profitable scheme for both employee and employer, under current market conditions.

The VirtualCall model will allow women to learn and work at home with flexible hours to serve as call center service providers. It enables women to find work with enterprises that employ call center bodies, such as mobile operators, e-shopping chains, and other sectors/fields. In the VirtualCall project, the call center sector was chosen as the sector to promote the employment of inactive women because this sector has grown by 21% in 2019 in Turkey (Çatal, 2021). The market cap for the industry reaches almost 1.5 billion USD and it employs 115,000 people. The call center sector has grown even despite the crisis environment in Turkey and the slowing economies in the EU.

Secondly, call center providers are already seeking employees that are fluent with the available technology and can easily work from home via their mobile devices and laptops. However, almost all call center position training courses are offered in a traditional way and mostly in big cities. Moreover, even if an individual has the finances and time to attend such traditional training, these courses do not provide a practicing phase, which is essential for an employee to be successful at the very first launch. A call center representative/agent position is difficult by its nature and thus achieving excellent customer satisfaction is key to success in the job position. That is why initial and continuous practicing is essential, and this is a key feature of VirtualCall’s e-Stage tool. E-Stage is the most transparent and realistic evaluation method when compared to other existing ones because evaluators will be co-workers, but the anonymous evaluation will be done by hundreds in a continuous manner. Thus, there will always be a chance for the individual to improve their score by improving their skills. VirtualCall also aims to use the available digital technologies for teaching and learning as well as actually working at a later stage after the completion of e-learning phase. That is, the whole activity will be in a virtual environment via smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Moreover, the system will offer continuous learning and will allow further development of the participants in parallel to their natural skills and talents as well as their further self-development perseverance. This will also be achieved by the e-Stage tool, where participants will practice among themselves and with future employers in virtual environments and improve their skills by re-studying the material and practicing in accordance with the feedback they will receive. This overall innovative approach will ensure complete learning and readiness for the real-life employment position. Moreover, this model will be applicable to other job positions which can also be carried out virtually.

The second priority conforming to VirtualCall objectives is to develop a job-oriented and efficient e-learning package that contains a new training content for inactive women (the primary target group and beneficiaries) and for those women who are not seeking a job specifically because of their barriers against full-time regular job attendance. So, the primary goal here is to bring these
inactive women to working life for their personal satisfaction both financially and mentally. These formerly inactive women will develop as home-based working call center operators/agents and even become micro-entrepreneurs selling call center services online.

The whole scenario would contribute to Turkish and European economic growth in parallel to a sustainable growth horizon by increasing employability of women. Partnership and VirtualCall design will allow participants to exchange their skills and knowledge in a multinational environment in the form of “virtual mobility,” and the program will also benefit the employers as a secondary target group. An intelligent VirtualCall platform and Android app was constructed to offer work-oriented e-training for inactive women. In countries such as Turkey, where women’s labor force participation is very low, re-employment of women who are not currently looking for a job may seem like a futile effort. However, it is foreseen that supporting such projects may increase women’s labor force participation in the future.

The VirtualCall project aims to enable women to participate in employment, at least by working at home. However, working at home brings some advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of working at home for women can be listed as follows: women can save time by eliminating commuting to work; women can fulfill their responsibilities at home; educated women who cannot participate in the labor market due to responsibilities such as maternity can be included; and women with housewife status can gain economic independence. The disadvantages, however, of working from home for women can be expressed as follows: working at home can isolate women from the public sphere and reinforce gender relations; working at home can strengthen the argument that responsibilities of the home must be carried out by women; and the distinction between work time and free time may become blurred.

Despite all its disadvantages, working at home should be considered as a practice that will increase women’s participation in the labor market. Many of the disadvantages of working at home are related to gendered norms. So, the way to reduce the disadvantages of working at home is to increase the awareness of gender oppression in the society.

Conclusion

The problem of economic inactivity is among the issues that have been on the agenda of countries for the last ten years and will continue to take place in the future. Considering that the world population is getting older, and the time spent in education and training is getting longer, it is thought that economic inactivity will cause larger problems in the coming years. Although there are rapid developments in technology, the need for human resources still continues, and the inability of an educated and productive workforce to be included in the workforce causes a serious waste of such resources.

Considering that the labor force participation rate of women is quite low, it can be stated that the problem of economic inactivity affects women more than men. Women are not sufficiently involved in the labor market due to their responsibilities regarding domestic work and care activities, and therefore they are characterized as economically inactive.

With the effect of gendered norms and patriarchal structures, women stay out of the labor market, and this situation pushes women to a more disadvantageous position compared to men, especially in economic terms. Due to the gendered division of labor, women are either forced to work in lower-paid and more precarious jobs in the labor market, or they must take full responsibility for domestic work and thus do not have the chance to earn an income.

As stated in the section of the study comparing economic inactivity in the EU and Turkey, the rate of economically inactive women in the total population (32.5% for 2020) is much higher
than that of men (21.18% for 2020). In Turkey, on the other hand, the gender gap in terms of economic inactivity is much more pronounced. While the rate of economically inactive women among the total population of women in Turkey is calculated as 65% in 2020, the rate for inactive men is 25.4%. When the reasons for women’s economic inactivity are examined, the most prominent reason for EU (28) countries is education or training, followed by caring for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons with a very small margin. The most important reason behind the economic inactivity of women in Turkey is the need to care for adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons. These findings point to the need for urgent solutions to the problem of economic inactivity of women in all EU countries and specifically in Turkey. In particular, the fact that women are excluded from the labor market due to their domestic responsibilities seems to be a problem that can be solved with long-term structural policies and developing gender awareness. On the other hand, until the long-term policies in question show their effects, it should be the primary goal to develop solutions that will at least allow these inactive women to participate in employment.

One of the proposals brought to solve the problem of women being economically inactive is the VirtualCall project. With this project, it is planned to implement a training and e-internship program that will enable women to be employed as call center workers at home. In this way, inactive women will be able to allocate at least some of their time to an income-generating activity, so they will be more economically powerful. The VirtualCall project, which aims to prevent human resource waste due to economic inactivity to some extent, aims to employ economically inactive women who have been well-educated but have been pushed out of the labor market due to family responsibilities. This article contends that the widespread implementation of such employment projects, especially in countries where women’s labor force participation is low, will yield positive results at least in the short term.

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References


