Women's Home-based Work in Istanbul's Garment Industry

Gender Inequalities and Industrial Work

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In many regions of the world, women's work in export industries has been at the centre of interest since the early 1970s, and this interest has further grown with the world-wide trend of 'feminization of employment'. Although there is great variation in the degrees and forms of women's work from country to country, there is a strong association between women's employment and production for export. Turkey went through the process of export orientation of its economy and has registered a growing export performance since the early 1980s. However, women's work in export manufacturing remains highly invisible in the Turkish case, in the context of an overall decline in women's employment.

With the neoliberal turn in economic policies in the early 1980s, the garment industry became one of Turkey's most important export industries. The expansion of the industry is attributed to initial government support, the falling cost of labour, and the renewed capacity of the textile industry to support the rapid expansion in the manufacturing of ready-made garments.¹ As elsewhere, the garment industry in Turkey draws heavily on women's labour, although women's contribution to the success of exports is largely invisible in official employment statistics. Women are the main suppliers of informal labour for the industry, through subcontracted and home-based piece-work. According to TurkStat's Household Labour Force Survey, one-third of all home-based women workers were engaged in textiles-related work in 2016.

This chapter examines women's home-based piece-work in the Turkish garment industry and shows the gender inequalities that underlie the export success of the industry, wherein the organization of production and workplace relations embed and reproduce gender ideology and norms. Women's

¹ Ayda Eraydin and Erendil Asuman, "The Role of Female Labour in Industrial Restructuring: New Production Processes and Labour Market Relations in the Istanbul Clothing Industry", *Palace and Culture*, 6 (1999), pp. 259–72; Saniye Dedeoğlu, *Women Workers in Turkey: Global Industrial Production in Istanbul* (New York, 2012).

engagement in garment production is ensured through the articulation of their subordinate position within the social organization of garment production and the mobilization of kinship relations. The findings of the chapter are based on a field study of Istanbul's garment industry over a fifteen-month period, between early 1999 and mid-2000. The main questions driving the field work were the role of women's labour in the generation of a globally competitive industry, the ways in which women became the main providers of labour for Istanbul's garment firms, and the implications of this integration into export production for gender relations. As part of the field study I interviewed women garment workers, garment workshop owners and their families, factory managers, and those engaged in informal work and other forms of invisible work in the garment industry. I conducted fifty interviews with women garment workers in different segments of the garment industry, and twenty-five interviews with factory managers and workshop owners.

1 Global Commodity Chains and Home-based Work

The commodity-chains approach has contributed to an understanding of the connections between global buyers and informal work in developing countries, and also offers a way of conceptualizing how labour market informalization affects women.² Along the same lines, Carr, Chen, and Tate have pointed out that technological change has facilitated "lean retailing", which demands the "quick and timely supply of goods associated with the just in time inventory system".³ The system is seen as a reason for the increase in home work in the garment sector, particularly in countries close to the main markets of Europe and North America, and points to how women's traditional informal work has been connected to the globalization of industrial production.

The increasing use of home-based work is associated with intensified global competition in industrial production, and with the drive of local exporters and producers to minimize costs and thus accumulate more capital. Home-based work is, therefore, linked to the international production system through a chain of dependent relations between multinational companies, their buyers, and local exporters, and between exporters and contractors and workers.

2 Gary Gereffi *et al.* (eds), *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Westport CT, 1994).

3 Marilyn Carr, Martha Alter Chen, and Jane Tate, "Globalization and Home-Based Workers", *Feminist Economics*, 6 (2000), pp. 123–42, p. 126.

Benería and Roldan⁴ have pointed out how the growing concentration of women in the informal sector was promoted through urban employment policies in Mexico City, and its political and economic implications for women's home-based industrial work. In addition, the diverse range of home-based work activities, including garment production and textile work, undertaken by women was conditioned by class, gender, and the dynamics of social relations in the workplace and household.

Although variations between countries exist, home-based work is an income-generating opportunity for low-income women in developing countries. Due to their limited mobility and the narrower range of options available to them in the labour market, married women especially make up the majority of the home-based workforce.⁵ Women do not leave the industrial labour force when they get married, but continue their income-generating activities at home by combining their domestic duties with home-based work.⁶ However, home-based work puts them in a vulnerable situation, as they hold very limited bargaining power to improve their working conditions. Also, subcontracting makes it very difficult to hold a single employer responsible for protecting workers' rights due to the many layers of production chains.⁷ Thus, these home-based women workers' earnings are lower than in the formal sector, and their employment is characterized by a lack of consistency of work contracts, difficult working conditions, and long hours of work.

Research has shown that gender norms and ideologies are instrumental in generating export success in developing countries. For example, Hsiung's study of Taiwan's "economic miracle" shows how women's labour was drawn into export production in small-scale, family-centred, export-oriented satellite factories in local neighbourhoods.⁸ With factory production located either adjacent to or within family living quarters, proletarian men became small factory owners by harnessing the labour of wives, daughters, and women in the neighbourhood. Women may also use their informal work in the export industry as a

4 Lourdes Benería and Martha I. Roldan, *The Crossroads of Class and Gender: Industrial Homework, Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City* (Chicago, 1987).

5 Lourdes Benería, *Gender, Development and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered* (New York and London, 2013).

6 Benería and Roldan, *The Crossroads of Class and Gender*; Jenny White, *Money Makes Us Relatives: Women's Labour in Urban Turkey* (Austin, 1994); Dedeoğlu, *Women Workers in Turkey*.

7 Lourdes Benería, "Shifting the Risk: New Employment Patterns, Informalization, and Women's Work", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 15 (2001) pp. 27–54.

8 Ping-Chun Hsiung, *Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan*, (Philadelphia, 1996).

way of building their identity and community membership. White⁹ highlights how women's home-based, income-producing activities in Istanbul, combined with the more traditional labour of housewifery and motherhood, are being viewed in the community as an expression of their identity as "good" and hard-working Muslim women. As women emphasize their gender identity in order to gain financial security and membership in low-income neighbourhoods, they provide a low-cost labour source for production in the global market. This is also true for women's home-based piece-work in export-oriented industries.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on women's home-based piece-work in Turkey by pointing to the major role of women in Istanbul's garment industry and how this role ends up with an articulation of their subordinate position. It also shows that the mobilization of kinship relations has played a significant role in the integration of gender roles and ideologies into industrial production and in the social organization of garment production in Istanbul. More recent research on women's home-based piece-work in Turkey shows the continued importance of the garment industry in generating employment for women, and the ways in which the devaluation of women's work generates low-cost labour for the industry. In a study analysing why women's home-based work in Turkey remains invisible and hidden, Atasü-Topçuoğlu¹⁰ identifies a process of deliberate obscuring and concealing of women's contributions whereby they gain neither public nor private recognition of their work. This is because women prioritize their roles as mothers and wives over their income-generating activities, which may signal that their husbands cannot provide for their families. Similarly, Balaban and Sarioğlu¹¹ show that piece-workers regard themselves as housewives who just earn *pazarparası* (money for weekly shopping at the bazaar). Although women's informal work is hidden and invisible in urban Turkey, these two studies also show that women's income-generating activities are an important source for the well-being of the family, helping to meet household expenses, pay bills and rent, and save money for children's education. The next section of the chapter presents a description of the women who do piece-work in Istanbul's garment industry and their working conditions.

9 White, *Money Makes Us Relatives*.

10 Reyhan Atasü-Topçuoğlu, "Home-Based Work and Informal Sector in the Period of Globalization: An Analysis through Capitalism and Patriarchy, The Case of Turkey", Master's dissertation, The Graduate School of Social Sciences, Middle East Technical University (2005).

11 Utku Balaban and Esra Sarioğlu, "Home-Based Work in Istanbul: Varieties of Organization and Patriarchy", Working Paper, Social Policy Forum, Boğaziçi University (2008).

2 Flexible Organization and Subcontracting in Istanbul's Garment Industry

The garment industry in Turkey is a classic example of decentralized production networks with the administrative centres of transnational corporations and international brand names playing a leading role in different segments of the commodity chains.¹² The industry is organized to include different scales of production, whose connections and networks are based on subcontracting linkages. Representatives of international brands, integrated textile production factories, large-scale garment factories, and garment ateliers are the main constituents of garment production in Turkey. Mass and sweatshop production complement each other despite the great contrast between them in terms of market access, power, and competitiveness, as smaller and more informal businesses have less access to resources and markets with less decision-making power over production relations.¹³

An asymmetry between large and small firms governs the subcontracting relations wherein the small firms do not have control over the production process or power over the decision-making process. The findings in Istanbul show that large-scale producers have relatively more power over production processes as compared to small-scale firms, while ateliers are more dependent on orders coming from the large firms or international companies. Although orders are usually passed from large-scale firms to ateliers, horizontal subcontracting relations between ateliers are established if different specializations and skills are needed. For example, garment ateliers producing designer or branded products could subcontract to ateliers that do mainly ironing, packaging, and finishing of garments, or to ateliers acting as distributors of piece-work.

Underlying Turkey's garment export success are networks of subcontractors who help to reduce the fixed costs and provide lower labour costs. These networks not only exist between firms of different scales, but also extend to home-based garment workers. The majority of small-scale workshops operate informally without provision of decent working conditions and evade tax

12 A classic example of buyer-driven global value chains (Gereffi *et al.*, eds, *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*). In garment production, mass production is only one type of business strategy, and sweatshop and home-based production act as complementary stages of subcontracting chains in the whole production line (Appelbaum and Christerson 1997).

13 Dedeoğlu, *Women Workers in Turkey*.

duties. As Hernando De Soto puts it, informality is a way of life for the poor¹⁴ and a way of survival for garment firms. Informality often assumes a relatively hidden, illicit, and under-reported character. Firms evade taxation, health and safety regulations, labour rights, and social security rules. Small workshops, in particular, keep themselves officially unrecorded.

Garment workshops stand at the heart of subcontracting chains providing backward linkages to factory production and enable the industry to reach untapped sources of low-wage women and children. The number of garment ateliers in Istanbul has recorded a phenomenal increase since the 1980s, most vividly observable in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods (shanty towns) where abundant cheap migrant labour is available. The location of workshops in basements and in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods allows workshop owners not only to take advantage of the low rents and low-wage labour in the area, but also to evade official inspections. Family ownership is a noticeable feature of these ateliers supported by family labour with the initial capital pooled through familial solidarity networks. Most of the ateliers specialized only in the sewing and trimming of parts of standardized products such as T-shirts and sweatshirts, while a few produced high-quality branded products requiring highly skilled labour and expertise in a certain aspect of production, such as embroidery, lacemaking, needlework, or stitching. The workshops were family businesses owned by men. The workers were immediate family members, more distant relatives, and neighbours, resulting in a high proportion of women working in these workshops.

Garment ateliers manufacture garments for export shaped by the demands of European and American fashion brand names. There are different categories of ateliers in Istanbul and they differ according to the type of market niche they serve. In table 5.1. we can see an outline of the features of these ateliers. A common underlying feature of all these ateliers is their reliance on the work of home-based piece-workers. Although reached in different ways, all the ateliers subcontract piece-work to women, and, in some cases, the number of piece-workers who work for ateliers could be higher than the number of those working in the atelier.

Home-based work takes on three different forms in Turkey: piece-rated work (for an employer, subcontractor, or mediator), order-based work, and own account work.¹⁵ The first two forms are dependent on an employer or

14 Hernando De Soto, *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*, (New York, 1989), pp. 11–12.

15 Şafak Tartanoğlu, "The Voluntary Precariat in the Value Chain: The Hidden Patterns of Home-Based Garment Production in Turkey", *Competition & Change*, 22 (2017), pp. 1–18.

TABLE 5.1 Garment ateliers in Istanbul

Ateliers working for brand-name exports	Ateliers working for standard exports	Ateliers working for domestic markets
Specialized, quality-oriented products	Production of standardized and simple products (T-shirts, sweatshirts)	Lower quality than exported products
Skilled and experienced labour	Rapid shifts between different subcontractor firms Skilled labour	More diversified product range Intensified utilization of family and kinship relations Greater extent of informalization

Source: Author's own fieldwork findings

mediator, whereas the last one is independent work and earns the lowest income.¹⁶ In the garment industry of Istanbul, the first two forms of home-based work are more widespread in practice.

3 Home-based Piece-work in Istanbul's Garment Industry

Home-based work serves as a driver for the flexibility of the garment industry and its success in global competition. Gaining access to the labour of home-based workers and keeping them within the subcontracting network requires reaching out to the most secluded form of labour in Turkey, that of housewives, and opening the patriarchal lock of private households in the outskirts of Istanbul. The industry employs different strategies to attract home-based workers and retain their labour. This part of the paper identifies the main characteristics of Istanbul's home-based workers and their role in global garment production.

16 Gülsüm Coşkun, "Building women home-based workers, organizations in Turkey", *Global Labour Journal*, 1, Special Issue on Globalization(s) and Labour in China and India (2010), pp. 212–16.

Women's home-based work in Istanbul's garment industry shows that the organization of women's piece-work and atelier production is based on gender and social relations as well as kinship relations in which women's work is embedded. This in turn often leads both men and women to devalue women's home-based work. These relations and ideologies also provide a mechanism whereby women produce cheaply for international and national markets. Thus women's labour, both paid and unpaid, is conflated with their social and gender identity, and their membership of social groups such as the family. Women's informal labour in home-based piece-work or in garment ateliers tends to reproduce the patriarchal character of social relations without any public recognition of the work.

4 Women as Piece-workers

Home-based women workers typically fall within the age range of 30–45 years, have lower levels of education (on average, five years of compulsory schooling), and are married with children. Piece-work is the main work opportunity for these middle-aged women with few qualifications and heavy child-care and domestic responsibilities. They belong to poorer households in their neighbourhoods, in terms of general levels of well-being. Women over the age of 45 are not preferred by intermediaries because speed at work decreases with age and they have deteriorating eyesight not suitable for fine needle and embroidery work. However, the women enlist their daughters to engage in piece-work during their summer holidays.

Life-cycle mobility is more apparent among piece-workers in Istanbul. It is common practice for a mother to be a piece-worker at the workshop where her daughter or other children work. Another form of mobility is for a garment worker to start work in a workshop when she is a young girl, and to become a home-based worker when she gets married or becomes pregnant. Women move in and out of employment, not only because they have weak connections to the labour market, but also because the fluctuating nature of the garment business creates a high turnover of workers. A woman may work in a workshop for a few months or for a year or so, and then, when there is no work and she is made redundant, she could stay at home for some time before looking for another place to work. In some cases, women's employment is interrupted by marriage or children.

Usually associated with the neediest women in the community, piece-work is done by women who have no economic support from husbands, such as divorcees or widows; women whose husbands do not provide for them for a

variety of reasons; or women who need extra cash for other reasons such as investing in ownership of a house. Such women were seen as *fakir* (poor), and were usually pitied (*yazık*) in their community. This also reflects how women without men's economic support were conceptualized in society.¹⁷

Piece-workers are involved in many different activities ranging from packing to cleaning the threads, to sewing beads, and embroidery. The working time of these women changes depending on the volume of work and the deadline. The women stated that they work longer hours particularly during holidays, stock renewal, and the beginning of the season, when orders come in high volumes with tight deadlines. During these periods, the working time increases to 16–18 hours per day. However, on a usual working day, the women said that they worked 12 hours, from 9 in the morning to 9 at night.

In Istanbul, piece-work is distributed to women through intermediaries, and the women usually perform their tasks in their homes. However, during the fieldwork it was observed that the intermediaries sometimes rented a small shop/workspace (*dükkan*) where all the piece-worker women came together to work, and these workspaces were preferably located close to or in the same neighbourhood as the women's homes. Their place of work is important for these women, and they prefer to work out of their homes or small workspaces located close to their homes. Piece-work is a manifestation of women's immobility, domestic responsibilities, and the unavailability of other types of work; "it represents a low-paid and labour-intensive work form primarily conducted by married women, where the productive and reproductive activities of women are juxtaposed both spatially and practically".¹⁸

During my fieldwork, piece-worker women cited many obstacles that prevented their employment in factories or ateliers: permission from husbands, child care, old age, and being unskilled were the most cited. Child care was the most commonly encountered problem for younger piece-workers. Working becomes possible for mothers only when proper child care facilities are available in the workplace; otherwise a family needs to find alternative modes of child care. For example, the help of other family members and private crèches, even though costly for a working-class family, are other means of handling child care when the mother is out at work. Using these options is viable only in the case of lucrative and stable employment. Women prefer to do home-based piece-work if only marginal and temporary employment options are available.

17 Dedeoğlu, *Women Workers in Turkey*.

18 Balaban and Sarioğlu, "Home-Based Work in Istanbul".

The testimony of one of my informants clearly singles out child care as a major obstacle to women's entry into the labour market:

How could I go out to work? I have two small children and my husband works all day and comes back late in the evening. I do not have anybody from my family who can look after my children while I work. My husband's family is far from where we live now. So I am doing piece-work and looking after my children at the same time. We live in a one-room flat which was transformed from a kind of storage room or *dükkan* (shop), so it is hard for me to have a relative with us to look after my children. I wish I had better-paid work so we could buy our own flat and live better.

5 Recruiting Piece-workers and Flexibility of Labour

A global surge in new forms of flexible labour relations and fragmentation of the labour force are often associated with feminization of the labour force.¹⁹ In both developed and developing countries, women seem to have been more affected by this trend than men.²⁰ An increasing number of home-based piece-workers is another phenomenon related to feminization of the workforce. The characteristics of piece-workers and the nature of home-based work are better researched in Turkey than other components of the female labour force.²¹ Although some of this research has shown a high number of women engaged in piece-work, little effort has been made to highlight the relationship between industrial production and women's piece-work. This relationship is best illustrated by the recruitment strategies adopted to employ piece-workers, which also show that recruitment creates new forms of hierarchy between co-workers and further flexibility of production relations for employers.

Kinship and community relationships play a significant role in accessing subcontracted work and the labour of home-based piece-workers. In Istanbul's garment industry, some tasks are subcontracted directly from a workshop to

19 Guy Standing, "Global Feminization through Flexible Labour", *World Development*, 17 (1989), pp. 1077–95.

20 Maria Mies, *The Lace Makers of Nasapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (London: Zed Press, 1982).

21 Emine Mine Çınar, "Unskilled Urban Migrant Women and Disguised Employment: Homeworking Women in Istanbul, Turkey", *World Development*, 22 (1994), pp. 369–80; Dilek Hattatoğlu, "Evkesenliçalışmastratejileri" [Home-based work strategies], in Aynur Ilyasoğlu and Nebahat Akgökçe (eds), *Yerlibüfeminizmedoğru* [Towards a local feminism] (Istanbul, 2001), pp. 173–204; White, *Money Makes Us Relatives*.

women, and others are allocated by middle-women, who are sometimes relatives of the workshop owner. There is a distinct difference between how large-scale factories managed their subcontracting, and how garment ateliers organized their relations with home-based piece-workers. Garment ateliers are mediators for large-scale factories in distributing garment pieces to home-based workers. As dealing with home-based work is a time-consuming and costly activity, large-scale factories preferred to subcontract this to garment ateliers. Despite some factories subcontracting piece-work to ateliers, the ones that specialized in designer and high fashion products had direct relations with home-based workers as the tasks required delicate and skilled handicraft, such as embroidery or stitching ornaments on garments. In order to find the right women for the work, factories established an efficient network of subcontracting.

Here is an example of how a large-scale factory directly managed its subcontracting relations with home-based piece-workers. Two workers were allocated to distribute garments to piece-workers, who were all women and lived in neighbourhoods close to the garment factory. One of these workers was the driver of the van, and he was also in charge of transporting the garments. The other worker was a woman who was in charge of the women piece-workers. She showed the women what needed to be done to the new pieces, and kept records of the garments distributed and the payments to each worker. She could decide independently how many pieces had to be subcontracted and to whom. This woman, Serpil, who was 35 years old and the mother of two children, told her story of how she became the middle-woman of the factory.

I am good at maths and also a high school graduate. Most of my colleagues are primary school graduates and I was quick to learn every job at the factory. So, our manager (*müdiir*) asked me to do this job when they decided to subcontract some tasks to women instead of doing them in the factory. Now, we have 50 women in different *mahalles* around here and some of these women have been working for more than eight years. What I do is very difficult because if a piece is missing or something is wrong with the quality of the work, I am responsible. I try to work with women whom I trust and have known for a long time. In the beginning, there were just a few women whom I reached through my own personal contacts and mostly from my own family and neighbourhood. We need to make sure that women have skills to do the job. Even though most women have skills of sewing and embroidery, it is more important to follow the designs and be precise, clean, and punctual.

Although Serpil was an ordinary worker in the factory, her role as a middle-woman gave her decision-making powers over the piece-workers. She was like a manager of the piece-workers, and demanded information about the progress of their work. She often reminded the women that the time taken to complete tasks was very important, and if the work was not completed on time, payment would have to wait until the following month. She was certainly the boss of the piece-workers, for whom having a good relationship with Serpil was a channel for getting access to regular piece-work.

The relationship between the women intermediaries and piece-workers was usually maintained on the basis of "fictive kinship",²² which is a form of social relations that mimics kinship relations among non-kin. Since many women get to know about piece-work opportunities by word of mouth, and through existing kin and non-kin networks in their communities, a form of "mutual indebtedness" is maintained between the middle-women and the piece-workers to manipulate social relations in order to ensure a steady supply of work. The important part played by middle-women in giving access to a regular supply of work was emphasized by many piece-workers. Thus, daily survival for piece-workers requires participating in social relations and community networks, and continuously nourishing a web of reciprocal arrangements.²³

The irregular nature of piece-work and strict rules of work completion have resulted in a complex alliance between women piece-workers and middle-women, which illustrates the extra-economic relations underlying the social organization of piece-work in Istanbul's garment industry. This irregular structure of work has developed a network of women in which a piece-worker, for example, is the main subcontractor of the factory, but also shares her quota with other women in her household or neighbourhood. In cases of surplus work and under time pressure, a piece-worker uses the help of her neighbours and pays them later. This practice of collaboration among women generates further flexibility in the organization of piece-work, and shifts the responsibility of middle-women, in terms of finding new subcontractors, to piece-workers.

I joined Serpil on one of her visits to her piece-workers during which she distributed some work and collected the finished pieces. In one of the neighbourhoods, there were two women piece-workers whom Serpil had known for a long time. When we arrived the two women were together making their garment pieces. Serpil gave them the new garments and explained what was required, and then a third woman suddenly appeared, carefully listening to

22 White, *Money Makes Us Relatives*.

23 Ibid., p. 133.

what Serpil had to say. Later, I asked Serpil who she was and she told me that the first two women shared some of their work with her. When there was too much work and too little time to finish all the pieces, Serpil herself gave work to the third woman. This was one of the ways in which the factory's circle of subcontracted women enlarged over time.

Another model used by garment ateliers is that by which they establish their network of piece-workers using the personal connections of the women in their families. Extended families always have some untapped labour of women that can be drawn into production whenever necessary. For example, the grandmother of the family is usually in charge of child care during the day, while other family members are working in the atelier. Sometimes she also does the finishing of garment pieces by cleaning stitched edges, or, in some cases, she acts as the middle-woman in their immediate environment by distributing garments to other women. Ateliers that are unable to utilize the labour of their own family usually have a number of piece-workers who have worked for them for a long time. These women establish a small network of piece-workers in which they have the leading role as distributor. The networks can be as small as four or five women.

6 Income from Piece-work: Charity or Survival?

Although piece-workers in Istanbul make a substantial contribution to global garment manufacturing, their income is conceptualized as *pazarparasi* (bazaar money) and is seen as charity to poor women. This conceptualization was made clear in the statement of an atelier owner, where he explained how and why he subcontracted to women:

We subcontract only to women and they sometimes come and ask us if there is any work. Most of the women are regulars and all are from this area. In the past, we hired women to do hand-work of the pieces as full-time workers but the garment business is irregular. Sometimes these women had nothing to do for weeks and we had to pay their salaries. Later, we decided to subcontract the women at home, so that we deliver pieces to them when there is work and pay them on a piece basis. For the women it is better to do piece-work than sit idle at home, so they can earn their *pazarparasi*. I think this work is good for women because *fakir kadin* (poor women) need to feed their children and at the same time they can watch over their children. Times are hard for families, so people are trying hard to make ends meet and everyone has to do something in

order to survive (*hayattakalmak için*). Piece-work gives the opportunity to live without depending on anybody (*el açmadanyaşama*).

The women involved in home-based piece-work are usually pitied in their community. Workshop owners represent piece-work as a kind of charity to women in need, even though it is entirely a business matter for them.

7 Uneasy Definitions of Work

The piece-work activities of women, such as knitting, sewing, and packaging by women, is arranged around the demands of child care, housework, and other obligations of the home, and they see their income-producing activities as a mere extension of their domestic responsibilities. The type of work women do, the location of their work, and the social context and social relations of their work have tremendous implications for how they define themselves and the meaning of work in their lives. Jenny White's study (1994) of a group of squatter settlement women in Istanbul who engage in home-based piece-work or work in family and neighbourhood ateliers for export and local markets, demonstrates the concentration of married women in the informal sector due to its easy accommodation of women's family responsibilities. White presents a detailed analysis of why the women she studied, although intensely engaged in income-producing activities, maintain a fiction of "not-working". In this regard, women's labour is seen as the property of the group and a woman's gender identity is largely defined by her labour, in the sense that her income-generating labour is conflated with her social roles. Thus the unpaid or poorly paid nature of women's labour is legitimized by the cultural construction of "giving" labour as a contribution to family and community, and an expression of identity.

Intentional concealment of their piecework as domestic work, was observable among the garment workers of Istanbul. Home-based workers, makers of traditional handicrafts, and some of the atelier workers described their activity as a hobby or help to the family business, and did not consider it as "work". That is, women regarded their work as an extension of their traditional housewifely activities by perceiving it to be an expression of solidarity and group identity. Women's invisibility in the labour market, is thus also generated through the uneasy definitions of work that they themselves use.

Women's unpaid or underpaid work as an expression of their social and group identity was also seen by my informants as a means of earning money. Although the expectation of and demand for a fair financial return were not

publicly stated, all the women I interviewed were well aware that their work, even as “help”, meant a financial gain, and directly or indirectly contributed to the family budget. The financial returns were highly appreciated by the women and their families. Despite being confined to their role of housewives and their marginal incomes as piece-workers, all the women in my sample were conscious of how much money they earned through their work and the dependency of their families on their income for survival. Women’s awareness of financial gain from their work does not, however, translate itself into women’s perception of themselves as workers and breadwinners of their households.

The case of my informant Ayla illustrates the extent of appreciation of financial gain made through home-based piece-work. Ayla, who was 32 years old and a mother of three young children, was a regular piece-worker for an atelier located in her neighbourhood. She said:

No one pays you money for sitting idle at home. My husband and all the others know that I earn money for my children and my family. We even managed to save for the future. In case of illness or an emergency, we at least have some money, so we will not be in need of financial help from other people (*elalem*).

Ayten was one of my key informants. I lived close to her and had long conversations with her. She has three sons, and a husband who has irregular employment and often moves from one job to another. Even though he was not unemployed for long spells, the money he made was marginal because of the irregularity of his employment. Therefore, Ayten began to take in piece-work from a large-scale textile factory eight years ago. She said:

I know that it seems like petty work, but I make as much money as my husband earns every month. Without my contribution we would not have been able to support our sons’ education. We have also built the house we live in with my contribution. Although it is very hard and irregular work, everyone knows that without it we would be starving out in the streets. My husband’s income is only enough to feed us, the rest is done through the money that I make from the piece-work.

The significance of women’s income for the survival of low-income families in Istanbul has not helped to change how women’s work is perceived and valued. The uneasy definition of women’s paid work as not “work” is also a result of the nature of garment work, which is mainly done at home or in family establishments. For women, the traditional meaning of work requires being present

at a workplace and working fixed hours, as observable in the case of factory workers. Piece-work and *elişi* (handicraft) activities are usually perceived as being not “work”, but as just passing time and making some cash.

Women manage to preserve a sense of self-respect and the identity of motherhood in the face of the perceived temporariness and marginality of their work by articulating the priority of their domestic roles and responsibilities over their paid work. In Istanbul, women's social identity as mothers and wives does not stop them from turning their skills into income-generating activities that contribute to making ends meet and make a significant contribution to the family budget. The pervasiveness of women's identity as “women of the house”, due to which women refrain from carving out a work identity for themselves, is also a result of the negative social image attached to working women.

8 Elişi: A Path from Household to Labour Market for Women

The tradition of women's engagement with handicraft activity (*elişi*) makes it easy for them to acquire garment-making skills. *Elişi* is a common activity covering knitting, embroidery, sewing, and needlework, to make a wide range of materials such as bedspreads, table covers, cardigans, and socks. Most working-class women enter adulthood from girlhood by acquiring the skills of embroidery, knitting, needlework, crochet, and sewing, at the same time as they also learn how to cook, clean, and serve. Making *elişi* has always been the basis of earning money for low-income women, and also builds a bridge to the labour market whereby women can earn some petty cash by making lace or other forms of *elişi*.

These skills, used to prepare an elaborate *çeyiz* (trousseau), are utilized to earn money in two ways. First, women make lace, embroidery, and knitwear for young girls' *çeyiz*; second, women use these skills to take on piece-work or to work in an atelier. Many women in the *gecekondu* areas of Istanbul live on incomes from either lace-making or needlework, similar to Mies's study of Narsapur in India, where lace-makers working from their homes exclusively utilized their skills to integrate the Indian economy into world markets of export production.²⁴

Hanife was a lace-maker who lived with her husband and two children in a one-room flat. Her husband had an irregular income and could barely support the family. Hanife kept her income from lace-making a secret from him, in

24 Mies, *The Lace Makers of Nasapur*.

order to force him to try and meet his family's basic necessities. She saved the money she earned in a bank or bought gold for herself. Despite the fact that she was engaged in lace-making for many years, her husband never realized that she was making money out of it, because women's *elişi* (handicraft) was always seen as a hobby and a non-monetary activity.

Filiz, a former garment worker, stopped working when she got married. However, although her husband had regular employment, his income was not enough to support the family. So Filiz started making *elişi* for her neighbours. She said:

His salary is all right but just enough for rent and food. I want to buy carpets and curtains for my home. ... Making *elişi* is better than going out for work. I earn some cash and do my household chores (*evişi*) as well. My husband does not know that I make money with *elişi*. He thinks this is a thing I do to pass my time and entertain myself. ... If I work hard I can make 50–75 million TL a month and spend some of this money to buy things for my house. It is not that I want to hide money from my husband, but I do not want to make him feel like he is not capable of earning money to support his family.

Filiz's earnings depend on the price set in the local market for *elişi* among women. For example, there is an approximate price for a ball of yarn (*yumak*). Setting up the price of the lace-maker's labour, two women, the buyer and the seller, negotiate and determine the price each time. A well-known fact among local women was that the prices for *elişi* are set very low. The low prices can be explained by the fact that customers and lace-makers are both from working-class families. If the price is low women can afford to buy, otherwise they would make it themselves since they all have similar skills of lace-making. Thus, low prices make income from *elişi* very low and marginal.

My interviews with women engaged in *elişi*-making show that there was always a demand for *elişi*, either from other women or from traders who specialize in marketing these products. The *elişi* trade took place through two different channels. First, there were shops that sell trousseau items and generate a demand for women's *elişi*. They buy the items from women and sell them in their shops. Second, there were middle-(wo)men who collected items from cities around Istanbul, such as Bursa, Balıkesir, etc., and brought them to Istanbul. The second channel was more outward-oriented and internationally marketed, with Arab countries being the main destination especially for women's headscarves, which were tediously decorated with needlework or lace-work.

Engaging in *elişi* (handicraft) was a way for women to express their identity. Women's *elişi* skills, which were normally devoted to making girls' *çeyiz* (trousseaux), were often turned into an income-generating activity that provided significant support for household income. Whenever women needed extra cash, they could rely on income from *elişi*. This work had the advantage of "invisibility", as in the case of Hanife who was trying to build a nest-egg. In some cases, if a woman is trying to establish financial security for the future, for instance, this income becomes vital. However, women's contribution to the household budget has not drastically altered the patriarchal nature of gender relations, and women's perception of their primary roles as mothers and wives.

9 Conclusion

This paper is based on a study that dates back to the early 2000s; however, its findings are still relevant for an analysis of piece-worker women's work in the manufacturing sector in Turkey today. There are similarities between the situation of women described here and that in more recent research on the topic. Current research on home-based work in Turkey is focused mostly on garment production²⁵ and women's role in the labour process of value chains in the garment industry.²⁶ Women workers are dependent on mediators for the supply of work and raw materials. They also have no control over the means of production.²⁷ Gendered control mechanisms make women's obedience easy and implicit, and resistance unnecessary, as they see their relations with the mediator as a part of patriarchal consensus. The gender division of labour is inherent in the organization of home-based work. In this sense, it is very important to understand the dynamics of the organization of home-based garment work in the value chains. Practices of control, in particular, are shaped by the varied patterns of gendered organization of work and the labour process.²⁸

The garment industry has been the top exporting sector in Turkey since the early 1980s when Turkey started to adopt economic liberalization policies. Women are the main suppliers of informal labour in the Turkish garment

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- 25 Esra Sarioğlu, "Gendering the organization of home-based work in Turkey: Classical versus familial patriarchy", *Gender, Work & Organization*, 20 (2013), pp. 479–97; Tartanoğlu, "The Voluntary Precariat in the Value Chain"; Dedeoğlu, *Women Workers in Turkey*.
 - 26 Saniye Atilgan, "Evden İçeri Bir Ev: Ev Eksenli Üretimve Kadın Emeği", *Birikim*, 217 (2007), pp. 134–40.
 - 27 Balaban and Sarioğlu, "Home-Based Work in Istanbul".
 - 28 Sarioğlu, "Gendering the organization of home-based work in Turkey".

industry through subcontracted and home-based piece-work. This chapter discusses in detail the gender inequalities that underlie the export success of the garment industry, pointing to the organization of production and workplace relations in the industry which embed and reproduce gender ideology and norms. Women's engagement in garment production is ensured through the articulation of their subordinate position with the social organization of garment production and the mobilization of kinship relations. While piece-work is an individual activity and each woman is paid individually for her work, a common argument found in the literature is that women do this work collectively in their homes with neighbours often joining in for an hour or so at a time.

Piece-work in Istanbul's garment industry is defined as women's work because of the assumed characteristics of patience, endurance, lack of mobility, and dexterity associated with women, and also because of the small amount of money paid for each piece. Networks of collaboration created among women are the main source of recruitment of piece-workers, and a further aspect of flexibility in garment production. Women manifest their roles as "good" mothers and wives and express their loyalty to their community by keeping their work invisible and hidden from public eyes. Studies illustrate how patriarchal dynamics restrict women's job opportunities and compel them to engage in home-based work, which is defined by low pay, long working hours, and lack of benefits and job security.