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‘As if she is family’: the marginalisation of unpaid household workers in Turkey

Hande Togrul Keklik

In Turkey, Evlatliks are unpaid workers within the home, who are brought into the household as children. The practice is often seen as archaic, yet experience in many different global contexts suggests that similar practices are widespread. Evlatliks are neither officially recognised by policy-makers for the vital work they do, nor recognised as true family members in the households where they work. What can development workers learn from their experiences, and can we draw out insights to help us address the powerlessness of child and domestic labourers around the world?

Introduction

Feminist economists argue that women’s experience of social and political marginalisation in most societies around the world is closely linked to their marginalised economic status, and the double burden of their working lives. In spite of the fact that women are busy working inside and outside the household, conventional definitions of economic activity leave out activities that are not paid. Women produce or prepare food for family consumption, they clean, cook, fetch water, they take care of the children, the elderly, and the sick. Yet it is seen as ‘natural’ for women and girls to be responsible for these tasks, because they are seen as dutiful acts arising from love and compassion. Furthermore, conventional economic reasoning is that since this work is for the family and is not to do with selling a product or services, it is not ‘real work’.

However, female family members may find that it makes economic sense for the household for them to offer their time and skills to employers outside. Upper- or middle-class women in particular may then bring in another woman to substitute for them in childcare and household duties. Women brought into the household in this way can be divided into two categories: those who are paid, and those who are unpaid. Paid domestic labour includes recognised ‘jobs’, for example those of cleaner, housekeeper, nanny and gardener. These paid workers may live with the family, or come into the household each day, living elsewhere.

The second category, unpaid workers, may be distantly related to family members, or they may be people who have no blood relationship with the family. Unpaid domestic workers are usually female, and enter the household as children. They may...
be fed and clothed by the household and given a basic education. They come from poor households who cannot afford to keep their daughters. For a family living in rural poverty, giving away a daughter is done as an act of desperation, to save her life. Often, the same desire to save a little girl’s life exists in families who take in such girls. However, the girls themselves experience a lack of freedom and are unable to earn money of their own. They cannot accumulate material resources in their own right, although, if they have the continued goodwill of the family, they may make use of family resources in many ways.

In the household, the status of such workers is ambiguous: they might be described as ‘pseudo-daughters’, or ‘pseudo-sisters’. They lack the rights – both legal and customary – possessed by family members. They tend to be ignored by governments and policy-makers who seek to support the rights of workers, as well as by those who focus on the rights of women within the family. These workers are invisible because conventional economic statistics miss out the value of the work they do, but also because they have an ambiguous status in the families with whom they live. Because they are not ‘real’ family members, they often lack the benefits which family members receive.

I am writing this as an economist, who decided that investigating the issues and concerns of evlatliks would be a useful and interesting topic for doctoral research. My fieldwork, which took place in 2004, started by using the ‘snowballing’ technique, talking to my family, friends and professional contacts in Turkey, to find participants who had been or were still evlatliks. It took me three months to find 32 evlatliks, 15 of whom agreed to participate in my research. I was also able to talk to some people who had evlatliks living in their households.¹

The Turkish case

In Turkey, abla is one name for girls and young women brought into the household to provide domestic work in return for their keep. This term means ‘elder sister’. The term that I have chosen to use in my own research, evlatık, is another common term. The literal translation of evlatık is ‘adopted child [usually girl]’. Yet, as Ozbay (1999c) suggests in his research, an adopted child is normally given the rights of a son or daughter. Evlatlıks do not have similar rights – rather, they are children brought into the household and cared for in return for domestic service.

Some studies have been undertaken into this category of workers in Turkey (Ozbay 1999a, 1999b, 1999c); this has included research by the International Labour Organization (ILO) into child labour. Child domestic workers are also recognised as very important as a sub-category of unpaid domestic workers. Ozbay’s (1999c) fascinating study Evlatlık Institution in Turkey: Are They Slaves or Daughters? traces the evolution of the institution of the evlatlık in Turkey, and sheds light on the transformation of the status and meaning of the evlatlık in Turkish society. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire,² slavery was an accepted practice.³ Ozbay (1999a) writes:
'It was the privilege of Ottoman Muslim households to use both black and white slaves in domestic work, whereas non-Muslims could only use free servants. Successive attempts to ban the slave trade were effective in reducing the number of slaves by the end of the nineteenth century. Orphan and/or poor peasant girls who were taken into middle class households in the name of "protection" and "goodwill" gradually replaced the former domestic slaves.'

The evlatlik institution was legally banned in 1964, together with the passing of a general anti-slavery law. Yet successive years of wars brought destitution, and large numbers of orphans needed to find ways to survive. In the early 1960s, my home town of Mersin was a relatively small eastern Mediterranean town, as compared to Istanbul, Izmir, and Turkey’s capital, Ankara. During the 1980s, it entered a period of rapid urbanisation that continues today. In Mersin, the evlatlik practice continued throughout. In my own family, there were several such girls. By the time they were teenagers, they did most of the household chores, and took care of my brother, my sister, and myself. This practice was customary in the region.

Many now view the evlatlik practice as a thing of the past. However, there is still a sizeable population of young women who perform unpaid domestic labour in the homes of others. Today, according to the 2000 population census, there are 67.8 million people living in Turkey, of whom 25.6 million are females aged over 12. Since it is estimated that the secondary education female enrolment ratio is 48 per cent, and half a million girls are already married in this age group (between the ages of 12 and 19), we can roughly estimate that at least 12 million young women are performing unpaid domestic labour, either in their natal homes or the homes of others. According to the latest Turkish child labour survey (1999), 'working children' are defined as children who are either engaged in economic activities or domestic chores (DIE and ILO 1999). Those who take care of the domestic chores within their own household or non-family households tend to get stuck in this situation, and do not gain access to schooling, or access to vocational opportunities.

Attitudes of the ‘employers’

When I shared my research agenda with ‘employers’, I encountered unease about the institution of evlatlik. People made comments such as, ‘Are you going to save the world?’; ‘Do you want to upset people just for research?’ and ‘What are you? An economist!? What does an economist do? Why don’t you study something about employment, money, supply and demand?’.

A widow from a well-off family, who knew that I was brought up by an evlatlik, pointed out to me: ‘You would know it so well, it is the hardest thing to adjust. What do you want to do with this study? It is simple, honey. It is poverty. When people are poor, they need everything. Of course, we were not very rich to provide everything but food, shelter and some support. The poor cannot easily access [what they need].
You should also talk to us. It is not so easy to raise them. It is a lot of work and patience dealing with them.

Nevertheless, I managed to find people to participate in my research. Almost all of the ‘employers’ felt that they had accomplished something substantial: they had helped poor people. However, they were not unaware of the contradictions that lay within the practice of ‘helping’ in this way.

The following account is from an upper-class man in his late seventies:

‘I cannot forget the day that I picked her up from the village. I was quite familiar with the evlatlik institution since my grandmother and older sister had evlatliks in their house. I went to pick up T. She was only 5 yrs old. Women of my household argued that [the] younger we get her, the faster she would adjust. She was sitting in front of their beat-up village shack, without knowing what was going to happen to her. Her mother said, “come on, uncle will take you to the city, you stay with them, we will come and see you”. She was clinging to her older sister’s skirt, scared, anxious and lost. I just cannot forget that day: I was distressed by the image of poverty. She may be saved, but it was unfair to separate her [from her family] this way. But I did separate her.’

Another research participant whose mother had invited an evlatlik into her home was in her sixties when I spoke to her. She remains very close to the evlatlik. She remembers the situation as follows:

‘They lived in dirt, had nothing to eat or put on. If they got sick, [there was] no doctor to see, no clinic to go to. It was destitution in a village just 10 kilometres outside the city. No road, nothing. They lived with a grandmother, slept with animals. She had fleas when I brought her here. She knew nothing, absolutely nothing. My mother slowly taught her how to live in a proper house and do housework. She was nine or 10 years old . . . I am not saying it was easy for her. She left all the people she knew, and the place she was familiar with. At first, she wanted to go back. Her grandmother wanted her back. We said, okay, you can go. When her father saw her healthy, well-fed and clean, he convinced her to stay. She decided herself, we gave her time, did not push. I thought we were saving a life. The hardest situation rises when they have children themselves. They lived in our basement apartment. We have always stayed close, right until today. She has two sons, and the younger one is very smart. One day he asked me, “how many grandparents do I have?” At that point, I had to tell him the truth. He accepted it very logically.’

The experience of evlatliks

In this section, I turn to examine the experience of evlatliks, from their own perspectives.

Becoming an evlatlik

‘GI’ spoke of her early memories of becoming an evlatlik:

‘I was so tiny when I arrived. The great-grandmother of the house sewed me a dress out of a man’s white shirt. Before putting that on, of course, I was washed, and another woman who I
cannot remember gave me a haircut. There were many women in this house; a great-grandmother, and her two daughters – one married with two girls and one boy, and another daughter who was a school teacher, and never married. I did not want to stay but my father brought me and left me. How could I go back?'

‘G’ told me about her experience of becoming an evlatlik, which was clearly very traumatic:

‘I hate my biological mother, she put me through this. My mother was sick, and she was going to die . . . that’s why she did it. But she did not die. Why didn’t she get me back? I cannot forgive her. I had so much abuse. That’s why my son is a heroin addict today, because I had to raise him in my “mother’s” house. She was not good to him. I was treated so badly, and then he got the same bad treatment. I tried to move with him, but we had to live in bad neighbourhoods. It did not help. I think the woman was not mentally healthy. She used to beat me with a wooden stick. She was cruel. I still love her. I cannot forgive my own mother.’

The denial of educational opportunities
Almost all the ‘employers’ who decided to speak to me voiced their desire to help their evlatliks, especially with schooling. The ‘employer’ quoted earlier, who remains close to her former evlatlik, commented: ‘I wanted her to become a school teacher, but it never happened’. For some reason, ‘employers’ tended not to put their general goodwill into action in terms of helping evlatliks to juggle domestic duties with education. My interpretation is that some simply did not see any benefit in sending these girls to school, given the lack of job opportunities. Being a domestic worker seemed to be the best option for them.

However, there was an obvious practical barrier to educating evlatliks: their domestic workload. Nine out of the 15 evlatliks I interviewed had not completed their primary education. For them, a major obstacle had been household chores competing for their time, added to insufficient support from elders in the house. One former evlatlik, ‘B’, told me:

‘I just cannot understand why they didn’t send us to school. It was even a challenge to go to the literacy course – they had it at the local primary school from 5–7pm three times a week. I never had time to do homework, or go to the classes on time. How could I finish work at 5pm. God! that is the time Queen [her ‘employer’] got home from work all tired, and she needed this and that. It never ended. What if I had a primary school diploma? What if I had secondary education? Was it that hard? Was it that expensive?’

The status of evlatliks within the family
The research revealed a wide variation in the relationships that evlatliks enjoyed with other members of the families in which they worked. This ranged from the relationship discussed by ‘B’, above, who did domestic work for a working wife, to other relationships in which the evlatlik worked alongside female family members.
For example, ‘L’, told me that she worked alongside the wife of the family: ‘We, all the women in the house, worked. I came to this household when I was in third grade – I must have been nine years of age. [The wife] woke up a little later than I, but she worked all day in the house. I followed her around, especially when I first arrived. I was young and did not know anything. But later I learnt all the housework’. But there remained a hierarchy between them: ‘L’, told me, [The wife] worked as hard as I did. Well … sometimes not so hard. Women are all the same, house chores are created for women.’

Another, ‘D’, saw the relationship as much less like a servant–employer relationship. She had been able to play the role of family member, and the nature of the family livelihood meant that she acquired some skills beyond domestic work. Having said that, the nature of gender relations within families meant that her role, even as a ‘daughter’, was clearly laid out for her, and involved a support role in business and at home. She said:

‘Yes, I come from a village, but I was treated like a real daughter. They had three boys. In fact, they wanted girls, but never succeeded. They got me. This was a wealthy family, [the husband] was a medical doctor. They had banana plantations in my hometown. That’s the way they got to know my parents. My father and [the husband] were involved in political party business. They wanted me also as a nurse for [the husband’s] office. They lived in the city. We had a full time cook, daily cleaner and another man to boss around. I was [the wife’s] confidante, her little companion. As I grew up, the cook, the cleaner and the other man disappeared, but we still had a weekly cleaner. They let me manage their money; I did shopping. I also worked at the medical home office. I knew how much money [the husband] made each day, I used to count it.’

**Support for evlatliks in adulthood**

It appears that the majority of the ‘employers’ felt that as good people, they had a responsibility to arrange a marriage for the girls when the time came (although this was not always the case). Providing a dowry, and/or financing and helping with preparations for the wedding, and setting up home, was a very important role. It gave ‘employers’ significant bargaining power, especially in relation to smoothing relationships with the prospective husband and his family. Half the evlatliks were proud of what their employer families had given them, and the other half were not satisfied at all. ‘B’ told me:

‘I know many evlatliks who had full household wares, appliances, and jewellery from their [‘employers’]. They gave me nothing. They prepared bedding and towels from old used ones. No jewellery. I was pretty much naked when I got married. You know, it doesn’t make you look good in the eyes of your husband and especially his family. You have no support at all. Nothing to count on. My father owned land and reared animals before he died. After his death, my uncles seized the land from us. I would have no problem if I had had support to get that piece of that land’.
Analysing similarities in the experiences of *evlatliks*

All the former *evlatliks* who participated in this study had come from rural areas, and similar backgrounds of poverty. They were all thankful for the food, clothing and shelter that they had received as *evlatliks*, but they clearly felt that this in-kind help, given to them as charity, was inadequate to meet their past, present and future needs. They had all had a low level of education: only one woman out of 15 had a high school diploma, with several language courses on top. All of them argued for the necessity of primary, secondary and tertiary education, and I was also told that it would be better if *evlatliks* had access to a social security scheme. They were very conscious about their class background, and – despite the bitterness that some clearly felt, as can be seen from some of the accounts earlier – they emphasised that they were not asking for revolution, but rather better care, fairness and protection.

No matter what kind of treatment they had received, all of the participants are still connected to the families that took them in. Some of them are very close and still provide services to them, while others are not that close, but again provide their labour if need be. Almost all of them got along well with the children of the households, and formed alliances with them.

**Conclusion**

The three ways in which domestic labour is provided to families – unpaid by family members, paid by non-family members, or unpaid by non-family members – raise important issues for the well-being of women from different class, racial, ethnic and age backgrounds. The obligations on female household members to undertake unpaid domestic work constrained their ability to obtain education, participate in the labour market as independent adults, and ultimately to participate as full citizens in the civic and political life of the country. Richer women can potentially free themselves from some of the burden of domestic work by hiring paid domestic workers, or bringing vulnerable girls into the household, as in this case study.

Unpaid domestic workers who live in households from childhood are the most vulnerable of all women doing domestic work; they are totally dependent on the goodwill of the household in which they live. Many of them can be considered as child labourers. While the daughters of the household play and go to school, *evlatliks* work at home, cleaning and cooking. Although they may be well fed and clothed, they live a life of servitude. In a best-case scenario, with a family that genuinely cares for their long-term welfare and does not view them only as labour, becoming a member of a better-off household may be a ticket out of poverty – but this relies on serious goodwill existing, and continuing to exist. But this is not guaranteed. Even in non-abusive scenarios where goodwill is present, this solution to poverty on the one hand, and lack of domestic labour on the other, perpetuates unequal social relations and hinders the attainment of gender equality.
The next step, after research such as this, is to influence the government to set up a transformative social protection scheme for domestic workers. NGOs and women’s organisations need to demand rights for domestic workers and consider collective bargaining. International donors could give support to local organisations that work to raise awareness at the community level. One positive development is that domestic workers’ issues are appearing at the international level, on the agendas of UN agencies as well as international NGOs. This entails achieving a very significant goal: acknowledgement on the part of policy-makers at all levels that domestic work is a real economic activity, even when it is not paid. Only at this point will those who take up this activity be seen as ‘real workers’ whose rights must be protected.

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Notes

1 Hande Togrul’s interviews and notes, summer 2004.
2 The Ottoman Empire stretched around the Mediterranean, including Anatolia, North Africa, the Middle East and South-East Europe. It lasted from 1299 to 1922.
3 Ehud R. Toledano (1994) states that most sources agree that Ottoman–Muslim slavery was not the same as Western slavery; it was relatively flexible and attitudes towards slaves were less exploitative.

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