A Capabilities-based Gender Equality Analysis of Educational Policy-Making and Reform in Turkey

This research aims to scrutinise the latest education reform and education policies in Turkey from a capabilities-based gender equality perspective. The data draws on interviews with stakeholders and practitioners to understand how gender equality is conceptualised in policy-making and to what extent reforms have fostered gender equality in girls' education. From a policy-making perspective, the data shows that reform has been successful in terms of a tangible, measurable outcome of an increase in enrolment rates by boosting the numbers of religious schools and introducing single-sex education with a limited conceptual understanding of gender equality, a focus on closing the gender gap and excluding boys from gender justice claims while, from the practitioners' perspective, it has given little concern to gender equality and constrained girls' capabilities. The paper fleshes out the tensions between the actors of policy-makers and practitioners by highlighting the need for a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of gender equality in educational policy-making and developing a capabilities-based gender equality policy that could dismantle conservative and gendered structures and accommodate boys.

Key words: policy-making, educational reform, Turkey, capability approach, gender equality

Introduction

Gender is involved in a broad range of inequalities in our world, particularly in relation to education and schooling. Across the world, women's illiteracy remains at 477 million (UIS 2015), while 65 million girls are still not schooled (UNESCO 2015). To address these issues, Sustainable Development Goals set out to eliminate gender inequalities, provide quality education and equitable access to education for girls and women, and to empower them at all levels by 2030. Although it is too early to foresee if Turkey will be able to achieve these goals, it actually missed the target of universal primary enrolment defined by EFA (education for all) in 2015, showing that there is still a long way to go towards achieving gender equality.

The main concern of Turkey for gender equality policy has been gender parity and the evaluative measurement of gender equality exclusively focused on the quantifiable indicator of closing the gender gap. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has launched various campaigns to increase the number of girls in secondary and primary schools and to achieve numerical equality in education (see Cin and Walker, 2016). These campaigns have achieved some level of numerical success by

significantly increasing the enrolment rate of girls in primary education—from 79 percent in 1997 to 95 percent in 2016 (MoNE 2016)—and by providing financial assistance to the most disadvantaged girls in rural and Eastern areas. However, little or no attention has been given to the qualitative and everyday schooling experiences of girls, gender and social relations within and outside schools, the quality of education, patriarchal structures shaping girls' and boys' identities differently, and market and family relations that impact girls' schooling (Cin and Walker, 2016). This implies that the gender equality aspect of the education agenda in Turkey has a normative conceptual policy goal that relies heavily on tangible and measurable outcomes, which frame an intervention strategy based on numerical parity.

The latest 4+4+4 (4+) education reform, made in 2012, sparked heavy and fervent debates about girls' schooling. The 4+ education reform under the AKP[1] (Adalet and Kalkinma Partisi) government was designed with the aim of democratising the education system. What made the 4+ significant and different was that the government wished to wipe the slate clean and change the structure of the education system completely (Inal 2012, 79). According to the bill, the 4+ reform was needed because of the difficulties people in "the rural parts of Turkey have gone through", which stopped them from sending— especially—their daughters to schools (TBMM 2012, 9). The reform launched a number of initiatives, such as provision for the expansion of religious (*imam hatip*) schools and promoting open education in an attempt to ensure the continuity of girls' education. For some, the new 4+ education reform challenges MoNE's 20 years of efforts launching legislation, campaigns, and policies to expand girls' schooling (Egitim-Sen 2013) on the basis that the reform claims to stipulate 12 years of compulsory education, but indeed, it actually paves the way for students to leave at the end of year four and opt for open education or *imam hatip* (religious) middle schools, which are provided as a solution in order to expand girls' education, without scrutinising and addressing the quality of education offered at these schools, girls' schooling experiences within this education system, and the matter of child brides/labour. Although recent figures[2] (MoNE 2016) showed some increase in girls' enrolment in secondary schools as many girls started to sign up for open education or enrol at *imam hatip* schools, the increase in enrolment rates does not necessarily demonstrate equality or quality in education. The policy understanding of equality, which rests on gender parity, cannot address the structural problems girls face, such as how they engage with school, or what and how they learn (Unterhalter 2005). Therefore, in this research, we aim to provide an analysis of girls' schooling by looking at the 4+ reform and its outcomes on girls' education. Our goal is to understand the initial implications of this reform from a gender perspective and girls' schooling, and to map out whether such reform within the context of the current socially and culturally pervasive patriarchal environment of Turkey can advance the concerns of gender equality in any way. Drawing from the capabilities-based gender equality perspective, we focus on i) stakeholders, i.e. trade

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[1] The current AKP government has been in power since 2002.
[2] The female enrolment ratio for secondary education increased from 63.86 % in 2011 to 94.36 % in 2016; the reform was introduced in 2012.

unions and journalists, as the key actors influencing policy-making and deliberating with the decision-makers to elicit the context and the rationale in making the reform, as well as their understanding of gender equality within this reform; and ii) teachers, as the practitioners and first-hand observers of such reforms. The interviews conducted with these groups provided perspectives on the extent to which new reforms have implications for promoting gender equality and fostering girls' capabilities and freedoms.

Education reforms in Turkey: An overview

The first major reform, called "the Basic Education Act", was passed in 1997 with the aim of expanding schooling opportunities for all children and increasing girls' schooling, especially in Eastern Turkey; it was also linked to one of Turkey's largest poverty improvement programmes (Dulger 2004). The programme introduced social policies to advance the conditions of the underprivileged, such as providing free education and health services for the poor and offering free meals and transportation to students coming from low-income families to encourage the schooling of girls and boys (Engin-Demir and Cobanoglu 2012). The World Bank guided this programme and provided financial support from 1997 to 2007 to support the country's infrastructural and financial arrangements (McClure 2014). Following the 1997 Basic Education Bill, the most comprehensive educational reform Turkey has ever undergone was introduced in 2012 with the 4+ reform, although this was preceded by changes such as a major revision of the primary education curriculum and textbooks, in 2004, and the adoption of a more student-centred primary education curriculum in 2005 (Özmen 2012).

It is important to note that the Turkish education system is highly centralised and all major policy decisions are made by the MoNE (Nohl 2008), and thus it leads to a top-down approach in educational policy-making and does not leave room for schools or stakeholders to have autonomy and power in decision-making (Karlidag-Dennis, 2017; Kanci and Gül-Altinay 2007). As argued by Karlidag-Dennis (2017), the 4+ education reform (launched in 2012) was likewise introduced with a top-down approach and presented as an essential change to create and promote democratic and pluralist education and society. The main changes the reform brought were dividing the school system into three levels (primary, middle and secondary) and extending the length of compulsory schooling from eight to twelve years, which paved the way for students to choose different types of schools at the end of primary school (year four); basic schools (both private and public), vocational schools, and open education. Since there are no other vocational schools that provide middle school education apart from *imam hatip* (religious) schools (Gün and Başkan 2014, 231), this situation led to a debate on whether the *4+* actually extended the length of compulsory education, or just allowed students to leave basic education at the end of year four and enter religious schools at the age of nine or ten. *Imam hatip* schools were historically established to train preachers and have been categorised as vocational schools. When the 4+ education reform passed, it also laid the ground for *imam hatip* middle schools to be re-established, which caused extensive discussions and protests from various parts of Turkish society, especially among secularist

people who argue that the *4+* education reform was introduced to promote the *imam hatip* schools and to decrease the actual physical attendance length of compulsory education to four years (Güven 2012). So, instead of increasing the compulsory education to twelve years and encouraging students to stay in schools longer, the reform actually "cut the compulsory schooling short and guided students towards open education or apprenticeships at an early age" (Okçabol, 2013: 231). As for girls' schooling, the concern has manifested itself in the potential increase of child brides and allowing girls to drop out after they completed the first four years of schooling. For one of the leading trade unions, 4+ does not make face-to-face schooling compulsory after the first four years and gives conservative families the flexibility and the leverage to not enrol their children in face-to-face education—especially their daughters—for middle school (Egitim-Sen, 2013 & 2015). However, the MoNE (2012) denied these allegations arguing that female students who were not allowed to attend schools with their headscarves, could now continue their education as the reform abolished this ban (from primary school onwards), which could be read as a positive step towards girls' schooling and alleviating the concerns of pious families. Drawing from this controversial debate on girls' schooling, our aim is not to outline the problems of the reform but to analyse it from a capabilities-based gender equality theoretical lens to understand its implications for promoting gender equality beyond the numerical concerns. To date, few researchers have analysed and critiqued the reform (Gün and Baskan 2014; Okcabol 2013) with a review on the changes the 4+ introduced, but a gender based analysis and understanding has not yet been presented. Therefore, this study aims to provide one of the first feminist analysis of the reform. We now turn to a discussion on capabilities-friendly conceptualisation of gender equality in education and how such an understanding can have an impact on policy.

Conceptualisations of gender equality in education and policy goals

Gender is an underpinning rationale that determines how gender equality is conceptualised and approached in education and it manifests itself in three frameworks (human capital, human rights and human development—mainly capabilities) that play a key role in shaping international legislation, documents, and governments' understanding of gender and gender equality in education. Each of these frameworks features a different—competing, yet complementary—approach to the way gender equality is addressed. The Human Capital theory, for instance, emerged in the early 1970s and focused largely on the gap between girls and boys in enrolment, the distribution of opportunities, and access to education (such as teachers, books, transportation facilities, and stipends). This theory elaborated on the economic value of schooling and economic empowerment, with an emphasis on delivering individuals for the labour market (Unterhalter 2009). For this approach, women's and girls' education is important to the extent it reduces the mortality rate, creates more educated families, and contributes to economic growth by fostering their participation in the economy (Unterhalter 2007a), and gender equality is limited to achieving equality in numbers and closing the gender gap.

On the other hand, the human rights-based approach recognises the existence of socially constructed gender differences (Vaughan 2010). Gender equality is understood to involve transformation and reforms in social institutions that perpetuate gender-based inequalities. However, granting rights does not always challenge the power and gender inequalities deeply embedded in institutions if there are no actions and implementations in place to dismantle the everyday sexism and unfreedoms. The approach, therefore, ignores the conditions that preclude the operationalisation of these rights (Unterhalter 2003; Robeyns 2006), focuses on legalistic solutions to inequalities, and fails to foster sustainable change and address local realities and complexities (Unterhalter 2009) and therefore has an 'ontologically individualistic' approach to learners (Robeyns 2003, 65), which means it does not look into social, economic, or political forces that influence gendered experiences within classrooms. However, it is widely used by UN agencies, who regard schools without considering the local contexts they are situated in, and thus do not act responsively towards the lived realities of learners in specific contexts (e.g. by ignoring the needs of communities and students marginalised on the basis of race, caste, tribe, language, and religion). With its interest in the enactment of negative freedoms, such as protection from abuse, but not with positive rights, such as one's right to learn in one's mother tongue and to have one's identity reflected in the school curriculum (Tikly and Barrett 2011), the rights approach, in general, is not sufficiently supported by political and financial commitments (Robeyns 2006). By and large, these two approaches, as the dominant normative frameworks of policy goals, do not stipulate a deeper understanding of gender equality; they focus on quantifiable indicators, such as schooling ratio and achievement, with no concern for qualitative indicators, such as experiences or the valued beings and doings of individuals.

As is often the case in debates of gender equality in Turkey, policy development does not aspire to achieve gender justice; however, where it does so, the emphasis is on quantifiable indicators, of closing the gaps and equalising the numbers, as is indicated in the human capital and rights approaches. The absence of such a policy understanding leads to the need to consider the impacts of new education reforms in relation to human development and the expansion of opportunities and freedoms as a necessity of indicator of gender equality. Therefore, the conceptualisation of gender equality from the capabilities approach guides us towards a deeper social transformation, not just goals that demonstrate this process in educational settings. In the next section, we conceptualise gender equality from a capability-informed perspective and discuss how it is reflected in policy development and evaluation.

Capability-informed gender equality in education and policy development

Sen's (1999) capabilities approach is a normative framework for human development based on the ideas of human dignity and social justice, and offers an alternative way of thinking about human well-being in comparison to the theories of utilitarianism, a preference-based or income-based approach, or theories of distributive social justice, such as those by Norzick and John Rawl. It looks into the real capabilities

of people to function and the opportunities individuals have to realise the functionings that they value. These functionings can be, for example: working, being well-educated, being safe. Capabilities are the combinations of functionings that a person holds the possibility of achieving (Sen 1993, 31), such as having the conditions (hospital, healthcare workers) to recover from an illness. The important point to question is to what extent people have genuine access to their capabilities and the ability to convert the resources/opportunities at their disposal into valuable achievements.

Capabilities has been generally used to frame issues of human values, but it has also been widely employed in thinking on education and development, and different dimensions of education, such as inputs (teachers, learning materials, quality of education), the conditions of being educated to support development, and the agency of individuals. Several research have used the capabilities approach to assess the valued capabilities of girls and women in education (Walker 2007; DeJaeghere and Lee 2011; Cin and Walker, 2013; 2016), as well as the educational well-being and freedoms of communities and people (DeJaeghere and Lee 2011; Okkolin 2017) by identifying the capabilities that education should promote for gender equality. In particular, some literature draws on Sen's concept of public debate in relation to the capabilities approach and elaborates on the role of participation and public debate in determining valued capabilities and fostering gender justice in education (Alkire 2002; DeJaeghere 2012).

So, with its focus on human freedoms and well-being, the capabilities approach views gender equality in education both as a legal and moral obligation, and as a necessary condition to widen opportunities (Unterhalter 2007a), to promote positive freedoms, scrutinise the conditions of being educated and to understand how these aspects influence the functionings valued by each person (Unterhalter 2007a; Tikly and Barrett 2011). It addresses the multiple perspectives of gender equality in education, such as gender discrimination related to learning, the reproduction of stereotypes about women and men through textbooks, and gender inequalities in the household, the workplace, and the state (Aikman et al., 2011), but also reconsiders the questions of justice in relation to gender equality, between school and the labour market, non-market settings, institutions, and pedagogies (Walker and Unterhalter 2007). Therefore, we can measure gender equality in education, in this approach, by the nature of education valued by individuals and whether they can achieve their valued beings and doings through education (Unterhalter 2007b), which allows us to acknowledge social and institutional structures requiring equity interventions, gender norms, and gender roles and identities between social arrangements and individual freedoms (Unterhalter 2007a). This is rather significant to think on "possibilities for well-being (through enabling valued functionings), agency expansion and mobilisation (enabling people to participate in their own development according to their own goals), and critically reflecting on one's own values and well-being (through inclusion in the development and policy process)" (Loots and Walker 2016: 262).

To integrate the capabilities perspective with policy development, Alkire (2008) proposes two applications of the approach: evaluative and prospective analysis. The evaluative aspect is concerned with which capabilities are expanded, to what extent they are expanded, and for whom; the prospective analysis focuses on how and why capabilities are expanded and identifying "which concrete actions are likely to generate a greater stream of expanded capabilities" (Alkire 2008: 32). In this paper, we are concerned with the primary evaluative role of the capability approach to assess how the new reform has affected particular human freedoms, which opportunities are available, what these freedoms are, and where interventions are needed to expand freedoms. Evaluating policy from the capabilities perceptive requires paying attention to the political and social structures influencing policies, such as whose values are being expanded and for which purposes (Eiffe 2014), which could lead to a prospective analysis to identify the structural changes that would expand on the identified capabilities (Loots and Walker 2016).

We therefore, through a number of interviews with those who impact the policy-making process and with teachers—as the bottommost practitioners of such policies—aim to explore the policy goals of the new reform and to understand where gender equality stands in its rationale, and to highlight how the conceptual different meanings of gender equality has a bearing on implementation. Drawing on particularly from teachers' perspectives, specifically those who are in Eastern Turkey, where the imminent effects of such policies are easier to see on girls' education because of the patriarchal nature of the society and communities, we look into the qualitative implications of the reforms on gender equality and girls' schooling.

Methods

We have conducted two sets of 16 interviews in total for this research: the first with 8 teachers, and the second with 8 stakeholders affecting the policy-making process, such as trade unions and journalists. The teachers were working in religious, primary, or secondary schools whereas three of them were holding positions as either principal or vice principal. Before commencing the data collection, all official permissions were obtained from the Ministry of National Education and data was collected in the Eastern Anatolian city of Van during the 2016–17 academic year. The interviews with teachers aimed at elaborating the educational opportunities and freedoms and the impacts of the new reform on students, along with other gender related issues that the girls themselves may not have been able to identify had we conducted these interviews with them directly. Therefore, we used purposeful sampling of recruiting teachers who had been working in the same school or region for at least 7 years so that they could reflect upon the changes and their experiences with girls since the reform was passed in 2012. The interviews lasted for approximately 40–50 minutes, and none of the participants allowed the researchers to make an audio recording of the interviews due to state of emergency being applied in Turkey. The profiles of the teachers are presented in table 1:

Table 1: Teacher Profiles Table Here

The second round of interviews was conducted with teacher unions (TUO), (n=4) and journalists (J) (n=4) to gather the opinions of these stakeholders on the relationship between girls' education and the 4+ reform. These interviews were significant in terms of providing more insight about the policy-making process in Turkey. There were two teacher unions that participated in the interviewing process: *Egitim-Bir-Sen* and *Egitim-Sen*, which are the two major teacher unions in Turkey. Egitim-Bir-Sen is known to have a close relationship with the government since the union's ideological stand is very similar to the AKP's (the governing party) liberal-conservative agenda. Egitim-Sen, on the other hand, is an opposition union, and is known to criticise the 4+ education reform very openly and supports a secular education system. The members that participated from these unions were the representatives of their local branches. Regarding the journalists, three newspapers were chosen prior to the data collection; however, due to the state of emergency, the names of these newspapers have been kept anonymous. The newspapers were chosen according to their ideological position. To have the most unbiased research possible, the research team tried to talk to both pro-government and opposition newspapers, therefore the newspapers chosen for this research are mainstream newspapers, but they all hold different views. One of them is known to be pro-government, whereas the other two are less explicit in their political stance, while being more critical of the government policies. Each of these interviews lasted for around 50–60 minutes. Some of the participants permitted the use of an audio recorder, as long as their names were kept private; some refused to allow an audio recording due to the state of emergency in place in Turkey. Participation in this research was completely voluntary and participants had the right to stop interviews and withdraw from the study at any moment they liked. The reason why the study was conducted with teachers and stakeholders influencing policy-making was to examine the implementation of the 4+ reform and the underlying aims of applying this policy, therefore, we recruited those who can provide insight on the policy changes. There were two different sets of interview questions for teachers and stakeholders. The interviews with stakeholders provided the researchers with a wider perspective on how education policies are being implemented and established in Turkey and helped to understand how they approach gender equality concerns of the reform. The interview questions with teachers, on the other hand, aimed to elicit their understanding of gender equality and how they view the 4+ reform in terms of girls' education in order to explore the extent reform played a role in fostering gender equality both at schools and in educational lives of students.

For data analysis, firstly, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, after which the researchers read all of the texts, made notes in the margins, and formed initial codes while highlighting the more significant statements of participants related to the reform. There were around 10–15 codes extracted from the data, such as: single sex education, promoting girls' education, gender policy, mixed-gender relations, and cultural values. The coding allowed the researchers to establish the themes, such as the understanding of gender equality, conversion factors and girls' capabilities and

provided a comprehensive analysis of girls' schooling from a capabilities approach and freedoms perspective by scrutinising the 4+ reform and its effects on girls' schooling. The body of available literature on the 4+ reform also offered a few codes for the analysis, and so the coding process employed emerging codes in order to determine the relevant statements. In the subsequent stage, the meaning or meaning units were listed, and the overlapping and repetitive statements were removed so that clusters and themes appeared. In summary, the data analysis involved examining the data, categorising the sets of data, grouping the sets into similar dimensions, and naming them, while extracting the meaning units and emerging themes. The most representative quotations were selected and translated into English.

Results

Scrutinising the Rationale of the Reform: A Limited and Fragmented Understanding of Gender Equality

Drawing on the interviews conducted with stakeholders as the key actors who have been involved both in the deliberation and policy-making process of the reform, we aimed to highlight how stakeholders approach and understand gender equality within this reform, or to what extent gender equality was given a priority in the policy goals. The interviews showed that there is a limited understanding of gender equality among the key actors, which rests on numerical parity and increasing enrolment of girls as the sole proxy for gender equality. Therefore, the lifting of the headscarf ban at every level of schooling—including primary school—and the establishment of more accessible religious schools (*imam hatip* schools) were seen as a significant step in expanding girls' access to schools and serving to the gender equality aims.

> There are many parents who do not send their children to school due to the headscarf ban. I worked both in urban and rural areas and keeping girls at home is more common in rural areas. As the number of religious schools increases, the number of girls who attend school increases, and parents decided to send their daughters to these schools (TOU1).

The new reform claimed to expand girls' freedoms and opportunities by abolishing the headscarf ban at the primary, secondary, and high school level of schooling, thus giving people religious freedom to attend school dressed in a way that they value, thereby reducing the concerns of families who did not want to send their daughters to school. The 'headscarf ban' was a crucial conversion factor that closed the opportunities of many women and girls to access education and employment for several decades in Turkey, but policy makers' sole focus on only 'access' indeed missed out the need to think about gender in relation to 'quality education' and the numerical increase in girls' enrolment and participation is regarded as the *only valid* way forward to promoting gender equality.

Particularly in Eastern Anatolia, there were many families who did not want their daughters to share the same class with boys or who refused to send their daughters to school because they would have to remove their headscarf at schools. There are also families who want their daughters to take religious education. Before the 4+ reform, they did not want to send their daughters to school but today, they can send them as their daughters are studying at single-sex religious schools. The important thing is that they let their daughters study now. It doesn't matter which school they send them to or what kind of education they get. The point is that those girls can study now. It may be religious education but at least they know what sort of education they are getting and that they are being taught religion related stuff at school (J1).

As seen above, the central concern is to get more girls into schools, with no concern for the quality of education, the school curriculum (except the presence of religious content), the type of female identities or gendered structures being developed, hierarchal and sexist relations or pedagogies within the school, girls' schooling experiences, or gender relations within and outside the schools. Likewise, another official from a trade union also emphasised the importance of the lifting of the headscarf ban, but also criticised the single-sex policy introduced to religious schools:

I am in favour of mixed education, as it better serves the pedagogical and social needs of students and I stated so when this reform was being drafted…yet I believe that lifting the headscarf ban is milestone. Most women who are enrolled in open education (open high schools) are mature women who could not study due to the headscarf ban. Now, more girls will be free to study (TUO 2).

In the same manner, another journalist responded to the claims that the 4+ reform would clear the way for underage marriages, as the bill makes it possible to pursue one's education through open education until the end of high school, by arguing that such comments were purely ideological and have nothing to do with the reform:

Today, women's rights in Turkey are much more progressive than 10 years ago. No one can forcefully marry you, so says the law…I find the claims that the 4+ reform will pave the way for child marriage as an ideological comment made by those who want to oppose this bill… we should wait and see the outcomes of the bill before making such comments (J2).

Although laws in Turkey protect the rights of girls and guarantee that any marriage under the age of 18 is illegitimate and regarded as child marriage, several studies show that girls' consent is still not being sought, particularly in eastern Anatolia, and that child marriages are still part of the education system that deprives girls of education (Aydemir, 2011; Özaydınlık, 2014). Therefore, the nature of the bill rarely addresses qualitative and gender-sensitive issues; rather, it is focused on boosting enrolment rates.

What can be inferred from the descriptions of the stakeholders is that the reform does not have a strong gender equality focus; neither does it touch upon the issues that need to be addressed in the education system to strengthen girls' personal development. The central argument and rationale focuses exclusively on the lifting of the girls' headscarf ban as a way to increase girls' participation in school, with no regard for the unequal everyday gender relationships, and patriarchal culture promoted both within and outside the schools, and broader forms of discrimination related to gender, which have been identified as the major issues that must be addressed to establish broader gender equality within the education system (Cin, 2017; Gumus and Chudgar, 2016).

The stakeholder interviews show that Turkey has adopted a human capital and rights perspective towards gender equality, meaning girls' access to education is seen as a right. The new reform attempts to ensure this access, but gender is read as a biological category; the opening of more religious schools and the lift of the headscarf ban are seen as making significant progress toward closing the gender gap ensuring that the right of access to education is achieved. Such frameworks draw on policy goals from a reductionist perspective of positioning girls in an enrolment and access setting. Although this is not in tension with human development or gender equality, it is insufficient for gender justice claims in education, which seek to promote moral, political, social and civic thought and entitlement. So, failing to address the persistence of gender inequalities and overlooking socio-cultural influencing factors creating gender inequalities in education is a critical oversight. Such a superficial conceptualisation of gender equality in policy can severely affect the freedoms of girls and constrain their capabilities and exercise of agency. It also leaves in place the structural or social arrangements, as well as other mediating factors influencing their capabilities and their freedom to act on capabilities.

From a capabilities perspective, gender equality in policy-making should seek to promote girls' agency through ameliorating gendered social forces that are shaping girls and boys differently in the school environment and providing meaningful education (Unterhalter 2007a), whilst not ignoring the structures, behaviour and culture that favour or disadvantage and ignore boys. Such a perspective is currently missing from the mind-sets of stakeholders and the rationale of the reform. What is more is that the stakeholders' conceptualisation of gender equality heavily depends on girls being primary targets—there is no mention of boys— any policy goals and intervention targeted at gender equality would need to focus on both genders. It becomes evident that boys' schooling, addressing the educational needs of boy or combating the toxic masculinity at schools which places men above women or validates masculine characteristic as markers of domination and strength is less of a concern.

Having pointed out the narrow, fragmented and exclusionary gender equality understanding of the stakeholders in policy-making, we now present the interviews with teachers as the practitioners of this reform to further explore the outcomes of this bill at schools and on girls.

Implications of the Bill for Gender Equality and Girls' Education: Practitioner Perspectives

Teachers as practitioners are those who have experienced and observed the implications and outcomes of the reforms and therefore, can identify the imminent effects of the bill. The data analysis indicates the ways practising teachers experienced the impacts of the 4+ reforms on girls' capabilities in four categories: 1) providing safe schools and efficient learning environments, 2) increasing the enrolment rates of girls, 3) constraining girls' social capabilities, and 4) restricting girls' intellectual capabilities.

Providing Safe Schools and Efficient Learning Environments

One of the most prominent challenges girls face at schools is an unsafe school environment, with verbal and sexual harassment occurring both within and around schools (Cin, 2017). Teachers argue that the single-sex education offered at religious schools provides girls with a safe, bullying-free and sexual harassment-free environment to study and ensures that they can enjoy their physical well-being:

> I think separating girls' and boys' classes was a good initiative; girls can act freely, they feel safer, there are no sexual harassment cases (…) In eastern Anatolia, this kind of harassment is a big deal for families and I think girls are more secure now. It was difficult to prevent such cases in co-education (Mustafa, Vice-principal).

Likewise, another teacher argued that single-sex education made it easier for girls to flourish academically without feeling shame and resentment:

> With 4+, girls now get more positive discrimination. Girl classes achieve better academically, but in co-education, boys dominate and girls stay aside (…) When it is only girls, they show themselves out there (Canan, teacher).

In general, teachers expressed that the single-sex education provided at religious schools was one way of ensuring that girls who are smart but remain silent can flourish. Girls' silence is often due to feelings of resentment, which could be associated with the patriarchal culture that requires women and girls to develop submissive identities and remain almost invisible in the presence of males. In such an environment, single-sex education can be argued to support and enable girls' intellectual capability of recognising and showing their potential, as well as to secure their physical well-being and providing the necessary conditions to receive education in a safe and harassment-free context.

Increase in Enrolment Rates of Girls

Girls' enrolment is a fundamental issue for MoNE. Despite the nationwide campaigns and policy initiatives offering positive affirmation, completion of a full course of primary schooling has never been achieved for either girls or boys, particularly due to the cultural prohibition of girls' education in Eastern Turkey. Therefore, one of the selling points and frequently articulated aims of the new reform was to increase the net enrolment rates of girls by increasing the number of religious schools and offering

single-sex school as an intervention strategy to convince families to send their daughters to schools. Both the MoNE (2016) figures and teachers in this study support the argument that the schooling ratio of girls, particularly in primary education, indeed increased:

> I can say that the schooling rate of girls has increased since the (single-sex) education respects the cultural values of the community here. Your daughter sharing her class and desk with a male student may not be important for you, but it is very important and unacceptable for people here, to the extent that girls choose to drop-out (Behice, teacher).

> I see that families in the village that would not send their daughters to schools do so now because there are religious schools offering single-sex education and single-sex dormitories and all opportunities are being provided for girls to study. (…) so I cannot deny its (4+'s) contribution to the schooling ratio (Cem, principal).

The reform played a crucial role in enabling girls' access to and participation in education; many of these girls would otherwise be kept out of schooling and be pushed toward early marriage. Although the education being provided is religion-based, teachers emphasise that this is what most families want in the region (Eastern Turkey) and it is the main motivation for parents to send their girls to schools. We can speak of the participation of girls in education as an expansion of their intellectual capability to receive education, to gain skills of literacy and numeracy, to access the opportunities and knowledge that could change their lives or open better lives than they lead although we remain sceptical that religious education may not challenge the stereotyping or coding regarding traditional roles of women in the society and family. So, as it stands, the reform does not address how the content and experiences of schooling relate to gender equality.

Constraining Girls' Social Capabilities

Despite increasing girls' enrolment and providing a safe and efficient learning environment, the single-sex education adopted by the reform has deprived girls of the opportunity to engage in mixed-gender interactions. Forming such relations is very important for girls raised in patriarchal cultures because it can help to dismantle the gender codes that place them as second-class citizens in comparison to men, and provide a transformative space to appear with boys without shame in a public setting, like school:

> Our aim is to socialise the women. Single-sex education displays an understanding distant from secular education and promotes a male-dominated mind-set that allows little freedom for girls and offers a social life only among themselves and, again, teaches them to adhere to oppression in the presence of men (Seda, teacher).

> These girls (stressing that girls of conservative background) do not learn to live in harmony with the opposite sex and how to communicate and interact with them (…) if they are raised like this (in single-sex schools), how will they work with men in the future? (Melek, teacher).

The point made here by teachers was that single-sex education, particularly in patriarchal contexts where gender norms and gender based discrimination are inherent, inhibits girls' social capabilities to establish relations with the opposite sex, speak back, and voice their ideas in mixed-gender environments. It also deprives them of a schooling process that could spark a process of recognition that girls could be on par with boys, thus contributing to the production of submissive gender identities and girls who internalise these gender inequalities in their subsequent lives.

Restricting Girls' Intellectual Capabilities

The reform also paved the way for open education after primary school, meaning that upon completing the first four years, children may choose to further their education through open education without physically attending school, but just sitting for exams.

> Parents can choose not to send their daughters after primary schools and there have been cases like this; they marry girls off (by unofficial imam marriage) and get them registered in open education. How can a girl in open education achieve the same as one in formal education and further her education? It cuts the girl out of school life and deprives her of all the social and intellectual gains and life she could have had (Serdar, teacher).

The flexibility for open education, despite the increase in enrolment rates, works as a disadvantage for some girls and keeps them away from school, which in turn limits their interaction with their peers, teachers, and social/intellectual facilities provided by school. Socialising is also a chrysalis for democratic values as students get to meet other students who are like not like-minded and not of the same class and respect them rather than living in a nutshell. Therefore, such interactions could help them develop the intellectual capability of developing aspirations, expanding their horizon and gaining knowledge and basic life skills; developing these capabilities leads to further capability development, as education has a distributive and interpersonal effect in reducing gender inequalities and expanding all other capabilities (Sen 1999), as well as contributes to diversity and progression in society and community.

Discussion

What a capabilities-based gender equality in education policy-making could offer?

The interviews with stakeholders who have directly or indirectly taken part in the reform reinforced our argument that Turkey has a limited vision in approaching gender equality in educational policy-making. Although we agree that providing women and girls access to education and increasing their participation is a significant step, it is insufficient in terms of coping with wider gender inequalities that disempower girls and women, preventing them from achieving what they value and challenging the norms, structures, relations and hierarchies that reproduce such inequalities. Therefore, a capabilities-based gender equality would require addressing conversion factors of gendered relations, structures, pedagogies,

practices and beliefs that work as barriers to girls' widening their opportunities and capabilities and achieving well-being (Unterhalter 2007a). The current reform does not comprehensively provide clear, in-depth policy goals and definitions of achieving gender equality that could bring transformative changes, therefore, the use of capabilities to inform policy goals would reduce the influence of the aforementioned conversion factors in education on girls' capabilities and agency.

The limited understanding that shaped the reform and policy was also reflected in its practices. It constrained girls' social capabilities of engaging freely in mixed-gender relations without harassment and shame, which could have been provided only through schooling due to the prevailing cultural values and social monitoring effectively regulating their bodies in the community. The reform also inhibited the development of girls' intellectual capability of benefiting from the cultural, intellectual and social facilities provided by school, which are of great importance for the development of further capabilities. The tension between the intentions of policy and how it is practiced is evident and it results from the issue of minimum compliance, meaning gender equality in education is a long established and aspired goal of Turkey, yet aiming enrolment indicates the minimum commitment to this goal grounded in a political and moral vision.

These findings address the necessity of integrating capabilities-informed gender equality in policy-making, but also highlight the significance of adopting a bottom-up approach that could transform gender inequalities. A policy understanding that does not create alternative space for bottom-up needs, listen to the voices of practitioners who could better identify the needs and structural problems, conversion factors or bring the voices of girls to the forefront cannot foster gender justice. A top-down approach with no public debate and deliberation with communities, practitioners, or girls, can only promote economic development by ensuring that a certain number of girls are in the education system, but cannot address the qualitative aspects of gender equality that could improve girls' and women's lives. Therefore, establishing policy goals requires bottom-up contributions where problems such as implementation, negative conversion factors, and structural and relational challenges arising from the top-down approach can be identified and used to serve as an informational basis for policy development. A failure to do so would only reflect the political and power influences shaping policies, as in the 4+ reform, in which neo-conservative values (introducing religious *values* both in their programs and political behaviour) and the agenda of the government are partially incorporated in education system. As a result, the reform sets a moral-religious compass for education and creates a culture based on religiosity through promoting single-sex education within the religious schools and prioritising these schools.

We argue that Turkey needs a comprehensive understanding of gender equality in educational policy-making that could dismantle conservative and gendered structures, but would also focus on boys. These structures impact girls' schooling experiences, opportunities, and access; challenging them would build a more gender just society, which is identified in the SDG goals that Turkey ratified and is

explicitly stated in the development goals of the government. A capability-informed gender equality has a lot to offer in thinking about how to transform social structures, confinements, and institutions to empower girls and give them room to manoeuvre to achieve their interests and aspirations. Considering the vast number of initiatives and campaigns launched in collaboration with MoNE, NGOs, and the EU (see Cin and Walker, 2016) to promote gender equality in schools, we argue that the issues surrounding equality and girls' empowerment are still priority issues for the government. However, lack of political will in reflecting these into policy goals and outcomes has withheld transformative changes that could promote sustainable gender equality.

Conclusion

This research offers an analysis of the 4+ reform from a capabilities-based gender equality perspective by drawing from 16 interviews conducted by stakeholders and practitioners. We cannot generalise the outcomes of the reforms on girls, as we have only conducted the interviews with teachers in Eastern Anatolia, where the gendered norms are most stratified. Nevertheless, the results reveal the underpinning rationale in terms of how little concern is given to gender equality and how it impacts girls' educational experiences—yet we could see that both practitioners and stakeholders influencing the decision makers keep boys' education out of gender equality claims and take girls as the point of reference. Although the education and schooling of girls is more at stake than that of boys in Turkey, single-sex education equally deprives boys of mixed-gender relations and the opportunity to mingle or communicate with the opposite-sex and does not address the toxic masculinity embedded in pedagogy, curriculum, school structures and gender relations. Similarly, initiatives that only focus on promoting girls' education and boosting their numbers can overlook the boys who do not have the necessary economic means to study, all of which is significant for building a gender-just society. So, it is time that we move towards a more inclusive understanding of gender that incorporates boys and engages them in gender equality initiatives.

We believe that the outcomes and impacts of the reform should be thoroughly analysed across the country to address its lack of gender equality conceptualisations. It is hoped that the findings will inform the debates on gender equality within the reform, as they allow us to conclude that traditional gender roles and patriarchy are not being challenged at schools; on the contrary, the policies adopted with the aim of improving women's educational and social lives seems to have widened the separation between males and females. Even though the government prioritises girls' education and equality agenda, there are obstacles to overcome, such as tackling the cultural norms surrounding girls, introducing a comprehensive understanding of what gender equality is, and applying this in schools. More importantly, there is a need to adopt a bottom-up approach; the inclusion of teacher trade unions and journalists in policy-making is important but insufficient in matters such as gender inequality, instead girls, boys, communities, and practitioners in the field should be the first to inform such policies.

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