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Sustainability of Handwoven Carpets in Turkey: The Context of the Weaver

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Forms of Production

Past research, conducted mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, has identified three forms of production in which carpets are woven as commodities¹. These are petty-commodity production, the putting-out system, and workshop production.

Petty-commodity production involves weaving in the home, with the male head of the household or other male relatives selling the finished product to a carpet dealer or at a local or regional market (fig. 1). The family owns the loom and other weaving supplies, and family members purchase or prepare the yarn themselves. Under the putting-out system, the yarn, rug patterns and perhaps the loom is supplied by a dealer who collects the finished product. Following the workshop model, weavers work in a centralized location, away from their homes, with all materials and patterns supplied by a manufacturer (figs. 2 and 3). Workshop production may also take the form of village- or government-organized cooperatives, in which women may provide their own materials and choose their own patterns, use materials and patterns provided by the cooperative, or engage in some combination thereof. Under all three systems women may be paid by the piece, by the knot, or by the square meter.



Fig. 1. Weaver working in her own home in the village of Feslegen, Mugla (southwestern Turkey), 2005. She intends to sell this rug. Photo by author.

¹ Berik 1986; Landreau 1995; Incirioglu 1991; Hart 2005.



Figs. 2 and 3. Weavers at the weaving coop workshop in the village of Sizma, near Konya, 2005. Photo by author.



These different modes of production are suited to different settings. Where women are able to weave only intermittently due to other duties they are likely to weave in the home as this form of production can be stopped and started at will. Indeed, that is how weaving and many other art forms primarily practiced by women (such as crochet, and needle-point lace) developed – as a way of filling in so-called ‘empty time’ with activities that did not interfere with other domestic duties. Home-based production (either petty commodity or putting out) is most suited to areas that have intensive year-round crops (as in the case of diversified cash crop agriculture), or where families are small and thus there is not as much ‘empty time’². Workshop weaving is most likely found in places with distinct agricultural and non-agricultural seasons or where people live in extended-family households and thus chores are shared among many family members. Under these conditions some women can leave the house and thus weave for extended periods of time uninterrupted.³

² Berik 1986.

³ Berik 1986.

Incentives to Weave

Research conducted during the summer of 2005 has shown that some women still weave under each of these arrangements, but as economic status increases, women generally stop weaving. There are a number of reasons why a woman might weave carpets. There are also a number of reasons why a woman may stop weaving, or not weave in the first place. These reasons include the physical act of weaving, the availability of “empty time,” economic gain, geographic location, and tradition.

The physical act of weaving is strenuous. Women sit on benches or the floor to weave. This position, as well as the act of tying knots on warp threads held under high tension and beating the weft in a repetitive motion with combs leads to numerous health issues such as bad backs, chronic headaches and hand or joint problems. That said, weaving is an activity that can take place in the home and can be stopped and started at will – allowing for childcare and other traditionally female household duties.

Weaving developed as a means of producing household goods during “empty time.” It is a task that can be stopped and started relatively easily and thus can take place between other duties. Women in rural Turkey usually weave carpets out of a need for cash or a need for dowry goods. When households are better able to generate cash income and more goods are available for purchase, less time is needed to provide for the household, and dowry goods may be purchased instead of produced. While women still weave carpets in many areas few still spin their own yarn. This is a time-consuming activity and pre-spun yarn is readily available most places. Women are thus unwilling to work as hard as they needed to in the past, when everything in the household was handcrafted.

Though male children are still more likely to receive education beyond the legally required primary level, as household incomes increase people have the opportunity to educate their daughters as well⁴. In one village we found that if women continued their education past primary school they were unlikely to weave. Of two families interviewed, one said that their older daughter weaves, but their younger daughter will go to high school and thus will not weave. In another household the young girl was saying that she does not like to weave, but her mother and grandmother said that she is not doing well in school, so she will learn to weave. School takes up time that would otherwise be devoted to chores such as weaving. Education will also improve a young woman’s chances of making a marriage that will move her to a town or city lifestyle, where carpet weaving will not be part of her duties.

Our research also confirms previous findings⁵ that women generally are not given control of the income generated by their labor. Weavers working for one company interviewed have been able to use non-cash bonuses (given to them in the form of gold bangles) in order to purchase land or sewing machines and thus profit directly from their work, but they are still not able to control the majority of what they earn. In a village where young women weave for a cooperative workshop, some weavers reported that they were only allowed to keep five New Turkish Lira out of the approximately 200 Lira they had been paid for their work, the rest being kept by their fathers. Even if women are not given control over the income generated by weaving, a rise in the financial wellbeing of the household will most likely have a positive effect on them as well. In addition to raising their family standard of living, women who are unmarried may also be

⁴ Ozbay 1995.

⁵ Berik 1986, Landreau 1995.

contributing to their own dowries, and thus improving their lives by having a wider range of suitors to choose from.

Weaving as income generation has generally been associated with poor areas as payment for the amount of time that it takes to weave a carpet is very low. Weavers generally operate as part of the informal economy, whether they are weaving for themselves or on a commission in the home, or in a workshop for a cooperative or a weaving company. As part of the informal economy health insurance and social security benefits are not generally available. Factory work, on the other hand, is likely to include such benefits as well as a steady paycheck and regular working hours.

With competition from machine-made carpets and handmade carpets from countries in the east, such as China, India, and Afghanistan that have lower labor and materials costs the situation for Turkish weavers is not improving. One company included in the study had recently outsourced its weaving to China and another had considered outsourcing weaving but decided that quality control would suffer and their clients would pay a higher price to ensure quality materials and workmanship.

Geographic location plays a part in whether a woman will weave or not, as well as which production structure she is likely to weave under. As was mentioned before, home-based weaving is most likely to take place in areas with year-round agriculture and workshop weaving is most likely to take place in areas with distinct agricultural and non-agricultural seasons. Additionally geography plays a part both in terms of the economic status of a region and in the access to markets for carpets and other goods. Of the three villages visited on the west coast, the village with access to water (and thus greenhouse production) had the least weavers. Villages in mountainous or arid regions have fewer opportunities for income generation and thus may be more likely to need the cash, however little, produced by weaving.

Whether a woman would weave or not is also affected by access to a market for her goods. Tourism is an important part of the Turkish economy, and tourists themselves comprise a large portion of the domestic market for carpets. As tourism continues to grow, money brought in by cultural tourism may provide some motivation for maintaining the craft in the future. On the other hand, money brought in by other industries in the rural economy that supply the tourist trade (such as greenhouse-based cash crop agriculture) can be sufficient to allow women to stop weaving. Greenhouse agriculture also requires year-round cultivation, and thus women have less 'empty time' to fill.

In areas with a tradition of weaving for dowry, being a good weaver may still bring prestige. One woman interviewed still shears her own sheep, spins her own yarn, and dyes the wool with natural dyes. She says that this is how she has always done it and it is how she will continue to do it. Another village, known for a brilliant yellow dye, has a high proportion of women who still use natural dyes to color their yarn. And villages with a weaving tradition may be more likely to see women weave as a form of income generation than villages with no weaving tradition in living memory. This, coupled with the fact that some women find weaving to be an enjoyable means of passing time and expressing themselves creatively, means that some areas may see weaving continue even if it is no longer a feasible form of income generation. As financial situations improve and women have 'free time' as opposed to 'empty time,' weaving may well shift to a leisure activity in its own right.

Conclusions

While market forces have changed how and why women weave, they do not seem to have changed weavers' status in Turkish society. Income from carpets can help a family gain access to the cash now needed for education and healthcare, and to buy necessities as well as luxury goods, but a woman's income still goes to the men of the family and it is still the men who make decisions about money. Women who weave usually do not have a choice as to whether they weave or not; they do not choose if the product of their labor is kept or sold, nor do they choose the price for their labor or of the product that is sold. As financial status improves, however, women no longer need to work so hard to provide for their households.

Some of the women interviewed said that they would keep weaving, but are only planning on teaching their daughters to weave if the girls are interested. As access to different forms of employment increases and education becomes an option for more women, Turkish culture is changing to accommodate other means of acquiring goods and showing a woman's skills and family connections. Where weaving is still a valued skill and weavers are well compensated for their labor the craft will continue, but it seems that only the high-end market will be able to withstand the pressures of global competition. The high-end market provides higher profits, which may be passed on to weavers in the form of higher wages and social security benefits. The skill-level needed may also inspire pride in artisanship and the cachet associated with Turkish carpets is more likely to be important to the clientele of this market.

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