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BRIEFS

**Work and Gender in  
Turkey's Export-Oriented  
Agriculture: The Case of  
Sweet Cherries**

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Nil Alt received her Master's degree in Geography, Planning and Environment from Concordia University, Montreal in 2017. In the same year, she started her doctoral studies in Human Geography in the Department of Geography & Planning the University of Toronto. Her current research focuses on uneven development, political economy of food and agriculture, rural transformation, and feminist labour studies.

Research on transnational agri-food processes shows that starting with the 1990s, classical export commodities (coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, cocoa, etc.) have been replaced by so-called “high value foods” (HVF), such as fresh fruits and vegetables, poultry, dairy products, and prepared convenience foods (Jaffe & Gordon, 1992, p.38; Goodman, 1997, p.8). In time, dietary changes, trade reform, and technical changes in the food industry (Santeramo et al., 2018) led to the expansion of the HVF sector. As these new consumption trends took hold, especially in the advanced capitalist countries of the Global North, diets composed of less red meat and more fresh fruits and vegetables came to be understood as healthier (Santeramo et al., 2018). Specifically, fruits and vegetables came to be seen as essential for a balanced and nutritious diet. Of course, all this was made possible by global developments including (i) access to inexpensive transportation along complex and long-distance commodity chains, (ii) the advancement of refrigeration technologies for effective storage —allowing for transportation of perishable fruits and vegetables.



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Consequently, “fresh” produce, uniform and unblemished, earned a permanent place under the supermarket spotlights as beacons of health and fitness. However, maintaining a year-round supply of seasonal fruits and vegetables required a re-configuration of globally dispersed production networks, typically shouldered by a cheap and flexible labor force (Gertel & Sippel, 2014).

Situated within this global agri-food context, the purpose of this policy note is to examine the production process for the most prominent high value fruit grown in Turkey, the sweet cherry. This will serve to make problems embedded in relations of production visible. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork of the export-driven sweet cherry sector, conducted between 2018 and 2021 in three different production sites, I will make some suggestions to inform more democratic and equitable social policies.

### **Turkey's Expanding Sweet Cherry Exports**

The production and consumption of cherries have increased due to various reasons including, recent trends of healthy eating and advancements in postharvest handling technologies. These developments brought

about a global increase in cherry production, with Turkey ranking first in terms of total area for sweet cherry production and quantity produced worldwide (FAOSTAT, 2019). Particularly, over the last couple of decades, cultivation of the large, firm and juicy export variety Ziraat 900 has enabled exporters to entrench Turkish cherry's competitive position in the global market. Based on value measured in US Dollars, Turkey's cherry export in 2019 ranks 4th after Chile, Hong Kong and the USA (FAOSTAT, 2019).

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Over the past few years, the Ministries of Agriculture and Trade as well as the regional exporters' associations have made persistent efforts to improve Turkey's position in the global cherry market. These efforts attracted wide publicity in local media and export-related gray literature, pushing a “success story” narrative.

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Eventually, years of steadfast commitment and persistent diplomatic visits to China paid off in 2015 when the country agreed to lift its long-standing and impracticable shipment requirements in the 2015 Plant Health Protocol. Fresh fruit exporters and relevant government offices celebrated the success of the Turkish cherry and set themselves to work to pave the way for record cherry exports (General Directorate of Food and Control, 2019). In the next year, bureaucratic negotiations carried out between Turkey's regional exporters associations and the Chinese authorities led to the Fresh Cherry and Grape URGE Project, a joint initiative between the Aegean Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Exporters Association and Turkey's Ministry of Trade (Aegean Exporters' Association, n.d.). Turkish cherry exports have seen significant increase since 2016 thanks to these public and private efforts.

The celebratory tone of the media outlets frame Turkey's enhanced competition power in the Asia-Pacific cherry market as a diplomatic and commercial success for the entire country. Yet, when such economically driven export agricultural models are

further scrutinized, the somewhat veiled social dimension of relations of production emerge. Agribusinesses make significant profits by exporting HVF's like sweet cherries, and to do so they need cheap and flexible seasonal labour to further reduce production costs. Therefore, export-oriented agri-food systems driven by the consumer demand for "eating fresh" are typically made possible by invisible seasonal labour (Gertel & Sippel, 2014).

### **What Expanding Cherry Exports Mean for Agricultural Labour**

Globally, the fruit and vegetable industry relies heavily on intensive human labour at the key stages of the production cycle, especially the harvest. For single-harvest crops like sweet cherries, harvest season is when an entire year's work culminates into a couple of critical weeks. So, the window in which sweet cherries can be picked for sale is extremely narrow. Cherries need to be harvested when they are almost or fully mature because they do not continue to ripen off the tree. Therefore, once picked, they don't store for very long, even if refrigerated. So, time is of the essence for the exporter.



**After all, one of the main competitive advantages of Turkey's sweet cherry production stems from the availability of low-paid and flexible labour enmeshed in highly informalized labour relations.**

The manual nature of harvest operations, the seasonality of harvest work and the highly perishable nature of sweet cherries (shelf life and storability) compel growers/exporters to search for reliable sources of cheap and flexible labourers during the two-week harvest season. However, with labour shortages emerging as a critical constraint particularly in rural areas of capitalist expansion (which lost worker population to rural outmigration to the growing construction sector), Turkey's rural employers have faced a major problem finding reliable and cheap labour that can be counted on to return each year.

In response to this "labour problem", the industry tries to assemble a highly flexible seasonal labour force that can be called to work, often on short notice, and dissolved again quickly. This is so, because the consistency of supply, defined as the ability to meet export orders continually with minimum quality failure, is highly dependent on fast and skilled workers available during harvest time. After all, one of the main competitive advantages of Turkey's sweet cherry production stems

from the availability of low-paid and flexible labour enmeshed in highly informalized labour relations.

### **Assembling a Flexible Labour Force**

Cherry pickers are invariably recruited through labour contractors, commonly referred to as *çavuş*. While labour contractors' primary function is to supply workers to growers, they also transport the workers to the orchard, supervise their work during harvest and, most importantly, pay them. Export-oriented, large-scale orchards rely exclusively on this type of labour intermediation for seasonal cherry picker recruitment. In most cases, *çavuş* capitalizes on his hereditary communal title, recruiting native families of his own province.

Supervised by the patriarch or "head" of the household, these worker groups are predominantly composed of women and girls, enacting familial gendered hierarchies at the orchard. Mobilization of such engrained power dynamics for capital accumulation locks women workers in lowest positions at the workplace without much prospect for change.

**... Since local markets are unable to supply such labour, and control over harvest labor is key to profitability, use of labour intermediation to source cherry pickers is prevalent among large-scale, export-driven producers. In this context, intermediation simply means that workers are employed directly by labour contractors rather than the agribusiness for which they work.**

During the harvest, the number of required cherry pickers can change daily according to fruit ripening levels. This means that businesses need cherry pickers as flexible and cheap as possible. Since local markets are unable to supply such labour, and control over harvest labor is key to profitability, use of labour intermediation to source cherry pickers is prevalent among large-scale, export-driven producers. In this context, intermediation simply means that workers are employed directly by labour contractors rather than the agribusiness for which they work.

The role of labour contractors in the organization of Turkey's agricultural labour markets are highly diverse. This diversity of labour contractor roles includes working as crew leaders; meeting labourers' basic transportation, health care and subsistence needs; providing job training; and even engaging in worker activism (Cinar & Lordoglu, 2010; Mura, 2016). In my fieldwork, labour contractors were invariably men who relied on their social status to arrange incessant and flexible flows of a highly feminized labour force for cherry harvests. In some cases, these arrangements relied on delayed payments to ensure that workers came back every day

until the harvest was complete. In other cases, the worker-contractor relationship involved debt bondage where the worker had to work for the contractor to pay back the advance payment that they had gotten during the off-season. Both situations create an informal space where the worker-employer relationship takes place under the radar, escaping government oversight and exacerbating women's vulnerabilities in and outside of the family.

### **Labour Control During Harvest**

Harvest is a stressful time for growers, exporters, and workers. Unsurprisingly, labour control, defined as the act of deploying coercive and consensual means to maintain the subordination of workers, is at its peak during this time. During the harvest, the orchard management team, and the labour contractors who are responsible to oversee their individual worker groups, exert remarkable pressure on the pickers to get them to work faster, harder, and longer.

Typically, workers are divided into groups and each group is allocated to a tree row. The pickers work under the immediate supervision of orchard staff and their contractor as they move along the rows.

Both types of supervisors continually pace along the row of workers through the day, yelling out instructions such as “Don’t throw the fruit in the basket! Place it in the basket gently!”, “I don’t want to see cherries without stems!”, “Don’t pull off the spurs! They will become next year’s cherries!”, “Make sure you move the full cases out of the sun!” and of course, “Come on, come on, faster!”. The orchard staff believe that yelling is necessary to “keep the workers’ attention on cherries”, to keep them from eating or stealing cherries and to make sure they don’t “slack”, implying the inevitability of using coercive means for enhanced worker productivity (personal communication, 2019).

### **Gendered Inequalities among Cherry Pickers**

Gender inequality is widespread in agricultural production in Turkey and elsewhere. Historically, today’s seasonal agricultural workers (local or migrant) in Turkey’s countryside were once either smallholders or sharecroppers. These relations of agrarian production characterized by the heavy involvement of family and/or community labour have been carried over to production relations in capitalist agriculture, enabling contemporary mid-size farmers and agribusiness to capitalize on rooted social hierarchies, particularly based on gender difference. Cherry pickers are predominantly women as well. The gendered pattern of harvest

operations, arguably the most significant stage of production, demonstrates how the liberalization of global food sourcing over recent decades has brought about important gender implications. At all three production sites, sweet cherries are largely viewed as a “female crop”, yet in all three of these orchards women do not have a say over their labour conditions, including their pay. While members of the orchard management team as well as the individual growers I interviewed repeatedly identified the ideal cherry picker as a woman because women’s hands “moved more gently and skillfully” and “women were more compliant and trainable than men”, women’s contribution to quality sweet cherry production is still poorly remunerated and they are paid less than their male counterparts.

Additionally, in one of the orchards where seasonal agricultural workers from Turkey’s Southeastern provinces made up the majority of the labour force, I could readily observe how women workers also undertook key social reproduction tasks such as the handling of food for the lunch breaks and attending to the young children who were brought to the orchard due to lack of childcare support. In other words, these women did not only perform a physically demanding task as cherry picking, but they also dealt with the mental and emotional strain of maintaining family members, most of whom were also cherry pickers.



## **The Ministry of Labour and Social Security should work in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to fully enforce the 2010 Regulations on Labour Intermediation in Agriculture.**

They had to fulfil all these duties fast under the disciplining gaze of both their family patriarchs and the orchard management.

### **How Can These Conditions Improve?**

Relations of agricultural production organized by labour contractors have been subject to jurisdiction with the 2010 [Regulations on Labour Intermediation in Agriculture](#). According to the regulations, labour contractors were mandated to hold an intermediation permit issued by the Turkish Employment Agency. The permit, which requires renewal every three years, stipulates that the contractor does not get any fees from workers, but is paid by the employer. Further, the contractor is asked to collaborate with the employer to ensure that the workers' housing and transportation needs are duly met. In case they are not, it is the labour contractor's responsibility to file an official application to the local authorities to have these conditions improved. The regulations also ask the contractor to ensure that the workers are paid directly by the employer in a timely manner. However, these regulations have never come into effect in practice.

My observations on sweet cherry harvests can be extrapolated to most of the export-oriented fresh produce with similarly narrow harvest windows. Therefore, the following suggestions aim to address a more comprehensive set of employment issues faced in agricultural production today.

- The Ministry of Labour and Social Security should work in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to fully enforce the 2010 Regulations on Labour Intermediation in Agriculture.

The 2010 Regulations concerning labour mediation should be revised to also address gender-specific issues. The following measures are suggested:

- The pay gap between men and women workers should be eliminated.
- The employer should be mandated to provide on-site childcare facilities for worker families with children during work hours.
- The employer must provide workers with mid-day meals to relieve women workers of unpaid work of meal preparation.



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