

Migration, Gender, and Integration: Syrian Women's Experiences in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

The global phenomenon of migration in the 21st century, often referred to as the "Age of Migration," is characterized by the increasing feminization of migratory flows and the growing recognition of women's distinct experiences within these processes. In the context of Syria, prolonged conflict and displacement have rendered women particularly vulnerable, yet have also positioned them as active agents in survival and integration processes within host societies such as Türkiye. This study examines the influence of gender on the social, economic, and cultural integration of Syrian women residing in Türkiye under temporary protection. It aims to elucidate the intersection of forced migration, gender norms, and integration dynamics, with a particular focus on the duality of vulnerability and resilience that characterizes the lived experiences of these women. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, this study integrates data from non-governmental organizations and institutional reports, survey results, and extant academic literature. Employing a feminist analytical framework, specifically the theory of the feminization of migration, the article explores the multifaceted dimensions of women's adaptation, encompassing legal status, employment, education, and social participation. The findings indicate that the integration of Syrian women in Türkiye is hindered by patriarchal structures, temporary legal status, and socio-cultural barriers, while also being influenced by their agency and adaptive strategies. The study contends that integration policies lacking a gender-sensitive perspective perpetuate dependency and social exclusion. A comprehensive, rights-based, and gender-inclusive framework is crucial for fostering women's empowerment, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting sustainable integration between migrant and host communities.

[Fenomena global migrasi pada abad ke-21, yang sering disebut sebagai "Era Migrasi", ditandai oleh meningkatnya feminisasi arus migrasi serta semakin besarnya pengakuan terhadap pengalaman khas perempuan dalam proses tersebut. Dalam konteks Suriah, konflik berkepanjangan dan situasi pengungsian telah menjadikan perempuan berada dalam posisi yang sangat rentan, namun sekaligus menempatkan mereka sebagai aktor aktif dalam proses bertahan hidup dan integrasi di masyarakat penerima, seperti Türkiye. Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh gender terhadap integrasi sosial, ekonomi, dan budaya perempuan Suriah yang tinggal di Türkiye di bawah status perlindungan sementara. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan irisan antara migrasi paksa, norma-norma gender, dan dinamika integrasi, dengan menitikberatkan pada dualitas kerentanan dan resiliensi yang mewarnai pengalaman hidup perempuan Suriah tersebut. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan data yang bersumber dari organisasi non-pemerintah dan laporan institusional, hasil survei, serta literatur akademik yang relevan. Melalui kerangka analisis feminis, khususnya teori feminisasi migrasi, artikel ini mengeksplorasi dimensi-dimensi adaptasi perempuan secara multidimensional, yang mencakup status hukum, ketenagakerjaan, pendidikan, dan partisipasi sosial. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa integrasi perempuan Suriah di Türkiye terhambat oleh struktur patriarkal, status hukum yang bersifat sementara, serta berbagai hambatan sosial dan kultural, namun pada saat yang sama juga dipengaruhi oleh agensi dan strategi adaptif yang mereka kembangkan. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa kebijakan integrasi yang tidak memiliki perspektif sensitif

gender cenderung mereproduksi ketergantungan dan eksklusif sosial. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan suatu kerangka kerja yang komprehensif, berbasis hak asasi manusia, dan inklusif gender untuk mendorong pemberdayaan perempuan, memperkuat kohesi sosial, serta mempromosikan integrasi yang berkelanjutan antara komunitas migran dan masyarakat penerima.]

KEYWORDS

Migration, women, integration, Syria, Türkiye

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Introduction

Migration impacts men and women in distinct ways, as it is not a process that treats genders equally. The migration experiences differ for men and women regarding behavior, access to opportunities, and the risks they encounter. Women migrants, in particular, face a heightened risk of human rights abuses, exploitation, discrimination, and health issues specific to their gender. These gender-related factors influence women's migration experiences from the moment they decide to migrate, distinguishing their experiences from those of men.¹ The global phenomenon of migration has long been a topic of interest to scholars and policymakers alike, with a growing focus on the distinctive experiences of refugee and migrant women. These women frequently encounter a multitude of challenges, including the need to navigate unfamiliar legal systems and confront societal stigma and discrimination. They also frequently encounter heightened vulnerabilities, particularly in employment, social integration, and access to healthcare and other essential services. These vulnerabilities are commonly compounded by intersecting factors such as gender, ethnicity, and immigration status, resulting in a disproportionate burden.

The migration of Syrian migrants to Türkiye differs from other migration flows to the country in several ways. Firstly, this migration culturally diverges from the migration of Turkish and Turkic kinship groups observed in historical processes. Although Türkiye and Syria are geographically neighboring countries, Türkiye is more integrated with the world in areas such as democratization,

¹ International Organisation for Migration (IOM). "Beyond Numbers: Gender Dimensions Throughout the Migration Cycle." *World Migration Report 2024*. <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int>.

industrialization, human rights, and economic development. This situation further accentuates the existing differences between Türkiye and Syria, and the distinction of this migration in both quantitative and qualitative terms creates challenges in the integration process.² In the initial phase of migration, Syrians often resided with relatives due to economic hardship, and subsequently continued to reside in areas densely populated by other Syrians. The prevailing distrust towards the host society, compounded by significant communication barriers, particularly for women residing alone, has resulted in a marked exacerbation of social isolation. Moreover, the increasing preference for Arabic in daily life has led to a decline in the motivation to learn Turkish, thus hindering integration.³

This research explores the experiences of Syrian women within the framework of forced migration, which involves the involuntary displacement of individuals due to factors beyond their control, such as conflict, violence, and economic hardship. While the United Nations defines a refugee as a person who has fled their homeland due to a well-founded fear of persecution and cannot safely return, Türkiye, due to its geographical limitations under the 1951 Geneva Convention, does not recognize Syrians as refugees. Instead, they are subject to a temporary protection regime. Therefore, the term of “migrant” will be used in this study to describe Syrians seeking safety and protection in Türkiye.

This study examines the complex challenges faced by Syrian migrant women in Türkiye, situated within the context of the feminization of migration. This concept is predicated on two primary components: the increasing representation of women within the migrating population and the distinct experiences of women migrants within the framework of gender. Historically, migration movements have been predominantly male-oriented; however, contemporary migration processes see women assuming significant roles both as individuals and within family units. Moreover, women's migration experiences are influenced by gender roles, which exacerbate their susceptibility to precarious employment and expose them to gender-based discrimination in the labor market. This theory also addresses the social, economic, cultural, and legal dimensions of migration. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses not only the growing number of female migrants but also the gendered impacts of migration. It offers a feminist perspective that connects migrant women's experiences to broader social, economic, and cultural dynamics within migration studies. It enables a comprehensive understanding of migrant women's multidimensional experiences, revealing that migration is motivated not only by economic factors but also by the pursuit of security, escape from violence, family reunification, and the search for freedom. By emphasizing women's agency in the migration process, it challenges the portrayal of women as passive victims, instead presenting them as decision-makers and active agents. This perspective necessitates the consideration of not only official policies and quantitative indicators when evaluating women's

² Karasu, Mithat Erkan. “Göç ve Uyum.” In *Uluslararası 11. Kamu Yönetimi Sempozyumu Bildiriler Kitabı*, edited by A. Yatkın, 631–649. Elazığ: Fırat Üniversitesi, 2017.

³ Harunoğulları, Muazzez. “Suriyeli Sığınmacı Kadınların Sözlü Anlatılarında Savaş, Göç ve Evlilik.” *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research* 7, no. 4 (2021): 353–368.

integration processes, but also gender-based roles, family dynamics, and socioeconomic dependencies. The main reason for employing this theory in this study is to provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the gendered dimensions of migration and the complex power dynamics shaping the experiences of Syrian migrant women in Türkiye.

Syrian Migration in Türkiye

An analysis of Türkiye's historical processes reveals that migration has frequently occurred within its borders. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Balkan migrants returning to their homeland after population exchanges, individuals fleeing the Afghanistan War and the Iranian Revolution, and thousands of unemployed people after the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc have made Türkiye both a transit route and a permanent settlement.⁴ The most recent wave of external migration has been the influx of Syrian migrants. The Arab Spring, which began in 2011, triggered significant social and political transformations in many Middle Eastern countries, with Syria being one of the most profoundly affected. Due to the civil war, millions of Syrians were forced to leave their country, and Türkiye emerged as the primary destination among the countries preferred by Syrian migrants.⁵

Although Türkiye is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, it has not lifted the geographical limitations concerning refugees. This restriction prevents individuals arriving from outside Europe from being granted refugee status in Türkiye. In 2014, the government introduced the 'Temporary Protection Regulation,' which specifically aimed to provide temporary protection to Syrian nationals, stateless individuals, and those displaced due to the events in Syria after April 28, 2011.⁶ Meanwhile, the status of temporary protection has created legal ambiguity for Syrian migrants. Compared to refugees in other countries, they are entitled to fewer rights. Although they have access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and limited employment opportunities, the temporary nature of their status brings uncertainty regarding long-term rights and integration prospects. Upon their arrival in Türkiye, Syrian migrants are registered by the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) and are issued registration cards. The holders of these registration cards are entitled to various rights, including access to healthcare, education, the labor market, and social services. These entitlements are part of the protections granted to individuals under temporary protection status, ensuring they receive basic services while residing in Türkiye.⁷

⁴ Karasu, "Göç ve Uyum", 640.

⁵ Erkan, Erol. "Suriyeli Göçmenler ve Dini Hayat: Uyum, Karşılaşma, Benzeşme Gaziantep Örneği." *İlahiyat Akademi Dergisi*, no. 4 (2017): 1-36.

⁶ Koser Akcapar, Şebnem, and Doğu Şimşek. "The Politics of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: A Question of Inclusion and Exclusion through Citizenship." *Social Inclusion* 6, no. 1 (2018): 176-187.

⁷ Gökalp Kutlu, Ayşegül. "The Gender of Migration: A Study on Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey." *Kadın/Women 2000*, 21, no. 1 (2020): 21-38.

In Türkiye, there is no systematic welfare program specifically designed for Syrian migrants. As a result, Syrian migrants in urban areas are often forced to meet their housing needs independently, typically by paying high rents and engaging in informal or illegal employment. Although Syrians have freedom of movement only within the cities where they are registered, many choose to migrate to and settle in different cities across. Media reports occasionally highlight the precarious living conditions of these refugees and migrants in urban areas, including exposure to human trafficking and economic exploitation, and some women and children are reportedly coerced into prostitution or begging.⁸

The 2022 Syrian Barometer study, conducted under Murat Erdoğan's coordination, revealed a significant increase in participants' concerns regarding the presence of Syrians in metropolitan cities. A substantial portion of participants believe that Syrians are granted privileges in various areas and that the policies implemented involve positive discrimination toward them. This perception has triggered considerable societal reactions, with frequent emphasis on the notion that Syrians should no longer be treated differently or receive preferential treatment. Participants have stated that Syrians should be removed from the country in some way. This suggests a considerable decrease in the level of societal tolerance toward Syrians. The belief in living peacefully alongside Syrians has significantly decreased compared to previous years. Social tension and conflict risks have been expressed more frequently than in prior years. Initially, the societal acceptance of Syrians in Turkish society was at a significantly high level; however, over time, this acceptance became “fragile” and shifted from “acceptance” to “tolerance”.⁹

Being a Refugee and Migrant Woman

Forced migration has increased in volume and political significance since the end of the Cold War. Migration studies in the 1960s and 1970s often centered on male migrants and portrayed women as passive followers, spouses or family members accompanying men either initially or at later stages. This gendered narrative was also reflected in state migration policies, which were shaped by the patriarchal myth that men are the primary breadwinners. Consequently, while children migrated unwillingly and women left beloved places behind, their roles were largely overlooked or reduced to that of dependents.¹⁰

Migration is a process that fosters socio-cultural transformation for both refugees and migrants and host communities. Its evaluation requires a framework that incorporates socio-cultural change. Regarding the demographic characteristics of international migrants and refugees, 52% are men, and 48% are women. Historically, women participated in migration as dependent individuals

⁸ Güçtürk, Yavuz. *The Loss of Humanity: The Human Rights Dimension of the Civil War in Syria*. Translated by H. Öz and G. Köse. İstanbul: SETA, 2014, 82.

⁹ Erdoğan, Murat. *Suriyeliler Barometresi 2022: Suriyelilerle Uyum İçinde Yaşamın Çerçevesi*. UNHCR, 2023

¹⁰ Carling, Jørgen. “Gender Dimensions of International Migration.” *Global Migration Perspectives* 35 (2005): 1–26.

responsible for family care. However, over the past century, they have increasingly migrated independently for educational or employment opportunities. Additionally, according to United Nations data, women and girls constitute approximately half of the refugee and migrant population who flee to other countries due to war, conflict, or other challenging living conditions in their home countries. The tendency of women to migrate increased by 3% between 1990 and 2020. While this percentage might seem statistically small, the female refugee and migrant population grew from 75 million in 1990 to 135 million in 2020.¹¹

The feminist perspective on migration addresses three principal issues. Firstly, the prevailing national and international legal frameworks concerning asylum are indicative of a patriarchal system, which consequently imposes various disadvantages on refugee and migrant women. Secondly, refugee and migrant women are more significantly impacted than their male counterparts during the asylum process, encountering multi-dimensional and more profound negative effects. Lastly, they do not constitute a homogeneous group; thus, their experiences during the asylum process vary according to intersecting identities such as ethnicity, class, age, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation. Feminist migration studies primarily focus on how gender relations which are embedded within family structures, societal norms, global dynamics, and legal frameworks, shape the migration experience. These studies explore both how gender influences migration and how migration, in turn, affects gender roles and identities, with particular emphasis on the diverse experiences of women throughout the migration process.¹²

Refugee and migrant women have contributed significantly to social, economic, cultural, and political domains by promoting various social changes in their countries of origin and destination. Addressing migration from a gender perspective is critical for understanding phenomena such as family integration, employment, education, marriage, culture, and social life in host societies and for developing appropriate policies. Despite their positive impacts, refugee and migrant women are among the most vulnerable groups in international migration. Their employment rates are typically lower than those of native women or male refugees, and they often receive lower wages compared to men. Furthermore, refugee and migrant women face risks such as gender-based exploitation, violence, and abuse, including human trafficking. Gender roles, ethnic differences, and the perception of being “foreign” can compound their challenges. Women who migrate through family reunification are often perceived as unable to fully adapt to fundamental values such as language and liberal lifestyles in host societies. Their roles in child-rearing and transmitting cultural values to future generations are sometimes viewed as obstacles to integration, and they are often held responsible for failures in social integration. Female refugees and migrants are disproportionately employed in domestic services, caregiving, waitressing, and other low-skilled jobs, as well as in tourism and entertainment industries. Migrant-

¹¹ UNDESA (2020). International Migration 2020 Highlights

¹² Buz, Sema. “Göçte Kadınlar: Feminist Yaklaşım Çerçevesinde Bir Çalışma.” *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet* 18, no. 2 (2007): 37-50.

receiving countries typically demand either highly skilled labor or low-paid, unskilled labor for jobs such as domestic caregiving. Women also often work in low-wage or illegal jobs to support the families left behind.¹³ Domestic services, such as child and elder care, house cleaning, pet care, and patient care, frequently involve long hours of intensive labor. For undocumented migrants fearing deportation, such work within households provides a “shelter” but also exposes them to exploitation and abuse. Victims of human trafficking may be forced to work to repay debts to individuals or organizations that brought them to their host countries, often becoming enslaved in the sex trade. Sexual exploitation remains a significant vulnerability for women during migration, particularly for those who enter countries through unauthorized and undocumented routes. These women face long working hours, low wages, and various forms of exploitation. Furthermore, they generally face direct discrimination and resistance due to their gender and have to struggle to integrate into society. During the migration process, women and girls encounter unique challenges stemming from societal gender roles.¹⁴

Refugees and migrants are defined as individuals who, due to fear or persecution based on religion, nationality, group affiliation, or political opinions, are compelled to seek safety in another country. However, Türkiye does not recognize individuals (except those from Europe) defined as refugees under international law. Instead, Türkiye grants temporary protection status, allowing individuals to remain until they can relocate to a third country. The legal status of Syrian women in Türkiye must be evaluated within the context of international norms. The status of Syrian women is typically designated as “temporary protection,” which constrains their capacity to attain permanent rights. The necessity of official registration to receive state services presents a significant barrier for these women. This consequently restricts their access to fundamental services, including healthcare, education, and social assistance, which ultimately results in social exclusion of the 3.6 million Syrians in Türkiye, 46% are women and girls, with 35.5% of this population being of working age.¹⁵

Syrian Migrant Women in Türkiye

The Syrian conflict, which began as part of the Arab Spring on March 15, 2011, evolved into a brutal civil war that disproportionately impacted women and children. A study by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network in Syria revealed that sexual violence was utilized as a war tactic, with rape cases documented in seven cities, including Damascus. These assaults reportedly occurred during protests against the government, at security checkpoints, and within detention facilities. The findings underscore the widespread nature of

¹³ Pele, Marie. “Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey: A Gendered Integration Process.” *Gender in Geopolitics Institute*, 2021. <https://igg-geo.org/en/2021/03/25/syrian-refugee-women-in-turkey-a-gendered-integration-process/>.

¹⁴ Pele, “Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey.”

¹⁵ Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, Türkiye’nin Aylık Göç Trendleri Haziran 2025 (İstanbul: Göç Vakfı, 2025), <https://gocvakfi.org/turkiyenin-aylik-goc-trendleri-haziran-2025/>.

systematic violence against women throughout the conflict, indicating a significant human rights issue that warrants investigation under international law. According to a November 2013 report by SNHR,¹⁶ military operations by security forces resulted in the deaths of over 10,000 women and the sexual assault of more than 7,000. The war's devastating impact has compelled numerous women to flee, carrying the conflict's mental and physical toll to their new homes. Research shows that women are more likely to migrate than men and experience more severe effects of the war.¹⁷

According to the Directorate General of Migration Management, as of June 2025, over 2.6 million refugees have arrived in Türkiye from Syria under temporary protection. Among them, approximately 48% are women, one of the most vulnerable groups.¹⁸ Consequently, the disadvantages of migration often disproportionately affect women. Both societal gender norms and the vulnerable and unprotected status of women during migration are key factors that increase their exposure to risks and exploitation. Additionally, women are among the most vulnerable groups not only due to gender roles but also as a result of discriminatory social norms such as a lack of property ownership, limited access to education, and early marriage.¹⁹

Syrian migrant women who have been displaced not only endure the war's social, psychological, and physical violence but also face additional struggles in their host communities. These challenges include securing essential resources, adjusting to new living environments, and managing various difficulties. The Mazlum-Der²⁰ study highlights major obstacles, especially in obtaining suitable housing, a basic need. While economic and social disparities directly affect housing options, the report stresses that migrant living conditions generally fall short of humanitarian standards. Syrian migrant women, due to low employment rates and traditional gender roles, are forced to spend most of their time in these substandard and unhealthy living spaces. The burden of household duties and childcare in these harsh conditions further complicates their daily lives. The absence of decent living conditions and limited socioeconomic resources also leads to various health issues. Women are particularly vulnerable to various health issues as a result of inadequate nutrition and limited self-care. An equally significant concern is the lack of psychosocial support. Many migrants face the challenges of financial hardship and emotional distress upon arrival in a new country, often without access to external assistance. Consequently, they are compelled to rely solely on themselves for both social and psychological support.

¹⁶ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). "November 2013 Death Toll." *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, December 1, 2013. <https://snhr.org/blog/2013/12/01/november-2013-death-toll/>.

¹⁷ Barın, Hilal. "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Kadınların Toplumsal Bağlamda Yaşadıkları Sorunlar ve Çözüm Önerileri." *Göç Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2015): 10–56.

¹⁸ Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, Türkiye'nin Aylık Göç Trendleri Haziran 2025.

¹⁹ Ferdous, Jannatul, and Dill Mallick. "Norms, Practices, and Gendered Vulnerabilities in the Lower Teesta Basin, Bangladesh." *Environmental Development* 31 (2019), 88–96.

²⁰ MAZLUMDER, Kamp Dışında Yaşayan Suriyeli Kadın Sığınmacılar Raporu (İstanbul: MAZLUMDER, 2014).

Furthermore, the process of adapting to a new culture and society is inherently stressful and poses considerable strain on individuals' well-being.²¹

In assessments of Syrian migrants in Türkiye, the presumption that families migrate collectively is both incomplete and restrictive. A substantial portion of this population comprises women who have lost their spouses due to the civil war, have been separated from family members, have never married, or have been compelled to migrate independently. For Syrian women arriving alone, after addressing fundamental needs such as shelter and sustenance, the process of social integration emerges as a significant challenge. In this context, these women probably experience profound psychosocial trauma due to the migration process, the repercussions of war, and social exclusion.²²

In Türkiye, Syrian migrants have gradually transitioned to a settled life since 2011, but employment-related challenges have become increasingly prominent. This phenomenon can be attributed to the ambiguity surrounding the legal status of Syrian migrants and the absence of a comprehensive legal framework to protect their fundamental rights. This has resulted in many employers exploiting legal gaps in the labour market, particularly in unregistered workplaces, commonly called "informal" or "underground" businesses. It is in these settings that Syrian migrant women are often preferred. A considerable proportion of migrant women encounter difficulties in participating in the labor force as undocumented workers.²³

The integration of Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye highlights the tension between humanitarian assistance and long-term social inclusion. This study contends that Türkiye's current migration and harmonization policies, while offering short-term relief, do not achieve genuine gender-sensitive integration as they neglect women's specific needs, reinforce dependency, and perpetuate patriarchal structures. Language acquisition and participation in public life are essential components of integration; however, Syrian women's engagement is constrained by gendered domestic roles, childcare responsibilities, and language barriers. Without acknowledging women as active agents in integration, policies risk perpetuating dependency and exclusion. Empirical research indicates that many women rely on children or husbands for interaction with the host society, which reinforces patriarchal dependence and limits autonomy. In conclusion, the central thesis of this study is that the integration of Syrian women in Türkiye cannot be achieved through temporary or gender-blind policies; rather, it requires a transformative, gender-sensitive approach that recognizes women's agency and structural inequalities as central to sustainable integration.

²¹ Barın, "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Kadınların Toplumsal Bağlamda Yaşadıkları Sorunlar," 12.

²² Harunoğulları, "Suriyeli Sığınmacı Kadınların Sözlü Anlatılarında," 365.

²³ Gülten Dursun and Sibel Nizamoğlu, "Türkiye'de İşgücü Piyasalarında Suriyeli Kadın Mülteciler: Konfeksiyon Endüstri Örneği," *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 23, Special Issue (2021): 109–132.

1. Employment and Economic Participation

Labour migration policies often reflect gender bias, favoring male-dominated high-paid fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) while disadvantaging women in feminized sectors such as health and education. Women's qualifications are frequently unrecognized, leading them to lower-skilled migration routes with limited protection and increased vulnerability, particularly in care work.²⁴ Approximately one-third of Syrian migrant households in Türkiye are supported by women and children. Therefore, women need paid employment to survive and sustain their livelihoods. However, the labor force participation rate among Syrian women is only 13.7%.²⁵ According to the 2019 data from the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services, while the total number of work permits granted to Syrians was approximately 63,789, only 7% of permits were issued to women. A similar pattern is observed in the 2023 data. According to the relevant statistics, the total number of work permits granted to Syrian migrants in 2023 was 108,520, of which only 6,398 were issued to Syrian women.²⁶ The lowest labor force participation rates among women can be attributed to several factors, including the delayed implementation of the Work Permit Regulation, the employer-driven nature of application processes, and the provincial restrictions on foreign residents. In-depth interviews conducted by Aygöl and Kaba²⁷ with 22 Syrian individuals in Istanbul's Sultanbeyli district revealed the emergence of a labor hierarchy within the Turkish labor market. Access to economic resources constitutes a critical factor that facilitates the integration processes of Syrian migrants, enabling them to become active societal participants and fostering the establishment of social connections with members of the host society. Conversely, Syrian migrants with limited or no access to economic resources experience more challenging and protracted integration processes. The participation of Syrian migrant women in labor markets is essential for their social integration; however they face significant social, economic, and cultural challenges in accessing employment and maintaining continuity in the labor market. Issues such as polygamy and child marriages among girls create problems for both host and refugee and migrant communities.²⁸ In the research²⁹ conducted by Mouflih with the experts working with Syrian migrants, it is emphasized that Syrian migrant women encounter challenging working conditions characterized by instability, inadequate protection, and employment in low-wage, unskilled positions. Gender-

²⁴ IOM, "Beyond Numbers," 15.

²⁵ Zeynep Kivilcim, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) Syrian Refugees in Turkey," in *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, ed. Jane Freedman, Zeynep Kivilcim, and Nur Ö. Baklacioğlu (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 26–41.

²⁶ https://www.csgb.gov.tr/tr/%C4%B1statistikler/calisma-hayati-%C4%B1statistikleri/resmi-%C4%B1statistik-programi/yabancilarin-calisma-%C4%B1zinleri/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁷ Hasan Hüseyin Aygöl and Emine Merve Kaba, "Suriyeli Kadınların İşgücüne Katılımı ve Deneyimleri (İstanbul-Sultanbeyli Örneği)," *Turkish Studies – Social Sciences* 14, no. 4 (2019): 1255–1275.

²⁸ Doğu Şimşek, "Mülteci Entegrasyonu, Göç Politikaları ve Sosyal Sınıf: Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Mülteciler Örneği," *Sosyal Politika Çalışmaları Dergisi* 40, no. 2 (2018): 367–392.

²⁹ Soukayna Mouflih, *Women on the Move: The Gendered Dimension of Conflicts and Forced Migration – Perceptions of Humanitarian Workers about Syrian Women in Turkey* (master's thesis, Social Sciences University of Ankara, 2022).

based discrimination further limits their access to employment opportunities, exacerbating socio-economic disparities. Despite the trauma of war, these women are compelled to undertake arduous roles to provide for their families. One of the experts indicates that language barriers and financial dependency pose significant challenges to the integration of Syrian migrant women. Their limited proficiency in Turkish exacerbates their dependence on others, constrains their ability to express themselves, and restricts their social engagement. As a result, many women find themselves confined to limited social networks, which hinders both their personal development and their integration into the broader community (P2, UN Agency, M).³⁰

In Türkiye, migrant women are predominantly employed in domestic services, childcare, and elderly care. They are also engaged in sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and sex. Syrian migrant women often have to participate in the labor market to sustain their livelihoods in the host country. However, their position in the labor market differs significantly from that of local women and migrant men. Regardless of their education level or professional qualifications, they are frequently employed in jobs deemed suitable for women based on traditional gender roles. Even when they possess skills as qualified labor, they often find employment in low-skilled jobs such as domestic work.³¹ Syrian migrant women are often compelled to work informally and in domestic services due to language barriers and a lack of professional qualifications. However, this informality brings various risks. Working informally forces them to accept low wages and endure harsh working conditions. Employers, who are aware of the fact that migrant women work without proper documentation and have a fear of deportation, exploit this situation, leading to further abuse. As a result, migrant women become vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment.³² According to a World Bank study, the employment rate of Syrian women aged 30-44 is a mere 7%.³³ This finding is particularly salient when contextualizing the underrepresentation of Syrian women in Türkiye's formal labor market. According to data from the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Welfare, in 2018, a total of 34,573 work permits were issued to Syrian nationals, of which only 3,047 were granted to Syrian women.³⁴ In the study of Mouflih, the other expert from the UN demonstrates that migrants are legally mandated to obtain work permits in Türkiye; however, employers frequently circumvent this requirement due to the

³⁰ Mouflih, *Women on the Move*, 56.

³¹ Hilal Küçük, "Toplumsal Cinsiyet Bağlamında Göç Sürecinde Kadın ve Erkek," *Toplumsal Politika Dergisi* 3, no. 1 (2022): 26-37.

³² Saniye Dedeoğlu and Çisel Ekiz Gökmen, "Göç Teorileri, Göçmen Emeği ve Entegrasyon: Kadınların Yeri," in *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifinden Türkiye'de Göç Araştırmaları*, ed. Kristin Biehl and Didem Danış (İstanbul: SU Gender and GAR, 2020), 18-37.

³³ Ximena Del Carpio, Sırma Demir Şeker, and Ahmet Levent Yener, *Integrating Refugees into the Turkish Labour Market* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2018/06/26/integrating-refugees-into-the-turkish-labor-market>.

³⁴ Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Security, *Work Permits of Foreigners: 2018* (Ankara: Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Security, 2018), <https://www.csgb.gov.tr/Media/4wpabah3/yabanci-calisma-izinleri-istatistikleri-2018.pdf>.

associated costs and regulatory burdens. As a result, the majority of refugees are employed informally in physically demanding occupations, with men predominantly occupying these roles, while women encounter even more limited employment opportunities (P1, UN agency).³⁵

The employment of undocumented refugees predominantly in the informal sector necessitates increased oversight and protection for both legal and illegal refugees working in low-wage, unregulated jobs without social security. The primary objective of these measures is to facilitate the integration of migrants into the formal economy. Furthermore, to enhance social and cultural interactions between migrants and the host community, thereby promoting a healthier and more efficient integration process, various programs and projects can be implemented.³⁶ In short, migrant women's participation in the labor market is essential to overcoming familial isolation. Successful adaptation to a new life requires women migrants to move beyond the private sphere, assume active social roles, and build self-confidence, thereby reducing their vulnerability.

2. Education

The other most significant challenge faced by Syrian migrants is that their proficiency in Turkish is limited. The language barrier not only impedes their ability to establish social and economic relationships with Turkish citizens but also leads to the formation of spatial and social clusters among migrants, reinforcing their isolation from the broader society. Consequently, the inability to communicate in Turkish presents a considerable obstacle to the integration of Syrian migrant women into Turkish society.³⁷ The participation of Syrian women in vocational training and Turkish language courses is significantly limited due to domestic responsibilities, gender role stereotypes, and caregiving obligations. Furthermore, factors such as child marriage and restrictions imposed by family members contribute to low enrollment and high dropout rates, thereby impeding their social and economic integration.³⁸ They predominantly form social connections with fellow Syrian migrants, and their restricted participation in activities outside the home impedes the establishment of a new social network. Language barriers, childcare responsibilities, and the need for spousal permission limit their access to the labor market and language training. Despite these challenges, grassroots initiatives such as Kadın Kadına Mülteci Mutfağı (Women Migrant Kitchen) and Göçmen Kadınlar (Migrant Women), aim to empower women economically and socially through participatory approaches. These initiatives focus on integration, social cohesion, and livelihood generation of Syrian migrant women.³⁹

³⁵ Mouflih, *Women on the Move*, 59.

³⁶ Kaya, Ayhan. "Debates on Migration and Integration in Turkey: A Retrospective Evaluation." *İdealkent Dergisi* 5 no.14 (2014): 11–28.

³⁷ İhsan Çetin, "Türkiye'de Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Sosyal ve Kültürel Entegrasyonu," *Sosyoloji Dergisi* 34 (2016): 197–222.

³⁸ Mouflih, *Women on the Move*, 61.

³⁹ Çetin, "Türkiye'de Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Sosyal ve Kültürel Entegrasyonu," 205.

In the 2016/17 academic year, more than 15,000 Syrians, 35% of whom were women, while 65% were men, were enrolled in Turkish universities. Several factors can affect the gap between female and male participation rates in higher education among the migrant population. Families may prefer allocating resources to their sons rather than their daughters, believing that girls can marry at a young age and would not contribute to the household's livelihood. Meanwhile, in the 2024/25 academic year, a total of 54,794 Syrian students were enrolled in Turkish universities. Of these, 29,006 were male and 25,788 were female, resulting in a female representation of approximately 47.1%. This marks a significant increase from the 2016/17 academic year, when only about 15,000 Syrian students were enrolled, with women constituting merely 35% of this population. Overall, the total number of Syrian students has risen by approximately 265%, while the number of female students has increased by over 390% during this period. This trend not only reflects a marked rise in refugee access to higher education in Türkiye but also indicates a substantial narrowing of the gender gap. The increase in female participation—from 35% in 2016/17 to 47.1% in 2024/25—underscores a notable advancement in gender inclusivity within refugee education.⁴⁰ The increasing number of Syrian students in Turkish higher education institutions is not merely a quantitative change, but also a reflection of deeper socio-cultural and structural transformations. This significant growth indicates considerable progress in refugee access to education in Türkiye. Several sociological dynamics underlie this transformation. Türkiye has actively supported the integration of Syrians under temporary protection through scholarships, eased university entrance procedures, and public awareness efforts. In this context, education has functioned as a key tool of integration, enabling Syrian youth to pursue upward social mobility and secure a place within Turkish society. The proportion of female students rose from 35% in 2016/17 to 47.1% in 2024/25. This 391% increase in the number of female students reflects not only an educational advancement but also a significant shift in gender dynamics within the refugee community. War and displacement have restructured traditional gender roles, leading to greater visibility of women in public life.⁴¹

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 40% of school-aged children under temporary protection in Türkiye were not attending school by the end of 2018. Barriers to accessing compulsory education also vary by gender. Child marriage, which is one of the barriers, is considered as a coping mechanism in response to the economic challenges faced by families. Economic difficulties lead families to resort to child labor and child marriage practices, rather than sending their children to school.⁴² Moreover, in-depth interviews were conducted with 42 Syrian women who were either formally or informally married to Turkish citizens by Gönül across seven provinces to explore their experiences. According to the participants' statements in this research, early marriages occurred due to family

⁴⁰ See in the link: (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>)

⁴¹ See in the link (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>)

⁴² UNICEF, No Lost Generation 2018 Update (New York: UNICEF, 2018), <https://www.nolostgeneration.org>.

pressure and the desire for safe migration after the war. Lack of language skills and domestic responsibilities hindered women's ability to continue their careers and pursue their education. Women were forced to discontinue their education at an early stage in line with family and societal norms.⁴³ Language barriers and cultural expectations often confine women to their homes, resulting in difficulties meeting basic needs and achieving societal integration. Registration requirements to access state services pose additional barriers for women, and national regulations are not always aligned with international standards. Consequently, integration policies should be formulated to provide refugees with equitable opportunities in the long term, particularly regarding access to the labor market and housing.⁴⁴

3. Social Participation and Community Engagement

The phenomenon of forced migration has been demonstrated to significantly impact social inequalities, giving rise to a range of new challenges and vulnerabilities. In such contexts, women encounter both financial hardship and gender-based violence, and they develop various strategies to ensure their safety. Within social structures shaped by traditional and religious norms, marriage emerges as a means of protection for women. Syrian women, in the context of forced migration, are subject to a dual perception: they are positioned both as victims and as individuals who disrupt local social structures. The rise of polygamy has resulted in a situation where local men may choose to marry Syrian women as second wives or to divorce their current spouses to marry them. Such polygamous practices, frequently occurring without the consent of local wives, contribute to the victimization of Syrian women and reinforce the perception of Syrian women as both disruptors of family structures and contributors to the suffering of local wives.⁴⁵

Syrian migrant women experience various forms of gender-based violence, coerced matrimony, and limited legal protections, particularly within unregistered and polygamous unions. These circumstances contribute to the proliferation of the sex industry and exacerbate the social isolation of these women, compounded by linguistic barriers and societal expectations regarding gender roles. They also encounter numerous challenges from legal procedures, including a deficiency of requisite documentation and protracted administrative processes. Although they ostensibly possess equivalent legal rights to the indigenous population, these entitlements are frequently contingent upon the possession of identification cards and residence permits. This issue disproportionately affects Syrian women, as many of their marriages to Turkish men remain unregistered. Consequently, when

⁴³ Seda Gönül, *Evlilikle Sığınmak: Türkiye'de Suriyeli Göçmen Kadınların Evlilik Deneyimleri* (master's thesis, Düzce Üniversitesi Lisansüstü Eğitim Enstitüsü, 2023).

⁴⁴ Şimşek, "Mülteci Entegrasyonu," 370.

⁴⁵ Kristen Biehl and A. Didem Daniş Şenyüz, "Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifinden Türkiye'de Göç Araştırmaları," in *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifinden Türkiye'de Göç Araştırmaları*, ed. Kristen Biehl and Didem Daniş (İstanbul: Göç Araştırmaları Derneği Yayınları, 2020), 8–17.

seeking legal recourse in cases of divorce, abuse, or neglect, they are unable to substantiate their marital status.⁴⁶

For women, migration is associated with a range of risks at every stage of the process, including violence, harassment, coercion, and abduction. The issue of sexual violence is often challenging to address, even under normal circumstances, and victims may feel compelled to conceal it. A further complicating factor is that women who migrate are unable to claim to have experienced violence in the country to which they have moved. A report based on research conducted by MAZLUMDER concerning Syrian migrant women in Türkiye reveals that local women harbor concerns that Syrian women may attract their husbands, which contributes to negative perceptions and specific attitudes towards them. A series of interviews with local women in Kilis reveals that, in marriages involving Syrian women, no responsibility is attributed to the men. The reasons for these marriages are largely explained through Syrian women. Forcing or coercing Syrian migrant women into early marriages or polygamy as second or third wives constitutes another form of exploitation. While the practice of marrying Syrian women was prevalent before the Syrian crisis, it has evolved into a domain of exploitation with the escalation in migration. The number of intermediaries facilitating informal marriages between men and Syrian women in exchange for a fee has increased, with women aged 15-20 being particularly favoured for such couplings. The financial compensation for these couplings is determined by factors such as the woman's age, physical characteristics, and health status. While these couplings are portrayed as acts of protection and support for Syrian women, they have effectively become a form of human trafficking, as the preference for younger women by local men.⁴⁷

According to the 2018 report by the Ombudsman Institution of Türkiye, early marriages, polygamy, and unregistered marriages persist among Syrian women. Awareness of domestic violence is limited, and numerous women lack knowledge regarding the procurement of legal protection when subjected to abuse. Furthermore, accommodation facilities for vulnerable women are inadequate, and many are deficient in information concerning necessary services. The report also emphasizes that women who were victims of sexual violence during the Syrian conflict, as well as those who are widowed, divorced, or single mothers, continue to face substantial challenges.⁴⁸ The marriages between Syrian migrant women who arrived in Türkiye after 2011 and Turkish men differ from the marriages that were an extension of the historical relationship between the two countries. The distinguishing factor is that these new marriages are considered a solution to war and difficult living conditions. Women who suffer from both the general violence of war and the ongoing use of sexual violence as a weapon in conflicts may choose marriage as a means of seeking refuge, primarily for security and economic

⁴⁶ International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), *Targeting Vulnerabilities: The Impact of the Syrian War and Refugee Situation on Trafficking in Persons* (Vienna: ICMPD, 2015).

⁴⁷ MAZLUMDER, *Kamp Dışında Yaşayan Suriyeli Kadın Sığınmacılar Raporu*, 3-36.

⁴⁸ Kamu Denetçiliği Kurumu (KDK), *Türkiye'deki Suriyeliler: Özel Rapor* (Ankara: KDK, 2018), <https://www.ombudsman.gov.tr/suriyeliler/files/basic-html/page1.html>, 228.

reasons.⁴⁹ Syrian women who have experienced the loss of relatives and face deteriorating living conditions may seek to secure their future or that of their daughters through matrimony, particularly when they lack social protection mechanisms. Female migrants who have become heads of households due to the loss of their spouses may perceive marriage as a means to ensure their family's economic stability. In Syrian families, the practice of paying a dowry for marriages is regarded as both a potential source of income and a method to safeguard the daughter's prospects.⁵⁰ Similarly, an expert from a local NGO in the study of Mouflif states that child marriage and co-wifery are regarded by some as mechanisms for social protection, enabling women to avoid sexual violence or the necessity of engaging in sex work for survival (P9, Local NGO, M).

Moreover, in the study conducted in Adana by Özüdoğru, it was determined that Syrian widowed women encountered prejudice from local women due to societal perceptions of them as potential second wives, which resulted in their exclusion from neighbourly relations. These women frequently encounter pressures to marry, as well as experience harassment and social isolation, which collectively result in a life largely confined to the home. However, the study also emphasises that this perception of exclusion should not be generalised to the entire host society.⁵¹ Conversely, in Harunoğulları's study, conducted in Kilis, it was observed that Syrians who married into the host community established harmonious relationships with their neighbours and their spouses' relatives, and did not experience significant integration problems. As a result, it was observed that such outcomes are influenced by the cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic characteristics of the host region.⁵²

Analyzing the phenomena of child marriage and polygyny among Syrian migrant women through the framework of Kandiyoti's⁵³ concept of the "patriarchal bargain" offers a meaningful approach to understanding the socio-cultural and gendered dimensions of these practices. This concept seeks to analyze the forms of division of labor, compliance, conflict, and resistance that emerge from varying systems of male dominance and kinship structures. At the heart of this concept lies the assumption that women's consent to gender regimes is shaped not only by the internalization of norms but also by the limited spaces of power and security they can negotiate within these systems. The patriarchal bargain does not entirely reject the possibility of women's agency within patriarchal structures; on the contrary, it highlights the strategic adaptations, resistances, and negotiations that women undertake within them. In this regard, even choices made under conditions of constraint are based on a certain degree of mutual accommodation and pragmatic balance. The concept proves especially illuminating in understanding women's experiences of marriage, as their orientation toward marriage is shaped

⁴⁹ Biehl and Daniş Şenyüz, "Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifinden," 10.

⁵⁰ Mahmut Kaya, "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınların Evlenme Deneyimleri: Fırsatlar ve Riskler," in *Uluslararası Göç ve Kadın Sempozyumu Bildiriler Kitabı* (Ankara: Star Matbaacılık, 2018).

⁵¹ Büşra Özüdoğru, "Yalnız Yaşayan Suriyeli Kadınlar: Adana Örneği," *OPUS* 8, no. 15 (2018): 1132-1162.

⁵² Harunoğulları, "Suriyeli Sığınmacı Kadınların Sözlü Anlatılarında," 363-366.

⁵³ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Ataerkil Pazarlık," *Feminist Bellek*, 2021, <https://feministbellek.org/ataerkil-pazarlik/>.

not only by personal desires but also by social pressures, the pursuit of security, and strategies for survival. Shortly, the patriarchal bargain refers to the limited gains that women obtain in exchange for the compromises they make within a patriarchal order. This unequal exchange not only perpetuates existing inequalities but also poses a significant barrier to women's empowerment.⁵⁴ In other words, forced migration causes individuals to become detached from their country, home, and native language, resulting in profound trauma. In this context, Syrian women's efforts to establish a household through marriage can be understood as a survival strategy—a means of taking root, returning to everyday life, and reconstructing a sense of “home”.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, the presence of young Syrian women has caused significant anxiety among local women. Local women feel uneasy, thinking that young Syrian women, who are in difficult situations, may easily accept marriage proposals. For example, it is reported that about 20% of divorces in Kilis are due to Syrians. Local women express the pressure of the fear of losing their husbands and accuse Syrians of distracting their husbands. This situation leads local women to develop negative attitudes toward Syrian women, damaging the integration between the two communities.⁵⁶ Moreover, while legally recognized marriages ensure specific rights and obligations between spouses, unregistered marriages (religious marriages) and polygamous couplings are not acknowledged by Turkish legislation and do not confer any legal rights or obligations. The latter may be considered a criminal offense under current laws. In legally recognized marriages, legal recourse and protections exist in cases of injustice and abuse, whereas unregistered marriages lack such safeguards.⁵⁷

Policies and Critics

Turkish society exhibited supportive and empathetic attitudes toward Syrian migrants. However, studies indicate a significant increase in intercommunal tensions from the second half of 2017, with violent incidents tripling compared to the same period in the previous year.⁵⁸ Criticism directed at the fact that Syrian women are fond of their adornment and men migrating to Türkiye instead of fighting for their countries leads to exclusion and stigmatization based on both gender and ethnicity. These forms of exclusionary gossip are produced by settled populations who hold dominant positions in public spaces, while the negative consequences are lived by the migrants themselves. For Syrian women who lack access to financial resources and legal status, security is often perceived as attainable only through marriage, following prevailing gender norms. The rise in

⁵⁴ Kandiyoti, “Ataerkil Pazarlık.”

⁵⁵ Gönül, *Evlilikle Sığınmak*, 42.

⁵⁶ TESEV, *Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Türkiye'ye Etkileri*, Report No. 195 (Ankara: TESEV, 2015), <https://www.tesev.org.tr/tr/research/suriyeli-siginmacilarin-turkiyeye-etkileri/>.

⁵⁷ Kaya, “Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınların Evlenme Deneyimleri.”

⁵⁸ International Crisis Group, *Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions*, Europe Report No. 248 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/248-turkey-syrian-refugees.pdf>.

hate speech and social stigmatization leads many women to withdraw from social interaction and avoid forming relationships with local individuals.⁵⁹ The rise in social discontent and the uncertainty surrounding the return of migrants have underscored the need for intensified efforts toward integration. Erdoğan⁶⁰ defines social cohesion and integration as the peaceful coexistence of Syrian refugees and the host (Turkish) community.

In the context of international migration in Türkiye, social cohesion policies had not been significantly developed before the Syrian migration. The fact that most migrants were of Turkish descent, while others were perceived as temporary and foreign, hindered the implementation of comprehensive integration and coexistence strategies.⁶¹ The Turkish government has adopted the concept of "harmonization" instead of "integration" when addressing the Syrian population within its borders. This approach is reflected in the implementation of policies and regulations designed to facilitate the assimilation of Syrian migrants into Turkish society. The Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) defines harmonization as a mutual process that aims to provide refugees the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve self-sufficiency across various aspects of their social lives in Türkiye (DGMM, n.d.). Notably, these regulations are not framed as state obligations under a rights-based approach, but rather as voluntary assistance the host nation offers to its guests, subject to available resources.⁶²

In addition to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) and the Temporary Protection Regulation, various ministries have issued secondary regulations and administrative guidelines to clarify implementing policies related to access of migrants to healthcare, higher education, and work permits. Furthermore, the Joint Action Plan and the European Union (EU)-Türkiye Agreement were announced in 2015 and 2016, respectively, with the EU allocating a budget of six billion euros to address the needs of migrants in Türkiye. However, policy ambiguities that emerged during this process have created significant challenges for integrating Syrian migrants, leading to precarious conditions for these individuals.⁶³ One of the fundamental steps toward social cohesion is learning the language of the host society. Language acquisition accelerates through communication and enhances migrants' interaction with the broader community. Therefore, language proficiency is regarded as one of the most critical aspects in discussions on integration.⁶⁴ A key barrier to women's integration is their dependency on male family members or children for public engagement due to language constraints. While children and husbands assist, this support inadvertently reinforces isolation. As children receive Turkish education and act as intermediaries in daily life, women's motivation to learn the language diminishes,

⁵⁹ Gönül, *Evlilikle Sığınmak*, 110-111.

⁶⁰ Murat Erdoğan, *Urban Refugees from "Detachment" to "Harmonization": Syrian Refugees and Process Management of Municipalities: The Case of Istanbul* (İstanbul: Marmara Belediyeler Birliği Kültür Yayınları, 2017).

⁶¹ Gönül, *Evlilikle Sığınmak*, 42.

⁶² Erdoğan, *Urban Refugees*, 18.

⁶³ Koser Akcapar and Şimşek, "The Politics of Syrian Refugees," 176-187.

⁶⁴ Gönül, *Evlilikle Sığınmak*, 114.

hindering their broader socio-cultural integration. Moreover, while language is a key tool for immigrant integration, Syrian women often meet their basic needs within their communities, reducing the necessity to learn Turkish. This inward social structure fosters cultural continuity but limits interaction with the host society, reinforcing segregation and reducing access to broader social networks.⁶⁵ Women's integration is also shaped by the limitations of temporary protection status. For example, heightened fears of deportation, especially following increased identity checks and the relocation of unregistered Syrians from Istanbul since late 2023, have led to greater anxiety and social withdrawal among the Syrian community, especially women.⁶⁶

The other major challenge faced by forcibly migrated women is the issue of labeling. According to labeling theory, when individuals from a particular socio-economic background are associated with acts of violence or deviance, others from the same group are similarly subjected to stigmatizing attitudes and social exclusion. Such labels not only shape public perceptions but also influence interpersonal behaviors toward the labeled group. Migrants are often perceived as "strangers" by host societies, a perception that amplifies fear and anxiety stemming from uncertainty. This dynamic contributes to the reproduction of generalized prejudice and discriminatory practices against migrants. As one migrant participant in Gülerce and Çorlu's⁶⁷ research noted: Whenever something happens, the first thought that comes to mind is, 'I hope it wasn't a Syrian' (K1, Female, 22). Shortly, the stigmatization and labeling of migrants represent major impediments to their social integration and hinder the development of inclusive societies. Moreover, the resentment and hostility expressed by segments of the host society constitute an intangible yet formidable barrier against migrants, exacerbating their sense of alienation. These emotional and prejudicial responses often operate more powerfully than physical boundaries, giving rise to heightened reactions toward anything perceived as "other," including behavioral patterns, styles of dress, and culinary traditions. In this context, cultural markers become sites of symbolic conflict, reinforcing social exclusion and deepening the divide between migrants and local communities.⁶⁸

The exclusion of refugee women from integration processes disrupts the continuity and effectiveness of the efforts. Having often endured more traumatic migration experiences, women face prolonged vulnerability and isolation in host countries when integration policies fail to address their specific needs. The lack of gender-sensitive approaches reinforces the invisibility of women and perpetuates trauma by confining them to the private sphere and neglecting their agency in public life. Thus, successful integration policies must incorporate a gender

⁶⁵ Elif Şahin, *The Integration of Syrian Women under Temporary Protection: The Case of Esenyurt District* (PhD diss., Bahçeşehir University, 2024).

⁶⁶ Şahin, *The Integration of Syrian Women*, 186.

⁶⁷ Hakan Gülerce and Rukiye Çorlu, "Yükseköğretimdeki Suriyeli Sığınmacı Öğrenciler: Uyum ve Çatışma Alanları," *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 12 (2021): 71-106, <https://doi.org/10.32739/uskudarsbd.7.12.85>.

⁶⁸ Gülerce and Çorlu, "Yükseköğretimdeki Suriyeli Sığınmacı Öğrenciler," 95.

perspective to ensure meaningful inclusion and recovery.⁶⁹ Ager and Strang⁷⁰ proposed a framework for understanding refugee and migrant integration, comprising four key components. The first one is the legal status and entitlements of refugees, the second one is access to economic resources, housing, education, and healthcare; the third one is the relationships that refugees establish with the host community; and the fourth one is physical and emotional security, stability, and their sense of belonging. These elements underscore the multifaceted nature of refugee integration, highlighting the importance of legal recognition, material support, social relationships, and personal security in the integration process. Research by Bloch⁷¹ indicates that refugees who are socially isolated face challenges in successful integration. These findings highlight the critical role of social connections and the impact of migration policies on the integration experiences of refugees.

Meanwhile, programs are actualized by state institutions, international actors like UN Women, IOM, and GIZ. For instance, the Turkish Red Crescent's Social Adaptation Aid (SUY) Project is implemented within the framework of FRIT (Humanitarian Aid Facility for Refugees in Türkiye), which is financed by the European Union and recognized as one of the largest cash-based humanitarian aid projects globally. This financial aid enables household members, especially women, to address their basic needs, including sustenance, shelter, and clothing.⁷² The Course Allowance Support Project has been implemented since April 2019, providing incentive payments to participants based on the vocational training they receive. The project is financially supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in association with Kızılay. Participants receive daily payments ranging from 150 to 200 Turkish Lira, depending on the course content.⁷³

Meanwhile, despite formal integration efforts led by public institutions, Syrian women's integration remains fragile due to temporary legal status, patriarchal gender norms, and restricted public participation shaped by domestic roles. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment and increased identity checks further limit their social visibility. Women's access to integration tools like language learning is often contingent on male permission, highlighting gendered barriers within the process. According to research conducted by Şahin⁷⁴ in Esenyurt, where Syrian migrants live intensely, integration activities, coordinated with Syrian civil society, include language and art courses for women. However, women's participation remains low, primarily due to childcare responsibilities and traditional family

⁶⁹ Silvia Sansonetti, *Female Refugees and Asylum Seekers: The Issue of Integration* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2016), [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/556929/IPOL_STU\(2016\)556929_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/556929/IPOL_STU(2016)556929_EN.pdf)

⁷⁰ Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008): 166–191.

⁷¹ Alice Bloch, "Labour Market Participation and Conditions of Employment: A Comparison of Minority Ethnic Groups and Refugees in Britain," *Sociological Research Online* 9, no. 2 (2004).

⁷² Kızılay SUY. "Social Adaptation Aid (SUY) Project." 2024. <https://platform.kizilaykart.org/tr/suy.html>.

⁷³ Kızılay MHD, "Mesleki Beceri Geliştirme Desteği," 2024, <https://platform.kizilaykart.org/tr/mhd.html>.

⁷⁴ Şahin, *The Integration of Syrian Women*, 182.

roles. The process of adaptation necessitates mutual understanding and cooperation to prevent conflict. However, limited language proficiency, difficulties in employment and housing, and restrictions on religious practices pose significant challenges to successful adaptation. Furthermore, migrants' resistance to relinquishing their value systems may lead to tensions within the broader process of social integration. Moreover, migrants originating from the same country often form their own social and economic spheres before achieving adequate integration. These enclaves tend to become insular spaces where cultural values are preserved, but interactions with the broader society remain limited. Moreover, the emergence of migrant-specific consumer markets further undermines the effectiveness of institutional integration policies.⁷⁵

Concluding Remarks

Migration is not solely a physical relocation; it is a multidimensional process that transforms an individual's identity, social relationships, and daily practices. Within this process, female refugees and migrants experience dual discrimination due to both their gender and migrant status, facing significant obstacles in areas such as security, employment, access to healthcare and education, and social integration. This article aims to highlight the challenges faced by Syrian women during migration processes, offering a roadmap for policymakers and researchers. Empowering women and facilitating their integration into society will contribute to a more sustainable future for both migrants and host communities.

Gender norms and the vulnerability of women during the migration process exacerbate their exposure to risks and exploitation. Many women face inadequate housing, gender-based violence, exploitation by landlords, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of protection. Syrian women are often underemployed, discriminated against, and paid low wages. Barriers to employment include traditional gender roles, limited vocational training, language issues, and childcare responsibilities. Vulnerability and the need for social protection are significant concerns. Their access to language education, participation in social life, and entry into the labor market is significantly constrained by the patriarchal family structure. Consequently, their public visibility is substantially limited and impeded. Additionally, some Syrian women prefer marriage to Turkish citizens as a means of securing social and legal protection. However, within the framework of Kandiyoti's concept of "patriarchal bargaining," these marriages can be interpreted as a process through which women transition from subjects to positions of renewed dependency.

While integration programs and harmonization policies exist at institutional levels, they often lack a rights-based and gender-sensitive perspective. Instead of treating integration as a mutual and inclusive process, many policies conceptualize migrants as passive recipients of assistance rather than active agents with legal

⁷⁵ Zeynep Aksoy, "Uluslararası Göç ve Kültürlerarası İletişim," *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 5, no. 20 (2012): 292–303.

entitlements. This reinforces dependency, inhibits empowerment, and perpetuates vulnerability. Temporary legal frameworks, bureaucratic obstacles, and the absence of permanent status further prevent women from accessing durable solutions or contributing meaningfully to host societies.

However, this research reveals that integration is not only hindered by structural challenges but also by cultural anxieties and symbolic conflicts. Negative stereotypes, hate speech, and gendered labeling have created a hostile environment where Syrian women are both hyper-visible—seen as threats to local families—and invisible—excluded from legal protection and social services. Practices such as polygyny and child marriage, while providing short-term security, reproduce patriarchal bargains that compromise women's autonomy and reinforce gender-based violence. Furthermore, integration should be seen as a broad and multifaceted process. While economic integration—characterized by access to employment and financial self-sufficiency, is frequently emphasized in policy discourse, a comprehensive integration process equally requires the promotion of social inclusion, cultural assimilation, and the safeguarding of psychological well-being. This encompasses opportunities to form social connections with local communities, understand cultural norms. Without addressing these non-economic elements, integration efforts remain incomplete and may not be effective. The successful integration of Syrian women requires policy frameworks that are both inclusive and gender-sensitive. These policies must take into account the unique challenges faced by refugee women, including language barriers, lack of education, exposure to gender-based violence, and caregiving responsibilities. Inclusive integration policies should ensure equal access to education, healthcare, legal protection, vocational training, and community participation. Tailoring support mechanisms to the lived experiences of Syrian women not only enhances their resilience and agency, but also contributes to the broader goal of social cohesion within the host society.

In this study the feminization of migration theory is applied to explain the multifaceted and gender-specific forms of exclusion and inequality faced by Syrian migrant women in Türkiye. This theoretical framework facilitates a more profound comprehension of integration as a complex process that extends beyond mere quantitative inclusion. It necessitates the acknowledgment of care work, the reduction of gender disparities, legal protection, and the elimination of sociocultural barriers. Consequently, the theory offers a valuable perspective for advocating gender-sensitive and inclusive integration policies that foster women's economic and social empowerment and ensure access to language education, vocational training, and childcare services.

In this context, several policy recommendations can be proposed to address the existing challenges. Primarily, it is crucial to strengthen the legal status of Syrian refugee women, provide comprehensive information regarding their rights, and enhance their access to legal support mechanisms. To facilitate their participation in social life, it is important to expand the availability of Turkish language courses specifically designed for Arabic-speaking women and to support cultural integration programs. To prevent informal employment, vocational training and entrepreneurship programs should be developed to encourage the

legal and secure inclusion of Syrian women in the labor market. Civil society initiatives that promote social interaction between the host community and refugee women, reduce prejudices, and foster solidarity should be supported. A specific and sensitive approach must be adopted in combating violence against refugee women; access to shelters, psychosocial support services, and legal counseling should be made widespread and easily accessible.

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