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Policy Brief: Labor Force Participation of Refugee and Turkish Women in Turkey

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Policy Brief:
Measures to Increase
The Labor Force Participation of
Refugee and Turkish Women in Turkey

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BACKGROUND

Turkey is a middle income country with severe gender gaps that are not in par with its development levels. Although Turkey is a member of G-20, it ranks only 133 in the World Economic Forum's 2021 Gender Gap Index. The World Bank's Woman, Business and Law index shows that a female citizen has 82.5 percent of the rights that a male citizen has in Turkey. Gender gaps exist in social and political spheres but are most notable in labour markets. Female labour force participation rate which stands at around 34 percent, are far below countries with similar income levels. Despite several policy reforms over the recent years to improve the employment opportunities for women, participation and employment have not sufficiently picked up. Insufficient childcare services, job insecurity, fear of harassment and the institutions that consider female employment as optional are among the most important barriers for citizen women in Turkey.

The difficulties faced by refugee women in Turkey are largely overlooked. The humanitarian crisis in Syria in 2012 resulted in a mass influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey. Turkey currently hosts 2 million Syrian men and 1.7 million Syrian women under the Temporary Protection Law. Among these women, approximately half of them are between working ages of 15-64. The integration and labour market barriers for refugee women are acute and their problems do not receive adequate policy attention. In 2018, only 9 percent of Syrian women were employed while 5 percent were looking for a job (Demography and Health Survey, 2018). Refugee women face language and information barriers and an overwhelming majority have literally no access to child care services. The Turkish government has so far issued a very limited number of work permits for refugees, and although the gender break down is not officially disseminated, these permits are much more likely to be granted to men. Given the few number of permits, the majority of the refugee men and women in employment are off the books. Official data shows that 99 percent of the Syrian women in the labour force are employed informally. The current situation and job insecurity make them highly vulnerable to abuse and other crimes, more so for women who have no alternative income sources. Xenophobia is on the rise and refugees live under a high degree of uncertainty. Unfortunately, there are also hierarchies across refugees. Official figures show that there are about 320,000 non-Syrian refugees in Turkey but due to lack of systematic data collection and public interest, the hardships and barriers faced by non-Syrian women are not sufficiently understood.

The Gender Working Group of the Refugee Council of Turkey (TMK) recently published a comprehensive report on the existing barriers and opportunities to women's economic participation, including lack of jobs, care and work permits. The report provides a comprehensive literature review of the domestic and international studies and presents quantitative analyses of factors that limit refugee and citizen women's economic participation. Drawing on the findings of the report and meetings with the representatives of civil society organizations, this note presents policy recommendations to increase participation in labour markets for all women in Turkey and facilitate economic integration for refugee women from all backgrounds.

BARRIERS THAT CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION FOR ALL WOMEN IN TURKEY

1. INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS THAT LIMIT FEMALE LABOUR SUPPLY

- The current institutions view women's employment as optional. While there has been significant progress over the years to improve work-family balance and incentivize female employment, economic and social rights of women in Turkey still lack behind those of men. The Women, Business and the Law index of the World Bank which evaluates the gender differences in legal rights in terms of mobility, workplace, earnings, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship and assets reveals that a woman in **Turkey has 82.5 percent of the rights of the men.**¹ Not only the gaps in legal rights, but the political rhetoric that prioritizes women's role as a mother and wife, rather than an *equal breadwinner in the family* limit women's economic freedoms.
- One of the challenges faced by refugee women with established professions and careers is a disruption in their career trajectory due to bureaucratic barriers for diploma equivalency. This is especially true for refugee women who have interrupted their postgraduate or doctoral studies. These professional women often experience a mismatch between their skills and the job requirements, which leads them to accept positions that are below their level of qualification. Therefore, institutions such as the Higher Education Council should be asked to facilitate diploma equivalency recognition in corporation with neighbouring countries.
- As of end-2020, there were about 4 million children in the 3–5 age group, and 3.7 million in the 0–2 age group in Turkey². And yet, childcare services at the prevailing prices are not affordable for the majority of families. Existing services are mainly private and suit the needs of working mothers (in terms of hours) and tend to be more expensive than the ability to pay. Majority of the publicly provided services are mainly only available for children aged 5 years-old and very limited spots are available for children younger than 3 in daycare services. For children between 0-35 months, there is no public provision mandated by the law. Furthermore, for women with low educational background, the difference between earnings and the cost of care is too low to justify joining the labor force.
- Although it is mandatory for establishments which employ 150 or more women workers to provide childcare, many employers still prefer to pay the fines rather than provide childcare. Practices such as municipal childcare services are still not sufficiently common in Turkey. **Paternal leave is restricted to 10 days for public employment and 5 days for those who are subject to the Labor Law, another reflection of the institutional perspective on women's assigned role.** While the incentives for employing women have been in place for almost a decade now, the current institutional environment does not make it easier to be a working mother in Turkey. Not only childcare, but elderly care will also be one of the pressing problems limiting women's employment in the coming decades due to population aging.

¹ <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>

² Oxfam-KEDV, (2020)

- Institutional approach and political discourse on women's employment need to change. International literature clearly shows that even when women start their careers on equal terms with men, they tend to fall behind men immediately after bearing children. Thus a holistic policy approach which i) does not prioritize men's employment, and, ii) dictates equal childcare responsibility on men and women is needed. Empirical evidence also suggests that **the programs and policies which are most effective to foster female employment are those which make being a working parent easier for both women and men**, such as flexible working hours and access to affordable childcare.
- In line with the above argument, investing in publicly provided childcare and supporting the care economy should be prioritized. There are approximately 10.5 million children, elderly and disabled in need of care in Turkey, corresponding to approximately 12.6 percent of the population. The recent Care Economy Report by Oxfam and KEDV shows that the paid segment of Turkey's care economy was US\$6.5 billion in 2019 while the unpaid care economy is around US\$27.4 billion, equaling 3.5 percent of the country's GDP.³ These figures reveal a huge potential for the formalization of care services in the Turkish economy.
- Childcare provision should be inclusive for all women in Turkey. As of 2018, the share of Syrian refugees who were below age 5 was 18 percent.⁴ Total fertility rate of Syrians in Turkey is around 5.3 births per woman, whereas the same figure is 2.3 for women from Turkey.⁵ Refugee women report that lack of childcare is among the main reasons for not being able to attend language or vocational training courses, as the UN Women's Needs Assessment Report (2018) shows. And this makes integration and economic self-sufficiency harder for refugee women. For those who are able to complete a vocational training course, the most popular areas of study are hairdressing and needlework, occupations that can be held at home. Refugee women tend to lack the informal support mechanisms from grandmothers as they usually flee from their native countries under difficult circumstances and involuntarily separate from their immediate family. In comparison, Turkish women seem to be twice more likely to benefit from receiving support from other females in the household in comparison to Syrian women.⁶ Hence, publicly provided childcare services eligibility should not be solely linked to citizenship and should be inclusive for all women residing in Turkey. Policymakers should design vocational training and employment frameworks that address the requirements of childcare and elderly support for women of all backgrounds. Local authorities and NGOs can potentially offer childcare services in the form of playrooms. Alternatively, a rotational childcare model can be designed, where women take turns looking after the children on a weekly basis.
- Informality and long working hours are important problems that limit women's choices and work-family balance. Official statistics of Turkstat suggest that the **informality rate for women in the agriculture sector is as high as 95 percent whereas outside agriculture it is around 40 percent**. Informality rate is 99 percent among Syrian women. Textile sector absorbs a significant proportion of foreign-born men and women who work informally. The

³ Turkey's Care Economy Towards 2040. Forthcoming

⁴ Demographic and Health Survey, 2018

⁵ Unfortunately, comparable figures for non-Syrian refugees are not available.

⁶ Demographic and Health Survey, 2018.

industrial sector comprising textiles and other industries employs 40 percent of all foreign men and 29 percent of all women who work informally. Informal workers in the agriculture sector have the lowest earnings, and within that specific group, foreign women earn almost one third of the amount that men with citizenship earn. Hourly wages can be as low as 7 TL for foreign women working in the textile sector and 5.8 TL for national women working in other industries. These figures point to earnings well below poverty lines.

- Turkey has the longest working hours across the OECD. There is an involuntary work culture where individuals are forced to endure long working hours without proper over-time compensation. And the situation is much worse for the disadvantaged labour market groups. Foreign women in informal jobs tend to work a significantly higher number of hours per week compared to women with Turkish nationality. In the textile sector, informally employed foreign women work on average 43 hours per week while informally employed women with Turkish nationality work on average around 32 hours. Hours informally worked per week by foreign men and men with Turkish nationality are more than 50 hours. According to the Labour Law, the maximum hours worked per week should not exceed 45 hours. In the extraordinary cases where the duration exceeds 45 hours, the employees should be expected to work less in the coming periods such that the average hours worked are not more than 45 hours on average over the 2 months. Furthermore, according to the Labour Law, a worker cannot be forced to work more than 11 hours in a day. Although the regulations are very clear in terms of working hours, the statistics show that many enterprises do not abide by the laws. In order to ensure that both women and men assume a balanced, *-if not equal-* amount of household and childcare responsibilities, audit mechanisms on working hours and on informal employment should be strengthened. Stable, flexible, and predictable working hours has a potential to increase women's participation in paid work.
- Number of work permits for refugees should be immediately increased. The "Regulation Concerning Work Permits of Foreigners Under Temporary Protection", which was enacted in 2016 and based on the 29th Article of "Regulation on Temporary Protection" regulates the conditions under which refugees under temporary protection can be employed in Turkey. According to the Ministry of Labour's 2020 (latest available) yearbook on work permits; a total of 633.7 thousand work permits were granted cumulatively between 2011-2019, of which 140.3 thousand of these permits were issued to citizens of Syria. This figure is miniscule compared to the 2.1 million working age (15-64 ages) Syrian population living in Turkey. The restricted number of work permits forces Syrian refugees into pathways of precarity as well as informality and limits their ability to fully benefit from the extension of social citizenship rights in other areas. Informal employment and job insecurity also make refugees vulnerable to exploitation of all kinds. Inability to access to decent jobs is among the top reasons why many refugee women report that they are not looking for a job. Number of work permits should be increased substantially, not only for Syrian refugees but for all refugees.

2. WOMEN'S SAFETY CONCERNS AND MEASURES TO ADDRESS THEM

- One of the biggest concerns of women all around the world is the fear of physical violence and sexual harassment. This concern is stronger for citizen and refugee women living in Turkey due to increasing violence against women in Turkey over the recent years. Survey by Turkstat (2021) shows that **35.5 percent of women do not feel secure in Turkey. Çelik and Çelik (2007) show that 37.1 percent of hospital nurses report that they had been harassed sexually at the workplace at least once.** Gunduz et al. (2007) document that 200 out of 356 professional sportswomen in Turkey claim that they had been sexually harassed by trainers, administrators, and spectators. The field study by Ünlütürk Ulutaş and Durusoy Öztepe (2021) show that the fear of sexual harassment at work is the major obstacle against women's employment in Konya. Furthermore, women who are sexually harassed at the workplace face difficulties reporting to the police due to the concern that they would be immediately laid off.
- Sexual abuse is also a tremendous concern for refugee women in Turkey because of the vulnerable and disadvantaged conditions they live in. Several studies document the immense degree of sexual harassment faced by women from Syria, especially in camps.⁷ Informal financial support mechanisms by neighbours and employers tend to make refugee women more vulnerable to sexual demands. Due to fear of sexual harassment, families tend to employ male children in the household, creating another layer of inequality and exploitation.⁸ Fieldwork interviews also suggest that women from Syria prefer to work in workplaces where other male members of the household are also employed in the same workplace to avoid harassment.⁹
- Physical violence is among the top gender related problems in Turkey. Violence against women has significant economic costs in terms of decreased mental health and productivity, lost income, and expenditures on service provision. Turkey ranks among the top countries in terms of female homicides by intimate partners, family, and non-partners.¹⁰ The pervasiveness of violence against women, including femicides, and the repeal of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, -also known as the Istanbul Convention- makes Turkey a difficult country for women to live and work safely. Courts should immediately reverse the repeal and policy makers should focus on concrete actions for zero-tolerance on sexual harassment and physical violence. Increasing the safety of public transportation and investing in female-friendly cities should also be included in the policy agenda of municipalities and other government institutions.

3. BARRIERS FOR INTEGRATION AND MEASURES TO ADDRESS THEM

- Information barriers are acute for refugee women. According to UN's Needs Assessment Report on Syrian women and girls under temporary protection in Turkey (2018), 92 percent of Syrian women are unaware of work permit regulations, 73 percent do not know where to

⁷ Alpak et al. (2014) and Baklacioğlu (2017)

⁸ Baklacioğlu and Kivılcım (2015)

⁹ Körükmez, Karakılıç, and Daniş (2020)

¹⁰ Aşık and Nas-Ozen, (2021)

seek assistance related to violence or harassment, 68 percent do not know about free legal counselling, 63 percent do not have information about home care, 59 percent do not know how to get psychosocial support, and 57 percent do not have information about childcare services. Although there are numerous vocational training programs targeting refugee women, only 7 percent of the interviewed Syrian women report to have taken part in vocational training up to 2018. Among the women who have not taken part in any vocational training courses, 14.8 percent reported that they were unaware of the possibility.

- Even more acute problem is that some of the refugee women are not aware of the fact that their rights are protected by the Turkish family law, not the laws of their native countries in case of a domestic dispute within the family. It is imperative that women in Turkey have access to vital information on living conditions, employment rights, legal regulations, and family law. Regrettably, a lack of awareness concerning the existence and services provided by NGOs often prevails. Early marriage, divorce, and polygamy are pervasive issues. These findings call for immediate action to disseminate information on access to key public services through simple interventions such as sending SMS, digital information awareness campaigns, or leaflets to refugee and host community women in Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish. The information provided can be about the legal rights, nearest health clinic, police station, legal or psychological counseling, language courses, vocational training and other types of free services provided by the government, NGOs, or international organizations. However, providing access to information alone is insufficient to ensure that women's rights are respected. Refugee women frequently report being subject to discrimination and facing extra difficulties obtaining official documents from public institutions, such as in renewing identity cards. Hence, practical measures to guarantee that all government institutions are aware of refugee rights are needed.
- Social contact with the local population is key for integration. Refugee women frequently receive less integration support than their male counterparts; especially with respect to employment-related measures. Language barriers are arguably one of the most important problems that refugees face in successfully integrating into the society and labor markets, and this is particularly true for refugee women. Several studies from the European Union show that the refugee women with intermediate or advanced levels of proficiency in the host-country language have a full 40 percentage points higher employment rate than those with little or no language skills.¹¹ In the context of refugees in Turkey, Kayaoğlu and Erdoğan (2019) suggest that having a higher level of education and Turkish language proficiency are associated with a higher likelihood of being employed as regular workers across Syrian women in Turkey.
- Language skills also matter for immigrants' and refugees' children's integration into the host societies. Therefore, there is a strong need to increase the capacity for Turkish language courses for refugee women. UN's Needs Assessment Report reveals that 26.4 percent of Syrian refugee women are not able to attend language or vocational training courses because

¹¹ Liebig and Tronstad (2018)

they do not have access to childcare services during when these courses take place. Hence, language courses should be designed such that women can attend courses with their children. Interacting, and practicing with their children through playing in these courses can facilitate learning of both the refugee women and their children. Alternatively, childcare services can be provided in the same vicinity during the courses. Interviews with refugee women also show that the A1 and A2 level courses are usually not sufficient to find employment and the number of more advanced courses should be increased. Many refugee women report that daily allowance is generally insufficient to cover the commuting costs for these courses. Though language courses may not immediately help Syrian and other refugee women to find jobs, it will nevertheless facilitate the integration process in the medium term.

- Refugees generally arrive in host countries with insurmountable problems and with high levels of stress for survival. Being a refugee woman in an unfamiliar country is even more difficult due to the double hierarchies, social norms, unpaid care responsibilities, and a lack of information for accessing even the most basic public services. Evidence suggests that refugee women worldwide are more likely to suffer from mental illness and depression than citizen women. Unfortunately, in the case of refugees in Turkey, a significant share of women seems to lack access to key information on public health services that they have a right to benefit from. The lack of information is likely to make the integration of refugee women slower as well as delay the timing when they mentally and physically feel healthy to work.
- Refugees also face a constant threat of expulsion and hate speech. The negative discourse towards the refugees are triggered further by the careless statements by some political leaders. Unfortunately, they are used as a political bargaining tool and yet the political leaders seem to be unaware of how the negative statements and threat of expulsion could be affecting the psychology of the refugees and their children. The elections are upcoming and the increased uncertainty generates extra anxiety and stress for refugee women, not knowing where their families will end up in one year. Hence, politicians and authorities should seek a more responsible and inclusive language in political matters concerning refugees. Furthermore, the portrayal of refugees in the media is often negative and lacking in nuance. Instead of being shown as individuals with unique stories and experiences, they are often reduced to a homogenous group of people in need of assistance. This portrayal can reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate discrimination against refugees. To combat hate speech, campaigns promoting the success stories of refugees could be designed. Prominent figures and artists can also be invited to participate in campaigns to reduce hate speech against the refugees.
- The issue of integration is often viewed through the lens of refugees, but it is important to avoid a one-sided perspective. Hence, it is imperative to advocate that integration is a two-way street and that policy makers should also take actions to build awareness for Turkish citizens. When designing integration programs, it is crucial to take into account cultural sensitivity to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. The language used in integration programs can have a significant impact on how immigrants and refugees perceive their host country and its people. In some cases, cultural misunderstandings can arise due to the use of language that is inappropriate or offensive to certain groups. Therefore, it is essential that integration programs use culturally sensitive language that respects the diversity of the individuals and

communities involved. Programs should aim to promote understanding and respect for different cultures, customs, and values.

4. WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION, FINANCIAL EXCLUSION, AND MEASURES TO ADDRESS THEM

- Women face various forms of discrimination in the workplace and from employers. Refugee women in particular report that they are being discriminated against at the workplace against both the citizen men and women. Gender wage gap analyses for foreign born workers and citizens using nationally representative labour force survey data confirm the wage discrimination across i) men and women, and, ii) across foreign born and Turkish nationals. However, they are insufficient sources to detect other important sources of discrimination. Awareness for legal action against mobbing and discrimination should be increased and in particular getting the information out to disadvantaged workers should be prioritized. For women employed in professional occupations, mentorship programs can be effective to break glass ceilings as well as to empower women. Empirical evidence from various countries show that mentorship programs have positive effects on achieving better career prospects for female mentees.
- Voluntary mentorship programs can also be launched for national and refugee girls at school. Integrating such modules into the education curriculum can help foster social cohesion, gender equality, and aspire girls through successful female role models. This is particularly important for Syrian and other refugee girls, as they may face stronger social barriers from networks within and outside.
- There is concrete evidence that women in Turkey face discrimination to access finance. The 2017 Global Findex Report by the World Bank shows that 83 percent of men and 54 percent of women in Turkey have bank accounts and the gender gap is about three times as large as the average gap in developing countries. The Global Findex Report also shows that 72 percent of unbanked women in Turkey indicate that one reason they do not have an account is that one of their family members already has one. Only 10 percent of firms in Turkey are female-owned. The 2019 Enterprise Survey of the World Bank shows that in Turkey, 58 percent of loans require collateral when the business is managed by a woman, versus 37 percent when the business is run by a man. Loan officers are also biased against women applicants in Turkey. Women applicants in Turkey receive approximately \$14,000 less in comparison to the loan approved for men, corresponding to a 7.5 percent lower loan amount for women.¹²
- Although the government offers several programs over KOSGEB to increase access to finance for women, evidence shows that gender gaps in access to finance are still large. Policy actions to alleviate the credit bottlenecks for female entrepreneurs should be taken. Blind credit systems can be designed which make the gender information unknown to employers and/or credit officers. **To promote female entrepreneurship, successful examples of Women's**

¹² Alibhai et al. (2019)

Cooperatives all around Turkey can be promoted. Women's networks can be supported and such initiatives can be scaled up through further partnerships with municipalities and the private sector. Tax incentives and non-credit subsidies can be designed to promote women's SMEs, women's cooperatives, to better thrive and create decent jobs for all women in Turkey.

5. NEED FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

- Another important but mostly neglected problem that limits policy makers' capacity to formulate the right policies for disadvantaged women in Turkey is the lack of systematic data. There are official regular surveys conducted by the Turkstat, however the information provided in the data mostly covers the Turkish nationals and is quite limited to analyze the pressing problems faced by the refugees. The 2018 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) which includes a separate Syrian module is an exception, but the DHS is conducted every five years and does not cover non-Syrian refugees or any other minority group.
- Currently, there is no systematic data collection for refugees originating from Africa, Turkic Republics, East Asia, Ukraine, or other nations, as well as for LGBT+ communities. Hence, the policy makers and NGOs have no means to evaluate how widespread certain barriers are for these groups and what can be done to overcome them. The government should take immediate action to invest in better data and ensure that the official statistics include not only Syrian refugees but also refugees from other nationalities and other disadvantaged groups. Without high-quality data, it is not possible to identify the problems and evaluate whether the public resources allocated for these groups are efficiently used. Without high-quality data, it is not possible to develop evidence-based policies to improve refugee and national women's inclusion in the labor market.
- In order to address the issues faced by refugee and citizen women in Turkey, it is imperative to foster better cooperation between women's advocacy groups and major players such as Ministries and local governments. Due to resource constraints, public institutions may struggle to keep up with the reality on the ground. This highlights the importance of collaborative efforts that bring together a range of stakeholders to ensure that the needs of women are adequately addressed.
- One potential strategy to promote better jobs for refugees is to involve unions in the process of increasing work permits and employment quotas. By working with unions, advocacy groups and other entities can help to create a more equitable and supportive environment for women seeking employment and greater economic empowerment.
- Finally, further research is necessary to understand the national and refugee women's perceptions on market work and division of labor within households. Understanding the interplay between institutions, policies, conservatism and gender norms can help design better work environments where women can balance work and family life.

CONCLUSION

This brief highlights the most important barriers that limit women's economic participation in Turkey and recommends immediate actions to overcome these barriers. As the most binding constraint limiting both the national and refugee women's participation in the labour markets, supply of publicly provided child care services needs to be increased urgently. Regulations that put women at a disadvantage should be reviewed and amended. Fiscal and legal incentives should be introduced to levelling the field for male and female labor supply and make work-family life more balanced only for women, but also for men. Regulations which incentivize the care economy should also be enacted.

Women are not safe in Turkey. Sexual harassment and violence are important threats for women, limiting their economic opportunities. We call upon the policy makers to increase the deterrence of the penalties for gender based crimes. Zero-tolerance policies should be complemented with improvements in policing and investments in infrastructure to make cities safer for women.

Labour market barriers for the refugee women should not be overlooked. Providing language courses can facilitate integration of refugee women and their children. Dissemination of information to refugee communities might also facilitate the integration and employment prospects. Most importantly, work permits extended to individuals under the Temporary Protection Regulation should be increased significantly. The penal code should be strengthened to deter crimes against refugees and public campaigns to fight with xenophobia should be launched. We also call upon political leaders to adopt a more sensitive language in issues concerning the refugees. The government immediately needs to invest in statistical and data collection capacity to be able to formulate policies based on evidence. Data on refugees, especially on non-Syrian and other minority women is scarce. Better data allows us to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing integration policies, and allows space for their modification if and when necessary.

Overall, the challenges faced by refugee and citizen women in Turkey require a multi-faceted approach that involves a broad range of stakeholders. Through enhanced collaboration and strategic partnerships, it may be possible to develop more effective policies and initiatives that promote the rights and well-being of all women in the country.