

PATHWAYS TOWARDS SOCIAL INCLUSION OF REFUGEES IN TURKEY

Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country in the world, including 3.6 million Syrians. Women and girls constitute 46 percent of this population. Despite stakeholders' efforts, including commitments to promoting gender equality, widespread poverty remains. Women and girls face a number of specific challenges, including extremely low levels of labor force participation. However, these challenges are not unique to Syrians. Social, economic and political exclusion preceded their arrival, including persistent inequalities between the rich and poor, women and men, and the regions. This article posits that much remains to be done to sustainably and meaningfully address the specific needs of women and girl refugees in Turkey, and that a holistic approach that promotes socio-economic development and inclusion is imperative.

Meryem Aslan & Josephine Whitaker-Yılmaz*



* Meryem Aslan is the Country Director of Oxfam in Turkey. Josephine Whitaker-Yılmaz is the Advocacy and Campaign Officer at Oxfam.

Turkey has a long history of receiving significant numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. Between 1920 and the mid-1990s, it received more than 1.5 million refugees from the Balkans¹ and it experienced a mass influx of half a million refugees from Iraq between 1988-1991.² Today, Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country in the world, a position it has now held for six consecutive years. The conflict in neighboring Syria, which began in 2011, has driven 11.8 million people from their homes, resulting in over 6.2 million internally displaced people³ and 5.6 million refugees.⁴ Whereas 85 percent of the global refugee population reside in low and middle-income countries,⁵ the world's six wealthiest countries host less than nine percent of the total.⁶ Most Syrians who have been forced to flee across an international border have sought refuge in one of Syria's immediate neighbors: Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt or Turkey, 3.6 million of which, or 64 percent, having escaped to Turkey.⁷ Together with more than 370,000 refugees from other countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Somalia,⁸ Turkey now hosts approximately four million refugees – or 14 percent of the global refugee population.⁹

The Refugee Response in Turkey

Syrian refugees are spread across all of Turkey's 81 provinces. They are primarily self-settled and live in urban areas, and only four percent live in temporary accommodation centers.¹⁰ "In April 2013, Turkey adopted a comprehensive Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), which provides the legal framework for asylum in Turkey, consistent with EU regulations, and affirms Turkey's obligations towards all persons in need of international protection, regardless of country of origin, at the level of binding domestic law."¹¹ The Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) of October 2014 is the main piece of domestic legislation that regulates and

¹ Kemal Kirisci, "Syrian refugees and Turkey's Challenges: Going Beyond Hospitality," *Brookings Institute*, 14 May 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/syrian-refugees-and-turkeys-challengesgoing-beyond-hospitality/>

² Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey: A Transformation from Emigration to Immigration," *Migration Policy Institute*, 1 November 2003, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/turkey-transformation-emigration-immigration>

³ UNHCR, "Syria fact sheet," *Relief Web*, January 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Fact%20Sheet%20January%202019.pdf>

⁴ UNHCR, "Operational portal – refugee situations: Syria Regional Refugee Response," <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

⁵ UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017," 20 June 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/>

⁶ Oxfam, "Six richest countries host less than 9% of refugees," 18 July 2016, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2016-07-18/six-richest-countries-host-less-9-refugees>

⁷ UNHCR, "Syrian Regional Refugee Response."

⁸ UNHCR, "Turkey Factsheet," September 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66510>

⁹ UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017."

¹⁰ Republic of Turkey Interior Ministry, Directorate General of Migration Management, "Syrians staying inside and outside of Temporary Protections Centers," http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik

¹¹ "Introduction to the Asylum Context in Turkey," Asylum Information Database, <http://www.asylumineurope.org/print/1627>

governs the protection of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Syrians registered under TPR (88 percent of the total refugee population¹²) are entitled to access a range of public services, including education and health services at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

The refugee response has, to a large extent, been nationally funded and mostly delivered through national and local institutions such as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), and various ministries and municipalities. The Turkish government reports that it has spent close to 35 billion dollars on its refugee response since 2011.

“The Turkish government reports that it has spent close to 35 billion dollars on its refugee response since 2011.”

Nevertheless, especially since 2015, the refugee situation in Turkey has attracted the support of an increasing number of national and international civil society organizations, as well as multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), and bilateral donors. Although it is challenging to get a comprehensive picture of the total development and humanitarian assistance received by Turkey to support the refugee response, according to figures reported via the United Nations’ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) Financial Tracking Service, Turkey received 3.3 billion dollars in humanitarian assistance since 2011.¹³ Following the EU-Turkey Statement that came into effect on 18 March 2016, in which the EU pledged an initial three billion euros in support for refugees and host communities in Turkey for 2016-17, followed by a further three billion euros in assistance for 2018-19, the EU became one of the largest international donors to the refugee response in Turkey.¹⁴ 4.2 billion euros of this total has so far been committed or contracted between 2016 and 2019.¹⁵

Despite the efforts of national and international stakeholders to meet the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey, several key challenges remain. 71 percent of Syrian

¹² Oxfam, KEDV and partners, “Understanding Syrian Refugees in Turkey,” March 2019, <https://oxfam.app.box.com/s/gf2v0xo9h3x6gpb9u7aeda4089jroukf>

¹³ UNOCHA, “Turkey 2011-2019,” <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/229/summary/2019> Calculations authors’ own.

¹⁴ European Council, “EU-Turkey Statement,” 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

¹⁵ European Commission, “EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey list of projects committed/decided, contracted, disbursed,” 16 January 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/facility_table.pdf

refugees in Turkey live in extreme or moderate poverty,¹⁶ with 82 percent reporting difficulty in meeting household needs with their income. Difficulties relating to employment are the most commonly cited problem for Syrians.¹⁷ Although those registered under TPR are eligible to apply for work permits, only 27,930 had been granted one as of the end of 2018.¹⁸ Education is another challenge, with just 62 percent of Syrian children enrolled in formal education as of September 2018.¹⁹

Women and Girl Refugees in Turkey

Globally, women and girls make up around 50 percent of refugees, internally displaced or stateless populations.²⁰ Amongst the Syrian refugee population in Turkey, women and girls constitute 46 percent (over 1.6 million), while men and boys constitute 54 percent (over 1.9 million). Despite explicit statements of support for the achievement of gender equality from multiple stakeholders engaged in the refugee response, including the European Union, the access of refugee women and girls to their social, economic, and cultural rights continues to be a challenge. For instance, although Syrian women's access to health services appears to be high,²¹ much remains to be done in terms of increasing their access to reproductive health and rights. For example, many Syrian women report that they are not aware of existing family planning or gynecological services.

Sexual and gender-based violence is another important concern impacting Syrian women and girls. The combined factors of forced displacement, poverty, and harmful traditional norms and practices result in a higher likelihood of forced and child marriages. Since many marriages are not registered, it is hard to establish the extent of the problem. Nevertheless, reports from centers established for women and girls indicate the increasing phenomena of child marriage and the difficulties associated with reaching those in need of support.²² Child marriages prevent girls from realiz-

¹⁶ World Bank, World Food Programme, Turkish Red Crescent, "Emergency Social Safety Net Post-Distribution Monitoring Report, Round 1," 24 May 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/emergency-social-safety-net-post-distribution-monitoring-report-round-1>

¹⁷ Oxfam, KEDV and partners (March 2019).

¹⁸ The Asylum Information Database, "Access to the labor market: Turkey," <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkey/access-labour-market-0>

¹⁹ UNICEF, "Turkey 2018 Humanitarian Results," December 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Turkey%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2028%20-%20January-December%202018.pdf>

²⁰ UNHCR, "Women," <https://www.unhcr.org/women.html>

²¹ 86 percent of women interviewed in a survey carried out by UN Women and ASAM report stated that they can access health services in cities in which they live. Alican Yücel et al., "Needs assessment of women and girls under temporary protection in Turkey," UN Women and ASAM, 2018, <http://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/08/needs-assessment-of-syrian-women-and-girls-under-temporary-protection-status-in-turkey>

²² UNFPA, "In Turkey, refugee child marriages drive adolescent pregnancies underground," 26 July 2018, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/turkey-refugee-child-marriages-drive-adolescent-pregnancies-underground>

ing their human potential, including their health and right to education, and pushes them into a cycle of poverty and violence.

“Although Turkish women participate in vocational trainings in higher numbers than men, this does not necessarily translate into jobs.”

The female labor force participation of Syrian women in Turkey is very low. Studies indicate that while 74 percent of men participate in the labor force, only 16 percent of women do so. Only nine percent of female respondents over the age of 15 reported that they are currently working, compared to 53 percent of men; over 70 percent of women report that household responsibilities, including child care, prevent them from working.²³ A lack of education and prior work experience also appear to be common. 32 percent have no formal education.²⁴ 65 percent of those now working in Turkey did not do so previously, and 68 percent of those seeking work have no prior work experience.²⁵ Young Syrian women participate in the labor market in even lower numbers than their older counterparts, with 79 percent of those aged 15–24 neither in education nor employment. In keeping with wider trends, responsibilities for care work appear to be a major barrier to their economic participation, with 31 percent of 18–24 year olds, and 20 percent of 15–17-year old Syrians reporting care responsibilities as the main reason for their non-participation.²⁶ Although there is a range of vocational training programs available to Syrians provided by both government and non-governmental actors, uptake is low. Instead, most rely on support from family and friends to find work.²⁷ Only seven percent of women in Turkey report having participated in vocational training services.²⁸ Lack of information among service providers from diverse institutions as well as refugees themselves, the language barrier, the socio-economic position of women prior to arriving to Turkey, their education levels and work experience, and difficulties in navigating the social, economic and institutional system, appear to add to the difficulties facing Syrian women.

²³ Oxfam, KEDV and partners (March 2019).

²⁴ Oxfam, KEDV and partners (March 2019).

²⁵ Oxfam, KEDV and partners (March 2019).

²⁶ Oxfam, KEDV and partners (March 2019).

²⁷ Oxfam, KEDV and partners (March 2019).

²⁸ Alican Yücel et al. (2018).

The Challenge of Social Inclusion

Notwithstanding the additional challenges they face because of their refugee status, the social and economic exclusion faced by Syrian women has many commonalities with the experiences of other women in Turkey. Although absolute poverty has been eliminated, challenges in social, economic, and political inclusion preceded the arrival of Syrian refugees, with persisting inequalities between the rich and poor, women and men, and the regions. For instance, the gap between rich and poor has been narrowing in Turkey since 2007.²⁹ However, the extent of this closure has not been enough to change Turkey's position as one of the most unequal countries in the OECD.³⁰

Despite improvements over the years, gender inequality remains pervasive, falling far behind what might be expected of the world's 17th largest economy. The female labor force participation in Turkey is amongst the lowest in the OECD, at only 35 percent.³¹ Just 29 percent of women over the age of 15 are employed, compared to 65 percent of men.³² 87 percent of women state that they would like to work in a paid job, but 55 percent state that their domestic responsibilities, including child care, prevent them from working.³³ 44.6 percent of all employed women work informally³⁴ without social security or job protection, 94 percent of women employed in agriculture work informally,³⁵ and 65 percent have experienced harassment at work.³⁶

Although research indicates that there is a strong positive relationship between higher levels of education and female labor force participation, two-thirds (67.4 percent) of Turkish women stop their education at primary level. Hence, although female labor force participation is highest amongst women with tertiary education degrees (69 percent), less than one-tenth of Turkish women acquire these degrees.³⁷ Women with tertiary education are also more likely to have paid jobs, participate in

²⁹ OECD, "OECD Economic Surveys: Turkey 2018," OECD Publishing, July 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Turkey-2018-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

³⁰ OECD, "Income inequality (indicator)," 2019, <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>

³¹ Turkish Statistical Institute, "Labor Force Statistics," 2018, http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1007

³² Turkish Statistical Institute (2018).

³³ Asli E. Mert, "The Diverse Barriers to Women's Employment in Turkey," Global Network for Advanced Management, 31 March 2017, <https://globalnetwork.io/perspectives/2017/03/diverse-barriers-womens-employment-turkey>

³⁴ Turkish Statistical Institute (2018).

³⁵ Turkish Statistical Institute (2018).

³⁶ "İsyerinde taciz var," *Hürriyet*, 9 June 2017, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ik-yeni-ekonomi/isyerinde-taciz-var-28387184>

³⁷ Feride İnan and Güneş Aşık, "Making economies work for women: female labour force participation in Turkey," *Oxfam and TEPAV*, July 2017, https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1436539353-9.Making_Economies_Work_for_Women_Female_Labour_Force_Participation_in_Turkey.pdf

the formal sector, and earn more than those with lower education levels.³⁸ Although Turkish women participate in vocational trainings in higher numbers than men, this does not necessarily translate into jobs.

As with the Syrian refugee population, unemployment is also especially high amongst young women. 22.3 percent of Turkish 18–24-year olds are unemployed, while 24.7 percent are neither in employment nor education. These rates are higher for young Turkish women, with 28 percent unemployed and 34 percent neither in education nor employment.³⁹ The process of accommodating four million refugees and existing efforts to address the specific needs of refugee women have inevitably been impacted by these chronic institutional and structural issues in the economy, labor market, and the overall policy environment. As services available to refugees in Turkey are by now largely integrated into mainstream government services and existing social security systems, the social and economic inclusion of Syrian women and refugees inevitably requires addressing the structural and institutional drivers of social and economic inequalities.

“In the long run, development aspirations that put women and men at the center cannot be achieved without investment in access to quality health and education services.”

Increasing access to information, investing in creative ways to address the difficulties caused by the communications barrier that go beyond language training, in-service training to the bureaucracy on gender equality, women’s rights and multi-cultural interactions, and standardized implementation of the laws that protect the rights of women, including refugee women, can certainly go a long way in helping refugees navigate the system and facilitate better access to rights and services. Such measures will also benefit the wider female population of Turkey.

Donor Contributions

Against the backdrop of the particular challenges faced by women and girl refugees and the pressing need to support social and economic inclusion, it is pertinent to consider how the international assistance that Turkey receives is contributing to these challenges.

³⁸ Feride İnan and Güneş Aşık (July 2017).

³⁹ Turkish Statistical Institute (2018).

As noted above, the EU is one of the largest donors of international assistance to the refugee response in Turkey. The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) was established as a mechanism to coordinate the EU's six billion euros financial support to the refugee response under the auspices of the EU-Turkey Statement. Although the statement itself does not mention women and girls and does not make any reference to gender equality, this does appear to be a consideration for the Facility. Despite the fact that neither of the Facility's strategic concept notes identifies gender-specific objectives, the Updated Strategic Concept Note of 2018 prioritizes the promotion of gender and age equality in proposed interventions on socio-economic support and health.⁴⁰ The Facility's Third Annual Report also states that the interventions it supports aim to promote equal opportunities for women and girls, men and boys, that gender-disaggregated data is collected to monitor this, and some dedicated actions have been developed in this area.⁴¹

Despite this explicit statement, and the financial, technical and administrative support dedicated by the EU to refugees and host communities in Turkey, it is difficult to identify monitoring data on exactly how the Facility is supporting gender equality. Almost half (46 percent) of funds committed, contracted, and disbursed to date have been allocated to humanitarian assistance; of those allocated to development assistance, education is the largest recipient sector (28 percent), followed by health (15 percent). Only eight percent is specifically focused on socio-economic support.⁴² According to the Facility's own figures, less than half a percent of the total funds have been invested in programs that are specifically designed to address the needs of women and girls.⁴³

Pathways to Enhanced Social Inclusion

Education and health are important investments for the realization of women and men's human potential and to expand their opportunities. In the long run, development aspirations that put women and men at the center cannot be achieved without investment in access to quality health and education services. Thus, initiatives that are implemented jointly by the EU, UN agencies, and the Turkish government, such as the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) program, which aims to increase attendance rates for both refugee and host community children, are critical.

⁴⁰ European Commission, "Facility for Refugees in Turkey: updated strategic concept note," 5 June 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/updated_facility_strategic_concept_note.pdf

⁴¹ European Commission, "Communication from the commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Third annual report on the Facility for Refugees in Turkey," 15 April 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/com_2019_174_fl_communication_from_commission_to_inst_en_v5_p1_1016762.pdf

⁴² European Commission, "The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey," March 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/frit_factsheet.pdf

⁴³ European Commission, "EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey list of projects committed/decided, contracted, disbursed," 16 January 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/facility_table.pdf

Lessons learned from such programs should be drawn upon to further increase the educational access of girls and young women in particular, and to promote enhanced attendance in secondary and tertiary education. Given the strong correlation between female labor force participation and education levels, and between tertiary education and better job prospects much more needs to be done to increase the educational attendance of all women in Turkey, particularly beyond the primary level. Lessons learned from the relative successes seen in expanding refugees' access to health services may also be profitably applied to addressing women's specific reproductive health needs and rights, as well as increasing attention to mental health care.

Yet, overall there is a need to better segment and sequence interventions in a way that is guided by a more profound understanding of how existing inequalities impact women in Turkey, including across regions and both refugee and host community women. This would require a shift towards a more equitable, inclusive, and long-term development paradigm amongst all development and humanitarian actors, including UN agencies, national and international civil society organizations and others. To achieve this, it is crucial that international assistance to Turkey goes beyond official development assistance (ODA), whether humanitarian or development, to include a range of measures from concessional credits to preferential trade that support overall employment creation and sustainable economic development.

“Much is left to be done in order to sustainably and meaningfully address the specific needs of women and girl refugees in Turkey”

Much remains to be done in addressing women's specific needs and increasing their socio-economic inclusion. As seen in the example discussed above, the intentions of donors to promote gender equality and to support gender-specific programs have yet to translate into gender-specific investments that fully support this sustainable inclusion of female refugees, as well as women and girls in the host community.

There is an urgent need to seek innovative, holistic, multifaceted solutions that could help turn unpaid care work, one of the most-cited barriers to women's economic participation in Turkey, including for refugee women, into an advantage for themselves. Such solutions can help transform women's skills in care work into an economic force that generates employment. Such approaches can also invest in women-run small and medium enterprises, promote alternative business models such as benefit corporations, cooperatives, social enterprises, and social businesses.

There are many examples of such models in Turkey and elsewhere in the world which have proven to be economically viable, while at the same time shifting the focus of the business to the common good that can be created for the wider community as well as the business owner(s).

There are many policies and tools that can be utilized to support women's economic participation and broader social inclusion such as vocational trainings that are designed based on accurate assessments of labor profiles, market demands and needs on various sectors, on the job trainings and incentives for regions that host the most refugees to expand job market. However, all these would require a deliberate and intentional social policy for the promotion of equality between women, men, girls, and boys.

Conclusion

More efforts are needed to sustainably and meaningfully address the specific needs of women and girl refugees in Turkey. Given the existing patterns of social and economic exclusion that existed prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees from 2011 onwards, a holistic approach that promotes socio-economic development and supports overall social and economic inclusion for all excluded groups is imperative.

The example of the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey discussed above demonstrates that general commitments to gender equality do not appear to be sufficient. Despite a shift in recent years amongst international donors from a largely humanitarian response to one that seeks to promote resilience and support development, the priorities of donors do not yet appear to fully reflect this shift. Further research into the extent to which both gender and social inclusion have been prioritized—or not—by all stakeholders engaged in the refugee response in Turkey is necessary to shed light on how the refugee response can be made more relevant to these critical socio-economic issues.