

## Ayrımcılık ve Sömürü: Kumkapı'daki Afrikalı Sığınmacıların Çalışma Koşulları ve Sığınmacılara Yönelik Tutumlar\*

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### Öz

Türkiye, coğrafi konumundan dolayı göçmenler için hem bir geçiş hem de hedef ülke olarak algılanmaktadır. Bu göçmenler arasında en belirginleri deri renklerinden ötürü Afrikalı sığınmacılardır. Avrupa'yı ya da gelişmiş dünya ülkelerini nihai hedef olarak tayin etseler de Afrikalı sığınmacılar Türkiye'de buldukları süre zarfında geçimlerini sağlamak durumundadırlar. Kayıt dışı ekonominin çeşitli sektörlerinde ve çalışma şartlarının iyi olmadığı işlerde istihdam edilen Afrikalılar, çoğu zaman tacize ve dolandırıcılığa maruz kalmaktadırlar. Bu makale, Afrikalıların iş yerinde karşılaştıkları ayrımcılığı ve sömürüyü ele almakta; ırkçı tutumların, fiziksel ve cinsel tacizlerin yanı sıra grubun çaresizliğinin ve savunmasızlığının altını çizmektedir. Makalede, öncelikle sığınmacılara odaklanılarak düzensiz ve geçiş göçü incelenmektedir. İkinci olarak, Afrikalı sığınmacıların Türkiye algılarını ortaya koymak ve Türkiye'ye göç nedenlerini incelemek amacıyla, Türkiye ve Afrika arasındaki politik ve ekonomik ilişkiler ele alınmaktadır. Ardından araştırmanın bulguları sunulmakta ve tartışılmaktadır. Son olarak, Afrikalı sığınmacıların karşılaştıkları problemlere yönelik birtakım çözüm önerileri ve mevcut durumlarını iyileştirmek için politika tavsiyeleri sunulmaktadır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Sığınmacı • Transit göç • Ekonomik sömürü • Ayrımcılık • Afrika • İstanbul

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# Discrimination and Exploitation: Workplace Conditions and Treatment of African Asylum Seekers Residing in Kumkapı<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

Due to its geographical position, Turkey has long been regarded by immigrants as a transit and destination country. Among these immigrants, the most noticeable, due to their skin color are the African asylum seekers. Though the majority of African asylum seekers ultimately aim to settle in Europe and other First World countries, they need to earn a living during their stay in Turkey. As this research shows, they are typically employed in various sectors of the informal economy, doing less desirable jobs, and are commonly victims of fraud and abuse. This article addresses the issues of the workplace discrimination and exploitation they face, noting racist attitudes, sexual and physical harassment, and the group's helplessness and vulnerability. We first examine irregular and transit migration to Turkey, focusing on asylum seekers. Next, to portray Turkey's image among them and explain their reasons for the migration from Africa to Turkey, we explore political and economic relations between Turkey and African countries. We then present and discuss the findings of the research. Finally, we offer solutions to the problems African asylum seekers face and report suggestions for improving their conditions.

## Keywords:

Asylum seekers • Transit migration • Economic exploitation • Discrimination • Africa • Istanbul

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Because of its strategic and geographic position, Turkey has become a crossroads for migration. Over its history, Turkey has borne witness to various internal and external population movements, which have transformed and enriched the country as well as its culture, language, and traditions. However, because the country has become both a transit and a destination country owing to the growing inflow of migrants, the country now faces serious challenges and problems managing migrants and migration-related issues arising in the society. Because the European Union (EU) protects its territory with “The Fortress Europe” construct and takes strict measures to control immigration, Turkey has also adapted its immigration policies accordingly, as it still strives for the EU membership. However, considering the lack of support and assistance from the EU, Turkey needs to refine its current practices and develop its own immigration policies to create more effective solutions to its ongoing problems. To achieve this, Turkish policy makers must understand the realities and issues present in their society, which now includes both Turkish citizens and immigrants. My aim in this article is to shed light on one of the most pressing issues: the economic exploitation and discrimination of the most noticeable immigrant group, African asylum seekers. Compared to other non-European immigrants in Turkey, Africans are more vulnerable owing to intense stigmatization, social marginalization, and racism manifested through physical and verbal violence. By documenting and discussing autobiographical stories and experiences told by African asylum seekers in Kumkapı, I aim to highlight the grim reality the group faces in the work place on a daily basis. In highlighting these details, I display a concern for the humane and fair treatment of Africans, emphasizing the need to implement and reinforce essential regulations and laws.

### **Methodological Remarks**

The site of the research was Istanbul’s Kumkapı district, where Africans, along with the immigrants from other nations (e.g. Georgia), live. The aim of this research was not only to explore discriminatory practices in the workplace but also to focus on the interaction and conflict between Turkish citizens and Africans residing in the area. Because the findings are too extensive to fit into one article, the present article addresses only one aspect of the research findings.

### **Research Design**

Initial literature review, which suggested discrimination against the African asylum seekers, helped the formulation of hypotheses prior to the actual field research. Also, before designing the research I made observations about the area, Kumkapı, during my numerous visits. I talked to some officials such as Katip Kasim Mosque’s Imam who provided food and support for the Africans, local governors who mentioned the demographic profile and history of the Africans in the area, and quite a few residents

sharing the same space with the Africans. Additionally, I had informal conversations with more than ten African asylum seekers who provided me essential information about their pressing issues and problems. Consequently, I had a considerable amount of data and preferred qualitative research to achieve a detailed and multidimensional analysis of the issues. Thus, for recording the stories and attitudes of individuals and groups about their lives and problems in Turkey, and for a close face-to-face interaction, I decided to conduct semi-structured in-depth and focus group interviews, which had an open-ended format, despite a set of pre-prepared questions and prompts based on the themes identified during the initial research and observations in the field. Semi-structured interviews seemed to be the most suitable form of research, because they allowed the interviewees elaborate on their responses in an exploratory manner. Based on the aforementioned initial research, I determined the number of interviewees (twenty) and potential limitations for the research, such as the difficulty to reach the Africans and the language barrier. I tried to eliminate the problems by taking measures accordingly and finalized my research design.

### **Universe and Sampling**

The universe of the research is the African asylum seekers in Turkey. It is important to note that the individual legal status of interviewees was diverse: Some were recognized or rejected asylum seekers while the others did not have any legal documents. Therefore, I will use “asylum seeker” as an umbrella term for the whole group. Asylum seekers were also ethnically diverse, and included Anglophone, Francophone, and Arabic speakers.

Because the research aimed to discover and understand specific issues such as the treatment of the Africans at workplace, I used non-probability sampling. Due to their security concerns, i.e. fear of being detained and deported, Africans were unwilling to participate in the research, unless someone they trusted agreed to be interviewed first. Therefore, regarding the difficulty of contacting undocumented immigrants and their concern for confidentiality, I had to undertake snowball sampling, in which an initial interview with an asylum seeker paved the way for contact with many others.

### **Data Collection**

The data discussed here were gathered between October 2013 and March 2014. The results drew largely on the data collected from twenty-one participants, three women and eighteen men from various African nations. During the interviews, for the sake of validity and reliability, I was accompanied by another sociologist as an observer who took notes and shared the important points of the interviews, and an African interpreter who spoke English, Turkish, Arabic and French.

### **Limitation of the Research**

A limitation of the research is the low number of female participants, although the few that did participate provided valuable and sometimes disturbing information about workplace conditions and the treatment of women. Because of frequent verbal and physical harassment in the streets, the majority of the African women (except for those with jobs), especially the Somalis, preferred to stay at home. The female informants I was able to contact agreed to be interviewed only with their male friends or family members present.

### **Data Analysis**

For the qualitative data collected, I used “content analysis” (Krippendorff, 2004) and employed a “direct approach” in which my prior research in the context had guided the analysis in initial coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The data analysis process included transcribing, coding, building patterns, interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. In other words, the data was analyzed according to the pre-established themes from the interview guide which was based on the initial research, and refined during the iterative process of the research, as I incorporated unanticipated themes emerging from my field notes and reflection on the data.

### **Irregular and Transit Migration to Turkey**

The categories *transit*, *illegal migrants*, and *asylum seekers* overlap and fluctuate, as migrants move from one category to another depending on circumstances and opportunities (İcduygu, 2006, p. 1). Bearing this in mind, I would like to reiterate that I will use the term “asylum seeker” as an umbrella term to eliminate any confusion.

In the first few years of the Turkish Republic, during the creation of the nation-state, immigrants to Turkey were mainly Muslim-Turks. The recent immigration trend presents a totally different immigrant profile: A wide range of ethnicities, religious groups, and nationalities with an array of reasons for leaving their motherland (İcduygu & Yökseker, 2012). Although Turkey was previously a migrant-sending country, it has become a migrant-receiving nation for the last three decades. Because of its strategic position at the intersection of many migration routes, immigrants have been coming from the Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa since the 1980s. In addition to its geographic position, another crucial reason why Turkey attracts large numbers of immigrants is its location at the very center of a conflict zone. During the Cold War, about three million Iraqi Kurds and Shiites escaped from Saddam Hussein’s attacks to the Turkish border. The country also experienced a massive flow of immigrants (2.5 million people) running away from ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavian countries. Somalis fleeing from civil war and famine in their homeland have also passed through Turkey. Finally, the revolution in Iran and the war in

Afghanistan pushed a huge number of people into Turkey (Loescher, 1993). Because Turkey seems to be one of the few (comparatively) stable and peaceful countries in the region and its location allows easy passage to Europe, it has become a transit country as well (Biehl, 2008).

Returning to the problems of African asylum seekers, it is important to note some key legal facts. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, for the groups migrating from non-European countries, Turkey does not grant refugee status. However, one can apply for asylum, which according to Jastram and Achiron,

“[is] not defined in international law; but has become an umbrella term for the sum total of protection provided by a country to refugees on its territory. Asylum means, at the very least, basic protection - i.e., no forcible return (refoulement) to the frontiers of territories where the refugee’s life or freedom would be threatened - for a temporary period, with the possibility of staying in the host country until a solution outside that country can be found.” (2001, p. 15).

While asylum seekers face many challenges in receiving social services and finding shelter, they must also cope with complicated and ineffective bureaucracy. Because they are not recognized by the state (hence also known as *Sans Papiers* or “without papers”) and lack the legal standing to complain to any officials, they are even more vulnerable to discriminatory attitudes and exploitation at the workplace (Lloyd, 2003). Considering the grave risks and dire conditions they face, it is puzzling that an increasing number of Africans are crossing the borders into Turkey, where they are not even granted refugee status. To shed light on this phenomenon, the next section briefly explores the image of the country in the African continent.

### **Turkish-African Relations**

Due to the prolonged period of integration and frustration with the EU membership process, Turkey has directed its attention to new markets for trade available in Africa. After Turkey launched its 1998 Africa Action Plan, investments and commercial relations increased. Turkey declared 2005 the “Year of Africa” and the Africa Union (AU) granted Turkey observer status in the same year (Özkan & Akgün, 2010). In 2008, the AU declared Turkey a strategic partner and constructive efforts yielded economic benefits for both sides. To illustrate, while Turkey’s trade volume was 5.4 billion USD in 2003, by 2008 it exceeded 16 billion USD (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 534). Turkey also expanded its trade zone in Africa, thanks to institutions such as the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey (TUSKON), enhanced its social impact with effective work by non-governmental organizations, and reached out to those in need through its international aid trusts and organizations. Interviews with Africans showed that Turkey’s aforementioned economic, political and

humanitarian strategies, along with its initiatives and investments for Africa, deeply influenced immigrants' decision-making process. The increasingly positive public image of Turkey projected by the media in African countries shaped immigrants' ideas and expectations about Turkey and Turkish people, before they set out on their difficult journey across continents.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Before examining the research findings, readers must bear in mind that Turkish citizens in Kumkapı, where the surveyed African asylum seekers live, are also mostly unemployed and poor. Therefore, because the Africans provide cheap labor and consequently drive down wages, they are regarded as a threat to employment and accused of unfair competition. The overrepresentation of Africans in low-paying service and manufacturing sectors is alarming to citizens sharing the same space, because they can no longer obtain certain jobs easily. Thus, locals perceive a sense of *foreign invasion* in their community. Therefore, the findings of the research suggest a link between the treatment of the Africans and the locals' opinions and sentiments resulting from the aforementioned situation in the area.

### **Demographic Profile of the Interviewees**

Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 39 years. Of 21 interviewees, 18 were male and 3 were female. While all the female and 13 male interviewees were single, 5 male interviewees were married with children. However, they had left their families behind until they could obtain jobs with a regular income and build a stable and safe life in their target countries. Seven interviewees were from Mali, six were from Cameroon, three from the Ivory Coast, two from Senegal, and the rest were from Uganda, Gambia, and Togo. Their education levels were also diverse: two never attended school, seven graduated from or left secondary school, six were high school graduates, four left university, one left primary school, and one did not answer the question.

### **Reasons for Coming to Turkey**

When asked about how they gathered information about Turkey, some participants reported that they had consulted businessmen or influential people in their communities who had been to Turkey before; others reported conducting their own research online and getting the impression that obtaining visas for Turkey was easy and that officials would not deport them even if their visas expired. Such misconceptions seem to have encouraged Africans, but media coverage of Turkish football teams, and Turkish-African economic and political relations definitely had a considerable impact on their decision-making process.



*“I heard that Turkey had quite good economic conditions, and I thought it could be a credible alternative to the European countries.”* (Yani, Mali, 33 years old)

*“I knew about projects by TUSKON and learnt that African businessmen were traveling to Turkey a lot.”* (Sema, Mali, 24 years old)

*“When I was in Cameroon, my initial plan was not to come to Turkey. I was prepared to travel to Canada. But the Turkish President Abdullah Gul visited Cameroon and signed a convention with my country, which made it very easy to visit Turkey. So, I thought that might be an advantage, and why not take it?”* (Rosine, Cameroon, 27 years old)

In addition to these accounts, some interviewees highlighted the fact that human smugglers convinced them to choose Turkey as their destination, and the prices that they had to pay were lower for Turkey than for the European countries.

*“I was a junior rugby player in Cameroon. A human smuggler told me that he had arranged a meeting for me with prestigious rugby players in Turkey. So, I paid him extra for this. But now I realize that it was all a lie.”* (Antoine, Cameroon, 20 years old)

For Muslim interviewees, the fact that the majority of Turkey’s population is Muslim made it appear safe and promising. Turkey was already helping the needy in African countries; so the interviewees could have never foreseen the issues they would face in the country.

Unbearable conditions in their homelands also triggered the thought of immigration in the Africans. Civil wars, political unrest, dictator rule, extreme poverty, and massive unemployment, which naturally come to mind when we think of Africa, were the major reasons given. Other reasons included the opportunities to conduct trade, become a football player, find a decent job to support their families back home, and receive an education.

### **Finding Employment**

The interviewees reported that they were illegally employed to make leather shoes and bags in the manufacturing sector, sew and iron clothes in textile factories, do construction work, or work in retail sales. Their salaries ranged between 600 and 1000 Turkish Lira a month:

*“They pay us twice a month, each time 400 Turkish Lira.”* (Mohammed, Senegal, 24 years old)

*“I get 150 Lira per week.”* (Samoy, Ivory Coast, 31 years old)

*"It is up to the boss, he pays as he likes."* (Yani, Mali, 33 years old)

*"They sometimes pay and sometimes don't."* (Donald, Cameroon, 24 years old)

Because immigrants are regarded as a cheap labor supply, manufacturers prefer them over Turkish citizens. As a result, due to fierce and unfair competition and greater job opportunities offered to immigrants, a conflict of interest is inevitable (Dedeoğlu & Gökmen, 2011). Although poor locals sharing the same space with Africans know that the immigrants are employed in the least desirable jobs under horrible working conditions, they still want these positions. They thus feel disappointed and exploited to see immigrants filling up positions and earning money that they need.

The immigrants being illegally employed and devoid of any legal standing to complain to any official body, also cannot object to long working hours:

*"We start working at 8 a.m. and finish at 9 p.m. They give no breakfast, lunch, or dinner. We have 10 minutes break every 3-4 hours, that's it. It's non-stop work there."* (Mohammad)

*"We start at 8 a.m. and finish at 10 p.m. I even sleep there at night. I lose track of time at my workplace. And they don't pay me regularly."* (Samoy)

It is ironic that one of the interviewees who had moved to Turkey to become a football player, complained that he could not even find the time and energy to train, as he always felt exhausted after long hours of work -doing ironing- at a textile factory. The Africans also felt compelled to tolerate the harsh conditions because of their promise to support their families. They were expected to send money back to their countries and save their families from misery.

### **Discrimination and Exploitation at the Workplace**

The Africans interviewed were quite anxious when asked whether they faced any discrimination at the workplace. Even though the interviews were conducted in a safe environment, the Africans were worried that their stories could be heard by co-workers or employers. A common feature of all their accounts was the humiliation experienced in their encounters with co-workers and employers. This is reflected in the attitudes, behaviors, and even in the type of work they are assigned:

*"They pay the white workers better. They also treat them better. For example, everyone finishes work at 8 p.m. The whites leave, but we the blacks have to stay to do extra work such as sweeping the floors."* (Emina, Cameroon, 30 years old)

*"We do the hard work while the whites are given easier jobs. But they are paid better."* (Yasa, Mali, 26 years old)

*“In my workplace, the things blacks and whites use are segregated. For instance, we cannot drink from the same type of glass; we cannot sit in the same area.”*  
(Kanagnte, Ivory Coast, 32 years old)

The discrimination, racism, and economic exploitation of Africans disrupt their emotional well-being. Because of their feeling of responsibility toward their families back home, the burdensome immigration process and experience, their language and adaptation problems, the lack of family support, and integration into a totally new social environment, the majority of asylum seekers experience psychological trauma and extreme stress (Cole, Espin, & Rothblum, 1992). Scientific research suggests that loneliness, isolation, and uncertainty about the future even cause serious mental problems in the first six months following immigration (Fekete, 2001). Women suffer far more distress and face even worse conditions finding and maintaining decent jobs. Because of the common Turkish stereotype of Black women as prostitutes, they need to fight prejudice both in the streets and at the workplace. As the African female interviewees observed, the stereotype justifies the sexual assaults in sex offenders’ minds. Sexual offenders at the workplace are oftentimes employers who expect the women either to serve their sexual needs or to risk dismissal.

*“When I was working at Topkapi, my boss wanted me to fetch him some girls for sex, but I didn’t. So I was dismissed a week later. For those involved in prostitution or this kind of illegitimate sexual relation at work, 90% of them start off with the intention of earning money only, in a normal way. But because of the employers’ insistent harassment and threats of rape, they give up and accept the situation. Otherwise you have to go back to your country or find a way to Europe.”* (Cecile, Cameroon, 39 years old)

Accounts by both male and female interviewees confirmed that women often do not receive payment after months of work until they have had sex with their employers. Cecile, Emina, and Rosine also related sexual and verbal assaults by male co-workers during breaks. Taking these stories and experiences into account, one could infer that the image in Turkish society of African women as prostitutes is actually perpetuated by such practices, which force these vulnerable women into the very positions they have been stereotyped for. In considering solutions to this problem, we need to examine the moral hypocrisy deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of commerce that might be exploiting not only African but also Turkish female workers.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the field research on African asylum seekers in Kumkapı, this article portrays the pressing issues of their employment in the informal economy. The analysis of the data reveals discriminatory and exploitative practices, as well as the sexual abuse of African women.

First of all, because of the human rights violations in this context, the involvement of United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR) and International Human Rights Commission (IHRC) is of utmost importance. The reports based on more detailed data collected in a wider context and including more participants can help raise awareness about the issue faster and more effectively, so that official bodies take permanent steps towards the solution.

Secondly, legal regulations on the asylum seekers' employment should be revised so that neither Turkish citizens nor the asylum seekers are disadvantaged. State control over the employment process and work periods should be exerted to prevent and penalize abuse and exploitation of asylum seekers. Also, the government should recognize the skills and professional backgrounds of the asylum seekers and put them to use. Providing registered employment accordingly can decrease or eliminate their dependency on social bodies, and enable them serve both their own community and the host country. For vulnerable groups such as the widowed women and orphaned children, skills training in various subjects such as sewing can be useful to make them self-sufficient, financially secure and more confident (Martin, 1992). For this purpose, non-governmental organizations, churches, mosques and other local organizations can support the education and training (Dedeoğlu & Gökmen, 2011; Schuster, 2004), report asylum seekers' progress and needs directly to the government, engage employers through diversity policies and monitor the results (OECD, 2014).

Another pressing issue is the stereotype of African women as prostitutes which further victimizes them at the workplace. Intelligence reports gathered from African women and other workers, regular checks, and close surveillance of the workplaces could prevent physical and sexual assaults. At societal level, such stereotypes and discriminations can be challenged, provided that the state launches and runs vigorous campaigns for informing people about the plight of the asylum seekers.

Finally, the interviewees expressed their fear of the police and their lack of trust in the justice system, assuming that Turkish citizens would always be supported. Therefore, police officers should provide asylum seekers with essential information about their rights and ensure that they feel free to visit any police station if they are mistreated. Asylum seekers should be allowed to create their own organizations to foster direct and constructive dialogue between their community and the state via Turkish-speaking representatives (Sığınmacılar ve Göçmenlerle Dayanışma Derneği [SGDD], 2011).

All in all, the findings of this research demonstrate the need for further research on the employment of different types of immigrants in a wide range of sectors and contexts.

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