

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Turkish Single-Mother Families in Germany: Support Systems and Acculturation Orientations*

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Abstract

Turkish diaspora families in Europe maintain strong family structures and intergenerational ties, which facilitate the transmission of cultural values to future generations. However, they are not immune to the broader transformations and challenges reshaping family life worldwide. This study aims to examine the impact of family transformation on the Turkish diaspora in Germany, with a particular focus on single-mother households. Based on qualitative interviews with fifteen Turkish immigrant women who became single parents due to divorce, the study identifies the key challenges and needs of these families and analyzes the support systems they engage with to address them. Findings show that single mothers primarily require guidance, housing, and educational support for their children. They initially rely on immediate social networks and later on Turkish community networks and associations, yet this process often produces feelings of exclusion and unmet expectations. In contrast, German institutions and society are evaluated more positively due to their respect for individual boundaries and the support they provide. These experiences play an important role in shaping women's acculturation orientations in child-rearing practices.

Keywords

Turkish diaspora, Germany, immigrant women, single-mother family, acculturation orientations.

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Almanya'daki Türk Tek Anneli Aileler: Destek Sistemleri ve Kültürleşme Oryantasyonları*

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Öz

Avrupa'daki Türk diasporası aileleri, güçlü aile yapıları ve kuşaklar arası bağları sayesinde kültürel değerlerin gelecek nesillere aktarımını kolaylaştırmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, bu aileler dünya genelinde aile yaşamını yeniden şekillendiren dönüşümler ve beraberinde gelen zorluklardan muaf değildir. Bu çalışma, özellikle tek anneli ailelere odaklanarak Almanya'daki Türk kökenli ailelerde yaşanan dönüşümün yansımalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Boşanma sonrası tek ebeveyn olan on beş Türk göçmen kadınla gerçekleştirilen nitel görüşmelere dayanan araştırma, bu ailelerin temel ihtiyaç ve zorluk alanlarını belirlemekte ve başvurulacak destek sistemlerini analiz etmektedir. Bulgular, tek annelerin öncelikle rehberlik, barınma ve çocukları için eğitim desteğine ihtiyaç duyduklarını göstermektedir. Kadınlar bu ihtiyaçları karşılamak için önce yakın sosyal ağlarına, ardından Türk topluluk ağları ve derneklerine başvurmaktadır. Ancak bu süreç çoğu zaman dışlanma duygusu ve beklentilerin karşılanmamasıyla sonuçlanmaktadır. Buna karşılık, Alman kurumları ve toplumu, bireysel sınırlara gösterdikleri saygı ve sağladıkları destekler nedeniyle daha olumlu değerlendirilmektedir. Bu deneyimler, kadınların çocuk yetiştirme pratiklerinde benimsedikleri kültürel uyum oryantasyonlarının şekillenmesinde önemli rol oynamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Türk diasporası, Almanya, göçmen kadın, tek anneli aile, kültürleşme oryantasyonu.

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Introduction

Recent diaspora policies of the Republic of Türkiye have been principally directed toward consolidating Turkish communities abroad through the preservation of their culture and identity. These efforts correspond to the expectations of Turkish populations, most notably in Germany, to support the preservation of their language and traditions and to ensure their intergenerational transmission. Families remain the foundational unit of social life and cultural transmission (Baykara-Krumme 22), as reflected in the growing emphasis on family-oriented social services that have constituted the core of diaspora support throughout the past decade. These services cover diverse initiatives, including the activities of the Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), student scholarships, pre-school language programmes, and the establishment of attaché offices by the Ministry of Family and Social Services (Adar 14).

The role of the family in the diaspora becomes especially evident in the marital patterns of Turkish communities in Germany, where, despite over six decades of migration history, many families still favour spouses from Türkiye for their children. Early studies linked this tendency to the first generation's aspirations of eventual return, whereas later generations – though born and raised in Germany and with no intention of repatriation – have maintained the practice to a lesser extent. This continuity has been attributed to several factors: the perceived lack of suitable partners in the host society (Huschek et al. 245), family concerns about preserving values such as honour and dignity, and assumptions that women from Türkiye, due to their traditional upbringing, would more readily accept unpaid domestic roles (Erten 34; Atila-Demir 129; Bayraktar 15). Recent studies also reveal more instrumental motivations, as some families arrange marriages as a means of controlling sons who exhibit problematic behaviours such as addiction or infidelity (Taş and Subaşı 57). Despite evolving dynamics, the underlying objective of preserving cultural traditions and reinforcing ethnic identity across generations has remained a recurrent theme (Huschek et al. 245; Liversage 434; Timmerman 593).

Although marriage migration continues to constitute a prominent channel for cultural transmission, it simultaneously imposes considerable challenges on women. These vulnerabilities are especially pronounced among Turkish

marriage migrant women in Germany (Nauck 481; Atila-Demir 178; Zielke-Nadkarni 171). In many cases, marriage results in profound feelings of loneliness, arising from the physical separation from one's family in Türkiye as well as the scarcity of opportunities to form new social ties in the host country.

In this context, the prevailing family-centred structure of Turkish migrant communities frequently functions as a mechanism of cultural preservation, sustained through close-knit and inward-oriented social networks. While this structure fosters continuity of cultural values, it also exacerbates the risk of social isolation for those who remain on the margins of these networks for various reasons.

For women who decide to divorce, this structure often becomes a source of heightened vulnerability, as leaving a marriage may transform temporary hardship into long-term structural disadvantage. In addition to the elevated risk of poverty, divorced women are often subjected to stigmatisation and marginalisation, which further erodes the already fragile support systems available to them.

Turkish-origin families in Germany have lower divorce rates compared to the German majority population, and available data indicate that these rates have remained relatively stable over time. However, official statistics provide only a partial understanding of family stability and dissolution, as they do not include data on divorces involving individuals of Turkish descent who have acquired German citizenship (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis]). Furthermore, the prevalence of protracted legal procedures and enduring cultural stigmas surrounding divorce indicate that separation is often perceived as a measure of last resort, even in families whose relational and social functions have substantially eroded (Atila-Demir 87; Duman 25). Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of the family institution within the diaspora requires an analytical perspective that transcends official statistics or commonly held assumptions regarding the family's role in the community.

In this respect, single-mother families represent a particularly insightful group through which such processes can be examined, as migrant single-mother households in the country are known to be disproportionately affected by

poverty and related risks (Maciejewski and Harder 20). A comprehensive understanding of the difficulties encountered by these families is crucial for fostering their well-being and functionality. Furthermore, it allows for a critical assessment of the extent to which Turkish community organisations and associations address their needs. From a broader perspective, these insights contribute to shaping Türkiye's broader diaspora-related objectives.

This study examines the experiences of Turkish women who migrated to Germany through marriage and raise their children as single mothers. Focusing on their journeys from the decision to divorce to their experiences as single mothers, the study explores both the vulnerabilities they face and the extent to which existing support systems meet their needs.

The Importance of Study

To date, only one study (Çoban) appears to have focused specifically on single-mother families within the Turkish community in Germany. Considering single-parent families as part of emerging social risks in Europe and considering both the rapid transformations in family structures and the multiple disadvantages faced by migrant single-parent families, the necessity of further research becomes apparent. By analysing these families across various contexts, such as income, integration, support systems, and coping strategies, this study aims to address this gap in the literature.

The study further examines the acculturation processes of Turkish children raised in single-mother families, highlighting the risks that arise when intergenerational ties weaken and social support systems prove insufficient. In doing so, it provides valuable insights for policymakers, social service providers, and educators concerned with the well-being and the maintenance of functionality of these families.

Study Aims and Questions

This study pursues two primary objectives. The first is to identify the immediate needs of single-mother women, particularly during and in the aftermath of the divorce, and to examine the systems with which they engage to address these needs. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of these systems based on the women's experiences. Accordingly, the study focuses on the following research questions: (1) *What are the fundamental needs of Turkish migrant women in Germany during and after divorce?* (2)

Which systems do they interact with to meet these needs? (3) What is the capacity of these systems to provide adequate support?

Many families regard the marriage of their sons to Turkish women as a strategy for preserving culture, intended to ensure the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. However, the dissolution of the family unit and the absence of the paternal figure in children's lives fundamentally contradict this traditional approach and may disrupt the intended continuity of cultural transmission. Building on this idea, the second objective of the study is to analyse the capacity for cultural transmission to children within single-mother immigrant families. Drawing on women's narratives, the study outlined the following questions in relation to this aim: (4) *What cultural transmission tendencies emerge among single-mother Turkish families in Germany?* and (5) *What factors shape these cultural transmission tendencies?*

Selection of Participants

The participants of this study were selected through purposive sampling. Participants were deemed eligible if they had been born in Türkiye, thereby being classified as first-generation migrants (Olczyk et al., 4), and had migrated to Germany through marriage, subsequently divorced, and were currently residing in Germany as single mothers. No restrictions were imposed in relation to participants' levels of education, employment or income. Similarly, neither the age of the participants nor the time elapsed since their divorce were considered exclusion criteria. This approach was adopted intentionally to explore potential variations in women's experiences across different migration cohorts and historical contexts.

Participant recruitment relied on several outreach strategies. A Turkish mosque community and a social pedagogue of Turkish origin working at a German non-governmental organisation (NGO) were informed about the study and asked to disseminate information about the study to potential participants. Furthermore, an announcement was posted in a local city Facebook group. A communication plan was established to facilitate direct contact between prospective participants and the researchers.

The final sample included fifteen women who shared several key characteristics: low income, lack of German language proficiency at the

time of migration, and having at least one child under the age of 18 at the time of divorce.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of Üsküdar University (Decision No: 61351342/020-122, 31 May 2024). The study was carried out in August 2024. Participation was entirely voluntary. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave informed consent prior to data collection, including their approval for the audio recording of the interviews. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants’ privacy, pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) were assigned to participants and are used throughout the text.

Table 1
 Information on Participants

	Marriage Age	Education	Children	Children’s Age at Divorce	Years of Single-Motherhood	Sources of Income
P1	24	College degree	2	15, 13	18 years	Full-time job
P2	19	High school	3	8, 6, 1	6 years	Part-time job Social benefits
P3	27	Vocational school	2	11, 9	9 years	Part-time job Social benefits
P4	24	High school	4	15, 9, 11, 7	27 years	Social benefits
P5	27	Elementary school	2	11, 4	10 years	Social benefits
P6	16	Secondary school	1	1	20 years	Full-time job
P7	28	High school	1	4	8 years	Part-time job Social benefits
P8	26	Vocational school	2	5, 3	3 years	Social benefits
P9	17	Secondary school	2	16, 13	6 years	Part-time job Social benefits

P10	16	Secondary school	3	17, 16, 6	18 years	Part-time job
P11	25	High school	2	16, 14	3 years	Full-time job
P12	26	Secondary school	2	17, 9	14 years	Social benefits
P13	18	High school	3	12, 8, 7	5 years	Part-time job Social benefits
P14	22	High School	2	17, 15	4 years	Full-time job
P15	22	High school	5	15, 14, 11, 9, 2	6 years	Social benefits

Limitatitons of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it focuses specifically on marriage migrant single mothers, representing a distinct subgroup within the Turkish community in Germany. Second, owing to the qualitative methodology, the findings are based on participants’ subjective experiences and interpretations. Third, the research was conducted in Mannheim, where the specific characteristics and composition of the Turkish community may have influenced the women’s experiences. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to all Turkish single mothers in Germany.

Although children growing up in single-parent families were an important focus of the research, their experiences were addressed indirectly through their mothers’ accounts rather than directly from the children themselves. This poses an additional limitation of the study.

Method

In the view of the sparse extant literature on Turkish single mothers in Germany, a qualitative approach was adopted as the most appropriate means of exploring their lived experiences. This approach provides in-depth insight into how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences (Skinner et al. 165).

A descriptive study design was adopted to examine the challenges these women face in single-parenting, as well as the institutional and informal systems with which they interact. In addition, an interpretive lens was

applied to understand how participants make sense of their circumstances within the wider socio-cultural context.

To enhance the validity of the findings, data triangulation was employed through the inclusion of multiple perspectives. In addition to in-depth interviews with single mothers, informal and semi-structured conversations were conducted with key informants, including social pedagogues of Turkish origin, administrators of Turkish associations, and Turkish diplomatic officials. Informal conversations were also held with women from the Turkish mosque community, particularly following a women's branch meeting. These diverse interactions not only provided essential contextual background but also enabled the cross-check and enrichment of participants' narratives, thereby enhancing the analytical depth and reliability of the study.

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that allows flexibility in adapting questions to the context and the participant's responses. Interview questions were open-ended, non-directive, and formulated in accessible language. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Following each interview, researchers jointly evaluated the conversation, and the findings occasionally influenced the questions asked in subsequent interviews throughout the study.

A sample of fifteen participants was deemed sufficient, as it allowed for a detailed exploration of the women's experiences. The group's shared characteristics such as comparable sociodemographic profiles and similar migratory and familial trajectories, further enhanced the sample's relevance to the study's objectives.

As the interviews progressed, it became evident that participants' experiences were shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including individual circumstances as well as broader social and historical contexts. Given the novelty of the research topic and questions, combined with the richness and complexity of the data, the use of predetermined themes was deemed inappropriate. Accordingly, a dynamic thematic analysis (Ozuem et al 10) was employed to enable a flexible and nuanced exploration of participants' lived experiences, while attending to the influence of contextual factors. Manual coding was employed to promote close familiarity with the data.

Initially, connections between the empirical material and the extant literature were explored. The dataset was subsequently segmented, coded, and categorized into themes. Each code was examined for consistency with both the empirical data and the theoretical framework. In the final phase, themes were interpreted in relation to the study questions, relevant literature, and the researchers’ analytical reflections. Divergent findings were explicitly acknowledged and contextualized.

Findings

The analysis identified two main themes, two sub-themes, and eight categories. The first theme, titled “Initial Needs” explores the most prevalent needs arising in the pre – and post-divorce periods and includes three sub-themes. The second theme, “Interaction with Systems,” examines the various systems with which the women engaged to address their needs as well as their evaluations of these systems’ effectiveness. This theme is divided into two sub-themes based on a systems approach. The first sub-theme, “Micro systems,” focuses on interactions with the women’s families of origin in Türkiye and their former husbands’ families in Germany, and it comprises two sub-themes. The second sub-theme, “Mezzo systems,” covers interactions with the Turkish community, religious groups, associations, and German local community, institutions, and professionals, and includes seven sub-themes.

Table 2
 Thematic Framework

Theme	Subthemes	Categories	Codes
1. Initial Needs Key needs and challenges immediately before and after divorce		Need for Legal and Practical Guidance	- Language barrier - Uncertainty and feeling trapped - Need for supportive guidance
		Need for Safe and Stable Housing	- Domestic violence and housing - Absence of family or friends to offer shelter - Negative impact of housing instability on children
		Need for Children’s Welfare and Academic Success	- Realistic parental awareness of children’s risks - Parental struggles without external support - Mother’s individual effort for children’s education

<p>2. Interaction with Systems Experiences interacting with various social systems and institutions before and after divorce, across micro and mezzo levels.</p>	<p>Micro Systems</p>	<p>Relations with Families of Origin in Türkiye</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hiding marital problems from families in Türkiye - Improving relations after divorce - Support provided by families in Türkiye for children
		<p>Relations with Former In-Laws in Germany</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information withheld by former in-laws - Minimal expectation of support from former in-laws - Unexpected support from sister-in-law
		<p>Experiences of Social Exclusion in the Turkish Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critism, condemnation, exclusion - Bonding with other divorced women - Hiding divorce due to social stigma
		<p>Mezzo Systems</p>	<p>Engagement with Turkish Associations</p>
		<p>Engagement with German Public Institutions and Local Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appreciation for respect of individual privacy - Barriers to accessing mental health services - Challenges in the education system

Initial Needs

The analysis indicated that, with very few exceptions, women experienced multiple needs throughout the pre – and post-divorce periods. By examining these needs, three sub-themes were determined. The first sub-theme “*Need for Legal and Practical Guidance*” highlights women’s need for timely, accessible, and culturally sensitive information and guidance when facing divorce-related decisions. The second sub-theme “*Need for Safe and Stable Housing*” underscores women’s urgent need for safe accommodation as a prerequisite for leaving abusive marriages and ensuring their and their children’s security. The third sub-theme “*Need for Children’s Welfare and Academic Success*” reflects women’s concerns about their children’s well-being, education, and long-term prospects following divorce.

Need for Legal and Practical Guidance

The most commonly reported problem among the participants, especially during the divorce procedures, was the language barrier and their insufficient knowledge of the legal system, institutions and processes. Accordingly, their initial need was for individuals or organisations that could assist them in overcoming the language barrier and their limited knowledge of legal matters.

P5 had to navigate the divorce process and its aftermath on her own. She recalled the numerous challenges she encountered after deciding to divorce, especially the uncertainty and lack of guidance in managing the legal and practical aspects of leaving an abusive marriage. She explained that she had been unable to leave the house for years because she did not know where to go, did not speak the language, and had no financial resources, which left her feeling entirely trapped. When she eventually sought help, she reached out to Turkish associations and connected with people, contacted Turkish groups on social media, and appealed to Turkish members of the local council and politicians. However, she remained uncertain about where she could actually turn for support, remarking; *“All I was told was, ‘Go here, go there.’ Where could I go?”*

P4 reported that it took her four years to obtain the necessary information about the divorce process. Given the limited technology of the 1990s and her extraordinary efforts to conceal the divorce decision from the Turkish community, this was a considerable amount of time. In the current age of the internet and artificial intelligence, accessing information on any subject appears relatively effortless, which could imply a declining demand for information and guidance among women in similar circumstances. However, P13’s statements revealed that women’s need for information and guidance at this stage also reflected a deeper need for relational support from individuals perceived as close and capable of offering understanding and empathy in an unfamiliar social context. As P13 stated: *“I could find what I needed to know by searching the internet. In this foreign country, I needed a Turk who would understand me and guide me through all these difficult days.”*

P1, a social pedagogue and single mother, reported that during her extensive work with families, she had encountered many women who were unable to

initiate divorce proceedings due to a lack of legal knowledge. She explained that when these women noticed their former spouses' attempts to mislead and intimidate them, particularly regarding custody, their first step was to seek clear information about the divorce procedures and their legal rights.

Need for Safe and Stable Housing

For women who decided to leave, particularly those subjected to domestic violence, the availability of safe accommodation was the most critical need, as its absence prevented them from implementing their decision. If a restraining order was issued against the husband, these women gained some time to plan their departure from home. However, it was common for men to refuse to leave the house after the restraining order expired, even when they accepted the divorce. In such cases, the level of violence and threats typically increased.

Another group of women without social networks in Germany, such as P6 encountered even greater difficulties in finding accommodation. Her prolonged search for a suitable and safe place for herself and her daughter had a significant impact on their lives. Subjected to violence from the outset of her marriage, she fled the marital home at the age of 18 with her infant daughter and nowhere to go. Following a period of search, she was able to move in with her aunt in Germany. However, some time later, her aunt asked her to leave, claiming that she was setting a bad example for her unmarried daughters. This marked the beginning of a prolonged period of instability, involving frequent relocations and changes in employment for both her and her child.

Need for Children's Welfare and Academic Success

Being an immigrant, being raised in a family characterised by dysfunctional relationship and communication patterns, witnessing parental divorce, lacking access to vital social support networks are each potentially detrimental to children's identity development, mental health and educational success. The women interviewed demonstrated a realistic understanding of the risks faced by their children. However, it was also evident that they frequently had to cope with these challenges in the absence of external support. This struggle was particularly reflected in their narratives concerning their children's education, which emerged as a significant area of concern. A shared

objective among all participants was to protect their children's educational success from the adverse experiences they had endured. Nevertheless, the majority reported that their children's academic performance remained at a low or average level.

Almost all of the women reported that their ex-husbands and former in-laws had severed ties with their children following the divorce. In response to these circumstances, two primary objectives consistently emerged in the women's narratives: protecting their children from social isolation and fostering both a sense of belonging and the development of a stable social identity. Frequent references to goals such as ensuring their children's proficiency in Turkish and encouraging familiarity with their cultural and religious heritage can be interpreted as closely aligned with these objectives.

Interaction with Systems

The micro and mezzo systems within which women sought support before and after divorce shaped their experiences in complex and interconnected ways. The micro-level systems include women's relationships with their families of origin in Türkiye as well as with their former husbands' families in Germany. The mezzo-level systems encompass both community-based resources, such as the Turkish community, associations, and mosques and the broader structures of German society, including professionals, institutions, and societal attitudes. An analysis of these systems illuminates the multi-layered support networks, or the absence thereof, that shaped the women's capacity to cope with the challenges they encountered during and after divorce.

Micro Systems: Relations with Families of Origin in Türkiye

Although most women reported positive relationships with their families of origin prior to marriage, these ties often weakened following marriage. For some, the weakening of ties was attributable to the urgency of establishing a new life in a distant geographical location, while for others, it resulted from restrictions and prohibitions imposed by their husbands. In most instances, family visits were infrequent, largely due to the socio-economic constraints of the families.

The vast majority of women, apprehensive about potential reactions including criticism or attempts to dissuade them from divorcing, concealed

problems within their marriages from their families for years. For some, these apprehensions materialised. When P5 eventually disclosed to her family that she had been deceived and subjected to violence for years and now intended to seek a divorce, she faced opposition from her brother, who insisted that divorce was a sin. Similarly, when P4 returned to her father's home in Türkiye with her four children after deciding to divorce, she encountered such disapproval from her family that she chose to return to Germany within a few months.

Nevertheless, many women reported improved communication and more frequent visits to Türkiye following their divorces. This rekindling of ties restored the involvement of families of origin in the lives of both the women and their children. For instance, P1 stated that it would not have been possible for her to cope with the divorce process without the emotional support of her family. P2 described how her teenage son, who exhibits defiant behaviour, becomes calm only after video chats with his grandfather in Türkiye. Likewise, P3 attributed her son's emotional resilience and notable academic and athletic achievements to the strong relationships he developed with his uncles and cousins.

Micro Systems: Relations with Former In-Laws in Germany

While most of marriages had been arranged through acquaintances and within a short timeframe, the study revealed that former in-laws often concealed important information from the women both before and after the marriage, which likely had a detrimental impact on the marital relationship. This was the case for P2 and P13, who discovered only after marrying that their husbands were drug addicts. Despite such negative experiences, most women did not hold entirely unfavorable views of their former in-laws. Some described their ex-mothers-in-law as 'well-intentioned but passive women', noting that although they disapproved of their sons' behaviour, they were unable to intervene effectively. For instance, P6 reported that her close relationship with her mother-in-law did not translate into expectations of support, since the latter was herself exposed to violence perpetrated by both her husband and son.

In several accounts, former sisters-in-law emerged as unexpected sources of support. P3, for instance, was compelled to work full-time and without

pay in her husband's family business from the second day of her arrival in Germany. Socially isolated, denied language education, and subjected to severe partner violence, she recalled her former sister-in-law's words as the only support she received from the family: *'Please put everything in this shop (a jewelry) in a bag and leave. Don't put up with the evil this man has done to you any longer.'*

Similarly, when P2 fled her husband's violence, her sister-in-law provided shelter for her and her children, assisted her in finding a Turkish-speaking lawyer, and persuaded her to remain in Germany for the sake of her children. Likewise, when P1 left her abusive home, her sister-in-law accommodated her and her children in, on the condition that she would not return to her brother. For P1, who had left home with no financial resources, this refuge signified the beginning of her journey toward independence, during which she obtained a driving licence, found employment, and eventually reached a point where she achieved self-sufficiency.

In most cases, however, women's relationships with their former in-laws were severed after divorce, as the in-laws sought to preserve their ties with their sons or brothers. The former in-laws' contact with their grandchildren also significantly diminished, if not ceased entirely. Notably, in all cases where divorce was prompted by domestic violence, the children refused to maintain any relationship with their fathers or paternal relatives.

Mezzo Systems: Experiences of Social Exclusion in the Turkish Community

Women who migrated to Germany through marriage became integrated into their husbands' social networks; however, due to limited language proficiency and imposed restrictions, their social interactions largely remained confined to these circles. Even if these relationships had remained positive throughout the marriage, they tended to deteriorate once the decision to divorce was made. From that point onward, the women were often subjected to criticism, condemnation, and exclusion by individuals with whom they had previously maintained close ties. P15 described her experience as: *"The people I lived with for years, who used to call me 'yenge' (sister-in-law), suddenly stopped greeting me altogether."*

P13 expressed that a trend had emerged in recent years in response to the isolation experienced by women. She observed that many women perceived

themselves as socially excluded, leading them to form friendships primarily with other divorced Turkish women. As P13 remarked, this created a negative perception within the community, suggesting that women were encouraging each other to seek divorce even in otherwise stable marriages. It can be argued that her remarks are indicative of a broader reality, as community leaders and officials consulted during the study likewise asserted that women's divorces are attributed more to peer influence than to serious problems such as violence, infidelity, or harassment.

Mezzo Systems: Engagement with Turkish Associations

Women reported experiencing exclusion and criticism from Turkish associations after divorce, particularly when seeking employment or accommodation. P7 and P11 stated that they had been volunteering in Turkish associations for years, yet they received no support from their fellow volunteers when they went through divorce. P7 described experiencing social exclusion when seeking help, observing that others appeared to avoid her whenever she expressed a need. She added that even her request to post a notice on the bulletin board in search of housing had been denied.

For religious Turkish women, community-level relationships are largely centred around the mosque. Although these relationships were highly valued, it became evident that the women did not derive tangible benefits from the mosque community and the services it provided. P2 stated, "*Our community lacks the capacity to provide comprehensive support. We gather, we eat, and we talk about religious issues, but we cannot even talk about our problems, let alone solve them. There is no one to listen to us.*" P12 conveyed a particularly pessimistic view, explaining that she has deliberately concealed her divorce from the mosque congregation she had participated for years. This decision was motivated by her observation of the negative attitudes towards divorced women within the congregation. According to her, many other women likewise concealed their divorce to avoid stigmatization. Negative experiences with religious associations were also conveyed during the interviews. When P5 decided to abscond with her children, she contacted a Turkish religious organisation that provided boarding education for children during the summer months. She explained that she had expressed her need to save herself and rebuild her life. She intended to take her daughter with her; however, she considered it unsuitable for her son

to stay in a women's shelter, and therefore, she asked if he could stay with the other children for a month or two. However, she was informed that her son's grades were too low for him to be admitted into their course. "*On that difficult day, they turned me away for that reason. I had to take my son to the women's shelter.*"

To protect children from social isolation and to develop a sense of belonging, women often referred their children to Turkish associations, mosques, or religious communities.

Regardless of their lifestyles or worldviews, almost all the women who sent their children to Turkish language courses organised by associations agreed that the education provided in these settings was shaped by particular ideological agendas rather than focusing on language and cultural learning. P8, for instance, noted that regardless of the association she attended, the instructors attempted to impose their own ideological views rather than teaching Turkish language and culture. Similarly, P3 reported that her child, enrolled with sole purpose of learning Turkish, began chanting slogans and singing hymns within weeks, an outcome she regarded as entirely unacceptable.

With the exception of P3 and P10, both of whom reported having lost their religious beliefs due to the negative experiences they endured during their marriages and thus leading them to oppose religious education for their children, the religious education of children emerged as a matter of particular importance for most women. Although some women did not actively engage in religious practice themselves, they nonetheless expressed a desire for their children to learn about religion. In this context, children were typically enrolled in courses provided by Turkish mosques or Turkish community organisations.

The majority of women expressed positive views and feelings about the religious education their children received, particularly in mosques affiliated with institutional structures such as DITIB. However, serious concerns were raised when children attended religious groups operating outside formal institutional frameworks. P4 and P15 reported that they had sent their children to courses organised by different congregations motivated by the belief, '*they should learn to pray and read the Qur'an wherever they could.*'

However, the outcomes did not correspond with their initial expectations. P15 indicated that she chose to distance her children from religious-based organisations as her trust in such institutions had diminished in the aftermath of FETO (Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization)-related developments. P10's experience in this regard was among the most negative. Contrary to her preference, her son attended a Turkish mosque. However, following some negative experiences there, he distanced himself from the Turkish community and began attending a mosque affiliated with a different immigrant group. Over time, he became involved with radical groups, secretly left for Afghanistan, and lived there for years. During this time, P10 received no communication from her son. He has since returned, and they are now working to rebuild their relationship.

The lack of response from the Turkish community to women's requests for assistance in raising their children alone had severe consequences. P5 explained that, following her divorce, she sought support from both her own family and her ex-husband's family, but received none. She also turned to associations and mosques, appealing to anyone or any institution that might help her son struggling with profound loneliness. However, none of these efforts yielded results. Over time, her son became involved with troubled peers, experienced difficulties at school, and eventually dropped out. According to P5, he began using drugs during this period and continues to do so.

As a result of these experiences, some women developed negative attitudes toward the Turkish community and its associations. When asked whether she had received support from any Turkish organisation during the divorce process, P6 responded that, as long as the German state acted as her guarantor, she felt no need for additional support and would appeal to state institutions in case of emergency. Similarly, some women who had spent most of their lives in Türkiye appeared to have lost their sense of belonging to the Turkish community. P14, for instance, expressed feeling alienated from her own people due to the lack of support she experienced during her most difficult times.

Moreover, it appeared that several women had lost the motivation to raise their children with a specific cultural orientation. When asked about the cultural identity they wished to pass on to their children, many conveyed

indifferences, noting that the adaptation of either Turkish or German culture was of no particular significance to them. Others gave more explicit negative responses, such as P6: “*Why should I bring up my child according to the culture of people who leave me alone and stigmatise me because I am divorced?*”

Mezzo Systems: Engagement with German Public Institutions and Local Community

The majority of women expressed satisfaction with their current lives in Germany, citing the ease of living, access to social benefits, and the absence of restrictions on individual freedom as key factors. P7 noted that, unlike Turks, Germans appeared unconcerned with her marital status and refrained from judgement, shaming, or gossiping. Similarly, P14 explained that her old friends withdrew from her during the divorce process, causing considerable distress through their insinuations and behavior, whereas the support she needed came from her German colleagues. Overall, most women reported having no intention of returning to Türkiye.

Women’s engagement with German institutions and systems varied based on their individual experiences. Those who received services from professionals working with disadvantaged groups, such as Jugendamt staff, shelter workers, and social workers, generally expressed satisfaction. However, women who had been subjected to violence often continued to feel unsafe even after reporting incidents to the police and judicial authorities. P2 reported that she had filed twenty-seven criminal complaints against her ex-husband and restraining orders had been issued five times. Despite reporting to the police that he had threatened to kill her, she was informed that no measures could be taken. She further noted, based on conversations with women who are victims of violence in Türkiye and remarked that their situation in Germany was not significantly better than that of women in Türkiye.

Reflecting common experiences among those enduring contentious marriages and difficult divorces, many women utilized mental healthcare services. However, the majority reported being unable to fully benefit from these services due to two main reasons: language barriers and differing attitudes between themselves and professionals, especially regarding gender roles within marriage and family values. This divergence limited access to

services and revealed a significant shortcoming in professional interventions that claim to adopt a multicultural perspective.

The German education system has faced criticism for its inflexibility in addressing even minor problems among migrant children. For example, P6's daughter was expelled from every kindergarten she attended on account of behavioral problems and has been receiving psychiatric treatment since age six, including periods of inpatient care. She believes her daughter, who experienced frequent relocations during critical developmental years as her mother sought work and housing, faced disadvantages that were largely ignored. *"If there had been a German child in my daughter's place, I am sure things would have turned out differently."*

Only a few women described their children as "successful students," and in these cases, it became evident that such achievements were largely attributable to the women's extraordinary individual efforts. Following the divorce, P4 focused on integrating her children into German society, with a special emphasis on education, noting that she had devoted her entire life to securing their success. She explained that upon realizing her children were becoming increasingly difficult to manage while she was working, she decided to leave her job. She further noted that when her sons were in high school, she took them to university events to encourage them to pursue higher education and to help them build friendships within the university environment. P4 also described her awareness of the challenges immigrant children encounter and her persistent efforts to overcome them. She explained that, recognizing the propensity for immigrant children to be marginalized at the first indication of difficulty, she persistently on behalf of her children at school. To strengthen her position with school authorities, she even joined The Greens. P4 recalled that one day her daughter's teacher praised her German language skills, implicitly treating her as a foreigner with unexpectedly good language ability. *"I told her, 'My daughter is not a foreigner. She was born here, she will live here, and will be part of this society.'*

P3 and P12 described their strategy for supporting their children's academic success as maintaining a parental support system by fostering relationships with other parents in the classroom. P3 noted that her son's enrolment in a school with a substantial migrant student population proved advantageous in this regard.

Some accounts included positive examples of teachers who provided additional German language instruction or assumed additional responsibilities outside school hours to enhance children's academic performance. Such well-intentioned individual efforts partially mitigate the disappointment caused by the education system's non-inclusive approach toward immigrant children.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study support previous literature suggesting that marriage migrant women tend to have low educational attainment (Liversage 438; Taş 223-226). The majority of participants held secondary or high school diplomas, and several were elementary school graduates. Among the participants, only one held a university degree from Türkiye, which did not benefit her professionally due to lack of language skills and diploma recognition. Consequently, she was compelled to work in menial jobs that required no formal education. This finding is also consistent with existing literature on the status-reducing effects of international migration on women (Piper 7).

The employment data reflects both systemic barriers and childcare constraints. While four women were employed full-time, six worked part-time and five were unemployed. The absence of informal childcare was identified as a key barrier to workforce participation, particularly for women with young children, thereby confirming earlier observations by Milewski et al. (157).

Despite widespread reports of low emotional support and even abuse from former in-laws, participants' views were nuanced and did not uniformly condemn their ex-in-laws, unlike findings in similar studies (Erten 43; Atila-Demir 159). While former mothers-in-law, often from the first-generation, generally offered no support, several women received crucial emotional or practical help from sisters-in-law who belonged to the second or third generation. This corresponds with research indicating that immigrant women tend to become more open to social change over generations (Buz and Schönberg 34; Rittersberger-Tılıç and Güllüpinar 43).

The social relationships of migrant women, particularly those from countries where traditional gender roles prevail, are usually restricted to their husbands'

and in-laws' social circles. This can lead to a lack of social support, which is an important problem since being excluded from this network through divorce can result in complete isolation (Erez 26; Nauck 481). It is widely recognised that women in this study often encounter negative reactions from their social networks following a decision to divorce. In fact, these social networks are characterised not merely by the absence of support not only lack support, but by active exclusion of women.

In line with the literature (Erten 38; Arıdırı 101), the study's findings reveal that women's primary needs during the divorce process centered on overcoming language barriers through access to information and guidance. They further expressed multifaceted concerns regarding their children's well-being and future. In attempting to address these concerns, some initially turned to the Turkish community and its associations. However, the support provided often proved inadequate, as these associations appeared to lack both the understanding and the institutional capacity to respond effectively.

The women's statements regarding the absence of sufficient support from Turkish associations were unexpected, given the large number of Turkish associations in Germany, many of which claim to be active in the field of social services (Adıgüzel 15). These findings of the study can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, this may indicate a lack of awareness within these associations concerning family-oriented problems and emerging social risks. Secondly, it may be posited that the services available to address these issues are not yet sufficiently comprehensive.

The perceived ideological bias of Turkish language and culture classes further reduced trust in associations, echoing Yağmur's (239) concern regarding the ideological capture of diaspora language education efforts.

Research indicates that immigrants relocating to countries with different dominant religions often turn to places of worship to preserve their cultural and religious identity and to cultivate a sense of belonging. In contexts marked by discrimination, particularly within official organizations, religious communities frequently serve as a refuge and source of support (Erez 32). Turkish mosques are significant spaces for many women of Turkish origin in Germany to sustain social relationships. Many participants reported that, despite receiving limited support, they continued to attend mosque

gatherings and benefited emotionally from these activities. However, the findings of this study indicate that mosque communities fail to adequately address the broader challenges faced by these women. As Burman, Smailes, and Chantler (344) argue, both Muslim and Jewish cultures typically avoid external involvement in family issues. This cultural norm makes it particularly difficult to address the problems of women experiencing domestic violence. Nonetheless, due to the scope, aims, and limitations of this study, no definitive conclusions can be drawn in this regard. Further research is needed to explore this issue in greater depth.

Women's perceptions of their interaction with German society varied depending on the level of engagement. In general, German society at the local level was viewed positively, particularly its non-discriminatory attitude toward divorced women. Younger women, in particular, expressed more favorable views. Interestingly, even women with limited contact with German society expressed satisfaction, which may reflect their positive experiences with social welfare institutions. More broadly, these accounts suggest that the women valued German society's respect for individual boundaries and privacy in interpersonal relationships, especially when juxtaposed with their feelings of disappointment regarding Turkish societal norms.

Women generally expressed positive views about German professionals working with disadvantaged groups. However, their assessments of various institutions and the professionals within them varied significantly. Consistent with existing research on migrant women, the most critical feedback, especially from those who experienced domestic violence, was directed toward the police and legal professionals. Women generally reported no difficulty in accessing mental health services; however, due to language barriers and cultural differences, they were often unable to make effective use of these services, a pattern also observed in previous studies (Bhuyan and Senturia 899; Guruge et al. 29).

The women interviewed demonstrated a strong commitment to securing their children's future, particularly with regard to education. Nonetheless, the women's accounts of their children's limited academic achievement resonate with finding in the extant literature concerning both single-parent families and immigrant children (Dronkers and Kalmijn, 11). Those who assessed their children's school performance positively were women who

had acquired sufficient German language skills during their residence in Germany. This ability enabled them to actively participate in educational processes and communicate effectively with the various stakeholders involved. A prominent theme in their narratives is the proactive strategies they employed to protect their children from potential discriminatory practices within the school system. These strategies varied widely, ranging from actively engaging with school administration, teachers, and other parents to joining political parties to strengthen their position.

For minority adolescents, a strong sense of ethnic identity plays a vital role in healthy self-development (Phinney 170). In its absence, acculturation stress and cultural conflict may result in behavioural problems and psychological distress, including depression (Buckingham and Brodsky 144). The socio-economic status of immigrant children's families, language barriers and the relative weakness of their social networks combine to place immigrant children at a situation of disadvantage within the broader social structure (Dežan and Sedmak 7). Conversely, the presence of familial harmony, support and affectionate relationships with parents and strong kinship ties has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on the mental health of immigrant children (Vitoroulis et al. 569; Nauck and Niephaus 294). Drawing on this information, it may be inferred that the strong bonds and intergenerational relationships that characterise Turkish families will be a source of resilience for children. However, before reaching this conclusion, several points warrant consideration.

First of all, the beneficial effects of intergenerational family ties and social capital, which are particularly pertinent for immigrant children, are diminished when children are raised in single-parent families (De Feyter and Winsler 447). As in Dronkers and Kalmijn's study (2), this research also found that, among Turkish families in Germany, divorce significantly disrupts the relationship between the child and both the father and the paternal side of the family. As Steinbach (1118) also points out, this situation significantly undermines the process of cultural transmission to children. In such cases, the mother, as the primary agent of cultural socialisation, assumes a central role in shaping the child's ethnic identity and overall development. Therefore, these women may be regarded as the main actors in the transmission of culture to children.

In this study, while many women articulated an aspiration for their children to learn the Turkish language and culture, this was not their sole concern. Contrary to Buckingham and Brodsky's (156) findings, the women interviewed did not convey concern regarding their children's acquisition of the host country's language or adaptation to its culture. Moreover, this study challenges Erten's (190) claim that mothers adopt a culturally protective stance and differs from Arıdırı's (71) study by revealing no strong intention among participants to expose their children intensively to Turkish cultural practices.

Some studies indicate that integration is more likely to occur successfully in single-parent families, particularly due to the specific characteristics of the mother (Dronkers and Kalmijn 11). The participants in this study were very keen for their children to become part of German society.

Some women in this study underscored their intention to raise their children with "basic human values" rather than instilling the specific characteristics of either Turkish or German culture. These women can be placed within the "individualist" category of the interactive acculturation model (Bourhis et al., 378). A study has shown that an individualist orientation is negatively associated with general well-being and the quality of social relationships (Mera-Lemp et al., 238). In this study, this orientation appears to stem from limited interaction with the host society and a pronounced sense of disappointment with the Turkish community in Germany, both of which contribute to feelings of social isolation.

A striking finding regarding women's interaction with the Turkish community is the persistence of negative attitudes toward divorced women over time. The reactions of criticism, exclusion, and neglect described by a divorced woman in the 1990s were also reported by participants in the 2020s. In addition to the inadequate support, these persistent negative responses seemed to significantly weaken women's sense of belonging to the Turkish community. Despite affirming their Turkish identity and expressing satisfaction with it, the women reported feeling a sense of alienation from the broader Turkish community in Germany. This sense of disconnection emerged as another key reason why many women were less inclined to transmit Turkish cultural values to their children.

A decline in cultural attachment among first-generation mothers, however, does not necessarily extend to their children. Studies by Gayırnal (101) and Özdemir (41) show that perceptions of collective identity tend to increase in the second generation, often accompanied by a renewed emphasis on Turkishness and religion. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to assume that a weakened sense of cultural belonging among mothers directly results in similar outcomes for their children.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the children of the women in this study differ from the second-generation immigrants discussed in the aforementioned studies. In contrast to the second-generation cases analysed in other studies, the children raised in single-parent households often lack strong intergenerational relationships and established social networks, both of which are key factors in the formation of a stable ethnic identity.

Suggestions

The findings of this study indicate that due to disrupted intergenerational relationships in Germany and the absence of adequate community support, children's sole connection to Türkiye and Turkish culture is mediated through their mother's extended family. If these ties are weakened or severed, the children's cultural and emotional connection link to Türkiye is likely to be severed. Several of the women interviewed explicitly expressed concern about this possibility.

These factors place specific responsibilities on Turkish associations and organizations to prevent cultural disconnection among children. Foremost among these responsibilities is imperative to restructure existing services through a needs-based approach that prioritizes accessibility, inclusivity, and effectiveness, while remaining independent of ideological biases.

Moreover, it is imperative for organizations to actively address and challenge negative perceptions surrounding divorce and single motherhood within the Turkish community. Institutions and associations are advised to develop strategies aimed at confronting prevalent stigmatization, promoting more inclusive attitudes, and implementing protective measures to safeguard children of divorced families from social marginalization and identity confusion.

Expanding the number of attaché offices affiliated with the Ministry of Family and Social Services is regarded as beneficial for accurately identifying the needs and challenges of disadvantaged groups in the diaspora, enhancing their empowerment, facilitating access to resources, and serving as an intermediary between these groups and civil society.

Implications for Further Studies

Given their current position in the labour market, employment status, and income levels, immigrant single mothers face considerable long-term risks. Foremost among these is the heightened likelihood of experiencing poverty in old age. Another potential challenge is the need for care later in life. While informal care is often viewed as the most viable option for elderly immigrant women with limited financial resources, this may not be feasible for the participants in this study due to strained relationships with their children and generally weak social support networks. Future research should investigate these vulnerabilities among Turkish migrant women with similar demographic and socioeconomic profiles.

Contribution Rate Statement

The authors' contribution rates in this study are equal.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study. There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

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