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The Place of Syrian Migrants in the Labor Market and Their Socio-Economic Status in Türkiye

Türkiye’deki Suriyeli Göçmenlerin İşgücü Piyasasındaki Yeri ve Sosyoekonomik Durumu

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ABSTRACT

Migration has both positive and negative effects on local population and on migrants themselves. “Working life relations” and “economic issues”, which are at the center of modern life, have an important place in the social adaptation and integration of migrants. In this study, the issue of “migration” and “immigration” has been evaluated as a multidimensional phenomenon based on the relevant literature. Within the context of the social potential of Syrian refugees along with economic elements, the role of immigrant entrepreneurship in labor markets, and the social adaptation and integration process have been interrogated in the article. According to the findings of long-term and comprehensive research reports, it has been seen that “migration” is a driving factor of social development; especially migration for economic reasons can make significant contributions to the destination countries destination countries for economic reasons. In many countries, international migrant workers constitute an important part of the labor force. Labor migration for employment both within and between countries is becoming increasingly dynamic. International migrant workers make up 4.9% of the global labor force. Inequality in the international migrant worker population persists, both in terms of gender and country of origin. Statistical data show that women migrant workers face more economic and social barriers in the country of origin. The problem of unemployment in labor markets in Türkiye has a historical background. However, with the mass migration of Syrians since 2011, the “unemployment problem” has been debated more and voiced by the actors of the political sphere. In this study, as the data in the relevant literature reveal, it has been determined that the majority of Syrian asylum-seekers in Türkiye are low-income earners; and that various injustices are experienced through their labor; that most of them are involved in unregistered work life; and that furthermore they work in labor-intensive sectors such as ‘textile, construction, and agriculture’.

ÖZ

Göçün, göçmenlerle birlikte göç edilen bölgedeki yerel nüfus üzerinde hem olumlu hem de olumsuz birçok etkisi bulunmaktadır. Göçmenlerin sosyal uyum ve entegrasyonunda modern yaşamın merkezinde yer alan “çalışma hayatı ilişkileri” ve “ekonomik konular” önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Bu çalışmada ilgili literatürden hareketle çok boyutlu bir olgu olarak “göç” ve “göçmenlik” konusu; ekonomik unsurlarla birlikte Suriyeli sığınmacıların sahip olduğu sosyal potansiyel; işgücü piyasalarında göçmen girişimciliğinin rolü, sosyal uyum ve entegrasyon süreci bağlamında değerlendirilmeye çalışılmıştır. Uzun süreli ve geniş kapsamlı yapılan araştırma raporlarındaki bulgulara göre “göçün” sosyal kalkınmanın itici bir unsuru olduğu; özellikle ekonomik nedenlerle yapılan göçlerin hedef ülkeler için önemli katkılar sağlayabildiği görülmektedir. Birçok ülkede, uluslararası göçmen işçiler, iş gücünün önemli bir bölümünü oluşturmaktadır. Hem ülkeler içinde hem de ülkeler arasında istihdam amaçlı işgücü göçü giderek daha dinamik hale gelmektedir. Küresel iş gücünün % 4,9’u uluslararası göçmen işçilerden oluşmaktadır. Uluslararası göçmen işçi nüfusunda, hem cinsiyetten hem de menşé ülkeden kaynaklı eşitsizlik durumu devam etmektedir. İstatistikî verilerden hareketle, kadın göçmen işçilerin göç edilen ülkede daha fazla ekonomik ve sosyal engelle karşı karşıya olduğu görülmektedir. Türkiye’de emek piyasalarında var olan işsizlik sorununun tarihsel bir geçmişi bulunmaktadır. Ancak 2011 yılından itibaren gerçekleşen Suriyelilerin kitlesel göçüyle birlikte “işsizlik sorunu” daha çok tartışılmaya ve politik alann aktörleri tarafından dile getirilmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu çalışmada ilgili literatürdeki verilerden hareketle, Türkiye’deki Suriyeli sığınmacıların çoğunluğunun dar gelirli olduğu; emekleri üzerinden çeşitli haksızlıklar yaşandığı; büyük bir kısmının kayıt dışı çalışma yaşamında yer aldıkları; ‘tekstil, inşaat, tarım’ gibi emek yoğun sektörlerde çalıştıkları tespit edilmiştir.

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Introduction

Income inequality, poverty and social inequalities continue to increase globally. "Migration" has been recognized as one of the most important social problems of the globalizing world due to the plethora problems it triggers. "Migration" is a social phenomenon with economic, social, cultural and political dimensions in terms of its causes and repercussions. Migration has both positive and negative effects on local populations. As experienced in some socio-economically developed countries such as Germany and Canada, "migration" has the potential to be benefited by the local community providing that it should be properly planned and managed. If migration policies have been shaped in an irregular, unplanned and uncontrolled manner, they may cause undesirable situations for both migrants and the local community in the country of migration.

In socio-economically developed countries, considering migration as a manageable social phenomenon impacts the way governments deal with issues such as "economic growth, social change, social policy, security and political construction" (Baldwin-Edwardas & A. Schain, 1994, p. 1). Managed migration can contribute to socio-economic development and the integration of societies with their diverse characteristics. The positive impact of managed migration on socio-economic development can also be observed in statistical data. Although approximately 3.5% of the world's population is migrant, the contribution of migrants to global GDP is 9%, which is a concrete indicator of the impact of migration on socio-economic development (IOM, 2020; UNDP, 2022).

In this study, the issue of "migration" and "immigration" as a multidimensional phenomenon, together with economic elements, the social potential of Syrian refugees, the role of immigrant entrepreneurship in labor markets, and the social adaptation and integration process were tried to be evaluated in the context of the relevant literature.

Social and Economic Consequences of International Migration

A significant portion of international migration takes place in a safe and orderly manner. According to the findings of long-term and comprehensive research reports, "migration" is a driving factor of social development; especially migration for economic reasons can make significant contributions to destination countries. The real wages earned by migrants in the countries they migrate to may be higher than what they could have earned doing similar jobs in their countries of origin. In 2022, economic remittance made by migrants will be around 830 billion US dollars annually, which shows the magnitude of the impact of migration on the economic structure (IOM, 2024, p. 6).

Social remittance is important in understanding the relationship between migration and social change. Social remittance is evaluated in terms of its different impacts on the donor and recipient societies. Social remittance refers to economic, social and political attitudes, behaviors and norms transferred from one place to another through migration. By way of it, non-material resources such as 'ideas, behaviors, identities, attitudes, values including social capital' are transferred from the receiver to the sender. Material culture and artifacts are defined as 'social remittance' when they gain corporate meaning. The first recipients of the accumulations made by immigrants are usually family members and close friends. In the process of international migration, new ideas, behaviors, and norms are transferred to source societies through "social remittance"; thereby social institutions and norms become interacted and thereby affected. International migrants transfer new behaviors, attitudes, and values that change the social norms of their communities. Social remittances transferred to countries of origin are considered one of the most important consequences of international migration. (Grabowska, 2018, p. 68-69; Tuccio and Wahba, 2020, p. 2). In this context, it is possible to consider cash transfers by migrants as the most concrete link between 'migration and development'.

Apart from its economic contributions, migration has positive aspects that can be critically important for destination countries experiencing depopulation. Along with its function of increasing national income and improving average living standards, international migration contributes significantly to the supply of labor in sectors and occupations with labor shortages. One of the important indicators of the level of development of a society is the quality of its labor force. If the migration can be managed in an effective, comprehensive and planned manner, it can contribute to the elimination of mismatches in the labor market. The positive effects of migration on the labor market can be seen not only in high-skill sectors but also in low-skill positions. "Migration" can increase both labor supply and labor demand, which means that labor migration can create additional employment opportunities for existing workers.

Some scholars who criticize orthodox economic theory have developed the "dual-segment labor market theory". The dual-segment labor market theory argues that migration is due to internal characteristics embedded in modern industrial society. According to this theory, the main reason for migration is the pull factors in the target regions. The built-in demand for low-cost, temporary workers stems from the structural characteristics of advanced industrial economies (Harrison & Sum, 1979, p. 689). According to the dual-segment labor market theory, the labor market consists of sub-segments. A duality develops over time between the high-wage primary segment and the low-wage secondary segment. While working conditions in the primary segment are generally favorable, working conditions in secondary employment are unfavorable. Job security is very low in secondary employment. The employee has little opportunity to develop himself professionally. In this context, the question of why immigrant groups are more disadvantaged in the labor market, facing lower wages and weaker employment opportunities is significantly important.

Migrants provide a dynamism in the world of work globally and are sometimes represented in successful start-ups. In addition, the presence of young migrant workers contributes to alleviating the financial pressures on pension systems in socio-economically developed countries with ageing populations (IOM, 2024, p. 6).

According to the United Nations Migration Report 2024, there are approximately 281 million international migrants in the world. The proportion of migrants in the global population is estimated to be 3.6% (IOM, 2024). There are more than 100 million migrants forced to be displaced worldwide; more than half of them are women and children. It is seen that women and children, who constitute the majority of forcibly displaced people, are the group most suffered most by the negativities brought about by the forced migration process (womenforwomen.org., 2025).

Across the world, "ethnic tensions, political strife, famine, climate change and acts of terrorism" continue to negatively affect social life. The number of people seeking asylum outside their own country or displaced within their own country has been constantly increasing. In recent years, the world has experienced mass migration movements that have caused great hardship, trauma and loss of life. Recently, millions of people have been displaced due to political, social, cultural upheavals and conflicts in different parts of the world such as Syria, Ukraine, Palestine, Yemen, Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia and Myanmar. In today's world, millions of people, referred to as 'climate refugees', have been displaced due to climatic causes such as floods and agricultural degradation. According to analyses conducted by experts working on climate, climate change will continue to displace millions of people in mass. The number of climate migrants is estimated to become between 25 and 30 million per year. According to calculations, it is estimated that 200 million people will be forced climate migrants by 2050 (UNDP, 2017, p.10). It is not possible to predict how climate change will impact affect the distribution of people globally. In this context, a relationship is established between climate change and forced migration. Many countries such as Pakistan, Philippines, China, India,

Bangladesh, Bangladesh, Brazil and Colombia have also experienced forced migration processes as a result of large-scale natural disasters due to climatic or meteorological conditions. On February 6, 2023, massive earthquakes struck southern Türkiye and northern Syria, killing more than 50,000 people, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee the disaster zone and causing billions of dollars loss as material damage.

There are pessimistic assessments by international strategists about situations involving crises, conflicts and tensions in different parts of the world, including the Middle East geography, that those will continue to maximize in the coming years due to the geopolitical power games of global actors in a war of resource sharing. There are pessimistic doubts about the long-term survival of the National Salvation Government, which has come to power after the overthrow of the Baathist regime in Syria, and which has said to be composed of composed of coalitions and to be temporary in power. There are observations that it is difficult for the National Salvation Government to maintain its existence in coordination with the different expectancies of groups with different characteristics across Syria. Despite the risks imposed by conflict and political tension across the Middle East, the region's countries are expected to evolve into increased economic growth and economic development in the coming years (The Economist Intelligence, 2025).

In many countries, international migrant workers constitute a significant share of the labor force. Working-age migrants aged 15 and over who join the labor force of the destination country of residence are defined as 'international migrant workers.' Migrant workers, who make significant contributions to the economies of destination countries, meet the need for labor in sectors such as "health, transportation, agriculture, food processing". 'Labour migration' between countries for employment purposes is becoming increasingly dynamic. Migrant workers are largely forced to work in temporary, informal or unprotected jobs. According to International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates, 169 million people worldwide are "international migrant workers". It is estimated that 73 percent of international migrants have "worker migrant" status. International migrant workers constitute 4.9% of the global labor force. According to ILO reports, inequality persists in the international migrant worker population, both in terms of gender and country of origin. According to ILO, the fact that the number of male migrant workers outnumber female migrant workers is considered as inequality in gender-based labor distribution. It is estimated that the ratio of female migrant workers is 41.5% and the ratio of male migrant workers is 58.5% worldwide. Based on statistical data, female migrant workers face more economic and social barriers. Gender discriminatory practices in the labor market are considered to be one of the main factors limiting the participation of women migrant workers in the labor market (ILO, 2024a; ILO, 2021, p. 11).

When statistical data are examined, it is seen that the number of male migrant workers in Türkiye is higher than the number of female migrant workers. It can be said that the socio-economic obstacles and indecencies faced by women working as migrant workers in the labor market in Türkiye negatively impact labor force participation. When the data on migrant workers in the labor market are examined both globally and in the case of Türkiye, it is seen that the difference between genders women and men is significant (ILO, 2024b).

Since 2011, millions of Syrians who have come to Türkiye in mass numbers have been working unregistered, and therefore, no clear data can be examined regarding their status in the labor market. According to academic studies and field observations on the current status of Syrians, Syrians generally work in temporary, uninsured, and low-wage jobs. The informal employment of Syrians in different sectors such as industry, construction, services, and agriculture poses various risks in terms of social, economic, and cultural aspects. It can be said that informal employment is a more significant problem for immigrant women.

Active Participation of Migrants in the Labor Markets and Social Cohesion

The rapid economic growth of the member states of the European Union has led to a planned demand for labor from less developed countries and former colonies of European countries. In this context, each developed country importing labor has developed its own immigration policies and programs both to attract the necessary labor force and to stimulate the labor market. In most European Union countries, migration policies are designed to attract migrant workers to the labor market and direct them to the sectors where they are most needed.

In the post-World War II period, millions of migrant workers were accepted in the European Union member states with the cooperation of state and private sector organizations and with the approval of governments, large segments of society and public opinion. Until the 1970's, the issue of "immigration" or "immigrants" were not seen as a political issue by the masses. On the contrary, an approach was adopted as if there was a reasonable harmony between the needs of the countries that exported labor and the needs of the countries in Europe from which labor was imported. With the oil shock in the first half of the 1970's and the decline of heavy industry in Western Europe, state policies that encouraged the import of immigrant labor were terminated. Immigration policies that included closing the doors to most legal labor migration were gradually implemented by Western European countries. By the 1980s, "foreign" labor was transformed into "settled alien" communities (IOM, 2008, p.166). Thus, in countries where citizenship was facilitated over time, immigrants were transformed into ethnic communities. Inevitably, intense migration pressure continued to grow throughout the world in the following decades. The increasing income inequality among countries worldwide and the high population growth rates in underdeveloped countries encouraged the flow of labor migration to developed countries. The impact of developments in communication technologies also created a broad awareness of the opportunities in the developed countries of Western Europe. In addition, due to wars, economic crises, disruptions in the global world system and political, ethnic, religious, etc. problems in underdeveloped countries, there were increases in forced migration movements. From the 1990's onwards, it became more difficult to control the borders of countries in Western Europe for physical, legal and political reasons. The flow of migration continued in an irresistible or unstoppable way due to existing economic needs, international agreements limiting the sovereignty of states and the protection of basic human rights universally accepted by international legal authorities (Baldwin-Edwardas & A.Schain, 1994, p. 8-9).

Some important observations can be made in the context of the migration process briefly explained above in the example of Western European countries. The revision of the Geneva Convention, adopted in 1951, in accordance with today's conditions is of utmost significance in terms of migration policies. Restrictions on legal migration encourage illegal migration. Obstacles regarding migration, regardless of the reason, include the construction of policies that will limit migration. Obstacles regarding migration include "tighter border controls, restrictions on visa procedures, sanctions against employers, more frequent use of deportation policies, making asylum criteria more difficult, and implementation of migration policies that take anti-immigrant populist discourses into greater consideration." International institutions such as the "International Labor Organization, the European Parliament and the European Commission" offer various solution proposals regarding the migration crisis. According to these institutions, in the context of income distribution inequality and serious economic inequalities in the global economy, migration pressure from underdeveloped countries is an inevitable process. In this context, "push factors" as one of the reasons for migration can be eliminated with various development-oriented supports to be provided to underdeveloped countries. However, it seems difficult to solve the migration crisis in a structural way with the financial supports in question. The existence of the poverty and exploitation mechanism resulting from the capitalist production process of the global world economy is one of the fundamental elements that ensure

the continuity of underdevelopment (Baldwin-Edwardas & A.Schain, 1994, p. 5-8). 85% of irregular migrants are in underdeveloped and developing countries. The burden of mass forced migration is largely on developing countries. All countries in the international system must take responsibility and duty in combating irregular migration. Irregular migration must be combated in accordance with the spirit of internationally valid legal documents such as the 1951 Geneva Convention. Measures must be taken against irregular migration by taking into account the socio-economic structures of target countries and by accepting basic human rights as a basis.

Labor markets and migrant workers contribute to maintaining certain standards in working life in accordance with the conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on working life. In this sense, Convention No. 97 provides migrant workers with assistance in their job search on the one hand, and with supplying equality of treatment in various fields on the other. Convention No. 143 introduces provisions to prevent the exploitation of migrant workers and provides for migrant workers to benefit from equal opportunities and practices. Furthermore, the International Labor Organization's Convention No. 100 provides for equal pay for equal work, disregarding individual differences in employment and the International Labor Organization's Convention No. 182 provides for the prohibition and elimination of child labor in poor conditions. Therefore, international conventions need to be regarded in order to reduce human rights violations that migrants are exposed to in labor markets and to ensure a peaceful climate.

Taking into account the special needs and expectations of migrants, who constitute the most vulnerable segments of societies, is important for social cohesion. In integration policies for migrants, not only the demands and expectations of migrants but also the concerns, demands, and expectations of the resident population are to be taken into consideration. Otherwise, social problems such as “conflict, alienation, and exclusion” may arise between local society and migrant communities. In the social adaptation and integration of migrants, “working life relations” and “economic issues”, which are at the center of modern life, have an important place. Therefore, socio-economically developed countries have priorities for labor markets and economic activities in the social cohesion and integration of immigrants. In developed countries, special attention is to be paid to supporting the economic integration of migrants with activities in the fields of 'culture, language, health and education' (Koçak & Gündüz, 2016, p. 73). Active participation of migrants in the labor market is one of the main factors facilitating social cohesion. The active participation of migrants in the labor market contributes to their economic empowerment and the socio-economic development of the society they come from. Active participation in the labor force also strengthens the social acceptance process of immigrants by the local community (Aslan & Köse, 2024, p. 46).

Since 2011, Syrian asylum-seekers who have been forced to migrate from their countries have to carry their social, cultural and economic social capital to the destination countries. According to Pierre Bourdieu, who describes capital as accumulated labor, social *capital refers* to individuals' social relations and solidarity networks; *cultural capital refers* to an individual's personal background, skills and qualifications; and *economic capital* refers to individuals' income status and financial resources. Social and cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital in certain situations. Cultural capital is “embodied, objectified and institutionalized”. “Cultural capital can be acquired completely unconsciously, to varying extents depending on the period, society and social class” (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-245). In this context, it is inevitable that there will be a transformation or change in the forms of social, cultural and economic capital after migration.

The Place of Syrian Migrants in the Turkish Labor Market

In Türkiye, one of the countries with the highest number of migrants, there is no clear figure on the expenditures made for Syrian asylum seekers due to uncertainties in data sharing between relevant institutions. According to a report by the European Court of Auditors (ECA), European Union countries, led by Germany and France, along with the UK, have provided €6 billion worth of support for Syrian migrants in Türkiye under the “Financial Assistance Program” between 2016 and 2019. Since 2011, the support provided by EU member states to Syrians is estimated to be over €30 billion (euronews.com, 2024). According to some calculations, Syrian asylum-seekers have brought a financial burden of around 70 billion dollars to Türkiye (Eraslan, 2021). The 6 billion Euros that the European Union member states have committed to gradually provide for Syrian asylum-seekers have had a very low share in total expenditures in Türkiye. It is estimated that if the EU were to accept the 3.5 million Syrian asylum seekers in Türkiye within its borders, the total cost would have exceeded 100 billion Euros. These statistical data mean that Turkey has borne a huge economic cost regarding Syrian immigrants.

The increase in global economic problems along with the Covid 19 pandemic process experienced worldwide in 2019 and 2020 also had a negative impact on Türkiye. The mass Syrian migration and the Covid-19 pandemic had negative socio-economic consequences for Türkiye. The socio-economic problems experienced in Türkiye led to an increase in hate speech towards immigrants.

There has been a chronic unemployment problem in the Turkish labor market since the 1990s. Despite high growth rates above 5% since the 2000s, the expected increase in employment rates in Türkiye has not been achieved. According to the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) for 2025, it is seen that employment is below expectations and unemployment rates are high (above 8%) with high growth. Based on the data collected by relevant public institutions such as TurkStat, it is seen that the unemployment problem in the labor markets in Türkiye has a historical background. Since 2011, with the mass migration of Syrians, the problem of unemployment has become more debated, visible and voiced especially by the actors of the political sphere. According to December 2024 data, the labor force participation rate of men in Türkiye was 66.9%, while the labor force participation rate of women was 32.4%. The labor force participation rate of Syrian migrant men in Türkiye is estimated to be around 70%, while the labor force participation rate of Syrian migrant women is estimated to be around 18%. Based on these data, it is seen that although the labor force participation rates of Turkish men and Syrian men are close to each other, the rate of working Turkish women is twice as the rate of Syrian migrant women. It can be said that gender-based labor force participation may be due to cultural diversities differences regarding working life. It is understood that Syrian immigrant women have participated in the workforce at a higher rate after migrating to Turkey (TÜİK, 2024).

Syrians under temporary protection face some fundamental problems in entering the labor market due to labor legislation. At the beginning of the mass migration process, Syrian migrants were not granted diploma accreditation, which led Syrians, who had to meet their vital needs, to take jobs in any profession they could find and perform instead of jobs that were appropriate to their knowledge and skills. The diploma accreditation problem, which constitutes an important barrier to their entry into labor markets, causes Syrian asylum-seekers to be underemployed. This leads Syrian asylum-seekers to underutilize their skills, receive low wages and work in multiple jobs for longer periods of time. As a result of these negative situations, Syrians who offer their labor to the labor market under difficult conditions are physically, socially and psychologically affected.

In the first years of the Syrian civil war, the majority of asylum-seekers came from rural areas. After 2015, the majority of Syrian asylum-seekers coming from Syria were from urban centers (ORSAM, 2015, p.18). In the post-2015 years Syrians coming from developed cities such as Aleppo had competencies in trade, production and service sectors. However, while there was an opportunity to benefit more from the experience of Syrian asylum-seekers in trade, production and service sectors, it is observed that this opportunity was not sufficiently utilized in Türkiye for a long time. Since 2015, Syrian asylum-seekers with certain qualifications have started to work in sectors such as “leather, industry, furniture” in many metropolitan cities, especially in Gaziantep and Istanbul; they have started to open their own workplaces and thus to take part in the labor market more effectively. In the first years of their arrival, Syrian migrant entrepreneurs who came with their capital were hesitant to establish partnerships with Turkish entrepreneurs due to mutual “trust” issues. It has been understood that this situation has not changed after Syrian migrant entrepreneurs' residence problems were solved and they became familiar with Turkish markets; Syrians do not favor engaging in business partnerships with Turks. Syrian enterprises employ Syrian asylum-seekers, including Syrian women and children, in their production areas 'for low wages, long hours and under poor conditions'. Since Syrian firms have difficulty competing in the domestic market, they focus on sales to foreign markets. It is understood that Syrian firms export to countries or companies that Turks do not have exported to in the foreign markets. Heretofore, they fulfill business documentation and procedures through Turkish firms. Syrian firms do not have the necessary documents for commercial activities due to the barriers arising from the existing legislation in Türkiye. Foreign trade by Syrian firms is estimated to be much higher than the official figures (ICMDP, 2020).

The majority of Syrian asylum-seekers in Türkiye are low-income earners. It is seen that the majority of Syrian asylum-seekers have to work over 45 hours per week, under poor conditions and for low wages. It is estimated that 65 % of Syrians in the labor force work over 45 hours per week, which is considered the regular working time (ILO, 2022). Apart from Syrian asylum-seekers, it is observed that child labor has started to increase in different lines of work among other migrant groups coming to Türkiye (Özcan, 2022). The unemployment rate of Syrians is estimated to be between 15-20 %. Considering those who have declared that they are looking for a job in the field of studies, it is understood that the unemployment rate is around 35 % (Koçak, 2021). The most important reason for the high unemployment rate is that Syrians have “short-term, insecure, low-paid and poor working and job conditions” and are therefore constantly looking for a better job even if they have one. In addition, the condition that Syrian asylum-seekers receive cash social assistance payment is based on the prerequisite that “not working in a job.” Thereby, the status quo leads to the untrue statement by many Syrians. Henceforth, it is more desirable for Syrians not to work and not to look for a job instead of having a job. In some social assistance programs, the fact that the relevant institutions require migrants “no member of the family should be working” negatively impacts the participation of family members in employment and their motivation to work.

It is estimated that more than half of the global labor force is in the informal economy. Especially in developing countries, the informal economy refers to situations where legal protection is not applicable, most of which involve the subsistence economic activities. In most developing countries, a large share of the labor force works in the informal economy (ILO, 2024a: p.55). In labor markets, informality is increasing due to reasons such as the lack of easy work permits for migrants. With informality, the tendency to pay low wages emerges spontaneously. One of the main problems of asylum-seekers in Türkiye is that they have difficulties in participating in the formal economy for various reasons. Due to the inability to participate in formal economic life, “informality, low wages and poor working conditions” are observed in the labor market. Due to this negative situation in the labor market, it can be said

that Syrian asylum-seekers are exposed to various injustices through their labor when compared to the resident population. Unregistered labor is one of the main problems of Syrian asylum-seekers. It is estimated that nearly 1 million Syrians work informally in Türkiye. It is observed that Syrian asylum-seekers work in sectors such as “textile, construction, shoe manufacturing, agriculture, furniture and seasonal agricultural labor” (The International Crisis Group, 2018: 6). Based on field data and observations, it is observed that Syrian asylum-seekers work in secondary and complementary jobs that local people do not want to do. Syrians are aspired to work in substitute jobs or are forced to work (Aslan & Köse, 2024; Cihannüma, 2022, p. 22). It is observed that the weight of Syrians in the textile sector, where they were employed in the first years after migration to Türkiye, has changed in the following years; it is seen that they have participated in the labor force at similar rates in general services, trade, textile and manufacturing sectors (ILO, 2022). As of 2024, the number of Syrian migrants with work permits in Türkiye is 123,574. The fact that the rate of Syrians with work permits is very low compared to the rate of Syrians without work permits. That shows that the rate of unregistered work is high (Multeciler.org, 2022).

The fact that Syrian asylum-seekers are largely involved in informal employment is recognized as an important social problem. According to the results of the Syrians Barometer Research Report (Erdoğan, 2023), even if it is assumed that only one person works in each of 630 thousand Syrian households, the number of employees should be over 630 thousand. Due to the very low wages received by informal workers, it is unlikely that Syrians, especially those living in urban centers, will be able to make a living on the earnings of one person working in the family. In this context, it is estimated that the number of Syrians actively working in Türkiye is around 1.3 million.

The arrival of Syrians in Türkiye has led to the emergence of a negative perception that unemployment rates have increased across the country, especially in the regions where the Syrian population is densely populated. Although the impact of widespread unregistered employment of Syrians on labor markets is not fully reflected in official data, observations and findings from fieldwork suggest that Syrian asylum-seekers are generally employed in unskilled, temporary, short-term, and low-paid jobs. This situation results in favor of Turkish citizens in some sectors and against them in others. The fact that a large number of Syrians' small businesses are illegal or unregistered causes unfair competition for Turkish businesses. Unfair competition leads to negative reactions from residents and small-scale tradesmen. Unregistered employment leads to non-payment of taxes and to tensions between the local community and the Syrian community under temporary protection (Aslan & Köse, 2024, p. 37). Low wages received by migrants lead to a deterioration in the balance of income and expenditure in the family and results in the emergence of livelihood problems. A significant portion of the global labor force in informal employment consists of home-based work. In order to increase the current income of the family, other members of the family, who are considered secondary labor, join the workforce. Thus, children are expected to become child labor instead of education and the problem of child labor increases in the society.

Following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, some important decisions were taken by the European Council on December 19, 2024 to support rapid economic recovery, reconstruction and stability in Syria. These decisions can be summarized as follows: 1- lifting the measures in the energy and transport sectors; 2- releasing the funds and economic resources of banks operating in Syria; 3- granting certain exemptions to the ban on establishing banking relations between Syrian banks and financial institutions on the territory of EU Member States and allowing transactions for reconstruction purposes in the energy and transport sectors; 4- extending indefinitely the application of the existing humanitarian exemption; 5- granting exemptions to the ban on the export of luxury goods to Syria for personal use. With these

decisions, in view of the new situation in Syria, the European Council decided to suspend a large number of restrictive measures. The EU Council's statement also emphasized the need to hold those responsible for the ousted Assad regime to account; to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Syrians without discrimination; and to respect the rule of law and international law (Council of the EU, 2025).

Since the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees places most of the obligations on underdeveloped or developing countries, it is understood that there is an unfair or inequitable division of responsibility among countries in the international system regarding migrants. In this context, the sharing of obligations or responsibilities should be brought to the agenda more effectively at the international level and a global policy change should be made on this issue. The normalization of Türkiye's political relations with Iran, Iraq and Syria contributes to the development of economic activities with these countries. In the case of Iran, Iraq and Syria, the deterioration of Türkiye's political relations with its neighboring countries poses the risk of opening space for terrorism and violence across the region.

Entrepreneurship of Syrian Migrants in Türkiye

When the countries receiving migration are analyzed, it is seen that the tendency of asylum seekers to be entrepreneurs is higher than that in the host society. It can be said that migrants tend to take more risks with the understanding that they generally have nothing to lose. Immigrants, who produced their own products at the beginning of their migration, have begun to produce different products and move towards wider markets in later periods. It has been observed that Syrian asylum-seekers in Türkiye tend to follow similar processes.

The prolonged stay of Syrians in Türkiye increases their desire to remain in the country. As of December 8, 2024, despite the end of the civil war in Syria and the change of regime, Syrians' behavior of spreading the return to their country over time can be read as a reflection of their desire to stay in Türkiye.

Due to the increase in the normalization process, there is an expectation in the public that Syrian refugees will leave in the long term. When the return statistics are examined since the regime change in December 2024, it is understood that there has been no mass return to a large extent. This situation shows that the possibility of a mass return of Syrian refugees in Turkey is low. The principle of "safe, voluntary, honorable and regular return" is taken as the basis in the procedures for the return of Syrians to their countries, carried out through the Presidency of Migration Management (Directorate of Migration Management, 2025a). According to the statement made by the Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya, it was stated that 175,512 Syrians returned to their country "voluntarily, safely, honorably and regularly" on the occasion of the regime change in Syria on December 9, 2024 to April 16, 2025 (<https://www.aa.com.tr>, 2025). According to the statement made by Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz on June 13, 2025 regarding the return of Syrians, the number of those who have voluntarily returned to Syria since December 9, 2024 has been over 273 thousand (<https://www.trthaber.com/>, 2025). Considering that there are 2 million 699 thousand 787 Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey as of the date of June 2025, it was seen that the number of Syrians who have returned is below the expectations. According to the statement of Gonzalo Vargas Llosa, the Syria Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 270 thousand Syrians have returned to their country in total after the fall of the regime in Syria, and it is estimated that more than 1 in 4 Syrian asylum seekers are planning to return in the next 12 months. According to the statement of Gonzalo Vargas Llosa, the Syria Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 270 thousand Syrians have returned to their country in total after the fall of the regime in Syria, and it is estimated that more than 1 in 4 Syrian asylum seekers are planning to return in the next 12 months. According to Llosa, more than 60% of

Syrian refugees are unlikely to return in the short term due to “concerns about existing housing and property rights, security, access to basic services and economic hardship”. In his statement, Llosa makes the following observation regarding the process of return of Syrians and the current situation: “About 60% of the houses in the region are severely damaged. The rest were partially damaged by the fighting during the war. Most families have no proof of ownership of residential properties. To make the return of refugees and IDPs sustainable, access to housing, land and property must be ensured” (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

According to studies conducted by international organizations such as the UN International Organization for Migration, as the length of stay of asylum-seekers who migrate due to compulsory conditions increases, the rate of return to their home countries decreases. In cases where the duration of stay in the country of migration is more than 10 years, the rate of return to their home countries decreases to one third (IOM, 2024, p. 182; Köse, 2025). Based on this statistical information, it is possible to foresee a similar situation regarding Syrian asylum-seekers. According to the Turkish Commercial Code in force in Türkiye, migrants can open businesses and apply for work permits. More than 55% of the workplaces established by Syrians are small businesses employing less than 5 people (Erdoğan, 2023). According to TEPAV's research results, Syrian business owners provide employment opportunities for 7 percent of the 3 million Syrians. There are more than 10,000 registered Syrian-owned businesses with an average of 7 employees (TEPAV, 2019). More than 55% of Syrian businesses export to Middle Eastern countries (Erdoğan, 2023). Turkish companies are seeking to partner or cooperate with Syrians to export to the Arab region. Strategic collaborations between Turkish and Syrian-owned companies open new markets and increase company revenues (Turan, 2022).

TEPAV's 2019 research report titled “*Syrian entrepreneurship and refugee businesses in Türkiye: How to benefit from Türkiye's experience?*”, Syrian migrant entrepreneurs want to stay in Türkiye even after the end of the war (not forgetting the regime change as of December 2024) and want the perception of “transience” about them to change. It was found that 72% of the Syrian entrepreneurs who participated in the survey conducted within the framework of the research do not intend to return to Syria even in the post-war period, considering that their enterprises in Türkiye have been successful (TEPAV, 2019).

The psychological situation that emerges in Syrian migrants ensures that they follow each other, stay together and support each other within their own communities. Since the majority of Syrian asylum-seekers in Türkiye have come to Türkiye after experiencing great traumas, they support each other within their own communities and solidarity networks. In a way, this situation, which is also referred to as chain migration, supports migrant entrepreneurship in Türkiye. On the other hand, it is understood that those who are eligible to work as a registered labor force prefer “entrepreneurship” as an inevitable result of the process due to the difficulties in obtaining work permits and the accreditation problems of their diplomas in Syria. In other words, the obstacles in entering the labor market lead Syrian migrants to become entrepreneurs and start their own businesses. It is observed that Syrian asylum seekers contribute to product and service diversity in almost every sector. Based on the examinations and readings made within the scope of this research, it can be said that Syrian immigrant entrepreneurs support Turkey's production and exports and contribute to the supply of resources.

It is observed that entrepreneurs who own Syrian companies face various obstacles in their domestic and international travels due to the legislation in force (İNGEV, 2017: 22; Cihannüma, 2022: 23). In this context, it is important to facilitate the movement of migrants engaged in trade between provinces. It is a fact that most of the small businesses of Syrians which do not operate in full compatibility with Turkish legislation cause unfair competition with Turkish firms. Facilitating the legal procedures faced by migrants who want to establish small businesses would reduce informality. If migrant workplaces and workers are registered and

their income is taxed, unfair competition and profits will be prevented.

Türkiye's trade volume with the region is expected to increase in the incidence of an end to violence and conflict in the Middle East. The implementation of policies in line with the recent peace climate can be considered as an important indicator of normalization for the region in terms of socio-economic aspects. For this purpose, if facilities are provided for immigrant entrepreneurs in the provinces located in the south of Türkiye, production and trade will increase and will support the development of the provinces in the region. At this point, the exemplary practices in Gaziantep province (ICMDP, 2020) can be extended to other provinces in the region. It should not be ignored that Syrian refugees in the country have a great potential in strengthening trade relations with the Middle East. Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Turkish Exporters' Association and businessmen's associations should prepare viable and sustainable programs to get more contribution by these people in the economic field.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An analysis of current indicators in terms of labor markets reveals that the working age population in Türkiye does not meet expectations in terms of quality. The fact that the labor force in Türkiye mostly participates in production in sectors with low added value and that a significant part of the society wants to work in easy and desk jobs shows that the young population is not being utilized effectively.

Türkiye continues to face the risk of immigration in the coming years due to the crisis centers around it. The interventions of international global powers in the Middle East affecting and will affect Türkiye and other countries negatively. The establishment of an environment of peace and tranquility will have a positive impact on the socio-economic development of the countries in the region. In this context, it would be beneficial to review and improve bilateral relations between the countries in the region.

In the scientific studies conducted before the regime change in Syria, it is seen that Syrian asylum-seekers mostly wanted to stay in Türkiye. In the process after the regime change, it is observed that Syrian asylum-seekers have changed their attitude towards their return to their country. With the new administration, there are changes in the demands and expectations of Syrians. Therefore, it is understood that a paradigm shift should be exercised towards Syrian migrants, taking into account the new reality that has emerged with the new process.

As one of the countries hosting the largest number of Syrian migrants, Türkiye needs to reorganize its migration policy within the framework of international law and in accordance with scientific and ethical principles. The current Syrian migrant population may return to their countries depending on the new conditions and developments in Syria. Depending on the socio-economic conditions in Türkiye, it is estimated that there is a Syrian migrant population that is unlikely to migrate. Considering that it is unlikely that Syrian asylum-seekers will return to their country in their entirety, more emphasis should be placed on social cohesion policies. Based on this situation, in order for a successful social cohesion process to work, it is important to facilitate the participation of migrants in working life and to encourage their participation in non-formal and vocational trainings in the context of meeting the need for intermediate staff. In this framework, attention should be paid to the harmonization of migration and employment policies in the process of implementing macro policies on a national scale throughout Türkiye. It should be ensured that relevant public institutions such as the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and the Ministry of Interior take the necessary measures to facilitate and encourage the transition to the registered labor force in a way to cover all segments of the society with Syrian migrants. In this context, it is important to direct the young Syrian migrant population to vocational trainings in the sectors in need and to ensure their participation in the qualified labor force.

With the change of regime in Syria, the “temporary protection status” that Syrian asylum-seekers in Türkiye have been enjoying for 13 years should be revised. Legally supportive arrangements should be made to facilitate Syrian asylum-seekers who actively participate in the labor market, invest and produce added value to continue their economic activities in Türkiye. In order for Syrian asylum-seekers, who have to work informally and precariously, to take part in the labor market as a regular employee, the obstacles arising from the legislation related to working life should be re-structured. It is important to encourage formal employment to include Syrian asylum-seekers as well as the local community, and all relevant institutions should support formal employment. Unregistered economy should be avoided like plague. The reasons why Syrian asylum-seekers in Türkiye are in unregistered employment and the repercussions of unregistered employment should be delineated in a multifaceted manner. Comprehensive, effective and sustainable policies need to be developed and implemented to reduce unregistered employment. Directing Syrian asylum-seekers under temporary protection to vocational education and training them for the need for qualified labor force would prevent the increase in unregistered employment. Providing vocational trainings in the areas needed by the labor market is thought to be effective in reducing unregistered employment.

It is important for labor unions, which are one of the important actors in working life, to review their negative perspectives towards working migrants in terms of social cohesion and integration. If trade unions give up their negative attitudes towards migrants, registering migrants in the workforce and making them members of a trade union, this will contribute to reducing informality, strengthening trade union would come true. That would contribute to reducing informality, strengthening trade union organization and ensuring social integration in the country. The ability of migrants to be organized in trade unions will strengthen their awareness of their labor rights and responsibilities.

It is observed that Syrian asylum-seekers who are entrepreneurs and have capital in Syria continue their entrepreneurial activities in Türkiye. If the work permits issued to Syrian migrants are revised based on objective criteria and bureaucratic procedures are facilitated, the added value of qualified and productive migrants to business life will increase.

The problem of child labor has become more visible in Türkiye due to the exposure of migrant children to child labor problem. Measures should be taken to prevent child labor, which is more common in urban centers. Children deprived of education create a new vicious cycle of poverty. In order to prevent child labor, the Provincial Directorates of the Ministry of Family and Social Services should conduct regular interviews with migrant families whose children are working and raise awareness of the families. Otherwise, there is a possibility that uneducated children will be marginalized in the future and harm the society they live in.

Entry into the labor market is very difficult due to the lack of diploma accreditation. Therefore, diploma accreditation needs to be facilitated through alternative solutions. Among these, it is suggested that there should be a training in the migrant's field of specialization followed by a vocational examination. Those who successfully pass these trainings and examinations should be recognized as having that diploma and its accreditation should be ensured. In this way, the migrant's contribution to the economy will be ensured by ensuring his/her rapid entry into the labor market in the field of profession in which he/she is specialized.

In Türkiye, as in other countries around the world, migrant unemployment is higher than that of locals. Unemployment can potentially lead to other social problems such as crime, illness, family problems and divorce. In this context, İŞKUR (Turkish Employment Agency) should adopt an approach to activate the potential of the migrant youth population; tables should be established within İŞKUR to serve migrants. The employment of young migrants should be taken into account in addressing the need for labor in areas of need in Türkiye. Utilizing the

labor of young migrants would have positive consequences on Türkiye's economy. It is expected that the implementation of more flexible approaches to work permits for Syrians will reduce informality and eliminate unfair competition over labor. In this context, migrants should be encouraged to take part in formal working life and start businesses. This would prevent unfair competition with Turkish firms and workers.

Ensuring a working life where there are no irregularities, where all segments of society comply with the written rules and where a rights-based approach is at the center is a matter of importance for both the local population and the migrant population. Structural measures should be taken by relevant institutions to prevent unregistered employment for both the local population and migrants. In this context, in order to prevent unregistered employment, it is important to “correctly identify the target group; improve the quality of vocational training; prevent unlicensed work; facilitate work permits; and promote a corporate culture that includes permanent measures rather than financial support that includes temporary solutions”. In addition, facilities should be provided for migrant women, who are considered as a disadvantaged segment of the society, to take part in the labor market.

Sharing statistical information on migration and migrants with relevant stakeholders with a more transparent and holistic approach is important for the formation of new projections. Periodically updating and sharing statistical data on migrants would make significant contributions to the research and policy development processes of experts working on migration.

The historical and cultural affinity between Turkish society and Syrians contributes to the mutual harmonization process. Despite the historical and cultural affinity between the two societies, it has been observed that the socio-economic problems in Türkiye in recent years have paved the way for a negative perception of Syrian refugees. In order to remove the negative perception of Syrian asylum-seekers, efforts to inform the public about the socio-economic contributions of Syrians should be supported. The successful and manageable social, economic and cultural integration of asylum-seekers can be considered as an opportunity for Türkiye. In this way, the negative effects of Syrian refugees on the Turkish economy could be eliminated and risks could be turned into opportunities. In this framework, it has been important for Türkiye to develop and implement a sustainable, predictable and manageable migration policy.

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