INVISIBLE LABOR, VISIBLE STRUGGLES: GENDER AND MIGRATION CHALLENGES IN NGOS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

This research investigates social invisibility among Turkish and Syrian women working in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Hatay. Data were gathered using a qualitative research methodology using semi-structured in-depth interviews done online following initial on-site observations and analyses. The research sample comprises six women (three Turkish and three Syrian) living in Hatay, chosen by the snowball sampling technique. Research indicates that gender discrimination, marginalization, and migratory status substantially influence workplace invisibility. Syrian women endure dual invisibility, as their status as migrants exacerbates gender-based disparities. The research highlights how structural and societal obstacles restrict women's visibility, impacting their professional engagement and interactions. Moreover, workplace inequality serves as a significant contributor to the exacerbation of social invisibility, with institutional obstacles hindering women's access to career advancement and professional acknowledgment. The study enhances the broader conversation on gender and migration within NGO contexts by elucidating these dynamics and providing insights into measures for cultivating more inclusive and equitable workplaces. These findings underscore the necessity of confronting intersectional problems to advance gender equality and social inclusion in professional settings.

Keywords: Inivisibilization of Female Labor, Migration, Non-Governmental Organizations, Workplace Inequity

GÖRÜNMEYEN EMEK, GÖRÜNÜR MÜCADELELER: TÜRKİYE'DE STK'LARDA CİNSİYET VE GÖÇÜN YARATTIĞI ZORLUKLAR

Özet

Bu araştırma, Hatay'da sivil toplum kuruluşlarında (STK) çalışan Türk ve Suriyeli kadınlar arasında sosyal görünmezliği incelemektedir. Veriler, ilk olarak yerinde gözlem ve analizlerin ardından çevrimiçi olarak yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler kullanılarak nitel araştırma metodolojisiyle toplanmıştır. Araştırma örneklemi, kartopu örnekleme tekniği ile seçilen Hatay'da yaşayan altı kadından (üç Türk ve üç Suriyeli) oluşmaktadır. Araştırma, cinsiyet ayrımcılığı, marjinalleşme ve göçmen statüsünün

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işyerinde görünmezliği önemli ölçüde etkilediğini göstermektedir. Suriyeli kadınlar, göçmen statüleri cinsiyete dayalı eşitsizlikleri daha da şiddetlendirdiği için çifte görünmezliğe maruz kalmaktadır. Araştırma, yapısal ve toplumsal engellerin kadınların görünürlüğünü nasıl kısıtladığını ve bunun onların mesleki katılımlarını ve etkileşimlerini nasıl etkilediğini vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, işyerinde eşitsizlik, kadınların kariyer gelişimi ve mesleki tanınırlığa erişimini engelleyen kurumsal engellerle birlikte, sosyal görünmezliğin artmasına önemli ölçüde katkıda bulunmaktadır. Çalışma, bu dinamikleri açıklığa kavuşturarak ve daha kapsayıcı ve eşitlikçi işyerleri oluşturmak için alınabilecek önlemler hakkında içgörüler sağlayarak, STK bağlamında cinsiyet ve göç üzerine daha geniş bir tartışma ortamı yaratmaktadır. Bu bulgular, mesleki ortamlarda cinsiyet eşitliği ve sosyal kapsayıcılığı ilerletmek için kesişen sorunlarla yüzleşmenin gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın Emeğinin Görünmezliği, Göç, Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları (STK), İşyerinde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitsizliği

1. Introduction

Issues of gender equality, women's rights, migration, and the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have gained increased attention in both academic and policy circles. Gender inequality systematically limits women's visibility in social and professional settings, reinforcing structural disadvantages that hinder their access to leadership roles and decision-making positions (Acker, 1990). This process aggravates their social invisibility, as their contributions are frequently undervalued and overlooked, which deepens gender-based inequalities even further (Kandiyoti, 1988). Societal gender norms and traditional perceptions—such as assigning domestic and caregiving responsibilities to women—further marginalize them in the workplace (Connell, 2002). As Scott (1986) notes, historical gender hierarchies have long placed women in subordinate roles, restricting their ability to participate equally across social domains. These dynamics are compounded in the case of migrant women, who face a "double disadvantage" due to the intersection of gender-based and migration-related discrimination (Yamaner, 2021). This study explores how these overlapping forms of marginalization are experienced by Turkish and Syrian women working in NGOs.

The international literature underscores the dynamic interaction between migration, gender, and societal roles, which emphasizes that migration is closely linked to gender identity and social norms (Danış & Biehl, 2020). Turkey, for example, has experienced significant demographic shifts that have affected both the hosting society and refugees since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in April 2011 (Ağır & Sezik, 2015). Hatay, one of Turkey's main refugee-hosting areas, is strategically located due to its proximity to Syria and its shared history and culture. The region's shared linguistic and social characteristics—such as its

substantial Arabic-speaking population—have facilitated the settlement and adaptation of Syrian refugees (Duruel, 2017).

Hatay's multicultural and rich history has allowed various communities of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to coexist peacefully. The phrase "Ezan, Çan, Hazan," which symbolizes religious harmony, reflects this cultural diversity (2017). This inclusive social fabric has played a crucial role in fostering social integration for refugees. The welcoming and integrated community structure in the region has been vital in facilitating the social inclusion of refugees. Yet, living environments differ significantly, with refugees settling in cities as well as temporary shelters. The interplay of geographical, cultural, and socio-economic elements positions Hatay as a key location for resettlement and adaptation for refugees, though it also poses obstacles that hinder the sustenance of lasting social unity.

Due to these factors, Hatay has emerged as a focal point for many national, international, and local NGOs that are engaged in meeting the needs of refugees and host communities alike. These groups play a crucial role in promoting integration, delivering humanitarian assistance, and aiding at-risk populations, such as women. Turkey's significant influx of migration has further heightened the importance of NGOs, especially in helping Turkish and Syrian women navigate the distinct sociocultural obstacles they encounter. Though these women may face varying types of marginalization depending on their nationality, they frequently experience shared challenges tied to gender-based inequality and a lack of societal recognition.

This study aims to explore the social invisibility of Turkish and Syrian women working in NGOs, emphasizing how gender, migration status, and workplace dynamics influence their limited visibility in professional settings. By examining whether NGOs exacerbate or alleviate these issues, the study aims to advance understanding within the fields of gender and migration studies, which sheds light on institutional roles in shaping visibility and equity.

2. Literature Review

The concept of civil society has evolved significantly throughout history, shaped by political and social transformations. Initially synonymous with the state, civil society later emerged as an autonomous sphere distinct from government control (Aslan, 2010). Ancient philosophers like Aristotle and Cicero conceptualized civil society as a structured space where free and equal citizens could engage in public discourse. Over time, as feudal structures disintegrated and urban economies expanded, the notion of civil society evolved into an independent sphere fostering economic and social autonomy (Tosun, 2001). The 17th and 18th centuries marked a crucial turning point in this transformation, particularly with the emergence of contractual theories proposed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Hobbes emphasized that civil society emerged as a response to the chaotic "state of nature," advocating for a strong state to maintain

order. Locke, on the other hand, viewed civil society as a collective agreement that safeguarded individual freedoms and private property. Rousseau introduced the idea of the social contract, highlighting the role of collective will in shaping society (Frimpong, Jones & Esedo, 2018; Carrin, 2006; Erten & Keskin, 2021). These perspectives collectively contributed to the development of modern democratic governance and civic engagement.

In the contemporary era, the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has expanded significantly, functioning as intermediaries between the state and society. NGOs operate across various domains, including human rights, environmental activism, and socio-economic development (Lewis, 2009). The globalization process has further amplified their influence, transforming them into key actors in addressing transnational challenges (Almeida & Chase-Dunn, 2018). Within this framework, the intersection of gender and migration has become a subject of growing academic interest, particularly in the context of women's social invisibility in professional settings. Acker (1990) argues that workplace structures are inherently gendered, systematically placing women in subordinate roles with limited career progression. Similarly, Kandiyoti (1988) explores how patriarchal bargaining restricts women's autonomy, forcing them to navigate within pre-existing gender hierarchies. Scott (1986) further highlights how historical gender hierarchies have rendered women invisible in both public and private spheres. This issue becomes even more pronounced when considering migrant women, who experience double invisibility due to their gender and refugee status (Herzog, 2018). Connell (2002) examines how gender norms are institutionalized, particularly in labor markets, where women, especially migrants, are often confined to low-wage and informal employment sectors.

Empirical research on Syrian refugee women in Turkey supports these theoretical frameworks. Studies by Danış & Biehl (2020) indicate that Syrian women in Turkey face systemic barriers to workforce participation, exacerbated by legal, cultural, and economic constraints. Ağır & Sezik (2015) discuss the demographic shifts resulting from the 2011 Syrian refugee crisis, highlighting the socio-economic challenges faced by displaced communities. Hatay, a key settlement area for Syrian refugees, presents a unique socio-cultural landscape that influences migrant women's experiences. Its geographic proximity to Syria, historical ties, and linguistic similarities have facilitated the integration of refugees, yet challenges persist (Duruel, 2017). Despite Hatay's multicultural heritage and tradition of coexistence, the social and economic marginalization of migrant women remains a significant issue.

The increasing role of civil society organizations in mitigating gender-based inequalities has been widely documented. NGOs focusing on women's empowerment and economic integration have played a crucial role in addressing the social invisibility of female refugees. UNDP and IBC (2020) emphasize the need for

structural reforms to ensure equal opportunities for migrant women in the workforce. Similarly, various civil society organizations have played a key role in supporting income-generating activities for disadvantaged women, contributing to their financial independence. However, women's labor market participation remains highly stratified by class and gender (Kocacık & Gökkaya, 2005). Lower-income women, especially those from migrant backgrounds, face additional barriers due to legal restrictions, cultural expectations, and employer discrimination. Feminist economic theories argue that economic inclusion should not be solely framed within a capitalist market structure but rather as part of a broader social justice agenda (Oakley, 1972). The 2011 Syrian migration wave significantly impacted the operational focus of NGOs in Turkey. Initially, humanitarian assistance efforts dominated, but since 2016, there has been a notable shift toward sustainable development programs emphasizing education, vocational training, and social inclusion. Interviews with NGO workers highlight this transition, with one respondent noting, "Our organization initially focused on emergency aid, but since 2017, we have shifted toward providing long-term support in areas such as healthcare, employment, and legal assistance." These findings suggest that while NGOs play a critical role in addressing gender-based inequalities, structural barriers remain. Sustainable change requires policy reforms, increased funding, and a commitment to gender-sensitive programming.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the social invisibility experienced by Turkish and Syrian women working in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Hatay. A phenomenological approach was adopted to capture the participants' lived experiences, utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. Due to the earthquake on February 6, 2023, interviews were conducted remotely via online platforms such as Skype and WhatsApp to ensure accessibility.

A total of six women (three Turkish, three Syrian) participated in the study, selected through the snowball sampling method to reach individuals with relevant workplace experiences. Participants' ages ranged between 25 and 35 years old, with varying educational backgrounds. Among the Turkish participants, two held managerial roles, while one worked as an NGO staff member. The Syrian participants had educational levels spanning undergraduate to postgraduate degrees and were engaged in different roles across both local and international NGOs.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, though technical difficulties occasionally led to multiple sessions. To enhance data credibility, a member-checking process was applied, ensuring that participants had the opportunity to review and confirm their statements before final analysis. The collected data were

analyzed through content analysis, identifying key themes such as gender-based workplace discrimination, socio-economic marginalization, and the intersectionality of migration and employment experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of in-depth interviews conducted with six female respondents who worked for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hatay. The outcomes present the main issues that were found in the qualitative data with an emphasis on social invisibility and gender discrimination.

Demographic Information of Respondents

NGOs are represented here by three Turkish women and three Syrian women who work at various level. The educational level of the participants varies from high school to postgraduate levels, with three of them having university diplomas, one of them having achieved a postgraduate level, and two of them having high school education. There are a variety of positions that these women have inside non-governmental organizations (NGOs); some of them are administrative or managerial in nature, while others are involved in field-based and operational responsibilities. All the participants, while having a diverse range of backgrounds, voiced their concerns with the lack of visibility and unfair treatment that they received in their respective employment.

Social Invisibility in NGOs

A key finding of this study is the widespread experience of social invisibility among respondents. Participants frequently mentioned that their contributions were overlooked, their voices were unheard, and their efforts were undervalued.

> One participant explained:
> *"Even though I work just as hard as my male colleagues, I don't receive the same level of recognition. Sometimes, it feels like I don't exist in the workplace"* (R1)

> Similarly, another participant noted that decision-making spaces often exclude women:
> *"I offer ideas in meetings, but no one listens. Then a male colleague says the exact same thing, and suddenly it's a great suggestion"* (R2).
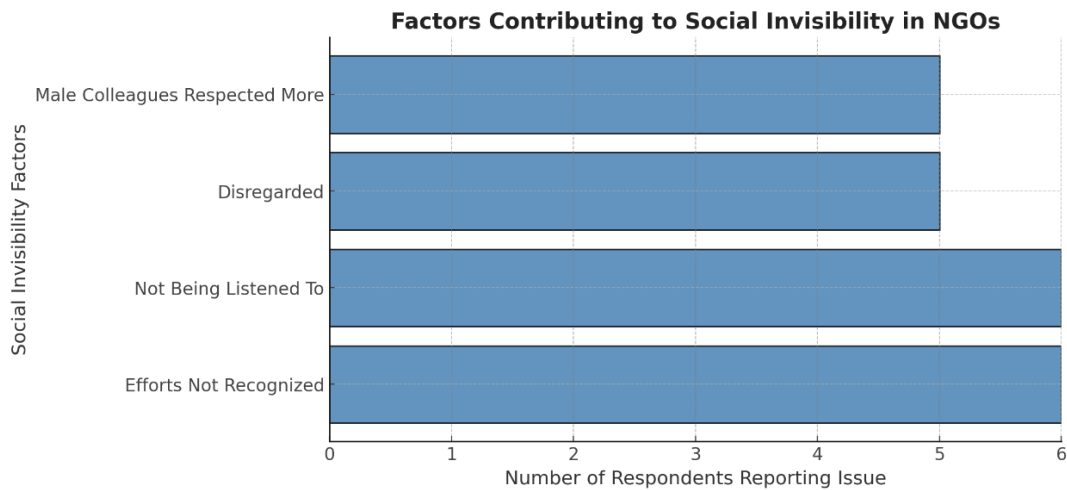
Figure 1. Factors Contributing to Social Invisibility in NGOs. Source: Research findings from field interviews (Dövme, 2024).

Gender Discrimination in NGOs

Other than invisibility, gender discrimination was also a prominent concern expressed during the interviews. Some interviewees described how they were excluded from fieldwork due to their gender, while others were relegated to domestic-related work within the workplace.

> One participant explained how gender roles shaped her daily responsibilities: "*I was hired as an office administrator, yet I was always expected to make tea and clean. It felt like my professional skills were ignored because I am a woman*" (R3).

> Another respondent observed that opportunities for advancement often favored men: "*Male employees are given better roles and higher salaries, even when we have the same qualifications*" (R5).

Figure 2. Gender Discrimination Experiences in NGOs. Source: Research findings from field interviews (Dövme, 2024).

Emotional and Psychological Effects

The impact of social invisibility and gender discrimination extends beyond professional experience, affecting participants' emotional well-being. Many respondents described feeling frustrated and excluded due to workplace hierarchies, emotionally drained from constantly proving themselves, and helpless in advancing their careers despite their qualifications.

> One participant explained:
>
> "*At first, I loved my job, But over time, feeling invisible and unheard drained all my motivation*" (R4).
>
> ''*I am a literature graduate. But we came here long after the war started. It took me some time to adapt to the culture here. At first, we didn't want to come to Turkey, but we had no choice. To survive here, I had to take on extra work. Because I am a woman, I was always made to do cleaning jobs. In fact, there were times when I was not even paid just because I am Syrian. I was seen as a foreigner from Syria—needy, fallen, and helpless. In this workplace, I no longer do cleaning tasks. Since I have a degree in literature, I now assist with document writing. I guess I am lucky because I went to university''* (R6).

Social invisibility of Syrian women is primarily shaped by their migrant status rather than gender. They are initially perceived as war refugees, foreigners, and victims and only then as women, which aggravates their marginalization (Yamaner & Herzog, 2021). These women migrants from Syria consistently report that their experience of social invisibility stems more from their migrant identity than from gender-based discrimination alone.

There is currently a competitive pressure between Turkish and Syrian women employed in NGOs, as the increasing participation of migrant women in the labor market has reshaped employment opportunities. While migration initially created employment opportunities for native women, the increasing integration of Syrian women into the labor market has increased competition, altering labor dynamics that were previously established. This transition has challenged Turkish women's previously existent employment advantages, altering workplace inclusion patterns (Aksu, Erzan & Kırdar, 2022).

The evidence shows that gender roles systematically disempower women, leading to their exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination in the workplace. The interplay between gender and migration profoundly influences Turkish and Syrian women's working lives, shaping their visibility and status within the workforce (Knappert, Kornau & Figengül, 2017). The study further points out that linguistic competence plays a critical role in professional recognition, as language proficiency facilitates workplace integration and career advancement. Furthermore, cultural disparities also impact women's career trajectories. These disparities significantly influence their professional interactions, growth, and overall workplace dynamics.

This study highlights that gender discrimination, social exclusion, migrant identity, educational background, and language proficiency collectively play a role in the professional invisibility of Turkish and Syrian women. These intersecting factors underscore the persistence of structural inequalities across multiple social and professional domains, restricting women's ability to establish themselves and advance in their careers.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the experiences of social invisibility among Turkish and Syrian women who work at NGOs in Hatay, focusing on how gender, migration, and workplace dynamics shape their professional lives. The number of participants was limited because the interviews were conducted online due to the devastating impact of the earthquake that also hit Hatay in February 2023. However, despite these constraints, the findings provide valuable insights into how gender and migration status interact and influence women's

visibility in professional environments. Future studies may expand the sample size to enhance generalizability, particularly as the region recovers and returns to normalcy.

The research reveals that social invisibility remains a widespread challenge for working women, marked by exclusion rooted in gender, marginalization, and undervaluation of their contributions. Turkish women largely confront gender-based discrimination, frequently being assigned to administrative or domestic positions regardless of their skills. Conversely, Syrian migrant women experience layered invisibility, as their status as migrants overshadows their gender, dictating their access to and constraints within employment. A participant encapsulated this hierarchy by remarking: "First, migrant women are dismissed, then local women, and finally, men." This perspective underscores the precarious position of migrant women in the labor market.

A central insight reveals that education and language proficiency are pivotal in influencing professional visibility and career progression. Both Turkish and Syrian women view education as a critical tool to overcome career obstacles, with Syrian women especially prioritizing acquiring Turkish proficiency and supplementary qualifications. Yet, the rising influx of educated Syrian women into the workforce has intensified competition with local women, which has altered job market dynamics and blurred traditional distinctions between privilege and disadvantage.

While NGOs are often seen as institutions that foster gender equity, the study highlights how deeply ingrained patriarchal systems persistently mold workplace frameworks. Women employed in NGOs, similar to those in other sectors, typically hold lower-ranking roles and lack access to leadership positions or involvement in policy decisions. Nonetheless, many participants strongly favored working in NGOs over other sectors, asserting that these organizations, despite existing gaps, still afford better prospects for gender-inclusive practices than traditional workplaces.

This study advances discussions on gender, migration, and labor rights by exposing systemic inequalities that influence women's professional experiences. Key recommendations include implementing employment policies attuned to gender and migration disparities to ensure fair access to jobs and advancement. Initiatives like language courses, skill-building workshops, and leadership programs could also diminish professional invisibility among women. Further studies should explore invisibility across diverse sectors to identify parallels beyond NGOs, while long-term analyses of women's evolving labor roles could clarify intersections of gender and migration over time.

Social invisibility, particularly in NGO settings, remains understudied in academic research. This work bridges this gap by offering empirical evidence for how gender shapes invisibility within civil society organizations. It also highlights that invisibility encompasses sociocultural, linguistic, and institutional

dimensions beyond gender alone. Subsequent research could build on these insights by investigating invisibility in contexts like private companies or government agencies, or by exploring how crises such as conflicts or disasters impact women's workplace inclusion.

Recognizing and addressing social invisibility is critical to fostering meaningful gender equity in professional spheres. Cultivating inclusive workplaces can empower women and strengthen institutional fairness. This research intends to lay groundwork for future studies on invisibility in gendered and migratory contexts, offering insights valuable to both scholarly debates and policymaking. By prioritizing visibility, organizations can better support marginalized groups and contribute to systemic equity.

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