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### Poverty through Migration: The Case of Syrians in Istanbul



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#### Abstract

While poverty has often served as a driving force for economic migration, in cases of migration caused by war, nationalism, and political unrest, poverty has increasingly become a consequence rather than a cause. Migrants who are forcibly displaced without making rational and informed decisions are subjected to various social issues in their host countries, especially legal status problems. Loss of income, unemployment, homelessness, and poverty are among the primary challenges. Poverty becomes not only an individual problem but also a family destiny. This study aims to investigate the life experiences, difficulties encountered, and poverty-inducing factors among Syrian migrants who have arrived in Istanbul through forced migration. In-depth interviews were conducted in districts with high concentrations of Syrian residents. The data were analysed using MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software commonly used in content analysis. The findings reveal that the fundamental cause of poverty is the sudden refugee movement triggered by forced migration. Five main themes were identified through content analysis: unplanned migration, bureaucratic obstacles, limited employment opportunities, excessive economic burdens, and social barriers.

#### Keywords

Migration · Forced Migration · Poverty · Migrant Poverty · Syrians.



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## Poverty through Migration: The Case of Syrians in Istanbul

Throughout history, the absence of necessities has driven people to migrate towards regions perceived as more prosperous. While sometimes triggered by the lack of essential food supplies, migration has also occurred due to the pursuit of safety, peace, and personal security. Violations of human rights arising from invasion, civil war, political instability, border disputes, and climate change have compelled individuals to migrate forcibly towards perceived safe zones.

In the 21st century, the Arab Spring has revealed one of the most devastating forms of forced migration. Syria, as the final epicentre of the Arab Spring, witnessed a humanitarian tragedy where millions lost their lives or became dependent on others for survival. Approximately 13.5 million Syrians sought safety in secure regions. While half of this population relocated within the country, the other half fled to neighbouring countries. During this process, Turkey, Syria's longest bordering neighbour, rapidly became the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees globally.

The inadequacy of temporary systems and the overwhelming number of refugees exceeding camp capacities forced many Syrians to seek shelter outside official refugee camps. According to data from the Presidency of Migration Management, nearly 3 million Syrians currently live outside temporary accommodation centres. Among the cities hosting large numbers of Syrians, Istanbul ranks first, with approximately half a million (470,935) Syrians residing there, followed by border cities such as Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Adana, Hatay, and Kilis (DGMM, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>, May 29, 2025).

Compared to other provinces in Türkiye, Istanbul offers more employment opportunities, diverse consumption choices, and relatively better living and working conditions. These factors have encouraged Syrians living in border cities to migrate to Istanbul. According to the 2020 Regional Results of the Income and Living Conditions Survey by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT), Istanbul (TR1) recorded the highest average annual equivalized household disposable income in Turkey, at 49,239 TL. This economic allure has motivated families on the brink of poverty to relocate to Istanbul (<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Gelir-ve-Yasam-Kosullari-Arastirmasi-Bolgesel-Sonuclari-2020-37405>, 02.06.2025).

Since the Ottoman conquest, Istanbul's Fatih district has remained a centre of attraction for migrants. The phrase "its soil is gold" metaphorically expresses the city's wealth of employment opportunities. Low-cost motels, hostels, and single-room accommodations in areas like Aksaray and Laleli often serve as the first stop for incoming migrants. Fatih has hosted both affluent and impoverished migrant groups. Particularly in Süleymaniye, derelict zones provide shelter to migrants at no cost (Şen and Şen, 2015: 37). Migrants begin building social networks and adapting to their new environment from these neighbourhoods. A similar pattern was observed among Syrians who arrived through forced migration. Many initially settled in Fatih, then gradually moved towards neighbourhoods where goods and services were more affordable, ultimately leading to a demographic concentration of Syrians in certain districts and contributing to a geometric population increase.

This population surge, accompanied by only arithmetic growth in goods and services, has created numerous challenges. The mass settlement of Syrians in the border and metropolitan cities has driven up the prices of housing and essential goods while lowering labour wages. Consequently, not only did local incomes decline, but Syrians also found themselves forced to work longer hours under harsh conditions for minimal pay.

This study aims to explore how the forced and large-scale migration from Syria to Turkey has affected Syrians socioeconomically. It seeks to identify the challenges faced by migrants who could not convert

their assets into cash, transfer their economic or social capital, or provide essential documents such as ID cards, diplomas, and certificates, thereby shedding light on the socio-economic hardships they encounter in Turkey.

## Relationship between Migration and Poverty

Due to its complex and multidimensional nature, poverty is a concept that is difficult to define. At its core, poverty is generally understood as the inability to meet minimum essential needs, primarily economic (Hatun, 2002: 7). It also encompasses exclusion from economic systems (Gündoğan, 2008: 42) and the absence of a minimum standard of living. In a broader sense, poverty reflects a lack of income, residence in low-status neighbourhoods or derelict areas, marginalisation within the urban space, limited access to urban resources, and insufficient access to fundamental services such as education, health, and justice (Tekeli, 2000: 145).

The main criterion in different types of poverty is the inability to earn a minimum income and to meet necessary expenses. The most basic form is *absolute poverty*, measured by the minimum required daily caloric intake and a "minimum food basket" approach (Ala, 2009: 2). In contrast, *relative poverty* is defined as the inability to attain a basic standard of living in comparison to the general societal level (Şenses, 2003: 92). *Objective poverty* refers to conditions caused by external factors, while *subjective poverty* is shaped by individual perceptions and preferences (Lok and Dessallin, 1995: 2–3; Aktan, 2002: 45). *Income poverty* denotes a lack of income, whereas *human poverty* refers to exclusion from social participation and access to opportunities (O'Boyle, 1990: 2–17). Scientifically, the term "poor" encompasses individuals whose income and living standards fall below acceptable norms (Ala, 2009: 2).

In studies conducted in the United States, poverty has often been linked to laziness or disability, associating the poor with an unwillingness or inability to work. However, the increasing number of working individuals among the poor led to the emergence of the concept of the "working poor" (Seçer, 2005: 139). These individuals dedicate their most productive hours to work, yet struggle to maintain a sustainable livelihood with their earnings (Gündoğan, Biçerli, and Aydın, 2005: 2). Factors such as age, education level, the existence of a reserve labour force, and migration are among the contributors to working poverty (Buğra, 2008: 3).

While micro-level causes of poverty include economic inadequacy, old age, disability, lack of skills, criminal records, and being left alone due to death or divorce, macro-level causes include a failing economy, unemployment, unfair income distribution, drought, famine, natural disasters, political and economic instability, a mismatch between education and labour markets, a non-productive population, inflation, population growth, and migration. Migration has at times been the cause of poverty and at other times its consequence (Aydın and Türgay, 2011: 253; Shepard, 1978: 217).

The relationship between poverty and migration has been examined through various lenses, including migrant poverty, working poverty, and urban poverty. Migration driven by poverty has often led to the emergence of urban poverty at the destination. From the perspective of relational sociology, the causes and consequences of migration vary. While poverty can initiate migration, forced migration resulting from war, disasters, and famine can itself become a driver of poverty (Bayhan, 1997).

Migration is broadly defined as a significant and impactful act of relocation. While voluntary migration is often driven by labour market needs in developed countries and later reinforced by family reunification, forced mass migration is a form of human mobility (Erder, 2000: 9). Thus, migration is generally classified as either *voluntary* or *forced* and as either *temporary* or *permanent* (Chomsky, 2007: 7). Voluntary migration is

driven by individuals' desire for better living standards (Castles and Miller, 2003: 31), while forced migration is the result of compulsion due to political unrest, civil war, famine, or natural disasters (Duruel, 2017: 208).

Globally, approximately 90% of migration occurs for economic reasons, while 10% seek asylum due to persecution or violence (Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2019: 1). Forced migration gained prominence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1939, just before World War II (Sarvimäki, Uusitalo, and Jäntti, 2009). Consequently, efforts to protect and support forced migrants became a priority in the first half of the 20th century (Loescher, Betts, and Milner, 2008: 1).

In the international literature, the concept of forced migration is both broad and complex. Terms such as *refugee* and *asylum seeker* are commonly used. However, with globalisation and the spread of neoliberal policies in the 1990s, an increase in global migration flows gave rise to the term “*people on the move*,” reflecting the scale of displacement (Crisp, 2009: 73–76).

Refugee movements globally fall into two categories: planned and sudden. *Planned refugee movements* involve individuals who anticipate political unrest and carefully prepare to move to another country. In contrast, *sudden refugee movements* occur when people are forced to flee urgently without prior planning, typically to neighbouring countries, with the hope of returning once normalcy is restored (Kunz, 1978: 131–132).

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), approximately 150 million people migrated between 1965 and 2000. This number rose to 173 million in 2000, 220 million in 2010, 258 million in 2017, and 272 million in 2020—marking the 21st century as the “age of migration” (Kobler and Lattes, 2017).

The population of forced migrants rose from 2.4 million in 1975 to 10.5 million in 1985, 14.9 million in 1990, and 18.2 million in 1993. While the global refugee population decreased to 12.1 million by 2000 following the end of the Cold War, it rose again to 25.9 million refugees and 70.8 million displaced persons by 2020 (UNHCR, 2020).

According to the 2018 IOM data, there were 25.9 million refugees worldwide, 52% of whom were under the age of 18. Syria ranked first among the source countries, with 6.1 million forcibly displaced individuals, followed by Colombia (5.8 million) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (3.1 million). Of the 17 million displaced children worldwide, approximately 13 million had refugee status (IOM, 2020: 10).

For the past two decades, most forced displacements caused by conflict, war, and persecution have originated in the Middle East and Africa. Among the 13.1 million displaced Syrians, 6.6 million were relocated internally, while 6.5 million sought refuge in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Libya, Jordan, Iran, and Egypt. Turkey granted *temporary protection status* to 3.6 million Syrians (UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/suriye-acil-durumu>, Accessed: July 8, 2020).

## Syrians Under Temporary Protection in Turkey: By Numbers

The Arab Spring, which began in 2010, eventually engulfed Syria in a civil war. By 2015, the intensification of the conflict had deprived 8.7 million Syrians of access to necessities such as food and shelter, while 5.7 million children were denied access to basic education. In the conflict zones, 58% of the local health facilities and 49% of primary healthcare centres ceased functioning, forcing many Syrians to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. In total, 13.5 million people sought safety in secure zones (UNHCR Syria End of Year Report 2015, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/editorial/2016/2/56cad5a99/unhcr-syria-2015-end-of-year-report.html?query=syria>). While half of the population was displaced internally, the other half fled to neighbouring countries. This mass and unregulated migration from Syria marked one of the most significant humanitarian crises in recent history. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described this wave as “the largest refugee crisis in recent history” (Erdoğan, 2016: 69).



According to the UNHCR's 2024 data, Turkey ranks first among countries hosting Syrian refugees. Among the nations most affected by the economic and social consequences of the Syrian conflict, Turkey—Syria's longest border neighbour, with a 911-kilometer shared boundary—has been the most impacted (UNCHR, 2025; İçduygu and Aksel, 2012: 21). This process rapidly transformed Turkey into the world's leading refugee-hosting country (Korkmaz, 2017: 58).

In April 2011, the first group of 252 Syrians crossed the border into Turkey ([http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/6/gecici-koruma\\_363\\_378\\_4713\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik), Accessed: December 31, 2024). As the unrest in Syria continued, the number of Syrians entering Turkey through border crossings increased significantly. While the numbers were in the thousands in 2012 and 2013, the escalation of violence in 2014 and the implementation of the open-door policy led to a surge in Syrian entries, reaching millions. According to data from the Presidency of Migration Management (DGMM) as of May 2025, the number of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey stands at 2,762,889.

Syrians currently reside in all 81 provinces of Turkey, particularly in the border cities and major metropolitan areas. Due to the prolonged lack of security in Syria, the "temporary" nature of their stay in Turkey has become indefinite. As job opportunities diminished in the border provinces, Syrians began migrating towards larger cities in search of better economic prospects (<http://www.ihd.org.tr/images/pdf/2013/YokSayilanlar.pdf>, Accessed: January 20, 2025).

Among Turkish cities, Istanbul hosts the largest number of Syrians, followed by Gaziantep, Hatay, and Şanlıurfa. According to the DGMM's May 2025 data, Istanbul is home to 542,782 Syrians under temporary protection.

The perception of Istanbul as offering greater employment opportunities and better living conditions than other provinces, along with the belief that they would face less discrimination in a large, diverse metropolis, has led many Syrians to choose the city as a destination. Nearly one-third of all work permit applications from Syrians under temporary protection originate from Istanbul (Çoban, 2018: 202). Although Syrians live across all 39 districts of Istanbul, they show a strong preference for the European side. Approximately 85% of the Syrian population in Istanbul resides on the European side, while 15% live on the Asian side (Erdoğan, 2017; Gülerce and Demir, 2021: 198).

In the early years of their migration, many Syrians did not have work permits. Consequently, they were employed under poor conditions, lacking job security, social insurance, state protection, or the support of labour organisations. Their work was irregular, insecure, and underpaid (Özkul and Kanyılmaz, 2012: 1). The Temporary Protection Regulation introduced in 2014, followed by the International Labour Force Law No. 6735 enacted on August 13, 2016, granted individuals under temporary protection the right to obtain residence permits and work legally. These legal arrangements represent the most concrete regulations governing the employment of Syrians under temporary protection. According to the regulation, Syrians may work in the province where they received their temporary protection identification cards (Korkmaz, 2017: 58).

Another significant reform introduced by the labour law is the "Turquoise Card" system. This card is designed to attract highly qualified foreign workers and international investors who contribute to Turkey's development, particularly in the fields of science, industry, and technology. The Turquoise Card provides holders with the same rights as a permanent work permit (Sağiroğlu, 2016: 65).

Between the implementation of the Temporary Protection Regulation and October 2015, Syrians under temporary protection were not legally allowed to work or be employed. In 2011, only 118 Syrians were issued work permits. This number rose to 220 in 2012, 794 in 2013, and 2,541 in 2014. After the legal reform in 2015, allowing temporary protection beneficiaries to work legally, the number of work permits increased. However,

despite a Syrian population exceeding 3 million, only about 60,000 legal work permits were issued, forcing the majority into informal labour markets.

To meet basic needs such as shelter and food, Syrian families often adopted a survival strategy where every working-age family member joined the labour force. In Istanbul, Syrians are mainly employed in low-skilled, physically demanding jobs. Informal sectors dominate the employment landscape. The main industries include textiles, manufacturing, and construction. Many also work in skilled trades such as shoemaking and barbering. Women often contribute to the household economy through domestic labour or work in textile workshops, while children frequently engage in street vending, begging, or shoe polishing (İNGEV, 2017).

In the border regions, the influx of Syrians was associated with rising unemployment rates. Turkish citizens in these areas often engage in seasonal labour in nearby provinces, a pattern replicated by many Syrians. Additionally, some Syrians have opened small businesses such as barbershops and grocery stores. In the construction industry, Syrians often accept lower wages as they live on-site, incurring no housing costs. They typically work in physically demanding and unskilled roles, while more specialised tasks are reserved for Turkish workers (Boyras, 2015: 52).

In agriculture, Syrians are commonly employed in planting, hoeing, harvesting, and other seasonal tasks. Their wages are generally lower than those of the local workers. Outside agriculture, they also work in construction, manufacturing, and textiles—usually in low-skilled jobs avoided by local labour (Özdemir, 2015: 1).

Before the war, only 10% to 20% of women in Syria participated in the workforce. Their limited education and professional skills made employment difficult. These challenges persist in Turkey, particularly in the border provinces where unemployment rates are high and language barriers persist. In agricultural provinces like Adana and Mersin, women's participation in agricultural labour is around 7%–8%, but it drops to 1%–2% in urban centres (Sönmez and Mete, 2015: 239).

## Field Research

### Methodology

With the ongoing instability in Syria, the duration of Syrians' stay in Turkey has exceeded a decade. Over time, their needs have evolved and become more complex. Millions of Syrians who arrived without making long-term plans are now struggling to survive under difficult living and working conditions. The absence of work permits until 2016 led to widespread informal employment. Many lacked sufficient capital, were unable to liquidate their assets in Syria, and could not validate their diplomas or credentials in Turkey. Consequently, they were forced to continue their lives under poor socio-economic conditions. It has been argued that Syrian migrants form the lowest stratum of the Turkish labour market (Akbaş and Ünlütürk Ulutaş, 2018; Mutlu et al., 2018).

While several academic studies have examined the poverty of Syrian migrants in border provinces, there is a scarcity of research focusing on Istanbul, despite it being home to a significant portion of the Syrian population. This study aims to fill that gap.

The research focuses on Istanbul, the province with the highest concentration of Syrians under temporary protection. The study was conducted in neighbourhoods where Syrians both reside and participate in the labour market. Businesses were selected using a random sampling method, and interviews were conducted with both employers and employees. A total of 40 Syrian men participated in the in-depth interviews. Due

to cultural reasons, including reluctance and hesitancy among female participants, as well as the predominance of male entrepreneurs and workers in the target population, all interviewees were male.

A qualitative approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of emerging research areas (Şimşek and Yıldırım, 2011). Although the research was initially intended to begin in 2017, a lack of Turkish language proficiency among Syrians and their distrust towards interviews hindered progress. Data collection was completed between June 1 and August 30, 2019, during which the participants showed improved integration, increased trust, and better command of Turkish. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using simultaneous coding. The qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA was used to identify common themes. Demographic data and similar responses were grouped and coded, transforming qualitative insights into quantifiable patterns.

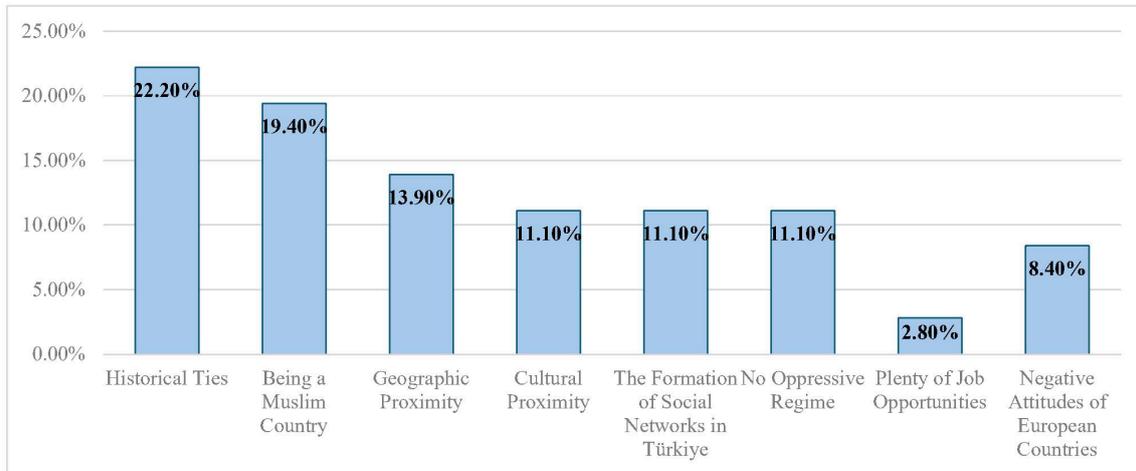
## Findings

All interviewees were male, with educational backgrounds ranging from primary school to university. Their ages ranged between 21 and 65 years, and they had resided in Istanbul for an average of 3 to 8 years. Most had lived in Syrian cities such as Aleppo, Hama, and Damascus before migrating, suggesting that proximity to the Turkish border and Turkey's open-door policy played significant roles in their decision to relocate.

From the perspective of migration theory, both *pull* and *push* factors were evident in the participants' narratives. Pull factors include strong historical ties between Syria and Turkey, a sense of cultural and religious affinity, and the presence of family members in Turkey. Participants often referred to themselves as "descendants of the Ottomans," viewing national borders as artificial and Turkey as an extension of their homeland. The belief in the possibility of returning to Syria postconflict also influenced their decision. Conversely, the escalation of the conflict, destruction of infrastructure, and economic collapse in Syria served as strong push factors.

When asked why they chose to migrate, participants commonly cited fear of conscription, concern over indefinite military service, and a desire to remain neutral in a multi-faction conflict. Many fled to the border countries, hoping that the conflict would end soon. The inability to access basic services, security threats, and deteriorating living conditions were also cited as reasons for forced migration.

most participants reported making their migration decisions hastily, with limited planning. Location choice was primarily influenced by social networks and geographic proximity to the border. Only a few had visited Istanbul before the war, and their knowledge of the city came mostly from relatives, cultural media, or symbolic events such as the Mavi Marmara flotilla.

**Figure 1***Reasons for Syrian Participants to Choose Turkey*

In [Figure 1](#)., when examining the reasons why Syrian participants prefer Turkey, the following factors emerge: historical ties between Turkey and Syria (22.2%), Turkey being a Muslim country (19.4%), geographical proximity (13.9%), cultural proximity (11.1%), the existence of social networks in Turkey (11.1%), the absence of an oppressive regime and the belief that they can live freely here (11.1%), the negative attitudes of European Union countries towards migration, including actions such as sinking boats and anti-immigrant rhetoric (8.4%), and the greater availability of job opportunities in Turkey compared to other alternative countries (2.8%).

Some participants explained their preference for Turkey over Europe by citing its religious and cultural compatibility. They expressed concerns over child welfare in Europe, claiming that Syrian children were taken from their families and placed in state custody or with unrelated families—situations they deemed unacceptable.

One participant shared:

*“We had no position left to stay in Syria. We had two options—come to Turkey or migrate to a European country. “Germany seemed attractive, but the lifestyle there does not align with our family values as Muslims.”*

Although some acknowledged that Europe offered better social benefits and income potential, concerns over strict regulations, delayed retirement, and long working hours were deterrents. Others believed they would be perceived not as victims, but as exploitable labour in Europe:

*“Even if Europe opens its doors, I wouldn’t go.” They don’t take us in for humanitarian reasons. They just want to exploit us. With their ageing populations, they need cheap labour, and people like us—unskilled and war-affected—are ideal for that.”*

Participants shared that before the war, they lived comfortably in Syria but were forced to migrate unprepared. Over time, the hope of returning faded, and despite being employed, they could not escape poverty. Contrary to public belief, many were educated and skilled, yet were unable to validate their qualifications and were forced into low-paying, underqualified jobs. To investigate their standard of living and the

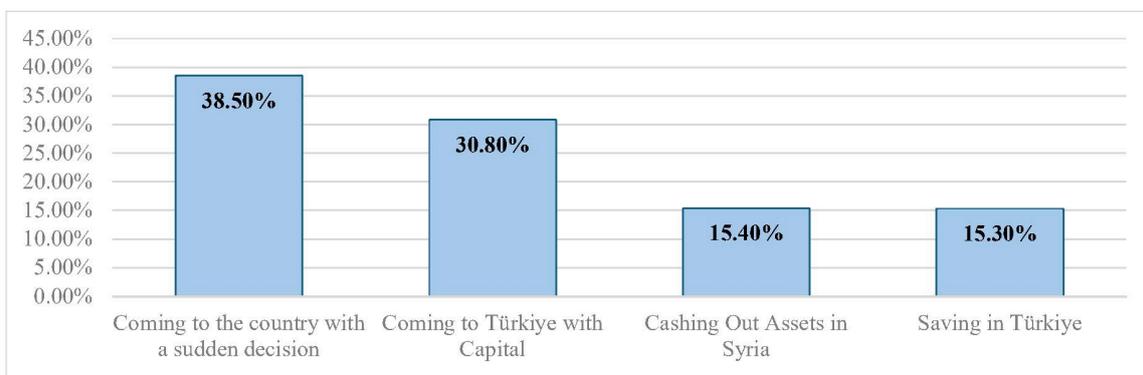
causes of poverty, five core themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: inability to plan migration, bureaucratic obstacles, inadequate employment opportunities, high economic burdens, and social barriers.

### Unplanned Migration

The root of the many challenges faced by Syrians in Turkey lies in their inability to plan their migration process. While some Syrians foresaw the dangers during the early stages of the Arab Spring in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen and were able to liquidate assets and migrate to safer destinations, the majority of participants in this study reported that they came to Turkey only as a last resort. Many assumed that the unrest in Syria would be temporary and thus did not develop contingency plans. As the conflict escalated, they fled to the border camps with only a few valuable belongings, driven by the urgent need for safety.

**Figure 2**

*Indicators of Unplanned Migration*



According to [Figure 2.](#), 38% of the participants identified their sudden decision to migrate as the primary cause of their hardships. Forced migration and displacement, by their very nature, prevent individuals from planning adequately, often resulting in legal, economic, social, and psychological difficulties (Skeldon, 2006: 39). When analysing the economic roots of their challenges, 30.8% mentioned that they had to liquidate their businesses or properties in Syria at extremely low prices, arriving in Turkey with insufficient capital. Many had left behind real estate, machinery, or business assets, and they stated that their impoverishment began during the war, not after migration. Furthermore, 15.4% of participants explained that the prolonged stay in Turkey depleted their initial savings, forcing them to sell their remaining assets in Syria at significantly reduced prices. Another 15.4% reported receiving financial support from relatives or friends to start small businesses, and viewed entrepreneurship as a survival strategy. The majority agreed that the chaos of the war had destroyed their wealth and livelihoods.

*“Before the war, we owned a textile factory in Syria. The business was thriving. But when the war broke out, production stopped, expenses rose, and we started consuming our savings. When the situation worsened, we had no choice but to flee the country.”*

Another participant shared:

*“As the war intensified and our living space shrank, we liquidated our businesses and sold everything we could in Syria. We arrived in Turkey with \$1 million, but our assets back home were worth far more.”*

Furthermore, another remarked:

*“We sold everything at far below market value, hoping it would be enough to buy a home or open a business in Turkey.” We still have property in Syria, but it has no value—no one wants to buy, so it’s useless to us.”*

In economically driven migrations, poverty typically triggers migration. However, in cases of forced migration due to war or political instability, poverty tends to follow migration (Light, 1972: 210). Many participants stated that before the war, they had lived comfortable lives. The war not only displaced them but also plunged them into poverty. Many initially believed their displacement would be temporary, but as the situation dragged on, they struggled without proper planning.

*“I came here with very limited money.” Turkey’s open-door policy allowed me to enter. I first stayed in Kilis, then moved to Bursa, and eventually to Istanbul. The poverty I experienced pushed me from one place to another.”*

Another participant reflected:

*“The war broke out suddenly. I had to abandon my education. I had no profession, no language skills, nothing... In this situation, being an unskilled labourer was my only option.”*

Participants who arrived with capital or had been business owners in Syria expressed a desire to become entrepreneurs in Turkey. Limited employment opportunities for foreigners often drove them to open small businesses, despite heavy expenses and debts. These individuals leveraged their social and human capital to build new enterprises (Ostgaard and Birley, 1996: 40).

*“For the first year and a half, I worked as a teacher at an NGO in Hatay. It was manageable because I planned to return to Syria. But as time continued and my hopes of returning faded, I moved to Istanbul, borrowed money from friends, and opened a small shop in Fatih.”*

Tekten Aksürmeli and Sağlam in Gaziantep investigated household survival strategies among the urban poor, comparing locals and Syrian migrants. Both groups employed similar coping mechanisms, but while locals relied on rural ties, migrants were more likely to move to larger cities to increase their income (Tekten Aksürmeli and Sağlam, 2021: 800).

*“The war worsened and everything was destroyed.” We contacted friends in Turkey, left everything behind, and came with just one bag. It was very hard. We didn’t know the country, didn’t speak the language, and had no money. We first stayed in border cities, but it didn’t work out. Eventually, we moved to Istanbul, borrowed money, and I started street vending.”*

Similar findings were reported by Artar (2018) in a study conducted in the Dikmen district of Ankara, where Syrian refugees described their emotional states, expectations, social exclusion, and survival strategies. The increasing cost of living and dissatisfaction among locals in the border areas pushed many Syrians towards cities like Ankara. Another study by Bakioğlu (2018) in Altındağ, Ankara, found that refugees were motivated to move to bigger cities by the prospect of cheaper rent, household goods, and more job opportunities.

One participant stated:

*“We used to run a textile business in Syria. But after the factory was bombed, everything was gone. Because we had acquaintances in Turkey and wanted a better future for our children, we came to Istanbul. Other Arab countries were just as unstable. The safest option was to move north—and that meant Turkey. We thought the war would end soon, but it’s been five years and nothing has changed.”*

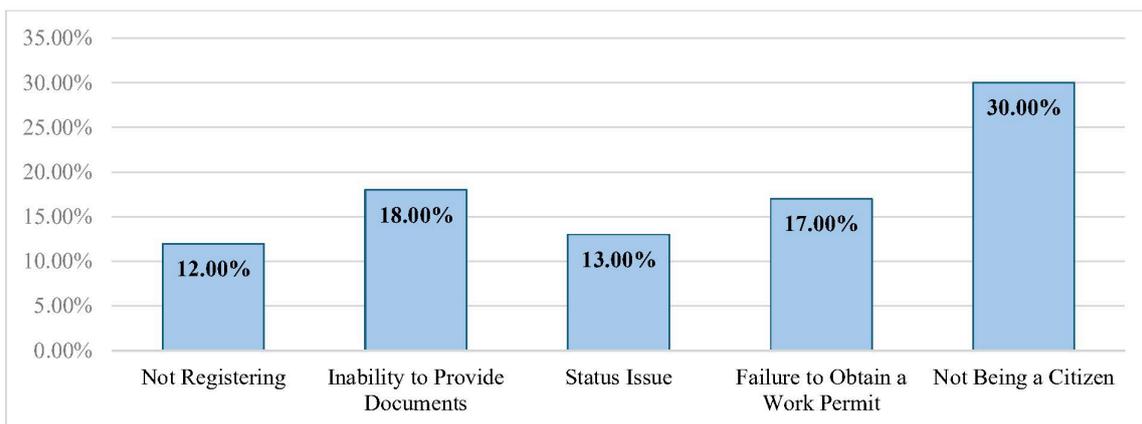
Most participants initially viewed Turkey as a temporary stop, hoping to return to Syria. However, as time passed, they were forced to take on debt, seek aid, liquidate assets at low prices, and work under exploitative conditions. These economic hardships left them vulnerable to deepening poverty. Cernea’s study supports this: in India, approximately 20 million displaced individuals over the age of 40 were reported to live in poverty (Cernea, 2000: 12).

### Bureaucratic Obstacles

Although biometric registration was initially carried out for Syrians entering Turkey in 2011, the rapid influx of thousands of asylum seekers soon overwhelmed the system, and registration processes became inconsistent. The unplanned nature of migration and congestion at border crossings led to significant bureaucratic challenges for Syrians in Turkey.

**Figure 3**

*Bureaucratic Barriers Faced by Syrians in Turkey*



Participants emphasised several key bureaucratic obstacles that contributed to their poverty and exclusion. Chief among these were their inability to acquire citizenship (30%), failure to validate educational or professional documents (18%), lack of work permits (17%), ongoing status uncertainty (13%), and challenges in registering with public authorities (12%).

Official registration is essential for the protection of refugees and migrants, enabling access to social rights, legal employment, and public services. Initially, registration processes were relatively accessible for Syrians in Turkey. However, as their numbers surged, the registration capacity diminished. While those residing in refugee camps were eventually registered, many outside the camps remained undocumented. Reasons for avoiding registration included a lack of information, scepticism about its benefits, and hopes of migrating to Europe—leading many to intentionally remain invisible to the Turkish system (Velieçoğlu Yonca, 2014: 29–30). Consequently, unregistered individuals face higher costs for healthcare, education, communication, and transportation, further worsening their poverty.

One participant described the consequences of not having proper identification:

*“One of the most expensive things for us in Turkey is transportation because we don’t have IDs. To minimise travel costs, we rent houses close to our workplaces. Many of my friends even sleep in the warehouses where they work.”*

In addition to being undocumented, many participants cited the inability to obtain Turkish citizenship or valid passports as a major constraint. These bureaucratic limitations restrict their mobility and economic autonomy. Without citizenship, they cannot fully access financial institutions, limiting their employment and investment opportunities.

*“If we were granted citizenship, we would work tirelessly—both for ourselves and for Turkey.” Syrians are entrepreneurial by nature and more willing to take risks. We would even work 16 hours a day if necessary because right now we cannot afford any idle time.”*

Another critical issue was the lack of recognition for diplomas and professional qualifications obtained in Syria. This prevented participants from working in their original fields and forced them into underemployment:

*“In Syria, I worked in design and earned around 30,000 TL per month. But here, I couldn’t continue in my profession. I used my limited savings to open a small nut shop. “Business is slow, and I’m living off my savings.”*

Because their educational and professional credentials were not accepted in Turkey, many Syrians were employed in jobs far below their qualifications. Some were unfamiliar with the job application procedures, while others lacked access to official employment channels. As a result, they were forced to work in fields unrelated to their training, increasing the likelihood of inefficiency and workplace accidents (ILO, 2016: 5).

*“If I could become a citizen here, I would open a shop selling and repairing electronics.” “I already have the skills, but without citizenship, I cannot get loans or grow my business.”*

Syrian entrepreneurs and investors also encountered specific bureaucratic hurdles, particularly in dealing with financial institutions and regulatory bodies. They faced difficulties in opening bank accounts, transferring large sums of money, and applying for loans. Their lack of citizenship or refugee status further restricted their economic options. Another challenge was the inconsistent implementation of legal regulations across different regions or government offices. The lack of guidance and support services for navigating the Turkish bureaucracy created inefficiencies and inequalities in access to services (ILO, 2016: 5).

*“Right now, I sell about 100 kilogrammes of baklava per month domestically. We can sell 3 to 5 tons, but without citizenship, we face too many limitations.”*

In contexts where migrants are excluded from the labour market, capital accumulation becomes critically important. However, migrants face additional barriers to accumulating and mobilising capital, especially when they lack citizenship or recognised legal status. Blanchflower and Oswald (1998: 40) found that immigrant entrepreneurs often rely on inheritance or personal savings for startup capital, as formal financial systems are largely inaccessible to them.

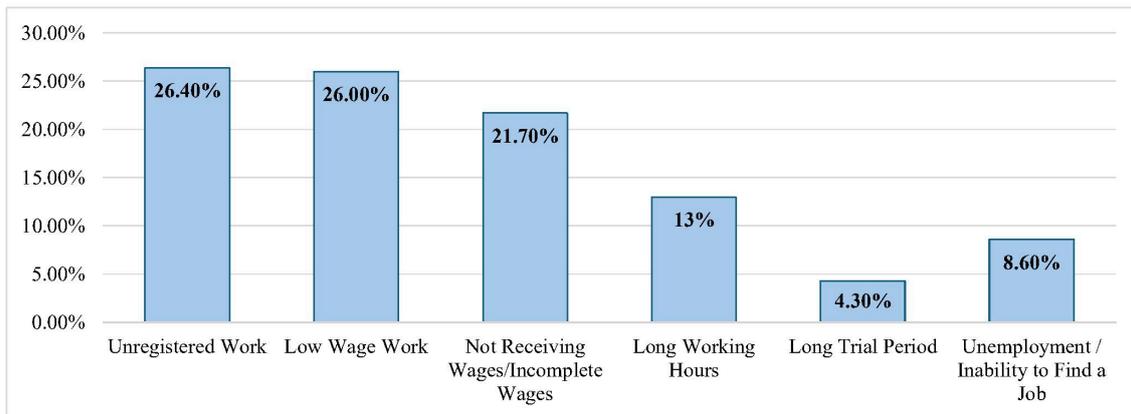
### Inadequate Employment Opportunities

A significant proportion of Syrians in Turkey work under poor conditions and for very low wages. Consequently, even though they are employed, they remain trapped in poverty. When participants were asked about the main problems they faced in working life, limited employment opportunities and unemployment ranked highest.

Due to factors such as language barriers, lack of recognised documentation, and the inability to prove their education or professional background, Syrians were often forced to accept unfavourable and exploitative working conditions.

**Figure 4**

*Limited Employment Opportunities*



According to [Figure 4.](#), the most frequently mentioned employment challenges were informal employment (26.4%), low wages (26%), non-payment or underpayment of wages (21.7%), long working hours (13%), long-term unemployment (8.6%), and prolonged probation periods (4.3%). These poor working conditions leave many Syrians with no alternative but to accept poverty. A study by Koçak, Ekmen, and Eti (2019) conducted in Istanbul's Beylikdüzü district found that Syrians were mostly employed in irregular, part-time jobs with no social security. They typically worked 6–7 days a week, for more than 8 hours a day, and received wages far below the average. The findings demonstrated that, under such conditions, it is almost impossible for migrants to escape poverty (Aydemir, Iştar Işıklı and Özmen, 2019: 60).

One participant shared:

*“At first, I worked in the textile sector. Employers kept saying, ‘We’ll try you out first, then sign a contract’. But during the trial period, they didn’t pay us at all. We worked for 3–4 weeks, then they replaced us with others—because there were so many people desperate for jobs.”*

Another participant highlighted the issue of excessive working hours with no compensation:

*“In Syria, I used to work 8 hours a day. Here, I work 12 hours and earn even less. We work seven days a week, and when we ask for extra pay, the employer says, ‘You sit when there are no customers—that’s your break.’”*

A vulnerability assessment by Kaya and Kırac (2016) also confirmed that many Syrians in Istanbul worked informally, particularly in the construction, agriculture, and textile sectors. According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, only 140,310 Syrians were issued work permits between 2011 and

2020. Considering that Turkey hosts over 3 million Syrians, this suggests that a vast majority are forced to work without legal protections (Dedeoğlu and Şahankaya Adar, 2016: 28). Many participants in this study confirmed that they worked informally and could not benefit from the social security system, which made their lives more expensive and their future uncertain.

Kutlu (2015) reported similar findings. Syrians were heavily employed in agriculture, construction, textiles, and heavy industry. These were low-paying jobs, physically demanding, and generally avoided by Turkish workers. Moreover, Syrians often did not receive the wages they were promised, and many did not even know how much they would be paid when hired.

This research, along with the existing literature, shows that most Syrians in Turkey work under informal, insecure, and underpaid conditions. These factors significantly contribute to their continued poverty.

As one participant described:

*“We are four brothers. In every job we’ve had, we were either severely underpaid or not paid at all. Eventually, we decided to open our shop and started making traditional breads, lahmacun, and other regional baked goods.”*

Another participant explained that harsh working conditions led him to view entrepreneurship as the only way out of poverty:

*“I was never paid properly.” I worked long hours—12 to 13 hours a day—without any social security. Still, my earnings were not enough to survive. That’s why I decided to open a small shop and try to save myself.”*

In short, Syrians who were unable to find work that matched their skills or qualifications and who were forced to work under exploitative conditions were often driven towards entrepreneurship. Shinnar and Young (2008: 242–262) argued that migrants excluded from the host country’s labour market see entrepreneurship as a path out of poverty.

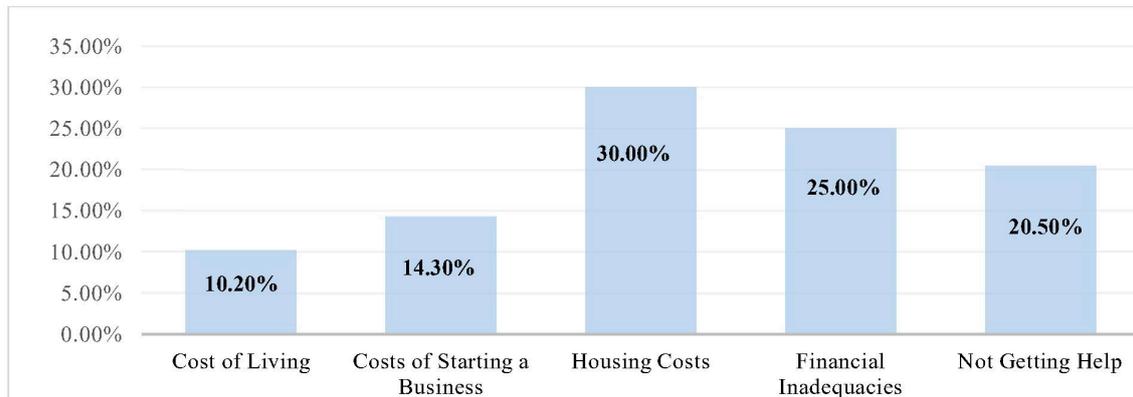
Similar findings were reported by Akbaş and Ulutaş in a study conducted in Denizli. Most participants held high school or university degrees, yet they had to work in completely unrelated fields in Turkey. A Syrian barber was employed as an unskilled worker in furniture manufacturing, while a plaster and woodwork specialist worked in general construction. One participant said his wife, a French teacher, could not find a job in education. Another, who had been a pharmacist in Syria, was working in construction and textiles in Turkey. He eventually opened a small shop selling phone accessories to escape poverty (Akbaş and Ulutaş, 2018: 182).

These findings suggest that migrant entrepreneurship is often a necessity-driven strategy aimed at improving working conditions and overcoming poverty.

### **Excessive Economic Burdens**

As the number of Syrians in Turkey exceeded expectations and the capacity of the refugee camps, many were forced to live outside these facilities. This shift brought significant financial challenges as they tried to establish a new life in an unfamiliar environment.

**Figure 5**  
Economic Burdens Faced by Syrians in Turkey



Participants frequently emphasised that establishing a new life in Turkey was economically demanding. Many noted that they did not previously have to pay for housing or workplaces in Syria and that leaving their properties behind or being unable to liquidate their assets significantly increased their financial hardships. Among the economic burdens expressed, the most frequently mentioned was housing costs (30%), especially high rents. For those who were self-employed or ran small businesses, the cost of starting a business added to the housing burden. Many reported experiencing material deprivation (25%) and indicated that they received little or no assistance (20%). Those who did receive help said it mostly came from friends, relatives, or members of their community in the form of cash or in-kind support (Coşkun, 2016: 94; Dora and Erdoğan, 2023).

One participant stated:

*“We were financially very comfortable before. My father had a factory. After the war began, we lost everything. Life used to be good... Now, everything is expensive, and we work as hard as we can just survive.”*

Many participants said that they owned homes, cars, and businesses in Syria. They used to live without having to pay for many basic needs, but now in Turkey, they must pay for everything—and sometimes even more than the local population. This “reset” of life from zero created immense financial strain.

*“Starting a business here is very costly. With rent taxes and other expenses, I’ve paid 300,000 Turkish lira in taxes over five years. For someone starting from the beginning, that’s overwhelming.”*

Another participant shared how even basic goods were expensive compared to Syria:

*“Turkey is expensive for us.” Back in Syria, we lived very comfortably on \$1,000 a month. Here, we barely survive on \$1,500. We are always thinking about tomorrow. Our anxiety about the future is constant.”*

Many Syrians mentioned that renting a home was particularly difficult because of widespread prejudice among landlords, who charged them more due to their refugee status. In addition to rent, high utility bills and the cost of food—especially compared to Syria—were major financial burdens. To cope with high rents, many participants reported sharing their homes with relatives, friends, or other families. When asked who they shared their households with, 30.8% said they lived with relatives, 23.1% with their nuclear family, 23.1% with friends, 15.4% with extended family, and 7.7% lived alone.

One participant explained:

*“We share the house with relatives.” Two families live in the same house. Since our wives don’t work, the income of both men goes towards covering expenses. One pays rent and bills, the other covers groceries.”*

Most participants were employed in jobs far below their skill levels and received low wages. Some noted that having more than one working family member helped them manage rising expenses and bills. One common strategy for dealing with poverty was to cut consumption and avoid any non-essential spending—similar to what has been observed among low-income Turkish households as well (Ersoy, 2006: 27).

A participant described this situation:

*“We receive social assistance, but not in cash. The government provides my daughter with school supplies such as bags and notebooks every semester. Sometimes we get coal support. We have a natural gas heater, but it’s too expensive, so we use coal or just bundle up in blankets. We only buy what is necessary for the kitchen. In summer, we eat apples, in winter, oranges. We cannot afford anything else...”*

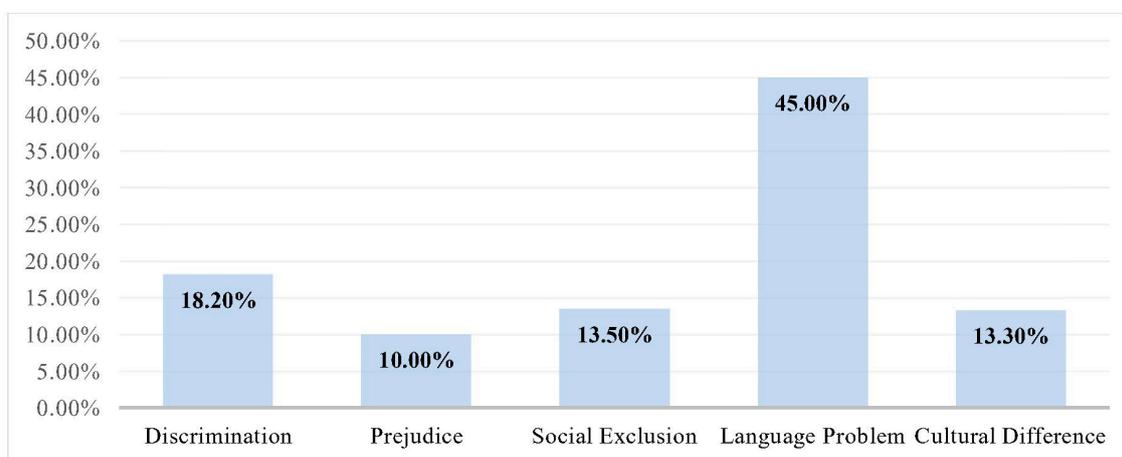
Most of the interview participants stated that since they were single, they did not receive aid, and that such assistance was mostly given to married families with many children. For many Syrians, receiving aid is perceived as a difficult process requiring numerous procedures. Not being registered brings various financial burdens and hardships. Regarding this issue, one participant said:

*“Since I don’t have an ID, I cannot benefit from anything and I cannot receive aid.” In the beginning, I didn’t want to register here and be labelled because we thought we would return, so I didn’t register. But now it’s been about six years, and recently my phone was stolen, but I couldn’t even claim my rights because I didn’t exist in the system here.”*

### Presence of Social Barriers

In addition to bureaucratic challenges, unplanned migration, and economic difficulties, social barriers significantly contribute to the deepening poverty experienced by Syrians in Turkey. Participants reported various forms of discrimination, exclusion, and prejudice that negatively affected their psychological well-being and integration into society.

**Figure 6**  
Social Barriers Encountered by Syrians



In Figure 6., one of the greatest obstacles preventing Syrians from benefiting from opportunities for social integration and employment is undoubtedly the language barrier (45%). Experiencing discrimination (18.2%), social exclusion (13.5%), cultural differences (13.3%), and prejudices against migrants (10%) pose challenges to their integration into society and hinder them from realising their potential.

For migrants, not being able to speak the official language of the host country causes numerous difficulties, starting with employment. Indeed, migrants facing language barriers are often paid less than other employees doing the same job or are employed in positions that require more physical labour and involve minimal human interaction. A similar finding was presented in a study by Taş, Küçükoğlu, and Menteşe in 2016. In this research, questions were asked about the working lives of Syrians and the challenges they face in Turkey. Among the Syrian participants, 57% identified the language barrier as the biggest problem in working life. Meanwhile, 43% stated that the language problem not only hinders social communication but also leads to issues such as unemployment, low wages, long working hours, not receiving payment, or receiving it late or incompletely (Taş, Küçükoğlu and Menteşe, 2016: 270).

Another reason for poverty among Syrians is the cultural tendency to position women within the household. Income-generating activities are mostly carried out by men, and Syrian families generally present a single-income family profile. Syrian women who work are mostly employed in jobs such as childcare, elder-care, or cleaning. In places where the service sector is widespread, they support dual-income households by performing day-to-day tasks. Due to security concerns, women are often reluctant to work. The absence of women from the workforce is one of the reasons for low household income (Özkarslı, 2015: 184; Aktaş, 2016: 45).

One participant expressed this as follows:

*“I work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, and I can only earn 2,000 Lire. I do all kinds of hard labour, and this is all I can manage. If my wife wanted to work, what could she do? Even Syrian men have trouble finding jobs. Furthermore, if they work, who will take care of the children or the elderly at home?”*

According to research conducted by the Development Workshop on Syrian Dom migrants, Syrian women have entered the labour market in cases where men were unable to find jobs or when there was no one in the household to provide for the family (Kalkınma Atölyesi, 2016). Syrian women largely work in the informal sector. In areas with a high reserve labour force, women are more likely to be affected by job insecurity. For the precariat, the term “immaterial labour” has been used more frequently. This definition has been applied more explicitly to migrant women (Casas-Cortés, 2014: 213).

Syrian women mostly work informally in the textile, ready-made clothing, agriculture, and service sectors. They are often employed in low-status, uninsured, and low-paid jobs such as domestic work, household care services, factory work, and positions in the entertainment industry (Williams, Coşkun and Kaşka, 2020: 3). The economic loss caused by informal employment is greater for Syrian women. Syrians experience a double disadvantage, both as women and as migrants. Migrant women are often paid significantly less than both migrant men and local women in the sectors where they are employed (Şenses, 2020: 49). Language barriers and cultural differences have placed Syrians in a disadvantaged position in the labour market.

One participant stated:

*“At first, I worked in the textile sector. The employers always told us, ‘We will try you out first, we will see, and then we will make a contract,’ but during the trial period, they didn’t pay us anything. We never*

*received compensation for our labour. They made us work for three or four weeks, and then they tried someone else for free. After all, there were plenty of alternatives—so many people looking for jobs...*

The increasing number of Syrians in the labour market day by day strengthens the reserve army of labour. In addition to keeping those employed under pressure, the reserve army of labour creates competition among the unemployed (Akpınar, 2009: 20). In Turkey, Syrians—who make up a large portion of the reserve labour force—are excluded on the grounds that they drive wages down and cause unemployment (Adar, 2018: 24). Competition between classes pushes back the rights previously gained by all workers. The presence of Syrians in the labour market as a reserve labour force not only fuels competition but also subjects Syrians to discrimination and exclusion in the labour market (Kahraman and Nizam, 2016: 817; Özbay and Karaca, 2025: 721).

The majority of participants indicated that they initially felt a warm welcome when they arrived in Turkey, particularly due to their religious and cultural affinity. However, over time, negative media portrayals, political rhetoric, and economic tension led to a shift in public perception. Syrians began to feel increasingly marginalised and targeted.

*“We were welcomed at first, especially during the war. But now, people are becoming more hostile. They look at us differently. They think we’re here to steal their jobs or get free benefits.”*

Participants reported being frequently stereotyped, often accused of being "lazy," "ungrateful," or "privileged." Some said they avoided speaking Arabic in public or socialising in large groups to avoid negative attention.

*“When I speak Arabic on the street, people stare at me or even insult me.” Once, someone told me to go back to my country. I didn’t even respond.”*

Several participants also described experiencing hostility or even physical violence. These encounters created a climate of fear and distrust, especially among those living in neighbourhoods with high anti-Syrian sentiment.

*“My shop was vandalised thrice. People threw stones at our windows. We filed complaints, but nothing happened. I cannot even put up an Arabic sign anymore.”*

A significant portion of the participants mentioned that even though they had lived in Turkey for many years, made friends, and contributed to the economy, they still did not feel fully accepted.

*“I’ve lived here for seven years. I speak Turkish well. My children go to Turkish schools. But when people ask where I am from and I say Syria, their attitude changes. I don’t feel like I belong.”*

Language barriers were also frequently mentioned, especially by older or less-educated individuals. While younger participants and those with higher education levels learned Turkish more easily, many still struggled with accessing healthcare, education, and employment opportunities due to limited language proficiency.

Participants emphasised that these social barriers often led to a sense of hopelessness and isolation, reinforcing the cycle of poverty. Discrimination in the labour market, in particular, limited their job opportunities and deepened their economic marginalisation.

A few participants attempted to combat prejudice through social interaction and community building. Some joined local NGOs or volunteer groups to bridge the cultural gap, while others relied on their children—who adapted faster—as mediators in social settings.

Despite these efforts, most participants expressed a sense of disillusionment. They felt they were being “tolerated” rather than truly accepted, and they feared that as the economic situation in Turkey worsened, Syrians would become even more scapegoated.

## Conclusion and Evaluation

Migration, particularly when driven by war and political instability, imposes numerous challenges upon both individuals and host societies. In the case of Syrians who migrated to Turkey following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, poverty has become one of the most critical and persistent issues. This study, conducted through in-depth interviews with Syrian men residing in Istanbul, reveals that poverty is not merely an economic issue, but rather the result of a complex interplay of legal, bureaucratic, social, and psychological factors.

The findings show that Syrians in Istanbul face deep-rooted difficulties stemming from five primary areas: unplanned migration, bureaucratic obstacles, inadequate employment opportunities, excessive economic burdens, and social exclusion. These factors are both causes and consequences of the poverty they experience. Participants frequently emphasised that their poverty did not begin in Turkey, but rather during the war in Syria. The sudden nature of their displacement meant they were unable to liquidate assets, bring financial resources with them, or prepare for life in a new country.

In the absence of a work permit or recognised legal status in the early years of migration, many Syrians were forced into informal and exploitative labour markets. Even after legal reforms allowed them to work, very few could access stable, decent employment. Many educated and skilled individuals had to work in jobs far below their qualifications. Others were driven into entrepreneurship not by opportunity but by necessity. The cost of living in Turkey—particularly rent, utilities, and food—further intensified the burden, especially for large families.

Bureaucratic difficulties, such as the inability to validate educational and professional credentials, challenges in registering with authorities, and the lack of citizenship rights, restricted their access to essential services and protections. Social discrimination and negative stereotyping further hindered integration and limited access to jobs and housing. Language barriers and a lack of social support networks compounded the problem.

Although the participants had resided in Turkey for several years and demonstrated resilience through employment, entrepreneurship, and adaptation, their precarious legal and economic status kept them vulnerable. Despite their contributions to the local economy and labour force, many felt excluded and marginalised.

This study suggests that the poverty of Syrian migrants in Turkey is not due to laziness, dependency, or cultural incompatibility, but rather the structural and systemic barriers they face. Addressing this poverty requires a multidimensional policy approach: Expanding legal employment opportunities and facilitating access to work permits, recognising foreign qualifications and enabling professional integration, increasing financial and social support, particularly in housing and education, and promoting inclusive public discourse to reduce discrimination and enhance social cohesion.

Long-term strategies should shift from temporary crisis management to durable solutions that acknowledge the permanence of this migration and the rights of those affected. If such policies are not developed

and implemented, migrant poverty will persist and may deepen over time—posing broader challenges for social harmony, economic sustainability, and humanitarian responsibility.



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