

## CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND LABOR MARKET INTEGRATION OF SYRIAN MIGRANTS IN TÜRKİYE AND GERMANY: A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Cüneyt Yılmaz<sup>1</sup>

### Makale Bilgisi

Geliş : 17/05/2026  
Düzeltilme : 11/07/2026  
Kabul : 04/09/2026

### Keywords:

Syrian Migrants  
Cultural Adaptation  
Labor Market Integration  
Türkiye  
Germany

### Abstract

This study examines cultural adaptation and labor market integration among Syrian migrants in Türkiye and Germany through a comparative sociological lens. A mixed-methods design combines quantitative labor market and demographic indicators from official sources ( the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Destatis), UNHCR, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) ) with qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews conducted with 60 migrants, 30 in each country. The analysis considers how education, host-country language proficiency, social networks, and cultural capital relate to employment outcomes, occupational mobility, and broader economic participation. Findings point to substantial differences in the pace and character of integration between the two contexts, differences that appear closely linked to institutional frameworks, labor market structures, welfare arrangements, and public attitudes. In Türkiye, integration proceeds largely through informal employment and community-based networks; in Germany, structured integration programmes support formal employment and skill development, although barriers relating to credential recognition and social inclusion persist. The study argues that cultural adaptation and economic integration are closely interdependent, and that successful integration depends on individual capacities as well as on the policy environments and structural supports available to migrants. Bringing together empirical evidence with sociological, cultural, and labor-economic perspectives, the study offers policy-relevant implications for migrant inclusion, social cohesion, and equitable economic participation in both settings.

## TÜRKİYE VE ALMANYA'DAKİ SURİYELİ GÖÇMENLERİN KÜLTÜREL ADAPTASYONU VE İŞGÜCÜ PİYASASINA ENTEGRASYONU: KARŞILAŞTIRMALI SOSYOLOJİK BİR ANALİZ

### Article Info

Received : 17/05/2026  
Revised : 11/07/2026  
Accepted : 04/09/2026

### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Suriyeli Göçmenler  
Kültürel Uyum  
İşgücü Piyasasına  
Entegrasyon Türkiye  
Almanya

### Özet

Bu çalışma, Türkiye ve Almanya'daki Suriyeli göçmenlerin kültürel uyum süreçlerini ve işgücü piyasasına entegrasyonunu karşılaştırmalı bir sosyolojik bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Karma yöntem tasarımı, resmi kaynaklardan (TÜİK, Destatis, UNHCR ve ILO) elde edilen nicel işgücü piyasası ve demografik göstergeleri, her iki ülkede 30'ar kişi olmak üzere toplam 60 göçmenle yürütülen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden elde edilen nitel bulgularla bir araya getirmektedir. Analiz, eğitim düzeyi, ev sahibi ülke dilinde yeterlilik, sosyal ağlar ve kültürel sermayenin istihdam sonuçları, mesleki hareketlilik ve genel ekonomik katılımı nasıl ilişkilendiğini ele almaktadır. Bulgular, iki bağlam arasında entegrasyonun hızı ve niteliği bakımından önemli farklılıklar olduğunu; bu farklılıkların kurumsal çerçeveler, işgücü piyasası yapıları, refah düzenlemeleri ve toplumsal tutumlarla yakından ilişkili görüldüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye'de entegrasyon büyük ölçüde kayıt dışı istihdam ve topluluk temelli ağlar aracılığıyla ilerlerken; Almanya'da yapılandırılmış entegrasyon programları formal istihdamı ve beceri gelişimini desteklemekte, ancak mesleki yeterliliklerin tanınması ve toplumsal kapsayıcılığa ilişkin engeller sürmektedir. Çalışma, kültürel uyum ile ekonomik entegrasyonun birbirine sıkı sıkıya bağlı olduğunu ve başarılı entegrasyonun bireysel kapasitelerin yanı sıra göçmenlere sunulan politika ortamlarına ve yapısal desteklere de bağlı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Sosyolojik, kültürel ve emek ekonomisi perspektiflerini ampirik bulgularla bir araya getiren bu çalışma, her iki bağlamda göçmen kapsayıcılığı, toplumsal uyum ve adil ekonomik katılıma yönelik politika çıkarımları sunmaktadır.

<sup>1</sup>Doç. Dr. 15 Kasım Kıbrıs Üniversitesi, Siyasal Ve Sosyal Bilimler Fakültesi [cuneytyilmaz@onbeskku.edu.tr](mailto:cuneytyilmaz@onbeskku.edu.tr), 0000-0003-1655-588X

Yılmaz, C. (2026). Cultural Adaptation And Labor Market Integration Of Syrian Migrants In Türkiye And Germany: A Comparative Sociological Analysis, Uluslararası Sosyal Ve Ekonomik Çalışmalar Dergisi, 7(2), 255-270, DOI: 10.62001/gsijses.1953687.

## INTRODUCTION

Migration is among the most consequential socio-economic and cultural processes of the twenty-first century, shaping labor markets, social cohesion, and policy agendas in host societies (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). The conflict in Syria since 2011 has produced one of the largest displacements in contemporary history, creating substantial demographic, economic, and cultural challenges for the countries receiving Syrian nationals. Türkiye and Germany have become two of the most significant destinations, yet the environments migrants encounter in each country differ fundamentally in legal status, institutional capacity, and labor market structure (OECD, 2021).

The scale of displacement provides essential context for this comparison. Since the conflict began in 2011, more than 13 million Syrians have been forced from their homes (UNHCR, 2026). At the most recent count, around 5.5 million people remained internally displaced within Syria and roughly 4.9 million continued to live as refugees abroad, following approximately 1.3 million refugee returns and 1.8 million returns of internally displaced persons since the fall of the Assad government in December 2024 (UNHCR, 2026). Türkiye and Germany illustrate two very different scales and trajectories of hosting within this broader picture. Türkiye's Presidency of Migration Management recorded approximately 2.3 million Syrians under temporary protection in 2026, down from a peak of about 3.7 million in 2021, as return movements accelerated after December 2024 (PMM, 2026). Germany's Federal Statistical Office recorded approximately 1.3 million Syrian nationals in the country over the same period, a population that has grown substantially since 2015 and now includes a growing number of naturalized citizens (Destatis, 2026). These figures situate Türkiye as a large-scale, geographically proximate first-asylum country operating under a temporary protection regime, and Germany as a smaller-scale but more institutionally structured secondary destination (a contrast that motivates the comparative design of this study).

Türkiye hosts the largest Syrian population in the world, the great majority registered under temporary protection rather than full refugee status; access to formal employment for this group remains restricted, social services are unevenly distributed, and integration policy is comparatively underdeveloped, which has pushed much of this population toward informal labor and community-mediated adaptation (Kirişçi, 2014). Germany, by contrast, has developed structured integration measures (compulsory language courses, vocational training, employment facilitation programmes, and formal mechanisms for recognizing foreign qualifications) intended to support labor market participation and social inclusion, although occupational mismatch and social discrimination remain persistent challenges (OECD, 2021). A systematic comparison of these two integration environments is useful both for theoretical development and for evidence-based policy design.

This study examines the relationship between cultural adaptation and labor market integration among Syrian migrants in Türkiye and Germany, attending to both individual and structural determinants. Cultural adaptation is understood here as a multidimensional process encompassing language acquisition, social network formation, identity negotiation, and psychological adjustment (Berry, 1997). Labor market integration is defined in terms of employment status, occupational quality, income, and economic security, shaped by access to formal labor markets, institutional support, recognition of qualifications, and social capital (Dustmann, Fabbri, & Preston, 2005; Crul & Schneider, 2010). The study addresses three questions: (1) how do Syrian migrants experience cultural adaptation in Türkiye and Germany; (2) how does cultural adaptation relate to labor market outcomes such as employment type, sector, and

income; and (3) how do institutional policies, labor market structures, and societal attitudes shape integration trajectories in the two countries.

A brief terminological note is warranted. This study uses “Syrian migrants” as an umbrella term for the population under review. Where legal status is directly relevant, more precise terms are used instead: in Türkiye, this population is registered under temporary protection status rather than refugee status in the sense of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which Türkiye applies with a geographic limitation; in Germany, most members of this population hold refugee or subsidiary protection status under EU asylum law. Institutional names are also standardized for the English text: the Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, Türkiye's national statistical authority, is referred to at first mention as the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat/TUIK) and as TurkStat thereafter, in line with the institution's own English-language usage.

The study's contribution lies in bringing together theoretical frameworks on acculturation, social capital, and labor economics with empirical evidence from two contrasting national contexts. Section 2 sets out the study's design, data sources, and analytic approach. Section 3 reviews the institutional and statistical background against which the fieldwork was conducted. Section 4 then presents the study's own findings, drawn from the 60 interviews described in section 2.3, before section 5 discusses these findings in relation to the wider literature and section 6 concludes with policy implications.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study uses a comparative, cross-sectional mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), combining secondary quantitative data and contextual literature with original qualitative interview data to examine cultural adaptation and labor market integration among Syrian migrants in Türkiye and Germany. The two countries were selected as contrasting cases of, respectively, a first-asylum context and a more institutionally structured secondary destination, differing in legal status regimes, labor market regulation, and welfare provision. This contrast allows the study to consider how institutional context shapes integration trajectories among a population with a broadly similar migration history and starting point - displacement from Syria after 2011.

### **Quantitative and Contextual Data**

Quantitative and contextual material is drawn from publicly available official statistics and institutional reports: TurkStat (2022) labor force and migration statistics, the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Destatis, 2021, 2026), UNHCR's Global Trends reporting (UNHCR, 2026), Türkiye's Presidency of Migration Management (PMM, 2026), the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2020, 2024, 2026), the Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, and comparative indicators from OECD (2018, 2021) and World Bank (2020) reports, together with contextual reports from international organizations (UNDP, 2020; UNHCR Türkiye, 2021). These sources are used descriptively, to characterize aggregate patterns of displacement, labor force participation, sectoral distribution, and wage differentials. They are not linked at the individual level to the qualitative interview sample and should be read as institutional and statistical background rather than as a formal statistical test of the study's own findings, which are presented separately in section 4.

### **Qualitative Data and Sampling**

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 60 Syrian migrants, 30 residing in Türkiye and 30 in Germany. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with the aim of

achieving diversity in gender, age group, educational background, and employment status (formal, informal, or unemployed) within each country sample; recruitment proceeded through migrant community organizations and snowball referral until the target of 30 participants per country was reached. Interviews followed a common protocol covering migration history, language acquisition, social network composition, employment experience, perceptions of discrimination, and future aspirations, and were conducted in Arabic, Turkish, or German according to participant preference, with interpretation support where needed. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and were transcribed for analysis. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any stage, and identifying details have been removed from all quotations reported in section 4.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively. In addition, multivariate regression models were estimated using pooled microdata from national labor force surveys, with employment status and occupational category as dependent variables and years of schooling, host-country language proficiency, length of residence, and social network indicators as independent variables. Because these models rest on cross-sectional survey data rather than panel or experimental data, the resulting relationships are interpreted as associations rather than as evidence of causal effects. Qualitative transcripts were analyzed thematically, with an initial round of open coding followed by focused coding to identify recurring patterns in language acquisition, social network formation, occupational experience, discrimination, and gendered barriers; codes were then compared across the Türkiye and Germany subsamples to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Section 4.1 summarizes the resulting sample composition before the thematic findings are presented.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations qualify the findings that follow. The qualitative sample of 60 participants, while purposively diversified, is not statistically representative of the wider Syrian migrant populations in either country, and the interview findings should be read as illustrative of recurring themes rather than as generalizable prevalence estimates. Quantitative indicators drawn from TurkStat largely describe the broader foreign-born or migrant population in Türkiye rather than Syrian nationals specifically, since disaggregated, Syria-specific labor force statistics are limited in publicly available Turkish sources; this is noted in the text wherever it affects interpretation. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of both the survey-based regression analysis and the interview data limits the strength of causal inference that can be drawn; associations reported here are best understood as correlational and interpreted alongside the qualitative evidence rather than as demonstrated causal mechanisms.

## **LITERATURE AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND ON SYRIAN MIGRANTS IN TÜRKİYE AND GERMANY**

Before presenting the study's own interview-based findings in section 4, this section sets out the institutional, statistical, and literature-based background against which those findings should be read. It draws on official statistics and prior research rather than on the 60 interviews conducted for this study, and is organized around three themes: aggregate labor market patterns, the quality and stability of employment, and cultural and social integration indicators more broadly.

### **Aggregate Labor Market Patterns**

Quantitative indicators point to substantial differences in the extent and quality of labor market participation between the two countries (differences that plausibly reflect distinct institutional frameworks and labor market regulations rather than individual characteristics of migrants alone).

TurkStat data on the foreign-born population in Türkiye ( a category that does not isolate Syrian nationals specifically, but within which Syrians under temporary protection form the largest single group ) show lower formal labor force participation than the native population, with a disproportionate share of employment in informal, unregistered work (TurkStat, 2022). This pattern is broadly consistent with research on migrant labor market segmentation in developing and transitional economies, where refugee and asylum-related populations often enter informal sectors as an immediate survival strategy (Dustmann, Fabbri, & Preston, 2005; Kahanec & Zimmermann, 2009). Informal employment offers a source of income but typically lacks social protection, job security, and clear routes to upward mobility, which over time can compound socio-economic vulnerability (ILO, 2018).

More detailed labor-market estimates from the ILO sharpen this picture. Of an estimated 2.16 million working-age Syrians in Türkiye, around 1 million are thought to participate in the labor market, the great majority informally and in low-skilled, low-paid positions, chiefly in manufacturing (particularly textiles), construction, and trade (ILO, 2024). Analysis of Turkish household labor force survey data suggests that much of the raw employment gap between native workers and Syrian migrants narrows once differences in age and education are taken into account: for men, the gap in paid employment falls from about 7.1 to 4.7 percentage points after such adjustment, and for women from about 16.1 to 4.0 percentage points, implying that demographic and educational composition, rather than nationality as such, accounts for a large part of the observed disparity (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, n.d.). Targeted programming has sought to address the remaining gap: an ILO-supported employment project implemented with Türkiye's Ministry of Labor and Social Security helped place over 26,000 people in jobs between 2019 and 2025, including more than 13,000 Syrians under temporary protection, with a reported 65% job-retention rate (ILO, 2026); between 2014 and 2024, more than three million Syrian trainees took part in Turkish- and vocational-skills courses offered through Türkiye's public education centers (ECRE/AIDA, 2025).

Destatis figures point to a different trajectory in Germany, where Syrian migrants of working age have progressively increased their participation in formal employment, particularly among those who arrived earlier in the migration flow. By 2021, employment rates among Syrian migrants aged 25-54 were approaching those of the native population, though disparities by gender and region remained (Destatis, 2021). This trend is consistent with research pointing to the role of structured integration measures (

language training, vocational education, and job placement services ) in supporting formal labor market access (OECD, 2021).

Table 1 summarizes the main comparative indicators discussed in this section. Because the underlying national datasets differ in scope, definition, and reference year, the table should be read as an indicative comparison rather than a matched statistical series.

**Table 1:** Comparative Population, Labor Market, and Social-Participation Indicators.

| Indicator                                                    | Türkiye                                                                                     | Germany                                                                | Source                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Registered Syrian population                                 | ~2.3 million under temporary protection (2026), down from ~3.7 million in 2021              | ~1.3 million Syrian nationals (2026)                                   | PMM, 2026; Destatis, 2026                 |
| Predominant employment form                                  | Informal, unregistered work                                                                 | Increasing formal employment, especially among earlier-arrival cohorts | TurkStat, 2022; ILO, 2024; Destatis, 2021 |
| Working-age labor force participation                        | ~1 million of ~2.16 million working-age Syrians estimated to participate, mostly informally | Employment rate approaching native population by 2021 among ages 25-54 | ILO, 2024; Destatis, 2021                 |
| Dominant sectors                                             | Construction, textiles, trade, agriculture                                                  | Manufacturing, logistics, health services, hospitality                 | TurkStat, 2022; Kogan, 2016               |
| Civic/voluntary-organisation participation (survey estimate) | ~18% of surveyed migrants                                                                   | ~45% of surveyed migrants                                              | TurkStat, 2022; Destatis, 2021            |

Sectoral distribution reinforces this contrast. In Türkiye, Syrian migrants are concentrated in low-wage, labor-intensive sectors such as construction, textiles, trade, and agriculture, sectors marked by high informality and limited regulatory oversight; this pattern is particularly pronounced among male migrants, while women more often work in domestic labor, small-scale retail, or informal services (TurkStat, 2022). In Germany, migrant employment is more evenly spread across manufacturing, logistics, health services, and hospitality; although many migrants initially enter entry-level roles because of language or credential barriers, formal employment gives access to social insurance, regulated working hours, and clearer paths for advancement (Kogan, 2016). Comparative research suggests that occupational mobility among refugees is linked to structured supports such as vocational training and targeted employment programmes (Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016).

Wage patterns follow a similar divide. Longitudinal estimates place average wages for Syrian migrants in Türkiye considerably below national averages for comparable occupations, consistent with the prevalence of informal work and the limited bargaining position associated with it (TurkStat, 2022); wage growth over time also appears constrained, suggesting that initial entry into low-wage sectors may have lasting effects on earnings trajectories. In Germany, wage gaps between migrants and native workers are narrower, especially in formal sectors covered by collective bargaining, and appear to narrow further with duration of residence and participation in language and vocational programmes, although gaps remain pronounced for recent arrivals and those without recognized qualifications (OECD, 2021). These patterns are broadly consistent with research identifying both institutional context and human capital investment as important correlates of migrant earnings (Chiswick & Miller, 2009).

Regression models estimated on pooled national labor force microdata point to host-country language proficiency as one of the stronger correlates of formal employment and occupational status in both countries, in line with earlier research emphasizing language as a central mechanism in economic integration (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003). In the German sample, recognition of foreign qualifications and participation in vocational training are also associated with a markedly higher likelihood of formal employment; models based on this sample associate higher language proficiency with an approximately 15-percentage-point higher likelihood of holding a formal employment contract, net of education, gender, and length of residence (Destatis, 2021). Because these results come from cross-sectional survey data, they should be read as associations rather than as evidence of a direct causal effect. In the Turkish sample, education is positively associated with employment, but the absence of formal qualification-recognition pathways appears to limit how far educational attainment translates into improved occupational status, consistent with reports of skill underutilization among highly educated migrants (World Bank, 2020).

### **Work Quality, Stability, and Occupational Mobility**

Beyond participation rates, the quality, stability, and mobility of employment are central to understanding how far migrants achieve durable economic integration, particularly for a population whose entry into host labor markets is heavily shaped by structural constraints.

National statistics indicate that Syrian migrants in Türkiye are concentrated in low-quality, precarious employment marked by informality, weak contractual protection, and wage instability; a large share of this employment sits outside formal regulatory frameworks, limiting access to social security, occupational safety protections, and career progression (TurkStat, 2022). This pattern matches broader literature on segmented labor markets, in which migrants are often channeled into secondary segments defined by low wages, instability, and little upward mobility (Piore, 1979; Kalleberg, 2009). In such conditions, employment functions largely as a survival mechanism: the absence of formal contracts and oversight is associated with exploitative practices, including long hours and delayed wage payments, and migrants often depend on informal networks that, while supportive, can also entrench structural disadvantage over time (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016; Kirişci, 2014).

Germany's more regulated labor market is associated with comparatively better job quality and stability for migrants who enter it successfully. Destatis data show growing employment in sectors covered by collective agreements, giving access to social insurance, unemployment benefits, and workplace protections (Destatis, 2021), though this falls short of full parity with native workers: occupational

stratification remains common in the early stages of settlement, when language barriers and non-recognition of foreign qualifications restrict access to higher-skilled roles (Kogan, 2016).

Occupational mismatch (the gap between migrants' qualifications and the skill level of their jobs ) appears in both contexts, though with different dynamics. In Germany, despite comparatively robust credential-recognition mechanisms, many Syrian migrants initially take up low- or medium-skilled jobs that do not match their prior professional experience, a pattern documented elsewhere as “skill underutilization” or “brain waste” (Dustmann, Frattini, & Halls, 2015; Chiswick & Miller, 2009); longitudinal evidence points to gradual improvement for some migrants through vocational training, language acquisition, and accumulated labor market experience. In Türkiye, mismatch appears more entrenched: without systems for recognizing foreign diplomas and professional credentials, even highly educated migrants are frequently employed in low-skilled sectors such as construction or informal trade, representing an inefficiency in the use of migrants' human capital within the host economy (World Bank, 2020).

Job and wage stability differ correspondingly. In Germany, formal contracts and labor protections support relatively higher job stability, although temporary and probationary arrangements remain common for recent arrivals, with stability tending to increase with length of residence as migrants build host-country-specific experience and professional networks (OECD, 2021). In Türkiye, informality makes employment more precarious, with continuity often contingent on short-term employer needs; irregular wage payments and limited minimum-wage enforcement in informal sectors add to income volatility and constrain migrants' ability to plan for the longer term (OECD, 2018).

Gender adds a further layer of difference. Female migrants in both countries face additional barriers to stable, high-quality employment, including caregiving responsibilities, cultural expectations, and limited access to childcare, though these constraints appear more pronounced in Türkiye, where formal employment opportunities for women are scarcer and informal work often lacks flexibility or security. In Germany, targeted programmes (language courses and employment initiatives aimed at women ) appear to have supported gradual improvements in female labor market participation, although disparities persist (OECD, 2021).

### **Cultural Adaptation and Social Integration: Contextual Indicators**

Cultural adaptation and social integration extend beyond economic participation to include social capital, community involvement, language proficiency, and cultural competence. Language proficiency is widely treated as a central facilitator of both cultural adaptation and labor market integration (Chiswick & Miller, 2009). Survey data suggest that Syrian migrants in Germany report higher German-language proficiency, on average, than Syrian migrants in Türkiye report Turkish proficiency, a pattern consistent with the wider availability of state-supported language courses in Germany (OECD, 2021).

Social networks (both bonding ties within co-ethnic communities and bridging ties across communities (Portes, 1998) ) form a second key dimension. Survey evidence suggests that Syrian migrants in Türkiye rely predominantly on bonding networks, which provide material and psychosocial support but may limit broader cultural integration (Yükseker & Çeler, 2024). In Germany, community organizations and structured programmes appear to support the formation of bridging ties, which prior research links to both employment opportunities and social participation (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Participation in civic, educational, and cultural activities offers one measurable indicator of social integration. As shown in Table 1, survey data indicate that Syrian migrants in Germany participate more

often in formal civic organizations, associations, and educational courses than migrants in Türkiye: approximately 45% of surveyed migrants in Germany reported involvement in community-based or voluntary organizations, compared with about 18% in Türkiye (Destatis, 2021; TurkStat, 2022). German integration courses explicitly cover host-country norms, rights, and responsibilities, and participation in these courses is associated with better employment outcomes and broader civic participation (OECD, 2021); comparable programmes are largely absent in Türkiye, where adaptation depends more on informal learning through community ties (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016).

Overall, language proficiency, network diversity, cultural competence, and civic participation emerge as recurring correlates of integration outcomes in the wider literature and official statistics reviewed here. German integration policy provides more structured pathways for developing these competencies, while the Turkish context relies more heavily on informal networks, producing more heterogeneous outcomes — consistent with broader international evidence that integration is multidimensional and shaped jointly by policy frameworks, social capital, and individual strategy (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014; OECD, 2018). Against this institutional and statistical backdrop, section 4 turns to the study's own fieldwork, examining how the 60 interview participants themselves describe and experience these processes.

## FINDINGS: EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD INTERVIEWS

Unlike section 3, which drew on official statistics and prior research, the findings reported in this section are based directly on the 60 semi-structured interviews described in section 2.3 (30 conducted in Türkiye, 30 in Germany).

### Participant Characteristics and Coding Approach

Table 2 summarizes the broad composition of the two subsamples achieved through purposive sampling for diversity in gender, age, education, and employment status (see section 2.3).

**Table 2:** Composition of the Qualitative Interview Subsamples

| Characteristic                      | Türkiye subsample (n = 30)                                              | Germany subsample (n = 30)                                                                |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gender                              | Broadly balanced between men and women                                  | Broadly balanced between men and women                                                    |
| Age range                           | Approximately 19-58 years                                               | Approximately 21-55 years                                                                 |
| Education                           | Primary schooling to university degree; concentrated at secondary level | Primary schooling to university degree; a larger share with post-secondary qualifications |
| Employment status at interview      | Predominantly informal employment or unemployment                       | Mix of formal employment, vocational training, and unemployment                           |
| Length of residence in host country | Approximately 3-11 years                                                | Approximately 4-10 years                                                                  |

Consistent with the coding approach described in section 2.4, transcripts were coded thematically. The analysis below is organized around the themes that recurred most consistently across both subsamples:

language and communication strategies, social networks, occupational experience, discrimination and belonging, gendered constraints, and adaptation and skill recognition.

### **Language Acquisition and Communication Strategies**

Language proficiency featured prominently in both subsamples, but participants described very different routes to acquiring it. Several Germany-based participants described structured language courses as central to both daily functioning and employment access. One participant put it directly:

*“Learning German allowed me to understand work instructions clearly, interact with colleagues, and feel part of the community. Without it, I would have been stuck in low-paid jobs.”*

Türkiye-based participants more often described learning Turkish informally, without access to a structured course. As one participant explained:

*“I picked up Turkish from my neighbors and from work. There was no course for people like us, so I learned by listening and by making mistakes.”*

These accounts mirror the contextual patterns reviewed in section 3.3 (Destatis, 2021; OECD, 2021; İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016), and are consistent with earlier research on host-country language competence as a mediator of employment quality (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003).

### **4.3 Social Networks and Community Ties**

Participants in both countries described relying on co-ethnic networks for practical support ( information about job vacancies, housing, and navigating bureaucratic procedures ) consistent with the bonding-tie pattern discussed in section 3.3 (Portes, 1998; Yüksek & Çeler, 2024). Bridging ties into the host society were described far less often by participants in Türkiye than by participants in Germany, several of whom linked involvement in local associations or volunteer groups directly to job leads or professional contacts, echoing Ager and Strang's (2008) account of social capital as a mechanism for overcoming structural barriers.

### **Occupational Experience and Perceived Barriers**

Occupational precarity was a recurrent theme among participants in Türkiye, many of whom described employment in construction, textiles, or small-scale trade with low wages, no formal contract, and little job security — consistent with the aggregate patterns discussed in section 3.1 (TurkStat, 2022; ILO, 2024). Participants frequently expressed frustration at being unable to draw on prior professional experience, echoing the skill-underutilization pattern noted above (World Bank, 2020; Dustmann, Frattini, & Halls, 2015). Germany-based participants, by contrast, more often described vocational training, mentorship, and job placement support as helping them move into regulated employment over time (Kogan, 2016; Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016).

### **Discrimination and Belonging**

Discrimination surfaced in both samples, though its form differed: Germany-based participants described subtler forms tied to workplace or housing interactions, often compounded by language differences, while participants in Türkiye more often linked discrimination directly to migrant or protection status, including instances of exploitative employment practice (Kirişci, 2014; İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). These accounts are broadly consistent with literature on the structural and societal dimensions of integration barriers (Crul & Schneider, 2010; OECD, 2018).

## Gendered Experiences

Female participants in both countries described caregiving responsibilities, limited childcare access, and sociocultural expectations as constraints on employment, with these constraints described as more binding in Türkiye, where women were more likely to remain in informal work or outside the labor force altogether. One participant in Türkiye described the tension directly:

*“I would like to work outside the home, but who looks after the children? There is no nursery nearby that we can afford.”*

In Germany, participants pointed to flexible language courses and targeted employment programmes as having eased ( without eliminating ) these barriers (OECD, 2021).

## Adaptation Strategies and Skill Recognition

Adaptation strategies also varied: Germany-based participants emphasized participation in social and civic activities as a route to understanding local norms, while participants in Türkiye more often described negotiating adaptation within the immediate community, maintaining cultural identity while acquiring the practical knowledge needed for daily life and work (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Education and skill recognition were described as pivotal in both contexts: participants with recognized qualifications or access to vocational training reported more positive integration experiences, while those without recognition described occupational downgrading — a pattern more entrenched in Türkiye, given the absence of formal recognition mechanisms, than in Germany, where such mechanisms exist even if imperfectly applied (Dustmann, Frattini, & Halls, 2015; World Bank, 2020).

Read alongside the contextual evidence reviewed in section 3, these interview accounts help explain not only what integration outcomes look like in each country, but how and why they take the form they do for the people directly affected by them.

## DISCUSSION

### Comparative Reflections: Germany and Türkiye

The two national cases differ not only in policy environment but in the underlying composition of the migrant population, which is worth making explicit. In Türkiye, the working-age Syrian population is comparatively young: ILO analysis of Turkish labor force survey data has put the average age of the Syrian population at around 23 years, roughly a decade younger than the Turkish national average of about 33 years (ILO, 2020). Combined with a concentration in secondary-level rather than higher education among many working-age Syrians, and the absence of a formal system for recognizing foreign diplomas, this demographic and educational profile has channeled most Syrian workers in Türkiye into low-skilled, labor-intensive sectors ( manufacturing, particularly textiles, construction, and trade ) largely on an informal basis (ILO, 2020, 2024). This is not simply a reflection of migrants' own characteristics, however: as noted in section 3.1, native-refugee employment gaps in Türkiye narrow substantially once age and education are controlled for, suggesting that demographic composition, rather than lower productivity or motivation, explains much of the observed disparity (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, n.d.). The remaining gap plausibly reflects the absence of formal recognition pathways and work-permit restrictions rather than a deficit in migrants' underlying human capital.

In Germany, the profile is different in ways that matter for how the labor market absorbs this population. Syrian arrivals since 2015 have included a comparatively larger share of migrants with completed

secondary and tertiary education, some of whom held professional qualifications ( in medicine, engineering, teaching ) directly relevant to sectors facing labor shortages in Germany (Kogan, 2016; OECD, 2021). Germany's formal credential-recognition system distinguishes it structurally from the Turkish case; even so, the process is often lengthy and uneven across professions and federal states, and many qualified migrants spend a period working below their qualification level while recognition is pending (Kogan, 2016). Where recognition is achieved, migrants' qualifications represent a potential labor market contribution in sectors (healthcare, engineering, skilled trades) where Germany's ageing workforce faces shortages, a contribution that is only partly realized at present given the pace of recognition procedures and residual language barriers (OECD, 2021).

### **Situating the Findings within the Literature**

The comparison between Türkiye and Germany is broadly consistent with research emphasizing the role of structured institutional support in migrant integration. Germany's formal language courses, vocational training, and qualification-recognition mechanisms align with earlier findings on the importance of state-supported mechanisms in labor market and social integration (Kogan, 2016; OECD, 2021), while the more informal, network-dependent pattern observed in Türkiye mirrors earlier accounts of the constraints associated with informal labor markets and limited integration infrastructure (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016; Kirişçi, 2014).

Language proficiency and social capital again stand out as central mediating factors, consistent with Chiswick and Miller's (2009) work on language as a determinant of economic integration and with Portes's (1998) and Crul and Schneider's (2010) accounts of bonding and bridging networks. The interview material also speaks to Ager and Strang's (2008) framework treating integration as multidimensional and jointly shaped by individual agency and structural conditions — a framework the present findings support without qualification for either country, since even in Germany's more supportive environment, migrants' outcomes were far from uniform. Gendered patterns of disadvantage documented in section 4.6 are consistent with earlier work on the intersection of caregiving responsibilities, sociocultural expectations, and institutional constraints (OECD, 2021); the finding that targeted German programmes mitigate but do not eliminate these barriers suggests that gender-neutral integration measures are, on their own, insufficient.

### **Scope Conditions and Qualifications**

Two qualifications are worth noting. First, the quantitative comparisons rely on national statistics that differ in definition, scope, and reference year: TurkStat data describe the broader foreign-born population rather than Syrian migrants specifically, while ILO and Destatis data are more directly comparable across Syrian cohorts, so the size ( though probably not the direction ) of the Türkiye-Germany contrast should be treated with some caution. Second, because both the qualitative interviews and the survey-based regressions are cross-sectional, the associations reported cannot establish that language training or credential recognition directly cause better outcomes, only that they are consistently linked to more favourable outcomes across both national samples; longitudinal data would be needed to test causal claims more directly.

With these qualifications in mind, the study's central contribution is to show that the same broad mechanisms ( language, social capital, credential recognition, and occupational structure ) operate in both countries, but do so within institutional environments that channel their effects very differently: toward

formal, if uneven, inclusion in Germany, and toward informal, community-mediated adaptation in Türkiye. This suggests that policy design, rather than migrants' individual characteristics alone, is a central determinant of how far cultural adaptation translates into durable economic integration.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study compared cultural adaptation and labor market integration among Syrian migrants in Türkiye and Germany using a mixed-methods design that combined official statistics and contextual literature with 60 semi-structured interviews. The evidence points to a clear contrast: Germany's structured language, vocational, and credential-recognition programmes are associated with more predictable, if still uneven, pathways toward formal employment and social inclusion; Türkiye's reliance on informal employment and community networks is associated with more precarious, community-bounded integration trajectories, marked by high labor force involvement but limited scope for upward mobility or bridging social capital. Gendered barriers (caregiving responsibilities, limited institutional support, and restricted access to formal employment ) were evident in both countries, though more pronounced in Türkiye.

The findings should be read with the limitations noted in section 2.5 in mind: the qualitative sample, while diverse, is not statistically representative; Turkish national statistics used here largely describe the broader foreign-born population rather than Syrian migrants specifically; and the cross-sectional design of both the survey and interview data limits the strength of causal claims that can be drawn from the associations reported.

With these caveats, the comparison points toward concrete and actor-specific policy directions rather than general recommendations. For Türkiye: central government ministries, particularly the Ministry of Labor and Social Security together with the Presidency of Migration Management, could extend formal credential-recognition procedures for foreign diplomas beyond current pilot arrangements; the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) could be more systematically linked to existing ILO-supported job-placement programmes to widen their reach beyond the roughly 26,000 placements achieved between 2019 and 2025; municipalities, which already operate many of the public education centers that have trained over three million Syrians since 2014, could be resourced to expand Turkish-language and vocational course capacity further; and employer associations in textiles, construction, and manufacturing could be engaged, together with the Social Security Institution, in formalizing existing informal employment relationships. For Germany: the Federal Employment Agency and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees could extend gender-targeted employment counselling and childcare-linked language provision; Länder-level vocational bodies and chambers of commerce and industry could work to shorten and standardize foreign-qualification recognition procedures, particularly in regulated professions; municipalities and civil society organizations could be resourced to expand bridging-network initiatives such as mentoring and buddy programmes; and employers in sectors facing skill shortages could be given stronger incentives to participate in structured integration internships and apprenticeships.

Future research could extend this comparison longitudinally, following the same migrants over time to better distinguish causal mechanisms from correlational patterns, and could usefully incorporate Syria-specific labor force data in Türkiye as such data become available, to allow more precise quantitative comparison with the German case.

## REFERENCES

- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166-191. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>
- Asylum Information Database (AIDA) / European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). (2025). Access to the labor market: Türkiye. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/content-temporary-protection/employment-and-education/access-labor-market/>
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Brücker, H., Rother, N., & Schupp, J. (2016). IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees in Germany: Overview and first results. Institute for Employment Research (IAB).
- Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2014). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (5th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chiswick, B. R., & Miller, P. W. (2009). The international transferability of immigrants' human capital. *Economics of Education Review*, 28(2), 162-169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2008.07.002>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Crul, M., & Schneider, J. (2010). Comparative integration context theory. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(7), 1249-1268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419871003624068>
- Destatis (Federal Statistical Office of Germany). (2021). *Migration and integration: Foreign population and labor market participation*. Wiesbaden.
- Destatis (Federal Statistical Office of Germany). (2026). Foreign population by place of birth and selected citizenships. <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Migration-Integration/Tables/foreigner-place-of-birth.html>
- Dustmann, C., & Fabbri, F. (2003). Language proficiency and labor market performance of immigrants in the UK. *Economic Journal*, 113(489), 695-717. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.t01-1-00151>
- Dustmann, C., Fabbri, F., & Preston, I. P. (2005). The impact of immigration on the British labor market. *Economic Journal*, 115(507), F324-F341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2005.01038.x>
- Dustmann, C., Frattini, T., & Halls, C. (2015). The effect of immigration along the distribution of wages. *Review of Economic Studies*, 82(1), 145-173. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdu024>
- İçduygu, A., & Şimşek, D. (2016). Syrian refugees in Turkey: Towards integration policies. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 15(3), 59-69.
- International Labor Organization (ILO). (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture* (3rd ed.). ILO.

- International Labor Organization (ILO). (2020). Syrian refugees in the Turkish labor market. ILO. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/syrian-refugees-turkish-labor-market>
- International Labor Organization (ILO). (2024). ILO's support to refugees and host communities in Turkey. <https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/ilo%E2%80%99s-support-refugees-and-host-communities-turkey>
- International Labor Organization (ILO). (2026). Promoting decent work for Syrians under temporary protection and Turkish citizens. <https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/promoting-decent-work-syrians-under-temporary-protection-and-turkish>
- Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (JDC). (n.d.). The labor market integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey. [https://www.jointdatacenter.org/literature\\_review/the-labor-market-integration-of-syrian-refugees-in-turkey/](https://www.jointdatacenter.org/literature_review/the-labor-market-integration-of-syrian-refugees-in-turkey/)
- Kahanec, M., & Zimmermann, K. F. (2009). Migration in an enlarged EU: A challenging solution? *Economic Papers*, 363. European Commission.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400101>
- Kirişçi, K. (2014). Syrian refugees and Turkey's challenges: Going beyond hospitality. Brookings Institution.
- Kogan, I. (2016). *Integration of immigrants in the labor market in Europe*. Springer.
- OECD. (2018). Working together for local integration of migrants and refugees. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085350-en>
- OECD. (2021). *International migration outlook 2021*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/29f23e9d-en>
- Piore, M. J. (1979). *Birds of passage: Migrant labor and industrial societies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.1>
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2014). *Immigrant America: A portrait* (4th ed.). University of California Press.
- Presidency of Migration Management (PMM). (2026). Temporary protection in Türkiye [statistical data]. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior. <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection-in-turkey>
- TurkStat (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu). (2022). Labor force statistics and migration data. Ankara.
- UNDP. (2020). *Human development report 2020: The next frontier*. United Nations Development Programme.
- UNHCR. (2026). *Global trends 2025*. <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>
- UNHCR Türkiye. (2021). *Syrian refugees in Türkiye: Field report*. Ankara: UNHCR.
- World Bank. (2020). *Migration and remittances data*. World Bank.

Yükseker, D., & Çeler, Z. (2024). Migrant integration in Turkey: Travels of a concept across borders and domains of knowledge production. *Migration Studies*, 12(2), mnae009. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnae009>