INSECURE FUTURE

DEPORTATIONS AND LACK OF LEGAL WORK FOR REFUGEES IN TURKEY

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Cover Photo: Syrian refugees work in a Syrian-owned clothing factory in Gaziantep, Turkey. Photo Credit: Chris McGrath/Getty Images.
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SUMMARY

Turkey hosts the world’s largest refugee population. It is a tremendous responsibility—one that not only the Turkish government but also the people of Turkey have been called upon to shoulder. Most of Turkey’s refugee population does not live in camps, but rather in host communities across the country, mostly in urban areas. In these communities, refugees rent apartments and send their children to Turkish schools. Although they often receive some form of humanitarian assistance, many refugees work to provide for their families. At 3.6 million, Syrians make up the vast majority of Turkey’s refugee population. In recent months, hosting Syrian refugees increasingly has become a politically contentious issue.

In July 2019, Refugees International traveled to Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Ankara to investigate refugees’ access to the labor market—a priority for refugees, humanitarians, and donors, but a politically charged topic for the host population. Nine years into the Syria crisis, with Turkey’s economy in decline and unemployment on the rise, the climate for Syrians in Turkey has reached a critical juncture. In July 2019, Turkish authorities conducted widespread identity checks in Syrian neighborhoods and subway and bus stations. These checks were followed by a wave of reported deportations of Syrian men to Idlib province in Syria—an active war zone. Turkish authorities denied these reports. However, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the international media extensively documented the forcible return of Syrian men, many of whom had been coerced into signing voluntary repatriation forms. The Turkish authorities also ordered Syrians not registered in Istanbul to leave the city and relocate to their province of registration or another province if they were not registered by August 20. This order caused much anxiety for people with jobs in Istanbul and those whose individual circumstances tie them to the city, particularly because Istanbul offers far more work opportunities than many other provinces. On August 20, the government extended the deadline to October 30, 2019.

Syrians interviewed by Refugees International also described an increasingly hostile environment in which acts of xenophobia are common. Although many Syrians in Turkey work, the majority do so in the informal labor market, where exploitation is widespread. Turkey introduced a work permit system for Syrian refugees in 2016, but permits must be requested by employers, who are often reluctant to cover the costs and face the administrative hurdles of hiring a refugee, or are uninformed about how the process works. As a result, most refugees are confined to low-paying jobs, many of them in small textile workshops and construction. Several higher-skilled Syrians told Refugees International that the barriers to entry in their traditional professions forced them to pursue work in the informal labor market. For non-Syrian refugees, who fall under a different work permit system, more stringent requirements make access to the formal labor market even more difficult. Also, since a change in the registration system for non-Syrian refugees in 2018, many Afghans have been unable to register with the Turkish authorities at all, making them ineligible for work permits.

Women represent about half of Turkey’s Syrian refugee population, yet their participation in the labor market is low. Indeed, only 15 percent of Syrian women engage in gainful employment, and even fewer have work permits. Syrian women often want and need to work but are unable to do so because the types of jobs available to them are often in factories or workshops in the informal labor market, entailing long working hours and low pay. In addition, Syrian women generally bear most of the responsibility for childcare and household duties, and in some cases their husbands or other family members are opposed to their work outside the home.
Even in this difficult climate, the Turkish government, donor countries, and international and nongovernmental organizations in Turkey are putting more efforts into improving refugees’ livelihood opportunities. Such efforts are key to enabling refugees to no longer rely on humanitarian assistance but rather support themselves and their families through legal work in decent conditions; in addition, working legally would enable them to better contribute to Turkey’s economy by using their skills and paying taxes. Enhancing refugees’ self-reliance by improving their access to livelihood opportunities is also one of the key objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. To have a concrete impact on refugees’ participation in the labor market, however, regulations on refugees’ access to work permits must be improved to facilitate legal employment. For their part, donors must continue their socioeconomic support for refugees and members of the host community, as well as humanitarian support for those whose circumstances do not allow them to work.

Women refugees remain a largely underserved population. If this situation is to change, programs must address the barriers women currently face, including the lack of childcare and cultural norms that oppose women’s work outside the home. Also, any vocational trainings provided should go beyond gender-stereotyped roles to help women find jobs that need to be filled and empower them as participants in the formal labor market and as members of society.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

*To the Government of Turkey:*

**Ministry of the Interior**

- Immediately comply with international law and cease all efforts to forcibly return refugees to Syria, Afghanistan, or any other country where refugees would face a real risk of torture or other ill-treatment or persecution.
- Launch public educational campaigns aimed at the Turkish public to dispel myths about Syrian refugees in Turkey and fight discrimination and negative stereotypes.

**Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM)**

- Provide unregistered refugees with the opportunity to regularize their status. In determining where to register these refugees, consider special circumstances, such as their responsibility for elderly family members or those having special needs. Refugees’ ability to find work in a given city and better contribute to Turkey’s economy, should also be taken into account.
- Enable non-Syrians seeking international protection, including single men, to register in offices of the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management (PDMM), which represent the Ankara-based Directorate General for Migration Management—the agency responsible for asylum and migration in Turkey, in the provinces.

**Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services**

- Publish the number of work permits (excluding renewals) issued for Syrian refugees under temporary protection—the status accorded to Syrian refugees in Turkey—disaggregated by
gender, as well as the number of work permits (excluding renewals) issued to non-Syrian refugees under international protection, also disaggregated by gender.

- Encourage more employers to hire refugees legally; reduce the processing time and costs for employers by waiving or lowering the work permit fee and simplifying the administrative process.
- To lower cultural barriers to the employment of women outside the home, conduct educational sessions on the participation of women in the labor market for Syrian refugee communities, including male family members and community leaders.
- Hold specialized trainings and Turkish language courses for higher-skilled Syrian refugees to facilitate their access to suitable jobs in Turkey.
- Give non-Syrian refugees access to work permits under the same terms and conditions as Syrian refugees under temporary protection.

**To the European Union (EU) and EU Member States:**

- Commit to continuing financial support for humanitarian and development programs benefiting Turkey’s refugee and host communities, including via the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) beyond the 2021 end date of the program.
- Increase resettlement of Syrian and non-Syrian refugees from Turkey to EU countries.

**To the U.S. Government:**

- Expand support for livelihood programs benefiting Syrian and non-Syrian refugees, including programs designed to increase women’s participation in the work force.
- Significantly increase resettlement places for refugees from Turkey, including Syrians and non-Syrians.

**To UN Agencies and NGOs Running Livelihoods Programs in Turkey:**

- Ensure that non-Syrian refugees also have access to livelihood programs.
- Provide vocational trainings for women outside gender-stereotypical areas, which would provide more job opportunities.
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A consultant for Refugees International traveled to Turkey in July 2019 to assess refugees’ access to the labor market, focusing on particular challenges faced by women and of the effects of a July 2019 crackdown on identity documents and a wave of subsequent deportations of Syrians in Turkey. The research is a follow-up to Refugees International’s 2017 report “‘I am only looking for my rights,’ Legal employment still inaccessible to refugees in Turkey.” The consultant traveled to Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Ankara, and met with representatives of the Turkish government and of international organizations as well as international donors and nongovernmental organizations. In Gaziantep and Istanbul, the consultant interviewed dozens of displaced persons from Syria, including men and women who were working – mostly in the informal labor market – and others who were unemployed. Some of the interviews were conducted individually, while others were in group settings. To protect their identity, Refugees International has used pseudonyms for all the displaced persons cited in the report.

BACKGROUND: REFUGEES IN TURKEY

Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees in the world.¹ As of August 2019, there were 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees living in Turkey, and nearly 400,000 refugees from other countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran.²

Turkey is a party to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol. However, it has never lifted a limitation of the geographic scope of the 1951 Convention only to people fleeing persecution in a European country. As a result, Turkish law does not recognize people who have fled persecution from non-European countries as refugees. Although Turkey has never lifted this restriction, in 2013 it enacted a domestic law on asylum, which introduced the status of “international protection”³ that includes the category of “refugees”—those who have fled persecution in a European country. It also includes the category of “conditional refugees,” which applies to people who have fled persecution or violence from countries outside of Europe.

In addition, in 2014 Turkey introduced a Temporary Protection system for Syrians—the only form of protection available to them.⁴ The system grants Syrians access to public services, such as health and education, but does not grant them the full rights accorded to refugees, such as freedom of movement and access to the labor market. In 2016,

1. A note on terminology: although under Turkish law, the status of refugee is reserved for people who have fled persecution in a European country, in this report, unless otherwise specified, the term “refugee” is used to describe a person who has fled his or her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution, regardless of the region from which they fled, in line with the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.
REGISTRATION PROCESS FOR NON-SYRIAN REFUGEES

Until recently, non-Syrian refugees applying for international protection would register with the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM), an implementing partner of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Ankara. They were then referred to one of some 60 “satellite cities,” where they had to register with the local office of the Provincial Department of Migration Management (PDMM) to obtain a Turkish identity card (commonly known as a kimlik).

However, since September 2018, UNHCR and ASAM no longer register international protection applicants. The only option for these individuals is to register with the Turkish PDMM. As Refugees International reported in December 2018, Afghans seeking international protection in Turkey face significant obstacles to registering at PDMM offices, which leaves them without access to a kimlik. As a result, they are denied access to both proof of legal stay in Turkey and essential services. According to information received by Refugees International in July 2019, these obstacles remain, especially for single men.


Turkey did introduce a work permit system that would allow employers to hire Syrians, thus representing an important step forward. Nevertheless, Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Turkey still face significant barriers to accessing the formal labor market, as do refugees from other countries. This situation exists partly because the permit system requires employers to apply for work permits on behalf of the applicants. Syrians have also opened businesses in Turkey; more than 7,000 companies are formally registered by Syrians, many of whom are refugees, since the beginning of the war in Syria.

According to the Turkish government, each working day five Syrian businesses are established in Turkey, and a fifth of all foreign-owned companies in Turkey are owned by Syrians.

The overwhelming majority—96 percent—of Turkey’s Syrian refugee population lives outside of camps, in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas around the country. Of the 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey, more than 500,000 are known to live in Istanbul; thousands more are estimated to live there despite being registered in different provinces or not registered at all. A city

of 15 million people, Istanbul attracts Syrians as well as refugees and migrants from other countries because of the job opportunities it offers in the textile, tourism, and service industries. Large numbers of Syrians also live in southeast Turkey in provinces bordering Syria—in particular, Hatay, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, and Kilis.

AN INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENT FOR REFUGEES IN TURKEY

Increasing Hostility Against Syrians

In recent years, Turkey’s economy has come under increasing pressure. So far in 2019, the currency has plummeted, inflation has soared, and unemployment has risen to more than 14 percent. In July 2019, economists predicted that Turkey’s economy would contract in the second and third quarters of 2019, and that only modest growth would follow.

At the same time, nine years after Syria’s ongoing civil war launched the world’s largest displacement crisis, public discontent in Turkey is growing over the Syrian refugee population. An increasing number of Turks believe that Syrian refugees are taking their jobs and that their government is spending excessive resources on services for Syrians. Some are even questioning the government’s decision to welcome Syrians in the first place.

The result has been an increasingly hostile climate and rising discrimination against Syrians in Turkey. For example, a wave of attacks against Syrian-owned businesses occurred in Istanbul in late July 2019. Syrians interviewed by Refugees International in Gaziantep and Istanbul described being confronted by Turks who questioned their presence there and other instances of hostile treatment in public. Some Syrians noted that it is increasingly difficult to find housing because landlords refuse to rent their homes to Syrians. Interviewees often said the media had played a role in portraying Syrians in a negative light.

“I have two daughters. I gave them Turkish names, so they wouldn’t have problems,” a Syrian factory owner told Refugees International in Gaziantep. He said he did not want them to face discrimination, and that the hostility against Syrians in Turkey made him think of going to Europe and investing there instead. “I have three companies, I employ 24 people, I contribute to the Turkish economy. If I go to rent a house, it will be a disaster for me,” he said.

“My situation is excellent, my salary is good, compared to other people,” said Majed, a Syrian man living in Istanbul with his family and working in an international hotel with a work permit. He is hoping to obtain Turkish citizenship but, he said, “because of the racism here, I want to go to another country once I get a passport.”

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Deportations to Syria and Orders to Leave Istanbul

During Refugee International’s research mission to Turkey in July 2019, news began spreading that Syrian men were being deported back to Syria. These reported deportations came after Turkish authorities in Istanbul conducted intense checks of Syrians’ identity documents. Many of the checks took place in largely Syrian neighborhoods and bus and subway stations Syrians were likely to frequent. Turkish authorities have denied their deportations of Syrians, stating that though “action” was taken against 12,000 irregular migrants in the second half of July, the targets were of Afghan, Pakistani, and other third country nationalities. Despite this claim, multiple credible reports indicate that as many as hundreds of Syrian men were deported to Syria, including Idlib province, a war zone. According to the reports, most of the men were stopped by Turkish authorities during identity checks in Istanbul. Those unable to produce kimliks from Istanbul were detained, coerced into signing voluntary repatriation forms, and forcibly returned to Syria.

On July 22, 2019, the office of the governor of Istanbul issued a press release ordering Syrians living in Istanbul who had registered in other Turkish provinces to relocate to those areas by August 20, 2019. The governor also indicated that unregistered Syrians in Istanbul would be referred to other provinces by the Ministry of the Interior. On August 20, 2019, the Minister of the Interior announced that the deadline for unregistered Syrians to leave Istanbul would be extended until October 30, 2019. According to media reports, the minister stated that families of children registered in schools in Istanbul; people working with valid work permits; and people with certain humanitarian needs, such as health issues, would be exempt from the order to relocate.

Lying at the heart of Turkey’s economy, Istanbul is attractive to many refugees because it provides more job opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors. In 2018, the Turkish authorities stopped registering Syrians in the city. However, more than 500,000 Syrians under Temporary Protection are still registered in Istanbul; thousands more are estimated to live there without the required identity documents. They include Syrians with temporary protection identity cards from other cities and Syrians not registered in Turkey.

The news of the deportations, increased identity checks, and order for unregistered Syrians to leave Istanbul caused much anxiety among many Syrians in the city. The pressure was evident in interviews Refugees International conducted with Syrians in July 2019, several of whom had identity cards from other cities but had moved to Istanbul because of the greater chances of finding work, to join family members who were

already registered there, or both. For example, Refugees International interviewed the mother of newborn twins whose husband does not have an identity card, though the rest of the family members—including a child with a disability—have identity cards from Istanbul. “He’s working,” the mother told Refugees International. “His employer said ‘I can do a work permit for you,’ but he doesn’t have a kimlik. Thank God [the authorities] haven’t stopped him.”

Syrian refugees interviewed by Refugees International had found work in Istanbul and been settled there for years. They described the lives they had built in Istanbul and said it would be difficult or even impossible to restart their lives in other provinces, where job opportunities are scarcer and, in some cases, they would be separated from their families. Some have special circumstances that tie them to Istanbul. “Aya,” a Syrian woman living in Istanbul with her family, said it would be impossible for them to move to Bursa, where they are registered, because her daughter has special needs. “Here in Istanbul I found a place [a daycare] for her. I work here, my husband, too.” Regarding the wave of identity checks in Istanbul, she said she knew she was easily identifiable as Syrian because of the type of headscarf she wears. “Now I don’t go anywhere. I get the bus to work, same thing for my husband and my daughter. We don’t go out.”

“Heba,” a Syrian woman who told Refugees International she had been living in Istanbul for three years using a kimlik from Marsin, said she and her family had moved there to be with her parents-in-law. “There is no one to care for them,” she said, adding that there are also more opportunities in Istanbul than in Marsin. “Here the salaries are higher, and the work is better,” she said.

### Making Ends Meet: A Constant Challenge

#### Efforts Toward Better Livelihood Opportunities

The Turkish government has made some welcome efforts to create better livelihood opportunities for Syrians under Temporary Protection. These efforts include providing vocational training courses and language classes through the Turkish employment agency and chambers of commerce. In addition, it reduced the work permit fee from TRY 537 (USD 97) to TRY 200 (USD 36) in December 2017, though it has since increased the fee to its current amount of TRY 372 (USD 67).17

These efforts are augmented by critical programs run by UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) that are designed to facilitate Syrian refugees’ access to the Turkish labor market. The programs include job placements and incentives to employers to hire Syrians with work permits, and programs that offer vocational training and support for Syrians to set up cooperatives.

#### Reality for the Majority: Precarious Work in the Informal Sector

Despite these efforts, most Syrian and non-Syrian refugees continue to face precarious and often exploitative working conditions in Turkey’s informal sector. Of the 2 million Syrian refugees of working age, up to 1 million are estimated to be working.18 There is no official number of active work permits available. However, between January 2016

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17. As of August 6, the exchange rate was USD 1 = TRY 5.53.cv
THE EU-TURKEY STATEMENT AND EU FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO TURKEY

In March 2016, the European Union (EU) and Turkey concluded an agreement in response to the arrival of more than 1 million asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants to Europe in 2015, the majority of whom had traveled by sea from Turkey to Greece. Turkey agreed to accept returned asylum seekers and migrants from the Greek islands. For its part, the EU pledged to resume talks on Turkey’s accession to the EU and visa-free travel for Turkish citizens to EU countries, and promised that for every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled in a European country. The EU also committed to providing EUR 3 billion in funding for projects supporting refugees in Turkey, with the possibility of an additional EUR 3 billion. The European Commission began contracting this second tranche in 2018. Funding under the second tranche includes projects to increase socioeconomic support for refugees and host communities.1 Although funding for humanitarian support continues, the second tranche is more focused on support that is more sustainable in the long term and helps with refugees’ inclusion and self-reliance.2 Projects under the second tranche are to be contracted by the end of 2020 but, at the time of writing, EU countries have not committed to further funding.

and October 2018, there were 60,822 work permits issued to Syrians.19 That figure likely includes renewals of permits for the same people, which must be obtained annually. It also includes work permits for Syrians with residence permits in Turkey; these permits grant them a different status from those under Temporary Protection. The vast majority of Turkey’s refugees work without work permits and outside the protections of the law. They have no social security and often receive wages below the legal minimum wage of TRY 2,020 (USD 365) net per month. Even for Turkish workers, informal work is widespread. Indeed, Turkey has a large informal labor market, in which one-third of workers are employed without social security.20

The work permit system poses a series of hurdles for Syrian refugees in Turkey. The main problem is that work permits must be

requested by employers, many of whom are reluctant to cover the costs of hiring a refugee or are uninformed about the process for doing so. As of July 2019, the fee for a work permit for a Syrian under Temporary Protection was TRY 372 (USD 67). In addition, the administrative process for requesting a permit takes an average of about one month but can drag on for longer. Also, work permits are valid for only one year, after which they must be renewed. In each workplace, Syrians under Temporary Protection cannot represent more than 10 percent of the workforce, though employers can apply for this requirement to be waived. To be eligible, Syrians must have had Temporary Protection status for at least six months. Finally, work permit holders are allowed to work only in the province in which they are registered.

For non-Syrian refugees, the rules make access to legal work particularly difficult. As is the case for Syrian refugees, work permits must be requested by prospective employers. However, the fee to obtain work permits for non-Syrians under International Protection is much higher, at nearly TRY 800 (about USD 144). In addition, the non-Syrian work permit beneficiary’s salary must be equivalent to at least 150 percent of the minimum wage—a significant obstacle for lower-skilled refugees seeking work in lower-paying jobs. Moreover, a legal quota requires that there be at least five Turkish employees in a given workplace for every foreign non-Syrian worker. Furthermore, requests for work permits can only be made six months after the candidate has filed an application for international protection. This final condition is particularly problematic for many recently arrived Afghans, who generally have been unable to register with the Turkish authorities since late 2018.21

The time and expense involved in obtaining work permits for both Syrian and non-Syrian refugees are quite demanding. Together, these costs and the required administrative steps create a significant disincentive for employers to use the permits. The resulting dearth of permits means that higher-skilled refugees are often forced to work in lower-skilled and lower-paying jobs in the informal labor market. Indeed, many of the Syrian refugees that Refugees International interviewed said they were working, or had worked, without work permits because employers were unwilling or unable to provide them. Many said their employers were unwilling to pay them a legal wage and contribute to their social security, instead preferring to employ them illegally at a lower cost.

Some interviewees said they had asked their employers to apply for a work permit for them but their requests had been met with excuses. “Khaled,” a Syrian man living in Gaziantep, said that when he worked in a factory, he repeatedly asked his employer for a work permit. However, the employer claimed that the process was being delayed at the Ministry of Labor in Ankara. “I asked for a work permit,” Khaled told Refugees International. “[The employer] asked for photos, a copy of my kimlik, [and] proof of accommodation. I asked ‘Where is the work permit?’ [The employer said] ‘In Ankara.’ Again I asked ‘Where is the work permit?’ ‘In Ankara.’” As described by “Samer,” a Syrian man working in Gaziantep, “The employer doesn’t say ‘no,’ but he doesn’t do it.”

Others said their employer had outright refused. “Abeer,” a lawyer from Syria, described the reality of working in Turkey when she arrived with her family six years earlier. “I was obligated to find work. In fact, my husband couldn’t find work, and when he did the salary was low,” she said. “Our children were two and three years old, I had to leave them at home. I worked in factories

21. Leghtas and Thea, “You Cannot Exist in this Place.”
from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with no work permit. I asked for a work permit in the factory but they said no.”

Refugees International also spoke with several Syrians who said they had sent one of their children to work to cover the high cost of living in Turkey. “In Syria we didn’t send our children to work,” one Syrian woman told Refugees International in Gaziantep. “We had our homes; we didn’t pay rent.”

Cash Assistance

Under the EU-funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), 1.6 million people in Turkey receive cash assistance in the form of cards commonly known as “Kizilay cards.” The assistance is aimed at the most vulnerable and provides monthly payments of TRY 120 (USD 21) per family member, as well as additional top-up payments of between TRY 50 (USD 9) and TRY 250 (USD 45) every quarter. The Turkish Red Crescent (Kizilay), the World Food Program (WFP), and the Turkish government implement the program, which has been in place since 2016.

Several of the Syrians that Refugees International interviewed who were receiving ESSN assistance said one or more family members in their household were working in the informal labor market. Indeed, according to a European official, about 80 percent of ESSN beneficiaries work informally. People employed with a work permit and their beneficiaries are not eligible for the ESSN.

Although work would be preferable to relying on assistance, access to work for Syrians in Turkey is often unreliable. Wages are low and the cost of living is high. As a result, interviewees who receive the ESSN told Refugees International they rely on the cash assistance to cover essential costs, such as rent. Although the ESSN alone does not cover all of their household expenses, it provides a stable income, whereas some work opportunities might last for just a few months. Many feel they cannot trade their family’s access to the ESSN for a job that is not guaranteed beyond a short period of time.

“Somaya,” a mother of four living in Gaziantep, told Refugees International that her husband’s income is not enough to cover the family’s expenses. “Here you have to pay rent, bills,” which, she said, amount to TRY 1,000 per month. Somaya said her family receives TRY 700 per month in ESSN assistance. “Without the ESSN, we would be in a lot of debt,” she said, adding that her family already has some debt. She also told Refugees International that it would not be a problem for her to give up the ESSN if a good job were available. “Relying on ourselves is better than getting assistance,” she said.

Limited Access to Work for Women

Around half of the Syrians in Turkey are women, and one-third of Syrian refugee households in Turkey are female headed. Yet, according to the UN, only 15 percent of Syrian women have income-generating jobs. Although there is no publicly available number of work permits issued to refugee women, it is estimated to represent only a tiny percentage. Refugees International found a widespread misconception that Syrian women in Turkey are not willing to work, which does not reflect the diversity of views among Syrian women on the topic of employment. This often-repeated statement

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23. UN Women and ASAM, “Needs Assessment of Syrian Women and Girls”
also fails to specify whether Syrian women’s alleged unwillingness to work is really an unwillingness or rather an inability to work in the jobs available to them as Syrian women in Turkey. As described by a UN Women official, “The statement that we frequently hear that ‘Syrian women don’t want to work,’ is a generalization that is not necessarily based on facts and is often a result of a lack of direct communication with the women and/or lack of information.”

Cultural barriers are also commonly cited to explain the low participation of women refugees in the labor market. However, in interviews with dozens of Syrian women in Turkey, Refugees International found that a number of other factors keep Syrian women out of the labor market; in reality, many of these women want to work.

Refugees International interviewed women who were widows, divorced, or single, as well as married women living with their husbands. Many said they had no choice but to look for work, either because they had no spouse or their husband did not work because of age, sickness, or physical disability. Others said they had a husband who was working, but they also needed to work to supplement the family income. Unfortunately, the challenges in doing so are significant.

A 2018 UN needs assessment found that Syrian women consider lack of employment, access to housing, and the inability to speak Turkish to be their greatest challenges in Turkey. The assessment found that among the main challenges for Syrian women who want to work are the following: (1) a lack of childcare; (2) resistance by family members to women working outside the home; and (3) housework and the responsibility for caring for other dependents (such as elderly people or people with a disability) at home. The Syrian women Refugees International viewed in Gaziantep and Istanbul echoed these concerns.

### Lack of Childcare and Responsibility for Housework

The fact that Syrian women bear the responsibility for childcare and housework is a major obstacle that prevents them from working outside the home. It is especially true because most job opportunities are found in factories or workshops that require long working hours. Many Syrians do not have family support in Turkey or other alternatives for childcare.

“Manal,” a widow living in Gaziantep with her children ages four, five, and 13, told Refugees International that she relies on her 13-year-old son to work informally and on ESSN cash assistance to pay for rent, water, and electricity. She said she is unable to work because of health issues and the lack of childcare. “Even employers say that with young children you can’t work,” she said.

### Gender Norms and Cultural Resistance to Women’s Employment

Refugees International found that in some cases, cultural resistance is an obstacle to women’s employment outside the home, although this does not explain why only a tiny fraction of refugee women have access to the labor market in Turkey. In many cases, conditions in Turkey are compelling women and their family members to overcome this resistance, pushing women who did not work in Syria to do so in Turkey. In Gaziantep, “Samira” told Refugees International that her husband sometimes finds work, but it is not stable. She said she cleans houses three times per week to supplement the family income.

insecure Future: Deportations and Lack of Legal Work for Refugees in Turkey

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income. “I don’t tell my family that I work,” she said. “And my husband, we’re obligated [for me to work], so he lets me work.”

“Mazen” told Refugees International that his family had had their own home and a good living situation in Syria. “I didn’t need my wife to earn an income. But here the income of men is not enough,” he said. “There are professions I used to refuse for her to work in,” he said. “But here, you take any opportunity.”

Another challenge is that vocational trainings in which Syrian women participate are often in gender-stereotyped fields that offer few job prospects. The UN needs assessment found that more than half of the Syrian refugee women who had participated in vocational trainings had received training in hairdressing and needlework, in which opportunities for formal work are limited. Agencies and organizations need to diversify the areas of vocational training they provide to women to better meet the demands of the labor market, without being limited to areas traditionally associated with female gender roles. In the programs they fund, donors should also prioritize trainings and other livelihoods schemes that help women access jobs effectively.

Sexual Harassment

Some women mentioned that sexual harassment was common in the workplace, and they had left jobs because of it. “Amina,” who works in an NGO without a work permit, and “Arwa,” a math teacher who has worked and continued her studies in Turkey, said they had experienced sexual harassment. “You can’t say anything because they’ll accuse you of starting it,” they said, adding that there should be mechanisms for women to file complaints without risking their reputations. “Iman,” a divorced woman, said the main challenges she had confronted were the language barrier and sexual harassment. “When I worked, I faced it [sexual harassment] a lot from my employer,” she said. “It was verbal. I immediately left the job.”

“Mariam,” a young Syrian woman, told Refugees International that she started working in Turkey at age 13, and her sister at age 14. She said that although her family had had a good living situation in Syria, their financial situation in Turkey had forced them to work. “Of course, my father isn’t happy we’re working, but we have to. He sees that it’s OK, and also, he’s older. My brother alone can’t support the family,” she said. She told Refugees International that as a girl working in textile workshops, she had faced harassment since age 13. “I changed jobs a lot because I experienced a lot of problems. I realized that all the places are the same. I worked in 10 textile places.”

Conclusion

In times of economic hardship, employment is often a major concern. When unemployment is on the rise within the host population, the issue of refugees’ participation in the labor market can be particularly sensitive. Turkey is no exception. Although Turkey has shown great generosity over the past years in welcoming people fleeing the war in Syria, the pressure it has placed on Turkey’s resources does not justify the recent wave of deportations of Syrians to Idlib, a war zone. Nor does it excuse the government’s failure to respond to the growing xenophobia directed against Turkey’s Syrian population.

The impetus to enforce rules on work permits and registration is understandable. However, the Turkish authorities have tolerated Syrian refugees working in the informal labor market

26 UN Women and ASAM, “Needs Assessment of Syrian Women and Girls.”
and living in Istanbul without the appropriate registration for years. The abrupt pivot to strict enforcement is unnecessarily harsh and fails to take into account the circumstances of refugees who have spent years building lives in Istanbul. The Turkish authorities should provide refugees with opportunities to regularize their situation and facilitate the work permit process for both employers and employees. Doing so would not only enable more refugees to work legally under fairer and more decent conditions, but also enhance their contributions to Turkey’s economy, ultimately benefiting the host community as well.

The primary responsibility for protecting the rights of refugees in Turkey falls on the Turkish authorities. However, Turkey will continue to need the support of donors to shoulder this responsibility. Turkey hosts more refugees than all of the EU countries combined. Resettlement is an important way to show solidarity with countries like Turkey that are hosting large numbers of refugees, and to integrate refugees into those countries where they may have better access to livelihoods. However, opportunities for resettlement are grossly insufficient; the United States, for example, resettled only 199 refugees from Turkey in fiscal year 2018. Between March 2016 and March 2019, the 18 EU countries participating in the resettlement scheme under the EU-Turkey Statement had resettled 22,292 Syrians from Turkey.27

The EU must continue to provide funding for refugee support in Turkey after the EUR 6 billion to which they committed under the EU-Turkey Statement have been spent. To help promote social cohesion, programs should empower both members of the refugee and host communities. Furthermore, if the EU and other donors are serious about helping refugees in Turkey to become more resilient and independent, women cannot be left behind. They, too, must benefit from efforts to integrate refugees into the workforce.

ABOUT
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Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.