

# **Syrian Women's Perspectives on Life in Turkey**

**Rights, Relations and Civil Society**



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## Executive Summary

This report stresses the importance of promoting a rights-based approach to the refugee issue in Turkey, specifically focusing on the experiences and perspectives of Syrian women. Adopting such an approach is necessary to ensure that refugees can build independent and sustainable lives, be recognized as social and political actors, and fully realize the legal rights they are entitled to. However, refugee rights have largely been absent from mainstream public debates in Turkey, which has had a significant impact on the everyday lived reality of Syrians in the country and strongly influenced the character of civil society's response to the refugee crisis. It is also one of the underlying causes of increased racism against Syrians in Turkey.

As the movement of Syrian refugees to Turkey was initially treated as a temporary issue, which was reflected in the Turkish states' lack of long-term policies and "guest" narrative, both the state and Turkish civil society organizations' approach to the crisis between 2011 and 2014 was generally humanitarian/emergency-based in nature, reinforcing the general perception of refugees as mere 'recipients of aid,' rather than individuals with rights and agency, and the hierarchical relationship between Syrian refugees and their "providers." The distribution of aid from multiple sources was sometimes influenced by identity politics, resulting in selective patterns of distribution based on religious and ethnic identity according to Syrian women interviewed during this research. In conjunction with the policies of the state, international donor priorities played an influential role in limiting the space for rights-based refugee work as there was little funding available for organizations active in this field. These dual influences – state policies and international donor priorities – have acted as the primary constraints on rights-based Turkish civil society's response to the refugee crisis.

Beginning in 2014, as it became clear that a large-scale Syrian presence in Turkey was a long-term reality, the state began adopting more integrationist policies. This shift of state policy, which accelerated after the EU-Turkey Statement, saw an expansion of Turkish civil society's work to encompass fostering social cohesion between refugee and host communities, mirroring a corresponding shift in donor priorities to this focus area. However, this change did not result in a significant increase in rights-based refugee initiatives, or seriously raise the prominence of refugee rights in public discussions on the issue. Furthermore, the increasingly restrictive political climate that followed the July 2016 coup attempt disproportionality affected rights-based organizations, including those working with refugees, further limiting their ability to operate freely.

In general, rights-based Turkish civil society organizations consider their work with Syrian refugees to be an extension of their overarching struggle for democracy and human rights in Turkey. Despite this, Syrian women have not been fully included in the feminist agendas of some women's rights actors, which has contributed to a lack of solidarity being established between Syrian and Turkish women.

Syrian civil society organizations have also become increasingly active in working with Syrian women in Turkey. Initially, the majority of Syrian organizations that established a presence in Turkey were primarily focused on the situation inside Syria and were often referred to as "cross-border organizations." However, as the political and military dynamics in Syria changed, first with the rise of the ISIS, and later as the regime consolidated its advantage on the ground, combined with the almost total closure of the border with the EU-Turkey Statement in 2016, Syrian civil society increased their direct engagement with refugees. While Syrian organizations were permitted to work in relative freedom between 2011-2016, the state's introduction of new laws and regulations in late 2016, including the requirement that all employees gain valid work permits, somewhat changed this situation. Furthermore, since the state began enforcing these laws, which resulted in the closure of many organizations and detention of their employees, a sense of insecurity has taken hold across the Syrian civil society landscape.

Syrian organizations' work with women encompasses a range of activities, prominent among these are economic empowerment initiatives that focus on vocational training, but also increasingly awareness-based activities to increase Syrian women's knowledge of their rights in Turkey. Despite Syrian organizations becoming more active within the refugee context, there is still a lack of coordination and cooperation between them and Turkish organizations, which was made clear during the interviews with organizations from both communities.

The root cause of several problems identified by the Syrian women involved in this study can in part be attributed to their legal status under "temporary protection." Temporary protection status must be understood in the context of the mainstream "guest" discourse on Syrian refugees in Turkey, which has served to marginalize rights-based approaches, and by doing so, inadvertently helped fuel racism and increased separation between Turkish citizens and Syrians. However, Syrian women are still entitled to a wide range of legal rights under temporary protection. Interviews with Syrian women have shown that when they have access to channels of information about these rights, in addition to mechanisms of support, they apply these rights in practice. Both Turkish and Syrian society organizations working with women have played crucial roles in facilitating this process. Another additional factor that encouraged women to put their rights into practice was seeing evidence of state authorities enforcing them.

Racism was a recurring issue raised throughout the interviews with Syrian women. Two main perspectives on relations between Syrians and the Turkish host community were identified. The first held that as the Turkish government adopted more long-term policies towards refugees, such as the entry of Syrian children into the public education system, the space for them to interact and build relationships with Turkish citizens increased, reducing tensions between them. Others felt that, while many Turkish citizens initially welcomed Syrians in the early years and provided them charitable assistance, once it became clear they were staying long-term, this goodwill gave way to resentment and discontent, which has subsequently manifested in the form of increasing racism and hate speech towards Syrians. Civil society's efforts to combat racism have mainly centered on social cohesion programmes and initiatives. Although these can have positive outcomes, their impact can only go so far without a corresponding public debate addressing the root causes of racism against Syrians within the social, political, and historical contexts in which it emerged.

One of the most important purposes civil society organizations' have served for Syrian women is providing a space for socialization. The social networks that develop among them during civil society organizations' programmes and activities have been shown to evolve into self-organization initiatives that enhance their sense of independence and security. Due to Syrian women's general dissatisfaction with the opportunities available to them under their "temporary protection" status or through civil society organizations in general, there is a widespread desire among them to become more self-organized at the community-level, and to receive support in doing so. Given the daily survival pressures many Syrian women face, this desire for self-organization was primarily expressed in terms of economic empowerment.

To assist engaged stakeholders at the local, national, and international levels in developing their strategies, approaches, and specific interventions to address the problems and issues impacting Syrian women in Turkey, this report will conclude by providing a set of general and specific recommendations based on the research findings.

## List of Abbreviations

<b>AFAD</b> .....	Disaster and Emergency Management Authority
<b>DGMM</b> .....	Directorate General of Migration Management
<b>EU</b> .....	European Union
<b>INGO</b> .....	International non-governmental organization
<b>ISIS</b> .....	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as the Islamic State and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)
<b>GBV</b> .....	Gender-based violence
<b>NGO</b> .....	Non-governmental organization
<b>UNHCR</b> .....	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



# Introduction

It is increasingly clear that a large number of Syrians will remain in Turkey long term or permanently, a fact that has only heightened the importance of ensuring their fundamental rights as refugees are realized in practice. Given the scale of the crisis, without the widespread adoption of a rights-based approach to the refugee issue, the situation for refugees and host communities alike in Turkey, as well as the relations between them, threaten to worsen. In this context, it is important to note that the survival pressures associated with prolonged displacement are often most acute for women. Sexual and gender-based violence, language barriers, child marriage, economic pressures, exclusion from decision-making processes and networks of community organization, legal uncertainties, and a lack of access to rights and services, among others, all contribute to the disproportionate level of hardship suffered by many Syrian refugee women in the Turkish context. This study sheds light on the challenges Syrian women face in Turkey and how they have evolved over time, with an emphasis on their knowledge of and access to rights and means of civic engagement, and the role of Turkish and Syrian organizations in facilitating this access, as well as the general nature of their interventions with Syrian women. It also explores the evolving dynamics between the Syrian refugee and Turkish host communities from the perspective of Syrian women.

While some actors at the local and national level, including civil society organizations, frequently highlight the fact that Turkey has the world's largest number of refugees, a transparent, rights-based, public debate about the Syrian refugee issue among stakeholders remains largely absent. Instead, the issue is mostly instrumentalized as a topic of agitation and propaganda before elections, during which it is seldomly discussed from a rights-based perspective. It also crops up on social media in the form of racist attacks against the presence of Syrians in public spaces, and in the form of hate discourse driven mainly by the circulation of misinformation. In general, there are insufficient efforts to correct misinformation, which is another symptom of the lack of transparent public debate around the refugee issue.

The approach of many civil society organizations to the Syrian refugee issue has been heavily influenced by both their dependency on international funding and associated donor priorities, and the areas of work they are permitted to be active in by the Turkish state. A chronological study of the fields of work with which civil society organizations have engaged clearly shows that both the political and donor trends have evolved from a humanitarian aid-focused approach towards building social cohesion between refugee and host communities. Rights-based work on Syrian refugees has neither attracted much international funding nor been tolerated well by the Turkish state. These dual influences are a significant factor in the overall lack of organizations engaged in rights-based work, and why the visibility of those that do work in this area has noticeably decreased over the years. The marginalization of rights-based approaches to the refugee issue has also influenced the way Syrian women themselves frame and understand their own situations and experiences.

## Purpose of Research

These state- and donor-focused perspectives have resulted in the perspectives of Syrian refugees themselves being mostly ignored and excluded from the already lacking public debate in Turkey around the refugee issue. We believe this lack of a transparent and public debate among various stakeholders, including refugees themselves, is one of the main reasons for refugees' lack of access to rights, as well as one of the factors that has created an environment conducive to racism and discrimination. In such a context, a gendered perspective on the refugee issue is even less present, despite the growing body of literature on the feminization of migration and the fact that a significant proportion of racism against Syrians in Turkey is expressed through a gendered discourse (e.g. gendered comments in relation to sexual harassment, or the common argument that "women and children are welcome but men should go and fight"). Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the public debate by highlighting the perspectives of Syrian refugee women in relation to following three focus areas:

1. The general challenges Syrian women face in Turkey. How have Syrian women defined the challenges they face in Turkey, and how have these challenges, and the different ways they address them, transformed over the years ?
2. The level of Syrian refugee women's access to information, mechanisms to uphold their rights, and civic engagement. Therefore, the research aims to understand Turkish and Syrian rights-based civil society organizations' operations and activities, and addresses the question: What is the role of Turkish and Syrian rights-based civil society organizations in creating access to channels of information concerning Syrian refugee women's rights in Turkey, and a space conducive to those rights being applied in practice?
3. The relationship between Syrian refugee women and Turkish host communities. Thus, the last questions addressed in this research are: How do Syrian women define the changing relationship with host communities? What are the multifaceted forms of racism they face? And what mechanisms have they developed to counter racism?

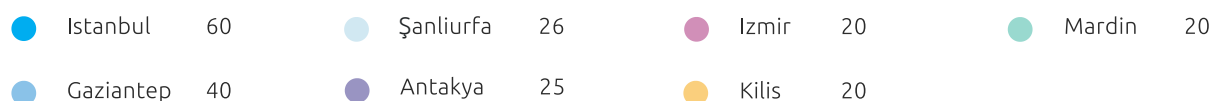
# Methodology

This research has been based on qualitative research methods that combine semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and ethnography.

The seven research locations are Gaziantep, Kilis, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Antakya, İzmir, and İstanbul. These locations were selected based on the presence of Syrian and Turkish rights-based civil society organizations and in order to reflect the heterogeneity of Syrian refugee communities in Turkey. Furthermore, through a choice of seven different locations, the research aimed to reflect how varying local social, economic, and political contexts influence refugee women's access to rights.

A total of 211 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the seven research locations. The research does not in any way claim to be representative of the Syrian refugee population in these locations and sampling was undertaken by snow balling. All interviewees were between the ages of 18-65 and the research team did its best to reflect the diversity of Syrian refugee women by attempting to incorporate differences based on ethnicity, class, level of education, and marital status.

Interviews per location / total: 211



There were nine subsections in the interviews: Demographics and basic personal information; circumstances of arrival to and movement in Turkey; household composition; economic/employment situation; education and training; children's education; legal status; civic engagement and aid; and social bridging and language.

Once all the interviews were completed, a total of nine focus groups were conducted in the same locations. The initial target was to select around ten individuals from among the women interviewed in each location to participate in the focus groups. However, due to the high mobility of Syrian communities, access to the same women interviewed was limited. Therefore, in some of the locations, some of the participants in the focus groups did not participate in the individual interviews. However, the topics addressed in the focus group discussions were mostly drawn from the answers given to the interviews. The focus groups allowed for deeper discussion around the research questions addressed and also provided the opportunity to incorporate the narratives of Syrian refugee women into the research results.

50 representatives of Turkish and Syrian rights-based civil society organizations were interviewed across the seven locations. The interviews were semi-structured and were designed to acquire a detailed profile of each organization and its areas of operations, and understand its relations with various stakeholders such as other civil society actors, state officials, and donors. Furthermore, the interviews sought to understand the organizations' approaches to gender equality and to what degree gender was factored into their activities.

The names of interviewees, focus group participants, and some civil society organizations have been kept anonymous at their request.

## Research Locations

Even though legal procedures, legal statuses, and the existence or lack of legal rights have a determining role in the degree to which refugees can build stable lives or develop feelings of belonging and un-belonging to the localities where they seek refuge, experiences of migration and seeking refuge are not unitary and homogenous, even under the same legal context. Therefore, in this study we aim to look at refugee women's negotiations with various actors and their active attempts to normalize their lives at the intersection of the Turkish state's centralized legal procedures and regulations and the local social and political contexts in which refugees are operating. Below is a brief contextual information regarding the seven localities in which this research was conducted. To first clarify, these overviews do not claim to cover all of the context-specific political and social dynamics present in each location, but instead aim to provide a concise summary of some of the main factors and characteristics that shape the refugees' experiences. It is also acknowledged that each city is not homogeneous and contains its own forms of internal diversity that are necessarily simplified below.

**Istanbul:** According to the most recent data, there are around 560,000 Syrians living under temporary protection in Istanbul, representing the single largest concentration of Syrians in Turkey. However, in terms of refugee density, this constitutes only 4% of the overall population of Istanbul, much lower than the 95% in Kilis, 28% in Antakya and 24% in Şanlıurfa.

Fieldwork has been carried out in two neighborhoods in Istanbul, namely Sultanbeyli and Esenler. Sultanbeyli, located on the Asian side of Istanbul, was initially established as an informal settlement area before being declared a district municipality in 1992 as its population rapidly increased after receiving large numbers of working-class internal migrants. Since 1992, conservative political parties have won municipal elections in Sultanbeyli, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been the major political actor in the area for the past decade and a half. Though many might interpret the conservative character of the political actors in Sultanbeyli to be the main reason why it is the only district on the Asian side of Istanbul with a refugee density above average, this is not sufficient to understand the pull-factors. Many Syrian women interviewed stated there were two reasons their families settled in Sultanbeyli: 1) the availability of jobs, due to a large preexisting informal sector catered towards the working-class internal migrants; and 2) services provided to Syrian refugees, through the Refugee Center established in affiliation with the municipality. These services range from language courses to vocational classes, a health care center where Syrian doctors are employed, legal aid, and humanitarian aid. It is also important to note Sultanbeyli has been attracting refugees from other parts of Istanbul due to the ease of registration at the DGMM, which used to be located on the top floor of the Refugee Center.

Esenler, on the outskirts of the European side of Istanbul, is also a neighborhood with a large population of internal migrants. The results of the latest municipal elections show Esenler to be an increasingly conservative neighborhood, with the AKP attracting a growing share of the vote. As with Sultanbeyli, here too a conservative social and political scene is not by itself sufficient to explain why Syrian refugees have favored settlement in Esenler. Conservative political actors have utilized the Islamic discourse of "*muhajirin/ansar*" in order to suppress racist attacks against Syrians in the area. However, as demonstrated in interviews with Syrian women, it was this combined with job opportunities in the large informal sector that made the area an attractive one for Syrian refugees. Furthermore, as Syrians moved to the area, civil society organizations also chose to open community centers there. The municipality has been relatively cooperative with civil society organizations, though it has not itself provided significant services to Syrians, as is the case in Sultanbeyli. Esenler has also been a destination for Kurds from Syria due to their networks with the local Kurdish population, with whom a common language is shared.

**İzmir**, which has a Syrian population of around 130,000, began attracting the attention of researchers and media in the summer of 2015, with the influx of refugees to the city in order to cross to EU countries through the Aegean Sea. İzmir becoming “popular” as a transit city to Europe drew the interest of many Syrians who were not in Turkey yet, but still in Syria and Lebanon. For these Syrians, İzmir became the first destination, unlike those Syrians who had crossed into Turkey in the previous years, for whom İzmir was a second destination. Syrians who came to İzmir with the intention to cross to Europe were mainly confined to the Basmane district and its surroundings, with invisible borders between them and the rest of the city that prevented interaction between locals and refugees. İzmir municipalities became infamous for their lack of support to Syrian refugees, which further contributed to the lack of interaction between locals and Syrians. However, civil society organizations in İzmir working with refugees mostly have a rights-based approach. This is because these organizations existed prior to 2011 and were already advocating for migrant rights, subsequently extending their capacity to address Syrian refugee issues, and/or due to the presence of a vibrant activist community in the city involved with other rights-based civil society issues, who established new organizations to advocate for refugee rights after 2014.

Even though crossing into Europe has mostly ceased after the EU-Turkey Statement, İzmir has now entered the Syrian imagination as a destination city rather than a transit city. Furthermore, a significant number of Syrians have replaced the Kurdish population of Turkey as seasonal agricultural workers, mainly in the Torbalı district. As in İstanbul, Kurdish networks also played a pull-factor in attracting Kurdish Syrians to İzmir.

Since 2011, cities bordering Syria have been at the forefront of all Syrian refugee-related news and research. **Gaziantep and Kilis**, being historically major entry/exit points for border trade, with networks based on family ties, have always been in contact with northern Syria, and were easily-reached destinations for middle- and upper-middle-class Syrians. However, with the liberation of Syrian border zones from 2011 on from the regime, border crossings acquired a new meaning and a hierarchical relationship between the Turkish and Syrian sides. Gaziantep, being an industrial city, was able to absorb many Syrian refugees who soon became low-cost labor for the city’s industrial and service sectors. Furthermore, due to Turkey’s open-door policy that lasted until 2015, Gaziantep became a hub for Syrian civil society organizations, who were doing cross-border work in the liberated regions in Syria. However, due to Gaziantep occupying a special place in the Turkish nationalist imagination, nationalist myths and discourses were quickly activated and utilized for racist, anti-refugee, anti-Arab purposes.

**Kilis**, a small city with a local population of 132,000 that only acquired the status of a governorate in 1995, has the highest percentage of Syrians in Turkey. This is due to the regime losing control over the closest border crossing early in the conflict (July 2012) and the fact that the nearby border area has always been a popular smuggling route. As a result of the state not investing in the infrastructure of city despite the increase in population and the city being hit by missiles multiple times, racist sentiments have arisen against refugees, rather than local populations directing their discontent towards the state itself. A recurring issue reiterated by interviewees in Kilis was the lack of adequate health-care services. Since the city does not have a major hospital, the influx of Syrian refugees has placed enormous strain on existing health infrastructure, and the state has failed to expand its capacity in response to the influx. This situation provides an example of how limited resources can become a source of racism against Syrian refugees, even though the discontent should more appropriately be directed at the states’ inadequate response. Human smuggling across the Kilis border also became frequent, often through the same smuggling networks that predated the conflict.



- Istanbul
- Şanlıurfa
- İzmir
- Mardin
- Gaziantep
- Antakya
- Kilis

**Şanlıurfa** mostly received refugees from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, in contrast to Gaziantep and Kilis, which received refugees mainly from Aleppo. Unlike in other cities, Şanlıurfa’s municipality adopted centralized coordination among all civil society organizations that provided humanitarian aid to refugees. Even though Syrian civil society was becoming active in Şanlıurfa after the liberation of Raqqa, once ISIS started gaining control over Raqqa, most organizations left Şanlıurfa. However, recently we have observed the emergence of new initiatives by Syrian women who focus more on their rights in Turkey and how to support themselves and their families in Şanlıurfa.

Before 2011, **Antakya** was one of the main cities benefiting economically from cross-border trade and from the considerable number of Syrian tourists it was receiving. As a consequence, Antakya tradesmen became disgruntled with the loss of revenue in the aftermath of 2011. Furthermore, with the advent of Syrian refugees to Antakya, the city witnessed sectarian tensions. As the border crossing in Antakya was the first to be liberated, the city was not at all prepared to receive refugees, and this abject lack of preparedness was a contributing factor to tensions between locals and Syrians from day one.

All of the above four border cities has large numbers of widows and single mothers among the refugee populations they received. Many Syrian women’s husbands have either been killed or arrested. The border cities were the most accessible to these women, and they mostly stayed in their city of arrival rather than moving westward toward Istanbul and İzmir. As a result, in these cities, in addition to civil society organizations largely targeting widowed Syrian women from a religiously-toned, conservative, “wife of the martyr” perspective, we also came across Syrian women’s initiatives geared more towards actively taking control to build new lives for themselves and for their children.

**Mardin**'s local population mostly comprises Kurds and Arabs. The fact that there are more Kurds from Syria, mainly from Haseke, in Mardin compared to other border cities has contributed to more contact between refugee and local populations and to better integration of Syrian children at public schools. Since both local and refugee children learn the Turkish language at school, refugee children do not feel like outcasts and are not subject to as much bullying as in other locations. However, sharing the ethnic background of the local population has not necessarily prevented racism altogether. Refugees' Syrian and Kurdish identities seem to come to the forefront selectively depending on the content of their interaction with the local Kurdish population.

### **Refugee Camps**

Despite the presence of refugee camps in border cities, this study was compelled to exclude them since access to the camps is substantially restricted by the state authorities. The lack of access to camps has been a concern for civil society since the start of their establishment and is seen to reflect a lack of transparency from the state. Furthermore, there has been consistent reports coming from inside camps regarding the prevalence of GBV, early marriages, and second marriages. However, since rights-based civil society organizations are not allowed inside camps, confirming these reports has not been possible.

Over the years, civil society organizations have expressed the view that the state is gradually taking steps to increase its control over refugee issues outside the camps as well by sidelining civil society organizations that it declares to be unqualified to work with refugees. Other than directly shutting down organizations on the pretext of involvement with 'terrorist organizations', one of the tools used to do this has been the requirement to sign protocols with the authorities in order to continue operating community centers. Many organizations that were not granted protocols were forced to shutdown their community centers or stop certain activities, such as language courses. Syrian women interviewed had varying responses towards this development. Some expressed their disappointment with the closing down of community centers, since they were generally in accessible locations they grew accustomed to. While others stated that they are content with going to state-affiliated centers such as those run by the Turkish Red Crescent, or taking language courses run by the municipalities, because they feel registering with such official bodies will make their situation less precarious legally, and offer them a way out of the legal limbo they have experienced for several years.

# The Turkish State and Civil Society's Response to Syrian Refugees

To better understand the limitations on rights granted to Syrians in Turkey, the Syrian refugee crisis must first be contextualized within the history of the country's migration regime. Until the mid-1990s, Turkey was considered a migrant producing country or a transit point for asylum seekers rather than being a destination country for migrants (İçduygu & Yüksek, 2012; Kirişçi, 2007). This began to change in the second half of the 1990s, as migrants started arriving and staying in Turkey from places such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. However, despite being a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol, Turkey retains a "geographical limitation" rule. This implies that only "persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe" can be granted refugee status in Turkey. Therefore, asylum seekers coming to Turkey from elsewhere (e.g. the above-mentioned countries) are not eligible for refugee status. For these refugee populations, UNHCR had been carrying out the registration, alongside with Turkish authorities, and was responsible for their status-determination in conjunction with its implementing partners. If UNHCR decided that someone had a legitimate refugee claim, they were responsible for resettling the person into a third country. Resettlement could take many years, up to a decade, forcing refugees to lead precarious lives in limbo while they remained in Turkey. Furthermore, the Turkish state mostly approached migration as a security issue opposed to a human rights issue. Although during this period there were some civil society organizations activity engaged with refugee/migrant issues, in general, defending the rights of refugees was not prominently addressed by civil society in Turkey. It was in this context that Syrian refugees started arriving to Turkey soon after the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011.

Starting with around 250 Syrians entering Turkey at the end of April 2011 and around 7000 Syrians who arrived in June 2011, after the Syrian regime's violent attack against Jisr Al Shughur, until the end of 2014, the Turkish government viewed the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey to be transitory, and therefore did not officially adopt long-term or integrationist policies (Ozden, 2013). The government's open-door policy towards Syrian refugees also partly reflected the widespread view that refugees would go back home soon. In this initial period, the Turkish government mainly focused on providing services to refugees in camps, allowing civil society organizations to operate and fill the gap in urban settings left by the government. In September 2011, the Ministry of Interior's AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority) and the Turkish Red Crescent built and subsequently assumed responsibility for managing the refugee camps. The fact that AFAD remained in charge of the camps long after the initial emergency period in itself shows that the Turkish government did not have a long-term integration policy towards refugees.

The mass arrival of Syrian refugees to Turkey, beginning shortly after the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, has resulted in a proliferation of civil society organizations in the country. Not only has the number of local, national, and international civil society organizations increased, but also many of the pre-existing ones have extended and diversified their mandates and capacities to address the refugee issue at various levels, including refugee women's access to rights. As a result, in the post-2011 period, Turkey has witnessed a heterogeneous and fragmented civil society scene vis-a-vis sources of funding, relationships with the state, and areas of activities. Mostly due to donor policy and the Turkish state's refugee policy, most civil society actors in the initial period from 2011 until 2014 focused on providing humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees. By the end of 2014, with the changing national and international policies towards refugees coupled with changing donor policy, civil society organizations adopted programs geared towards integration and social cohesion as well as refugee rights. However, with the state of emergency that came into effect after the attempted military coup of 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016, some of these civil society organizations had to either completely halt their activities or restrict them to areas permitted by the state.



While the increasingly restrictive post-coup climate has negatively affected Turkish civil society in general, it has had an especially detrimental impact on rights-based organizations, which have had to tread carefully and limit their activities to avoid provoking punitive government action. These factors, coupled with the adoption of a more state-centered approach to providing services to refugees that followed the EU-Turkey Statement signed in March 2016, led to civil society's involvement with the refugee issue becoming largely "fixed" in the sense that the role of certain organizations became increasingly entrenched with state support, while others were prevented from continuing their work by various means due to the state policies. These developments also severely restricted the space for new actors to become active in the refugee field if they lacked state support. In other words, the changing role of civil society organizations in enabling Syrian women's access to rights in Turkey since 2011 has been deeply interlinked with both donor policy and the Turkish state's overall policies towards Syrian refugees, as well as civil society actors in Turkey. Therefore, an analysis of the Turkish social and political context is necessary in order to gain a clear understanding of civil society organizations' operations in relation to Syrian refugees in general and Syrian women in specific.

## **Politicization, Dependency and Hierarchy: Humanitarian Aid in the Syrian Refugee Context in Turkey**

With some exceptions, as mentioned above, the majority of local and national civil society organizations working in the field of refugees initially focused on emergency humanitarian aid, rather than adopting a rights-based approach advocating for long-term status and legal rights for Syrians in Turkey. Due to a lack of long-term integrationist policies by the state, the provision of humanitarian aid lasted for a period much longer than emergency situations typically require. This approach served to deepen the rift between local and Syrian communities, fueling hate speech and racism against refugees over the following years.

In this initial period, many of the more visible civil society organizations working with refugees were religious in orientation, meaning that much of the humanitarian aid distributed to Syrians was carried out from an Islamic charity perspective. The literature on Syrian refugees and civil society in Turkey tends to focus on the disproportionate role played by faith-based civil society organizations in the response to the crisis (Danış & Nazlı, 2018). As the Turkish government increasingly adopted neo-liberal policies, it utilized the concept of Islamic charity in order to replace and weaken the welfare state and its provision of services to citizens and residents (Göçmen, 2014). As a result, civil society actors increasingly became organizations ideologically close to the government, distributing charity to the "needy," rather than rights-based organizations monitoring the government's policies and advocating for the rights of marginalized sectors of society, such as refugees. This also enabled the government to exert more control over civil society, thus entrenching a governance system where state and non-state actors alike were ideologically aligned with each other, undermining pluralism in civil and political contexts in the process. Therefore, in this initial period, up until 2014, civil society actors working with Syrian refugees were mostly those in ideological proximity to the government, and their engagement was primarily defined by the aforementioned charity and humanitarian aid approach towards refugees.

Such an approach was also instrumental in defining the role of refugee women as in need of charity and protection. In several interviews with both civil society representatives and Syrian women, it was mentioned that it is primarily women who go to the organizations to receive humanitarian aid.

This is due to various reasons, such as men finding the process humiliating, men working, and in certain cases, families believing women will appeal to feelings of pity more than men. Thus, as a result of this approach, Syrian women's role became primarily defined by their victimhood based on the perception of them as wives and mothers who are receiving humanitarian aid for their families in need. It did not view women as individuals and social actors with rights, actively building a future for themselves and their families in a new setting.

Though, to a certain extent, the government played an important role in ideologically homogenizing the civil society organizations active in the field of refugees by tending to support those organizations ideologically aligned with it, it is also important to critically examine the shortcomings of civil society actors historically closer to the opposition, whose response to the influx of Syrian refugees also needs to be contextualized within the political and social dynamics present in Turkey. Many of these actors did not initially want to constructively engage with the refugee issue, mainly because they viewed Syrian refugees through the prism of their own opposition to the Turkish government and its foreign policy in Syria. Therefore, rather than actively advocating for refugee rights, such civil society actors referred to Syrian refugees as "Erdoğan's refugees," or used the language of identity politics to conflate Arab and Sunni Syrians with "fundamentalism" and "jihadism."

As a result, many among civil society organizations affiliated with the government as well as those opposed to the government ended up adopting a selective humanitarian aid policy towards Syrians based on their ethnic, sectarian, and political identities. This contributed to establishing hierarchical relationships between refugees and citizens and rendered the term "refugee" a derogatory one. Women's bodies became a field of contestation for receiving humanitarian aid both for pro-government and also civil society actors closer to the opposition. A woman interviewed in Istanbul mentioned that she was not able to receive humanitarian aid from local civil society organization due to the fact that she is not covered. Women also mentioned instances when they were not able to receive aid from other organizations since they are wearing the niqab. Others have mentioned how sectarian identities play a role in access to humanitarian aid through civil society organizations.

In this initial period until the end of 2014, the Turkish state mainly utilized two discourses when referring to Syrian refugees: the "guest" discourse and the religious "*muhajir-ansar*" discourse. On the one hand, both discourses approached the refugee issue from a short-term and transitory perspective, enabling the state to avoid having to adopt a rights-based perspective towards refugees. On the other hand, and interlinked with the first function, both discourses were utilized at the public level to temporarily prevent anti-refugee sentiments. During times when anti-refugee sentiments surfaced, the state tried to contain them by employing either one of the discourses, but never argued publicly and officially that it was a human right to be a refugee. Soon enough the "guest" discourse was turned upside down by anti-refugee actors, who framed it in context of a literal hierarchical relationship between the "landlord" and "guest" to argue that "guests do not stay forever" and "are at the mercy of landlords."

Interviews with Syrian women showed that most of them uncritically accepted the guest discourse and took at face value that being "guests" meant not having rights in Turkey. Therefore, for many Syrian women, the "refugee" identity ended up becoming a derogatory one, and they felt unprotected by the law. This was accompanied by a lack of official channels to access information regarding their rights as Syrian women in Turkey. Many have stated that Syrian social media groups are the only channels through which they have access to news regarding Syrians in Turkey. To summarize this initial period up until the end of 2014, the state's short term, transitory approach to Syrians, coupled with a lack of channels for them to access information on the one hand, and a corresponding lack of civil society actors advocating for refugee rights on the other – which instead mainly focused on the selective distribution of humanitarian aid according to ethnic and religious identities – resulted in Syrian women feeling stripped of any rights and confined to a hierarchal relationship with their "providers."

## Temporary No More?

In 2014, under the Law on Foreigners and International Protection that was adopted, a Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) was created to centralize all migration and asylum matters under a civilian body. DGMM is now the authority responsible for the registration and status determination of Syrian refugees under temporary protection status. Temporary protection status was regularized through a legislative act in October 2014. It implied that unlike in other neighboring countries, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) role would be limited to that of a “complementary” protection actor that does not deal with the registration of Syrians, or their resettlement to a third country. The main rights secured by temporary protection are: a) non-refoulement, meaning non-deportation to Syria unless the refugee voluntarily wants to return; b) non-punishment of irregular entry to Turkey; and c) access to services such as free health care and public education.

Temporary protection status has been consistently criticized by many rights-based civil society organizations due to the fact that it does not correspond to the evidently long-term nature of Syrians presence in Turkey. By not being legally recognized as refugees, Syrians in Turkey cannot transform their current status into long-term residency or naturalization in the future.

At the governorate level, provincial governors take the lead in field coordination with AFAD, DGMM, and other related ministries. With this new administrative structure inside Turkey, along with Turkey increasingly prominent function as buffer zone to prevent refugees crossing into the EU and across its other borders, it is becoming clearer that going back to Syria is not realistic for most refugees for the foreseeable future, and so the Turkish state has started adopting more long-term policies.



## Growing Crisis, Expanding Focus : Civil Society's Pivot Towards Syrian Women

Such developments at the national and international levels were accompanied by more international funding becoming available to civil society organizations in Turkey to expand their mandates to include refugee activities. It was in this period that some of the civil society organizations interviewed started their operations. These organizations also had to become more professional in order to meet donor requirements, causing them to avoid the use of identity politics discussed earlier. Many of these organizations opened community centers for refugees where they provided a variety of services ranging from language and vocational courses, to legal support and informative sessions.

Among the organizations interviewed, in this period, feminist organizations such as Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı/Women's Solidarity Foundation KADAV and KAMER Foundation extended their activities to Syrian refugee women, treating them as part of their feminist cause. According to the program coordinator of KADAV, they could not extend their activities to Syrian women until 2014 because they insisted on applying for funding for women's issues rather than applying separately for refugee issues. However, it was not possible to increase the same funding package, and they eventually had to apply separately in order to extend their activities to refugee women. The politics of donors thus plays an important role in segregating refugee women from citizens rather than incorporating them.

The majority of the organizations interviewed—some being women's organizations, but not necessarily identifying as feminist—were solely focused on Syrian refugee women in their activities, emphasizing the refugee identity of women rather than their gender, thereby creating a distinction between citizen and refugee women. This applied to the establishment of community centers as well, even though eventually, on paper, they stated that community centers were open to citizen and refugee women alike.

The funding available for community centers for refugees enabled civil society organizations to focus mostly on women's issues, since it was mostly women coming to community centers. In all of the seven locations where the research took place, legal aid and informative workshops related to the legal rights of refugee women were organized at community centers run by civil society organizations.

While the main issues for which women requested legal aid were related to registration and divorce, the principal topics addressed during the informative sessions pertained to second marriages, early marriages, and domestic violence.

Interviews with civil society organizations as well as Syrian women point to the fact that these centers largely became the primary channel through which women accessed information about the legal system in Turkey, and to lesser extent, directly engaged with it. Practicing their legal rights was dependent on more structural changes such as government policies and their economic situation. It is clear that even though it was through civil society organizations that women learned that early marriages and second marriages were not legal, the rate of their practice started to decrease either only after the government begun taking punitive action against them or after the family could financially afford to not marry off their daughter at an early age or as a second wife. Therefore, in contrast to the culturalist argument that these practices are part of "Syrian culture," it became clear that when Syrian women have both the legal information and the structural conditions available to them, they do actively defend their rights.

Gender-based violence (GBV) was another issue that most civil society organizations interviewed were addressing. After Syrian women learned the channels through which they can act against GBV, what encouraged more of them to actively practice their rights was seeing the judiciary and security services actually taking action against perpetrators.

In short, civil society organizations' becoming channels of access to legal information, combined with state action through its judiciary and security forces to ensure those rights are enforced, resulted in an increase in both refugee women's access to and practice of their rights in Turkey. Without the state fulfilling its role, these rights would largely exist only on paper, rendering the situation of refugee women precarious and in limbo opposed to one in which they are recognized as individuals with rights and agency.

## Strengthening Traditional Gender Roles or Not?

Many of the organizations interviewed started running vocational workshops in such fields as hairdressing, cooking, and sewing. While many are critical of the donor focus on such vocational workshops, arguing they negatively reinforce traditional gender roles, others argue that the content of the workshops do not necessarily mean women are being confined to traditional gender roles. For many women, these workshops offer a rare space for socialization and one of the few opportunities available to them to leave their homes and go to a public space. Therefore, the transformative effects these opportunities have on women's lives go far beyond acquiring new skills.

In addition, while vocational trainings most often do not result in women gaining employment in the relevant fields, some civil society organizations interviewed have provided women who participated in their workshops with other work opportunities, either as translators or coordinators. However, it must be noted that the number of jobs available to Syrian women is very limited due to legal difficulties in acquiring work permits for them.

Furthermore, interviews with Syrian women showed that in many instances community centers and activities carried out by civil society organizations served the unintended purpose of establishing long-lasting networks among the refugee women who met at these locations. For example, in one of the research locations in Istanbul, women who met at a community center's women empowerment program developed an informal network and provide support to each other in their daily lives in issues ranging from finding jobs to providing childcare in times of need.

In Antakya, some of the women interviewed had established a more structured network compared to those in Istanbul. These women, most of whom are widows, had met at workshops offered by a civil society organization and established a network that gradually took a cooperative-like structure. They have opened a shop, which they run collectively, and where each woman contributes and sells her own produce, be it handicraft or jam. Thus, the civil society organization that had been offering only short-term needs-based services to women ended up triggering a much bigger change where women took control of their lives and established a source of income and social support through collective action. It is important to note that the conditions for such collective action became possible only after Syrian women felt that they were permanently in Turkey, which became an increasingly widespread sentiment after the EU-Turkey Statement that effectively ended the large-scale flow of refugees' from the country to Europe, and after the Turkish government took concrete steps towards long-term integration, such as the registration of Syrian children at Turkish schools. It should also be noted that these women undertook this collective action despite the legal obstacles they faced, such as obtaining permits to open a business.

In the border towns of Kilis, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Antakya in particular, there are many Syrian women whose husbands have either been arrested by the Syrian regime or killed in the war. These women had easy access to Turkish border towns, and largely remained in their initial destinations rather than moving towards cities in the Western parts of the country such as Istanbul and İzmir. Instead of the state adopting a policy to accommodate Syrian widows and single mothers, it seems it has sub-contracted the issue to civil society organizations affiliated with it, which tend to be more conservative and

primarily religion-based. These organizations run several houses in which women and their children live collectively. Most of the women interviewed who live in these houses complained about a severe lack of privacy. Though it was not possible to visit and observe these houses, based on the interviews, the impression was given that they were not designed as shelters to empower single mothers or widows, but rather as houses to accommodate the “wives of the martyrs” without encouraging them to establish independent lives for themselves.

## Rights-Based Civil Society Organizations

The widespread application of legal rights granted to Syrian women mainly gained traction after the state adopted more long-term, centralized refugee policies from 2014 onwards, when women started to develop greater awareness of their rights in Turkey. However, to date, the state has avoided using the term “integration” even though there are obvious moves towards this process, such as schooling for Syrian children in the public education system. Despite beginning to develop centralized policies that constituted gradual steps towards a long-term refugee policy framework, these policies were often ambiguous and varied significantly between locations. Both Syrian refugees trying to establish independent lives for themselves and civil society organizations trying to accommodate them thus have to operate with this legal ambiguity and inconsistent application in mind.

Among the civil society organizations interviewed, a few of them pursue a rights-based approach to the refugee issue, meaning that rather than focusing on short-term humanitarian needs or the provision of basic services, these organizations do advocacy work to ensure Syrian refugees’ long-term welfare needs are met and that they are able to establish themselves as active agents with unambiguous legal rights and independence. Such organizations aim to affect structural change, monitor government policies, and lobby for Syrians’ refugee status and rights. However, the state’s persistent framing of Syrians in Turkey as temporary and transient has represented an ongoing challenge, since it is in direct conflict with these organizations’ advocacy for securing long-term refugee status and rights for Syrians. In addition, with the failed coup attempt of 2016 and the period of emergency law following it, the political environment for such organizations became increasingly difficult to operate in. As pressure on civil society grew, and defending human rights in general became more difficult, political restraints on organizations advocating for the rights of refugees were no exception.

Therefore, the challenging environment in which civil society organizations are operating in Turkey, especially over the past two years, as well as the precarious legal situation of Syrian refugees themselves, has restricted the ability of such civil society organizations to monitor violations, intervene when they occur, and advocate for refugee rights in general. The same difficulties are sometimes also faced when trying to approach refugee women’s problems from a feminist and rights-based perspective that aims to go beyond basic aid provision (food, clothes, fuel for winter, school supplies), social services (legal aid, information, psycho-social counseling), and cultural and art projects geared towards the harmonization of refugee and local communities. In a later section, this report will also attempt to demonstrate how Syrian women’s lack of awareness about rights-based perspectives affects the way they perceive their own situation.

Rights-based Turkish civil society organizations consider their work in the refugee field as part of their general struggle to expand democracy and defend and advance human rights in Turkey, rather than treating it as a separate issue. During the first years of Syrian refugees arrival to Turkey, such organizations focused their efforts on critiquing the existing legal approach to asylum seekers, and mostly advocated for the Turkish state to grant refugee status to Syrians. This was an extension of the advocacy these organizations were already carrying out for many years before the arrival of

Syrian refugees, the space for which - alongside other rights-based issues - had increased due to the process of accession to the European Union (EU).

The same organizations also worked on documenting violations of Syrian refugees' human rights, as they had been doing for years for asylum seekers from various other countries in Turkey. As the EU signed a deal with Turkey ensuring Syrian refugees remain in the country in return for monetary support to Ankara, Turkey was declared a safe country for refugees. During this period, the aforementioned NGOs continued documenting human rights violations of Syrian refugees in order to counter this statement. The above-mentioned political climate, combined with an increasingly nationalist and populist environment at the societal-level, led to a further change: gearing the discussion towards racism against refugees. More recently, many NGOs have shifted their work to combatting racism. This is also in accordance with donor policy, which in line with Turkish state policies, has also shifted in priority towards "social cohesion" efforts.

Civil society organizations whose area of work focuses on women's rights extended their programs to cover the specific needs of Syrian women, especially around issues that relate to accessing information about their rights as women in Turkey. This was mainly due to the fact that the Turkish state was not providing sufficient channels for refugees to access information; instead, and in parallel with donor policy, it encouraged civil society organizations to provide information to refugees. This information mostly pertained to issues of civil law, marriages and divorce, child custody in cases of divorce, and domestic violence. Some of the organizations have also been providing legal support, thus enabling refugee women to practice their rights, and not merely acquire information about them.

Despite the fact that many Syrian women interviewed mentioned the importance of civil society programs concerning legal awareness and legal support in achieving a sense of stability and empowerment, it should also be mentioned that for many organizations, women's rights issues were dealt with as part of refugees' social cohesion rather than from a feminist perspective. This is mainly because the feminist movements in Turkey were not able to go beyond their localized and nationalistic identity politics—be it Turkish or Kurdish—and thus were not able to incorporate refugee women's rights into their perspectives. Therefore, in line with their perspectives, the inclusion of refugee women into their agenda was very much ethnically-determined. Feminist movements mostly started paying attention to the plight of refugee women once Kurdish women began arriving from Kobane. Furthermore, Yazidi women's suffering under ISIS was rightly another major focus of feminist movements in Turkey. However, feminist movements largely neglected the majority of refugee women from Syria, mostly due to the polarized political landscape in Turkey and the politics of the opposition in Turkey, which considered Arab Syrian women to be "refugees of the governing party" and failed to establish networks of solidarity with them.

Feminist movements' interactions with most refugee women were thus limited to community centers where legal aid was provided to refugees, rather than building a culture of solidarity that extended beyond these activities. This was also due to the fact that different actors among the feminist movements in Turkey tended to consider only Kurdish women from Syria as political actors, excluding Arab and Turkman women from their focus based on the categorization of them as merely refugees in need of humanitarian aid. In other words, a hierarchical relationship was established between Turkish feminists and refugee women on the basis of the latter's ethnic and sectarian identity. This was also one of the key reasons why a strong relationship based on a sense of solidarity has been lacking among Syrian and Turkish rights-based organizations.

## Hate Speech and Racism Against Syrians in Turkey

Hate speech and hate crimes against Syrian refugees began surfacing mostly after the EU- Turkey Statement that made it clear to Turkish citizens that Syrians were not temporary residents or “guests” in the country. Hate speech and racism most prominently emerged on social media through online campaigns calling for the deportation of Syrians from Turkey. Most of these campaigns centered around circulating false information advancing the notion that the state was favoring Syrians over Turkish citizens; claiming untruthfully, for example, that Syrian students did not have to take entrance examinations in order to register at universities. As the Turkish state failed until very recently to take significant steps to proactively correct such misinformation, it fell to civil society organizations to combat these campaigns by widely disseminating accurate information regarding the rights and services available to Syrians in Turkey.

Some organizations also carried out activities targeting specific public institutions in order to counter racism in Turkey. An example of such activities is the provision of training to teachers at public schools who have Syrian students in their class about how to deal with students from different backgrounds and how to counter the racism such students might face from parents and students alike. Other organizations prepared reports regarding media and hate speech against refugees and organized workshops around the issue.

However, as much as the above activities played an important role in limiting the spread of racist attacks against refugees, civil society organizations in Turkey have not yet systematically analyzed racism against Syrians within the current political context of Turkey or adopted strategies that address its root causes. Pursuing an approach based on facilitating social interactions between Syrians and Turkish citizens can produce positive outcomes on a project-by-project basis, but such an approach does not fundamentally alter the sociopolitical driving forces behind the rise of racism and hate speech against Syrians because it does not meaningfully address them. As the spaces of civil political debate have become increasingly limited, with the violent and exclusionary politics of xenophobic nationalism and populist discourses increasingly permeating Turkish society, hate speech against Syrians needs to be analyzed and addressed within such a political context.

In line with donor policies and the government’s policy of social cohesion, many civil society organizations have started undertaking projects that aim to bring together Turkish and Syrian women through various activities, such as daily trips in the city and common training programs. Some civil society representatives have mentioned that these activities help Syrian and Turkish women recognize their commonalities as women rather than their differences in nationality. In that sense, such programs are very important in constituting the first steps towards solidarity-building among women from Turkey and Syria with regard to the women’s rights movement. However, some Syrian interviewees mentioned that despite the fact they view these programs very positively, unfortunately they feel the programs will not be able to build long-lasting relations between Syrian and Turkish women. As one focus group participant said, “Once we leave this room, we are no longer in touch with each other. Our relations here are not carried over to the neighborhoods and to our daily lives.” Therefore, it is of vital importance that civil society organizations plan their programs to foster relations outside the immediate physical parameters of the civil society organizations and inside the life-spaces of refugees themselves. In addition, the above statement further highlights the limited ability of social cohesion activities based purely on exposure and socialization to combat the root causes of racism against Syrians in Turkey, which are embedded in the political, social, and historical contexts the crisis emerged and evolved within.



# Close Together, Far Apart : Relations Between Turkish and Syrian Civil Society Organizations

Despite the fact that Turkey, especially in the border cities, had been the hub for Syrian civil society since the arrival of Syrians to Turkey, relations between Turkish and Syrian rights-based organizations remained very weak, especially in the initial years after the arrival of refugees to Turkey. This held true for the most part until the Turkish-Syrian border was sealed off by the Turkish state in 2015, mainly because Turkish rights-based organizations work related to Syrians was mostly related to their legal status, whereas Syrian rights-based organizations at that point were primarily focused on their work inside Syria. As Turkish organizations approached refugees simply as victims whose rights were to be advocated for by Turkish human rights defenders, and were not interested in recognizing Syrians as active political agents, it was not possible at first to build constructive relations with their Syrian counterparts. At the same time, as indicated by many refugee women, Syrian organizations ignored the situation of refugees within the Turkish context and were not able to play the role of intermediary between refugees and Turkish civil society or the Turkish state in advocating for the rights of Syrian refugees.

## Syrian Civil Society Organizations in Turkey

For this section of the research, representatives of 24 Syrian civil society organizations were interviewed across 6 cities in Turkey. All were either specifically women's organizations or organizations in which women's rights represent a major focus of their agenda and activities. Organizations that do not engage women's rights issues as a fundamental aspect of their mission or explicitly work with Syrian women were deliberately excluded from the study. No organizations were interviewed in Istanbul as we could not identify any women-focused rights-based organizations active in the two neighborhoods where the research took place.

Prior to the Syrian uprising, the space for civil society to operate in Syria was extremely limited. The Assad regime had always been hostile towards any pro-democracy and human rights-based actors, with many activists being subject to arrest and torture, which largely forced their work "underground" (Badael, 2015). In the post-2011 period, hundreds of new civil society groups and organizations—characterized by a high degree of internal heterogeneity—emerged, in many ways representing the nucleus of the Syrian uprising. Many mobilized around the struggle for freedom, justice, and democracy, while others acted as service providers in the absence of the state and given the abuse of public services (e.g. water and electricity) as a weapon of war by the regime.

The Syrian civil society movement in Turkey should be understood as a continuation of this post-2011 phenomenon, although with different motivations for establishment. The driving motivation for most of the interviewed civil society organizations was responding to the Syrian refugee crisis, and specifically to the needs of refugee women and their lack of knowledge concerning their rights as refugees in Turkey. This is in contrast to the large number of Syrian groups and organizations established in the first few years of the uprising, which mostly operated as service providers, worked to build democratic structures, or advocated for the rights and freedom of the Syrian people. Thus, while many of these groups and organizations were based in Turkey, their goals and activities mainly focused on the situation inside Syria, which is why they are generally referred to as "cross-border organizations". This study shows that a new generation of Syrian civil society actors has emerged in Turkey that are distinct from the cross-border organizations. Because the latter became established

much earlier, and were primarily focused on activities inside Syria, many received significant external funding and developed strong relationships with donors early on. However, the new wave of refugee-focused groups and organizations that have arisen in the Turkish context generally lack access to the same sources of funding and have therefore remained much more grassroots in orientation.

Several of the interviewed organizations' staff and members had been heavily involved in grassroots civil society activism before they fled to Turkey. After their arrival, these civil society activists remobilized and applied their skillsets across the border. While some continued to primarily focus on the situation inside Syria by actively maintaining working connections to civil society actors in their places of origin, as well as through using new means (e.g. electronic) to continue their activism from abroad, others redirected their full focus towards working with Syrian refugees in Turkey. Those fleeing areas after they were seized by ISIS tended to fall into the latter category, as the nature of ISIS's rule meant that civil society work became virtually impossible, and therefore their ability to maintain working relations with their former colleagues in Syria was not an option.

## **Syrian Civil Society Organizations' Focus Areas, Activities and Size**

This study identified a variety of focus areas among the interviewed organizations in relation to their work with Syrian women. These included: Women's economic empowerment; gender equality; combatting gender-based violence; documenting cases of detention and forced disappearances in Syria, and raising awareness about these issues; and building relationships between the Turkish authorities and Syrian civil society in Turkey. Reflecting this, their organizational activities also covered a range of different focus areas. Prominent among these were economic empowerment initiatives (which predominantly took the form of vocational training); responding to violence against women through the provision of legal consultations, medical assistance, educational programmes about women's rights in Turkey; and psycho-social support services, which many organizations said the demand and need for is rapidly growing.

Of the organizations interviewed, 50% were small (fewer than 50 staff/members), 33% lower-medium sized (between 50 and 75 staff/members), 8% upper-medium sized (75-100 staff/members), and 8% large (100-200 staff/members). It should be noted that these organizations are heavily dependent on volunteers. Volunteer staff constitute 63% of their overall human resources, with the remainder being made up of either full- or part-time employees. This poses serious sustainability challenges given the often-transient nature of volunteers, and organizations' institutional memory and overall stability if they occupy key positions.

## Timeline of Syrian Civil Society Organizations' Emergence in Turkey

Most of the Syrian civil society organizations interviewed were established between 2014 and 2016. This period coincided with an escalation of violence in Syria, including the rapid territorial expansion of ISIS, as well as an intensification of airstrikes against civilians in northern Syria. These factors contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of Syrians entering Turkey seeking asylum, including many civil society activists eager to continue their work across the border. For example, in Raqqa, the number of civil society groups and organizations was comparatively high compared to other areas in northern Syria prior to the emergence of ISIS, however, when ISIS seized control, many of these groups/organizations were forced to flee to Turkey. While this meant that many had to cease their work entirely, others re-formed into new groups, adopted new mandates, and begun working directly with Syrian refugees. This trend was also highlighted during interviews with Syrian organizations in Şanlıurfa, some of which had been active in Deir Ezzor prior to ISIS taking over, before subsequently fleeing, re-forming, and changing the nature and scope of their work to specifically address refugee issues.

Importantly, in addition to developments in Syria, the timing of the organizations' establishment reflects the more permissive environment and wider operating space available to them in Turkey between 2014-2016. Reflecting this, Most of the organizations interviewed described registration and associated legal processes during this period as "easy." More than half of the organizations interviewed are legally registered as non-profit associations in Turkey. Those that are not gave several reasons as to why this was the case. Some lacked resident/work permits among their members while others did not have sufficient financial means to cover necessary costs (e.g. hiring an accountant or paying required fees).

After peaking throughout 2015-16, the rate of establishment declined significantly in 2017. This was mainly due to changes in government policy towards Syrian civil society organizations, which involved stricter enforcement of the relevant laws and regulations, such as the need for all staff to possess work permits.

## Shifts in the Scope of Syrian Civil Society Organizations' Work Over Time

From their establishment until the present, while Syrian civil society organizations have, for the most part, not significantly altered their core missions, the scope and nature of their work has evolved in response to the changing needs of their beneficiaries, opportunities for organizational growth, and most importantly, the lessons they have learned through their experiences on the ground. A trend identified during the interviews that highlights this point is a noticeable shift away from economic empowerment initiatives (i.e. vocational training mainly focused on sewing, knitting etc.) to activities designed to build Syrian women's knowledge about women's rights topics, especially in relation to their rights in Turkey. Some of the organizations interviewed have also expanded their programmes to work directly with children. According to the organizations, this shift was largely caused by the problems they encountered in trying to engage women who have children, either because they could not participate in their activities at all, or because they would discontinue their involvement as they could not leave their children at home. In response, many organizations developed programmes to support children or established kindergartens to provide childcare, so their mothers could

participate in activities. Other organizations have steadily increased their focus on healing and psycho-social support services.

The chronic lack of interest among national, regional, and international actors in addressing rights-based issues such as arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances in Syria, and their ongoing failure to meaningfully pursue accountability against the perpetrators, combined with the regime consolidating its military and political advantage, has had a major impact on the strategies and approaches of Syrian human rights organizations in Turkey as well as elsewhere. As a result, civil society organizations primarily focused on documenting human rights violations against women have increasingly engaged in sustained advocacy to raise awareness and mobilize public opinion on specific issues related to justice and accountability, in addition to their ongoing data collection activities. There has also been a discernable increase over the past two years in the number of women-focused initiatives implemented by these organizations involving both oral history research, which aims to ensure Syrian women's experiences and perspectives are documented and preserved, and women-focused victims' support groups as part of this shift in strategy and approach. These trends have increased many Syrian human rights organizations level of engagement with refugee populations.

## Challenges Facing Syrian Civil Society Organizations in Turkey

The interviewed organizations referred to various challenges they are currently facing. The primary challenges they identified were changes in government policy, reaching out to women, and a lack of financial and technical resources. Each of these is explored in detail below:

### **Changes in Turkish government policy towards Syrian civil society organizations operating in Turkey**

From early 2012 until the end of 2016, Syrian civil society organizations enjoyed a generally permissive environment vis-à-vis the Turkish state, enabling them to operate with relative freedom. However, the Turkish government's imposition of new rules and restrictions on Syrian organizations in late 2016 had a dramatic effect on their operations that continues until today. The introduced requirement that all employees must possess valid work permits had a particularly far-reaching impact, especially for rights-based organizations. Many organizations could not cover the financial cost of gaining work permits, which requires them to pay tax and social security for their employees. As most were fully dependent on donor funding, it was also not possible for them to reallocate resources to absorb the new costs, and they had no additional sources of income to adapt to the law changes. For those that could afford them, the process of securing work permits was bureaucratic and time consuming, which placed an additional time and resource burden on organizations that were often already under resourced and overstretched, and furthermore, there was little guarantee they would even be granted the work permits in the end. Over time, obtaining a work permits became extremely difficult. A new regulation was introduced that required Syrian civil society organizations to provide documented proof that they were formally cooperating/coordinating with the Turkish Red Crescent or with a Turkish NGO such as the IHH in order to obtain work permits for their employees. To further complicate matters, the Turkish government provided a list of designated Turkish organizations that Syrian civil society organizations could be associated with, all of which were focused on humanitarian aid or service provision, meaning that rights-based organizations had no option but to implement direct aid projects in order to meet the work permit requirements.

To enforce the new laws, the Turkish authorities also began making unannounced visits – primarily in

Gaziantep – to Syrian organizations' offices. In many cases, Syrians present at organizations' premises during these visits were detained for not having work permits without police checking whether or not they were members, volunteers, or just visiting. This is despite there being nothing in the law that prevents members or volunteers being present at an organization's premise. This development led to a significant contraction in the space available for Syrian organizations to operate openly and instilled a climate of fear throughout the Syrian civil society landscape. Interviewed organizations referred to how this caused them to avoid gathering, or going to their offices, and some began working exclusively from cafes or houses. In the words of one interviewee: "We are very frustrated with the way the Turkish authorities have been handling Syrian civil society organizations. We are scared, we are insecure, we conduct our activities in private houses now." Several of the organizations interviewed emphasized the huge psychological impact these developments have had on their staff/members, who now work in fear of being deported or criminalized. The Turkish government crackdown also extended to international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), with several being forced to shut down their operations in Turkey for perceived violations of the new laws and regulations. This further compounded the hardship of many Syrian organizations that received training, funding, and other forms of support from targeted INGOs.

Another recurring issue raised during the interviews was the continuous and unpredictable nature of law changes. Given the absence of Turkish language skills in most of the organizations interviewed, keeping up-to-date with the constantly changing laws is difficult. Even organizations that can afford ongoing legal support still find the fluid nature of law changes challenging to stay on top of, as their Turkish lawyers often require time to fully understand them and any procedural changes they may entail.

### **Challenges in reaching out to refugee women**

The interviewed organizations also face challenges in reaching out to Syrian women and getting them to participate in their activities and programmes. A number of reasons were given for this. For women who suffer from economic hardship, the cost of transportation to and from community centers or events is simply too high for them to meet, and the limited resources available to most civil society organizations mean they cannot offer financial support to cover these costs. Another challenge is the fact that many women have young children and no one to take care of them in their absence. While, as mentioned above, some women-focused organizations have tried to address this problem by providing child-friendly spaces on their premises, most have not. Restrictions on women's freedom of movement imposed on them by their husbands or male relatives, also create obstacles to some women's ability to participate. Lastly, several organizations stated that a general mistrust of civil society actors and NGOs among some Syrian women further complicates their outreach efforts. In addition, and perhaps reflecting a lack of adequate outreach efforts on the organizations' part, several Syrian women interviewed criticized them for repeatedly reaching out to the same women instead of incorporating new groups of women into their activities.

### **Limited financial and technical resources**

Given the general trend towards declining donor support for Syrian civil society (which reflects overarching shifts in donor policies regarding Syria), and the further lack of external funding available for smaller, local organizations, few of the interviewed organizations are successfully securing funding, and for those that are, the amounts being secured are insufficient to cover their planned activities or achieve their organizational goals. The ongoing struggle to secure adequate funding has meant that many conduct their activities on an entirely voluntary basis. Several said they had experienced long periods of financial difficulties in which they could not cover basic organizational costs. 25% of the Syrian civil society organizations interviewed have no funding at all, while most of them receive annual funding below \$50,000. There were only two exceptions, with one receiving between \$50,000 and \$200,000, and the other more than \$500,000.

## Relations with Turkish Civil Society Organizations

With growing needs for education, legal services, livelihood support, in addition to addressing increased tensions between Syrians and host communities, it is more important than ever that Syrian and Turkish organizations working with refugees coordinate their efforts as much as possible. However, there are significant obstacles to increased coordination, including language barriers, a lack of knowledge about each other's context/operations, and cultural differences, among others.

Currently, there is almost no cooperation or coordination between Turkish and Syrian civil society actors, and this absence of working relationships is especially pronounced in relation to rights-based organizations. When the interviewed Syrian organizations were asked to name Turkish organizations working with Syrian refugees, almost all of them were able to name the big humanitarian ones, such as Bülbülzade and IHH, as well public institutions such as AFAD and the Turkish Red Crescent. Very few were able to name more than one or two rights-based organizations, if any, which clearly indicates a widespread lack of minimum knowledge about Turkish civil society organizations working in the refugee field. Many of the organizations highlighted language barriers as one of the main obstacles preventing them from building of relationships with their Turkish counterparts, except for organizations in Şanlıurfa, where Arabic is spoken, creating a space for communication.

Mistrust of Syrian civil society among Turkish organizations was raised by a few of the interviewed organizations. It is difficult to analyze the reasons behind this, especially since those interviewed were not able to name any Turkish organizations beyond major humanitarian actors. However, this mistrust can be interpreted as an extension of the general mistrust between refugee and host communities, which has worsened over time, especially since the employees of these Syrian civil society organizations are refugees themselves. Reinforcing this, when questioned about relations with Turkish organizations, many interviewees located the issue in the wider context of relations between Syrians and host communities, with one senior civil society employee saying, "There is no cooperation because they look at us as outsiders."

Other interviewees viewed the lack of coordination between the Turkish and the Syrian organizations as a predominantly Syrian problem. Over the past eight years, Syrians have been urging for intervention to end the war and to stop the flow of refugees to neighboring countries and Europe to no avail. A common attitude among Syrians is that those who did not experience the war cannot understand the suffering of those who did, nor their context and experience. This sentiment is one reason why some Syrian organizations do not actively pursue cooperation and coordination with their Turkish counterparts.

Several organizations have participated in activities organized by their Turkish counterparts, though these are usually one-time events. 28% of those interviewed have partnered with Turkish organizations at some point, usually for one-time activities, such as exhibitions to show products made by the women they work with. A few pointed to Syrian-Turkish kitchen initiatives as a collaborative activity they participated in on an ongoing basis. Only one organization had a memorandum of understanding with a Turkish organization, which they refer women beneficiaries to. 24% of the Syrian organizations were invited to participate in events organized their Turkish counterparts. These varied from advocacy-based events to participating in Iftar during Ramadan. One organization mentioned that they were once invited by Kadem to an event in Ankara as representatives of refugees to speak about the situation of refugees in Turkey, while a second was invited by Bülbülzade to write in their monthly magazine about various topics related to Syrian women. Another Syrian organization also mentioned they had hosted two workshops by Turkish organizations that provided legal advice about women's rights and Turkish law in their center.

These examples of collaboration, however, were usually one-offs, and did not develop into sustainable and ongoing working relationships. More importantly, the events or partnerships were mainly run by humanitarian/need-focused organizations, several of which were explicitly religious in character. Invitations from Turkish feminist or rights-based organizations to Syrian organizations were very few, another indication that the lack of coordination and collaboration between Syrian and Turkish civil society actors is most pronounced in relation to women's and rights-based organizations. There is one unique example in the collected data: The Women of Urfa, which has both Turkish and Syrian staff members, was the only organization that had access to both communities and worked with both Turks and Syrians.

## Interpretations of Gender and Feminism

75% of interviewed organizations consider themselves as feminist. However, most displayed a lack of understanding of what a feminist agenda looks like. Some exhibited only a basic understanding of gender, based on the traditional men/women binary, while others were more overtly conservative, viewing equality exclusively through the prism of gender roles as defined by their religion/culture.

Others viewed feminism as synonymous with working with women, in the sense that any organization that works with women is by default a feminist organization. This reflects a general confusion among several of the interviewed organizations that conflates the work and orientation of feminist organizations with those that work with women but do not necessarily have a feminist agenda. Few explicitly defined feminism as achieving political, social, economic, and personal equality between men and women, along with equal opportunities between all members of a community irrespective of their gender.

Organizations that viewed equality through the prism of traditional gender roles seemed to assume that activating women's potential lay in forms of economic empowerment that emphasize gender stereotyping (e.g. sewing, knitting, hairdressing). The same groups (and some others) also heavily emphasized the potential for women to play a lead role in bridging the gap between refugees and host communities, a view that was similarly informed by assumptions about women's 'innate' characteristics typically attributed to femininity, further reflecting a poor understanding of feminism. Moreover, some of the organizations often referred to women as "victims" as opposed to active agents that can affect change, reflecting general attitudes towards refugees and women in particular. These ingrained assumptions and biases very likely affect the design, planning, and implementation of women's empowerment programs and activities.

35% of the organizations stated that they have gender policies. When asked to describe these policies, they focused on two main issues: gender equality in employment issues or giving employment opportunities to women. For those that were not explicitly women's organizations but nonetheless had a strong woman-focus, their gender policies included ensuring that 50% of their beneficiaries were women, including for training and educational opportunities. Only one organization mentioned they were planning to expand their gender policies to include sexual harassment in the work place. 57% stated they did not have gender policies, with some explaining this on the grounds that they only worked with women, and thus had no need for gender policies.

Very few organizations had the opportunity to train their team on gender-related issues. Training opportunities were usually provided by other local or international organizations, and in most cases only one or two staff members attended. In total, 10 of the 24 organizations interviewed said that at least some staff had participated in gender-related trainings.

# Needs of Syrian Women From the Perspective of Syrian Civil Society Organizations

All of the interviewed organizations stated that Syrian women face a range of gender-specific challenges and problems. These included:

**Poor economic and living conditions:** As many Syrian families have lost male family members in the conflict, a large number of women have assumed the role of primary 'breadwinner.' Most of these women had little to no prior work experience, which combined with a lack of local language skills, has made it immensely challenging for them to earn money for their families.

**Exploitation and sexual harassment in the workplace:** Given the daily survival pressures many Syrian women face, they are often forced to work in exploitative conditions defined by long hours, low pay, and a lack of security and legal protections. As work permits are not easy to obtain, many Syrian women have no choice but to work illegally for much less pay than Turkish employees in the same position. Their dependence on unofficial employment to meet their family's' basic needs creates a power imbalance that is often exploited by employers, resulting in unfair conditions and a hostile environment being forced on Syrian women in the workplace. These factors also leave Syrian women at high risk of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace. Interviewed organizations were very conscious of this issue as it was repeatedly raised during the interviews.

**Legal needs and access to information:** Some organizations mentioned the need for an increased focus on legal support to ensure women understand their rights. Several stated their belief that many Syrian women do not know where or how to report crimes. If they are subjected to sexual harassment at the workplace and wish to take action, it is essential they know how and where to do so. This is also relevant to the legal situation of early and second marriages, which, though common in Syria, tend to increase during displacement.

Economic empowerment and humanitarian support feature prominently in terms of the civil society organizations' programmes and their fields of work. Several were specifically founded for the purpose of improving living conditions for Syrian women or refugees in general, which they primarily pursue through economic empowerment. However, these organizations gradually began to widen the scope of their work to include knowledge empowerment. Informal education appears to be the major theme of this shift, which includes training on gender, reproductive health, and language courses for women. Many organizations, especially in Antakya, have given particular attention to legal support, and have lawyers that provide legal services to women in need.

Turkish language courses are one of the highest priorities, as language remains one of the greatest barriers women face in finding jobs or communicating with the host community. Syrian civil society actors engaged with women's issue do not work in isolation from INGOs working in the field of women, so there is space for interaction. This interaction, and the subsequent knowledge-sharing it entails, could be another reason behind the increased shift towards knowledge empowerment activities, which are more consistent with mainstream feminist perspectives of empowerment.

Despite many Syrian organizations identifying sexual harassment and exploitation in the workplace as one of the key challenges facing Syrian women, there was little evidence they are formally addressing the issue in the programs they have designed, aside from the general women's rights awareness workshops some of them conduct. This may reflect a lack of experience in translating awareness of these problems into concrete programs, or fears of addressing the issue due to its sensitive nature.





**Syrian civil society organizations' intervention design processes**, according to most organizations interviewed, were based on surveys and/or needs assessments they conduct through individual meetings or focus groups with the women in areas of operations. While most of the organizations stated that their projects and programmes were designed based on the needs of women, most do not appear to conduct ongoing data collection activities to develop in-depth understanding of refugee women's needs across various indicators (such as class, age, education level, religion, and occupation) and different phases of their displacement. A few did not specify any methodology for designing their interventions beyond stating that their programme teams are responsible for the design process without providing specific details.

## Understanding the Situation of Syrian Women in Turkey: Profiles and Perspectives

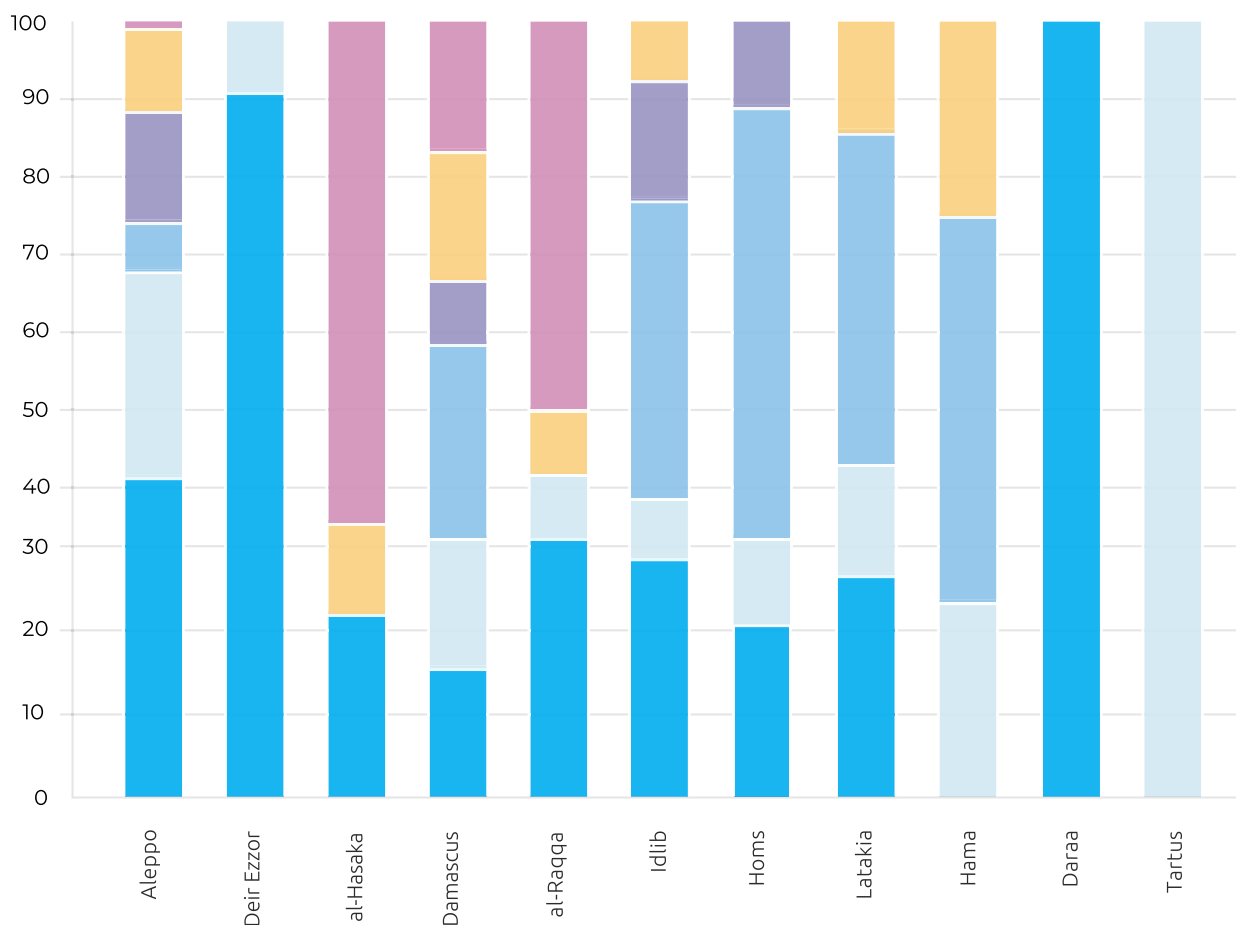
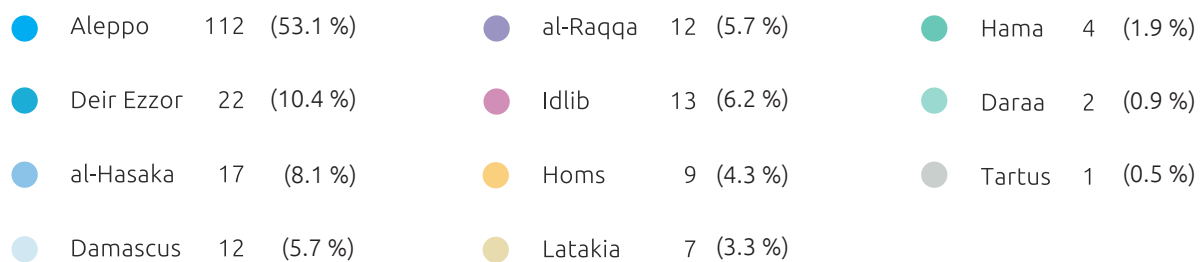
Geographical spread: A total of 211 women were interviewed during the research process. The below graph shows the number of interviews conducted in each of the seven locations. The largest number was in Istanbul, as data was collected in two different neighborhoods, and Istanbul has the largest number of Syrian refugees overall (close to 560,000). The rest of the sample was chosen based on the size and influence/impact of Syrian refugee populations in each city. For example, Gaziantep comes second in number of interviews not only because it has a population of around 412,000 Syrians, but also because it has played a unique role as the hub of Syrian civil society as well as an industrial city with a large number of Syrian workers.

### **Composition of Syrian refugee populations in Turkish cities in relation to their city/region of origin**

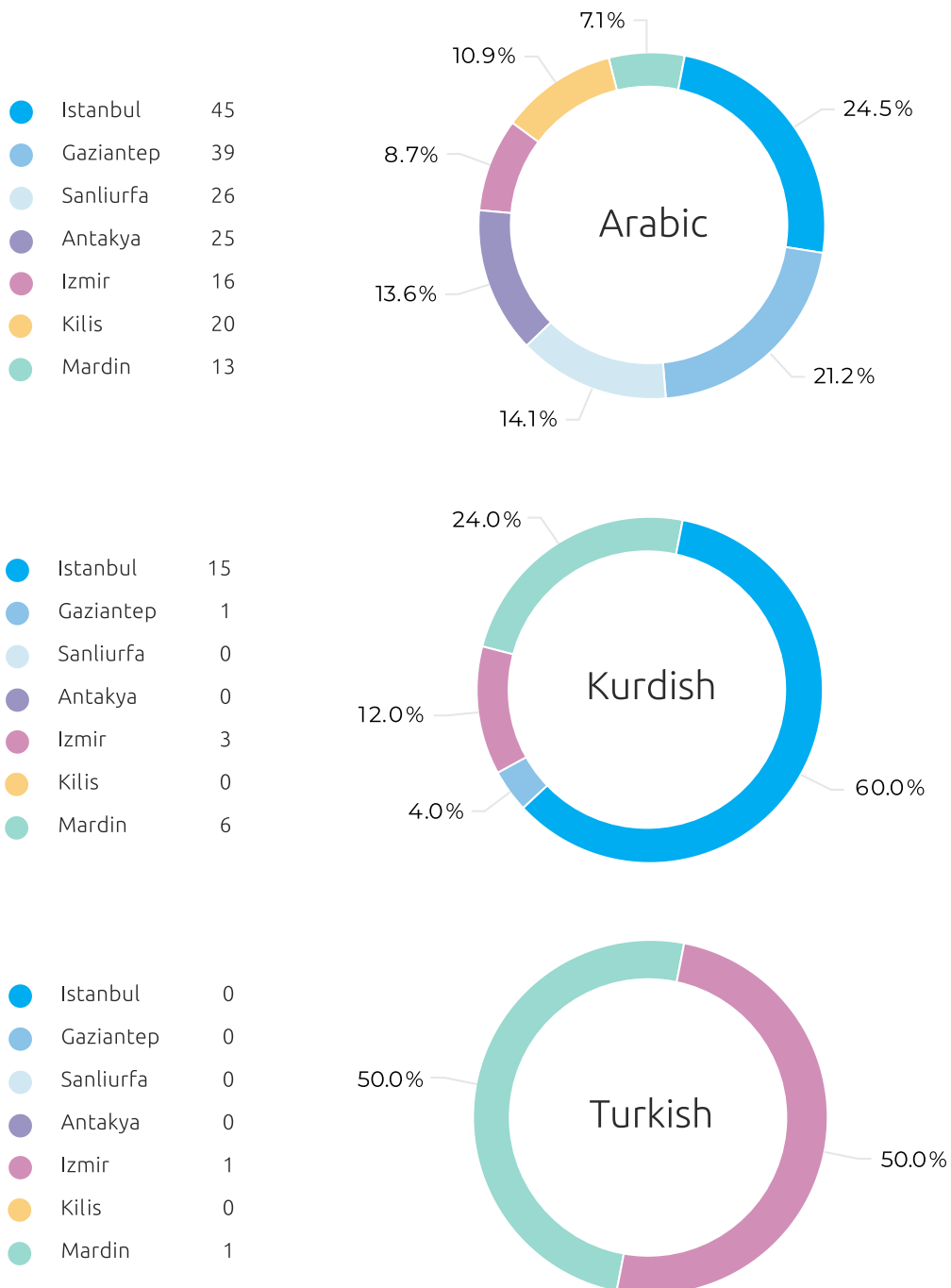
Interviews with Syrian women show that safety and the presence of social networks are the most important factors in choosing a place of residence in the asylum country. Interviewees tend to choose locations where their relatives, neighbors, and people from their hometown are, which is the case with migrant communities in general as reflected in the relevant literature. For example, Şanlıurfa hosts a large number of Syrians originally from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, whereas Syrians from Aleppo constitute the majority in

Gaziantep. Geographical factors are also important here; refugees tend to settle in the border cities closest to their home towns, not only because of the proximity, but also because border cities are often similar to where they are from in terms of landscape, culture, and in some cases architecture, helping them stay connected with their home country. Many Syrians also preferred settling in the border cities due to the fact that until 2015, the border remained open and they could freely travel back and forth. However, the closure of the border led to the increased movement of Syrians to western cities, such as Izmir and Istanbul. Trade relationships between border cities are another factor, as refugees tend to settle in the places they know best. For example, the cities of Gaziantep and Aleppo are linked by ancient trading ties that have connected them for centuries. On the other hand, Syrians settled in Istanbul were initially driven by economic factors, as larger cities offered more job opportunities.

Women's city of origin in relation to their city of residence in Turkey



## Mother tongue and its correlation with city of residence



Ethnic and linguistic commonalities are other major pull-factors in determining where Syrians choose to settle, as they can mitigate the social and cultural dislocation caused by displacement. For example, Mardin hosts a large number of Kurdish Syrians owing to the sizeable indigenous Kurdish community in the city. For this reason, Syrian children in Mardin also faced less racism at school from their peers than in other cities. The above-mentioned factors (ethnic and linguistic commonalities), in combination with the preexisting social networks, also explain why many Kurds from Syria moved to Istanbul from the border cities soon after arriving in Turkey. Ironically, these factors initially enabled them to find jobs and housing easier than the Arab Syrians.

## **Arrival to Turkey**

The patterns of arrival to Turkey found among interviewees reflected the general movement of Syrians into the country. This movement was heavily affected by the Turkish government's policies, which shifted from an "open door" stance, to visa restrictions and the construction of a border wall, a change largely triggered by the EU-Turkey Statement. While more than 70% of the women interviewed fled to Turkey between 2011 and 2014, fewer than 30% arrived after 2014, and only 3% arrived in 2017. Despite post-2014 escalations of violence in Syria, especially with the regime regaining control of Aleppo and forcing thousands of families to leave their homes, the number of refugees arriving to Turkey dramatically decreased, as illustrated in the graph. Turkey imposed visa restrictions on Syrians on 8 January 2016. Prior to this date, Syrians were able to enter the country without a visa. It remains very difficult for Syrians to obtain this visa, especially for those still inside Syria. Prior to 2016, irregularly entering Turkey through smuggling routes was relatively easy, as several women described, and reflected by the fact that the majority of Syrians in Turkey entered the country by irregular means. However, this began to change in 2016, when intensive security measures imposed by the Turkish police made being smuggled into the country very difficult and costly. Moreover, Turkey began building a wall along its Syrian border, further complicating the process of smuggling.

Just 33% (70) of the women interviewed entered Turkey legally, with 67% doing so irregularly. The latter were compelled to enter this way primarily due to a lack of documentation. Many Syrian women had never thought to obtain travel documents such as passports prior to being forced to flee, at which point there was no official government presence in their region to issue such documents. Others lost their documentation in the midst of the conflict. Moreover, as mentioned, smuggling was seen as an easy option up until mid-2016. This lack of documentation and irregular entry status among the majority of Syrian women has increased their vulnerability in the country of asylum in the country of asylum, restricting their movement between cities inside the country and further compounding their fear and instability.

One woman described her experience being smuggled into Turkey as follows: "I am a person with a disability, I need help to walk. I managed to enter Turkey after five smuggling attempts. There was a time where I spent 10 days at the border, failed to enter and had to return to Idlib. Another [time], I managed to enter with other people, but the Turkish Gendarmerie forced us to return." Other women told stories of being financially exploited by the smugglers, as the latter increased their prices when border security measures were intensified. Smugglers take advantage of migrants, especially women, fleeing war and violence seeking safety and a better life. This leaves migrants vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

## **Marital status of women interviewed**

62% of the women interviewed are married and accompanied by their husbands, while 4.2% are unaccompanied by their husbands, either because the latter is involved in the armed conflict, was killed, went missing, or traveled abroad. Divorced women account for 4.7% of the total, with separated women and widows comprising 5.2% and around 10%, respectively. This makes all-female households account for 24% of interviewees, which does not reflect the reality of Syrian women in Turkey as statistics suggest that female-headed households are in fact higher than this figure. Moreover, the focus group participants in some cities, such as Mardin, Kilis and Izmir, were not part of the individual interviews, and they included many divorcees and widows. The socio-cultural shifts generated by changing household structures within the Syrian refugee community in relation to the significant increase in women-led households will be discussed further in a later section.

## Education Level

It is noteworthy that around 50% of the women have a low level of educational attainment, being intermediate school graduates and below. Nearly 10 % of the women interviewed could not read or write. 16.5% stated they were high school graduates, and 32% are graduates of universities or educational institutions. Several young women stated that they could not continue their education in Syria due to the war and have faced numerous challenges in continuing their education in Turkey, not only because of the language issue, but also because they lack the documentation universities require for registry, which in many cases was lost or unobtainable. On the other hand, young women who managed to enroll in Turkish universities faced other challenges related to a lack of clarity regarding Syrian student's administrative status. Universities are not used to dealing with Syrians, and young women said they usually depend on senior Syrian students to get the information they need.



## Family Income

The monthly average income of the families of women interviewed is generally below the minimum wage declared by the Turkish state for 2018, which was 1,603 TL net (equivalent to 2,029 before income tax). The below chart shows average income for families in each of the seven locations. The Gaziantep average is higher than other cities, and slightly above the minimum wage, however it is important to note that Syrians, unlike Turks, do not benefit from social security, as the majority do not have work permits, meaning their income is generated through the informal economy, exposing them to higher risk and making them vulnerable to abuse, especially when they experience financial difficulties.

Average monthly income (TL)



# Syrian Women's Perception of Their Legal Status in Turkey

Changes in the legal status of Syrians in Turkey since they began arriving to the country in 2011, and the extent and limits of de jure rights granted to them by temporary protection regulation have been discussed earlier. In this section, we will address Syrian women's perceptions of their rights (or lack thereof), and how they utilize informal networks and support mechanisms in order to compensate for either their lack of rights or their lack of access to rights.

Even though demand for long-term legal status in Turkey became more prevalent as it became clear to Syrians that they would not be returning to Syria in the foreseeable future and that the routes to Europe were mostly blocked due to the EU-Turkey Statement, there is still not a clear demand among Syrian populations to be granted refugee status in Turkey. Although some of the women interviewed contrasted their conditions in Turkey with those of Syrians who live in Europe, they were not contextualizing the contrast within the de jure legal statuses of Syrians in Turkey and in European countries.

Most women were not aware of the legal categorization of their status as "temporary protection" as opposed to "refugee." Instead, the Turkish state's narrative of Syrian refugees as "guests" was prevalent among Syrian refugees themselves. As one Syrian woman interviewed in Gaziantep stated, "Being a refugee means being 'without;' it means being 'lesser than;' it means being second class. Being a guest is better. It makes you feel welcome." Defining her presence in Turkey as that of a guest rather than referring to her "temporary protection" status also demonstrates how the Turkish state has to a certain extent succeeded in achieving what it intended to through the "guest" narrative; namely, to not only prevent and minimize the backlash among Turkish citizens, but also avoid having to approach the Syrian refugee issue from a rights-based perspective.

However, the "guest" narrative and the temporariness of their situation in Turkey are not accepted at face value by all women. For example, another woman interviewed in Gaziantep stated that, "I just think of the five years I spent in Turkey as taking a break. I thank Turkey for opening its doors to us and all, this is something most Arab countries did not do for Syrians; however, I want to move on to Europe." Others expressed similar feelings of their lives being on hold in Turkey and wishing to move on to Europe in order to seek stability. In their first years in Turkey, they were contrasting the policies of the Turkish state towards refugees with the unaccommodating policies of Arab states, and were "grateful" to Turkey for its open-border policy. However, as time progressed, and refugees increasingly felt unable to establish stable lives in Turkey, they started comparing conditions in the country with those in Europe. This is when the limits of the guest discourse were laid bare, as it became increasingly clear that populist discourses will eventually produce intensifying resentment and discontent if they are not replaced by concrete rights that allow Syrians to establish secure lives in Turkey.

Syrian women's main criticisms of their legal status in Turkey was not expressed as a criticism of temporary protection status itself, but rather how the legal status manifested and was experienced in their everyday lives in the form of the "kimlik," the temporary protection ID card. For example, most women talked about the difficulties they faced in acquiring the "kimlik." Even though the law on foreigners, which also regulates Syrians' status in Turkey, is centralized, there are localized regulations as well. This discord between centralized law and localized regulations is at the core of the problems Syrians face in their everyday lives. Either due to the fact that some governorates, such as Gaziantep and Istanbul, stopped registering Syrians, or due to the lack of bureaucratic capacity to register large numbers of Syrians in certain governorates, many Syrian families felt like they have to pay informal/illegal intermediaries through whom they were able to acquire their kimlik, despite the fact that the Turkish authorities have consistently emphasized that such intermediaries do not have any official status with the Turkish state.

None of the women interviewed referred to the process of acquiring the kimlik as “registration.” In the imagination of Syrians in Turkey, acquiring the kimlik does not seem to correspond to registration for a specific legal status and access to rights provided by that status. For example, all of the women who referred to problems they were facing with access to services mentioned the lack of kimlik, but none made the conceptual link between lacking a kimlik and a lack of registration for the status of temporary protection. We interpret this to be mainly due to the fact that the state authorities do not adequately inform Syrians what temporary status is and what it entails. Instead, Syrians largely find out what services they have access to through their own informal networks and through individual experiences when they go to different government service providers, such as schools and hospitals. This also plays a major role in Syrians’ feelings of instability.

One of the main problems Syrian families face when it comes to acquiring kimlik pertains to a mismatch between the city of registration and the city of their actual residence. Since Gaziantep, for example, stopped registering Syrians, many Syrians had to register in other cities such as Mersin. However, the kimlik ensures access to health care and education only in the city where it was issued. Therefore, many women spoke of how their children could not register at Turkish public schools in Gaziantep. This was also mentioned as one of the major reasons why they registered their children in Syrian schools in the first place, rather than Turkish public schools. Similarly, they mentioned that, due to their lack of access to Turkish public hospitals, they had no choice but to use unregistered Syrian clinics. Therefore, it is clear how the lack of a well-functioning bureaucratic system contributed to the creation of parallel service providers for Syrians.

A participant in the focus group in Istanbul has stated that her father, registered in Şanlıurfa, had cancer and died in Istanbul. However, due to a glitch in the bureaucratic system caused by the mismatch between location of registration and the location of actual residency, the system in Şanlıurfa did not declare him as dead. Therefore, his children were not eligible for scholarships that are available to orphans.

Other than Gaziantep, İzmir seems to be another location where there is a high rate of mismatch between the city of registration and the city of actual residence. This is mostly due to the fact that İzmir was not the point of entry to Turkey, but a second destination after Syrians spent some time in the first city of entry and were subsequently unable to carry over their registration to İzmir. Transferring their registration between cities is another major problem mentioned by many Syrian women. In contrast to Gaziantep and İzmir, none of the women interviewed in Sultanbeyli, Istanbul mentioned problems related to acquiring the kimlik, and indeed the ease of registration in Sultanbeyli has been one of the major pull factors to the district.

In all the seven locations where fieldwork was conducted, the second major problem mentioned by women related to their legal status was the exploitation of Syrians at the workplace. Even though, according to the law, Syrians under temporary protection have the right to acquire work permits, an overwhelming majority of Syrians throughout Turkey are being employed without them, thus paving the way for their exploitation. The Turkish authorities issued a new labor regulation for Syrians under Temporary Protection in January 2016. According to the “Regulation on Provision of Work Permits for People Under Temporary Protection”, Syrian refugees who are registered in Turkey are eligible to receive work permits only in their city of registration. Furthermore, it is not refugees themselves who apply for the work permit, but their employees. This has been one of the main reasons why a very low percentage of working Syrians have work permits.

Most Syrians work in low-skilled sectors, such as seasonal agriculture work or in textile factories. Quite a few of the focus group participants discussed how many Syrian women who have high school or even university degrees are also forced to work in low skilled sectors due to the difficulty of finding jobs that match their level of education. Many receive salaries below the minimum wage and are employed without social security. Most Syrian women interviewed classified the problem of getting

paid less than minimum wage and without social security as racism, rather than associating it with labor exploitation or problematizing state policy towards issuing Syrians work permits.

Employment without work permits also makes Syrians more vulnerable when it comes to situations of contact with the police. Many women talked about how working illegally has discouraged them from going to the police to resolve conflicts with Turkish citizens, as this fact would likely cause significant problems for them if they file a complaint. Furthermore, many referred to instances of being threatened by Turkish citizens about going to the police. Therefore, labor exploitation severely restricts the ability of Syrians to access justice in other sectors of their lives.

Due to the lack of a rights-based framework available to Syrians to approach and analyze their conditions in Turkey, they seem to have accepted outright exploitation as a reality that cannot be changed. For example, many Syrian women said that “work hours in Turkey are very long,” not recognizing that excessive work hours are illegal according to Turkish law. Thus, instead of rightfully viewing long working hours as a manifestation of labor exploitation directed at Syrians, they discuss it as something of a given in Turkey. Some women discussed acquiring citizenship only within the context of exploitative work conditions. One woman interviewed in Sultanbeyli said, “It is up to my husband to decide whether we should get citizenship or not since he is the one who needs it. He is the one who is working. If we get citizenship, his work conditions will improve so he should decide if he wants it or not.” Another woman in Sultanbeyli also stated that she wanted citizenship in order to have social security at work like the Turkish workers do.

Due to both the difficulties of finding employment that aligns with their skills, and frequently exploitative conditions present at jobs that are available to them, some women have started self-initiatives to generate income for their families. A number of women interviewed in Antakya had met each other at events held by a civil society organization and decided to bring together their skills to start a cooperative-like initiative. They rented a shop in a low-cost neighborhood where each of the women produces a different product to sell. Products range from pickles to hand-made soap. They obtained all the necessary permits from the authorities to open a shop and stated that all they need now in order to expand their shop is a sponsor who trusts them. Being part of such an initiative has also provided them with a safety network in their everyday lives. For example, they help each other out with matters such as childcare or finding an apartment for rent.

The interviews with Syrian women made it clear that there is uneven access to both humanitarian aid and rights, mainly due to a lack of official channels of information. In almost all locations, except Sultanbeyli, some of the women mentioned that they knew of neighbors who received financial support and humanitarian aid available to Syrians whereas they themselves did not. When asked whether they were aware of the conditions a household needs to fulfill in order to access such aid—such as number of children under 18 in the household; number of working age family members; number of elderly persons in the family; if there are any disabled family members—the answers made it obvious that many do not have a clear idea. Therefore, in some of these cases, due to lacking the information regarding necessary conditions to access aid, some women consider aid distribution to be sporadic and selective, believing that they are being left out because they do not have the necessary connections.

When asked how they acquire information regarding legal matters or access to services, most women in all locations said it was through their own community’s informal networks. Since it is mostly the women of the household who interact with public authorities such as the directorate of education and school administration for issues related to children’s registration; civil society organizations and the Red Crescent for issues related to humanitarian and legal aid; and the district governorate for issues related to registration; women end up having the monopoly and authority over access to and sharing of information. As one interviewee in Gaziantep said, “Here in Turkey we have more opportunities for socializing. I learned of my rights not through organizations, but through socializing. This made Syrian women here stronger compared to Syria.”



In this section, we have tried to demonstrate how being granted rights by law does not necessarily translate into equal access to or practical application of those rights. Women have argued that civil society organizations should play a bigger role in solving this problem, since they constitute public spaces to which women have easy and safe access. Many of the women interviewed in İzmir have indicated that the civil society organizations to which they have access to not only provided them with informative sessions regarding their rights as Syrian women in Turkey, but also with support on how to put that information into practice. In addition to providing Syrian women information about their rights in Turkey, many of these civil society organizations have also provided legal aid. This meant, for example, that beyond learning about their rights when subjected to different forms of domestic violence, they were also able to obtain a lawyer through the organizations to start court cases to divorce their husbands. Syrian women have stated that access to information about their rights, as well as being able to practice their rights, have greatly contributed to them feeling empowered and stable in their life in Turkey. These women have also mentioned that they want to stay in Turkey, rather than go back to Syria in the future.

## Changing Household Structure

Changing household structure as a result of state violence, conflict, and mass migration is one of the main factors that has altered gender dynamics within Syrian communities, both in positive and negative ways. On the one hand, it has fostered creative mechanisms of coping with harsh conditions in the diaspora, as well as creating new spaces for women's resistance in the household. Yet, on the other hand, it has also consolidated patriarchal structures and the exploitation of women and children, which require active state intervention to be undone.

Many of the women interviewed, and especially those in the border cities, emphasized the fact that many Syrian refugee women arrived in Turkey alone with their children. For a significant percentage of these women, their husbands were either killed in the war or imprisoned by the regime. The Turkish state has mechanisms for the distribution of humanitarian and financial aid to single mothers, yet lacks an approach that actually empowers them to actively build independent lives for themselves and their children. Among the focus group participants in Kilis, there were single mothers, some of whom were living together with their children in houses run by Islamic charities for Syrian widows. In these houses, each woman and her child/children were sharing a room, as well as common spaces such as the kitchen and bathroom, with other women and their children. In general, women reported that these houses were useful as a first resort since they were not paying rent, however, none referred to the houses as "shelters." They stated that the main problem in the houses was a lack of privacy. Additionally, they mentioned that they would have preferred if the organizations running the houses actively helped them to find jobs to support themselves and their children.

Among the focus group participants in Antakya were also single mothers whose refugee experiences in Turkey were different to those in Kilis. As covered in previous sections, rather than being dependent on humanitarian aid through charities or the state, they decided to start a cooperative-like structure to open a shop where they sell their hand-made products.

A contrast of the two groups of single-mothers in Kilis and Antakya shows how an approach of solidarity results in building independent lives whereas an approach of charity does not allow women to go beyond their existing situation to build independent lives.

Losing husbands as a result of state violence or conflict before coming to Turkey is not the only reason for women-headed households. Many of the women interviewed referred to the rising rate of divorce among Syrian women after becoming refugees. Overall, the general perspective of women who participated in focus groups seems to be that, in Turkey, women have more rights than in Syria, and that has

empowered and encouraged Syrian women. Even though legal information on women's rights seems to be the first step towards making the decision to divorce, support in exercising those rights appears to be the main driving force behind taking action. The interviewees stated that such support came either from their Turkish neighbors or Turkish civil society organizations. One of the women told her story as follows: "Turkey changed us all. I got married when I was 13. In Syria, men were not afraid of the law. There he would beat me up. Here when he beat me up, my neighbor heard it and told me next time if I signal her, she can call the police. So, I told my husband if he beats me up, I will call the police. He stopped beating me. Then later we separated."

Another interviewee said, "News gets around quickly. Here the police come and detain the husbands if the wives complain of domestic violence. So, many husbands stopped beating their wives. Also, at a lecture at the organization they told us about different kinds of violence. It is not only beating up. Sexual violence by the husband is also a crime here, as well as economic violence. If the husband forces the wife to have sex, the wife knows she can complain to the police."

Some of the interviewees emphasized the difference between separation and divorce and the role of civil society organizations in helping Syrian women undertake the relevant legal process. Even though many Syrian women have separated from their husbands while in Turkey, since they did not go through the legal procedure of divorce, they cannot benefit from legal rights such as alimony and the financial support they are eligible to receive from the Turkish government. Moreover, since in many cases the financial aid for the family through the Red Crescent is in the name of the husband, the wife and children lose access to it when the families are separated without a court sanctioned divorce. The interviewees emphasized the role of civil society organizations in providing them with lawyers for advice and representation in court.

Interviewees indicated that the financial independence women gained as a result of working in Turkey is the main reason women are able to take the decision to divorce their husbands. Some have also said that the fact they are not in their hometowns, thus away from the social pressures of the community and the extended family, encourages them to separate from the husbands. Furthermore, the fact that the law in Turkey gives custody of children to their mothers (with certain exceptions, of course) is also one of the main reasons why women are now deciding to divorce, rather than in Syria, where they were afraid of losing the right to child custody.

However, not all women are able to afford to leave their husbands. Some interviewees told stories of having to endure violence from their husbands since they are financially dependent on them. In such cases, as many interviewees have indicated, access to women's shelters plays a large role in them taking the first step towards leaving their abusers. In other cases, women stated that after the divorce their school-aged children were forced to work to take care of the family. Therefore, state-centered sustainable financial support to women-headed households plays a vital role in children of divorced women being able to continue their education. Furthermore, in many cases divorcee women do not have any place to leave their children when they go to work. Due to the absence of their extended families, whom previously provided a support system, and also because many workplaces do not have day cares for their workers to bring their children, women in this situation are not able to go to work.

One of the issues where there has been a clear lack of access to information regarding the legal system in Turkey is the phenomenon of second marriages. Many families married off their daughters to Turkish men as second wives, primarily due to financial problems.

Turkey, being governed by civil law, allows for marriage to only one person, and religious marriages have no legal validity. Since the majority of the Turkish population is Sunni Muslim, most Syrian refugees had assumed that Turkey was governed by Islamic law, thus allowing up to four marriages. Therefore, many women who were married off to Turkish men as second wives were unaware that these so-called religious marriages were not legally binding.

However, it is clear from the statements of many interviewees that since the civil society organizations started prioritizing the issue, many Syrian women have gained access to information sessions on the legal system. This has had a positive influence on the participation of women in the decision-making processes when it comes to marriages, and, even though it is very difficult to obtain any statistical data on the topic, based on the interviews it is clear that there has been a decrease in second marriages of Syrian women to Turkish men.

There is a similar discussion around the issue of child marriages. There have been many reports of Syrian girls under 18 – and some as young as 13 – being forced to get married. As the statements of interviewees make clear, culturalist arguments do not suffice to explain the crime committed. Instead, financial difficulties faced by Syrian families in Turkey appear to be the main reason behind the increase in child marriages. Even though it is a crime in Turkey, and mandates punitive action, the state has only recently begun taking steps towards preventing it. Some focus group participants stated that they had witnessed the arrest of husbands when state officials came across such cases. In these situations, girls were given the choice of either going back to living with their parents or staying under the custody of the state. Only after the state started taking punitive action has there appeared to be a decrease in early marriages.

## **Syrian Women’s Perspectives On The Main Problems They Face in Turkey**

Refugee women face various problems in Turkey, ranging from economic insecurity to sexual harassment and abuse. This section addresses these problems from the perspective of Syrian women.

### **Economic problems**

Given the daily survival pressures prolonged displacement has caused for many Syrians in Turkey, problems related to meeting basic needs such as food and shelter were identified as the most pressing issue by the women interviewed.

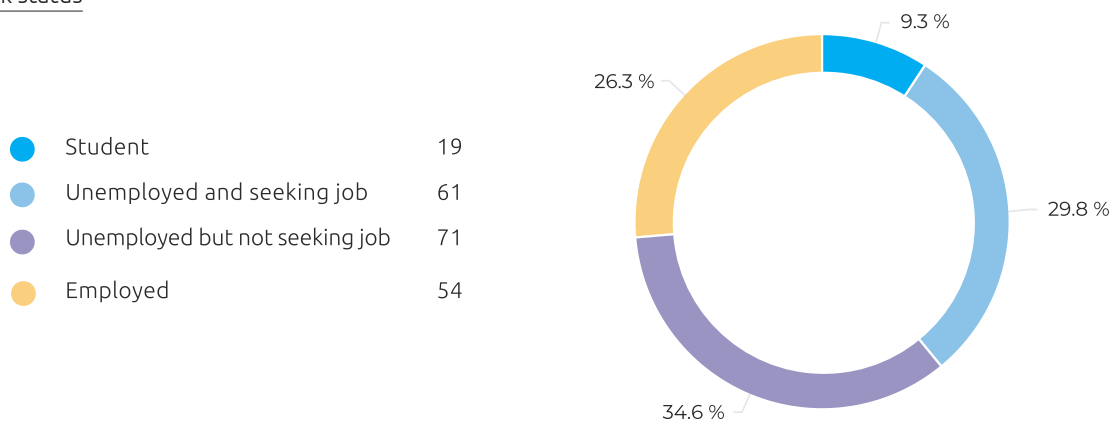
#### **1) Employment and labor exploitation at the work place**

Employment and labor exploitation at the work place was highlighted by most of the women interviewed. It is extremely difficult for Syrians to find jobs commensurate with their skills and education in Turkey. While labor laws require Syrians to obtain a work permit in order to legally gain employment, many employers are willing to employ Syrians illegally to take advantage of their comparatively cheap labor cost. Work permits are difficult for Syrians to obtain, which has forced many, including women, to find alternative means of earning income. The majority of working women interviewed were forced to work in the informal or shadow economy, exposing them to unfair wages and unsafe conditions. Many spoke about exploitation at the work place, both in terms of salaries and working hours, with several saying that Syrians are paid less and required to work longer hours than Turkish citizens in the same position. In several interviews it was mentioned that women are forced to accept unfair conditions. If the employer decides not to pay or to arbitrarily cut a salary, women cannot report this to the police as they would be at risk of deportation or prison if they did. Syrian women perceive the law as invariably on the side of the Turkish citizen, even though they are the ones who are committing a crime by exploiting the refugee, with several saying, “If it is between you and the citizen, the citizen always wins.”

The proportion of women working in Syria before 2011 was generally low. Many women seeking jobs in the Turkey have not worked before. They have been forced to turn to work as a result of the difficult

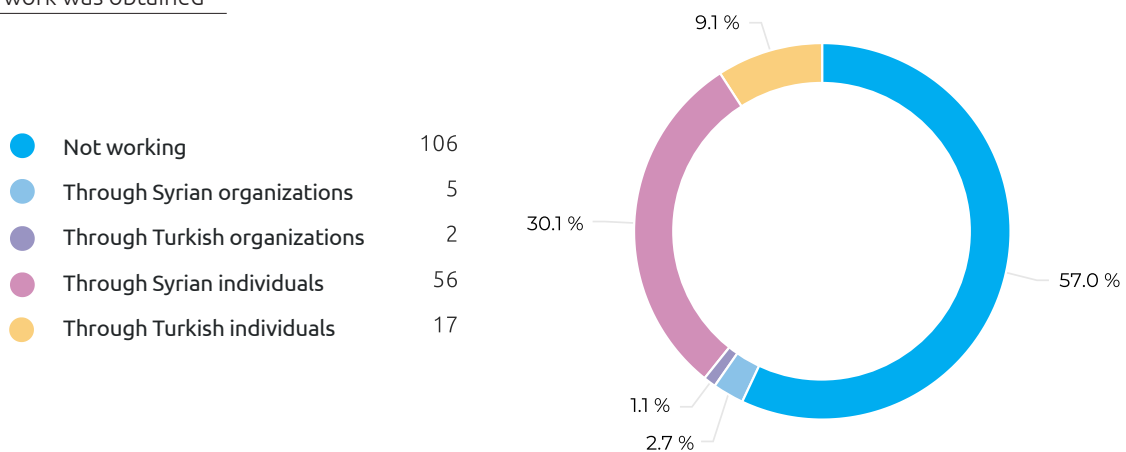
living conditions, especially given the increase in women-headed household due to their husbands being dead, missing, combatants, or asylum-seekers in Europe, as well increased rates of divorce. The below graph shows the job status among women interviewed.

Work status



When women were asked how they found jobs, the majority said it mainly occurred through personal networks (i.e. Syrian friends and relatives), while some said that because they speak Turkish, they secured employment through connections with Turkish citizens. Several women asserted that both Syrian and Turkish organizations had not supported them in finding employment, which reflects the view of women that they should be more responsive to their most pressing needs in general. See below graph:

How work was obtained

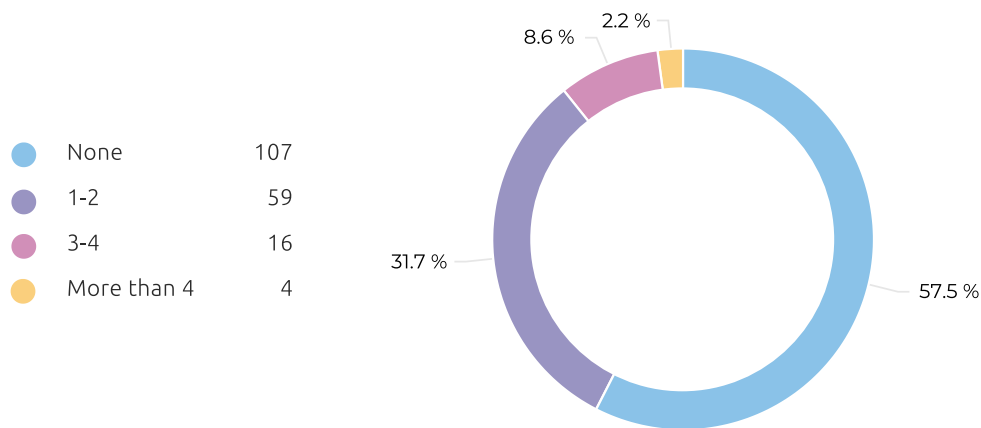


Several women pointed to other problems linked to the informal labor sector, such as child labor, with many stating that large numbers of children work with them during school holidays and weekends. Moreover, women usually do not find a job in their field of expertise, and highly qualified professionals such as lawyers accountants are regularly forced to work in menial jobs to survive. This is symptomatic of the situation in most refugee communities, where educated refugees are often overqualified for the only jobs available to them. Others referred to discrimination as a reason for the lack of work opportunities.

## 2) Housing

Syrian women interviewed face great difficulties in finding and affording proper houses to live in. This was highlighted as a problem across all seven locations targeted in this research. The chosen locations for the field research host the largest number of refugees across the county. Since the arrival of Syrians, the cost of rent has increased with the rising demand. In places such as Gaziantep, entire neighborhoods were built to host the large influx of Syrians and grew rapidly in response to housing needs. Several women interviewed stated that they intend to rent cheap houses commensurate with family income. These houses are often old with numerous problems, such as basements that are humid and full of mold, which causes health issues for occupant families, especially young children. Moreover, many women share houses with other relatives as they cannot afford to rent alone, forcing them to live in overcrowded environments. This has also been used as an excuse by landlords to refuse to rent their apartments to Syrian families. Furthermore, many women had to change their houses several times to find cheaper houses, adding to their feelings of instability, as seen in the graph below.

Number of residence changes in Turkey



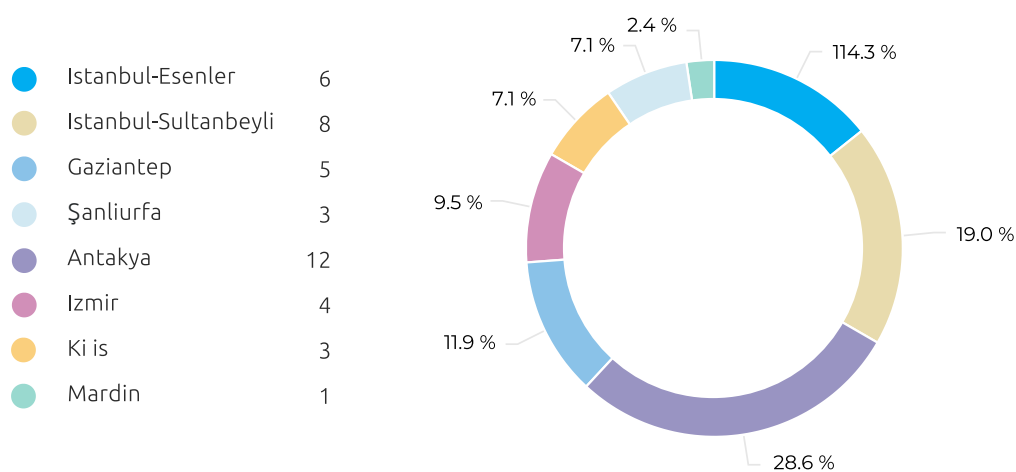
## Sexual harassment and abuse

A major finding of this research is the high rate of sexual harassment Syrian women are subject to in Turkey. More than 20% of those interviewed spoke about sexual harassment and identified it as a serious problem Syrian women face in Turkey. Several women interviewed recounted incidents of sexual harassment or assault that happened to them, in front of them, or to women they knew. These incidents, as indicated in the interviews mainly took place in markets, streets, and on public transportation. One of the interviewees said, "Once I was with a group of women, an old Turkish man hit one of us on her ass as he knew we were Syrians." Another said, "Many times Turkish men follow us in their cars as they know we are Syrians. They think Syrian women are not good. I also don't go to the bazaar anymore because old Turkish men harass us, they touch us inappropriately." Several women linked the sexual harassment they faced to being Syrian, as in it is based more on their Syrian identity than being a woman – although this sentiment was not shared by all interviewees. This link reflects the tensions between Syrian and host communities, though it also reflects a denial and minimization of the explicitly gendered nature of the specific-harassment they face. Many women refuse to believe the treatment they endured was abusive, finding it easier to interpret as an outgrowth of general hostility towards Syrians rather than gender-based violence or abuse. This situation can also be analyzed as part of intersecting identities and how sexual violence becomes a tool of racism against refugees, especially when both sides feel the law is not protecting the refugee women.

It should be noted that sexual harassment was mostly mentioned in the individual interviews; fewer women in the focus group discussions brought up sexual harassment or abuse. This could reflect a methodological issue, however, one of the primary reasons women do not come forward to speak about sexual harassment or report it is feelings of shame and fear of the social consequences such as being unfairly judged by their community. Given the latter, participants of focus groups perhaps felt uncomfortable addressing these issues in front of other participants. For example, we came across cases where women who reported that they were divorced in their individual interviews felt the need to hide this during focus group discussions.

The below graph illustrates the number of mentions of sexual harassment per city. It is important to note that the number of mentions does not necessarily indicate that sexual harassment is more prevalent in one city compared to another. It could be attributed to that fact that some women are more open to discussing sensitive issues such as sexual harassment, and such women were more concentrated among interviewees in some cities compared to others. In other words, the below findings should not be used as the basis for making assumptions about a respective city's social context.

Mentions of sexual harassment per location



## Hate speech and hate crimes

Some Syrian women interviewed reported a discernable increase in the amount of hostility directed at them by Turkish citizens over the years. In a spectrum from hateful behavior and micro-aggressions to overt violence, the phenomenon exists in almost all cities in varying degrees and forms; all forms involve practices of exclusion and rejection. Mardin appeared to be the only city in which women felt less rejected and faced fewer problems with the local community. The forms of racism they experienced varied based on the content. For example, a few women said that Turkish residents of Mardin do not like Syrians who have been granted Turkish nationality. Moreover, several women said they were exposed to violence in the streets due to their outward appearance; Syrian women who wear the hijab do so differently than Turkish women, which makes them recognizable, and thus easy targets of racism. Several women interviewed said they began wearing the hijab the Turkish way in order to avoid violence and harassment in the streets. The rejection of Syrian children in Turkish schools is another major concern for Syrian women in the context of racism. Women tend to classify their relations with the Turkish community in terms of the extent of their children's integration and well-being in schools.

## **Language**

The majority of the women interviewed said language was one of their main problems in Turkey. A lack of Turkish language skills affects all aspects of Syrian women's life in Turkey, from finding jobs to their ability to communicate with the host community, to understanding their rights in the country. Language has been brought up as a main challenge especially when it comes to certain services, such as healthcare and education for their children, or their own education, especially female university students. Mothers struggle with their children as they are not able to support them in their learning at home. Several women complained about their children being treated the same as their Turkish peers at school, whereas in their opinion they should receive special treatment as they are not native speakers. As a result of the language barrier, many women seemed reluctant to use health services; in fact, many women said they prefer to see Syrian doctors, as they are simply unable to communicate with the Turkish medical staff. On the other hand, there has not been sufficient effort from the government to introduce Syrian doctors into the public health system, though some have been allowed to open private medical centers and clinics.

Around 60% of women interviewed speak and understand a small amount of Turkish, enabling them to conduct basic conversations related to daily life. Many of them attributed the lack of language proficiency to an inability to afford courses or afford transportation to attend free courses, and the lack of free courses provided by the state or NGOs. However, others did not learn the language because it clashed with their work, or for family reasons, usually related to restrictions on their movement imposed by their families.

## **Education**

Access to education is one of the most pressing issues Syrian women raised during the interviews and focus group discussions. This is despite the Turkish authorities having taken steps to more proactively address this issue over the past two years, which reflects the state's view that encouraging the inclusion of Syrian children in the Turkish education system is one of the key issues in transitioning from a temporary emergency refugee policy to a long-term integrationist approach following the Turkey-EU Statement. Several interviewees mentioned that in the early years of their presence in Turkey, many school principals rejected registering Syrian children at their schools even though Syrians have legally had access to public education at all levels since 2014. While some women interpret this act by some school principals as racism, it is also important to note that in certain cases, schools were not equipped enough to accept an increase in the number of students. Another issue that links the problems Syrians have regarding education and racism is the way Syrian children are being treated by their peers. Some women have mentioned their children were on the verge of dropping out due to racism they face at school. Others, however, have mentioned that their children adjusted to Turkish schools well and made Turkish friends. However, it appears that Syrian and Turkish children's friendships do not go beyond the school campuses. They do not visit each other at homes or spend time outside of school together.

Another problem raised in the interviews was the years of education their children had missed out on and the impact this has on their ability to readjust to a learning environment. Since some children were not able to attend school in Syria due to the conflict, and their parents were unaware of the relevant laws and school registration process, many Syrian children missed out on multiple years of schooling. As a result, when these children re-enter formal education, there is a large age difference between them and their peers. Though some of the organizations interviewed stated that they have or had programs supporting such children after school, it is clear from what the mothers are saying that there needs to be a program installed in the public-school system to enable Syrian children to catch up.

## Syrian Women's Perspectives on the Causes of Problems & Possible Solutions

The narratives of Syrian women regarding the causes of the problems they face varied according to whether they approached them from a rights-based perspective, or through the lens of discourses promoted by the state. Several women interviewed stated that the main cause of problems they face is the length of Syrians' stay in Turkey and the ongoing conflict inside Syria. When Syrians first arrived, they were treated as guests by the Turkish community and the state based on the assumption that they would return home soon. However, as the conflict became increasingly protracted it became clear this would not be the case. According to women interviewed, the duration of Syrians' large-scale presence in Turkey has fueled a perception among the Turkish community that they are taking their jobs and draining public resources at the expense of Turkish citizens in need. Many Syrians interviewed referenced the fact that Turkey hosts the world's largest Syrian refugee population as the prime cause of the problems faced by Syrians in the country. Such statements by women who participated in the focus groups illustrate how racist discourses are being internalized by segments of the refugee community. As the necessity of seeking refuge is not discussed as a human right, Syrians find themselves torn between feeling they need to be grateful to their Turkish hosts, yet also needing to provide an explanation for their suffering.

Several women mentioned the Turkish community's lack of knowledge about Syria and Syrians as another cause of the problems they face. Many provided examples during both the individual interviews and the focus groups of how Syrians are perceived by the Turkish community as ignorant and ill-educated. Moreover, some women mentioned that members of the Turkish community sometimes ask them questions that not only surprise them but reflect stereotyping and a chronic lack of knowledge about Syrian culture and society. One woman said she was asked if there are tomatoes in Syria. This lack of knowledge has led to mistrust and rumor-spreading, contributing significantly to the increase in tensions between the Syrian refugee and Turkish host communities.

Moreover, the practice of polygyny, which is common in Syria, has been identified by several women as a cause of problems between the two communities, with Syrian women perceived of by Turkish women as a "man-kidnapping" threat. In addition, many women interviewed identified the lack of knowledge of Syrians' rights in Turkey as a major cause of problems, which leads to Syrians not reporting abuses and exploitation, or even hate crimes. A lack of Turkish language skills is linked to all of the above, and to other problems faced by Syrians in the education and health systems, for example. Many women also criticized the integration approach of the state and civil society organizations, describing it as a one-sided approach that focuses on teaching refugees about selective issues related to Turkey, while making no efforts to educate Turks about Syria.

Many women proposed solutions to the problems they face in Turkey. Had the state and civil society organizations made more of an effort to take their perspectives into consideration when formulating their policies, interventions, and overall response, the situation for Syrians in the country may have been significantly better today. Several women mentioned that combating the widely held sentiment that Syrians must be sent back to their country is critical if acceptance of Syrians' presence in Turkey among the host community is to be achieved. Several of them stated that even if the conflict ends, they will not return to Syria. Many have been granted Turkish citizenship, while many more are seeking to obtain it, and have established a life in Turkey. Others stated that integration needs to be a two-way process that requires sustained effort and goodwill on both sides. Several women suggested that civil society organizations providing courses and trainings to facilitate Syrians' integration should do the same with the Turkish community by, for example, providing dialogue training,



information sessions on Syrian culture and society, and intensifying their anti-racism efforts and outreach among Turkish citizens.

The majority of women interviewed perceived a lack of language skills to be a major problem. Their criticism lay in the approaches to language teaching and the lack of a comprehensive state-led approach to enhancing Turkish language skills among the Syrian community. As such, more courses should be made available to the Syrian community by both the state and civil society organizations, Syrian and Turkish alike. More advanced courses are required and should be made available, in addition to courses with greater flexibility to accommodate those working who have limited time to attend. According to several women, the inclusion of Syrian teachers at Turkish schools could improve the situation for their children, while others added that more Syrian doctors should be allowed to work at hospitals to improve health services for the Syrian community and decrease language barriers for Syrian patients. In addition, several women maintained that there should be more education on Syrians' rights in Turkey, as knowing the law and their rights is fundamental for Syrians to reduce the challenges they face and enable them to live in dignity.

## **Taking The Initiative: Self-Organizing Among Syrian Women**

The programmes and activities offered to Syrian women by civil society organizations constitute an important space for socialization. Despite the fact that interviewees voiced numerous criticisms towards civil society organizations, which are discussed in more depth below, many mention them as the places where they have established strong social networks with other refugee women. In contrast to their relationships with Turkish women they met through these organizations, the relationships they formed with Syrian women extended beyond the activities and physical premises of the organizations. This trend highlights the important position civil society organizations occupy in terms of enabling self-organizing among refugee women.

There was a widespread desire among the Syrian women to increase their level of self-organization and numerous examples of women taking concrete steps to do so. One of the participants in the focus group in Şanlıurfa said, "I became politicized here. I had nothing to do with politics or organizing before." She defined her politicization in Şanlıurfa as participating in grassroots women-led initiatives to acquire information about their rights as Syrians in Turkey. Most women interviewed remarked that the Turkish state has not used sufficient channels to enable Syrians' access to information regarding their rights and legal situation in Turkey. Many also mentioned their discontent with the civil society organizations they are involved with. Their disappointment with Syrian opposition actors for failing to end the conflict, combined with Syrian organizations' comparative lack of engagement with refugees, has led to a general resentment towards Syrian civil society organizations among Syrian women. In addition, despite most women stating that they primarily access services via Turkish organizations rather than Syrian ones, many mentioned that doing so reminds them of the international community's deafness and indifference to the crimes taking place in Syria. Since Turkish civil society organizations are primarily funded by Western states and multilateral institutions, there is also confusion among Syrian women about the affiliation of these organizations (e.g. whether a particular organization is working for the EU or Turkish state). Furthermore, some women felt that these organizations were enriching themselves by exploiting the suffering of Syrians to secure foreign money.

Given this discontent and resentment towards both Syrian and Turkish civil society organizations, coupled with the Turkish state's unwillingness to take further steps to expand rights granted to Syr-

ians, Syrian women in almost all of the locations where the research was carried out expressed a desire to self-organize. Due to economic insecurity and exploitative working conditions, women mostly discussed self-organization in the context of economic empowerment. Most expressed a desire to start cooperative-like business initiatives by utilizing the networks they have established while participating in civil society organizations' activities. Some of the focus group participants in Antakya mentioned that they met at events organized by a civil society organization and have subsequently taken concrete steps towards greater self-organization through opening a cooperative-like shop – although they still expressed a need for financial support to grow and expand the business. Women interviewed in Esenler also mentioned that they are interested in establishing their own income generating initiatives. However, they do not have resources and skills that will help them access funding, i.e. knowledge of how to write proposal or develop a business plan, etc.

Aside from economic initiatives, women have also established informal networks to share information they have acquired access to through myriad channels. The types of information circulated within these informal networks predominantly relates to two issues: 1) basic regulations, such as registration the of children in schools; and 2) survival strategies, e.g. finding employment or affordable housing etc. However, while they serve vital functions and are an important stepping stone towards the greater self-organization of Syrian women, these informal networks do not appear to be adequately equipped to address issues that require further and more complicated legal action, such as divorce, complaints regarding sexual harassment, and gender-based violence. In these situations, refugee women still utilize civil society organizations as their primary point of reference.

Similar networking initiatives focused on advocating for their rights as refugee women in Turkey, or against exploitation at the workplace, do not appear to be on the horizon at present, most likely due to the political climate in Turkey. The refugee community at the neighborhood-level is not yet able to mobilize politically to further their rights. Such political mobilization requires a guarantee of basic rights for refugees, such as the right not to be criminalized for engaging in rights-based advocacy. However, as a participant in a focus group in Istanbul stated, the precariousness of their legal situation acts as a powerful deterrent to taking action regarding rights-based advocacy in Turkey. In short, the refugee community has been unable to establish effective channels or mechanisms for communication to voice their suggestions, criticisms and demands with the state. This has led to a one-way relationship in which refugees have no formal way to collectively provide feedback to the state, rendering refugees a passive group with no political agency.

Several women mentioned that they had requested civil society organizations to support them in becoming more self-organized, but said they showed little interest in doing so. This lack of follow-up and perceived unresponsiveness to their expressed needs contributed to the general mistrust of and disappointment in Syrian civil society organizations many women felt. They also expressed frustration that while these organizations are receiving external funding to support women, they are doing little to help them become independent and instead perpetuating their dependency on others through their approach. Since donors favor well-established organizations with a high degree of professionalization that can meet their requirements in terms of reporting and publicity, it is extremely challenging for small, independent grassroots women-led initiatives to access funding. If donors maintain this approach, they will fail to take advantage of the widespread desire among many Syrian women to proactively increase their level of self-organization.

## Changing Relations Between Refugee and Host Communities: For Better or Worse?

According to the narratives of Syrian refugee women who participated in focus group discussions, Syrian communities in general considered Turkey to be a country of temporary refuge rather than a final settlement destination during the early years of the conflict. This was mainly due to the expectation that the conflict in Syria would not last long and they would soon head back to their homes. Accordingly, Syrians did not show much interest in engaging with or establishing relations with local communities. This outcome was consistent with the Turkish state's policies towards Syrian refugees in the earlier years after their arrival as addressed in the previous sections. Therefore, economic and legal contexts in which Syrians were trying to build new lives for themselves, also played a role in leading to isolated parallel lives for Syrians in Turkey.

Syrians have had access to all different levels of public education in Turkey since September 2014, but at that time, still had the option of sending their children to temporary education centers where the Syrian curriculum was taught in Arabic. Many Syrian women interviewed mentioned that they put their children in temporary education centers rather than in Turkish public schools because they were not aware of the regulations regarding the registration of Syrian children in public schools. Furthermore, Syrian families themselves preferred for their children to be educated in Arabic with the Syrian curriculum as they believed they would soon go back to Syria and continue their education. Access to education in all migrant settings constitutes one of the major tools to facilitate integration as well as socializing for women, since it is mostly women who are responsible for children's daily activities and schools provide an important point of social interaction while dropping off or picking up children. By not enrolling their children in public schools, many Syrian women missed out on this opportunity to interact and build relationships with local women. Education was thus one of the many examples of Syrian communities building parallel lives in Turkey through the creation of separate institutions and systems that exacerbated their separation from local populations.

The entry of Syrian children into the Turkish education system has both reduced the level of racism experienced by some Syrians and intensified it for others, although only a minority of women stated that they face less racism compared to the early years in general. One of the women interviewed in Gaziantep stated, "Racism against us decreased as our children started going to Turkish schools because Turkish families got to know us." As this quote suggests, schools do provide positive channels of communication between refugee and host communities that help to prevent racism. Most women have stated that it is them, rather than the fathers, who register children at schools, take them to and from, and attend Parent Teacher Association meetings. Therefore, it is the women who interact with public officials, the school administration, and also Turkish parents. As touched on above, this socialization has pushed them to improve their Turkish and made them more empowered inside the household vis-à-vis the children's fathers. However, at the same time, the large-scale entry of Syrian children into the education system also highlights, for both refugee and host communities, that refugees intend to remain in Turkey long-term, which in turn, can and has fueled racist sentiments against the presence of refugees in public spaces and a backlash against the sharing of public resources. Reflecting this negative effect, another woman stated that, "tensions among Turks and Syrians increased once our children started registering at Turkish schools since Turkish parents did not want their children to be sitting next to our children."

Since refugee communities assumed that they would be returning to Syria soon, in the early years, they were mostly dependent on the savings they brought with them from Syria. Up until 2015, while the border was still effectively open, many families went back and forth between Turkey and Syria. Some were engaged in cross-border trade as a source of income, while others were still able to re-

ceive their salaries in Syria and used them to survive in Turkey. These were further reasons for the lack of economic integration during this initial period. Despite the lack of efforts on the part of the Turkish state, local communities, and refugee communities alike to build sustainable inter-communal relations during the initial years, many women who participated in focus groups said they faced much less racism in their initial years in Turkey. Reflecting this, several women referred to the fact that their Turkish neighbors were very welcoming upon their arrival and helped them with finding apartments, furnishing their apartments, and covering their emergency needs.

As the border closed leaving many Syrians dependent on working in Turkey for survival, it became very difficult for most women to find employment that aligned with their level of education and experience. As is commonly stated in the literature on gender and women, refugee women are usually forced to work in positions far below their qualifications and experience. As one of the women stated, this causes a sense of humiliation that reduces Syrian women's eagerness to socialize with local women, who despite not having a higher level of education, tend to look down on them due to economic conditions.

While some refugee women likened their situation to that of Palestinian refugees, as the hope of returning to Syria dwindled, they were faced with two options: Either building a more permanent life for themselves and their families in Turkey or making attempts to move on to a third country, usually within the EU. Some of the women interviewed had attempted to cross the sea into Europe but failed in doing so. They mentioned that the main reason they preferred Europe was they felt that settlement there would enable them to have a more stable future for their children than was possible in Turkey. Many cited the promise of legal status in Europe as a major contributing factor to stability, while others mentioned that salaries and housing provided to refugees by European states would allow them to live more dignified lives in contrast to their situation in Turkey. As one of the interviewees in Izmir stated: "Refugees in Europe have more dignified lives. When you have a more dignified life, you have the self-confidence to establish relations with your surroundings." However, in contrast to this woman's statement, another interviewee stated: "In Europe, refugees feel like they are charity cases since they receive aid from the state. However, in Turkey, despite the worse living conditions, we feel like we do not depend on anyone. We work and survive. Therefore, we feel stronger towards our surroundings."

Another major factor contributing to refugees' feelings of stability appears to be the acquisition of language skills. Many mentioned language courses provided by European states as one of the most important steps towards integration. The majority of the women interviewed referred to the lack of free language courses by the Turkish government as one of the key factors contributing to the current absence of sustainable relations between refugees and host communities. However, it is important to note that for refugee women, acquiring language skills is not simply a way to passively integrate into Turkish culture and society, but also a tool of empowerment for them to proactively address the challenges they face in Turkey. Some mentioned how they have become able to reply to racist remarks or express their rights or gain access to information and opportunities after acquiring Turkish language skills. Others reproach themselves for not making the effort to learn Turkish and state that a lack of language skills is the key barrier to establishing stronger neighborly relations with the Turkish host community. Most mentioned that this was the reason they do not pay visits to their neighbors, despite the fact that there are no problems between them and they are on good terms.

Many link racist sentiments towards Syrian refugees to this lack of language skills. As a woman from Gaziantep stated, "At a shop, I am a customer, I am not a beggar. I pay and buy. But if you don't speak Turkish, they don't respect you here. This is a big problem. They have to respect you whether you speak the language or not." However, women who participated in the focus group in Mardin made it clear that common language and ethnicity do not necessarily prevent racism. A focus group participant in Mardin stated that the "Kurds of Turkey look at us Kurds of Syria not as Kurds, but as Syrians."

Some women, for example, mentioned that they no longer allow their children to play outside in the streets due to racist attacks, citing multiple cases of Syrian children being beaten up by local children.

Refusing to learn the language of the host country sometimes becomes a tool of passive resistance against racism. A woman in Esenler, İstanbul expressed her frustration in the following words: "I refuse to learn Turkish because I do not want to understand what they are saying about me as I walk on the streets or enter a shop. I don't want to understand their racist remarks."

As the prospects of returning to Syria became increasingly dim and the EU reached a deal with Turkey in 2016 effectively preventing Syrian refugees from reaching European soil, both the Turkish state and civil society actors started taking steps towards the integration of refugees, though the term 'social cohesion' is preferred over 'integration' by the Turkish authorities. This has coincided with the state passing new regulations aimed at limiting the mobility of Syrians at multiple levels. In January 2018, the Turkish state reinstated visa requirements for Syrians wishing to enter Turkey, thus limiting the arrival of more Syrians to Turkey mainly from Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. This coincided with the construction of a wall along the Syrian border, which began in January 2016. Turkey's policy therefore dramatically pivoted from an "open-door" position to a closed one.

In addition to building this concrete wall and reinstating visa requirements, with the aim of preventing more Syrians arriving to Turkey, the Turkish state also took steps to severely limit the mobility of Syrians already inside the country. For example, the new regulations made changing the city of registration more difficult. Unless they had family members, a job offer, or acceptance to a school, it became practically impossible for Syrians to move to a new city. Furthermore, it was declared that no more Syrians would be registered in certain cities, including İstanbul. As for temporary travel, each Syrian has to apply for a travel permit at the local directorate general of migration management office. Apart from the inconvenience of waiting in long lines from the early hours of the day, it is not even guaranteed that they will receive the necessary travel permissions in the end. Some interviewees reported that police check points along highways have begun checking Syrians' travel permits and sending them back to their city of registration if they do not have the required documents. Being restricted not only inside the borders of Turkey, but within the borders of their city of registration, has caused further frustration among Syrians. And yet, as one of the interviewees in Antakya stated, "this frustration has been accompanied by the realization that Syrians no longer have opportunities to travel outside of Turkey, and thus are no longer temporarily in Turkey and have to do our best to build sustainable lives in this country, including establishing relations with their surroundings."

Many of the focus group participants stated that Turks as well as Syrians had come to the realization that Syrians presence in Turkey is not temporary but long-term. This realization, unfortunately, has resulted in increased racism. As a participant in Sultanbeyli said, "Recently there has been more racism. At first, they thought we were guests, but now they realize we are not going away." Many cited the shops and market places as the main places where they face racist remarks. Increasing rents by the landlords is mentioned by the participants as one of the main excuses for racist behavior towards Syrians. This situation has made it more difficult for Syrians to find housing, which has resulted in Syrians coming up with their own real estate system, eliminating the intermediaries between refugees and Turkish landlords. When a Syrian wants to change apartments, they immediately spread the word within the community so that another Syrian family can replace them without having to pay a commission to the real estate agent. This is a further example of the parallel systems established by Syrians, that in many cases, increase their general isolation from the host community.

Religious occasions also seem to play a central role in facilitating host and refugee community socialization. Many Syrian women have mentioned Quran reading sessions as a way they socialize with their Turkish neighbors, stating the latter are happy to host them as they can have the Quran read to them in proper Arabic. Even though here a common religion provides an opportunity to socialize rather than simply a set of common values, many women expressed their desire to stay in Turkey opposed

to Europe based on the presence of shared cultural and religious values. Some of the women emphasized that they want their children to grow up in a Muslim country, among Muslims, and therefore they preferred to stay in Turkey.

In most cases, Syrian women did not utilize the language of rights when discussing their relations with local communities. Rather a discourse of humility, acceptance of their situation, and the similarities between Turkish and Syrian culture were used. However, a small number of women did refer to the rights-based obligation of taking in refugees fleeing from conflict and approached relations between Syrians and local communities from that perspective. While discussing racism, one of the participants in Sultanbeyli said, "Turks should know why we came here. They should know we came here because of war." Variations of this statement were very common among the interviewees, which can be understood and as a criticism of the "guest" discourse prevalent in Turkey.

The exploitation of Syrian women through second marriages, as well as the exploitation of Syrian children through early marriages, are causes of racism against Syrians at a gendered level across ethnicities. As one of the participants in Mardin stated, "Kurds of Turkey do not like Kurds of Syria. They believe we will steal their husbands. Being Kurdish does not prevent that belief." Unfortunately, the exploitation of Syrian women has not generated feelings of solidarity among women from Turkey and Syria, but instead provoked racism. This in itself shows the need for a stronger rights-based civil society that brings together women from Turkey and Syria. Another woman in Mardin said, "Men do not differentiate between Turkish or Syrian or Kurdish. Turkish women also get sexually assaulted." This perspective of gender-based solidarity needs to be further encouraged as part of the overall effort to combat racism towards Syrians in Turkey.

It is clear based on the interviews that, although there were exceptions to the rule, the majority of women felt racism against refugees had increased in recent years. This trend has paralleled the realization within both communities that a large-scale Syrian presence in Turkey is a long-term reality, not a temporary one as initially assumed. The fact that the refugee issue was perceived of as temporary in the early years of the crisis, which was reflected both by the state's policies and discourses on the issue, was a major factor in Syrians not making greater efforts to cultivate strong ties with their Turkish neighbors and establishing parallel systems and institutions, which have ultimately served to heighten their isolation from the host community. While spaces for socialization between the locals and Syrian women have opened up through the opening of public schools to Syrian children, and for example, by virtue of their shared religion, language remains a major barrier to laying the foundation for more sustainable relations. However, while most of the women did not use rights-based terminology, there is a widespread sentiment that given the circumstances that led them to flee Syria, they have an inherent right to be recognized as refugees and that this should be acknowledged by the host community.

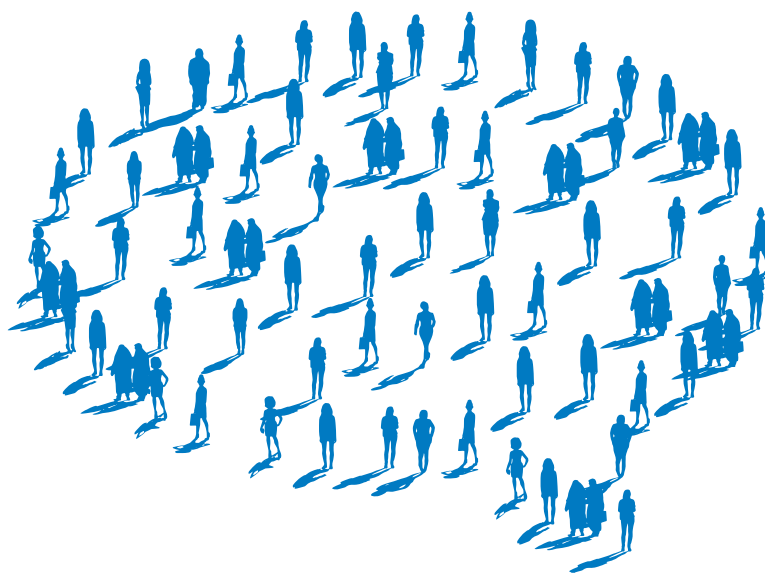
The women interviewed referred to a lack of knowledge within the Turkish community about Syria and Syrians as a factor that contributed to racist stereotyping. Many women also explained the tensions in economic terms, namely, that Syrians are seen as competitors for limited resources (e.g. jobs and housing), which is especially pronounced in lower-socioeconomic areas where host community populations also tend to be vulnerable and economically insecure. The distribution of aid to Syrians further exacerbates tensions in poorer neighborhoods when the Turkish citizens they live beside are often facing similar challenges without additional support. The relationship between aid distribution and increased tensions between Syrian and Turkish communities in more deprived areas should necessitate the adoption of a 'do no harm' approach. It also highlights another reason why humanitarian-aid focused approaches should be limited to the initial emergency response period, not only so refugees can be supported in such a way that enables them lead stable, independent lives, but also to minimize tensions between refugee and host communities.

## Possibilities of Solidarity Between Refugee and Host Communities

As mentioned in other sections of this report, some of the interviewees have indicated that the general perception among Syrians in Turkey is that during the initial years after the arrival of Syrian refugees, host communities were more welcoming than in recent times. The narratives of interviewees made it clear that during this period, the dynamic between refugees and their Turkish neighbors was largely characterized by a relation of “help”. This dynamic was most apparent in the border cities as many Syrians had extended family ties in these areas and therefore preexisting social networks to appeal to for support. Highlighting this view of their initial reception in Turkey, many of the interviewees used statements like the following: “They opened their houses to us; some provided furniture to us; blankets, kitchen supplies.”

However, according to the interviewees, this relation of help did not evolve into a relation of solidarity over time. As one of the interviewees in Izmir pointed out, local communities initially considered refugees as victims of war, but as “victims” started building lives in Turkey, the local communities’ reactions towards them transformed into resentment. Reflecting this shift among the host community from a general desire to help to growing anger and resentment, another interviewee in Istanbul stated: “Turks are fed up with us. They accuse us of increasing rents and decreasing salaries. They want us to go.” Instead of establishing and strengthening networks of solidarity between the two communities, Syrians came to primarily be seen as unwanted competitors for already limited resources (e.g. jobs, public services) by Turkish citizens.

Furthermore, identity politics played an important role in the relations established between host communities and refugee communities. Instead of general sense of solidarity being established, mechanisms of support emerged between refugees and citizens of the same ethnicity or sect, although these mechanisms have also fallen short of developing into deeper and equitable networks of solidarity.



# Recommendations

As this report has demonstrated, the situation of Syrian women in Turkey has been largely determined by the strategies, policies, and interventions of actors at the local, national, and international-levels. While there have been positive developments towards addressing the challenges and needs of Syrian women, this report has also identified significant shortcomings in the status quo approach of these actors. In terms of creating an environment for Syrian women that widely recognizes their social and political agency, enables them to actively practice their rights, and allows them to build independent lives for themselves, there is still much work to be done. Below are some recommendations for engaged stakeholders that we believe will help make tangible progress towards creating such an environment in Turkey.

## **To Turkish and Syrian civil society organizations**

- Actively create spaces and mechanisms to foster enhanced cooperation, such as holding regular coordination meetings and jointly-implementing women-focused projects.
- Place renewed emphasis on supporting the mobilization of Syrian women to access their rights and organize at the community-level through intensified outreach and sustained follow-up that enables them to increase their independence and further activate their agency.
- Take deliberate steps to counter the widespread mistrust of both Syrian and Turkish organizations among Syrian women by focusing on building positive community relations and clearly articulating organizational missions and goals in such a way that reestablishes confidence in their work.
- Syrian organizations must make more concerted efforts to combat the general mistrust of them present among Turkish civil society actors through increased outreach and relationship building. This is an important precursor to increasing the level of meaningful cooperation between them.
- Conduct regular needs assessments and actively consult Syrian women to listen to their problems and proposed solutions. This is necessary for Syrian women themselves play a proactive role in defining their areas of need, problems, and the most effective ways civil society actors can address them.
- Increase their focus on the rights-based approach and increase channels of access to legal information, especially in relation to exploitation in the work place, including sexual harassment, and second marriages.
- In addition to raising awareness about rights and legal procedures, it is crucial that civil society organizations design programmes and systems to ensure that Syrian women can actually apply these rights and use legal services in practice.
- Diversify their target groups, i.e. deliberately make efforts to incorporate new groups of Syrian women into their programming opposed to limiting themselves to the same group of women.
- Turkish women's organizations should actively include Syrian refugee women of all backgrounds in their feminist agenda.



## **To Municipalities and Central Government**

- Discourses used by the state and local-level governing bodies should shift towards emphasizing that seeking refuge from conflict and persecution is a fundamental human right.
- All levels of government should make a more concerted effort to combat misinformation and rumors circulated about Syrian refugees by providing clearer channels of information for Turkish citizens about the services available to them.
- Provide clearer channels of information to refugee women about their rights in Turkey.
- Ensure work permits are granted to Syrian civil society organizations' employees to reduce their vulnerability and enable them to expand the scope of their work with Syrian women.
- Increase "peace" education initiatives at public schools to improve relations between Syrian and Turkish children and youth and reduce the prevalence of bullying.
- Take concrete steps to combat the general exploitation of Syrians in the workplace.
- Increase awareness about and take steps to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace through an integrated strategy across different government agencies (e.g. police and the governmental and civil offices refugees are engaged with) to create an environment conducive to instances of sexual harassment being reported and followed up on.
- Provide free language courses at different levels of aptitude that accommodate the time constraints faced by many Syrian women due to family and work obligations.
- Increase the level of engagement and working relations with Syrian civil society organizations in general and rights-based organizations in particular.
- Establish afterschool programmes for Syrian children who are reentering the education system after years of absence due to conflict and displacement to assist them in catching up.

## **To International Stakeholders (INGOS, Governments, Multilateral institutions)**

- Support the mobilization of Syrian women to build independent lives that break cycles of dependency and victimhood.
- Increase support for and promote rights-based approaches to the Syrian refugee issue.
- Increase support for "second generation" Syrian organizations that have emerged from the refugee context and are focused on refugee-specific issues as these organizations are struggling to secure external support at a time when the needs of refugees in Turkey is growing.

## Conclusion

This report has attempted to demonstrate how the lack of a rights-based public discussion on the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey has informed and shaped the challenges and problems Syrian women face. While the Turkish state's decision to adopt an "open border" policy early in the Syrian conflict deserves significant recognition on humanitarian grounds, its initial short-term, transitory policy towards Syrians, centered on the notion of them being temporary "guests", was also instrumental in marginalizing a rights-based understanding of their situation and circumstances that continues to have repercussions today. Although a large-scale, sustained humanitarian response to the crisis was undoubtedly necessary, without corresponding high-profile efforts to advocate for Syrians' rights as refugees, frame their situation in rights-based terminology, or develop strategies and programmes to enhance their social agency and independence, state and donor policies – which were the main determinant of civil society's response – led to Syrians being primarily viewed through the prism of "victimhood" and dependency. These policies also increased the level of separation between Turkish citizens and Syrians, as evidenced by the emergence of parallel institutions and systems for Syrians that added to their isolation, and inadvertently fueled racist discourses.

The state's gradual adoption of more long-term policies on the refugee issue from 2014-onwards, combined with a widening of donor priorities, saw a rise in programmes and activities geared towards promoting social cohesion between refugee and host communities among civil society actors. This shift was also an acknowledgement of the rising resentment and anger refugees' ongoing presence in Turkey was causing among segments of the host community. However, this expansion of focus was also made without a major increase in the prominence of rights-based approaches, although a number of Turkish civil society organizations still actively engaged in advocating for Syrians' refugee status and legal rights, as well as the specific rights of Syrian women in Turkey. It also did not entail a fundamental departure from the mainstream "guest" narrative that had originally been predicated on the assumption Syrians would be a temporary issue, instead of one that centered on seeking refuge being a human right.

In this context, the problem of racism featured prominently in the interviews and focus groups with Syrian women. Two different perspectives were identified on this issue. The first was that the introduction of long-term policies had increased the number of spaces open to Syrians to interact and build relationships with Turkish citizens and therefore improved their overall relations. The second was that the prolonged nature of Syrians' presence, combined with their increased access to state resources and services vis-à-vis increasingly integrationist policies, had led to increased racism and discrimination against them in their daily lives. While social cohesion initiatives are designed to mitigate racism and tensions, it was clear from the interviews that this approach is not a comprehensive solution, as it does not address the root causes of racism against Syrians' and the social, political, and historical contexts in which they are embedded.

Many of Syrian women's problems and challenges stem from their legal status under temporary protection. From their perspective, the constant changes to the rules and regulations associated with their status, such as travel restrictions between cities based on where someone is registered, among other issues, add to their general feelings of insecurity. Despite the impact the limitations of temporary protection status have on their everyday lives, few interviewees explicitly expressed a demand for long-term refugee status. As temporary protection status is inextricably linked to the mainstream "guest" narrative, it also appears that many Syrian women have uncritically internalized this narrative in the absence of a rights-based approach, in the sense that the perceived need to express gratitude to the Turkish state takes precedent over their human rights as refugees.

Civil society organizations, both Turkish and Syrian, have played a pivotal role in increasing the channels of access to information available to Syrian women about their rights in Turkey. The interviews indicated that when women have access to information about their rights, and support mechanisms to realize them, they apply them in practice. Furthermore, an additional contributing factor to women actively practicing rights was witnessing state authorities enforce them (e.g. in cases of gender-based violence or early marriage). There was an expressed sentiment among interviewees that both understanding their legal rights and how to apply them in practice gave them an increased sense of empowerment and security in their daily lives. However, it was also clear that women's access to rights and services remains uneven between different locations.

While Syrian women acknowledged the good work civil society organizations do and the benefits they receive from their programmes and activities, there was also feelings of disappointment and mistrust towards them among some interviewees. There were several reasons for this, such as the perception that they are enriching themselves based on the suffering of refugees, but key among them was the perception that there is often a disconnect between the programmes and activities offered by civil society organizations and the expressed needs of Syrian women, which civil society should take renewed efforts to address. There is also a need for Turkish and Syrian organizations to increase their levels of coordination and cooperation, especially since stronger working relationships between them can play an instrumental role in building networks of solidarity between refugee and host communities.

A recurring theme encountered throughout the interviews with Syrian women was the desire to take greater control over their lives through increasing their level of self-organization, primarily in the context of economic empowerment. This was based on both their general dissatisfaction with the opportunities available to them through civil society organizations (i.e. gendered vocational training) and as a result of labor exploitation and the difficulty of gaining work permits for Syrians under temporary protection. A number of self-organization initiatives were identified by women during the interviews, such as the cooperative business opened by a group of Syrian women in Antakya. Other examples related to more informal networks, which provide women with crucial support systems and enhance their sense of independence and security. It was also clear that civil society organizations play an important role in the formation of these self-organization initiatives among Syrian women, as they often constitute one of the main spaces for socialization. However, based on the interviews, there was no indication that self-organization initiatives among Syrian women have currently extended to rights-based advocacy.

The desire for greater self-organization can also be placed in the context of the socio-cultural shifts generated by the Syrian conflict within the refugee community, as a significant and growing percentage of refugee households are headed by women. Dislocated from traditional systems of social support, many Syrian women have been forced to become the primary breadwinners and caretakers of their families, assuming new financial roles and responsibilities in the process. While this shift has exacerbated the survival pressures many Syrian women experience, combined with increased awareness about their rights in Turkey, it has also simultaneously increased their sense of empowerment, confidence, and agency. As reflected in the interviews, there is a strong demand to further build off this sentiment by increasing the level of self-organization among women in their communities.


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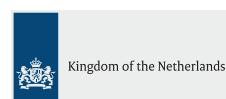


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 **Kingdom of the Netherlands** Dutch Embassy in Turkey. The protection and promotion of human rights worldwide is one of the corner stones of the foreign policy of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. The Dutch Embassy in Ankara and the Consulate General in Istanbul support organisations working on human rights, including refugee rights, and the rule of law in Turkey.

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Badael was established in 2013 in response to the urgent need to strengthen inclusive, representative, grassroots civil society groups (CSGs) in Syria. Badael's mission is to support local-level peacebuilding, rights-based campaigning and non-violent activism through capacity building, advocacy and research. A firm commitment to women's rights and gender equality is evident throughout our work, reflecting Badael's core belief that mobilizing and empowering women must be a central component of any effort to build sustainable peace in Syria.

