# THE ROLE OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN TURKEY

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The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in the Empowerment of Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey

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# DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in The Empowerment of Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey

This study examines the role of nongovernmental organizations in eliminating political, social, economic, and gender-based obstacles in the way of ensuring empowerment for Syrian refugee women who fled the Syrian Civil War and settled in Turkey in the past ten years. The rapid influx of refugees paralyzed the Turkish migration management system. Millions of refugees settled in urban areas despite precarious conditions. Not being granted official refugee status by the Turkish state, the temporary protection regime made it difficult for Syrians to enjoy fundamental human rights. Civil society had to step up, playing the role of intermediaries between refugees and the state while providing humanitarian aid of all sorts. This qualitative research formulated upon several semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with NGOs operating in the field examines how the gender-based disadvantage experienced by refugee women has been addressed in NGOs' agendas and what strategies are developed in order to push decision-makers to have a gender perspective. Our study shows that these NGOs have shed light on the gender-blindness of traditional state apparatus and pushed their mechanisms to acknowledge the multiple disadvantages experienced by refugee women. NGOs discovered alternative ways for refugee women to access the necessary social capital for empowerment. Despite the political pressure upon civil society, NGOs introduced a more gender-based conceptualization of social cohesion and integration by empowering refugee women and aiming to impact various decision-making mechanisms.

# ÖZET

## Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Göçmen Kadınların Güçlenmesinde Sivil Toplum Örgütlerinin Rolü

Bu çalışmada, son on senede Suriye İç Savaşından Türkiye'ye sığınmış göçmen kadınların yaşadığı siyasi, sosyal, ekonomik ve cinsiyet temelli sorunlarla mücadelesi ve güçlenmesinde sivil toplum örgütlerinin rolü incelenmektedir. Suriyeli sığınmacıların temel insan hak ve özgürlükleri bağlamında değerlendirilmesi gereken ihtiyaç ve taleplerinin muhatabı geçici koruma statüsü sebebiyle direkt veya yalnızca devlet olmaktan çıkmıştır. Sivil toplumun yoğun sorumluluk aldığı kentte yaşayan göçmenlerin karşılaştığı çoklu dezavantajın cinsiyet perspektifinden ele alınıp alınmadığı, bu yaklaşımın geleneksel devlet mekanizmalarına nasıl entegre edilebileceği alanda çalışan sivil toplum örgütleriyle gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış, derinlemesine görüşmeleri temel alan bu çalışmanın esas sorgusudur. Düzensiz göçmenlerin ve kentte yaşayan mülteci nüfusun yüksek oranı, göç idaresindeki yetersizlikler Suriyeli kadın sığınmacıların yaşadığı çoklu dezavantajın dikkate alınması için sivil alanda ekstra bir öğrenme sürecini ve iş birliğini gerektirmiş, STK'lar bu süreçte mülteci kadınların güçlenmesi için gerekli sosyal sermayeyi sağlamanın türlü araçlarını geliştirirken hem kurumsal hem savunuculuk anlamında kapasitelerini artırmışlardır. Sivil toplum, süregelen politik baskıya rağmen karar alma mekanizmalarında feminist bir etki bırakarak hem Türkiyeli kadınları hem göçmen kadınları daha demokratik bir sosyal uyum ve birlikte yaşama bağlamında buluşturma çabasının öncüsü olmuştur.

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# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dear parents; Ülker and Salih. My father passed away in the first year of my master's program. Hope you are proud dad. Here is to you two!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AFAD | The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı) |
| AKP | Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) |
| CHP | Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) |
| CTDC | Center for Transnational Development and Collaboration |
| DGMM | The Directorate General of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü) |
| EU | The European Union |
| ECHO | European Commission Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| FRONTEX | The European Border and Coast Guard Agency |
| FRiT | the Facility for Refugees in Turkey |
| FSA | The Free Syrian Army |
| GIZ | The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) English: GmbH, German Agency for International Cooperation |
| GONGOs | Government Operated Nongovernmental Organizations |
| HCG | The Hellenic Coast Guard |
| IGOs | International Governmental Organizations |
| INGOs | International Non-Governmental Organizations |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| ISIS/ISIL | The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant |
| LGBTI | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex |

| | |
|---|---|
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa |
| MHP | Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| NGOs | Non-Governmental Organizations |
| PRM | The United States Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration |
| SDF | Syrian Democratic Forces |
| SGBV | Sexual and Gender-Based Violence |
| SNA | The Syrian National Army |
| YPG | People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) |
| TAF | The Turkish Armed Forces |
| TUİK | Turkish Statistical Institute (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu) |
| UN | The United Nations |
| UNESCO | The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| UNFPA | The United Nations Population Fund |
| UNHCR | The United Nations High Commissionaire for Refugees |
| US | The United States (of America) |
| WHH | Welthungerhilfe |

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

This study examines the role of nongovernmental organizations actively operating in Turkey with the goal of eliminating political, social, economic, and gender-based obstacles in the way of ensuring the empowerment of Syrian refugee women who fled the Syrian Civil War and settled in Turkey in the past ten years. Since Turkey had signed the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees with a reservation that grants official refugee status to only those who come from Europe, people fleeing from the Syrian Civil War have not been granted official refugee status by the Turkish state.[1] Lacking official refugee status, the temporary protection regime made it difficult for Syrians to enjoy fundamental human rights. The rapid influx of refugees paralyzed the Turkish migration management system. Millions of refugees settled in urban areas despite precarious conditions. These precarious conditions include traditional or reinstituted gendered power dynamics that put women refugees in even more vulnerable positions. Women refugees are experiencing sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, and disadvantages in socioeconomic aspects of life that hinder their access to basic needs and services, whether they live in camps or urban areas. The patriarchal power relations in both the refugee community and the host

[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.). Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. UNHCR. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10

community create new impediments to Syrian refugee women's empowerment in the post-migration process.

Civil society has played the role of intermediaries between refugees and the state while providing humanitarian aid, doing advocacy work to eliminate xenophobic sentiments in the host community, and influencing policymakers to provide the necessary conditions for social cohesion and integration. Although civil society organizations initially had to assume the position of service providers to refugees since the Turkish state lacked the capacity to respond to the crisis in a comprehensive manner, their ultimate goal was to empower refugees to become self-sufficient, resilient members of the host community so that social cohesion would be achieved. These empowerment strategies needed specializations for different groups, women, LGBTI people, children, the elderly, and the disabled, considering how power dynamics played out differently for each group. For this research, we will focus on the empowerment of Syrian refugee women in areas concerning education, healthcare, employment, and psychosocial wellbeing. Nongovernmental organizations were acknowledging the fact that Syrian women were under the heavy burden of rebuilding a life in Turkey, dealing with the trauma of war, the patriarchal oppression in the domestic and public sphere, the xenophobia in the host community, the loss of their psychosocial and economic support mechanisms all at once.

Civil society in Turkey has been tamed under the competitive authoritarian rule of consecutive AKP governments targeting the legitimacy and functioning of civil society groups, especially after the wave of demonstrations in 2013 following the Gezi Park protests (Yabanci, 2019). The Gezi Movement started as a small-scale, peaceful protest against the demolition of a public park in the central district of Istanbul, Taksim.

However, it gained massive support from the public throughout the country following the AKP government's violent response, described as a 'disproportionated retaliation' by many. Despite this political pressure upon civil society under the competitive authoritarian rule of AKP, NGOs have introduced a more gender-based conceptualization of social cohesion and integration while leaving a feminist impact on various decision-making mechanisms both at the national and international levels. This qualitative research formulated upon several semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with NGOs operating in the field examines how the gender-based disadvantage experienced by refugee women has been addressed in these NGOs' agendas and what strategies have been developed in order to push decision-makers to have a gender-based conceptualization of social cohesion and coexistence. Our study shows that NGOs discovered alternative ways for refugee women to access the necessary social capital for empowerment in economic, social, cultural, and intellectual terms, creating spaces for them to reignite a sense of confidence and power. These attempts shed light on the gender-blindness of traditional state apparatus and aim to push state mechanisms to acknowledge multiple disadvantages experienced by Syrian refugee women. Our study will contribute to the literature by showing which gaps are expected to be filled by NGOs despite the fact that the Turkish state is supposed to actively deliver services to refugees and create channels for better incorporation into the host community. Combining the gender aspect with this migration management crisis once again shows us the urgent need for gender equality policy-making and implementation processes in Turkey since one of the perils of rising authoritarianism in the country is the systematic attack on the women's rights movement. These NGOs' emphasis on common demands and problems of women in Turkey and Syrian refugee women might create the

gender-equal language of social cohesion and integration and form an alliance to eliminate multiple disadvantages in solidarity.

This thesis consists of 6 chapters. In Chapter 2, we elaborate on the intersectional feminism literature, which provides a theoretical framework for our analysis. Adding to that, we stress the often life-changing, substantial difference stemming from refugee empowerment work done by NGOs with an intersectional perspective which addresses multiple power dynamics that might be simultaneously at play in creating the feeling of disempowerment and even 'victimhood' in Syrian refugee women in Turkey. The chapter continues with the conceptualization of such intersecting identities and what they are meant to mean throughout the manuscript.

In Chapter 3, we try to give readers a short timeline of events and alliances built during the Syrian Civil War and Turkey's geo-political position among the involved parties. With its proximity to the war and the impossible to control long border, Turkey inevitably got affected by the Syrian War. The chapter continues by explaining the possible implications of mass refugee movements following civil wars for neighboring countries hosting them, temporarily or permanently.

In Chapter 4, we will get into detail with the intersectional migration approach that focuses explicitly on gender-based issues of refugees by using existing literature and our takes from the field. It is the part where our field research resonates with the contemporary migration literature and starts to find its voice by drawing attention to recent new information attained in the field. In Chapter 5, we explain the role of NGOs in refugee women's empowerment processes and uncover how these attempts might have revealed the Turkish state's need to endorse a more gender-based conceptualization of social cohesion and empowerment.

# CHAPTER 2

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research aims to provide an intersectional feminist account of the NGO-led empowerment mechanisms of Syrian refugee women in Turkey. For this purpose, we first need to understand the link between gender and migration and in what ways being a refugee woman is different from being defined just as a refugee. Such an intersectional account would provide a more significant vantage point that encapsulates the dynamics at play that affects and differentiates not only the experience of migration but also the motivations and aftermath of it on the basis of gender. In the second part, we will conceptualize integration and social cohesion by underlining what we mean and do not mean by the word integration. By doing so, we aim to decipher which institutional and discursive impediments might need to be eliminated in our efforts to achieve social cohesion in the case of Turkey. Even when such structural limits are removed, and discriminatory measures are eliminated, the need to provide an answer to the hanging question of how refugee women would be empowered so much so that they could realize their potential in political, socioeconomic, psychosocial, and cultural terms. It is because empowerment does not only imply a negative sense of freedom where one can be freed from persecution, violence, or abuse. Conceptualizing empowerment in such a way that would associate the positive sense of the term freedom where a refugee woman feels free to express her opinion, participate in new social settings, access goods and services without fear, to realize her capacity to the fullest by being given equal opportunity.

Furthermore, we will focus on what roles NGOs might assume in providing such safe and dependable social capital to refugee women in their empowerment process within a complex, multi-layered policy-making environment. It has to be reminded that it is an environment where responsibilities are not as transparent as required due to the legal status of refugees or states' inability to meet the criteria in providing goods and services more than basic humanitarian aid. Lastly, our methodological approach will be explained in detail so that our field research's sampling and data acquiring process will be understood before we move on to the specific case of Syrian refugee women in Turkey.

## 2.1 Intersection of gender and migration

The concept of 'intersectionality' can be regarded as "…signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p.76)." Utilizing such conceptualization of intersectionality in feminist analysis of refugee women's experience would not only fundamentally challenge the ahistorical and essentialist notions of womanhood but also would provide us with alternative and comprehensive ways to conceptualize refugee empowerment in these multiple areas of life. A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectional feminism provides us the vantage point which can unveil the mechanisms and ways in which different forms of inequality and

disadvantage can be at play simultaneously and exacerbate each other in women's path to feeling recognized and empowered as equal subjects in a polity.[2]

Although women have been historically subjected to discrimination and sexual or gender-based violence, the mechanisms promising to protect citizens are usually formulated gender-blindly and fail to capture the patriarchal power dynamics at the very foundation of the traditional state apparatus. When women who are not organically tied to the state via citizenship experience multiple disadvantages, discrimination, or violence, their access to the state's political, legal, and psychosocial support mechanisms becomes a much more complex problem. Nation-states' responsibility towards protecting the lives and fundamental human rights of stateless persons, refugees, and asylum seekers might be unclear or too complicated even though international human rights law, certain international treaties, and protocols do provide a basis for action. Adding gender to this already complicated issue creates the need to explore the foundation of the nation-state and how nation-state and citizenship are tied to individuals' gender identity.

Feminist migration analysis and theory have influenced the way migration scholars evaluate the concept of gender in analyzing migration dynamics. In the 1970s and 1980s, gender was conceptualized by migration scholars as an individual level, fixed biological category assigned at birth. The difference in sexual identity of migrants, male or female, was treated as just a dichotomous variable, not bearing more significance than other fixed categories of survey data such as ethnicity, religion, or native language (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000; Indra 1999; Kofman et al. 2000). The critical and fundamental

[2] *Intersectional feminism: what it means and why it matters right now*. (2020, July 1). UN Women Headquarters. Retrieved January 2, 2022, from https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters

shift in such perspective took place towards the end of the 1980s as feminist migration scholars emphasized the effects of gender on relations of power before, during, and after the migration.

In their study, Castles and Miller (1998) underlined the importance of this trend of feminization of migration since the 1990s. Castles and Miller highlight the increasing role of women in migration. Although their primary focus is on labor migration, their findings are thoroughly relevant to our study, considering how the socioeconomic and intellectual background of migrant women affects their wellbeing during and after migration. By using the analytical tools of critical social theory, feminist migration scholars underlined the fact that gender relations are essentially related to how people decide to migrate, the material conditions within which migration takes place, and how people's modes of incorporation into the host society alters (Cantu´ 2009, 31–32).

Even the idea of migration might stem from gendered roles members of each household assume or what kind of gendered expectations are at play in the labor force or in terms of military service (Morokvasic, 1984). As we elaborate more in the following chapters, in the case of forced migration due to an armed conflict, it usually is the men of the household who is expected to fight in the conflict, to be in the war zone in the name of defending the lives, property, and honor of family or community members while women are expected to care for the children, the elderly, and the disabled along with providing care for fighters.

Under conditions of war, civil or international, women have been systematically targeted as representatives of a subordinated nation or community since they have been assigned subordinated positions and roles in family or group settings or have been seen as transmitters of the enemy's ethnic culture (Ray & Enloe, 2002; Hodge, 2007; Nawyn,

2010; Skjelsbaek, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Such widespread, systematic violence may take place in various forms, but it usually occurs as sexual and gender-based violence, most commonly rape, sexual slavery, forced miscarriages, and mutilation in an attempt to dishonor the opponent due to the patriarchal framing of women in war. Wartime rape can be in the form of gang rape or repeated rape under imprisonment conditions (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, 91). Sexual slavery may become so institutionalized by armed forces that women are perceived to be 'servants' to the fighters, as in the case of the Japanese army during the 2nd World War (Yoshimi, 2000).

Facing the threat of persecution, the dread of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, and various forms of inhumane treatment, it is vital for migrant women to have social networks to share information and resources for a safe route to some freedom and to be able to rebuild their lives elsewhere relatively easier (Boyd 1989; Curran et al. 2005; Massey et al. 1993). Women have been expected to sustain such social support channels, mainly to keep steady and dependable relations with the members of their kin, considering access to non-kin networks might be problematic compared to men due to normative gender roles (Curran and Saguy, 2001).

The policy-making processes regarding refugees are usually taking place at the international, national, and sometimes municipal levels. Although scholarly attention has been paid to the political implications of mass refugee movements, they often fail to recognize gender-based violence and discrimination as 'political' issues worth taking into account while formulating policies to prevent violence in and around conflict zones and further provide conditions for a smooth and sustainable social cohesion in the host countries. What human rights activists and international or national NGOs are doing can be described as disturbing that sterile environment by reminding us that, going back to

the root arguments of feminism, the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970). Sexual and gender-based violence (henceforth SGBV) and discrimination experienced by women, children, and LGBTI people are usually disregarded due to the policy makers' perception of sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination as 'personal' issues growing out of individual problems, certain cultural codes, domestic dynamics et cetera. For decades, feminist scholars have been explaining the structural factors that not only fail to combat gender-based violence but even create an ungoverned arena for perpetrators to feel almost free to continue with their actions. Since our ultimate goal is to eliminate constraints making it difficult or even impossible for refugee women to feel empowered in the post-migration settings, we have to address the root causes of SGBV cases and how the authorities' actions or inactions affect its prevalence.

Women in Turkey, either local or refugee, have been suffering political, social, economic, and cultural discrimination on the basis of gender. The decision of the Turkish government to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 made it more evident that the current regime aims to undermine and even reverse what has been achieved by the women's rights movement in Turkey.[3] The Turkish government's argument concerning the decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention was that the Turkish law to protect family and prevent violence against woman (Act No. 6284) basically serves the same purpose. However, the implementation of the Law 6284 is already problematic, and the Turkish state's emphasis on family and women is highlighted even in its name (Eşit Nesiller Derneği, 2022). Hosting millions of asylum

[3] Amnesty International. (2022, August 8). Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention rallies the fight for women's rights across the world. Retrieved August 31, 2022, from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/turkeys-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-rallies-the-fight-for-womens-rights-across-the-world-2/

seekers under temporary protection and hundreds and thousands of undocumented migrants, Turkey needs to have a legal framework that would provide protection to women, LGBTI, and even men who experience sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence and do not have citizenship or experience such discrimination and violence outside of heteronormative relationships or family. The Istanbul Convention is a significant achievement nationally and globally because it provides a legal framework to protect women from violence and promote gender equality through legislation, education, and awareness raising without discriminating based on legal status.

## 2.2 Conceptualizing integration and social cohesion

Existing discussions and academic literature on citizenship, assimilation, and multiculturalism provide us with various perspectives when it comes to international migration. Transnational migration is a fact for Western societies; most of them are now hosting the second and third generations of immigrant minorities. Hence, the main question is what nation-states should do about their political status in the polity. Migrants not only affect public services, political campaigns, and policy prescriptions but also engage in economic and social affairs. The scope of their rights and liberties becomes the heart of the matter. In an attempt to define the concept of citizenship, Bloemrad argues that it may encircle legal status, rights, political participation, and a sense of belonging while the only entitled and omnipotent body to guarantee people have rights and liberties is the state itself (Bloemraad, Korteweg, Yurdakul, 2008). So, whenever immigration is considered, especially when globalization is more prevalent than ever, a widespread questioning of concepts like multiculturalism, national identity, social cohesion, immigration control, and state sovereignty takes place.

Nationalists argue that the cultural boundaries of a country ought to overlap with its political boundaries, implying that diversity is a threat to social cohesion because it creates divisions within society (Gellner, 1983). Classical liberals associate multiculturalism with group rights and underline the controversy of recognizing group-specific rights of immigrants by the state because liberalism is founded upon individualism. Active support of specific groups is unthinkable for them while they are in favor of a neutral state concerning pluralism in the public sphere. Some feminist fractions argue that multiculturalism prioritizes group rights and overshadows individual rights, while racism and sexism remain exclusionary and depoliticized. An impressive body of literature has emerged to criticize multiculturalism by blaming it for making some cultural distinctions seem more significant than they are. At this point, it is crucial to make the necessary distinction between nationality, which implies the identity people assume, and citizenship which refers to the legal ties of the people with the state.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Western democracies have become skeptical of multiculturalism, and the assimilationist approach has been revitalized to emphasize the need for cultural commonalities instead of nourishing diversity in receiving societies. Bloemraad et al.'s (2008) radical discussion is around state borders and proposes a cosmopolitan, transnational, and post-national citizenship. First, the authors argue that the traditional understanding of citizenship is outdated and needs to be denationalized because it leaves immigrants with foreign citizenship in the society debar from performing a bundle of rights. On the one hand, nation states require emotional solidarity among their citizens; on the other hand, nation-state promises to guarantee individual rights and liberties institutionally. At this point, Bloemraad et al. mount a reasonable counterargument by saying that without national boundaries, i.e., under

conditions of cosmopolitanism, it is hard to promote these two prerequisites. It is a legitimate critique of post-nationalism by emphasizing the lack of empirical evidence for the existence of post-national citizenship and the state of already recognized human rights in liberal democratic states. Hence, they conclude that the argument about the "age of post-nationalism" is not very convincing, particularly when we take into account the legal and socioeconomic situation of asylum-seekers and refugees in reality.

As an alternative critique of assimilationist policies usually defended in liberal democracies, Rainer Bauböck emphasizes the need for social cohesion through overarching and overlapping identities rather than overriding, imposed ones (2002). He introduces his argument by opening the debate on what social cohesion means for liberal democracies. At this point, he refers to a famous concept, namely 'imagined communities,' in which social cohesion is achieved through the division of labor and a literate population (Anderson, 1983). Not surprisingly, the ones who do not meet these requirements are immigrant minorities, and they are left out of the imagined picture. He continues to criticize the need for shared democratic values argument concerning constitutional patriotism, which requires well-established human rights, the rule of law, and democracy altogether. However, Bauböck (2002) argues that these values are not specific to a nation or a group; they are universalizable and can be shared by all. So, it does not make sense to prevent immigrants who experience human rights violations or flee authoritarian regimes and civil wars and are willing to be a part of liberal democratic societies. After all, they choose their destination, if they have the opportunity, according to what they have been longing for, and what they value.

Moreover, it is not fair to expect these people to explicitly renounce their values and absorb so-called Western values combined with the receiving country's national

history and language as a prerequisite for granting them citizenship rights. Especially when the members of the immigrant-receiving population claim to have these virtues of liberal democracies even though they have been systematically rejecting the idea of facing off past crimes committed against predominantly ethnic and religious minorities (2002, p.13). Bauböck argues that, under these circumstances, it is possible to give political participation rights to immigrants either by naturalization or by empowering non-citizens to vote and continues by criticizing dual citizenship and dual loyalty stances of different nation states while proposing the necessity of sharing overarching and overlapping identities and why they ought to be self-transformative. To achieve this kind of a sharing environment, we should rewrite history not as a nationally constructed tale but as the true story of interacting societies and cultures, including immigrants. He concludes his argument by naming a new solution as the catalyst model, which is a more accurate way to follow in order to reach a more pluralistic, even cosmopolitan world. However, in the real world, not only individuals but also states do not want to face their history because it requires them to face past crimes, rip the bandage off, and take accountability, accordingly. Expecting all societies to achieve this kind of courageous act seems a little utopic but promising for a more peaceful future.

Even when certain rights are granted to minority groups, including immigrant communities, there is an issue of controlling in-group dynamics that might create new hierarchies and power struggles within the group, probably targeting the already disadvantaged ones due to gendered social norms. Susan Okin (1998) argues that protecting the needs and claims of minority groups via state apparatus could be acceptable if and only if policies that recognize the cultural diversity of minority groups would benefit everyone within that group equally and if women are fully represented in

negotiations during the policy-making processes. This issue requires special attention because the feminist agenda necessitates that women should not be disadvantaged on the basis of sex and that they have human dignity equal to that of men.

Although many scholars who advocate minority rights focus on differences among cultural groups, the fact that minority cultural groups themselves are gendered requires us to look for within-group relationships and the private space in which these gendered roles most frequently emerge. Some of these cultures appoint responsibilities for women only in the domestic sphere and prevent them from realizing their potential by keeping them busy with domestic work, reproduction, and child-rearing. Okin (1998) argues that some cultures have powerful drives to control women and to subordinate female members of the group through certain rituals and practices. She gives examples of different practices that sprung from founding myths of Abrahamic religions and some other rooted belief systems. The practices of clitoridectomy, polygamy, child marriage, forcing rape victims to marry their rapists, sexual harassment, wife murder, mother-child suicides, purdah, and penalizing rape victims with the offense of zina are all aimed at controlling women of society. No matter who is guilty, legal systems and moral templates are biased against women, and female members of society suffer in the end. So, before granting special rights to minority groups, Okin argues that states must ensure that the basic liberal principles are applied within the group. There should not be any discrimination among members of the group on the basis of sex, race, or sexual preference. The willingness of a group to be less patriarchal should be our basis for justification of special group rights, and the groups need to assure us that they apply liberal principles in the private sphere, too.

Considering the aforementioned debates, giving immigrants certain rights and liberties in Turkey would necessitate a careful evaluation of existing power dynamics at the international and national levels. The historical connection between Turkey and Syria, being part of the same empire for centuries and having similar demographics living along an almost 900 kilometers national border, has become important. Some people have family members in both countries since their homeland was severed along the national border after the Turkish War of Independence, or they had migrated for family reunification, socioeconomic reasons, or due to religious and political tension in the area during and after the border was set.

While discussing overarching and overlapping identities or shared history, one cannot possibly neglect that both countries host Sunni-Muslim people predominantly. In a recent study, Haddad (2020) analyzes the relation between sectarian identity and national identity by borrowing from Yuval-Davis, Lawler, and Brubaker's framings of identity. According to Yuval-Davis (2006), subjects' identity formation is a dynamic process depending on one's notions of belonging, which are ever-evolving and context-dependent. Affirming that, Lawler (2014, p.2) suggests that identity can only be achieved through social relations, an individual by her/himself cannot produce or reproduce a politically significant identity. According to Brubaker et al. (2004, p. 47), collective identities are "… not things in the world but ways of seeing the world. They are ways of understanding and identifying oneself, making sense of one's problems and predicaments, identifying one's interests, and orienting one's action." Using these arguments as points of departure, Haddad (2020, p.126) asserts that sectarian identity can be deeply intertwined with national identity and is formulated quite similar to other identity-building processes since it can be highlighted at times of crisis "...by political

actors and social and political institutions seeking to reproduce the group and order society by persuading members to deepen their belief in, and attachment to, group-specific narratives, symbols, boundaries, and fellow members." Hence Haddad (2020, p.126) defines sectarian identity as individuals' affiliation, regardless of it being voluntary or active, to a collective characterized by sectarian (in the sense of major, institutionalized, intra-religious) divisions. The sectarian identity of migrants, the fact that most of the refugees are Sunni-Muslims just as most of the people of Turkey are, was utilized by the Turkish state at a time when AKP's 'ensar' discourse was still finding resonance. In fact, there were cultural similarities between Turkish people and Syrians thanks to the shared history; for instance, some groups spoke the same language or dialect, their cuisine was similar, and family dynamics were resembling, i.e., gender stereotypes were almost identical in both communities. However, such commonalities and focusing on the overlapping identities were not enough to prevent the rising anti-immigrant discourse in the county as the refugees' stay was prolonged and the war continued in Syria.

Neither the people of Turkey seem to be in agreement to live by the requirements of liberal-democratic values, which necessitates public remembrance of past crimes and respecting diversity in a polity, as Bauböck (2002) suggested, nor the overlapping identities were relevant enough to draw people's attention to a pluralistic future together. The people of Turkey were already struggling with an economic recession, high inflation, and a rising unemployment rate. Refugees were the easiest target to put the blame on since their legal status, asylum seekers under temporary protection, was providing limited protection of their rights and liberties in Turkey, and it only does so if the refugee in question is documented. The Turkish government's welcoming of millions

of people without a proper migration management policy and its unwillingness to provide long-term, practical solutions for the ongoing economic recession should have infuriated the host community. However, under the AKP's competitive-authoritarian regime, it is tricky to criticize government policies, and the party still strongly influences its voter base. Susan Okin's (1998) emphasis on private implementation of such liberal democratic principles to achieve an empowering incorporation process for refugee women became even more relevant considering the high number of cases regarding forced marriage, polygamy, early marriage, sexual harassment, domestic violence which ends up in nongovernmental organizations' hands to deal with as our field research shows.

Melinda McPherson's (2010) study concerning refugee settlement practices in Australia shows that the integrationist discourse is a normalizing one that regards refugees as problematic subjects whose potential and agency are neglected in the policy-making processes. By framing refugees and migrants as problems, the host community evades the responsibility of listening to their needs and providing for them after acknowledging the potential of these people that can be realized once they have the opportunity to achieve self-knowledge, informed self-direction, and self-care. Nation-states usually define members of the host community as the right subjects, while refugees allegedly represent deficiency and non-conforming outsiders. It enables states to blame rapid demographic change following a mass migratory movement, especially if the state in question has already been associated with democratic backsliding or economic recession. Rapid demographic change can indeed create turbulence in the receiving society's socioeconomic, cultural, and political balance; however, it cannot be held accountable for damage resulting from the authoritarian tendencies of the

government itself and its unwillingness to provide long-term solutions for issues like high inflation and unemployment rate or poor migration management. Not only that, but nongovernmental organizations may also assume such a position and preclude the possibility of reaching out to the refugees and making their voices heard publicly through NGOs. This understanding of integration has to be problematized before we move on to the discussion of successful integration. Nation-states and host communities have to recognize these people as prospective citizens who have the capacity to be invested so that we can be aiming at a peaceful integration.

Lastly, in their comparative study on diverse processes of social cohesion in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan as the three countries hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, Ozcurumez and Hoxha (2020) propose three criteria to make use of while determining context-dependent indicators of social cohesion. Using such criteria, they conclude that the types of social cohesion practices in these countries can be classified as peacebuilding, community engagement, and resilience-building activities (Ozcurumez & Hoxha, 2020, p.9). In their analysis, the authors argue that it is crucial to look beyond what response might have been provided via legal and policy frameworks and to emphasize the reflexes developed at the local level so that we can recognize different manifestations of social cohesion that are bound to change contextually. Second, it requires us to highlight the social aspect of cohesion instead of the policy level since it unfolds rapidly and provides the opportunity to evaluate and compare the quality of social interactions under varying conditions. Lastly, they underline that the lack of attention to identifying causal mechanisms of social cohesion creates a massive gap in the social cohesion agenda. Their study concludes that it is not sufficient to

explain causalities just by looking at constituting elements in social cohesion processes in refugee-hosting countries.

## 2.3 Conceptualizing empowerment of refugee women

For the purposes of this research, it is necessary to first define what we mean by empowerment and then accordingly operationalize the feminist initiative that is to be taken by NGOs in refugee empowerment and social cohesion with the common aim of political change. The United Nations World Food Program Gender Glossary defines empowerment as "....a process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their environment." [4]Such empowerment can only be achieved after the elimination of disempowering factors that systematically ignore certain needs and priorities of people and hinder individuals' economic, political, and social improvement. Taking one step further, the same UN Guide provides five dimensions for women's empowerment: access, conscientization, mobilization, control, and gender equality mainstreaming.

According to the UNHCR Guide, access refers to equal and sustained availability of goods and services to refugee women so that they would be less affected by the disadvantages stemming from the traditional distribution of resources that systematically excludes or neglects women's needs and priorities. Such empowerment might include

[4] A Practical Guide to Empowerment: UNHCR Good Practices on Gender Equality Mainstreaming Cover Photo: UNHCR, L. Taylor and W. Stone
https://www.unhcr.org/protection/women/3bbc24532/practical-guide-empowerment.html

the widespread provision of basic humanitarian aid such as access to proper nutrition, hygiene products, shelters, clothing and healthcare, and educational services, employment opportunities with humane working conditions. Moreover, the second step in the empowerment agenda, conscientization, might be explained as individuals, especially women, comprehending that gender roles and expectations are social constructs instead of being an undeniable result of the natural order. Not only for women but also for men, it is crucial to decipher the complex web of power relations at play in the creation of gender roles so that they can be altered on both individual and collective levels. Mobilization requires women to step out of their homes where they might have felt oppressed and traumatized due to sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination in the domestic sphere. Taking that first step out is not easy for a refugee woman who feels alienated and excluded from the public sphere. So, any empowerment endeavor should consider this prison-like experience of everyday life and create safe spaces for refugee women to come together, share their experiences, exchange information and goods so that they would once again feel like equal contributors to society, even when it is a small group of people. As efforts are put into empowering refugee women, equal opportunities are provided to them; it is likely to create a sense of control over their lives for refugee women. Once women regain control of their finances, communication, and social network in a newly established setting, it inevitably creates a sense of empowerment to achieve more.

Further achievements might include helping those still in need of assistance in eliminating disempowering factors in their lives by referring to their own experience and setting themselves as living examples of empowerment. The UNHCR finally aims to achieve gender-equality mainstreaming in refugee communities, consciousness-raising

in groups that are not only negatively affected by the direct and indirect consequences of embedded gender inequality but also in those groups who have systematically benefited from it. Such gender equality mainstreaming in women, men, LGBTI, and children would ultimately create a more harmonious environment for everyone included and remove some burden over refugee women's shoulders in the integration process.

E. Summerson Carr's (2003) conceptualization of empowerment theory from a feminist perspective also emphasizes that empowerment is inherently a process rather than an outcome. Such a process does not necessarily follow a linear trend as developmental theorists would like to assume but may have a cyclical nature. Carr uses feminist literature on positionality, interpretation, identity building, and mobilization for change to examine the dynamic interplay between conscientization and social change (Alcoff, 1988). Positionality requires us to develop an understanding of multiple political disadvantages experienced by refugee women resulting from various mechanisms of oppression and deprivation.

The positionality of refugee women in Turkey is intertwined with powerlessness in socioeconomic and psychological terms that mainly signals the absence of external support mechanisms to boost individual or group self-esteem to realize their potential in a new setting. Such powerlessness manifests itself not only because of their non-citizenship status but also because of institutional and structural sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression and easily results in the alienation of one's self. On the other hand, a cathartic life event like forced migration might also trigger refugees' interest in social and political settings that deprive them of their socioeconomic wellbeing in the host community despite their effort to blend in peaceful and participatory manners. Although such a perspective could be assumed after a certain

political consciousness and conscientization are achieved, without well-organized consciousness-raising programs and venues to increase the likelihood of everyday peaceful encounters of migrant communities and host communities, it is futile to expect such achievement. As Carr argues, conscientization is inherently an analytical process that might require a better understanding of the context migrants find themselves within and hardly have access to the necessary tools and know-how.

Defining their identity and position and then interpreting it is neither easy nor an individual process, but an interpersonal and dynamic one that might actually create the conditions for social mobilization and hence the political change. Such mobilization attempts, even when planned in collaboration with local actors such as NGOs working in the field, might hit brick walls at times. Even failed attempts to achieve empowerment of refugees and bring about social cohesion provide us the unique knowledge of what is working and what is not in the Turkish context. It is crucial to highlight the importance of collective dialogue and social action, whether it is achieved in small or large demographics. Although achieving Syrian refugee women's empowerment in socioeconomic or psychological terms requires long-term and intensive social work, it is vital to emphasize small-group works that might seem insignificant in the first place, especially for people who do not know the dynamics of feminist mobilization. A Turkish language lesson, a guitar course, a talk on combating sexual and gender-based violence in domestic settings, and legal advisory provided to a small group of refugee women produce a domino effect in their lives; it not only helps them overcome structural challenges on their way to empowerment but also inspires other refugee women to become a part of this political change.

## 2.4 NGOs becoming the linking social capital for Syrian refugees

Throughout this thesis, we will address Putnam's social capital theory while explaining how refugees in Turkey achieve social cohesion with the intermediacy of NGOs. Borrowing Putnam's theory of social capital as connections among individuals that become available through relationships established in social networks that facilitate social trust, reciprocity, and cooperation provides us the necessary perspective to understand NGOs' involvement in refugee resilience and empowerment in Turkey (Putnam, 2000). The study frames the ultimate social cohesion as the lowest possible tension, violence, or conflict among social groups that manage to tolerate difference and harmoniously coexist with one another while sharing a sense of togetherness. There are different mechanisms in the way of achieving social cohesion among these groups of various backgrounds, namely bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

According to Putnam's theory, bonding social capital develops within a particular group of people with relatively similar characteristics and interests. It implies the least possible difference among members and hence usually the easiest to achieve. For example, members of the same extended family or followers of the same religious/sectarian or political affiliation within the refugee community might find it easier to achieve a sense of belonging, reciprocity, and cooperation. Moreover, the need for communicating and cooperating with another group almost inevitably emerges either during the flight from the conflict or resettlement processes, especially if the groups have access to exclusive resources. Bridging social capital comes into play at this point, aiming to increase opportunities for finding common ground among these not-so-similar communities due to ethnic, religious, gender, or socioeconomic characteristics.

Although how crucial investing in these two kinds of social capital is self-evident, it does not mean much if one lacks the resources and know-how to access the authorities and those in positions of power, let alone have their trust or respect. Linking social capital, as the name suggests, refers to a group's trustable relation to the institutions or individuals who do not have similar characteristics to group members but hold positions of power that might as well influence the group's destiny. The NGOs in Turkey assumed this position, creating and reinforcing links that would eventually enable refugees to access the authorities and feel empowered as they try to build a life here in Turkey. This empowerment requires upward social mobility, positive momentum in their livelihood through employment, education, access to health services, and being free from the threat of displacement or violence of any form. None of these requirements could be met without a systematic approach to the issue directly formulated by the state as the overarching authority. Even though the Turkish government had initially reserved a significant amount of money and resources for Syrian refugees by employing the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and the Red Crescent (Kızılay), the rapid increase in the number of Syrians crossing the Southeastern border and settling in all over Turkey made it impossible for public institutions to keep track of the movement let alone budgeting the government spending on migration management. So, the government's failure to provide for the needs of millions of documented or irregular migrants at once as the refugees started to settle in not only camps but also in urban areas in precarious conditions has led civil society to expand its activities in the migration field.

NGOs in Turkey prioritized pushing the political actors and institutions to realize that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey will only increase from then on, so a long-

term policy change is required. During that critical period, NGOs working on humanitarian aid projects in Turkey have prominently assumed the position of intermediary between the government officials and migrants by providing means and services that are almost inaccessible for refugees because of the refugees' inadequate knowledge of the host country's official language, bureaucratic processes, or the general institutional structure. Their complementary role in service provision to Syrian refugees in Turkey was accompanied by constant advocacy for refugee rights and lobbying to transform the Turkish state's migration management approach from crisis response to welfare support with the ultimate goal of improving social cohesion. These NGOs have almost assumed the position of subcontractors of the state in migration governance by filling the huge gap in service provision, logistic support for urban refugees, reinforcing basic humanitarian aid, and providing legal advisory. So, our primary goal is to evaluate how successful the NGOs incorporated in our research, sharing the principle of gender equality with the objective of ensuring Syrian refugee women's empowerment, were in their effort to play the intermediaries between the Syrian refugee women and the Turkish state. It is also crucial to locate in what areas and issues they lack the capacity and require intervention from the Turkish state and the INGOs actively involved in the agenda of empowering Syrian Refugee women living in Turkey and providing active financial and organizational support for refugee resilience in general.

We will be analyzing our field data following Putnam's social capital theory to determine NGOs' success and limits in providing empowerment channels for Syrian refugee women in Turkey, where the Turkish state regards NGOs as if they were subcontractors to the migration and integration crisis management. Under scrutiny, we might be able to see how crucial it is to understand NGOs become irreplaceable for

Syrian refugee women to access the means to achieve humane living conditions in the host community that systematically puts multiple obstacles and disadvantages in their way to empowerment. While doing so, as Putnam emphasized, it is crucial to question the positions NGOs take with respect to refugee women since reemphasizing their vulnerabilities or building a narrative of victimhood might not be the best way to eliminate the overwhelming feeling of disempowerment they experience. It is vital to acknowledge and conceptualize those disempowering dynamics at play. However, the assumption is that seeing beyond the 'survivors of persecution,' recognizing Syrian refugee women as individuals with similar experiences and needs to the women of Turkey, carrying a vast potential to integrate into the society, to become a part of the women's human rights movement might create a better framework of analysis. As emphasized in the 1990 UNHCR guidelines reinscribing the victim status of refugee women, underlining their disempowered state due to multiple power dynamics that stripped them of their self-esteem and value, might justify NGOs' devotion of resources. However, it recreates a hierarchy and impedes a true sense of solidarity and long-term social cohesion.[5]

## 2.5 Methodology

Before starting the fieldwork, we applied to The Ethics Committee for Master's and Ph.D. Theses in Social Sciences and Humanities at Boğaziçi University with our research proposal and have gotten their approval. This qualitative research is based on

[5] UNHCR. (1990). GUIDELINES ON INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION: Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. https://www.unhcr.org/3d58ddef4.pdf

several semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with NGO representatives after getting their explicit consent to participate in the study. Each interview took around an hour, and during the in-person meetings with interviewees, which took place in their respective offices, we were able to attain some field observation. We were particularly clear from the very beginning that our interviews would stay anonymous, and they could retract from the study anytime if they did not feel comfortable with being involved in it. We could not conduct direct interviews with Syrian refugee women due to restricting measures taken by the Ministry of Interior Affairs (Dağlıoğlu, 2015). Despite that, it was possible to observe the interactions of refugee women during NGO activities, although for short periods of time, for example, during their tea meetings, while they were cooking together in the NGO kitchen, helping each other out with the recipes, or dropping off their children to daycare. This restriction eliminated the possibility of getting help from a translator, preferably a refugee woman who could understand and speak both Turkish and Arabic, so that we could communicate with refugees easily. Because even if we had the permission for our study to include Syrian women as direct respondents, the possibility of language becoming a barrier would still be there even if both parties speak a common second language like English, or in the case of us getting help from a professional translator who is also a total stranger to the refugee community. People might get overwhelmed while speaking in a language other than their native language, or things might get lost in translation due to having a poor command of the common language by either or both sides. All in all, we were able to prepare and conduct all the interviews in Turkish.

Regarding the sample selection, our prioritization criterion was NGOs' frequent or long-term involvement in the projects explicitly targeting the empowerment of Syrian

refugee women. Another important factor was their recognition by national or international actors; this is also related to our first concern. If an NGO has a certain level of institutional capacity, either in terms of its structural development or human capital, it starts to be recognized by fellow national NGOs, and then the INGOs or IGOs during the latter's search for finding the perfect candidate to grant humanitarian aid funds. Once known in this network of international and national nongovernmental organizations, they can be notified of new projects or coordination announcements. Availability of NGOs via online meeting channels or having an actual office space in İstanbul was also critical because this research has no financial sponsor, and the researcher reimbursed all expenses. Keeping the 'do-no-harm' principle in mind, in order not to trigger a secondary trauma in those closely involved with humanitarian aid and crisis management in refugee settlements, we tried to choose our words carefully. We let them navigate challenging topics such as sexual and gender-based violence, people losing their lives due to precarious living or working conditions, and life-threatening migration routes by providing as much space and time as needed to decide on their responses. Participation in our study was voluntary, and no material benefit has been promised or given to NGOs or our interviewees. We tried to give them a space to directly share their impression of academia by asking them whether they find academic studies to be of importance in the refugee resilience efforts, hoping that facilitating such communication and discussion would help both parties in allying with each other for similar purposes but on equal and more conscious terms.

In this study, we combined our field observations, interview transcriptions, and existing literature in an order to theoretically analyze them with the ultimate goal of

reaching a scientifically significant conclusion that eventually has an impact on future decision-making processes involving actors in refugee resilience agenda.

# CHAPTER 3

# THE ROLE OF TURKEY AS THE ULTIMATE HOST COUNTRY

## 3.1 Initial dynamics of the Syrian Civil War and its spillover effects

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War had various spillover effects for Turkey and other neighboring states, escalating after the diplomatic relations between the Turkish government and Bashar al-Assad came to a dead end. Turkey decided to use military forces against the Assad regime through Free Syrian Army in the summer of 2011. In her article, borrowing from the conflict clustering literature, Parlar Dal (2016) argues that bad neighborhood(s), interaction opportunities and ties, and conflict characteristics were the factors that contributed to the unintentional spillover effects of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey. The Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Turkey share a long border, about 900 kilometers. The conflicts right next to this border, especially the ones between YPG and Assad's regime forces or the ISIS, and to a lesser extent, the ones between the ISIS and the regime forces, made it even more difficult for Turkey to control spillovers.

It is important to emphasize the fact that Turkey's insistence on fighting the Assad regime and ISIS together has left the Turkish government in a complicated position in both national and international contexts. The international reaction was that the Turkish state should have followed the same strategy as its NATO allies in strictly controlling the entrance of foreign fighters of ISIS to Syria via the Turkish border. The Turkish government was also heavily criticized at the national level by the main opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP). Despite its support of the cross-

border operation, the critique was around the Turkish government's unwillingness to come up with proper legislation concerning border control and refugee resettlement. The main opposition was simultaneously fueling a rather anti-immigrant discourse.

### 3.2 Political implications of the mass migratory movement of Syrians

In older research conducted by Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006), dynamics of conflict in host countries that coincides with refugee influx were explained. Although this particular study covering the onset of civil wars between 1951 and 2001 was published way before the Arab Spring and hence the Syrian Civil War, it provides us with valuable insights into the very discourse and grievances regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey. A comprehensive quantitative analysis of transnational refugee-related conflicts proves that even if the majority of the refugee population keeps out of armed conflicts or does not participate in civil or political crimes, restrains from perpetuating violence of any kind; they may still be perceived as a threat by the host community. These grievances may be due to several political and or socioeconomic reasons. Possible ethnic ties between the refugee population and the host community may create an affirmative or negative impact on the public perception of refugees. Syrian refugees were predominantly Muslim Arabs, so they are not particularly associated with ethnic animosity. Their Muslim identity shaped the Turkish government's 'ensar' discourse, referring to the people of Medina who helped immigrated Muslims from Mecca back in the times of Prophet Muhammad.

On the other hand, Syrian Kurds might have been seen as a threat by the host community considering the Turkish State's long-lasting armed conflict with the separatist Kurds on the country's Southeastern border, usually associated with PKK; this

ethnic tie did not create a substantial effect on the conflict as the authors suggested. However, when the number of refugees is high, especially in proportion to the host community, and their settlement is dense around already politically and economically contentious areas, it is expected to create more tension. As this very study suggests, given that the number of Syrian refugees settled in Turkey is the largest in the world, it was expected to trigger maybe not a civil war but some kind of resistance in the host community.

Regarding the Turkish case, the refugee community experienced a relatively peaceful encounter, keeping in mind that there were nativist sentiments, security concerns, and blaming of refugees for the economic deterioration in the country either by politicians or the public. Although what Turkey has developed can hardly be called a ‘generous asylum and refugee program,' the government's cooperation with the UNHCR and the EU and initiatives taken by NGOs in the field made the social transition process smoother. Having a significantly lower refugee population living in camps might have prevented ghettoization, and possible organization of armed groups in camps by the radicals. Most of the Syrian refugees who settled in urban areas got into the labor market and applied for urban housing, public services, especially for educational and healthcare purposes. Such a large number of refugees indeed raises the stakes for unemployment and scarcity of housing, land, goods, and services. We know for a fact that employers do prefer refugees over native citizens as blue-collar workers since they are often irregular migrants without an official refugee status or work authorization whose fundamental rights cannot automatically be regulated or protected by the law, leaving them vulnerable to the workplace or socioeconomic abuse of any kind. Refugees as urban dwellers are not deemed worthy of proper living environments and flats and are forced

to settle in the outskirts of the city, in shanty towns where city infrastructure is worse off, and access to public transport or any other public service is already difficult.

### 3.3 Turkey-EU refugee deal

The overall response of the European states, specifically the European Union, was a disappointment from the perspective of international human rights law and the domestic politics of Turkey. The EU feared the rapid and mass influx of refugees and immediately played the security card against it, even though it meant turning a blind eye to the increasingly authoritarian nature of Turkish politics and irredentist practices of the Turkish government in Syria. By signing the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, the EU de-facto appointed Turkey as a buffer zone to prevent Syrians' mobility towards Europe via land or sea route. While funding the humanitarian aid projects targeting refugees in Turkey, they, in a way, outsourced the migration crisis management. In addition to leaving fundamental human rights principles only in discourse while in practice disregarding them altogether, the European Union even failed to keep their promises concerning revitalizing Turkey's EU accession process or modernization of the EU-Turkey customs Union in return for keeping the migrant within the Turkish borders or deporting them to anywhere outside of the European Union member states, including Syria where the civil war escalates each day.

In recent research conducted by Karadağ and Bahar (2022), the authors examine the increasing border control between Turkey and Greece since the 2016 statement and how both states' national and international politics have been affecting refugee mobility and vice versa. Greece being the gate for Syrian asylum seekers fleeing the war and searching for better living conditions in Europe than in Turkey, the EU invested in

mechanisms to control and monitor this mobility and, if possible, to prevent it. Combined with the political turbulence in Turkey, which was triggered by a coup attempt in the summer of 2016, institutional structures governing shoreline surveillance were altered entirely. The Turkish Coast Guard Command has been described as a general armed law enforcement force controlled by the Ministry of Interior, which at the same time governs the Directory General of the Migration Management (DGMM). Simultaneously, the EU funded a wide range of humanitarian aid projects in Turkey to keep refugees' livelihoods at least at a bearable standard, knowing well that it is beyond the Turkish state's financial or structural capacity. For this purpose, the EU-Turkey statement provided the conditions for establishing the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, an institutional structure to manage to fund education, healthcare, socioeconomic support, and migration management.

These efforts brought along some preferable results for the EU. There was a sharp decrease in border crossings. This development encouraged the EU to keep things as it is without confronting the Turkish government on the presidential decrees overriding a series of fundamental rights and liberties following the coup attempt. Over the two years between 2016 and 2018, civil society organizations and actors played significant roles in refugee resilience and empowerment in Turkey, thanks to European Union and the United Nations agencies' funds and cooperation. However, starting in 2018, the Turkish government changed gears and moved towards a more restrictive and centralized migration management formula. The DGMM became the most critical actor, so much so that the UNHCR's involvement in asylum and refugee determination procedures had come to an end. Syrian refugees' new registration for settling in big cities, which were preferred overwhelmingly by refugees due to the wide range of

employment and settlement opportunities, became out of the question. The Turkish government aggressively increased the criteria for safe and sustainable access to public services such as healthcare or education while putting restrictions on NGOs that could typically have the capacity to compensate for such services. While the Turkish state authorities had limited Syrian refugees' mobility within the country, there was also increased surveillance over border crossings on land or at sea and, at times, violent measures taken by FRONTEX and the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG). As if these were not enough for refugees to feel helpless, the Turkish Government actually carried out the border opening plan threatening the EU by opening the Pazarkule border gate, between Turkey and Greece, in 2020. Migrants rushed into the gate with the hopes of eventually resettling in one of the European member states. Although some succeeded, the overwhelming majority had suffered violent and inhumane treatment by the Greek military and FRONTEX. Following that, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic made the human rights abuses on the Turkish-Greek border and the Aegean islands reach an unprecedented scale. It became impossible to track people's movement, let alone their well-being, in the face of a global pandemic. Covid-19 precautions require people to have a hygienic environment, a safe and enclosed shelter, running water, proper nutrition, and access to health services in case of an emergency.

# CHAPTER 4

# INTERSECTIONALITY AND REFUGEE WOMEN

Throughout this chapter, we will be focusing on the importance of elaborating what axes of differentiation might intersect in a historically specific context and how this intersection affects the lives of Syrian Refugee Women living in Turkey, taking their multiple identities into consideration at once. Such inquiry would provide insight into the established patriarchal, racist, and classist norms and regulations within the Turkish context and the shared disadvantages of 'othering' in economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective, and experiential areas of life among the refugee women and the women from Turkey. Defining the limits of Syrian refugee women's political, socioeconomic, and psychological empowerment could provide the necessary roadmap for drafting a comprehensive, inclusive, and intersectional agenda of the feminist movement in Turkey that eventually would benefit every woman equally and without discrimination.

This intersectional account of the multiple discrimination experienced by refugee women is inspired by another brilliant study by Deacon and Sullivan (2009), which revealed that response mechanisms to displaced people, especially due to armed conflict, are male-centered and neglect differentiated resettlement experience and needs for basic resources of refugee women. The authors conducted their research by interviewing 31 refugee women resettled in the US. Although the demographic data from the refugee population was different from ours, and it was before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the experience of refugee women does not change much in terms of sexual and

gender-based abuse and discrimination. Furthermore, in an early work by Pittaway and Bartolomei (2001), the gender-blindness of the 1951 Refugee Convention and international law is blamed since they have fallen short of responding to the multiple discrimination refugee women experience during and after resettlement following armed conflict. The necessary recognition of refugee women's specific experiences and needs did not come until the most important international actor, UNHCR, added the issue as a separate item to its agenda in 1985. The absence of legally binding structures left women refugees in even more danger as the authors define the intersectionality of race and gender.

The intersectionality of race and gender has to be understood well, especially if there are nationalist and fundamentalist framings of women as 'bearers of culture and values' since it makes any assault targeting women political acts of aggression. Refugee women, under gender-based and xenophobic violence, are reluctant to share their traumatic experiences with immigration officers, not to be labeled as prostitutes, which would cause further harassment of their bodily integrity and deprivation of their refugee rights. This silencing of the issue is not an autonomous decision made by these women. The patriarchal and xenophobic structures leave them alone with their trauma. Pittaway and Bartolomei's insistence is on the necessity of recognizing the sexual abuse of refugee women as a war crime and persecution. Not only that, but this recognition also has to be grounded in international law because domestic legal structures and social policies may not be sufficient at times. It is also essential for the authors to approach refugees as people with equal rights instead of seeing them as subjects of pity and charity before taking the aforementioned legal and political steps. The primary support mechanisms that refugees need cannot wait for some developed countries to feel

empathy on the basis of racial similarity with the victims of systematic violence, as took place in the case of the Yugoslavian Civil War. They emphasize how racism shapes the experience of refugees not only by causing the very crisis but also by deploying xenophobic mechanisms during the resettlement processes. The framing of these discriminatory support channels is explained by cultural compatibility, which is usually about the economic dependence between the countries of concern. The issue is so sensitive to be left to the individual actors and states. It has to be dealt with at the international level and within a legal framework. It is on, especially the UN agencies and governments, to recognize this as a human rights issue, disregarding the official status of refugees in their country of asylum. This approach is crucial for the case of Syrians in Turkey since they are not officially recognized as refugees and are only asylum seekers under temporary protection. UN agencies took their stand accordingly and played a crucial role in their resettlement process.

Patricia Hill Collins articulates the issue of intersectionality by explaining the similarities among the issues concerning gender, race, class, and nation by explicitly focusing on the general US conceptualizations of each by reminding us that these are not distinct areas of interest but are issues coming out of a more extensive social construction process (1998). The starting point has to be the traditional definition of the ideal family in the US. It proposes certain gender, race, and nation ascriptions, which affect the overall social organization. The family is seen as a symbol of unity, solidarity, and belonging; all of these have implications not only for the family but also for racial groups and the nation as a whole. In family, we encounter a naturalization process of hierarchy through relations of gender and age that comes with different roles and responsibilities. Unfortunately, that naturalization is also applied to the practices of

violence and defines the necessary conditions for resorting to violence. It defines the home as a sanctuary for only its members and privatizes the place for them while assigning women's roles to the in-home activities, unlike men, who are the public faces of the family. It is similar to racially segregated neighborhoods and nation-states' obsession with territorial integrity. The ideal family assumes blood ties as something sacred and naturalizes the bonds among members of kinship networks. This membership, however, comes with both privileges and responsibilities. Hierarchical structures define these privileges and responsibilities, and it is not a surprise that women are the ones who enjoy fewer privileges while bearing much burden than their husbands or children. Also, racial discrimination in education, employment, and housing led the White working-class people to consider social locations as private property to be disposed of as inherited wealth. Before she concludes, she mentions the eugenic thinking that highly influenced American society's social and political organization and worked against the interests of already disadvantaged groups in society, especially people of color, immigrants, and women. So, deciphering not only the so-called family values which shape the American Dream's 'ideal family' but also its correlations with racial disputes and the concept of a nation or national unity is a crucial step to be taken in order to deal with intersectionality.

By moving one step further, Jane Freedman (2009) analyzes the implementation of policies made at the international level. Although there have been considerable changes in the international law and agendas of important international actors in terms of recognition of gender-specific experiences of refugee women, we still need to appropriate these global norms and principles within each context in order for them to be effective. These international norms and policies can only address specific issues of

female refugees when the power relations within each context are fully understood in terms of gender. Domestic norms, discourses, and values are important factors during the implementation of instruments developed by global actors and can only be understood with the help of national actors who are familiar with the context. She warns us against the danger of either acquiring an already discriminatory normative framework, built according to the experiences and perspective of Western women, of global agents or prioritizing pre-existing norms and values within the country of concern. We need to find a way to emancipate female refugees from labels that reflect them as vulnerable victims who lack agency, their own voices, preferences, or demands. Western conceptualization of women has always been a subordinating one, undermining the agency and power of women. Instrumentalizing such frames might seem beneficial in terms of mobilizing support for the protection of women from multiple discrimination. However, those frames are essentialist and enforce traditional gender roles while endangering women refugees' chance to be included in policy-making processes concerning their situation. At this point, NGOs and associations need to abstain from using such essentialist frames in their efforts to protect and support refugee women. They need to approach them as individuals who flee but also have their own voices, expectations, and perspectives. Her recent study on the current refugee 'crisis' in Europe following the Syrian Civil War emphasizes the sexual and gender-based violence experienced by refugee women (2016). She calls for an urgent change in the policies of the EU in general and its member states in order to show how genuine they are in protecting refugee women from multiple sources of oppression. She highlights the necessity of providing legal and safe routes for refugees while entering Europe since, in the absence of such mechanisms and channels, refugee women try to find their own

dangerous, ways to do so. The official discourse around refugees prevents them from being welcomed by the host community. Their reception becomes another life-threatening factor, furthering the risk of persecution. Although discrimination and gender inequality does not guarantee a ground for claiming asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the principles of UNHCR and the EU's Qualification Directive recognize gender-based persecution as a legitimate ground for claiming refugee status in the country of asylum (Freedman, 2016, p. 24). The realization of refugee women's human rights depends on the authorities' will to take responsibility for providing for their needs and supporting them during the integration processes.

After relating problems and dangers facing refugee women during their integration process in general, it would be necessary to focus more on the case of Syrian refugee women in Turkey. A comprehensive rapport that analyzes the Syrian Refugee Crisis from a gendered perspective through qualitative research published by the Center for Transnational Development and Collaboration (2017) provided the perspective needed to compare the earlier phase of the management of the mass migration of Syrians with the current situation. Since there was little emphasis on the situation of Syrian refugee women and LGBTI individuals in the literature then, their findings have a particular significance. The rapport primarily reminds us that most of the refugee population lives outside camps as urban refugees and lacks necessary humanitarian aid. Poverty and precarious living conditions put women refugees in an even more vulnerable position. Especially single women are being sexually harassed by their homeowners in case the woman cannot pay the rent. They cannot easily go out and work because male family members, if there are any in the house, prevent women from leaving home by saying it is to protect the family's honor. Women are housebound,

although it is almost impossible to call these places houses. They are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence in the house. As if it is not enough, a feeling of isolation gets deeper due to the lack of social cohesion and integration. Even if they managed to leave the house, they feel insecure because of the eyeing and verbal harassment by the locals. They are seen as rivals in the job market, sex workers on the pavement, and threats to national security. As the article describes, their legal status is in limbo, increasing their feelings of unsettlement and insecurity. They do not have access to legal, social, educational, or health services available for an official refugee. It leaves women defenseless against their exploiters; they have nothing to use as evidence since their work or residence is already unregistered. Another critical issue is the language barrier which is a huge impediment to education and employment. There is a lack of opportunities; these refugees cannot continue to do their previous occupations because of the same barriers. They can only be employed if they agree to be paid too little and to work for long hours, the harshest job requirements that most locals would refuse to accept. The same vulnerability makes Syrian women subject to another kind of exploitation: Unregistered marriages. They are being forced into these marriages mostly by their own families for money, and child marriage is not rare for the same reason. Especially in Southeastern Anatolia, Syrian refugee women are forced to marry ISIS militants and manipulated by these radicals. As the Turkish state and international actors continue to ignore their fragile situation and fail to promote necessary conditions for social cohesion and integration, these women's lives are on a knife edge.

To understand the nature of SGBV, Özçürümez et al. (2020) attempt to reveal the ways in which vulnerabilities, insecurities, and victimization of refugees intersect. The authors start by challenging the mainstream take on SGBV that restricts gendered harm

within the frame of two stereotypical parties' positions, a female victim versus a masculine threat. It is the normalized distribution of gender roles and power within traditional-patriarchal dynamics of war and forced migration. The same patriarchal structures affect not only women but also men, children, LGBTI people, the disabled, and the elderly in a pretty similar fashion. While it is predictable for the states and military organizations to reinforce patriarchal power dynamics and discourse, witnessing the usage of similar framings of women, the portrayal of them as vulnerable victims by the NGOs advocating for refugee women's rights might sound problematic. Özçürümez et al. describe this as a strategic choice in order to easily justify the effort and resources devoted to the refugee women's resilience agenda by non-profit organizations and state agencies. However, we should be able to further achieve refugee women's resilience and empowerment without reducing their capabilities and power. We need a better conceptualization of the effects of war on women and women's relation to the war. Militarized masculinity does indeed take women in conflict zones as the ultimate victims of rape and torture, patriarchal dimension of militarism presumes abusing women in conflict zones' sexual, psychological, and bodily autonomy is an inevitable part of the 'conquest.' Such essentialist and structuralist approaches that immediately put women in the vulnerable victim position argue that women of particular identities, whether ethnic, religious, or political, can be specifically targeted for their very identities. It is consistent with the reality in conflict zones. However, militarized masculinity does not only target women, but it targets everyone. Since 'femininity' calls for inferiority in the social hierarchy to a patriarchal mindset, the perpetrator feminizes and humiliates their enemy once more by resorting to SGBV, raping, impregnating, or torturing them. SGBV can take place in various forms, such as intimate partner violence, early or forced marriage,

survival sex, and the threat and fear of violence and harassment from the local community (Charles and Denman, 2013). Sharing a house with multiple families or members of the extended family leaves especially young girls vulnerable to sexual abuse. In order to decrease the possibility of such incidents, families usually prefer to marry their young ones early on. In one of our interviews, it became evident that, if necessary, actions had been taken on time to prevent such marriages, there could be actual results:

> As the possibility of young women and girls to be abused by the people living in the house or the neighborhood increases, families take 'precautions' like locking them in their rooms or houses. Early marriages, under-age marriages are so high proportionately. However, if we get a chance to speak to their mothers for even an hour, they might get convinced and say 'oh, okay then' and they just give up on the idea (of early marrying their daughters). On the one hand, it is nice to see we are able to trigger such a response, on the other hand the idea of failing to have such a short convincing speech leading to create terrible living conditions for people is so disturbing (Interview 1, see Appendix C, 1).

Women, children, LGBTI persons, the disabled, and the elderly are indeed the first targets of such violence as they become more vulnerable, having limited resources to access proper housing, food and health supplies, childcare, elderly care, educational and healthcare facilities, legal aid, employment opportunities and so on. The conflict zone, the route they had to take, and the place of resettlement are all dangerous for these people. These people may be traveling with their abusive partners, parents, or other family members, lacking the opportunity to break free even if they wanted to since the route they take often is way more dangerous without community support. They become even more vulnerable during boat crossings, detention centers, and refugee reception centers as the officers there either perpetuate violence or do not intervene to prevent violent acts within the refugee community. Economic empowerment of refugee women might have solved most of these problems. However, even if they have survived SGBV,

it still is too difficult to apply for jobs when one has to rear and bear children, lead a household, and learn a completely different alphabet, language let alone overcoming the cultural and structural barriers against women's employment or equal pay, in either formal or informal economy. An example of such gender-based discrimination in employment and informal economy is explained by one of our respondents explicitly:

> The pregnancy possibility makes women less preferable to employers. It is not that they cannot find any job, they might be working in textile etc., but they might get sexually abused on the worksite. It may not even be the employer abusing them, but the socially embedded idea of women being more vulnerable and assailable creates a guardianship responsibility for the employer. Hence, employers do prefer men who can take care of themselves over women. Refugee women workers are also underpaid; it is a universal thing anyway. If such women have no husbands who are in a position to confront the employer concerning workplace abuse or unpaid work, they become even more vulnerable there, as if they are with no one to look after them. It is terrible (Interview 5, see Appendix C, 2).

Even if refugee women succeed in getting employed, female-led refugee households usually live on their family savings, borrowed money, or community support, which is not sustainable and, in the long run, makes them even more dependent on the same people they might have been harassed by sexually, economically, or psychologically. Considering that most of Turkey's refugee population is already employed in the informal economy, including refugee children in child labor, the issue becomes even more complicated if left in the hands of the neoliberal economy without institutional and structural intervention. Hourani et al. (2021) argue that a more dynamic conceptualization of gender relations is necessary for formulating solutions to SGBV cases. Instead of holding onto these essentialist and structuralist, fixed takes that reinforce the traditional gender roles and vulnerable victim discourse and further underestimate women's agency to defend themselves or to fight back in the processes of conflict and migration, we shall conceptualize gender as socially constructed. Only such

reading of the context would provide the necessary perspective that gives space and agency to the survivors of SGBV to make their voices heard and alter the power dynamics. Such analysis will make it easier to explain how these power relations change over space and time, what other motivations come into play and how they affect each other in our objective of eliminating institutional obstacles that prevent refugee women from actively participating in building their present and future as politically recognized agents of social cohesion. A sustainable refugee resilience and empowerment program requires having reflective and realistic footage of the field and listening to the refugee women in person by bringing together a group of social workers, human rights activists, and refugees themselves with the objective of leaving an actual impact on the policy-making processes.

# CHAPTER 5

# NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING IN THE FIELD OF REFUGEE EMPOWERMENT IN TURKEY

## 5.1 Background on the NGOs included in the study

For this research, we have conducted eight interviews with eight nongovernmental organizations operating in the refugee empowerment area with a special emphasis on women's issues and gendered aspects of international forced migration. Two of these NGOs were women's organizations that were founded way before the Syrian Refugee Crisis and had to create an agenda for Syrian refugee women following the mass influx of refugees in 2015. Two of these were refugee support organizations, one of which was also founded before the Syrian case but had to expand its operational and institutional capacity following the year 2015. Two health rights organizations added refugee health cases to their agenda after receiving an immense number of applications for consultation on area-specific issues by other NGOs that lack particular expertise or support mechanisms. The remaining two NGOs were humanitarian aid organizations founded with the objective of helping those in the most vulnerable positions in social, economic, and political terms. They had to reorganize their institutional structure and agenda like the rest of the civil society, while Turkey welcomed millions of refugees in less than ten years.

We tried to include as many nongovernmental organizations as possible with different foundational purposes so that it might be possible to track their pathways to realize and then emphasize the intersectionality of gender and migration on their agenda

following the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Although it was not intentional, seven of these NGOs were founded before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, so it became inevitable for us to track such a trend in their institutional history. None of the organizations were government-organized, i.e., a GONGO. In order to respect the ethical principles we have conducted the interviews, we will not disclose the organizations' or our interviewees' original names. Instead, for readers' ease, we will use letters in alphabetical order for each organization, noting that the letters do not imply any hierarchical order amongst the organizations' size, the sphere of influence, or importance to the research.

The first women's organization I worked with, NGO A, was founded after the 1999 İzmit Earthquake, a devastating event that fundamentally changed the trajectory of Turkey's civil society organizations and how they were perceived in the country. The earthquake's damage was enormous, and the Turkish state was poorly prepared for such a disaster in organizational or infrastructural terms. Even with the quick and massive flow of humanitarian aid from all over the world, with the support of the international community, it would be impossible to reach out to everyone affected without the involvement of the civilian people of Turkey. Although civil society's involvement was crucial in healing the wounds, it made it clear that the disaster management capacity of neither the Turkish state nor the existing civil society organizations was sufficient in the face of massive displacement of people and a huge need for basic livelihood support. The foundational inspiration of NGO A was witnessing the healing effect of women's solidarity and resilience in the humanitarian aid operations following the earthquake. Since then, they have worked as a women's rights organization with a special emphasis on gender-based violence and empowering women against multiple discrimination. However, they had to enlarge their focus after receiving numerous sexual and gender-

based violence case consultations from their neighboring NGO working in refugee resilience. Their location was crucial in receiving such cases considering the fact that it is challenging to navigate in İstanbul for a non-Turkish speaker, especially if they are undocumented and escaping violence from either a specific person or the locals. This NGO's İstanbul office was at a central location near the city's famous touristic sites and a large neighborhood densely populated with international migrants. Not only that, but the office was also right next to a refugee support organization. The two organizations shared a hall in the same building, so it was almost natural for them to share and consult cases with each other. As they continued to welcome Syrian refugee women and LGBTI people at their offices, it became inevitable to hire an Arabic translator and update the signs to provide information in Turkish, English, and Arabic. Their first impression of the Syrian refugee women reminded them of their own story. Seeing these women trying to build a life here in Turkey from scratch against all odds once again proved that war is a man-made disaster and it profoundly and fundamentally changes people's lives forever, especially those at higher risk of discrimination and violence and got ripped off of their identity, socio-economic and psychological wellbeing. The NGO A was an implementing partner of the organizations like UNHCR, UN Women, the EU, and the GIZ. Their fundamental goals were first combating violence against women and LGBTI+ in all forms, providing safe spaces for those who survived the violence of any kind, creating empowering mechanisms for their employment and hence socio-economic independence while fostering feminist solidarity among local and refugee women by doing consciousness-raising programs and advocacy work for women's rights.

The founding of the second women's rights organization in our research, NGO B, dates back to the early 1990s. It was a time when Turkish society was still under the

depoliticizing fog of the 1980 coup d'état, after which the civil society was crushed by the military junta and the succeeding governments, and important political figures were either banned from politics, in prison, or found asylum abroad. It was also a time women's movement in Turkey gathered momentum, especially after the 1987 'Women's March for Solidarity against Battering.' This march is pinned as a turning point for the women's movement in the country by many feminist scholars and activists, noting that it was the first permitted mass women's protest after the coup. It gave the courage and motivation to women to come together in more organized ways to claim women's human rights and to formulate structured, feminist mechanisms of policy intervention and recommendation.

The NGO B was one of those organizations with the objective of ensuring women's active and widespread participation in a more democratic, gender-equal, and peaceful polity by providing education on women's human rights and doing national and international advocacy work to empower women in Turkey to free themselves from any socio-economic, political, or gender-based discrimination and disadvantage. We felt the need to include this organization in this research due to their irreplaceable role in providing support to other NGOs working with Syrian refugee women but lack the capacity to empower them in a systematic, women's human rights-based agenda. Whenever we interviewed an organization without a specific emphasis on women's rights, we encountered the NGO B, their involvement via organizing educational programs targeting other NGOs and their workers, or consciousness-raising meetings on women's human rights with Syrian refugee women's groups directly. Although they cannot provide legal or psychological assistance to women in violence cases, they play an essential role in providing know-how in a foreign country where they lack the

accumulated knowledge of the legal, educational, and healthcare system as stateless people who are already having a hard time with the language barrier.

The NGO C, the first and biggest refugee support organization I had the chance to collaborate with for our research, is one of the oldest civil society organizations in the field, almost the pioneering one with more than 25 years of experience. At this point, it is important to remember that the 1990s were turbulent times for Turkish politics. The country was trying to find its place in a post-Cold War world by standing near to European intergovernmentalism. However, after the initial phase of the neoliberal integration of Turkey during the Özal era, the country experienced a downturn in economic development due to poor financial decisions taken by a series of short-lived coalition governments. Political Islamists were becoming more organized, while the secular Kemalists and the military were losing their grip on civilian politics. The political and ethnic conflicts with the Kurdish population in Southern Anatolia and the Alawite community had created a state of terror and polarized the public. Too many political figures were murdered, and the cases remained unidentified for years. Fleeing conflict and hoping to become more anonymous in the metropolis, Kurds and Alawites had to move from their hometowns, settling in big cities and causing an upward trend in domestic migration. On top of those, due to Turkey's geopolitical position, the collapse of the USSR, the Yugoslav Wars, and the Gulf War caused a rapid increase in irregular international migration movement in the country.

Being far from formulating and providing long-term, peaceful solutions to domestic conflicts stemming from political, socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic differences, the Turkish state and the public were now facing a mass movement of people fleeing war and seeking refuge. So, NGO C's foundation in the middle of this

mass mobilization was critical in providing support and solidarity mechanisms to those at risk. Such mechanisms initially included providing psycho-social support, guidance, and cooperation in order to empower migrants, domestic or international, to stay safe, to know and claim their rights even when civil society representatives are out of reach so that they would not become targets of violence or discrimination perpetuated the host community and the authorities. The organization was founded by ten people but experienced exponential growth over the years in line with the increasing migrant population, especially after the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Nowadays, the NGO C employs thousands of people at several offices throughout the country. They signed several protocols with the Turkish state agencies, especially the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and the Ministry of Health. Other important organizations that provide financial support or supervision to the NGO C can be listed as the UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women, EU, PRM (The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, the US Department of State), GIZ, the British Embassy, and the Danish Refugee Council. They mentioned that some private pharmaceutical companies were also partnering in their projects. At first, their main goal was to respond to this rapid movement with the most efficient means possible with years of experience, providing humanitarian aid, livelihood support, and psycho-social and legal guidance. As the stay of Syrian refugees extended, they had to put more emphasis on social cohesion and altered their organizational structure accordingly. They had to come up with projects aiming to increase literacy and employment rate, prevent sexual and gender-based violence, early marriages, child labor, and peer bullying, provide safe spaces for those who have survived abuse or violence and raise consciousness on women's rights and children's rights, provide consultation on Turkish migration management and any legal

issues concerning the Syrian refugee population. Currently, the NGO C can be considered the ultimate domestic refugee support organization, in touch with almost every NGO in the refugee resilience field and provides support to those organizations, including the rest of the NGOs we have conducted our research with, that cannot provide sufficient mechanisms of support to Syrian refugees in specific cases or projects.

The NGO D was the only organization I included in this study founded after the Syrian Refugee Crisis had started but still prior to 2015. Their Istanbul office was neighboring the NGO A in the same building, working closely with them and the NGO C. They define themselves as a refugee support organization and provide services to all asylum seekers and migrants. They have projects and refugee support centers specifically designed to improve refugees' health and working conditions in the labor market. The organization is being funded by ECHO, The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, through the intermediary of the UNFPA. Although a relatively small-scaled organization without an organic link to the UNHCR, thanks to close bonds some of the NGO representatives have built with Kızılay, the local municipality, and the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management over their time at the NGO D, they were able to reach out to their target population. They have wanted to be more active in providing psycho-social guidance and doing advocacy work for women and children in the refugee community; the organization lacks the necessary personnel and infrastructure to do so. However, it was critical for us to include this organization in our study considering their first-hand knowledge and encounter with refugee women on a daily basis during their projects concerning improving migrants' working conditions but especially in Refugee Health Centers, because it is usually women to seek help for themselves, the children, the disabled, and the elderly due to

traditional take on caregivers being female. Not only that, but most of the male refugees are also at work during the Center's working hours, so their beneficiaries are predominantly female refugees and mostly Syrian women.

The other two organizations were working as implementing partners of UNFPA, the NGO E, and the NGO F. The NGO E's original agenda revolved around advocacy work for youth health rights, safe spaces for peer education on sexual and reproductive health, and providing support to those affected by sexual and gender-based violence. As the Syrian refugee women and young girls were growing in number among their beneficiaries, they founded refugee centers in various cities where they were welcoming young refugees, both male and female. However, the number of male participants in educational activities or social events was radically lower. The NGO F provides legal and medical consultation in cases of sexual violence and sexually transmitted diseases through mass communication channels and in person. They can remain anonymous unless the process requires legal actions to be taken since consulters are usually reluctant to share their sexual experiences or how they would encounter a sexually transmitted disease. We had the chance to interview both organizations' representatives together right at a time when they were working on a collaborative project draft. The two have organic ties and consult each other on cases requiring special legal and psychological expertise.

The NGO G's story dates back to the 1980s, when rapid population growth, uncontrolled economy, urbanization, and volatile job market were the main issues during Turkey's neoliberal transition. From the very beginning, the association prioritized women's reproductive health while doing consciousness-raising programs for promoting gender equality and combating sexual and gender-based violence. In 2015, they also felt

the need to develop a specific program for specifically Syrian Refugee Women and started looking for financial support and supervision from an experienced institution. After signing a series of protocols, the NGO G has been funded by the UNHCR, GIZ, and WHH while often cooperating with the local NGOs. The association started with workshops and meetings around issues concerning their wellbeing, livelihood, and needs here in the host country. In addition to providing protection and consultation or basic livelihood support to refugee women experiencing multiple disadvantages, they organize workshops, educational programs, vocational training, and solidarity group meetings, including local women, intending to empower Syrian Refugee Women while fostering social cohesion between the two communities.

Our last NGO is working heavily on the issues concerning refugee children and women, Syrian or not, but their beneficiaries, like the rest of the organizations, are predominantly Syrian refugee women and their children. Just like the NGO A, they were founded after the 1999 İzmit Earthquake in an attempt to be a part of a collective trauma-solving process, to heal from a disaster through strengthening solidarity among women and children. Their ultimate goal is to promote gender equality and provide fundamental mechanisms for the empowerment of women and children who have survived disaster conditions and are trying to build a life for themselves in a completely different context where they are more at the risk of discrimination and even physical, socio-economical, psychological, and political violence. They have stayed relevant in the refugee resilience arena by providing humanitarian aid and advocacy work for over twenty years. The NGO I's involvement in this research was crucial because the children's issues are usually women's issues due to the traditional perception of women being caregivers. This organization is the most experienced regarding refugee children's

protection and empowerment. They have separate empowerment agendas for refugee children and women, including consciousness-raising workshops, information meetings, general, legal, health, and psycho-social support activities, and psychological consultation. The last two NGOs are in close and frequent contact with each other in comparison to the rest, considering their solidarity centers are located so close to each other in a densely migrant-populated district of Istanbul, far from the city center, and can be considered ghettoized.

## 5.2 Main inquiries on the NGO work on refugee empowerment

While examining NGO work's effects on refugees' empowerment process, we need to ask whether the actions taken by states or NGOs create new hierarchies and re-subordinate refugee people. Stephanie J. Nawyn (2010) problematizes a certain level of state control potentially emerging out of social welfare assistance programs provided by the government in the US context. She argues that most refugee resettlement programs are centering their attention on quick employment and faster economic integration, considering the state's attitude toward unemployed refugees. However, what makes these employment practices easier and faster is the very characteristic of these jobs, i.e., not requiring much job training, education, or language proficiency, already racialized or gendered. This way, it becomes a vicious circle; each quick employment reproduces stigmatization and subordination based on gender or ethnic identity. She gives the example of Vietnamese women being easily trained by the previous generation of Southeast Asian immigrants in the sector to become manicurists. Nawyn's (2010) argument is that by providing alternative empowerment opportunities besides occupational ones, resettlement NGOs enable refugees to resist assimilationist practices

in the host community. The provision of advocacy work and cultural services empowers refugees, especially women who are subject to multiple discrimination and assimilation during resettlement, while acknowledging their agency and potential to realize their objectives. These alternative avenues of empowerment positively affect their adaptation experiences instead of enforcing previous stigmas. More importantly, it is not only about providing services but also about providing exit options for already disadvantaged people. By pointing out similar employment practices and problems based on gender or race refugees face in the EU member states, Sales and Gregory (1996, p. 347) emphasizes the need to have more practical ways of ensuring the refugee population's access to social and economic rights than the existing 'incorporation regimes' have provided so far. As long as this access is tied to formal citizenship status or legally resident migrants, it becomes impossible to offer a lifeline to the most vulnerable groups. The importance of alternative organizational networks for providing these crucial opportunities is once again revealed in the European context. Considering the official status of Syrian refugees in Turkey and asylum seekers under temporary protection, their findings relate to our case.

One of the interviewees elaborated on the under-capacity of the Turkish state to provide necessary health and educational services for its citizens and the refugees as one of the main reasons why xenophobic sentiments resonate with even the most apolitical locals and how it results in attacks on NGO offices and workers:

> For example, let us say there is a project providing easy access for refugee children to undergo an eye examination. A citizen might stand up and say, 'We have been waiting for an appointment for six months for my children's eye examination; they cannot see the blackboard at school. Why are you giving them privileges?' The fury does not always come from a 'Filthy Syrians, they should go back to their countries' kind of a standpoint but from an 'even we (as citizens of Turkey) do not have access to such services' one. I do not find them

> completely wrong, but we are not the ones to be held responsible. Because we report that the same service is needed for Turkish citizens, we look for funds to provide it, but no one takes action when it comes to Turkish citizens. If there is a fund, people do create solutions to such problems. But people do not know all these processes and blame us for prioritizing refugees over them. They show their anger by attacking our social workers and refugee support centers (Interview 4, see Appendix C, 3).

Eve Lester (2005) investigates the role of NGOs in refugee protection through international advocacy and policymaking. Her emphasis is mainly on the pointlessness of holding a series of sterile meetings in Geneva with the attendance of various IGOs and NGOs working in the field, distant from the brutal realities of the refugee experience. It is not easy to witness what is happening in the field, in detention centers, refugee camps, and urban areas populated by refugee groups. NGOs must reflect on the field's very experience during these fancy meetings. Real solutions can only be produced when real problems are revealed, and the decisions made during these meetings should be implemented by these NGOs. Terrible realities of the conflict, experiences of violence, abuse, and harassment must be mentioned so that the international community takes real action. Both IGOs and NGOs need to follow the principle of 'First, do no harm,' take responsibility for their work, and hold their governmental and intergovernmental colleagues accountable.

The role of NGOs in response to Syrian refugees in Turkey is comprehensively examined by Mackreath and Sağnıç (2017). This study revealed that NGOs function in such a way that they handle the issues emerging outside of refugee camps left untouched by the state, almost as a 'subcontractor.' As a result, Syrian refugees assume NGOs as a part of the state mechanism. On the other hand, there is a debate about the position of NGOs in this relationship. Some argue that NGOs have to prioritize delivering the basic needs of refugees, while others underline the necessity of first acknowledging and

advocating their rights so that their economic, social, and political empowerment can be achieved. Assuming an advocacy-based approach to the problems of Syrian refugees has political implications that can have negative consequences for NGOs' relation to the state, so they basically choose the financial help-based approach to be more effective and escape from a contestation with the state. The study also points out the fact that there is a lack of communication, coordination, and collaboration between NGOs. This is mostly because of a rivalry among those NGOs working on similar projects and competing for the funds provided by various international actors, the state, or the international nongovernmental organizations. They conclude by reminding us of the already segregated social and political environment of Turkey that disables the integration process and shapes the power dynamics between the state and the civil society actors. The government of Turkey is criticized for using NGOs as instruments in implementing its political agenda concerning refugees and the state's relationship with the international community.

More specifically, Didem Danış and Dilara Nazlı (2018) studied the reception practices of civil society organizations and their alliance with the state concerning the accommodation of Syrian Refugees in İstanbul by conducting fieldwork in a peripheral district, Sultanbeyli. They observed 'a faithful alliance' between the state and certain NGOs in which NGOs assume a supporting role while the state is the leading actor responsible for the reception and integration of refugees. In line with this argument, the authors observe that NGOs provide straightforward, practical, and efficient services without formal authorization. Even health services are offered without fulfilling certain legal obligations, thanks to some NGOs' good relationship with the local and national authorities. The educational services were previously provided informally, but it is now

under the control of the Ministry of National Education. However, in Sultanbeyli, the provision of these social services by NGOs is structured in a segregationist manner, meaning that the refugee and local people are benefiting from those services separately, in a schedule to prevent their encounters. Danış and Nazlı (2018) argue that although the governance discourse normalizes NGOs' subcontracting roles, the state does not give up on its will to control and sometimes restrict the capacity of civil society organizations in order not to let them enjoy full autonomy in their actions.

The state had a new strategy that aimed to delegate some of its responsibilities concerning the resettlement of Syrian refugees to nongovernmental organizations during that time frame. However, the selection process for appointing these half-autonomous actors is made according to the compatibility of the political agenda and principles of the organizations with the ones acquired by the AKP government, basically employing a selective governance modal. Taking more concrete steps toward social cohesion and integration of Syrian refugees requires more than this selective governance of the issue.

Almost all the organizations I have interviewed complained about the same issues prohibiting their objectives in empowering Syrian refugee women. First and foremost, there is the language barrier. If a refugee woman cannot communicate in a safe environment in their native language, it is way more difficult to overcome her problems for these NGOs. They are already understaffed and in need of going through a tiring process of getting the necessary approval from the Turkish state in order to provide language education to migrants. Especially after the pandemic, the language barrier became a more significant problem due to decreasing exposure to everyday life and children staying at home for remote education without contacting their friends and teachers in person because children’s enrollment and attendance in schools prove one of

the most effective ways for Syrian refugee community to learn the local language early on. Although it is beneficial from the language learning aspect, these children are exposed to peer bullying at schools and at times, psychological abuse from their teachers. Discrimination and bullying at schools are at the top of the list of complaints these NGOs receive from Syrian refugee women. In time, children become unwilling to attend school and look for employment or early marriages. One of our interviewees has underlined this issue as follows:

> If you ask me what the most pressing issue and priority for refugee women who comes here for support are, I would say peer bullying. Especially when schools are open, peer bullying toward refugee children is the most painful experience refugee women have been complaining about. Kids are having some serious problems at this point. With the pandemic outbreak, refugee children had difficulty learning Turkish since they had to stay home. We realized a drastic change in this (refugee children's language skills) after we reopened our office with the pandemic coming to an end. Refugee children at a certain age usually speak Turkish very well, but now we see five, six, and eight-year-old refugee children unable to speak Turkish. In the past, they were able to learn the local language at school, on the street, and by talking to their classmates. Now, I think this is a serious problem; refugee kids could not learn to speak Turkish during the pandemic. This will influence their academic success at school because peer-bullied because kids will not be able to express what they have been through and cannot talk to their teachers. Parents will not be able to support them in such cases because they do not speak Turkish, either (Interview 8, see Appendix C, 4).

While child labor and early marriage are problems already being neglected by the authorities in Turkey, refugee children are not even included in the national statistics while making up the majority of the cases (Duran & Eraslan, 2019; Öztürk et al., 2021). Since they usually are undocumented, they are more prone to being manipulated, bullied, and abused under poor working conditions than adult refugees, submitting to work for less money but for long hours. Employers exploit their youth power, lack of experience, or relatively docile nature with respect to older refugees. These children are

considered an extension of Syrian refugee women since it is the perception in Syrian households. If there is one, the man of the household usually works for long hours and barely sees the children. Even if men are around, the social norms put childcare as a female-specific obligation, feeding the gender stereotype. So, coming up with resolutions to refugee children's problems, especially peer-bullying, early marriages, and child labor, is also essential for NGOs, even if they do not have special programs or projects targeting refugee children's wellbeing and education.

Another common theme was donor organizations' indifference regarding the requests made by their implementing partners for issues not covered in the ongoing projects. In such cases, usually coming from activists with volunteering backgrounds, NGO workers have to find alternative mechanisms of solidarity that deprive them of their time, labor, and material wellbeing. For example, when there is a domestic violence case, it might take several days for the authorities to respond while it is an emergency. For instance, the beneficiary woman might be getting death threats. For such cases, it is left to the NGOs to cooperate and provide a safe space and basic needs for women, sometimes endangering their own safe space and investments. It indeed strengthens the bond among local NGOs, NGO workers, and refugee women, but it is way risky for everyone included. NGO workers themselves might become targets of verbal or physical harassment and even violence.

Moreover, NGO workers are now even afraid to tell that they are working with Syrian refugees in public, considering widespread hate speech and xenophobic discourse around Syrian people, especially Syrian Refugee women in Turkey. In the beginning, they were even getting compliments for doing 'God's work' for the sake of religious fellowship or helping out the 'guests' who are in need of assistance until they get back to

their country. As it became apparent to everyone that there is nothing more permanent than temporary migration, as Stephen Castles (1986) argued, it was now an issue requiring long-term, well-planned policies. As if not formulating such policies or even recognizing the need to do so, there are instances where the Turkish government directly or indirectly, via media personalities with strong sympathy for the AKP rule, attacked certain civil society figures and organizations, causing some NGOs to become the target of hate-speech and organized digital lynch.

For example, the state authorities launched an operation to close down the Tarlabasi Community Center, a neighborhood solidarity organization funded by the European Commission in a densely migrant-populated district of Istanbul where the local municipality and the national government have been launching a series of gentrification projects. The accusation was disseminating terrorist and LGBTI propaganda since the organization was supporting not only women or children refugees but also LGBTI people who live in Tarlabaşı. In this socio-political conjuncture, how people respond to NGO workers' occupation has radically changed. NGO workers became afraid of telling taxi drivers or new acquaintances, people they have short encounters with and their job. Not only that, but they also had to warn refugees not to hang around refugee support and solidarity centers in large groups since seeing a large group of refugees minding their own business and not looking weak or miserable might agitate locals. Both the beneficiaries of these centers and service providers are now careful to keep a low profile to avoid verbal or physical abuse by locals. The hate speech and previous attacks on centers made them overly cautious. One of the NGO representatives shared an incident where a local man punched a pregnant Syrian woman

in the back while scolding her for giving birth to babies that would ultimately increase the refugee population in the country.

> For example, their landlords force them to evacuate their houses, and then a fight occurs between renters and landlords. Refugees have difficulty even walking down streets feeling safe due to xenophobia and discrimination, especially pregnant women. There was a case as a refugee woman related to me 'I was waiting at a bus stop, and a man came near me and punched me in the back.' Because the locals think the number of refugees only increases because refugee women are giving birth, seeing them pregnant makes them angry, especially at the refugee women and, more specifically, pregnant refugee women. Even seeing refugees with a smile on their faces makes the locals angry since how can they be happy? They do not deserve to be happy. The refugees should be in misery, in miserable, painful conditions. No one is sharing seats on buses with refugees… They have a really hard time at hospitals for similar reasons (Interview 7, see Appendix C, 5).

Now, what is expected from refugees is first to return to their countries, if not, to suffer in silence and misery here. In the eyes of the majority of people of Turkey who have internalized the xenophobic discourse, non-citizens, no matter what their legal status entails, are not worthy of having proper housing, building families, getting employed in decent paying, non-abusive jobs, getting an education, or benefiting from health services here in Turkey. It is a common prejudice that these people lack the civilized manners to blend in with Turkish society, whereas the locals seem to have no problem with treating refugees in a quite uncivilized manner, to the point of beating a pregnant woman at a bus stop, before the public eye, with her not being able to reciprocate fearing that would escalate things and put her and her baby's lives at risk. Refugee women usually refrain from responding to such abuses by their employers, neighbors, or random locals, fearing their names would be soiled. They are afraid that misinterpretation of such incidents might create tension with the men of the family as they are, traditionally, supposed to uphold the family's honor. On top of that, such crimes against refugee women are usually not reported since authorities' involvement might reveal that they or some

family members might be undocumented and at risk of deportation. This amplifies the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in Syrian refugee women.

According to the NGO G's representative, the salary of NGO workers is so out of proportion if the donor institutions would take the inflation rate in Turkey into proper consideration. Apparently, it is the one item on donors' agenda where they act the least generous. The NGO workers' livelihood drastically worsens while the requests they keep getting from the refugee community have drastically increased, along with the applications made by local people. NGO workers do not feel safe around, and on their way to their workplace, they are prone to experience secondary trauma due to their constant exposure to sensitive cases, while no psychological support or social benefits for their wellbeing are provided. They try to help each other out in solidarity and give informal resting days to each member in order to avoid burnout. Trying to come up with solutions to refugees' problems, at times locals' problems, puts too much psychological and financial burden on their shoulders. Their productivity is highly affected by these feelings of not being able to reach out to everyone in need in the most effective way possible. As one of the interviewees explained:

> Many refugee women come here with multiple traumatic experiences, and it definitely impacts our lives, too. Especially our social worker friends who constantly encounter with such traumatic cases experience a situation called secondary trauma. We try to deal with this in our own ways. Although we get supervision for such cases, there is no direct, in person, effective professional psychological support mechanism in our reach. We try to find a solution to this among ourselves, overcoming this challenge by sharing such experiences with each other, with laughter and tears. [6] (Interview 3)

[6] Travmalarıyla gelen bir sürü kadın oluyor ve elbette bizim hayatlarımızda da bunun etkisi oluyor. Özellikle sosyal çalışmacı arkadaşlarımız bire bir sürekli bu travmalarla karşılaştıkları için onlarda da ikincil travma dediğimiz durum yaşanıyor. Bununla da bir şekilde baş etmeye çalışıyoruz. (…) süpervizyon

Furthermore, the rising inflation and unemployment rate during and after the pandemic deepened the poverty in both populations. The social status of the working-class people of Turkey is almost the same as their alleged 'job-takers,' the refugees. Of course, being a stateless person holds way more risk, including deportation or resettlement, compared to an unemployed citizen who can still enjoy benefits of the social state such as unemployment pay or state insurance. However, it is easier to point fingers at the already disadvantaged one instead of criticizing the migration management or financial management of a competitive authoritarian government of twenty years, and this is the case for many members of the host community. On the other hand, the NGOs that work with both communities, host and refugee, underline the importance of this shared sense of powerlessness in building a network of solidarity between them. As one of the interviewees asserts, as refugee women and local women meet each other and their encounters become more frequent, their dialogue evolves from different food recipes to everyday problems; they realize the similar dilemmas and impediments in the way of their empowerment that they have been fighting. In an interview, such solidarity has been exemplified as follows:

> For example, we organized a group work in Esenyurt. You know how difficult of a place for refugees Esenyurt is. Syrian women and local women participated in that group work together, and before they started the program, they were like, 'What are we going to encounter with?' Since, at that time, most of them had not met a refugee, a Syrian woman before. Anyways, the program lasted for five weeks, and we received feedback from participants after it came to an end. Two of them (local women) told me the following when we finished the group work: People in my building were collecting signatures to throw a Syrian family living in our building out of their house, but I did not sign it and had a fight with the building manager. I did everything possible to prevent them from evacuating

alıyoruz ama daha etkin, profesyonel, bire bir bir destek almıyoruz. Kendi içimizde çözüm odaklı, birbirimizle paylaşarak falan mücadele ediyoruz. Bazen gülerek, bazen ağlayarak...

> their flat and will continue to do that. Another woman told me a similar story of people collecting signatures to throw a refugee family out of their apartment building. She, by herself, started to collect signatures to prevent this from happening by talking to all the neighbors door-to-door to convince them. She also called the refugee family's landlord to tell him how she appreciates having that refugee family as her neighbors and how people in the building have been treating them unjustly, so he needs to prevent a possible eviction attempt. And she did; she prevented this eviction in her building in the end. (Interview 7, see Appendix C, 6).

They both suffer from issues concerning traditional gender roles that bound them to the domestic sphere, not being able to access sufficient food and supplies for their family's wellbeing, not being able to pay for rent, and even being on the verge of eviction due to rising housing and rental prices, and not being able to leave the house or work due to the childcare or elderly care responsibilities. They have difficulty navigating when a domestic violence or sexual and gender-based violence incident occurs. It is already difficult for local women to seek and receive help in such cases due to their restricted social support system or inadequate knowledge of deploying institutional protection mechanisms. They may never report these cases since marital violence or rape is not something society would openly discuss or problematize. When a local woman reports a domestic violence case to the police, the usual scenario is police officers visiting the household and asking women if they still have any complaints while the perpetrator of the crime is standing right next to her. Such cases result in police officers leaving the scene with gender-normative suggestions of bringing peace to this 'family issue,' and the men of the household once again beat up women. The de facto ineffectiveness of the Law of 6284 that actually requires police forces first to provide protection to the survivor of abuse and violence and investigate the case after creates a loophole for even those familiar with the Turkish legal framework. For refugee women, being unable to talk to the police due to a language barrier or lack of know-how creates multiple

disadvantages in such cases as SGBV and domestic violence. Despite the challenges, as refugee women start to feel empowered enough to take action for others as the NGOs tried to achieve, such crucial information and confidence can spread within the refugee community, as we were told by one of our interviewees:

> Once refugee women gather information on something, they immediately share it with other refugee women, for example, 'My upstairs neighbors were constantly fighting, too much noise was coming from there, I gave her this number to call, or I showed her how to use KADES app on the phone. (...) I am hearing too many instances of this. For example, one of the refugee women goes to a hospital and sees a woman in the line with a black eye. An instant thought of the possibility of wife-beating occurs. She waits until the husband leaves for a toilet break, approaches the now-alone woman, gives the emergency number to police forces, or shows how to use the KADES app. While doing that, they do not directly ask whether they were beaten or not; they are using alternative ways to help out, like 'Have you heard that there is such an app called KADES, apparently it works in different languages, including Arabic? I have just found out, so I wonder if you heard about it?' As we receive such feedback, we feel like we are on the right track (Interview 2, see Appendix C, 7)

Such instances prove that access to information on such vital issues is essential for refugee women to eliminate disempowering factors from their lives and then build up the necessary courage and confidence to improve their material and psychological wellbeing. By creating channels of solidarity between local women and other refugee women through organizing spaces of encounter, experience-sharing, and co-creation, NGOs increase the chances of Syrian refugee women's empowerment in Turkey. They function as intermediaries, service providers, and consultants depending on the pressing issue, but they ultimately achieve to provide significant social capital for Syrian refugee women against all odds.

# CHAPTER 6

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, our primary goal was to evaluate the role of nongovernmental organizations actively operating in Turkey with the agenda of eliminating political, social, economic, and gender-based obstacles in the way of Syrian refugee women's empowerment who fled the Syrian Civil War and settled in Turkey for the past ten years and then building up the necessary institutional mechanisms to prompt their empowerment process. The precarious conditions created by traditional and reinstituted gendered norms and power dynamics in the host country put women refugees in more complex and vulnerable positions with respect to the rest of the migrant populations. Women refugees have been experiencing sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, and disadvantages in political, socio-economic, and cultural arenas that hinder their access to basic needs and services, whether they live in camps or urban areas. The patriarchal power relations in both the refugee community and the host community create new impediments in Syrian refugee women's lives in the post-migration process. Empowerment of Syrian refugee women requires first eliminating these disempowering factors that create gendered harm and then institutionalizing mechanisms to increase these women's chances of actualizing their potential in the host community so that peaceful and gender-equal integration and social cohesion would be possible.

Despite the Turkish government's efforts to take control of the migration management without much involvement in the crisis-management processes and its

oppressive and restrictive stance toward the civil society organizations that are not favoring the AKP's policies, NGOs have played the role of intermediaries between refugees and the state while providing humanitarian aid of all sorts, doing advocacy work in order to eliminate xenophobic sentiments in the host community, and influencing policymakers to provide the necessary conditions for social cohesion and integration to a significant extent. Although civil society organizations initially had to assume the position of service providers to refugees, almost as subcontractors to the Turkish state, their ultimate goal was to empower refugees to become self-sufficient, resilient members of the host community so that social cohesion would be achieved. On the other hand, empowering refugee women required following an intersectional agenda where gender inequality had to be included among the axes intersecting with the refugee crisis.

This qualitative research conducted with NGOs operating in the field shows that NGOs discovered alternative ways for refugee women to have access to the necessary social capital for empowerment in economic, social, cultural, and intellectual terms, created spaces for them to reignite a sense of confidence and power, to be mobilized once again, to feel a sense of control over their destiny and lives. NGOs' attempts shed light on the gender-blindness and discriminatory approach of traditional state apparatus towards refugees from non-European countries and aim to push state mechanisms to acknowledge multiple disadvantages experienced by Syrian refugee women.

On the other hand, NGOs' attempts to bring together women from local and refugee communities and prompt a dialogue revealed that the grievances and needs of both populations have been getting similar on the basis of gender-based discrimination and violence or socio-economic wellbeing. The Turkish government has targeted

women's rights in Turkey; there have been direct and indirect attacks on the women's movement. Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, poor implementation of laws and regulations that was formulated to protect women's interests in cases of sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination, violent police attacks on women's marches and protests, the government's open villainization of gender-equality discourse creates an environment of antagonism where women, citizen or refugee, feel disempowered, unprotected, and under threat of prosecution. Not only that, Turkey's deepening financial crisis, increasing unemployment rate, high inflation, shrinking job market for low-skilled Turkish nationals due to employers' profit-maximizing preference of undocumented migrants over Turkish citizens who require social security plans, poor and even dangerous working conditions in general but especially in the informal economy created a sense of hopelessness and increased need for basic livelihood support in both groups. As the NGOs that participated in our study repeatedly emphasized, such unbalanced distribution of powers under the competitive rule of AKP can only be balanced by formulating a way of integration where gender equality is included among other objectives of social cohesion where achieving socio-economic, cultural, psycho-social wellbeing of both the receiving population and the refugee community is vital. Gender is a cross-cutting identity that has to be acknowledged and evaluated intersectionally in NGO activities and policy making processes at local, national, or international levels to achieve refugee empowerment and social cohesion in refugee-hosting countries.

The five goals of gender-based empowerment of Syrian refugee women seem to be partially achieved through the endeavors of NGOs. According to our field data, NGOs working on the refugee empowerment agenda with a gender focus have a hard

time keeping their ultimate goal of achieving social cohesion and gender-equality mainstreaming intact. As long as the Turkish state treats NGOs as subcontractors and abstains from actively participating in the refugee empowerment agenda, continues to fail to perform its duties in migration management, NGOs will be filling the service provision gap for refugees in Turkey. Although the stay of Syrian refugees seems to be prolonged and most probably permanent, civil society organizations have a hard time making authorities acknowledge it and act on this trajectory in collaboration. Providing humanitarian aid, language courses, and vocational training is necessary but not sufficient for NGOs' agenda. They aim to achieve the conscientization of gender equality in refugee women. They want them to be mobile, take action for their wellbeing, and feel empowered enough to control their destiny. Although NGOs' efforts might have an impact on a significant number of Syrian refugee women in Turkey, it requires much more robust mechanisms to be involved. Turkish state's involvement would bring about fundamental changes in the empowerment of Syrian refugees with the institutional power it has, nationally and internationally; hence it holds the power of 'opening borders.' The most difficult to achieve the goal of refugee empowerment seems to be gender-equality mainstreaming, considering how NGOs still play the role of service providers. They are, at best, raising consciousness on the issue in refugee communities they can reach. Gender-equality mainstreaming would definitely require the active involvement of the host community and making use of more widespread, embedded channels of communication that belong to the state through education, media, or gender-equality-oriented policy making processes.

Our study will contribute to the literature by showing which gaps are expected to be filled by NGOs despite the fact that the Turkish state is supposed to actively deliver

services to refugees and create channels for better incorporation into the host community. Combining the gender aspect with this migration management crisis once again shows us the urgent need for policy making with the aim of gender equality and implementation processes in Turkey since one of the perils of rising authoritarianism in the country is the systematic attack on the women's rights movement. These NGOs' emphasis on common demands and problems of women in Turkey and Syrian refugee women might create the gender-equal language of social cohesion and integration and form an alliance to eliminate multiple disadvantages in solidarity. This alliance would inevitably threaten the very foundation of the patriarchal state as the gender-equality mainstreaming would ultimately require oppressors to share power and delegate control over major political issues to those who have been systematically excluded from decision making processes, namely women.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

| **Interview ID** | **Interviewee** | **Format** | **Date** | **Length** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview 1 | NGO A Representative | Conducted online | 04.05.2022 | 50 minutes |
| Interview 2 | NGO B Representative | Conducted in person | 07.05.2022 | 75 minutes |
| Interview 3 | NGO C Representative | Conducted in person | 11.05.2022 | 65 minutes |
| Interview 4 | NGO D Representative | Conducted online | 14.05.2022 | 70 minutes |
| Interview 5 | NGO E Representative | Conducted in person | 02.07.2022 | 65 minutes |
| Interview 6 | NGO F Representative | Conducted in person | 02.07.2022 | 65 minutes |
| Interview 7 | NGO G Representative | Conducted online | 08.07.2022 | 75 minutes |
| Interview 8 | NGO H Representative | Conducted online | 18.07.2022 | 60 minutes |

# APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1- First, is it possible if you introduce yourself?

   a. How would you describe your organization's vision and duties?

   b. What was the motivation behind your decision to work here?

2- After you started working here, what issues in your organizational agenda required your attention the most? What matters have you prioritized more often than others?

3- How is your relationship with local and national administrations as an NGO? Are there any agents who enable or maybe try to hinder your activities?

4- How would you describe your relationship with other national or international NGOs? Do you often organize projects in cooperation with other civil society actors or institutions?

5- Are there any national or international institutions you apply to in emergence of a need for financial or content-wise advisory? Can you comment on the possible influence of those institutions on your agenda and activities?

6- What is different with having Syrian refugee women in your target group when you compare the experience with the rest of the migrant population?

   a. Are there any distinctive group characteristics that make it easier or harder to work with Syrian refugee women?

   b. If any, how would you perceive these characteristics?

   c. If the difference is due to group-specific problems, what kind of principles you follow while producing solutions and compensation for such problems?

7- How did your organization formulize the peaceful co-existence practices for Syrian refugee women and women of Turkey? Were you able to foresee the possible commonalities or problems that might arise between the two groups?

8- Were there any dynamics in the migration field that you could not perceive beforehand? If any, please explain how these dynamics affect social cohesion and refugee resilience processes.

9- How the locals react to your activities?

a. If the reactions are negative, would you interpret them as hate speech or hate crime?
b. Have your personnel or facilities been attacked verbally or physically?

10- What was the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on your organization and activities targeting refugee population?

11- How would you evaluate the ways in which the ongoing financial crisis in Turkey affected Syrian Refugee women's empowerment? What has changed for them in the last two years in terms of socio-economic status?

12- What are your plans and demands for increasing the effectiveness of your activities in ensuring the refugee women's resilience? Are there any institutions or political actors you think should take more responsibility towards this goal in the immediate future? If there is, can you elaborate on those responsibilities.

13- Where do you see the academy in this network of responsibilities and the socio-political crisis? What do you think researchers should do from now on?

# APPENDIX C

## INTERVIEW RESPONSES IN TURKISH

1- Genç kadınların şöyle bir sorunu oluyor, evlerde, ekonomik olarak çok sıkışık, imkanları olmadığı için bir evi çok fazla aile paylaşabiliyor. Bu sefer, genç kızların diğer aile üyeleri tarafınan tacize uğrama ihtimalleri de artıyor. Uğrama ihtimalinin artması sebebiyle odalara kilitlenme, evlere kapatılma gibi şeyler de çok fazla oluyor. Erken evlendirilme, çocuk yaşta çok çok fazla orantısal olarak, yani çok sık karşılaşıyoruz öyle söyleyeyim. Anneleriyle konuşunca 'aa tamam' diyorlar, çok vazgeçen de oldu mesela. O bir taraftan çok güzel gibi bir yandan da çok üzücü çünkü bir saatlik konuşmayla 'aa tamam evlendirmeyim o zaman' denebiliyorsa yani, veremediğimiz o bir saatlik konuşma sebebiyle insanların korkunç hayatlar yaşadığını bilme fikri çok can sıkıcı.

2- İşveren için de doğurma ihtimali sebebiyle çok daha tercih edilmez oluyorlar. Tekstilde falan çalışıyorlar tabii ki kadınlar iş bulamıyor değil buluyor ama kadınlar tacize uğrayacak falan. Şeyden de değil, işveren kendi taciz edeceğinden de değil belki, kadın toplumsal olarak daha kırılgan ve saldırıya açık dolayısıyla kadını koruması gerekecek. Onun yerine daha hani kendi başının çaresine baksın diyebileceği bir erkeği işe almayı tercih edebiliyor. Daha az ücret ödeniyor kadınlara zaten, çok evrensel bir şey. Tacizler, paranın ödenmemesi gibi şeyler hele ki kadının eşi gidip kavga çıkaracak bir pozisyonda değilse görece 'sahipsiz' mi denir, sahipsiz hale geliyor ve daha da... Çok kötü!

3- Mesela öyle bir proje varmış o sırada göz muayenesiyle ilgili ve bir şekilde o hizmete mülteciler daha hızlı erişmiş. Benim altı aydır çocuklarım bozuk gözle tahtayı

göremiyor, siz niye onlara ayrıcalık tanıyorsunuz gibi bir serzenişe dönüşüyor. Öfke her zaman 'bunlar gitsin, pis Suriyeliler' gibi bir yerden değil de 'bizim neden hizmete erişimimiz yok' gibi bir yerden çıkıyor. Ben bu arada bunu haksız bulmuyorum ama yine bu öfkenin muhatabı biz değiliz. Çünkü aynı ihtiyacın Türkiyeliler için de var olduğunu her yerde söyleyip fon arıyoruz ama kimse Türkiyelilerle ilgilenmiyor. O yüzden, şu an nerede fon varsa o grubu hedefleyen bir şeyler yazıldığından o grubu hedefleyen bir şeyler üretiliyor. Ama tabii ki tüm bu süreci bilmiyor insanlar ve bize öfke duyuyorlar. Bunu çalışanlarımızı döverek, merkezlere saldırılar düzenleyerek...

4- Ama ne olursa olsun, kadınların en büyük öncelikleri, en fazla neyle geliyorlar diye sorarsanız: Akran zorbalığı. Özellikle okulun açık olduğu dönemlerde kadınların en çok canını yakan şey, çocukların okulda yaşadıkları akran zorbalığı. Bu kısımda gerçekten çok büyük sıkıntılar yaşıyorlar. Pandemiyle birlikte aslında çocuklar Türkçe öğrenmekte de zorlandılar, ev içerisinde kaldılar mülteci çocuklar. Şimdi pandemiden sonra ofiste çalışmaya başladığımızda onu fark ettik. O yaştaki çocuklar normalde Türkçe öğrenmiş oluyorlardı, ama şimdi beş, altı, yedi yaş hatta sekiz yaşındaki çocukların da Türkçe konuşamadıklarını görüyoruz Daha önce çocuk sokaktaydı, bir yerdeydi, okuldan arkadaşıyla bir aradaydı öğreniyordu. Şimdi bu bence ciddi bir sorun bu, pandemide çocuklar Türkçe öğrenemediler. Bu onların okul başarısını da etkileyecek, zorbalığı da etkileyecek; çünkü çocuk kendisini ifade edemiyor, öğretmeni ile konuşamıyor. Anne baba bu konuda destekleyici ebeveynler olamıyorlar çünkü onlar da dil bilmiyorlar.

5- Mesela evden çıkarılmalar, ev sahipleri ile kavgalar gürültüler, ayrımcılığa da bağlı olarak sokakta güvende yürüyemiyorlar. Özellikle hamile kadınlar, mesela şey gelebiliyor; 'ben durakta bekliyordum, adam geldi, sırtıma vurdu.' Çünkü şey, çocuk doğurdukça çoğaldıklarını düşündükleri için daha da öfkeliler özellikle hamile kadınlara

ve kadınlara. Sokakta gülüyor olmaları bile rahatsız ediyor yerel halkı, çünkü nasıl mutlu olabilirler ki? Onların aslında hiç mutlu olmaya hakları yok. Onların ezik, ezilmiş, acı çeken bir pozisyonda durmaları gerekiyor. İşte otobüslerde yer verilmemesi, binlerce örnek... Hastanelerde gerçekten ciddi sıkıntılar yaşıyorlar yine aynı şekilde.

6- Mesela Esenyurt'ta ben bir grup çalışması yaptım. Esenyurt biliyorsun, mülteciler için zor bir mekân. O grup çalışmasına yerel ve Suriyeli kadınlar birlikte katıldılar ve bu yerel kadınlar programa başlamadan önce şunu söylüyorlardı 'ya şimdi neyle karşılaşacağız?' Çünkü çoğu bir mülteciyle, Suriyeli kadınla bir araya gelmemişti. Neyse program beş hafta devam etti, program bittikten sonra geribildirimleri aldık. Program bittikten sonra iki tanesi şunu söyledi: Benim binamda Suriyeli aileyi kovmak için imza toplandı, ben buna imza atmadım ve yönetici ile kavga ettim, onların çıkmaması için elimden gelen her şeyi yaptım ve hala buna devam ediyorum dedi. Diğer bir kadın da şunu söyledi, yine aynı şekilde imza toplanmış mülteci ailenin atılması için binadan, bununla da kalmamış, bütün komşuları gezmiş, o kadının ev sahibini aramış; ben, demiş, komşumdan çok memnunum, onu haksız yere çıkaracaklar, buna engel ol! Ve o ailenin kendi binasından attırılmasına engel olmuş.

7- Mesela 'üst katımdaki komşum çok kavga ediyorlar, çok ses geliyor, önceden hiç bunları duymuyorduk ama ben işte ona şunun numarasını verdim, işte ona KADES'i gösterdim sohbet ederken' gibi, kadınlar aynı zamanda o bilgiyi kendi çevreleriyle paylaşıyorlar. (…) Ve ben bunun çok örneklerini görüyorum. Hastaneye gidiyor kadın, yanına gelen kadının mesela gözü morarmış; ondan sonra mesela kocası tuvalete gidiyor, şöyle düşünüyor, dayak yemiş olabilir. O arada polisin numarasını veriyor ya da telefondan gösteriyor, 'ya biliyor musun böyle bir uygulama var bu Arapçaymış, ben de

yeni öğrendim, sen biliyor musun?' Aslında 'sen dayak mı yedin diye sormuyorlar.'

Böyle geribildirimler aldığımız zaman da aslında doğru yolda olduğumuzu görüyoruz.

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