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Qualitative Study on The Workplace Experiences of Turkish Nationals and Syrian Workers Under Temporary Protection

Türk Vatandaşları ve Geçici Koruma Altındaki Suriyeli İşçilerin İş Yeri Deneyimleri Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma

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Emre BİLGİSEVEN
Psikolog, Bağımsız Araştırmacı / Psychologist, Independent Researcher
emrebilgisevenn@gmail.com/
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0390-5101

Enver MENGÜ
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi- Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi Sosyal Hizmet Bölümü/ Asst. Prof. Dr. İstanbul Medeniyet University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Social Work
envermengu@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6871-688X

Ömer Miraç YAMAN
Prof. Dr., İstanbul Üniversitesi-Cerrahpaşa, Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi, Sosyal Hizmet Bölümü / Prof. Dr. İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Social Work
omermirac@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/ 0000-0001-9989-8575

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ÖZET

2011 yılında Ortadoğu'da yaşanan iç karışıklıklar sonucunda Suriye'den Türkiye›ye *göç süregelmektedir. Türkiye, bu göç dalgasını yönetmek amacıyla sürecin başından itibaren etkin politikalar geliştirmiştir. Geçim kaynaklarının sürdürülebilirliği, göçmenlerin yalnızca ekonomik değil, sosyal uyum süreçlerinin de temelini oluşturan istihdama erişim ile doğrudan ilişkilidir. Buna karşılık olarak* Türkiye, *Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği ve* çalışma *izinlerine ilişkin hükümler gibi yasal* çerçeveler *getirmiştir. Ancak bu düzenlemelere rağmen, yapısal engeller ve kayıtlı istihdama sınırlı erişim nedeniyle geçici koruma altındaki Suriyelilerin büyük* çoğunluğu *kayıt dışı* çalışmaya *devam etmektedir. Bu durum, iş yerinde hem hukuki güvencelerden yoksun bir zemin yaratmakta hem de kültürel uyum süreçlerini karmaşıklaştırmaktadır. Ayrıca, farklı kültürel gruplar arasında iş yerinde yaşanan gerilimleri düşürmeyi, ortak* çalışma *kültürünü desteklemeyi ve pazar içinde uyumu artırmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu* çalışma*, Türkiye'deki yerli ve Suriyeli işçilerin iş yeri deneyimlerini incelemeyi; istihdam dinamikleri, uyum sürecindeki zorluklar ve iş gücü piyasasına katılım gibi konulara odaklanarak ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Yaşanan bu durumun* çalışanlar *nezdinde karşılıklarını bulmak adına toplamda 7 yerli ve 7 Suriyeli işçi olmak* üzere *toplamda 14 işçi ile görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Araştırmada yapı bakımından yarı yapılandırılmış açık uçlu mülakat formu*

kullanılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, iş bulma sürecinin zorlukları, çalışma *koşulları, iş yerindeki dinamikler ve uyum sürecinin geleceği, bireyin kariyer yolculuğunda ve geleceğe olan bakışında* önemli *etkenlerdendir. Bu durum, Suriyelilerin iş sağlığı ve güvenliği ile* çalışma *koşulları gibi konuların, uyum ve sosyal uyum* çabalarının *kayda değer bir yüzdeliğini oluştururken; kültürel farklılıklar, dil bariyerleri ve yaşam tarzındaki* çok *yönlülük, yerli halk ile Suriyeli sığınmacılar arasındaki iletişim ve etkileşimde güçlükler* çıkarabilmektedir.

ABSTRACT

In 2011 civil unrest in the Middle East, migration from Syria to Turkey has persisted. In response, Turkey has actively developed policies to manage this influx from the outset. The sustainability of livelihoods is directly linked to access to employment, which forms the foundation not only for migrants economic independence but also for their social integration processes. In response, Turkey has introduced legal frameworks such as the Temporary Protection Regulation and provisions for work permits. However, despite these regulations, the vast majority of Syrians under temporary protection continue to work informally due to structural barriers and limited access to formal employment. This situation not only creates a lack of legal protection in the workplace but also complicates efforts toward cultural integration. These efforts also focus on reducing workplace tensions between the diverse cultural groups, enhancing the shared work culture and promoting harmonization within the labor market. This study aims to explore the workplace experiences of Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under temporary protection (tp) int Turkey, focusing on employment dynamics, integration challenges and labor market participation. To assess employees' responses to these challenges, the study conducted interviews with a total of 14 workers, comprising 7 Turkish nationals and 7 Syrian workers under tp. Utilizing a semi-structured, open-ended interview approach, the research aimed to capture detailed insights into their experiences. The findings reveal that job acquisition difficulties, working conditions, workplace dynamics, and prospects for future adaptation are pivotal factors that significantly shape an individual's career trajectory and perspective. While issues such as occupational health and safety and working conditions of workers constitute a significant percentage of integration and social cohesion efforts, cultural differences, language barriers, and versatility in lifestyle can create difficulties in communication and interaction between Turkish nationalss and Syrian asylum seekers.

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INTRODUCTION

Migration manifests as a dynamic social phenomenon varying in form and intensity, significantly impacting settlements of individuals and communities (Faist, 2003; Tekeli, 2011; Castles & Miller, 2008: 29; Audas & McDonald, 2004: 17). The escalation of anti-regime movements in Syria in 2011, as part of the civil unrest in the Middle East, led approximately 4.6 million people to seek refuge, predominantly in Turkey, which experienced a substantial migration surge (Yazgan et al., 2015: 183). In response, Turkey implemented an "open door" policy, providing shelter and basic needs to Syrians. This massive influx required rigorous monitoring and strategic responses including humanitarian aid and solutions to employment and security challenges (Koca, 2015: 210). The economic, social, and political impacts of migrants on host communities led to the development of policies to manage and understand the long-term consequences of this crisis, supporting migrants' pursuit of economic stability and welfare (Çakır, 2011: 215).

Subsequent migration waves from Syria resulted in varying settlement durations

in Turkey, notably influencing asylum-seekers' access to sustainable livelihoods, a key indicator of community cohesion (Gülsoy and Kanbir, 2022: 284). Temporary protection laws and work permits were introduced as solutions to these challenges. However, as the situation evolved, new challenges emerged, including increased labor market competition between Turkish nationalss and Syrians, heightening tensions (Çetin, 2016). This research further explored the ongoing processes, challenges, and work dynamics experienced by individuals striving to maintain their livelihoods, thereby shedding light on the future of integration processes based on interviews with affected parties.

Syrian Labor Force in Turkey

It is observed that 71.9% of participants in the Turkish labor market are men, with women making up the remaining 35.7% (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023). According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the national unemployment rate was 8.7% as of late 2024. Altough no precise figures are available for Syrians under temporary protection, studies and field reports suggest that their unemployment and informal employment rates remain significantly higher due to ongoing structureal barriers (TUİK, 2024)

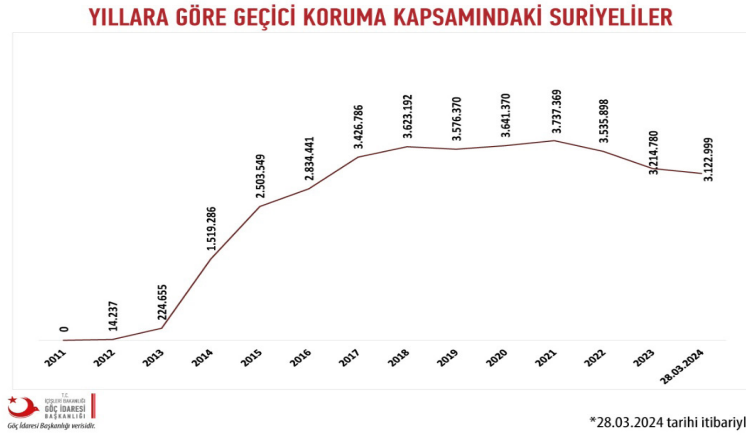
Initially, many Syrians employed in Turkey resided in camps but later transitioned to active roles in the labor market, demonstrating a degree of adaptation, whether formally registered or not. However, according to the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), as of 2023, over 3.2 million Syrians were under temporary protection in Turkey, with approximately 1.8 million estimated to be of working age (15–64). Despite this, only about 120,000 work permits have been issued to Syrians under temporary protection since the implementation of the Temporary Protection Regulation in 2016 (DGMM, 2023; Erdoğan, 2021). This indicates that less than 7% of working-age Syrians are formally registered in the labor market. The significant gap between the number of eligible workers and those with legal employment status underscores the persistence of structural barriers. As a result, the vast majority of Syrian refugees continue to work informally, particularly in low-wage and low-security sectors such as textiles, construction, and agriculture.

The increasing acceptance of legal work permits over the years indicates a growing Syrian presence in Turkey. Faced with challenges from long-standing open-door policies, Turkey has implemented new policies affecting both Syrians and Turkish nationalss to manage migration-related issues (Danış & Dikmen, 2022: 40). Ager and Strang (2008) emphasize that harmonization through stages such as work, housing, education, and health is essential for accessing fundamental rights. While Turkey has made progress in several of these domains, complete and rapid harmonization remains elusive. In the early years of migration, many Syrians were accommodated in temporary shelters and refugee camps established by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), particularly along the southern border provinces (Erdoğan, 2017). However, over time, there has been a significant shift from camp-based living to urban settlements, where Syrians largely secure housing through private rental markets without direct state support. Although access to basic services

such as health and education has been facilitated through the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (YUKK) and the Temporary Protection Regulation, there is currently no comprehensive national housing support policy for Syrian refugees outside of these camps (Ataş, 2017; Kaya & Kıraç, 2016).

However, Öztürk and Çoltu (2018) note that while the issuance of work permits in 2016 represented a formal step toward integration, it also revealed immediate public policy challenges, particularly in implementation. In the labor market, many Syrian refugees have resorted to informal employment due to the lack of official work permits, leading to an increase in labor supply (Figure 1). To address this issue, a decision was made in 2016 to facilitate Syrian refugees' access to the labor market, aiming to regulate the market and enhance integration processes (Caprio & Wagner, 2015). Specifically, the Turkish government introduced the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection in January 2016. This regulation allowed Syrians under temporary protection to apply for work permits through their employers, provided they had been residing in Turkey for at least six months. It also limited employment to the province of registration and imposed a 10% cap on the number of foreigners employed within a company (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2016). Although the regulation was well-intentioned, its implementation was hampered by multiple practical obstacles. Bureaucratic complexity made the permit process lengthy and inaccessible for many employers, while sectoral restrictions limited the types of jobs Syrians under temporary protection could legally obtain. Additionally, employers often displayed reluctance due to administrative burdens and associated costs, further discouraging formal registration. These combined factors significantly reduced the regulation's intended impact on labor market integration. Consequently, a substantial portion of Syrians continued to work informally, particularly in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and textiles, where informal labor remains prevalent.

Figure 1
Number of Syrians Under Temporary Protection in Turkey by Year (2011-2023)



Graph 1. **Source**: https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638 **Access Date: 28.03.2024**

In 2016, the Turkish government introduced the *Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners Under Temporary Protection*, which allowed Syrians under temporary protection to apply for work permits through their employers, provided they had resided in Turkey for at least six months. The policy aimed to formalize refugee labor participation, reduce informal employment, and support long-term integration. However, its practical impact has remained limited due to administrative complexity, employer hesitancy, and sectoral restrictions (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2016; Erdoğan, 2021). Initially, many Syrian refugees were accommodated in government-run camps (also referred to as *temporary accommodation centers*), operated by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). These facilities offered basic services such as shelter, healthcare, and food. However, over the past decade, a large proportion of Syrians have left these camps—due to overcrowding, lack of opportunity, or personal preference—and have moved into urban areas, where they must secure housing independently, often under precarious conditions (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016; Erdoğan, 2017). This shift from camp-based to urban living has exposed refugees to new forms of economic vulnerability. Without formal employment or sustained housing support, many Syrian refugees are compelled to enter the labor market informally. Their inclusion in the labor force, often in low-wage, low-skill sectors, affects Turkish nationals living standards by intensifying competition and altering labor supply-demand dynamics (Erdem, 2023). These dynamics complicate meaningful integration, especially in regions where public services are overstretched and social support networks are weak.

Policies addressing recent migration waves, particularly Syrian refugees, present significant social and economic challenges. The issuance of work permits under temporary protection, part of the harmonization phase within Labor Law No. 4817, is supported politically to mitigate various challenges (Da Lomba, 2010; Şimşek, 2018; Phillimore, 2012). Nonetheless, restrictions in certain professions highlight the difficulties in addressing legal and practical barriers (Erdoğan, 2019). Additionally, social cohesion serves as an integration tool, encompassing workplace interactions, cultural harmony, and addressing discrimination and prejudice (Tatlılıoğlu, 2012: 76).

Economic challenges such as wage disparities and job insecurity complicate the adaptation process for migrants. In Turkey, cultural norms significantly influence interpersonal interactions and workplace dynamics (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Bloch and McKay, 2015; Lamba and Krahn, 2003; Danzer & Ulku, 2011). These norms present challenges in navigating cultural codes within the Turkish nationals Syrian community (Tutar, 2016: 52). Thus language and cultural differences often lead to incompatibility and critical attitudes (Oytun Orhan et al., 2015: 16). On the other hand, adaptation restrictions may isolate individuals, impacting their access to work and social life, leading to exclusion (Şimşek, 2018). Also, status disparities and legal uncertainties often impede the adaptation process for migrants, impacting not only the individuals but also their families, and can result in long-term societal exclusion.

Research Model and Design

This study aims to investigate the experiences of Turkish nationals and Syrian wor-

kers under tp through a qualitative research approach, which prioritizes understanding phenomena holistically in their natural settings, uncovering multiple layers of meaning (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2017: 39). Utilizing the descriptive analysis method as outlined by Creswell (2021) and Maxwell (2008), the research seeks to explore the realities of being a Turkish nationals and Syrian worker in depth. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the study delves into the participants' narratives to grasp how their experiences intersect with their personal realities, emphasizing the multidimensional learning and contextual understanding essential for grasping the complexities of their work lives (Patton, 2022; Yıldırım, 1999: 10; Sale & Tielke, 2018: 129). This method offers a grounded and realistic perspective on how the phenomena described by the workers through their stories impact their lived experiences, identities, and societal roles.

Sample Group

The sample for this research comprises Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp residing in Istanbul, a primary hub for migration and economic activity. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, based on their work experience in sectors where Turkish nationals and refugee labor commonly intersect. The aim was to capture diverse workplace experiences across both formal and informal employment, particularly in fields such as garment manufacturing, food service, and construction. Recruitment was carried out through community networks, referrals from NGOs, workplace visits, and recommendations from other participants, ensuring variation in registration status, occupation, and educational background. While the sample included workers with different educational levels and professional roles, common patterns were observed. Several participants—both Turkish nationals and Syrian—had secondary school education and were employed in low-wage, manual labor. In contrast, those with higher education levels typically held more formal positions, such as NGO staff or television presenters. Registration status was treated as a central analytical factor, given its impact on employment conditions, legal protections, and access to services. The study included both registered workers (e.g., NGO and TV employees) and unregistered workers (e.g., a Syrian factory worker without a residence permit, and a waiter without insurance). Ethical approval was obtained from the [insert university/institution name] Ethics Committee (Protocol No. [insert number]). All participants were informed about the research purpose, assured of confidentiality, and gave written and/or verbal informed consent. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect identities, particularly for participants in informal or undocumented situations. Special care was taken to avoid coercion during recruitment, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted in either Turkish or Arabic, based on participants' preference, with interpreter support when needed to ensure accurate and respectful communication. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Informatıın of Turkish nationals Participants

Participant	Age	Education	Occupation	Length of stay in Turkey	Residence	Marital Status	Cohabitants
Y1	50	Secondary School	Garment Worker	50	Beyoğlu	Married	Husband
Y2	24	High school	Factory worker	24	Esenyurt	Single	Family
Y3	49	High School	Carpenter (Furniture manufacturing)	49	Bağcılar	Married	Wife and children
Y4	28	Master's Degree	NGO Worker	28	Eyüp	Single	Friends
Y5	31	Master's Degree	TV Presenter	31	Ümraniye	Single	Family
Y6	38	Primary School	Cook	38	Sultangazi	Married	Husband
Y7	25	Bachelor's Degree	Waiter (Cashier)	25	Fatih	Single	Friends

Table 2

Socio-Demographic Information of Syrian participants

Participant	Age	Education	Occupation	Length of stay in Turkey	Residence	Marital Status	Cohabitants
S1	37	Secondary School	Garment Worker	13	Fatih	Single	Family
S2	34	Madrasa 12th year	Factory Worker (Master)	6	Tekirdağ	Single	Friends
S3	34	6th Grade	Grade Carpenter (Furniture Manufacturing)	10	İstanbul	Single	Single

S4	40	Associate degree	NGO Worker	10	Fatih	Married	Husband and Children
S5	31	Bachelor's Degree	TV Presenter	7	Fatih	Single	Family
S6	19	10th Grade	Cook	5	Fatih	Single	Single
S7	24	Primary School	Waiter (Cashier)	7	Esenler	Single	Friends

Limitations

The study faced several limitations affecting its scope and depth. Language barriers necessitated the use of an interpreter for interviews with Syrian employees, relying on translated transcriptions for data collection. Inadequacies in translations meant that interpretations often depended on the interpreter's ability to convey information accurately. The study's coverage was also limited, excluding sectors like medicine, law, psychology, and retail due to difficulties in accessing professionals in these fields, which restricted the generalizability of findings across all potential employment sectors for Syrian refugees. Additionally, privacy concerns reduced participation, particularly among workers in sensitive situations who feared repercussions from openly discussing their employment status. Despite these challenges, the research included both registered and unregistered workers to capture a wide range of perspectives on workers' rights and registration status, indirectly broadening the data interpretation and attempting to overcome limitations by exploring general attitudes towards employment conditions.

Data Collection Tools

The primary method for data collection in this worksite study was through interviews, utilizing a form that included socio-demographic and work-life questions. A specific socio-demographic data form was also prepared and used during the interviews to gather detailed background information on the participants. In-depth interviews, a widely used method in qualitative research (Creswell, 2021: 85), were employed to elicit rich, contextualized accounts of participants workplace experiences. This method allowed for a nuanced interpretation of how participants construct meaning from their lived experiences and how these are shaped by broader social and legal structures (Berg & Howard, 2019: 118). These interviews were complemented by informal, non-participant observations of the participants working environments, either before or after the interviews. When possible, the researcher visited workplaces such as garment workshops, kitchens, or construction sites to observe the physical conditions, tools used, and overall atmosphere. These observations were not formally recorded

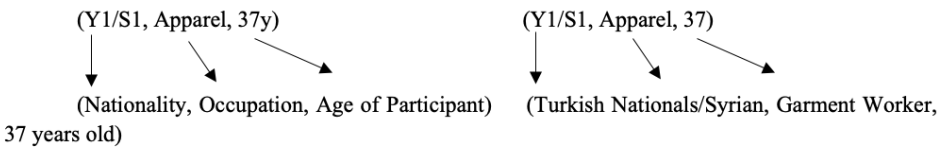
but helped contextualize participants narratives by offering insights into their daily routines, spatial constraints, and interactions with colleagues. This approach ensured a richer understanding and a more consistent flow of information from lived experience to thematic interpretation.

Consent was obtained from participants across various sectors -garment, factory, catering, service, and media- to explore factors such as workplace tensions, incidents of violence, salary discrepancies, and working hours. Both participant groups responded to the same set of questions, allowing for a balanced discussion on these topics. The questionnaire was academically reviewed, and irrelevant questions were eliminated to finalize the tool. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and approval. Prior to the main study, two preliminary field studies were conducted to refine the research questionnaire. A total of 14 interviews were held 12 face-to-face in a common location and 2 via an online platform.

Data Analysis Process

The audio recordings, totaling 204 minutes, from the interviews were transcribed. During transcription, repetitive codes were eliminated to distill main themes and sub-themes. These transcribed data were analyzed using a method proposed by Yıldırım & Şimşek (2017). From this analysis, five main themes emerged: the Process of Finding a Job, Working Conditions and Difficulties, Workplace Dynamics, the Future of the Adaptation Process, and Outlook for the Future. The data were re-read and interpreted with these themes in mind.

In the findings section, participant anonymity is maintained, and they are identified only as Turkish nationals or Syrian to clarify the perspectives being presented. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to efficiently evaluate and present the analysis findings. Detailed guidelines for citing quotations from the research are provided to maintain clarity and attribution throughout the study.



FINDINGS

The research explores the experiences of Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp in Turkey, focusing on the impact of social networks in job acquisition, workplace conditions, and integration prospects. Findings indicate that family, friends, and social connections are crucial in securing employment, with most participants using these networks during the recruitment process. Key challenges identified include low wages, high work intensity, and lack of social security. Workplace dynamics between Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp showed both harmony and tension. Looking forward, concerns about economic difficulties and discrimination pose potential risks to integration, although some remain hopeful about improving cultural harmonization. This reflects the complex socio-cultural dynamics and challenges within Turkey's labor market.

Job Finding Process

Various factors including social networking, job advertisements, and personal acquaintances significantly influence the job-finding process. Once a job is secured, adapting to the workplace becomes the next major challenge. Social networks, particularly family members and friends, play essential roles in securing employment. The narrative explores in detail the mechanisms of how workers obtain jobs and adjust to the labor market, with Y1, S1, and S2 providing insights into the roles of intermediaries in initiating employment and navigating workplace integration as follows:

> *Since I have an uncle here, and my uncle does this job, I had to take this job out of necessity. (Y1, Apparel, 50y)*
>
> *My brother was working in this profession. Then he helped me, so I started (S1, Apparel, 37y)*
>
> *A friend of mine referred me to this place. (S2, Factory Worker, 34y)*

It is observed that employees are dependent on their social environment when starting a job. With examples such as brothers, uncles, and friends, the close environment is an important point in the process of finding a job. These individuals relied on these social connections to find a job and adapted to the labor market through these relationships. While this adaptation process was long and difficult for S4, it was reported to be faster and smoother for S3 and Y4.

> *In Osmaniye, I worked as an electrician, I worked as an apartment cleaner, I also worked in a lathe factory, I had an operation during the time I was working the lathe factory, then the factory owner did not hire me again, he said he did not need me. After that, I couldn't improve myself in Osmaniye. I decided to come to Istanbul. Because companies, factories and associations are in Istanbul. I found a job opportunity in an association, an officially established association. They needed an interpreter. I got into this business as an interpreter. (S4, NGO, 40 years)*

> *He had friends of ours. I came, we made a deal and then I started, just here immediately. (S3, Furniture Manufacturing, 34y)*

> *I was already a volunteer here before I started working. I started working in 2019. Later, when I was graduating, I was offered a job here. This is how I started (Y4, NGO, 28y)*

S4, who stated that in addition to working in many jobs, health problems cannot be ignored, thinks that he will find a job in Istanbul based on the current conditions and his brother's advice. S4 also stated that he was well-received due to the fraternal ties with the Turkish nationalss:

> *Everyone hired us with open arms. First, not because we worked cheaply, but because when we first arrived, everyone hired us as muhajir. This person has a family, a wife, children, and a victimized person; let us work, too. Everyone said so. I never talked about the salary, and they pay a salary. It is a good salary. (S4, NGO, 28y)*

In addition, one of the participants S7 applied for a job through social media, while S5 stated that she found a job through a job advertisement and then gradually moved up the ranks as they met and started working at the association as follows:

> *There was a hairdresser on the same street as our house. Then I heard that she could work at the association when she had acquaintances there, so I went and started working. While working at the association, I received training there. From there, there is a rise in the workplace, she starts to take on more and more tasks, then the relationships get stronger, and I started working as a presenter. (S5, TV Presenter, 31y)*

> *I saw an advertisement on Telegram. That's how I found this job. (S7, Waitress, 24y)*

The research participants have a wide range of past work experiences. Responses from Y1-7 to S1-7 show a wide range of individuals working in craftsmanship, interpreting, and service sectors. The professional backgrounds of the participants show that some of them continue their family occupation:

> *Father's profession. With the encouragement of our father. Our father left the business, and we took over. (Y3, Factory Worker, 49 years)*

Some of them started new professions after they arrived as refugees:

> *I worked as an electrician, cleaned apartments, and worked in a lathe factory. I found a job opportunity in an association, an officially established association. They needed an interpreter. I took this job as an interpreter. (S4, NGO, 40 years)*

Others reveal that they gained experience in different sectors due to their skills and abilities:

> *I was a monthly worker in a subcontractor company for about six months. After that, they liked my working system. I came here, submitted my papers, and started here (Y2, Factory Worker, 24 years).*

In the interviews, a notable point is the lack of clear distinction between the groups regarding job selection. Both Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp often accept jobs recommended by relatives rather than pursuing preferred careers. For instance, while S4 struggled to maintain his employment, S3 managed his role with ease, suggesting that job stability can vary based on individual experiences and the nature of job acquisition. Post-migration, employees working in their field of expertise generally find and retain jobs more comfortably. Moreover, Turkish nationals workers typically advance from a certain baseline, indicating that specialization significantly influences job opportunities for both Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp.

Working Conditions and Challenges

The study's findings show that the physical nature of work significantly impacts workers' daily lives and health. It reveals that the length of working hours and the job's physical demands are the main areas where workers struggle.

Respondent S7 complain about low wages, high work intensity and precarious working conditions:

> *The salary may not be enough. Sometimes we work more than working hours. That makes us very tired. I experienced the same thing when I was working among the Turks. If you work more than 12 hours, the Turk may not pay your salary because he is working illegally, they delay it. They delay it for 10, 20, 30 days, and sometimes they don't pay it at all. I have experienced such financial problems before. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

On the contrary, Y4 emphasized their satisfaction with their current situation.

> *There is the right to freedom in our working conditions, but despite this, since we are like brothers and sisters among ourselves, everyone completes the place where someone is missing instead of looking for each other's deficiencies, and we always carry out work together with this trust. Therefore, we do not have any difficulties in this regard. (Y4, NGO, 28y)*

Another issue that workers are concerned about is job security and fair wages. Participant S4 emphasize the lack of job security and fair compensation for labor:

> *In 7 years and 6 and a half, my salary barely reached 15.000. They don't give raises in accordance with the state because I started for 1000TL. The minimum wage was 2500TL then. In 2016, I remember the minimum wage was 2700TL. I worked for 1000TL. Of course there are always difficulties. First of all, we have a living problem. I mean because the salaries are not enough. (S4, NGO, 40 years)*

S2 stated that in addition to job security, bosses like foreign workers.

> *Sometimes you have a fight, you leave, you come back again. He is the boss, I mean, I love him, he loves the same way. Bosses love foreigners very much. I have a fight, I leave. And I mean, I just came back (S2, Factory Worker, 34y)*

While S2 stated that labor is not compensated, Y5 stated that working in state institutions provides a fairer wage and job security compared to the private sector:

> *At TRT, they pay you for your labor because it is a state institution. But when you look at the private sector, you can't get exactly this return in the private sector (Y5, TV Presenter, 31y)*

Participants S7 and Y1 complained about low salaries, high work intensity and working conditions without social security, while Y4 expressed satisfaction with their current situation:

> *The salary is low. Sometimes the work intensity is too high, and we feel like we cannot afford it, and sometimes the work intensity is low and we feel like we are doing nothing. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

> *In textiles, there is not much to demand rights. I mean, the working conditions are already clear. In the morning. It's long. You work 10 hours (Y1, Apparel, 50y)*

Y4 expressed satisfaction with their current situation:

> *I was working here in an environment where our rights were always respected. I have never encountered situations such as permission, human approach, workplace friendship or competition between any staff at the same level and this kind of backstabbing that happens in different environments. (Y4, NGO,28y)*

Participants indicated that the working climate and working hours significantly impacted them. Y5 and Y7 emphasized the adverse effects of long working hours on personal life and overall quality of life:

> *I mean, in terms of working hours, especially in the private sector, it's something that doesn't have a day and night. I mean, they can call you at 2 or 3 a.m. and say run, there is something like this here. There is not much concept of work life. (Y5, TV Presenter, 31y)*

> *We have one day off a week. Other than that, we work full time. You don't have a private life outside of that. I mean, let me go out for a walk, do something, no. It is only one day, remember. Other than that, we work in the classroom. (Y7, Waiter, 25y)*

S7 stated that in addition to long working hours, economic difficulties such as late or non-payment of salaries cause physical and psychological fatigue:

> *The salary may not be enough. Sometimes we work more than working hours. That makes us quite tired. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

Both Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp report issues with long working hours. Syrian workers under tp, in particular, face challenges in receiving their salaries and defending their employment rights, compounded by language barriers and limited knowledge of labor laws. S2 notes that employers favor Syrian workers under tp, which may indicate discrepancies in rights and salary practices. Meanwhile, Y5 highlights disparities in treatment between state and private sector employees. Y7 laments the lack of personal time due to extensive work hours, and Y5 describes a lack of routine in his life, contrasting his unpredictable work schedule with more structured aspects.

Workplace Dynamics

According to participants, relations between Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp can be both harmonious and tense. Y2 talk about tensions and groupings between them.

> *They are very comfortable. I mean, even I am not this comfortable in my own country. Not even the boss, not even the manager interferes with them. They don't say anything. They do their work, sit, and play on the phone. They are very comfortable. If we pick up the phone over there, they say, are you idle, is your work done? I mean here, in this factory, we have no value. Turks have no value. But Syrians are more valuable in their eyes. In the eyes of the bosses, managers. (Y2, Factory Worker, 24)*

S1 mentioned good harmony and cooperation.

> *There was no change. It is the way it is. I find both good, I just find it easier to work with Syrians because communication is easier. (S1, Apparel, 37y)*

S5 refers to people's good behavior due to their position and the strict rules in the workplace.

> *Every workplace has obligations. But in my current position, they treat me well out of necessity. The way the people I met at the hairdresser behave is completely different from the way they behave now. We are talking about the same people. There are also difficulties with the labor law. It is forbidden to talk and chat inside the workplace. It is also forbidden to say outside that I work in this place and do this task. They have to do this for their safety. (S5, TV presenter, 31y)*

In addition, Y1 and S3 mentioned communication problems and groupings due to the language barrier in the workplace climate and stated that these situations cause workplace conflicts and dissatisfaction:

> *This is because of the high number of employees. So you have difficulty in communication. Since they don't speak the language, you may inevitably have problems. (Y1, Apparel, 50 years)*

> *It could be the language. For example, there may be a problem because you cannot speak the language. I don't know Turkish very well, but then gradually. (S3, Furniture Manufacturing, 34y)*

In addition, S4 pointed out that she tried to understand the mutual situation by empathizing with the workers she worked with with the salary she received after she started working.

> *There was a small difference in salary between me and the Turks. Because they are in this company for a long time. They've been together for years. And I'm a newcomer. That would be unfair to me getting the same salary as a Turk? Even I wouldn't accept it. This guy has been with the boss for 5 years. And this one just arrived. How can we get the same salary? No way.*

> *I'll take a lower salary and that's fine. I make a living. I have my dignity. (S4, NGO, 40 years)*

S5 stated that it is a privilege for workers to have citizenship and that individuals with citizenship do not have their salaries cut. In contrast, those without citizenship have their salaries cut by half because they are going through a complex process.

> *People with citizenship are treated better. It can also be Syrian. If they have citizenship, their rights are many times better. Suppose there is a financial hardship at the workplace, while the salary of the person with Turkish citizenship is not affected. In that case, the salary of those without Turkish citizenship can be reduced considerably. They cut my salary in half. We are going through a difficult period. We were told that from now on you will come every two days, not every day, and your salary will be halved. (S5, TV presenter, 31y)*

On the other hand, S7 preferred to work with Turkish nationals people.

> *My preference is to work with Turks because Syrians do not respect our rights as much as Turks do. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

In workplace dynamics, effective communication emerges as a foundational aspect. Y1 observes that working in a friendly environment differs markedly from interactions with Syrians, potentially leading to group formations and tension. Y2 echo this, noting the comfortable behavior of Syrian workers under tp and the resultant tensions that may arise. However, organizational measures can mitigate these issues. S5 suggests a need for broader workplace inclusivity, while employers implement strategies to preempt potential conflicts. S7 expresses a preference for working within his professional field rather than alongside Syrian workers under tp, highlighting personal choices in job settings.

Future of the Harmonization Process

Participants expressed different views on the future of the integration process between Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp. Y1 predicted that economic problems and increasing discrimination will negatively affect this harmonization.

> *Economic problems push it in that direction. As it grows, these will be reflected. Everyone will blame each other. Of course it will be harsh. It always happens because of the country. (Y1, Apparel, 50 years)*

In addition, S4 emphasized that social media content has an aspect that manipulates the perception of the integration process.

> *There are good and bad in every society, but right now there are a few degrees more on the streets, on the roads, in workplaces. But they have exaggerated it on social media. Everyone shoots and sends these, talks about whatever they want on social media. Without researching, without knowing, there is definitely a target. Those who take these photos and share them on social media have a target. What is their goal? To disrupt the environment. (S4, NGO, 40 years)*

Contrary to what has been said, Y4 and S7 believe that adaptation will increase over time and cultural adaptation in the workplace will improve. These views illustrate the complex nature of cultural dynamics in workplaces and how social and economic factors shape these processes:

> *I think spending time together increases harmony, but it is also clear that exclusion and bullying have increased since then. Just as misogyny and bullying have increased, on the contrary, I think efforts to raise awareness have also increased since then. Especially the number of civil society seeking rights has increased at this point. Both Turkish nationalss and Syrians accepted each other and integrated more easily. But again, I feel like those with lower levels of education, those who are content to act on what they hear, have not made much progress in this regard. (Y4, NGO, 28 years)*

Similarly, S7 reflected that workplace integration had improved over time:

> *We have a very good harmony compared to the old days. It will increase even more in the coming days. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

However, S7 also noted that outside the workplace, deeper cultural integration remains limited:

> *At the moment, I'm talking about the employees, they have more or less adapted. They have been here for more than 10 years and they are slowly starting to adapt. But if we take it on the employees, but if we take it on the normal people, I think Syrians, refugees will still not be able to adapt to Turkey. I think so. I think they still cannot separate from their own culture and integrate with us. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

Participants expressed varied perspectives on the integration of Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp. While some, like Y1, linked economic difficulties and rising discrimination to increasing social tension, others, such as S4, criticized the role of social media in amplifying negative stereotypes and distorting public perception. "Everyone shoots and sends [videos], talks without knowing… there is definitely a target… to disrupt the environment," S4 explained. This often plays out on social media, where Syrian workers under tp are wrongly blamed, distorting perceptions of reality. Despite these challenges, participants like Y4 and S7 shared more

hopeful views, observing improved workplace harmony over time and highlighting the role of civil society and daily interaction in fostering mutual understanding. They recognized that shared religious beliefs and linguistic similarities can bridge cultural gaps. However, several participants also noted that deeper societal integration remains limited, particularly beyond the workplace. The process of cultural adaptation, they emphasized, is complex, gradual, and shaped by both personal interaction and broader social narratives.

Looking to the Future

Participants' plans for the future and their challenges as migrants cover a broad spectrum. Participant such as, Y1 expressed their hopelessness about the future.

> *I don't see much of a future at this point. I don't have to grow up anymore, I have to take care of my child now. I mean, I am beyond growing up. How can a child grow up in Istanbul without getting into filth? It is difficult. This process is difficult for everyone. But when I look at it from their point of view, I agree with them. (Y1, Apparel, 50 years)*

participant S5, in addition to expressing the difficulties he experienced, stated that if he quits his job, his intermediaries or those who are intermediaries for him may also quit their jobs at any time and that it is impossible to move forward without nepotism.

> *We work with the idea that I will get citizenship and go to Qatar. Because in order to find a decent job here, you need connections. This is the only way to get somewhere. You are working there. And you told me about me. I started working on that occasion. I had a problem and when I quit, everyone I referenced has to leave that channel in the same way. If you have started packing, I have to pack too. The place where I work doesn't have such a thing thanks to its strict rules. There will be no conversations between us at work so that there is no grouping. (S5, TV presenter, 31y)*

S6 has an optimistic perspective in line with her career goals:

> *When it comes to my future, I do not think about going abroad. I am completely in the idea of progressing in Turkey and opening my own private place. (S6, Baker, 19y)*

In particular, S2's dream of starting their own business in Turkey and S7's plan to migrate abroad reflect both strategies for coping with challenges and ways of seizing opportunities:

> *I'm going to open a shop here. That's my dream. I will open a small shop. I will work piece by piece. I mean, for example, not the boss, but me. But I will work piece by piece. They will call me with an offer. (S2, Factory Worker, 34y)*

> *It is very difficult to live here. I may not have a future here. I applied through the migration management program. There is a very high number of applicants, but it is very unlikely that everyone will go, they read everyone's documents one by one. (S7, Waiter, 24y)*

Workers express concerns about their future, highlighting the difficulty of earning a living and supporting their families, leading to a sense of hopelessness about personal and familial development. Y1 notes the challenges are daunting for everyone, worrying about her own family's well-being. S5 faces job insecurity, dreaming of better opportunities abroad but acknowledges the necessity of connections for career advancement. Despite these difficulties, some remain optimistic, planning to start their own businesses, reflecting varied approaches to overcoming obstacles and leveraging opportunities for a better future.

Discussion

This study explores the employment and social integration experiences of Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp under temporary protection in Turkey. The findings reveal that access to jobs frequently relies on personal recommendations and social networks. Many Syrian participants found work primarily through acquaintances or relatives, especially in sectors such as garment manufacturing or food service (Gülerce & Demir, 2022). However, this reliance on informal channels brings significant limitations, particularly by constraining opportunities for career advancement and reinforcing subordinate roles in the workplace (Karabulut & Gezici, 2023: 368). Structural barriers further complicate these challenges. The absence of legal work permits and the uncertainty surrounding legal status have emerged as central obstacles. Participants without formal registration shared their inability to negotiate wages, their fear of dismissal without recourse, and their vulnerability to exploitative conditions. As one unregistered Syrian factory worker remarked, "They can fire us any time, and we cannot say anything because we don't have papers." This individual experience reflects a broader structural issue: Syrian workers under tp remain in the informal sector, where they lack social security coverage, are excluded from union representation, and are unable to access legal protections against exploitation (Öngel, 2017: 30). This vulnerability is deepened by language barriers and limited awareness of Turkish labor rights and regulations (Duruel, 2017: 219). These findings reinforce earlier observations (ORSAM, 2014: 51), yet they highlight a more nuanced understanding: the barriers faced by Syrian workers under tp are not solely bureaucratic—they shape the day-to-day realities of labor and limit future prospects. While informal networks are also common among Turkish nationals (Lordoğlu & Aslan, 2016), for Syrians, this necessity becomes a structural dependency that curta-

ils autonomy. As a result, the employment process transforms into a survival strategy rather than a pathway to social mobility. In this context, solidarity among Syrian families becomes an essential coping mechanism. Dikkaya and Dinçer (2023) indicate that the presence of family members in a particular region increases job accessibility for others, enabling shared navigation of an unfamiliar labor market. However, such reliance may result in occupational mismatches and diminished bargaining power. Indeed, workers who secured jobs through personal referrals often received lower wages than those who applied through formal channels (Karabulut & Gezici, 2023: 368). This situation entrenches socioeconomic inequalities and perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage.

Although both Turkish and Syrian workers under tp face extended working hours and below-market wages, their circumstances are not equivalent. Turkish nationals employed formally retain at least partial access to institutional protections, while Syrian workers under tp—particularly those in informal sectors—are excluded from union representation, legal safeguards, and social security systems. The Temporary Protection Regulation necessitates employer-sponsored work permits, yet the process is marred by bureaucratic inefficiencies and employer reluctance (Öngel, 2017: 30). Consequently, most Syrian workers under tp remain in unregulated sectors, where they are treated as easily replaceable and lack mechanisms for legal recourse. These systemic disadvantages not only harm Syrian workers under tp but have spillover effects on the broader labor market. Çınar (2018) notes that the wage depression experienced by Syrian workers under tp indirectly influences wage expectations among Turkish workers as well. The competitive dynamic intensifies, particularly in regions where multiple ethnic groups vie for limited employment opportunities. Dedeoğlu (2018) argues that this mobility increases labor competition and amplifies Turkish nationals anxieties, especially as Syrian workers under tp shift rapidly across sectors. Initially perceived with empathy, the presence of Syrian workers under tp has gradually become a source of concern for many Turkish employees. This transformation is exacerbated by unequal access to opportunities, language barriers, and the emergence of workplace hierarchies. Employers often assign Syrian workers under tp to subordinate roles to preserve harmony, but such strategies reproduce inequality. Sarıalioğlu (2024) emphasizes that these practices also serve to reinforce ethnic hierarchies and manage perceived threats through controlled labor segmentation. Ekici (2019) explains that direct contact in diverse workplaces can generate negative perceptions, particularly when power dynamics are skewed. According to Pettigrew and Tropp's (2011) intergroup contact theory, such imbalanced interactions may fuel prejudice and reinforce group-based divides. Despite this, the study identified instances where mutual understanding and shared goals fostered workplace cohesion. These examples demonstrate that inclusive practices and equitable structures can transform potential tensions into collaboration.

In line with earlier findings, the research again underlines the significance of personal networks in recruitment and the impact of work experience on job retention. Challenges like extended working hours, irregular pay, and language barriers

particularly affect Syrian workers under tp, while cultural differences and economic strains sometimes exacerbate workplace tensions. Despite these issues, shared language and cultural experiences offer a foundation for increased cohesion, necessitating targeted policy and management strategies to enhance integration (İlgazi, 2019: 108). To effectively address the challenges identified in this study such as informal employment, wage disparities, language barriers, and workplace tensions policymakers and employers must adopt strategies that are not only comprehensive but also grounded in the lived realities of both Turkish nationals and Syrian workers under tp. Participants emphasized that while policy initiatives such as free language courses and vocational training programs exist, they are often inaccessible in practice due to long work hours and caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, education on legal rights has limited impact among unregistered workers, who lack the legal recognition to benefit from such efforts.

Therefore, workplace-based language support, peer education, and mechanisms for employer accountability should be prioritized. Employers must adopt inclusive hiring practices, ensure basic protections regardless of legal status, and foster respectful work environments. Tailored, context-sensitive policies can help bridge structural gaps, reduce labor exploitation, and foster a more inclusive and productive workplace culture. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for a multifaceted and realistic approach to integration one that aligns both with participants experiences and the constraints of current labor market conditions in Turkey.

YAZAR BEYANI / AUTHORS' DECLARATION:

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