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Syrian Women in Working Life: Slavery or Emancipation?

Turkey has become the major refugee-hosting country due to unpredicted influx of Syrian refugees caused by the civil war in Syria since 2011. According to the UNHCR data from February 2017; 4,957,907 registered refugees have forced to leave Syria to escape from the war conditions and 2,910,281 refugees have been settled in Turkey (UNHCR 2017). In these circumstances, Syrian refugees encounter many problems in both daily and working life in Turkey. The difficulties are doubled for Syrian women and children as they are the most vulnerable groups among Syrian refugees. The main problems encountered by Syrian women are discrimination in both their daily and working life, physical, sexual violence and early marriage, less participation into the labour market and informal employment in poor working conditions due to cultural and patriarchal patterns in the society. They also have language barrier due to very limited access to the social life, contrary to Syrian men as they are more included in working life.

Although almost half of the Syrian refugees residing in Turkey are women, they are almost invisible in the society and there has been limited research on -or response to- the gender-specific impacts of forceful migration. Discrimination against Syrian women both in the society and labour market is as a reflection of widespread gender inequality, conservatism and rooted patriarchy in the country. As many studies emphasize, one of the main reasons of women's low participation into the labour market is gender-based division of labour in the labour market, gender-blind structural barriers, discrimination, and patriarchal mindset in Turkey. Despite the fact that women's labour force participation in Turkey is very low compared to the world average, the labour force participation of women could be considered relatively higher (32.7% in November 2016, TURKSTAT, 2017), compared with Syria, 13% in 2010 and 14% in 2014 (World Bank). In a similar manner, Syrian women are seldomly participating in working life in Turkey, in mainly informal sectors, such as seasonal agricultural works, textile and garment sector under the unacceptable working conditions.

Against this background, this study aims to ascertain the employment status of Syrian women in the Turkish labour market by examining their daily and working life conditions, discrimination, and obstacles at social life and work. In this regard, this study will discuss the impacts of cultural and social patterns on the employment of Syrian women and explore what kind of obstacles and barriers which Syrian women encounter in the access to the labour market through secondary resources and interviews. The study also aims to investigate life strategies adopted by Syrian refugee women in order to open a space in the labour market. In-depth interviews with Syrian women and the representatives of women organizations which are particularly working on Syrians will be conducted to determine the current problems of women in both daily and working life. Moreover, the study will compare the case of Turkey and other European countries such as Germany and Italy in terms of migration policies against the women and develop the policy recommendation on the problems to be determined and gender sensitive policies to be developed.

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