

POLICY BRIEF **03.17.23**

Intersecting Vulnerabilities: Syrian Refugee Women and Turkey's Agricultural Workforce

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INTRODUCTION: SYRIAN REFUGEES ARE CHANGING THE FACE OF TURKEY'S AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE

In recent years, political events and attempts to integrate migrants into domestic labor forces globally have increased the number of people forced to live on the margins of society without stable social or economic systems. Turkey's labor market, with its growing Syrian refugee and migrant population, is no exception. The number of Syrians now under temporary protection in Turkey totals around 3.6 million, making Syrians Turkey's largest refugee sector.

Available data shows that these Syrian refugees are 54% male and 46% female. Additionally, 47% of all Syrian refugees are children under the age of 18. The majority of registered Syrians are women and children, indicating a family-based migration pattern. Furthermore, it is estimated that around 1 million Syrians now work informally in Turkey since the number of work permits issued to Syrians is quite low. Seasonal agricultural work comprises one of the largest informal labor markets that Syrians have started to populate in recent years.

This brief explores how Syrian refugees who are women and children gain access to employment and how their vulnerabilities influence their integration into Turkish labor markets, specifically the agricultural

sector. This analysis incorporates the concept of "intersectional vulnerabilities," or the interconnected disadvantages created by social categorizations such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and social status. It also highlights the interconnectedness between women's activities in the realms of production-paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities by focusing on how the feminization of Syria's agricultural labor force in Turkey is built on the intersectional vulnerabilities of women and children.

Finally, this brief examines how Syrian female labor is institutionalized through paid and unpaid activities that are directly related to production of low-cost crops that can compete in international markets or that support lower wages for domestic consumers.

BACKGROUND: A HIGHLY VULNERABLE LABOR FORCE

An increasing demand for manual labor in Turkey's agricultural sector, mainly for hoeing and harvesting, has inevitably boosted the demand for seasonal agricultural wage labor in recent years. Especially during peak production periods, seasonal workers usually travel with their families, farming different products and creating a migration cycle that takes six to nine months a year. Due to harsh working and living conditions — characterized by low daily wages and the insecurities



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involved in seasonal agricultural work — this work is mostly carried out by the most economically-disadvantaged groups in Turkey as a survival strategy.

The source of workers has historically shifted from one poverty-stricken group to another as the agricultural industry continues to rely on vulnerable populations for low-cost labor. Over the years, different groups have dominated the pool of available farm workers in Turkey. In the 1990s, it was internally displaced Kurds, followed by ethnically Arab Turkish citizens living in Urfa, Mardin, and Adiyaman, and, lastly, international migrants, particularly today's Syrian migrant population.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this brief are based on fieldwork carried out by a team in the rural tent areas of the Adana Plain in Turkey between April 2017 and January 2018. Survey work was conducted in Arabic and included 905 people from 112 worker households, using a questionnaire with both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Fieldwork also included in-depth interviews with a total of 50 people, including 25 Syrian refugees, 10 local agricultural workers, 10 landowners, and five agricultural labor intermediaries. The sample of 905 people was distributed equally between men and women, and almost half (45.2%) were under the age of 18.

Owing to the young age composition and mostly rural background of Syrian agricultural workers, educational attainment was extremely low. Almost half of the population (47%) was illiterate and primary school graduates made up only 22.5%. Dropouts from primary school (9.8%) and secondary education (4.6%) were also high. More than half of the sample (53.6%) were agricultural workers back in Syria and 18.8% were farmers.

Data reveals distinctive characteristics of Syrian households: The average length of stay was 3.5 years, a typical household was composed of eight people, and 80% of all families were from Halep and Haseke. All of the families had stayed in refugee camps, and 17% were not registered with Turkish authorities and had no identification cards.

HOW VULNERABILITIES AFFECT WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE WORKFORCE

The recent addition of female Syrian refugees to the agricultural labor force in Turkey has diversified the labor pool and served as a major supply-side strategy used by Syrians to compete for agricultural jobs. However, the fact that women and children comprise the majority of this workforce indicates that this labor pool has thrived primarily because of the intersecting vulnerabilities of women and children.

Feminization is now visible in the number of women who work in agriculture as well as in discourse surrounding the “best worker” debate. In our sample of 112 Syrian households surveyed, 56% of women were engaged in agricultural work (254 out of 453 women). The rate for girls aged 6–14 was 49.3% and increased to 89.7% for girls aged 15–17. Girls tend to work in high numbers until the age of marriage. This may be due, in part, to how agriculture is believed to be women's work within the Turkish culture. For example, one *dayıbaşı*¹ (a labor intermediary) in Adana, (53 years old with 20 years of experience) explained how he forms his worker teams, showing a preference for female workers:

“Everyone knows that women are the main workers. When forming our worker teams, we always seek to have women. Otherwise, when there are no women, no work gets done at all. They work hard and fast. They are diligent at what they do. Young men can be troublemakers from time to time, but women and girls are easily controlled!”

As this labor intermediary noted, women are perceived as ideal workers because of their hard work ethic and the ease with which they can be managed.

Notably, Syrian women continuously maintained that their lives back in Syria were radically different. For example, a mother of five discussed her changing work pattern and roles as follows:

“Back in Syria, only men worked, and one income was enough to support a family. My husband was a butcher and we had a small plot of land in the village we lived in. I used to do the work in our garden and look after my family. ... Here the whole family has to work, but it is still not enough to support us. Men, women, boys and girls, all work!”

ONE IMPACT: WAGES ARE DECREASING WHILE PROFITS ARE RISING

Competition for existing jobs between Syrian and Turkish workers mostly results in decreased wages and increased profits for farm owners and traders. Decreasing workers' wages, however, mean that workers have to work longer hours and more members of a family have to work to meet their subsistence level. In a work regime where workers are already working up to their physical limits, the only strategy is to draw on the labor of almost all family members as much as possible. An 18-year-old girl explains her situation:

“I would have never worked if we were back in Syria. Only my father would go to work. Here, life is so expensive and we have nothing. We all have to work. My brother who is 12 years old started to go to the fields this year. We all need to work. My father has a heart condition and is too old to work in a field.”

ANOTHER IMPACT: DOUBLED RESPONSIBILITIES FOR WOMEN

Migrant women face the double burden of juggling agricultural work and domestic responsibilities at home even as their workloads have increased as a result of deteriorating living conditions and longer wage work times. Living in tent camps (usually made of nylon and pitched on bare ground in open air with no access

to refrigeration) makes the tasks women must undertake even harder. All the typical activities of a household — such as cooking, doing laundry, taking care of children, gathering wood for fuel, carrying water, taking care of oneself, and ensuring basic hygiene — are more exhausting and take more time. These responsibilities fall unevenly on the shoulders of women and girls. A 25-year-old Syrian mother of three described her situation:

“We used to have a nice house with a garden. Now, look at us: We live in this dust and mud. I have to carry water to cook and other things. ... It is hard to adapt living in these conditions. It is difficult to protect ourselves from all sorts of dangers, such as floods, insects, snakes.”

Women's unpaid domestic responsibilities are as vital to seasonal agricultural work as the activities done in the fields and on farms. Worker family movement from one province to another — which involves carrying all household possessions so that they can construct a home in a new tent camp — requires women to mobilize their domestic duties so that workers can be released to toil in the fields. Therefore, domestic responsibilities can be seen as the main engine of seasonal agricultural work based on a low-cost labor pool.

PATRIARCHAL SOLIDARITY HELPS CONTROL FEMALE LABOR

Even though the time Syrian women spend on paid and unpaid work increased greatly after migrating to Turkey, their labor is controlled by both the patriarchal and capitalistic realities operating in their new communities. The result is that women exert little control over their income or labor.

The imposition of patriarchal control over female labor and earnings is mostly the result of how agricultural work is managed and controlled by a group of men who together form a patriarchal solidarity. This patriarch includes the male heads of households, labor intermediaries, and landowners. For example, the decision of

who will work in a given family is made by male family heads and labor intermediaries. Even if adult men are not working, and the livelihood of the household is provided by women and children, the matter of how many and which individuals from a household will work outside the home is decided in male-dominated settings.

Furthermore, intermediaries pay wages directly to the heads of households, bypassing female and child workers. Women's labor also serves as the invisible foundation of the negotiation process between the male heads of households, male labor intermediaries, and male landowners. In short, patriarchal solidarity between men controls the work of Syrian women and demands their submission, even as men benefit from the fruits of women's labor.

CONTROLLING FEMALE WORKERS THROUGH PAYMENT METHODS

The wage payment system used by the Turkish agricultural system is also a way to exert control over primarily female workers. Wages are determined daily, and workers are entitled to wages based on each day of work completed. However, workers never see this cash. Instead, agricultural labor intermediaries agree to pay families a certain wage at the beginning of the season before they even travel. When the work commences, the intermediaries give each worker a wage card (a card with the intermediary's name and picture) for each completed work day. After a day's work, the male head of their household collects the wage cards from the women and children in their families and keeps track of the wage system. Meanwhile, the intermediary tallies expenses for each family including charges for electricity, water, food, and more.

When the time comes for a cash payment, a deduction for tallied expenses is made, and the remaining sum is paid. Male heads of households usually receive their families' wages from the agricultural intermediary after the employers have sold their product and received payment due. With almost no exception — even in cases where mostly women and children work —

“the father” receives the wage cards and, eventually, the payment. In this manner, male agricultural intermediaries reinforce the patriarchal hegemony.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The work of female Syrian refugees in the realms of production, domestic responsibilities, and other unpaid labor are vital to the production of low-cost agricultural products in Turkey and are at the center of survival strategies for Syrian families. The participation of women and children in Turkish agricultural labor markets is easily controlled by cooperation between patriarchal relations and capitalist exploitation. All of these factors have led to the intensification of women's gendered subordination.

The increased workload for Syrian women — both in paid and unpaid labor sectors during the post-migration process — has illustrated that the survival of Syrian families relies not only on the longer hours that women work in agriculture and domestic activities, but also on the exertion of stricter control over women and their labor. Therefore, improving the status of women is crucial for enhancing the resilience of migrant groups. However, creating policy recommendations to accomplish this goal is a complex and multifaceted endeavor that requires significant structural changes. Here are some Turkey-specific recommendations:

- Create decent work conditions for refugees through the formalization and regularization of informal sectors in Turkey.
- Allow easier access to work permits so that refugees can benefit from formal employment conditions.
- Provide women and worker families with access to more facilities and utilities that lighten their unpaid workload, such as childcare facilities, soup kitchens, laundry, running water, and electricity.
- Mandate decent accommodation conditions in workers camps, reduce

allowable working hours within national legal limits, and improve working conditions for workers engaged in seasonal agricultural work.

- Furnish workers, especially women, with protective equipment and clothes to reduce the dangers of agricultural work, such as heat, dust, pesticides, and other chemicals.
- Formalize individualized wage payments to secure women's access to cash payments.

ENDNOTES

1. This is the local Turkish name given to labor intermediaries organizing labor supply and demand in agricultural labor markets. Dayıbaşı is usually a person commanding a large group of workers and allocating them to different work in the fields.

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Cite as:

Dedeoğlu, Saniye. 2023. *Intersecting Vulnerabilities: Syrian Refugee Women and Turkey's Agricultural Workforce*. Policy brief no. 03.17.23. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.