

## **Coping with Intersecting Vulnerabilities: Syrian Refugee Women Working in Textile Workshops in Istanbul**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on the intersecting vulnerabilities of Syrian women refugee workers in Istanbul and the practices they have developed and employed to cope with them. In the particular case of women refugee workers, the intersection of gender, labor, and refugee status creates overlapping vulnerabilities that invoke an understanding of the multidimensionality of women's adverse experiences and coping practices. Thus, an exploratory research design was adopted to investigate how and to what extent the intersecting content of vulnerabilities is reflected in the coping practices of women refugee workers. In 2011, Turkey opened its doors to Syrian refugees fleeing the war in their country. However, with high unemployment rates and the prevalence of informal work, the situation Turkey offers refugees is far from an ideal employment context and can have devastating effects, particularly on women refugee workers. It is well known that they earn less than the minimum wage, work very long hours, and are exposed to ill treatment in the workplace. However, the ways in which they cope with these issues remain a mystery. To understand this, we used a qualitative method to collect data. We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 Syrian women working in textile workshops in the Zeytinburnu District of Istanbul. A feminist intersectional approach informed the content of this research. The findings show how intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by women refugee workers directly and greatly affect their coping practices. The findings further reveal that women refugee workers' coping practices also have an intersectional content.

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### **Key words**

Syrian women refugee workers, intersecting vulnerabilities, intersecting coping practices, textile workshops

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## Introduction

Caught in the middle of the conflict between the regime and the opposition in 2011, millions of Syrians had to leave their country in search of safety and opportunities. Located on Syria's northern border, Turkey is one of the host countries and is now home to nearly four million Syrian refugees,<sup>1</sup> half of whom are women and girls (European Commission Factsheet, 2021). Language barriers, professional deficiencies, and irregular legal status have pushed refugees into the informal labor market. In the textile industry, where refugee workers are concentrated, more than ninety-seven percent of Syrians work informally (ILO, 2017). Most Syrians work long hours and earn less than the minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> Compared to Syrian men, Syrian women must accept work in more difficult conditions and for much lower wages (Caro, 2020, p. 18).<sup>3</sup>

A significant number of studies reveal that compared to other workers, women refugee workers are at greater risk of exploitation, abuse, and violence (Pombo, 2015; Von Hase, Stewart-Evans, Volpe, & Kuschminder, 2021). A significant number of Syrian women in Turkey are of working age (Oktay, 2014), most of whom work 10-12 hours a day non-stop for low wages (Kaya & Demirağ, 2016, p. 164; Körukmez, Karakılıç, & Daniş, 2020, p. 27). They face gender-based and refugee status-based social exclusion, discrimination, and violence in the workplace (Kaya & Demirağ, 2016, pp. 165-66) and also have difficulty gaining access to employment, safe housing, childcare services, free legal counseling, and psychosocial support (Easton Calabria, Tong, & Topgul, 2018, p. 7; Yücel, Utas, Luchsinger,

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term “refugee” refers to Syrian nationals who have fled the war in their country to seek protection in Turkey. It should be noted, however, that they do not have legal refugee status, as a result of Turkey’s geographic limitation to its ratification of the 1951 Geneva Convention (for details of Turkey’s interpretation of the convention, see the official website of the Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management). Yet, Syrian people seeking safety in Turkey since the war broke out are referred as “refugees” in both Turkish (see the Turkish President’s speech, “Turkey will not send”, 2022) and international contexts (see United Nations, European Union, and World Bank reports and news on the subject, such as Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2021; “Ten years on,” 2021).

<sup>2</sup> As of May 2022, the national minimum wage in Turkey is 4,253.40 Turkish liras per month (around USD300)

<sup>3</sup> The textile sector in Turkey provides the largest amount of women’s employment in Turkey with 41% of total women’s employment (Sosyal Güvenlik Kurumu, 2018). However, this only takes account of women working formally. It is well known that a large number of women are employed informally in textile workshops (Acar, Çakır, Mutlutürk, Topal, Salı, & Yaman, 2020).

Vurgun Kavlak, Bjorg Kristjansdottir, & Freizer, 2018, pp. 62-64).

While the intersectionality of multiple identities makes refugee women more vulnerable to the unfavorable impacts of the informal labor market (Duran, 2018, p. 56), it is interesting that most plan to stay in Turkey despite adverse working and living conditions (Korkmaz, 2018, p. 105; Aydemir & Aydemir, 2020, p. 12). Certain coping practices employed by the refugees, such as benefiting from the informal economy in particular ways (i.e. starting a new business), play a crucial role in their decision to stay in the host country whether it provides them good opportunities or not (Clemens, Huang, & Graham, 2018). The tendency to stay in the host country indicates that refugee women are not simply victims of disparity, discrimination, or deprivation. It is also well-accepted that they are also agents of their lives who actively engage in developing strategies to cope with vulnerabilities (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021, p. 2).

There is considerable literature on refugee women's coping strategies and the questions of how they cope with racism (Braun-Lewensohn, Abu-Kaf, & Al-Said, 2019), violence (Erez & Ammar, 2003), and poverty (Snel & Staring, 2001; Peri, 2018) have been answered in various ways. Additionally, methods of coping with other vulnerable situations, such as natural disasters, climate change, and separation from family (Makabenta & Garces-Ozanne, 2019) have been explored in various geographical and cultural contexts.

However, the literature on this topic has two major limitations, lacking either a critical gender perspective or an intersectional understanding of vulnerabilities. The literature has been dominated by research adopting a unidimensional approach and gender-blind lenses, essentially a male-centric perspective. Thus, it fails to address the multiplicity of the complex and unique reality of women refugee workers' vulnerabilities and coping practices.

This is also evident in the case of Turkey. In the relevant literature, research investigating the intersection of gender with other social structures, such as ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, labor, and refugee status, and how this affects women's lives, is very limited. In terms of coping studies, it is the gender-based intersectional approach that reveals how women's ways of coping with issues dramatically differ from men's. Drawing on the intersection of gender and immigration, Uçar (2020), for instance, focuses on refugee women engaged in piecework at home and reveals how they benefit from their homes as a mechanism that makes them invisible, providing them with protection from outside risks of racism and gender-based violence, while men work outside. In another study, Sevlü (2020) found that refugee women employ indifference and submission as coping strategies for

social exclusion and discrimination. Another rare study highlights how hijaps (Islamic head covering) and marriage are turned into practices coping with discrimination and violence in Syrian refugee women's lives (Herwig, 2017). Employing the term "coping" from health psychology, such works have investigated refugee women's emotional reactions to external stressors.

A broad theoretical debate on coping exists in the social sciences<sup>4</sup> and refers to a wide range of contexts, including social psychology (Carr & Umberson, 2013), political science (Leifer, 2000), and sociology (Thoits, 1995). Among these, the majority of studies use the term to mean the cognitive and emotional efforts of individuals to manage external difficulties (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). However, it should be noted that in this paper we use the term "coping" to mean practical attempts, rather than cognitive and emotional efforts. By this, we emphasize the difference between "coping" as a "strategy" which has long-term psychological effects and "coping" as a "practice" which has short-term concrete effects on the daily lives of individuals. In this study, we use the term with the latter meaning.

In light of the gaps in the literature mentioned above, this paper explores the intersecting vulnerabilities of Syrian women refugee workers in Istanbul and the practices they have developed and employed to cope with them. Demonstrating the relationship between gender, labor, and refugee experiences, this study highlights the distinctive characteristics of Syrian women workers' vulnerabilities related to their work and investigates how and to what extent the intersecting content of vulnerabilities is reflected in their coping practices.

In the following section, we discuss our methodology, including descriptions of our participants, our field, the research method, the data analysis, and our overall approach. We then discuss our findings and finish with our conclusions.

## Methodology

### The Participants

During March and April 2022, we conducted interviews with 13 Syrian women refugee workers from three textile workshops in Istanbul's Zeytinburnu District.

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive view of the subject, see Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; and Parker & Endler, 1992. For more recent debates, see Krohne, 2002, and Locke & Sadler, 2007.

All arrived in Turkey after 2011. We reached the women through personal relationships and using the snowballing method. One of the authors has close relatives living in Zeytinburnu who have contact with people working in the textile workshops. Introducing us to some of the women refugee workers, those contacts functioned as “mutual acquaintances” in reaching the participants. There is a considerable literature on the role of “mutual acquaintances” in qualitative research (i.e. Brewis, 2014; Kent, Davis, & Shapiro, 1981; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2013) which also refers to the widespread use of this method by researchers.

Finding volunteers to participate in the study was a challenging task. Women refugee workers had concerns because of their informal working conditions. Many of the women we invited to participate in the research rejected our offer. However, we were able to counteract this by contacting potential informants through mutual acquaintances, thereby creating a sense of trust. Thus, mutual acquaintances acted as gatekeepers in reaching women refugee workers and eight participants were recruited in this way. We then extended our participant pool using a snowballing technique, which is the most widely used participant recruitment method in qualitative research (Etikan, Alkassim, & Abubakar, 2016, p. 6).

Participants’ personal characteristics varied in terms of educational and occupational backgrounds, marital status, and age. All were over the age of 18; the vast majority were aged between 20 and 35 and only two (aged 41 and 45) were over 40. Thus, the age distribution of our informants seems compatible with the textile sector’s preference for young workers (Mutlu, Mısırlı, Kahveci, Akyol, Erol, Gümüşcan, & Salman, 2018). All but four participants were married with children. Of those four, two had lost their husbands. The other two were single and living with their parents.

Of the 13 participants, five had primary, four had secondary, and one had high school education. Two had dropped out of primary school and one had received no institutional education. Overall, our participants’ education level was quite low. As we discuss later in this paper, compared to the national minimum wage, the participants’ wages were also very low. These two data seem compatible with research indicating a correlation between low education level and low wages in the context of women refugee workers (Mamgain & Collins, 2003, p. 113). All but three informants said that they had no prior employment background. However, their narratives highlight the fact that a significant number of them (seven of the 13) had been unpaid family workers on their family farms in Syria.

## The District

Characterized by a flexible employment structure, precarious and exploitative working conditions, and low wages, the textile industry currently employs a significant number of refugee women in Turkey (Mutlu et al., 2018). Recently, with its huge number of textile workshops, Istanbul has become the center of textile production. In addition, hosting 537,000 Syrian refugees, Istanbul is the most popular city among refugees (Mülteçiler Derneği, 2022). However, due to the prevailing informality of the sector, there are no complete data on the textile workshops and workers in the Zeytinburnu district or the city as a whole. Despite the lack of official data, Zeytinburnu is a district known for its numerous textile workshops located in apartment basements and employing a large number of refugees, a frequent topic in academic papers and the foreign press (“In Turkey, a Syrian child has to work to survive,” 2016; “Istanbul letter: Sweatshops, not school await refugee children,” 2016; Mutlu et al., 2018; Reuters, 2016; Toksöz, Erdoğan, & Kaşka, 2012).

## The Research Method and Data Analysis

As a qualitative method of giving voice to people who are not often heard (Sprague, 2005, p. 120), we conducted in-depth interviews to give women the opportunity to express themselves in a long and uninterrupted way. For the sake of research from a feminist perspective, we were aware of “the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women’s own descriptions and accounts” (Reinharz & Chase, 2003, p. 74). Interviews were therefore the most appropriate research method for this study.

We asked the participants open-ended questions about the challenges they faced in their working lives and how they coped with them. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Some of our interviewees spoke Turkish only a little, while others spoke it fluently. An interpreter who spoke Arabic and Kurdish was present during all the interviews. All interviewees were informed about the research. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured. Throughout the study, we used pseudonyms to refer to the participants.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. After identifying significant themes from the data, we performed a descriptive analysis and went beyond that with an interpretive discussion. We summarize our findings in the conclusion. This study was approved by the Erciyes University Research Ethics Committee.

## Researching From a Feminist Intersectional Approach

In traditional social science research, women's experiences are not seen as subjects of knowledge; they are often ignored, misinterpreted, or devalued (Oakley, 1998, p. 709; Jaggar, 2008, p. 35). To this end, we adopted a feminist perspective to privilege women's experiences as subjects of knowledge production (Smith, 2008, pp. 39–43). Additionally, the intersectional nature of the subject of this particular topic requires an intersectional approach.

In this research, the intersection of gender, labor, and refugee status creates overlapping experiences containing different social, cultural, and economic dynamics, which inherently invokes an intersectional approach (Collins, 1998). Such an approach allows researchers to conceptualize identities, such as gender, class, race, and immigration, as inseparable parts of a whole and see the interaction between them. It also highlights the overlapping nature of social identities and how this creates multidimensional experiences of discrimination. It thus provides an understanding of the interaction between identities from a broader perspective (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001).

Furthermore, feminist intersectionality highlights the fact that women are not a homogeneous group but have diverse backgrounds, such as class, race, and religion (Gouws, 2017). Allowing the multidimensionality of women's oppression to be seen, it also paves the way to understanding the compounding nature of the strategies employed by women to cope with challenges. As discussed further in this paper, as well as the vulnerabilities experienced by women, their strategies to cope with them are also intersectional.

## Findings and Discussions

We discuss our research findings in two sections. The first focuses on the process of finding a job. It discusses the challenges faced by the participants and the practices they developed to cope with them throughout this process. The second section concerns the work-related issues that our participants experienced and how they coped with them. This second section is divided into three subsections: the first focuses on how women cope with their lack of professional skills, the second discusses how they deal with the issue of low wages, and the final subsection centers on women's ways of coping with discrimination and harassment at work.

## Coping with Limited Access to Employment: Finding a Job through Social Networks

Informants defined the process of finding a job as one of the most challenging issues faced after resettlement. Previous research on the topic reveals that it is an extremely arduous path for refugee women, for various reasons,<sup>5</sup> that often ends with informal jobs (Archer, Hollingworth, Maylor, Sheibani, & Kowarzik, 2005; Senthana, 2019). Correspondingly, all our informants said that they work without contracts or social security.

The vast majority of the informants said that they found jobs through their acquaintances. They often had strong ties with people who worked in that particular job or were familiar with it. Izar said, for instance: “I found the job thanks to my sister-in-law. She was working there. I said, ‘Find me a job’. I asked her to talk to her head worker.”

The person who helped Izar find a job was a close relative and the majority of the participants (eight out of 13) found their jobs through their relatives. The relationship between them was usually close, including sisters, cousins, and sisters-in-law. Similarly, for instance, Eva said that her cousins helped her find the job: “I have two cousins working already. I asked them if [the employer] would hire me too.”

Apart from kinship, neighborhoods could also create an opportunity for refugee women to find jobs, as some of the respondents revealed. Zahra described this at length:

My neighbor was working there. I asked her if they would hire me too. She asked them. They called me there the next day. I started working. Maybe they [the employer] would not have hired me if it were not for her. I looked for a job for a long time. I wandered the streets. I went in everywhere I saw. I asked everyone. I said “I need a job.” I said I was hardworking. But there were no jobs. If it wasn’t for my neighbor, maybe I would still be looking for a job. Finding a job is not easy.

Thus, the respondents’ narratives reveal that an acquaintance with an existing

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<sup>5</sup> Building on research which covers Syrian refugee women in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, The World Bank Report reveals that “in addition to legal restrictions, language and travel barriers, and poor match between skills and labor market needs” limit women’s access to employment. Furthermore, according to the report, “women are more limited by lack of safe, reliable transportation; gender wage discrimination; sexual harassment; and cultural barriers, and they have more household and childcare responsibilities” (Datta, Constant, Thawesaengskulthai, & Acheson-Field, 2020, p. 1).



worker in a particular workplace is considered a significant reference. Our respondents' narratives generally revealed how they instrumentalized their close relationships to find a job. Utilizing kinship, friendship, and neighborhood shows how it turns into a coping practice to find a job in a context in which refugee women's access to employment is limited.

The role of social networks in resettlement is well known (Beaman, 2012; Lamba & Krahn, 2003). For instance, refugees tend to resettle in cities where their relatives live (Körükmez et al., 2020, p. 20). An important reason for this is that kinship ties play an important role in finding a job, as it is difficult for refugees to find work and informal jobs require social networking. However, looking at the overall picture, one can observe that gender makes an important difference in the usage and content of social networks as a coping practice. For instance, when searching for a job, refugee men are able to utilize a wider social network, including people they have not previously been familiar with (Mutlu et al., 2018) while, as our participants' cases highlight, the refugee women's network is limited to a very close circle of acquaintances, mostly relatives and neighbors from the same nation-based circles. Thus, while refugee men can benefit from weaker and looser ties to find employment, refugee women's access to work, as our respondents' narratives highlight, requires stronger and closer connections. This reveals that women's networks are also expected to be limited to people of the same nation, Syrians in this particular case.

Another critical point revealed is that, in each case, the friends and neighbors who helped the participants find a job were women. Therefore, women's social networks are also limited by gender. This is consistent with classical patriarchal gender norms<sup>6</sup> that allow women a very limited women-only space in which to socialize.

In summary, our participants' accounts show how they functionalized their social networks as a coping practice within the limits drawn by the intersectional vulnerabilities they experienced. According to this, the participants being Syrian, refugees, workers, and women was directly reflected in their coping practices in this particular process.

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<sup>6</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, p. 278-79) defined classic patriarchy as a system of male dominance, characteristic of Muslim societies in the Middle East, in which girls are given away in marriage at a young age into households headed by their husbands' father where they are subordinate to all the men. In the family, the husband is responsible for a woman's honor. Kandiyoti describes classic patriarchy using the concepts of subservience and manipulation (ibid., p. 278).

## Workplace-related Issues and Coping Practices

### Coping with lack of professional skills: Overcoming challenges through solidarity

The informants had neither the professional skills nor the training related to their current jobs. That employers in informal work areas prefer unskilled and uneducated labor has been established<sup>7</sup> (Hofman & Steijn, 2003). On the one hand, the deficiencies in the refugee women's backgrounds helped them get these particular jobs but, as the participants mentioned, they were expected to learn the required skills in a very limited time. Although all the informants were familiar with basic sewing skills, only one had used a sewing machine prior to getting the job. They had to learn complex sewing methods using a sewing machine within a given time.

The informants' narratives revealed that women overcame such obstacles by helping each other. Zahra said:

When I first started to work, I did not know anything at all. Sewing machine, how to use it, how to insert the needle, what is one thread, what is double-thread... How many times I did I stick a needle through my fingers? I used to be covered in sweat from stress. I thought I wouldn't be able to learn. My friends showed me how to use the machine. Also, I watched them as they sewed. Then I started sewing properly.

It seems that employers, in their search for cheap labor, are willing to allow workers to go through such a learning process. However, what is of great importance here is that "solidarity among women" emerges as a coping practice for women refugee workers. Women's shared interests and common experiences lead them to cooperate. Referring to the other women at work, Eva said, "I can tell, during the first two days they did most of the job." What Eva said further might be pointing out that this kind of solidarity is common among them: "Now I teach

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the paper, we use the phrase "informal work" instead of "informal sector." Referring to the ILO's definition of the phrase, Dedeoğlu (2011, p. 27) warns about the misleading use of "informal sector." According to this, using the term "masks the diversity and complexity of the work arrangements and processes, and seems to imply (incorrectly) that such processes are limited to one sector" (ibid.). Thus, we prefer to use "informal work" which means work "done by all wage workers who work without a minimum wage, assured work, or benefits, whether they work for formal or informal firms" (ibid., citing from Chen, Jhabvala & Lund, 2001).

the friends who are new how to use the sewing machine.”

In the narratives, “friends” included particular Syrian neighbors and relatives who shared similar working and living conditions with the informants. Thus, the accounts show that solidarity among Syrian women refugee workers increases, at the intersection of gender, labor, and refugee status, as a way of coping with lack of professional skills.

Other studies claim the opposite. For instance, in her study of Syrian refugee women, Uçar (2020, p. 51) argued that poverty weakens social ties and undermines the desire for solidarity among refugees. However, our study shows that empathy arising from common experiences increases solidarity among women. The difference in results seems to be due to the fact that as the intersecting components of vulnerabilities vary by context, so do the refugee women’s responses to those contexts. In our participants’ case, working in the same workplace was added to being a woman and a Syrian refugee, and this intersection created solidarity.

Although “solidarity” stands out as one of the key concepts in related studies, it mostly refers to non-governmental organizations that show solidarity with refugee women. Approaches that ignore the capacity of refugee women to create solidarity among themselves is challenged by our participants’ accounts on how they help each other without expecting anything in turn.

### **Coping with low wages: Additional income-generating informal activities**

Many studies have confirmed the prevalence of low wages in informal work (Barın, 2015; Kaya & Demirağ, 2016; Uçar, 2020). It is also known that the predictors of higher wages for refugees differ according to gender (Mamgain & Collins, 2003, p. 113). For instance, in a study of the US labor market in Portland, Maine, Mamgain and Collins (2003, p. 113) found that for refugee men, the best predictor for higher wages was “English proficiency,” whereas it was “education” for refugee women. Our participants’ descriptions of the wages paid also highlight this fact. All indicated that they suffer the most from low wages. All informants received between 1.500 and 2.500 Turkish liras a month, far below the national poverty line.<sup>8</sup> “When I first got the job I was told I would get paid 2.000 liras. But they never paid me that. They pay me 1.800 liras. We work hard for very little money.

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<sup>8</sup> The Turkish Confederation of Trade Unions declared that the poverty line in Turkey in 2022 is 16.052 Turkish liras per month (around USD864) (“Turk-Is: Aclik Siniri”, 2022) which is nearly four times the minimum wage.

We can't afford the bills, the rent, children's needs. I can't afford anything with this amount of money but bread and cheese." (Mina)

Uncertain wages were also a subject of complaint: "They do not pay me the same all the time. I get 1.500 liras often. I get 1.750 liras sometimes. [...]. It is too little money. It is not enough for anything." (Fatma)

The incomes of working refugee women are often insufficient to meet their needs. This is especially so for women who do not have a spouse and have to take care of their children; they cannot pay their bills and rent with a single income and cannot afford to keep their children's nutrition at a healthy level (Barin, 2015, p. 42; Uçar, 2020, p. 45). This is clear from our respondents' accounts. According to the coping strategy index, buying food on credit, making children work, selling household assets, and begging are the most common behaviors among refugee women to cope with low wages (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016, p. 32). Our informants' narratives further reveal that they generate additional income through certain informal activities. For instance, they take possession of leftover materials in the workplace. Reshaping this fabric provides some personal and family related needs.

We have a lot of fabrics left. They are not used. They throw them away. They leave them on the vacant lot behind [the workplace]. The garbage truck picks them up and takes them away. I select from the good ones. I sew diapers with them for my son. I make them [into] handkerchiefs. I make washcloths and towels to use in the kitchen (Zana).

Sometimes they sold them to earn some money: "A friend of mine sews nice t-shirts and shorts for kids with the fabric left. She sells them. It earns only a little, but it is money anyway. She takes home one more loaf of bread." (Zana)

These are distinctive coping practices. They seem unique to women who are challenged by very difficult financial conditions. When their conditions combined with the resources at their disposal, such unique methods emerged, pointing to the capacity of refugee women "to act within structural conditions" (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021, p. 1).

### **Coping with sexual harassment in the workplace: Support from patriarchal bonds**

Harassment is characterized by "unwanted and inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances" in a workplace or social situation (Staruch & Eccles, 2022, p. n/a). Recent studies have shown that refugee women are frequently exposed to harassment in the workplace in host countries (Pittaway, Bell, & Bartolomei, 2017;

Rohwerder, 2018). Our interviewees also complained about harassment in the workshops.

A significant number of our informants mentioned that sexual harassment was widespread in workshops. Ayla's account, for instance, indicates this as follows: "[Male workers] don't care if you're married or single. They stare [while working]. They brush against you as they pass by. They tell each other abusive jokes loudly. They use obscene language loudly. It happens all the time." Indeed, in the case of refugee women, marriage does not protect them from sexual abuse (Kaya & Demirağ, 2016, p. 166).

There were also informants who shared their personal experience. For instance, Zilan told about her experience with an abusive man at her workshop: "He used to look at me and make embarrassing jokes. He used to use obscene language. His friends said once 'don't do it, it is a shame.' He said 'she doesn't understand anyway, she is Syrian.' But I do understand. I was irritated by his jokes." Zilan's account is in line with research showing that being stigmatized as a "Syrian woman" legitimizes the harassment and abuse of refugee women by local men<sup>9</sup> (Gönül, 2020, p. 92). In certain cases, in order to avoid harassment, refugee women hide the fact that they are from Syria (Körükmez et al., 2020, p. 4).

When asked if she complained about him, Zilan answered, "I could not complain about him. Because then they tell you that you can leave. Because he is Turkish and you are Syrian." Zilan thought that being Syrian bears pejorative connotations among local people. Therefore, being Syrian appears to be an obstacle to women's pursuit of their rights.

One interviewee said that she was harassed by an employer: "I told him I was looking for a job. He took me to his room. He locked the door and approached me. When I realized that he was going to hug me, I screamed. He unlocked the door right away. He said 'go.'" (Nadina)

In such situations, women might choose to remain silent and not react to avoid social consequences. In certain cases, silence is considered a coping strategy (Tankink & Richters, 2007). However, passivity can also allow abusive behavior to continue. We wanted to determine if the participants reacted against it and if they did, how. In most accounts, seeking help from male relatives came to the fore as a method of coping with sexual harassment. For instance, Zilan continued her narrative as follows: "I asked my brother to pick me up after the shifts. My house is

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed study on local people's perception of refugee women in Turkey, see Saygi, 2020.

very close, two blocks away. But I need my brother to do this ... he does not disturb me anymore. He sees my brother next to me every evening. He does not even look up at me.”

Likewise, Fatma’s older son visited his mother at work during lunchtime or picked her up after the shift. This was a sign of her “being under protection”: “When [men] think you are unprotected, they don’t leave you alone.” Here, women’s engagement with a patriarchal bargain<sup>10</sup> becomes obvious. Accordingly, remaining within the bounds of gender-based roles, women use patriarchal protection against a patriarchal attack, in this case, sexual harassment.

### Conclusion

This paper focuses on the subjectivities of Syrian women refugee workers’ at the intersection of gender, labor, and refugee status. Specifically, looking at the intersecting vulnerabilities of Syrian women refugee workers in Istanbul, we investigated how and to what extent women’s intersecting vulnerabilities are reflected in their coping practices. Findings reveal that women’s intersectional vulnerabilities are directly and largely reflected in coping strategies, and women’s coping practices also have an intersectional content.

The results of this study highlight the adverse work-related conditions that heighten refugee women’s vulnerabilities: limited access to employment, lack of professional skills, low wages, and sexual harassment in the workplace. In addition, the following coping practices were highlighted: women’s limited social networks, solidarity among refugee women, additional income-generating informal activities, and support from patriarchal bonds. Adopting a critical gender perspective and intersectional understanding, this study contributes to the literature by understanding the complex, multidimensional, and unique nature of the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of women refugee workers.

In this study, we did not discuss whether women were empowered by the coping practices they developed; the focus was limited to the short-term effects of these practices. Their potential to create a positive transformation in women refugee workers’ lives is unknown. However, the findings provide an important resource for future studies focusing on this question.

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<sup>10</sup> “Patriarchal bargain” refers to the process through which women benefit from the short-term advantages of patriarchy in exchange for adapting to existing gender roles (Kandiyoti, 1988). Based on this concept, we use it here to mean that women benefit from patriarchal tools to meet their security needs.

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