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SSN

THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET *Programme*



Exploring Labor Market Participation of Female ESSN Recipients

2nd Round of Focus Group Discussion Report

Jul'24



KIZILAYKART
Cash Based Assistance
Programmes



Exploring Labor Market Participation of Female ESSN Recipients

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Jul' 24



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
İŞKUR	Türkiye İş Kurumu (Turkish Employment Agency)
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
PAB	Pre-Assistance Baseline
SSN	The Social Safety Net Programme
TRC	Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay)

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Executive Summary



This study aims to explore the participation of female ESSN recipients in the labor market, examining their readiness and willingness to work, as well as their skills, job preferences, and livelihood opportunities. It also seeks to understand the challenges they face in accessing employment, and identify key factors influencing their income generation and employability. As a result of the focus group discussions conducted, it was identified that women's desire to participate in the labour force has increased compared to previous years. However, due to their responsibilities related to childcare and housework, only a few women work which many women prefer to work from home or in workplaces close to home. The challenges hindering women's participation in the formal labour force such as lack of Turkish language, childcare responsibilities, limited skills and work experience, difficult working conditions and accreditation issues persist. Thus, environmental conditions suggest a growing trend of informal work becoming a necessity rather than a preference. Consequently, the cash assistance remains their only source of income.

Introduction

In 2023, only 6 per cent of refugee women in Türkiye were able to participate in the labour force compared to 62 per cent of refugee men.¹ According to the KIZILAYKART M&E team's 2024 analysis, 96 per cent of women receiving the Social Safety Net (SSN) assistance do not participate in the labor force.² Refugee women in Türkiye encounter multiple barriers to labor market participation, including language difficulties, lack of legal protections, and cultural discrimination. Those factors contribute to their underrepresentation in the workforce and limit their access to find better job opportunities.³ Thus, most of the working female refugees in the country engage in informal jobs compared to formal employment, although informal jobs offer lower salaries and no guarantee of continuity.⁴ The last FGD Report of ESSN⁵ highlights that due to issues such as childcare responsibilities, health, age, difficult working conditions and age, female recipients prefer cash assistance rather than participating in the labour force. In addition, low labour participation levels depend on limited availability of formal job opportunities, accreditation difficulties and legal adaptations in the country context, as indicated in the FGD Report in 2022.⁶ In light of above these trends, this report explores the dynamics related to the economic participation of women refugees living in Türkiye by focusing on the ESSN recipients' experiences. The specific objectives of the FGDs were to identify the opportunities and challenges perceived by refugee women in the labour market and to assess the understanding and willingness of women to participate in the labour market, both informally and formally.



¹ Murat Demirci and Murat Güray Kırdar

World Development, Volume 162 (2023), Article 106138 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106138>

² KIZILAYKART, M&E Unit Analysis, PDM Report, Unpublished.

³ GÜZEL, B., SELÇUK, O., AYGÜLER, E., (2024) "Untold Struggles: Unveiling Employment Challenges Faced by Asylum Seekers in Türkiye", Çalışma ve Toplum, C.2, S.81. s. 459-492

⁴ Murat Demirci and Murat Güray Kırdar

World Development, Volume 162 (2023), Article 106138 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106138>

⁵ Beyond Assistance: Perspectives of Refugees on Socioeconomic Environment, Emergency Social Safety Net Programme, Focus Group Discussion Series, 2023.

⁶ Livelihood Experiences of Refugees Living in Türkiye, Emergency Social Safety Net Programme, Focus Group Discussion Series, 6, 2022.

Key Findings

- Breadwinners of ESSN households are typically the son or the male head of the household, engaged in professions such as painting, plastering, shoe repairing, tailoring, and driving.
- Cash assistance is found to be insufficient to cover household needs, with rent and utility bills being the most difficult costs to manage.
- Households are being forced to cut back on children's essential needs such as food, education, and clothing, causing children to sometimes be withdrawn from school.
- Coping with financial difficulties primarily by getting into debt, spending savings, withdrawing children from school and additional work.
- Though some had vocational experience either back home or had enrolled in vocational training in Türkiye, most female recipients expressed feeling underqualified for employment and being unemployed.
- Barriers to employment for female recipients include childcare responsibilities, language barriers, tough working conditions, health issues, workplace bias, and poor qualifications.
- Female recipients believe factories and the tailoring industry offer the most accessible job opportunities for women.
- Some female recipients prefer home-based or close-by jobs, part-time employment, and female-only workplaces.
- Out of 10 female participants, 7 prefer uninsured occupations due to the shortage of KIZILAYKART cash assistance showing that cash assistance does not deter them from working but makes them reluctant to take insured jobs.



Methodology

Research Design

The research utilized a qualitative methodology through the implementation of focus group discussions (FGDs). Focus group studies collect information from a compact and varied assembly of individuals engaged in a moderated group conversation.⁷ The overall study design, including the preparation of the discussion guide, data collection, analysis and reporting were led by the Türk Kızılay Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Team.

Data Collection and Sampling

The study took place in July 2024, involving 42 female ESSN recipients from five provinces. A simple random sampling technique was utilized to select the respondents. FGD data collection was led by the Türk Kızılay Monitoring and Evaluation Team (M&E), notes were taken, and moderation was made by Türk Kızılay field staff. Along with that, data analysis was finalized by the Türk Kızılay M&E team and supported with a secondary data review. Prior to initiating the data collection process, a refresher and informational session was held, aimed at refining the questions and integrating feedback from field staff. FGDs were held face-to-face, and expert moderators from Türk Kızılay carried out the discussions with observers from MoFSS at the Türk Kızılay Community Centres in sampled locations. The discussions were performed in the Arabic language, the native tongue of the respondents. Staff from Türk Kızılay transcribed the reports using the notes taken during the sessions. Türk Kızılay Monitoring and Evaluation staff employed a qualitative content analysis method when reporting these transcriptions employing the MAXQDA Program.



7 Plummer-D'Amato, Prudence. (2008). "Focus group methodology Part 1: Considerations for design." *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 15, no. 2: 69-73.

Geographical Coverage

The FGDs were conducted in 5 provinces namely; İstanbul, İzmir, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Ankara. Selection of these provinces was guided by two main criteria: population size and the rate of job placements among recipients.

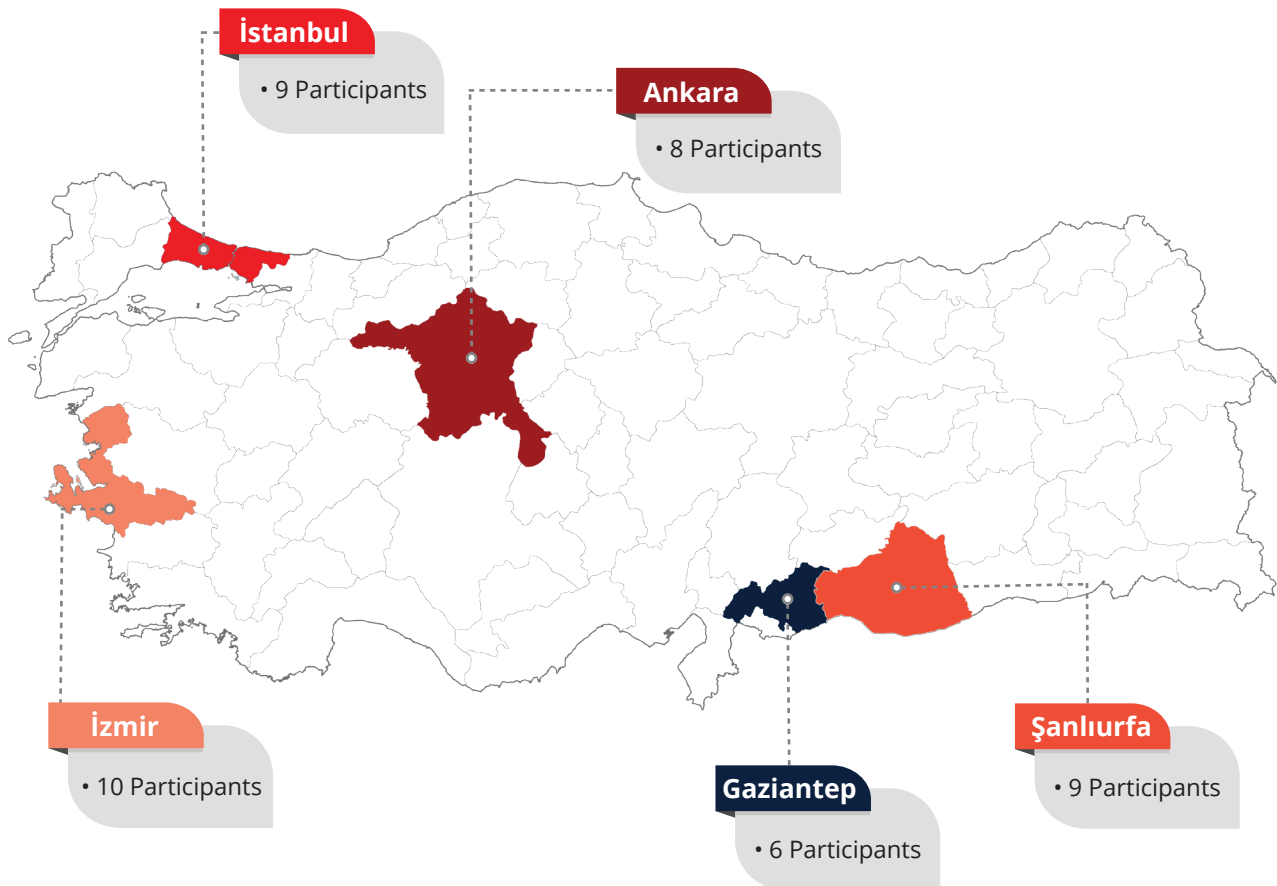


Figure 1 Geographic Area of the Study

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

Around one-third of the women participating in the FGD had no educational background. The remain has primary school degrees. Notably, 9 out of 10 women had no work experience. 67 per cent of the participating women were between 30-50 years old.

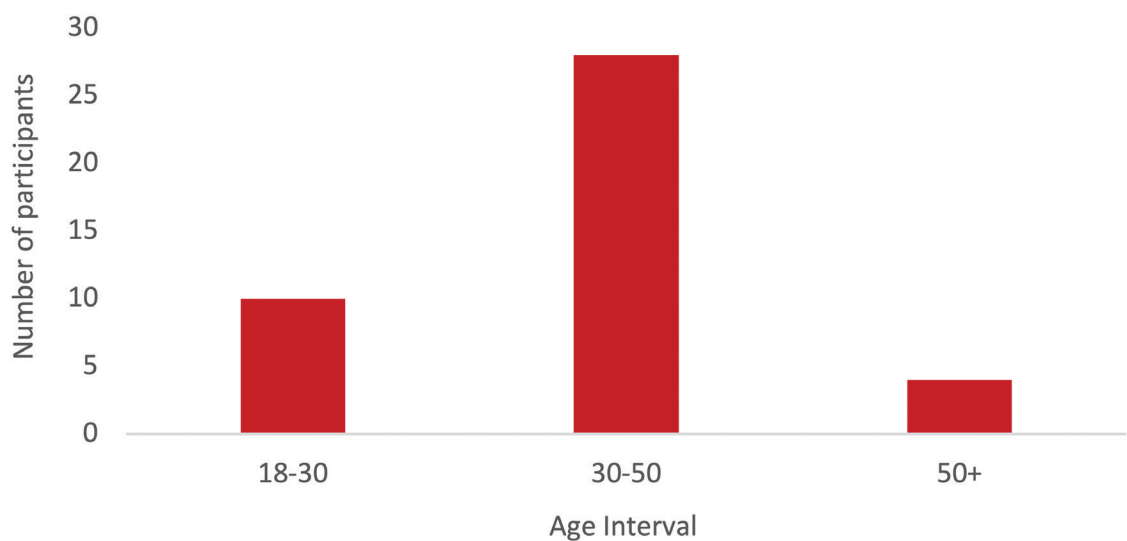


Table 2 Age Distribution of the Respondents





“Rent, medication costs, hospital expenses are really challenging us. My grandchild is 7 years old and disabled. The money we earn through labor isn’t even enough to get us through the end of the month, we have to take loans.”



Participant in Şanlıurfa

“We can’t afford it. We prioritize urgent and significant needs. We have to cut down on school and social activities.”



Participant in Gaziantep

A Glimpse into Household Working Conditions, Financial Challenges and the Effect of Cash Assistance

This section of the study presents an overview of the general living conditions and household expenses. Nearly all participants reported that the breadwinners within their households are either the son or husband, consisting of the male household members. These earners are engaged in professions such as painting, plastering, shoe repairing, tailoring, and driving. Some of them were continuing their professions from their country of origin, such as driving and taxi driving, after relocating to Türkiye. While the majority of the participants stated that the head of their households are employed in these professions, some highlighted that their household heads lack professional qualifications and rely on daily wage labor. Unskilled employment is pretty common in refugee households as the Pre-Assistance Baseline (PAB)⁸ findings also indicate that 79 per cent of ESSN recipients are engaged in unskilled work.

Participants consistently noted that the cash assistance they receive is insufficient to meet their essential needs. The most significant and burdensome expenses are rent and utilities followed by costs for medical care, food, education, and clothing. Particularly, the PAB report shows that food expenditure has the highest share in ESSN households. Food is followed by rent and clothing.

⁸ Pre-Assistance Baseline Report, Social Safety Net Programme, 2024, Unpublished.

Participants have expressed that they are compelled to cut back on every aspect of children's needs to cover household necessities. Many reported struggling even to provide sufficient food items. Education related expenses and clothing were highlighted as the most challenging needs to fulfill. To address their children's needs, participants often have to minimize their own necessities, borrow money, and in some cases, withdraw their children from school, emphasizing the hardship.



“

Life is very hard. Everything is very expensive. We have no other worker besides my spouse. My daughter has two daughters, and we cannot enroll the children in school due to financial difficulties.”



**Participant
in İstanbul**

“I had to withdraw my two children from school because I couldn't meet their needs. We can only cover less than half of their requirements. Everything was better two years ago; now we can't even afford clothes for the children. The KIZILAYKART assistance used to meet our needs more adequately, but now it doesn't cover much.”



Participant in İzmir

“I'm failing to cover my children's general and educational expenses, so I'm trying to cover their expenses by getting into debt, but it's still not enough.”



Participant in İzmir



“The landlord raised the rent from 900 TRY to 4000 TRY, we might starve but the landlord won’t wait. Last year, I had to pull 2 of my 5 children out of school because I couldn’t afford their needs. I want to educate them but I can’t meet their needs.”



Participant in İzmir

“When it’s not enough, we borrow money. But even if we borrow, what happens next month is that we have routine expenses and also the debt added on top. Therefore, the situation becomes even more difficult.”



Participant in İstanbul

“The landlord wants the rent before the due date, we are 3 families living in an apartment, he raised the rent from 13,000 to 25,000 and I had to sell my gold bracelet to cover it. My husband closed his shop and now does repair work at home, we can’t make ends meet.”



Participant in İzmir

Consequently, participants mentioned that having fewer children is seen as an advantage. Some noted that since rent and utility bills are the most burdensome expenses, children’s needs are often deprioritized, making the number of children less significant in this context. Female participants stressed that when prioritizing food and health needs for their children, clothing, and educational expenses are the first to be cut. They have also expressed their inability to provide allowances or send their children to social activities, further reflecting the financial strain they face.

Female participants have indicated that their primary coping strategy when assistance falls short is to borrow money, mainly for grocery shopping. Additionally, they reported resorting to using their savings, withdrawing children from school, taking on additional jobs, and cutting back on necessities as the most frequently used strategies to manage financial shortfalls. The PAB findings reveals that the most utilized coping strategies for ESSN households include buying food on credit, borrowing money from relatives to face basic needs and spending savings. Reduced education and health expenditures emerged as other adopted coping strategies, given the high proportion of children in recipient households.



Professional Background and Employment Status of Female ESSN Recipients

Female ESSN recipients predominantly reported that they possess no professional skills and are unemployed. Some of the participants shared that, while in their hometown, they worked as teachers, tailors, and hairdressers, yet have been unable to secure employment in Türkiye due to accreditation issues and childcare responsibilities.

Some participants disclosed that they attended vocational training courses offered at Türk Kızılay Community Centers. Although one in five participants had acquired professional skills either in their country of origin or Türkiye, they remained unemployed. These results show no critical changes since the FGD study conducted in 2021.⁹ Additionally, the majority indicated that very few women in their social circles are employed. However, a small number did mention finding work in sectors such as tailoring, factory labor, or cleaning services.

The secondary data on this issue supports these findings. The employment rate for Syrian women in Türkiye was approximately 19.6 per cent as of 2022, which was at 9.5 per cent in 2009 back in Syria. However, this figure persists significantly lower than the employment rate for Turkish women, which stood at 34.0 per cent in 2022. Among Syrian refugees, only 6 per cent of women engage in paid employment compared to 22.2 per cent of Turkish women.¹⁰ In 2023, refugee women in Türkiye find employment mainly in agriculture, manufacturing, and services, though these jobs are often informal with low wages and poor working conditions. Agriculture jobs are more accessible, especially in the Southern and Southeastern regions. The manufacturing sector, particularly textiles, employs many due to its need for low-skilled labor.¹¹

9 Exploring the Livelihoods of Women Refugees in Türkiye. A Qualitative Study on Emergency Social Safety Net(ESSN) Applicants, A Remote Focus Group Discussion Report, 2021.

10 Demirci, M., & Kırdar, M. G. (2023). The labor market integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey. *World Development*, 162, 106138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106138>

11 Republic of Türkiye. (2023). WFP Annual Country Report 2023: Country Strategic Plan 2023 - 2025.



“I was a French teacher in Syria. After coming here, I couldn’t work because my children were young. My husband had also passed away.”



Participant in Şanlıurfa

“We understand from our spouses that it is impossible for a woman with children or without a profession to find a job during this period. We don’t know the language, we don’t have a profession, how can we find a job in this situation?”



Participant in İzmir



“I have four children so I’d work from home if possible, as I don’t want to be away from them. Once, while I was out working, one child broke his arm. It might be easier to work when they’re older.”



Participant in Ankara

“One of the reasons I hesitate to work is that I am afraid of being mocked because I am Syrian. Also, the biggest obstacle to finding a job is having young children, not knowing the language, and many people around me are unable to work for the same reasons.”



Participant in İzmir

“My children are young, there is a language barrier, and the wages are very low.”



Participant in İzmir

Barriers to Employment

The vast majority of female participants stated facing challenges in accessing employment opportunities. The primary barrier identified was childcare responsibilities, compounded by the absence of relatives or close ones to help with childcare. Participants emphasized language limitations and difficult working conditions as additional hurdles to employment. Health issues were noted as another crucial impediment. Other obstacles include workplace bias against refugee women, low wages, long working hours, cultural constraints, and lack of professional qualifications. Additionally, half of the participants raised age-related challenges, noting that employment opportunities are more readily available for those aged between 18-40. However, it should be underlined that compared to FGD 2021 Report, female recipients are more willing to attend the labor force currently due to economic constraints and low transfer amount.

Consequently, flexibility for balancing work and domestic responsibilities is crucial for refugee women. Home-based work opportunities should be created and supported. Also job creation and entrepreneurship opportunities should be developed particularly through the promotion of remote jobs and digital literacy, which can serve as a bridge for refugee women into sustainable employment alternatives.

Additional Information on Refugee Employability

The Syrians under Temporary Protection and People under International Protection can register and benefit from the services of İŞKUR, the Turkish Employment Agency, after six months of residence in Türkiye.¹² Such services include counseling, job matching, skills training, entrepreneurship support, on-the-job training, and job placement support. They can be enrolled in technical and vocational training and apprenticeship schemes offered by the Ministry of National Education. In addition, they can start and develop their businesses.



¹² <https://www.csgeb.gov.tr/digm-en/contents/working-life-and-social-security-in-turkiye/working-life-in-turkiye/iskur/>



“I know both Turkish and Arabic. Therefore, I can find a job easily. In addition, diplomas and certificates can make it even easier to find a job.”



Participant in Gaziantep

“I think having a language certificate will be a priority for getting a job. If I had the opportunity, I would like to improve myself in humanitarian sector.”



Participant in İstanbul

“I would prefer it to be part-time in order to meet the needs of my children”



Participant in İstanbul

“I would like to work in a job in the hairdressing field where I don't neglect my children and is close to my home.”



Participant in Ankara

Empowering Employment

Participants believe that engaging in vocational training and enhancing Turkish language skills would be beneficial for their employment prospects.

Many of the participants should choose to pursue employment, participants emphasized the most important criteria would be the ability to work from home or at job sites near their residence. They also consider part-time employment would be particularly beneficial, given their childcare responsibilities. Other preferred criteria included workplaces that employ only women with less concern about whether these positions are insured. Nonetheless, a small number of participants stated their disinterest in working under any circumstances.

Female recipients believe that the most accessible job options would likely be in factories or the tailoring industry. When seeking initial support for job access, participants indicated that they would turn to relatives and neighbors though some felt no one in their network could provide the necessary assistance. Among women in their communities who are employed, they found employment in factories and textile industries.

In light of these findings, to address the challenges encountered by refugee women in Türkiye, a number of initiatives should be taken to facilitate their successful integration into the labour market and society at large. These should include vocational training programmes, entrepreneurship support and job placement services specifically tailored to the specific needs of refugee women. The establishment of women's cooperatives is crucial to creating employment opportunities and strengthening the skilled labour market.¹³ In addition, the provision of childcare services and financial support is essential to enable women's active participation in the labour market. To increase their employability and independence, online training modules and mentoring programmes should be introduced to develop essential skills and boost confidence. Efforts should also be made to increase social cohesion and improve communication between refugee communities and their host communities, creating a basis for mutual understanding and support.¹⁴

13 FAO. 2022. Türkiye – Syrian Refugee Resilience Plan 2022–2023. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc2343en>

14 IOM (International Organization for Migration). Needs Assessment Report on Women Empowerment in Adana and Gaziantep, February 2022.

Employment Preferences of Female ESSN Recipients

The economic situation in Türkiye has further complicated employment prospects for refugees, especially women. Although the ESSN provides crucial financial assistance, many households still struggle to meet their basic needs. For instance, only 54% of C-ESSN recipients had expenditures below the minimum required for basic needs as of late 2022. This economic strain can deter women from pursuing formal employment, as they may prioritize immediate financial assistance over long-term job security.¹⁵ The key findings of the 12th FGD Report¹⁶ stress on how female recipients face hardship without cash assistance, including resorting to coping mechanisms such as borrowing money, reducing their food intake and engaging in child labor.¹⁷ Furthermore, when given the option of formal employment, participants expressed that health concerns, childcare obligations and the aforementioned accreditation issues prevent them from taking up these job opportunities. In this study, 70 per cent of female participants expressed a preference for working in informal jobs due to common concerns over formal employment might lead to the discontinuation of their KIZILAYKART cash assistance.

15 EU Support to Refugees in Türkiye. (2023). The Facility Results Framework Monitoring Report No. 11: Results Achievement Progress (as of 31 December 2022). June 2023.

16 Beyond Assistance: Perspectives of Refugees on Socioeconomic Environment, Emergency Social Safety Net Programme, Focus Group Discussion Series, 2023.

17 Ibid.



“I don’t want to work in an insured job because we receive cash assistance, albeit small. I don’t want an insured job because insurance stops the assistance.”



**Participant
in Istanbul**

“Some of our relatives and neighbors work in insured jobs, and after evaluation, we think that the KIZILAYKART would be more beneficial, so working in an insured job doesn’t seem reasonable to us.”



**Participant
in Ankara**

“

“I prefer to work in official and insured jobs because they are more reliable.”



**Participant
in Gaziantep**

“Working in a regular, insured job is important for the protection of our rights and for obtaining citizenship.”



**Participant
in İstanbul**

Participants noted the convenience of managing day-to-day and weekly earnings for essentials like market expenditures, rent, and bills, making informal work more attractive. However, the lack of vocational qualifications was emphasized as a barrier to securing insured employment. While some participants indicated that they preferred insured jobs for protection of their rights, potential of obtaining citizenship, higher wages, and healthcare benefits; others found the flexibility and ad-hoc income of informal work more appealing. These participants also recognized the long-term security and stability of insured employment but acknowledged the challenges of obtaining it.

Participants also mentioned that verifying their vocational skills and language proficiencies through certificates would help them find employment. Overall, female participants emphasized that receiving cash assistance does not discourage them from work and expressed a desire to enter the workforce due to challenges in meeting basic needs. However, it's important to note that their reluctance towards insured jobs stems from the concern over insufficient experience and risking their cash assistance.



Conclusion

The report provides a comprehensive picture of the various challenges faced by female ESSN recipients in Türkiye, particularly in relation to household income, cash assistance, employment opportunities and professional empowerment. The reason why female recipients are not able to enroll into labor force and why their only source of income is SSN Programme cash assistance is also assessed within the theme. It was identified that female refugees have little or no work experience, lack of language skills and responsibilities related to childcare as indicated in the previous reports. For the ones who consider working, informal jobs are more accessible and attractive, not only because of lack of skills, but also because of the continuity of cash support. In addition, the recent economic fluctuations in Türkiye and the exclusion of men from cash assistance resulted in female ESSN recipients to become more willing to participate in the labour force.

Female participants underlined that cash assistance is insufficient, especially for covering high-cost necessities such as rent, utilities, and healthcare. This leads households to adopt coping strategies, including borrowing and cutting back on basic needs. In line with the FGD 2021 Report,¹⁸ this study reached several key barriers to women's participation in the labour force including childcare responsibilities and language barriers to a lack of vocational training and social constraints. Along with that, a clear preference remains among women for flexible, informal jobs which would not risk receiving cash assistance, stressing the sensitive balance between the need for ad-hoc income and the concern of losing cash support. Despite the hurdles, there is a strong willingness to work, stemming from both the desire to improve the living conditions of their families and an awareness of the benefits, such as increased wages and health benefits, that comes with formal employment. However, the availability of such opportunities and the capability to secure them is being hindered by various factors, including lack of vocational qualifications and societal barriers.

Efforts to empower female ESSN recipients through vocational training and language skills are seen as positive steps towards enhancing their employability and professional qualifications. Moreover, accommodating their employment preferences, such as offering part-time or home-based jobs close to their residences, could significantly improve their access to the labor market. In the broader context, addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that involves not only improving employment opportunities but also ensuring that cash assistance programs do not inadvertently discourage workforce participation. Ultimately, empowering these women with the skills, opportunities, and support they need to thrive is crucial for their well-being and households.

¹⁸ Exploring the Livelihoods of Women Refugees in Türkiye. A Qualitative Study on Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) Applicants, A Remote Focus Group Discussion Report, 2021.

Recommendations



More projects and policies need to be developed to encourage women's participation in the labour force due to reasons such as insufficient Turkish language competence, persistence of harsh working conditions, and lack of progress in work experience. Enhancing Turkish language and social skills for women is crucial for their labor market integration and rights assertion. Access to education, particularly in flexible employment sectors and enhancing vocational training are important. Supportive measures for childbearing women, advocacy for refugee women and young girls' participation in the workforce also take very important place. Recognizing foreign qualifications and securing sustained funding for empowerment programs are also vital for long-term economic independence and integration of skilled refugee women. Addressing the root causes of workplace bias and ensuring equitable working conditions for refugee women, are critical steps towards creating an inclusive work environment where women can thrive without facing barriers. Besides that, providing accessible and affordable childcare support is pivotal in enabling women, especially mothers, to enter or re-enter the workforce confidently, knowing their children are well cared for. Thus, revising assistance programs to encourage formal employment is essential. Accordingly, different strategies should be implemented, such as the provision of cash assistance if women participate in the labour force at the same time. Overall, the poverty of refugees has a dramatic impact on their integration into the host society over the long term. These recommendations collectively aim to remove barriers and create a cohesive environment for female ESSN recipients to achieve their full potential in the workforce.

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