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The Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Building upon empirical research, this study examines the socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Syrian refugees in Turkey by analyzing its implications on employment, livelihood opportunities, and social cohesion. More specifically, it focuses on the experiences of Syrian refugees to examine the ways in which they exert their agency to cope with the structural constraints when faced with 'multiple crises' in host countries, intersecting with the dynamics of a 'normalized refugee crisis'. Our findings from fieldwork conducted in the top six refugee-hosting cities reveal that loss of jobs, limited access to decent work, increased dependency on external financial assistance, and social exclusion have been some of the most acute effects of the pandemic on refugees. Meanwhile, the perceived effects that refugees have on the host community's welfare trigger problems that impede social cohesion. All in all, the study intends to highlight the far-reaching effects of the pandemic beyond its direct health implications by addressing the structural vulnerability of refugees and the importance of providing an enabling environment for socio-economic self-reliance.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, Turkey, Covid-19, migration management, refugee politics

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Introduction

In recent years, the substantial increase in Turkey's refugee population has affected the country's political economy in multiple ways by exerting significant pressure on public resources, labor force dynamics, as well as the public attitudes towards migration.[1] The outbreak of the

1 Nearly 4 million refugees and asylum seekers are registered in Turkey, of whom 3.2 million are Syrians under temporary protection (Presidency of Migration Management 2023).

Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and the economic problems associated with it has added a new layer of complexity to the challenges faced by refugees and the host communities. In this empirical study, we examine the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on Syrian refugees in Turkey by analyzing its implications on employment, livelihood opportunities and social cohesion. More specifically, we focus on the narratives of Syrian refugees to understand the ways in which they exert their agency to cope with the structural constraints when faced with 'multiple crises' in host countries. With the intention of reflecting the situation on the ground, we present data from fieldwork conducted in the top six refugee-hosting cities (Adana, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Mersin, Şanlıurfa) between November 2021 and February 2022. In addition to 15 key informant interviews, a total of 628 Syrian refugees participated in the research through a survey, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews.

As Peters (2021: 4) sets forth, many countries have faced at least three interconnected crises in 2020 and 2021: "Covid-19 and the health crisis, an economic crisis resulting from the health crisis, and a social crisis around inclusion and equity." While the repercussions of the health and economic crises have been more tangible, these often interact with long-standing social problems that are manifested as racism, social exclusion, inequality, and reactions to immigration (Peters 2021: 5). Focusing on Turkey's context, we discuss that the global health crisis not only reinforced the pre-existing vulnerabilities of the country's economy and labor market, but also intersected with the dynamics of a "normalized refugee crisis," which have already generated precarious economic and socio-cultural conditions for those affected. While the study does not seek to examine the course of events or public narratives on the 'refugee crisis', we acknowledge that depicting refugee issues as a crisis often generate a context of "refugee crisis without refugees," undermining refugees' own stories and perceptions while contributing to their dehumanization (Jelínková 2019: 33). By using the term "normalized," we follow Zetter's (2022: 488) argument that it has become normalized to conceptualize refugee displacement as a crisis, mainly because they transform into situations of protracted displacement, leaving refugees dependent on assistance in an environment of "normalized crises of precarity."

As Berlant (2011: 10) puts it, "crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness, but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming." Thus, we are mainly interested in exploring how refugees perceive their own circumstances in a state of "crisis ordinariness" (protracted displacement), when faced with the added pressures of a health crisis and economic downturn (Berlant 2011). Our main findings reveal that job losses, limited access to decent work, increased dependency on external assistance, social exclusion, and greater perceived discrimination have been some of the deteriorated effects. The pandemic also appears to have triggered refugee entrepreneurship, the emergence of new business models, and certain shifts in gender roles. Although the study results did not reveal substantial local variations, doing research in six cities enabled us to identify common socio-economic challenges experienced almost in all local contexts. Where available, we also demonstrate how the pandemic's socio-economic effects vary based on gender and across the local settings.

The study proceeds as follows. We initially offer a brief review of the scholarly literature on the conceptualization of crisis to illustrate the nature of intersecting crises such

as the "refugee crisis" and the "Covid-19 crisis." The second section focuses on the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on Syrian refugees to have a better understanding of the barriers the pandemic has reinforced in access to employment and livelihoods while also providing a contextual background on the refugee situation in Turkey. In the third section, we explain the research methodology and provide information on the profile of research participants. We then discuss the empirical findings with reference to both displacement and pandemic-induced issues in employment, livelihoods, and social cohesion, reflecting the research participants' views and perspectives complemented with the survey results. The final section provides a summary of the main findings.

Overlapping Crises: The "Refugee Crisis" and the "Covid-19 Crisis"

Sparked by the arrival of nearly one million refugees at European shores, what came to be called the 2015 European "refugee crisis" has stirred widespread public and academic debate ever since. As some scholars argue, framing the refugee influx as a crisis in media and political discourses was ideologically charged, pressuring governments to take urgent action or reminding the public what was supposed to be done in recent months and years (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018). While security-focused responses drew widespread criticism for undermining the humanitarian challenges experienced by refugees, political responses remained fragmented, resulting in limited collective efforts to find durable solutions for refugees (Zetter 2022: 488). In 2022, Europe experienced a new "refugee crisis" of a much larger scale due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine with consequences still unfolding. In Zetter's (2022: 487) words, the movement of refugees is "inescapably and almost without exception described as a crisis in the popular imagination and in policy discourse."

Often reinforced by media-induced global crisis narratives, crisis finds meaning in many different contexts in today's world as a "notion, condition and experience" aligning with climate change, displacement, conflict, poverty, financial or political instabilities, and so forth (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020). With specific reference to the refugee/migration-crisis nexus, the term is suggested to have emerged in political, media, and scholarly discourses to broadly describe "individualized migration and asylum episodes seen as crises" (Cantat et al. 2020: 6). Cantat et al. (2020) point out that the crisis terminology is often employed selectively, especially when referring to migration incidents in Europe, while numerous displacement incidents outside of Europe were not framed as a crisis. Some scholars claim that the 2015 "refugee crisis" was indeed a "recontextualized" version of the earlier negative descriptions highlighting the "pre-existing processes of simultaneous politicization and mediatisation of immigration" (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018: 3). Some others stress that the governments associate migration with crisis to refer to "chaos" or "disorder" while it actually represents a "crisis of protection" experienced by refugees throughout their displacement (Almustafa 2022). Using the 2015 "refugee crisis" as a reference point, Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2020:12) assert that the crisis may evolve over time but the framing of migration as a crisis may lead to outcomes in pursuit of other agendas since many governments maintained emergency measures despite experiencing a sharp decline in asylum applications in subsequent years.

Extant literature shows that crises may form "chains of crises" by either overlapping or interconnecting with each other (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020: 15; Peters 2021: 4). Due to their multi-layered nature, crisis often intersects with the precarious economic, social and political conditions generated by a preceding crisis or challenges already faced due to existing vulnerabilities as well as gender-specific and intersectional social inequalities (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020). A burgeoning literature put the spotlight on Covid-19, offering critical insights into overlapping vulnerabilities arising from the intersection of pandemic and climate change, racial, economic and environmental injustices (Fernando 2020). In examining what they call the "pandemic precarity," Perry et al. (2021) demonstrate that socioeconomic disparities in the United States have deepened across race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status due to the pandemic. Focusing on the governance of interlinked crises, Peters (2021) argues that persisting social problems such as social exclusion and inequality have been amplified by the pandemic and the economic downturn, which may overall be impacted by the more subtle spread of populism. Vieten (2020) further suggests that the context of the health crisis have contributed to the normalization of far-right populism as well as the escalation of xenophobia, which has been associated with the refugee movements since the 2015. Against this background, the "refugee crisis" and the "Covid-19 crisis" become a compelling illustration of interconnected or overlapping crises, urging for a more nuanced understanding of the inter-crisis relations rather than taking the latter's occurrence in isolation but with reference to a context of normalized displacement.

Shared Struggles: Covid-19's Impact on Refugees in Turkey and Beyond

Several studies have shown the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged groups such as migrants, refugees, and racial/ethnic minorities, which all point at the intersection between a health crisis and the pre-existing issues of economic deprivation, food insecurity, housing insecurity, health disparities, and discrimination. A recurring theme in recent research is the emphasis on those in vulnerable employment who experienced job losses while also facing increased xenophobia and discrimination.

A recent study by the UN International Labour Organization also confirms the severe impact of Covid-19 on migrant workers and their access to decent work (Jones et al. 2021). The additional challenges migrants face and the reason why they experience job losses earlier than the members of the host community mainly stem from the fact that they often work in sectors with "high levels of temporary, informal or unprotected work, characterized by low wages, as well as various forms of social and economic discrimination" (Jones et al. 2021: 3). The assessment draws attention to the structural vulnerability of migrant workers causing them to be regularly excluded from social protection, which necessitates an overhaul of labor-migration governance systems and practices across the world.

The impact of the pandemic on mobility, livelihoods, and employment also posed severe socio-economic challenges in Turkey especially to the most vulnerable populations, including refugees (Kirisci and Erdogan 2020; Akyıldız 2020). It was estimated that

around 7 million workers were at the risk of losing their jobs due to the economic impact of Covid-19, in which employment vulnerability was identified to be the highest in textile and apparel, accommodation, food, and leather sectors (Demir Seker, Nas Ozen, and Acar Erdogan 2020). While the pandemic affected refugees and the host communities in multiple ways, there seems to be a disproportionate impact on refugees mainly due to their limited access to public services and formal employment, which is often exacerbated by the language barrier and other related social-cohesion problems. More to the point, the lack of formal employment opportunities and competition among Syrians and host communities were already critical issues before the pandemic but were rather normalized in a context of protracted displacement. A survey conducted in 2017 found that more than 71% of respondents from the host community believed that Syrians were taking jobs away from people in Turkey (Erdoğan and Uyan Semerci 2018).

To briefly contextualize the refugee situation, Turkey initially pursued an open-door policy as early as 2011 and granted Syrians temporary protection (TP) status in line with the country's revised migration governance framework (Erdoğan 2020). As Syrians' displacement got protracted and the numbers increased, the scope of TP enabled their access to healthcare and education services, social assistance, and the labor market, with no pre-set rules on maximum limit of stay. There have also been policy developments recognizing the importance of social cohesion such as the 2018-2023 Harmonization Strategy Document and the National Action Plan.

Previous studies address that the "refugee crisis" does not follow a similar pattern in Turkey when compared with the European case. Some scholars highlight the different starting points: in Turkey "it is as old as the Syrian civil war" (Makovsky 2019), while the European Union (EU)'s response is described as "mute" until the summer of 2015 (Elitok 2019). Some others indicate that the term "crisis" has been absent in Turkish public discourse especially when compared with its peak in Europe from 2015 to 2017 (Sert and Danış 2021). Nonetheless, the refugee situation has become deeply politicized across Turkey's political spectrum as the country went through a series of elections and economic downturns. As argued elsewhere, Syrians have domestically become a perceived societal security threat in three specific ways – as a "rival victim" group; as a "voter or demographic" threat; and as having "unfair" access to public services (Memişoğlu and Ilgit 2016).

Further, Turkey has not been immune to the global rise of xenophobia, populism, and the anti-immigration sentiments associated with it. Ozduzen et al. (2021) draw attention to the rise and mainstreaming of "digital racism" on online platforms, which peaked around 2019 as Syrians became more settled with diminishing prospects of mass return. Economic downturn and concerns over loss of social cohesion are among factors that have intensified anti-refugee sentiments in recent years (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019). These sentiments gained more momentum in 2021 with the emergence of the first example of a "European-style far-right political party" (Victory Party) pursuing a strong anti-refugee rhetoric and political agenda (Irgil and Balcıoğlu 2022). During the 2023 elections, the Victory Party's rhetoric was echoed by other parties, notably the leading opposition Republican People's Party,

employing campaign slogans such as "Syrians will go back" (Gjevori 2023). Unsurprisingly, Syrians are reported to experience deeper social isolation due to widespread resentment and discrimination, a situation precipitated by the pandemic and intensified by political discourse (İnanç 2022; Nashed 2022).

Nearly half of Turkey's Syrian refugee population is of working age (19-64) (Presidency of Migration Management 2023). Official figures demonstrate a steady increase in the number of work permits issued to Syrians under TP, jumping from 34,573 in 2018 to 91,500 in 2021 (Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2021). Concerning entrepreneurial activities, there were around 20,000 Syrian-owned small and medium-sized enterprises as of 2021 (Ekonomim 2021). Meanwhile, an estimated one million Syrians were reported to be informally employed in labor-intensive sectors and low-wage jobs (Del Carpio and Wagner 2015). A study from 2018 indicates that most of those in informal labor were men and the share of working women was low in all age brackets, the highest being 7% for the 30-44 age group (Del Carpio, Seker, and Yener 2018). Whereas initial studies suggested that Syrian refugees predominantly were from rural backgrounds with limited financial means, recent research reveals a more socio-economically diverse profile, displaying a wide array of experiences, skills and resources (Kadkoy 2017).

In the extant literature, it is frequently addressed that access to formal employment remains a persisting challenge for most Syrian refugees, considering the increasing yet still limited number of work permits granted so far, limited job opportunities, and difficulties in finding jobs matching skills (3RP 2022). As will be elaborated later, livelihood challenges were further intensified during Covid-19 due to job losses and inability to cover basic expenses (Relief International 2020). Many Syrian business owners reported suspending their activities partially or fully, relying on savings and Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) cash assistance programs as alternative income sources (Concern Worldwide 2020). Regarding the comparative effects of the pandemic on labor market dynamics, a recent study by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) demonstrates that job loss or unpaid leave rates were three times higher among Syrians than host community members (Akyıldız 2020). Women from both communities have been the most affected group – 32% of the total respondents but only 7.4% women managed to keep working part or full-time after the pandemic.

Some of these most acute effects can also be better understood considering Covid-19's broader impact on the Turkish economy. According to a World Bank study, the pandemic has worsened the pre-existing vulnerabilities of the Turkish labor market, including problems in labor demand, the pressures of high foreign exchange rates and the depreciation of the Turkish Lira, and the relatively high share of informal employment (around one third) (Demir Seker, Nas Ozen, and Acar Erdogan 2020). In contrast to the successful economic performance of the 2000s, the study highlights the financial difficulties faced by micro to medium-sized enterprises in maintaining high demand for workers, which were mitigated by economic growth and government programs, resulting in the creation of 7.5 million jobs between 2009-2018. However, currency problems from 2018 caused significant pressures on the labor market, leading to around 700,000 job losses in 2018-2019. The next section will introduce the research methodology, followed by a discussion of its findings.

Methodology

Employing a mixed methods approach, we conducted a quantitative survey (360 respondents), 64 qualitative in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 34 focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 628 Syrian research participants.[2] The fieldwork took place in Istanbul, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay, Adana, and Mersin from November 2021 to February 2022. With a similar distribution of participants across cities, the research sample shows a balanced gender representation, consisting of 52% female and 48% male participants (see Table 1). We also conducted 15 key informant interviews with representatives of public institutions and of national and local organizations involved in the refugee response.

Table 1. Research Sample

	Participant distribution by city and gender			**Participant distribution by city and type of research**			
City	Female	Male	Total by gender	FGD	IDI	Survey	Total by research type
Adana	55	45	100	30	12	58	100
Gaziantep	52	55	107	36	12	59	107
Hatay	57	47	104	36	10	58	104
Istanbul	52	51	103	36	10	57	103
Mersin	59	55	114	42	11	61	114
Şanlıurfa	53	47	100	24	9	67	100
Total	**328**	**300**	**628**	**204**	**64**	**360**	**628**

By using snowball sampling, the aim was to represent a diverse group across gender and age, which proves to be an effective method in sampling hidden and vulnerable populations. We also acknowledge the study's limitations. Firstly, our sample selected through snowballing cannot be generalized and is not representative of the entire Syrian refugee population of Turkey. The findings discussed are indicative and descriptive only. Secondly, due to the timing of the research and the passage of time, we cannot rule out the potential influence of recall bias, since the research participants may not have accurately remembered their pre-pandemic experiences. To maintain the reliability of our data, we have mostly focused on interpretation of qualitative findings that were recurring themes, also verified with the survey results.

The survey consisted of 54 questions on both pre- and post-pandemic conditions, covering socio-demographic issues, questions about income level, employment status, socio-economic challenges, social cohesion issues, and so forth. The data sets obtained from the survey were analyzed at a 95% confidence level with SPSS 24.0. For qualitative data collection, each IDI and FGD has been conducted in line with the specifically designed question sets, recorded with the consent of respondents. The transcriptions have been coded and analyzed using the computer-based content analysis program MAXQDA 2020.

2 Please see the replication data for this manuscript at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CY4YTX.

Discussion of Findings

As shown in Table 2, demographic analysis reveals that our survey sample comprised a relatively young population, with almost half of the participants falling within the 26-40 age group (48%). This group was followed by those aged 41-55 (27%) and 18-25 (21%). Marriage was prevalent among respondents (69%), and the rest were either single (23%) or divorced/ widowed (8%). Close to half (44%) reported having two to four children. Regarding education, 41% of those surveyed had completed secondary/high school and 28% had a university degree. While primary education was the highest level for 19%, a small minority (9%) had never attended school and another 3% had basic reading and writing skills. Additionally, almost one in two respondents (49%) reported proficiency in understanding and speaking Turkish.

Table 2. Demographic Overview of Survey Participants

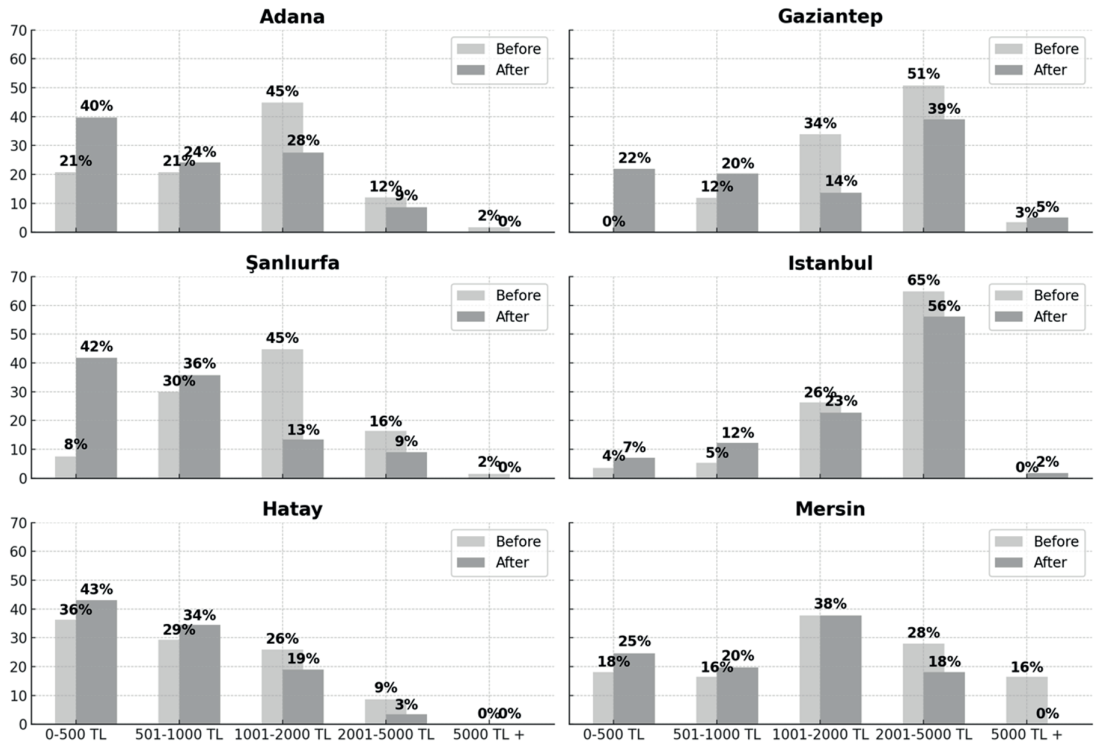
		Number	Percent
Nationality	Syrian	360	100%
Age	18-25 years	79	21%
	26-40 years	171	48%
	41-55 years	97	27%
	55+ years	13	4%
Gender	Female	186	52%
	Male	174	48%
Marital status	Single	84	23%
	Married	250	69%
	Divorced/Separated	15	4%
	Widowed	11	4%
Number of children	No children	98	27%
	One	30	8%
	Two to four	157	44%
	More than four	75	21%
Education level	Only reads and writes	12	3%
	Never been to school	33	9%
	Primary school	67	19%
	Secondary/ high school	146	41%
	University degree	100	28%

Given that most of the respondents (74%) have been in Turkey for more than five years, it could be expected that they have reached a certain degree of stability. An overwhelming majority (86%) stated they had TP status, whereas a smaller proportion (2%) reported that they had obtained Turkish citizenship. Complementing the results of the survey, the main purpose in the following sections is to elaborate on the experiences and coping strategies of research participants concerning employment, livelihoods, and social cohesion in the intertwined contexts of Covid-19 and protracted displacement.

Livelihoods in Limbo: The Impact of Covid-19 on Refugee Employment and Income Security

First and foremost, comparative analysis of pre- and post-pandemic income levels and employment status demonstrates the role of Covid-19 in aggravating poverty and financial insecurity. With a slight increase from 69% to 77%, majority of the respondents reported having a monthly income below the net minimum monthly wage, suggesting substantial economic vulnerability even before the pandemic. Most strikingly, the percentage of respondents who indicated having an income of 0-500 TL (0-37 USD) almost doubled with the pandemic (from 14% to 30%).[3] While participants from Hatay and Mersin had the lowest income level, participants from Istanbul and Gaziantep had the highest level. Except for these two relatively more industrialized cities, income levels declined in all the other cities after the pandemic (see Figure 1).

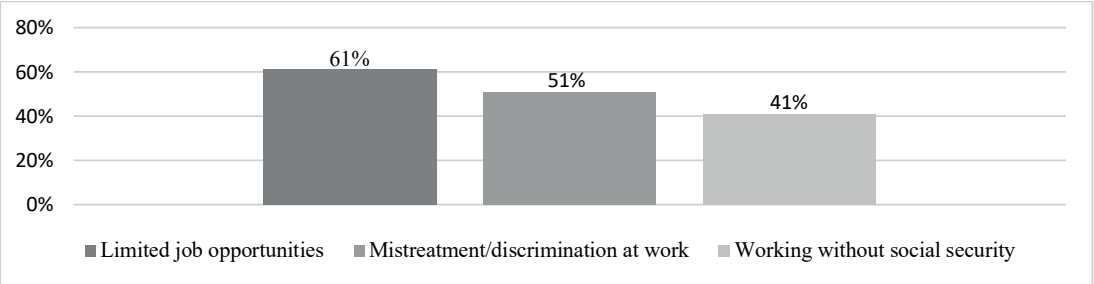
Figure 1. Income levels before and after Pandemic by City



The employment status of the research participants also appears to have noticeably changed: only 11% indicated working compared with 40% who reported working before the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the most cited work-related problem after the pandemic was limited job opportunities, followed by mistreatment/discrimination at work and working without social security (See, Figure 2).

3 USD calculation is based on the exchange rate of January 2022.

Figure 2. Post-Pandemic Work Related Problems



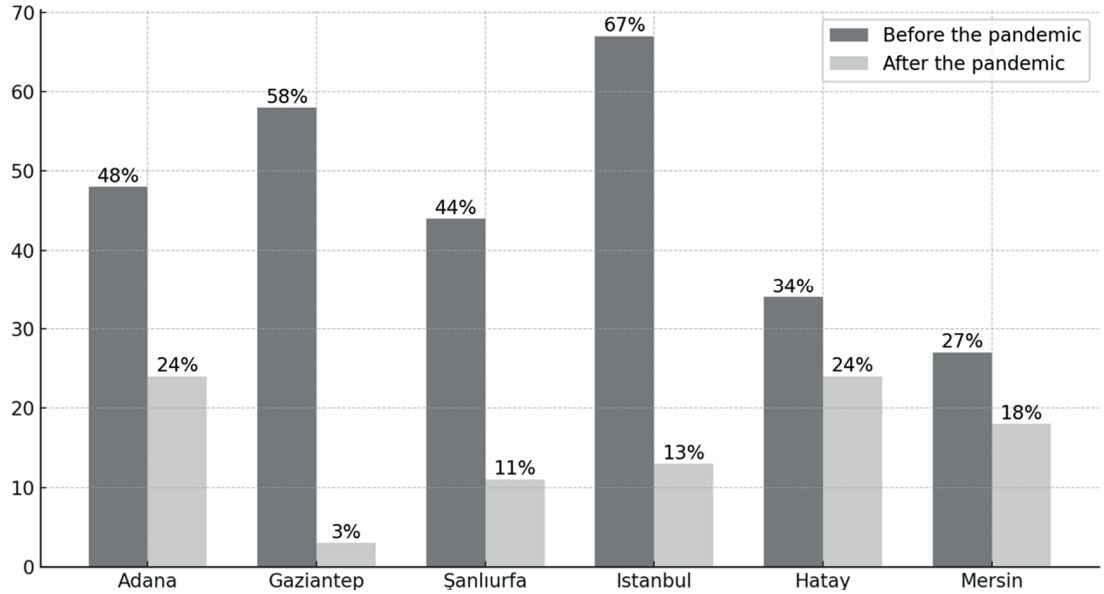
Respondents in all cities highlighted low wages, job losses, and the difficulties in finding jobs during the pandemic coupled with increasing costs of living both due to the pandemic and the economic downturn. The issue of limited employment opportunities was especially prevalent in Şanlıurfa. Previous research also highlights the city's persistently high unemployment rate despite high demand for the skilled and qualified workforce (Orange 2021). Meanwhile, 65% of our respondents from Şanlıurfa indicated secondary/high/vocational school and university as their education levels, yet still faced challenges to access formal employment irrespective of skills or educational background.

Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2020) suggest that a crisis may become an issue of emergency where people seek ways to manage and move forward, or as a catalyst for renewal, or as a new normal. Accordingly, we identified several coping strategies that research participants commonly referred to in recovering from job losses during the pandemic. These included shifts in gender roles (stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers), settling for daily jobs, increased self-employment/entrepreneurial activities and, to a lesser degree, relocation to another city. The first two strategies were more widespread in Istanbul, since there were more male respondents who attributed job losses to the pandemic. To illustrate, in one of the FGDs in Istanbul, all seven male participants indicated they had lost their regular jobs during the pandemic. Two respondents mentioned going to daily jobs when they were called by the employers, while the others did not work at all. Among those who did not work, some mentioned taking care of the children, as their wives started working as cleaners even though they had never worked before. One critical problem raised by those who were going for daily jobs was not getting paid: "this is really demotivating, when you work and cannot get what you deserve. I see no point in searching for jobs if I cannot get paid" (Male, 30, Istanbul).

A survey conducted in Central America and Mexico found that 51% of the migrant research participants lost their employment due to the pandemic, while 22% became more 'entrepreneurial' after experiencing unemployment (IOM 2020: 21). Our study revealed similar findings – among respondents who stated working after the pandemic, 11% reported being self-employed or having their own businesses, which was only 1% before the pandemic. Compared to Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Istanbul, there were more respondents from Mersin, Hatay, and Adana who started their businesses after the pandemic (See, Figure 3). Some

mentioned becoming self-employed, for example collecting and selling recyclable items, while others opened their own small-scale businesses like grocery stores to cope with job losses and mobility restrictions. Still relatively small, the percentage of those who stated having a work permit also tripled after the pandemic (from 3% to 9%). Fewer respondents in average (6%) but slightly more respondents from Gaziantep and Hatay (10%) added moving to these cities for employment after losing their jobs during the pandemic.

Figure 3. Entrepreneurial Activity Before and After Covid-19 by City



Participants across all the fieldwork sites mentioned having extra difficulties paying bills and rent due to the loss of steady income and the increased costs of living, a critical problem similarly identified in other studies (Karadağ and Üstübici 2021: 86). A key informant added that Syrians in informal employment were not able to benefit from the government's wage-support programs during Covid-19, which deepened their material hardship. Referring back to Peters' discussion on the interconnectedness of health, economic, and social crises, we also assess our research participants' diminished livelihoods with reference to the economic downturn and rising inflation in Turkey, as well as in relation to "pandemic inequality," which goes beyond the loss of income and unemployment (Nassif-Pires 2020). As Crawley (2021: 2) asserts, "rights and opportunities associated with migration often reflect and reinforce existing spatial, structural and social inequalities, including those related to gender, age and income." These disparities were further aggravated by Covid-19 due to the marginalized socio-economic status of refugees in almost all countries (Crawley 2021: 6).

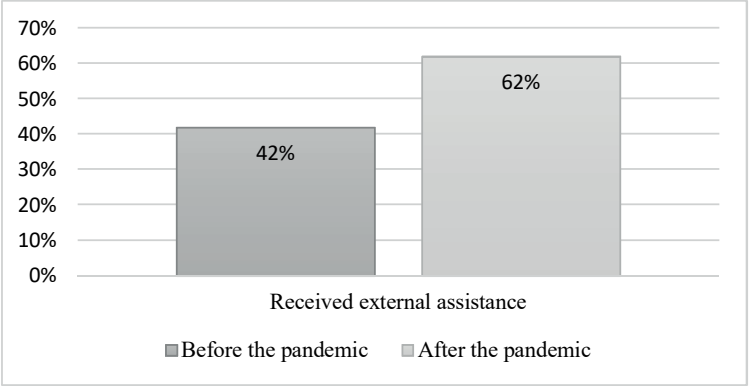
Drawing from their personal experiences, research participants commonly viewed the rising instability in the job market as a sign of workplace inequality. Several participants noted that, following the pandemic, Turkish workers were asked to return to their jobs while Syrian employees were not. Some others explained the reason of not being able to obtain

social security or work permits with reference to "not being Turkish citizens" or employers' reluctance to apply for work permits "because they were Syrians." A research participant shared that he was working in a textile atelier for 11 hours and was not getting paid fairly. When he asked for a raise, the employer refused: "he said, I need to be happy about it, because I am Syrian, and I will not be able to find any other jobs" (male, 25, Adana). In line with the survey results, some respondents defined their perceptions of social and economic inequality as discrimination against Syrians:

> "What I want to tell Turkish citizens, we don't steal their jobs. Because it's the Turkish employers who recruit us for low wages. If they were asked to work for such low wages, they wouldn't accept it anyway." (Male, 45, Şanlıurfa)
>
> "Syrians work for daily wages without social security, as they don't have other options. There is discrimination towards Syrians. My husband once went to work an hour late, and they cut his daily wage. They would never dare to act that way to a Turkish worker." (Female, 25, Hatay)
>
> "Turks and Syrians work in the same place, but they are not paid equally. Syrians don't get paid the minimum wage; they don't get to sign formal contracts. I think this is clear discrimination." (Male, 27, Şanlıurfa).

As illustrated in Figure 4, the share of survey respondents receiving external assistance, mainly cash and food, rose by 20% during the pandemic. Increased dependency on external assistance in the absence of a permanent job or regular income was a prominent structural constraint revealed in our findings.

Figure 4. External Assistance Before and After the Pandemic



As Zetter (2022) argues, humanitarian emergency responses recognize the existential needs of refugees, but they are also insufficient in answering the complex experience of forced displacement. Whereas they often contribute to "normalize a refugee crisis," development-led responses "diminish the exceptionality of refugee crisis" through supporting self-sufficiency of refugees (Zetter 2022: 491). The words of a local NGO worker from Mersin reflect how the pandemic reversed their progress in this regard:

> "After almost ten years, it felt like we were back to square one. We were mostly carrying out job placement assistance for up to 100 people every month. But we had to reallocate our limited resources to food baskets and cash assistance because of diminished livelihoods."

Many IDI and FGD participants referred to the ESSN program as their primary or only source of income during the pandemic, which appears to have provided an extensive financial relief to over 1.5 million vulnerable refugees who were not formally employed.[4] Nonetheless, our findings also revealed that dependency on ESSN assistance was a contributing factor in normalizing unregistered employment due to research participants' concerns about losing the assistance if they acquire work permits. As some respondents commented: "If I have social security, I cannot benefit from Kızılaykart. My employer does not want to pay for social security either" (Male, 30, Mersin); "I work at a small tailoring atelier without social security. I don't want it anyway because my Kızılaykart would get cancelled" (Female, 40, Adana). According to a 2018 report by the Ministry of Labour, the revision of the ESSN criteria on employment could lead to around 167,000 recipients' formal participation in the labor market, reinforcing a development-sensitive approach rather than dependency on humanitarian assistance (Akyıl 2018). Nonetheless, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic made such revisions more complex leading to additional cash assistance to the program's beneficiaries. A vast majority of ESSN recipient households (83%), who participated in an assessment study of the program in 2021, reported having at least one household member working, mostly engaged in unskilled and semi-skilled activities (IFRC and Turkish Red Crescent 2021: 20).

Findings from key informant interviews also pointed at informal employment/absence of social security as the root cause of aggravated problems of poverty during the pandemic, while providing further insights into the labor market dynamics. For instance, eight out of 15 key informants highlighted the increased demand for semi-skilled workers during the pandemic. A local-NGO representative from Hatay noted that Syrian refugees were ideal candidates to fill such labor shortages due to difficulties in finding Turkish citizens who would settle for semi-skilled professions. Meanwhile, another key informant who was responsible for running vocational training courses said Syrian refugees were not included into their programs due to "low-level of education," suggesting that some barriers are also socially constructed.

Illustrated as "low-level education" in the above narrative, common misperceptions about the socioeconomic homogeneity of refugees are indeed another structural constrain, which also become rather normalized in protracted displacement contexts. As extensively addressed in the literature, economic and social downward mobility, loss of professional status, lack of skill recognition are longstanding problems experienced by refugees in host countries

4 Kızılaykart is a cash-based assistance platform managed by the Turkish Red Crescent. Individuals who meet the ESSN eligibility criteria receive a monthly payment via Kızılaykart. One of the criteria for ESSN eligibility is not being formally employed (for further information, see IFRC and Turkish Red Crescent 2021).

affecting their well-being and inclusion into the labor market (Gans 2009). University-graduate respondents, especially from Gaziantep, Adana, and Şanlıurfa (44%, 40% and 27%, respectively), also explained the difficulties in finding skills-matching jobs both before and after Covid-19. Many stated being either unemployed or working in low-paid jobs without social security: a respondent who was an English teacher in Syria worked in a poultry factory in Şanlıurfa, a respondent from Istanbul with a civil engineering degree worked as a porter, a lawyer and a referee from Gaziantep were unemployed, as they could not practice their professions due to equivalency issues.

Most female research participants indicated not currently working in Turkey both before and after Covid-19, while some mentioned previously working in Syria. Concerning multi-folded gender issues in times of crises, Rydström (2020) shows how climate disasters such as storms interacted with pre-existing gendered inequalities in Vietnam, resulting in "protracted period of difficulties" for women. Similarly, many women referred to their intensified domestic workload both due to displacement and pandemic, lack of support in childcare and elderly care as barriers in finding employment. Several respondents specifically addressed the need for flexible or work-from home jobs for women:

> "I am a housewife, but I used to work as a tailor and dishwasher in restaurants before. I now have a small child and no one to leave her with, so I had to quit working." (Female, 25, Mersin)

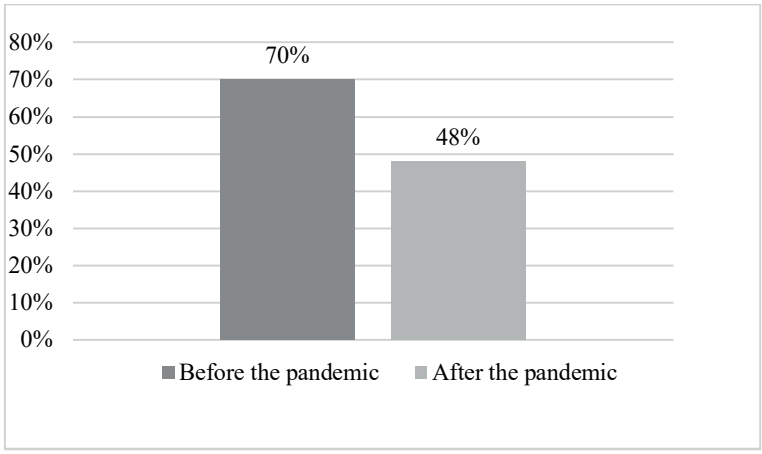
> "All of us would work if there were suitable jobs. We constantly look for jobs. But we rather need work-from-home options, because we have small kids and no one to take care of them." (Female, 28, Hatay).

Based on the narratives of female research participants who indicated working, our findings pointed at the facilitating role of employment-guaranteed vocational training for an inclusive labor market. This was particularly evident in Mersin, Adana, and Gaziantep, where the municipalities carry out refugee employment programs matching local labor market needs in partnership with international, national or local organizations. Several women from these cities mentioned finding jobs or setting up their own businesses in sectors such as cooking, tailoring, and hairdressing after completing vocational courses. Some also highlighted how acquiring new skills helped them to overcome socio-cultural barriers as they felt more "confident" and "employable."

From Integration to Isolation: Social Cohesion Challenges for Refugees during Covid-19

Whereas social relationships are considered at the core of the refugee-integration process (Strang and Quinn 2021), our findings revealed that Covid-19 aggravated refugees' sense of social isolation. According to the survey results, participation in social cohesion activities declined considerably due to the suspension of face-to-face activities and the closure of community centers (see, Figure 5). Non-participation was especially high among respondents from Istanbul (79%).

Figure 5. Pre- and Post- Pandemic Participation in Social Cohesion Activities



In grasping the significance of such activities from a gender-specific perspective, many women noted losing access to their only space of socialization outside their homes. As a respondent added, this situation also weakened their interactions with the host community:

> "I attended both integration activities and Turkish language classes. The best part was to be able to get together with Turkish people and chat. These encounters almost stopped with the pandemic, but things are gradually normalizing." (Female, 30, Gaziantep)

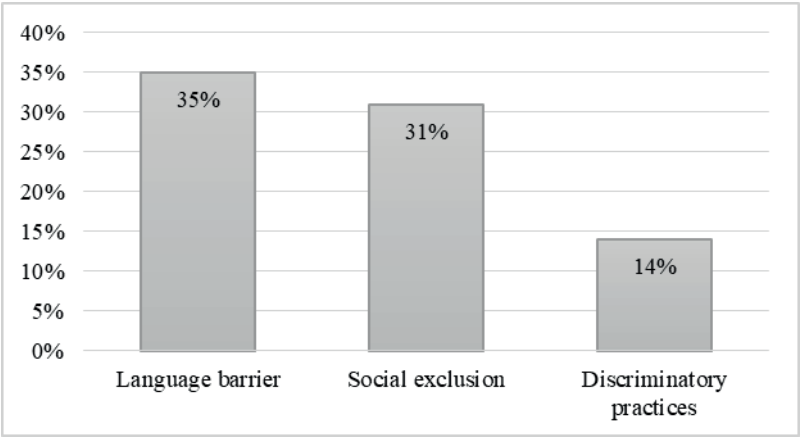
In the absence of such communal spaces, relations with neighbors have become a common way of making and maintaining social connections. Some research participants mentioned having good relations with their neighbors before the pandemic, while others pointed at the role of the series of lockdowns in bringing them closer:

> "We met our Turkish neighbors early in the pandemic. Everything was difficult and unknown. We now help each other when someone gets sick. We send food. They don't treat us like foreigners." (Female, 35, Istanbul)

> "With our neighbors, we only said hello to each other because of the language barrier, but I think such things become less of an issue with Covid-19. Our kids started playing more during the pandemic. We also started interacting more with the help of the kids. We even visited each several times." (Male, 30, Istanbul)

Figure 6 highlights the most cited challenges to social cohesion during the pandemic, as reported by survey respondents. These include language barrier that impedes access to services and intercommunal relations, along with experiences of social exclusion and discrimination by the host community. Although the percentage of respondents reporting discriminatory practices remained consistent with pre-pandemic levels, the qualitative data revealed a recurring theme: individuals experienced discrimination more frequently in the workplace and public spaces following Covid-19. This increase was primarily attributed to heightened economic difficulties.

Figure 6. Barriers to Social Cohesion During the Pandemic



As previously mentioned, some key informants also indicated that a chain of societal issues –not solely the pandemic – reinforced pre-existing perceptions and misperceptions about Syrian refugees. Economic problems, the politicization of the refugee situation, and the spread of misinformation all collectively contribute to discriminatory attitudes and practices. When asked how they were dealing with discrimination, respondents said they remain silent, while also highlighting their lack of knowledge about complaint mechanisms:

> "We experience discrimination all the time. In my opinion, both the pandemic and the economic recession made it worse and the problems with the host community got more serious. We face discrimination everywhere, on the streets, in the neighborhood. There are no laws to protect us. I have no clue where to complain when I experience discrimination." (Female, 45, Mersin)

> "I think the root cause of discrimination is that some believe (locals) we receive a lot of assistance as Syrians during any crisis. But we don't receive that kind of assistance. We try to explain the facts, but they still don't believe us." (Female, 23, Gaziantep)

> "The moment there is some political news about Syrians, we immediately get reactions like go back to your country, you will be sent anyway. This is happening a lot lately, even in the public buses, we just remain silent." (Male, 30, Istanbul).

Conclusion

As addressed with reference to a wide array of events and experiences, a crisis of emergency such as a health crisis has the potential to exacerbate the effects of displacement, poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to protection. As witnessed in the case of "refugee crisis" and the "Covid-19 crisis," the overlapping or intersecting nature of crises becomes self-explanatory by further exposing the multi-faceted challenges that refugees experience in the rather normalized and yet precarious conditions of protracted displacement. This study assessed the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on Syrian refugees in Turkey with the aim of

contributing to burgeoning research on intersecting crises which have great potential to play a role in finding improved solutions to crises that deepen existing socio-economic inequalities. Based on empirical research, one main purpose was to increase evidence-based knowledge about the effects of the pandemic on refugees by offering some comparative perspectives on the pre- and post-pandemic conditions on the dynamics of employment, livelihoods, and social cohesion.

In line with existing literature, the study findings also demonstrated that the pandemic led to income loss, changes in employment status, reinforced perceptions of social isolation and discrimination, which overall highlight the severe impact the health crisis had on some prominent social and economic well-being indicators. Considering Covid-19's broader impact on the Turkish economy and the labor market particularly, the paper discussed problems of employment vulnerability for refugees, highlighting unregistered employment and the lack of social security. Using some other main findings as the concluding remarks, the paper also revealed that poverty, economic insecurity, lack of job opportunities, and dependence on assistance were some of the persisting problems further exacerbated by the pandemic conditions. Meanwhile, our findings revealed changes in gender roles, as well as increased entrepreneurial activities as coping strategies in the post-pandemic context. With reference to social cohesion dynamics, one critical finding is the growing concern of refugees about the incidents of discrimination that they experience in the workplace and other public spaces, which they mainly attributed to the pandemic and the exacerbated economic problems.

All in all, the pandemic's reach has extended beyond health implications, shedding light on and aggravating the structural vulnerabilities of refugees who often lack social protection. Creating an environment that encourages socio-economic self-reliance is essential to navigate future crises. The earthquakes in southern Turkey in February 2023 have once more highlighted the urgent need to address these vulnerabilities and promote self-sufficiency. The pandemic's socio-economic consequences, now intertwined with social and economic losses from the earthquakes, have intensified the need for protections for refugees and for host communities in the affected areas (Duruel 2023), notably Hatay, Gaziantep, Adana and Şanlıurfa – key locations of our research. Identifying these layered vulnerabilities through future research is vital to develop sustainable strategies, enhancing community resilience in the face of multifaceted crises.

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