

Socio-economic integration of Syrian women in Turkey: benefits and challenges of the cooperative model

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Women's cooperatives can help enable the socio-economic integration of Syrian women in Turkey and address gendered barriers to the labour market. Obstacles remain, however, if the cooperative model is to be sustainable in the long term.

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees calls on States and other stakeholders to promote and enable sustainable, productive employment and decent work for refugees. In Turkey, which hosts 3.7 million Syrian refugees, the Syrian refugee population has had the formal right to work since 2016 but the majority of this population remains in the informal labour market.

Labour force participation is particularly low among displaced Syrian women in Turkey: 18.6% in 2020.¹ Much of the internationally funded livelihood support is focused on the socio-economic integration of Syrian women. However, a large proportion of women-centred livelihood programmes simply aim to reach women in order to satisfy internal gender quotas, and lack a clear connection to gaps in the Turkish labour market. Interviews conducted with staff members of international and non-governmental organisations providing livelihood support to Syrian refugees in 2017-18 revealed that the programmes are designed in this way as many Syrian women have caring responsibilities within their families that prevent them from participating in full-time job training or placements.² Moreover, interviewees explained that when livelihood support is designed based on a gender-blind analysis of labour market demand in Turkey, it tends to target sectors dominated by men.

In order to avoid livelihood programmes being largely focused on men, organisations have adapted the activities they offer to ensure that at least 50% of recipients of livelihood support are women. Since the formal activities provided for women, however, are designed to offer flexibility and target sectors culturally perceived as 'female', they tend not to provide secure and reliable income. Refugee women who are sole providers for their children and need to work are therefore more likely to seek

and find employment opportunities which do not involve internationally funded livelihood support.³

Examples of livelihood activities provided specifically for Syrian women include vocational training in areas such as hairdressing or make-up, craft production and sales, often without a solid business model behind them. This has led to livelihood support for women often placing an emphasis on social cohesion over income generation, making it different in nature from the support provided to Syrian men, which usually aims to create economic self-sufficiency and labour market integration. Some NGO staff providing livelihood support for women are critical of the lack of connection to the Turkish labour market and wary of making false promises to those who wish to integrate economically in Turkey. As one international NGO worker explained:

"You need a business-minded person who actually understands how to identify a market and a production line. If we have these wonderfully painted plates but it takes three days to make a single plate that's really bad. [...] At some point I said ok, this is a really stupid activity because they come and it costs them [a small sum] for the bus and for them it's a lot, they skipped their lunch because they can't afford even a simit [Turkish bread]. [...] It gets them out of the house, but then it should be called a social activity. It would be a social community space or a very different heading, like psychosocial well-being or something. But if you put it in the category of livelihoods or income generation, you are putting pressure on that mindset. [...] It's really unfair to the women because they have this expectation."

Women's cooperatives

In recent years, women's cooperatives have emerged as a form of livelihood support for Syrian women that attempts to both provide

a social space for women and establish a sustainable connection to Turkish labour markets. They began to flourish in Turkey in 2019 and are found in several provinces, focusing on a wide range of work including soap-making, handicrafts, agri-food, cleaning services and restaurants.

Cooperatives incorporate the logic of corporations and communities, aiming to provide both a social space for integration and a viable business model for the products being produced.⁴ They are member-owned, member-controlled and member-benefiting enterprises that provide goods or services to satisfy their members' economic, social and cultural needs. Categorised as social enterprises, cooperatives are driven by a shared set of values and principles. First, the principle of ownership implies that members are equal and jointly own the cooperative enterprise. Second, cooperatives adopt a democratic decision-making governance structure whereby each member has one vote and members participate in setting policies and making decisions. Third, cooperatives are intended to benefit their members both through economic production activities and through providing education and training.

A closer look at one such project provides important insights. This particular women's cooperative in south Turkey was established by an international organisation in 2020 and implemented in collaboration with a local metropolitan municipality. The project aimed to create livelihoods for refugee women by helping them gain relevant skills and facilitating interactions with the host community. The social cooperative was founded with 37 Syrian, Persian, Afghan and Turkish women producing and selling agricultural products. It is currently focusing its efforts on open-field agriculture, greenhouse cultivation, mask sewing, visor production, cultivated mushroom production and the drying of fruits and vegetables.

Interviews with Syrian women who are members of this cooperative demonstrate that many are motivated to attend to earn an income but are restricted in terms of a) which forms of paid labour are available to them and b) the settings in which they feel culturally comfortable. The focus on needing money to survive

was evident in the refugees' original reasons for joining the cooperative. When one member, Derifa, explained why she had started working in the cooperative, she repeated the Arabic word *majbur*, which means 'having no other choice'. Another woman, Batoul, similarly described a sense of obligation by referring to the material needs of her family. It was the living conditions in Turkey that motivated her to seek work even though her family initially opposed the idea.

Most of the interviewees described how difficult they found it to start working and their feeling of bringing shame to their families by working outside the home, even though they did so to provide for their families. The fact that the cooperative was a women-only space where they could earn money in a more flexible setting than a full-time job enabled these Syrian women to participate. These are the same gendered factors that NGO workers have identified as enabling women to access livelihood support but with an added emphasis on the importance of earning money. Most of the refugee women lacking prior work experience also described their fear about the outside world. The welcoming and supportive atmosphere in the cooperative helped alleviate their fear about work, although anxiety about other places of employment remained. For example, Derifa described being afraid to work elsewhere as she would not know "what kind of environment I am going to face at other workplaces".

By offering refugee women a working space where they feel safe and happy, particularly for those who have never worked outside the home before, cooperatives can function as a stepping stone for Syrian women into other forms of employment. Many interviewees described a sense of belonging as well as a sense of personal strength and independence, feeling valued and valuable as financial contributors within their families. Some of them spoke of plans to use their experience with the cooperative to access future employment opportunities or open their own business. There were also examples of changing gender dynamics within households as women felt more able to stand up to their husbands than they did before. As Kaylah said:

“My life has become more valuable. I feel freer, stronger and more secure. I used to feel worthless as I was living the life of others but not my own. Now, sometimes we have fights with my husband, and I wave my debit card to him [laughs] and tell him ‘I am strong’.”

Many of the women referred to the cooperative as a family and a place where they could go for help and support. It also enabled interactions between Syrian women and members of the Turkish host community who also participate in the cooperative. Refugee women described widespread prejudice held by local women in their neighbourhoods and emphasised how the shared space of the cooperative enabled Turkish women to understand refugees’ living conditions and empathise with them. One interviewee described it as “feeling like one family inside and foreigners outside”, which suggests that social inclusion in Turkey is still a far-off goal. This was echoed by another interviewee called Amal, who highlighted the separateness of Turkish and Syrian communities outside the cooperative. The cooperative has provided a space where women from both sides listen to each other and try to communicate despite the language barrier that separates them elsewhere:

“The [Turkish] people here listen to me and slowly try to chat with us. This project has at least given us a chance to get to know each other, and an opportunity to chat. It has broken the prejudice a little. [...] We share ideas woman to woman and learn new things from each other. This job [at the cooperative] has changed us.”

Towards longer-term success and sustainability

The key to a successful cooperative model rests on integrating cooperative principles into both daily activities and strategic decisions while keeping all members involved. Syrian women should therefore be able to shape these enterprises according to their needs, but in Turkey this is challenging given that non-citizens are not legally allowed to serve on the boards of directors of cooperatives.

Within such a gendered labour market, it is challenging for cooperatives as models of livelihood support to balance the factors enabling socio-economic integration with

real opportunities for earning income – that is, to avoid falling into the trap of providing support that heavily comprises social activities with little income-generating potential. Salaries within the cooperative considered here came from the project budget rather than a sustainable production line, providing the participating women with only about 35 Turkish lira (approximately 2 USD) per day. What is more, there was no sustained focus on women’s rights and no equal sharing of responsibilities. Refugee women mentioned that they were responsible for production while the Turkish women oversaw sales, which created very different positions within the cooperative with different levels of voice in decision-making. To build a stronger organisational identity, working collectively for the common purpose should be underlined for all value chain activities (that is, all activities along the full lifecycle of a product), including income-generating activities.

It is crucial that the principles of member centrality and democratic governance are embedded in the operation of cooperatives, and it must not be assumed that the existence of a cooperative model is in itself enough to contribute to equality and inclusion purely because of its basic principles.⁵ Additionally, in order to be successful, cooperatives need to be a part of a value chain that allows sales to take place. A crucial component of this is cooperatives being embedded in local communities and working as part of a global movement to strengthen ties with other cooperatives through local, national and international structures. This structural element helps cooperatives find suppliers, customers and employees to ensure their activities are sustainable.

The experiences shared by the women in our interviews demonstrate that women’s cooperatives can help enable the socio-economic integration of Syrian women in Turkey. Enabling factors include the provision of flexible working hours and childcare, women-only working spaces, and opportunities for interaction with host communities. However, to remain sustainable as a support model for the socio-economic integration of refugee women, cooperatives need to actively apply the principles of member centrality and democratic

processes, and they must offer incomes that are supported by reliable production and value chains, not anchored purely in the aid economy. Without these important elements, women's cooperatives will risk suffering from the same problems that have plagued much of the other livelihood support provided for Syrian women in Turkey, where social cohesion is prioritised at the expense of critical income generation and where the voices and needs of Syrian women risk being overlooked in the process.

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