

COUNTRY BRIEFING: TURKEY

OVERVIEW

This brief focuses on the gendered dynamics of labour migration in Turkey, looking at the labour migration of both skilled migrant women working and living in Istanbul, and lower skilled Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs). The findings are based on two distinct case studies that look at female labour migrants from neighbouring countries in the Global South, particularly the former Soviet Union (FSU), as well as from the Middle East (Iran, Lebanon and Syria), and female labour migration from the Global North from Canada, the US and Europe. The participants predominantly work in two sectors: domestic and care with the majority of those from the FSU working as live-in-care givers and often experiencing substantial deskilling. The majority of professionals are upper-middle income academics, teachers, coordinators, editors, translators and NGO workers, who have mostly migrated from North America, Europe and the Middle East.

The migrant workers' experiences are mapped across both public and private spaces to show how gender inequalities are specific to time, place and culture. This brief also looks at the drivers and processes of migration and experiences of urban life (at home, in work and socialising) of the women who have migrated to Turkey to live from countries in the Global North and Global South.

While migration remains a live issue globally, relatively little work has been done to explore gendered migrations to the Global South, and what research has been done has largely focussed on domestic and care work. This brief contributes to a better understanding of the global circulation of gendered labour, the drivers of this movement, women's rights and agency and how migrant women use urban spaces within these contexts.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Three types of migration predominate in Turkey: feminised labour migration associated with domestic and care work from the former Soviet Union countries, Moldova and Bulgaria; transit migration especially from South Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan where Turkey has become a route to Europe; and the migration of skilled professionals from both the Global South and the Global North, from countries such as Iraq, Iran and Syria, the US and Canada.

Migrants who join Turkey's labour force enter into cultural norms and workplace practices that continue to uphold gender inequality. Some of the challenges they face include:

- **An unequal workforce and gender pay gap.** Although 49.9% of Turkey's population is composed of women, [women's labour force and employment participation rate is less than half that of men](#). In addition to this, women face a [15.6% gender pay gap](#) and this gap increases with age and lower educational level.



- **Family norms restrict women's employment.** While some highly educated women occupy important positions in employment, women's marital status and motherhood significantly restricts their participation in employment. For example, only [11% of men and women interviewed](#) for the Social Institutions and Gender Equality Index (SIGI, 2019), agreed that it is perfectly acceptable for any women in their family to have a paid job outside the home if they want one.
- **Within the skilled labour force women face barriers to promotion.** When looking at the number of female managers to male, only [14.7% of managers are women, compared to 85.3% who are men](#).
- **The domestic labour and care sectors are unregulated and fall outside of the Labour Law.** The care and domestic sectors are devalued and lack basic workers' rights frameworks, which serves to both deepen class and gender-based inequalities, and leave women who work in these sectors without legal and social protection.



KEY FINDINGS

- **There are multiple drivers of migration.** For skilled migrant women, precarious working conditions appear to be one of the drivers of migration, along with kinship ties, marriage migration and the desire to make a change in lifestyle. For lower skilled migrant women, drivers of migration include discrimination, heavy and unequal work burdens based on the gendered division of labour and the lack of a right to work, as well as domestic violence in their home country. Other drivers of migration, mainly for Syrian, Iranian and Lebanese women, are conflict and political pressures, and gendered violence and discrimination towards the migrants' sexual identity in their home countries.
- **Precarious and informal work practices are common, increasing women's vulnerability.** In Istanbul, many domestic and care workers work without a work permit and without basic social security. Within the framework of informality, the lack of standards in relation to MDWs working and living conditions, the particularities of "home" as a workplace and the privileged position of employers reinforces the inequalities and vulnerabilities of migrant women workers.
- **COVID-19 has deepened the discriminatory practices towards MDWs in Turkey.** Migrant women working in the domestic sector have been highly affected by the pandemic. While a small group of migrants had the opportunity to go back to their countries of origin, the vast majority of MDWs lost their jobs in the initial months of the pandemic and remained stuck in Turkey. Those most severely affected work as daily cleaners, who not only lost their employment and income, but also fell into a vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation due to their precarious position in the labour market.
- **Many experience verbal and physical sexual harassment in public spaces.** A large majority of migrant women are exposed to verbal, physical and/or sexual harassment in public spaces in Istanbul, and are anxious about femicide and violence against women. However, the city itself being a global city of opportunity with a blend of Middle Eastern, West Asian and European cultural patterns is often one of the reasons they choose to remain in Turkey. Nevertheless, cultural differences and exclusionary attitudes in Turkey often cause these women to feel excluded and vulnerable.
- **Despite the risks, many low-skilled women feel it is worth migrating.** Despite precarious labour positions in the domestic and care sector, their desire and will to improve their and their family members' lives, as well as to leave behind patriarchal relations and ties is clear when women's gains and achievements from their employment are considered. Migrant women's coping mechanisms in relation to these risks tend to be individual and limited rather than based on collective action. They tend to turn their own networks into coping mechanisms, rather than focussing on collective or unionised action.
- **Skilled migrants have greater mobility, but they can become unskilled in Turkey.** Compared to other migrant groups, skilled migrants have more mobility opportunities due to their social and cultural capital. But at the same time, the social and cultural capital of skilled migrants are often rendered invisible after migration, and as a result, highly skilled migrant women can become unskilled.
- **Educated migrants from the former Soviet Union experienced substantial deskilling.** The worst deskilling is among educated migrants from the FSU whose lack of cultural and economic capital means they remain in domestic and care work where they form the majority of live-in workers within the local female workforce.
- **Violence remains a clear threat.** Migrant women in Turkey pay attention to gender codes and are anxious about femicide and violence against women. This is more prevalent among migrant domestic workers, whereas the women from the Global North in skilled labour tend to live in safer areas of the city.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Academia and research institutions:

- **More research is needed to understand the complexity of the profile of both skilled migrants and MDWs, including their educational levels and skills.** Research should dismantle the assumption that highly skilled women come only from countries of the Global North. Additionally, the complexity of the motivations and experience of Global North migrant women workers requires more investigation.

Government, local authorities and civil society actors:

- **Cross sector collaboration across actors is crucial for the enforcement of women's rights in Turkey.** The Government of Turkey, in collaboration with local authorities and the third sector, as well as INGOs and NGOs actors, should work together to raise awareness of and create a shift in gender discriminatory social norms. Doing so will improve the understanding of and enforcement of women's rights in the country, including their free use of public spaces.
- **National legislative frameworks should be used to uphold MDW's legal rights in collaboration with the countries of origin.** The Government of Turkey should intensify efforts to legally protect the work of MDW's under the national legislative framework, to ensure basic workers' rights and social security for these, as well as other women migrant workers in the informal sector. Bilateral agreements with the countries of origin, and with the collaboration of international, regional and local actors, should be considered to improve the conditions and the assistance towards MDWs along all phases of their journey. Economic empowerment, legal protection, job security and access to health and social care should be granted to all migrant women workers under this framework.
- **The government should make advancements towards urgently re-joining the Istanbul Convention.** In March 2020, the Turkish government withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, established for the protection, prevention, prosecution and ultimately the elimination of all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence and specific measures for the protection of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women. The lack of such a powerful legal tool has increased the gendered vulnerabilities of migrant women, but also affects all women in Turkey. The

Convention also provided the possibility of granting independent, non-spousal residence permits to migrant women, as their residence permits are often connected to and reliant on those of their abusive spouse or partner, thus preventing their loss of legal residency.

FURTHER READING

- E Tuncer & Z.C Eren-Benlisoy, "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Skilled Female Migrants in Istanbul](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2023).
- Z.C Eren-Benlisoy & E Tuncer, "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Migrant Domestic and Care Workers in Istanbul](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2023).
- E Kofman & R Lazzarino, "[Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration: Analytical Snapshot](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2023).



PROJECT TEAM

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