

**Research Article**

**Empowering through Solidarity: The Role of Women's Cooperatives in the Integration of Syrian Refugee Women in Türkiye**

*Dayanışma Yoluyla Güçlenme: Kadın Kooperatiflerinin Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınların Entegrasyonundaki Rolü*

**Nazlı KAZANOĞLU**  
Dr., Nişantaşı Üniversitesi

İktisadi, İdari ve Sosyal Bilimler Fakültesi  
Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü  
[nazli.kazanoglu@nisantasi.edu.tr](mailto:nazli.kazanoglu@nisantasi.edu.tr)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4870-6435>

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**Abstract**

*The Syrian Civil War, triggered one of the largest humanitarian crises of the 21st century, displacing nearly 35 million Syrians. As of 2024, Türkiye hosts approximately four million Syrians. Among various strategies proposed for facilitating refugee integration, women's cooperatives remain an underexplored area within the literature. This article explores the potential role of women's cooperatives in supporting displaced Syrian women's integration processes. Rather than focusing on the challenges faced by these women, the study centres on the transformative capacity of cooperatives as community-based spaces that offer economic, social, and cultural pathways to integration. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork and relevant academic literature, this article contends that through their inclusive, participatory, and solidarity-based models, women's cooperatives can foster economic empowerment, cultural interaction, and social cohesion among Syrian and Turkish women. By spending time in these cooperatives, women not only gain income-generating skills but also engage in intercultural dialogue and shared daily practices, which organically contribute to cultural integration. The findings also reveal structural limitations such as dependency on external funding, lack of institutional support, and inadequate long-term policy frameworks. Nevertheless, the article argues that women's cooperatives represent a promising grassroots model for sustainable refugee integration when supported through inclusive and gender-sensitive public policies. In contributing to debates on migration, gender, and integration, this study sheds light on an overlooked but significant site of resilience, solidarity, and empowerment: women's cooperatives.*

**Keywords:** cultural integration, economic integration, gender studies, refugee crises, refugee integration, Syrian Civil War, women's cooperatives, women's empowerment.

**Öz**

*Suriye İç Savaşı, 21. yüzyılın en büyük mülteci krizlerinden birini tetikleyerek yaklaşık 35 milyon Suriyelinin yerinden edilmesine neden olmuştur. 2024 itibarıyla Türkiye yaklaşık dört milyon Suriyeli mülteciye ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Mültecilerin entegrasyonunu kolaylaştırmak için önerilen çeşitli stratejiler arasında kadın kooperatifleri, literatürde yeterince incelenmemiş bir alan olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu makale, Türkiye'de yaşayan Suriyeli mülteci kadınların entegrasyon süreçlerini desteklemede kadın kooperatiflerinin potansiyel rolünü araştırmaktadır. Bu kadınların karşılaştıkları zorluklara odaklanmak yerine, çalışmada kooperatiflerin ekonomik, sosyal ve kültürel düzeyde entegrasyon sağlayan topluluk temelli mekânlar olarak dönüştürücü kapasitesi ön plana çıkarılmaktadır. Nitel saha çalışması ve ilgili akademik literatürden yararlanan makale, kadın kooperatiflerinin*

**Önerilen Atıf /Suggested Citation**

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*kapsayıcı, katılımcı ve dayanışmacı yapıları sayesinde Suriyeli ve Türk kadınlar arasında ekonomik güçlenmeyi, kültürel etkileşimi ve sosyal uyumu teşvik edebileceğini savunmaktadır. Kadınlar bu kooperatiflerde zaman geçirerek yalnızca gelir getirici beceriler edinmekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda kültürlerarası diyalog kurmakta ve ortak günlük pratikler geliştirmektedir; bu durum da kültürel entegrasyonu doğal bir biçimde beslemektedir. Bulgular, dış finansmana bağımlılık, kurumsal destek eksikliği ve uzun vadeli politika çerçevelerinin yetersizliği gibi yapısal sınırlılıkları da ortaya koymaktadır. Buna rağmen makale, kadın kooperatiflerinin kapsayıcı ve toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı kamu politikalarıyla desteklenmesi hâlinde sürdürülebilir mülteci entegrasyonu için umut vadeden taban örgütlenmesi modellerinden biri olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Göç, toplumsal cinsiyet ve entegrasyon tartışmalarına katkı sunan bu çalışma, direniş, dayanışma ve güçlenmenin önemli ancak ihmal edilmiş bir alanına; "Türkiye'deki kadın kooperatiflerine" ışık tutmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kültürel entegrasyon, Ekonomik entegrasyon, Kadın güçlenmesi, Kadın kooperatifleri, Mülteci entegrasyonu, Mülteci krizi, Suriye İç Savaşı, Toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmaları.

## Introduction

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March in 2011, marked the beginning of one of the gravest humanitarian emergencies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Triggered by the Assad regime's violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations, the conflict has displaced approximately 35 million Syrians, forcing many to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Among these host states, Türkiye has emerged as a primary destination, currently sheltering around four million Syrians as of May 2024 (TurkStat, 2024). In the early phase of the conflict, between 2011 and April 2013, Türkiye adopted a humanitarian "open-door" policy, allowing unrestricted border crossings and granting temporary asylum to displaced Syrians. This approach, grounded in humanitarian norms, showcased Türkiye's commitment to providing protection for those escaping war and persecution. However, as the number of Syrians in Türkiye swelled and the crisis persisted, the Turkish government has introduced and implemented the "Temporary Protection Regulation" on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October in 2014 (Demirbaş & Akyiğit, 2018), formalizing Syrians' access to basic rights and services, including healthcare, employment, education, and shelter, while offering legal protection from forced return (Kazanoğlu, 2023; Üstün, 2016). Since then, in collaboration with both domestic and international stakeholders, the Turkish government has rolled out various programs to address the multidimensional needs of the Syrian population. These initiatives aim not only to alleviate immediate suffering but also to promote long-term social cohesion and resilience. Despite these efforts, the unprecedented scale of displacement has placed immense pressure on Türkiye's resources and infrastructure, revealing gaps in policy implementation and creating significant challenges for Syrians living in Türkiye. Among the approximately four million Syrians in Türkiye, women have come to face heightened vulnerabilities across economic, legal, and psychological domains, which hinder their ability to rebuild stable and autonomous lives in their host communities.

Empirical research and policy discussions such as the joint workshop hosted by PODEM and ORSAM in Gaziantep in December 2015 and studies by Alparslan-Kılıç and Toker-Gökçe (2020), Building Markets (2022, 2024), Çayın and Atalay (2020), Erdoğan (2019), and Kazanoğlu (2023) have identified socio-economic exclusion as one of the most pressing issues confronting Syrian women. Structural, legal, and sociocultural constraints limit their participation in formal labour markets, relegating many to informal employment where they face poor working conditions, low wages, and exploitation. Language barriers further compound these difficulties by restricting access to jobs, vocational training, and integration programs. Discrimination based on Syrian nationality exacerbates workplace exclusion, while caregiving responsibilities particularly for single mothers and widows—limit women's capacity to engage in paid employment. The lack of accessible childcare services and the dual burden of income generation and domestic responsibilities further entrench their economic precarity.

Discriminatory attitudes toward Syrians living in Türkiye, particularly women, compound the issue, creating work environments where they are often undervalued or outright rejected based on their Syrian nationality (Koburtay et al., 2020). For those who manage to secure work, balancing employment with familial obligations poses another significant challenge. Syrian women frequently bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, including childcare, eldercare, and household management (Baranik, 2021). The lack of affordable and accessible childcare services further restricts their ability to engage consistently in paid labour, forcing many to choose between earning an income and fulfilling family duties. This dual burden is particularly overwhelming for single mothers or widows, who constitute a

considerable portion of the Syrian population, pushing them deeper into economic precarity. Economic marginalization leaves many Syrian women in Türkiye trapped in cycles of poverty, with limited pathways to financial independence or upward mobility (Building Markets, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. The consequences extend beyond the individual level, as families reliant on informal, low-paying jobs struggle to meet basic needs such as housing, healthcare, and education. Furthermore, the lack of economic agency among women undermines their ability to participate in decision-making processes within their households and communities, perpetuating gender inequality and reducing their overall quality of life.

In addition to socio-economic marginalisation, Syrian women face significant barriers to education, which profoundly affect their integration prospects. While Türkiye has made efforts to integrate Syrian children into the public education system, various obstacles continue to undermine these initiatives (Alparslan – Kılıç and Toker- Gökçe, 2020; Şahin and Sümer, 2018). Language differences remain a major hurdle; Syrian students often struggle to keep up with their Turkish-speaking peers, leading to frustration, disengagement, and eventual dropout. Economic pressures within Syrian families also play a significant role; many families rely on older children's labour to supplement household income, and young women are often tasked with household responsibilities that conflict with their ability to attend school regularly. Cultural factors further complicate matters, as traditional gender roles within Syrian communities place greater emphasis on marriage and domestic responsibilities for girls than on formal education. Early marriages are particularly prevalent, driven by economic hardship and cultural expectations, and are often viewed by families as a means of ensuring financial stability or social protection for their daughters (Buckner et al., 2018). However, these practices curtail educational opportunities and deprive young women of the chance to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for personal and professional growth. The consequences of limited access to education are far-reaching; without formal education, Syrian women face diminished opportunities for integration into the labour market, further entrenching their economic dependency on male family members and perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. Moreover, a lack of educational attainment limits their ability to participate meaningfully in broader societal structures, reinforcing social isolation and diminishing their prospects for long-term stability and empowerment.

Furthermore, Syrian women in Türkiye also confront profound social and psychological challenges arising from their experiences of displacement, cultural differences, and the prolonged uncertainty of their living conditions (Kazanoğlu, 2023; Shiko, 2019; Şimşek, 2019). Many women experience significant isolation due to language barriers, limited mobility, and cultural differences between Syrian and Turkish communities. Language acquisition remains a primary hurdle; without proficiency in Turkish, many women struggle to navigate daily life, access services, or form meaningful connections with their host communities. This lack of communication not only isolates them but also reinforces a sense of otherness, limiting their ability to integrate into Turkish society. Traditional gender roles prevalent in both Syrian and Turkish societies often confine women to domestic spaces, further reducing opportunities for social interaction and public participation. This isolation is even more pronounced in refugee camps or urban settings due to overcrowded housing conditions, which leave many Syrian women with limited chances to rebuild their social networks.

Psychologically, the trauma of war and displacement has left deep scars on many Syrian women. Witnessing or experiencing violence, losing loved ones, and the stress of fleeing their homes have contributed to widespread mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. Despite the high prevalence of these issues, access to psychological support remains limited. Cultural stigma surrounding mental health within Syrian communities often discourages women from seeking help, while a lack of trained mental health professionals and interpreters in Türkiye further restricts access to care. These barriers leave many women to cope with their trauma alone, contributing to a cycle of isolation and deteriorating mental health.

Perhaps most importantly, Syrian women face significant discrimination from segments of the host population, often rooted in economic, cultural, and political factors that fuel resentment and hostility

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<sup>1</sup> Available at:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66708a0c236025663ebcd96f/t/66ad52d798f84f0c39ead668/1722634979088/SME-Snapshot\\_Women-Entrepreneurs\\_ENG.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66708a0c236025663ebcd96f/t/66ad52d798f84f0c39ead668/1722634979088/SME-Snapshot_Women-Entrepreneurs_ENG.pdf)

toward Syrians. One primary driver of discrimination is economic competition; the large influx of Syrians has strained local labour markets, particularly in urban areas where many Syrians reside. Turkish citizens often perceive Syrians as competitors for scarce jobs, especially in informal sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work, where wages have reportedly been suppressed due to the availability of refugee labour (Building Markets, 2022<sup>2</sup>; Erten and Keskin, 2023). This economic tension has fostered resentment, with many Turkish citizens blaming Syrians for rising unemployment and declining wages. Housing markets have also been affected, as increased demand for rental properties in areas with high concentrations of Syrians has driven rents up, further straining the financial resources of Turkish citizens and fuelling frustration toward Syrians (Rottman et al., 2024; Tüfekçi and Hazer, 2023).

Cultural differences have also contributed to discrimination. Syrian women, in particular, face stereotypes and misconceptions regarding their cultural practices, dress, and behaviour. Some Turkish citizens view Syrians as resistant to integration, perceiving their maintenance of Syrian cultural traditions as a refusal to adapt to Turkish norms. Women wearing traditional attire, such as the hijab or abaya, may encounter heightened scrutiny or hostility, as these visible markers of identity reinforce perceptions of “otherness.” (Cankurtaran and Albayrak, 2019). Additionally, rumours and misinformation about Syrians, often perpetuated through social media, have exacerbated tensions. False claims about Syrians receiving disproportionate financial aid or privileges from the Turkish government have fuelled resentment, despite evidence showing that such claims are unsubstantiated. Women, as visible members of the Syrian population living in Türkiye, often bear the brunt of these negative attitudes in public spaces, facing verbal harassment or exclusion.

The politicisation of the refugee issue in Türkiye has also significantly contributed to tensions between Syrian and Turkish individuals. Political rhetoric framing Syrians as a “burden” or “temporary guests” has shaped public opinion, often casting them in a negative light. Women and children, despite being among the most vulnerable, are not exempt from these broader narratives. Political tensions have created uncertainty regarding Syrians’ long-term status in Türkiye, leading to increased discrimination as citizens fear that the presence of Syrians will become permanent. Overall, the integration processes of Syrian women living in Türkiye are profoundly undermined by a myriad of challenges including economic pressures, educational barriers and social isolation together with psychological toll of displacement and the trauma associated with their experiences.

Considering the prevailing status of Syrian women living in Türkiye (Cankurtaran and Albayrak, 2019; Kazanoğlu, 2023; Tüfekçi and Hazer, 2023), this article argues that women’s cooperatives can serve as transformative platforms for the integration of Syrian women in Türkiye. Positioned at the intersection of gender empowerment and social solidarity, women’s cooperatives offer structured environments that facilitate skills development, economic inclusion, and community participation. Thus, the article explores the potential of women’s cooperatives not only as mechanisms of livelihood generation but also as catalysts for sociocultural adaptation and capacity building. Hence, this article is an endeavour to delve into the transformative potential of women’s cooperatives as catalysts for social and cultural adaptation among Syrian women living in Türkiye. In the quest for a full understanding of how women’s cooperatives can contribute to Syrian women’s integration processes, this article is structured into six sections. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on feminist and integration theories. This is followed by a brief discussion of the women’s cooperatives in Türkiye. The fourth section explains the research design and the methodology. The fifth section presents findings from fieldwork, highlighting the roles cooperatives play in addressing integration challenges faced by Syrian women. Drawing on empirical data and existing literature, the final section offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the impact of women’s cooperatives and enhancing their contributions to sustainable integration.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66708a0c236025663ebcd96f/t/66ad52d798f84f0c39ead668/1722634979088/SME-Snapshot\\_Women-Entrepreneurs\\_ENG.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66708a0c236025663ebcd96f/t/66ad52d798f84f0c39ead668/1722634979088/SME-Snapshot_Women-Entrepreneurs_ENG.pdf)

## **Women's Empowerment, Cooperative Structures, and Integration**

Since the onset of the Syrian Civil War, the academic focus on the integration processes of Syrian population has grown significantly, reflecting the urgency and complexity of this global issue. Accordingly, the term integration has emerged as a central yet highly contested topic within migration studies, generating an extensive debate among scholars and policymakers (Da Lomba, 2010). That is to say that integration is a multifaceted and evolving concept that defies a singular, universally accepted definition (Castles et al., 2002). Its meaning shifts across contexts, shaped by the perspectives of policymakers, migrants, host communities, and scholars alike. While widely used, the term remains conceptually ambiguous and politically contested, often employed with varying assumptions and expectations depending on the actors involved and the types of migration under discussion (Bradley et al., 2023). For instance, the integration pathways of refugees differ significantly from those of labour migrants due to divergent legal statuses, motivations for migration, and conditions of reception in the host country.

At its core, integration is a dynamic and reciprocal process through which newcomers engage with the legal, social, cultural, and economic structures of the host society, while simultaneously influencing and reshaping the host environment. It is not a linear journey toward assimilation, but rather a multidirectional process of mutual adaptation, negotiation, and recognition that unfolds over time (İçduygu and Diker, 2017; İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016; Kazanoğlu, 2023).

One of the most critical dimensions of the overall integration process is the economic integration, encompassing refugees' access to the labour market, the ability to secure stable and adequately paid employment, and opportunities for upward economic mobility (Shiko, 2021; Valente and Bunar, 2010). It plays a central role not only in enabling newcomers to achieve long-term self-sufficiency, but also in reducing their dependency on state support, and contributing productively to the host country's economy. While the central objective of economic integration is to reduce reliance on state support and promote fiscal sustainability for host governments, a successful economic integration comes with two additional and interrelated dimensions: (a) social integration and (b) cultural integration. To begin with, social integration, very briefly refers to the extent to which migrants and refugees are able to establish meaningful and sustained social connections within the host society (Özer et al., 2021). It transcends the notion of passive coexistence, instead emphasizing the formation of interpersonal bonds, trust-based networks, and reciprocal social interactions that facilitate a sense of inclusion and belonging. This process includes a broad spectrum of activities, such as connecting with neighbours, participating in community organizations, engaging in volunteer work, and taking part in civic and political life (Akar and Erdoğan, 2019; Gürsoy and Ertaşoğlu, 2019). Simply put, social integration refers to a process through which individuals internalize the cultural norms, values, and practices of their society and involves enabling refugees to coexist with the members of the host society without experiencing any kind of discrimination, threat, or exploitation either from institutions or individuals within the receiving country (Berry, 1997; Crisp, 2004). Within this process, migrants and/or refugees seek to participate within the daily lives and interactions of the host societies, which necessitates the cultural integration referring a continuous process by which migrants and host communities engage with one another's cultural values, norms, and practices. Cultural integration involves the adaptation of migrants and/or refugees to certain cultural aspects of the receiving society while simultaneously seeking to preserve their own cultural heritage and identity (Banki, 2004; Blau, 1960). It is very important to note that cultural integration does not mean cultural assimilation or the erasure of differences. Instead, it is about cultivating mutual understanding, fostering pluralism, and co-creating spaces of intercultural exchange. This process is most effective when understood as bidirectional demanding not only efforts from migrants and/or refugees to engage with the dominant culture but also openness, acceptance, and willingness to accommodate diversity on the part of host communities. Through such reciprocal engagement, cultural integration becomes a pathway toward more inclusive, equitable, and cohesive societies (ibid., 2004).

While wars, natural disasters, and other humanitarian crises may appear to be gender-neutral in nature, their impacts are far from evenly distributed. In practice, such crises tend to disproportionately affect women due to existing structural inequalities and gendered social roles. Women often bear the brunt of disrupted healthcare services, increased caregiving responsibilities, and heightened risks of gender-

based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse in displacement settings. Additionally, their access to economic resources, decision-making mechanisms, and humanitarian aid is often limited compared to men, further exacerbating their vulnerability. According to UN Women's Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality report<sup>3</sup>, now in the fourteenth year of the Syrian conflict, the protracted crisis and strained conditions in host countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Türkiye have led to the increasing marginalization and exploitation of Syrian population particularly women. Within the specific context of Türkiye, these pressures have led to a marked increase in gender-based domestic violence, elevated levels of anxiety and depression among Syrian women, and have compelled many to assume the role of primary household provider amidst highly precarious and challenging conditions (Kargın, 2018; Cankurtaran and Albayrak, 2019; Öztürk et al., 2019). While Türkiye's temporary protection regime provides a legal framework for access to basic rights and services, structural inequalities within migration governance and host society institutions continue to disproportionately affect women. Many Syrian women who have already endured severe trauma, including family separation, forced displacement, and conflict-related violence have come to be navigating complex bureaucratic systems, linguistic and cultural barriers, and frequently face unequal access to healthcare, education, and legal support (Cankurtaran and Albayrak, 2019). Economic insecurity is another major challenge, as legal restrictions, informal labour dynamics, and discrimination often exclude them from stable and dignified employment (Korkmaz and Tanrıseven, 2024). Alongside economic hardship, Syrian women are at heightened risk of gender-based violence in both domestic and public settings. Reports have documented increased cases of intimate partner violence, early and forced marriage, and sexual harassment, while limited awareness of legal rights and services discourages women from reporting abuse (Doğutaş, 2019). These overlapping challenges significantly hinder Syrian women's ability to rebuild their lives and integrate into Turkish society. Moreover, many women have assumed the role of primary breadwinner due to the absence of male relatives, taking on unfamiliar responsibilities in precarious work environments. In this context, this article argues that women's cooperatives can serve as a vital mechanism for promoting Syrian women's empowerment and supporting their social, cultural, and economic integration.

### **From Foundation to Function: A Historical and Current Overview of Women's Cooperatives**

The origins of cooperative movements as an economic organization can be traced back to mid-19th century England, where the repercussions of the Industrial Revolution, considered one of the most transformative periods in human history were most intensely felt. Deteriorating working and living conditions for the working class prompted a collective search for solutions, ultimately giving birth to the cooperative movement (Geray, 1992). In 1844, twenty-eight textile workers in Rochdale, England established the first cooperative, which soon inspired the foundation of a carpenters' cooperative in France in 1845 and an Artisans' and Agricultural Credit Cooperative in Germany in 1849 (Gümrük ve Ticaret Bakanlığı, 2012). These early examples catalysed the expansion of cooperatives across Europe and laid the groundwork for the formalization of the global movement with the founding of the International Cooperative Alliance in 1895. In the Turkish context, yet the cooperative movement emerged with the creation of the "Homeland Funds" (*Memleket Sandıkları*) in 1863 and significantly evolved following the 1961 Constitution, which recognized cooperatives as a responsibility of the state (Kazanoğlu, 2024). The state's increased institutional support and policy commitment led to a considerable expansion in both the number and scope of cooperatives. This expansion was bolstered by important legal reforms, most notably the Cooperatives Law of 1969, which provided a more structured and comprehensive legal framework (Şahankaya et al., 2023; Ticaret Bakanlığı, 2017).

Starting in the early 2000s, Turkish cooperatives faced significant challenges amid neoliberal reforms and the expansion of industrial agriculture. These transformations led to the emergence of "new generation cooperatives," which prioritized social objectives over profit maximization and rejected hierarchical organizational models (Kurtuluş, 2019; Kazanoğlu, 2024). Unlike traditional cooperatives that focused on redistributing profits among members, these new structures reinvested surplus resources

<sup>3</sup> Available at:

<https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2018/RefugeeCrisis-All-Brief-FINAL-links.pdf>



in socially beneficial initiatives, marking a clear shift toward community-oriented and solidarity-based economic models.

It was within this evolving cooperative landscape that women's cooperatives began to take shape. While their origins were influenced by broader structural shifts affecting Turkish cooperatives, the 1999 Marmara Earthquake played a decisive role in accelerating their development (Demircan-Yıldırım, 2020). The disaster caused widespread social and economic disruption, compelling many women to contribute to household incomes while continuing their domestic responsibilities. However, structural barriers restricted their participation in the formal labour market. In response, NGOs such as the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV) and various development agencies began promoting cooperative-based models that enabled collective income generation and strengthened social solidarity (OrKoop, 2022; Ticaret Bakanlığı, 2017). Following the earthquake, international donors including the World Bank and the EU supported women's entrepreneurship through grants and microcredit schemes, further facilitating the growth of women-led cooperatives.

These early initiatives were later institutionalized through the 2011 Women's Environment, Culture, and Enterprise Cooperative Charter and the 2012 Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperative Protocol, introduced under Article 88 of the Cooperatives Law. The Ministry of Trade's 2012–2016 National Cooperative Strategy also underscored the importance of organizing women under cooperative structures to promote entrepreneurship and strengthen their economic participation. Between 2011 and 2024, 305 new women's cooperatives were established across 61 provinces, bringing the total number to 594, including those in liquidation (SİMURG, 2024).

Women's cooperatives have since demonstrated multifaceted value including advancing gender equality, supporting women's empowerment, boosting employment, and contributing to sustainable local development. Scholarly studies (Şahankaya-Adar, Dedeoğlu, and Kurtuluş, 2023; Aksoy and Günay, 2018; Özdemir and Yılmaz, 2008; Karakuş, 2022) emphasize that these cooperatives represent a shift from traditional rural family-based production toward collective, organized labour models. Defined as non-profit enterprises founded, managed, and operated by women, they aim to promote gender equality, enhance women's economic and social participation, and contribute to local and national development (Şahankaya et al., 2023). Today, Türkiye hosts approximately 594 women's cooperatives, primarily concentrated in urban and coastal regions and operating in sectors such as agriculture, food production, and artisanal crafts. Although relatively limited in number, their impact is significant: around 7,200 women benefit from cooperative activities annually (Kazanoğlu, 2024). Nonetheless, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on the empowerment of Turkish women within these structures, largely overlooking their potential role in the integration of Syrian women. Addressing this gap, the following section presents empirical findings on how women's cooperatives contribute to the social and economic integration of Syrian women in Türkiye.

## Research Design

This article, which aims to explore the relationship between the integration process of Syrian women living in Türkiye and women's cooperatives as well as to contribute to their integration process and accordingly, capacity building, adopts a qualitative approach and employs qualitative research methods. Utilising qualitative research methods, this study examines the subject through an interpretive and exploratory lens within their natural settings (Baltacı, 2019). The empirical data have been collected through the combination of observation and thirty-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with both Turkish and Syrian cooperative members. Five women's cooperatives, known for having a significant number of Syrian members—two located in Büyükçekmece, İstanbul, one in Sultanbeyli, İstanbul and the other two in Küçükçekmece, İstanbul—were systematically observed over a period of twelve consecutive days each between July 2024 and September 2024. The selection of these five cooperatives was driven by their distinct focus areas and unique contributions to the integration and empowerment of Syrian members.

The cooperative in Sultanbeyli was chosen because of its emphasis on bringing together Turkish and Syrian women, aiming to foster mutual understanding and reduce potential tensions or prejudices between the two groups. By creating a collaborative environment where members worked closely on shared goals, this cooperative sought to build bridges between communities and promote social

cohesion. Additionally, it provided Syrian female cooperative members with opportunities to generate economic income, thereby addressing a critical need for financial stability. On the other hand, the cooperatives in Küçükçekmece and Büyükçekmece were selected for their focus on offering Syrian women various training programs and mentorship opportunities. These cooperatives aimed to enhance the professional skills and competencies of its members, enabling them to improve their vocational capabilities and achieve greater self-sufficiency. Through these programs, Syrian women were supported in their professional development, which not only contributed to their personal growth but also increased their potential to integrate into the labour market and broader society. Together, these cooperatives represent complementary approaches to addressing the economic, social, and professional challenges faced by Syrian women in Türkiye.

The observations were carried out during the cooperatives' operational hours, from 9:00 a.m., when they opened, to 6:00 p.m., when they closed. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of their daily operations and interpersonal dynamics. The observations focused on key areas, including the nature of social interactions among members, the division of labour within the cooperative, and the relationships established between Turkish and Syrian members. Particular attention was directed toward understanding how tasks were allocated and performed, the degree of collaboration and mutual support among members, and the overall working environment. Informal interactions during breaks, patterns of communication and coordination, and the influence of cultural differences on relationships were also closely examined.

In order to ensure a robust and comprehensive analysis, the observations conducted at the cooperatives were supplemented by a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 31 cooperative members. These interviews were strategically designed to delve deeper into the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the cooperative members, thereby enriching the data gathered through direct observation. Of these thirty-one total interviews, six were conducted at the cooperative in Sultanbeyli, Istanbul, with three of them involving Turkish members and three involving Syrian members. Additionally, eight interviews were carried out at one cooperative located in Küçükçekmece, Istanbul. Among these, five were conducted with Turkish members, and 3 with Syrian members. Another cooperative in Küçükçekmece was relatively smaller, therefore only six interviews were managed to be conducted: three with Syrian and three with Turkish members. Finally, in Büyükçekmece, seven interviews were conducted in the first and other four were conducted in the second cooperative. The interviews at Sultanbeyli provided valuable insights into the interactions and collaborative practices within the cooperative, highlighting how the cultural, social, and professional dynamics between Turkish and Syrian members influenced the functioning and outcomes of the cooperative together with the challenges faced by both the Turkish and Syrian cooperative members, particularly stemming from the cross-cultural communication. The interviews at Küçükçekmece on the other hand, provided first-hand data on how those training programs offered to Syrian women were organized, the expectations of the Syrian cooperative members regarding these programs, the perceived impact of the trainings, and whether they effectively addressed the Syrian women's needs. The discussions also explored how the training initiatives contributed to Syrian female cooperative members' skill acquisition, confidence-building, and overall integration into cooperative activities and broader society.

The interview process was guided by a thematic framework designed to capture the multifaceted nature of integration and capacity-building within the cooperatives. Questions explored areas such as members' motivations for joining the cooperative, their perceptions of inclusion and equity within the group, the support structures available to them, and the specific barriers they encountered in achieving their goals. Additionally, the interviews sought to understand how the cooperative facilitated skills development, economic empowerment, and social cohesion between Turkish and Syrian members. The gathered data were then analysed using the thematic analysis technique outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This data analysis technique was chosen due to its capacity to systematically identify, examine, and report key themes and patterns within a complex dataset, while maintaining flexibility that allowed for the emergence of unanticipated insights. Thematic analysis proved particularly suitable for the nature of the qualitative data gathered in this research due to its capacity to capture both the explicit meanings and the underlying ideas conveyed by participants. According to Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, the analysis proceeded through six iterative stages: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial



codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. The first stage involved engaging directly with the data—reading and re-reading transcripts to develop an in-depth understanding and noting initial observations and potential points of interest. In the second stage, the data were divided into meaningful segments and systematically coded to represent notable features and recurring ideas. The third stage involved grouping related codes and identifying broader themes that captured patterned meanings across the dataset. During the fourth stage, the coded data were revisited to review and refine these themes, ensuring their internal consistency and distinctiveness. In the fifth stage, each theme was clearly defined, delimited, and conceptualised to reflect its analytical contribution to the research questions. Finally, in the sixth stage, the findings were coherently reported, presenting a thematic account that integrated the major insights emerging from the data while linking them to the theoretical framework and overall objectives of the study. All in all, by triangulating the data collected through these 31 interviews with the detailed observations conducted during the field visits, the study was able to construct a comprehensive understanding of the cooperatives' internal dynamics.

### **Bridging the Borders: Role of Women's Cooperatives in Supporting the Integration of Syrian Women in Türkiye**

Having set out the context within which women's cooperatives operate in Türkiye and defined the characteristics of these cooperatives, wherein the number of Syrian members is high, this section turns to the findings of our fieldwork with a view to reflecting their own views and experiences on the impact of the cooperative membership on their lives in Türkiye. This article has conceptualised the term integration as a dynamic process through which Syrian population engage with the social, cultural, and economic structures of the host society, while simultaneously influencing and reshaping the host environment. The findings of this research indicate that women's cooperatives emerge as promising mechanisms for Syrian women's economic, social, and cultural integration. Nevertheless, their impact is closely shaped by factors such as the cooperatives' financial capacity, the availability of local government grants, and the broader sociopolitical climate of the neighbourhood wherein the cooperative is based, including the attitudes of host communities toward Syrian population.

#### ***Economic integration***

The ability of securing stable and adequately paid employment together with an easy access to the labour market is not only the fundamental driver of women's empowerment (Kabeer et al., 2005) but also of economic integration of refugees (Shiko, 2021). A significant number of national and international reports and academic research (Building Markets, 2017; Çayın and Atalay, 2020; Kılıçlı and Aygün, 2018; Kazanoğlu, 2022) have already put forth that unemployment and the lack of stable income-generating opportunities is one of the most pressing challenges faced by Syrian women in Türkiye. That is to say that Syrian women in Türkiye remain structurally disadvantaged in their access to the labour market, which not only impedes their economic integration but also severely limits their ability to achieve empowerment and autonomy within the host society. However, the findings of this research suggest that the situation may not be entirely bleak, as women's cooperatives appear to offer a promising avenue for addressing this structural disadvantage by providing Syrian women with accessible, community-based, and relatively stable employment opportunities that can foster both economic self-reliance and social inclusion. Almost all respondents to this study stated that cooperative membership effectively address this issue, enabling them to secure an adequate and regular income. For example, a Syrian woman who has been living in Türkiye for eight years and has been a member of the cooperative for nearly three years mentioned that:

*When we first arrived here, our situation was quite difficult. We initially went to obviously one of the camps and stayed there for a while, but then we needed a place to live, food to eat, and of course, money to afford all of that. Around that time, I heard that the cooperative was offering cooking classes for Syrian women, and that we could also take lessons in Turkish, literacy, pastry-making, and bread-making while working in the cooperative kitchen. I have been coming for three years now. I have a regular monthly income, and my language skills have improved significantly. Of course, I did not just learn how to cook*

*here, but now I can cook at a professional level and feel confident enough to work elsewhere.*

Previous research have further extensively delved into the underlying factors contributing to the high unemployment rates among Syrian women in Türkiye. Findings consistently point to a combination of structural and socio-cultural barriers. These include: (a) limited access to affordable and reliable childcare services, (b) lack of proficiency in the Turkish language, (c) restricted mobility, and (d) insufficient formal education or vocational qualifications (Akar and Erdoğan, 2019; Kargın, 2018; Kılıçlı and Aygün, 2018). These obstacles are further compounded by discriminatory hiring practices and the precarious nature of the informal labour market, which frequently excludes Syrian women from stable and adequately paid employment. The findings of this research suggest that women's cooperatives play a highly effective role in addressing many of these interlinked challenges. Notably, all cooperatives visited during the fieldwork phase of this study were found to offer a combination of vocational training and Turkish language courses together with several discussion platforms for Turkish labour law and workplace culture. With respect to lack of language skills together with Syrian women's unfamiliarity with the Turkish labour code and work culture, all of the cooperative presidents interviewed under the scope of this research reported that such trainings were regularly offered within their organizations. For example:

*So, when we first received funding from the UN and started including refugee women as part of the cooperative, almost none of them could speak proper Turkish. They also had no idea about their rights when it came to social security, basically, there was a workforce there, but they had no knowledge to back it up. So, what did we do? Especially during the first year, with the UN funding, we paid them a salary to make sure they weren't left vulnerable and had a basic income. At the same time, we organized courses for them, on Turkish labour law, Turkish language (both spoken and written), and more informally, on how the Turkish work culture operates. The women came in as if they were coming to work, but instead of working, they attended these training sessions.*

A Syrian cooperative member from Büyükçekmece also mentioned how useful those trainings were:

*I mean, it is not like my Turkish was zero, but I was missing a lot, and honestly, I was scared sometimes. I didn't always understand the tasks I was given. For a whole year, I came in five days a week like I was going to work, but instead I attended those classes. I even studied at home in the evenings. Now it has been three years that I have been working here in the kitchen, taking orders and everything...It really helped me a lot.*

In addition, two of the cooperatives, one based in Büyükçekmece and the other in Küçükçekmece, provide comprehensive childcare services for their members. This support enables Syrian women, who were previously excluded from the labour market due to the lack of accessible childcare, to engage in employment. In this regard, the president of the women's cooperative located in Küçükçekmece emphasized that having access to a building spacious enough to establish an on-site kindergarten significantly facilitated the employment of Syrian women. She explained that many of these women were previously unable to participate in the workforce due to a lack of affordable and reliable childcare options. By providing a safe and accessible place where they could bring their children while working, the cooperative removed one of the key barriers to their labour market participation. This childcare solution not only supported the women's economic empowerment but also helped them feel more secure and integrated into the cooperative environment:

*We chose the harder path because we did not want a single woman's rights to be ignored. The women we work with are all over 40, and many of them have never worked before or would not even have the chance to work elsewhere. A lot of them are widows or divorced. There is one woman, for example both she and her daughter lost their husbands. Two widows under the same roof, and they have no other job options. We try to support women like them...We actually have an extra floor downstairs where mothers with children over the age of three who cannot afford to send them to daycare can bring their kids along. Two of our founders are a psychologist and a drama teacher, and they worked with the kids too, helping them with school, offering emotional support. For us, it's not just about*

*empowering women financially. We are trying to support them in every possible way, we try to reach their families too...And like that, Syrian women who had no one to look after their kids were finally able to come in and earn their own income too.*

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that women's cooperatives hold considerable potential to function as inclusive platforms for the economic integration of Syrian women in Türkiye. By addressing key structural barriers such as lack of language skills, childcare, and knowledge of labour rights, women's cooperatives not only provide employment, but also offer the tools necessary for long-term empowerment and autonomy. The community-based, solidarity-driven nature of these initiatives creates safe spaces for learning, working, and connecting across cultural lines, which, in turn, fosters social cohesion alongside economic resilience. Far beyond income generation, cooperative membership cultivates confidence, skills, and a sense of belonging key components of successful integration. In contexts where Syrian women are systematically excluded from formal employment, these grassroots initiatives serve as both practical and symbolic pathways to inclusion, economic empowerment, and agency within the host societies.

### ***Social integration***

The findings of this research suggest that women's cooperatives play a crucial role not only in fostering economic empowerment among Syrian women but also in facilitating their broader social integration into Turkish society. Specifically, the cooperative setting offers a unique and supportive space where Syrian women, many of whom spend several hours each day at these centres, are able to go beyond merely accessing paid employment. These environments actively enable them to forge meaningful and sustained social bonds, which deemed to be an essential component of the long-term social integration. Through their regular presence and active engagement in the cooperatives, Syrian women gradually build interpersonal trust, friendship, and solidarity, both among themselves and with Turkish women living in the same neighbourhoods. This process is not limited to workplace interaction alone; rather, it extends into shared leisure activities, informal conversations, and mutual assistance networks that organically emerge from these inclusive, community-based spaces. Such social interactions serve to bridge the often-stark divide between refugee and host communities, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and marginalization commonly experienced by displaced populations. As can be seen from the below-example, cooperative members reported that these everyday exchanges foster a sense of belonging and emotional security, as they began to feel accepted, heard, and supported within their new social environment:

*The women come here to cook, yes, but they do not just cook and leave. They stay. They sit down, they taste the food together, and they chat. And during these conversations, something really powerful started to happen: they began to realize that there really is not much difference between them. For instance, in our team here, we have Safiya, who is a Syrian woman, and Nermin, who is Turkish. And honestly, they are so alike, it is almost uncanny. They have been through similar struggles, they have had similar pasts, and now they even joke that they are like twins. Of course, Safiya's story has its own unique hardships, but at the core, they deeply relate to one another. That kind of connection started breaking down the initial prejudices. And that is exactly what we hoped for. Especially in Sultanbeyli, which is a more conservative, closed-off area where women typically stay home, we wanted to create a space that slowly shifts that culture. We saw that these women needed to come out of their isolation. And little by little, they did. What is really striking is that almost every single woman who joined the cooperative said, "My self-confidence grew because I do not feel alone anymore."*

In a similar manner, a Syrian woman from a cooperative based in Büyükçekmece recalled one of her recent memories:

*This is our fourth year here, but only our second year with the cooperative. My daughter is right in the middle of her teenage years, and honestly, life was already tough even before puberty hit. Once that started, I really did not know what to do. She barely had any friends at school, she was completely alone. And let's be real, I was not exactly in the best shape myself, how could I, at 45, be her only friend? But when I started coming to the cooperative*

*more regularly, I found out that many of the other women here also had kids. Slowly, we started connecting them, and eventually, they became friends. It might sound simple, but for us, it was huge. My daughter no longer spends her birthday with just me and her little brother, she actually has friends now, kids to hang out with, people to go out with. After everything we have been through, that means the world to me.*

Furthermore, this reciprocal network of social ties cultivated within the cooperative setting fosters a strong sense of mutual support and solidarity among its members, which goes beyond the above-mentioned example of spending leisure time together. In times of hardship, Syrian women have come to be knowing that they can rely on one another for practical help, empathetic listening, and shared advice. This sense of collective resilience transforms the cooperative into far more than just a workplace. It becomes a vibrant hub of social capital, where horizontal relationships between women of diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds are consciously built, reinforced, and valued. The trust and companionship that emerge from these relationships lay the foundation for a deeper, more sustainable form of social cohesion. For example, one of the Syrian cooperative members from Küçükçekmece told one of her very hopeless situations as follows:

*Honestly, my daughter was running a very high fever, and it was during the pandemic, so I had absolutely no idea what to do. That morning, I was sitting there really upset and overwhelmed when the president of the cooperative noticed me and came over to ask what was wrong. I explained the situation to her, and she immediately stepped in to help. She went from one doctor to another, trying to find someone suitable for my daughter's condition, because I truly did not know where to go, which hospital to trust, or how to even start the process. I was completely lost. At home, I had just been rubbing vinegar on her joints, thinking maybe that would help a little. I was doing what little I knew, but it obviously was not enough. The support I received that day meant everything. It wasn't just about medical help it was about someone standing by me in a moment of panic and confusion, making sure I did not have to go through it alone.*

Finally, one of the cooperatives visited as part of this research, located in Sultanbeyli, organizes regular socializing and networking events designed to foster interaction between the Turkish and Syrian communities living in the region. These events serve as informal yet powerful platforms for dialogue and mutual understanding, allowing individuals from both groups to connect on a personal level. By creating a safe and inclusive environment where participants can share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations, the cooperative helps dispel stereotypes and reduce the social distance between host and refugee populations. As attendees come to recognize the commonalities in their daily struggles and aspirations, these events contribute meaningfully to overcoming the stigmatization faced by Syrian refugees. In doing so, they also create an enabling environment for refugees to become more actively involved in the local economy, particularly through their participation in cooperative structures that offer solidarity, skill-building, and pathways to economic integration.

As can be seen, grassroots, women-led cooperative structures demonstrate their unique potential to foster integration processes that are not solely economic in nature but also profoundly social and emotional, enabling Syrian women to feel seen, supported, and included within their host communities.

### ***Cultural integration***

Last but not least, the findings of this research clearly demonstrate that the experience of spending an entire day within the cooperative environment, working side by side with both Syrian and Turkish women naturally fosters a space for everyday cultural exchange. This daily, close-knit interaction does not rely on formal dialogue or structured intercultural programs, but rather unfolds organically through shared tasks, meals, conversations, and mutual support. In this way, the cooperative becomes a living space where cultural integration takes root in the most practical and meaningful sense: through genuine human connection, mutual understanding, and the normalization of difference in daily life. For example, Syrian and Turkish women who spend their entire workday together in the cooperative not only collaborate on daily tasks but also share lunch breaks and social time beyond the workplace. This extended interaction provides them with meaningful opportunities to observe and participate in each other's daily routines, family lives, and cultural practices outside the formal setting of work. Such

engagement goes beyond superficial contact and helps build genuine interpersonal relationships grounded in mutual respect and curiosity. This dynamic vividly illustrates the concept of cultural integration, which should not be confused with cultural assimilation or the erasure of cultural differences. Rather, cultural integration involves fostering mutual understanding, encouraging pluralism, and creating inclusive spaces where diverse cultural identities coexist and interact positively. Crucially, this process is two-way: it requires both migrants or refugees to actively engage with the host society's culture and the host community to demonstrate openness, acceptance, and flexibility in accommodating cultural diversity. Within the context of women's cooperatives, Turkish and Syrian women do not maintain cold distance or social separation; instead, they engage in active cultural exchange. Although their cultures are already closely linked historically and geographically, these interactions deepen their appreciation and knowledge of one another. For instance, during cooperative events, Turkish women might learn intricate Syrian embroidery patterns, a traditional art form that carries significant cultural meaning, while Syrian women may adopt local Turkish cooking methods or recipes, integrating new culinary practices into their daily lives. These reciprocal exchanges enrich both groups culturally and contribute to a shared sense of community and solidarity, which are essential elements for successful cultural integration. That is to say that the everyday interactions between Syrian and Turkish women within these cooperatives reveal the subtle yet powerful ways cultural integration occurs organically through shared experiences, cultural exchanges, and the normalization of difference. This bidirectional process challenges dominant assimilationist paradigms by emphasizing pluralism and mutual accommodation, illustrating how integration requires openness and flexibility on the part of both refugees and host populations.

All in all, the findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role that women's cooperatives play in facilitating the integration of Syrian women into Turkish society, demonstrating that integration is a complex, dynamic, and reciprocal process that transcends purely economic dimensions. By offering accessible employment opportunities coupled with targeted vocational training, language courses, and childcare support, these cooperatives effectively address structural barriers that have historically marginalized Syrian women from the formal labour market. Yet, the impact of these initiatives extends far beyond economic empowerment; they foster social cohesion and emotional well-being by creating inclusive, solidarity-driven spaces where trust, friendship, and mutual support flourish. The cooperative environment nurtures not only skill development and financial independence but also the restoration of agency, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging, deemed to be the crucial elements of sustainable integration within the host communities.

## Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War, widely regarded as one of the most devastating conflicts in modern history, approximately 35 million Syrians were displaced and forced to seek refuge abroad. According to the latest available data almost four million of these displaced Syrians currently reside in Türkiye. Despite the substantial efforts made by the Turkish state to facilitate the integration of millions of Syrians, the findings of this research underline that a significant proportion of these individuals still struggle to complete their integration processes. One of the most critical barriers remains their exclusion from the formal labour market, which exacerbates their already precarious living conditions by perpetuating economic insecurity, dependency, and social marginalisation. In this regard, this article has addressed a largely overlooked dimension of refugee integration by examining the role of women's cooperatives in supporting Syrian women's integration processes in Turkey. The empirical findings of this study reveal that women's cooperatives not only create opportunities for income generation and vocational training but also foster a profound sense of social belonging and cultural exchange. By providing structured and inclusive spaces where Syrian and Turkish women can work side by side, cooperatives help dismantle social prejudices, build trust, and create horizontal networks of solidarity that extend beyond the workplace. These dynamics not only strengthen the economic self-reliance of Syrian women but also allow them to navigate the broader social and cultural structures of the host society with greater confidence and agency.

However, the fieldwork findings reveal several structural and operational challenges that limit the long-term impact of women's cooperatives on the integration of Syrian women. The most prominent issues include: (1) the heavy dependence of cooperatives on short-term external funding, particularly from UN

agencies and international donors; (2) the lack of institutional mechanisms to integrate Syrian women's participation into national and municipal employment programmes; (3) limited access to affordable childcare, which restricts Syrian women's engagement in cooperative work; and (4) persistent social prejudice and linguistic barriers that hinder sustained intercultural interaction. To address these challenges, a multi-level policy approach is required. At the national level, the Ministry of Family and Social Services and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security should incorporate women's cooperatives into the broader refugee integration and employment policy framework by creating dedicated grant schemes and technical support programmes for cooperatives working with Syrian women. At the local level, municipalities should strengthen partnerships with women's cooperatives through social procurement, provision of working spaces, and inclusion in local development planning. These measures would enhance both the visibility and sustainability of cooperatives as key community-based actors in integration. Civil society organisations and women's networks also have a crucial role to play in ensuring that these initiatives remain inclusive and participatory. Collaborative training programmes focusing on language, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship can enhance Syrian women's employability and self-reliance. Meanwhile, donor agencies and international organisations should prioritise long-term capacity-building support over short-term project funding to ensure the institutional stability of women's cooperatives.

Overall, this study demonstrates that women's cooperatives function not merely as economic actors but as critical social infrastructures that bridge the economic, cultural, and emotional dimensions of integration. Therefore, efforts to expand and strengthen the role of women's cooperatives should be considered a critical element of future policy frameworks aiming to build a more inclusive and resilient host society. However, it is also crucial to underline that while this research contributes to ongoing debates in migration and integration scholarship by highlighting grassroots, women-led cooperatives as transformative agents capable of bridging economic, social, and cultural divides simultaneously, it also calls attention to the need for sustained policy support and inclusive governance frameworks that recognize and strengthen such community-based initiatives. Future research might further examine how these cooperatives navigate structural constraints and scale their operations amid fluctuating political climates, and how their members' evolving identities reflect both adaptation and resilience. Ultimately, women's cooperatives represent a promising, holistic model for fostering not only the economic inclusion but also the social and cultural integration of Syrian women, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners committed to building more equitable and cohesive societies.

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**Araştırma Makalesi**

**Empowering through Solidarity: The Role of Women's Cooperatives in the Integration of Syrian Refugee Women in Türkiye**

*Dayanışma Yoluyla Güçlenme: Kadın Kooperatiflerinin Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınların Entegrasyonundaki Rolü*

**Nazlı KAZANOĞLU**  
Dr., Nişantaşı Üniversitesi

İktisadi, İdari ve Sosyal Bilimler Fakültesi

Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

[nazli.kazanoglu@nisantasi.edu.tr](mailto:nazli.kazanoglu@nisantasi.edu.tr)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4870-6435>

**Genişletilmiş Özet:**

2011 yılında başlayan Suriye İç Savaşı, milyonlarca insanın ülkesinden kaçmak zorunda kaldığı büyük bir insani kriz yaratmış; bu kriz, 21. yüzyılın en kitlesel yerinden edilme vakalarından birine dönüşmüştür. Savaşın etkisiyle yerinden edilen Suriyelilerin büyük çoğunluğu komşu ülkelere sığınmıştır. Türkiye, yaklaşık dört milyon Suriyeli mülteciyle dünyada en fazla sığınmacıya ev sahipliği yapan ülke konumundadır. Bu bağlamda, özellikle kadın mültecilerin topluma katılımı ve sosyal uyumu hem akademik literatürde hem de politika belgelerinde önemli bir tartışma konusu haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, Suriyeli mülteci kadınların Türkiye'deki entegrasyon süreçlerini incelemekte ve kadın kooperatiflerinin bu süreçteki rolünü analiz etmektedir.

Suriyeli kadınların karşılaştığı entegrasyon sorunları çok boyutludur. Kadınlar, savaşın ve göçün neden olduğu toplumsal travmaların yanı sıra, Türkiye'de cinsiyet temelli ayrımcılık, yoksulluk, dil engeli, eğitime erişim eksikliği, toplumsal dışlanma ve güvencesiz çalışma koşulları gibi birçok yapısal sorunla karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Bu sorunlar, sadece kadınların bireysel yaşamlarını değil, aile içindeki konumlarını, toplumsal rollerini ve gelecek perspektiflerini de etkilemektedir. Nitekim, mülteci kadınların istihdam piyasasına katılım oranları oldukça düşüktür ve genellikle kayıt dışı, güvencesiz ve düşük ücretli işlerde çalışmaktadırlar. Bunun yanı sıra, gündelik yaşamda karşılaştıkları kültürel farklılıklar, dil engelleri ve ayrımcı pratikler; aidiyet hissini, sosyal uyumu ve kimlik oluşumunu da olumsuz etkilemektedir. Bu çalışma, tüm bu yapısal engellerin ortasında kadın kooperatiflerinin, Suriyeli kadınların sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik entegrasyonu açısından önemli bir potansiyel sunduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Kadın kooperatifleri, yalnızca ekonomik üretimin ve gelir getirici faaliyetlerin yürütüldüğü yapılar değil; aynı zamanda kadın dayanışmasının inşa edildiği, toplumsal bağların güçlendirildiği, güven duygusunun yeniden inşa edildiği ve kültürel etkileşimin mümkün kılındığı sosyal alanlardır. Araştırma kapsamında, İstanbul'un Büyükçekmece (2), Küçükçekmece (2) ve Sultanbeyli (1) semtlerinde faaliyet gösteren toplam beş kadın kooperatifi incelenmiş ve bu kooperatiflere üye toplam 31 Türk ve Suriyeli kadın ile derinlemesine mülakat yapılmıştır.

Elde edilen bulgulara göre, kadın kooperatifleri, Suriyeli ve Türk kadınlar arasında karşılıklı öğrenmeyi, kültürel etkileşimi ve toplumsal empatiyi mümkün kılan organik sosyal alanlar yaratmaktadır. Kadınlar, ortak üretim ve paylaşım süreçleri içerisinde yalnızca ekonomik değil, aynı zamanda duygusal ve kültürel bir alışveriş sürecine de girmektedirler. Kooperatifler, gündelik yaşamın ortaklaştırıldığı, yemek tariflerinin paylaşıldığı, çocuk bakım deneyimlerinin konuşulduğu, dinî pratiklerin müzakere edildiği çok katmanlı bir etkileşim alanı yaratmaktadır. Bu anlamda, kooperatiflerde geçirilen bir gün, kültürel entegrasyonun günlük hayatta somutlaştığı, normların ve değerlerin karşılıklı olarak yeniden

anlamlandırıldığı bir deneyim alanına dönüşmektedir. Bu yapılar, kadınlara yalnızca birer “yardım alıcısı” değil, aktif birer üretici ve karar alıcı olarak katılma olanağı sunmaktadır. Suriyeli kadınlar, bu süreçte hem ekonomik bağımsızlık kazanmakta hem de sosyal kimliklerini yeniden inşa etmektedirler. Bununla birlikte, kooperatifler aracılığıyla edinilen aidiyet duygusu, mültecilik deneyimini dönüştüren önemli bir etkidir. Birçok kadın, kooperatif sayesinde kendini ilk defa “topluluğun bir parçası” olarak hissettiğini ifade etmektedir. Ancak bu olumlu etkiler, yapısal bazı sınırlılıklarla da karşı karşıyadır. Kooperatiflerin sürdürülebilirliği, büyük ölçüde yerel yönetimlerin, uluslararası kuruluşların ve sivil toplum aktörlerinin sağladığı maddi kaynaklara ve teknik desteğe bağlıdır. Dış fonların azalması ya da siyasi konjonktürün değişmesi, bu yapıların devamlılığını tehdit etmektedir. Ayrıca, bazı kooperatiflerde Suriyeli kadınların yalnızca “emek sağlayan” konumunda olduğu, karar alma süreçlerine yeterince katılmadığı da gözlemlenmiştir. Bu durum, entegrasyonun yüzeysel kalmasına ve kültürler arası ilişkilerin hiyerarşik bir düzlemde işlemesine neden olabilir.

Çalışma, entegrasyonun yalnızca ekonomik ya da hukuki bir uyum süreci olmadığını; aynı zamanda gündelik yaşam pratikleriyle, karşılıklı tanımayla ve sosyal bağ kurma süreçleriyle şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Kadın kooperatifleri, bu çok katmanlı entegrasyon sürecine önemli bir katkı sunmaktadır. Kooperatifler, özellikle ataerkil yapılar içerisinde görünmez kalan kadın emeğini görünür kılmakta ve kadınları kolektif dayanışma temelinde güçlendirmektedir. Bu bağlamda, kadın kooperatifleri; toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği, sosyal adalet ve katılımcı kalkınma gibi hedefler açısından da stratejik bir öneme sahiptir.

Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, kadın kooperatiflerini yalnızca bir istihdam alanı değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal barış, kültürel çoğulculuk ve demokratik katılım açısından da önemli bir araç olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Suriyeli kadınların entegrasyonunda başarılı örnekler sunan bu yapılar, devlet politikaları ve uluslararası aktörler tarafından daha fazla desteklenmelidir. Kadınların kurduğu ve yönettiği bu taban örgütlenmeleri, hem kadınların kendi yaşamları üzerinde söz sahibi olmasını sağlamakta hem de toplumlar arasında köprü kurmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, kadın kooperatiflerinin yalnızca “iyi uygulama örnekleri” olarak değil, yapısal dönüşümün mümkün olduğu modeller olarak ele alınması gerektiği ileri sürülmektedir.