

İnceleme Makalesi

Kadın Kooperatifleri Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınların Güçlendirilmesi İçin Bir Çözüm Olabilir mi?¹

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Öz

Bu makale, maddi ve maddi olmayan güvencesizlik kavramlarına referans vererek, mülteci kadın kooperatiflerinin farklı boyutları üzerine eleştirel bir analiz sunmaktadır. Türkiye’de artan mülteci nüfusuna yönelik toplumsal uyum politikalarının bir sonucu olarak çok sayıda ulusal ve uluslararası destek programı hayata geçirildi. Bu destek programlarının önemli bir çıktısı haline gelen kadın kooperatifleri Suriyeli mülteci kadınların yaşam koşullarını iyileştirmek adına bir çözüm olarak görülmektedir. Mülteci kadınların kayıt dışı işgücü piyasasına katılımına ilişkin artan literatür ışığında bu makale seçilen üç kooperatif projesi üzerinden Suriyeli mülteci kadınların güçlendirilmesine yönelik olasılıkları ve iddiaları incelemektedir. Bu makale ile kooperatiflerin rolü, Suriyeli mülteci kadınların çalışma ve yaşam koşullarını iyileştirme ve nihayetinde güçlenmeye yol açma potansiyelleri toplumsal cinsiyet perspektifinden araştırmaktadır. Güçlenme söyleminin kullanımı ve ölçümünün belirsizliği, Suriyeli mülteci kadınların yaşadığı maddi olmayan güvencesizlik ve kooperatiflerde kadınlara sunulan toplumsal cinsiyetçi işler gibi kooperatiflerin farklı boyutları tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınlar, Türkiye’de Kadın Kooperatifleri, Güçlendirme, Hak Temelli Yaklaşım, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifi.

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Review Article

Can Women's Cooperatives be a Solution for the Empowerment of Syrian Refugee Women?

Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflective analysis of multiple dimensions of refugee women's cooperatives with a reference to the concepts of material and non-material precarity. As a result of integration policies towards increasing the refugee population in Turkey, the number of international and national support programs for Syrian refugee women in Turkey has increased. As one of the important outcomes of these support programs, women's cooperatives are seen as a solution to assist Syrian refugee women. In the light of growing literature on Syrian refugee women's participation in the informal labor market, this paper scrutinizes the possibilities and arguments for the empowerment of Syrian refugee women over three selected cooperative projects. This paper explores the role of cooperatives and their potential to enhance Syrian refugee women's working and living conditions, ultimately leading to empowerment, from a gender perspective. For this purpose, different dimensions of the cooperatives are discussed such as the ambiguous use and measurement of the empowerment discourse, non-material precarity that Syrian refugee women experience, and the type of gendered work provided for women in cooperatives.

Keywords: Syrian Refugee Women, Women's Cooperatives In Turkey, Empowerment, Rights-Based Approach, Gender Perspective.

Introduction: Informality and Precarity of Labor Market for Refugee Women in Turkey

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees with more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, and half of this population are women (UNHCR, 2022). Today, Syrian refugees have the specific status of temporary protection (TP) which grants access to certain rights and services like education, health and, albeit limited, some social support programmes. However, the ambiguous policy framework towards Syrian refugees and the TP status is problematic as it covers limited rights and services with no access to formal employment. By defining Syrian refugees' position as "neither refugee nor guest" Baban et al. (2017, p.13) point out the precarious living conditions of the Syrian population. Similarly, Ilcan et al. argue that such ambiguous status often contributes to "high levels of uncertainty and vulnerability for displaced and forced migrants" (2018, p. 57). Although growing research examines different dimensions of Syrian refugees' precarious position in the light of Turkey's policy and practices, gender is usually neglected in these studies as Syrian refugee women are not as visible as Syrian men in the labour market due to their reproductive responsibilities. It is well-known that migrant women's experiences is different than man's and their living conditions and choices are usually limited by social constraints and patriarchal norms (Morokvasic, 1984). Like any other female migrant groups, refugee women also face similar discrimination in destination countries as a result of the intersection of migrant and gender identities (UNPF, 2018).

The relationships between precarity, gender, and migration are complex in the context of Turkey (Şenses, 2020). Informal labor market participation of refugees is a significant part of this complexity. Existing studies show that migrant women mostly work informally in a gendered segment of the labor market such as domestic care, garment workshops, agriculture, tourism, and commercial sex (Toksöz & Ünlütürk-Ulutaş, 2012). Although there is a concentration of certain nationalities in certain jobs, low -status, low wages, and informality are common characteristics in economic sectors where migrant women's labor is demanded in Turkey. For example, live-in domestic care works are done mainly by single women migrants from the former Soviet Union countries, due to patriarchal and religious norms in Islamic Middle Eastern countries like Syria (Sherif-Trask, 2006) This sector is not considered as an option for Syrian refugee women who mainly participate in informal jobs in the garment industry or agriculture. Migrant women's labor is often labeled as low-status 3D jobs (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) which are not preferred by native workers. Moreover, in the literature, 3D jobs are categorized as low-skilled, poorly paid, and dead-end jobs (De Haas et al., 2019). Migrant work requires long, underpaid working hours, and sometimes they even, do not get any payment or even if they get paid, they get irregular or delayed payments since they have no channel to claim their rights (Toksöz, 2020). These characteristics of the informal sector make migrant women vulnerable to exploitation. As a result, "migrant women were working in

low-paid precarious work, invisible as ‘dependents’ and living under the patriarchal relations of both the host society and their local community” (Şenses, 2020, p.55). In fact, Dedeoğlu’s study (2020) on Syrian migrant women working in the seasonal agriculture sector in Adana province shows how Syrian migrant women’s inhumane working conditions are also linked to the patriarchal family structure. In other words, often Syrian refugee women experience harsh working conditions and have no power over their labor and earnings. Another field study also explains how exploitation in the labor market and the lack of access to formal labor work are connected to discrimination in everyday life, stereotypes and prejudices generated by the locals (Kaya and Kırac 2016, p.2). In other words, Syrian refugee women experience “hyper-precarious” (Lewis et al., p.582) positions due to a combination of different structural constraints including informal working, gender relations, and socio-legal definitions that come from being in a refugee position. Refugee women’s cooperatives initiated by I/NGOs (international and non-governmental organizations) are increasing in number in Turkey. These cooperatives are usually initiated by I/NGOs and presented as a solution to Syrian refugee women’s hyper-precarious position affected by patriarchal and religious norms (Yaman, 2020) as well as capitalist production relationships in Turkey. In the light of current literature and discussions, this paper examines three examples of women’s cooperative projects. These projects were selected due to relatively recent establishments and accessible project outputs through available reports on their websites. More importantly, these cooperative projects claim that the labor force participation of Syrian refugee women leads to empowerment or increasing self-reliance.³ The usage of empowerment in this paper is based on Page and Czuba’s (1999, p.2) definition: “Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important.” These projects were funded by the International Labor Organization (ILO), World Vision International (WVI), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). While the information about ILO’s cooperative project is accessible on the organization’s web page⁴, WVI’s website⁵ also covers different information and reports including the testimonies of participants. Regarding the third cooperative project initiated by FAO, the impact report⁶ of the project published online and the cooperative project’s website⁷ are analyzed. Although those cooperative projects show differences, two of them imply a causal relationship between refugee women’s labor force participation and empowerment. As a

³ Although the concept of self-reliance is a common concept used in these reports, it is seen that it is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of self-confidence in the FAO report.

⁴ https://www.ilo.org/ankara/projects/WCMS_644741/lang--en/index.htm

⁵ <https://www.wvi.org/stories/syria-crisis-response/empowering-syrian-women-through-cooperative-courses-turkey>

⁶ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb0348en/CB0348EN.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.fao.org/fao-stories/article/en/c/1265076/>

different dimension of current discussions over Syrian women's labor market participation and empowerment, this paper critically analyzed these arguments based on these three cooperative projects by emphasizing how the empowerment concept turns into self-responsibilization which promotes neoliberal⁸ economy policies. In this paper, as a viable alternative to neoliberal approaches, a rights-based approach is offered.

Refugee Women's Cooperatives in Turkey

To improve the precarious conditions and to prevent the impoverishment of Syrian refugee women, projects and international support programs developed by I/NGOs gained great importance in recent years. Although women's cooperatives for Syrian refugees are relatively new, the history of cooperatives in Turkey dates back to the mid-90s. Cooperatives were established to find solutions to support poor women through gendered economic activities such as sewing, cooking, and souvenirs that require manual dexterity. For example, in 2001, after the 1999 Gölcük earthquake, several women's cooperatives were established to support women in the earthquake regions with the support of KEDV (Kadın Emeğini Destekleme Vakfı) and today their number has reached to 60 women's cooperatives (Serinikli, 2016). Another well-known example is the establishment of the Women's Cooperatives Communication Network (KİA) in 2005. This network became official in 2014 and was named as SIMURG. One of the most important aims of the SIMURG is to increase the participation of women's cooperatives in the economy and develop cooperatives' institutional capacities (KEİG, 2018). A recent study points out the common aims of women's cooperatives such as supporting women's empowerment by meeting the economic, social, and cultural needs of women (Taş and Kazar, 2019). In other words, one of the significant aims of women's cooperatives is to create better opportunities for poor female producers and consumers.

The first contemporary example of a cooperative project for Syrian refugee women is ILO's project, started April 2018 named "Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities in Turkey" which is headed by UN Women and in cooperation with the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM). In the project's scope, vocational market-oriented training courses, including entrepreneurship courses, are given to Syrian refugees to create opportunities for income-generation activities and support women's empowerment. Cooperatives are a relatively new phenomenon and can be considered as an attempt to enable Syrian refugee women to participate in the labor force and to earn a living. According to the information on the web page⁹ one of the objectives of the project is to empower Syrian refugee women through market-oriented

⁸ "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p.2 and his discussion on self-responsibility pp. 168-69).

⁹ https://www.ilo.org/ankara/projects/WCMS_644741/lang--en/index.htm

vocational and technical training courses and entrepreneurship courses. According to the project's website, the programme was funded by Japanese Government and the EU Regional Trust Fund and 3.280 women participated to the trainings between April 2018 – December 2019 in Gaziantep city.

A second cooperative project has been initiated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)¹⁰ in 2020. This cooperative is an output of the “Promoting Self-reliant Livelihood through Employment and Micro-entrepreneurship Project” which is funded by the Japanese government. Under this project, there are three support programs. The first one is a women's cooperative named Crane located in İzmir producing stuffed mussels (FAO, 2020). Another program consists of fifteen vegetable farms in Şanlıurfa producing bell peppers, finally, a further example is a cooperative in Mardin producing traditional olive soap. Products produced in these support programs are purposefully chosen due to the huge and stable demand in the market. Although men are also part of the cooperatives, the main aim of these initiatives is stated to increase income-generating opportunities for Syrian and Turkish women. In this cooperative both Syrian and Turkish women access occupational trainings to fulfill quality and safety standards. Then, they can start working in the cooperative as producers. Cooperatives also guarantee buyers through accessing local restaurants and retailers according to the Impact Report published by FAO (2020): “After the completion of the project in March 2020, the cooperative (in İzmir) has continued to sell on average 500 kg of stuffed mussels each week.” According to the “Impact Stories” cited in the report, in addition to earning money, cooperative members' self-reliance increased due to daily interactions with other stakeholders like buyers and producers (FAO, 2020). As they are a part of the cooperative, they were able to learn the Turkish language and adapt to Turkish society. This resulted in an increased self-reliance. In other words, according to this report, all three support programs under the cooperative project have important social outputs in addition to economic ones. According to the report, 143 of the 150 persons who participated in vocational training, completed the training. Of these 143 persons, 73 are Syrians (51%), 70 are Turkish (49%), 116 are women (81%) and 27 are men (19%) (FAO, 2020). According to the impact highlights on employment rates, “48% obtained new income sources after the training” and “78% of project participants stated that the project has a positive effect on their self-confidence” (FAO, 2020, p.4). Although these statistics can be important to understand project impacts, there is no information about how self-reliance is conceptualized and measured, and what the new income sources for 48% of participants are. The impact report does not provide sufficient information if these jobs are formal or informal sector jobs.

¹⁰ <https://www.fao.org/fao-stories/article/en/c/1265076/>

The third example is the cooperative project initiated by World Vision which is partnered with the Turkish Red Crescent. This project's aim is also described as the empowerment of Syrian women through cooperative courses in Turkey (WVI, 2021). For this purpose, 50 Syrian refugee women and Turkish women¹¹ are trained in agriculture and food production sectors. On World Vision's website¹², there is information about cooperative initiatives and testimonies from the individuals who participate in vocational training. Testimonies on the webpage are similar to those on the FAO's page¹³. In those testimonies, attendants of the cooperative courses mainly emphasized their gratitude for being a part of the cooperative, how they became mentally stronger or felt empowered, discovered new skills, and could contribute to their family's needs due to the daily income they earned in the cooperative or how they become stronger and more independent (WVI, 2021). Although most of the testimonies shared in the pages emphasize how participants plan to produce some products and make new sales by finding new possible channels after the cooperative training ends, there is no information about whether participants find employment or not after the training period. There is no conceptualization regarding the concept and measurement of empowerment except for the participant testimonies which emphasize a sense of empowerment increase, like in the first example of the cooperation project initiated by FAO (together with all three support programs under the cooperative project).

Although the ILO and WVI funded cooperative projects directly use the concept of empowerment, FAO's project does not directly point out "empowerment" instead, the concept of "self-reliance"¹⁴ is used on their website. Regardless of the concepts used in these projects, there is a common understanding behind these cooperative initiatives that indicate having an income through cooperatives can have a liberating effect for women's life. This argument is expanded in the following sections by touching upon three aspects.

Women's Cooperatives: Empowerment Through Cooperation?

Besides the three examples given in the previous section, empowerment is a powerful aim that shapes cooperatives, NGOs and INGOs projects. Most of the time, empowerment is the desirable 'output' of projects especially in relation to refugee women. A narrow definition of the empowerment of women through cooperatives refers to making money through employment or revenue creating activities such as producing homemade products. However, the literature asserts that empowering refugee women is a complex issue that cannot be achieved

¹¹ There is no information on the website about the number of Turkish women participating in the cooperative project.

¹² <https://www.wvi.org/stories/syria-crisis-response/empowering-syrian-women-through-cooperative-courses-turkey>

¹³ <https://www.fao.org/fao-stories/article/en/c/1265076/>

¹⁴ In the literature, (refugee) women's self-reliance mainly is conceptualized as relational to economic self-reliance of (refugee) women that increases with paid employment by participating in the labor force. For this reason, most of the time it is measured whether women participate in the labor force or not (Bloom et al., 2019; Leeson et al., 2020).

automatically by making money through employment (Yalim and Critelli, 2023; Osha and Mishra, 2013). The idea of poor women's empowerment through cooperatives has different dimensions and this paper offers a critical evaluation and some reflections from a gender perspective.

The first problem is the need for precise definitions of empowerment in the reports and projects. When the impact reports are revisited, the issue of empowerment is different from the interpretation of empowerment in feminist literature. This is common although the concept of empowerment is widely used by cooperatives, NGOs, and INGOs which are working for gender equality. There is no explanation about what empowerment means and what the components are, as it is shown in three cooperative examples. Although reports do not explicitly emphasize this information, the term is treated as a destination point through employment and does not focus on "pathways women are traveling in their own individual or collective journeys of empowerment" (Cornwall, 2016, p.342).

Empowerment is to be considered as a unique process (Batliwala, 2007) for every woman rather than a homogenous output. However, the information and reports of the cooperative projects mentioned above do not provide any information about the differences among Syrian refugee women participants. Cornwall expresses this idea: "What empowers one woman might not empower another: There is no one-size-fits-all recipe for empowerment" (2016, p.344). Moreover, the idea that treats empowerment as an endpoint assumes that it should be permanent. On the contrary, it can be temporary. For example, women participants of a cooperative can experience increased empowerment at the beginning of the cooperative training, but after the training ends and the production process starts, their empowerment can disappear due to the working conditions and environment. Some information on the number of participants is provided but there is no follow-up information about participants neither about their living nor working conditions.

According to Rowlands' definition (1995, p.102) empowerment covers different aspects:

[empowerment means] bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it. This puts a strong emphasis on access to political structures and formal decision making and in the economic sphere, on access to markets and incomes that enable people to participate in economic decision-making.

As Rowlands' definition shows, access to decision-making processes both economically and politically is a major part of the empowerment process. Although access to economic resources is highlighted in the definition, participation in the economic decision-making process (i.e. decision about how much money to spend for what in the household) and not merely earning income per se is also emphasized. Economic opportunities can increase

the range of alternatives for precarious people “but do not necessarily enable them to reach a point where they can take charge of creating for themselves the options from which they get to choose” (Rowlands, 1995, p.104). From a gender perspective, these decision-making processes are closely linked to the gendered division of labor and responsibilities in the household (Wiesman et al., 2008).

The complex nature of empowerment and lack of its conceptualization in those cooperative initiatives causes another problem, namely measuring or operationalizing empowerment. By arguing that the measurement of empowerment is necessary, Kabeer offers three interrelated and inseparable dimensions: “resources, agency, and achievements” (1999, p. 435) all are considered as important parameters for the measurement of empowerment. Similarly, Huis et al. (2007) contribute to the discussion on women’s empowerment on three relational levels: micro, meso, and macro. The main aim of Huis et al.’s study is to highlight different levels of empowerment to understand and measure the personal, relational, and societal levels of empowerment holistically and relationally. Their three-level model of empowerment is crucial for further studies to enhance the understanding of women’s empowerment. Moreover, Huis et al. (2007) show the importance of specific interventions for different levels of women’s empowerment. Measuring empowerment, considering its complex and multilevel nature, is possible, and related literature gives some reference points. Although women’s own experiences provide significant insights to evaluate social phenomena, this process should also be scientifically and analytically sustained. In other words, there is a need for systematic and scientifically founded research (using qualitative and/or quantitative techniques) to have a better understanding of empowerment and how it is experienced and perceived by women. However, there are no sections about how the testimonies of participants are collected on the websites of these projects. In other words, measuring complex concepts like empowerment or self-reliance by relying on random testimonies of the refugee women participants of cooperatives which are not obtained by scientific methods cannot provide an objective result. Furthermore, not providing any conceptualization and measurement methods of the concept of empowerment in the reports prevent comprehending and measuring this phenomenon as well as the success of these projects.

The second problem regarding the empowerment discourse is the attempt to empower women through gendered jobs such as cooking/food production and agriculture, as seen in two (FAO and WVI) cooperative initiatives. It can be argued that these projects actually serve to reproduce gender inequalities in the society through perpetuating gender roles. In other words, cooperatives are not promoting the idea that women refugees can be employed in jobs other than cooking, cleaning, or serving which have already gendered characteristics. Instead of vocational courses for better-waged and skilled jobs, gender roles of women are usually reproduced through vocational courses for cooking, hairdressing, or producing homemade products. Atakan and Çoban’s (2022)

study about women's cooperatives also supports this argument by showing how women's labor is marginalized and squeezed into a specific type of work in cooperatives as mentioned above. In other words, women practice patriarchal homemakers' duties in a more organized and systematic fashion which can cause the exploitation of women's labor in cooperatives. Their research suggests that "women's labor in cooperatives requires intense self-exploitation and this situation is legitimized in the name of 'participating in social life rather than working'" (Atakan and Çoban, 2022, p.255).

Without a doubt, empowerment through creating revenues on gendered jobs can provide a certain degree of empowerment, however, women's non-material precarity and position in the gendered segments of the labor market still remain. In other words, cooperatives underestimate the non-material precarity conditions that many women experience. In Turkey, patriarchal family and society are important structural obstacles for women's empowerment as much as being able to access to employment. Structural obstacles do not automatically disappear when refugee women make their own money by participating in the labor force or producing home-made products. In this point, as Şenses (2020) strongly emphasizes, highlighting the distinction between material and non-material precarity is crucial. Material kind of precarity mostly refers to refugees' economic problems based on insufficient livelihood, poor housing, or health conditions (Toksöz et al., 2012) while non-material precarity mostly "operates at the discursive and relational level and combines with material forms of precarity" (Şenses, 2020, p.59). Employment or economic activities such as cooperatives can contribute to improving the material conditions of refugee women and their families as recent studies on women's cooperatives in Turkey point out (Çınar et al., 2021; Kızıldağ, 2019; Taş and Kazar, 2019). However, non-material precarity is a significant phenomenon that shapes refugees' lives, which are determined by prejudices and stereotypes. Based on a content analysis of the representation of Syrian women in the Turkish daily press, Narlı et al.'s (2020) study argues that it is a common practice to portray Syrian refugee women as a risk or threat to Turkish society. Their study shows, how they are associated with swindling Turkish men by arranging fake marriages and stealing gold or breaking down family units for being kuma (second wife) (ibid). Furthermore, the authors assert that non-material precarity, which is mostly discursive and stereotypical, is produced by media. Thus, it is not an easy task to separate material (i.e., structural) precarity from non-material (i.e., discursive, agency-based) precarity. As Şenses (2020) underlines, material and non-material precarity are relational, interconnected, and intertwined. In other words, supporting the material conditions of Syrian refugee women with labor force participation is not sufficient to empower refugee women unless it is combined with some measures against non-material precarity. As feminist scholars point out, labor force participation does not automatically cause empowerment (Elson, 1999; Humphries and Sarasua, 2021; Pearson, 2007). Thus, empowerment cannot be handled in isolation from the structural aspects of family and society. In fact, empowerment is a relational concept that can be only

understood through a combination of the personal and political (Cornwall, 2016). On the webpages of the three cooperatives, the concepts of empowerment and self-reliance are mostly associated with an improvement of the material conditions of Syrian refugee women through making money. The fact that a woman works in a cooperative and makes her own money may not automatically mean that women have control and are part of decision-making mechanisms over economic matters in the family context. Due to patriarchal norms and gender inequality, it is known that women may not be able to keep and spend their own income through waged employment. It is also worth noting that there are women who cannot join these cooperatives due to patriarchal norms. As Keysan and Şentürk (2020) point out in their study, most of the Syrian refugee women may not be allowed to work or participate in NGOs because of their gendered roles and responsibilities in the household. This situation makes Syrian refugee women dependent on male household members.

Considering non-material precarity as well as material precarity brings us to the third argument. The idea that Syrian refugee women's empowerment is possible with their participation in the labor market or by producing home-made products can be also seen as a neo-liberal way of approaching the structural problems of refugee women. In other words, the state's responsibility over a vulnerable group is transferred to the free market relations through cooperatives funded by NGOs and revenue generating activities and employment. Although cooperatives are interpreted as valuable initiatives where Syrian refugee women can provide alternative economic gains other than participating in informal sectors, it cannot be considered as a sufficient and sustainable way of maintaining their livelihood. In fact, Özgür Keysan and Şentürk (2021) documents in their study that refugee women prefer direct economic support instead of vocational courses or counselling from the NGOs. Cooperatives do not provide any social security and wage employment. Even though participants of cooperatives gain some skills with vocational courses or acquire temporary economic gains through collective activities in cooperatives, finally, they provide no guarantee to find secure and waged employment. Furthermore, this discourse implies that the empowerment of Syrian refugees could only be possible with their participation in the labor market and ignores the fact that the state has responsibilities and duties towards vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Associating the conditions of empowerment of Syrian refugee women with their participation in free market relationships shifts the focus from a "rights-based approach"¹⁵ to a result-based approach" (Batliwala, 2007, p.562). From a rights-based approach, it is not possible to interpret refugees as equal agents who are obliged to participate in the workforce to maintain their own and their family's livelihood. In the context of Turkey, access to formal employment is already limited for refugee women due to different political, bureaucratic and practical obstacles (Şenses, 2020). Furthermore, it is the state's responsibility to provide protection to the

¹⁵ "The rights-based approach to migration is based on international human rights law and should underpin all migration policies: under international human rights law, all migrants are entitled to the respect, protection, and full enjoyment of their human rights, regardless of their migration status" (Hujo, 2019, p.26).

vulnerable groups defined by national or international law. Valtonen (2008) points out the risk of traumatization and the importance of a rights-based approach towards the needs of forced migrants. Thus, if the discourse on empowerment and increasing self-reliance of Syrian refugee women is discussed from a rights-based perspective, structural obstacles and the state's responsibilities become more visible. It does not mean that initiatives like cooperatives do not have any positive effects on Syrian refugee women, on the contrary, meso-level mechanisms like I/NGOs are important agents in refugee studies. However, their dependence on funding and the temporariness of support mechanisms do not provide sufficient supports for refugees (Özgür Keysan and Şentürk, 2021). Therefore, a rights-based approach towards the needs of forced migrants and the role of the state agencies are still crucial. Furthermore, I/NGOs do not have the capacity of solving structural problems such as, language courses, and child or elderly care (Yudiastu and Pratikto, 2021) faced by women. For example, gender-based domestic responsibilities as well as patriarchal norms are important obstacles for Syrian refugee women's labor force participation, and free childcare or elderly care services should be provided by the state. Literature on this issue also emphasizes the importance of enhancing dialogue through the cooperation of NGOs with local and national government agencies to produce long-standing solutions instead of temporary ones (Atar et al., 2022; Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017; Kaya and Kiraç, 2016). A rights-based access to adequate support services and the labor market could be a major agenda for state and non-governmental organizations. Without eliminating structural barriers (language, psychosocial services, access to the labor market, free childcare facilities, etc.) these cooperatives cannot solve the problems of millions of refugees.

Conclusion

In Turkey's informal market conditions and existing patriarchal structures, cooperatives are presented as an alternative way to create revenue for Syrian refugee women. This paper offers a critical analysis of selected women's cooperatives in Turkey (Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities in Turkey/ILO, Promoting Self-reliant Livelihood through Employment and Micro-entrepreneurship Project/FAO, Empowering Syrian women through cooperative courses in Turkey/WVI) by focusing on the conceptualization of empowerment, and the types of jobs provided for refugee women. The underestimation of non-material precarity that Syrian refugee women experience is stressed, and the neo-liberal understanding of cooperative projects has been criticized from a gender perspective.

This paper offers a critical analysis of the discourse and the practices of refugee women's cooperatives under three points. The first one is a lack of conceptualization. Three of the cooperatives explicitly claim that with the cooperative projects, the empowerment of women is increased, while the other one (FAO's project) claims that obstacles for women are removed, and the self-reliance of Syrian refugee women is increased. However, there is

no conceptualization of either empowerment or self-reliance in the online documents provided by the cooperative projects. In order to claim that there is an increase, the indicators that are expected to have increased should be conceptualized and checked over time. Two of the cooperatives, especially the World Vision's cooperative project, consider empowerment as the endpoint, and assume that all women who participate will follow the same path to empowerment. However, as Cornwall and Edwards emphasize “empowerment is a complex process that requires more than the quick and easy solutions often offered by development agencies” (2010, p.1). Thus, it is hard to say that with women’s occupational training and their participation in the labor market, their empowerment is automatically increased. Besides, more systematic and in-depth research is needed to gain further insight into the experiences and perceptions of Syrian refugee women joining cooperatives.

The second problem is that cooperative projects only concentrate on the material precarity of Syrian refugee women but not the non-material one. Although non-material precarity is mostly based on prejudices, and stereotypes and occurs in the discursive realm, non-material aspects are inseparable from material precarity. Ignoring the non-material precarity that Syrian women experience and relating the empowerment of those women only with labor force participation presents a reductionist approach. Gendered types of work that these women experience in cooperatives cause an increase in their non-material precarity. Types of work such as cooking or agriculture do not challenge the inequality within the gendered division of labor. Instead, gendered inequalities are sustained as these cooperatives direct women to these gendered sectors of the economy.

The third one is interpreting Syrian refugee women’s empowerment with their participation in the labor market as a neo-liberal way of handling structural problems. Besides, this approach transfers the state’s responsibilities and duties to the individual’s actions and choices in the free market. Instead of approaching issues from a result-based understanding, the state is expected to integrate a rights-based approach. In other words, the state is expected actively to take responsibility and cooperate with I/NGOs not only concerning employment problems of refugees but also in relation to areas like registration, legal assistance, and improving education and language. The three criticisms about the cooperatives discussed in the article can also be considered as a series of suggestions to make cooperatives into agents of meaningful change. As a first suggestion, scientific conceptualizing and measurement of the concepts are needed and they should be in line with the purpose of the project. Writing impact reports or sharing information on websites and sharing each stage of the project in a transparent way is important not only for cooperatives but for other projects that are designed for Syrian refugee women. Secondly, cooperatives need to relinquish the reductionist approach by taking into consideration social constrains, gender inequalities and the obstacles refugee women may come across both in their home countries and in Turkey. As a solution to the first and second problem, it is crucial to employ social research and to allocate more time and

funds to the measurement and evaluation stages. Thirdly, as Daniş and Nazlı (2018, p.154) argue by emphasizing the importance of state and civil society cooperation, the issues related to refugees can be considered not as a problem to be solved but from a rights-based approach. A rights-based approach to Syrian refugee women and their engagement in women's cooperatives can relate the discussion of empowerment to international human rights in which all migrants are entitled to access protection of their human rights no matter of what migrant status they hold.

Limitations and Further Research

Based on available data, this paper examines the role of refugee women's cooperatives from an empowerment discourse. For this reason, this article has some limitations that can be filled with further research. The first one is the lack of information about the operational and organizational differences among the cooperatives. For example, they are funded by different INGOs and they are not located in the same localities. For the purpose of the article, the focus is upon the common aim and understanding of the cooperatives however, they are not homogenous and show different results in terms of empowerment of women and improving non-material precarity. Secondly, although Syrian refugee women have some common characteristics of precarity such as participation in the informal labor market, they are also not homogenous groups in terms of age, education, skill, socio-economic status, and migration history. Those differences affect their empowerment level and their way of experiencing cooperatives.

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