



# Between Legal Limbo and Irregularity:

The Situation of Syrian Transwomen  
Refugees in İzmir



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Between Legal Limbo and Irregularity: The Situation of Syrian Transwomen Refugees in İzmir  
Association for Solidarity with Refugees

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**Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği**  
**Association for Solidarity with Refugees**

Address: Uğur Mahallesi 848 Sokak No:16

Konak / İzmir / Türkiye

Tel : 00 90 232 483 54 21

E-mail: bilgi@multeci.org.tr

Web: multeci.org.tr

The Association for Solidarity with Refugees regularly organizes focus group workshops with underrepresented and disadvantaged groups within the migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee communities. These small-scale, in-depth meetings are conducted in private, secure environments, ensuring participants feel comfortable and safe to share their experiences. The primary objective of these sessions is to gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and struggles faced by these vulnerable groups. In addition, the insights gathered from these discussions play a crucial role in shaping and guiding the organization's strategies for providing targeted support and services to migrants and refugees. By fostering an inclusive dialogue, the Association ensures that the voices of the most marginalized individuals are heard, helping to create tailored programs that address their specific needs, advocate for their rights, and promote their well-being. The workshops also serve as a platform for community building, empowerment, and the development of solutions that reflect the lived realities of those often left out of larger conversations.

This thematic report was developed based on the discussions held during these meetings. While the issues covered do not encompass the views or experiences of all focus group participants, similar groups, or individuals across Turkey, the report aims to provide a snapshot of the situation and highlight the challenges faced by the disadvantaged groups in focus.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	6
2. Methodology .....	7
3. Discussions .....	8
a. Past Experiences .....	8
b. Discrimination and Violence .....	10
c. Legal and Bureaucratic Challenges .....	11
d. Economic Exploitation and Job Discrimination.....	11
e. Security Concerns and Irregular Migration .....	12
f. Psychological and Emotional Strain .....	13
4. Conclusion .....	13

# The Situation of Transwomen Refugees in İzmir

## 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, millions of Syrians have fled the country, with Turkey becoming the largest host of Syrian refugees. As of 2024, over 3.5 million Syrians reside in Turkey under temporary protection. Although Turkey's initial open-door policy has been widely praised, lack of long-term strategy and planning have resulted in significant strain on the country's resources and infrastructure, exacerbating the challenges faced by both refugees and host communities. This failure to develop sustainable solutions has left millions of refugees in precarious conditions and placed an undue burden on local services. Most Syrian refugees live in urban areas rather than camps, often facing challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education and healthcare.

Under the temporary protection system, Syrian refugees in Turkey have access to basic services, including healthcare and education, but they lack full legal refugee status. This creates uncertainty about their long-term future and restricts their ability to obtain citizenship, travel freely within the country, or find stable employment. As the Syrian conflict drags on with no immediate resolution in sight, many refugees remain in limbo, unsure whether they can return home or integrate fully into Turkish society.

For vulnerable groups like LGBTQ+ individuals, including transwomen, these challenges are even more pronounced, as they also face widespread discrimination, violence, and legal barriers. Despite being in Turkey for over a decade, many Syrian refugees still live in precarious situations, with limited access to stable livelihoods and long-term security.

Transwomen refugees in Turkey face a unique set of challenges stemming from both their gender identity and their status as displaced individuals. As refugees, they confront the legal and social difficulties common to many asylum seekers, such as limited access to resources, restricted mobility, and precarious legal status. However, their experience

is further complicated by the deep-seated discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community in Turkish society. This double marginalization places transwomen refugees in an especially vulnerable position, where they often struggle with isolation, discrimination, and a lack of adequate legal protections. For many transwomen refugees, the social stigma surrounding both their gender identity and their refugee status severely limits their opportunities for integration into Turkish society.

Additionally, restrictive policies such as the requirement for travel permits, which prevent refugees from moving freely between cities, create further barriers to economic stability and safety. With limited job opportunities and rampant discrimination in both the public and private spheres, transwomen refugees are often forced into precarious and dangerous situations. The lack of formal support structures, combined with societal hostility, has led many transwomen to consider migrating irregularly to other countries in search of safety and acceptance, despite the significant risks involved.

## 2. Methodology

This report was prepared based on an in-depth focus group workshop held at the Mülteci-Der Office in Izmir on June 27, 2024. The focus group was organized to gather firsthand insights from five Syrian transwomen living in İzmir under temporary protection status. The participants were invited by Mülteci-Der. The transwomen, who have faced significant challenges related to both their legal status and gender identity, were selected to provide a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Of the five participants, two were proficient in Turkish, allowing them to actively engage in discussions. For the remaining three participants, an Arabic translator from Mülteci-Der was present to ensure that language barriers did not impede their ability to contribute fully to the conversation. This approach helped create an inclusive environment where all participants could express themselves freely and comfortably, regardless of language proficiency.

The focus group was conducted by a team of professionals from Mülteci-Der, including two experienced lawyers and a protection officer. Their roles were critical in

guiding the discussions and asking structured questions aimed at understanding the participants' experiences in areas such as legal challenges, discrimination, and daily life in Turkey. Additionally, a social work intern was present to observe and provide support, ensuring the participants' well-being throughout the workshop.

To foster a sense of safety and confidentiality, the meeting was held in a private setting, allowing the transwomen to discuss sensitive topics such as violence, harassment, and the difficulties they face as both refugees and members of the LGBTQ+ community. This method ensured that the participants could speak candidly without fear of reprisal, helping to reveal the full extent of their struggles.

### 3. Discussions

This focus group workshop aimed to gather insights into the experiences of five Syrian transwomen refugees residing in İzmir. The discussion focused on their previous support experiences, daily challenges, discrimination, and security concerns, as well as issues related to migration and legal status.

#### a. Past Experiences

The participants expressed significant challenges in adapting to life in Turkey, facing a multitude of obstacles that were further compounded by their status as both refugees and transwomen. One of the primary issues identified was the language barrier, which severely limited their ability to navigate daily life, access services, and communicate effectively in Turkish society. Although two of the participants could speak Turkish, the others relied heavily on informal support systems or translators for basic interactions. This language gap created additional difficulties in accessing healthcare, legal services, and educational opportunities, which are crucial for integration and well-being.

In addition to the language barrier, a lack of legal knowledge presented a major hurdle for the participants. Many were unaware of their rights and the legal processes involved

in obtaining residency permits, healthcare access, and employment opportunities. This lack of information often left them vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and even legal consequences, such as fines for traveling without the required permits. Some participants shared that when they first arrived in Turkey, they were entirely unaware of the legal frameworks in place and were uncertain about how to secure their status or access essential services. This situation often led to feelings of helplessness and fear, as navigating an unfamiliar legal system without adequate support became a constant source of stress.

Social integration also emerged as a significant challenge. Despite living in Turkey for several years, many participants reported feeling isolated and excluded from broader society. They highlighted experiences of discrimination in various spheres of life, particularly in education and employment. One participant recalled that, even though they had received some support while living in Istanbul, the underlying social prejudice against trans individuals remained pervasive. This was particularly evident in educational settings, where some were forced to drop out or were threatened by teachers due to their gender identity.

In the context of employment, the participants noted widespread discrimination, which made securing stable and dignified work nearly impossible. Many reported being forced to leave jobs due to harassment and bias from both employers and colleagues. One participant shared that they had worked in state-owned factories but ultimately quit after facing constant discrimination. The precariousness of their employment situation was exacerbated by their temporary protection status, which limited their legal employment options and subjected them to further exploitation in informal or seasonal work. The lack of stable employment also made it difficult for the participants to build a sustainable life in Turkey, as they were frequently met with hostility when attempting to enter the labour market.

Additionally, the participants expressed frustration with the systemic barriers they faced as transwomen refugees. In particular, the requirement for travel permits, which restricted their movement between cities, was a major point of contention. This restriction not only limited their access to better job opportunities but also placed them in unsafe or unwelcoming environments. Furthermore, the constant need to present



travel permits left them vulnerable to discrimination from law enforcement, who often treated them with suspicion due to their gender identity.

Overall, the participants' accounts reflect the multi-layered difficulties they face in Turkey, where language barriers, legal obstacles, and social exclusion intersect to create an environment of deep insecurity and marginalization. Despite the occasional support they received, the pervasive discrimination in education, employment, and public life continues to hinder their efforts to integrate and live safely in Turkish society.

In addition to the challenges of language barriers, legal issues, and social integration, the participants in the focus group shed light on a range of other critical concerns, further illustrating the precarious situation faced by Syrian transwomen refugees in Turkey.

#### b. Discrimination and Violence

A significant portion of the discussion centred on the persistent discrimination and violence experienced by the participants in their daily lives. The refugees spoke openly about the widespread social stigma attached to both their refugee and trans identities. One participant emphasized that “some Turkish citizens treat animals with more respect than they do Syrian transwomen”, reflecting the deep-seated prejudice and dehumanization they endure. This discriminatory treatment has led to repeated acts of violence, such as an attack on their home, where they were physically assaulted. While the incident was reported to the authorities, the legal process has been slow and ineffective, leaving the victims with little hope for justice. This sense of insecurity is compounded by the knowledge that both the state and parts of society are hostile toward their presence.

The psychological toll of constant discrimination has been immense. Several participants described how they are forced to alter their physical appearance, such as growing out their hair and beard, to avoid standing out in public, a practice that causes them both physical and emotional distress.

### c. Legal and Bureaucratic Challenges

The participants also voiced deep frustration with the bureaucratic and legal obstacles they face as refugees under temporary protection. Although they have lived in Turkey for over a decade, none of them have been granted full legal refugee status or citizenship, leaving them in a state of perpetual limbo. This lack of legal recognition not only undermines their ability to secure basic rights but also contributes to their marginalization in society. Without proper documentation, they are unable to move freely within the country, leaving many effectively confined to specific cities due to the restrictive travel permit system. This restriction exacerbates their isolation, making it difficult for them to access better job opportunities, healthcare, and social services in other regions.

One participant shared a particularly painful example of this bureaucratic challenge: their friend, who was seriously ill, could not access adequate medical care because their ID was registered in another city, and they lacked the necessary travel permit to seek treatment elsewhere. This bureaucratic inefficiency can have dire consequences, particularly for refugees who rely on public services to meet their healthcare needs. Additionally, seasonal employment, which many transwomen refugees depend on for survival, becomes even more tenuous when travel is restricted, further undermining their ability to achieve any level of financial security.

### d. Economic Exploitation and Job Discrimination

Economic exploitation is another widespread issue for transwomen refugees in Turkey. The participants reported that, due to their refugee status and trans identity, they are often subjected to informal, low-paying, or temporary jobs that offer no job security. Many employers exploit their precarious legal status and vulnerability by paying them below the legal minimum wage or offering them unstable seasonal work. This economic marginalization leaves the participants struggling to make ends meet, and some have been forced to rely on informal networks or community aid to survive.

Even when the participants managed to find employment, they frequently encountered discrimination and hostility in the workplace. One participant described their experience working in three state-owned factories, where they were harassed and ultimately had to quit due to the pervasive discrimination. Another reported that their teacher had threatened them with violence because of their appearance, reflecting how deep societal intolerance runs, even within institutions that are meant to provide support or education.

#### e. Security Concerns and Irregular Migration

Security concerns emerged as a central theme during the discussion, with many participants expressing a desire to leave Turkey due to the instability and hostility they face. The participants made it clear that while not all Turkish citizens are openly hostile, the overall environment is far from safe. Some transwomen refugees feel that they are constantly at risk of physical and psychological harm, not only from society but also from the police and other state actors. Several participants shared stories of friends who had attempted or succeeded in leaving Turkey irregularly, often via dangerous routes involving smugglers. The risks associated with irregular migration, such as human trafficking, sexual violence, and even death, were well-known among the group, yet many still viewed these dangerous paths as preferable to remaining in Turkey under such hostile conditions.

The absence of any safe, legal pathways to migrate or resettle to third countries, particularly for LGBTQ+ refugees, was a source of immense frustration. Despite having lived in Turkey for over a decade, many of the participants have no viable options for resettling in Europe or elsewhere, leaving them trapped in a cycle of discrimination and uncertainty. Some even expressed that the constant threats and difficulties they face in Turkey made the prospect of irregular migration, despite its dangers, seem like the only escape from their current situation.

#### f. Psychological and Emotional Strain

The prolonged instability and uncertainty have taken a profound psychological toll on the transwomen refugees. The participants described feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and exhaustion from years of struggling against systemic barriers with no end in sight. Several shared that the cumulative effect of legal uncertainty, social exclusion, and the threat of violence had left them emotionally drained. The lack of progress toward gaining legal status or even basic human rights has caused many of them to lose hope for their future in Turkey. As one participant put it, "The main reason we want to leave is that there's no stability here."

## 4. Conclusion

The focus group discussion with Syrian transwomen refugees in İzmir brought to light the extensive and interconnected challenges this vulnerable population faces. As refugees under temporary protection, they are caught in a system that provides limited rights and lacks long-term solutions. Simultaneously, as transwomen, they endure compounded discrimination based on both their refugee status and gender identity. The participants' accounts of their struggles reflect a broader systemic failure to address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ refugees in Turkey, leaving them marginalized, vulnerable, and often in dangerous situations.

One of the most critical issues raised during the discussion was the severe impact of legal and bureaucratic obstacles. The temporary protection system, while offering some access to basic services, leaves transwomen refugees in a state of limbo. Many have lived in Turkey for over a decade without any pathway to citizenship or permanent residency. This lack of legal recognition restricts their access to essential services and imposes travel restrictions, making it difficult for them to secure employment, access healthcare, or relocate to safer areas. The requirement for travel permits, in particular, emerged as a major source of frustration, as it not only limits their mobility but also exacerbates their sense of confinement and helplessness.

Economic exploitation was another key concern, with participants highlighting the lack of stable employment opportunities and the widespread discrimination they face in the workplace. Many are forced into precarious, informal jobs, often subject to exploitation by employers who take advantage of their refugee status and trans identity. The lack of legal protections for trans individuals in the workplace, coupled with the absence of economic support systems, leaves them in a constant state of financial insecurity. This economic marginalization, combined with social stigma, pushes many transwomen refugees further into the margins of society, where they must navigate not only survival but also the emotional toll of exclusion and rejection.

Discrimination and violence were recurring themes throughout the discussion. The transwomen shared personal stories of harassment, violence, and hate speech, both in public spaces and within their own communities. The deep-rooted prejudice against both Syrians and trans individuals in Turkish society manifests in daily acts of discrimination, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults. The legal system, which is slow to respond to such cases, often fails to provide justice or protection, leaving many of these individuals vulnerable to continued abuse. This constant threat of violence has forced some participants to conceal their gender identity, which takes a severe toll on their mental health. The participants spoke of the physical and psychological exhaustion of having to hide who they are in order to avoid further harm.

The cumulative effects of legal uncertainty, economic instability, social exclusion, and violence have driven many of these transwomen refugees to consider leaving Turkey. For some, the prospect of leaving Turkey irregularly, despite the inherent risks, appears to be the only viable option for escaping the hostile conditions in which they live. Many participants expressed frustration with the lack of legal pathways for LGBTQ+ refugees to seek asylum or resettlement in safer, more accepting countries. The absence of such pathways forces them to remain in a country where they are neither fully protected nor integrated, and where their future remains uncertain.

Psychologically, the prolonged instability and exclusion have had devastating consequences. Several participants spoke of their growing sense of hopelessness and emotional fatigue after years of navigating a system that offers them little hope for improvement. The mental health burden of living under constant threat, combined with

the lack of support structures, has left many transwomen refugees in a state of despair. The ongoing uncertainty about their legal status and future prospects in Turkey only adds to this emotional strain, with many feeling trapped in a country that neither fully accepts them nor provides a viable path forward.

The overarching theme of the discussion was one of fatigue and frustration. After more than a decade of living in Turkey with no resolution, the transwomen refugees find themselves grappling with both the systemic barriers that keep them in a state of vulnerability and the societal prejudices that deny them dignity and security. Many have lost faith in the prospect of ever being fully accepted or integrated into Turkish society, and for some, the desire to leave has become overwhelming, even if it means taking dangerous and life-threatening risks through irregular migration.

In conclusion, the plight of Syrian transwomen refugees in İzmir reveals the deep flaws in the country's refugee and protection systems. Without significant reforms, this vulnerable population will continue to suffer from legal uncertainty, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Immediate action is needed to ensure that transwomen refugees are granted the protections and opportunities they deserve, both in Turkey and internationally.

Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneđi / Association for Solidarity with Refugees is a civil society organization that has been carrying out rights-based work since 2008 to ensure asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants affected by forced migration can access their rights and services with dignity, in line with universal human rights, as well as international and national law.

**Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneđi**  
**Association for Solidarity with Refugees**

Address: Uđur Mahallesi 848 Sokak No:16

Konak / İzmir / Türkiye

Tel : 0090 232 483 54 21

E-mail: bilgi@multeci.org.tr

Web: multeci.org.tr

