



Navigating Uncertainty:

Challenges and Experiences of Refugees in
Izmir – Insights from Focus Group
Discussions (June – November 2024)



Thematic Report | January 2025 | Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği

Navigating Uncertainty: Challenges and Experiences of Refugees in Izmir – Insights from Focus Group Discussions (June – November 2024)

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 (Mülteci-Der)** is an independent, rights-based civil society organization established in 2008, dedicated to advocating for the rights of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Turkey. As part of its mission, **Mülteci-Der** provides legal aid, supports vulnerable individuals, and works to ensure that Turkey's policies and practices align with international human rights standards. The organization is an active member of several national and international networks, including the **European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)** and **Türkiye Mülteci Hakları Koordinasyonu (Turkey Refugee Rights Coordination)**.

Mülteci-Der 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.

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1. Introduction

For decades, Turkey has played a pivotal role as both a destination and a transit country for migrants and refugees seeking better opportunities or safety. Its geographical position, bridging Europe and Asia, makes it a strategic passage for individuals striving to reach European shores. However, the journey is fraught with significant challenges, including perilous crossings, restrictive policies, and systemic discrimination.

Izmir, one of Turkey's largest cities, has become a critical hub in the migration landscape. Situated on the Aegean coast, Izmir serves as a primary departure point for irregular crossings to Greece and other European destinations. Its proximity to the Greek islands makes it a focal point for migration flows, often drawing international attention during periods of heightened activity.

Izmir is home to a diverse mix of migrants, including individuals fleeing conflict in Syria, economic hardship in sub-Saharan Africa, and political instability in the Middle East. While Turkey's temporary protection regime provides limited access to services for some refugees, many migrants remain undocumented, navigating the complexities of a system that often excludes them from fundamental rights and protections.

For these individuals, Izmir represents both opportunity and adversity. While some seek to settle and integrate into local society, others view the city as a transitory stage on their journey to Europe. This dual role exacerbates existing tensions, as resources remain stretched and public sentiment toward migrants fluctuates.

The challenges in Izmir are emblematic of broader issues within Turkey's migration policy framework. Migrants in the city frequently encounter obstacles such as limited access to legal documentation, healthcare, and employment. These barriers not only hinder their integration but also compel many to consider irregular migration as a last resort.

This report emerges from a series of focus group discussions conducted between June and November 2024, aimed at understanding the lived experiences of refugees in

Izmir. Participants shared their struggles and aspirations, painting a vivid picture of their daily lives marked by resilience, uncertainty, and systemic challenges. The focus groups, held in İzmir city center and surrounding areas, brought together diverse individuals, including women, men, children, and marginalized groups, to ensure a holistic understanding of the refugee experience.

It is important to note that the focus group meetings informing this report were conducted before the latest developments in Syria in December 2024. While recent events may have sparked widespread assumptions that Syrian refugees will return to their homeland soon, it is likely that such returns will take years to materialize. Consequently, the findings presented here remain highly relevant, offering critical insights into the challenges and aspirations of Syrian refugees in Izmir, as well as other vulnerable groups.

The discussions shed light on key issues including barriers to employment, education, housing, and healthcare, compounded by pervasive discrimination and bureaucratic inefficiencies. They also revealed a recurring theme of psychological and social stress due to prolonged uncertainty about their legal and societal status. These challenges are further exacerbated by societal misconceptions and hate speech, which undermine integration efforts and perpetuate exclusion.

This report organizes the insights from these discussions into key thematic areas, identifying gaps in policy and practice while offering actionable recommendations for stakeholders. It seeks to inform policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders to foster better integration and support systems for refugees, ensuring their basic rights and dignity are upheld.

Through the voices of the participants, this report aims to amplify the perspectives of those often unheard, advocating for systemic change and the realization of a more inclusive society.

2. Methodology

The focus group discussions conducted for this report were designed to explore the challenges, experiences, and aspirations of refugees living in Izmir. This section outlines the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical approaches employed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the refugee experience.

The study employed a qualitative research design, using focus group discussions to gather in-depth insights into the lives of refugees. This approach was chosen to facilitate open dialogue, capture diverse perspectives, and uncover nuanced experiences that quantitative methods may overlook. The discussions were guided by semi-structured protocols, allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining a focus on key topics such as employment, education, housing, healthcare, and legal issues.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure diverse representation. Selection criteria included factors such as demographic diversity, including men, women, children, and individuals from marginalized groups; nationalities such as Syrian refugees, African nationals (e.g., Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola), and others under Turkey's Temporary Protection and International Protection regimes. Efforts were made to include individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, levels of Turkish language proficiency, and lengths of residency in Turkey.

The focus groups were conducted between June and November 2024 in collaboration with local NGOs and community centers. A total of six sessions were held, each lasting approximately two hours. Locations were chosen to be accessible and comfortable for participants, including community centers, NGO offices, and public spaces. Sessions were moderated by experienced facilitators, including protection officer, lawyers from Mülteci-Der and representatives from other NGOs, with translators present when necessary. Discussions followed a pre-designed structure but allowed for organic conversation to explore additional relevant topics. Data collection tools included audio

recordings, with participant consent, for accurate transcription, and observational notes taken by facilitators and note-takers.

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the discussions, how the data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Identifiable information was excluded from the report to protect participants' identities, and contributions were voluntary. Participants were encouraged to share only what they were comfortable disclosing.

While the methodology ensured a rich collection of data, certain limitations were acknowledged. The focus on migrants and refugees in İzmir may not fully represent the experiences of refugees in rural areas or other parts of Turkey. Despite the use of translators, subtle nuances in communication might have been lost. Additionally, time constraints in focus groups limited the depth of exploration for some issues.

3. Key Themes and Findings

The focus group discussions provided a comprehensive view of the multifaceted challenges faced by refugees and migrants in İzmir. Participants shared personal experiences and observations, shedding light on systemic issues that affect their daily lives, long-term stability, and opportunities for integration. These insights were grouped into key themes, highlighting the interconnection between social, economic, legal, and psychological barriers.

The findings reflect widespread difficulties in securing stable employment, affordable housing, and access to essential services like healthcare and education. Refugees also reported facing pervasive discrimination, both institutional and societal, which exacerbates their vulnerability and limits their ability to rebuild their lives. Despite these hardships, many expressed resilience and a desire for stability, education, and meaningful work.

This section explores these themes in detail, beginning with the social and economic challenges that form the foundation of refugees' struggles in İzmir. It then delves into

issues related to legal barriers, psychological impacts, and other systemic obstacles, offering a holistic understanding of the experiences of refugees and migrants.

3.1. Challenges Faced by Refugees in Izmir

3.1.1. *Lack of Legal Documentation and Registration*

One of the most significant challenges faced by refugees in Izmir is acquiring legal documentation and registering themselves with local authorities. This issue permeates nearly every aspect of their lives, hindering access to essential services and opportunities while exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

Refugees consistently reported difficulties in obtaining identification cards, which are fundamental for accessing critical services. In the 13 November meeting, participants expressed deep frustration over the bureaucratic obstacles preventing them from acquiring ID cards. Without this documentation, they are effectively excluded from healthcare systems, legal protections, and educational opportunities for their children. Refugees highlighted that even routine tasks like enrolling a child in school or seeking medical treatment become insurmountable barriers without proper identification. For instance, one refugee shared that they had applied for an ID card multiple times over the course of a year without success. This lack of recognition by local authorities not only denies them legal rights but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty and instability. Another participant recounted an incident where their child, born in Turkey, was denied an ID card despite repeated attempts. This left the child stateless, unable to access vaccinations or other basic healthcare services.

The inability to obtain valid travel permits significantly impacts mobility and family cohesion. Refugees noted that traveling between provinces without permits is often met with police checks, detainment, or fines, creating a constant sense of fear and restriction. During the 27 June session, participants described harrowing experiences of being stopped at checkpoints while traveling to visit family or pursue job opportunities. Some reported being detained for hours before being allowed to proceed, while others

were forced to pay hefty fines. Refugees also shared the psychological toll of these restrictions, explaining how the fear of police confrontations prevented them from leaving their homes, isolating them from potential employment opportunities or even essential errands.

The lack of documentation perpetuates a state of limbo for refugees, who feel trapped by uncertainty and an inability to assert their rights. In multiple focus groups, refugees spoke of their inability to make long-term plans due to the precariousness of their legal status. In the 30 September meeting, a refugee explained how the lack of an ID card prevented them from renting an apartment or opening a bank account, further marginalizing them economically and socially. Another participant shared that without proper identification, they are often viewed with suspicion and treated unfairly by landlords and employers. This uncertainty extends to healthcare as well. Several participants recounted being denied treatment at hospitals because they could not present valid ID cards. One refugee shared an instance where their critically ill child was turned away from a hospital despite carrying medical records, emphasizing the life-threatening consequences of being undocumented.

Bureaucratic inefficiencies and systemic discrimination compound the problem. Many refugees reported hostile treatment from government officials and arbitrary rejections of their applications for documentation. During the 18 July meeting, refugees highlighted the lack of transparency in the registration process, describing how requests were often dismissed without explanation. Some participants also noted the racialized nature of these barriers, where refugees of African origin faced even greater difficulties in obtaining documentation compared to other groups. As one participant poignantly stated, "We are invisible to the system, and when we try to make ourselves seen, we are pushed further into the shadows".

The lack of legal documentation not only restricts immediate access to services but also stymies refugees' long-term integration and stability. Without IDs, refugees cannot work legally, resulting in widespread economic exploitation and job insecurity. Moreover, the absence of formal recognition leaves many ineligible for residency or citizenship pathways, forcing them into perpetual uncertainty.

3.1.2. *Discrimination and Racism*

Discrimination and racism are pervasive issues that deeply impact the daily lives of refugees in Turkey, manifesting in various forms and settings, from interpersonal interactions to systemic barriers. These challenges were consistently raised during focus group discussions, highlighting the breadth and depth of the issue.

Incidents of racism and xenophobia were recurring themes across nearly all the sessions. Participants shared numerous accounts of verbal harassment on the streets, often stemming from their visible identity as refugees or foreign nationals. In the 18 July discussion, one participant recounted how their child, a Syrian refugee, was bullied at school. The child was labeled a “problem” by local peers and ostracized by their classmates. These experiences were not isolated. Several participants noted that negative stereotypes about Syrians, amplified by media narratives, perpetuate harmful generalizations about refugees as burdens on society or threats to public safety. This, in turn, fuels a cycle of public hostility and stigmatization.

Institutional discrimination further compounds the challenges faced by refugees. Many participants expressed frustration over biased treatment by police, municipal authorities, and healthcare providers. In the 24 September session, a mother described how her children were denied access to education due to their lack of identification cards, despite her repeated attempts to secure the necessary documentation. Without such critical documentation, they were systematically excluded from basic rights and services. This sense of institutional bias was echoed in the 30 September discussion, where participants highlighted how government policies often appeared to target refugees, restricting their mobility and access to essential resources. The deliberate withholding of identity cards or the imposition of administrative hurdles not only exacerbates refugees’ vulnerability but also deepens their distrust of public institutions.

The social exclusion experienced by refugees extends beyond formal systems into everyday life, shaping their interactions and relationships within their communities. Refugees frequently reported differential treatment in the housing market, where landlords often charged them higher rents solely based on their status as refugees.

During the 30 September meeting, participants elaborated on how this exclusionary behavior was not limited to housing but pervaded various aspects of their lives. Refugees spoke of microaggressions, such as being avoided by neighbors, treated dismissively by shopkeepers, or excluded from local community events. These forms of daily discrimination contribute to a profound sense of isolation, leaving many refugees feeling unwelcome in the very communities they are trying to integrate into.

3.1.3. Access to Education

Education has emerged as a critical area of concern for refugee families in Izmir, particularly for the younger generation whose future depends on uninterrupted learning and integration into the host society. However, refugees face significant barriers in ensuring their children have access to education, which not only affects individual children but also has broader implications for the community's long-term stability and development.

One of the most pressing challenges is the difficulty in enrolling children in local schools. In the session on 24 September, several mothers shared their struggles with securing admission for their children. Despite having lived in Turkey for several years, many of these families were unable to register their children due to bureaucratic hurdles or the absence of required documentation, such as identification cards. The lack of proper registration leaves these children excluded from formal education systems, further marginalizing them and limiting their opportunities for advancement. Parents expressed frustration with the inconsistent and opaque processes, noting that some schools were unwilling to admit children without formal identity documents, even when it was clear that the family had made good-faith efforts to comply with registration requirements.

Beyond administrative challenges, the psychological toll of discrimination also hinders educational access for refugee children. Many participants reported that their children faced bullying and harassment at school, which discouraged them from attending. During the 24 September discussion, mothers described their children's

reluctance to go to school, rooted in fear of being mocked or ostracized by peers and sometimes even teachers. For many children, this daily exposure to hostility undermines their self-confidence and desire to learn. One mother recounted how her daughter, once eager to attend school, now dreaded the classroom environment after experiencing repeated verbal abuse from classmates. This emotional strain not only disrupts the learning process but also reinforces a sense of alienation from the broader community.

Family separation further complicates the educational experiences of refugee children. In the 23 August session, families discussed the challenges of maintaining schooling while navigating the instability of separation. One teenager explained how they had to drop out of school to work and support their family after their father migrated to Europe in pursuit of reunification. This situation was not uncommon; many families found themselves forced to prioritize immediate economic needs over long-term educational goals. The uncertainty of family reunification exacerbates this issue, as children often struggle to focus on their studies while grappling with emotional distress and the absence of parental guidance. For many young refugees, these circumstances severely impact their ability to pursue education consistently, jeopardizing their future prospects and perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization.

3.1.4. Economic Challenges

Economic challenges were among the most pressing concerns voiced by refugees, reflecting the multifaceted difficulties they encounter while trying to sustain themselves and their families in Izmir. These challenges encompass issues related to employment, entrepreneurship, and systemic financial exploitation, which collectively create significant barriers to achieving financial stability and independence.

One of the primary concerns raised by participants was the difficulty in securing stable employment. Refugees frequently expressed frustration over their inability to obtain formal jobs due to the lack of legal documentation. Without proper work permits or identification, refugees are often relegated to informal labor markets, where they face precarious conditions and exploitative practices. During the focus group on 30

September, several women shared stories of being forced to accept low-paying informal jobs, often with little to no guarantee of receiving the full wages promised. This dynamic places refugees in a position of economic vulnerability, where they must depend on exploitative employers to make ends meet, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and insecurity.

In addition to employment difficulties, the challenges of starting and sustaining entrepreneurial ventures emerged as a critical issue. Refugees attempting to open small businesses often found themselves thwarted by bureaucratic delays, discriminatory practices, and financial constraints. For instance, during the 13 November meeting, one participant described their aspiration to open a small shop. However, they were discouraged by the exorbitant rents charged to refugees and the discriminatory treatment they faced from local authorities, who made the application process more cumbersome. Such barriers prevent refugees from pursuing self-employment opportunities, which could otherwise provide a pathway to economic independence and community integration.

Financial exploitation further exacerbates the economic struggles of refugees, affecting both their housing and employment situations. Many participants shared experiences of landlords and employers arbitrarily increasing rents or lowering wages simply because of their status as refugees. In the 30 September discussion, one participant described how even after securing housing, they found themselves at the mercy of their landlord, who raised rent prices without warning. Similarly, employers in informal sectors often reduced agreed-upon wages or withheld payments altogether, knowing that refugees lacked the legal recourse to challenge such injustices. These practices leave refugees feeling powerless over their financial future and unable to plan for long-term stability.

The combined impact of these economic challenges creates a persistent state of insecurity for refugees. Unable to access stable jobs or create sustainable businesses, many find themselves trapped in cycles of exploitation and dependency. These barriers also have far-reaching effects on their ability to access other essential resources, such as education and healthcare, further entrenching their marginalization. Participants consistently emphasized the need for targeted support, including legal reforms to ease

documentation requirements, programs to protect refugees from financial exploitation, and initiatives to promote fair access to entrepreneurship opportunities. Without addressing these systemic challenges, refugees will continue to struggle with achieving even basic levels of economic security and independence.

3.1.5. Health Services Access

Access to health services remains one of the most significant challenges for refugees in Turkey, affecting both their physical and mental well-being. Despite the critical importance of healthcare, refugees face numerous obstacles in accessing even basic medical attention, leaving many to endure unmet medical needs and the compounded effects of trauma and displacement.

Barriers to accessing healthcare were a recurring theme in discussions. During the session on 24 September, participants expressed deep frustration with being routinely denied healthcare services due to their lack of identification or registration status. These systemic barriers mean that even those with urgent medical needs are often turned away from hospitals and health centers. One participant shared a harrowing account of seeking treatment for a severe condition, only to be refused care because they could not present an official ID card. Despite presenting medical records and explaining their situation, the participant was denied access, forcing them to rely on informal or unqualified sources of medical assistance. This experience was echoed by many others, highlighting how the inability to access healthcare leaves refugees in a precarious position, where treatable conditions can quickly escalate into life-threatening issues.

Mental health challenges add another layer to the difficulties faced by refugees, stemming from their experiences of war, forced migration, and the discrimination they encounter in their host communities. In the 23 August focus group, participants discussed how the trauma of family separation has left profound scars on their mental well-being. Many refugees described living in a state of constant uncertainty, waiting indefinitely for family reunification. One mother shared that the prolonged absence of her husband, who had migrated to Europe, left her feeling isolated and overwhelmed, with

her mental health deteriorating under the strain of raising children alone. For many participants, this uncertainty creates a pervasive sense of hopelessness, exacerbated by the lack of support systems to help them process their trauma.

Feelings of demoralization and alienation were prevalent among participants. Some expressed that they often contemplated leaving Turkey, even if it meant undertaking dangerous journeys across borders, as they felt unable to find stability and support in their current environment. A participant described the immense emotional burden of feeling invisible within the system, saying that the lack of access to healthcare and mental health services was a stark reminder of their marginalization. This alienation further deepens the sense of despair that many refugees feel, making it difficult for them to envision a better future for themselves or their families.

These barriers to health services, both physical and mental, underscore the urgent need for more inclusive healthcare policies and systems that address the unique needs of refugees. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of creating pathways to healthcare that do not rely solely on identification cards, as well as the need for culturally sensitive mental health services to help them cope with their experiences. Without such measures, the health crisis facing refugees will continue to grow, compounding the challenges they already face in rebuilding their lives.

3.2. Impact on Mental and Social Well-being

The psychological toll of displacement, compounded by the enduring challenges of discrimination and instability, emerged as a central concern among refugees. These issues affect not only their emotional well-being but also their ability to integrate and build meaningful lives in Turkey.

One of the most deeply felt sources of psychological distress was the separation from family members. Many participants described being torn apart from immediate family members who either remained in their countries of origin or had migrated to Europe in search of safety and stability. During the 23 August session, participants repeatedly

emphasized the emotional strain of this separation. For younger refugees, the uncertainty surrounding family reunification often led to overwhelming feelings of anxiety and depression. One teenager shared how waiting for reunification with their father in Europe had drained their motivation to pursue education or think about career aspirations. This uncertainty creates an emotional limbo, where hopes for the future are perpetually overshadowed by the pain of separation.

Isolation and difficulties in social integration were also recurring themes in discussions. Refugees frequently spoke about the profound loneliness they felt, exacerbated by the challenges of adapting to a foreign culture, language barriers, and the hostility of local communities. During the 30 September focus group, women emphasized how language remains a substantial barrier, particularly for those who arrived later in life and struggle to acquire proficiency in Turkish. For many, the inability to communicate effectively limits their independence and access to essential services, leaving them reliant on family members or community organizations for basic needs.

This sense of isolation was further deepened by discriminatory experiences. Refugees described being made to feel unwelcome in public spaces and even in their own neighborhoods. Some recounted instances of neighbors avoiding them or treating them with suspicion simply because of their refugee status. These interactions reinforce feelings of alienation, as refugees perceive themselves as outsiders in a society where they are often stigmatized. One participant from the 30 September session explained how their attempts to connect with local communities were met with dismissive or hostile attitudes, making it clear that they were not considered part of the social fabric.

The combined effects of family separation, language barriers, and social exclusion contribute to a pervasive sense of hopelessness among refugees. Many participants expressed that while they longed to integrate and build stable lives in Turkey, the emotional weight of these challenges often left them feeling stuck and unable to move forward. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions, such as language support programs, initiatives to promote cultural exchange, and policies that facilitate family reunification. Without such efforts, the mental and social well-being of refugees will continue to suffer, hindering their ability to thrive in their host communities.

3.3. Gender-specific Challenges

Refugee women face unique and gender-specific challenges that further compound the difficulties of displacement and integration. These challenges were particularly evident in discussions surrounding single mothers and the barriers to education for girls, reflecting how gender intersects with systemic inequalities to create additional burdens for women and girls.

Single mothers and other vulnerable women often find themselves at the intersection of societal prejudices and systemic barriers. During the 24 September session, participants shared their struggles with accessing aid and services in the absence of male family members. Single mothers described how societal norms often view them with suspicion or disdain, making it even harder to navigate already restrictive systems. One participant explained how she was unable to secure employment despite being highly motivated, as potential employers dismissed her capabilities without the "protection" or endorsement of a male family member. Similarly, healthcare services were harder to access, as bureaucratic processes and cultural biases left these women without the support they needed to advocate for themselves or their children.

Access to education for girls emerged as another significant challenge, with cultural and financial barriers often standing in the way of young girls receiving a formal education. During the 24 September discussion, mothers expressed profound disappointment and frustration over their inability to send their daughters to school. Financial constraints were a recurring theme, as many families prioritized immediate survival needs over long-term educational goals. One mother recounted the story of her neighbor, who had married off her young daughter at an early age instead of allowing her to continue her education. This decision, while heartbreaking, was attributed to the family's desperate financial situation and the cultural norms that undervalue girls' education compared to boys'. The participant reflected on the lost potential of girls who are forced into early marriages or kept out of school, emphasizing how these decisions perpetuate cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

These gender-specific challenges highlight the critical need for targeted interventions that address the unique vulnerabilities faced by refugee women and girls. Programs that support single mothers in gaining financial independence, alongside initiatives that promote the value of girls' education, are essential to breaking down the barriers that prevent women and girls from thriving. Without such efforts, refugee women and girls will remain disproportionately affected by the hardships of displacement, unable to realize their full potential or contribute meaningfully to their communities.

3.4. Aspirations and Concerns for the Future

Amid the numerous challenges they face, refugees consistently expressed their aspirations for stability and a better future, particularly for their children. However, their hopes were often tempered by the realities of bureaucratic obstacles and an uncertain environment, leading to widespread frustration and, in some cases, a willingness to undertake risky alternatives in pursuit of their goals.

The desire for stability was a recurring theme during discussions, with many participants emphasizing their determination to create a secure and hopeful future for their children. In the 30 September focus group, women spoke poignantly about their dreams of raising their children in an environment free from fear and uncertainty. They longed for opportunities where their children could receive a quality education, develop skills, and have access to better opportunities in life. One participant shared her vision of seeing her children grow up to become professionals, such as doctors or teachers, contributing positively to society. Despite the many obstacles, this hope for a brighter future acted as a driving force, motivating many refugees to persevere in the face of adversity.

At the same time, the persistent frustration with bureaucratic barriers cast a shadow over these aspirations. Participants consistently voiced their discontent with the complex and opaque administrative processes that made everyday life challenging. These barriers—ranging from difficulties in obtaining legal documentation to restrictions

on movement—created a pervasive sense of helplessness among refugees. During the 27 June discussion, participants openly expressed their despair over the bureaucratic hurdles that left them feeling trapped. They explained how these obstacles not only prevented them from accessing essential services but also made it nearly impossible to achieve the stability they so desperately sought.

This frustration often led refugees to consider irregular migration as a potential escape from their circumstances, despite the inherent risks involved. Participants spoke candidly about the dangerous journeys some had already undertaken in hopes of finding stability elsewhere, particularly in Europe. The 27 June session revealed how the lack of viable options in Turkey pushed many to take these perilous routes, often at great financial and emotional cost. One participant recounted how their neighbor had spent their entire savings to secure passage for their family, only to face further uncertainty upon arrival in another country. For many, the decision to migrate irregularly was seen not as a choice but as a last resort—a response to the belief that remaining in Turkey meant a continued cycle of instability and unfulfilled aspirations.

The tension between hope and frustration encapsulates the complex reality faced by refugees. While their aspirations for stability and a better future remain strong, the systemic barriers they encounter threaten to extinguish these hopes, driving some toward desperate measures. Addressing these concerns requires not only policy changes to reduce bureaucratic obstacles but also initiatives that offer tangible opportunities for refugees to build stable and fulfilling lives in their host communities.

3.5. Social Support Networks

Social support networks play a critical role in the lives of refugees, providing them with much-needed assistance and a sense of community in the face of numerous challenges. These networks, comprising both formal organizations and informal connections, serve as lifelines for refugees navigating the complexities of life in Turkey.

However, the support they provide is often insufficient to meet the overwhelming needs of the refugee population.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community organizations have been at the forefront of offering assistance to refugees, and their efforts were frequently acknowledged with gratitude by participants. During the 13 November and 24 September sessions, refugees expressed appreciation for the work of NGOs in helping them understand their rights, access essential services, and navigate bureaucratic systems. One participant shared how an NGO provided them with legal aid during a critical moment, enabling them to secure documentation that would have otherwise been inaccessible. Another participant highlighted the emotional support these organizations offer, explaining how their advocacy efforts have helped refugees feel seen and heard in a system that often marginalizes them. Despite these positive impacts, participants also noted that NGOs face significant constraints in terms of resources and capacity. With the growing refugee population and the scale of the challenges they face, even the most dedicated organizations struggle to meet the demand for their services.

Alongside formal organizations, informal support networks—comprised of friends, neighbors, and community members—also play an important role in refugees' lives. Participants mentioned how these networks provide day-to-day assistance, whether through shared resources, emotional support, or guidance in navigating unfamiliar systems. However, these informal networks are often fragile and highly dependent on individual circumstances. In some cases, the shared experiences of hardship and displacement create strong bonds of solidarity, but in others, the precarious situation of refugees makes it difficult for these networks to offer consistent or reliable support. One participant explained how they relied on their neighbor for help with childcare while seeking employment, only to lose this vital support when the neighbor was forced to move due to rising rent costs.

The limitations of both formal and informal support networks leave many refugees in a state of vulnerability. NGOs, while instrumental, cannot replace the systemic changes needed to address the root causes of refugees' challenges. Similarly, informal networks, while valuable, are insufficient to meet the broader structural needs of refugee

communities. Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening these networks, not only through increased funding and capacity-building for NGOs but also by fostering community programs that encourage mutual support and resilience. Without such efforts, refugees will continue to face significant gaps in their social support systems, further exacerbating the difficulties they encounter in rebuilding their lives.

4. Conclusion

The challenges faced by refugees in Izmir, as explored in this report, underline the complex and multifaceted nature of displacement. Each aspect of their lives—legal documentation, discrimination, education, economic opportunities, healthcare access, and social integration—is interwoven with systemic barriers and societal attitudes that hinder their ability to rebuild and thrive. These challenges are not isolated but interconnected, often compounding one another and creating a cycle of vulnerability and marginalization.

The lack of legal documentation emerges as a foundational issue that cascades into numerous other challenges. Without proper identification, refugees are excluded from basic services such as healthcare, education, and formal employment, perpetuating their precarious living conditions. Similarly, the prevalence of discrimination and racism further alienates refugees, making social integration and daily survival arduous tasks. Refugees' narratives reveal not just the external barriers they face but also the profound psychological toll of these experiences, as family separation, isolation, and systemic inequities weigh heavily on their mental well-being.

The economic struggles faced by refugees highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms. Refugees' reliance on informal employment exposes them to exploitation, while barriers to entrepreneurship limit their potential to achieve financial independence. These economic challenges are further exacerbated by the inadequate access to healthcare services, leaving refugees vulnerable to physical and mental health crises.

Despite these significant obstacles, the aspirations and resilience of refugees remain evident. Their desire for stability, education for their children, and opportunities for a better future underscores the importance of creating pathways for integration and empowerment. Refugees' reliance on social support networks—both formal and informal—provides a critical lifeline but also highlights the limitations of current systems in addressing their comprehensive needs.

To create meaningful change, a multi-pronged approach is required. Addressing bureaucratic barriers, combatting discrimination, improving access to essential services, and fostering inclusive social environments are critical steps toward building a more equitable system. Enhanced support for NGOs, alongside government-led initiatives to promote integration and protect refugees' rights, can help bridge existing gaps and enable refugees to contribute meaningfully to their host communities. It is important to underline that these focus group meetings were conducted before the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the aspirations and plans for the future discussed by participants may be significantly different now.

This report underscores the urgency of addressing these challenges not only as matters of humanitarian obligation but also as opportunities to harness the potential of refugees to enrich and strengthen the societies in which they reside. The path forward demands collaboration, empathy, and a commitment to creating a future where refugees are not merely survivors but active participants in shaping their destinies and the communities around them.

Annex: Focus Group Meetings Details

27 June 2024 –Focus Group Meeting

- Location: İzmir
- Participants:
 - Total: 5 Syrian national
 - Languages: Two participants spoke Turkish, others understood but did not speak.
 - Demographics: Mixed gender, including LGBT individuals and those with intersectional challenges (e.g., transgender identities).
- Key Focus: Initial challenges upon arrival in Turkey, mobility restrictions, and legal documentation issues.

18 July 2024 – Focus Group Meeting

- Location: İzmir
- Participants:
 - Total: 7 Syrian men
 - Profession:
 - 3 NGO workers
 - 2 doctors at Migrant Health Centers
 - 1 traditional healer
 - 1 unemployed individual
- Key Focus: Racism, social tensions, and the impact of misinformation and economic hardship on refugees' lives.

23 August 2024 – Focus Group Meeting

- Location: Bostanlı Denizpark Restoran, İzmir
- Participants:
 - Total: 11 Syrian women and girls
 - Age Range: 14 to 26 years
 - Languages: All participants spoke Turkish.

- Key Focus: Educational interruptions, family separation due to migration, and the psychological impact of prolonged uncertainty.

24 September 2024 – Focus Group Meeting

- Location: Konak Mülteci Derneği, İzmir
- Participants:
 - Total: 5 refugee women and 4 children
 - Demographics:
 - Women with varied family situations, including single mothers and displaced individuals.
 - Children facing barriers to school enrollment.
- Key Focus: Barriers to children’s education, housing insecurity, and societal discrimination.

30 September 2024 – Sakin Mekan Focus Group

- Location: İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi Sakin Mekan Agora Toplum Merkezi
- Participants:
 - Total: 4 women and 2 children
 - Demographics: Women of different ages (34 to 50 years), some with children born in Turkey.
- Key Focus: Economic challenges, increased racism, and family fragmentation due to migration pressures.

13 November 2024 – Joint Focus Group with Yaşamak Derneği

- Location: Yaşamak Derneği
- Participants:
 - Total: 12 individuals (6 women, 6 men)
 - Nationalities: Mixed, including participants from Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon.
- Key Focus: Motivations for irregular migration, issues with documentation and identity, and the impact of systemic exclusion.

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

