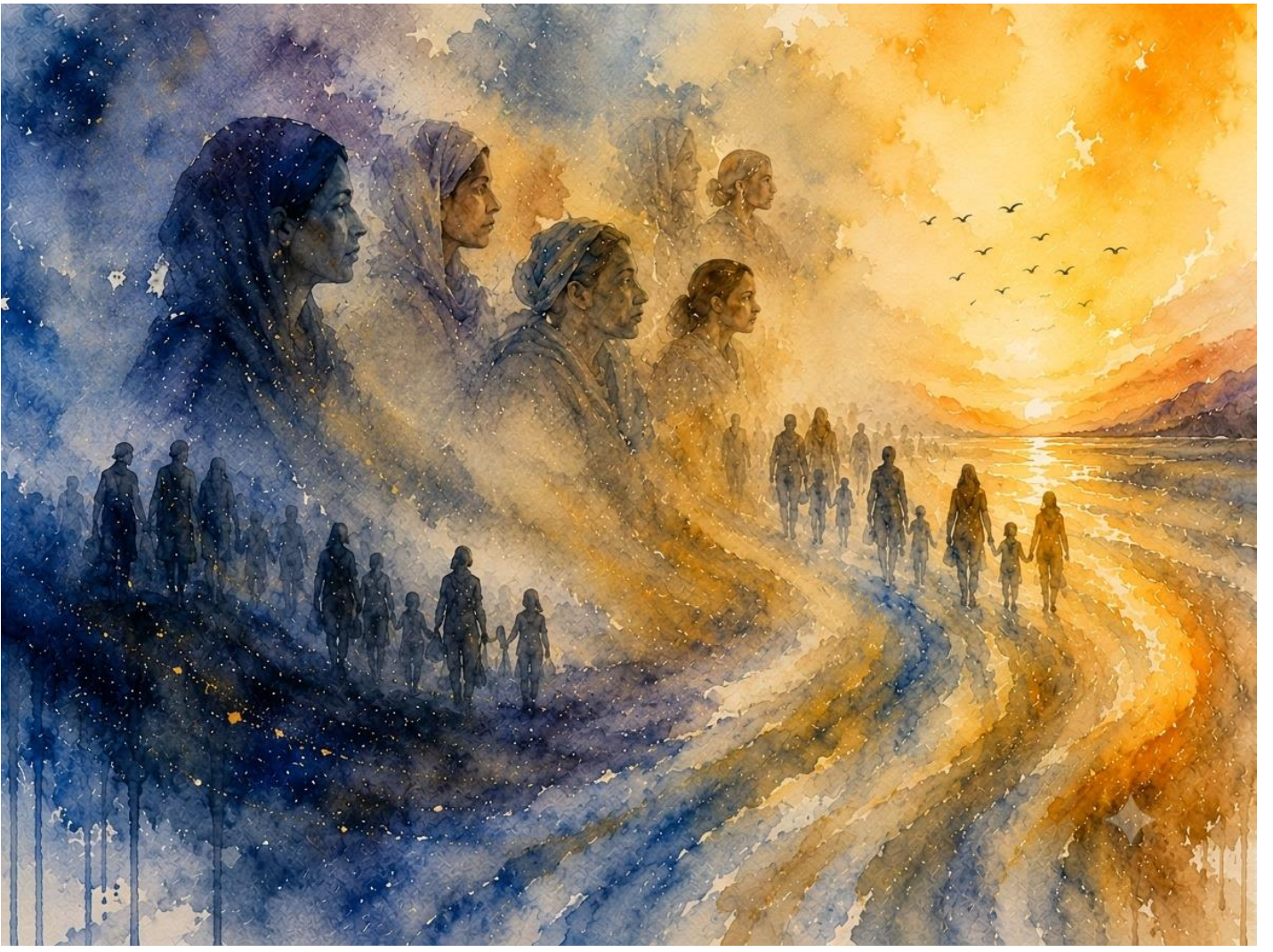




Listening to Refugee Women:

Syrian Refugee Women in İzmir on Rights, Protection and Voluntary Return

(November 2025 – June 2026)



Thematic Report | June 2026 | Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği

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Association for Solidarity with Refugees

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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 **Mülteci Hakları Koordinasyonu (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. Executive Summary

Between November 2025 and June 2026, Mülteci-Der held a series of information and focus-group sessions with Syrian refugee women under temporary protection in İzmir. This report sets out what participants shared. It covers five themes: gender roles and gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, family law, the rights of people under temporary protection, and voluntary return. The sessions took place during a period of change, following the change of government in Syria in December 2024 and a series of adjustments to the rights and services available to people under temporary protection. The findings reflect a small number of participants and are not statistically representative; they are recorded as the concerns and requests that women raised.

Across the sessions, women described a single set of linked decisions rather than separate problems. The question of whether to stay in Turkey or return to Syria ran through every theme. Participants described return as a subject that divided families, with men often more inclined to return, children and young people who had grown up in Turkey strongly resistant, and women frequently caught between the two. They pointed to housing, schools, healthcare and the absence of basic infrastructure in Syria as reasons return was not yet possible, and many reported that relatives who had returned regretted it. Information about return reached women mainly through relatives and social media rather than institutions.

Access to services was a recurring concern. Participants described inconsistent charging for healthcare, inactive identity records, and confusion about what was covered, against the background of a change in the temporary protection regulation, effective at the start of 2026, that aligned their healthcare access more closely with that of Turkish citizens. The “closed neighbourhood” registration practice was described as limiting where families could live. Several participants reported hate speech and differential treatment after developments in Syria, including in public institutions. Uncertainty about the future of temporary protection, often heard about first through social media, was itself a source of worry.

On gender, family law and health, the sessions surfaced both knowledge and hesitation. Many participants had married as children and reflected on this for their daughters, often describing changed decisions after coming to Turkey. Women raised detailed family-law questions about religious and civil marriage, custody and documentation, and asked repeatedly about citizenship. On health, women knew of screening but described fear and practical barriers; some said the sessions encouraged them to seek care they had previously avoided.

Participants valued the sessions as a space for information and for support, and responded well to a participatory method and shared their ideas about qualities of a good expert to facilitate these sessions. They asked for more sessions on family law and women's rights, for psychological support, for help finding work, for activities closer to home, and for clear information from institutions. A closing meeting with expert and partner organisations reflected on effective methods for this work, on the gap between holding information and acting on it, and on the particular barriers refugee women face. The report points to a continuing need for accessible information, for legal and psychological support, and for services that treat refugee women without discrimination

2. Introduction

Turkey hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, the majority of them Syrians under temporary protection.¹ According to official figures of the Presidency of Migration Management, approximately 2.9 million Syrians were registered under temporary protection at the end of 2024.² This figure has fallen over the following period, to around 2.7 million by late May 2025, as voluntary returns increased following developments in Syria.³ The population is not evenly spread. More than half of those registered live in five of Turkey's eighty-one provinces, with İstanbul hosting the largest number, and in some southern provinces those under temporary protection make up around 10 to 15 per cent of the local population.⁴ İzmir, where this report is based, hosts a smaller but substantial community. Women and children make up a large share of the population under temporary protection.⁵

Temporary protection is governed by the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) and the Temporary Protection Regulation. It grants the right to legal stay and access to certain services, including health and education, but it is not a permanent status and it does not provide a clear route to long-term residence or citizenship. People under temporary protection are registered in a province and face restrictions on movement between provinces. Their access to services depends on the province in which they are registered and on the state of their registration records. For women, this framework shapes everyday matters: whether a family can rent housing in a given neighbourhood, whether a child can enrol in school, whether a medical examination is provided without charge and whether the family can stay together.

¹ UNHCR Türkiye (2026), *Annual Overview – 2025*, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120539>

² Presidency of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı), Temporary Protection statistics, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

³ Figure of approximately 2,710,476 as of 29 May 2025, Presidency of Migration Management, Temporary Protection statistics, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

⁴ On the provincial distribution of Syrians under temporary protection, see Presidency of Migration Management, Temporary Protection statistics, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

⁵ On the age and sex breakdown of the population under temporary protection, see Presidency of Migration Management, Temporary Protection statistics

The sessions covered by this report took place during a period of significant change in the policy environment for Syrian refugees in Turkey. The most important development was the fall of the regime in Syria in December 2024. The fall of the previous administration reopened the question of return for the first time in years and changed the terms in which return is discussed by governments, international organisations and refugees themselves. According to UNHCR, more than 1.2 million Syrians had voluntarily returned from neighbouring countries by early 2026, alongside a larger number of internally displaced people who had returned to their areas of origin. UNHCR has described this as a historic movement of return, while stressing that it also presents urgent challenges.⁶

Returns from Turkey have formed a substantial part of this movement. UNHCR figures indicate that several hundred thousand Syrians returned from Turkey in the period following December 2024, the largest share of returns from any single host country.⁷ At the same time, the same sources note that conditions for safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return are not yet in place for many, given concerns about security, housing, infrastructure and access to education and economic opportunity.⁸ These two observations, a large movement of return and the absence of conditions for sustainable return, sit alongside each other and are central to how participants in these sessions described their own situations. To manage return in this period, the authorities introduced a temporary arrangement allowing people under temporary protection to make a limited number of “Go-and-See” visits to Syria within a defined window, with the stated aim of allowing people to assess conditions before deciding whether to return. As reported, the great majority of those who made such visits returned to Turkey afterwards.⁹

⁶ UNHCR, “Historic return of displaced Syrians presents opportunity and urgent challenges” (press release), UNHCR Türkiye, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/news/press-releases/unhcr-historic-return-displaced-syrians-presents-opportunity-and-urgent>

⁷ UNHCR Türkiye operational updates and the Operational Data Portal, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>

⁸ UNHCR, “Historic return of displaced Syrians presents opportunity and urgent challenges” (as above); see also the Syria Regional Refugee Resilience and Response Plan 2025, <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/syria-regional-refugee-resilience-and-response-plan-2025>

⁹ On the temporary “Go-and-See” visit arrangement and the proportion of visitors who returned to Turkey, see UNHCR Türkiye, movement procedures, <https://help.unhcr.org/turkiye/volrep/movement-procedures>

Alongside the question of return, there were important changes in access to services. The most significant for the women in these sessions concerned healthcare. As reported, a regulatory change taking effect at the start of 2026 ended the previous arrangement under which people under temporary protection received state-funded healthcare as a distinct group, and aligned their access more closely with that of Turkish citizens. Under the arrangement described in reporting on the change, coverage is tied to formal employment and social security contributions, to private insurance, or to a means-tested application for those who cannot pay, while emergency care remains available to all.¹⁰ A related change from late 2024 exempted people under temporary protection from parts of the work-permit regime, with the stated aim of encouraging formal, insured employment.¹¹ Registration and residence rules also continued to shape daily life. Turkey applies a limit on the proportion of foreign nationals who may register in a given neighbourhood, which independent monitors report was lowered in recent years.¹² In practice, this “closed neighbourhood” arrangement restricts where people under temporary protection can register an address and where they can rent housing. Monitoring bodies have also reported that address-verification exercises have at times led to the deactivation of identity records which can interrupt access to services.¹³ Movement between provinces continues to require permission.

The future of the temporary protection regime itself was a subject of public discussion during the period. As reported, no decision to end the regime had been announced by the authorities at the time of these sessions and temporary protection

¹⁰ On the change to healthcare access for people under temporary protection effective at the start of 2026, UNHCR Türkiye <https://help.unhcr.org/turkiye/information-for-syrians/access-to-health-services/>

¹¹ On the work-permit exemption for people under temporary protection introduced in late 2024, see AIDA/ECRE, *Country Report: Türkiye* <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/content-temporary-protection/employment-and-education/access-labour-market>

¹² On the limit on the proportion of foreign nationals registering in a neighbourhood, see AIDA/ECRE, *Country Report: Türkiye* <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/content-temporary-protection/movement-and-mobility/freedom-movement/>

¹³ On address verification and the deactivation of identity records, see AIDA/ECRE, *Country Report: Türkiye* <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/content-temporary-protection/housing/>

remained in force.¹⁴ The uncertainty itself, rather than any confirmed change, was a recurring source of concern among participants. International bodies have noted that conditions in Syria do not yet allow for return in safety and dignity for many, and that returns must remain voluntary and consistent with the principle of non-refoulement. Taken together, these developments describe an environment in which long-standing arrangements were changing at the same time, and in which information did not always reach the people most affected.

It is against this background that this report should be read. Between November 2025 and June 2026, Mülteci-Der held a series of information and focus-group sessions with Syrian refugee women under temporary protection in İzmir. This report sets out what participants shared during those sessions. It covers five themes: gender roles and gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, family law, the rights of people under temporary protection and voluntary return. These themes were chosen because they reappear in the questions refugee women bring to Mülteci-Der and because they are closely linked in the decisions women make about their lives in Turkey. For the women who took part, the five themes were not separate matters but parts of a single set of decisions. A choice about whether to stay or return touches on housing, children's education, health, marriage and a woman's standing within her family. A change in legal status affects access to healthcare. A question of family law, such as whether a marriage is religious or civil, affects custody and the ability to travel with children. Mülteci-Der chose to bring these themes together for this reason and to record women's own perspectives on them.

The women who took part live in several districts of İzmir, including Basmane, Kadifekale, Karabağlar, Mevlana and Bozyaka. Most are married and have children. Some are lone women whose husbands are in Syria or in Europe and some had spent years apart from a spouse before these sessions. Many had arrived in Turkey a decade or more earlier and a number of their children were born in Turkey or have

¹⁴ On the continuing application of the temporary protection regime, see AIDA/ECRE, *Country Report: Türkiye* (cessation of temporary protection) <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/temporary-protection-regime/> and UNHCR Türkiye. On conditions for return and the principle of non-refoulement, see UNHCR, *Position on Returns to the Syrian Arab Republic*, 16 December 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/113771>

grown up there. The sessions combined information, provided by experts, with open discussion, so that participants could both receive guidance and describe their own situation in their own words.

3. Methodology

The findings draw on a series of information and focus-group sessions held at the Mülteci-Der office and in community settings in several İzmir districts between November 2025 and June 2026. The full schedule of sessions, with dates, locations and facilitators, is set out in the Annex.

Each session combined an information component with focus-group discussion. Experts presented on the session theme and participants were then invited to share their views and experiences. Several methods were used across the cycle. Some sessions opened with a short video. Others used a “*myths and facts*” method, in which the facilitator read out common statements and participants discussed whether they agreed, after which the relevant legal provisions were explained. This approach allowed participants to set out their own views before the legal framework was introduced.

Participants were Syrian women under temporary protection. The age range was wide, from around 18 to 60. Most were married and had children. Some were lone women whose husbands were in Syria or in Europe. Several sessions included Turkmen-origin participants who spoke both Arabic and Turkish. The number of participants varied by session, generally between 9 and 17 women, and children often attended with their mothers.

Sessions were facilitated in Turkish with consecutive Turkish–Arabic interpretation. In one session, at the participants’ request, group interpretation was replaced by whispered interpretation for those who asked for it. One participant later noted that this had made it harder to follow, and that some who would have preferred full interpretation did not say so because of group pressure. This is recorded here because the interpretation method can shape what is shared and understood.

All testimonies have been anonymised. Quotes are attributed by code only, and names and identifying details have been removed. Quotes may have been lightly edited for clarity and kept short.

The findings reflect a small number of participants. Focus-group dynamics may shape what is shared, as some participants speak more readily than others and the presence of others can both encourage and discourage disclosure. The report aims to provide a snapshot of what these participants described, rather than a representative picture of refugee women in İzmir. It does not claim to be statistically representative.

4. Key Findings

4.1. Gender roles and the effects of migration

A recurring theme across the sessions was how migration had changed the roles expected of women and the work those roles involve. When facilitators opened a session by asking what roles society assigns to women and men, participants first asked whether they should answer for Syria or for Turkey. The question itself pointed to a difference they felt clearly. Several described life in Turkey as having increased their responsibilities rather than reduced them. Women who had entered paid work now carried both that work and the running of the home.

Participants set the two settings against each other. OG1-K1 said: *“In Syria, women marry young and do the housework.”* OG1-K2 said: *“In Turkey we have responsibilities both outside and at home, so we get very tired.”* OG1-K3 framed the change as one in men as well as women: *“In Syria they were the men; here they became men.”* OG1-K4, a young mother, described the same shift through her daughter, who did not want to return: *“I am 26, I have an 11-year-old daughter. She does not want to go to Syria. She says, ‘let us go but come back at once,’ because she has got used to it here and does not want what is there.”* Where a woman was managing alone, the burden was described as heavier still. OG1-K5 said: *“I have*

been without my husband for five years, so I both work and look after the house. I get tired, but I can do it."

Views on women's capacities differed within the group and participants debated them among themselves. When an expert asked whether women could be managers, the answers ranged widely. OG1-K6 drew on familiar assumptions: *"Women cannot be managers because they are emotional and physically weak."* OG1-K7 rejected this directly: *"Women are better managers and do better work than men."* Several stressed that women already carry more than men. OG1-K8 said: *"A woman's responsibility is greater. She does the housework, looks after the child and the school. A woman does many things; a man can do one thing. Women take on more responsibility than men."* Others noted that men who worked outside did not share the care of children at home.

4.2. Gender-based violence: awareness and attitudes

Sessions on gender-based violence introduced its different forms, including physical, psychological, economic and digital violence, stalking and child marriage. Protective and preventive measures under Law No. 6284¹⁵ were explained.

Some of this material was new to participants. Several said they had not known that violence between spouses could be named as such, and that digital violence was a new idea to them. A number had attended a similar session carried out by other organisations before. As reported, some participants did not agree with all of the material. OG1-K9 questioned the framing of early marriage by pointing to rising divorce rates: *"In the past people married at 13 or 14 and had long marriages. Now they marry at 20 and divorce rates have risen a great deal. Why do you think that is?"* These responses are recorded as participants expressed them.

The discussions surfaced views that were challenged within the group itself. Where the "myths and facts" method was used, the facilitator read out common statements and participants debated them. On the statement that a husband may sometimes raise his hand to his wife, and that the shame lies in telling others, OG6-

¹⁵ Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women (Law No. 6284), <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/>

K1 responded: *“There is no need for it to be that way.”* On staying in a violent marriage for the sake of the children, responses were divided. One participant said children might be a reason to stay; OG6-K2 said: *“I would not want my child to witness such a thing,”* and OG6-K3 added that a child *“will not be able to forget it when grown, and will have psychological problems.”*

On the statement that the man who earns the money is the head of the household and decides whether a woman may go out or whom she may see, several participants disagreed. OG6-K4 said: *“No, the responsibility of the home is not on the man alone. Responsibility is on everyone. A woman should not have to ask permission. However she was before marriage, she should be the same after.”* OG6-K5 described the difference between request and control: *“Some husbands like to be told; others impose it.”* On the statement that women earning their own money or gaining higher education leads to moral decline, the response was firm. OG6-K6 said: *“We do not agree. A woman going out and earning her own money does not mean there is moral decline. There are many women who earn their own money and live with good character.”* On the idea that family should not intervene between a couple, views again differed, with some seeing reconciliation as helpful *“only if both sides consent,”* and OG6-K7 noting: *“In Turkey, women can obtain their rights after divorce.”*

4.3. Early and child marriage

Early and child marriage was a recurring theme across several sessions and participants often raised it themselves. Many of the women had married as children, and they spoke about this directly. OG5-K1 described marrying at 13: *“They married me off at 13. I did not know what marriage was, what a husband was. After I came to Turkey I told my husband that here I understood I was a human being. I suffered a great deal because I knew nothing. However it begins, that is how it goes on.”* In a later family-law session, others described a similar age: *“I married at 14,”* said OG7-K1; *“I was 14 too,”* said OG7-K2.

Several participants reflected on what early marriage had meant for their daughters, and described changing their own decisions after coming to Turkey. OG7-K3 said: *“It used to be that way. We came here and saw. I married my eldest*

daughter here at 17.” OG4-K1 described marrying a daughter early but staying close to her: “I married my daughters early. That was our custom. But I never left their side; I always supported them.” Her daughter, OG4-K2, who had been married early, said of her own future children: “I will not marry my children early. I married at 13; it was very hard.” Another participant, OG7-K8 said “I married young. I sometimes ask my parents how they could do that. They tell me that they had asked me and I said yes. I said yes because I thought marriage was about wearing a nice dress. They did not tell me what marriage is about and how hard it is.” Some compared expectations across settings: OG5-K2 said her daughter had married at 24 and that her own father still thought “she married early; it would have been better at 26.”

Participants were also critical of the practice. OG7-K4 said families “cannot manage the responsibility of daughters themselves, so they pass it to another family. In this way they wrong the girls,” and OG7-K5 said: “Shame on the fathers who give away daughters who are not ready to marry.” In such situations where only a religious marriage could exist, participants noted practical consequences, including for divorce. In one session, when the facilitator explained that any marriage under the age of 15 is prohibited and constitutes child abuse, participants who had married as children exchanged looks, as if to say “you see?” OG7-K4 said, they did not know about the duty to report of early child marriages and said “If I knew, I would have reported my father and my brother. My sister-in-law was very young and was not ready to be married.”

4.4. Sexual and reproductive health

The sessions on sexual and reproductive health focused on breast cancer and HPV awareness and early detection. It opened with questions to gauge what participants already knew and did. A few said they had been screened before, and only one said she went to a doctor regularly; four said they did not go regularly but checked themselves at home. The discussion showed that fear was a barrier to follow-up. OG3-K1 said: “I have a lump. In 2018 the doctor said there were lumps in both. I was afraid, so I do not go, but I check myself in every shower.” OG3-K3 said: “Three years ago there was a lump. The doctor gave medicine and said he would need to take a sample if it did not pass. I was afraid and did not go for the check.”

The session also surfaced barriers tied to documents and identity records. Among the participants were women with inactive identity records or without documents, including a woman who had divorced while pregnant and whose newborn also had no identity document. These circumstances affect whether a woman can reach a doctor at all which sits alongside the question of awareness that the session addressed.

Participants said the session gave them practical information they had not had before. OG3-K4 said: *"I did not know that marks could appear; it was good to learn the signs, so we will know if we see them."* The nurse leading the session encouraged them not to assume the illness would not reach them and described self-examination as a matter of a few minutes. The session connected to wider questions about access to healthcare, discussed below. In the closing meeting, OG9-K1 said that attending the session had encouraged her to go for a smear test she had previously avoided: *"With the reproductive health session I gained more courage. I knew there was a test but was afraid, so I did not go. I decided to have the test."*

4.5. Family law

Participants associated family law mainly with marriage divorce and custody. The sessions covered the difference between religious and civil marriage, the steps for marrying in Turkey, custody both within and outside a civil marriage, consent (muvafakat) and third-country resettlement files. Where a child is born outside a civil marriage, participants were told that custody rests with the mother. Many questions followed from this and the discussion was shaped throughout by the participants' own circumstances.

Views on the value of civil marriage were mixed and were often expressed through experience. OG7-K6 said: *"We do not have a civil marriage, but my husband looks after me, thank God, there is no problem."* OG7-K7 took the opposite view after a difficulty: *"My son had a civil marriage; now the girl has left, and we are struggling to get them divorced. What was the need for a civil marriage? Without it we would not have had this trouble."* The sessions explained that rights on divorce exist and

that in a religious marriage the right to divorce rests with the man. On polygamy, raised through the “myths and facts” method, participants drew on family memory. OG7-K8 said: *“My father had several wives; there were many problems at home,”* and OG7-K9 noted the practical limit in Turkey, where *“they can only register one wife.”*

Participants asked detailed and practical questions, many of them tied to voluntary return. They asked about custody where only a religious marriage exists, including whether a mother could travel abroad with her children, or go to Syria, without the biological father’s consent. One asked whether a grandmother could take her grandchildren to Syria after the children’s mother had returned and her son remained in Turkey. Another asked about a daughter-in-law and baby without identity documents, and whether they could make a voluntary return. A woman whose husband had gone to Syria three years earlier, leaving a power of attorney for the children, asked whether custody now rested with her.

Information was given about legal aid (Adli Yardım) and the İzmir Bar Association, including its offices in the courthouse and about the women’s rights centre of the Bar Association, which several participants had not known about. They were told they could seek advice and support there on divorce, violence and similar matters. One participant asked whether applying for legal aid at the Bar Association building would lead to the police being informed. Participants were also asked whether they knew of the migration authority’s legal aid project for correcting civil-status or registration records before a voluntary return; most said they did not.

In more than one session, participants moved the discussion to citizenship which some described as the more important subject. OG5-K3 asked whether children studying or at university in Turkey could apply. OG5-K4 described the uncertainty of an open application: *“We applied for citizenship; someone from the migration authority met with us, but they did not give us a tracking number. How can we learn what stage our application is at?”*

4.6. Rights under temporary protection and access to healthcare

Participants raised concerns about possible changes to temporary protection itself, including reports that the status might be replaced by a residence permit. Several said they heard such reports through social media and did not know whether they were accurate. OG4-K3 said: *"We hear that temporary protection will be cancelled and we will move to residence permits. How will we pay? I do not have a passport. I cannot go to Syria and re-enter to apply for a residence permit. And they say it costs a great deal to get a passport and apply for residence permit."* OG8-K1 linked the question directly to return: *"When the schools close, we will make a voluntary return to Syria."* OG8-K2 said the opposite: *"We are not thinking of returning yet. Those who went regret it."* Reports of a July deadline for the end of temporary protection circulated among participants and the expert explained that any decision to end temporary protection would be a matter for the Presidency.

Access to healthcare after the change in the temporary protection regulation was described as inconsistent and a number of participants said they had stopped going to hospital for minor illnesses. OG8-K3 said: *"We no longer go to hospital when we are ill. We only go when it is something serious; for now we treat simple things like colds at home."* Several reported being charged for examinations or being unable to obtain medicines and described uncertainty about why charges arose. OG4-K4 said: *"They took 300 lira for the child. They direct you somewhere else, and there they ask for about 300 lira too. We did not continue with the examinations. They do not tell you what you will pay before they scan the barcode."* OG4-K5 described a free examination at a migrant health centre followed by an unexpected pharmacy bill: *"The medicine came to 2,600 lira because there was no insurance; they said my card was inactive and that I should update my data."* OG4-K6 gave the contrast between a documented and an undocumented condition: where she had a medical report, the examination was free; when she went for a different complaint, she paid.

Others described identity records being inactive or the general health insurance (GSS) being closed when a family member's employment started, and the steps needed to have records reopened. The role of the Kızılay card in determining charges was raised, and participants disagreed about whether cardholders were charged: *"Those with a Kızılay card do not pay,"* said OG4-K7; *"No, I see that*

cardholders pay too,” said OG4-K8. The expert advised participants to ask what each charge was for, to request an invoice, to use the patient rights units and to apply to the local social assistance and solidarity foundation if they could not pay, noting that requests should be made in writing.

Participants also described the effect of the “closed neighbourhood” residence-registration practice on housing. OG4-K9 said: *“This closed-neighbourhood practice causes great problems. Because the neighbourhood is closed, we cannot rent where we want. We pay a lot of rent for poor housing in places we do not want.”* Several participants reported hate speech and differential treatment after developments in Syria, including in public institutions and in healthcare settings in particular. As reported, some described being asked by staff why they had not yet returned: *“Assad has gone; why have you still not left?”* OG8-K4 said the institutions troubled her more than the street: *“We hear it more in institutions. At the health centres, in the markets, they ask. We are less troubled by our neighbours and landlords.”* What weighed on OG8-K5 most was “the feeling of being a burden,” even as she explained she had no home to return to and that her children, now settled, would struggle. OG8-K6 said that after she complained about a transport official who had refused to serve her, the official was no longer there when she returned.

4.7. Voluntary return

Asked what voluntary return meant to them, participants gave mixed answers. Some welcomed the end of the war: *“The war is over, we are very glad of that.”* But many described return as a hope held by older family members rather than by their children. OG2-K1 said: *“This was the dream of the elders, a dream built for adults. But the children who grew up here do not want to go; they want to stay. They say, ‘we were children when we came, now we are grown.’”* The same participant described the language barrier her children raised: *“The child asks, ‘how will I learn Arabic there?’ I say, ‘as we learned Turkish here, we will learn Arabic there,’ but he does not accept it.”*

Participants described voluntary return as a subject that divided families. As reported, men were often more inclined to return, while children and young people

who had grown up in Turkey were strongly resistant, and women were frequently caught between the two. OG2-K2 described the dilemma: *"If we leave the children here and go, we will be separated. If my husband and I return, the return will be in vain, because there will be a separation. If I go, my mind will stay here."* OG2-K3 described a child born in Turkey: *"My son says, 'mother, I was born here, so I must stay here.'"* Several described children who refused outright, in some cases with reference to the language barrier, in some cases to trauma from the war. OG2-K4 recounted: *"When he was two, the house collapsed on him; it left a trauma, his left eye does not see. When these questions come up, he remembers those days and does not want to return."* OG2-K5 described the lengths to which children went: *"My son threw himself in front of a motorbike so as not to go; his leg broke, and because of that we could not make the return."*

Participants said they relied mainly on relatives in Syria and on social media for information about return, and on individual applications to the provincial migration authority. Many said they had had little contact with institutions on this subject. OG2-K6 said: *"We do not get information from the association, the migration authority or the UN. This is the first time we are attending an information session on voluntary return."* Several reported that relatives in Syria advised them not to come, and that returnees regretted their decision. OG2-K7 said: *"Many of those who went regret it. They send us advice: do not come. They say, 'there it is paradise, here it is hell,' the other way around."* OG2-K8 described her mother-in-law's return: *"Four years ago my mother-in-law returned. She lives in one room. No electricity, no water. There is no order."*

When asked what conditions would make return possible, participants pointed to housing, schools, healthcare and basic infrastructure. OG2-K2 said: *"If there is a house, we can return."* OG2-K9 said: *"Health services, schools. There are no schools. Many are destroyed. I am very sad when I see the children who go to school there."* Several said they did not want to start again from nothing. OG2-K8 said: *"We stayed eight years in a camp and did not learn one word of Turkish. In İzmir we started from zero. If we go now, we do not want to start from zero again."* Participants also raised practical concerns about documentation, including whether children born in Turkey, without documents showing they are Syrian, could cross the

border. OG2-K3 said: *“One of my children was born here. There is no document showing he is Syrian. Even if we cross the Turkish border, they would not let him into Syria.”*

Participants also mentioned that in some parts of Syria, early marriages, plural marriages and levirate marriages still happen and women’s rights and situation is still open to improvement. OG2-K1 said: *“Women have become more aware [of their rights and opportunities here] and they no longer want to return there.”*

Concerns about family separation were frequent, including accounts of husbands who had returned alone and of women who had long been apart from a spouse. Some women linked return decisions directly to being a woman. OG2-K10 said: *“Men go, and women divorce so as not to go. Husbands can leave; the man decides to go, the woman decides on divorce.”* OG2-K11 reflected on her own standing: *“My husband went to live with his family, so I did not go; I do not want to live with my in-laws. I had my own house, my own car in Syria. Am I now to live with my in-laws?”* Facilitators noted that separation from a spouse was, for some, already a long-standing feature of their lives.

4.8. Contact with organisations and what women asked for

Across the sessions, participants described limited prior contact with NGOs and official institutions on these themes. Several said they had not received information on voluntary return, temporary protection or family law before, and that they did not generally seek information from institutions. In the closing meeting with participants, OG9-K2 noted that some in her neighbourhood were wary of civil society organisations: *“Hold more meetings in our area. The people there are wary of NGOs.”*

Participants valued the sessions for the space they created and for the experts who led them. OG9-K3 said: *“The experts were moderate and open to exchange. We could exchange views. I see this place as a second home.”* OG9-K1 reflected on hearing about her rights from a lawyer: *“It was very good to hear this from a lawyer. She must explain her rights to a Turkish woman, but that she defended our rights as refugees was very good.”* Several commented on the participation of a male expert,

which they found valuable. OG9-K4 said: *“It was good to see that a man could empathise and look at things from our side.”* OG9-K3 reasoned from it: *“We thought, ‘if this man cannot bear to harm those he loves, his wife, how can our husbands harm us?’”* OG9-K5 said that hearing a man describe pain he could not himself experience made her feel understood.

Participants described what they took from the sessions in personal terms. OG9-K1 said the family-law session had made her think *“that I should put myself forward more, that I should have mercy on myself and value myself.”* OG9-K6 said the information was familiar but that the session reminded her she needed to put it into practice and to think of herself.

Participants asked for a range of future activities. These included more family-law and women’s rights sessions, psychological support, help with finding work, sessions on raising children and on managing separation, gatherings on special days such as 8 March, neighbourhood meetings, and a WhatsApp group to stay in contact. On family law, OG9-K2 said: *“Explain family law at length. In our area divorces have risen a great deal.”* On work, OG9-K7 said: *“Can you help us find work? We trust you more.”* On psychological support, OG9-K3 summarised what she wanted: *“Even if society does not support it, psychological sessions would be good. We need to know how to feel strong and well in these situations.”* On frequency, participants suggested monthly meetings, which they felt were well spaced. Some also suggested sessions for men, while doubting that men would attend.

4.9. Reflections from the expert and partner meeting

A closing meeting brought together around ten experts from civil society organisations, a bar association, and a local authority women’s studies centre working with refugee, asylum-seeker and migrant communities in İzmir. The meeting was held to share experience on effective methods for addressing gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health with these communities, on approaches that increase participation, and on handling sensitive subjects in a safe and culturally appropriate way. The discussion is summarised here without attribution to any organisation.

Participants observed that refugee communities are not homogenous, and that gender norms vary by age, ethnic origin, religion, region and socio-economic background. Several noted that migration and conditions in Turkey have changed the roles of women and men, and that this change is experienced by some as empowering and by others as a threat or a burden. Tensions were described between younger people and children who want to remain in Turkey and families who plan to return, linked in part to the difference in gender norms between the two settings.

A recurring theme was the gap between holding information and acting on it. Participants noted that many of those they work with have attended awareness sessions before and hold basic knowledge of their rights and of services, but face real difficulty in using that knowledge in daily life. As reported, women may know that what they are experiencing is violence, and may know of screening services such as smear tests and breast cancer checks, but hesitate to act or to attend. One explanation offered was psychological, including the effect of earlier negative experiences in some healthcare settings during the early period of migration. Participants agreed that one-off sessions are not enough, and that repeated sessions, reminders, counselling and continued encouragement are needed to support a change in behaviour.

On methods, participants described what they had found effective. Encouraging participants to speak, rather than lecturing to them, was seen as central. Several noted that women treat the sessions not only as training but as a space for social support, and that interactive and enjoyable methods, focused rather than long sessions, real-life examples, facilitators sharing their own experience, and small-group work all increase participation. A “*myths and facts*” method was described in detail by a facilitator who had used it: presenting common statements for discussion allowed participants to express their views, helped avoid family conflict where families attended together, and allowed women who already knew that something was violence to begin to name it among themselves. The same facilitator stressed that participants need to be heard without judgement, and that solidarity, rather than pity, should guide the work. The point was made that a structured women’s human

rights education programme already exists and could be used, with interpretation support for Arabic-speaking participants.

The participation of male experts, who had received training on gender issues and had engaged in their own critical reflection on gender norms, was discussed as a notable finding. Sessions led by men received more positive feedback than expected, and the delivery of gender-equality messages by men was felt to have had a strong effect on some participants. Participants suggested that male experts could also work with men in their own communities. One organisation described working with heterosexual men with little prior contact with civil society, beginning with everyday subjects and moving gradually towards gender, and reaching them through young male interpreters and in everyday settings; it noted that men, too, hesitate to speak for fear of disclosure, and that a men-only space made participation easier. The suggestion that awareness work should extend to men recurred, on the basis that decision-making power often rests with men while sessions are usually delivered to women.

Participants identified a lack of trust in, and information about, services. Legal aid mechanisms were said to be little known, and fear of approaching institutions was common, as captured by a question raised in the sessions: *“If we go to the Bar Association, will they inform the police?”* Information about voluntary return support was also found to be lacking. Participants noted that trust is hard to build with refugee communities and it is built more readily through community-centre models.

Several participants reflected on the particular position of refugee women within protection mechanisms. It was noted that a refugee woman who reports violence and then withdraws the complaint may face additional consequences, including risks to her status, that a citizen would not face, and that the prospect of an alleged perpetrator’s removal can itself discourage reporting. Participants from women’s rights work observed that the difficulties women face are in many ways shared across groups, while also recognising that refugee women face forms of discrimination tied to their status. Psychosocial needs were raised throughout, including the effect of uncertainty about the future of temporary protection, family conflict over return decisions, and the effect of economic hardship on mental health.

Participants also reflected critically on their own field. Several questioned whether a service-provider relationship can become directive, and whether data collection serves communities or funders. Some described uncertainty, after many years and many projects, about what is most useful now, and a shared sense that needs are growing while support is not keeping pace. There was broad agreement on a shift from one-off training towards longer-term empowerment, on the value of peer and community-based education delivered by people who share a language, and on the importance, above all, of listening. The common information needs that organisations reported from communities were the future of temporary protection, citizenship processes, changes in access to healthcare, voluntary return, custody and border crossings for children, the position of people without documents and of newborns, and family conflict over young people and children who wish to remain in Turkey.

5. Conclusion

Across the cycle, participants asked for continued and expanded support. They asked for more sessions on family law and women's rights, for psychological support, for help finding work, and for sessions on raising children and managing family separation. They asked for activities closer to where they live, and for ways to stay in contact between sessions. They also asked, repeatedly, for clear and reliable information from institutions on the questions that affect them most: temporary protection, access to healthcare, citizenship and voluntary return.

Taken together, the sessions point to a group of women navigating overlapping pressures. Decisions about return are shaped by housing, children's education, health and family relationships, and rarely rest with the women alone. Access to healthcare was described as uncertain, and changes to status were a source of worry that participants often heard about first through social media rather than from institutions. Several participants described attitudes that had hardened after developments in Syria, including in settings where they sought services.

At the same time, the sessions showed what participants found useful. The combination of information and open discussion allowed women to receive guidance and to reflect on their own situations. Some described changing their decisions as a result, including seeking health screening or reconsidering early marriage for their daughters. The closing meeting with expert and partner organisations reflected on these methods, and on how gender-based violence and reproductive health can be addressed effectively with refugee communities.

These findings are recorded as the concerns and requests that participants raised. They point to a continuing need for accessible information, for legal and psychological support, and for services that treat refugee women without discrimination. Mülteci-Der will continue to document these concerns and to raise them with the relevant institutions.

Annex I: Focus Group and Information Meetings

No	Date	Theme	Location	Participants	Main topics
1	26.11.2025	Mechanisms against gender-based violence	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	17 women (ages approx. 18–60)	Gender roles; types of gender-based violence (physical, psychological, economic, digital, stalking, child marriage); protective and preventive measures under Law No. 6284
2	11.12.2025	Voluntary return	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	9 women (mixed Arab and Kurdish background; some lone women)	Meaning of voluntary return; sources of information; conditions for return; situation of women in Syria; effect on children; family separation; UNHCR return assistance
3	18.12.2025	Sexual and reproductive health	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	11 women (with 4 children and	Breast cancer awareness and early detection; self-examination; barriers

		(breast cancer awareness)		2 infants); from Basmane and Kadifekale	including fear and documentation; neighbourhood sessions
4	23.01.2026	Rights of persons under temporary protection	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	9 women and girls (ages approx. 16–55)	Rights under temporary protection; access to healthcare and recent changes; data updating and access to services; voluntary return; early marriage; cancer screening
5	05.02.2026	Family law	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	12 women (1 child)	Marriage, divorce and custody; religious and civil marriage; consent (muafakat); third-country resettlement files; legal aid; citizenship
6	12.03.2026	Gender roles and gender-based violence	Mülteci-Der building, İzmir	11 women (with 17 children)	Gender roles; early and child marriage; divorce; intervention by family; economic control; women's education and work
7	09.04.2026	Voluntary return	Karabağlar, İzmir (community cafe)	16 women (with 13 children); did not speak Turkish	Voluntary return as a personal decision; conditions for return; citizenship for children born in Turkey; work permits and the cost of living; requests for “Go-and-See” visits
8	16.04.2026	Family law	İzmir	16 Turkmen-origin Syrian women	Religious and civil marriage; divorce rights; polygamy; child marriage; Bar Association women's rights centre.
9	28.04.2026	Sexual and reproductive health (HPV awareness)	Bornova, İzmir	19 Syrian women	HPV awareness
10	07.05.2026	Rights, health and voluntary return	Community centre, Basmane, İzmir	Approx. 14 women (wide age range; one academic; several lone women)	Access to healthcare and GSS; charging and identity records; hate speech and treatment in institutions after developments in Syria; voluntary return; work permits and social security

11	10.06.2026	Project evaluation and closing (participants)	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	6 women (1 child); from Karabağlar, Mevlana and Basmane	Evaluation of the sessions and experts; the male expert's participation; interpretation; requests for future activities; an account of domestic violence
12	24.06.2026	Project closing (experts and partners)	Mülteci-Der office, İzmir	10 participants from oartner and expert organisations	Project outputs; effective methods for addressing gender-based violence and reproductive health with refugee communities; gender roles and transformation after migration

Anonymised Participant List

The codes below identify participants whose words are quoted in this report. The letters “OG” stand for the Turkish for focus group (odak grup); the number matches the session in the table above, and “K” (for kadın, woman) with a number identifies the participant within that session.

Code	Session	Brief descriptor (from session notes)
OG1-K1 to	1	Women aged approximately 18 to 60, attending the

OG1-K9	(26.11.2025)	session on gender-based violence
OG2-K1 to	2	Married women with children, of Arab and Kurdish
OG2-K12	(11.12.2025)	background; several with a husband in Syria or Europe
OG3-K1 to	3	Women from the Basmane and Kadifekale areas,
OG3-K5	(18.12.2025)	attending the breast cancer awareness session
OG4-K1 to	4	Women and girls aged approximately 16 to 55, several
OG4-K9	(23.01.2026)	with children with health needs
OG5-K1 to	5	Women attending the family-law session, most
OG5-K4	(05.02.2026)	married, mixed Turkish and Arabic speakers
OG6-K1 to	6	Women attending the gender-roles and gender-based
OG6-K7	(12.03.2026)	violence session
OG7-K1 to	7	Turkmen-origin women attending the family-law
OG7-K9	(16.04.2026)	session; several married as children
OG8-K1 to	8	Women of a wide age range; several lone women;
OG8-K6	(07.05.2026)	discussing health, rights and return
OG9-K1 to	9	Women from Karabağlar, Mevlana and Basmane who
OG9-K7	(10.06.2026)	had attended earlier sessions, at the closing meeting

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.

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