



SYRIAN TEXTILE WORKERS
AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
A CASE FOR CLOSER COOPERATION
BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE EU

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About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabanci University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

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1. Introduction

Turkey has contributed significantly to humanitarian relief for more than 3.5 million civilians affected by the war in Syria. The protection and rights that Turkey has granted to Syrian refugees¹—including access to its labor market—have been widely acknowledged. The textile and garment industries provide jobs to almost one-third of Syrian workers in Turkey.² While these sectors have opened opportunities for poverty reduction and self-reliance, employment conditions are often deemed to be precarious and exploitative. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has hit the garment industry in an unprecedented way, exposing and reinforcing preexisting vulnerabilities of informal workers and of refugees in particular. This has provided a special impetus to reassess policy measures for people under temporary protection accompanied by improved labor rights for domestic and foreign workers in Turkey's informal economy.

This policy brief provides insights about the working situation of Syrians in the garment industry to explain how vulnerabilities among informal workers intersect with cleavages based on ethnicity, age, gender, and legal status. COVID-19 has exacerbated economic hardships, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. It thereby exposes both the flaws of Turkey's temporary protection regime as well as the real costs of a global industry that builds on low-cost and flexible production. Efforts to improve the situation of Syrians in Turkey must, therefore, combine humanitarian relief with labor protection in the informal economy. To achieve this, revitalization of political and economic cooperation between Turkey and the EU will be key.

The policy brief begins with information on the methodology of this study. This is followed by an overview of informality in Turkey's textile industry in order to place the research topic in a wider socioeconomic context. Section four explores the workplace conditions in Turkey's garment industry to explain how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted its informal workforce and, within this group, refugee workers in particular. Finally, the study suggests key mechanisms and policies that will help refugees and local workers alike in their struggle for a decent life amid the coronavirus pandemic and beyond.

2. Methodology and Field Work

This policy brief combines primary data from field research in Istanbul's garment industry with secondary sources drawn from NGO reports and academic articles. Field research was conducted between February and May 2019 by a team of four researchers (two from Turkey and two from Syria) who interviewed 55 Syrians to elicit information about the working conditions and vulnerabilities in the garment industry. To access sensitive information and avoid biased responses, interviewees were primarily selected via personal contacts and snowball sampling. For the same reasons, interviews took place in private settings outside factory premises. Most interviewed workers were young men, between 16 and 25 years old, who came to Turkey between 2014 and 2016. Given that garment production is considered a low-skill activity, the levels of education in our sample were surprisingly high, with one in five interviewees having obtained a high school degree.

Most interviewees' workplaces were located on the European side of Istanbul and employed less than 50 workers. Overall, 85 percent of interviewed textile workers did not hold a work permit or an official employment contract. This number, however, is well below the average share of informal Syrian workers but reflects our active search for formal refugee workers to grasp the potential benefits of work permits. Field research was complemented by a comprehensive review of reports on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on Turkey's labor market and refugees' livelihoods.

3. Informality in Turkey's Textile Industry

Turkey is the seventh largest exporter of clothing in the world, and it ranks third among the countries that manufacture apparel for the EU. For the Turkish economy, textiles and garments are the second largest export market to the EU, and the sector employs some 1.3 million people. The success of Turkey's garment industry has been closely linked to the availability of a cheap and flexible workforce. Against the background of an

industry shifting toward fast fashion, characterized by shorter production cycles and smaller orders,³ Turkey's competitiveness has particularly benefited from a large informal sector.

The formal and informal sectors share a complementary division of labor. Both working arrangements may coexist within the same factory, where workers can be subject to various contractual conditions. Informality is rarely found at the stage of companies that supply international brands directly, as these companies are subject to labor audits; however, it is common among these first-tier suppliers to subcontract to smaller businesses. These second- or third-tier suppliers often heavily rely on informal and temporary workers.⁴ Despite operating outside labor, health, and financial regulations,⁵ studies found that these subcontractors form an integral part of Turkey's clothing production model.⁶ It is estimated that around 48,000 out of 52,000 companies in the garment industry have fewer than 50 employees.⁷

Since its inception, Turkey's garment industry has heavily relied on migrant workers. Long before Syrians arrived in Turkey, garment workshops employed Azeris, Afghans, Uzbeks, and other (domestic and international) migrants who were willing to accept jobs that lost attractiveness among local workers. Among the various groups of migrant workers, refugees arriving from Syria are offered a unique avenue for obtaining a work permit under the temporary protection regime if several criteria are met. These include registration for temporary protection with the Turkish authorities at least six months prior to the work permit application. Furthermore, the workplace must be in the city of registration, and the percentage of Syrians in the workplace must not exceed 10 percent of the total number of employees. Another important restriction is that work permits can only be issued to Syrian refugees at the request of an employer. According to the Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Services, 31,185 work permits were issued to temporary protection beneficiaries before February 2019.⁸

Informality in the clothing industry is linked to a number of economic and legal vulnerabilities. The lack of work permits and written contracts

make workers particularly vulnerable in cases of discrimination, arbitrary dismissals, or delayed payments.⁹ These conditions are not restricted to migrant workers per se, as around one-third of the entire Turkish workforce is informally employed.¹⁰ However, economic deprivation and an insecure legal status render refugee labor a distinctly disposable and exploitable commodity¹¹ as the temporariness of refugees' legal status, accompanied by threats of deportation, obstructs any possible individual or collective action to better their own conditions. Accordingly, the share of refugees working under informal conditions has been found to be substantially higher as compared to their Turkish colleagues.¹²

4. The Working Conditions of Syrian Textile Workers

The working situation of Syrian refugees in the garment industry is indicative of an industry that builds on low-cost and flexible production. Informal workers allow garment exporters to minimize costs while delivering rapidly changing product lines in relatively short lead times. Many refugees are willing to accept the precarious working conditions, characterized by long working hours, low wages, and experiences of discrimination, that have pushed Turkish workers into the service sector.¹³

Considerable flexibility is expected regarding working hours. In times of large orders and approaching delivery deadlines, many Syrian workers reported working overnight, also on short notice. With constant fears of losing their jobs, Syrian workers have few choices other than accepting any demands by their employers. Threats of firing employees have been mentioned by many respondents as a common method for employers to push workers into unpaid overtime:

"For two and a half months, I have worked every day until nine or ten p.m.. 'If you don't do overtime today, don't come tomorrow,' my boss says." – Yamen (23)

"Sometimes my boss calls me on Sundays and says it is urgent. He tells me that I will lose my job if I don't show up." - Muhammed (18)

Fears of job loss appear to be justified as many interviewed workers reported being immediately laid off in times of low workloads. This may happen without prior announcement for indefinite periods.

Such flexible practices can also be observed with regard to payments. Around 80 percent of informally employed respondents stated that they earn well below the minimum wage. However, most respondents also reported further wage reductions in periods of decreased workload or in events of illness. As one Syrian worker mentioned:

“Sometimes electricity goes off and our boss sends us home early. Even though it is him who sends us home, he is cutting our salaries. Or when we finish our work early, then he tells us to go home and, again, he takes it from our salaries.” – Abdulkadir (21)

Economic hardship is further exacerbated by arbitrary payment terms, including late payments, unpaid training periods, or extra hours without additional compensation. As a result, over half of our respondents indicated that their salaries would not meet their monthly expenses, particularly as most of them also support their relatives. The largest share of interviewed workers’ incomes was going to housing, which amounted to over 60 percent of the monthly salary. To decrease these costs, many workers shared their home with up to 20 other people.

Most Syrian respondents were convinced that they are worse off than their Turkish colleagues. Pay gaps were believed to exist independently of work experience or performance. Even though many had gathered industry experience prior to their arrival in Turkey, almost all respondents felt restricted to low-paid positions in their factory.

“The hardest work is always given to Syrians. The reason is that we don’t complain.” – Muhammed (18)

“Even if a Syrian works better than a Turkish citizen, he would earn less.” – Abdulkadir (21)

One in three respondents also reported mistreatment by their boss or colleagues, including racist insults or incidents of physical violence. However, whereas long working hours, low

payments, and mistreatment were mentioned by an overwhelming majority of Syrian textile workers, these conditions varied between different groups. Female workers earn considerably lower wages than their male colleagues, and even in cases of prior work experience and higher education, they remain primarily restricted to “simple” work with lower pay, such as cleaning and packing. The same applies to child workers below the age of 16, who rarely have a clearly defined position in the factory but are expected to fulfill various tasks. In our interview sample, these ranged from bringing tea and food, buying cigarettes, or cleaning the toilets. Most child workers indicated that they would prefer to go to school but that they had to complement the salaries of their parents.

The disadvantaged position of child labor and women is exacerbated by a lack of prior work experience. Many interviewed women indicated that circumstances forced them to seek employment for the first time. Accordingly, their opportunities on the job market were few, and they were rarely familiar with capitalist work relations and wage negotiations. This makes them less likely to decline work instructions or ask for better pay. As was exemplified by a young woman:

“When we first arrived in Turkey, we didn’t know anything. I thought, if I am preparing breakfast for my boss, he is going to treat us better and pay us higher salaries.” - Zaynab (24)

Employment terms of informal workers are distinct from the situation of formal employees who have shorter working hours and significantly higher wages. Among the formally employed respondents, the average income was more than 20 percent higher and payment was more reliable, with no wage losses during times of sickness or periods of low workloads. Against this background, more than three-quarters of informally employed respondents stated their preference for a formal work contract. However, most interviewed workers were not aware about the regulation on the provision of work permits for people under temporary protection.

In addition, a number of structural obstacles were mentioned as barriers to obtaining a work permit. Around one-third of interviewed workers were not

eligible to receive a work permit in Istanbul for legal or bureaucratic reasons. These included missing registrations for temporary protection status or registrations in different cities from their current workplace. Changing the place of registration was described as difficult, if not impossible, as new registrations for Istanbul have de facto stopped.

A second major obstacle relates to employers' unwillingness to initiate the work permit application. Many interviewed workers indicated that they received a negative response from their boss when asking for a work permit. Whereas some employers openly refused to apply, many also gave indifferent responses, asking to come back another day.

Overall, market demands for flexible and low-cost production, combined with a lack of access to social security and legally mandated rights, render refugee workers particularly vulnerable. Among refugee workers, cleavages based on age, gender, and legal status are reflected in wages and the options that workers have to improve their own lives. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the economic hardship for refugee workers, particularly for those lacking an official employment contract.

5. Syrian Workers amid the Coronavirus Pandemic

Turkey has become one of the top 10 countries in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. Its fast-rising infection rates have been partly a reflection of its increased testing capacity, which the Turkish government has implemented alongside containment measures such as business lockdowns and movement restrictions. From mid-March to early June 2020, travel was restricted, borders were closed to non-citizens, and entry or exit became restricted for 31 provinces. The Turkish Government also implemented partial curfews during weekends and banned all non-essential movement for people over 65 and under 20 years old (with exemptions for those who could prove they held a regular job position with a social security registration document).

Containment measures alongside reduced domestic and international demand during the

pandemic have adversely affected manufacturing and trade around the world. In Turkey, an analysis of electricity consumption suggests that overall production has dropped by up to 25 percent since the coronavirus outbreak compared to 2019 levels. However, manufacturing sectors have been affected to different extents. Among the most severely hit are the textile and garment industries, with decreasing capacity utilization rates of more than 40 percent in April 2020.¹⁴ Consequently, many factories had resorted to temporary or permanent closings and downsizing of staff. In an open call to garment brands, the Turkish Clothing Manufacturers' Association Board (TGSD) stated that due to COVID-19, buyers would increasingly withdraw their orders, solicit discounts, and request extensions on payment terms. Hence, the Association declared, "if brands do not help their suppliers finance the minimum liabilities, suppliers will not be able to pay their employees' salaries and secure their livelihood."¹⁵

The Turkish government has responded with several economic stability measures to mitigate the economic consequences for workers and firms. On April 17, it imposed a ban on terminating employment contracts for a period of three months. Furthermore, payments of short-term work allowances and credit support to firms were introduced to preserve existing levels of employment. Workers that do not meet the conditions for the short-term work allowance can also benefit from daily wage support.

Notwithstanding the importance of these measures, the needs of informal refugee workers have been virtually disregarded, leaving them unprotected from job loss and unable to access state support. Providing the basis for a flexible production model that allows industrialists to adapt quickly to market volatilities, refugee workers were among the first to be laid off without any financial compensation. Various surveys of humanitarian organizations found that the number of unemployed refugees has grown disproportionately since the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁶ Due to their uncertain legal status and missing employment contracts, these workers are neither protected from the temporary layoff halt nor can they benefit from short-term work allowances or daily wage support. Missing employment

contracts has also meant that workers below 20 years old were subject to curfews and, hence, lost their income even if their workplaces did not close. Faced with collapsing demand, it is anticipated that employers' willingness to initiate new work permit applications and cover the application fees (currently amounting to 347 TL) will further decrease.

Due to economic deprivation and limited income prior to the pandemic's outbreak, it has become increasingly challenging for many refugees to secure even the most basic needs. According to a recent study, 72 percent of refugee households have had to cut essential expenses such as food, medication, and hygiene products during the pandemic.¹⁷ As services of provincial directorates for migration management (PDMMs) have been partially suspended and many humanitarian organizations have shifted to operating remotely, access to aid and assistance has become more restricted, particularly to those who are unregistered or do not have valid residence documents.¹⁸ This is alarming as a majority of refugee households depend on external material support, such as direct assistance under the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) program, which the European Union funds and the Turkish Red Crescent administers.¹⁹

Studies also found that fears of deportation lead to delays in seeking medical support. Even though a regulation passed on April 13 made COVID-19-related health service free of charge for all people in Turkey,²⁰ many unregistered refugees did not know that expulsion orders had stopped due to COVID-19.²¹ Reluctance to approach medical assistance is particularly worrying as many Syrians in Turkey live in crowded homes located in densely populated areas, which makes it difficult to control the risk of contagion.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The pandemic has revealed and reinforced the vulnerabilities of Syrian refugees that already existed prior to the global health crisis. These vulnerabilities are inherent to informal work, including lack of protection against sudden dismissals and insufficient social safety nets, and

are further exacerbated by legal uncertainties and economic deprivation that many refugees face. Hence, there remains an urgent need to improve the livelihoods of refugees, which have been disproportionately hit by the pandemic. In order to mitigate the current emergency while promoting the self-reliance of informal workers, basic needs assistance should be combined with long-term opportunities to participate in the formal economy.

Such efforts call for international solidarity. The fight against a global pandemic and ensuring dignified living conditions for those fleeing war are not domestic challenges but instead require urgent international cooperation and joint action. They necessitate constructive dialogue about responsibility- and burden-sharing, in particular with neighboring countries. The European Union should take a constructive role in supporting Turkey's humanitarian efforts. This study points to three priority areas of intervention:

Provide Urgent Assistance to Cover Basic Needs

As the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately worsened the livelihoods of refugees, with many being unable to cover their basic expenses, refugees' needs for material support are expected to significantly increase. This includes many households that were previously self-reliant. Additional cash transfers or vouchers will be needed to complement existing support schemes, which appear to be insufficient to mitigate the socio-economic effects of the pandemic. Among beneficiaries, priority should be given to households with the fewest income opportunities, including female-headed households and unregistered refugees.²² Against this background, the EU should scale up its Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) to fund the continuation of its established humanitarian support programs, including the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE), which are both expected to end within the next 12 months.²³

Improve Access to the Formal Labor Market

Sustainable livelihoods and self-reliance of refugees require a secured income accompanied by social security. As this study illustrates, both are not the case for informal workers. Access to the formal labor market can partly be improved by lifting procedural obstacles for people under temporary protection to apply for work permits. Among the most pressing issues are possibilities to transfer the place of registration as a prerequisite for work permit applications. Alternatively, the work permit regulations should allow refugees to work in different cities from their place of registration. However, as long as work permit applications are left to the mercy of employers, formal job opportunities for refugees will be subject to arbitrariness and uncertainty. This is why the gatekeeper role of employers in the application process should be limited, for example, by expanding the validity of work permits to more than one workplace.

The EU can play a constructive role in incentivizing the formalization of informal workers by offering trade concessions in return for improved job opportunities for refugees. While job trainings and language courses have been widely adopted to overcome an alleged mismatch between the skills of refugees and labor market requirements, it is questionable whether such an approach proves useful in an industry that primarily relies on low-skilled workers.²⁴ Expanding preferential access to EU markets could complement these efforts by generating jobs and, thereby, bringing a range of benefits to the Turkish economy.²⁵

Push for Due Diligence in the Garment Industry

Formal employment opportunities in the garment industry are unlikely to lead to sustainable livelihoods unless the structural reasons for worker exploitation are addressed. The adverse effects of an industry that builds on fast and low-cost production become particularly obvious at the lower tiers of the supply chain, where time and cost-cutting pressures incentivize labor exploitation to meet the demands of global and domestic garment brands. Hence, improved work permit regulations will only lead to formal employment opportunities if buyers give their suppliers the financial capacity to bear the costs that come with the formalization of refugee workers.

Against this background, the EU could play a crucial role to align the purchasing practices of brands with support for core labor rights. Efforts to ensure that garment companies carry legal responsibility for labor rights abuses along their supply chains already started in 2014, when EU member states initiated informal consultations on the so-called “EU Flagship Initiative for the Garment Sector”. But, despite a request by the European Parliament to the Commission to table a legislative proposal, no legal progress has been made as of today. By exposing the shortcomings of the global garment industry, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided renewed impetus to introducing mandatory human rights due diligence for EU-based corporations to reduce the negative impacts on workers along their supply chains.²⁶ As the main export destination of Turkey’s garment industry, binding EU legislation on due diligence obligations for garment brands would promote the formalization of domestic and foreign workers in Turkey and create more equal standards for EU and non-EU suppliers to prevent price competition at the expense of labor rights.

Endnotes

- 1 | Syrians in Turkey are not legally recognized as refugees, but instead they are subject to temporary protection. Hence, in this policy brief the term “refugee” refers to the forceful and involuntary nature of migration, rather than to any legal status.
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- 12 | E. Erol et al., “Suriyeli Göçmen Emeği: İstanbul Tekstil Sektörü Araştırması,” *İstanbul: Birleşik Metal-İş Yayınları*, 2017.
- 13 | Gökçe Uysal and Engin Volkan, “Syrian Workers and Informality in the Textile Sector in Istanbul,” *IPC-Mercator Policy Brief* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, May 2020), <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20200515-01053644.pdf>.
- 14 | Ayça Tekin-Koru, “COVID-19 and Industrial Production in Turkey,” VOX CEPR Policy Portal, May 14, 2020, <https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-and-industrial-production-turkey>.
- 15 | Letter from the President of the Turkish Clothing Manufacturers’ Association, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://tgsd.org.tr/en/from-the-president/>.
- 16 | According to a survey conducted by SGDD-ASAM, over 58 percent of refugee workers have lost their jobs following the COVID-19 outbreak; see, SGDD-ASAM, “COVID-19 Salgınının Türkiye’de Mülteciler Üzerindeki Etkilerinin Sektörel Analiz,” May 2020, http://panel.stgm.org.tr/vera/app/var/files/a/s/asam_covid_anket_raporu_200518_2_tr.pdf. Relief International has found this share to be at 87 percent. A survey of 200 refugee families, conducted by “Sevgi ve Kardeşlik Vakfı” in March 2020, states that “almost everybody” had lost their work; see, “Türkiye: SEVKAR - COVID-19 Salgını Döneminde Mülteci ve Göçmenlerin Durumlarına İlişkin Rapor,” May 28, 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/76663>. According to a needs assessment by Welthungerhilfe, out of 123 interviewed refugees who used to work before the outbreak of the virus, 78

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- 21 | “Türkiye: SEVKAR - COVID-19 Salgını.”
- 22 | According to a needs assessment of the Danish Refugee Council, five groups of refugee households should be prioritized for receiving material assistance: widowed/single and female-headed households; households affected by diseases; large families with few working members during the crisis; unregistered refugees that may be cut off from support programs. See, Danish Refugee Council, “COVID-19 Impact on Refugees.”
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