

# FROM SYRIA TO TURKEY: BEING A WOMAN



Prof. Dr. Özlem CANKURTARAN  
Research Assistant Hande ALBAYRAK

**Editors:**  
Prof. Dr. Şevkat BAHAR ÖZVARIŞ  
Social Psychologist Türküler ERDOST





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# **FROM SYRIA TO TURKEY: BEING A WOMAN**

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“Strengthening Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Response Services for Syrian and Other Refugees through Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)/Women’s Health Counseling Units Project”

This publication has been prepared and printed by Hacettepe University Research and Implementation Center on Women’s Issues (HUWRIC/HÜKSAM) in the scope of the “Strengthening Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Response Services for Syrian and Other Refugees through Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)/Women’s Health Counseling Units Project”. All publishing rights are owned by Hacettepe University Research and Implementation Center on Women’s Issues (HUWRIC/HÜKSAM). No citation can be made without reference. All rights reserved.

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## FOREWORD

Turkey has faced an intense influx of migration, which started in 2011 in the wake of the civil war in Syria. Those who migrated to Turkey were initially settled in camps and certain provinces, but most soon moved to other parts of the country. This was a novel experience for Turkey, and, in the beginning, the country's officials had to fumble their way through many problems. In recognition of the shortcomings in the services provided in this field, Hacettepe University Women's Research and Implementation Center (HUWRIC), started to implement the Project for "Strengthening Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Services for Syrian and Other Refugees through Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)/Women and Girl Safe Spaces" in our area of expertise. The project was launched in 2015 and is ongoing under the protocol agreed with the Ankara Health Directorate, in partnership with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and with the financial support of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). Under the project, we have created Women and Girl Safe Spaces in Alemdağ, Gülveren and Yenimahalle. Thus, for the women who needed support and who were experiencing problems exacerbated by being both women and refugees, we have created spaces where they can act freely and safely, and can access services.

Academic studies are meaningful as long as they are not disconnected from the field. In this process, we have benefited from the field itself, i.e., the experiences of refugee women and girls. We have established bonds with them, and thanks to these bonds, we have learned a huge amount from them. We have also had the chance to convey our professional experiences to them and try to help them solve their problems. They have grown stronger; we have grown stronger.

Another major responsibility that stems from working at a university is to evaluate what has been done with a scientific approach, and to share our findings with others so that they may provide guidance. We consider this work valuable in that it conveys the experiences of women, and it allows scientific assessment of the subject.

When undertaken by a great team, the work conducted proves to be all the more valuable. Everyone contributes their own opinions, perspectives and experiences to the eventual product. For their contributions to this work, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Prof. Dr. Özlem Cankurtaran, the Head of the Executive Board of the HUWRIC, who has dedicated her life to the women's rights movement and the empowerment of women; and to Research Assistant Hande Albayrak, who has exhibited courage and fortitude in choosing to work in such a challenging field at the very beginning of her career. We are also indebted to social workers, Esra Yurtseven, Tuğçe Uygun and Yonca Usta, who



have acted as fine interpreters between researchers and participants using their professional bonding capabilities; and to Psychologist Sevinç Sürmeli. Moreover, we are thankful to our project coordinator Sinem Aydın for the effective facilitation. In addition, we must thank the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), and the Ankara Health Directorate for their valuable cooperation, mutual understanding, goodwill and tireless efforts in this important and lengthy project.

We have faith in our work, and in the power of women and girls. We derive the strength from this power. We hope to conduct many studies in which we can grow stronger together, move on together to better days, and sow the seeds of new stories of empowerment.

**Prof. Dr. Ü. Şevkat BAHAR ÖZVARIŞ**

HUWRIC Director



# LIFE STORIES OF WOMEN WHO HAVE MIGRATED TO ANKARA FROM SYRIA DUE TO THE WAR IN SYRIA, FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

## From Oppression to Women's Solidarity: Stories of Syrian Women

*A woman is nothing. She is entitled to nothing and she has no right to anything. She cannot have any rights before or after marriage. This is what upsets me the most. Women cannot have any rights anywhere. Neither as a child with her family, nor as a wife with her husband. This saddens me greatly, and I feel much pressure on me. A woman is supposed to tolerate everything: her parents as a young girl; her husband, her mother-in-law, and her children after marriage, and everything else. She has to take on the entire burden, and she has no rights. That is, she is not entitled to go outside to get fresh air, and she does not have even a couple of minutes to set aside for herself. In no way does she have any rights. Sometimes, I cry for the time gone, for the lost time, for having done nothing. I believe that my life has been spent in vain and wasted. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)\**

\* While quoting women's narratives, identifying information of women such as age (A), marital status (married (M), divorced (D), number of children (C) and the place they live in Syria has been given in parenthesis.



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## INTRODUCTION

The anti-regime protests that flared up in Syria in March 2011 were met with an armed response, resulting in one of the most large-scale humanitarian crises in recent years. Millions of people were affected, and eventually decided to leave the country. Turkey hosts the highest number of refugees around the world. Turkey is now home to more than 3.5 million registered Syrian refugees, as well as more than 365,000 refugees from other nations who are registered with, and fall under the responsibility of, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As of July 7, 2018, the number of the Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey is 3,554,072 according to the Directorate General of Migration Management of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The number of Syrians who live in Temporary Sheltering Centers is 212,816 (6%). The remaining 3,341,256 (94%) Syrian refugees lives outside Temporary Sheltering Centers, i.e., in the cities. In Turkey, which hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees, about 54.2% (1,926,987) of the Syrian population in the country are male and 45.8% (1,627,085) are female. 46.6% (1,656,638) of the Syrian population in Turkey are children aged below 18. These figures change every day.

In the six years since the start of the war in Syria, numerous people had been displaced within the country and have had to leave the country due to the conflict. Given the number of people who stayed in the country and who are not easily accessible, the number of the people in need of humanitarian aid increases every day. According to estimates by the UNHCR, the total number of Syrian refugees across the world is 4,900,741, and 6.6 million people have been displaced inside Syria as of February 1, 2017. Turkey has been chosen by many Syrian refugees both because it is a neighboring country and it implements an “open door policy.”

Initially, Syrian refugees in Turkey were defined as “guests,” a denomination which does not provide any legal rights. However, “temporary protection status” was conferred upon Syrian refugees with a regulation on temporary protection that was passed on October 22, 2014 under Article 91 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. As pointed by Erdoğan (2014), it appeared that it was no longer possible to build Turkey’s policy on Syrians on “temporariness” alone. What is delayed or neglected due to the expectations of “temporariness” may lead to profoundly serious problems in the future. Therefore, while doing whatever is needed to ensure the return of Syrians to their home, both in foreign and domestic policy, strategies for coexistence should be developed, acknowledging that a significant portion of them



will stay in Turkey on a permanent basis (Erdoğan, 2014).

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted using a qualitative method and semi-structured forms with 26 Syrian women working as health mediators in Ulubey, Gülveren and Yenimahalle Women and Girl Safe Spaces in Ankara, established within the framework of the Project for Strengthening Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Services for Syrian and Other Refugees through Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)/Women and Girl Safe Spaces, conducted by the Hacettepe University Women's Research and Implementation Center (HUWRIC) in compliance with the protocol agreed with the Ankara Health Directorate and in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), with financial support from the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). The aim was to learn about the life experiences of Syrian women before and after the war, and during and after their migration. In addition to their war and migration experiences, we also sought to learn about their experiences regarding the training provided at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces, their employment, as well as their changing lifestyles and empowerment practices.


### **Research Objectives**

Concerning Syrian women, this study aims to demonstrate and understand:

- the rights and practices generally pertaining to women, and how being a girl or woman is socially and culturally constructed in Syria;
- the experiences of women during the war;
- the process of deciding to migrate, and migrating;
- life experiences in the places of migration; and
- their employment experiences at Women and Girl Safe Spaces run by the HUWRIC, their experiences regarding the training they received on various matters, on women's rights in Turkey, and reveal how these shape their narratives.

### **Women in Pre-war Syria**

Syrian women were granted the right to vote in 1949, and the right to be elected in 1953. Although the Syrian state ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, and despite the high level of education and increases in the level of paid employment, women are underrepresented in public and political life (FIDH, 2012). In line with the call by the Constitution of 1973 for equality among citizens and elimination of the obstacles to the advancement of women, government policies started to encourage the participation of women in education and the labor force. In this context, the rate of literacy of Syrian women rose from 37% in 1981 to 76% in 2007, while their labor force participation rate increased from 12% to 31%. (World Bank, 2009 cited in Freedom House, 2010:2). However, it should be noted that the representation of women in senior positions is extremely low. In 1976, a woman was appointed as a Culture Minister in the Cabinet, while the first female Vice President was appointed in 2006. According to the results of the election in 2011, three out of 33 senior state officials were women: the Vice President, the Minister of Tourism, and the Secretary of Environment. In the parliamentary elections of 2007, 1,004 of 9,770 candidates were women, and 31 were elected to the parliament, accounting for 12.4% of all deputies. According to 2007 data, there were



319 women in local councils, corresponding to 3.2% of all council members. As regards the level of representation of women in the judiciary, a woman was appointed as a state lawyer in 1998. As of 2010, 13% of the judges and prosecutors in Damascus were female (FIDH, 2012). It is reported that the legal reforms for promoting gender equality of women, as well as channels for challenging discriminatory laws and practices are limited. It is stated that the restrictions on the freedom of organization of women in particular leads to women's rights organizations to operate illegally. The only legal women's organization in Syria is the General Women's Union (GWU), established by the government. The head of the GWU is officially assigned by Bashar al-Assad's Ba'ath Party, and the Union receives financial support from the government. The Ba'ath Party argues that the GWU represents all Syrian women, regardless of their de facto political affiliations. All women's groups other than this Union are illegal, and there are laws prohibiting the use of foreign funds or grants (Freedom House, 2010: 1-6).

Although Syria signed the CEDAW in 2003, it introduced reservations to certain key provisions of the Convention. These provisions include the monitoring of policies for eliminating all forms of discrimination against women in Article 2; the provision of equal rights to men and women in the transfer of nationality to children in paragraph (2) of Article 9; the provision of freedom of travel and residence in paragraph (4) of Article 15; the protection of equal rights and responsibilities in marriage, as well as having the same rights and obligations in selecting the family name, child bearing decision, care and adoption in sub-paragraphs (c), (d), (f), and (g) of paragraph (1) of Article 16; and legal age for marriage in paragraph (2) of Article 16 (FIDH, 2012). The reservations regarding these Articles reveal certain facts about Syria as well.

Under the Personal Status Act of 1953, which is applicable to Muslims in Syria, lawsuits related to family and inheritance-related matters are heard at the religious courts. (Christians have their own personal status laws). Under Articles 15(1), 16 and 18 of this Act, the minimum age for marriage is 17 for women and 18 for men, but judges may endorse a marriage between a girl aged 13 and a boy aged 15. Under the same Act, Muslim women are prohibited from marrying without the permission of their fathers or a close male relative (Article 21) (FIDH, 2012). Polygamy is allowed for men and no permission is needed from the first wife for it. A man who seeks to marry a second wife is required to prove that he has financial resources and provide legal legitimacy (Article 17). In addition, if a woman works outside home without permission from her husband (Article 73) and if she refuses to obey her husband (Articles 74-759), then she is deprived of financial maintenance from her husband. In compliance with this Act, men can initiate divorce lawsuits unilaterally by informing the authorities, while women can only file for divorce in cases of "incompatibility, bias, lack of affinity, absence or distemper" (Articles 105-112). However, in case of divorce, a woman loses her financial rights and *mahr* (a gift, monetary or otherwise, given to a bride by her husband in Islam). As regards the custody of the child, women retain custody of their daughters until the age of 13 and sons until the age of 15 after the divorce. However, if they re-marry before these ages, they lose custody of their children (Article 138). Unless otherwise stated in their marriage contracts or decided by a judge, women are required to travel with their husbands (Article 70). A married woman cannot leave the country with her children without permission from the guardian of her children (Article 138). In addition, testimonies of men and women have equal weight under the civil and commercial code. However, the testimony of a woman has half the weight of a testimony of a man in sharia courts (FIDH, 2012). Examination of these laws reveals that Syrian women do not have equal rights regarding marriage, divorce, custody and other family matters.

The criminal law does not contain provisions regarding the rape of a wife by their husband during the marriage (Article 498). In addition, if a rapist marries the raped woman, he is not punished (Article 508).



Although the Syrian Criminal Law was amended to increase penalties for honor killings in 2009, killings perpetrated in the name of honor are still perceived as a mitigating factor in the country. On the other hand, there are efforts to pass new bills regarding human trafficking and, in this context, the first shelter was opened for human trafficking victims in Damascus in 2009 (Freedom House, 2010: 2).

It is noted that many women in Syria, especially those living in rural areas, do not know their rights fully, and they tend to relinquish their rights due to social or family pressures. As seen in sharia-based practices and unequal inheritance rights, property rights are clear example of this. These practices perpetuate the dependence of women on men. Recent studies indicate that domestic violence is very widespread across Syria, but due to a lack of laws criminalizing domestic violence, perpetrators of domestic violence go unpunished (Freedom House, 2010: 2-3). Legal practices and social attitudes are proof that women are/were under pressure in the public and private sphere in both pre-war and today's Syria.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women defines gender-based violence as violence that is directed against an individual based on his or her sex or gender. Buz (2006: 24) argues that basic causes of sexual and gender-based violence are the attitudes and practices that are based on gender-based discrimination, and that treat women as having lower social status than men.


Social groups that continue to keep women in a secondary position and that are against the development of women's rights continue to exert dominance over women despite official efforts to improve women's rights through legal amendments. Society and families pressure women to assume domestic responsibilities fully and comply with social norms to maintain family honor. The level of pressure is so high that certain behaviors that do not comply with this pattern may result in the murder of a woman (OECD Development Centre, 2009 cited in Freedom House, 2010: 3).

As women led lives under the conditions discussed above in pre-war Syria, the destruction of the rule of law during the war and the very brutality of war have further amplified cases of gender-based violence experienced by women.

## **Problems Faced by Women During the War in Syria, and Reasons for Their Decision to Migrate**

The waves of protests that were triggered by unemployment, harassment, and government usurpation in various parts of North Africa and the Middle East paved the way for the emergence of mass movements referred to as the Arab Spring, and in the same context, mass demonstrations were launched against the Assad regime in the Syrian city of Daraa in March 2011. These demonstrations turned into a civil war between the Assad regime and the opposition forces (Yazbek, 2013; Moore and Talarico, 2015: 228). War directly and indirectly breeds destructive experiences related to violence, fear and loss. Yet it is accompanied by unique, cruel experiences for both men and women. These differing, gender-based experiences include the risk of death or injury in the war for men, while women face risks during their gender-based duties such as domestic roles and care in the face of attacks (Cockburn, 2001; Miller et al. 2002 cited in Deacon and Sullivan, 2009).

Women, too, adopted a stance regarding the war and assumed important roles. Starting with the protests staged for democratic reforms, women launched protests and strikes, marched for solidarity with victims, and called for the release of their arrested family members and the end of state violence.



Both male and female protesters were taken into custody by security forces. Women were reportedly tortured by law enforcement authorities in the detention process. Nevertheless, it was revolutionary for women to go beyond gender stereotypes and assert their existence in the public sphere with the protests they staged (OHCHR, 2013). It is maintained that kidnapping, harassment and rape are used in effort to suppress these roles women assumed in the public sphere. In addition, war is used as a weapon to destroy the identity, honor and social texture of families and communities (Davis, 2016: 1174). As indicated by Buz (2006: 20), women who join dissident groups due to, and to fight against, the traditional practices in their respective countries are punished twice for engaging in political struggle (which is perceived as a male-specific field), and for refusing to comply with their traditional women's roles. Women experience cases of gender-based persecution in the countries where various forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, are traditionally legitimized.

On October 31, 2000, sexual and gender-based violence against women was included in war crimes with the United Nations Security Council resolution no. 1325 due to the incidents of 1990s (UNSC, 2000). The cases of rape and sexual violence against women during the 1992 Bosnian war, the 1990-1993 Rwandan genocide, and the 1991 Sierra Leone civil war were the incidents that played a role in defining sexual and gender-based violence against women as a war crime. Concluding that the Syrian army's operations were "part of a widespread or systematic attack on civilians," the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic held in August 2012 concluded that cases of killing in detention, torture, kidnapping and rape during attacks in the Syrian Arab Republic should be prosecuted as a crime against humanity (Davis, 2016: 1176). As cases of rape are generally not reported in Syria, the perpetrators of this crime can go unpunished. Lack of reporting of rape due to social, religious and cultural stigmatization is an obstacle to its prevention, and this stigmatization makes it harder for the victims of rape in Syria to tell their stories. A study conducted between 2011 and 2015 documented 142 rape claims. In the report of this study, it was pointed out that most rapes (34%) occurred while the victimized woman was in detention or prison, and the cases of rape were most of the time reported when they occurred during house raids and kidnappings (Levrant, 2015: 4).

In *Sexual Violence against Refugees*, a report issued by the UNHCR in 1995, sexual violence against refugees was categorized into five periods in which refugees may be subjected to sexual violence: prior to escape, during escape, in the country of asylum, during repatriation operations, and during reintegration phases. In this report, it is noted that prior to escape, men, women and children may be targeted for abuse by the police, the military or other officials in the country of origin, and individuals may face the risk of sexual violence and torture. Sexual violence may also occur at the hands of irregular forces in situations of internal conflict, and it may occur in the form of bartering women or girls for arms. During escape, refugees may be sexually attacked by pirates, bandits, members of the security forces, smugglers or other refugees. Border guards may detain and abuse women and girls, sometimes for extended periods. Smugglers may assist female refugees across the border in exchange for sex and/or money and valuables. In the country of asylum, refugees living in camps or in urban situations may be subjected to sexual attacks by persons in authority or otherwise in a position to take advantage of their particularly vulnerable situation. Female refugees may be sexually attacked by members of the local population, by officials, including those responsible for their protection such as border guards, police or military personnel, by international refugee workers, or by fellow refugees (UNHCR, 1995).

Forms of domestic violence often escalate in direct proportion to the pressures of refugee life. Women and girls may be abused and forced to prostitution. During repatriation operations, where large population movements may separate women and girls from their usual support systems, crowding and



other changes may make normal control and protection measures difficult to implement. The same dangers found during escape and exile may be faced once again on the return journey or upon return to the country of origin. During reintegration phases, returned refugees may be targeted by the government, military or others in retribution for having fled. Women in particular may be prone to sexual extortion in exchange for material assistance, or for identification cards or other forms of documentation required by government officials (UNHCR, 1995).

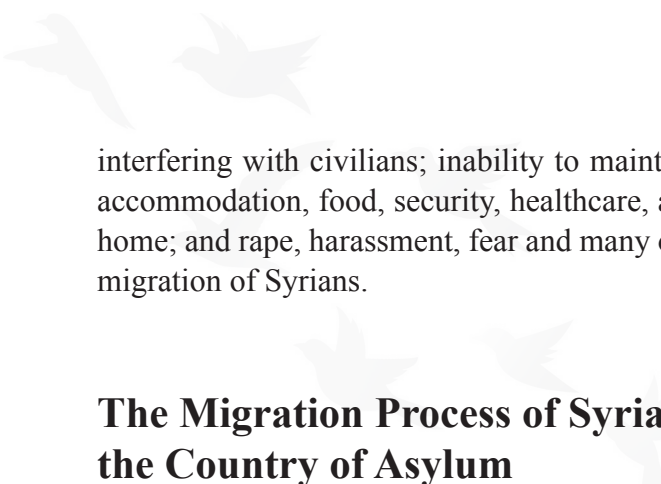
As demonstrated in numerous studies and reports, discrimination and inequality systematized in strict gender-based power relations and classified in hetero-normative patriarchal structures breeds discriminatory social, cultural and economic norms. This gender inequality underlies all sorts of violence against women and girls in both conflict non-conflict environments (Davis, 2016: 1174). According to the ecological model by Heise (1998) and theoretical framework by Usta and Singh (2015), violence against women in war manifests itself on four levels: structural (the level of patriarchy and gender inequality, the level of poverty, disruption of the legal system and displacement), social (gender changes, change of social norms, desensitization, access to arms and being a refugee), relational (change in gender roles, loss of social security networks and ethnic/religious differences) and individual (loss of income, insecurity, psychological dysfunction and loss of coping mechanisms) (Usta, Masterson and Farver, 2016).

As noted in the reports concerning violation of women's human rights, at the beginning of the revolt in Syria, violence against women was systematically used by the government, and security and military forces as a tool of political repression to suppress communities and protesters. Syrian women and girls, including female activists and the women in the families of male activists faced extensive violence in the form of kidnapping, forced disappearance, torture, enslavement, forced labor, coercive detention, refusal of fair trial, etc. Women were subjected to various forms of violence including forced displacement and resettlement, forced and early marriages in refugee communities in neighboring countries, and prevention of access to basic services, including healthcare services (UN Women, 2013; Euro-Mediterranean Rights Network, 2013; Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016).

Living in an atmosphere of war leads to failure to satisfy basic needs, disrupts individual routines of living, and is accompanied by physical, social, economic and psychological hardships. Refugees who leave their countries due to war reportedly suffer from psychological, social and physical effects of escaping from the violence of war; limited access to basic needs such as food and water; living in fear; trying to live without past routine activities; being away from home; facing uncertainties due to migration (Sen, Al-Faisal, AlSaleh, 2013: 198); a fragmented family; exposure to sexual violence; trauma due to death of family members; poor health; and loss of home and other property (Buz, 2006: 33).

As maintained by Hampton (2013), a substandard mode of living and malnutrition which impair immunity make people in certain regions of Syria prone to disease, and may take serious, life-threatening forms. In Hampton's study, a physician from Doctors Without Borders in Syria notes that there are problems related to garbage removal and water supply, which may result in the proliferation of disease. For the World Health Organization (WHO), the major health problems facing Syrian refugees are upper respiratory tract infections, diarrhea and skin problems. It follows that war not only affects the psychosocial health of individuals, but also causes individuals to suffer from bio-psychosocial problems due to physical conditions. Given the amplified effects of these conditions on women and girls who are married at an early age, particularly during sensitive periods such as pregnancy, these problems may have a dramatically detrimental impact on health.

Loss of relatives in the war (or the risk of losing them); bombings near one's home; various groups



interfering with civilians; inability to maintain daily life; difficulties in satisfying basic needs such as accommodation, food, security, healthcare, and education; the risk of losing one's life; seizure of one's home; and rape, harassment, fear and many other factors can be listed as the causes of displacement and migration of Syrians.

## **The Migration Process of Syrian Women, and Their Lives in Turkey As the Country of Asylum**

Syrians who arrive in Turkey enter the country through legal means, i.e., using their passports, or illegal means. It is known that those who have entered the country through illegal means faced a number of dangers during their travels. Due to their vulnerable nature, women and girls may go through traumatic experiences in war and during the migration process. Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women and girls may take various forms during their escape, in the country of asylum, during repatriation operations, and during the reintegration phases (UNHCR, 1995).

As regards the experiences of women during their escape, a study conducted by Freedman (2016) in Kos found that Syrian women complained of violence from all sides of the conflict, and lost hope of returning to Syria. Many women interviewed indicated that they were subjected to violence from various sources during their escape to the EU. One of the sources of this violence was the smugglers and traffickers, particularly for the women who travel alone or with their children. An NGO staffer who was working in the city of Calais in France said during the interview that smugglers forced women to have sex, and there are networks of "sex workers" in the camps. A UNHCR representation pointed out that the increased restrictions on entry to the EU and more closed borders would amplify the sexual demands of smugglers and the vulnerability of women. Women also indicated that they suffered from psychological and physical violence at the hands of their families and husbands during their escape. It is noted that after entry into EU countries, women asked for little help or support in order to address violence committed by their husbands. One of the ultimate findings of this study is that usually, no woman who survives gender-based violence reports it, and that it is particularly difficult to report sexual violence openly. Women tend to refrain from receiving medical, psychological or legal support services, fearing that this may delay their journey, and they avoid talking about sexual violence even in the country of asylum (Freedman, 2016).

Rape survivors often refrain from reporting sexual assault or receiving medical treatment due to the belief that rape tarnishes the family, and feeling of shame, fear of retaliation, stigmatization and other powerful social norms (Refugees International Field Report, 2012; Watts and Zimmerman, 2002; FIDH, 2012, Anani, 2013:76). Anani (2013: 77) reported that when Syrian refugees interviewed in Lebanon were asked specific questions on the effects of sexual abuse/rape on them, the majority indicated that they were trying to ignore and forget about it, and some said that it was their own fault, and nothing was done for the few who did report it. The behavior of the majority of the participants varied significantly depending on the status of displacement and on what they witnessed, and this frequently led to conflicts within households. Participants expressed feelings of insecurity, sadness, doubt, anger and loneliness and occasionally self-harmed.

Given the experiences of refugee women in the country of asylum, migration may lead to changes in power and gender relations in the family and between spouses, and occasionally, an increased rate of domestic violence or exacerbation of existing domestic violence (Freedman, 2016). In addition, refugee






women generally face intrinsic challenges in the negotiation of new gender roles in the country of asylum. The gender roles in the country of asylum are often different from the ones present in refugee communities; women experience more daily freedoms than they are used to, and some women may find new opportunities. For instance, although they have never worked outside the home before, refugee women start to work and learn how to establish a new balance in their domestic responsibilities (Kulig, 1994 cited in Deacon and Sullivan, 2009). Changes in gender roles may also occur due to loss of husbands or as women assume new responsibilities regarding the care of children and older relatives (Buz, 2006: 32). The nuclear family generally differs from the extended family or traditional power structures that also include relatives, and it serves to increase mutual trust between spouses and expands the roles of family members, especially of women. The declining power of the traditional family means diminishing pressure and control of the patriarchy over women (Hugo, 1992: 190; Chant, 1992: 200; Raghuram, 2004: 3; Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1993: 134 cited in Buz, 2006: 30). Buz (2006) concluded that patriarchal control declines as a result of migration and women tend to be freer compared to their status in their country of origin.

Research on the different effects of migration on women and men suggests that women adapt better to changes in the countries of origin and host countries and acquire autonomy through labor participation. They also question traditional gender relations. Women's ability to better adapt to migration is also influenced by the requirement to maintain their roles as mothers, their feeling of needing to be strong in order to keep their family together, and the decreasing control over them (Buz, 2006: 35-86). Proficiency in the language spoken in the host country and formal education were found to facilitate the successful adaptation of refugees to resettlement life (Dona & Berry, 1999 cited in Deacon and Sullivan, 2009).

Even though host countries provide many services to Syrians free of charge, and provide generous financial support through legal arrangements in accommodation, healthcare, foods and education (as in Turkey), this assistance is not sufficient. Despite the regulations introduced in healthcare and education, access to these services remains restricted due to factors such as language barriers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017). In a report published by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) in 2014, it is noted that the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey came from Aleppo (36%), followed by Idlib (21%), Raqqa (11%), Latakia (9%), Hama (7.5%), Al-Hasakah (5.4%) and other regions (10%). The 2014 AFAD survey of 495 Syrian women found that 58% of them had lost at least one of their relatives in the war, and 82% chose Turkey due to ease of transportation. 49% reported difficulty sleeping for the adults in the family, and 35% reported this for the children also. The survey also frequently found polygamous marriages, pregnancies at the age of 13-14, huge age differences between spouses, women who were subjected to violence at the hands of their husbands but were afraid to report it, and a tendency for camp authorities to try to solve the problem of violence against women by talking with men.

In another survey, it was indicated that while some Syrians managed to buy good homes with the financial sources brought with them from Syria, the majority of them were living in crowded homes, sharing with other Syrian families. Otherwise, they were living in unhealthy conditions, in basements, warehouses, slum houses, etc. and were unable to satisfy their basic needs, such as heating. This was either due to high rent or difficulties in finding homes to rent. In addition, problems such as higher-than-normal rent for homes, lack of rental contracts for the homes, and lack of adequate household furnishings were reported. It was stressed that the general living conditions, insufficient nutrition, and lack of self-care created substantial risk for infections and communicable diseases. In September 2013, the AFAD issued circular no. 2013/8 concerning "healthcare and other services for Syrian guests" to ensure that Syrian refugees receive healthcare services free of charge. However, it is noted that Syrian refugees, particularly



those who have chronic diseases, face problems due to a lack of interpreters for refugees seeking medical care, as well as a lack of access to free medications. In addition, it was observed that Syrian women generally received no support in terms of women's health, hygiene and family planning. The report also included statements from Syrian women interviewed that they were sexually harassed by people in their neighborhoods and workplaces, and they were propositioned with polygamous marriages. It was also stated that this was common practice across Turkey, that Turkish people would like to marry their daughters, and that some landlords proposed that daughters could be married off to them as second wives in return for rent discounts (Mazlumder, 2014).

These surveys indicate that displaced women face many problems. These include communicable diseases; forced marriage; forced prostitution; harassment, rape and other gender-based violence and sexual violence; abuses such as child marriage; reproductive health problems such as lack of sufficient care during pregnancy and delivery; nutrition and accommodation problems; environmental health problems; chronic diseases and psychiatric problems; discrimination based on sex, age, race, color, sexual orientation, national or social origins; and failure to obtain sufficient information about rights and services, and their ability to access to them.

## **Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)**

After Syrians fled to Turkey due to the civil war in Syria, national and international civil society organizations launched various projects to address economic, healthcare and social problems faced by the Syrian community. These services were provided to a mixed target audience, i.e., one which could not be differentiated based on population group and gender. Therefore, they failed to address the gender-based needs of girls and women. One gender-sensitive project is being implemented by Hacettepe University Women's Research and Implementation Center (HUWRIC) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and with financial support from the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), and in compliance with a protocol signed with Ankara Health Directorate. Services are provided to refugee/immigrant women in Gülveren, Alemdağ and Yenimahalle Women and Girl Safe Spaces in Ankara, established within the framework of the Project for Strengthening Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Services for Syrian and Other Refugees through Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)/Women and Girl Safe Spaces. The services provided at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS) include sexual and reproductive health, and family planning individual consultancy and group training, awareness-raising activities for gender-based violence, psychosocial support for women who are victims of violence, women's empowerment activities geared toward the prevention of violence (for example, city trips, Sunday trips, picnics, etc.), Turkish language practice activities, planning training for Syrian health mediators employed for the project, mother and child activities, and the distribution of aid kits provided by the UNFPA.

In March 2015, there was only one Center, located in the neighborhood of Ulubey in the district of Altındağ. In February 2016, the number of Centers rose to three, with one Center established in the neighborhood of Gülveren in the district of Mamak, one in the neighborhood of Alemdağ in the district of Altındağ, and one in the neighborhood of Yenimahalle in the district of Yenimahalle—all in Ankara. The Women and Girl Safe Spaces are located inside Immigrant Health Center buildings run by the Ankara Health Directorate. A female social worker and a psychologist who are able to speak Arabic fluently, as well as a female Iraqi physician who acts as an assistant physician, work at each Center. In addition, 35 Syrian women who were trained to act as bridges between their communities and the



Women and Girl Safe Spaces are also employed as health mediators.<sup>1</sup> A distinguishing characteristic of this project is that all people working on the project are women.

Provision of healthcare services at WGSS has facilitated work on violence against women. Furthermore, training has been provided at the Centers by social workers and psychologists in line with the principles of gender-sensitive services. One of these principles is that the experiences of women are valuable. War is generally described in connection to stories of male heroism. Women's experiences are neglected to a great extent. Women are remembered by their experiences regarding sexual violence such as rape. The principle of treating the experiences of women as valuable paves the way for understanding what women have gone through in forced migration due to war and how they have rebuilt life in the country of asylum. The principle that "the personal is political" is another important principle for the empowerment of women through breaking their silence. Thanks to this principle, women can develop an understanding that their problems are linked to policies, not to their private spheres. This principle has been implemented through training and consultancy activities for women. Another principle relates to seeing the differences of women, i.e., avoiding putting Syrian women in such categories as "uneducated," "unemployed," or "married," but rather seeing them in the context of different classes, religions, levels of education, and sexual orientations. Another principle is that traumas can be mended through solidarity. Thus, women will be able to share their pre- and post-war traumas and take steps toward rehabilitation.

<sup>1</sup> In 2018, this number was decreased to 15.



## RESEARCH METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

Previous studies on immigration and Syrian individuals usually employed quantitative data collection methods. We adopted a qualitative research design in order to describe the problem in a more holistic way. In this study, we used the feminist methodology to reveal what sort of social construct was facing participating Syrian women in the context of social gender. In addition, we sought to understand how the patriarchy that reproduced hierarchical power relations was experienced before, during and after the war.

Feminist research aims to uncover obstacles to women's empowerment and transform patriarchal structures. In this study, superiority relations and how they can be transformed were discussed with the participating women to achieve their empowerment. Therefore, feminist research is conducted not on women, but with women (Harding, 1987a; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). Through the qualitative research methods used in this study, semi-structured forms were used to conduct in-depth interviews with 26 Syrian women who received training and started to work as health mediators at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces in Ulubey, Gülveren and Yenimahalle in Ankara. In this study, the women relied on the women's rights training they had received to analyze and question what it means to be a girl and woman in Syria from a gender perspective. This made it possible for the women to analyze all life stories in terms of how pressure was exerted and how they resisted it, and with regard to empowerment.

The study was conducted at the Ulubey, Gülveren and Yenimahalle Women and Girl Safe Spaces in Ankara, established within the framework of the Project for Strengthening Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Services for Syrian and Other Refugees through Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)/Women and Girl Safe Spaces, conducted by the Hacettepe University Women's Research and Implementation Center (HUWRIC) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and with financial support from the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).

The questions in the semi-structured forms used in the study were designed to collect information about the life experiences of the women who were working as health mediators at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces at various stages: before and during the war, during migration, and in the country of asylum, as well as their views on the lives and rights of women. The research questions were prepared using previously performed studies and theses on refugees and immigrants.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Board for Non-Invasive Clinical Research of Hacettepe University (Annex 1). In order to facilitate the establishment of a trust relationship—



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an essential ingredient of a qualitative study — efforts were made to keep the number of researchers low, and the researchers were Prof. Dr. Özlem Cankurtaran, who works at the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences of Hacettepe University Department of Social Work and is a member of the Executive Board of the HUWRIC, and Hande Albayrak, a PhD student and research assistant in the same department.

Pre-trials were conducted to identify questions that might be added afterwards and to ensure that questions were comprehensible. The interviews started in March 2017, and lasted until February 2018. The interviews were held on a voluntary basis by appointment with the women as appropriate, and the interviews were conducted in the interview rooms of the Women and Girl Safe Spaces. The interviews lasted for two hours on average due to the involvement of an interpreter. Before each interview, the participants were informed of the purpose, content and duration of the study, and the sharing of research results. Their consent was obtained for the interview to be recorded for future analysis. To ensure that the participants felt comfortable while answering questions freely, the social workers and psychologist who worked at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces who were able to speak Arabic fluently, and with whom the participants had been previously acquainted, acted as interpreters during the interviews. The fact that the social workers and the psychologist had previously worked with the participating Syrian women and established a trust relationship with them allowed researchers to ask sensitive questions and, at the same time, helped the participants feel at ease. In addition, it is believed that the sharing of life experiences during the interviews provided valuable information for the social workers<sup>2</sup> and the psychologist<sup>3</sup> as well.

To ensure the anonymity of the participating women, we gave them Arabic code names derived from nature. The stories of women are provided with a denomination including their age, marital status, number of children, and city they came from. The socio-demographic information related to 26 women who participated in the study is also provided in the table below.

<sup>2</sup> Social Workers: Esra Yurtseven, Tuğçe Uygun, Yonca Usta

<sup>3</sup> Psychologist: Sevinç Sürmeli

## Socio-Demographic Information of the Syrian Female Health Mediators

Name	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Age at First Labor	City of Residence	Age of Marriage	Education Status	Work Experience in Syria
Ballut (Oak)	28	Married	4	14	Aleppo	12	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade drop-out	None
Kine (Eucalyptus)	29	Divorced in TR	3	18	Aleppo	17	Dropped out aged 14	None
Arız (Cedar)	52	Married	6	15	Aleppo	14	Up to 5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Selling clothes at home
Sanobar (Pine)	37	Married	3	26	Aleppo	25	Up to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Hairdressing
Seru (Cypress)	30	Married	4	16	Aleppo	15	Primary school - Up to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Hermel (Palm)	27	Married	2	19	Aleppo	19	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Nicme (Star)	42	Divorced in TR	5	15	Aleppo	14	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Seme (Sky)	44	Married	9	16	Aleppo - Al-Bab	15	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Turab (Soil)	40	Married	5	23	Aleppo	23	High school drop-out	None
Bürken (Volcano)	28	Married	3	18	Aleppo	15	Up to 7 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Şems (Sun)	33	Married	3	20	Aleppo	19	Up to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Asife (Storm)	43	Married	6	18	Aleppo	17	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
May (Water)	41	Religious divorce	4	16	Al-Hasakah	15	University graduate	Teacher
Rih (Wind)	41	Married	4	16		15	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade - Secondary school graduate	None
Şellel (Waterfall)	35	Married	3	22	Aleppo	21	Engineer	Teacher
Tabia (Nature)	24	Her husband is missing	2	16	Aleppo	14	Primary school - Up to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Vadi (Valley)	39	Religious divorce	4	21	Aleppo	14	Up to 4 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Bahr (Sea)	34	Married	1	27	Damascus	22	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	Hairdressing
Bedir (Full Moon)	21	Married	None	None	Raqqqa	18	High school graduate	None
Nahr (River)	32	Married	5	17	Aleppo	16	Up to 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Cezire (Island)	23	Married	2	18	Aleppo	17	Completed 10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Tutor during the war
Şiheb (Comet)	43	Married	4	23	Aleppo	20	High school graduate	None
Cebel (Mountain)	40	Married	3	24	Tadmur - Homs	20	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
Vaha (Oasis)	50	Divorced	6	13	Damascus	12	Never attended	Factory worker
Zobea (Hurricane)	42	Married	5	17	Aleppo	16	Primary school - Up to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	None
İğsar (Tsunami)	28	Married	4	17	Aleppo	16	Up to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	None

As the majority of the health mediator women who participated in the study were from the city of Aleppo, and only four participants were from other cities such as Damascus and Homs, the status of women in Syria should be taken into consideration based on the social, economic and cultural context in Aleppo. The ages of women interviewed varied between 24 and 52 years. As for the number of children the participants had, they generally had three children or more. The average number of children was approximately four. In the marital status category, 6 women were single and 20 were married. As for the age of marriage, some women married at the age of 12-14, and 16 women married before the age of 18;



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in other words, the majority of the marriages were child marriages. In addition to child marriages, the number of women who gave birth at a particularly early age was high. According to the self-reported educational status of the women, most of them were primary school (up to the 6th grade) or secondary school (up to the 9th grade) graduates. Three women were continuing high school education to which they referred to as the baccalaureate, while only one woman was a high school graduate and two women were high school drop-outs. Two women were university graduates. Seven women had worked in Syria before coming to Turkey, while 19 women had no previous work experience. The jobs held by the women included working factory work, hairdressing, selling clothes at home, and teaching.

The study was analyzed using the Maxqda 12 qualitative data analysis software program. After the transcription of the audio recordings, the interviews were entered into the program and were subjected to thematic analysis. All transcripts were read in full by the researchers several times (repetitive reading) and various groups were created. The transcripts were differentiated based on certain categories, codes and themes. Recurring and differing themes were clarified, and the themes were finalized along with the literature reading. In the writing phase, the data was described in detail with examples according to the themes.





## ANALYSIS

# LIVES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SYRIA

### Being a Girl in Syria

Living conditions in Syria differ greatly based on the city of residence and the family. Many women recounted life stories that were characterized by repressive practices, while some indicated that they “led lives in which they felt free.” Many of the health mediators interviewed stated that their upbringing in compliance with their gender roles started at a very early age. It was observed that girls’ responsibilities in the family included helping their mothers, assuming responsibility for housework, taking care of their siblings, and serving their brothers due to the fact that boys enjoyed power similar to their fathers at home; these duties and responsibilities reserved for girls are indicative of the dominance of patriarchy. In addition, in many narratives, the participants indicated that the girls were expected to learn how to perform household chores as soon as possible and be ready for marriage, and they indeed got married as early as the age of 12-13, effectively finding themselves married while they were still playing games.

The following narrative of a woman implies that the living conditions of girls and women varies depending on the region:

*In Aleppo, the idea of marriage is indoctrinated into girls at the age of 11-12. Girls are forced to wear the hijab and married off, and this is done forcibly. It differs considerably from Raqqa. Raqqa is very different. In Raqqa, it is important for girls to attend school. In Raqqa, early marriage is not common. Girls wear the hijab if they want to, not because they are forced to. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

Concerning **the responsibilities of girls for doing household chores and taking care of their siblings**, the narratives of the health mediators indicated that women tended to give birth to many children, and the care of those children naturally fell to the eldest sister. Yet, efforts are made to teach girls how to do household chores and take care of small children in order to get them ready for marriage.

*It was a tough childhood. I was the eldest sister and my mother would frequently be pregnant and, so, I had to take care of my siblings. I sort of assumed the responsibility for the family and I got married at the age of 12. At the age of 6, I started to do household chores. At the age of 6, I started to take care of my siblings. I would bathe them. I would do daily chores. I would wash the dishes and clothes. I had to. When I was very young, my mother taught me everything in the house. My father’s parents were living with us. I went to school for*





*three years. Then, my mother did not send me to school because there was too much work to be done at home. All my younger siblings completed primary school. I was not in a good position, and I was very sad about not attending school. I will always feel regret about this. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*At the age of 11, they told me that I had grown up and had to learn how to do household chores before getting married. The only thing my mother would do was get pregnant and give birth. There was no stopping for my mother. I was doing all the other work. My mother is just 15 years older than me. I was the nanny and governess for my sisters and brothers. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Being a girl is just about helping the mother. A girl is not entitled to go out and wander around or play games or spend time with friends. She is only supposed to help her mother. At the age of 7, you start to wash the dishes and wipe the floors, and there is only one reason for this: if you marry at an early age, you know how to do household chores. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed noted that girls and boys were raised differently, as boys were taught that men dominated women and men were supposed to control the family. Girls, on the other hand, were raised so that they would submit to the power of men and serve men. The participants indicated that boys would be spoiled by the parents, who believed that the boys would take care of them when they grew up.

*After I left school, I would do the cleaning and do what my older brothers would ask. I would prepare their food. Girls are supposed to serve their father and brothers. I want to forget about it. I was always at home, doing the chores. I do not want to remember those days. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Will men help women with household chores? No, never. Men do not work at home. I go to school and do other chores and, to top it all, I am supposed to bathe him when he comes home. And I was supposed to do my homework. Only after doing my chores did I have a chance to study. This is the way I was raised and trained. I had accepted that boys are superior to girls. From time to time, I feel sorry deep inside. Sometimes, I would feel exasperated. I would tell my mother I that I was tired. "He is a man; he is supposed to be so, and we are supposed to like this," my mother would say. Parents think about their future. They believe that when boys grow up, they will and should take care of them. They spoil the boys and believe that the power should be given to them in childhood. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

In their narratives, the Syrian health mediators indicated that **girls were not entitled to anything** as they were locked up at home and their education was interrupted, and their right to play games was denied just because they were girls. The end of childhood is marked by adolescence and wearing the hijab.

*Girls are entitled to nothing and they have no right to anything. This is an important thing. In some regions, girls may be relatively freer, but certain things are still prohibited to them. They cannot go outside alone; someone must accompany them. For instance, they are not supposed to go out or enter certain places on their own. Even my relatives cannot recognize me in that attire. My face was veiled, and I would not see anyone since I was a child. They would not allow me to see anyone. They would not allow me to play games in the street. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*It is forbidden to go out to the front of the house; it was not the right thing to do. Girls were*

*not supposed to play outside. I would play games only with my sisters and brothers, but I would not have much time for play come to think of it. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*When I had my first period early in my puberty, I started not to go outside to play games. When the first signs of adolescence such as breast growth appeared, my mother told me that it would be shameful for me to go out. She argued that people would reprove the mingling of girls with boys. (Bahır, A34, M, 1C, Damascus)*

*I was at home all through my childhood. The case of girls varies depending on the family. I would see other girls playing games in the street, but it was forbidden for us. We could not go out, even on the balcony. It was shameful, so they said. I started to wear the hijab at the age of 9, and it was not my decision. I was a little girl, and I was wearing the hijab; it was very hard. And just because I was wearing the hijab, I was no longer a child and I could not play games with other children in the street. Yet I would have liked to ride a bicycle, and I still do. This is because I was not able to play games. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

**In their narratives on the education of girls**, the Syrian health mediators maintained that they had to leave school and it was common practice not to send girls to school because of household chores and adolescence. In addition, they noted that one of the reasons for not sending girls to school was the concern that something bad might happen to them. They also indicated that girls were married off instead of being sent to school in an effort to protect them from war. As the patriarchal ideology designates the owner of a girl as her husband, it urges parents to prepare girls for marriage and give them to their rightful owner. One of the manifestations of this mentality is that Syrian women are prevented from being educated.

*My parents forbade me to attend school. Girls are not entitled to study; everything is for boys. No one trusts girls. There are both boys and girls in schools, but they do not send girls to school because they do not trust them. They are concerned that girls may go astray in the mixed environment, or boys may molest them. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I loved going to school very much, and I was very successful. I was happy. I was not aware of anything. When I moved from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (I think I was at the age of 13 or 14), there was something against the State, like an uprising, in Syria. Then, my parents were afraid to send me to school and took me out of school. I was very young when they married me off to someone living in a village. (Arız, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*Education is compulsory until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. But no one cares about what the State says. Such an obligation is defined in the laws, but people do not send [their girls to school] if they do not want to. This varies from one family to another. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*For example, I did not attend university, and I was married off at an early age. I do not have any expertise or a job, but what they taught us in childhood is that a woman is considered property along with everything she has, and she belongs to the man with everything she has. But this is not right. (Vaha, A50, D, 6C, Damascus)*

In addition, as noted above, the status of women in Damascus differs from that of women elsewhere. Some narratives indicate that certain families attached great importance to education of girls, and some fathers were even quite insistent on making their daughters attend school.

*For instance, in Aleppo, it is very difficult to go to university, but in Damascus, it is easier. It has nothing to do with wealth; it has to do with the city. Apart from the difficulty of going to*



*university, they send girls to school up to 9<sup>th</sup> grade assuming that they will soon be married. The practice of not sending girls to school is ingrained in society. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed also talked about **wearing the hijab at an early age**. In describing their personal experiences, some indicated that it proved traumatic for them to wear the hijab and they found it hard to accept it, and even exhibited certain forms of resistance such as removing the hijab at school. Others noted that it was easier for them to accept it as it was common practice in the community. To facilitate the wearing of the hijab, the child's desire to grow up is instrumentalized as well. The respondents also stated that their community exerted intense pressure on girls to wear the hijab, and most children did not want to play with girls who did not wear the hijab.

*I started to wear the hijab at the age of seven. It was not my decision to wear the hijab. I was wearing it at home. I would take it off when I went to school. At the end of the school, I would wear it again before going home. I did not wear it willingly. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I started to wear the hijab at the age of 16. All of my school friends were wearing the hijab. Only I did not wear it. The mothers of the other girls said, 'If you do not wear the hijab, do not walk with our daughters.' So, I started to wear the hijab. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*I started to wear the hijab at the age of nine. Initially, I wanted to wear it to emulate others. My mother was against the idea. "It might stop your hair growing. In my opinion, you should not wear it now," she said. My mother convinced me, and I stopped wearing it. Our neighbors and the husband of my older sister exerted great pressure on me. "Your hair is beautiful; you are very beautiful; you are so sweet; no one should see it; it is religiously forbidden," the husband of my older sister said, and he threatened me. "I will not buy you chocolate and things from the grocery store," he said. When I wore it and went to the street, I could see how people looked at me. "She wears the hijab, but she still plays games in the street. This is a contradiction; it is a shame. This is not acceptable." I could feel this and similar attitudes of people. So, I never felt comfortable. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

*I started to wear the hijab at the age of 11, but I would still wear pants. After I was engaged at the age of 13, I started to wear the hijab in this way. In the past, we would cover our face as well, but I do not cover it in Turkey. It was the order in the family. I did not feel uninvited. I saw my older sisters, they started to wear the hijab at this age. I also started to wear the hijab. It was as if it brought more strain on me. Let no one see me; let no one look at me intently. This was because they would tell me that I had grown up. I learned how to be more careful with my behavior and words. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I started to wear the veil when I was 7 and put on the jilbab at the age of 10. I started to veil my face and hands when I had my first period at the age of 12. What would depress me the most was to go to school and see my friends wearing their normal clothes. That was because I was wearing the hijab. I would ask myself: "Why are my friends not like this? Why is the daughter of 'blah-blah' not like this? Why me?" When I raised any objection, they would say: "You are going astray; you will go haywire like them, just to go against us." Sometimes, when a friend of mine who did not wear the hijab would call me on the phone, they would immediately hang up the phone... "That nasty, aberrant girl," they would say. When I see other people, my heart hurts... Why am I like this? Why is she like that? I want to be like her. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

The Syrian health mediators also indicated that it was common practice to **marry off girls at an early age**. They noted that this practice was more prevalent in certain areas where women and girls were denied their rights and treated as second-class citizens. They further mentioned that in early marriages, the groom's family sought to raise the bride according to their rules, and it would be harder for older girls to be married off.

*Child marriages are most prevalent in Aleppo. Elsewhere, such as in Homs, Tadmur and Damascus, you may graduate university before marrying. That is, you may be married at a later age; there will be no problem. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*There was not predefined age for marriage in Syria. The criterion was this: a girl should be married after her period starts. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*In Syria, it starts at the age of 14, and even 13. It is not very frequent, but there are still cases of marriage at the age of 13 or 14. The standard age for marriage is generally 16 or 17. It is rare for a girl to get married at the age of 20. While the common practice is to marry off girls at the age of 16 or 17, there are also cases of marriage at the age of 13 and 14. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*People believe that girls should marry at an early age or no one will be willing to propose marriage when they are older. On the other hand, families want young brides so that they can raise them according to their family traditions. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*I loved going to school very much, and I was very successful. I was happy. I was not aware of anything. When I moved from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (I think I was at the age of 13 or 14), my parents took me out of school. I was very young when they married me off to someone living in a village. (Arız, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*... but I remember that when the parents of my husband first came to our home, I was playing with my toys. "Guests have come. Get up, get dressed, comb your hair and make coffee for them," my mother said to me. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

## **Getting Married and Married Life in Syria**

Under the heading of 'married life', Syrian health mediators provided narratives concerning the marriage process, violence in marriage, childbirth, abortion, daily life practices, and divorce processes.

The respondents indicated that women would mostly marry their relatives, and if a girl's close relative (such as the son of her uncle) wanted to marry her, she would not be married off to another person, but that close relative would be preferred. They explained that the age of marriage was particularly low, and it was customary for newly married couples to live in the same house with the groom's parents. They noted that in this process, all household chores like cleaning and cooking would be the responsibility of the "bride" and the extended family exerted intense pressures on the bride in this regard.

*There were two families in the household I joined as a bride; two women, eight girls and nine boys, and the responsibility for all of them... I was the first bride, and there was no other bride. The two women in the house were eventually my relatives, and I had to get along well with them. I had to serve everyone, running from one to another. I had great difficulties in adapting to the life in the village. (Arız, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*



It was noted that married men would frequently commit physical, psychological, economic and sexual violence against their wives. The women defined this violence as ‘**oppression.**’ This definition implies that the violence to which they were subject was severe. They maintained that despite this, they were taught to keep silent in the face of violence and be submissive, and they were unable to report the violence to the authorities or their relatives.

*When I got pregnant with my first child, my husband pushed me down the stairs and beat me up. For this reason, and because I was beaten frequently during my pregnancy, my baby died of brain hemorrhage a week after birth. Following this incident, I considered a divorce, but I thought that when I returned to my parents, they would still marry me off to someone I did not like and the same thing would happen, and my father did not approve my divorce. Then, I got pregnant once again and gave birth to my child. My husband kept beating me. For instance, my mother would say, “Go get dressed up and beautify yourself, and do not let anyone think that you are unhappy in marriage.” There is a Syrian saying, “If you have blood in your mouth, do not show it to anyone by talking to them.” For this reason, I would always keep silent and I would adorn myself before visiting anyone. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*My neighbors who would be beaten by their husbands would keep silent and take no action. None of them filed any complaint. Looking at other people, I realize that this is considered normal. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*My husband would frequently resort to violence. I was unable to escape violence in my family. It was physical violence. We were living with the parents of my husband, but my husband was extremely jealous, and he would tell me not to speak to anyone or make jokes with anyone. I got married and I got pregnant right away. My husband would commit so much violence against me. He would beat me up just because he was unemployed and did not have any money. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*When we moved to a new house, he got jealous and worried. When I paid a visit to my neighbor, he would call me on the phone. “Where are you? What are you doing? Come home,” he would say. He began to suspect my teacher. He forbade my friends and neighbors to come home. Even my parents were not allowed to visit me. He severed my ties with my social circles. When my neighbor came to my house for a cup of coffee, I would be afraid, because it might result in trouble. He might come home or phone me unexpectedly. That is why I was in constant fear. “My neighbor came. What’s wrong with it?” I would say, but he would attack me and beat me up. “I am a man. I am entitled to beat you,” he would say. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*My husband was very fond of his parents. “Never talk back to my parents,” he would say. He would commit violence against me, especially when I talked back to him or resisted. When I said something in response to his words, he would beat me in order to make me obey his words. I was subjected to violence several months after I was got married. There was psychological, financial and physical violence. But I could not tell anyone. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*He is short-tempered. He tries to dominate me and have his own way. Sometimes, I am lost in thought, and he asks, “Who are you thinking about?” He gets jealous even when I talk*

to his nephews. "Why do you talk to them?" he asks. He allows me to go out only with his mother and older sister. He does not let me go out with any other person. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)

I was hospitalized because of violence at the hands of my husband at the age of 15. I divorced my husband due to violence after I was discharged from the hospital. I had no children. I got married again at the age of 19. I saw my husband a couple of times. He was 25 years old when we got married. I wish I had not got married. My husband had been divorced and had four children. He had a 9-year-old daughter whose stomach was swelling up. Then, he brought his first wife to the house because of his daughter's disease. Then, we started to have problems a lot of the time. At that time, I had my own children. My husband liked to establish dominance. In the beginning, he was poor. He had nothing. But he started to work as an arms dealer. He earned money and started to persecute people more. When he had money, he started to crush us and torment us more. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)

The wedding ended, and the door of the room was closed, and I cried. "I want my parents," I said to my husband. My mother-in-law had talked to my husband and asked him not to be compassionate with me. She had told him to stand strong. She had told him to scare me. And my husband did what he had been told to do. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)

The women interviewed indicated that their mothers-in-law had been very dominant in their lives because they generally lived with their parents-in-law when they first got married. They noted that in addition to violence at the hands of their husbands, they had been **subjected to violence at the hands of their mothers-in-law**.

It was the second day of my marriage. All the kitchen duties were my responsibility. They had left me with responsibility for the entire house. My aunt's daughters were not working. The house was very big. Each of us had certain responsibilities. For instance, one day, I woke at 8 o'clock in the morning. I went to my mother-in-law. "Why did you wake up so late?" she said, and started to beat me up. I had not known what life was before I came here. I lived with the parents of my husband for 14 years. My husband beat me up excessively, but it was my mother-in-law and father-in-law who would threaten me. "If you tell it to your parents, we will never let you go visit your parents, and we will not allow them to visit you," they would threaten me. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)

My mother-in-law would kill with her words. She would call me a dog or donkey or some other animal. When a new bride came to the house, my mother-in-law would beat her up, but I would save her. My mother-in-law was very jealous. There was psychological violence. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)

We were obligated and we had to live with my mother-in-law. We had bigger problems. The mother of my husband would continually urge my husband to hit me. "Look what she is doing. She is not good. Is it acceptable to bathe the infant," she would say, and she would try to exert pressure on my husband. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)

The women interviewed indicated that **when women filed for divorce**, the courts would be biased toward men, and the divorce process would be prolonged in order to make them grow weary. Women would be deprived of the financial rights to which they would be entitled to in case of divorce, and custody of the children was generally given to the men.



*Everything is in the hands of men, and for instance, a man can talk to the kadi (Muslim judge). “I have not made up my mind. Do not rule on our divorce for now,” he can say to the kadi. Men already have the last say and women cannot do anything. (Zobeia, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Women think over divorce for many years, but they decide to do so when push comes to shove. Men can get divorced easily without a problem. (Şiheh, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Women file their petitions for divorce with the court. They come and go for months, and it may even take a year, but their efforts are in vain, because the courts are biased in favor of men. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

The respondents pointed out that divorced women would be perceived as “faulty or wicked” by society, and women who were already invisible in the public sphere could not engage in public life at all and would be subjected to much more pressure and stigmatization in case of divorce. They added that when a woman got divorced, it would affect her parents and sisters as well.

*It is very difficult for women to get divorced in Syria. People are quick to spread rumors about divorced women, describing them as “wicked” and so on. When a woman gets divorced in Syria, she loses her value or worth. People’s respect for her decreases. Only about 10% of divorced women get the chance to get married again. Men are so cruel with women; that is, a man may leave his wife and go and marry another woman, but they do not divorce them; they just leave them as they are. Suppose a woman gets divorced. When she goes out and her neighbor says hello to her. Then, people may gossip about her, saying that she has had an affair with her neighbor and her husband has divorced her because of that. Her parents would not allow her to go out or talk to others freely. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*The public perception is that a divorced woman cannot be equal to other women. They are regarded as having done something evil or wicked. (Vaha, A50, D, 6C, Damascus)*

*When a woman gets divorced in Syria, life becomes extremely hard for her. She goes back to the house of her parents, and her parents marry her off to someone who generally proves to be worse. She may become the second, third, or even fourth wife of a man. As I am aware of this fact, I never thought about getting divorced in Syria. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Two years after I was married, I went to my parents and told them that I wanted to get divorced. I have unmarried sisters and my father said that if I got divorced and came back to the house, my sisters would not be able to get married. So, I went back. People believe that the mothers of the divorced women are not good, and they have problems with their husbands and their relatives too. So, they suffer consequences. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

Another form of violence against women is that women may be **forced to give birth to many children**. The women from Syria indicated that their husbands pressurized them to give birth to more children by threatening to marry a second wife. This threat is accompanied with the widespread belief that a husband will be more attached to his wife if she gives birth to more children. Another reason is the desire to have a boy. It was noted that birth control was not common practice and abortion would be used only in situations affecting health. The respondents indicated that if women used birth control methods or resorted to abortion/spontaneous abortion (using traditional methods) without informing their husbands, this would result in divorce. Likewise, Karakaya et al. (2017) interviewed 50 refugee

women who migrated to Turkey due to the war and found that child marriages were widespread in their countries, and they would accept polygamous marriages if they were unable to give birth to a child. It was reported that their fertility rate was influenced by older members of the family, the desire to have a boy, and government support. It was also reported that abortion was unlawfully performed, although it was religiously and legally forbidden, and that the community exerted pressure on women to have children.

*... some women said, "If you give birth, your husband will start to treat you better and be more attached to you," but the exact opposite of what they said happened to me as he started to beat me more. This time, my husband adopted such logic: "You have given birth to so many children that you cannot leave me, and I can beat you up at will." (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*They obtain pills that can terminate pregnancy and take them without informing their husbands. My mother told me that our neighbor had not wanted to give birth to the twins and taken those pills. She had had an abortion, but she had been pregnant with three babies. Following this incident, she had become sick and had been taken to the emergency room. At the hospital, her husband had learned that she had taken abortion pills and divorced her. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*My mother had given birth to eight children hoping that they would be boys, but only one of them was a boy. In Syria, boys are very popular. In the old traditions, it is said: "You are a man and you need someone to inherit your family name." A girl sits at home and she cannot work. A boy can earn money. He can help us. They all think this way. The reason we attended school was this. There is no boy, but there are girls. They will not let us down; they will go to school. This was what forced us to attend school. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed stated that they were unable to go out without permission from their husbands and they only appear in the public sphere in the company of their husbands or other family members. They indicated that they could only talk about their experiences at home to those very few people who were close to them because they feared that their husbands or parents might hear about them, or that these experiences might be spread as gossip. The statement, "***This is also what women believe,***" shows that the women had internalized and maintained the life that conformed to gender stereotypes, as well as the pressures in the public and private sphere. It was observed that the respondents did not work and those who did work preferred jobs that could be performed at home in compliance with gender stereotypes. Later in this study, detailed information on the working life of the respondents will be provided.

## Being a Woman in Syria

The Syrian health mediators were asked, "How do you define being a woman in Syria?" In response, they stated that they were subordinate in society. In their narratives, distinction was made between the state and society. They underlined that even though the state endowed women with rights to education, employment, etc., society ignored those rights. They saw society as a mechanism that reproduces the privileged position of men through customs and traditions.

*Yes, religion and media argue for women's rights, but this is just fanfare for men. Men have the power; they possess the power; so, they consider themselves entitled to pressurize women. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*





*In some places, women can enjoy their rights as women. Elsewhere, they are housewives, but they have no rights. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*There are some places in Syria where women can fully enjoy their freedoms. They can go to school or go out and visit places. In some places, they suffer much oppression. They do not want to get married, but they are forced to do so. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Women have no rights. Men have all the rights. Women are at home. Everything is forbidden. For instance, if she talks back to her husband, he says, "Do not argue with me, I am a man." It is forbidden, even at home. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*A woman is supposed to do everything according to the will of her husband. If she fails to do so, the man beats the woman. If she says anything, she still gets beaten up. That is the custom in that country. I do not know how I can explain it, but everything is forbidden. Women do not have any value. Women have no income. Women cannot command much respect. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*In Syria, women have no rights. They suffer from much oppression. They find no comfort. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Take inheritance, for instance. In the laws of the state, women are equal to men in regards to inheritance, but in reality, this is not the case. Preachers say, "Men should get higher shares than women." The state has given us the right, but we do not use it. We cannot use it. You are equal in the eyes of the state, but it not in the eyes of society. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*In fact, the state gave women rights in law. That was OK. The problem, however, was with the customs and traditions related to women. These customs and traditions would restrict their freedoms. There was no problem with the State's laws. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The biggest problem for women in Syria is that they have no freedoms. They are not free. They are not like men. They are not free like men. The state does not really discriminate. It allows women to work. It allows women to work at state institutions and attend school. Neither the state nor any law poses any obstacles, but society is another story... (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I do not think such things will change too much in Syria. So far, I have only heard about women's rights on the TV in Syria. That was all. And women seem content with their fate. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

*They do not know that they have rights. And all freedoms belong to men. As they see this and learn it from each other, they go on in the same manner. Now, laws describe everything, and women have many rights. But in a debate, women and men take opposite sides. When a woman says something which the man does not like, he says, "Women are not supposed to make comments." In religion, it is said that women have certain rights. In the media, it is said that women have rights. But this is just talk. They make it seem as if women have rights. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*Even if the state provide rights, no one can use them because of society. And the Syrian people have defined certain roles for women, and they have to stick to those roles. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*



# LIFE IN WARTIME AS DESCRIBED BY SYRIAN WOMEN

This section of the study focuses on the living conditions of Syrian women in wartime, their gender-based violence experiences, and their experiences in the war, and the process of their decision to migrate.

## Women in Wartime

### *The Role of Women in War: Women in the Resistance, Medicine Dispensation, Food Preparation, and Other Auxiliary Roles*

In Syria, as in other parts of the Middle East, women opposed the war and attended protests, launched protests and strikes, marched for solidarity with victims, and called for the release of their arrested family members and an end to state violence (OHCHR, 2013; Moore and Talarico, 2015: 229). With few exceptions, they were not involved actively in armed conflict in the war. Yet, they were considerably affected by the war physically, psychologically and financially. It is important to acknowledge and highlight the resistance of women to the war (Haddad, 2014; Moore and Talarico, 2015).

In this study, the health mediators interviewed were asked to talk about what they knew about the women who participated in the protests. They noted that the majority of the women who participated in the protests were the women who took to the streets when their husbands, children or family members were “killed, kidnapped, oppressed or persecuted,” although they had previously keep silent in the face of violence and pressures.

*Yes, the women also took to the streets. Many of these women were those whose children, husbands, or relatives were wronged, abused, kidnapped or killed. Although they had never uttered a word in objection, the women poured out to the streets with their children, husbands and family members. That was the time they had an opportunity to have their say. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Of course, women also hit the streets to protest because there was oppression. They also took to the streets because their children had gone, and their husbands had been persecuted. They went out with the strength they derived from them. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*



*The women were attending the protests because their husbands or children had been killed, and they had lost everyone. They took to the streets as they had “nothing to lose.” (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

Women who had been detained during the protests were stigmatized in society due to rape or sexual abuse in detention (Moore and Talarico, 2015: 231). The respondents of this study, too, indicated that they heard that **the women who attended the protests were tortured and raped.**

*In the media, they showed the women demanding freedoms, but they also showed how they were persecuted when the soldiers caught them. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I heard from the news about the women who attended the protests: certain women had participated in the demonstrations. “They are going astray. Where are their husbands? Who let them go out on streets?” they would say. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The women who attended the protests were tortured. They were raped. They were deprived of food. They were given electrocuted. Their nipples were cut off with pliers. If only they were arrested... If only they were detained... They carried out all sorts of torture you can think of on those women. This is what I heard from neighbors.... In Selame, there is a sect called the Ismailites. There were also Sunnis. They would not torture Ismailites like they tortured Sunnis. They were also tortured. Suppose that one Sunni woman and one Ismailite woman took to the streets. They would take both of them. They would beat up the Ismailite woman and send her back home. They would torture the Sunni woman. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*


It is known that women assumed auxiliary roles in war even if they did not participate in it actively. In their auxiliary roles, women were expected to provide healthcare and nutrition services for the fighting men. In this context, the respondents indicated that women had been given training on emergency health services, and pools were created for the dispensation of medicines and food preparation, and women worked at these pools.

*Generally, women would create pools or common areas. They would dispense medicine or cook food. Women were trying to do everything in the background. I would hear that certain women from a certain family had been fighting. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I do not know exactly, but society certainly does not see it normal for women to attend protests. For instance, it is forbidden for women to attend meetings, but they were given training on giving injections to, or treating, members of the civil fighting force. There were many people who were injured, and they wanted women to learn about healthcare and work as nurses. There was such training at the health center near our home, but I did not attend it. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

## **Being a Woman in War: Kidnapping, Violence, Rape, Intimidation, Pressure and Child Marriage**

The sheer multiplicity of the warring factions in Syria and the diversity of their ideologies and agendas create risks for women and result in different consequences, such as exposure to violence. Their experiences related to violence are not limited to sexual violence and rape during the conflicts;



there experiences vary according to the region. Women are subject to many forms of violence such as enslavement, arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, and kidnapping. They are also forced into marriage and other arrangements as a result of the repressive ideological doctrines of certain powers. Despite the various identities of the warring parties and differences in the patterns of violence specific to the regions under siege, the basic discourse that governs the conflict (and the ideologies of the different warring parties) are highly gendered and sexualized. Women's experience of risk and violence is influenced by an interaction among class, ethnicity, political activism, geography/place of residence, economy and religion. In making an in-depth analysis of risks and vulnerabilities, the social position of women (at the points of intersections of multiple marginalities) and the gender relations before and during the conflict, as well as inside the government, should be taken into consideration (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016: 12).

Rape has been used as a weapon by the warring forces during the war and migration to demoralize the enemy, boost the morale of its own soldiers, and even declare a symbolic victory (İnal, 2014). It is known solitary women, women without partners, unaccompanied children, children in foster care, women taken into custody, and women in similar situations have a higher risk of exposure to sexual violence during the war. Individuals of both sexes and in all age groups have a higher risk of suffering sexual violence, especially in case of detention. In addition, sexual violence may be experienced in all phases of the war and migration (during escape, in the country of asylum, during repatriation operations, and during reintegration phases) (UNHCR, 1995).

Due to the conflict in Syria, women have faced and continue to face a number of difficulties, including arrest, loss of relatives, physical and economic hardships, and gender-based violence (AFAD, 2014). In a study conducted in Syria between 2011 and 2015, it was pointed out that the majority of rapes occurred while the woman was in detention or prison, and during house raids and kidnappings (Levrant, 2015: 4). Güçtürk (2014: 54) mentioned the claims of rape of women and girls, which were referenced in various reports as mass scale violations during the civil war in Syria. The report included claims that armed groups raided houses of civilians in residential areas, raped women and girls in front of family members and killed them after the rape, and that women were also raped in prisons.

The health mediators interviewed indicated that they had not experienced such events themselves, but they heard about **numerous cases of kidnapping, disappearance, rape, and physical violence**.

*Then, we heard that they kidnapped and raped women. We heard that there were riots somewhere and bad things happened. Then, the civil fighting force, too, entered the neighborhood and the war started in our neighborhood. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*In the war, fighters would enter houses and beat women. Just imagine that they enter your houses and beat you in front of your children. It was very difficult. In some houses, there were rapes and similar incidents as well. Some girls were raped in front of their fathers. They entered my mother's house and started to beat my sister in front of my mother. The wives and children of some people could do nothing but watch them. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*When the civil fighting force entered Raqqa, they started to harass women; they would stare at them. They would even forcibly marry women without permission from their parents, and they would have sex with the girls they liked. They could take even married women by force. They would even put their hands on the head of a woman and say "Allahuekber" three times and say, "Now, she is my religiously lawful wife." They could take any woman without the*



*consent of her husband, father or brother, even if she had children. They saw themselves entitled to do so. And it was not restricted to women. They could take a car, or any item or anything they liked, and they would utter takbir on it three times before taking it. Cases of thefts skyrocketed as they could steal anything. If they saw a telephone, they could put their hands on it and utter takbir three times and take it. Daesh might see a girl and take her. It would be enough for them just to hear about women. So, if they heard that only women were living in a house, this would prompt them to action. They would go to that house and take all the women. And a woman would have to marry not only one man, but five or even 10 men. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*When the civil fighting force wanted to enter a neighborhood, they would give money to someone from that neighborhood and buy that neighborhood. When they bought the neighborhood, they would get the right to use everything in the neighborhood. This was because there was no state. I was so scared that I would not go out on to the balcony. Normally, I did not like to veil my face. As a woman, I felt the urge to cover my face because I was afraid. When the militants saw a beautiful woman, they could take her even if she was married. They could take her even before she was divorced. They claimed to have the authority to issue divorce decisions. They would take women and marry them. Following these events, Aleppo was split in two. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

Syrians who fled the cities under the conflict pointed out that rape or fear of rape had been one of the main reasons for marrying off women or girls (Davis, 2016: 1174) and taking refuge in neighboring countries (Güçtürk, 2014: 54). The health mediators interviewed noted that **for fear of rape, they would not go out of the house and they had moved to some other place. Two respondents noted that their parents had married off them because of this fear.** They indicated that in wartime, the duration of engagement was shorter and wedding costs were lower. They stated that the number of marriages in wartime was higher as it was perceived as method for protecting women and the marriage costs were lower. In addition, they mentioned the fear of rape of their children as one of the reasons for leaving their country.

*My parents were very scared. Warriors could come and take the girls. They wanted to marry me off right away. "The war has erupted, and people may be more secure if they are married," they said. For instance, they would come to recruit soldiers or militants from the houses, and if a problem occurred or they were unable to recruit anyone, they would take girls. They would take the girls and we would not be able to see them again. If the man they wanted went to them, they would give the girl back and cut off the man's head. Some people said that they would take the girls and marry them, and make sure that they cook food and do the cleaning. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*I heard about how children and women were kidnapped. Who kidnapped who, we did not know. It was a chaotic environment. The kidnapped woman or child did not return. They went missing. But we were prohibited from going outside because of these incidents. Some would go out in order to bring food for the children, but they did not return. We would wait for the men to bring food. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The soldiers had entered the neighborhoods and they were stealing stuff. They were treating girls badly. We would hear from other people that they would rape women if they entered the house. I had daughters at the age of 13 and 14. I was afraid for my daughters, so I went back*

to my parents. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)

*Things are more difficult for women in wartime. Indeed, I have heard about many things such as harassment, rape, and kidnapping. My husband was working at night, so I had to stay with my neighbors, because there was so much bombing. I also heard about cases of kidnapping. There were rumors both about the opposition and Assad's supporters. The opposition would accuse Assad's supporters of being behind those kidnappings, and vice versa. This was the reason we fled in the first place. A girl in our neighborhood had been kidnapped. A week later, they brought her back; she had been raped. Because of this incident, I was very scared. I would never go out. If I had to leave the house, I would go hide in the mosque. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*The war began and strangely enough, women grew wary of going out on the streets. Initially, we were not scared that something bad would happen to us, that is, adults, but we were certainly concerned about our daughters. I did not witness it personally, but I heard many rumors about the civil fighting force kidnapping girls or doing other things. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*In wartime, it became more frequent to marry off girls. This was because the marriage process was faster. In the past, people would make a lot of preparations for the wedding. In wartime, however, wedding costs and preparations were scaled down. Suppose there were three or four girls in the same house and their father was in prison. "Let them marry and save themselves," people would say. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

There was an atmosphere of repression in the areas which came under the control of the conservative forces (Haddad, 2014). The respondents indicated that **during the war, there were pressures on women and girls who were not able to go out on the streets alone, and if women went out without the hijab, they would be detained or flogged.**

*For instance, if the militants saw a woman not covering her face, they would detain the woman and make her husband flog her. This is what I saw with my own eyes. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Now, it is really hard to go from one place to another in Raqqa. Even if you go somewhere very close, say, the house next door, all of your clothes should be complete, and you are not supposed to go out alone. Currently, there are statement-taking cars in Raqqa: both for women and men. So, if a woman walks alone on the street, the 'woman car' goes to her and takes her statement. In addition, it is forbidden for women to go out alone; they must be accompanied by their father, older brother, uncle or sons of her siblings. That is, they must have a 'mahram' with them. You cannot even go out to the garden without wearing the hijab or in a manner that does not comply with their rules. Otherwise, they will take the woman. When they saw a woman who did not cover her hair, they would take her, and we would never hear about her. Even if you paid money, you would not get her back. "We did not do it," they would say. No one knew where the girl had been taken. That is, the parents would go ask about their daughters and they would complain about the kidnappings, but they would refuse to divulge information about her whereabouts, feigning ignorance. In some cases, some family member would trail behind her and pay them some money, and then, they would release her. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*



**As for the state of women's husbands and boys in wartime,** the need for gendered male power triggers the efforts by warring forces to recruit soldiers, and the desire of men to join the war. A respondent indicated that personal requests or age were not considered when recruiting people for the war.

*They were recruiting boys. The state's army would take older boys. Or it would kill them if they learned that they were supporters of the civil fighting force. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

A health mediator interviewed talked about **the boys' desire to join the war, noting that they had started a business in the country of asylum for their youngest child, and made him marry in order to dissuade him from joining the war.**

*We came here. "I will go to Syria and join the war. I will join the jihad," he kept on saying. "I will leave my wife and children with you and go to the jihad," he said once. "We cannot take care of ourselves. How can you leave your children?" his father told him. We did not allow him to go. But he would come every week or once in every 10 days to say that he would go and fight. We asked someone to persuade him not to go. "Okay, then, I will take my wife and children and go together to Syria," he eventually said. "Get your stuff ready, and we will go to Syria," he would say to his wife. And something happened to my youngest son. He went missing for three days. He eventually showed up and said he would join the jihad. So, his father decided to rent a store and start a business for him. "We will open up a store for you, and you will operate it. Then, we will help you marry," we told him. He started to work at the store and run a business in partnership with his five older brothers. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*He went crazy. "When I can get out of here, I will go to Syria," he said. We were concerned about him and we decided to get him married so that he might come to his senses. We got into debt to cover his wedding costs. But we were determined to make him marry. We brought the bride from Gaziantep. When I had been visiting my daughter and sister there, we had talked about the girl. I went to see her, and I liked her. She was 18 years old. My son was 21 or 22 years old. We were forced to do so, so that he would not go to Syria or do anything bad and cause trouble for us. So, we got him married. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

## **Living Conditions in Wartime as the Most Devastating Trauma/The Destructiveness of War**

As for the living conditions of Syrians in wartime, we see that vital needs such as food, water, fuel and access to healthcare are not met (Davis, 2016: 1166). They live in fear and are unable to sustain themselves day-to-day (Sen, Al-Faisal, AlSaleh, 2013: 198). Working life has halted, and education and security needs are not met. A survey conducted by AFAD (2007) on Syrian individuals who took refuge in Turkey due to the conflict found that the homes of 29% of the Syrian individuals interviewed were ruined, while the homes of 23% of them were significantly damaged. It is known that during the war in Syria, the husbands of many women have been killed, arrested or removed from their families. In one in every four families, women were left alone to provide food and shelter for their children. One in every three women was not adequately fed (Jabbar and Zaza, 2016: 306). As maintained by Hampton (2013), this substandard mode of living and malnutrition impairs immunity and makes people in certain regions of Syria prone to diseases, which may take serious and life-threatening forms. It is reported that **13.1**

**million people** in Syria are currently in need of aid, and **6.1 million people** have been displaced inside Syria. **2.9 million people** live in hard-to-access or blockaded locations (UNHCR, December 7, 2017).

The health mediator interviewed indicated that **they had had difficulties in meeting their basic needs such as shelter, food, electricity, water, diapers, healthcare, and education as their homes had been damaged** in bombardments during the war:

*We stayed in our house for about four years until it was destroyed in the bombardment. Then, we had to leave it. This happened two and a half or three years ago; four years ago, at most. We had a very hard life. There was no water. There was no electricity. There was nothing to keep us warm. We could not buy anything when one of us was sick. I could not buy even diapers for my youngest kid. None of us were hurt in the bombardment. Only my youngest child was hurt. Something hit her and her abdomen, and her legs were burned. After she was injured, it was the hardest time of my life. I dealt with her wounds for one year. I went through many hardships during that one-year period. I washed her wounds with soap at home. I bought burn cream from the pharmacy, but I could not take her to hospital. My husband could not work anyway. We all fled, leaving everything behind. The house of my neighbor, 10 meters away from ours, was bombed. God saved us. I was afraid. Everything was so hard. Everywhere we went, there were clashes. No water, no electricity, no food. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*We had been deprived of electricity and water for one year before we came to Turkey. We lived without electricity for one year. My husband was unable to work due to the war. There was no school because of the war. Water would be provided once every 10 days. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*We lived in the war for three years. It was very hard. Your house could be bombed any minute. "Which wall will be destroyed?" we would ask ourselves when we sat down. This was because there were frequent clashes. Most of the time, we would run to the bathroom. With the children, we would hide there. My husband was working at night. There was no electricity. We would use kerosene lamps. We would bring water from the mosque. Everything was extremely expensive. Wages were very low, and everything was very expensive. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I was so scared. We lived at the very center of the war for three years. Any noise would scare the hell out of us. We were very concerned about our children. I would send them to school, I would wait for them anxiously until their return. Would they come back? I would have the same concerns for my husband as well. When he went out, I would go to the door and think whether he would return or not. That was how we lived. Food was so scarce. There was no electricity. Later, it became harder to find even bread. There was money, but no bread to buy with it. I did not want to wake up one morning to see that one of my children had died or something bad had happened to them. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Normally, all of my children, including my daughters, were going to school there. But when the war erupted, we could not send them anymore, because there was writing on the walls. "Do not send your children to school. If you send them, only their clothes and bags will come back home," they wrote. We were very scared. So, we stopped sending them to school. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*





*We were living at a house in Aleppo which did not get any sunlight. After the war had erupted, we could not make out whether it was day or night when the lights were out. We were always in the dark. For a year and a half, we relied only on candles. Even if we wanted to go out, we could not because of fear. When we were eager to go out, they would impose a curfew. Like other children, my children were adversely affected. They attended the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Then, the incidents started, and they could not go to school. (İğsar, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I was pregnant with my third child. I had not given birth yet at the beginning of the war. The war was very bad. We would gather in a room because of the bombardments. One month before childbirth, apartment buildings collapsed. One month before the childbirth, I went to another place which was free from clashes in order to go to hospital for the delivery. We stayed with one of our relatives. They brought a physician home for the birth. My father-in-law could have died while bringing the physician. The lights were out, and I gave birth by the light of a candle. It was in 2011. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*After the war started, the children went to school for one year; but then, the school was bombed. The children were scared. They had bombed the entire school. Seeing each other wounded, the children started to cry and after that, they could not go to school. We lived in the war for two and a half years. The children were not able to attend school for two years in Aleppo. Then, they shut down the school altogether; they did not want anyone to attend school. So, the children were left as such. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*


The women interviewed indicated that they were unable to go out due to fear of bombings amid the clashes, and they had had traumatic experiences as they witnessed houses damaged and human bodies mutilated in the bombardments. They also indicated that such events particularly affected children.

*Life was hard during the war. You just have to wait. Would the plane come and drop a bomb, killing us? Children would hide under the couches. We were adults and still afraid. How could the children not be scared? (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*We lived in fear. We were always in the house, and we could not get out. When we got out, a plane would come. So, we always stayed at home. We could not even sit next to the window. When there were clashes, we would go underground and stayed there for the night. There was no light; we had to use candles. Not just me, but everyone there. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*We lived in fear during the war, and it was hard. At that time, my daughter fell ill; she got psoriasis due to fear. There were white spots on her face and hands. When the bombardments got worse, we went to my older sister and stayed there for one month. The bombardments did not stop there. There were bombings near our house too. We suffered a lot; we went through tough times. I saw my nephew die. There was a bombing in the marketplace. I saw how people were mutilated. I saw them remove body parts in front of me. My children would see them, but I was quick to close their eyes. Otherwise, they would have seen corpses that were torn to pieces. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Those were hard times. We spent many nights without sleep due to fear. Aleppo was split in two. One side was being bombed, while the other side was bombing. We were not on the side that was being bombed; we were on the side where the state was. The sound of planes and bombings would most affect us. The other side, which was in front of our house, would be*



*bombed and we would go to the furthest part of the corridor inside the house. My husband, children and I started to sleep in the same room. We would sleep in the innermost room which did not face outside. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*They dropped a big box of explosives into our next-door neighbor's house. There was bombardment in our neighborhood. The youngest daughter was awake at home. When the building next to our houses exploded, our house was damaged as well, and there were holes in our house. The explosion was accompanied with a flash of light, and my daughter was very scared. It was my 8-year-old daughter who was affected most among my children. She hardly ate anything or slept because of fear. We came to the camp in Jarabulus. There was a physician there. Something from that explosion had entered my daughter's ear. The camp's physician removed it. She could not hear anything with that ear. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

Under these unsustainable wartime living conditions, the individuals first opted for displacement or were displaced within Syria. However, as the living conditions in the places they moved to changed, many Syrians had no choice but to migrate to other countries. According to the UNHCR statistics, **6.1 million people had been displaced inside Syria** (UNHCR, December 7, 2017). The women interviewed indicated that, depending on the intensity of war, they left their place of residence to go to where their relatives lived. They had to live together with several families in the same home, and they initially chose to move inside the country as they believed they would soon return to their own homes.

*Four months after the war erupted, we stated to move from one home to another. Actually, the reason we moved from one city to another was that we were hoping to go back to our home. "We'll go back in two months," we would say to ourselves, but eventually, we learned that our house had been bombed and plundered. We soon ran out of gold, and we decided to go back home. However, we were told that the state army had confiscated the house and we were not allowed to stay there. I saw the war up close, and I witness a lot of things. I saw many dead bodies on the ground. I witnessed many explosions and I saw numerous charred corpses. Then, we moved to another city, Latakia. After we settled in Latakia, my husband could not find a job. We stayed there for eight months, spending the rest of our money. In this process, someone we did not know took my husband's car. They might have been from the civil fighting force or Daesh [ISIL]. Several people we did not know confiscated our car. When they took our car and we were left with nothing, we started to use my gold and jewelry to cover our costs. Eventually, we ran out of my these, and eight months later, we decided to go to Turkey so that my husband could find a job. There was no water, no electricity, no bread, no nothing. We had to move. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*People would move from where fighting was intense to other places. At that time, there were no clashes in the city where we lived. As such, some of our relatives came to us as relatives. I mean, there were 50 guests at home. The house was big, but some had to sleep in the kitchen or on the balcony. It was a four-bedroom house. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Initially, we were living in a city which was under the control of the civil fighting force. Life got harder there. We decided to go to a region which was under the control of the Syrian regime. We had a lot of trouble during our voyage. We had to tell lies. We moved from one city to another, frequently telling lies, until we came to the divided border. When we reached Assad's territory, we had many problems. I would have rather died. I thought that we would be able to live the life we used to live there. In the beginning, no one would meddle with*



*anyone. The government would not interfere in anyone's lifestyle. But that was not what happened. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

*It was no longer possible to stay in our precinct. My children were young, and they would jump out of fear when a car passed. I was worse than them. Then, Daesh [ISIL] entered our village. They removed us from the area and put us in a school. But the school was very crowded. Food and water were so scarce. So, it was impossible to stay there. We were unable to sleep safely. As we stayed at the school, we realized that we could not stand it any longer. We would hear planes fly over and drop bombs. There were too many people in the school, and it was very likely for the plane to assume it was a Daesh [ISIL] meeting and decide to strike it. So, when an airplane flew over, we would be afraid that they might drop bombs. We decided that we could not take it anymore. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*We stayed at the house in the village. It was very crowded. There were children, brides, grandchildren, etc. Everyone was in the same room. We were not comfortable. We would ask other people if there was any other house we could live in. A friend of my husband had a house located not inside the village, but on the foothills of a mountain. "It is a big house; you will be fine there," he said. We moved to that house. We stayed there for eight months. Then, the civil fighting force entered. Something had happened between it and the regime. We could not go to the regime-controlled areas where everything was expensive, and we needed money. If they believed that you were from the civil fighting force, they would kill you. There were no jobs, nothing. Then, we could not bear anymore, and we went to another place, but we could not stand it there either. Eventually, we return to our home. But during the eight months, many cases of theft had happened, and all of our belonging had been stolen. It was heartrending to see it, and I became ill. We stayed there for a while, but many young people and women died in front of us. We would see many people die every day, and we could not bear it any longer. There was a village which I had never visited, but my older sister said that we should go there. We went to that village; it was very close to Raqqa. We stayed there for about one year. We had been to so many places, but there were no jobs, no food, nothing in any of them. At first, I assumed that my son could go to school, but there was no school left. In that village near Raqqa, my children opened a mini-grocery store. After a while, we started to earn some money to make a living. Then, ISIL, who fought the civil fighting force occupied Raqqa. It was very scary as the planes were dropping bombs on one side, and ISIL was opening fire on the other. If you went out, the planes killed you, thinking you with ISIL. They killed a lot of families like that. But you had to go out to buy something. But they would kill you as soon as you left the home. Then, it became clear that we had no choice but to go to Turkey. We sold the gold bracelet of one of the brides, the gold necklace of another, the fridge, TV set, blankets, etc., we had brought from our home, everything in our car. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*When the first bombardment happened, we moved house and my husband, children and I went to the village. His second wife refused to live with us and went to her parents. We went to the village of my husband's family. Finally, I could not take it anymore because it was so crowded. 10 families were living in the same house. There were the children and brides of my co-sisters-in-law. It was very cramped. So, I told my husband that I wanted to go back to our home. I said to him that if he did not agree with me, I would take the children and go. We went back to our home. We hoped that the planes would not come. But there were*

*bombardments, and our balcony collapsed. (Nime, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I experienced the war in Syria for a year. We all thought that the war would not come to where we lived; we assumed it was impossible for the war to erupt in our settlements. The government forces established a front in front of our house. They were shelling the other side. We were no longer able to get out of the house. The business stopped as well. When people walked out of their homes, they would walk under the shadow of death. The fighter planes were dropping bombs everywhere. My husband was unemployed for six months. My sister-in-law's family stayed with us. They had five children and we had three. My mother-in-law and my father-in-law also stayed with us. All roads were blocked for us. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

Many people lost their lives because of the war in Syria. In a survey by the AFAD(2017), 36% of the Syrian individuals interviewed indicated that at least one person from their household had died during the conflict, while 29% stated that at least one person from their household had been wounded. In this present study, three health mediators interviewed had **lost relatives in the war**.

*I stayed there for five years. I stayed for a year after my son died. My son was caught in a gunfight and died. He was 12 years old. He would have turned 13 two days later. I was in shock, and I received treatment for two months. Then, I decided to take my children and go. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

In addition, two health mediators interviewed stated that **their husbands had been taken and detained by armed forces, and they had not heard from them**. They did not know that if they were alive or not.

*"We need to talk to your husband for five minutes," they said. My husband did not take his ID card with him. That was a one-way trip. "Five minutes" became six years. My mother-in-law wanted to go and ask, "Where is my son?" She wanted to know what his fate was. People told her not to go, saying it had something to do with politics. My mother-in-law was afraid to ask. The regime's army took my husband and imprisoned him because his name was similar to someone they wanted. And my life became harder. They said that my husband would stay in jail for a few months. But I did not hear from him for three months. When I was unable to contact him, I got worse. I could not talk for a while. No sound would come out of me. I could not distinguish the time or place. Then, my mother-in-law, and one of his relatives, who was a soldier, went to Damascus several times. Eventually, they brought a paper. It certified that my husband was dead. They did not show the paper to me for a while. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*



## DECIDING TO MIGRATE AND NARRATIVES OF BORDER CROSSING

### The Process of Deciding to Migrate

As noted above, the health mediators interviewed in this study stated that they had moved to various places inside the country. However, as their basic needs, including security, could not be met, and given their relatives had missing or faced the risk of being detained, they could no longer bear the situation. They decided to migrate. The AFAD reported that 80% of Syrian individuals who left their country did so due to security concerns or life-threatening dangers, while 12% migrated for political reasons (AFAD, 2017: 9). In the present study, the interviewed women's narratives demonstrate that they made the decision to migrate when they could **“not take it anymore”** as a result of **experiencing life-threatening events and witnessing the death of other people**.

*I made up my mind after the bombardment began where we lived. I woke up one morning to find a human arm on the balcony of my house. His head was on the building next to our house. There were so many bombardments and so much gunfire where we lived. Because of this tension and stress, I was unable to walk on my feet and my arm was hurting a lot. After so many incidents, we eventually decided to come here. It was me who made the decision. “I will go,” I said, “because I cannot take it anymore.” I was very nervous and extremely stressed. I phoned my father. “If you do not give me permission, I will flee on my own,” I said to him. Then, my husband refused to go to Turkey. “In Turkey, women are dress obscenely. They do not wear the hijab. We will not go to that country,” he said. When the war grew more intense, I said to him that I would take the children and go. Then, ISIL entered our city. They started beheading people. And I called my parents. “Either we leave right now, or I will go alone,” I said to them. And my father sent my mother and 18-year-old brother to accompany me to Turkey. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I could not stand the loss of my niece. We had been in the same place. If my children had been outside, they would have died as well. So, I could not take it anymore and I insisntly asked my husband to leave. We decided to go for 2-3 months. We would stay in Turkey for just 2-3 months, and then return to Syria. “This war is our war; we must be in Syria,” my husband would say. We decided to stay in Turkey for 2-3 months because I went crazy in Syria. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

## **Another factor that influences the migration decision process is the risk of a son and/or husband being recruited.**

*After the war erupted, we spent most of our time thinking about whether we should go or not. I had an older son. I was concerned about him. He was a young boy. He might join Daesh or the civil fighting force. I was afraid that my son might go. I started to look at the routes. I would take the illegal route. I looked for who might take us and how. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

According to the AFAD study, of the Syrian individuals who chose to go to Turkey, 54% did so because of ease of transportation, and 27% because of their trust in Turkey (AFAD, 2017: 9). Concerning the factors that influenced the choice of country and city of asylum, many respondents indicated that they picked Turkey and Ankara as their destination because they had relatives or acquaintances in Turkey and in Ankara; the border between the two countries allowed easy passage under the conditions prevalent at that time; it was close to them not only in terms of distance, but also of culture; and there were employment opportunities, and schools where their children could be taught in Arabic.

*I have said it before. We sold everything when we first arrived. We were left only with a few personal items. We had not brought much stuff. When we came here, my husband's uncle's son who was married to my sister was here. There was also my brother in Adana. So, we did not know which city to go to at first. Yes, they had come 2-3 months previously. First, we hesitated. Then, some members of the family went to Adana and others to Ankara. We thought that we would move to the city where we could find work and make a living. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*The reason I came to Turkey was to make sure my children attend school. Then, we rented a house. Step by step, slowly. We came to Turkey three years ago. My sister was in Ankara. That is why we came to Ankara. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Before we came to Ankara, a friend of my husband had come. He said to my husband that he would work there and make things better. That is why we came to Ankara in 2013. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*My sister was also in Ankara. I was looking for a job and I wanted to make sure my children attend school. So, I came to Ankara. Also, my sister said that there were Arabic schools in Ankara. That is why we came to Ankara. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

## **Narratives of Border Crossing**

When the health mediators interviewed were asked about their escape processes, it was found that some of them entered the country through legal means, i.e., using their passports, while others chose illegal means. Those who took the illegal route were faced with a number of dangers. They indicated that they had to go through various checkpoints set up by various armed forces inside the country, and the route was rife with dangers up until the border crossing point.

*First, I came with my uncle in a car. There were two families and me in the car. When we arrived at the first checkpoint, we were terrified. Huge bearded, burly, colossal men staffed*




*the checkpoint. My uncle was very afraid of soldiers. "When they ask where we are going, do not tell them that we are going to Turkey. Tell them that there is a field we have rented, and we will harvest it," we told him. It was the most feared checkpoint. They made my uncle get out of the car. They asked him where we were going. My uncle told them the story we had fabricated. They came and asked a woman in the car where we were going. "We are going to visit our relatives," she told them. And the soldiers went crazy. "You are lying," they said. They said they would call someone named Hale from the army. The guy they referred to as Hale was infamous for killing people. My uncle got on his knees, begging. "Please, do not do it," he pleaded. He tried to give money to the soldier. "Are you trying to bribe me?" the soldier said, getting angry. My uncle came to the people in the car and collected money from everyone. He collected 55,000 Syrian pounds. Then, they let us go. That is, we gave \$100. Nothing happened at the remaining checkpoints. They just looked at our ID cards and let us go. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*We were staying in a city which was controlled by the regime's army. So, it was harder for us to go to Turkey. There were no clashes. In order to pass, we had to go through a region where clashes occurred. There was a region where the civil fighting force and the regime's army would patrol. When they saw each other, they would engage in armed conflict. They would open fire on civilians as well. We had time while going through that region. My daughters were very scared because there were many dead people. We saw them. After we left the region, I was relieved both for myself and for my daughters. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed indicated that during their escape, they had to walk over the mountains, through river beds and on roads covered with thorn bushes. They stated they paid huge sums to smugglers, and there were people who were shot dead while crossing the border. Some mentioned that they had to stay for several days near the border, and there were ditches dug along the borders which made their passage harder. Some family members stayed on the Syrian side because they could not cross the border, and they grew weak due to malnutrition and long periods of walking and running. They had only been able to bring a small bag with them. There were moments of catharsis when the respondents were telling the stories of how they crossed the border. War and migration to other countries are traumatic events. The emotional burden created by the trauma suffered by the women interviewed manifested itself in the form of the deterioration of their physical health. They pointed out that they had always felt that they had to be strong, but for the first time, they had a chance to express themselves emotionally thanks to this study.

*We came through illegal means. We gave money to a smuggler, who made us cross the border. The soldiers were shooting at us. The smuggler made us cross the border at another point. "Let's go back to Syria," my husband said. "I would rather be dead than go back," I said to him. We traveled in a car from Aleppo to the border and, then, we crossed the border on foot. While we were crossing the border, the soldiers fired at us, but we continued to walk. However, a man and a woman who were behind us were shot dead. After we crossed the border, the other smuggler was waiting for us. He made us get on a bus and we came to Kilis. There, we bought a ticket and came to Ankara. We took two bags with us. We brought our clothes, and the smuggler carried them. When we passed to the other side, they put them in the car. It took an hour to cross the border. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*We had to wait for several days at the border, because none of us had a passport. So, we came here through illegal means. We gave money to smugglers. As we were crossing the*



border in large numbers, the soldiers opened fire on us. A young man was shot dead; we saw it. Everyone including my co-sister-in-law crossed the border. My husband, my mother-in-law, my youngest son, my co-sister-in-law stayed. Before the border, there were ditches and they were pretty deep. It looked unlikely that we would be able to cross it because we had our elderly mother-in-law with us. With great effort, we got her in the ditch and started to help her climb using the holes on the ditch's wall. But at that time, we saw soldiers coming. My husband took our son and went toward Syria so they would not shoot them. We were so scared that we could not go back we stayed where we were. The soldiers saw an old woman who was being helped by another one to climb the wall. They did not tell us a thing. We were terrified that they might shoot us. But seeing us, they did not say anything and moved on. Then, I managed to pull my mother-in-law out of the ditch. While my husband and son were running away, they had a sack with them. My daughter-in-law had just given birth to a baby, and she was carrying the baby, and my son had their other children with him. We had to go, but my husband and other son had stayed on the other side. At that time, my son was 9 or 10 years old. I had never felt that my husband was so precious to me until then, but I could not do anything. There was also my son. After the ditch, there was a large piece of land like a garden, and behind it, there were cars. If you could get cross that land, you could get in the cars. If you got in the cars, the soldiers would not interfere with you, but if you got caught in that garden, they would beat you or open fire on you. We had to move fast in order to cross that land. My son was tugging at my arm. "My husband is there, my son is there. I cannot come with you. Take you grandma and go. I will go back," I shouted at him. My other son was shouting at me from the Syrian side. "Mom, you go. Do not worry about me. I am with my dad," he said. It broke my heart to see my son at that moment. Eventually, my son tugged me and made me get in the car. We went to Gaziantep. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)

In 2015, it was harder to come to Turkey. We spent a month on the road. It was very difficult. We would come and go. They would frequently close the gates. We would stay in tents or vans. The roads to Afrin or Azez would be closed frequently. We could not get there. We paid 10,000 liras in order to come here. Six of us came here, my children and I. Daesh was in control of the place we came from. They would not let us get out of there. It took two weeks to get from the Daesh-controlled area to the regime-controlled one. We entered Turkey via Antakya. When we came to the border, people were looking at us. We were knee-deep in mud and dirt. We entered, and took a queue number. "Wait," they told us, "You will wait until tomorrow." We paid money and took a bath. We washed our heads. We dried our clothes using the fan. We waited at the border like that. We came to the border on foot. We came in a van up to a certain point. Then, we walked. We walked for four or five hours. Why was I afraid to bring my daughter? The children were young, she might get lost. That is what I was afraid of. The trip was so difficult. We were so scared. The children were holding my hands. The girls were walking ahead of us. We would walk at night so that they would not see us. That was because the soldiers would not allow it. We were walking at night as we moved closer to the border so that the soldiers would not see us. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)

My husband had come to Turkey in order to work for 10 months before we came. We came through illegal means. We tried three times to come using the Aleppo route. We got as far as Hatma; there were tents there. We had relatives there. We sat there. Then, a smuggler came, and we contacted him. They took us near a mountain where we waited until 2 a.m. Then, we tried to enter, but the gendarmerie opened fire on us, and we had to go back. We made






*several attempts until 7 a.m. Eventually, it became clear that we would not be able to do it, and we returned to our relatives in Hatma. A few days later, we found another smuggler. He took us through pomegranate gardens, taking a different route. In the daytime, three families went, but only one family was able to make it across the border. As the second family was trying to cross, the gendarmerie got on our trail again. We could not do it and went back again. The other family decided not to enter Turkey because they did not have any money left. Then, I called my husband. I told him that we had run out of money. He said he would send it. We waited for four or five days. Then, he sent the money, and another family came from the village. We decided to make the crossing with them. Then, we tried to cross via a place called Leysun. We could not make it from there either. It was a very difficult route. We walked through the river. I took my little boy. My daughter took the other children. We walked for three or four hours. Eventually, we managed to come through Cilvegözü, Latakia. Then, we went to Antakya. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I came with my husband and my youngest son through illegal means. It was hard, really hard. My son was with me, but he did not have his shoes. "I want to wear my shoes," he was saying, crying. But the smuggler would shout at us constantly, telling us to keep silent. It was a terrible ordeal for us. When we had to cross a place running, my husband would go first, and then my son and I would follow. After a while, I grew so tired that I was unable to tug my son along. I had run out of energy. We had already run constantly for an hour and a half. The reason I had not brought my daughters was that my husband had learned that the escape was extremely difficult. So, we thought that it would be better if we got them passports and brought them in that way. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*The civil fighting force was in control of the entire road, so our journey was easy. We took a bus to the camp. On the way, we would occasionally see planes. It took us four hours to travel from Aleppo to Jarabulus, which was a village-like settlement, but we would stop when we saw a plane. The driver stopped the bus four or five times. Otherwise, the planes would strike it. We took the bus to Jarabulus. We stayed there. After a while, ISIL entered there as well. After the arrival of ISIL, there were many clashes. When there was an explosion, small bullets would stray toward the camp; they would even go through the tents. We had spent all our money because we had stayed in Aleppo for two years while my husband was not able to work. As we did not have any money, we did not know how to make the crossing. And there were too many opportunistic smugglers. They could speak Turkish as they had been in contact with Turks. We had relatives and acquaintances in the camp, and we borrowed some money from them and gave it to the smuggler. And the smuggler made us cross the border. They made us get in a vehicle they used to carry sheep, and took us up to the border. At the border, there was something like a ditch under the barbed wire. You had to go down under it and up. At that point, we had very hard time as the soldiers were firing at us from a distance. We could just hear the sound of the gunfire. "Do not be afraid. This is just a warning shot. Keep going," the smuggler told us. So, we crossed there and walked, but never saw the gendarmerie. Those who had their children with them and who were carrying bags had to leave their bags behind. "Look, the police will come. Drop your bags and go," the smuggler was telling those with children. They left their bags behind, took their children and went under the fence, then came out of a deep ditch. There was a rope on the other side and a smuggler was holding it. Everyone would climb out of the ditch using that rope. Then, the smuggler made us run for half an hour so that we would not run into any trouble. "Drop*



*the bag and run,” my husband said to me, and I did what he told me. We ran for a while and there was a Turkish guy waiting for us with his car with whom the smuggler had made a deal. We got in the car and he took us away. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Our crossing was very tough. After the school, we decided to move to Turkey. There was a tourism company organizing tours to Turkey. We gave them money in order to travel to Turkey, and they gave us a ticket. But it turned out that they were a smuggling company. We thought that we would go through border crossing Bab al-Hawa or Bab al-Salam. But the guy took us to the border. “I will take you through the border,” the smuggler said. At first, they told us that it was very easy to cross into Turkey. Then, we came up to the border and the driver left us and went away. The smuggler took us to a mountainous area. There were weeds and thorns everywhere. We crossed that field, and I assumed that it was only us who would go to Turkey. I saw that some 500 people were waiting near the border. Initially, I had not thought that we would travel through mountainous terrain. I thought it would be a flat area. There was a Turkmen woman who helped my children go under the fence. When it was time for me to cross, the gendarmerie came and opened fire on us. As they began to open fire, that Turkmen woman took the children and crossed the border. My children had gone, but I tripped on a rock and went down in the ditch. Then, a soldier came. “Go back or I will open fire,” he said. “Shoot me if you want. My children have crossed, and I am not going back,” I said to him. But we did not understand each other as he was speaking Turkish and I was speaking Arabic. “Go, or I will shoot you,” the soldier said. “Okay, shoot me. I do not know who my children are with or where they have gone. Shoot me if you must, for this reason,” I said. “Children,” my husband said, in Arabic. Then, the soldier understood that word as Turkish and Arabic had similar words for it. “Children? OK, go,” he said. We left everything we had brought with us, including clothes, shoes, etc., behind. I did not even have my shoes while crossing the border. That is how we crossed the border. There was another soldier who said, “Do not let them go, and send them back.” The other soldier said to him: “They had children. That is why I let them go.” There was another person waiting for us. We came here one or two months ago. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*It was not very expensive when we came. It was 300,000 Syrian pounds (SYP) to travel up to Ankara. We paid 20,000 Syrian pounds per person. They took us from Aleppo to the border in a car. The smuggler made us walk through a forest, mountainous terrain and gardens. “Here is the border with Turkey, and you will go in car from here,” they said. We got in the car to cross the border. My crossing was very easy compared to other people’s. At the time we made the crossing, the gendarmerie would take refugees to the camp. Now, they open fire on them. But we did not see any gendarmerie. My crossing was easy, but the children were crying all the time, and my mother fainted due to the heat. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*We came from Aleppo to Turkey. We went first to Aleppo and then we came through illegal means. It was very easy. We went to a village. I was pregnant. There, the rebels helped us make the crossing. We came to Turkey in 2014. We arrived first in Kilis, and then went to Ankara. My parents were in Ankara. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*It was in April. It was very cold, even though it was April. There was a lot of snow in the mountains and we had to walk for a long time. I cannot describe the difficulty of walking. Still, I think the one or two hours of distress on the way pales in comparison to the troubles*



*left behind. “You will spend two hours of life in trouble, and then, you will be happy for the rest of your life,” I was telling my mother. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

Seven of the health mediators interviewed stated that they entered Turkey legally with their passports without problem. They indicated that even those with expired passports were allowed to pass freely. Even when some family members did not have passports, they were registered as if they were members of another family. They also noted that some women opted for illegal means although they had passports because they believe they might get into trouble when they returned to Syria.

*We came here from Tell Abyad. We entered through legal means three years ago. It was not so hard. My husband already had a passport, but it had expired. Still, no one said anything. They just recorded our names and let us pass. People who did not have passports could register by declaring themselves members of a specific family before crossing the border. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*I did not come through illegal means. I came to Turkey with a passport. My son had come to Turkey three months previously, and his fiancée was in Syria. “I will take the bride and we will conduct a wedding. And I will go back to Syria,” I thought to myself. However, people told me that if we went to Turkey using my passport, Turkey’s seal would be imprinted on it and when I returned to Syria, the army might send me to jail. So, we tried to make the crossing through illegal means, but we had to wait for the gap between the change of the soldiers. This time, the gendarmerie would throw large stones at the trespassers. So, I was scared, because my son’s bride was with me. And it was very cold; it was in winter, and we had to wait for 24 hours at the border for the change. It was both cold and we had to wait, and they were throwing stones. I had a friend in a village near the border. We went there. “I do not want to do it. I will go back to Damascus,” I said. “Go to Turkey legally using your passport. Let them seal it. When you return to Syria, you can submit your normal ID card pretending that you did not have the passport,” my friends advised. So, my son’s bride and I passed through the border crossing legally with my passport and came to Kilis. But my son said that when I go back to Syria, everyone would know that I went to Turkey and so, the army would detain me when I returned. So, he did not let me go back. I wish I had entered legally from the start. But they scared the hell out of me. Still, our journey was very easy. I came here a year and eight months ago. (Vaha, A50, D, 6C, Damascus)*



## LIFE IN PLACES OF ASYLUM

The stories of the health mediators interviewed in this section of the study include how they felt in places of asylum, their experiences related to settlement and building a new life, the aid and support they received in this process, their observations regarding the hardships Syrian individuals faced in Turkey, and the difficulties they encountered regarding child marriage, violence, language problems, working conditions, child labor, and education in Turkey.

### Starting a Life in Places of Asylum

#### *What is Felt in the Destination of Migration After the War*

When the health mediators interviewed were asked about what they felt when they first came to Turkey, they stated that **they were able to get good sleep as their basic needs were met, they felt secure, and there was no longer the sound of planes and bombings**. One woman indicated that she felt as if she was **“living in Paradise in Turkey”** after leaving behind all what she had been through. Another woman described the process of **“getting rid of the pressure of the war and her husband’s parents, and coming to Turkey”** using color codes, and said that her life in Turkey was **“pink.”**

*My husband had a job. I was rebuilding a life. I had left behind everything in my life. I spent the first month crying. There was electricity, water, and food. There was a life. In its simplest form, the air was different, and I started to feel as if I was living in Paradise here. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I got away from my husband’s parents. On that day, I was born again. There were four colors in my life. It was white when I was a child. I got married, and it turned to black. When I moved away from my husband’s parents and went to Lebanon, it turned to gray. When I came to Turkey, it was pink. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Before we came here, my sister-in-law’s son came and started living here. We came shortly after him and with his help. We were here four months after them. They live somewhere nearby. After we came here, I felt closer to the people because their traditions and style of dress were similar. I did not feel as if I came to a remote culture. I met nice people and, most importantly, I felt safe here. I had never felt this safe in Syria during the two years before we*



*came here. I had never felt so secure in the last two years amid those bombardments, in the war environment and in that deprivation. When we were there, fear was everywhere. I felt fear in everything, in the water I drank, the food I ate, the house I lived in. Fear dominated everything. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*When we got here, we were relieved. In Syria, there was a lot of noise, and my children would be scared. We and the children can sleep better. After we came here, the planes flew during the public holiday, and my children were scared. “Mom, what’s going on?” they asked. I told them that nothing would happen. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*We were very relieved when we came here, and our moods lifted. In the first week we arrived, the children slept for three days; they would just wake up and eat something before going to sleep again. “Look. Listen. There is no noise. Just relax,” my husband would say, in the first days. When an plane flew by, we would be still afraid, but the children could sleep longer and got some rest. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

As seen in the narratives of the women, in addition to the relief of escaping the war environment, their compulsory migration was a source of sadness. The respondents expressed sadness for the relatives who were left behind and for the desertion of their homeland, and for being guests in the country of asylum. The women interviewed indicated that they felt extremely relieved to escape the war environment, while regretting leaving their homeland. Another hardship they faced was leaving relatives behind in Syria. The cultural similarity between the Syrian and Turkish societies made this process somewhat easier.

*On the day we came here, we believed that we would never find a place as beautiful as our homeland. So, I was very upset. I cried all the way through. Coming here, I felt very down and depressed, for leaving the homeland behind and being a guest here... (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*Psychologically, you considerably worn out. It is a very corrosive process. You leave your parents and your home behind; it is really backbreaking. But my older daughter is still therm. I am thinking about her, feeling sad. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

### ***Settling in the Place of Asylum: Finding and Renting a Home***

The problems Syrian individuals encountered in finding homes in Turkey have been mentioned in a number of studies. These studies found that these individuals tended to live in the slum neighborhoods created by urban sprawl, where rents were lower. It was further reported that several families would stay in the same buildings which were not normally habitable, and rents increased due to the higher demand for houses (Orhan and Gündoğar, 2015: 16). A study by the AFAD (2017) found that of the Syrian individuals living outside of camps, 62.4% lived in a house or apartment, and 31.5% lived in ruined buildings, while 2% stayed in temporary shelters, plastic or makeshift buildings, or tents. 47% of Syrian individuals indicated that their dwellings were not sufficient in size, and 49% were not comfortable in their homes. 40% did not consider their dwelling safe, and 56% did not see their dwelling as appropriate for climatic conditions.

The majority of the health mediators interviewed stated that **when they first arrived, they stayed with their relatives for a few days before they rented a home**. They added that they had problems in finding a home to rent as **people were reluctant to rent houses to Syrians and therefore, they had to**

**stay together with several families in dilapidated or undesirable homes.** They indicated that as their husbands found jobs over time, they were able to move into better homes. Some of them expressed that they had been subjected to discrimination while looking for a home to rent, while others stated that they found support and cooperation from the local community.

*When we came here, we stayed with a friend of mine for three days. Then, we rented a home in..., but it was so terrible that no one would normally stay there. But they did not leave us with any money at the border; not a single dime. So, we agreed to stay in that house. We were paying TL 250 in rent. After staying there for a while, we rented our home here. I had one bracelet and I sold it to a jeweler. I bought a small propane cylinder, and some kitchen utensils. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*We have been living in the same house in... for four years. Our house is both small and humid. We pay TL 200 in rent. But no one wants to rent us a home because we are from Syria. My daughters are now grown, and they talk about the homes of their friends, their private rooms, cabinets and toys enviously. "There are houses, but they do not rent them to us," I had to tell them. (İğsar, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*We had brought three blankets from Syria, but there were many children in the houses, and none of them had a blanket. My husband had brought two carpets from Syria. We spread them over instead of the rugs in that house. Those thin rugs were so bad that they could not be used to cover anything. We had the women's worn clothes, and we sewed them onto the rugs and made them like quilts. We started to lay them over the children. It was a very bad house, and you could not eat anything inside. It was very damp. For instance, we could not fit into bathroom when we were bathing the children; the children would get dirtier instead of getting cleaner. It was so small that when we woke up at night to drink water, we had to walk carefully trying not to step on the children sleeping on the ground. When my son started to work and other children found temporary jobs, we were able to buy blankets and kitchen utensils. Then, we found a home for rent by Turks with some difficulty; they asked for a considerably high rent. Eventually, we got a deal and rented the home. My older daughter-in-law moved to that house. There were six people. (Arız, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*My husband found a building which would be destroyed six months later. It was an empty building with a well in front of it. There was nothing inside the house. There was only one carpet on the second floor. There was a stove on first floor. The third floor was in the best shape. We took the stove to the third floor and lived on the single carpet for two months. Our neighbors noticed and came to us. Seeing our state, they were very surprised. "How can you live here?" they asked. They opened our closet and saw its meager contents: two sponge beds, two pillows, and a carpet. That was all we had in the house. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*We came here and stayed at his aunt's son's place for three days, and we found it in these three days. Step by step, slowly. The Turkish people here treated us very well during our search for a home to rent. We moved to the home we rented in three days and, on the fourth day, my husband found a job and started to work. The rent was TL 160. We stayed in that house for two years. It was very damp, and we were getting sick. That is why we decided to move to another house. We moved to... This house is better than the other one. Now, we pay TL 500 in rent. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*



Some health mediators interviewed indicated that **when they first came to Ankara, they were afraid to leave the house because of rumors of women being kidnapped. Consequently, they were unable to learn about the support and aid provided during the process of setting up home.**

*My husband's older brother and brother-in-law were here. When he went to them, he heard rumors of women being kidnapped and harassed. Hearing so many rumors at first, they made us live in fear. We were living atop a hill, and there were few people around. We could not go out because of fear. We were unable to find out about the support or aid programs, and we could not apply for them. "Go to the foundation," the landlord said. I heard the name of the foundation first from him. Yet we could not go there because they cautioned us not to go out. My daughter-in-law, children and I are at home; we are kind of imprisoned in the house. We live in a house with 14 or 15 other people. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

Some health mediators interviewed stated that their husbands had come to Turkey before they came, and their husbands had rented a home and bought basic furnishings in advance.

*When I came here, we had a home. My husband had rented it. It had some basic furnishings as well. My husband had started to work at a furniture company. He had no knowledge of furniture, but he learned it here. I lived in a house heated by a stove for two and a half years. It was very difficult. In Syria, there was no coal, no stove, and no wood. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The health mediators interviewed pointed out that **they encountered difficulties in finding a home, they were defrauded during this process, and the house they were living in were demolished as part of urban renewal projects.**

*It was summer when we arrived. I had my uncle here. As he had nine children and was living in a very small house, we only left our stuff with him, and started to stay in the park. Then, we looked for a home to rent for several days, and eventually found one. My husband had given me our gold to me because he thought he might die in Syria. The person who prepared the rental contract deceived us and he TL 800 from us. Afterwards, the landlord got to know us and we told her that they had taken our TL 800 via an interpreter. She told us not to worry about it. "Do not pay me the rent from now on," she said. We stayed there for four months without paying the rent. It was in the Önder neighborhood. But the house was demolished as part of an urban renewal project. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Syrians are buying houses from Turks. Then, they sell it to another Syrian for TL 3,000. Since Turks do not rent houses to Syrians, these Syrians find a ramshackle house or buy a house from a Turk by chance, and then, they sell it to a Syrian. "You cannot buy it from a Turk; come and buy it from me," they say. They rent it, but they take money as if they are selling it. "I will sell this house to you; I bought it from a Turk," they say. At first, I tried hard to find a house. I cried on the streets. I asked everyone I could. But I could not find a home. I went to a house. It was in ruins. There were a few armchairs and one bed. There was no cabinet, no washing machine, nothing. They wanted to sell it for TL 3,000. Eventually, I decided to buy it and bargained the price down to TL 2,000. I bought the house for TL 2,000. When my husband started to work, I bought a fridge, a washing machine, etc. I had just finished setting up the house when the authorities decided to demolish it. I do not how to find a house again, and I am afraid that even if I could find one, it might be demolished as well. Turks are*

*reluctant to rent their houses because some Syrians sell them or refuse to pay the utility bills.  
(Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

### ***Settling in the Place of Asylum: Aid***

In addition to the difficulties in finding accommodation in the process of settling in the place of asylum, refugees also suffer hardships in procuring essential items and satisfying their basic needs due to financial problems. Although many people and organizations provided aid to refugees, this aid might fall short of fully satisfying needs due to its intermittent nature. In a study by the AFAD (2007), more than half of Syrian individuals living outside the camps noted that they did not have sufficient furniture/household goods at home. In addition, of the individuals interviewed, 41% indicated that they had insufficient clothes; approximately 50% stated that their basic needs were barely met; 36% noted that they received aid in kind/cash from a non-governmental organization; and 30% stressed that they were provided aid by government agencies.

**Regarding the process of finding household goods and meeting basic needs**, the health mediators interviewed stated that they received **aid from various people or organizations** because their husbands were able to earn only very low wages. They noted that aid from individuals came from people whom they referred to as benefactors and from their neighbors. They were also able to access aid via mosques. The narratives of the respondents demonstrated that they met their need for aid by communicating it to each other and, in this process, a civil network of solidarity emerged.

*When I first came here, I could not leave the house out of fear. But, one day, I could not stand it any longer because I had to ask for work, support or aid. So, I got out, and ran into Kine, another health mediator working here, on the street. I asked her if there was anywhere I could apply for aid or support. Kine gave me something and helped me. Kine knows the sources of support and aid well. Then, she taught me where to go and we started going together. Whenever she received aid in kind such as lentils or pasta, she would give the extra stuff to us. Then, I heard that there was a man called H., who was providing aid and support, and helping people find jobs. I went to see this man, and he found a job for one of my sons. He also visited our house to see its condition. Whenever he saw me on the street, he would give money to the children. He would provide aid. He would bring meat and other things on Eid. After hiring Z., they liked him very much because he is a good, honest boy. He would also give away 100-lira cards for shopping at BİM stores. At that time, we were in a bad shape financially, and I would rejoice when I got those cards. (Arız, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*Now, we can hardly pay the electric bill. The water bill is very high. We do not know how to pay it. There is a society called the 'Norwegians' and they have been providing monetary aid for three months. This aid has helped us a lot, covering a significant portion of the housing costs. They have not made the payment for this month yet. They have postponed it for a month. The municipality was also providing aid, bringing five parcels of foodstuff once every six months. There was also a foundation, providing stuff worth about TL 20 for a year and then, it stopped. The landlord helped us regarding the household goods. We have not received help from elsewhere. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*They opened our closet and saw its meager contents. Two sponge beds, two pillows, and a carpet. That was all we had in the house. My neighbors were helping us by bringing a meal*





*and bread every evening. At that time, I was pregnant and sick. My neighbors started to bring goods constantly. They brought everything, including armchairs, sofas, beds, dishes, and cutlery. This came as a great relief to me. I thought that now, I had something. A woman took me to a foundation. I had physical examination. They took me to a pharmacy and gave me medicine. I got some aid for food from this foundation. It was a good thing for me to meet these women. A Turkish woman I met helped me obtained a telephone line, and so, I managed to contact my son. There were few Syrians around me. I did not know the language. I did not know whom I could ask for help. They gave me a lot of stuff after I went to the foundation. One group would help the people from Syria a lot. This man was a member of this group. His name was S. They would provide a small allowance of TL 200 every month. It was a foundation that aided Syrians. After I gave birth, S. and his wife helped us very much. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Goods and foodstuffs were being distributed from a mosque. We took things from there. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*We are grateful to the people who helped us. People working at ASAM [Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants] have provided rental aid and financial support for the last two months. That is how we live. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Our neighbors found out that we had come from Syria. They brought us some stuff and some rich families who cared about Syrians would bring goods. Now, there are a lot of sources. Most recently, the Norwegian Embassy has launched a course, giving TL 600 to those who attend the course. It is the best. It is really hard to pay both the bills and the rent. TL 600 proves to be very useful. They pay TL 600 to those who do not attend the course for three months successively. I do not attend the course, and I am receiving that three-month payment. They call us to inform that our allowance has been deposited in our PTT account, and I can go withdraw it. The embassy has reportedly created a list of sensitive, vulnerable groups with special needs. Due to our special status because of my husband's illness, they became aware of our status and they called us, and they are now helping us. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Our home is located close to the mosque, and the imam of the mosque was aware of us. He sent a couple to our house. When we first came, there was just a carpet on the floor. The couple who visited us spoke English, and my older daughter knows English. They talked to her. They wanted to help us. "I will bring you some home stuff in a week," they said, and they did so. They were very helpful. (Şiheh, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*After I went to the Center (referring to the WGSS), I was briefed about the sources, and learned that they were sources of support and aid. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

As seen in the narratives above, there was no systematic way in which Syrian families found support or aid. They only gained access to financial incidentally or through personal relationships. It is crucial to develop a systematic and rights-based mechanism for collecting and distributing aid.

The health mediators interviewed indicated that **there were cases when aid was distributed in a manner incompatible with human dignity, and people distributing aid could use discriminatory and denigrating language.** They noted that due to such practices, they felt bad and they decided whether to take aid based on the manner in which it was distributed. The fact that receiving aid was shaped based

on gender stereotypes, and those who were in need of help and who received it were women has been noted emphatically in this study. This created an additional emotional burden for the women. The efforts of Syrian women to apply for aid and support in order to manage poverty helped them get out of the home, but at the same time, increased the risk of their exposure to harassment.

*We received aid from the municipality three times. They brought coal. When I receive aid, I feel like I am begging. I feel terrible. For instance, I know how Syrians crushed each other in order to get aid. We went to the district governor's office in order to register for aid. The women working there were shouting, "Shut up, Syrian." We were supposed to mute our cell phones and stand like soldiers. My sister was with me, but I could not ask her anything. "One minute, shut up, Syrian." There was nothing we could do because they would give money to us. Moreover, the officials at the district governor's office said to us: "All of you, look. Remove your face veils. We will take photos. We will distribute the aid." They yelled at those who raised objections. We went to ASAM to register for a card. But my husband did not want me to go for aid. "You already have a bad name," he was saying. My husband does not want it, but I go if it is given through cards or allowances. I do not go if it is given in kind. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

**As aids was not distributed centrally based on a single information/data system,** the respondents indicated that they had to register with each institution separately, and that they were considerably distressed due to uncertainty about where they would be entitled to aid in this process.

*They go for aid at 5 o'clock in the morning. I go at 7 o'clock in the morning to find 200 people in front of me in the queue. They take us here and there without any result. There was no order. They have just started to introduce some order. The headman gives us a date and we go to the district governor's office on that date. Although we registered before Eid, they say there is still nothing, and they can only provide travel allowance. We do not know what happens and where. They drag us here and there. "Come and register here. Submit your ID card," they say, but we are already in the civil register. They can draw up a list from the register and contact us by phone. All our information can be accessed from it. They make us go there and wait. Whether they will give the aid is uncertain. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

### ***Settling in the Place of Asylum: Adapting to the Environment***

**Adaptation** of refugees to the neighborhood they live in is a key factor in the sustainability of their lives. When the health mediators interviewed were asked about the environment where they lived, it was found that they had difficulty in communicating with other people and going out because they did not know the language. They did not realize that many people around them were Syrians because they could not go out. The AFAD (2017) found that 21% of the Syrian individuals interviewed stated that they were unable to adapt to social life in Turkey. As reasons for adaptation failure, they reported the psychology created by the war (60%), financial problems (72%), cultural differences (44%), differences in social life (40%), ethical differences (29%), and differences in religious perceptions (18%). Obviously, language and economic conditions are decisive in adapting to a new life for refugees.

*When we first came, we settled in Ulubey. Yes, it was very hard for me. I had a hard time, especially with the language, but the children did not find it so hard. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*



*My parents were already here. They would come and visit me, so I could go out. This did not pose any problem, but I would never go out alone. For more than one year, I was unable to go out alone. So, our life here was like being in prison. In the beginning, my brothers would come and take me to my parents, although they were living in the same neighborhood. When we were in Syria, they had told us scary things about Turkey. I was very afraid as I did not know the language. It took some time for me to get used to this place. After coming to the Center (WGSS), I started to relax a bit. Before that, I would go out only if I had to, but I would never allow my daughters to go out. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*At first, it was very difficult. I got used to it gradually. It was frightening for me to stay alone in a foreign place. Later I got used to it. I was surrounded by Syrians, but I did not know they were Syrians. I realized that they were Syrians at a later stage. Then, I started to meet people and got to know them. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*For the first year, it was really hard for me as there were strangers around me. I did not know the language and I had to use gestures all the time. We could not get everything we wanted at first. When they saw Syrians, they would call them “Syrians” using the Arabic word. It would make me very sad. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*


As seen in the narratives of women, the patriarchy that permeates every inch of life manifests itself not only in adaptation of men and women to the environment, but also in the changes in gender roles. The health mediators interviewed maintained that **it was easier for women to adapt to the environment than men**. As noted by the respondents, **the reason men find it harder to adapt to the environment** was that men had lost their jobs and status before migration. They were unable to accept this, and working life proved more difficult for men who did not know the language. The respondents indicated that **women were more able to adapt because** their practices related to household chores and child care did not change much in the place of asylum, and women were raised to be compliant.

As noted by Buz (2006), research on the different effects of migration on women and men suggests that women adapt better to changes in the countries of origin and host countries. Women’s better ability to adapt to migration is also influenced by the requirement to maintain their roles as mothers; the feeling they need to be strong in order to keep their family together; and the decreasing control over women (Buz, 2006: 35-86).

*Women can adapt more quickly. For instance, when a woman gets married, she tries to be compatible with her husband. But men are on their own. Women are more adaptable because they have more patience and they are more open to learning new things. (Vaha, A50, D, 6C, Damascus)*

*The adaptation of women takes place faster after coming here. This was what happened to me. In Syria, my husband ran his own business, but here, he had to work as an employee under the control of other people. He was the ruler of his business in Syria, but here, he cannot control anything. He cannot accept it; he still cannot accept it. He had a big language problem. Just because he cannot accept it, he does not and cannot learn the language. He does not want to learn it. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*When I got here, I did not know the language, but I was able to communicate using gestures. I did everything this way. I did not feel the language problem at first, because I was at home. I had four children. There were six people at home, and I was responsible for them, so, I did*



*not feel it very much. I was at home. I was with my family. But my husband felt it. He faced difficulties after he found a job and started to work due to lack of knowledge of the language. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Women can adapt much faster. This is because it is the women who shoulder the whole burden. They do all the chores at home; cook, wash the dishes, do the cleaning, take care of children. They do everything. As a matter of fact, they do not have time for adaptation [problems]. They are obliged to adapt. But it does not work like that for men. Men have free time. They work if they want to. They come home from work, and then eat and sleep. If they do not work, they leave the entire burden to women. Men can go and visit different places and they have free time. They think about this. They have concerns about going back to Syria. "We will return to Syria," they tell themselves. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

## **Settling in the Place of Asylum: Hardships**

Refugee women living under difficult conditions feel obliged to show great resilience in order to overcome hardships, and out of their responsibilities for providing care to others. However, the stress caused by the resettlement process has major effects on physical and psychological health. Adaptation to a new country, life and language; and the social and economic conditions and the stress factors created by these create significant burden on women (Deacon and Sullivan, 2009; Jabbar and Zaza, 2016). Resettlement creates a number of needs. Deacon and Sullivan (2009) found the needs of refugee women to be language; economic and social support; and access to resources provided by the government, other social welfare agencies and local communities.

In this study, the hardships faced by the Syrian refugee women in the place of asylum excluding the accommodation and financial problems discussed in the previous section were found to be child marriage of Syrian girls, growing problems of violence exacerbated by migration-related problems, problems related to language, child labor due to financial problems and difficult working conditions of husbands, and the hardships faced by children in education.

### ***Child Marriage of Syrian Girls in Turkey***

Child marriage was common practice before the conflict in Syria, but new factors that might increase the risk of child marriage among Syrian refugees emerged due to migration. For instance, a study conducted on Syrian refugees in Lebanon reported security concerns related to conflict and displacement, a sense of insecurity, worsening economic conditions and failure to maintain the education of adolescent girls. In the surveys conducted on young refugee women and their parents, professionals who worked with refugees indicated that the period of engagement had declined, the age of marriage had decreased, consanguineous (cousin-cousin) marriage had declined, and the costs of marriage had declined (Mourtada, Schlect and DeJong, 2017: 27).

In the first section of this study, the narratives of many health mediators interviewed about child marriage were given, and high prevalence rates of child marriage were noted for specific regions in Syria. In response to the questions about the state of child marriage among Syrians in Turkey, the respondents noted that child marriage was still prevalent among Syrian refugees. It was indicated that child marriage,



which was performed through a religious ceremony, was maintained in the same manner in Turkey. The women interviewed pointed out that in case of child pregnancy, refugees would use the ID card of their older relatives when referring to a hospital or they would summon a Syrian who can deliver the child at home.

*Early marriage has not declined among Syrians since coming to Turkey; it is the same. I hear about many early marriages, but I also hear about many cases of divorce. They will do here what they were doing in Syria: religious weddings. That is the custom. "It is a chance for marriage and when such a chance emerges, one should get married," they say. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The rate has declined in Turkey, but it is still common among those from Aleppo. Their parents marry them off. The people of Aleppo would do so in Syria. They would marry off their daughters aged 13 or 14. The preacher solemnizes the marriage. If women get pregnant, they take the ID cards of other people to be admitted to hospital, or they will call for a Syrian who can deliver the baby. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*


*My 16-year-old daughter got married four months ago. After my daughter got married, we learned about the law that prohibits marriage under the age of 18. When we were in Syria, my daughter Rabia and my son Hasan were very hardworking at school. They would refer to themselves as Physician Rabia or Physician Hasan. I was not planning to marry them off at an early age. I was planning to arrange their marriage after they completed their education. But all those dreams vanished after we came here. One of them got married and the other is working. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*One of the health mediators interviewed noted that although child marriage was very common in the first years when the migration to Turkey started, as the women learned about the laws and their rights and became empowered, the practice of child marriage started to decline.*

*When we first came here, there were many cases of child marriage. But there has been a big change. Today, when a proposal to marry a daughter comes to a woman, she is quick to note that her daughter will complete her education. In the past, it was more frequent. It has declined considerably, especially this year. (Nisme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

### ***Experiences of Violence in Turkey***

Refugee life increases not just domestic violence, but also other forms of violence (UNHCR, 1995). Another reason for increased domestic violence is the change in power and gender relations among spouses due to migration (Freedman, 2016). A study conducted by the UN in 2010 demonstrated that prior to the war and migration, one in every four Syrian women was subject to gender-based violence at the hands of her husband (Davis, 2016: 1177). According to the literature, violence which was already perpetrated in order to maintain power and control over women in a patriarchal structure, continued with increasing intensity in parallel to the changing socio-economic conditions after migration. A study conducted on Syrian refugee women in Jordan found that one in every three women was subjected to physical violence. According to this study, these women suffered from violence perpetrated mostly by their husbands, followed by their fathers and brothers (Al-Shdayfat, 2017). The studies found that Syrian



refugee women were subjected to psychological and physical violence during the escape (Freedman, 2016), and at the hands of their husbands in the country of asylum. However, women were reluctant to report violence and requested little help and support (AFAD, 2014).

Even though the women interviewed in the present study noted that the violence to which Syrian women was subjected had declined in Turkey, violence against women was still one of the biggest problems facing women. Intimate partner violence manifested itself in many forms such as physical, economic, psychological and sexual violence, while violence at the hands of mothers-in-law continued to exist as a form of psychological violence in which a woman would keep another woman under control in an effort to acquire power and dominance.

*Now, the biggest problem of Syrian women in Turkey could be violence, that is, various forms of violence. Most of them suffer from physical violence or assault. But some are insolent, so psychological violence may be more frequent. Aside from them, there is also the damage done by the old traditions and customs. That is, people stick to them to a great extent and this causes a lot of damage to women and society at large. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The biggest problem faced by Syrian women is violence, and this applies to all of my acquaintances. Physical violence or psychological violence at the hands of the mother-in-law, verbal violence. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Violence at the hands of mothers-in-law declined slightly due to the disruption of the traditional extended family as a consequence of migration.*

*I have seen a great change in myself. I have started not to fear violence from my mother-in-law. In the past, I would be very scared if she would say anything, but now, I am not afraid. Currently, I know what I am doing, and I do not have to answer to anyone for it. (Ncime, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*The source of pressure was my parents-in-law, and they are now far away from us. For instance, one day, my father-in-law phoned my husband, saying that he was allowing me to go out alone. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The biggest problem faced by Syrian women is that everything is forbidden. It is forbidden to go out. It was forbidden to go out in Syria. If we go out here, it still causes problems. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

A respondent who had divorced her husband because of repression and violence indicated that her son had to work, and he soon started to exhibit oppressive behaviors, attempting to dominate the family.

*My oldest son is aged 14 and he collects paper to make a living for us. He is extremely introverted; he really does not talk to anyone. He has started to imitate his father. He tries to dominate me and the children. He tries to prohibit certain things for us. I have problems with that. Right now, my biggest worry is my son. I fear he might be like his father. I do not know what to do. He does not treat us violently, but he is extremely introverted. When he gets angry, he breaks things. He breaks things in the house. He yells and shouts, but does not treat us violently. I am very attentive. I fear that these behaviors may end up becoming violent. So, I want to take measures at an early stage. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

Orhan and Gündoğar (2015: 16) found that older or younger, single or married Turkish men tend to



marry young Syrian women at the highest rates in Kilis, Şanlıurfa and Hatay. While the rate of marriage to Syrians is not particularly high in the official records, the actual figure is higher when marriages through religious procedures are taken into consideration. There are also reports that certain people act as agents for arranging such marriages in return for money. As gift is paid to the Syrian parents in such marriages, Syrian families see the practice of marrying off their daughters to Turkish men both as a means of earning money and as a way for saving their daughters from the deprivation of refugee life (Orhan and Gündoğar, 2015: 16).

In the present study, a respondent whose husband had died in Syria indicated that she married again in Turkey, but her Turkish husband committed economic and psychological violence against her. As the patriarchal structure is dominant in Turkey, Turkish men tend to marry Syrian women whom they believe to be submissive due to the patriarchal life in Syria, trying to establish dominance over these women. This can be seen clearly in the following narrative of a health mediator:

*My husband forbade me to go outside. It was forbidden to visit someone. It was forbidden to speak. No neighbors. No friends. He turned out to be worse than Syrians. At first, he told me not to work. "I will let you work when you can speak Turkish," he said. I brought him here (WGSS) and he met T. (social worker). He did not allow me to work here.... invited my husband to the Center to talk him to let me work here. But my husband did not accept it.... called again, and my husband reluctantly agreed. When there was an agreement between us, I was not able to understand why he got angry and what he really wanted. He got mad and broke my phone. I was afraid he might do something to me. I did not have anyone to rely on. I had money when I was working. Now, I am unemployed, and I am ashamed to ask for money from my husband. "What will you do with it?" he asks even if I ask for TL 5. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

**Another form of violence** to which Syrian women are exposed in Turkey is **a form of psychological violence that is manifested as a fear in the face of threats made by their husbands to divorce, or take a second wife**. The narratives of the respondents demonstrated that **the rate of Syrian men marrying a second wife did not change** in Turkey, and in case of such polygamous marriages, the first wives may accept it or opt for divorce, trying to survive with their children.

*The biggest problem faced by women is with their husbands. There are many Syrian women who complain that their husband will leave them. This is the women's problem and they express it. Either these guys will divorce them and marry someone else, or they will leave them without divorce. I will be left alone, and he will go and marry someone else. After they have come here, men do not feel responsible for anything. Here, no one cares even about an official wedding. It is as if they have performed the wedding in another country and they have got divorced after coming here. And women are concerned that their husbands may leave them. All men have younger wives. They already marry young women and when a man reaches the age of 30, his wife becomes 18. When the woman reaches the age of 18, he starts to look for a younger wife. Women tend to talk about their married lives. They are being threatened. They make too many compromises just to persuade their husbands not to divorce them. For example, a man threatens his wife: "Do not do this. Do not do that. Or I will divorce you. Do not go out. Do not talk to anyone." And the woman agrees to do everything he says just to prevent him from divorcing her. Women make too many concessions in terms of their rights and personality. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*This is the thing: here, men tend to fall in love with women other than their wives and marry them. In other words, cases of polygamous marriages have increased. In some cases, all the wives live in the same house. In other cases, separate houses are rented for the wives. Cases of divorce have increased as well. For instance, if a man marries another woman, his first wife returns to her parents either in Turkey or Syria. At worst, if her children are working, they rent a house and leave the husband behind. Polygamous marriage had not been common practice in Syria, but it has risen here. So, the divorce rate of women has escalated as well. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

A study conducted in Jordan found the reasons for the failure of Syrian refugee women to report violence they have experienced to be their nonacceptance of violence; fear of consequences of reporting violence; lack of social support; failure of healthcare providers to support them in reporting violence and at the later stages; and sense of powerlessness of women (Al-Shdayfat, Hatamleh, 2017). Challenging the “privacy of domestic violence”, discussing this matter and attempting to report violence in a life shaped by patriarchy means “betraying the family and violation of social integration” (Sharara, 2012; Abadeer, 2015 cited in Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). The narratives of the women interviewed demonstrated that Syrian women tended to conceal the violence to which they were subjected from the people around them due to the “**doctrine of privacy.**” Therefore, violence against Syrian women continues to exist because of its invisibility.

*There are women who have been persecuted among those who visit this Center, but they cannot talk about it. I met a woman. I know she was subjected to violence. “Come and let us talk. File an official complaint. Let us do something against it,” I told her. She did not want to do it. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*In Syria, it is extremely shameful to talk about what happened at home with someone else. So, there is no name for violence there, and there is nothing like the Centers (WGSS) either. Although it is normally a shameful to describe violence, and I would never talk about it in Syria, I tell everyone about it here. “It is shameful,” they tell me, but I do not think it is shameful. Rather, we should tell everyone about it and report it so that other women do not keep silent in the face of violence or beating. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*In our customs, it was shameful to talk about violence. We would not be able to talk about it. So, if you face is bruised, you would say that you hit the wall by accident. It was officially possible to file an official complaint about it, but no one would do it. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

Another issue identified by the study is the harassment of women on the streets. However, the women interviewed stated that they were afraid because of their refugee status, and they were unable to file official complaints against perpetrators.

*I heard a woman talk about it in the market a few days ago. A car driven by Turks would stop by and “Get in the car,” they would say. The man would extend money to the woman in order to persuade her to get in the car. I knew a woman who was my former neighbor. She was walking with her daughter on the street when a car stopped by and a man tried to blindfold her and force her to get in the car. Her daughter started to scream, and the woman hit the man with her elbow and managed to escape. Still, they do not file complaint. They are scared. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*





### ***The Language Problem***

The inability to speak the language of the country of asylum is the most significant issue that affects all the life practices of the many people subjected to forced migration. Although there are free Turkish language courses for Syrian refugees in Turkey, many of these refugees cannot speak Turkish. The respondents indicated that they had difficulties in going out and making use of healthcare and other services because they could not speak Turkish.

*I have not faced many problems, but the language problem was the greatest problem for me. I was not able to go anywhere, and I would have hard time in handling my business. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*The biggest problem is the language problem. When we want to go somewhere, we do not know the way, we do not know anything, and we have to wait for another person. I cannot ask many questions because I do not know the language. It would be better if we moved forward knowingly after learning the language. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed pointed out that they faced problems and had negative experiences in making use of healthcare services because of the lack of interpreters in hospitals. The women who learned Turkish to a certain level at the language courses indicated that they would try to speak Turkish at hospitals, but healthcare professionals would still ask for an interpreter.

*The biggest problem for the Syrian women in Turkey is the language problem and childbirths at hospital. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Everything is easy as long as there is an interpreter. If there is no interpreter at the hospital, then there is a lot of trouble. When we go to the hospital, we try to speak Turkish, but they still ask for an interpreter. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

### ***Working Conditions: Men Working in Labor-Intensive, Low-Wage Jobs for Long Hours Without Social Security***

Challenges of resettlement may be exacerbated by economic hardships such as difficulties in creating jobs in line with the skills of refugees (Dona & Berry, 1999 cited in Deacon and Sullivan, 2009). The health mediators interviewed reported that one of the hardships they faced in the country of asylum concerned the working conditions of their husbands. They noted that their husbands were working long hours without registration or security.

*You cannot prove it. There is no proof that he is working there. If the boss refuses to pay his wages, he cannot claim anything. The boss may say that he is paying blah-blah. You cannot counter him as there is no signature whatsoever. You can hardly prove that he is working at all. The boss may claim to have paid the wages, and you cannot raise any objection. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*He works as a tailor, but he has to work sitting for 12 hours. He starts to work at 8 o'clock in the morning and stops at 8 o'clock in the evening. He earns between TL 1500 and TL 1700. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed indicated that their husbands and children who were working in temporary jobs, unregistered and without security, were defrauded and were unable to collect their already low wages.

*They say that they will pay a salary, but then lay you off at the end of the month. Then, they continue to palm them off for a long time, saying they will pay their salaries. Eventually, they do not pay them. This is what happened with my husband and son. It is very sad, and we are very upset when this happens, but we cannot do anything about it. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*After we got here, we started living in Urfa. We stayed in Urfa for two months. During this time, we were both unemployed. We had spent everything we had brought with us, including money and gold. There was no work and no money to pay the rent; we did not have anything. We met a Turkish man in Urfa. We came to Ankara with him. My husband started to work on a construction site with this man. He would only pay TL 50-100 on a weekly basis. Eventually, this man did not pay TL 3,500 which was our due. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*There was a building under construction. "Are you looking for a job?" a man there said to my husband. "Yes," he replied. "Come work with us on this construction site," the other man said. My husband started to work on the construction site. The guy would give him TL 100-200 at times. He was supposed to pay TL 1,500. He worked there for nearly one and a half months. He asked for the money, but the man said, "I do not have any money to give to you. If you want, you can quit." (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*This is worse, both financially and morally. Financially, a boss may employ you for a few months and lay you off, saying, "There is no work, and I cannot employ you." (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

A woman interviewed stated that in addition to the arduous working conditions, proper safety measures were not taken and as a result, her husband had an accident and lost one of his eyes. She added that no compensation was paid to him and he was not employed due to his health problems. As such, his son had to work as a child worker.

*Life was very good for us for the first five or six months after we came here, because my husband was working, and the children were fine. But then, my husband had an accident at work and his eye was damaged. He is blind in one eye, and he cannot work. Because my husband cannot work, my son started to work at a furniture store. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

### ***Child Labor due to Economic Hardship***

Interruption of education and child labor, particularly for boys, appear to be major risks in overcoming the adversities of refugee life (UNHCR, 2015). Major factors paving the way for child labor among refugees include failure of families to generate sufficient income; lack of measures against employment of children; high demand for child labor; preference for child labor due to low wages paid to children; and interruption of schooling due to refugee life (Lordoğlu and Aslan, 2018: 719). In various studies, has been found that 400,000 Syrians, most of whom were children, were employed at illegal workplaces for low wages, under unhealthy conditions, and without registration (Erdoğan and Ünver, 2015). Some



health mediators interviewed indicated that their children had to work. A woman mentioned that her son had had accidents at work, suffered from various problems, and was subjected to maltreatment in the workplace.

*We stayed at a house for six months after coming from Syria. They were working on a construction site. My 18-year-old son was working in the fields. When he came home, he would be exhausted. My other son fell from a building on the construction site twice due to the sun and heat. We came here and he now works in a restaurant. My other son is working at a car wash. My son Muhammed attends school. Although he was supposed to attend the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, he started in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. However, he found it hard to continue and he eventually dropped out of school. We found a job at a barber for him. It was not bad at first. The commute was a rather long; he had to travel for half an hour to go to work. His boss gave him a bike to commute. TL 150 was needed for its repair. I did not have that much money. So, we could not get it fixed. "I can go there on foot," Muhammed said. One day, he slipped on his way to work. Then, he went to the barber's shop and sat down. His boss told him to get up and work. "Give me five minutes so that I can catch my breath," he replied. "You are going to work or I will cut your hair," his boss said. "How will you cut?" asked Muhammed, and his boss shaved his hair in the middle of his head. (She starts to cry). (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The children are going to school, but my 13-year-old son cannot attend any longer. He works because his father cannot. He was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We were very upset at first. We would have waited for him to finish the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. But we had to send him work because of the electric bill and rent. Now, my son earns TL 100 a week. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

### ***Hardship Faced by Children in Education***

The "Circular on Education and Instruction Services for Foreigners" numbered 2014/21 issued by the Directorate General of Basic Education of the Ministry of National Education introduced the right to enroll in public schools in Turkey for Syrian children who are under the International Protection System in Turkey as temporary protection beneficiaries, and for the citizens of other countries who are International Protection Applicants. Syrian children in Turkey can attend schools where they can be taught in Arabic, or public schools where the language of teaching is Turkish, like Turkish citizens. In the *Guidebook on Special Education Services for Individuals with Temporary Protection Status* prepared by the Ministry of National Education in cooperation with UNICEF, it was noted that 60% of school children with temporary protection status have enrolled in schools registered with the Ministry of National Education as of December 2016. Problems related to curriculum and language, teacher supply and training, adaptation to the school environment, and education process were reported in education.

Many health mediators interviewed pointed out that their children attend school in Turkey. Some children attend schools where they are taught in Arabic and Turkish, while others attend schools where they are taught in Turkish.

*My children are aged 7 and 9. My son attends a Turkish school and my daughter goes to the Syrian school. The Syrian school provides education up to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. At the Syrian school, they teach both languages. I want them to learn Arabic first, then Turkish. At the age of 7, children are enrolled directly in Turkish schools. This year is the last of the Syrian*

*school. Then, they will all go to the Turkish school. (Tabia, A24, D, C2, Aleppo)*

*My daughters can go to school and I use my salary to fund their education. My younger daughter started the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She is in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade now. My older daughter not keen on school because she could not speak the language. After coming here, she got stronger and started to attend high school. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*All four of them went to school when first came. My oldest daughter went to school for two years. My son went to school for a year and a half. He had to work after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The younger children are still going to school. Everyone in my daughter's class got engaged and she wanted to as well. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*My children, aged 12 and 10, go to the Syrian school. I would like to send them to the Turkish school, but I hear that they ask for too much money and it would be difficult for the children. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*Both of them go to a school close to home. Both attend the Imam Hatip secondary school. My husband had attended until high school, and he wants his children to study. He is satisfied with their education. I did not attend school, so I want my children to study. I frequently stress this. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

It was previously noted that children were unable to attend school for a few years due to the war in Syria. Legal and physical arrangements were made to ensure that Syrian children can attend school in Turkey following migration. The respondents noted that due to the differences in the education systems of two countries, the older children resuming their education faced certain difficulties.

*Last year, my three daughters were going to school. But now, there is no school which my eldest daughter can attend. So, we cannot send her to school. My son and other daughter cannot go to school. There is no school for my eldest daughter. Schools do not accept her due to her age. In Syria, she would have finished the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. If she had finished the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, there was something called "baccalaureate." Two years later, she could have attended university. But now, the schools here do not accept her because she does not have a diploma. As she is not deemed to have graduated primary school or high school, she cannot attend school here. My son is 16 years old and there is no Turkish school he can attend. There is no Arabic school for him to resume his education. He cannot attend the Turkish schools because he cannot speak Turkish. So, he does not attend school. Sometimes, he works for a week and sits idly for the next. I tried to arrange a computer course for him. He loves computers. He went to one previously, but he must be over 18. If I can find a school or a training course to send them to, I will. The biggest change in my children's life was in terms of schooling. That is, they cannot attend school. In particular, my eldest daughter and son were affected considerably. When we were in Syria, they were attending school. My eldest daughter's greatest wish was to finish school and study English literature. My son's dream was to finish school and study computer engineering or do something to do with computers. But their dreams are now gone. We think about them and get emotional, and we cry a lot. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

Some respondents indicated that they had difficulties in sending their children to school because the schools were located far away, and they had transportation problems. They were afraid that their children might be kidnapped because they did not know the language.



*My daughter has not been able to learn Turkish, and she is afraid to go to school. We are trying to convince her to go to school. My son and daughter are 13 and 12 years old, respectively. So, he does not attend school, fearing that they might beat him or kidnap him. Someone has to drive him to school, but his father does not have the financial means to do so. They do not understand the language. I think someone will beat or kidnap them. I found a job for my son. He sells roses. He has learned to speak Turkish after started working. They do not attend school, but I will enroll them in school. The schools nearby did not accept them. They said that they should go to ... first. But who can take them there? (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

One health mediator interviewed stated that her son did not want to attend school because he had been exposed to bullying there.

*My child goes to the Syrian school. I want to send him to the Turkish school next year, but he cries, saying: "I do not like Turkish children, do not send me. They always bully me, and I get scared and run away. They beat me." He does not want to go. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The health mediator interviewed indicated that parents, teachers and managers at the schools attended by their children developed discriminatory behaviors between Turkish and Syrian children, and a particular school introduced a discriminatory arrangement related to the organization of education.

*There are differences between Syrians and Turks. In Bursa, we sent our children to a Turkish school, but the children did not want to go. When a child played with my daughter, they would say, "How can you play with a Syrian kid?" Even the teachers would do this. I mean, discrimination. So, we thought that we should come here as there is a Syrian school here. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I sent my children to a Turkish school so that they could learn Turkish. But there was a problem. They put Syrian children in one classroom and Turkish children in another. So, they could not learn Turkish. I thought that I should hire a tutor so that they can learn Turkish and study better. I am sending them to school for nothing. So, I am teaching them at home. If they go to school, they will get only a diploma. I send them to school only for diploma. They do not learn much in school. I hired a Turkish tutor for my children. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*



## CHANGES DUE TO MIGRATION, AND SYRIAN WOMEN AS HEALTH MEDIATORS

The gender roles of refugees may differ in the country of asylum from those in the country of origin. As for Syrian refugees in Turkey, men spend more time on finding jobs and working in order to meet economic needs in the new settlements. Women assume new roles and responsibilities for settling in the new habitat, and making use of education, healthcare, social welfare and other services in line with the needs of all family members. These new roles may offer opportunities for their liberation. In this section of the study, the changing lives and gender roles of women, accompanied with their empowerment and liberation in the place of asylum, are described in the context of the support and training provided to the female health mediators working at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces.

### **Introduction to Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS)**

As the Women and Girl Safe Spaces are located inside Immigrant Health Center buildings within the healthcare system, this facilitates the introduction of women to WGSS. It was observed that the promotion of WGSS by women who are informed of, and receive support from them, has been influential in the introduction of Syrian women to the Centers (WGSS). The respondents noted that one of the major motivations for women to attend the Centers (WGSS) is to participate in practical Turkish language courses (speaking groups) organized by Arabic speakers. During the Turkish language courses, it was found that most women were illiterate, and this complicated the process of learning a second language. The female health mediators were mobilized to help illiterate women read and write Arabic.

*I would frequently visit the WGSS. After we got settled, solved accommodation and employment problems and so on, I had a time to think about myself. "I need to learn how to speak Turkish to communicate with my neighbors," I thought to myself. One day, I was downstairs, and I heard that there was a meeting with women. I sat there and had a conversation, and they gave me a kit for it. I enrolled in the Turkish speaking course. That is how I was introduced to it. Now, I tell everyone I meet to go to the Center (WGSS) to learn Turkish. (Ariz, A52, M, 6C, Aleppo)*



*I was visiting this place for healthcare services for the elderly and my children and grandchildren. I happened to learn that there was a Turkish speaking training course here. Initially, I came here to learn Turkish. My daughter's teacher would say something, and I could not understand it. Now, I can understand conversations, but I cannot answer them. So, I first came here to attend the Turkish speaking course. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*When I took my daughter for her vaccinations, I met T. (the social worker at the WGSS). I heard that T. was giving a speaking course to teach the language. I was very glad to meet her because T. knew how to speak Arabic. I was on good terms with her. I would go to the Center every day to learn Turkish, and I would not skip a lesson. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

Some health mediators interviewed noted that they came to the WGSS in order to benefit from the reproductive health services, and this was how they were first introduced to the Center. It turned out that one of the means of reaching women was the Center's reproductive health services.

*My sister and I went first to the... Center (WGSS) for the intrauterine device (IUD) placement. On that day, we met T. and S. and we loved them. After chatting with us, they sent us to the... Center (WGSS). Here we met E. (the social worker at the WGSS). E. started to chat with us. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I came here for the IUD placement after an abortion. Then, I met E. (the social worker at the WGSS), and loved the place. I learned about the Center after two and a half years. I have been visiting it for three months. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*


One of the health mediators interviewed indicated that she happened to learn about the Center when a social worker from the WGSS lent support to her after a unpleasant event during an aid distribution.

*There was a problem with the aid. The people there treated me badly. I was crying at the Center (WGSS). Then, I met T. (the social worker at the WGSS), who showed an active interest in me. T. talked to me about this problem. "You can file a complaint if you want," she said. This made me feel relieved. I realized that T. actually heard my voice. It was good to see someone care about you. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

Some of the health mediators interviewed stated that they continue being in touch with WGSS after they visited the Center (WGSS) to receive psychological counseling services besides other services and after they learned about these services from their communities, or after they saw the posters concerning the violence against women.

*My child was being vaccinated, and I had lost the child's birth certificate. I first met T. (the social worker at the WGSS), and gradually, met everyone. I did not attend any training sessions, but I would come to consult with T. I told my life story to T. so that she would give me some advice. I had problems with my husband, but I could not give up the children. I would consult with T. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I came here to seek assistance. I saw the poster showing a woman who suffered from violence, hung by T. "What is the meaning of the writing?" I asked T. "I was giving a training course here on this subject. You can attend it if you like," she said. In this way, I started to visit the Center. Then, I started to attend the Turkish lessons here (WGSS). This is the way I was introduced to this place. I was going through a hard time. T. talked about my rights. She told me that it was wrong to be beaten. "No one can have a good reason for violence," she said.*



*In her lessons, she explained that we had our rights, children should not beat each other, and parents should not beat their children. I had a 6-year-old son and my husband would say that I had to do whatever my son asked me to do just because he was a boy. I had to obey his commands. This applied to my daughter. For example, my husband would say that our daughter had to bring her older brother a glass of water if he wanted her to do so. But I no longer taught them in this manner, and so, my husband started to beat me more. Things got worse over time and one day, T. told me about the Violence Prevention and Monitoring Centers (ŞÖNİM). She said that I could go and stay there with my children. I wanted to go there, and I talked about this with my parents. My mom agreed and told me to go, but my father and older brother did not accept it. "If you go there, we will come and kill you," they said. As I frequented this place (WGSS), I became aware of my rights. Eventually, I started working, and this proved to be a second life for me. After I got divorced, I was relieved even more. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I had a neighbor whose husband had died in the war in Syria. She was suffering to violence at the hands of her brother. She had two children. I had heard from other people that there was such a Center (WGSS) in Ulubey. I told them about my neighbor's problem to get advice about what I could do about it. Previously, I had only heard about it. I had heard also that there were training course given at the Center. But I first tried to solve my neighbor's problem with her brother. I told her to leave the house and take her children with her. T. was helpful and my neighbor went to a women's shelter. She did not stay in the shelter, but eventually, she got on good terms with her brother. This is how I was introduced to the Center. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I heard about it when several women were talking about it among themselves. They said that it was giving Turkish language courses. So, at first, I wanted to learn Turkish. Later, I found out that there was a physician (referring to the social worker at the WGSS) to whom you could tell all your problems, and who could refer you to a lawyer or aid. That was how I came to the Center. The first day I arrived at the Center, I felt very embarrassed and shy, so I sat outside. I had nothing to do outside, but I still sat outside (laughing). "Oh my God, where should I go now?" I was saying to myself as I was sitting there. "Find T. and get registered for her Turkish language lessons," they told me. So, I went to T. and got enrolled. Then we made jokes and laughed. Then, I felt as if I had known her for 100 years. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

## **Working as a Health Mediator at WGSS**

Access to social support during the war and the ensuing refugee life is crucial as it facilitates the process of being loved, respected and valued as part of a social group, in overcoming negative experiences and adapting to the new place of settlement. In addition to social support from family and friends, a work environment, too, constitutes a major area of social support for women. Friedan (1963) studied refugee women and found that being a working woman helped increase their self-esteem and self-confidence, reduced economic hardship, and improved their life satisfaction and individual wellbeing as they were able to help their families (Jabbar and Zaza, 2016: 306). Therefore, being a working woman in the refugee life is important in terms of ensuring the wellbeing of women and family members.





### ***Being a Working Woman***

The rate of literacy of women in Syria rose from 37% in 1981 to 76% in 2007, while their labor force participation rate increased from 12% to 31% according to World Bank data (World Bank, cited in Freedom House, 2010: 2). Although women's labor force participation of women increased over the years, it should be noted that this rate may also vary depending on the region, given the fact that lives of women vary depending on the region.

In a study conducted by the AFAD (2014) on Syrian women in Turkey, it was found that 87% did not have wage-earning occupations, and those women who did have a profession tended to be a teacher, tailor, hairdresser, farmer or nurse. In the same study, it was determined that the majority of women were primary school graduates and housewives, and that university graduate women tended to work as teachers or were unemployed housewives. Only 2% of Syrian women in Turkey are actively working. During the interviews, women stressed that they wanted to work as tailors, cleaners, farmers, etc., in compliance with the roles assigned to women by society, if they were granted such an opportunity (AFAD, 2014). In projects targeting Syrian women, it is critical to resolve problems stemming from gender inequality, as mentioned in previous sections, by promoting gender equality and improving the living conditions of women.

As noted above, in this project conducted by the HUWRIC, 35 Syrian women were trained to act as bridges between their communities and the Women and Girl Safe Spaces, and are employed as health mediators.

The majority of female "health mediators", who had had no work experience in Syria prior to migration, noted that this was their first employment in Turkey. Four health mediators had had work experience in Syria. Their work experience in Syria came from occupations that complied with their gender roles, such as providing hairdressing services to women at their homes, tutoring students at home, working at a bakery, and selling clothes to women at home. For instance, a woman who held an engineering degree in Syria indicated that she was unable to work in engineering due to social pressures and, instead, she chose to tutor students under flexible conditions.

*If I had worked as an engineer, I would have had to stay at work from morning till night. I was married and had children. I could not work hours that long. I did not work as an engineer in particular. One reason for this, or what prevented me from doing this, was that my neighbors or my husband's parents would say: "You have your children. How can you go out, leaving your children behind? Isn't it a pity that you go out, but your children are alone at home?" So, they would pressurize me. While I did not care much about such remarks, I might have been influenced to a certain extent. I also loved to teach. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

As working provides an experience beyond the patriarchal life that imprisons women in their homes, the women were also asked about their experiences as a working woman. The women indicated that being a working woman had impacted on their entire lives. The respondents stated that previously they had not even imagined the idea of a woman working. After they started working, they acquired a greater say in matters related to the home, assumed responsibilities regarding shopping and paying the utilities, and saw positive changes in their relationships with their husbands. They obtained an equal footing with their husbands and they felt stronger and more valuable.

*Work made me feel good. I keep waiting for a call from work so that I can go. I felt comfortable. My husband, too, is very pleased. The communication between my husband and me had*

*improved. We have started to get along better. The relationship between us has gotten better. He has started to value me more. Being a working woman makes me feel so different and so good. I had to tell my husband everything. We need this, we need that. That is not the case anymore. Our life is getting much better. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Our life has fundamentally changed. I have started to have a say in all matters. I have started to be consulted regarding matters such as household spending and the schools our children will attend. For instance, it was me who decided that our daughter should continue to go to school. I hear from other women about the aid to be distributed. He does not know about this. It is me who goes there. I register for the aid. I go and get it. I have become like him. We have become equal. As I am like him, I buy things and bring them to the house. I take care of the house. We are equals now. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I worked here for the first time. It was so nice. I felt like I was valuable. You feel that you are valuable in the eyes of the children. It is also a joy because I am doing it contrary to his wishes. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I would feel so lonely when I stayed at home, doing nothing. After I started to visit this Center, I felt psychologically relieved and my mood improved. I feel that I have changed. It is the first time I have ever worked. I feel so different. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*In Syria, I was not working. I came into existence after I started to work here. I felt that I was a human being. I realized that I had rights. I found out that I had a place in this world. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*I felt relieved after I came here. This place has a positive impact on me emotionally. In Syria, I was not working. I am now a working woman. This was a nice change for me. Before I came here and saw the things here and met other people here, I had never thought that women could work; neither myself nor my children. Now, I have learned that women can work and do something, and that was good. (Şiheh, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

As the women talked about their work experience and their feelings about earning money, they used the following words: **“After I earned my money, I started to understand what I want,” “For the first time, I felt that it was my money,” “This is the money I have earned and I will spend it as I like,”** and **“Earning money is like a weapon.”**

*Formerly, I would ask him to give me TL 5 or TL 10. I always needed something. I would feel embarrassed to ask for it. Now, I do not ask for anything. After I earned my money, I started to understand what I want. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*In the past, I would just sit at home. I had never had a salary in my life. This is the first time I have worked and earned money. “What do you want?” I asked my daughter when I got my salary. “I want pants,” she said, and I bought them. Then, I went to the store and bought snacks and things. I kept TL 100 to pay the rent, but when I got home, my husband said: “Do not keep it for the rent; it is your money. See what the children want.” For the first time, I felt that it was my money. I was very happy. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*It was the first time that I had ever earned money in my life. It was so different. I took the money and said: “This is the money I have earned, and you will not meddle with it. I will spend it as I like.” (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*



*Earning money is like a weapon. For women, working is like holding a gun. You realize that you are doing something with your life. You have the money, and you become stronger and can do whatever you want. I said that earning money is like a weapon because if I want something, I have the money to buy it. I do not have to ask my husband for money. I have my money and I can do anything I want. That is why I likened it to a weapon. By working, I was no longer a burden on my husband. Everything about the children was my responsibility, while my husband took care of the rent, electricity and water. I was able to do whatever I wanted with my money. I had four children and I could buy what they needed. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

The respondents stated that **working and earning money** was a positive boost to their moods, helping them feel stronger. They started to feel like valuable individuals and their self-confidence increased; they had never felt so good.

*This is the first time I have worked. I have not worked before, but I would knit sweaters for the children at home. I was very happy (laughs). In Syria, it is inappropriate for women to work. I came here and started working here, and I started to feel like an individual. I realized that people pay respect to me and I deserve respect. I felt that I was becoming stronger. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*


*As I started to work, even my husband changed. He is no longer the same man. I started to give my opinions about what I wanted or did not want. Previously, I would never leave the house. Now I am free. I am saying this for my friends from Aleppo and Damascus. I have changed everything. I felt frozen before. I thought that I did not know anything. It has changed my mood. In the past, it would take one or two hours for me to get out of the house. Now, I get ready in 10 minutes so I can meet my friends sooner. I have come out of my shell and can visit any place. I go to Ulus or Kızılay on my own. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed indicated that through the work they did, they felt that they were providing a benefit to people, and their socialization through assuming different roles in life improved their mood. A woman described the working environment as heaven and her home as hell.

*I felt so happy to get to work. This was because previously, I would not leave the house. I would sit at home alone. I had no relatives or friends whatsoever. I started to feel better when I came here (WGSS) and listened to the complaints of other women. It felt like heaven when I came to the Center (WGSS). It was like hell to go back home. I loved working as a health mediator. It felt like that this work was my whole world. They taught me how to interview people here. My trust in people increased. My colleagues here were nice as well. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

*After I started to work here and give advice to other people, I felt stronger. I feel that I can rely on this place. (Bahır, A34, M, 1C, Damascus)*

The health mediators interviewed pointed out that being a working woman changed their lives and purpose as they realized that they could have roles other than cooking, and taking care of their children and husbands. They noted that this change came as they started to feel important because they were helping others, providing a benefit, and exerting efforts in a job that facilitated their self-improvement outside the home. They stressed that their work helped them find their purpose in life.



*As you know, women do not work in Syria. I felt myself useful as I went out and worked. At least, I know that I can do this when an opportunity presents itself. Previously, I would not think that way about myself. This is because I felt that I am something. My life no longer consists of cooking or caring about children or my husband. There is another labor and purpose as well. Sometimes, one has something and feels oneself so great when one performs it. One feels so important. That is how I feel when I am working. Now, I have another responsibility other than my husband and children. I am responsible also for other people. Now, I feel myself responsible. (İğsar, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*This is the first time I have worked, but it is a good thing for me, and I feel very glad about it. Now, I have a goal, and there is order in everything. What I do and at what time is fixed. Now I work, and I have created a plan for myself about where to go and when to be ready for work, and so on. I have created a routine based on my work. It was good for me, and I felt like I was doing something good while I was working. Ultimately, I started working in a place, and the people were helping me, and I am helping other people in return. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*For instance, a woman comes here (WGSS), and she does not know the place. She does not know to which physician to apply. We help her. Sometimes, very poor people come and ask us to tell them about aid. I feel so good when I can help people. Consider a woman who has had argument with her husband, and she does not know what to do. I send her to the Center (WGSS). I was very pleased with what I did. That was because I could help people. There was nothing in my previous life; it felt void. I felt like I had a purpose to help other people in this life. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I am very happy to work as a health mediator. A lot of women are subject to violence, and we help them. That is why I am so happy. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The respondent explained that being a woman and mother who works and earns money empowered them and their daughters, giving their daughters motivation to go on with their lives. They transformed from being a weak mother, to a strong woman and mother in the eyes of their daughters.

*We started working here (WGSS). I realized that my life was changing as I earned money. I was able to buy the things my daughters wanted. In the past, I could not buy anything for myself at a grocery store. I could only buy what we needed. As I worked and earned money, it was no longer necessary for me to wait for others to give money. It is very important to be free to spend money at will. I was able to change my life. My daughters can go to school and I use my salary for their education. My older daughter was not interested in school because she could not speak the language. After coming here, she got better and started to attend high school. I am a role model for my daughters. My girls are very impressed with it. They were not like that before; they have changed so much. After this work, I felt much stronger. So did my daughters. I was so weak, but I started to get stronger, and I saw the difference. I feel like I have gotten stronger thanks to the Center (WGSS). The mother's role has changed in the eyes of my daughters. I have transformed from a weak woman into a strong, working, money-earning woman. With my job at this Center (WGSS), I have changed from a weak woman into stronger one. I even realized that I had a purpose this life. Previously, I used to think that my body and soul should not be here. It did not matter if I existed or not. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*



### *The Reaction of Husbands to Women Working*

In a patriarchal social structure, women working in jobs where they are visible in society is undesirable as it disrupts the continuation of power and control over women, and facilitates their empowerment. In undermining this unequal structure, however, as Deacon and Sullivan (2009) noted, efforts to create employment opportunities for refugee women in the face of patriarchal family structures that do not favor women working outside of the home, it is important to design work patterns that do not neglect women's household responsibilities. This ultimately makes it possible for women to work outside of the home.

In this study, the health mediators who started work for the first time in the place of asylum were asked about their husband's reactions. The respondents stated that their husbands were keen on the idea of their wives working in the beginning, but they stopped opposing this because of economic hardship, flexible working hours, female-only work environments, the positive effects of working on the mood of their wives, and the easy nature of the work. As the men observed that what the women learned at the WGSS had a positive effect on mitigating the trauma of war and reduced the risk of women's health deteriorating at home, they tended to allow the women to work.

*This is the first time I have worked. I have four children and before, my husband would work. I have never worked before. My employment here (WGSS) is a first. When I started work, my husband was very happy. He did not object to it because he could see my happiness. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I have discussed the matter with my husband and eldest son. "No problem," they said. "That is, if it is not an exhausting job and if it makes you feel good, then go work," they said. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*Previously, I was psychologically exhausted. After I started to work here (WGSS), I would return home in a happy manner and I would smile and amuse myself. Seeing this, he would say, "You can do whatever job there is there." (Laughing). (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

In societies such as that in Syria, where the patriarchal structure is strong and women are considered only as family members, this structure causes women to develop a completely submissive identity and does not allow women to work outside home. It argues that women are weak, and they need to be constantly protected against the external world. Or it allows women to be employed only in a 'protected' environment. The idea of allowing their wives to work in a foreign country created fear in the men at first, but since the women worked as health mediators at the WGSS (which can be considered to be a 'protected' environment for women), their concerns were mitigated. As can be understood from the narratives of the women in the section titled "Being a Working Woman," the function of the WGSS based on the principle of developing gender-sensitive services helped women find their own voice.

*The best thing here is that it is not inappropriate for women to work. Whatever we need at home, I can buy it, or my husband buys it, and this creates no problem. Actually, my husband was not keen on the idea of me working at the beginning. "Why are you going?" he would say. But as I started to get paid, things were better. But the best thing was when I started to talk, or when I started to express my ideas. Formerly, my husband would be worried that something might happen to me when I went out. He would be afraid that I might not be able to defend my rights or raise my voice. Then, my husband saw that this would not happen*

*as I got stronger. "No one can do you injustice," he says, with pride. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

Two women who started to work for the first time in Turkey indicated that their children had problems with the fact that their mothers were working, and that they themselves had difficulty in adapting to their role of working mothers. Provision of services geared toward children at the WGSS enabled women to work, but a lack of sufficient child services at the WGSS occasionally created problems for working women.

*When I first started to work, my children had some problems. "Mom, you left us," they kept on saying. It was not in our traditions for women to work. But later I talked to the children. "I earn money and it will make us have a more comfortable life," I said to them. The children were happy afterwards. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The children would see me working. "Mom, you are working; you are going out," they would say. "Yes, it has to be like this. Life has changed, and we, too, need to work, and you should appreciate it. As your parents, we are working for you, and you should appreciate him," I said to them. It was OK. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*My husband started criticize my working. "Do not go. What are you doing there? What is that work you do there?" he would say. At first, he did not trust this place and he did not allow me to come here. "What might happen at the Center (WGSS)?" I said to him. Then, I was hired. "I cannot come every day as I have children," I said to them. "No, you will come only for one day a week," they said. So, I took the job. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The health mediators interviewed noted that one of the major reasons for their husbands allowing them to work was economic hardship. They pointed out that when their husbands were able to meet the needs of the family, they were not keen on their wives' working.

*At first, he would shout and get angry when I went out. But, now, he allows me to go out to work as I come to the Center (WGSS) and get paid TL... as a salary. But, previously, he would cause a lot of trouble. "Why are you going? What will you do there?" he would say. Now, it has become routine. My grandmother and grandfather are 80 and 85 years old, respectively. My grandmother can go out one or twice a year to see his son. This is their mentality: the woman does everything her husband wants. And they do not go out just because their husbands do not want them to. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*In Syria, I did not have to work because my husband had a good income. There, we had built our own house. Here, we live in a rented house and my husband can only occasionally find work. So, I have to work. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

Some women indicated that they had told their husbands that they were going to the WGSS for language, healthcare and other services because they knew that their husbands would not allow them to work. Women develop various forms of resistance against patriarchal pressures. As seen in the following narratives, the women used the pressure their husbands felt as a result of living in a foreign country and being a refugee in the country, and they said that they had signed 'contracts' in order to work.

*No, at first, I did not tell my husband that I had started working here (WGSS). After I started coming to this place, my husband got used to it. "I am going to the Turkish language courses," I would say, at first. Later, he again asked why I was going. "I am going to work," I replied.*



*He was startled. "What kind of work?" he said. "We go there, and we have courses and interviews. We receive courses on women's rights," I said to him. "Um," he said, and gave a weird reaction. But he eventually got used to it. Yes, I have always wanted to work. I would have worked, even at home, but my husband never let me do so. "Is something missing? Isn't my income sufficient for you?" he would grumble. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I lied to my husband. I did not tell him that it was about women's rights. I said that I wanted to learn Turkish and attend the training. And he agreed. "That is enough. Quit the job," he eventually said to me. And I said that I could not quit because I had signed a contract. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

A woman noted that she started working in defiance of her husband who did not allow her to work.

*My husband does not approve me of freely going out and coming here. When I first started to work (at the WGSS), we argued a lot. "Even if you do not give permission, I will still work," I said to him. Toward the end of my employment, my husband would say, "Well, you will quit soon, and then where will you get support?" My husband is now very happy as I will not be able to go out, but just sit at home. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The women-only work environment at the WGSS meant that husbands adopted a positive approach to the employment of their wives. The respondents were asked if they would still agree to work if there were male employees at the WGSS. The majority of the women replied that their husbands would not allow them to work at a workplace with male employees, and they themselves would not be inclined to work at such a workplace. Also, there were some respondents who said **they would work with men if their husbands approved** while others noted **they would still work even if their husbands did not approve**.

*My husband was already not very keen on the idea of me working, but he still gave me permission. If he had not allowed it, I would not have worked. If there were men at the workplace, I would not work. And my husband would not allow it. It would be too hard for me. My husband would not allow it. I am happy to work with women, and my husband is happier. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*If there were men, I would not work here. My husband would not allow it. I do not like to mingle with men. For instance, even my husband's uncle had his eyes on me. So, I do not like to work with men; it bothers me. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I would still work at the Center even if there were male staff. The teacher at the tile course was a man. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I would work here even if there were men here. This is my opinion. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*If there were male staff here, my husband would not allow me to work here. "Only the physician and the cleaner are male. Other than them, there are no men there," I said to my husband. "We always deal with women," I said. So, he consented. If he gives me permission to work with men, I can work then. If people inspire confidence in me, I will work. But my husband is jealous. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*If we had worked with men here (WGSS), there would have been problems. Recently, we attended a training course where a woman's body was projected on the wall and its anatomy*

*was studied. I explained that we were just learning it, but if there were men among the audience, there would be problems. If training sessions were separate and working was together, it might be acceptable, but if we were supposed visit homes with men, my husband would have trouble accepting it. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*If there were men working here (WGSS), I would still work. As I do not care about my husband, I would still work even if he does not agree. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

## **What is Learned at the Center (WGSS), and How it is Used in Real Life: Empowerment of Women**

The women who work as health mediators at the Women and Girl Safe Spaces, are given training on various subjects. The subjects from these training sessions which women found most memorable include women's rights and services for women in Turkey; pregnancy; domestic violence; child marriage and its consequences; diseases; gynecological diseases; family planning and reproductive health; and communication with and care for children. The women interviewed pointed out that in these training sessions, they learned many things they did not previously know, and this served to empower them. They also transferred what they had learned to other women around them.

*The training we received proved to be beneficial both to ourselves and to the women around us. We explain what we have learned to them. To my relatives in the first place. I tell what I have learned to my neighbors. We have received training on women's rights, children, diseases, child care, and family planning. The training on women's right was the best for me. (Tabia, A24, D, C2, Aleppo)*

*My life has changed considerably since I started coming here (WGSS). Then, I realized that I knew nothing in this country. I do not know the laws. I do not know how things work in this country. I do not know where to go. I have learned all these things in the lessons you have given. We learned about cleaning. The physician explained cleaning while talking about certain diseases. Cleaning is a simple topic, but I had not heard what was explained to us. After I started working here and giving advice to other people, I felt stronger. (Bahır, A34, M, 1C, Damascus)*

*We receive training here (WGSS). I personally apply what I have learned in my life. As we receive training on breastfeeding, or women, or health, the training benefits me and my family. I can spread this information to my relatives and friends. I did not know many of the things I have learned at this Center. For instance, I did not know that women have rights, or that they can take legal action to defend their rights or if they are exposed to violence. Here (WGSS), we have learned what women's rights are. We learn things at the Center (WGSS), and we can explain these things to other women. It is really different to talk about what we have learned through training, rather than just hearsay. After receiving training here, we started to explain things in a more informed way. Thanks to the training here (WGSS), we know more about breastfeeding, pregnancy and violence. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I did not even like going out, but I started attending this Center (WGSS) and participating in the training here. I felt that I assumed responsibilities. I have learned about women's rights and started to teach them. The women to whom we have given this training have started to*





*get stronger. The laws are better here. They treat women equally. From this perspective, I like it here better. Women's rights will not be lost here. Previously, I did not know it, but I now know how many years I should leave between pregnancy. When I see those women who do not know this principle, I talk to them. "Do not do this to yourself," I say to them. "What will we do? How can we get protection?" they ask. I refer them to the Center (WGSS). "Go and get whatever you need," I explain. Also, I like it when Turks do not have a lot of children. Having a lot of children is not good. Turks tend to have few children. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*First, we learned about violence. We learned what violence is. We learned that women have rights, and this was empowering to learn. We learned about all types of violence: physical, psychological and sexual violence. We learned that women's health is a right and that reproductive health is a right, and that it is a right to have access to them and family planning. We did not know any of this, and we learned it all. In fact, when I first came here, I was afraid even to talk, and I was scared and embarrassed. Afterwards, I realized that this is something that empowers women. It is good for their psychological wellbeing. It makes women valuable, it adds value to them. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I have just learned about women's rights. As I got married at an early age, I did not know them beforehand. I have learned about them here (WGSS). I also try to teach them to other people. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I have learned lots of things here (WGSS). I feel stronger. I think I have a very strong personality. Other than that, I have learned about civil law. I did not know any of these things. I did not know that women had rights, and they cannot get married if they are under 18. And I did not know that violence was forbidden. I learned about gender equality. I have learned many things about reproductive health and gynecological health. I now know that there should be two years between two children. I have learned a lot of things about these topics. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

The women interviewed stated that thanks to the training they received on child abuse, they taught their children about the issue, and they were now more aware of it.

*I have recorded all the trainings. They were extremely useful. I have learned a lot, but there was a training session on child abuse. It impressed me the most. I tend to go out frequently. I leave my children with neighbors or relatives. After the training, I started to be more aware. I talked to my children extensively. I told them what they should do if someone attempted to kiss, touch, caress or bite them. I have gained a little bit more awareness about this matter. I now pay more attention. I had never even thought about it before. My awareness about the issue has been raised. Likewise, I started to be more careful about my older daughter. She goes to school, but she cannot speak the language. I cautioned her that someone might try to offer to go somewhere with her, then abuse her. "You go to school with your friends; come back with your friends," I tell her. "Be more careful. If someone bothers you, go tell your teacher. There is nothing to hide from anyone," I said to her. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

*They taught us that we should teach this to our children as well. We have taught our children how to behave or react in case of abuse or any other thing. We did not know it ourselves.*

*At the same time, we accepted the fact that we had no option other than to comply when something was forced on us. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

The respondents indicated that the use of visual materials, games, activities and role plays during the training facilitated the retention of the topics taught, and they expressed their satisfaction. The use of both large- and small-group interaction during the training paved the way for the women to question their previous knowledge. Learning new information, becoming more conscious, and experiencing solidarity with the Center's (WGSS) staff helped women feel emotionally liberated as well. To describe this effect, a woman used the metaphor "my heart had been closed" and said that "the knots of her heart began to unravel" during the training sessions.

*I have learned a lot. I had forgotten some things, and I have been able to remember them again thanks to the training. My heart had been closed, but as our trainers talked and as I took the microphone, I felt that my heart started to beat enthusiastically. I started to feel like a normal person, and the knots of my heart began to unravel. Instead of just expressing facts, we perform role plays. We ask questions. "What do you think? Should it be like that?" In this way, we can understand the topic better; we participate in the lessons and express our views. During the training, we are asked questions, and this ensures that we can learn more effectively. In the training provide elsewhere, they just write information on the blackboard, explain it and then they go. In contrast, at the training sessions here (WGSS), we feel like we are part of the training sessions. They are patient with us and as such, the sessions are much more useful. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

The women had the opportunity to get to know the city they lived in as the training sessions were held at various locations. Moreover, the health mediators could make new friends during the activities they performed together, and this enhanced their socialization, contributing to their empowerment.

*I go out alone. I know a little bit of Turkish. We went to Ulus and Altınpark. We went to the hotels for training. We went to many places and explored with T.(social worker at WGSS) (Tabia, A24, D, C2, Aleppo)*

*When I started to visit this place (WGSS), I was very happy. My life became joyful. Previously, I was working, and I would just sit down and cry after work. But now I have new friends. I learn new things. (May, A41, D, 4C, Al-Hasakah)*

*In the past, it would take one or two hours for me to get out of the house. Now, I get ready in 10 minutes to meet my friends sooner. I have come out of my shell and can visit any place. I go to Ulus or Kızılay on my own. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*My life has changed a lot. Previously, I would shuttle between children and the house. Now, I have met a lot of women and new lives. I touch people's lives. I went on a trip to Eskişehir. After I started working with you (WGSS), I became more sociable. I now reach more people. My life has become a little wider. I have experienced a big change in my life. I can say that I am freer now. I can go out and walk around. We participate in training. We are able to go on trips. This has all affected my life a lot. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

It was observed that thanks to the training they received, the health mediators tried to **lead lives on a more equal basis with their husbands and children**. It was found that reactions given by women changed their communication with their husbands. A woman stressed that the training offered them guidance in their lives, saying, "**They taught us not only our rights as women, but also how to live.**"



*I transfer what I learn here (WGSS) to my neighbors, sister and niece. I tell them about their rights. So, I tell what I have just learned to people around me, and this proves beneficial not only to me, but also to them. Thanks to the training I have received here, my communication with my children and with my husband has changed. For instance, I no longer say the things I used to say when we quarreled. “You have changed a lot. You were not like this,” my husband says. For example, my children have changed as well; my reactions to them have changed. I have started to give advice to other people and guide them. For instance, I have a neighbor with whom I discuss the things I have learned here, and I tell her how she should behave. My influence over her has been so great that she has changed a lot, and everyone sees the change in her. I guide people and I feel satisfaction in doing this. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I would like to add one more thing. If I have a trouble with my husband, I say, “I can file a complaint against you there (WGSS),” and he replies, “You would not talk like that in Syria.” Thank God, and thanks to T. (the social worker at the WGSS), she taught us our rights. They taught us how our relationship with our husbands or children should be. They have taught and showed us our rights as women and how we can live together. My husband is very happy about it. “You have grown up and you really know how to defend your rights,” he says. “I just ask for my rights, and I do not want anything but my rights from you,” I say to my husband. Formerly, we did not have any rights. They were lost. But this is not the case now. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

A health mediator who was living with her adult married son and daughter-in-law mentioned that she was trying to adopt a more egalitarian approach by cautioning her son’s behavior toward his wife. Another woman indicated that thanks to the training on child rights and communication with children, she realized that she was not giving her little children the right to self-expression.

*Normally, some customs are above the law. But I have applied what I have learned here to my life. For instance, my son comes from work. He takes his shower and has dinner. Then, he tells his wife to get him something. “If you want it, go get it yourself,” I say to him now. I have started to implement this in my life. My youngest child M. would go to speak, but I would say: “Hush, your older brother will speak.” I did not know this would break his heart and upset him. Now, when M. goes to talk, if his brother tells him to “Shut up,” I say to his older brother, “No, you shut up. Let M. finish what he was going to say.” He should be able to talk and express himself. If a child is not allowed to speak, then you cannot understand or solve their problem. My son goes out and hangs around with his friends. If we do not give him the right to speak and if we hush him, we cannot know what happens in his life. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

### ***Understanding Women’s Rights: Comparing Turkey and Syria***

The women interviewed noted that at the training they received at the Center, they learned about the state of women’s rights in Turkey, and they had chance to draw comparisons between Turkey and Syria in this area. Here are some sentences from their narratives: **“In Turkey, rights are upheld. Freedoms are safeguarded here.” “...at least, women have rights and opportunity to claim them.” “In Syria, there is**

***no such thing.” “Here, women can demand their rights.” “When a woman takes legal action, the laws are not against her, but support her.” “In Syria, they say that women have rights, but that is just empty talk. In reality, you cannot benefit from anything.” “This is not the case in Syria. Even if a woman demands her rights, the man will be deemed to be in the right.”***

*I am very strong now. I do not want to return to Syria. This is because I have found myself, and there are freedoms here. There are rights. This is what I have seen. Freedoms are safeguarded here. Indeed, at least, women have rights and opportunity to claim them. In Syria, there is no such thing. People can get divorced somehow if they are suffering in the marriage. But, in Syria, there is no such thing. For instance, here, women have the right to take their children with her in case of divorce. In Syria, they are not able to do this. For instance, in case of sexual violence in marriage, if your husband forces you to have sexual intercourse, and you do not want it, you have rights. You can apply to a court. Such a thing was out of the question in Syria. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Here is what I learned here. A woman can do whatever she wants. She can say “no” whenever she wants to. “I do not want to marry this man,” she can say. In Syria, there is no such thing. If I go to the police or any other authority, they defend women. This is not the case in Syria. Even if a woman demands her rights, the man will be deemed to be in the right. For instance, when I first came here, a Turkish man was coming behind me, saying, “I will give you a carpet and other things.” When I said I was going to report it to the police, he immediately went away. There is no such thing there. In Syria, women are there to be blamed. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

*Everything is so different. People can enjoy their rights and freedoms here. This is not the case in Syria. For instance, everyone’s rights are upheld, and if I file a complaint, I have rights. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

*Compared to Syria, there is a huge difference between the two countries as regards women’s rights. Life is very different from what we currently have. Here, life does not consist of staying at home, eating and drinking things. If our children had a problem regarding school, there was no authority to report it to or file a complaint about it. Here, you can go and talk to the school manager. For instance, if a man abuses a woman, she can file a complaint. In Syria, there was no such thing. Simply, I am a woman and I have a life here. It is a huge change. To give an example from my own life, I did not know what child marriage was. I did not even know there was such a thing called child marriage. But right now, I am aware of it. We got married young, and we had no idea how dangerous early marriage was. I have learned this. For instance, you may suffer from many diseases if you get married at an early age. We learned that here. We can go to the doctor if we have a problem. Such a thing was out of the question in Aleppo. You have to go to a private doctor. The government would not cover your healthcare expenses. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Here, women have greater freedoms in law. They have more rights. When a woman is subjected to violence, she can go to court and file a complaint. Polygamous marriage is forbidden. No one can have multiple wives. When a woman takes legal action, the laws are not against her, but are supportive to her. In case of divorce, a woman can get custody of her children. In Syria, a mother cannot get her children if someone reports negative things about her. As a result, women have secured their freedoms. In Syria, you cannot register your child*



*in the civil register if the father does not give permission to use his surname. In Turkey, a child can be registered under the mother's surname. (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

### ***Women's Rights as a Means of Resistance to Violence***

The women developed an awareness of women's rights thanks to the training they received at the Centers (WGSS) in Turkey. They indicated that levels of male violence declined in their lives in this country compared to their previous lives in Syria. Some women noted that as they learned about the legislation that protected women against violence, they chose to fight back instead of keeping silent and being submissive. It was observed that the women developed practices of resistance against domination and violence, and learned these practices from each other.

*The violence to which Syrian women are subjected in Turkey is not the same as before. When we first came here, it was more frequent. Now, it has declined. Violence decreased as women became stronger and learned about their rights. We no longer keep silent. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*


*My husband was the same when we first came, but he is better now. As my parents are here, I would threaten him when we quarreled. "If you act in this way, I will go to my parents," I would say. Then, we started to be nicer to each other. When we first came to Turkey, he would beat me after coming home. I learned that I had rights and I could file a complaint. After he beat me, I said to him: "There was a man who beat his wife and she filed an official complaint against him, and he is now in jail." He was afraid. I would say it directly, but I would talk about a real-life example. "He did something to his wife, and she filed a complaint against him. Then, they put him in prison," I said, to scare him. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Syrian women would only talk about the cases of violence they were subjected to once they could not take any more. Since coming to Turkey, things have changed. Men feel that women are getting stronger since coming to Turkey. Women support each other. When I talk about violence, I say: "If he hits you, you have the right to hit him back. Come when you want to press charges, and I will come with you, and I will back you." Women are stronger here. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*Violence against women has reduced considerably in Turkey. Men work longer hours, and when they return from work, they just go to sleep. They no longer have the strength to be violent. And women have started to develop stronger characters. They now know their rights. They go out and learn. This is another reason. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed indicated that they were able to resist their husbands' efforts to marry second wives after they started to learn about the law and their rights in Turkey. During the interviews, it was found that Syrian women were particularly vulnerable to the issue of their husbands' marrying a second wife.

*If my husband marries a second wife, I will go crazy and lose my mind. I could not take it. I love the Turkish laws because they prohibit polygamous marriages. That is unacceptable. (Nahir, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*



*(Smiling) In Syria, he was very rich, and he had a lot of money. If he had wanted, he could have married a second wife. Even his parents were forcing him to take a second wife. But after coming here, he run out of money (smiling. Seeing this, I feel that I am stronger, and I can talk back and defend my rights. (Zobe, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

It was observed that Syrian women in Turkey were able to break their silence against violence and take the decision to divorce as they learned about the laws protecting the rights of women. They moved away from the repressive society of their country of origin, and their public and social support networks became stronger.

*I never thought about getting divorced in Syria. But after coming to Turkey, I became stronger and I learned about the laws. So, I thought to myself that I must get divorced here because it was unlikely in Syria, because I would have been regarded as a divorced woman in the eyes of society, parents and others. I could not get divorced in Syria because the pressures the public perception. In Syria, there was no support mechanism, and so, I had to be patient. But I came here and the experts at the Center (WGSS) can support me. I know that the experts here can arrange a place for me to stay. But in Syria, I could never have done this. That was because I had to go back to my parents, who would have given me a hard time and persecuted me. They would have eventually married me off as a third or fourth wife, who had previously been married and divorced. ... My husband inflicted much violence on me, even in Turkey. I kept silent and did not raise any objection for the sake of my children. When I came to this place, I became aware of my rights. Eventually, I started working, and this proved to be a second life for me. After I got divorced, I was relieved even more. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Most divorced women are afraid of their social circles. When other people talk to a divorced woman, the woman would be concerned about what they would think about her and tell their friends about her. My older sister got divorced in Turkey, and I helped her through the divorce. Her husband had a second wife and he was living with her in Mersin. My sister was living in Ankara. Her husband would not give her any money. It was my older brother who used to pay the rent and utility bills. I talked to her husband and asked him to divorce her. I said that my older sister had a life to live. Eventually, they got divorced. When we came to Turkey, their marriage turned out to be unofficial, because they had had a religious wedding. We applied for an ID card and it turned out that she was single according to the official records. I explain to her that we could go to court concerning the children, we could get certain tests done in order to prove that children were hers, and she would benefit from certain rights concerning the children. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

## **Suggestions from Women Regarding Women and Girl Safe Spaces**

When the health mediators were asked for their suggestions about the services the WGSS might provide in order to reach more women, they stated that they were generally satisfied with the services. They pointed out that the Center should be promoted more extensively. They also noted that the Center should have child-friendly areas where the women who receive support from the Center could spend time with their children. They also mentioned that the Turkish language courses and aid should be provided for newcomers.



*This place (WGSS) deserves to be promoted more extensively. Our efforts are not sufficient. There should be more training here. For example, I talked to my neighbor yesterday. She will get divorced. “There is a Center you can apply to,” I told her. “Will they help me, or will they abandon me like other government agencies?” she asked. “No,” I said, “they will help you. Just go there.” “Will they listen to me? Will they try to understand me? What will they do about my problem?” she asked. “They will listen to you and guide you. You can talk to them freely as you would talk to your sister,” I told her. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*If the Center had a room where women could leave their children, this would encourage more people to come. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*The training sessions provided here (WGSS) are okay. Women like to learn about culture and become more aware. Of course, they are extremely motivated to come in case of aid. They have gotten used to receiving aid since coming to Turkey. It is important to increase the amount of aid in order to persuade them to come here. Indeed, when women come here to attend the training or receive services, their husbands say: “What use does it have? Why are you going?” It would be helpful if aid was provided once every month or two. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*





## CHANGES DUE TO MIGRATION AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

### Changes due to Migration

In the light of the studies conducted on refugees, it has been maintained in previous sections that migration may offer an opportunity for refugee women who suffer from unequal living conditions for change, empowerment and liberation. The projects conducted for refugee women who emigrated from a country where gender inequalities are high can create significant areas for empowerment.

The health mediators indicated that as their husbands spend the entire day working, they assumed the responsibility of addressing the needs of the household and children. **They noted that they assumed active roles in dealing with school-related affairs and addressing the needs of the house, which provided them the opportunity for liberation in terms of leaving the house.**

*I was a kid when I first got married, and I had a horrible life. Everything has changed since we came here. Well, I now have as much responsibility as he does. I have assumed the management of the household, and he has assumed some of it too. There is now some freedom. Now I have certain responsibilities. He just goes to work. I go to work, I take the children to school, I deal with the needs of the home, I identify what is needed at home and buy it. I may ask him to get something, and he may bring it or give money so that I can buy it. There has been a lot of change in this regard. The change is great. I now have more freedom. I can go out. He just wants me not to talk to men so that people do not gossip about me. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*The change here is huge for women. Previously, men would work and go shopping on their own. He would pay the utility bills. But this is not the case here. We do our own shopping. The roles have changed. In Syria, I would not leave the home as people would find it disgraceful. But this country is not like that; we can go out freely. This place is very free. In Syria, society would disapprove of women who went out and walked around. Here, society is not like that. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)*

*My husband was working at a construction site all day long, and he would not have time for anything else. He was not able to find time for other errands. So, I started to go to the*





*market, pay the utility bills, and go to the children's school. I started to go to the district governor's office and work at the Center (WGSS). I would not have done any of this in Syria. Now, I am accustomed to this country. I have not had much difficulty. It is more relaxed here. In Syria, women had nothing. All errands were the responsibility of men, and women would do nothing. Men would do everything. It is no longer the case in this country. Both men and women can go out; now they are equals. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*Here, life is harder. In Syria, women would not do anything. But those who have come here have to help their husbands. They have to visit their children's school and get them enrolled there. They have to go and get aid. They have to do household chores. Formerly, all they had to do was to clean the house, get dressed up and wait for their husbands. All other tasks would belong to their husbands. Many women believe that they no longer have any lives, as they would just get dressed up and go out in Syria. Now, more than half of responsibility of the entire household falls on the shoulders of women. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*There has been much change for the Syrian women in Turkey. I can see women outside the home. They can go shopping. Women can attend courses and go out alone. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*


It is understood from the narratives of the women that liberation can also be attributed to the weakening social pressures in the country of origin due to the introduction to a new social environment through migration. In addition, the respondents indicated that their liberation was further facilitated when their husbands saw and tolerated their need to go out and take a walk to recover from the psychological trauma of their war experiences.

*After I came here and started to visit the Center (WGSS), I grew stronger. I was away from my parents, and this has really empowered me. "You cannot have everything you want," I say to my husband. I am more relaxed or stronger as I am away from my parents and older brothers in Syria. "You are running rampant," my husband would say to me after we came to Turkey. My husband gets mad and says, "You do not listen to me and you do not do what I want." But that is okay. I have learned something. I feel like a bird which has been released from its cage. I have seen people and their lives. I live my life and go out. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*The first time I went out was to get some fresh air, see different things and recover. I was taking my children to the park every week. I would go out with my husband's permission. I was exhausted and depressed. I felt constricted. So, I had to go out, and my husband knew it. He would not let me do so in Syria because it was against the customs. But it is not the case here. He had to comply with the customs of Turkey. He had to adapt to Turkey. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*It is now better for women. In the past, we had to veil our face in order to go out. Well, I was more relaxed than most women in Syria, as I would not comply with those rules. But most women would live as if they were in prison. They would not be allowed to go out at all, or they had to be accompanied by their husbands. "Take your son and go," they now say. Some women note that their husbands have changed a lot, and they are freer now. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*It is like this country, but I now live more freely here. I feel freer. In Syria, when I went out*



alone, people would find it disgraceful and gossip about me. In Syria, my husband would not allow me to go out alone, and I would not go out without his permission. But after we came here, I started to go out alone gradually. Initially, I would seek permission from my husband, but now that is no longer needed. “I allow you to go wherever you want without informing me,” he says. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)

A health mediator noted that she would go out, visit the Center (WGSS) and attend training courses without getting permission from her husband, saying: “**We only have one life. We will not have another chance. I want to lead my own life.... This is my life.**” She underlined that she makes her own decisions in her life.

*I would visit the Center (WGSS) every day. But I would not tell my husband that I was going. I would say to him that the training course was given once a week. There came a time when I decided not to ask my husband. I would do as I wished. If I wanted to go to the training course, I would go. If I did not want to go, I would not go. I wanted to make a life for myself. If I had said to him that I would go every day, he would let me do it. We only have one life. We will not have another chance. I want to lead my own life. I will make my own decisions about my life. Sometimes he tries to fight back, but I do what I say. “I have no right to meddle with your life, and you do not have the right to interfere in mine,” I say to him. I love my husband very much, but this is my life. After coming to Turkey, I felt like a human being. When I compare my previous life and with my new one, I certainly favor my current life. Now, I have become like a lioness. (Bürken, A28, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

The Syrian women who work as health mediators in Turkey pointed out that **their apparel has changed** as they observed the lifestyles of the women in their circles.

*In Syria, I had to dress up all in black. I like fashion, and I do not want to cover my face and be dressed all in black. Here in Turkey, my apparel is more relaxed. For instance, I see you; you are a woman and can do whatever you want. This is what we should be able to do as well. We cannot just stay at home and keep silent. For instance, when I come here, I see that S. and T. (the social worker and the psychologist at the WGSS) are women, but they do something for women, and this empowers me. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Everything, including how I eat or drink, my thoughts, my children, and my apparel have changed. I no longer cover my face with a veil when I am alone. But I cover my face when I am with my husband. His parents would not accept it. So, I do it to ward off trouble. They do not see me often, and they do not know that I go out alone (without a face veil), or that I go out in this manner when I go out with my friends. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*If I am to make a comparison between Turkey and Syria, I can simply say that I have found myself here. For instance, I would not be able to go out in this attire in Syria. People are more aware here. If I see a girl without a scarf, I do not criticize her. Indeed, the girls who do not wear headscarves are stronger and even more restrained. This place is different. In Syria, a woman has to cover her face when she goes out. She has to wear gloves so that her hands are not seen. If they saw me in this attire (pants and tunic), they would think that I am a foreign woman and they would speak ill of me. Even a coat that extends below the knee may not be approved. The men who come from Aleppo are terrified to see women in this state. They look at them disapprovingly. “Come and have tea with me if you like,” they even said*



*to me. "What does it have to do with it?" I retorted. "You have become like Turkish women," they would say. "You have forgotten your roots. You go out in this manner." In Syria, I would cover my face with a veil and wear gloves before going out. (Cezire, A23, M, 2C, Aleppo)*

The women voiced **their views about changes in the role responsibilities of men and women** as a result of what they have observed in terms of the living conditions in Turkey, and the gender equality training provided at the Center (WGSS).

*In my opinion, men should have whatever responsibilities women have. And women should have whatever responsibilities men have. This applies not only the household chores, but to every matter. The best thing here is that it is not inappropriate for women to work. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*In Syria, I thought that men should go and work, but women should be able to do something for themselves. But I could not do anything. In Syria, I did not know anything because my husband did everything. But in Turkey, I try to come to the Center (WGSS) after my husband goes to work. I try to go to Kızılay. That is, I feel that I can do something here. Here, I paddle my own canoe, and I am more comfortable. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*


*In terms of roles, it is okay. For instance, men work outside of the home, while women work at home. But I questioned why men did not help women when they do not work. For instance, there are off days and they are perfectly capable of helping their wives. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*But after I came here, I learned that I can do all this, that is, I can organize my life and I can take care of my children on my own; I can make a living on my own. I have noticed and learned this. So, I have realized that I can do everything I expect from my husband, and this has been a good thing for me. People have to change. We were not like this when we were there, but change should come. So, we have arrived at this point; women and men are and should be equal. Men cannot exist without women and vice versa. They are equal and they should have the same rights. This is the right thing. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*Now, the change is huge. There has been a lot of change in my view. For instance, I now believe that just as a man can work, a woman can work. As for child care, I have taken care of my daughters, but we have still children to take care of, and this is not a responsibility that exclusively belongs to women. Men should also assume responsibility in this matter. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed indicated that **the training and consultancy they received** at the WGSS **helped them manage their lives**. They noted that the training on women's rights in particular helped them make radical decisions and become liberated.

*I have changed a lot. I came here with my older brothers who got me across the border. "Never go out. Do not do anything. I will bring you everything you need," my older brother would say. Then, I observed that people were acting in a relaxed manner. After seeing this place, I have removed some of the restrictions on my life. "Do not meddle with me. I will work now. I will do it. I will learn. I will go out," I said. "I will learn so that I can teach my children." This was what I decided to do. I started living like this. I saved myself. I felt that I was something. I was scared before. But now, I have made the decision: If my husband*



comes, I will stand against him. I will not give my children to him. I will take legal action first, for divorce and, then, for the custody of my children. I will not leave him anything. Here, laws favor women. This is what I have seen, felt and learned. I have recorded all the training sessions. They were extremely useful. Since I have been able to take control of my life and rights, I have been able to reject my former life. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)

My life here differs considerably from the one in Syria. In Turkey, I have lost my children, but I have gained my freedom. I feel more comfortable. In the past, my name was the “woman who was beaten by her husband, and who stayed at home and cleaned the house.” With the information and support I got from here (WGSS), I got divorced and I have now become the woman who works with the physicians at the Center (WGSS). So, I am more relaxed and freer. I was a woman who did not know anything. Now, at least I have regained my dignity. For instance, when I see a woman who has been beaten or subjected to violence, I say to her: “Do not remain passive against violence. You have rights.” Just as they have taught me, I want to be a role model for other women. They should learn that this is not supposed to happen. We are now at a time when we need to change what we learned from our ancestors. We need a change in our lives and in our generation. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)

When comparing their current lives to their lives in Syria, the life practices which the health mediators identified as having changed as a result of migration, such as training, socialization, increased responsibilities, leaving the house, and work are all factors that empowered the women. One of the women interviewed expressed the change in her life and her empowerment saying, **“I see myself as a second individual, that is, I feel as if I have created a second personality.”**

I am here after what I have been through and witnessed, and this is what makes me stronger and, at the same, sensitive. Before, my children and I would expect my husband to give us money or buy things we needed. Now, I have my salary, and now, the children expect me to buy things for them. In the past, the only freedom I had was to visit my relatives and neighbors. I would not be able to visit other places. Here, I am more relaxed regarding freedoms, and I can visit the Center (WGSS) or go to Kızılay; this makes me feel stronger. (Nahr, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)

In Syria, I did not have the right to have a say. Here, I now have a say in many matters, and I have started to talk about many things. I have some power. I see myself as a second individual, that is, I feel as if I have created a second personality. Indeed, the previous personality would be afraid of everything, and would not say anything. Now, I feel stronger. At least, what I say at home is taken seriously, and I can get things done. I feel like I have a voice in this matter. I am strong. In Syria, I would tell my problems to my mother, but she would not pay much attention. “Be patient; such things happen,” she would say. Here I feel stronger. When I have a problem, I come here and talk about it. I learn new things and feel stronger. I can share my problems. I have learned and acquired lots of things from the training. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)

In a sense, migration liberates women. I have discovered freedom. And I have taught it to my daughters. I am teaching it to everyone around me. I have been liberated to a certain extent. I am strong, and I have to be strong. Otherwise, I would not be able to go on. (Seme, A44, M, 9C, Al-Bab)



*My husband has witnessed my empowerment. This was not something he wanted to see. He thought that I could not live away from or without him. He was shocked and terrified to see the change in me. He left me in my most difficult times. He left me in Lebanon, during the escape, and here, without employment and without any money. But I make sure that my daughters can attend school. I work and stand on my own two feet. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

## Expectations for the Future

The changing living conditions of Syrian women are changing their expectations from life. In a study conducted by AFAD (2017), 30% of Syrian individuals stated that they were in desperation about their future. 41% of the Syrian individuals interviewed indicated that half of the Syrian people in Turkey would stay permanently in Turkey. When they were asked about their expectations for the future, the majority of the health mediators expressed their intention to build a life in Turkey. In this context, their expectations include the continuation of their children's education, having a regular job, learning the language, doing what they were not able to do in Syria, being saved from the worse events, and ensuring gender equality.

*My expectation for the future is being saved from the worse events. Let adversities not happen. This is good enough for me. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

In one story about her desire to build a life in Turkey, a woman noted that women, who did not have any rights in Syria, want to build a life in Turkey. In addition, another important expectation of the women was the continuation of their children's education.

*Firstly, I do not want to return to Syria. I hope that my children will attend school and they do not drop out of school. They should have an occupation and lead a good life. I do not want anything. I just want these. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*To see that my children have completed their education and are employed. I would appreciate it if I could find a job. Those who are wealthy naturally want to return to Syria. Those who have no rights there do not want to go back. I feel better here, and I am freer. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I hope that my children complete their education and my husband becomes a good man, or I will leave him. Just these. (Şems, A33, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I do not have high expectations. If the war does not end and we cannot return to Syria, I want to have the same rights as Turkish citizens. For instance, I want to be able to buy a home. I do not want to pay rent every month; I feel terrible about this. I want my rights to be equal; I do not want refugee status. A little bit of belonging. (Zobea, A42, E, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I expect my children to finish their school and reach their goals. If they want to study, they should. For myself, I hope to finish school. (İğsar, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

In their expectations for the future, dominated by their intention to build a life in Turkey, the women interviewed expressed their interest in learning the language. In addition, they also intend to manage their lives as they wish. An woman interviewed described her expectation for the future as “**being able to**

***do what she was not able to do in her previous life.***” This statement indicates that the migration process has turned into an opportunity for the women.

*First, I want to speak Turkish fluently and accurately. I want to talk like Turkish citizens. I want to do what I was not able to do in my previous life. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I would like to learn Turkish. “See how I have learned to speak Turkish before learning how to write in Arabic.” This is because Turkey has brought good things to me. If my parents push me, I may have to marry again. If my older brothers push me, I may have to marry again in order to get rid of this pressure. But I do not want to get married again. I want to learn the language and build a life here. I have to secure myself first. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

In the above-mentioned narrative, Kine, a 29-year-old woman who was divorced, indicated that her parents disapproved of her building a life as a single woman, and she was facing pressures from them for her to marry again. She added that these pressures would escalate. As noted by Deacon and Sullivan (2009), single refugee women are subjected to pressures to marry again in the country of asylum. Due to these pressures, they may not be able to benefit from all resources, including language learning and training, which would help them improve their socio-economic status. If they are deprived of social support, the pressures of cultural norms may overwhelm single refugee women.

Women who were not able to work although they wanted to so in Syria expressed their expectations of working in a job where they could benefit others. They noted that this expectation was fulfilled by working at the Center.

*My expectation was to be able to work. I had tried that; I did not expect much from it. I just wanted to try to work. I wished I had a job in this life and could be of benefit to others. This was what I wanted to do. I did it, thank God. If I had been able to attend school, I would have wanted to become a teacher or physician in order to be a benefit to others. But that did not happen. Instead, I stayed at home and I got married. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*My dream was to become a physician and go to medical school. I also wanted to establish a humanitarian association. I would like to help people. I want to establish a big association where elderly people, women who were subjected to violence, and orphans can stay. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

A health mediator who dreamed of a future where women have rights and live freely emphasized not only her wishes for the end of dominance over women, but also voiced her demand for equality.

*My expectation for the future is that women should have all their rights. Women should be able to voice their views freely. They should be able to go out freely. Their partners should trust women. “Where have you been? Where are you coming from?” They should not ask questions like this. There should be equality. Women should be able to voice their opinion just as men do. In my eyes, a man should not be commanding or domineering. He should act equally. A man is a human being, created by God. So is a woman. So, he should treat her on equal terms. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*



## Views on Returning

A survey conducted by AFAD (2017) found that 16% of Syrian individuals do not plan to go back; 35% would go back to Syria after the conflict in the country ends; and 24% do not think that the civil war in Syria will end in the near future.

When some of the health mediators interviewed expressed their intention to build a life in Turkey, they were also questioned regarding their thoughts about returning to Syria. Many women stated that they do not want to go back, but their husbands are eager to return. The explanation they offered was that their husbands had lost their previous power and social status by coming to Turkey, and they suffer maltreatment under the working conditions in Turkey.

*I hope the war ends, but I am not planning to go back. On the other hand, my husband wants to return, as he is subjected to insults at his workplace. "You will work like a donkey," they say to him. "I tolerate denigration. I have to work, so I keep silent," he says. Some bosses and some people are very kind and helpful, but some people are not. This applies to all nations. There are both good and bad guys all around the globe. (Sanobar, A37, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*Everything has changed. People ask me if I want to return when the war in Syria ends. No, I never want to return. I am very comfortable here, and I do not want to go back. I want to stay here. This is because I never saw anything good there. In Syria, my husband was the had his own business, but here, he has to work as an employee under the control of other people.... That is why, he wants to return to Syria. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

The women interviewed indicated that their **"liberation"** is the reason they do not want to go back. They expressed their intention to stay in Turkey, saying: **"That is, I have acquired my freedom here,"** and **"...if they do not force us to return to Syria, I will stay here."**

*Turkey is more beautiful than Syria, so if they do not force us to return to Syria, I will stay here. This is because when we go back to Syria, my husband will return to his former self. Here, I do not keep anything away from my children. I do whatever they want. This is what matters. If they do not take me to Syria by force, I will not go. I have no home in Syria. I love my life here very much. It is not easy to build a life again. I like my life here. I am freer now. I feel comfortable. I am so happy. I can go out, walk around and make decision myself without having to tell anyone. I have been liberated and I can do anything without having to tell anyone. I can do anything even if it is a simple thing, without anyone knowing. (Hermel, A27, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*Those who are wealthy naturally want to return to Syria. Those who have no rights there do not want to go back. I feel better here, and I am freer. (Turab, A40, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*No, I do not want to. I love Turkey. That is, I have acquired my freedom here. There is no one here other than me who speaks. I know that if there is something that bothers me, I know that I can file a complaint against it and claim my rights. That is why I want to stay here. We are comfortable here. (Bedir, A21, M, NC, Raqqa)*

The women interviewed indicated that **they no longer had a home to return to as their homes were destroyed, burned down or bombed; that their possessions had been stolen in the war in Syria;**

**and that they have built a new life here, as their children had adapted to Turkey and their schools.** They stated that they do not want to go back for these reasons. **“I do not have a home to return to.”**

*No, I do not want to go back. They stole all our stuff from the house. After stealing it, they burned the house down. There were so many clashes that our house was completely destroyed. I do not have a home to return to. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*We probably cannot return as the children are accustomed to this country. My son is now in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He has no idea about Syria. How can he go to school if we go back there? (Şellel, A35, M, 3C, Aleppo)*

*They also noted that they are **afraid that they will be persecuted upon return to Syria, or during the process of returning** because others know that they fled to Turkey.*

*Migration is extremely difficult, especially for women. So, I am afraid to go back. I am afraid that soldiers may detain or shoot me, or they may resort to violence, or do other things. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I did not come through illegal means. I came to Turkey with a passport. I was planning to return to Syria. However, people told me that if we went to Turkey using my passport, Turkey's seal would be stamped on it and when I returned to Syria, the army might send me to jail. So, we are afraid. (Vaha, A50, D, 6C, Damascus)*

Some health mediators expressed their intention to return **“if the war ends...”** or **“if there is peace and freedom in Syria.”**

*For now, I am not planning to return as the war is not over. I will return if the war ends and everything is okay. There is no place like the homeland. No place is like one's homeland, even if it is a good place. I lead a free life here. But my brothers and sisters are there. I have not seen them since the war started. I miss them. “The war is not over; everything, including utilities, are expensive. Stay there,” my brothers said. (Seru, A30, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I would like to live in Syria, but, of course, under these conditions—in peace, and provided that girls have the same freedoms as boys. I would not feel sorry if I stayed in Turkey for the rest of my life. I love this country and its system. (Asife, A43, M, 6C, Aleppo)*

*I hope there will be peace for everyone. I hope the war in Syria will be over as soon as possible so that we can return. (May, A41, D, 4C, Al-Hasakah)*

*My current expectation is that there will be no war in Syria, and I can see and live with my parents before they die. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

In AFAD's study (2017), 51% of Syrian individuals stated that they were not eager to go to a third country with better conditions than Turkey. In the present study, many health mediators interviewed indicated that they were not planning to go to a third country. They noted that the lifestyles and customs in Turkey are close to theirs; they feel better being physically close to Syria; they have built a life here; they are comfortable here; and that the migration process is exhausting. Therefore, they do not want to go to a new country.

*After coming here, they crossed the Aegean Sea to Germany. Our relatives may request our admission. My son wanted to go Germany, but I did not. I love this place. I did not want*





*to go. The traditions of that country are foreign to us, so I did not want to go there. I was scared. The traditions and lifestyles of this country are closer to ours. (May, A41, D, 4C, Al-Hasakah)*

*I had the opportunity to go to Europe as my husband's case was sensitive. But I wanted to stay here because its traditions, customs, and religion were close to those in my country. Also, this country is physically close to my country. If everything is okay again, I would like to return to Syria. (Nahr, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I never wanted to go to a third country. I do not want to leave this place. I am okay here, and I do not want to exhaust myself any more. (Zobea, A42, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

## **In Closing, a Sense of Sisterhood**

At the end of the interviews, the women were asked if they would like to add anything. As they felt unburdened by telling their stories and they believed that their stories were understood, they uttered expressions of closeness and candor with the researchers: “...**the most important thing is that I have kept this inside for 13 years, and as I have told my story, I feel relieved of this burden,**” and “**You are like my sister.**” They pointed out that they were glad that such a study was conducted, and they wanted to see more projects on women's rights implemented. They felt that they were not alone.

*Thank you very much. You are like my sister. (Ballut, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I want the projects geared toward women to continue. At least, their ideas should change. Even if you get tired, I want you to continue working with women. I want them to change. (Kine, A29, D, 3C, Aleppo)*

*I would like to thank you very much for caring about women's rights. Thank you for this Center (WGSS) and for working with women. (Nicme, A42, D, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I believe I am unburdened. (Rih, A41, M, 4C, Aleppo)*


*I would like to attend all the training if you give me notice of them. I want to learn. If you can give me notice a few days in advance, I would like to leave the children with my neighbor and attend them. (Vadi, A39, D, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I feel relieved after telling my story (laughing). (Nahr, A32, M, 5C, Aleppo)*

*I am very glad that someone cares about me... What I fear most is that they say, “Get out of here,” but I will never be concerned if people care about me. Thank you very much. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I am not going to say anything. I just cannot thank you enough. I have met very nice people. I have learned something here. We have shared something, and I know that if I am in trouble or if something happens to me, there are people I can consult and a Center (WGSS) I can visit. This makes me very happy. Thank you very much. (Şiheb, A43, M, 4C, Aleppo)*

*I hope the war ends, and you come to Syria to visit us. You will see that we used to have a comfortable life. We were living in Tadmur, a tourist destination. Its name comes from a*



*woman who revolted against Rome. Zenobia was the name of the woman. The ruler of the city of Zenobia was a woman. That is why ISIL wants to destroy us. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*I would like to thank you very much. This is the first time I have felt a place has really taken active interest in Syrians. I am very grateful for such a place. (Cebel, A40, M, 3C, Homs)*

*It was a very useful interview. The most important thing is that I have kept this inside for 13 years, and as I have told my story, I feel relieved of this burden. (Vaha, A50, D, 6C, Damascus)*

*I am so happy, thank you. (Íğsar, A28, M, 4C, Aleppo)*



## CONCLUSION

In this study, we aimed to learn about the experiences of Syrian women before the war, during the war and during their escape, in the country of asylum; and also about their changing lifestyles, the empowerment practices taught through training provided, and their employment at the WGSS. The following are the results and conclusions of the study:

***Being a Girl in Syria:*** The upbringing of Syrian women in compliance with their gender roles starts at a particularly early age. Girls are raised in preparation for marriage and to serve men. At home, they help their mothers, do the cleaning, care for their siblings, serve their brothers, and perform similar chores. It was found that girls do not have a life of their own, and, as such, they do not have much time to play games, which is one of the most important elements of childhood. Most of the women stated that they started wearing the hijab at age 9-10. As they perceived wearing the hijab as a sign of growing up, they were eager to wear the hijab, but they rejected certain forms of veiling, such as covering the face with a veil. The practice of wearing the hijab goes hand in hand with the locking up girls in the home. Educational facilities introduced by modern nation-states ensure that children can be prepared for adulthood in a system that is separate from adults. The education of Syrian girls is interrupted. This is followed by child marriage. According to the narratives of the women interviewed, their childhood ended at age 12-13 and, in some cases, at the age of 16. Of 26 women interviewed, only 9 were aged 18 or over when they got married.

***Getting Married and Married Life in Syria:*** Girls tend to be married off, often to their relatives, and at an early age. The respondents referred to customs and traditions in explaining child marriage. The women noted that these customs and traditions seek the submission of women. The widespread practice of child marriage causes concerns for parents that their older daughters may not be able to get married. This in turn paves the way for child marriage, thereby creating a vicious cycle. Another thing to note is that men, who hold the reins of power in the extended family—in accordance with patriarchal ideology—can decide that girls should be married off to relatives, and these decisions cannot be challenged. Following marriage, submission (or lack of it) to men, or even to women who act as carriers of the patriarchal ideology and who share the power of men (such as mothers-in-law), may result in severely violent experiences for women. Even the women defined this severe violence as oppression. In the face of such severe violence, women tend to refrain from filing complaints or talking with anyone about it due to the doctrine of privacy. In addition to well-documented cases of violence, studies concerning violence against women should take into consideration the pressure of having boys rather

than girls, and giving birth to many children and thread of marrying a second wife, which we believe to be linked to “womanhood” in the Middle East. Some women use certain contraception methods secretly to avoid the pressures to give birth to many children. Women feel obliged to bear this violence because of society’s patriarchal oppression of divorced women, and the constant humiliation and attrition of women in the divorce process. The existence of laws that oppress women by denying them an equal share in the division of property or custody of children in case of divorce is another factor discouraging women from divorce.

***The Destructiveness of War and Women:*** Living in a wartime environment is coupled with many problems, including those related to shelter, (in)security, nutrition, displacement, and access to basic services such as healthcare and education. In addition, the wartime environment is replete with horrendous experiences for women such as sexual violence, rape, poverty, loss of relatives, and child marriage (for girls). In war, women are not assigned active roles like those assumed by men, but they are given roles such as care givers, and take on other activities to maintain life. The respondents indicated that they did not give much thought to the causes of the war, but they heard that there were women who attended the protests for “freedoms”, and that they were tortured and raped in detention. As the war progressed, the participants noted the majority of women participated in the protests when family members had been killed, kidnapped, oppressed or persecuted. However, the women interviewed did not attend the protests in question, but sought a way to keep their families together and escape the war. In the face of all these traumatic events, the women had to stay strong and rebuild a life, which was a great burden. This burden manifested itself the deterioration of physical and psychological health of the women who participated in the study.

***Migration and Life in the Place of Asylum:*** In order to escape from the destructiveness of the war, the women first moved to different places within Syria, and after they were out of options, they decided to migrate to another country. The decision to migrate was generally taken jointly by couples, but some of the women were more determined than their husbands. There were also women who used the war as a pretext to migrate and escape domestic violence. In making the decision to migrate, the fear that husbands or sons might get involved in the war played a role in addition to the destructiveness of the war.

As the women were recounting stories of their escape, they experienced occasional moments of catharsis by reliving traumatic experiences, such as crossing the border with the help of smugglers, passing checkpoints armed forces checkpoints, and the challenging terrain of the escape route. The women interviewed chose Turkey as the country of asylum because it was close to Syria, making it possible to return when needed. They chose Ankara as the city of asylum because they had relatives or acquaintances who had settled there previously. To rebuild a life in the place of asylum, initially the refugees had to overcome poverty. In the first year of their arrival, the women were not able to leave the house due to their fears of being ‘foreigners’. In addition, having escaped the war environment, they felt that they and their children were safe, and this played a role in showing resilience in rebuilding their lives. The women described the biggest problem they faced as the lack of knowledge of the language, and they also talked about unsanitary conditions in the homes they rented. Some of the women indicated that they suffered from discrimination and abuse (such as being defrauded) in their search for a home to rent. The women who fled the war pointed out that they had run out of funds to a large extent, as they were unable to work during the war in Syria, and they had given a significant portion of the money they had to smugglers during the border crossing. The women became impoverished during the war, and needed financial assistance in rebuilding a life in Turkey. Thus, they started to interact with their environment to learn how to access aid. The women started to manage the aid process, and in this process, they contacted



various agencies and institutions outside their homes, and developed new skills. The lack of systematic and regular aid proved to be challenging for the women. The necessity of managing the aid process created a change in gender roles for the women and at the same time, created a heavy burden to them. In addition to the development of their relationship with the environment in the process of receiving aid, household chores and caring responsibilities helped the women adapt to the place of asylum. Compared to these women, men were less successful in this adaptation. For the respondents, the reason for this was that men lost their jobs and the status they had before migration.

Migration due to war increases the need for healthcare services. The interviews were unable to benefit from healthcare services, both for themselves and for their children, due to a lack of interpreters. One of the problems they faced in Turkey was that their husbands had to work in jobs without security and under poor conditions. Due to poverty, their sons had to drop out of school in order to work. Failure to provide education for their children constituted a major problem for the women. This problem is a source of sadness particularly because one of the reasons they left their country was to ensure that their children could attend school. Another source of concern is that their children face various discriminatory attitudes in education.


As victims of child marriage, these women do not want their children marry at a particularly early age. However, girls aged 15-18 are forced to get married if they cannot continue their education and if they cannot find a job. This is a problem especially the refugee girls in Turkey.

***Changes due to Migration, and Syrian Women as Health Mediators:*** The women, who had been locked in their homes in Syria, have undergone a significant change due to the war and migration to another country. There are several factors leading to this change:

- 1) Questioning their lives as a consequence of the fear of death experienced during the war,
- 2) Moving away from the social pressures in the country of origin,
- 3) The living conditions in the country of asylum (the women have to deal with tasks outside the home, such as meeting the needs of the home, taking the children to school and making use of healthcare and financial assistance services, since men typically work long hours),
- 4) Women's relatively better status in the country of asylum,
- 5) Working at the WGSS and receiving awareness-raising training on women's rights.

As part of a gender-sensitive project, Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS) aim to ensure that women are able to access healthcare services and at the same time, develop awareness about gender-based violence, and provide the tools needed to combat violence. Thanks to the WGSS, the Syrian health mediator women who participated in the study confronted the patriarchal oppression they had internalized, and tried to build a new identity in the face of it. Based on the narratives of the health mediators, working as health mediators at the WGSS, their process of empowerment is summarized below.

- 1) After moving away from the patriarchal pressures of the Syrian society, the women have been able to exhibit more equitable attitudes at home concerning gender roles in a society which is in a relatively better position in terms of gender equality in a new country.
- 2) The economic hardship in the country of asylum and feeling psychologically better among the



other women at the WGSS in the face of the war trauma made it easier for the women to work in paid employment. This employment has paved the way for the women to discover their identity and make decisions by themselves.

- 3) The training they received on family planning, gynecological health, hygiene, child abuse, communication skills, etc., has been effective in improving their living conditions, making them move active in accessing the services, and developing better communications with their children, husbands and social environments.
- 4) Learning about the legislation on women's rights, women have started to feel more secure against domestic violence. They have prevented violence which would otherwise have been committed by their husbands by telling them about what they have learned about women's rights at the WGSS.
- 5) Working with other women concerning the violence against women and creating changes in their lives has further empowered women.
- 6) Working as a health mediator, informing other Syrian women of the resources available to improve living conditions, and supporting them has increased the women's self-esteem and self-confidence.
- 7) By becoming part of new social networks thanks to the WGSS, women have become aware of new resources and opportunities.
- 8) By developing new friendships with other women they have met through the WGSS, women have realized the importance of solidarity among women in daily life. This solidarity has enabled them to develop the resilience to overcome the trauma of war, and the hardship they have faced in the country of asylum



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Fakülteniz Sosyal Hizmet Bölümü öğretim üyesi **Prof. Dr. Özlem CANKURTARAN**'ın **Arş. Gör. Hande ALBAYRAK** yardımcılığında yürüttüğü "**Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifi ile Suriye'den Savaş Nedeniyle Ankara'ya Göç Eden Kadınların Yaşam Hikayeleri**" başlıklı araştırma projesi, Üniversitemiz Senatosu Etik Komisyonunun **25 Nisan 2017** tarihinde yapmış olduğu toplantıda incelenmiş olup, etik açıdan uygun bulunmuştur.

Bilgilerinizi ve gereğini rica ederim.

Prof. Dr. Rahime M. NOHUTCU  
Rektör a.  
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