

# SYRIAN WORKERS in TURKEY'S GARMENT INDUSTRY

*Looking Back, Moving Forward*



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## 1. Introduction

As the Syrian civil war enters its ninth year, more than half of the Syrian population has been forcefully displaced from their homes, with 5.6 million seeking refuge abroad. With its open door policy, Turkey has contributed significantly to humanitarian relief for more than 3.5 million civilians affected by the war in Syria. The protection and rights that Turkey has granted to Syrian refugees<sup>i</sup>—including access to its labour market—have been widely acknowledged by international organisations and foreign governments.

The vast majority of Syrians in Turkey reside outside of refugee camps, making their living from waged labour in towns and cities across Turkey, including work in the garment industry. Turkey's garment industry has become one of the largest sources of income for Syrians, with an estimated 250,000–400,000<sup>ii</sup> Syrian workers. In recent years increasing attention has been directed toward the precarious employment conditions of Syrian refugees in this sector. Particular attention has been drawn to child labour in the supply base of global garment brands, increasing demands for supply chain transparency and responsible business conduct. While a large number of public and private support schemes have been initiated, recent studies suggest that there remains an urgent need to protect Syrian refugees from discrimination and exploitation.

This report begins with the assumption that any attempt to improve the working conditions of refugees has to build on an in-depth understanding of the challenges and aspirations of refugee workers themselves. Although structural conditions render refugees more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in general, refugee workers are not a uniform group. Cleavages based on age, gender, ethnicity, legal status, and language skills intersect with their experiences as well as with their strategic options and constraints to improve their own lives. This is why support schemes have to be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of different groups of refugee workers.

Focusing on how refugee workers experience and navigate their precarious situations, this report sheds light on both the individual as well as the structural factors that enable and constrain refugee workers in their struggle for a decent life in Turkey. Hence, while the purchasing practices of brands and the domestic policy framework remain decisive in shaping the conditions on the factory floor, refugees' own agency and struggles must be understood as a constitutive element of their workplace experience. Such an actor-centred approach will allow us to evaluate the importance of different levels of intervention and to identify key mechanisms and policies to improve working conditions for refugee workers.

## 2. Background: Syrian refugees in Turkey's garment industry

The garment industry is among the most important sectors of Turkey's economy and foreign trade, contributing significantly to the country's revenues and employment. Turkey is the seventh largest exporter of garment products in the world, and it ranks third among the countries that manufacture apparel for the EU. For the Turkish economy as a whole, textiles and garments are the second largest export market to the EU.

As is the case in other countries, the success of Turkey's garment industry has been closely linked to the availability of a cheap and flexible workforce. Against the background of an industry shifting toward fast fashion, characterized by shorter production cycles and smaller orders<sup>iii</sup>, Turkey's competitiveness has largely relied on an informal sector that has allowed garment exporters to react more flexibly to market demands and rapidly changing product lines and to deliver in relatively short lead times. This informal sub-sector shares a complementary division of labor with the formal economy. While formal enterprises that export to international brands are often subject to labor audits by their US or European customers, it is common among these first-tier suppliers to subcontract to smaller businesses once larger orders come in<sup>iv</sup>. As subcontracting to smaller units is considered an integral part of the Turkish production model<sup>v</sup>, around 48,000 out of 52,000 companies in the garment industry have fewer than 50 employees<sup>vi</sup>. It is estimated that up to 80 percent of workers in these factories operate outside labor, health, and financial regulation<sup>vii</sup>.

Apart from the widespread use of informal labor, Turkey's garment industry heavily relies on migrant workers. Long before Syrians arrived in Turkey, garment workshops employed Azeris, Afghans, Uzbeks, and other (domestic and international) migrants who were willing to accept jobs that lost attractiveness among local workers. Hence, informal migrant workers are not a new phenomenon in Turkey's garment industry. However, Syrians represent a unique group among garment workers, not only due to their rapid population increase in recent years but also because they are among the few migrant groups that are legally eligible to obtain a work permit.

Given the low entry barriers for migrant workers, it comes as no surprise that approximately 18 percent of the Syrian youth in Istanbul found work in the garment

industry<sup>viii</sup>. As a result, there has been a growing interest in researching Syrian refugees in Turkey's garment industry and the implications for policy makers and the private sector. Surprisingly few studies, however, have based their reports on primary data collected from refugee workers themselves. A notable exception is a comprehensive study published by the Turkish labour union Birleşik Metal-İş in 2017. The study draws on more than 600 interviews with Turkish and Syrian workers to explore the differences between Syrian garment workers and the local workforce in terms of working conditions, salaries, and demographic structure<sup>ix</sup>. The study finds that informality is far more common among Syrian nationals, with close to 100 percent of Syrian workers lacking a work permit that would grant them access to social security and legally mandated rights and benefits. This share was only around 50 percent among their Turkish colleagues.

Furthermore, the share of female workers was found to be significantly lower among Syrians, whereas child labour (workers at the age of 15 and below) is more prevalent. Wages in Turkey's garment industry are characterized by a hierarchy led by male Turkish workers. While female Turkish workers, on average, earn less than their male colleagues, they are better off compared to Syrian men, followed by Syrian women, which are at the bottom of the wage scale. In particular, the wages of female Syrian workers were found to be well below the minimum wage and even below the hunger limit as defined by the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk İş). At the same time, the working hours of garment workers substantially exceed the legal limits, with one-third of the workforce spending more than 60 hours per week at the workplace. In addition, the report points out that Syrians face further discrimination by other factory workers, which widely share a negative perception of their Syrian colleagues.

These conclusions were largely confirmed by a study of the non-profit organisations Fair Action and Future in Our Hands, which interviewed four Syrian workers in Turkey<sup>x</sup>. Their report also reveals that the lack of work permits and written contracts comes with a range of additional disadvantages, including difficulties holding factory owners responsible in cases of arbitrary dismissals or if payments are denied or delayed.

## Regulation on Provision of Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection

In January 2016, the “Regulation on Provision of Work Permits for People under Temporary Protection” entered into force. Work permits can be issued to Syrian refugees at the request of an employer if a number of key criteria are met. These criteria include:

- the applicant has to be registered with the Turkish authorities as a person under temporary protection
- the temporary protection registration has been made at least six months prior to the work permit application
- the workplace has to be in the city of registration
- the number of Syrian workers cannot exceed 10 percent of the Turkish citizens in the same workplace

Work permits are subject to renewal every year. Until September 2018, a total number of 27,930 work permits were given to Syrian nationals.



## 3. Syrian Refugees in Turkey's Garment Industry: Projects and Rationales

Growing awareness of the precarious working conditions in the supply base of global brands has generated hopes for a positive change for domestic and foreign workers in Turkey<sup>xi</sup>. Such hopes have been nourished by a rapidly expanding number of support programs by NGOs, government agencies, and private sector organisations to improve the conditions of

informal migrant labour in Turkey's garment industry. Despite sharing similar objectives, these programs have focused on different aspects that bear on the working conditions and risks of exploitation. Projects can be distinguished along three distinct areas of intervention: (1) the individual level of workers, (2) state regulations, and (3) the global industry level.



### 3.1. The Individual Level

A common explanation for the disadvantaged position of refugee workers in the labour market refers to the skills and knowledge of foreign migrants as compared to demands in host societies. From this perspective, restricted information about bureaucratic procedures and the legal framework, as well as barriers related to language or culture, hinder participation of Syrians in the formal economy. Prior work experiences and levels of formal education may similarly play an important role. As studies have highlighted, between 20 to 30 percent of Syrians in Turkey are illiterate and another 10 percent never attended school<sup>xii</sup>. This “mismatch between the skills of refugees and formal labour market requirements”<sup>xiii</sup> suggests that significant investments in training and education will be necessary to facilitate the integration of refugees into the formal labour market. At the same time, labour market integration may be hindered by the willingness of refugees themselves to apply for work permits. As is frequently argued, Syrians who plan to move on to a third country might fear lowering their chances for resettlement once their legal status in Turkey becomes consolidated through formal work.<sup>xiv</sup>

#### Key elements of Turkish labour law

- Employers are obliged to provide the employee with a written document specifying the conditions of work, including working hours, wage, and information regarding the termination of the contract.
- All employees must be registered with the Turkish government’s health insurance system (SGK) to receive benefits in case of illness, pregnancy, disability, and retirement.
- In case of contract termination, employers have to respect a minimum notice period that depends on the time of employment (at least four weeks for employees who have worked longer than six months in the company).
- An employee who has worked at least one year is entitled to severance pay (if specific conditions are met).
- Working time should not exceed forty-five hours per week.
- The monthly minimum wage amounts to 2,558.40 TL gross, which results in a net wage of 2,020.90 TL after taxes.
- Employees are entitled to a minimum of 14 days of annual leave upon completion of one year of service.
- Female employees are entitled to a number of benefits in case of pregnancy, including paid and unpaid maternity leave, flexible working hours after birth, and nursing allowance (given that social security contributions have been paid for at least 90 days in the year prior to the birth)
- Any discrimination of employees in terms of race, gender, political opinion, or religion is prohibited and employers must treat workers in similar positions equally
- It is prohibited to employ children who have not completed the age of fifteen.



Against this background, various NGOs, municipalities, and private sector organisations have started to engage in training and capacity building. For example, Turkey's employment agency İŞKUR offers on-the-job trainings for workers and vocational trainings to increase the employability of low-skilled workers. Furthermore, İŞKUR offers business schools to promote entrepreneurship among Syrian nationals. In addition, United Work, a non-profit organization funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Trade and Development, assists Syrian job seekers with trainings on "Turkish Business Life" to raise awareness about the formal and informal rules in Turkey's economy. A large number of organisations, including municipalities and humanitarian organisations, such as Kızılay, also started to provide Turkish language courses to Syrians as well as legal counselling to inform Syrians workers about their rights and responsibilities.

In the garment industry, two Turkish business associations have engaged in vocational training programs to enhance the skills of refugee workers in accordance with market demands. Between 2015

and 2016, the Istanbul Apparel Exporters' Association (IHKIB) partnered with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD) to build up vocational training ateliers in refugee camps. In a similar vein, the Turkish Clothing Manufacturers Association (TGSD) is engaged in a training atelier in Istanbul where Turkish and Syrian nationals can develop their vocational skills related to cutting, sewing, ironing, and packaging<sup>xv</sup>. A number of global buyers have also started to provide individual support to refugee workers, often in collaboration with NGOs. For example, brands have teamed up with the Refugee Support Center (MUDEM - RSC) to support refugees with obtaining a work permit and to educate refugee workers in terms of labour rights and company rules. Various brands have also declared their contribution to the publication and dissemination of information material in Arabic language on the rights and responsibilities of refugees in Turkey.

## 3.2. State Regulations

Other programs have directed attention to the regulatory environment as an impediment to formal workplace integration of refugees. Most frequently mentioned are bureaucratic barriers to transfer refugees' city of registration, which is a precondition to finding a job in different provinces from where refugees applied for temporary protection status. Since 2017, the possibility to freely choose the place of registration or to transfer registrations to other provinces became increasingly restricted. Many provinces such as Istanbul, Hatay and Mardin have de facto stopped registering Syrian asylum seekers. In August 2019, temporary protection holders residing in Istanbul but registered in other places were instructed to return to their assigned provinces by 30 October 2019.

Besides restrictions on the places of registration, work permit fees and burdensome paperwork have been mentioned as barriers to formalizing refugee workers, which is further complicated by the yearly renewal procedure<sup>xvi</sup>. As the work permit fee significantly adds to the annual labour costs, smaller companies in particular are less likely to formally employ Syrians.

Beyond bureaucratic procedures and state regulations specific to the situation of refugee workers, general concerns have also been raised about the effectiveness of labour law enforcement at the factory level. The fact that around one-third of the entire Turkish workforce is informally employed<sup>xvii</sup> implies that informality in Turkey's economy is not restricted to refugees but represents a wider phenomenon. This means that any examination of the working conditions of Syrians has to consider the broader industry structure rather than place the emphasis solely on Syrians' legal status and related formal rights. With regard to the garment industry, studies have claimed that informal labour is not only tolerated by public authorities but its generalized practice has made it a widely accepted norm in the industry. Hence, it has been claimed that any progress in the conditions of Syrian workers (as well as local workers) will primarily rely upon the capacity and willingness of the state to enforce existing labour laws.<sup>xviii</sup>

Furthermore, various studies have pointed to the need for a long-term perspective for Syrian refugees in Turkey as a prerequisite to address labour rights violations at the workplace. From this viewpoint, refugees' precarious



working conditions have to be seen in relation to refugees' wider immigration status and their rights to housing, health, and social welfare. In particular, the temporariness of the legal status, accompanied by constant threats of deportation, obstructs any possible individual or collective action of refugees to better their own conditions and render refugee labour a distinctly disposable and vulnerable commodity.<sup>xix</sup>

Given the central role of the state in shaping workplace conditions, a number of refugee support programs have particularly focused on lobbying the Turkish state to adapt its migration policies. Notably, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) has sent three open letters to the Turkish government to ease the application process for work permits, decrease work permit fees, and extend the geographical validity of work permits. This has been complemented by meetings between brands and Turkish government representatives to discuss legal reforms in Turkey for improved workplace integration of Syrian refugees. Such efforts have also been facilitated by multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI). One aspect of their programme for the protection of refugee workers is to promote exchange and collaboration between brands, trade unions, NGOs, and the Turkish Ministry of Labour.

Apart from lobbying for improved legislation, projects of various organisations have also focused on reducing the detrimental effects of current policies. This includes the coverage of work permit application fees and social security premiums of employers (as done by the International Labour Organization - ILO) or a temporary subsidy of wages (as offered by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit - GIZ). However, while various efforts have been directed at the regulatory environment specific to persons under temporary protection, the general enforcement of labour legislation in Turkey has received little attention.



### 3.3. Global Industry Level

The third level of intervention asserts that working conditions in supplier factories are to a large extent determined by global garment brands, which are often based in end markets. Given their operational and financial capacity, brands play a crucial role in incentivizing their suppliers to meet labour standards or, similarly, in undermining efforts to ensure dignified conditions for the workers that produce their products.

On the one hand, brands can play a constructive role in upgrading labour conditions in supplier factories by providing financial incentives to socially responsible suppliers, by committing to due diligence guidelines, or by disclosing their suppliers to third party inspections. On the other hand, many reports have pointed out that precarious working conditions in the garment industry are closely linked to brands' business model, which often relies on intense downward pressure on suppliers' pricing and lead times. According to findings by Human Rights Watch, purchasing practices by brands are characterized by "low purchase prices and shorter times for manufacturing products, coupled with poor forecasting, unfair penalties, and poor payment terms"<sup>xx</sup>. As a result, suppliers are driven to cut costs through increasing workers' hourly production targets or by restricting workers' breaks. Another common method of supplier companies is the outsourcing of production to smaller, low-cost units that operate outside the monitoring mechanisms of brands and government inspections. While brands usually forbid outsourcing by their suppliers, their own demands for low-cost production and flexibility are effectively creating the conditions that drive unauthorized subcontracting and, hence, represent one of the root causes of informality and labour abuses on the factory floor.

Against this background, various projects have urged garment brands to tackle labour abuses against refugee workers in their supply base. Since 2015, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre has monitored how major garment brands address the issue of informal refugee workers along their supply chains and the steps they are taking to protect Syrian refugees from exploitation. The Britain-based charity ranked the responses based on various indicators, such as best practices in preventing and mitigating discrimination and exploitation of refugee workers. In a similar vein, the non-profit organisations Fair Action and Future



in Our Hands explore in their study 'Invisible Workers – Syrian Refugees in Turkish Garment Factories' how Nordic fashion brands manage the risks of refugee exploitation in their supply chains. Overall, both projects found that many brands are aware of labour rights violations along their supply chains in Turkey and some have started to take targeted actions, such as concrete policy communications between brands, their suppliers, and Turkish authorities. However, other brands continue to ignore the issue and take few efforts to prevent the abuse of refugees in their supply chains.

In addition to pressures on brands to take preventive steps against labour rights abuses, various multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs), such as Fair Wear Foundation, Fair Labour Association, or Ethical Trading Initiative, developed concrete guidelines and advice to partner brands on how to support Syrian refugees in suppliers' factories. For example, the Fair Wear Foundation published the guidance "Risk related to Turkish garment factories employing Syrian refugees" to help brands carrying out thorough due diligence in their supplier factories in Turkey.

However, despite numerous efforts in the right direction, only 27,930 work permits were given to Syrian nationals from 2016 to September 2018. Hence, there remains an urgent need to identify the main causes for informality and exploitation of refugee workers and to develop a sustained and coordinated approach to improve working conditions in Turkey's garment factories. Such an approach has to build on a profound understanding of the challenges and opportunities of different groups of Syrian workers in Istanbul's garment industry.



## 4. Case Study: Methodology and Research Design

This report draws on 55 interviews with Syrian workers in Turkey's garment industry. Interviews were conducted in Istanbul between February and May 2019, carried out by a team of four field researchers (two from Turkey and two from Syria). Field researchers followed an interview guideline designed to elicit information about the personal and professional backgrounds of interviewees, their working conditions, and choices and constraints regarding their future prospects. The interviews were partially transcribed and coded with the help of a qualitative data software programme (Atlas.ti) to organise data around pre-defined themes and to identify the generalisability of individual statements. Quantifiable data was analysed with Excel to verify and substantiate findings. In addition, the preliminary results were discussed during several meetings with field researchers as well as during a presentation at Istanbul Policy Center (IPC).

To ensure validity and avoid biased responses, interviews took place primarily in private settings. Interviewees were selected via personal contacts and snowball sampling. While this helped to build trust and to access sensitive information, it did not allow us to exercise control over the selection of interviewees based on the locations of their workplaces. Hence, the report does not claim to be representative of all production sites in Istanbul or of the entire Turkish garment industry. However, while we acknowledge that industry characteristics may significantly differ

### 4.1. Overview of Interview

between locations, this study offers a profound understanding of the diverse working lives among refugee workers in Turkey's most important industrial location.

The majority of interviewed workers were young men, between 16 and 25 years old, who arrived in Turkey between 2014 and 2016. Almost three-quarters of the interviewed Syrians came to Turkey together with family members; however, more than half of our interviewees were unmarried and did not have children. Given the fact that garment production is considered a low-skill activity, many Syrian garment workers had surprisingly high levels of education, with the share of high school and university graduates over 20 percent. At the same time, more than half of interviewed Syrians indicated that they did not have any work experience before arriving in Turkey.

Due to a number of constraints, getting in touch and gaining trust among female workers was perceived to be more difficult compared to men. In total, 13 percent of our interviews were conducted with female workers, which is consistent with female labour force participation in Syria during the last decade. At the same time, this number exceeds the share of female interviewees in similar studies in Turkey's garment industry.

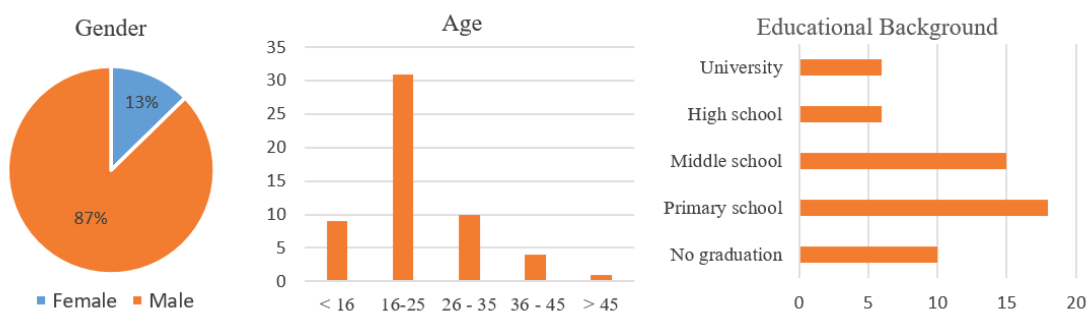


Figure 1:  
Interview Sample Overview

## 4.2. Workplace Locations and Job Positions

The vast majority of workplaces of interview partners were located on the European side of Istanbul (Figure 2). Almost three quarters of these factories employed less than 50 workers, which suggests that they did not have direct business relationships with global brands but that they operated on the subcontractor level. Most of these workshops employed several Syrians and other foreign nationals. This confirms earlier studies which have pointed to a network effect, whereby most Syrians find work through personal relationships and work in companies where other Syrians are employed. Accordingly, 67 percent of respondents indicated that they found their position through friends and family members who worked for the same company. While some stated that their own initiative has been decisive in getting the job, either by applying for job ads or by visiting factories directly, none of our interview partners made use of an official employment agency.

The majority of interviewed workers were employed in the sewing section of the workshop, followed by “runner” positions, responsible for a range of different tasks such as carting cloth, product control and cleaning the factory. Overall, 85 percent of interviewees were informally employed and did not hold a work permit or an official employment contract. Interviews with formal workers allowed us to compare the working conditions of formal and informal workers and to understand the potential benefits of obtaining a work permit. Four interviews with formally employed workers were conducted inside the factory.

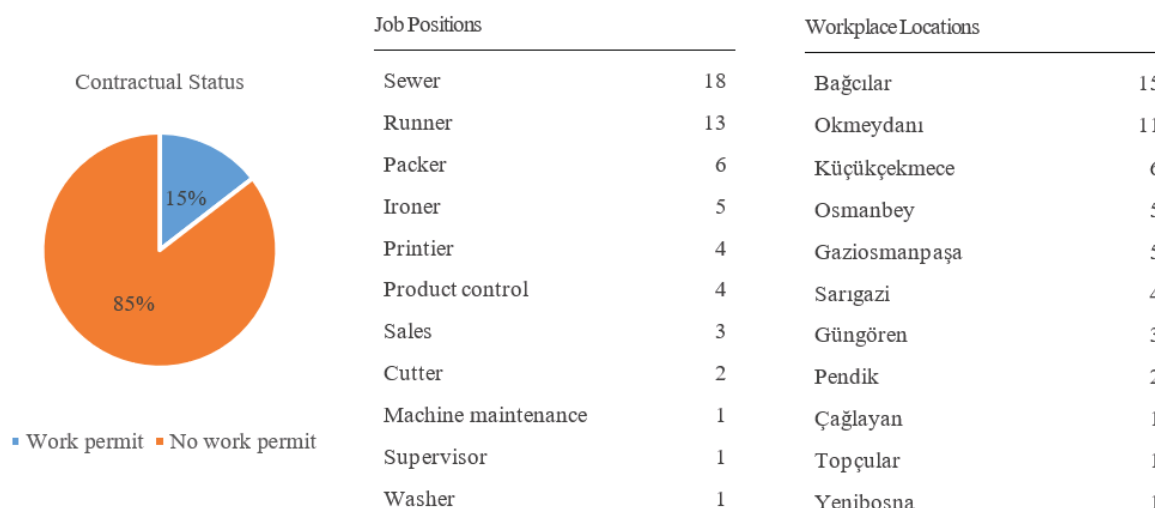


Figure 2: Employment Characteristics of Interview Sample

## 5. Working Conditions of Syrian Garment Workers

A variety of personal and external factors shape the working realities of Syrian garment workers. However, notwithstanding the unique circumstances of individuals and groups, a number of experiences were more common than others.



*“For two and a half months, I have worked every day until nine or ten p.m.. ‘If you don’t do overtime today, don’t come tomorrow,’ my boss says.” - Yamen (23)*

### 5.1. Working Hours

With only a few exceptions, official working hours in Istanbul’s garment factories start between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. and finish between 6:00 and 7:00 p.m., amounting to an average daily working time of more than ten and a half hours between Monday and Friday, in addition to half days on Saturday. Employers grant three breaks during work time: one tea break in the morning and one in the afternoon and a lunch break at noon.

While the beginning of working hours as well as break times are strictly observed, all interviewed workers stated that they are expected to show considerable flexibility regarding end time. Particularly in times of

large orders and approaching delivery deadlines, it is the norm among garment workers to stay considerably longer. Workers stated that they regularly had to work overnight and even sleep in their workshops if it is getting too late. At the same time, many workers reported that they are temporarily laid off if the workload is low. This happens without prior announcement for days, weeks, or even a few months.

Respondents frequently emphasized the compulsory nature of working extra hours. Facing constant threats of losing their jobs and with little legal protection, Syrian workers have few choices other than accepting employers’ demands. The same applies to working on Sundays or public holidays.



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



*“At least once a month my boss forces me to stay until midnight. In these days I am sleeping in the workshop. As I am the only one who sleeps there, I feel restless and invite my brother to stay with me.” - Ahmed (24)*

## 5.2. Salaries

The vast majority of Syrian garment workers, around 80 percent of those who work informally, earns well below the minimum wage. In addition to already exploitative salaries, 65 percent of Syrian workers reported that they face further wage reductions for a variety of reasons. These include unpaid leave in periods of decreased workload or during power cuts.

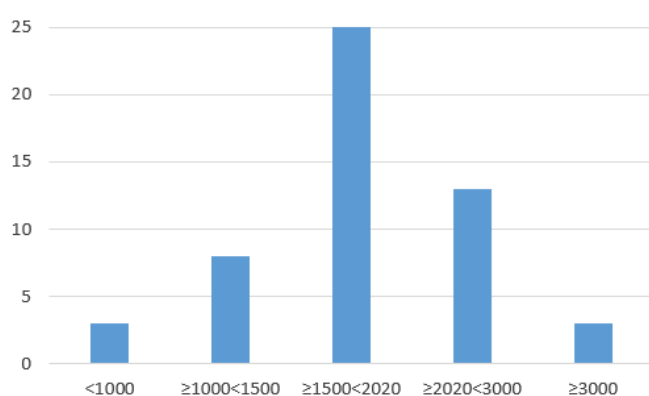


Figure 3:  
Overview of wages (in TL)

Furthermore, Syrian workers have to cope with wage losses in events of illness or during national holidays.

In addition to reduced wages, many Syrian garment workers were reportedly exposed to arbitrary payment terms. This includes varying wage levels, late payments or unpaid training periods. At the same time, working extra hours without additional compensation is often expected.

As many Syrian refugees have to support their relatives, more than half of those interviewed indicated that their salaries do not meet their monthly expenses. In addition, housing costs represent a major cost factor, on average amounting to over 60 per cent of the monthly salary. As a result, many workers had to share their home with up to 20 other people. Within each household, more than half of working-age people had a paid job but in many cases children had to supplement the income of their parents. Another coping strategy of adults was to continue working at home, whereby wages were calculated on a per piece basis. Others mentioned that they had to take on additional jobs during their days off (e.g., as waiters or street sellers) or that they had to borrow money at the end of the month.



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

***“They cut the salary even if I go two minutes late.” – Ziad (31)***



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



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



***“The foreman is always a Turk. Even if a Syrian works better than the foreman, he could never become a foreman.” - Ahmet (24)***

### 5.3. Discrimination

There is a widespread perception among Syrian garment workers that they are discriminated against at their workplace, particularly in respect to wages and job positions. More than half of Syrian workers stated that they work for lower wages than their Turkish colleagues in similar positions. Many interviewees demonstrated knowledge about the wage levels of their colleagues and pointed out that they would earn up to three times as much if they were Turkish. There is a strong belief that this pay gap exists independent of work experience or work performance and is rooted in ethnic identity. In fact, many Syrian workers had gathered industry experience prior to their arrival in Turkey but felt restricted to low-paid positions in their factory.

Furthermore, one-third of interviewees mentioned that they were given more difficult and “dirty” tasks compared to their Turkish colleagues. These impressions were exacerbated by experiences of psychological pressure. Overall, more than one-third of interviewed Syrians reported mistreatment by their boss or colleagues. Most commonly mentioned was yelling racist insults or to work faster, sometimes even incidents of physical violence. These experiences have strongly reinforced feelings among Syrian workers of being unwanted by colleagues and only accepted as a source of cheap labour.



***“Turkish workers can take days off. Also, if they don’t want to work extra time that’s okay. But for us it’s not.” - Ziad (31)***



***“Our boss behaves differently with Syrians. There is some injustice. He is never shouting at his fellow citizens, but at Syrians he is always yelling and making humiliating comments.” - Muhammed (37)***



## 6. Determinants of Workplace Conditions for Syrian Textile Workers

While long working hours, low payments, and mistreatment affect the overwhelming majority of Syrian garment workers, precarious conditions as well as prospects for positive change varied considerably between different groups. Our data allowed us to explore five key determinants that underlie the working experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey. This allowed us to provide a broader picture of key challenges and opportunities for intervention.



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

## 6.1. Gender

Female workers earn considerably lower wages than their male colleagues. The average full time salary for a female worker amounts to 1364 TL compared to an average of 1962 TL earned by their male colleagues. Several factors render Syrian women particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Many women have no prior work experience and indicated that circumstances forced them to seek employment for the first time. Accordingly, they are rarely familiar with capitalist work relations and negotiating their employment conditions. This was well exemplified by a Syrian woman who stated that she used to prepare food for her boss so he would become friendlier and start paying more. However, even in cases of prior work experience and higher education, it was primarily restricted to “simple” work with lower pay, such as cleaning and packing. Another common task for women was to clean the clothes of remaining threads in the end of the production cycle.



***“I didn’t want to work in a textile factory, but I had to, to look after my child.” – Hiba (34)***

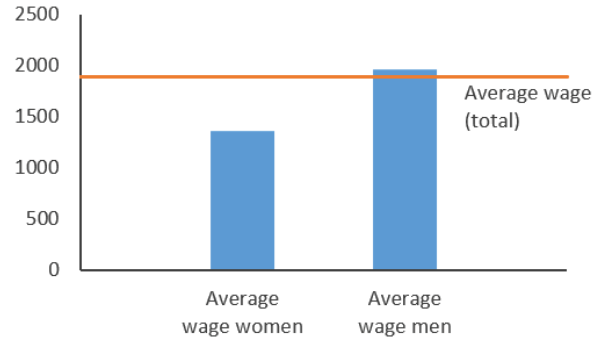


Figure 4:  
Average wages by gender (in TL)

Furthermore, women are more likely to accept lower paid jobs because they have to support their families. While less than half of male workers were married and had children, this share accounted for 85 percent of female respondents. As most women were also responsible for childcare at the same time, some could only work half days or take night shifts in order to look after their children the next morning. This double workload and responsibility also meant that female workers had less time to engage in job searches or to participate in education programs. The responsibility that women carried for their families was also clear when asked about their future plans. For many women, the wellbeing of their families was priority in personal and professional decisions, including their places of residence.

In addition, many female workers reported that they would face pregnancy discrimination. Interviews revealed that pregnancy was expected to lead to job loss, which on many occasions employers communicated directly. As a result, women preferred to hide their pregnancy as long as possible.





Figure 5:  
Child worker in a garment workshop



***“I give all of my salary to my father. In exchange, he gives me 5 TL every day, from which I buy poğaçı.” - Abdullah (13)***

## 6.2. Age

Children age fifteen and below are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. With an average monthly wage of 1,340 TL, their income is comparable to those of women. However, in contrast to other workers, interviewed child workers were rarely employed in a clearly defined position but instead did whatever their boss requires. These tasks may range from bringing tea and food, buying cigarettes, or cleaning the toilets. Apart from being cheaper, children are also preferred for such tasks as they are said to be more obedient and less likely to decline any work instructions.

Eight out of nine interviewed children indicated that they would prefer to go to school but that they had to financially support their families. Some of the children stated that they would work together with one of their relatives in the same factory, and their wages would go directly to a family member. Children who received the salary themselves reportedly forward all of it to their parents in exchange for daily pocket money. As working times were hardly compatible with school hours, most underage interviewees had left school at an early age.

As compared to their senior colleagues, it became obvious during conversations that children had

difficulties coping with the physical and psychological pressure at work. Many of them complained that they would rarely sit down during their 11-hour shifts. Many also reported that they were screamed at.

The fact that child workers shared most of their daily life with adult colleagues inside the factory had serious implications for their self-perception and future dreams. In one case, a 13-year-old worker explicitly mentioned that he was not a child anymore.



***“I really have difficulties to be on my legs all day. I hope my foot is feeling better soon.” - Abdurrahman (15)***

### 6.3. Legal Status

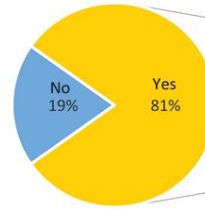
The interviews revealed a large gap in the perception of working conditions between formal and informal workers. On average, formal workers had shorter working hours and worked less on Sundays and public holidays. Their average income was more than 20 percent higher and payment was more reliable, with no wage losses during times of sickness or periods of low workloads. For female workers, formal employment conditions would result in wage increases of more than 67 percent on average. Furthermore, the share of formal workers who felt discriminated against with regard to wages and extra work was significantly lower compared to informal workers.

Against this background, 82 percent of informal workers stated that they would prefer to have a work permit. This contrasts sharply from the widespread belief that free healthcare and uncertain future residence status disincentive taking up a formal job. The benefits of formal employment were not just associated with better working conditions but also with improved access to other rights such as obtaining citizenship, buying property, or improved access to health services. However, the majority of interviewed workers were not aware about the regulation on the provision of work permits for people under temporary protection.

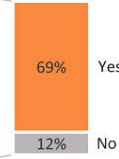
Two obstacles were mentioned as the main barriers to obtaining a work permit. The first relates to whether Syrians have registered under temporary protection as well as their place of registration, which is the only city in which they are legally allowed to work. While 19 percent of workers indicated that they have not applied for temporary protection status (yet), another 12 percent had registered in a different city from their current workplace. Hence, around one-third of interviewed workers were not eligible to receive a work permit in Istanbul, even if they wanted to. Changing the place of registration was mentioned to be very difficult, if not impossible, and new registrations for Istanbul are de facto stopped.

Besides legal and bureaucratic obstacles, a second major obstacle relates to employers' unwillingness to apply for a work permit. The vast majority of informally employed Syrians indicated that they received a negative response from their boss when asking for a work permit. Most

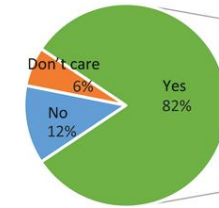
Have you registered under temporary protection?



Have you registered in Istanbul?



Do you prefer to have a work permit?



Have you talked with your boss about it?

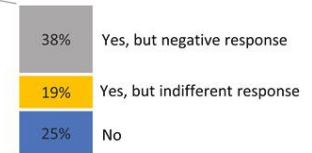


Figure 6: Challenges to receive a work permit

frequently, employers directly pointed out that they will not apply for a work permit, or they denied the possibility that Syrians can get a formal work contract. Others referred to the ten-percent quota at workplaces, which would not allow them to register additional Syrian workers. Many bosses also gave indifferent responses, asking the worker to come back another day. As a result, many Syrian workers stated that they would not even ask for a permit as they were discouraged by the responses that their friends had received.



***"I told my boss that there is a possibility for Syrians to receive a work permit. He denied it. I told him that friends of mine got it, but he hasn't responded to that."***  
- Ahmet (24)



***"I registered in Hatay, that's why I can't work formally in Istanbul. I told my boss many times, I went so often to the immigration office, but there is nothing I can do."*** - Umar (20)

## 6.4. Formal Education and Language Skills

Among refugee workers in Istanbul's garment industry, formal education does not have a positive impact on wages. We also found little evidence that Turkish language skills were positively correlated with wages in garment factories. However, while formal education and language skills did not seem to be directly reflected in workers' salaries, there is conversational evidence that they help in accessing work permits and defending one's rights against employer abuses. This was best exemplified by a Syrian with profound knowledge about his labour rights who successfully obtained his work

permit after informing his boss about the bureaucratic procedure and convincing him to apply.

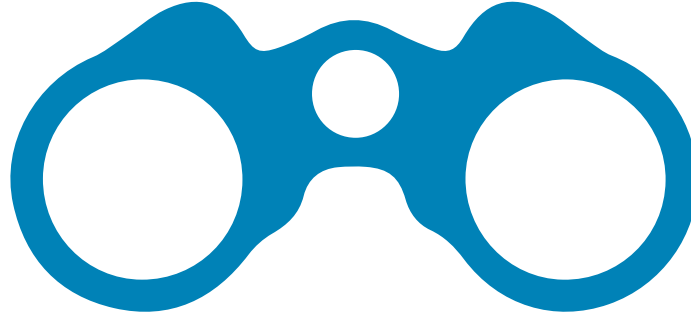
However, only one in four Syrian garment workers stated that they were aware of Turkish labour law, and less than half of respondents knew about the regulation of work permits for people under temporary protection. Furthermore, 62 percent of respondents stated that their level of Turkish was only basic or that they did not know any.



***“I asked my boss for a work permit a long time ago. He told me, ‘Muhammed, it is impossible’. But a friend of mine got it before, and he gave me a small book with all the information about it. So I read it and went back to my boss and told him all about it. And I gave him the book and asked him to check all the information himself. Finally, he said okay and now I got it 3 months ago.” - Muhammed (25)***



***“In comparison to my Syrian friends I am privileged, because I know the Turkish language and I have citizenship. If I want to complain about something, I can. But the others can't claim their rights.” - Muhammed (37)***



## 6.5. Industry Experience and Future Prospects

The interviews revealed different reasons for Syrian refugees' participation in Turkey's garment industry. The most common answers referred to the sector as one of the few employment options in Istanbul, with particularly low entry barriers for foreigners. Others stated that friends or relatives would be working in the same factory, or they would receive better wages compared to in other sectors.

A considerable number of respondents pointed to their prior industry experience as the main motivation behind seeking employment in Istanbul's garment sector. Many of these workers saw purpose in what they were doing and connected their past experience and current employment to their future aspirations. While some had worked as tailors for up to ten years, others reported that they worked in garment factories since they finished school. Asked about their future plans, 64 percent of interviewees with prior industry experience answered that they could imagine continuing working

in the garment industry, either in a higher position or by opening their own factory.

For workers with future ambitions in the garment industry, perceived barriers to take on higher positions represented a particular problem. Entering the labour hierarchy from below, possibilities for upskilling and professional development depend on the goodwill of bosses and supervisors. However, Syrian workers complained that they were denied trainings during working hours, for example, to practice sewing on the machine. Hence, the only chance was to practice before or after work or during breaks. Another respondent reported that he would participate in vocational training courses after work, hoping that a formal certificate would allow him to get into a higher position one day. However, Syrian workers widely shared the opinion that their current work situation deprived them of possibilities to improve their positions.

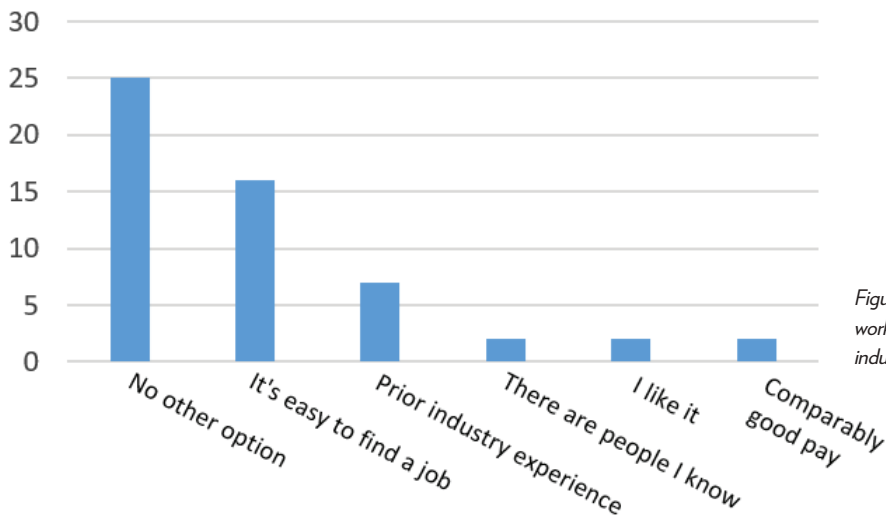


Figure 7: Reasons for working in the garment industry



## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations: The Case for a Coordinated Multi-level Approach

This study points to an urgent need to continue working towards improved workplace conditions for Syrian garment workers in Turkey. After years of public attention, the working situation of a huge majority of Syrians remains exploitative to a degree that is not only inconsistent with Turkish labour law but also stands in sharp contrast to brands' commitments to responsible business conduct. Our fieldwork finds strong evidence

that positive change for Syrian garment workers will depend on a variety of targeted interventions at various scales. In order to be successful, interventions should be tailored to the needs of different groups of refugee workers, taking into account the unique challenges they face regarding their age, gender, legal status, level of education and future aspirations.



## 7.1. The Individual Level

Interviews revealed two main strategies of Syrian garment workers to improve their situation. The first is to change their workplace if another factory offers better pay. Hence, some workers reported that they had changed their workplace up to 10 times since they arrived in Turkey. On another note, some workers successfully negotiated wage increases with their boss after working in the factory for some time. Such anecdotes were supported by qualitative analysis which showed that wages correlated positively with working periods in the same workplace.

Given that a majority of Syrian workers were not aware of the regulation on work permits for foreigners under temporary protection, it is necessary to improve services that strengthen refugee workers' knowledge of Turkish labour law and bureaucratic procedures. This is particularly relevant as employers are largely reluctant to initiate the work permit application voluntarily. Furthermore, information about formal employment opportunities is likely to improve the agency of informal refugee workers vis-à-vis employers. As our respondents relied solely on their own social networks for job-seeking purposes, there is particular potential for employment agencies (such as İŞKUR) to improve

transparency about formal job opportunities and to provide legal assistance and trainings about labour market rules in Turkey. Given their low levels of work experience, female workers should particularly benefit from such measures to counter arbitrariness and employer discrimination. United Work's education program on "Turkish Business Life" is a good example in this regard. Such programs should also help to highlight the whole range of (financial and non-financial) advantages that come with formalisation.

In contrast, language courses will not benefit Syrian workers per se, unless they are tailored to the needs of various groups. Language courses will be particularly beneficial to workers with higher levels of formal education, and who seek to find employment in sectors other than the garment industry. However, the situation of low-skilled workers, who are likely to stay employed in garment production, is not expected to improve significantly with better language skills. Instead, vocational training courses, as provided by ITKIB and TGSD, are more promising to facilitate access to better-paid positions. However, vocational training alone will not be enough to improve the working conditions of Syrians in an industry that largely confines foreigners to lower positions.



## 7.2. State Regulations

There is an urgent need to strengthen government inspections on the factory level, particularly to combat exploitation of child labour. While over one third of interviewed workers have experienced inspections at their workplace, none of our respondents reported about consequences for employers or workers. Instead, informal workers and children were usually sent home before inspectors arrived. Hence, improvements in inspections will not depend on frequency but rigidity of controls.

However, inspections alone will not solve the issue of child labour as many interviewed children indicated that their income was needed to support their families. Despite existing family assistance schemes by the Turkish government and NGOs, an overwhelming share of 80 percent of the interviewed workers with children stated that they would not receive any support due to a number of reasons, including missing documents or lack of information about bureaucratic procedures and eligibility criteria. Hence access to existing family support schemes should be facilitated to tackle

child labor and also to mitigate the impact of gender-based discrimination.

Our interviews also confirmed findings from earlier studies that pointed to procedural obstacles for people under temporary protection to apply for work permits. Among the most pressing issues are possibilities to transfer the place of registration as a prerequisite for work permit applications. Legal assistance for workers to change their place of registration would largely help Syrians who registered under the temporary protection regime, but in another city from their work place. However, while changing the place of registration is a necessary step for a large part of Syrian garment workers, it is not sufficient to obtain a working permit. As long as work permit applications are left to the mercy of employers, the working conditions of refugee workers will be subject to arbitrariness and uncertainty. The current regulations could be revised to limit the power of employers controlling access to work permits.







### 7.3. Global Industry Level

Our fieldwork has clearly shown how time and cost-cutting pressures incentivise labour abuses. The negative implications of an industry that builds on fast and low-cost production becomes particularly obvious at the lower tiers of the garment supply chain, where informal labour helps suppliers to meet buyers' demands for flexibility. Accordingly, workers reported that working conditions were particularly difficult when orders were high, often leading to workers putting in overtime hours without compensation. At the same time, workers were forced to take unpaid leave during periods of low workload.

While this study identifies regulatory obstacles and information needs at the individual level as obstacles to access the formal labour market, buyers have to give their suppliers the financial capacity to bear the costs that come with the formalisation of refugee workers. Against this background, brands should thoroughly examine

whether their purchasing practices allow suppliers to comply with labour rights. The corporate responsibility of brands becomes even more important in a context where workers' legal status is characterized by uncertainty and arbitrariness.

Overall, the question of whether brands are willing to take responsibility for worker rights violations along their supply chains will be the key to improving the situation of refugee workers in Turkey. In line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UN Guiding Principles) and the OECD Guidance on Due Diligence for Responsible Supply Chains in the Garment and Footwear Sector (OECD Due Diligence Guidance on Garments), a credible commitment by brands will require assessment of potential risks, the development of appropriate responses and transparent communication on how negative impacts are addressed.

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