

The Migration Profile of Women Labor Turned Toward Turkey in the Post-Soviet Period: The Example of Female Sales Representatives in the Textile Sector in Kumkapı

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Abstract

Following the independence of countries from the USSR at the beginning of the 1990s, intense immigrations from these countries beyond their borders were experienced for reasons such as the extreme poverty, declining wages, and political instability that emerged there. In these migrations, which are known as post-Soviet migrations, Turkey became an important target country for immigrants due to reasons like its demand for an actual work force, flexible visa applications, and geographical proximity. This study addresses the positions of female migrants originally from the former Soviet Union who work in Istanbul's textile sector in Kumkapı. The scope of the research aims to examine these female migrants' issues, such as the processes in choosing migration, the economic and social reasons for immigrating, work conditions, the support they provide to the family economy, evaluating the types of free time and locales, their inclination to go back, plans for the future, and their relationships with Kumkapı, which is an important center on labor market participation. In-depth interviews have been performed with six female immigrants in this qualitative study realized in Kumkapı. The participants generally see demand in the labor market for reasons such as their provision of low-labor force in particular, they are educated and relatively qualified, many work illegally, and they reduce many employer expenses. The migrant women, who can be evaluated as the faded unseen faces of the city and the economy, are observed to work regularly or irregularly in not only the textile sector but also in home, maintenance, and office services, as well as to not work in jobs that are inimical to their social capital; the greatest sources of motivation in the migration processes is observed to be intermediaries.

Keywords

Female migrant labor to Turkey • Feminization of migration • Kumkapı • Undocumented and irregular migration • Profile of migrant women

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Received: April 13, 2018

Accepted: June 19, 2018

Online First: July 1, 2018

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ISSN 2149-4398 • eISSN 2458-8962

DOI 10.12738/mejrs.2018.3.2.0005 • Summer 2018 • 3(2) • 197–228

Focusing on migrant women involved in the labor market in the Kumkapı district of Istanbul after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this study discusses the immigration and employment processes of migrant women who work in shops selling textile products in Kumkapı, the social and spatial relationships they have established, the people who play a role in this process, and the position and importance of institutions.

When looking at Turkey's history of immigration, migrations from the former USSR can be said to both bring Turkey to the position of *a country that receives immigrants* (Bulut, 2016, p. 71) as well as to have a significant place in terms of bringing the concept of feminization of migration to the literature on Turkish migration. The fact that migrant women have higher education levels is another characteristic of these migrations. Criticisms directed at this situation, where female migrants who work in jobs requiring fewer qualifications in Turkey in relation to their own professions after migrating and that open the way to mental waste, are also available (Ünlütürk, Ulutaş, & Kalfa, 2009, p. 15). These migrant women, generally working in the health, food and drink, entertainment, care services, textile, and prostitution sectors, as well as others in Turkey (İçduygu, 2004, p. 11), at the same time form a sector known as the "suitcase trade" by creating a unique area for themselves in trade. Kumkapı is a district that has been significantly developed by the sector and has also become a home for secretive and informal sectors (Çakırer Özservet, 2014, p. 21). The district of Kumkapı is an important living and work area for migrants due to reasons like being an international trade center, having a central location in accessing many transportation hubs, and the reduced visibility irregular migrants have thanks to its cosmopolitan structure.

Method

In selecting the sample of the research, the shops that sell textile products in the Kumkapı district of Istanbul have been identified as the sample unit at one time from within the universe using the selection style of *single-stage sampling*. Female participants were selected using a form of analogous sampling (a subset of the *objective sampling* selection method) in a *non-arbitrary* manner from similar subgroups who had been governed by a form of communist government, left their country due to the economic instability when their regime had collapsed, and migrated to the district of Kumkapı, the sample unit. In this context within the scope of the research, in-depth interviews were performed using a semi-structured interview form with six migrant women who had come to Turkey through regular or irregular ways from various countries whose economy had destabilized after the disintegration of the USSR and who are employed in stores in Kumkapı that sell textiles within the Turkish labor market. All the female participants forming the sample have been selected from those working at different work places and who have a better level of

Turkish. The interviews were performed at the participants' places of work in Turkish at times when customers were few; voice recordings were made. Notes taken after the interviews from the voice recordings have been included in the analysis.

Findings

The obtained findings have been evaluated under the headings of "Demographic and Sociocultural Information," "The Decision to Migrate to Turkey: Economic and Social Reasons," "Intermediary Persons or Institutions," "Money Transfers and Supporting the Family Economy," "Kumkapı as a Trade and Employment Center," "Forms and Localities for Evaluating Free Time," "People and Groups with Whom Relations Have Been Established," "On Their Tendencies to Return: Going Back to the Homeland and the Frequency of Families' Coming," "The Desire to Go Back," and "Plans and Dreams for the Future."

When examining the obtained findings, the presence of any acquaintances or relatives in Turkey and its geographical and cultural proximity, which may be specified among the reasons for migrant women choosing Turkey, form important sources of motivation that had affected the migrant females. At the same time, if the reasons for migrating from their own country are looked at, the most identified among these reasons are shown as rising unemployment, low wages, families being scattered, and inadequate social and economic opportunities.

The work the migrant women do in various sectors in the process of becoming a part of the Turkish labor market in addition to sectors in general like elderly/child care and cleaning, are observed as a step process with the aim of being able to learn Turkish when they begin working relatively more qualified jobs such as the sales consultancy where they worked during the interviews. Kumkapı, being an international trade center, has become an employment center for such jobs and a type of living center for immigrants. The fact that these employees are seen to be quite popular is easily observed in the district of Kumkapı, which is an important center for finding work for migrant women coming from former Soviet Union countries, especially those who are multi-lingual.

Trying to stay in very tight relationships with their families and homelands, these migrant women can be said to send a large portion of the money they earn in Turkey to their families and thus contribute both to the economy of Turkey and their own countries through the *migrant foreign exchange of currency*. In this sense, those working in Turkey to sustain their livelihood with as few expenses as possible are observed trying to reduce their living costs in a way that is also removed from any type of social activity while doing this. Constantly coming and going to their countries, the participants' social relationships in Turkey are seen to remain limited

only to where they live and work, and the people they establish relationships with are seen to be quite few in number. The people who have the most relationships are employers and those who are intermediaries for those coming to Turkey.

Lastly, the migrant women, many of whom wish to return, can be said to avoid building permanent relationships in Turkey and usually invest in their homelands. Although the time to return home permanently is also ambiguous for the participants, almost all of them have the general desire to end this back and forth migration one day.

Results

These female immigrants, having come from former USSR countries and been working in the labor market in Turkey, sometimes regularly, sometimes irregularly, on average for 13 years since coming to Turkey, do not only work in the textile sector while in Turkey; they have also worked in home, care, and office services. Participants who have graduated from departments like nursing and medicine are noted to perform more patient care, while middle school and technical school graduates are noted to work as cleaners or service agents in home and office services. From this perspective, these immigrants (generally identified in the literature as experiencing a *de-qualification/de-skilling*, *downward social mobility*, and/or *loss of qualifications*) are observed mainly to also not do jobs that are inimical to their social capital. Care and home services, not a sector, are highly preferred among the migrant women. Because of reasons like having an indoor work environment, not having a specific overtime, and being really tiring for the soul and body, as well as the wages obtained in contrast with all this being relatively low, maintenance and cleaning services also do not appear very profitable.

These immigrant women in the research sample can be named as the faded unseen faces of the city due to both their *unregistered status* as well as their choices to live in limited locales with limited opportunities for the purpose of reducing their living expenses.

As a result of the obtained findings, these migrants' inability to benefit from social security services (especially those with informal employment), the clear occurrence of exploitation of their flexible labor force, and not having any channels or organizational activities where their voices can be heard publicly can be seen as important issues. At the same time, in forming the legal working conditions of immigrants in Turkey, the request for too many documents, the multitude of bureaucratic procedures, and the thought that these processes will lead to material and temporal losses for them can be shown as obstacles in front of the legitimacy of immigrants.

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