

ISTANBUL BILGI UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS
EUROPEAN STUDIES MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAM

A CASE STUDY ON IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND PROTECTION
SYSTEMS: THE LIMINALITY OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN ISTANBUL

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ISTANBUL

2022

A Case Study on Irregular Migration and Protection Systems: The Liminality of
Afghan Women in Istanbul

Düzensiz Göç ve Koruma Sistemlerine İlişkin Bir Vaka Çalışması: İstanbul'daki
Afgan Kadınların Eşikliği

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Tezin Onaylandığı Tarih : 04.07.2022
Toplam Sayfa Sayısı : 106

Anahtar Kelimeler:

- 1) Irregular Migration
- 2) Afghan Women
- 3) Liminality
- 4) Gender
- 5) Survival Strategies
- 6) Istanbul

Keywords:

- 1) Düzensiz Göç
- 2) Afgan Kadınlar
- 3) Eşiklik
- 4) Cinsiyet
- 5) Hayatta Kalma Stratejileri
- 6) İstanbul

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my distinguished academic advisor, Prof. Dr. Pınar Uyan Semerci, for being such an inspirational figure throughout my challenging research process. I would also like to thank her for her valuable guidance and support all the way through my studies. This research would not have been possible without her. I would like to thank each and every one of the participants in my research, who opened their hearts and shared their experiences and feelings. And last but not least, I would like to thank my partner, Robert Hughes, for all his support throughout my thesis writing process.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ASAM: Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants
- DGMM: Directorate General of Migration Management
- ECHO: European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Office
- ESSN: Emergency Social Safety Net
- EU: European Union
- FRONTEX: European Border and Coast Guard Agency
- GBV: Gender-based violence
- HRDF: Human Resources Development Foundation
- INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization
- IOM: International Organisation for Migration
- JWF: Joint Way Forward
- KADAV: *Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı*
- LFIP: Law on Foreigners and International Protection
- LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer+
- NGO: Non-governmental Organization
- NPAA: National Program for the Adoption of the *Acquis*
- UNDP: United Nations Development Program
- UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Figure 1: Illegal Border Crossings on the Eastern Mediterranean Route in Numbers

Figure 2: Two Categories of Protection in Turkey

ABSTRACT

Among the irregular migrants living in Istanbul, undocumented Afghan women have received disproportionately little attention in the literature on refugees and migrants in Turkey. Through interviews with fifteen such women, this study explores how they see their current lives following the journey from Afghanistan, the challenges experienced, and the strategies used to survive, as well as their conception of the future. Taking into account other research on migrants regionally and globally, the study finds that all the participants have experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, a state of ‘liminality’, often expressed in the strong Dari term of *bisarneveshti* (‘having no assigned destiny’). The fundamental uncertainty resulting from their lack of legal status generates further sources of uncertainty: exclusion from social and economic structures results in extreme hopelessness and depression. Paradoxically, though, they remain hopeful in the face of their hopelessness.

Key Words: Irregular migration, Afghan women, liminality, gender, survival strategies, Istanbul

ÖZET

Türkiye'deki mülteci ve göçmenlerle ilgili literatürde yer alan, İstanbul'da yaşayan düzensiz göçmenler arasından Afgan kadınlarla yapılan çalışmalar oransal olarak daha az ilgi görmüş durumdadır. Bu çalışma, on beş Afgan göçmen kadınla yapılan görüşmeler aracılığıyla, kadınların Afganistan'dan yola çıktıktan sonra mevcut yaşamlarını nasıl gördüklerini, yaşadıkları zorlukları ve hayatta kalmak için kullandıkları stratejileri ve ayrıca gelecek algılarını araştırıyor. Bölgesel ve küresel olarak göçmenler üzerine yapılan araştırmaları dikkate alarak genellikle tüm katılımcıların farklı düzeylerde, güçlü bir Darice terim olan bisarnevshiti ('belirlenmiş bir kaderin olmaması') olarak ifade edilen bir "eşiklik" durumunu deneyimlediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Yasal statülerinin olmamasından kaynaklanan temel belirsizlik durumu, daha fazla belirsizlik kaynağı yaratır: sosyal ve ekonomik yapılardan dışlanma, aşırı umutsuzluk ve depresyonla sonuçlanır. Ancak paradoksal olarak, umutsuzlukları karşısında umutlu kalırlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Düzensiz göç, Afgan kadınlar, eşiklik, cinsiyet, hayatta kalma stratejileri, İstanbul

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Turkey hosts one of the largest numbers of refugees of all countries in the world, but not all of them have received the same attention. As the media flits from one crisis to the next, Afghans arriving in Turkey are one group with a disproportionately low public profile, despite their home country continually taking centre stage in world affairs over the past decades.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1977, Afghans started to seek asylum in other countries. This situation was worsened by the USA's response to 11 September and resulted in Afghans being one of the largest groups of asylum seekers in the world. Today, with the Taliban taking complete control of Afghanistan in August 2021, many Afghans try to flee their country and look for safety in other countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran and then Turkey. A huge number of Afghan migrants have already entered Turkey through the Iranian-Turkish border. According to the statistics of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), the number of apprehended irregular Afghan migrants in 2021 alone was over 36,000 people, which is the highest number among other nationalities apprehended in Turkey (DGMM, 2021). Since the developments in Afghanistan in 2021, many Afghans have already crossed the borders to Iran and from Iran to Turkey.

Partly due to Turkey's geographical position, it is one of the main destinations as well as a transit country for irregular migration, especially from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. In the aftermath of the Syrian war, the Syrian refugee crisis has had an immense effect on Turkey. Many Syrians have crossed the border to seek asylum in Turkey or move forward to Europe. Turkey and the EU have tried to cooperate in order to control the fallout, but the results of their efforts have been limited.

Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been recognized by the EU as an important strategic partner in managing irregular migration, being a transit country. Europe has been trying to negotiate with Turkey to control and indeed stop irregular migrants going to Europe under certain agreements, such as the readmission agreement in 2016 with Turkey. Despite the long process of Turkey's accession to the EU and the related efforts to align Turkish migration policy with the *acquis communautaire*,¹ this has not been enough to guarantee the services that migrants require, including protection for regular and especially irregular migrants in Turkey. This leaves them to fight for their own survival from the moment they arrive, with whatever plans they had at departure often thrown into a state of never-ending chaos, both logistically and psychologically. This, as will be seen in the context of other research, has been referred to as a kind of 'liminality'.

But why is it that relatively little attention has been paid to Afghan women migrants in Istanbul? I would propose two main reasons. First, the war in Syria and its impact on Turkey has understandably skewed research towards Syrians. Second, it should be remembered that migration has historically been considered as a 'male' phenomenon. Women have often been seen as passive actors who depend on their husbands and have followed the male members of their family. Yet recent studies clearly demonstrate that migration is an issue affecting large numbers of women too. According to the statistics provided by the UNHCR, the number of female Afghan asylum seekers in Turkey in 2020 was 49,051, whereas the number of the male asylum seekers in Turkey was 76,053 in the same year: the women are fewer but are hardly an insignificant minority.²

However, the view of the general public in Turkey continues to view Afghan migrants as being largely male. Although this view is correct in statistical terms, one

¹ *Acquis communautaire* is the term used to refer to the legislation, legal acts and court decisions that cumulatively constitute European Union law.

² Source: UNHCR - Refugee Statistics

consequence of this may be the unintentional sidelining of Afghan women migrants. In a recent article on the subject, Didem Danış points to the fact that the irregular migration journey is very difficult: the journey is long and the risks of sexual abuse and violence against women is higher; Afghan men are also motivated to support their family by migrating in search of work (Danış, Afgan Göçüne Van'dan Bakış, 2021). While I do not dispute this finding, I merely wish to observe that such conclusions may have a disproportionately large effect on the views of the public. This may be one reason why only a limited number of studies have been done specifically on Afghan women in Turkey.

My own experience, both personally and professionally, has given me cause to question this narrative. I am an Iranian woman who has experienced migration as an adult. Having come to Turkey to attain my bachelor's degree, I have been living here for 9 years and am now a fluent Turkish speaker. Despite having either a residence permit or a work permit during all these years, I have experienced many difficulties in accessing services and have felt a real lack of belonging. This was an important reason for my decision to work in a field where I could help the migrants who do not know Turkish and cannot access their basic rights in Turkey, first as a volunteer and later as a professional. My work has mainly been with Afghan migrants in Istanbul, primarily as a social worker. While working at Zeytinburnu municipality as a social worker for two years, I gained an insight into the problems faced by Afghan women: they often lack legal status in Turkey, are unable to get registered in Istanbul and to access any basic services. This carries many risks, not the least being deported back to Afghanistan. Such undocumented women were the most at risk from exploitation at work, as well as from domestic violence, which was in fact the main problem women asked me to help them with. Often with nobody to turn to and leading largely secret lives in the bustling metropolis of Istanbul, these women prompted me to ask questions such as the following: Did they choose to stay undocumented, as part of a survival strategy that they deliberately adopted? Or was their status solely the result

of being abandoned by the Turkish protection system? To what extent did an onward voyage to the EU influence their thinking?

With the above in mind, my main goal is to better understand the mindsets of Afghan migrant women in Istanbul, as well as to shed light on the real-life consequences of the life in limbo led by such women. What, in real terms, does such a ‘liminal’ life mean?

As one element of this liminality, I aim to obtain an understanding of the effects that irregular migration has on their gender roles. If it did, what changes, if any, does irregular migration cause to an Afghan migrant woman’s perception of her roles as a woman?

1.2. Methodology

It seems that the most suitable research method for this thesis is field research: to observe and interview Afghan irregular migrant women on their lived experiences, with the benefit of my own experience working with such women. My experience has helped me to shape the questions for the qualitative research methodology that I have chosen for the study. This section begins with an introduction of my observations drawn from my work experience, after which I will present my methodology.

1.2.1. Observations From My Work Experience

Through my six years of experience in the field, while working with undocumented migrants in Istanbul, I have had the opportunity to observe and get to know the Afghan diaspora in Istanbul. Working as a protection officer, I understood Afghan women’s reasons for fleeing their country, their life in Istanbul, their challenges, needs and hopes.

Through working closely with these women, I became familiar with the application process for ‘international protection’, both in theory and in practice. ‘International protection’ is a status akin to refugee status (albeit not identical to it) for which Afghans may, but do not always, choose to apply. I observed the process of applying for international protection in theory and in practice, discovering that the process of the asylum application is very different for non-Syrians and arguably more difficult.

Lack of Legal Status, Reasons, And Consequences

The factors that can influence the decisions made by Afghan women in relation to ‘international protection’ and their preferred place of residence in Turkey can be broadly stated as follows.

First, incoming migrants do not understand the rules to which they are subject. The Afghans with whom I have worked generally did not know about the application process for ‘international protection’ when they entered Turkey. Some are caught by the police at the border between Turkey and Iran. When the police give them a travel document for an assigned satellite city, they do so usually without providing a proper explanation of the application system and the risks of failing to register in the allotted time, which is 15 days.

Afghans usually come to Istanbul either because they have friends or family there or simply because they have heard of the city’s substantial Afghan community. The smugglers in many cases bring them directly to Istanbul. In some cases, migrants try to go to their assigned satellite city, but are not accepted there and are asked to go to another city. As they have limited economic power, the fact that they pay a large sum of money to the smugglers to bring them to Turkey, in addition to their fear of the police and of being deported, results in them having no choice but to come to Istanbul to find work or to seek help from their acquaintances or the wider Afghan community there.

When they come to Istanbul the first thing they do is to find a job and try to survive. Although they know the risks of having no ID in Turkey, they stay in Istanbul where they have a better chance of finding a job with a low salary. In many cases, they also send their children to work as the salary of a single worker is very low.

Once a migrant has begun an undocumented life in Istanbul, it becomes more difficult to move out to a satellite city. Any journey to a different city in Turkey carries with it a risk of deportation, so before setting out a migrant would be advised to get a travel document. But by now, this is no longer straightforward: since they have failed to register themselves in their assigned city within the first 15 days of their arrival, a deportation order will already have been automatically issued against them, and this will first need to be appealed. The appeal process can take up to 2 years, during which time they are necessarily unregistered, whether or not they travel out of Istanbul. As a result, with the economic incentive to remain in Istanbul, moving out often presents the riskier option.

The Afghans who arrive in Turkey without getting caught by the police are not assigned a satellite city when they enter Turkey. In this case, they could go to a city and file their application. In many satellite cities, especially those which are closer to Istanbul such as Yalova and Sakarya, it is almost impossible to get registered. This leads many to go further south in Turkey. If their application is accepted in one of the satellite cities there, they are usually asked to wait up to two years until their appointment time. All this time they must stay without an ID. This means they are left without access to any services. In case their application is accepted they are asked to provide a rental contract before they are given an asylum applicant ID card. This is especially difficult for most Afghans, as it is expensive to rent a flat in general. Even if they can afford that, after being given an asylum applicant ID card, they have to wait for as long as the assessment for different aid provided, which can take a few months.

The financial support provided by the sources of aid, such as the Red Crescent, is barely enough to make a living. More generally, there are some NGOs providing aid for those with an international protection ID. However, it has never been enough or sustainable. To make matters worse, they have to wait in a place where they are unable to find work for several months while their application for aid is being assessed.

While working closely with Afghans on a project operated by Save the Children and the Zeytinburnu Municipality, I came across many Afghans who had received humanitarian residence permits. They explained that to obtain this document, they applied to an organisation called the Afghanistan Association Federation. Although I have not been able to verify this independently, in my experience it is almost entirely the Afghans with Turkic backgrounds who are able to get humanitarian residence permits. Afghans from other ethnicities apply (and pay considerable money) to register themselves with this organisation in the hope of getting an ID in Istanbul. However, as far as I am aware, none of the beneficiaries who were not Turkmen or Uzbek have been accepted and given this document.

Throughout my work, I have also found out that one of the reasons for them staying in Istanbul in particular is the possibility to move forward to Europe easily. In some cases, they would wait in Istanbul, work to save money and, at the right time, would try to go to Europe with the help of a smuggler.

On paper, it seems simple for Afghans to apply for asylum in Turkey, but in practice, my experience suggests that it does not work like that. As one of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers, Afghan migrant women choose to stay in Istanbul without an ID and survive even without access to social, health, education and essential services of this kind.

Gender Roles and Gender-based Violence

Culturally, traditional gender roles are predominant in the Afghan community. During my work with Afghan women who have come to Istanbul, I observed that generally they have obtained more control over their lives, working outside home and gaining more awareness of gender issues. Often, they mention their wish to study, to work in better jobs and to ask for their rights in case of gender-based violence. Many women shared with me that they used to not work back in Afghanistan. However, in Istanbul, everyone must work due to the high cost of living.

While working with Afghan women who were survivors of gender-based violence, it became clear that sometimes they had to stay in a violent relationship due to having no legal status in Turkey. Turkey, as a signatory to the Istanbul Convention (leaving aside its recent decision to withdraw from the convention), has or at least had a responsibility to protect GBV survivors regardless of their legal status. According to Turkish law, GBV survivors should file a complaint at their local police station first and ask for protection. However, when I accompanied the beneficiaries at the police station, I learned that they would typically first hold the GBV survivor at a detention centre. As a protection officer, I had to inform the beneficiaries of the detention procedure and possible risks. In most cases, they dropped their complaints because they feared detention and deportation. In this way, even where protection officers advocate for their rights, women in this situation are forced to accept all kinds of domestic violence to avoid deportation.

With all the observations from my work experience, I can confidently state that the current protection system is being implemented in the field haphazardly at best. Even where it is implemented, it is not enough to protect Afghan women, which in turn creates further challenges for them. Living in a system that constantly purports to provide assistance and protection, but rarely actually does what it says it will do, has

struck me as one contributing factor to the liminality in which these women live, which will be the subject of coming chapters.

1.2.2. Methodology, Limitations and Challenges

The method I have used in this research is qualitative. Qualitative research establishes the means to understand the social reality of the individuals while focusing on the way the individuals interpret their experiences (Zohrabi, 2013). In particular, I have chosen to adopt a semi-structured open-ended interview style. In this method, the researcher creates questions but does not have to follow the questions in the same order in every case or ask precisely the same questions, being able to ask further questions based on the particular responses received and thereby having more flexibility (Henriksen, Englander, & Nordgaard, 2021). This provides the means for the researcher to better understand their living conditions, survival strategies, future hopes and perspectives. It also helps to actively involve the participants in the research, which also makes for a more equal relationship between the researcher and the participant (Westmarland, 2001).

One of the biggest challenges in studying irregular migration is accessing and collecting data. Data on irregular migration is often unreliable, due to the inability of most countries to collect information about the number, demographic and socioeconomic profiles of irregular migrants (Koser, 2007). Therefore, host countries generally announce estimated and approximate statistics.

Researchers need to be aware of the ethical sensitivity that is involved in working with irregular migrants (Koser, 2010). They need to be consistent in using specific terminology and concepts as well as respecting the respondents. In particular, whenever I use the term *irregular migrants*, I am referring to Afghans who migrate from their home country or another country without meeting the necessary legal obligations of the host country.

There are two main challenges in doing research on irregular migrants. First, a migrant's legal status is not clear at first glance. Therefore, it is difficult to find and identify irregular migrants. Second, once they have been identified, it is challenging to contact and convince them to take part in an interview. In addition, it is vital to keep the information of the participants confidential (Duvell, Triandafyllidou, & Vollmer, 2008).

Taking these challenges into consideration and the fact that undocumented migrants, especially women migrants, are vulnerable groups trying to survive in precarious circumstances, building trust was crucial for collecting data, as described below. Before I started with the interviews and contacting prospective participants, I received approval from Istanbul Bilgi University's Committee of Ethics in Research on Humans (See Appendix B).

I first found participants through my own contacts. With the help of my work experience, I was able to make connections with some Afghan migrants in Istanbul. Beginning with one, I chose the rest of the participants using a 'snowball' sampling method. This yielded a group of 15 women living in Istanbul from a variety of backgrounds. Many of the participants were living in Zeytinburnu, where I used to work with Afghans on a project operated by Save the Children and the Zeytinburnu Municipality for two years. Therefore, some of those recommended by other participants already knew me or knew another Afghan woman whom I have assisted through my work.

One advantage that I had was my personal background as a Dari speaker and a woman: this helped the participants to feel more comfortable during the interviews. In addition, I could explain the research and the purpose in their own language—another factor that I believe helped to build trust. Culturally, Afghan women are generally more comfortable talking with women. Before a participant referred another to me, I

asked her to explain the research, the purpose of it and then to get consent to share their contact with me for the interview. My reasoning behind this was that it would be easier for the proposed participant to refuse to participate in the interview by speaking to a person she knows than it would be for her to tell the interviewer directly.

Another important step to build trust was informed consent. At the start of the interviews, the participants were informed that their participation in this study is voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time they wanted. After explaining my research and its purpose, I clarified how the information collected would be confidential.

In this way, I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A) with 15 irregular Afghan migrants. The interviews were conducted at a convenient time for the participants via telephone or WhatsApp. The reason that the interviews were not conducted face-to-face was due to the Covid-19 risks and the fact that irregular migrants in Turkey cannot receive the covid-19 vaccine (VOA, 2021). The interviews were recorded on my laptop and notes were taken during the interviews. I explained verbally that the collected data and recorded files will be confidential, their names and identity will be anonymized, and only used in relation to this study. All participants except for one gave me permission to record the interview. One of the participants was not content in recording her voice so I only took notes during her interview. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and was recorded on my laptop with the permission of the participants. I transcribed and anonymized the records; after analysing the data, the notes and the records were destroyed.

Finally, it is important to mention that I have not interviewed Afghan irregular migrant women in Istanbul who fled Afghanistan after the developments in 2021, when the Taliban took control of the whole of the country. The focus of this study is on those women who have spent several years in Turkey and are therefore in a better

position to comment on the state of its immigration and protection systems. However, I aim to take into account the possibility that these developments may have affected the perspectives of the Afghan women that I have interviewed.

1.3. Synopsis of the Chapters

The structure of the following chapters is as follows.

1. In the first chapter, the focus and the aim of this study, as well as the methodology applied in the qualitative research, have been clarified.
2. The second chapter provides theoretical backdrop, looking at the meaning of irregular migration in the context of the theory of liminality in particular. Given my choice to focus on women participants, the chapter also considers some of the more important developments in the study of women migrants and the so-called ‘feminization’ of migration.
3. The third chapter moves from the theoretical to the historical and the practical: it seeks to explain the current Turkish migration policy in the light of both the history of Afghan and non-European migration flows into the country and the influence of Turkey’s relations with the EU. All of this has the potential to affect the attitudes and strategies of the participants who are the subject of this study.
4. With the considerations of Chapters 2 and 3 in mind, chapter 4 contains my findings from the interviews with the participants, an analysis in the context of the theory considered and the study’s conclusion.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTS, ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Irregular Migration

Irregular migration has become a primary concern during the last decade. The incentives of managing this phenomenon by policy makers are mostly security- and sovereignty-orientated. Preventing, restricting and returning irregular migrants, as well as the related readmission agreements, are the result of securitization of irregular migration. Despite all these preventive measures against irregular migrants, the numbers remain high, both globally and in Turkey specifically.

2.1.1. ‘Irregular’ Migration

The term ‘irregular migrant’ refers to a person who enters a state or territory without the necessary documents, including those who overstay their visas, having had a rejected residence permit or asylum application, as well as those who have never applied for residence or asylum (IOM, 2021). However, in the literature there are various definitions and conceptualizations of irregular migration. The common use of the term ‘irregular migrant’ has been criticised, with some scholars instead proposing to use a term such as ‘precarious migratory status’ (Goldring et al., 2009).

Research on irregular migration shows that it is multidimensional. Samer (2001) defines irregular migrants as individuals who either enter a country without the needed legal documents or overstay their visas. He adds that people who are involved in informal employment are defined as irregular migrants as well. However, others do not consider people involved in the informal labour market as irregular migrants.

Whatever categorization is adopted, it is not controversial to state that among the reasons that force people to migrate and stay ‘irregularly’ in other countries are weak

economic conditions, civil war, conflict, and deteriorating climate conditions. As a pull factor, people seek better lives in other countries. Krause (2008) demonstrates that strict border policies such as the Schengen agreement and other restrictive immigration policies limit people's 'legal' entry opportunities and as a result increase the number of irregular border crossings. The increase in the demand for unskilled or low-skilled labour due to deregulation and the liberalisation of many economies around the world also attracts more people to migrate internationally in an irregular capacity (Overbeek, 2002).

2.1.2. Two Main Approaches to Irregular Migration

In the conceptualisation of irregular migration, there are two main approaches. The first looks at irregular migration as illegal, as something to be combatted and prevented. The approach of many policy makers in the European Union and elsewhere in the world in this way contributes to the criminalization of irregular migration by applying labels such as "illegals", thereby promoting their being deprived of the protection of the rule of law (Taran, 2000). In particular, the securitization of migration has had an immense effect on the EU's decisions (Samers, 2004). Megoran's study on the securitization of irregular migration has demonstrated borders have been strengthened in order to keep out a perceived threat (Megoran. et al., 2005). The result of such securitization and harsh border control policies, such as that deployed at the EU's and US-Mexico borders, is the suffering of migrants and refugees, the risk of violent deaths and being exposed to smugglers (Jones, 2016).

The other approach is based on human rights. Thomas Spijkerboer (2007), for example, suggests that states have an obligation to account for the increasing number of deaths at borders caused by the intensification of border controls, on the basis of international human-rights law (Spijkerboer, 2007).

Patrick A. Taran reveals the inadequate and deficient application of international human rights law by many states towards irregular migrants. The exploitation of irregular migrants in the informal economy with ‘flexible’ working hours, unhealthy or unsafe working environments, low incomes and the constant threat of deportation are advantageous to many states and incentivize breaches of human-rights law (Taran, 2000).

Some studies focus on the state policies towards irregular migration. Tools that may appear purely administrative on the surface may in reality be applied for more malignant purposes. Dennis Broeders (2007), for example, views the EU migration database as a control mechanism for irregular migration: the motive for developing this system is a tool for the surveillance of irregular migrants in Europe, excluding and discouraging irregular migrants’ from arriving and staying, as well as facilitating the deportation of those apprehended (Broeders, 2007).

2.1.3. Irregular Migration in the Turkish Context

Turkey, with its increasing economic and regional power in recent years, has over time become a destination country in its own right, as well as being a transit country for regular and irregular migration (Aktel & Kaygısız, 2018). Focusing on irregular migration in Turkey, İçduygu (2007B) explains how it constitutes one of the main sources of migratory flows in the Mediterranean area. He paints a thorough picture of irregular migratory flows to Mediterranean countries in Europe such as France, Italy, and Greece. This study provides data estimating the number of irregular migrants in each country, explaining that southern European countries receive irregular migrants from different countries like Turkey, Pakistan and Congo. His study argues that the increasing rate of irregular migration has resulted in confusion among policy makers in the EU, with the receiving countries imposing restrictionist migration policies or adopting liberal economic policies in order to attract irregular migrants (İçduygu,

2007). Despite the strict measures taken by states to control borders and impose other controls, millions of people live as irregular migrants (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012).

Classifications of exactly what constitutes being an ‘irregular’ migrants vary. For example, İçduygu classified irregular migrants in Turkey into three main groups: 1) Eastern European women who migrate for domestic work, such as providing care services for the children or elderly of upper class families; 2) economic migrants from the Middle East, such as Iranians and Iraqis, or Asian countries such as Pakistanis, or African countries such as Congo; and 3) rejected asylum seekers who do not go back to their home country, staying in Turkey to look for ways to go to another country or participate in the informal economy (İçduygu, 2003). More recently, Sağıroğlu (2015) has divided irregular migrants into three groups: 1) short-term transit migrants who enter Turkey regularly, overstay their visit visa and try to go to another country; 2) those who enter Turkey irregularly, do not apply for asylum or are rejected asylum seekers, and cannot move to other countries and therefore stay in Turkey; and 3) migrants who come to Turkey regularly but participate in illegal economic activities (Sağıroğlu, 2015). These two examples suffice to demonstrate that the phenomenon known by the deceptively simple label of ‘irregular’ migration is in fact rather more complex. It is a fundamentally vague and understudied term, a category that is defined negatively by reference to a limited range of ‘regular’ existences.

In spite of these complexities, policy makers both in Turkey and further afield too often opt to group all ‘irregular’ migrants together. Following an increase in the securitization of irregular migration worldwide, in an effort to “combat irregular migration”, Turkey cooperates with the International Organization for Migration, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ICPMD and several national non-governmental organizations (DGMM, Turkey’s Combat against Irregular Migration, 2022). There is little doubt that Turkey takes an increasingly securitized approach towards irregular migrants, having passed a decree in 2018 to establish a “department

for combating irregular migration” (DGMM, Turkey’s Combat against Irregular Migration, 2022). This is in part due to the encouragement of the EU: in addition to the readmission agreements considered in more detail in section 3.3, Turkey has received technical and financial support from the EU to enhance the assisted returns of irregular migrants (ICMPD, 2021).

2.2. Liminality

Liminality is in many ways an appropriate conceptual framework within which to situate my research. Deriving from Latin *limen* meaning ‘threshold’ or ‘border’, it describes a state of limbo, an existence that straddles different categories or one that does not fall neatly into any one of them.

Turkey’s geographical position is itself, in a very obvious sense, liminal: it is a transit for people crossing regularly and irregularly to Europe from Africa and the Middle East. However, in this thesis I wish to argue that many migrants, in particular including Afghan migrant women, enter a fundamentally liminal state of being and, furthermore, that it is difficult for them to exit this state.

Before making that case, let us consider the meaning and usage of the concept of liminality. It was first conceptualised by Gennep et. Al. (1960) and Victor Turner (1969). Liminality is used to describe the period in transition, referring to being ‘betwixt and between’ categories of classification. It is also used to describe the middle phase of a rite of passage: the transition starts with separation, is followed by the liminal and ends with incorporation (Turner, 1969).

In the context of ritual practice (the context in which the theory was developed in its original form), the liminal situation can be described as follows: “the initiands live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain: the

initiators come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially unstructured” (Thomassen, 2006). In this stage, individuals try to gain new social roles and reintegrate. The old identity disintegrates, is followed by ambiguity and then finally by integration accompanied by a new perspective. According to Turner, all liminalities will eventually terminate with the community’s integration in the new environment or the creation of their own new social structure. The state of limbo may result in hopelessness and frustration.

In this way, the situation of irregular migrants who have left their countries and are not able to integrate legally, socially, economically, and psychologically in the transit or the host country is in line with Turner’s (1969) definition of liminality, being ‘in betwixt and between’ the positions assigned by laws and customs (Turner, 1969). The concept of liminality has come to be used often in the literature of time, migration and refugees.

In this context, analysing the experience of migration through the lens of temporality has provided a new critical view on contemporary migration. Scholars have, for example, considered the experience of mobility (and immobility), temporal insecurity and inequality in their fieldwork on refugees in camps, asylum reception and detention centres and border crossings (Jacobsen, Karlsen, & Khosravi, 2021). Dwyer describes waiting in migration as coming in two forms: 1) a ‘situational’ form which includes day-to-day forms of waiting, such as that for services or administrative decisions; and 2) an ‘existential’ form of waiting, such as that for justice and regularisation (Dwyer, 2009).

Hightower (2015) points out that limbo is a product of government law and policy and does not just exist by itself. He has analysed Australian restrictive regulations towards migrants and has described limbo as a tool for the government to restrict migrants’ accession to borders and protection. In a similar vein, an analysis of the

integration process of forced migrants from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991 described how refugees attempted to manage their life in limbo, including in relation to their psychology and social life (Vrečer, 2010).

Other analyses go even further than those considered above, finding a link between the very identity of a refugee and liminality. According to the definition of refugees as “people who have undergone a violent ‘rite’ of separation” by Harrell-bond and Voutira (1992), refugees are people who are by definition in ‘transition’ until they are assimilated into the host country.

Interesting work in this connection has been done in the US context. Chavez (2012) uses the concept of liminality in his study on irregular migrants in the United States. The lack of legal status causes the feeling of being “stuck”. Using Turner’s (1979) terminology, these people have left their countries and have not yet acquired legal status in their host country. Chavez explains the legal limbo as an obstacle to integration into society, resulting in refugees as a class being in the state of limbo. Harrell-bond and Voutira (1992) add that the state of liminality can be psychological, social and economic, as well as legal. The social exclusion of newly arrived migrants in Canada showed the effects of stress living in a liminal life (Simich et. al., 2009). Similarly, Sarah Mahler’s (1995) study on undocumented migrants in the USA has demonstrated how liminality and the resulting stress effected their everyday lives.

Being stuck in the ‘never-ending present’ makes one feel that it is meaningless to try to carry out a future plan (Jeffrey, 2008). However, Burn says that waiting moves through different stages and therefore the level of uncertainty changes. She showed in her study that even in a state of uncertainty people can anticipate alternative futures and gain ‘agency-in-waiting’. She concludes that people use hope to cope with the uncertainty helping them to stay afloat (Burn, 2015).

In Turkey, liminality in the context of non-European asylum seekers is used by Didem Danış (2005) to describe the integration of the asylum seekers who are stuck in Turkey on their way to Europe (Danis, 2005). She found that through the support of social networks, a half-complete “integration from the periphery” is possible. When the refugee’s legal status is in limbo, their adaptation will stay in limbo. Therefore, the effectiveness of a migrant’s coping mechanisms is tied to the structure of the host society. The fact that Turkey is in some cases not a final destination for asylum seekers means that a ‘liminal’ experience of life for asylum seekers, especially irregular migrants, is inevitable. These refugees may engage in “segmented” or partial integration but, as long as any improvement does not happen regarding their legal status, their resilience remains fragile.

In chapters 3 and 4, it will be considered how the experience of irregular Afghan migrant women in Turkey can be understood in terms of ‘liminality’ and what the consequences of this are.

2.3. Feminization of Migration and Gender

Migration has historically been considered as a ‘male’ phenomenon, as noted briefly in Chapter 1. Women were seen as passive actors who follow their husbands and depend on men socio-economically. It was therefore often assumed that most migrants are males (Caritas Internationalis, 2021). This has resulted in a male-centred migration policy, directly influencing the decisions of policy makers. Here, I discuss how women are systematically overlooked in migration policies and mention some changes in the studies towards this issue.

Statistics of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) show that almost half of all international migrants are women. As people have become more aware of this in recent years, the term ‘feminization of migration’ has become more commonly used. Yet we should be careful not to assume a significant shift in the gender make-

up of migrants: according to the statistics, women made up 47% of international migrants in 1960, only increasing by 2% in the following decades (UNDP, 2009). Female migration has long existed and is not a new phenomenon. What has changed, though, is the lens through which migration has come to be viewed.

The direction of research on women, gender, and migration was changed by an article published by Mirjana Morokvasic in 1984. Studies done by social scientists on international migration gradually became gender-balanced and paid more attention to female migration. Many migration scholars have indicated that the migration phenomenon is itself gendered and that it needs more sophisticated analysis (Donato et al., 2006).

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2000) explains that the feminism and migration scholarship has developed in three stages: 1) remedying the exclusion of women from research, 2) moving from 'women and migration' to 'gender and migration', and 3) gender as a constitutive element of migration.

The first stage of research on feminism in 1970s and early 1980s was the effort to bring women into the migration picture, focusing mostly on the traditional view of migration made by women as a 'family follower'. This was an important step, insofar as it drew attention to women in the context of, for example, education and fertility. The second stage emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s with a focus on the intersectionality of race, class and gender. Awareness of gendered migration patterns and gender inequality started to be discussed in this phase. Power relations in the household and gendered social networks came to be seen as important factors shaping the process of migration. In this phase, feminist scholarship explained gender as an integral part of political and economic structures and operations, taking into account the role played by gender in the spheres of labor, citizenship, ethnicity, sexuality and identity. Both as a subject of research and as an analytical category in its own right,

the female gender was revealed to have been marginalised within mainstream migration research (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000).

The migration scholar Gloria Moreno Fortes Chammartin (2002) has shown that, with the rise of capitalism, industrialized countries prefer to hire undocumented migrants because they accept work for a lower rate. She discusses how irregular female migrants in particular are more vulnerable to discrimination, as well as to violence and abuse in comparison to male migrants. Gender plays a main role in deciding what kind of jobs are given to male and female migrants. Women are mostly preferred for work in domestic and cleaning services, as well as sex work. In order to stop this, some countries imposed restrictions on female migration, which encourages human trafficking and smuggling. That is the reason that a relatively larger proportion of female migrants travel irregularly for work and face a greater number of obstacles and are more vulnerable in general. In this way, men and women face different risks and their opportunities differ (Chammartin, 2002).

Forced migration can have varying effects on women's power relative to male members of their families. In the process of forced migration, it can empower women; alternatively, male power may be maintained as a support mechanism for women in an unknown new environment. Changes in gender relations depend on many factors, including migrants' backgrounds, their status in the host country, the available social networks and the regulations and policies regarding migrants in the host country (El-Bushra, 2000). Similarly, Richter explains how notions of gender shape migrants' actions and abilities. A different gender identity from that preceding migration can even be created. At the same time, new structural limitations may be imposed by the host society on migrant women (Richter, 2004).

Looking at the survival mechanism of migrant women, Martin (2004) suggests that refugee women respond better to the difficulties involved in forced migration, adjust

and develop better coping mechanisms in crisis. She points out that survival strategies in patriarchal societies are ‘built-in’ for women, equipping them with the tools they need to survive even before they arrive in the host country. She explains, by giving examples from societies in Latin America, that women are used to having fewer opportunities than men and often believe they must be thankful for any help they can receive, cope with unexpected situations, and look at bad experiences positively (Martin, 2004). More recently, Salman Akhtar (2018) has indicated in his book *Migration and Identity* that gender has an impact on the psychological effects of migration. He argues that women tend towards intimacy rather than distance in establishing relationships, as well as noting the fact that women have an innate ability to better adapt into the host country (Madendağ, 2019).

2.4. Conclusion

In Chapter 2, I have considered some of the more important studies to date on irregular migration, looking in particular at theory relating to liminality and to gender. This chapter has also considered how such theory has been tested against the experience of irregular migrants, both globally and specifically in the Middle East and Turkey.

Following a review of the literature, it seems to me that very little scholarly attention has been paid to Afghan women migrants in Turkey. It appeared that a study such as this should focus on the experiences and survival strategies undergone by these women in particular and that, furthermore, liminality and gender are two suitable theoretical contexts in which to base my study. In practical and psychological terms, do these women view themselves as being in a middle phase of a transition akin to that described by Turner? Or are they resigned to remaining in a state of temporality or transition? Finally, to what extent does their transition, if any, relate to or encompass their gender identity?

CHAPTER 3: AFGHAN MIGRATION, TURKISH POLICY AND AFGHAN WOMEN IN ISTANBUL

Having laid the theoretical groundwork in Chapter 2, this chapter provides the factual context for my research. First, I provide some background on Turkey's general migration profile in recent decades (section 3.1.) and then move to the specific migration flows from Afghanistan to Turkey (section 3.2.). The subsequent part considers the effects of EU policy on Afghan migration through Turkey (section 3.3.). With that context in mind, the following sections then consider Turkish policies and laws concerning irregular migration (section 3.4.) and protection systems (section 3.5.).

3.1. Turkey's Migration Profile

Starting from the early years of the Turkish Republic, the immigration flow of ethnic groups which were culturally and linguistically close to Turkey was supported by the government, to increase Turkic 'homogeneity'. A large number of immigrants with Turkic origins, such as Tatars, Bosnians, Circassians and Pomaks, settled in Turkey (Kirişci, 2007). As for emigration, until the 1980s, Turkey was largely known as a country from which people emigrated to the EU without any particular issue. At the beginning of the Cold War, migration relations between the EU and Turkey were mostly seen as technical-economic. With the 1961 bilateral agreement between Germany and Turkey, which initiated a guest-worker program, a significant Turkish population emerged in Germany (Aydin & Tocci, 2015). The Turkish government thought that Turkish workers would eventually come back to Turkey. Instead, Turkish people settled in Europe and brought their families to Europe under family reunification schemes (Kirişci, 2007).

Towards the end of the Cold War, both the immigration and the emigration profile of Turkey began to change. The immigration flow of non-Turks increased, owing to a

range of factors, including regional unrest such as the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the eventual break-up of the Soviet Union and, more generally, the result of increasing globalisation. In this way, since the 1980s the number of immigrants and asylum seekers has increased from the Middle East, former member states of the Soviet Union, and the Balkans (İçduygu & Aksel, 2013). At the same time, after the military coup and the civil war between the Workers' Party and the Turkish state in 1984, a huge number of asylum seekers fled from Turkey to Europe. The possibility of an influx of Turkish asylum seekers frightened Europe, leading to the introduction of visa requirements to EU countries for Turkish citizens (Aydin & Tocci, 2015). In this way, the EU came to take an increasingly strict approach both to Turkish and non-Turkish migrants originating from Turkey.

3.2. Migration from Afghanistan to Turkey

With this Turkish context in mind, let us now consider the issue of Afghan migration, including to Turkey. When talking about Afghan migration, the first thing that comes to people's minds is that it is a result of war. In fact, many Afghans have moved to neighbouring countries for trading opportunities. In addition to employment opportunities, seasonal emigration to escape drought has been another reason for migration (Monsutti, 2006).

Yet there is little doubt that forced mass migration has come to the fore, beginning notably with the decade-long Soviet invasion of 1979 that occurred in the aftermath of the Saur Revolution of 1978. During the period of Soviet occupation, the majority of the country's infrastructure was destroyed, and the country was beset by wide-scale insecurity, as war intensified between the Soviet army and the Mujahideen rebels. This resulted in the mass forced migration of Afghans, mostly to Pakistan and Iran (Dimitriadi, 2013).

Significant Afghan migrant flows to Turkey started in 1982, following an official invitation from the republic. This invitation was only for Uzbek or Turkmen Afghans with Turkic origin. Turkey granted refugee and settled status to 2,000 Afghans with Turkic backgrounds under the 1934 Settlement Law. Under this law, an Afghan community of ‘Turkish origin and culture’ thus emerged in Turkey during the years of 1982 and 1983. They were provided with housing and agricultural fields to work on in six cities: Van, Tokat, Kırşehir, Sivas, Şanlıurfa, and Hatay. However, after a while, many Afghan families moved to bigger cities like Istanbul and Ankara in search of more job opportunities.

The Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996 and their introduction of a repressive legal system started the next wave of forced migration from Afghanistan. Extreme human rights violations, as well as the outbreak of fighting, caused many to leave the country. From 1983 until the late 1990s, Afghans came to Turkey to join the Afghan community or stay as irregular migrants in Turkey with the intention of going to a third country, mostly in Europe (İçduygu & Sibel, 2018).

Following the 9/11 attacks, the US-led invasion started in October 2001, resulting in a further exodus. However, this was followed by a repatriation of around five million Afghans, which was planned by the UNHCR and host countries. However, it was not carefully considered whether it was sustainable for a large number of returnees to stay in a poor, fragile country. The failed US-led invasion in Afghanistan had, by 2008, led to the next wave of forced migration from Afghanistan (Schmeidl & Maley, 2008).

Since the early 2010s, Afghans continue to arrive in Turkey, with large numbers crossing the border irregularly: the number of Afghan migrants who crossed the Turkish border without the necessary documents in 2014 was 12,248, while and on

2020 it has risen to 50,161.³ Some have seen this as an indication that most of the new arrivals were on their way to Europe and did not intend to stay in Turkey (İçduygu & Sibel, 2018), although, as will be seen in the next section of this Chapter, this conclusion may obscure a more complex picture.

Turkey is of course not the only country to which Afghans have migrated: Pakistan and Iran have taken in far larger numbers. According to the latest statistics from UNHCR, the number of registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan is over 1.28 million and 780 thousand in Iran.⁴ However, after 2000, both Iran and Pakistan adopted more restrictive policies towards Afghans (Dimitriadi 2013). In recent years, news of Afghans facing considerable problems in Iran and Pakistan has continued to emerge,⁵ making the route to Turkey and potentially onwards to the EU remain relatively appealing to many.

3.3. EU Policy on Afghan Migration Via Turkey

Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been recognized by the EU as an important strategic partner in managing irregular migration. The number of Afghans arriving to the EU grew steadily in the 1990s and reached a peak in 2001. The international intervention in Afghanistan led to an initial decrease, but the resurgence of insecurity in the country during the turbulent US occupation and the gradual reassertion of Taliban power can be seen in the European Commission's statistics on asylum

³ Source: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikler>

⁴ Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

⁵ The Iranian government has in recent years started introducing new policies regarding the distribution and renewal of Amayesh cards; these are refugee identity cards that grant opportunities for work, travel and access to social services (ACAPS, 2021). At the same time, the return of the Taliban has caused a large increase both in Afghans arriving and those being deported by Iran back to Afghanistan, according to the International Organisation for Migration (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/11/afghan-refugees-deported-from-iran-as-humanitarian-crisis-deepens>). Similarly, according to the UNHCR, over 300,000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021. As they entered Pakistan irregularly, they are at risk of deportation (VOA, 2021).

applications made in the EU: from 36,105 applications in 2014, there was a steep rise to 175,440 in 2015 and 179,860 in 2016.⁶

These record numbers in 2016 are followed in 2017 by only 41,840 asylum applications in the EU. This is likely in part the result of the Joint Way Forward (JWF), an agreement between the EU and Afghanistan that was signed in October 2016 in order to facilitate the return of rejected Afghan asylum seekers in Europe. Around 9,000 Afghans have been returned to Afghanistan from the EU under this agreement. The main reason for the rejection of Afghan asylum applications was that the people who fled the conflict could go to a safe zone within the country (Pitonak & Beşer, 2017). However, several reports on the returnees to Afghanistan showed that it is not safe to send Afghans back to their country. During the past decade, it has become clear that Europe is increasingly unwelcoming towards Afghan migrants.⁷

Yet the JWF is not the only reason for this shift: EU policy towards Afghan migrants has also to a significant degree been influenced by the Syrian civil war that started in 2011. Due in part to the EU's Dublin Regulation,⁸ many Syrian migrants tried to reach Europe by using smugglers and embarking on a dangerous journey through transit countries.

In response to the crisis, in May 2015, the European Commission adopted 'A European Agenda on Migration'.

Within the framework of this agenda, the so-called 'readmission program' was the most challenging element for the EU. With most of the irregular crossings between

⁶ With the Taliban taking over Afghanistan in 2021, this number has increased again.

⁷ For example, in 2016 a report on Afghan deportees from Europe showed that they came to the UK when they were under 18 years old but were still deported to places where they cannot find jobs, a safe place to live or health care. In 2017 a report by Amnesty International revealed that at least 10,000 Afghans were deported from Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany. It claimed that, following their return, they were killed, injured in bomb attacks, or were prosecuted (Sajjad, 2018).

⁸ Regulation establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the member states by a third-country national.

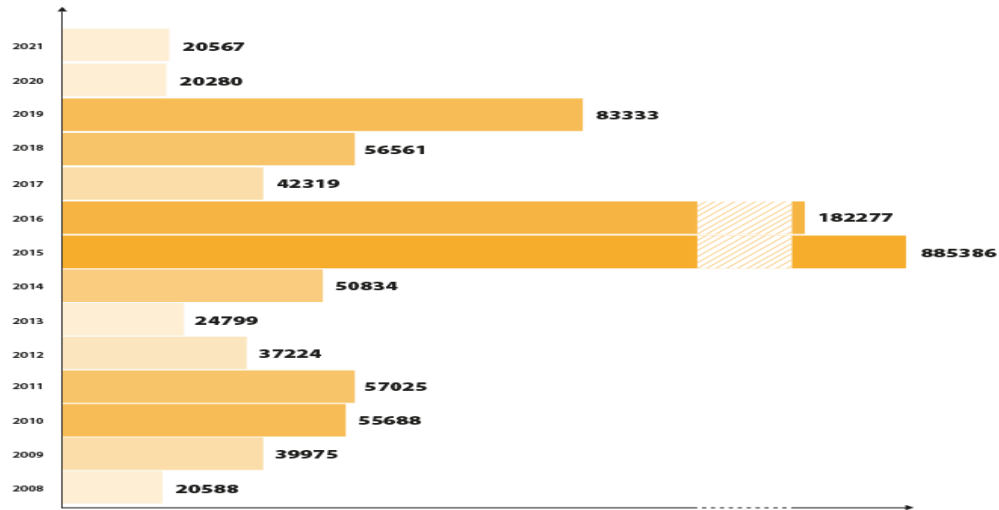
Turkey and Europe being made via the Eastern Mediterranean, having a readmission agreement with Turkey was considered an essential step to stop irregular crossings. As a result, the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement was agreed in March 2016. In return, the EU would offer three billion Euros to Turkey for funding the protection and essential needs of Syrians (European Council, 2016).

Although there is little doubt that the 2016 EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement was primarily motivated by the Syrian crisis, it is important not to ignore its effect on other groups of migrants to the EU, including Afghans. This can be seen in one of the two main principles of the agreement: all new ‘irregular migrants’ (including both Syrians and others) crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 would be returned to Turkey.

The number of arrivals from the Eastern Mediterranean—the route taken by most of the arrivals into Europe⁹—in 2015 was 17 times more than 2014, as seen in Figure 1 below. While most of the migrants on this route originated from Syria, they were followed by Afghans. Following the agreement, there was a notable decrease (FRONTEX, 2021).

⁹ The Turkish Aegean shore and a land border between Turkey and Bulgaria are the main crossing points on the Eastern Mediterranean route.

Figure 1: Illegal Border Crossings on the Eastern Mediterranean Route in Numbers.



Source: FRONTEX, 2021¹⁰

However, recent statistics suggest that both the 2016 EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement and the 2016 EU-Afghanistan JWF have not led to the fall in immigrants and asylum seekers desired by EU policy makers. In 2019 the number of Afghan migrants crossing via the same route increased by 167%, outnumbering the Syrians who crossed in the same year (FRONTEX, 2021). Similarly, the European Commission's statistics on asylum applications show a 34% rise in the number of Afghan asylum applications in the EU compared to 2018.

3.4. Legal Structure of Turkey: Migration and Asylum

Turkey's migration and asylum framework is intricately connected with its relations with the European Union. Turkey's relationship with the EU is a long and fluctuating one, dating back to the Cold War and still at the forefront of EU foreign affairs.

¹⁰ <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/eastern-mediterranean-route/>

Migration management in particular is considered a key part of the harmonisation process with the EU. The mobility of Turkish citizens to the EU, irregular transit migration through Turkey to the EU and the existence of large Turkish communities in some EU countries have all resulted in debate and discord between the EU and Turkey. It is also an important piece in the puzzle of understanding the position of Afghans in Turkey.

3.4.1. Early Legislation and 1951 Refugee Convention

Before ratifying the 1951 Convention in 1962, Turkey did not have any major legislation on migration management in place, except for the Law on Settlement (1934). This gave the right of settlement to asylum seekers and immigrants who have Turkish descent and culture. It provided easy access to Turkish citizenship to those with Turkish ethnicity, while it was stricter for non-Turk foreigners (İçduygu, 2007).

During the period of the Cold war, Turkey, with the help of the UNHCR, received refugees from the Communist Bloc Countries in Europe, including from the Soviet Union (Kirişçi, 2012).¹¹ It was in this context that Turkey ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention in March 1962. The signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention have obligations regarding refugee protection. However, Turkey maintains a geographical limitation whereby only people originating from Europe may seek full refugee status; non-European asylum seekers were therefore excluded from these rights under the Convention (Frelick, 1997).

3.4.2. ‘Temporary Protection’ Since 1994

As discussed in section 3.2, the immigration flows since the Cold War have been increasingly irregular and non-European. While maintaining the geographical

¹¹ In addition, many Bosnians, Kosovars, Bulgarians, and Chechens came to Turkey as asylum seekers between 1992 to 1999.

limitation, Turkey introduced a system of ‘temporary protection’ for asylum seekers coming from non-European countries until they were resettled in a third country. As Turkey increasingly became a country of asylum, cooperation with the UNHCR office in Ankara was a necessity: at that time, the UNHCR had the responsibility to assess the asylum applications regardless of their country of origin (İçduygu, 2003).

Owing to the high rate of asylum applications from the Middle East and other non-European countries, Turkey adopted a new regulation on asylum: the Regulation on the Procedures and Principles Related to Mass Influx and Foreigners Arriving in Turkey or Requesting Residence Permits to seek Asylum from a Third Country, which was adopted in November 1994 (İçduygu, 2007).

National security concerns were a primary motivating factor behind this regulation. It was criticised by international human rights advocacy groups and western governments, due to the lack of attention that it paid to the rights of asylum seekers and refugees (Frelick, 1997). For example, it only allowed refugees to apply for asylum within five days of their arrival, failing which they would be liable to deportation. Turkey was accused of failing to provide adequate protection to asylum seekers and violating the principle of *non-refoulement*¹² (U.S. Department of State, 1997).

3.4.3. EU Accession and Turkish Migration Policy

It can be seen from the above that Turkey’s migration profile was fragile at the turn of the millennium, just as Turkey was declared eligible to join the EU: at the Helsinki Summit of 1999, the European Union officially recognized Turkey’s accession, subject to making certain changes, including in relation to asylum and migration

¹² Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be re- turned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.

policy. The legislative changes to align Turkish with EU regulations were introduced by the ‘National Program for the Adoption of the *Acquis*’ (NPAA) in 2001 and revised in 2003 and 2008. Setting up reception centres, improving the database to keep track of asylum seekers, upgrading social support mechanisms, combating illegal migration, putting in place comprehensive asylum law, and establishing a unit for immigration and asylum were promised by Turkey, according to the NPAA (Resmi Gazete, 2008).

One of the most important pre-accession requirements was that Turkey had to remove the geographical limitation on its accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Although countries such as Hungary, Latvia, and Malta had been through the same procedure, Turkey did not trust the EU and was afraid that it might become a dumping ground for the EU’s unwanted refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, lifting the geographical limitation in Turkey was considered unpalatable by Turkish policy makers until the accession to the EU was ensured (Kirişçi, 2012).

3.3.4. Asylum Since the Syrian Civil War

The tension between the EU and Turkey goes a long way to explain why Turkish migration policy and law was not well prepared for the Syrian influx that began in full in 2012. As the numbers of Syrians crossing into Turkey grew, it decided to adopt the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), on 4 April 2014 and the accompanying Temporary Protection Regulation shortly thereafter (considered further below). With these instruments, the 1994 regulation considered above was repealed.

LFIP, being the first inclusive act on migration management in Turkey, was constituted for human and migrant rights. This law introduced ‘International Protection’ status in two forms: conditional refugee and subsidiary protection.

As in the previous regime, the new law continued to operate under the shadow of the geographical limitation for non-Europeans: conditional refugee status is granted to a person originating from a non-European country who has fled his or her country due to the fear of persecution on the basis of the person's race, religion, political opinion, ethnicity, or membership of a particular social group. Subsidiary protection status is granted to a person from a non-European country whose refoulement to the country of origin carries a risk to the person's physical integrity. These categories are considered in further detail in section 3.4, but it is important to note here that the current regime remains biased in this fundamental respect: only asylum seekers originating from European countries are deemed to fall into the refugee definition of the 1951 convention and are granted refugee status (Asylum Information Database & European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2021).

Nonetheless, the LFIP is the best illustration of Europeanization in Turkey. It brought changes in work and residence permits for foreigners, rights to family unification, and social rights. The Temporary Protection Regulation, which was issued under the LFIP in 2014, aims to provide protection to foreigners coming to Turkey in a 'mass influx'.¹³ Although no specific nationality was mentioned in this regulation, it has been applied only to Syrians (Kaya, 2021). This regulation gives protection and assistance as well as the right to stay until their life is no longer at risk in their home country. The right of access to education, public healthcare, social assistance, and the labour market are also provided for. Since 2018, however, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) has taken over all residual responsibilities from the UNHCR, regarding the registration and status determinations within the scope of the temporary protection regime (Asylum Information Database & European Council on

¹³ Arrival in the Community of a large number of displaced persons, who come from a specific country or geographical area, whether their arrival in the Community was spontaneous or aided, for example through an evacuation programme (Source: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/mass-influx_en)

Refugees and Exiles, 2021). This has in practice given Turkey near-absolute control over the implementation of the LFIP.

The 2016 EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement for migrants—primarily those from Syria, but also with indirect consequences for those from Afghanistan—was introduced in section 3.2, but the implications of this Agreement on the Turkish protection system should also be considered.

The significance of this agreement for migrants in Turkey is difficult to overstate and is borne out by recent research. First, it should be remembered that it has had a negative impact on the situations of migrants before their re-entry into Turkey. According to Human Rights Watch, for example, Greece adopted a ‘containment policy’ that keeps asylum seekers in the island where they arrive and facilitates their speedy processing and return to Turkey. However, due to the shortage in services, this process can take months. Research has shown that women and girls in Greek camps lack safety and are exposed to gender-based violence. In this way, the EU-Turkey deal not only violates basic human rights, but also puts the vulnerable ones more at risk (HRW, 2018), increasing the eventual burden that must be borne by Turkey when such migrants re-enter.

Ayhan Kaya (2021) has provided an interesting commentary on the process of the 2016 EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement, along with the Visa Liberalisation Dialogue (VLD), arguing that they facilitate the instrumentalization of Syrian refugees and irregular migrants in Turkey. Under the VLD, EU visa liberalisation was intended to start three years after the 2016 EU-Turkey Readmission Deal entered into force, such that Turkish citizens could enter the Schengen area for short-term visits without the need to go through a burdensome visa process. However, owing to the fallout from the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 and Turkey’s refusal to lift the geographical limitation in the 1951 Refugee Convention before full accession

to the EU, the visa liberalisation process has been delayed. In this new political context, Kaya shows how Syrian refugees have been instrumentalized as bargaining chips as part of a broader political conflict, in which a range of other factors have played their part: the financial sanctions imposed on Turkey by the EU in the aftermath of the crisis over gas drilling on the shores of Cyprus, the suspension of the 2016 EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement by Turkey and the announcement by the Turkish Minister of Interior about opening the border to Greece and Bulgaria.

Another controversial and complicated matter between Turkey and the EU highlighted by Kaya is the relatively liberal border and visa policies adopted by Turkey in comparison with those adopted under the EU *Acquis*. Turkey was asked to adopt the Schengen negative list and to tighten its borders with some neighbouring countries due to irregular migration (Kaya, 2021) but has yet to do so.

3.5. The Protection System in Turkey

Protection is a broad concept ranging from the most fundamental human rights to civil and political rights to more mundane administrative matters. The basic aim of protection is to provide full and equal respect to all individuals without discrimination, enhancing physical and psychological security, minimizing threats and violence, and strengthening capacity (European Commission, 2016).

Turkey is a signatory party to 1951 Refugee Convention; however, the current migration framework remains subject to geographical limitations, as described in the previous section. In this section, I will look at the categories of protection provided under the Turkish system in more detail, with Afghans in mind in particular.

The Turkish protection system has two main categories: ‘temporary protection’, which is applicable to Syrian refugees and ‘international protection’, which is available for asylum seekers coming from other non-European countries (Skribeland,

2018). According to the latest data, in 2021 over 3.6 million Syrians are under temporary protection and over 330,000 refugees and asylum seekers are under international protection in Turkey. According to the same data, since 2019 Afghans make up the biggest number among applicants for international protection.¹⁴ Figure 2 below shows the categorisation and sub-categorisation of different statuses.

Figure 2: Two Categories of Protection in Turkey

International Protection			Temporary Protection
Available upon individual assessment of asylum seekers			Provided on a group basis in mass-arrival situations where high numbers make individual assessment unfeasible
Terms set out in the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (in force since April 2014)			Terms set out in Temporary Protection Regulation (in force since October 2014)
Refugee	Conditional refugee	Subsidiary protection beneficiary	Temporary protection beneficiary
Less than 100 people	c. 370,000 people	Less than 100 people	c. 3.6 million Syrians

Source: NOAS. 2018, p. 11. Seeking Asylum in Turkey, Available at: <[Tyrkia-2018-Update Web.pdf \(noas.no\)](#)> [Accessed 15 November 2021].

3.5.1. International Protection

As shown in Figure 2 above, there are three types of international protection: 1) ‘refugee protection’, 2) ‘conditional refugee status’, and 3) ‘subsidiary protection’. The ‘refugee protection’ status essentially follows the formulation in the 1951 Refugee Convention (except for its being limited to those coming from Europe): it is given to a person from a European country who seeks asylum in Turkey due to a well-founded fear of being prosecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside their home

¹⁴ Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations>

country and is unwilling to go back as a result of this fear. This status gives applicants the chance to achieve legal integration in Turkey in the long term.

This is the main difference between ‘refugee protection’ status and ‘conditional refugee’ status: the latter is given to asylum seekers originating from non-European countries based on the same fears, but these are only allowed to reside in Turkey until they are resettled to a third country. Finally, asylum seekers who do not fulfil the eligibility criteria of ‘refugee protection’ status or ‘conditional refugee’ status but who would, if returned to their original country, be subject to the death penalty, torture, or indiscriminate violence due to war or internal armed conflict, may be granted ‘subsidiary protection’ status (Aras & Mencütek, 2020).

Afghans and other non-Syrian persons who have fled their country can approach the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) and ask for asylum under this category. If a person makes an application for ‘international protection’, the person has the right to stay in Turkey until a decision is made by the DGMM regarding their asylum claim. During this time, all ‘international protection’ applicants have the right to access basic rights, including healthcare and education. If the DGMM accepts their asylum claim, the person is typically assigned ‘conditional refugee’ status (as can be seen from the statistics in Figure 2 above), where he would be entitled to the same rights until resettled to a third country. Individuals must apply for ‘international protection’ in the city that they are present in. If the application is rejected by the DGMM, individuals have the right to appeal within a specified time limit.

As of 10 September 2018, the UNHCR has stopped carrying out the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process, as mentioned in the preceding section. Since this date, according to the LFIP, the Turkish DGMM has been responsible for undertaking and processing ‘international protection’ applications. Individuals who want to apply for

‘international protection’ should now approach the DGMM in order to be registered in a relevant province. Registration is allowed in all 81 provinces in Turkey, but permanent residence is limited to some cities called the ‘satellite cities’. After registration the individual is given an ID number that enables access to rights and social services. UNHCR and its partners continue to provide protection services and counselling¹⁵, but, as noted above, the UNHCR is no longer responsible for registration and assessing international protection applications.

3.5.2. Temporary Protection

As briefly mentioned in section 3.3.4, in the event of a ‘mass influx’ where a large number of people arrive via an international border and Turkey as the host country cannot respond adequately and promptly, ‘temporary protection’ is provided. According to the DGMM, Syrian nationals in Turkey are given ‘temporary protection’ status within the framework of international and customary law, based on three factors: ‘clean’ acceptance to Turkey within the open-door policy, implementation of the *non-refoulement* principle without exception, and meeting basic needs of newly arrived Syrians in Turkey (DGMM, 2021).

An interesting question of what exactly amounts to a ‘mass influx’ arises at this point. The Syrian mass influx to Turkey is not the first one. Before the introduction of the LFIP in 2014, mass influxes to Turkey occurred in the Ottoman Empire with the Crimeans, Tatars, Albanians, Pomaks and others. It continued in the post-Republican period with the Turkish-Greek population exchange, Yugoslavian immigrants, and the Turkish-Bulgarian residence agreement, to name a few. Then, in 2011, due to the conflict in Syria, a new mass influx of Syrians arrived in Turkey (DGMM, 2021).

¹⁵ Source: https://help.unhcr.org/turkey/#_ga=2.21913019.14522075.1652862136-944690846.1647587320

After the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, what might be called a ‘mass influx’ of Afghans has been expected by many. Emergency evacuations have already been carried out by the US and other countries. The Turkish government started to monitor the border with Iran closely and they had caught 27,000 Afghans who were crossing the border by the end of August 2021 (Euronews, 2021). However, whether or not the political reality of Turkey would ever permit Afghans to be viewed as a ‘mass influx’ and thereby qualify for temporary protection akin to Syrians remains to be seen. It is worth noting that, although the last decade has to some degree seen the intertwining of EU policy on Syrian and Afghan migrants (as considered in section 3.2 above), there remains a vast gulf in their treatment under Turkish law and policy.

3.5.3. The Undocumented

There of course remains another category of displaced persons in need of protection that receives far less attention than the categories described above and is especially relevant for the purposes of this thesis: undocumented migrants. Turkey hosts large numbers of international migrants who do not have legal papers. These migrants can be in detention centres, not registered by Turkish authorities, or have rejected asylum applications. While registered Syrians and non-Syrians have access to basic rights and services, irregular migrants are highly marginalised and have no access to any kind of protection (Aras & Mencütek, 2020).

3.5.4. Humanitarian Residence Permit

‘Humanitarian residence permits’ are also regulated under LFIP) and its implementing regulation. According to the DGMM, among those eligible for humanitarian residence permits are persons against whom a deportation order has been issued but the order cannot be implemented, or the order is being appealed, as well as certain cases where the best interests of a child are at stake, among others. In theory, this kind of permit is available to all applicants, regardless of their

background or ethnicity. However, according to my experience at work, migrants from Afghanistan who have Turkic backgrounds are usually the ones who receive humanitarian residence permits.

3.6. Social Aid by I/NGOs and the Turkish Red Crescent for Migrants and Refugees

As an alternative, albeit informal, protection mechanism, NGOs and INGOs are accessible to asylum seekers in Turkey and provide different forms of protection-related assistance. Among these is an implementing partner of UNHCR in Turkey called SGDD-ASAM, the largest NGO providing counselling in many provinces in Turkey. There are other NGOs such as Refugee Rights Turkey, HRDF, Kaos GL, KADAV, Positive Yasam, and others besides. All these organizations provide different services to different groups of asylum seekers and immigrants: for example, women, children, LGBTQ+ persons, sex workers and others (AIDA, 2020).

The Turkish Red Crescent provides social support for asylum seekers that fall under the categories of ‘international protection’ and ‘temporary protection’. Working in cooperation and coordination with a wide range of institutions and organisations,¹⁶ it is responsible for providing emergency aid and integration services for all foreigners registered in Turkey and in need of assistance, providing in-kind and cash assistance, as well as developing and implementing related programs. For example, the ‘Red Crescent Card’ (smart cards distributed for in-kind / cash aid), child protection and the provision of child-friendly areas (where psychosocial support and skill-building activities are made available for children aged 4-18) and community centers

¹⁶ Examples include the Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of Migration Management, AFAD, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and United Nations agencies.

(vocational and language courses for adults and children outside the camps) are provided to documented migrants falling within these two categories. In addition, services provided in reception centres, shelters and removal centres, among other services,¹⁷ are carried out under the aegis of this program (Turkish Red Crescent, 2022).

Social Cohesion Assistance is another example of economic aid given to migrants who fall under ‘international protection’ status or ‘temporary protection’ status who reside outside of Temporary Shelter Centres and meet at least one of the criteria of the need. The amount of aid is 155 TL per person and per month, and its financing is provided by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) (Mülteciler Derneği, 2022).

These are all laudable initiatives, but it must be stressed that they are only available for documented migrants falling within one of the categories of protection specified under Turkish law, as described in this section. Undocumented migrants, including large numbers of Afghans, slip through the net.

3.7. Laws and Regulations Regarding the Prevention of Violence Against Women

Adopted in March 2012, the purpose of this law is to protect women, children, family members and victims of stalking, who have been subject to violence or are at risk of violence. The country of origin or legal status of a woman is of no consequence in the implementation of Law No 6284.

However, this law has been criticised for different reasons. While it is comprehensive insofar as it applies to all women, it has been attacked for having been poorly

¹⁷ Harmonisation activities, psychosocial support, protection, referral and advocacy are examples of other services provided.

implemented, owing to a lack of resources and the fact that the responsible authorities are, when implementing it, affected by their own social or religious agendas. In the views of many, the nation's male-dominated culture results in women not being viewed as individuals with their own discrete legal rights, but rather as a component of the family unit. Effective action cannot therefore be taken against violence towards women (Gunes, 2019).

Mor Çatı, an organisation that works closely with gender-based violence survivors, indicates the critical importance of this legislation in protecting women from violence. In practice, they note, this law may be implemented differently. A lack of knowledge of its provision among police officers and public officials, combined with a lack of adequate resources and a male-oriented approach (similar to that described by Gunes, as mentioned above), means that the law has not been implemented satisfactorily (Mor Çatı, 2022).

The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention is a human rights treaty designed to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. It has been signed by all EU Member States. The prevention of all sorts of violence against women, the promotion of equality between men and women, the obligation to protect and support those who have experienced violence are the most important binding provisions on the signatories of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2022).

According to the Istanbul Convention, Turkey must guarantee the implementation of the provisions of this Convention; in particular, measures to protect the rights of victims shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, color, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status (Mor Çatı, 2022).

Although the convention was signed by Turkey in 2011 and approved by the Cabinet Decree in 2012, it was abolished in 2021. This decision was justified on the grounds of “normalizing homosexuality and incompatibility with Turkey’s social and family values” (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). This is a blow to the security of all women, especially those who are more likely to be exposed to violence, such as Afghan undocumented women.

My work has involved me closely with Afghan women who are survivors of gender-based violence. Turkey, before the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention, had a responsibility to protect GBV survivors regardless of their legal status. However, GBV survivors were often detained after filing a complaint. In addition, in my experience, Law 6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women, as the only other law for women who are subjected to gender-based violence, is not usually implemented in the way it should be.

In this chapter, I have tried to describe the history of Afghan migration and the Turkish migration policies. I described how the Turkish migration and asylum policies were developed in the EU context, with the purpose of admission to the EU but also in the shadow of the EU’s political desire to reduce flows of migrant. Keeping all above in mind, in the next chapter I will present my finding and analysis of my field work.

CHAPTER 4: THE LIFE OF IRREGULAR AFGHAN WOMEN MIGRANTS IN ISTANBUL

4.1. Characteristics of the Participants

Below is a brief profile of each of the interviewees. I do not mention their names in order to protect their identity. I was able to interview women across different ages, education levels, marital statuses and backgrounds.

Name	Age <i>(See note 1 below)</i>	Marital Status <i>(See note 2 below)</i>	Level of Education <i>(See note 3 below)</i>	Number of Children <i>(See note 4 below)</i>	Number of years in Istanbul <i>(See note 5 below)</i>	Current Employment <i>(See note 6 below)</i>
Participant 1	23	Widowed	Middle school	1	3	No
Participant 2	44	Married	Primary school	4	3	Yes
Participant 3	35	Married	Graduate	1	3	No
Participant 4	43	Married	Illiterate	6	3	No
Participant 5	22	Married	High school diploma	1	3	No
Participant 6	35	Married	Illiterate	7	3	No

Participant 7	42	Married	Primary school	6	3	Yes
Participant 8	48	Married	Middle school	5	4	No
Participant 9	27	Married	High school diploma	1	3	No
Participant 10	39	Married	Illiterate	5	6	No
Participant 11	26	Married	High school diploma	2	4,5	No
Participant 12	28	Married	Illiterate	3	4	No
Participant 13	26	Married	Primary school	2	6	No
Participant 14	40	Married	Middle school	3	4	Yes
Participant 15	25	Married	High school diploma	2	5	Yes

1. The participants' ages were between 22 to 48 years old.
2. 14 participants are married and moved to Turkey with their husbands and children.
3. Four interviewees were illiterate and could not go to school due to security or family problems. Three participants had completed primary school, three had completed middle school, and four had completed high school. One person had completed undergraduate studies in Psychology.
4. The number of children was between one to seven.
5. All participants came to Turkey between 2010 to 2020 before the US military left Afghanistan and the Taliban took control. The length of stay in Turkey is between two and a half and six years.
6. Ten participants introduced themselves as housewives and were responsible for taking care of the children and handling house-related work. Four had jobs in textile factories and were required to work for long hours.

Note on arrival into Turkey: 14 participants entered Turkey irregularly. One of the participants entered regularly (with a visa) and had a residence permit for four years, but her residence permit was not renewed in the last two years.

All the women who participated in this study come from different backgrounds, have different stories, and come from different educational and socioeconomic levels. Though not covered specifically in this study, these factors all influence their lives and their hopes and plans for the future. However, all participants indicated that they were forced to flee Afghanistan due to threats from the Taliban in their region.

The interviews have demonstrated that all these women, to a greater or lesser extent, found themselves living in a state of waiting and ambiguity in Istanbul. This chapter is going to consider the ways in which their lives are 'liminal'. I shall start with the reasons behind their forced migration. Following this, their life in limbo and its reflections on various aspects of their life will be considered. Last but not least, I will explain what kind of survival strategies these women adopted in their life in limbo.

4.2. Liminality

4.2.1. Leaving Afghanistan: The Beginning of Liminality

This chapter begins by explaining the reasons the 15 participants were forced to leave Afghanistan. It will be seen that they are in one way or another always waiting: waiting for a change in migration regulations, a change in their status in Turkey, or a change in border control policies. We will see how the migration regime allocates irregular migrants to prolonged and perhaps even perpetual waiting.

Leaving Afghanistan marked the beginning of a transition, a pivotal act about which many of the participants spoke. Most of the women interviewed elaborated the reasons leading to their irregular migration. The main factor that stood out from the interviews was a sense of threat to their safety and security. Some participants emphasised having no job and income in their country due to their bad economic situation, in addition to their concerns for their safety.

For others, the key motivator was not political insecurity or violence. One participant stated that the reason she had fled Afghanistan was the fact that she was forcibly married to a man when she was 13 and after the death of her husband, her family wanted to force her to marry someone else. But even in the case of participants who did not report being forcibly married, it is clear that personal and family considerations were key to their feelings of insecurity. All participants had children. An important reason for their initial decision to migrate was the fact that they could not send their children to study. The hope of a better and more secure future for their children was something they considered to compel or force them to leave.

Generally, they explained that life in Afghanistan became unbearable. It was striking that many participants described their ordeals as being an accumulation of threats,

instability and stress, affecting all aspects of their lives, economic, social and familial. For example:

P4: “My husband had a shop in Afghanistan. They invaded his shop, accusing him of being in the Mujahedin. They beat him a lot. We went to Herat to live in hiding. The situation was worse there and we felt we had to move onto Iran and then to Turkey. When my children went to school in Afghanistan, we were not sure they would come back. We were looking for peace. So we came here looking for peace and security.”

4.2.2. An Indeterminate Journey

At this point, it is interesting to consider how the participants imagined that their journeys would take shape. Put simply: they knew they had left, but when did they think their journeys would end?

For all but one of the participants,¹⁸ their journey to Turkey took them through Iran. Many participants noted that getting an entry visa to Iran was easy. Some had wanted to try living in Iran but found that the education and employment options were not enough. They also referred to their lack of legal status there and fear of getting deported. All of these factors combined to leave them in a liminal state, which they hoped to leave behind for a better life in Turkey.

The hostile nature of the Turkish system was felt even before they set foot on Turkish soil: they could not apply for a Turkish visa, which is difficult and expensive to get. This fact led them to risk walking for very long distances to cross to Turkey from Iran, having already determined not to go back to Afghanistan. In this way, as Krause (2008), Megoran (2005) and Jones (2016) have all demonstrated and as remarked in Chapter two above, the experience of these participants suggests that a significant

¹⁸ One participant was born and raised in Iran. One participant never passed through Iran and went from Afghanistan straight to Turkey.

reason behind the increase in irregular border crossings is the fact that ‘legal’ entry is prohibited. Just as it is true of the Schengen agreement’s effect on the borders of Schengen countries, so it is true at Turkey’s eastern border.

Another reason why a visa requirement at the Turkish border is not seen as a significant obstacle is that, for many of the participants, Turkey was not their final destination: they stated that the reason behind choosing Turkey is to go to Europe irregularly. Turkey was a gateway to what they consider to be a comfortable life in Europe. For different reasons, in the end they could not go to Europe. Some did not have enough money to pay for the smuggler; some were tricked, and their money was stolen.

By contrast, other of the participants reckoned on completing their journey in Turkey but then changed their minds after experiencing the difficult living conditions here. What they had imagined Turkey to be turned out to be an illusion. Some participants expected that the Turkish government would protect them, legally and by giving them access to essential services here, but were disappointed. In such cases, journeys that were in some sense determinate upon their departure from Afghanistan became indeterminate following their arrival in Turkey.

Others cited similarities between the culture and religion of Afghanistan. One participant chose to come to Turkey because she thought she would be given citizenship if she gave birth to a child in Turkey. But these were in the minority.

4.2.3. *Bisarneveshti*: Liminality in Afghan Terms

One concept in particular stands out from the accounts given in this study: it is a state of mind expressed by words such as: *Bisarneveshti* (بی سرنوشتی), *Belataklifi* (بلا تکلیفی) and *Bicharegi* (بی چارگی). These are difficult to render in English, but approximate respectively to ‘being without fate or destiny’, ‘being without an assigned purpose’

and ‘being without an escape / helpless. It is worth taking a moment to consider the semantics of such terms. In a simple and direct sense, *bisarnevesht* may be used to describe an ‘unsuccessful’ journey - which is of course literally true of the journeys taken by these participants. But the terms also have spiritual and religious connotations that are more deeply rooted in Persian Farsi-speaking and Dari-speaking communities. To lack destiny and assigned purpose has an almost cosmic significance: it conveys a sense of utter pointlessness and chaos that in some sense negates their value as human beings.

P8: *“We all come here and stay here with Bicharegi. We had to come here. We had no choice. I ask for attention to all Afghans. It is like we are left out and they don’t see us.”*

It strikes me that such terms, insofar as they are the negation of clearly defined states and trajectories, are a version of the ‘liminality’ proposed by Turner, expressed in Afghan terms. Perhaps, though, the terms go even further: it seems no coincidence, for example, that language of this kind is used in the context of suicide, as shall be considered below. In this way, liminality can reach such an intensity that an irregular migrant can feel that the only remaining path that offers sufficient clarity and resolution to their failed rite of passage is death itself.

As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this chapter, a state of *bisarneveshti* is the final result of an accumulation of problems and uncertainties, both material and psychological. In the most obvious day-to-day sense, these women lack security in their housing, access to health care and other such basic rights. At the beginning of the interviews, almost all participants started by describing material things that they lacked, primarily: 1) not having an ID in Turkey, 2) money, 3) no education for children, and 4) no access to healthcare. Yet in a broader sense, the problems that they have lived through have built to such a degree that whatever hopes and plans for

the future they had have been left in ruins. In a great many of the statements made by the participants, the feeling of an unclear future shines through.

All of the participants were well aware of the risks to which they were exposed as a result of not having regular legal status in Turkey. At the root of their uncertain existence in Istanbul is not having a valid residence permit or an international protection ID card. Therefore, I will start with the reflections of liminality in legal status.

4.2.4. Uncertain Legal Status

Irregular migrants in Turkey who are waiting for a chance to move forward or to get legal status in Turkey are left with a feeling of *bisarneveshti*, as described above—a version of the “betwixt and between”, to use Turner’s concept, as considered in chapter 2. The long process undergone by Afghan migrants, starting from Afghanistan or Iran and continuing in Turkey, can be seen as a rite of passage: they hope and indeed expect that the process or transition will be completed one day in either Europe or even in Turkey. As Harrell-Bond and Voutira (1992) explain, the feeling of the state of liminality and being in transition continues until they are accepted as citizens or otherwise integrated into the host country.

Danış (2005) points out that as long as the refugee’s legal status is in limbo, their adaptation will stay in limbo. Danış’s view is borne out by this present study. First and foremost, the participants’ accounts suggest that the application process for international protection is very difficult if not impossible for Afghan women in their position. The immigration offices in satellite cities, despite being ‘satellite cities’ designated under Turkish regulation as host cities for such applicants, often forward the applicants to other cities. Even though these cities are obliged to accept their application according to international application procedures and Turkish

immigration policy, they do not accept them for different reasons, especially on the grounds that they do not have the capacity.

P5: “We tried to apply in different cities. They just wanted to get rid of us... When we entered the office they said, “here they come again”. So we were left with no money and we decided to stay in Yalova. I tried to get an ID by going to the migration office one day every week but they refused each time.”

When administrative hurdles of this kind are presented to applicants over and over again, it might be said that the system itself constructs and perpetuates a state of liminality. The process of recognition being made subject to endless form-filling and other bureaucracy results in fundamental uncertainty in the system, as explored by Hartonen, et. Al. (2022). Whether one’s application for international protection would be accepted or not in a satellite city and, if so, when it would be questions that often go unanswered for years in the Turkish protection system.

Even in the case where a satellite city does accept a registration, it usually offers fewer job opportunities, and in case of leaving their registered province for a bigger city, they cannot access medical care, register their children to school or work legally (Leghtas & Sullivan, 2016). To put this point in terms used by more than one participant, they have to choose between getting an ID in a place where they cannot support themselves financially, on the one hand, and finding work in a place where they can get no ID and therefore are in danger of deportation, on the other. If they go to a satellite city to apply for international protection, they must live in that city and present themselves to the authorities once every two weeks. While they live in limbo like this, they typically have no other source of financial income such as savings or any family resources to help them and should therefore support themselves. When forced to choose between these two, they consider an irregular life in Istanbul to be safer and more secure overall.

Some of the participants originally considered Turkey as a place where they could live more easily and be protected by the Turkish government but were subsequently disillusioned. This fact has changed their plan entirely: as long as the asylum application procedure and having a legal status is made almost impossible for them, they focus on risking their lives and moving forward to Europe irregularly. As a result, two participants mentioned that they are waiting for the Turkish government to open the borders to Europe in the way that happened in 2016. In this way, the border regimes are also a reason for their liminal life, their *bisarneveshti*.

The temporary protection status in Turkey is given to foreigners who have had to leave their country in a ‘mass influx’, cannot go back, are at the border of Turkey or have crossed the Turkish border and need emergency protection. This status has been given to Syrian asylum seekers since its adoption in 2014.

Tanya (2022) has recently demonstrated that temporary protection status is itself not a safe legal status in the long term and suffers from many inadequacies of its own. For example, a lack of information on how to access services in Turkey, coupled with discrimination and language barriers, restricts the access of Syrians with temporary protection status to basic services and secure sources of employment (Tanya, 2022).

Afghans have never been given temporary protection, in spite of the fact that arguably they have come in large numbers to the Turkish borders and, like those fleeing Syria, have had to flee their country due to threats to their safety. Perhaps more significantly, Afghans can only apply for international protection where their case is assessed as deserving on an individual basis: they have to prove that they individually were under threat.

This difference in treatment is all the more upsetting when Afghans have themselves come to Turkey in significant numbers: the tens of thousands arriving may pale in comparison with the millions of Syrians that have arrived over the last decade, but it

has become increasingly difficult to justify a difference in treatment between Syrians and Afghans on purely numerical grounds. In simple terms, why should a ‘mass influx’ merit preferential treatment over those arriving in a steady trickle?

That aside, there is little doubt that certain rights of those holding temporary protection status—to access certain healthcare facilities, the educational system and the regular job market—are coveted by Afghans. Participant 13 mentioned that:

“Syrians have the right to go to school, go to hospitals and receive social aid. When they arrive, they can easily get an ID. We Afghans have also fled war and unsafety. Why are we excluded like this?”

However, a major feature of temporary protection is that it gives right to stay in a place in Turkey for an assigned period of time. While this is by no means a perfect solution for Syrians (for example, as demonstrated by Hartonen et al. (2022)), the fact that Afghans are not treated in the same way is perceived by them as unfair. This difference in treatment arguably worsens the feeling of uncertainty and liminality experienced by irregular Afghan migrants.

Participant six said:

“...One of them [my friends] has a valid ID but they are trying to save money to go to Europe. They have IDs and have been waiting for a long time for a change to their situation. They are bisarnevshst like me. They are saving money to go to Europe.”

On the other hand, it is important not to lose sight of the problems inherent in the temporary protection system. Given some rights but denied others and with no guarantee that their temporary protection status will not be revoked, Syrians too find themselves living in limbo as a result of Turkish protection policies.

4.2.5. Self-Reliance in Absence of Legal Status

The fundamental uncertainty introduced into the lives of the participants by their not having regular legal status leaves them to fight for themselves. In the wake of this first problem, many others follow.

Some recent studies have demonstrated that, due to a lack of economic opportunities in satellite cities, migrants are forced to move to bigger cities and become vulnerable to exploitation (Leghtas & Sullivan, 2016).

This was also clearly reflected in the accounts of the participants, who either themselves work in the informal economy, where exploitation is common, or have family members working as such. The unhealthy and risky working conditions tolerated by many Afghans working in the informal labour market, coupled with bad housing and malnutrition, have a direct impact on Afghan women's economic status. According to the interviewees, the monthly income of Afghan families living in Istanbul range from 2500 to 5000 Turkish lira (around, but often below, the legal minimum wage). In addition, though, they usually work 12 hours a day in jobs requiring heavy physical labour.

It is worth noting here that all 15 of the participants earned their money from the textile sector, either themselves or through their male relatives. The textile factories are usually in basements, a fact which the participants noted as leading to breathing problems after many hours spent working there. The four participants who themselves worked in textiles (as opposed to their male relatives) noted additional health issues specific to women. In one case, the woman concerned had a miscarriage and needed urgent healthcare. Due to not having an ID, she was left with no choice but to pay for expensive private healthcare, which in turn decimated what little savings she had.

Accompanying these vulnerabilities are other problems still. According to two participants, they are paid less than employees who are Turkish citizens but doing the same job, an inequality that adds a psychological burden to their material woes. Another participant was not paid for the work she had done. Employers prefer to employ migrants without a work permit as a way to get cheap labour. And as noted by Dedeoğlu & Gökmen, as well as paying a lower wage, they also do not have to pay for their insurance (Dedeoğlu & Gökmen, 2011).

It may be asked why such practices are so widespread. Is it simply that the employers are unscrupulous and are looking to maximise their profits by saving on labour? While this may be true in one sense, a recent study has proposed a more structural approach to understanding the prevalence of this practice: according to Khosravi, border policies (and, we might add, the entire protection system in Turkey) renders migrants' available time as having the value merely of "stillness" and "passivity" in the "waiting phase" (Khosravi, 2021). In this way, borders and protection policy have the indirect consequence of maximising the potential of the labour force. As such, the system encourages employers to see the time of these people, stuck as they are in a long drawn-out transitional stage, as less valuable than the time of regular employees.

4.2.6. Additional Stresses of Single Parenting

Afghan women who are living in Istanbul as singles or without their spouses face an extra layer of uncertainty, in addition to the economic weaknesses and lack of regular status already identified. Two of the participants were single parents and acted as the head of the household. Participant 7 is a married woman who lost her husband when they were attempting to cross the Iranian-Turkish border, although she subsequently learned that he has remained in Iran and is living there without work or other source of income. She works in Istanbul to support two of her children that are with her, while at the same time sending money to her husband in Iran. As the breadwinner for

her family, she is forced to work for long hours in poor conditions and leave her small children at home with others.¹⁹ This creates a risky situation both for the children (as they stay with strangers at home alone) and for the mother, with all the responsibilities of both the mother and father in the traditional Afghan household placed on her shoulders.

Yet another consequence of having irregular legal status as a woman is the greater risk of being sexually harassed. One participant expressed her feelings of insecurity at her previous work because of being a woman. She explained that her colleagues were able to harass her without fear of consequence, knowing that she would be afraid to go to the police.

4.2.7. No Way Out: The Psychological Consequences

With the accumulation of the material troubles described in the sections above, it is hardly surprising that most participants described themselves as living in a state of severe stress and depression, sometimes with psychosomatic effects.

P7: "Because of my problems here I cry a lot; I cannot control myself. I have low blood pressure. Whenever I become stressed and worried, I faint."

Living in a hazardous present but incapable of imagining a future for themselves, the participants are in a state of constant ambiguity, stuck between waiting for regularisation (changes in regulations) and moving forward (waiting for open borders) and deportation. The knowledge that at any time one could be arrested and deported has resulted in the participants' severe levels of stress. One participant said:

¹⁹ Another participant made a similar remark: when she used to work she had to leave her child alone at home. Her child is 4 years old but she is forced to leave him in order to work.

P4: "I am worried that one day when my husband goes to work, he might not come back. If the police find him at the workshop where he works or even on his way to work, they would take him to jail and deport him."

Many participants mentioned that they have to rent houses that are in poor condition with high prices. All the participants except for one expressly linked the housing conditions with their sense of not being accepted in Turkey. They compared it with their expectation that they had from the Turkish protection system and the expectation of a 'better' future they had once held.

P1: "I have psychological problems. I sometimes can't breathe, I just cry. I wanted to commit suicide a week ago because of the pressure caused by my problems. I cannot go to Afghanistan. We came here because of those problems and now our life here is like this, full of Bicharegi and Belataklifi."

One logical consequence of living in a state of never-ending liminality and *bisarneveshti*, when taken to its extreme, is that the only conclusion to an otherwise indeterminate journey and pointless existence is to end life itself. One participant stated openly that she wished to commit suicide. In so doing, she used two words, both of which recall the *bisarneveshti* previously considered (in section 4.2.3. above): these were *bicharegi* ('having no way out', 'helplessness') and *belataklifi* (having no clear future).

4.2.8. Social Exclusion as a Reflection of Liminality

Marginalisation and separation happen when the host community does not sufficiently allow for integration in the host country. Malkki argues that refugees are seen as a threat to national security and social structures and that such a threat should be dealt with (Malkki, 1995). One solution adopted to deal with this threat has been to keep refugees in camps where they are excluded physically and socially from the

host country. Studies conducted on refugees living in camps refer to this as a kind of spatial liminality (Gold, 2019).

P4: “We live like prisoners. We live without any IDs.”

But life does not need to be led in a camp for it to be socially excluded or unintegrated. The social exclusion of irregular migrants in Istanbul can be observed in the words of participant four, quoted above. Their situation seems in the case of some participants to resemble living in a camp.

It is well established by previous studies that legal, economic and social exclusion from the host society is an obstacle to integration and can result in mental illness (Galabuzi, 2004). Gold’s 2019 study on refugees in Switzerland defines the process of asylum as a ‘rite of exclusion’. Similarly, Vrečer (2010) observed the mental breakdown of the refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, blaming it on their not being properly allowed to integrate economically, politically and socially. In the Turkish context, Kutlu (2002) described this phenomenon as “Turkey as a waiting room”, feeling stuck in Turkey for an unknown period of time. He argued that an obstacle to the integration of refugees is being left in a state of waiting. The liminality resulting from a lack of legal status creates ambiguity and uncertainty, leading in turn to mental exhaustion. This frustration leads to constant shifts between hope and hopelessness (Chan & Loveridge, 1987).

The experiences of the participants are well aligned with the findings of these studies. It was striking that not one of the participants knew Turkish fluently. In fact, many knew absolutely no Turkish. This fact resulted in not making Turkish friends, and in some cases not even allowing a basic conversation with Turkish speakers. The lack of access to Turkish courses for undocumented Afghan migrants was a reason mentioned by the participants for not learning the language.

In addition, high levels of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment has had a negative effect on migrants' social lives. Almost all political-party leaders in Turkey have shown anti-immigrant sentiment, targeting different groups of refugees. This raised violence towards migrants in Turkey. Since the Taliban taking over Afghanistan, anti-immigrant sentiment has increased even more, as people fear that Turkey would potentially be at the receiving end of a new wave of refugees (Çelik & Geybullayeva, 2021). From the interviews with the participants, the increase sense of social exclusion and isolation was clear. One participant mentioned:

P3: *"I want to add that when someone does something bad, it does not mean all Afghans are bad. One person does not represent all of us. I wished people could understand this. There are good and bad people everywhere."*

To make matters worse, it goes without saying that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on many aspects of people's lives: economically, socially and psychologically. Studies on this matter have demonstrated that the pandemic increased xenophobia and the scapegoating of migrants for the pandemic. Some states have also used the pandemic to justify stricter migration measures (Gürsoy, 2022).

4.2.9. Uncertainty for the Future

Most participants expressed that they were hopeful when they first came to Turkey and after seeing the reality, they were left with a mixture of hopelessness, uncertainty and fear.

The uncertainty that accumulates in the lives of the women should by now have become clear. Having begun their 'rite of separation' by leaving Afghanistan, they arrive with hopes that are then dashed, finding their lives turned into a state of never-ending waiting. The final goal—getting legal status in Turkey or reaching Europe—turns out to be an illusion.

Let us now consider how this affects their view of the future. When asked about the participants' hopes and plans, many expressed that they are incapable of making a plan for the future and are hopeless. After three or more years of waiting (as is typically the case for these participants), during which time they have been unable to make use of their basic rights, take part in the economy and integrate into Turkish society, they report that they have lost hope of getting legal status and finding stability in Turkey altogether, both for themselves and for their children.

P12: *"I expected that the government would support us and give us a shelter. We were hopeful in the beginning. But now I have no future. If someone helps us financially or we can save some money, we will try to go to Greece. Or at least, we want to register with the UNHCR here so that we know they will send us to another country in 2-3 years. As long as we are here like this, we are bisarnevshst – sadness and no future. Nothing went the way I expected..."*

It should be remembered that only one of the 15 participants is a university graduate. On the subject of the future of her child, she made a particularly striking set of remarks. Herself a former university lecturer in Afghanistan and now living irregularly in Turkey, she reported that access to education was her biggest problem as an irregular migrant. She expressed her deep sadness about her child not going to school:

"When I see my daughter not going to school at this age, it hurts me so much. I wanted her to study. This is the most important thing for me. I will try to teach her at home myself."

Some participants mentioned that they send their children to Quran class. It seems that many mosques in their neighbourhood offer free Quran courses for migrants regardless of their legal status and that basic mathematics is also sometimes provided through the mosques. But with that limited exception, it would seem that women in

this position have another worry to add to their list: the life of their children may not appear to be any more certain than it is for them. (Paradoxically, though, as will be seen in section 4.4, they still find cause to hope for a better life for their children.)

As for the ones who want to reach Europe, the path forward is hardly any clearer. Several mentioned that they struggle to make ends meet, not being able to save money for paying smugglers to get them to their European destinations. They feel that they are stuck in this stage of transition and that they cannot plan for themselves or their children's future.

P3: *"I feel that my future is not clear at all. We are like guests who don't know when they will leave the host's house. I don't know my destination."*

P10: *"I am bisarnevash. I hope to get ID or some money to go to Europe. I want to sell my kidney so that I could take my children to Europe. I want a bright future for them, not this misery and lack of future."*

More than this, though, it seems to many of the participants that this stage might never come to an end. What they had envisaged as a transitional stage in their transition is revealed with time, paradoxically, to be permanent.

4.3. Gender Roles in Liminality

The state of liminality can also have an impact on the women's perception of their gender roles. In order to consider the patterns of change in gender roles amongst the Afghan community of Istanbul, it is important to bear the Afghan context in mind. Afghan culture and society is predominantly patriarchal. Based on tradition, Afghan women are considered as the honour of the family and are expected to perform traditional gender roles assigned to women, such as taking care of the household and children. Within such a patriarchal society and culture, women typically marry

young; their marriages are usually arranged, with an expectation they will focus on childbearing and will not work outside the home (Lipson & Miller, 2009). If the marriage is loveless, they still have to meet their husbands' needs and are responsible for sexual and domestic services. If they refuse, women are considered dishonour to the family and their community (Nawid, 2007).

With the resurgence of the Taliban, women's position in society has worsened still. Restrictions on accessing education for girls and young women, the *burqa* being compulsory, not being allowed to leave home without a male family member and restrictions on female employment have all taken their toll on the lives of Afghan women. One participant mentioned that repeated forced marriage was the primary reason for her fleeing Afghanistan:

P14: "I was forcibly married to a man that my father chose for me when I was 13. I have a daughter from that marriage. My ex-husband died 5 years ago, and I went back to live with my parents. My ex-husband's family took my daughter and never allowed me to see her. My parents forced me to marry someone else. That is why I fled to Turkey."

By considering factors such as attitudes towards and access to employment, health and education, an insight can be gained into the gender roles assumed by women within their household following their displacement from Afghanistan. Gender is the rights and responsibilities assigned to individuals that are embedded into our lives (IOM, 2022).

Many studies emphasise that life in exile reconstructs the gender relations within a community. The female-headed household is one possible outcome of forced migration, if their husbands have died during war or have been separated from their families during their escape and subsequent travels (Martin, 2004). Rostamy-Povey's (2007) study argues that changes in gender relations among Afghan refugees in Iran

and Pakistan are easier to be accepted by their community. As Afghans feel closer culturally and religiously to these two countries, it is easier for them to integrate in education and the economy, thereby allowing them to move away from their traditional gender roles. A trend of this kind can be seen in Afghan families in Turkey as well. The similarity in culture and religion in Turkey to that of Afghanistan was mentioned by the participants and presented as a reason to stay in Turkey: three women emphasised their wish to continue their education and start working somewhere. They emphasised that they were not able to do so when they were in Afghanistan.

In addition, the participants often expressed their wish for their children to go to school. They never mentioned any difference in attitude towards the education of their boys from the education of their girls—something that would be far more difficult in Afghanistan. Even though most of the participants performing traditional Afghan gender roles, they seem to not want the same lifestyle for their children.

In their difficult living conditions in Istanbul, some of the participants, as well as their young daughters in some cases, go to work, mentioning that they have no other choice. Some participants noted that this kind of behaviour would have been culturally impossible in Afghanistan. Such relative freedom for Afghan women in Turkey is similar to what Rostamy-Povey argues in her research on Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan. However, whether a change in behaviour or lifestyle indicates a change in attitude towards their gender roles or is instead just a result of them feeling safer in Turkey than in Afghanistan is hard to tell:

P5: *“I feel safe here in comparison to Afghanistan as a woman. When in Afghanistan I could not leave home alone. I was not comfortable going somewhere alone. Here I can even travel by myself.”*

In other cases, a new life in Turkey is not matched by a new lifestyle or set of gender roles. Of the 15 participants, only four had work outside the home. Those not working outside often expressed that they needed to stay at home, take care of the children and do work related to the house such as cleaning and cooking. This does not by itself demonstrate that the remaining 11 do not *want* to change their lifestyles, but it does at least suggest that life in Istanbul often does not provide the right conditions for realising that change. In other cases, it was apparent that Istanbul was perceived as the more conservative option of those considered available. As one participant puts it: *“I am worried that if I go to Europe my daughters will have boyfriends. It is not accepted in our culture. In Turkey, we have more control over our daughters’ lives.”*

The desire not to westernise should therefore not be underestimated. In this connection, the work of Rostamy-Povey (2007) is interesting to note: this study compares changes in gender roles in Afghan communities in Iran and Pakistan with Afghans in the UK and USA. She demonstrates that among those living in the latter two countries there is more resistance towards Western culture than among those living in Iran and Pakistan.

Yet for those women who want to leave behind the characteristics traditionally associated with womanhood in Afghanistan, their irregular status can pose an additional hurdle. Some said that the reason for them not working was their being irregular. Despite the possibility noted above for women to gain new power and control over their lives after migrating, the fear of deportation, as well as exploitation and even violence at work, inhibits them from integrating into the economy and into society more generally.

P1: “My colleagues were generally good to me, but the Turkish ones were asking for inappropriate things from me as a woman. They knew I don’t have papers and I

cannot defend myself. They were harassing me. If I had had papers here, they would not have dared to do so.”

As noted above, another participant expressed her feeling of insecurity in her previous work because of being a woman. She explained about her colleagues harassing her, knowing that she does not have documents and would be afraid to go to the police.

Men, too, are forced to reconsider the traditional Afghan configuration of gender roles. In a family that no longer can rely economically on a male breadwinner, men's positions can change too. This can increase tension in the household and lead to increases in domestic violence (Martin, 2004). A way for men to release the stress that results from a life in transit may unfortunately take the form of violence towards their wives; this is the explanation offered by some for the increase in domestic violence that can be observed among some communities following their forced migration. According to studies conducted on Afghans who live in Pakistan, a lot of Afghan women experience different types of gender-based violence at the hands of their husbands or family members (Jensen, 2019). It has separately been argued that the increased violence in refugee camps is the result of boredom and stillness (Szczepanikova, 2005). (And, as we have seen, the life led by irregular Afghan migrants in Istanbul to some extent resembles life in a camp.)

Given the sensitivity of the subject, it is perhaps not surprising that none of the participants mentioned domestic violence. This could be due to the limited time of the interviews and the difficulty in establishing a level of trust within a short space of time. However, from my previous experience working with Afghan women here, I can confidently state that gender-based violence is common amongst irregular Afghan migrants in Istanbul, ranging from the physical and sexual to the psychological and the economic, perpetrated by their husbands or other male

members in their family. Even though some participants mentioned that they felt safer in Istanbul or said that they wanted to go to work and continue their education, it is clear that traditional gender roles persist among the Afghan community in the city, and that gender-based violence is common.

Turkey, as a signatory party of the Istanbul Convention (and under separate domestic law), has the responsibility to protect GBV survivors regardless of their legal status. But this law is often nowhere to be seen in practice: in every case of GBV that I have seen, the existence of the law by itself without any advocacy to back it up was almost meaningless. According to Turkish law, the GBV victims should file a complaint at their local police station and seek protection. However, when I accompanied the beneficiaries at the police station, the police would first hold the GBV victims in a detention centre. As a protection officer, it was my job to inform the beneficiaries of the relevant procedure and possible risks. In most cases, they gave up their complaint against their husbands due to fear of detention and getting deported. In this way, they had to choose between the lesser of two evils: violence at home or a possible deportation.

Turkey's failure to recognise gender equality, which is among the more important obligations of the Istanbul Convention, does not help the rate of gender-based violence among Turkish citizens, let alone undocumented Afghan women. Under the title of "Migration and Asylum" in the Istanbul Convention, it is made clear that "victims whose residence status depends on that of the spouse or partner..., in the event of the dissolution of the marriage or the relationship, are granted in the event of particularly difficult circumstances, upon application, an autonomous residence permit..." (Article 59-1). In addition, necessary legal arrangements should be guaranteed by the national law for these individuals without a legal status to be able to apply for residence permit (Article 59-2). Article 61 explains the matter under the principle of non-refoulement, requiring that victims of violence against women who

are in need of protection, regardless of their status or residence, shall not be returned under any circumstances to any country where their life would be at risk or where they might be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

This convention obliged the signatory governments to take the necessary legal arrangement to protect migrants subject to gender-based violence regardless of their legal status. However, even before Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, these two articles were barely applied in practice by the authorities in the cases on which I worked. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, an increase in violence against women and girls has occurred globally and has been labelled the ‘shadow pandemic’. This was no less true in Turkey. The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 and high levels in violence against women and girls has negatively affected many Afghan irregular migrants’ lives in Istanbul, creating a dead-end for these women who were seeking a way out of a violent environment.

Taking into account both the participants’ narratives and my own experiences at work, it can be concluded that a significant number, albeit not all, Afghan women in Turkey are open to change, including in relation to their gender roles. With varying levels of success, these women have gained more power in their family since starting their new lives in Turkey. However, the longer conversations that I have been able to have with Afghan women as a result of this study have introduced doubt into this picture that brings us back to the central theme of this thesis: namely, that the lack of documentation is an obstacle for those who wish to see changes in their gender relations. Besides that, the increased gender-based violence amongst irregular migrants that I have observed has a negative effect on the lives of many Afghan women here.

4.4. Surviving in Limbo

In spite of all the uncertainties considered so far, somehow or other the participants, along with many other Afghan women in Istanbul, are surviving. This section focuses on the strategies to cope with the fragilities and uncertainties considered above. In the main, these were (1) social networks and (2) hope, which are considered in turn below.

4.4.1. Social Networks

Social networks provide support for Afghan families who are newly arrived in Istanbul. Most of the women reported that prior to their journey they either knew people in Istanbul or were at least aware of an Afghan community there being a potential source of support. Twelve participants out of the fifteen were living in Zeytinburnu, where there has been an Afghan community since the mid-1980s. Some mentioned that they were able to get support to find a house or job with the help of this network after they first arrived in Istanbul. There are also many Afghan restaurants and shops there. According to the reports of the interviewees, it is easy to find work in Zeytinburnu, especially in textiles. One said that there are lots of textile workshops and *“we just enter and ask if they need someone. Some of them have also hung adverts on the entrance written in Dari saying that they need someone to work there.”*

One participant expressed her happiness at living in an area where she could talk to women who spoke the same language and had shared similar experiences to her own. While others reported increased stress levels due to not having contacts in Istanbul, they nonetheless found social support from their community.²⁰

²⁰ P2: “As we don’t have Kimliks [(ID card)], we could not rent a house when we first arrived. An Afghan person helped us rent a house in his name. I don’t even have a Turkish sim card. But we stayed near the shore in Zeytinburnu for a week until someone helped us rent a house.”

In addition, an organisation called the Afghanistan Association Federation was founded with the purpose of developing relations between people from Afghanistan who live in Turkey and Turkish people, helping Turkish and Afghan businesses to establish economic relations, protecting common historical and cultural assets and developing cultural relations. They have on-going projects in pursuit of these aims, according to their website (Afghanistan Dernekler Federasyonu, 2022).

The recent field study on Afghans by Didem Danış and Deniz Sert (2021) demonstrated similar solidarity amongst Afghans. The dependence of the informal economy of Turkey on irregular migrants, although dangerous and exploitative, creates job opportunities for irregular Afghans in Istanbul. Afghans are known to be hard-working people in comparison to other migrants.

The plan of many is to find work in the Turkish informal labour market first and to save money to go to Europe. The demand for low-skilled labour due to liberalisation of the economy is considered as a pull factor for irregular migration. It was often expressed that they wanted to go to Europe as a place where they could ensure a good future for their children.

P11: “We came to Turkey through Iran. We did not live in Iran. We wanted to come to Turkey in order to go to Europe. But we were unsuccessful. We never wanted to stay in Turkey. Life would be better in Europe. My children could go to school, and they could have a better future. We did not have enough money to go. But if I had had enough money I would have gone before. Now I’m waiting until they open the borders like they did in 2016.”

As noted above, Turkish was spoken by none of the participants. However, two expressed that they have good relations with the Turkish people and mentioned that they want to help.

P4: “My neighbours are very nice. One of them saw that my children are not going to school. She came to the immigration office in Istanbul to ask for a humanitarian residence permit. The immigration office did not accept us. They said it is closed now for applications. But at least the neighbour came with me.”

It is clear that many Afghans who do not have an ID cannot access any social services or aid and many believe that there is no organisation in Istanbul helping financially or otherwise (when in fact, as noted above, there are some organisations doing limited work in this field). On the other hand, some other of the participants mentioned that they have received limited aid from the organisations mentioned above. In addition to this, a few of the participants mentioned that they get help from their own community.²¹ However, these services were expressed to be insufficient by all participants.

4.4.2. Hope

The survival strategies considered above are more in the realm of material and physical survival, but there remains a question as to how Afghan women in this position survive psychologically. The state of liminality clearly has an impact on the participants' plans for the future, as discussed in section 4.2.4. The feeling of being stuck and in waiting is accompanied by a sense of social exclusion. Women who participated in this study have been waiting for at least three years, and some for considerably longer.

Even though all mentioned their uncertainty about the future (and the university-educated participant described the sadness of not seeing her child properly educated), all still hoped for a better future for their children. Some still believe, despite years of

²¹ On stated that when she has questions, the Zeytinburnu municipality project provides legal counselling as well. She also mentioned that she has received a food coupon from SEVKAR and the IBC.

waiting, that they may get a valid ID in Istanbul and send their children to school, work, and create a better life here, while others pin their hopes for a better future for themselves and their families on moving to a European country. Two participants stated that they are waiting for the chance of an open border, as happened in 2015-2016. Another said she wanted to continue her studies.

P3: *“If I go to Europe, I will get rid of this ‘bisarnavashti’. My child will be able to go to school. I myself would go to university to do my masters. My husband wants to study too.”*

Burn (2015) refers to the phenomenon of ‘agency-in-waiting’: as waiting is prolonged, it goes through different stages, resulting in changes to the level of uncertainty. What begins as radical uncertainty (short-term waiting) is converted to a protracted uncertainty (long-term waiting), which has different psychological effects (Burn, 2015). Hope, even where it is not grounded in reality, seems to be a way to cope with uncertainty towards the future when the waiting has become long-term.

This was identified in the participants’ comments. Saving money to go to Europe, or simply receiving status ‘updates’ about international protection applications, could be described as instances of agency-in-waiting. One participant is waiting for the Turkish land borders with the EU to be opened, as happened in 2016 and again briefly in 2020:

“The Turkish government opened borders to Europe in 2020 again. We went to the Greek border, but they pushed us back and threw gas at us. We had to come back. But maybe this will happen again, and we could cross.”

Despite the violence experienced at the border, she clings onto hope in her state of protracted uncertainty. The Afghan women considered in this study could be said to be stuck, paradoxically, in a state of both hope and hopelessness.

4.5. Conclusion

The focus of this study has been on the lives of undocumented Afghan women in Istanbul. A part of its purpose has been to identify and explore the vulnerabilities in the daily lives of these women, but I have also attempted to discover what kind of coping mechanisms they have adopted, and to understand some of the other consequences of their precarious lives, including possible changes to their perception of gender roles.

The participants had different stories, were from different educational and social backgrounds, and have different new lives in Istanbul. However, one common feature stood out from their responses. All participants were in a state of waiting, whether to get legal status and a settled home in Turkey or to reach Europe. This was a critical aspect affecting their everyday life experience and future hopes. Excluded from the legal, social, and economic structures in Turkey, all the participants have found themselves waiting to be included in those structures. The respondents spoke of their lack of stability at work and the resulting uncertainty of income, the insecurity of their accommodation, their inability to access basic rights such as health and education, and their unsuccessful attempt to get legal status in Turkey. In addition, they have to bear the psychological burdens that accompany their material problems: these range from discrimination in the workplace, to social isolation, to forming a partially or wholly new gender identity for themselves.

When seen through the theoretical lens proposed by Gennep et. al. (1960) and Victor Turner (1969), the Afghan women's state of 'betwixt and between' is the middle 'liminal' phase of the rite of passage, following the initial phase of departure, and ending with the final phase of incorporation or reintegration. This study explores some of the core features of that liminal second phase. As was demonstrated in section 2.2, an increasing body of research in many places—Australia, the US,

Europe and the Middle East—situates the experiences of refugees and irregular migrants within a Turner-style theory of liminality. Building on the important work of Daniş in the Turkish context, my study suggests that undocumented Afghan women represent a rather stark example of those spending prolonged years in the second, transitional phase. Although the ‘temporary protection’ status given to Syrians is itself problematic in many respects, we have also seen (in section 4.2) how Afghans see themselves as being, and in some ways indeed are, worse off than their Syrian counterparts. Both in a relative and in an absolute sense, irregular Afghan migrants lead decidedly liminal lives in Turkey.

In addition, perhaps, the evidence gathered from the participants in this study allows us to speculate further on the significance of Turner’s theory in the context of migration studies. We have seen that many of the participants, when asked to describe how they felt about their lives in Istanbul and about their future, phrased their responses in terms of *Bisarneveshti* (بی سرنوشتی), *Belataklifi* (بلا تکلیفی) and *Bicharegi* (بی چارگی): they are without destiny, assigned purpose and escape. These words, as we saw at section 4.2.3, not only describe a journey that is unsuccessful and indeterminate in a very literal sense but also, at a more abstract level, connote a sense of complete pointlessness or meaninglessness.

This may support further speculation that what is normally a transitional phase can take on a dangerously permanent quality where not followed by the expected reintegration. As Daniş (2005) and Harrell-Bond and Voutira (1992) observed in the context of other groups of migrants, the liminality can seem to be permanent. In the case of these Afghan women, it might be tentatively concluded that the narrative of *Bisarneveshti* and the related terms above somehow express or embody that speculation in Farsi terminology: these women have been left in the transitional phase for so long that they feel abandoned in the most fundamental sense. They are ‘without fate or destiny’ as they wait in Istanbul, not only deprived of certainty in their present

transitional phase but also left with a strong sense that their future will be no clearer or better.

To translate this into more practical terms: the state of ambiguity created by a chaotic and harsh migration and protection policy—both domestically in Turkey and as a result of the EU-Turkey dynamic—has left the respondents to this study with a sense that they are abandoned in the present and incapable of planning for the future, because in some sense they may believe that they have no future. If such a worldview becomes permanent in the manner contemplated by Turner, then even radically improved migration and protection policy may struggle to persuade these women that they could one day lead safe, stable and meaningful lives.

As was seen in section 4.2.4, at the heart of the various economic, social and psychological problems faced by the participants is their uncertain legal status, itself the product of an unclear and poorly implemented protection system. In this system, a seemingly never-ending chain of bureaucracy, with participants being referred from one potential satellite city to another, turns what purports to be a clearly defined and obtainable ‘international protection’ status into a mirage, ever receding into the distance. With liminality existing at this fundamental legal level, it is little surprise that a participant should report feeling like a perpetual guest with no clear indication of when they will be asked to leave the host’s house.

The exclusion of the participants in this study is not geographical, insofar as they do not live in a camp or other such regimented area, but it was striking that they felt and described their isolation in spatial terms, comparing their lives in Istanbul with living in prison. The legal, social and economic exclusion created a feeling of being trapped and of uncertainty. This feeling can result in mental illnesses (Galabuzi, 2004), as was also the case with some of these participants. Taken to the extreme, that sense of

‘being without assigned fate or destiny’ (*Bisarneveshti*) is so intolerably liminal that one can be driven to contemplate or attempt suicide, as one participant reported.

Yet it would be incorrect to conclude that the narrative of *Bisarneveshti* tells the whole story of the lives led by these Afghan women. In the face of their vulnerabilities and the ambiguity of their circumstances, they somehow manage to survive and to cope with their prolonged waiting, both practically and psychologically. The participants shared their positive experience from the Afghan community in Istanbul, especially in Zeytinburnu district, where residents helped them to find houses and jobs. Being within something resembling an Afghan community made some participants feel at home and supported, despite the fact that they are subject to many material and physical hardships: many Afghans, including some of these women themselves, work in textile factories and endure very hard-working conditions. However, the dependence of Turkey’s informal economy on irregular migrants increases the job opportunities for Afghan migrants as well (Danış & Sert, 2021). The present study suggests that, while they consider finding work illegally in Istanbul to be a better survival strategy than moving to a satellite city and placing their trust in the unreliable protection system, they nonetheless continue to resent and despair of the systems that held out a hope of protection that turned out to be false.

With such materially precarious lives, the women’s psychological survival strategies take on a greater significance. Despite many years of waiting and the fact that they see themselves as having ‘no assigned fate’, the participants expressed hope for the future. This finding is similar to Burn’s (2015) findings on internally displaced Georgians from Akhbazia: when waiting is long-term, migrants gain “agency-in-waiting”. In this case, the participants hope to save money in order to reach Europe (in one case, as we saw in section 4.4.2, suggesting that reaching Europe would allow her to rid herself of her *bisarneveshti*) or they hope to get an ID in Turkey, even when

Turkey's migration regulations dictate otherwise. Hope was also frequently expressed in the context of continuing education, finding better or more work, or merely a vague wish for a 'better future'.

It is clear, therefore, that both practically and psychologically the situation of these women is not simple. We may wonder: what type and degree of 'liminality' is required before an Afghan woman feels that there is 'no way out'? After what period of time living a liminal life would she consider her situation somehow permanent or irreversible? Although my study cannot provide definitive answers to these types of questions, it is certainly interesting to note that despite many years of waiting in a liminal state in Istanbul—at least three years and as many as six—the participants still maintain in most cases a sense of real hope and are, in the face of their difficulties, surviving in practical terms. This may perhaps suggest that 'permanent' liminality is a state that is not reached quickly, or that it is even one that is not reached at all. I offer that suggestion tentatively on the basis of this small study. It would be interesting for future wider-ranging studies to look more closely at these issues.

As one aspect of the liminality lived by these women, we have also considered how, in the process of forced migration, gender roles and power dynamics may be affected. The changes depend both on the migrant's cultural background and the environment and laws of the host society (El-Bushra, 2000). In the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, women typically carry out traditional gender roles. This study has raised the possibility that migration can change the perception of women's gender roles. Although only four out of fifteen participants were working outside (with the remainder taking care of their children and houses), this is not an insignificant proportion. In addition, the religious and cultural similarities between the Turkish host community and their country of origin (mentioned by several participants) have to some extent made it easier for Afghan women to integrate in the economy.

Further research is required to determine whether the changes in behavior reported by some of the participants are the result of a new perception of their gender roles or are instead the result of other factors (for example, that it is safer to leave the house in Turkey than in Afghanistan, as reported by one participant). It is nonetheless striking that all participants wanted either to continue their education or to be able to work but said that they were unable to do so because of having no legal status. So although patriarchal societies can equip women with “built in” survival strategies, as Martin (2004) observed, the limitations presented by their legal status in Turkey are an obstacle to their realising their hopes.

In life in transit, men usually find it harder to find a job and therefore often feel the threat of losing their power at home. This factor can increase domestic violence. In this study, the participants did not mention domestic violence, but my years of working with Afghans in Istanbul suggests that domestic violence is common in irregular Afghan families. Their lack of legal documentation and the poorly implemented Turkish laws on gender-based violence, not to mention the recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, each hinders irregular Afghan women from speaking out about it, let alone taking the necessary action against it.

Turkey’s historical migration flows, its laws and regulations on migrants, its relations with the European Union and its approach towards irregular migration in particular all come together to shape the lives of irregular Afghan women in Istanbul. The destabilising effect of Turkey’s approach to the EU harmonisation process, coupled with the complications introduced by the Syrian crisis, have combined to make it extremely difficult for large numbers of Afghans to access the ‘international protection’ system. With the instability in Afghanistan deeply rooted and emigration flows from that country unlikely to stop any time soon (particularly in the wake of the developments in 2021), the inadequacies of the Turkish protection system that have been explored in this study urgently need to be addressed.

With this small study, I have tried to shed some light on Afghan women's everyday challenges within the context of a failing protection system. Although by no means the only group of refugees in Turkey receiving insufficient attention, there are a range of factors behind the underrepresentation of these women in the literature. With much of the spotlight focused on Syrians in Turkey, the slower and steadier influx of Afghans has received less scholarly input. In addition, while migration studies in recent decades have made a greater effort to consider the position of women migrants (the so-called 'feminisation of migration'), the public (and, we might add, policy makers too) are perhaps insufficiently aware of just how many Afghan migrants in Turkey are women. Finally, as well as their being Afghan and women, they are also undocumented: this presents a third and formidable obstacle, given the difficulties involved in finding, contacting and then engaging undocumented migrants in research of this kind. For all these reasons, it seems right that a study such as the present one has focused on this particular group.

However, it is important to end with a note on the study's limitations. First, it was based on a small sample of Afghans living only in Istanbul. Drawing wider conclusions from its findings and making firm inferences about the larger population of Afghan immigrants in Turkey should not be done without corroborating research. Second, this was a 'snapshot' study: it considered the participants' situations at a single moment in time, rather than over a period. Finally, it should be remembered that this study was limited to Afghans who arrived before the recent assumption of control by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021. Further research, ideally with wider geographic and temporal scopes than this study, could provide firmer ground for policy makers looking to improve Turkey's protection system.

Following the completion of the research for this study, one of the participants reached out to me to report that she had been deported to Afghanistan; now back in Afghanistan, she says that her and her son's lives are again in danger and they want to

flee again. In my work with Afghans now, I continue to come across similar stories of women being deported back to Afghanistan. It is remarkable that we live in a world in which potentially *repeating* cycles of migration are even contemplated. Such news makes it even more urgent to study the Turkish protection system, to see whether it actually protects refugees and other migrants in need of support.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

1) General information:

- a) Tell me about yourself: What is your name?
- b) How old are you?
- c) Are you married? Do you have a child/ children?
- d) How long have you been in Istanbul?
- e) Where do you live?
- f) Who do you live with?

2) Living situation in Istanbul

- a) Could you explain to me how you see your life here in Istanbul?
- b) Could you explain one day of your life here?
- c) Do you work? (If not) How do you make a living in Istanbul? Do you receive any aid? (If yes) Could you explain your working experience?
- d) How did you find your job?
- e) How much is your or your family's income approximately?

- f) How long do you work?
- g) Are there any problems at work that you experience?
- h) How are you treated at work?
- i) Could you tell me what are your basic needs?
- j) Do you have any problems reaching these needs? Could you elaborate?
- k) Could you tell me about your health situation?
- l) What do you do when you or your children get sick?
- m) Do your children go to school? If not, why?
- n) Could you explain how you deal with your daily challenges/ problems?
- o) Is there any person/ organization/ ... that you go to when you have a problem?
- p) Do you have friends in Istanbul?
- q) Could you explain your relationship with them?
- r) Have you ever tried to apply for 'Kimlik' in Turkey? (If not) why? (If yes) could you explain the process? What happened?

3) Hopes

- a) What was it like when you first arrived in Istanbul?
- b) What were your expectations (before you arrived)?
- c) How is it now (How did it turn out)?
- d) Did it meet your expectations? To what extent?
- e) What were the unexpected parts?
- f) In your opinion, what is the most important issue that needs to be solved?
- g) By whom? If it is solved, what would change in your daily life and future plans?
- h) What are your future expectations and hopes in life?
- i) How do you perceive your life be like in Turkey/ or somewhere else?
- j) Do you want to add anything?

APPENDIX B: Ethics Board Approval

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of this dissertation.