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# Syrian Refugees and Agriculture in Turkey

*Work, Precarity, Survival*

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*To my beloved Ayşe Defne*



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## Preface

The research I undertook for this book had started long ago before it came into life, and it has opened a new window for me to understand the life-worlds of seasonal agricultural workers in Turkey. Without a doubt this is an unjust and unequal world full of contradictions and conflicts. In this chaos and inequalities, labour seems to be the only medium to comprehend the lives and survival of many families trying to make a living at the edge of global economies. As a researcher, I have always aimed to bring out women's voices and views by using the research tools provided by interdisciplinary fields, such as gender and migration studies. This pursuit has also tended to centre on women's work practices and gender relations, which shape the very nature of the practice of earning a living. This time, my projection was not only on Syrian women but also on Syrian agricultural worker families and children.

Having this vantage point has also enabled me to analyse not only the life-worlds of women but also the ways in which women shape the political, social, cultural and economic changes taking place in the societies in which they live. Thus, it is always important to understand not only the socio-economic transformations through the lenses of gender and migration studies but also the role women play in these grand transformations. That is why this book chooses to focus on one segment of economic life, that is agricultural work, in which women seem to be quite invisible, with an aim to unleash the gendered aspect of habitus, even in the least expected areas.

Together with the arrival of a large number of Syrians, Turkey is home to the largest Syrian refugee community in the world and the agricultural sector offers work opportunities for vulnerable Syrian refugee families. This book exposes the fast-changing relationship between seasonal agricultural production and the work practices of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Through close ethnographic study I carried out over four years with nearly 1,000 people, the book illuminates how the increasing number of incoming Syrians results in the 'precarization' of the workers – particularly women and children. I examine Syrian families' working and living conditions with a special interest in the

dynamics of how they utilize the labour of women and children to survive and have access to work.

I conducted an in-depth study of the Syrian community – at a time when the state apparatus is hostile to research on the subject; the material in this book is unique and offers an insight into remote agricultural sites that are invisible to many. It is an analysis of the precarization process of Syrian labour in an industry that wants to attract the most vulnerable people into the workforce. By focusing on the intersectional vulnerabilities and the context-dependent precarization, the book argues that the commercialization of agricultural production and the increasing use of waged labour bloom antagonistic encounters of different ethnic, cultural and religious groups in rural Turkey.

## Acknowledgements

The book is the result of a string of research and fieldwork I undertook between 2015 and 2019 to examine the lives of seasonal agricultural workers in different parts of Turkey. In this endeavour, I worked with different institutions and people, but among others, the Development Workshop (DW) Cooperative has been the home of that string of research. I thank DW and its team for allowing me to observe the living and working experiences of seasonal agricultural workers and to go after the questions I sought to answer. I also thank Kurtuluş Karaşin for sharing his photo to be the cover image of the book.

My special thanks also go to Aslı Şahankaya for being with me in each and every step of the way. I thank my colleagues at the University of Mugla – Ummuhan Gökoavlı, Çisel Ekiz Gökmen, Aysun Danışman and Bilge Şentürk – for making life bearable and lighting it in the difficult times of the Covid-19 pandemic and of the writing process. Solidarity endures in unusual ways. My family has always provided me with unlimited support, and it would not have been possible for me to write this book without their support and guidance. My daughter has been the cheerer when I needed a little boost to go on with the writing. My utmost appreciation goes to all these people.

Finally, to the seasonal agricultural worker families who generously opened up their homes and hearts to me. No words of thanks are enough. I only hope that I have managed to remain somewhat true to their perspectives and stories, and that these perspectives will find their way into broader debates about the issues of refugees, gender and social integration in Turkey and strategies for advancing women's and children's interests in general.



## Introduction

This study is an account of Syrian refugees' involvement in seasonal agricultural work in Turkey, a site of precarization of labour markets, and specifically women's and children's central role in a work regime that continuously seeks paths towards bonded labour. It explores the relationship between labour supply and demand in Turkey's seasonal agricultural labour markets, which are continuously geared towards tapping into the most vulnerable sources of the labour pool to reduce production costs. The book seeks mainly to answer the question: 'under what conditions does precarization occur for workers in Turkey's agricultural labour?' It also follows the ways of how women's and children's labour has played a central role in the precarization of Syrians in a work regime that continuously seeks paths to bond labour. The material illuminates the strategies and responses of both the poorest labour segment (Syrian refugees) and other actors, especially labour intermediaries (*dayıbaşı* or *elci* in Turkish). It also explores the strategies employed in agricultural production in general and examines the contribution of migrant labour to the competitive strength of the Turkish seasonal agricultural sector in global food markets.

Sharing the basic premise of Castels's analysis of migratory processes in *International Human Mobility: Key Issues and Challenges to Social Theory* (2015), which are shaped by both macro-social structures and the actions and perceptions of affected populations, migrants and non-migrants, I argue that global agricultural production relies increasingly on strategies that attract diversified forms of labour with intersecting vulnerabilities and on the adaptation of labour control practices that generate a form of bonded labour. The concerted efforts of the actors involved in seasonal agricultural production in Turkey to find and retain cheap sources of labour exploit Syrian workers,

and Syrian refugees also hold onto their precarious agricultural jobs by integrating the most vulnerable members of their families into the workforce, that is, women and children.

Various studies have depicted migrant labour as instrumental in increasing the precarization of the labour force worldwide. The extreme forms of labour exploitation experienced by migrant workers, labelled as 'hyper-precarity', play a central role in the precarization of employment (Lewis et al., 2015). Many studies have emphasized the instabilities and insecurities particular vulnerable groups – such as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – experience in employment and workplaces, documenting how they can be compelled, coerced or restricted into highly exploitative work (e.g. Jordan and Brown, 2007; Lewis et al., 2015). Migrants' 'life-worlds . . . are inflected with uncertainty and instability' (Waite, 2009: 416), which increase their representation in the 'migrant precariat' (Schierup et al., 2014; Schierup et al., 2015). Migrant workers are engaged in precarious work around the globe, but their experiences differ in complex, but socially patterned, ways.

The precarization of labour all over the world goes hand in hand with increasing transnational migratory movements that are partially the result of rising demands for casual labour in many sectors following global economic restructuring. Many production sites in urban, but also in rural, Turkey have experienced a similar trend of a growing demand for migrant labour. Agriculture in Turkey has been one of the major sectors with high demand for migrant workers as its need for waged workers has been increasing steadily since the early 1990s. With the arrival of Syrian refugees since 2011, when internal conflict erupted in Syria, refugee labour in seasonal agricultural work in Turkey has grown significantly. Syrians work mainly in seasonal agricultural production in which workers travel to different provinces to undertake employment during high seasons of a given product.

As shown by Martin Bak Jørgensen (2016), precarization as a string of procedural aspects is context dependent and may take different forms in different socio-economic settings. The empirical sections of my work document how context-dependent strategies absorb and generate precarious workers, in particular Syrian refugees in Turkey's seasonal agricultural sector, an industry producing for world markets. The precarization of Syrian labour is generated through a set of strategies applied in the agricultural sector integrating the most vulnerable labour force (women and children) and the sector's labour demand

strategies (recruitment, retention and remuneration [3Rs], using such methods as labour intermediaries, secluded refugee settlements and a specific wage payment system). By focusing on intersectional vulnerabilities and context-dependent precarization in exploring the labour market integration of Syrian refugees, the book shows that differential inclusion of migrant labour through gender, ethnicity, age and patriarchal relations supports the precarization of Syrian labour by increasing the bargaining power of migrant labour, namely the domestic native Turkish precariat. The book, therefore, contributes to the literature on migration and labour studies, as well as female and child migrant labour. It draws on anthropological and sociological perspectives to address questions of critical importance to the social sciences.

Research was conducted among the Syrian workers of Turkey's seasonal agricultural sector, an important sector for its capacity, not only to export worldwide but also to supply cheap products for domestic consumption. I have collected rich empirical data that provides analysis of who exactly works, under what conditions they work and how they interact with other local groups. At a descriptive level, the book reveals the lives of Syrian refugees in the insecure, invisible and low/unpaid end of the labour market and the labour relations of a quite peculiar production – seasonal agricultural work – and its place in national and global markets.

## The objectives of the book

My study has three objectives. The first objective is to explore the nature of Syrian refugees' work and help render it visible in Turkey's seasonal agricultural labour markets, where most of the work takes place informally. Turkey is home to the largest Syrian refugee community in the world, and the overwhelming majority of refugees live outside refugee camps and struggle to make a living. Agriculture offers a wide range of work opportunities for vulnerable Syrian workers, and the host country's landlords and agricultural labour brokers have welcomed Syrian refugee families whose involvement helps to reduce average wages in seasonal agricultural work in many parts of Turkey. Literature concerned with migrant work in seasonal agricultural production typically focuses on Western countries, where most workers are temporary migrants who move across countries seasonally. Syrians in Turkey, in contrast, are



permanent workers who are changing the very nature of seasonal agricultural work in Turkey.

With a focus on the precarization of Syrian labour in Turkish seasonal agricultural work, my second objective is to examine the supply factors that condition Syrians' work. As of August 2020, the Syrian population in Turkey has exceeded 3.5 million and is composed mostly of young people under the age of eighteen and women with low educational attainment. Many have settled in large cities, such as Istanbul, İzmir and Bursa, where employment opportunities are more diverse than in smaller locales, but the majority remain in cities near the Syrian border, such as Hayat, Kilis, Şanlıurfa and Gaziantep. Syrians have emerged as a new precariat of the Turkish economy.

The sudden arrival of Syrian refugees has presented a new dynamic in the most labour-intensive, often informal sectors, such as textiles, tourism, construction and agriculture: competition for the most precarious jobs among the poor – the precariat. Syrians have been taking a lion's share of most casual jobs in the agricultural sector. Integration of the most disadvantaged groups into the labour force in recent years has intensified the precarization of the labour force and has generated competition among different worker groups for existing jobs. The integration of Syrians into agricultural work is largely based on a string of absorption strategies adopted both by refugees competing to access these jobs – supply-side strategies – and by the sector seeking to integrate the most vulnerable labour force. The supply-side strategies of Syrian refugees have been constructed to win the rivalry between poverty-stricken groups and have resulted in the deployment of the most vulnerable segments of the Syrian population, namely, women and children. An infinite capacity to control female and child labour is an important aspect of the seasonal agricultural labour market, and control over workers takes many shapes, handed over from the heads of households to labour intermediaries and then to landowner employers.

The winning strategy of Syrian refugees in this competition is to tap into the large labour pool of women and children, whose labour is essential for production in the fields and also enables social reproduction of worker families. Moreover, the book dwells on the concept of 'differential inclusion' (Mezzadra and Nielsen, 2013: 165), which refers to the role of the border in selecting, filtering and differentiating migrant labour and to the inclusion of different kinds of migrants, from different levels of subordination that shape

labour markets and intersectional vulnerabilities, as forms of embodiments of interconnected disadvantages based on social categorizations, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender and social status (e.g. being migrants). The concept of 'vulnerable integration' refers to the inclusion of the most vulnerable segments of migrant labour in the face of this competition. By adopting Polanyi's concept of 'double movement',<sup>1</sup> as an agency through which people develop varying forms of agency and resistance, my objective is to analyse how female and child labour are used in seasonal agricultural work and why refugee families have increasingly relied on these two categories of labour to gain access to agricultural jobs. This analysis enables to form the fact that the interactions of structure and agency are an integral part of social transformations but, in return, affect how global social transformations played out on national, local, household and individual levels. The book traces the impact of global capitalism on refugees and their households and focuses on social transformations steering antagonistic confrontations between different ethnic, religious and cultural groups in rural Turkey. In this setting, the agency of refugees is limited not only to their potential of earning a living and supporting their families but also to their strategies to manage the confrontations and rivalry existing in Turkey's agricultural sector.

My third objective is to provide an understanding of the labour demand strategies conditioning Syrian refugees' entry into agricultural wage work in Turkey. Isolated tent settlements (retention), labour intermediaries (recruitment) and a specific type of wage payment system (remuneration) are distinctive strategies the sector has adopted to organize its labour process. The 3R strategies reveal the broader interrelated structural process in which both structure and agency play a crucial role in reproducing, challenging and reconstructing the power relations in the labour market. The use of migrant labour in agricultural production illustrates the transnational connectedness that affects national societies, local communities and individuals (Castels, 2015). The result of the adoption of these strategies is that migrant workers are more vulnerable, more flexible and more competitive and therefore more attractive in meeting the demands of the sector seeking cheaper labour.

In an overall assessment, my main argument is that the influx of Syrian refugees has led to the further precarization of agricultural labour in Turkey since Syrian agricultural worker families practice family-based work arrangements in which fathers/husbands wield patriarchal control

more aggressively over women and children who disproportionately work in seasonal harvesting cycles. This feminization of Turkey's agricultural labour – the increasing reliance on the work of female and child Syrian refugees who receive lower wages and accept harsher worker conditions – has led to its precarization. Moreover, Syrian refugees mostly do not possess formal work papers and thus are considered 'irregular' migrants whose basic wages are not guaranteed in the agricultural sector. Due to high housing costs, they often accept company-provided housing and other services from Turkish farmers, who trap them in 'bonded' labour relations in which it is difficult for them to escape.

My argument in the book shows how Syrian female and child labour are used in paid and unpaid activities directly related to the production of low-cost crops that compete in international markets or support low wages of domestic consumers. The intersecting vulnerabilities of female and child labour whose labour has been a part of successful negotiation process of Syrians enable further precarization of agricultural labour in Turkey. Moving all members of a family together to work is the strongest indication of how worker families rely on the interconnectedness of productive and reproductive work to gain access to income-earning potential in the agricultural sector, mostly through immeasurable use of female labour. Productive work in agriculture is only possible because of the work women perform in the realm of reproductive work, which systematically subsidizes capital and enables ultra-exploitation of migrant labour. Therefore, an analysis of the precarization of refugee labour is considerably determined not only under the impact of intensification and/or informalization of productive work but also in the ways social reproduction internalizes production costs to workers, families and communities, in this case Syrians.

On another level, the book argues that the precarization of Syrian labour is not only affected by the living arrangements but also by the recruitment of the agricultural labour force, organization into working teams and transportation to the fields. This research will help to show that labour markets are bearers of social relations, in the sense that they are instantiations of the social, ethnic and gender relations in the society in which the labour market is embedded. Social relations as bearers of class, ethnic and gender relations reflect existing problems of social domination and subordination at institutional levels, such as household, community, the market and the state. Embeddedness of the labour