

Educated Syrian Working Women: Evaluation of the Acculturation Process

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Abstract

Turkey is the country with the largest Syrian refugee population in the world. This research examines how Syrian-educated refugee women perceive their acculturation experiences and their life experiences pre- and post-migration. Women (ten participants) who were educated in their country and had working experience participated in the study. The study in the qualitative research method is in the phenomenological design. Research data were collected using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher.

The experiences of the participants have evaluated seven titles. Migration and post-migration; interaction in the post-migration process; relations in the post-migration process; social identity, intersectionality, and discrimination; professional life; life satisfaction and adaptation; expectations. As a result of the research, it has been determined that participants' lives pre- and post-migration changed, and women's education facilitated their language learning, acculturation, and adaptation.

Keywords: *Syrian Working Women; Acculturation; Social Identity; Intersectionality; Adaptation*

Introduction

Today, it has a rapidly growing refugee and displaced population (UNHCR, 2018). The turmoil in many parts of the world often triggers waves of migration (Young, Korinek, & Huu Minh, 2021). This re-process brings opportunities and uncertainties (Adams & Kivlighan III, 2019). Refugees experience traumatic events and may be exposed to many risk factors pre- and post-migration (Malm et al., 2020). The changing lives of refugees postmigration and the adaptation process are also important issues. Simultaneously, this intergroup interaction and change are essential for all groups. Relocation refers to an individual's transition from one identity hierarchy to another. Post-migration, the individual reposition self in the new cultural structure (Joseph, 2013). Migration is challenging for everyone, but women participate more passively in the migration process. Therefore, they are disadvantaged group members; each stage is a more challenging process for them (Rezazadeh & Hoover, 2018). Of the 13 million Syrians (Damen, Huijnk & Dagevos, 2022), who have been displaced since the conflict in Syria in 2011, approximately 3.7 million live in Turkey (Association of Refugees, 2022). About 46% of Syrians in Turkey are women. Although Syria and Turkey are neighboring countries in the same geography, they have differences in many social, cultural, ethnic, and religious areas. For this reason, it is thought that knowing the acculturation processes of Syrian women will facilitate their adaptation processes.

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Acculturation

Culture involves making sense of and sharing everyday life experiences. When individuals migrate, their heritage culture also interacts with the culture of where they settled (Schwartz et al., 2010). Intercultural contact affects psychological, social, cultural, and behavioral processes (Cobb et al., 2019). Acculturation refers to physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. It occurs in the newcomers and host group due to intercultural contact (Berry & Dasen 2019:23). A successful acculturation process is also related to the individual's pre-migration, migration, and post-migration experience (Damen, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2022). The individual may feel threatened and exposed to trauma pre-migration. The person suddenly decides to go to a safe place to protect himself and his relatives. The longer and more challenging one's journey, the longer it takes to become ready to join the larger society (Bhugra & Jones, 2001). In the post-migration process, refugees may stay in reception centers for a long time in the host country, move away from daily life, and interact more strongly with their heritage cultures (Larruina and Ghorashi, 2016).

During this process, individuals attempt to learn the social and cultural characteristics of the host country. Stress factors that affect an individual's psychological well-being and adaptation accompany the transition from one culture to another. Individuals may experience identity confusion, language barrier, social isolation, and social, emotional, and economic difficulties and problems (Bhugra & Jones, 2001). The cultural dimension level is the refugees' approach to the host society regarding cultural values, preferences, and beliefs. Usually, the dominant group within each country determines the core values. However, the host society's norms, values, and beliefs may change over time.

In contrast to the social and emotional dimensions, cultural orientation is more mutually exclusive (Schwartz et al., 2010). While the cultural similarity of the newcomer and host groups facilitates social contact, cultural differences can be a barrier to contact (Damen, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2022). Another possible indicator of socio-cultural cohesion is language proficiency because being more proficient in the language of the host country can provide more confidence and facilitate social interactions and learning about cultural values (Statham & Tillie, 2016)

Social Identity

Social identity is shaped by social interactions between the individual and the groups to which they belong. It provides a cognitive framework for an individual's place in society. Simultaneously, it has emotional value, gives the person a sense of belonging, and adds meaning to life. A person's social existence depends on the fact that his social identity has an implication and is shared by group members (Cobb et al., 2019; Weichselbaumer, 2020). Immigrants rebuild their social identity in the new culture. An identity is an anchor in contemporary society for refugees and provides positive/negative emotional bonds with the host society (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009; Damen, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2022). If the host society does not accept newcomers, they may turn intensely toward heritage groups or withdraw, becoming misidentified. It can prevent refugees from establishing social and emotional bonds (Damen, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2022).

Intersectionality focuses on the meaning of being a member of multiply disadvantaged groups (Syed, 2010). Individuals' different group memberships can provide them with multiple-



intersecting categories of identity. The concept explains how different group identities interact, leading to negative experiences and discrimination (Weichselbaumer, 2020). Studies on intersectionality have generally focused on the combination of race/ethnicity, religion, and gender (Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Manassen & Verkuyten, 2018; Weichselbaumer, 2020). A migrant woman reconstructs representations of identity as both a woman and an immigrant. Joseph (2013) indicated that gender roles, ethnic origin, and religious understanding of Malaysian immigrant women have changed after migration. A study conducted with refugees of African origin in Australia determined that women had to work because the men in the family could not earn enough income. It has been observed that this situation causes changes in women's social identity and gender roles (Li, Liddell & Nickerson, 2016).

An individual's social identity can cause discrimination. The more pronounced the differences between individuals, the more likely they are to be discriminated against (Tilcsik, Anteby & Knight, 2015). When people are discriminated against, they form stronger psychological bonds with their cultural group, giving individuals a shared perspective on social reality and a sense of belonging (Cobb et al., 2019). Perceived discrimination is one of the most crucial stress factors. Individuals may be subject to discrimination due to their ethnic origin, race, religious affiliation, physical characteristics, or clothing style (Weichselbaumer, 2020). Perceived discrimination negatively affects the acculturation and adaptation of an individual. As a result, it may cause the individual to establish strong bonds with the heritage culture and develop weaker relations with the host culture (Berry & Sabatier, 2010). Ethnic identity is crucial for people excluded by the host culture to protect their psychological health. When the host society discriminates against an individual, they may identify strongly with their origin group. Anti-immigrant rhetoric restricts the rights and freedoms of refugees and causes discrimination. It also has negative psychological and physical consequences for refugees (Jannesari et al., 2020). As a result, refugee groups may face discrimination because of their identity and intersectionality. In particular, refugee women are more negatively affected by this process.

Psychological and Socio-cultural Adaptation

The acculturation process affects the individual's psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004). The individual occurs psychological, social, behavioral, and cultural changes during acculturation and can occur within a short or extended period. Adaptation emerges because of the behavioral and cultural changes experienced by the individual (learning a new language, changing eating habits and clothing styles, traditions, values, attitudes, identity structure, and relationship styles). While some of these changes are easily achieved, some may cause acculturation stress and make the adaptation difficult (Berry & Hou, 2016).

Psychological adaptation refers to the individual's emotional difficulties in the acculturation process. The indicators of psychological adaptation are psychological well-being and life satisfaction. If the individual copes with the problems successfully, his psychological well-being and life satisfaction will increase. (Ward and Kennedy, 2001; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen, 2002: 345–382;). The individual's identification with heritage and host culture affects psychological adaptation (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). An individual's life satisfaction is determined by the level of identification with the social group to be a member of and by positive comparisons with the reference group. Life satisfaction is the cognitive

evaluation of the quality of life (Pavot & Diener, 2008). The individual perceptions the conditions of the host country better than his own country. This provides a protective perspective for the individual. Different studies have shown that economic and non-economic conditions (political and religious freedom, access to health services, less corruption, and gender equality) affect individuals' life satisfaction. These factors are central to the livability of a society (Bartram, 2011; Cobb et al., 2019).

Socio-cultural adaptation refers to the ability of individuals to cope with behavioral difficulties during the acculturation process (Van de Vejer & Phalet, 2004). Behavioral changes occur faster than emotional changes. The interaction of refugees with the larger society causes changes in their behavior, habits, and life practices. Although the host community provides primary life resources such as welfare, freedom, employment, health, and education services, access to these resources depends on the refugees' language proficiency and education level (Hynie, 2018; Chen et al., 2022).

Refugee women may have difficulties in the larger culture due to their language deficiencies and are less visible in the public sphere (Jannesari et al., 2020). This situation negatively affects the socio-cultural adaptation of refugee women (Fokkema & De Haas, 2015; Jannesari et al., 2020). Social support provides a protective mechanism for refugees against psychological and socio-cultural changes. In cases where the individual cannot find social support during the relocation process, women are more affected. Women redefine their identity in the new settlement and build new social networks (Ward & Styles, 2005). Syrian refugees do not come alone like the other (Afghan and Iranian) groups in Turkey. Families provide individuals with social support and information on coping with difficulties (Arends Tóth & van de Vijver, 2008). Simultaneously, social support contributes to refugees' life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Cobb et al., 2019). For this reason, it is thought that the social support mechanisms of Syrian women are an essential resource in overcoming the difficulties in their lives.

Purpose of the research

The psychological, social, cognitive, and economic dimensions of the forced migration process are examined multidimensionally by different disciplines. This study evaluates in detail the pre- and post-migration experiences, acculturation, and adaptation processes of educated working women from Syria.

Method

Research design

This research was designed in a phenomenological pattern. In a phenomenological analysis, events are described as multidimensional (Karagöz, 2021: 913). The individual attributes meaning to his phenomenon due to his perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2012). The acculturation experiences of Syrian refugee working women are explained with a descriptive phenomenological pattern.

Sample

The sample was selected by the snowball sampling method. The sample of the study included 10 Syrian refugee women working in İzmir. Participants were informed about the subject and



purpose of the research. They signed voluntary participation forms and agreed to involve in the study. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants demographic information

Participant Code	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Education	Occupation	Working Status in Syria	Arrival Year	Language Proficiency
P1	37	Married	3	University	Teacher (Math)	+	8	+
P2	26	Married	2	High School	Assistant Accountant	+	6	+
P3	44	Divorced	3	University	Teacher (Kindergarden)	+	9	+
P4	41	Divorced	4	Secondary School	Cosmetician	+	7	+
P5	47	Married	3	University	Teacher (English)	+	9	+
P6	34	Single	-	University	Teacher	+	9	+
P7	51	Married	5	High School	Nurse	+	8	+
P8	45	Married	4	High School	Health Technician	+	9	+
P9	49	Married	4	University	Pharmacist	+	9	+
P10	36	Married	4	Secondary School	-	-	7	+

Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and prepare research questions by scanning the relevant literature and taking expert opinions. The interviews lasted approximately 1½ or 2½ hours. The participants in the study expressed themselves in Turkish. However, when necessary, the translator also participated in the process—requested permission from the participants for audio recording. It was written during the interview if the participants did not allow the audio recording. The study analyzed data based on Giorgi's (2007) four-stage data analysis. Firstly, all knowledge, values, perceptions, thoughts, and experiences related to the subject are determined (synthesis of bracketing). In the second stage, the meaning units are formed (phenomenological reduction). In the next step, the themes of the phenomenon are reached (creative diversity). In the last stage, meaning is synthesized (the overall structure of experiences). In direct quotations, the participants are indicated as “P1, P2.”

Findings

The findings that make up the structure of the participants' pre- and post-migration acculturation experiences were determined in the seven titles.

Migration and post-migration: Participants said they worked pre-migration but were irresponsible for looking after the family due to the patriarchal structure. One participant (P9) said “I didn't have to go to work all the time when I was working with him. I would be more concerned with children. I had time for social activities. We were in a better position economically.” This participant worked in a pharmacy with her husband. Another participant (P5) said, “I worked until I got married, then I quit my job when my wife said we didn't need it.” Participants stated that we were a better economy in Syria here. All participants said that

family ties are essential in the pre-migration process. One participant (P6) explained that “I was happy. I lost my fiancée and brother in the war, and life turned upside down. We lost my mother because of my brother's sadness. It is difficult to return to that life again.” They stated that the family ties of the participants were strong during the pre-migration period, but this sometimes creates pressure. Some participants (P5, P7) had problems with their spouses and families and said they continued their marriage due to social pressures. It has been observed that women adopt traditional gender roles even if they are educated.

Interaction in the post-migration process: The participants' relationships with their groups and members of the larger society were evaluated. The participants came with information from their acquaintances. Some of them (P1, P4, P7, P10) left the camp after staying there for a while. The participants preferred places close to their previous relatives to live. Additionally, the participants stated that they experienced a language barrier when they arrived. The participants initially chose to interact with people from their heritage rather than with the dominant culture. They indicated that they interacted with the dominant society over time due to necessity. A participant (P2) said, “I tried to learn Turkish. I knew the language would make my life easier here.” A participant (P9) said, “After I came, I felt rootless. I didn't know what to do. Some of the in my family moved to the Netherlands. We should make a life for ourselves. My uncle lived in Izmir and said it was a nice place. We rented a house close to them; they found a job for my husband. Everything is different here. It's more comfortable...” Participants emphasized that language proficiency in interacting with the larger group was essential.

Relations in the post-migration process: Respondents report that their lives have changed significantly. A participant (P3) said, “We used to do what our spouses said. He married again while I was there, but I couldn't say anything. I left when I came here and worked. Here, you are human and valuable.” Participants stated that family relations and their spouses have changed. It has been observed that women's position at home has also improved as spouses support each other economically. One participant (P9) said, “We are like Turkish women. We do everything for ourselves. I have four daughters who should live freely here. My two daughters are at the university. They want to live their own lives like the young people here.” Another participant (P8) said, “Our families are pretty traditional. In the beginning, he had consulted with his family about everything. But they have not interfered with us since we came here. I am glad we came. Life is more difficult, but I am happier.” All the participants stated that there were changes in their relationships post-migration.

Social identity, intersectionality, discrimination: The participants defined themselves as Syrian and Muslim. They said that being a Syrian/refugee and a woman makes it difficult to find a job and social relations. Participants without spouses stated that they acted more carefully. Participant (P4) said the first landlord mistreated and threatened her because she was the only woman. The participants expressed that compared to other workers, they work long hours for low wages because they are Syrian and female. A participant (P2) said, “We experience less discrimination here. My brothers are in Belgium. They have a hard time because they are Muslim and Syrian. At least everyone is Muslim here.” said. They mentioned the difficulty of being a Syrian woman and a working mother in Turkey. The participants experienced discrimination due to their identity. Remarkably, the participants indicated that it is difficult to be a single mother (P3, P4) and they spend effort in children), and they spend a lot of effort on the needs of their children.



Professional Life: Opportunities and Challenges: The participants stated that they tried to look for a job in the new culture. They said that although Syria and Turkey are similar in terms of religion, there are differences in their business life/relationships. Some participants stated that they were teachers (P1, P3, P5, P6), but they had difficulty doing their jobs. P3, “We were teachers in Aleppo. I was a kindergarten teacher. We suffered a lot when we came here. I couldn't find a job for a while. I learned Turkish at an NGO in Antep. I started working there. Then, we came to Izmir, and they became a reference for this job. I'm lucky. I work with children here. I didn't have to look for another job.” Another participant (P5) described her experience; “I started cleaning in the study center. Then, they learned I am an English teacher. I set the course schedule and service. I am satisfied with my job. If I were in the classroom, everything would be better.” Participants stated that they could not do their jobs due to barriers such as diploma equivalency and language. The participants also expressed their experiences in the job search process. One participant, P1 said, “I was also supporting children in the camp. I teach math here at an NGO. I also participate in projects.” Another participant (P4) said, “My uncle's bride knew Nilgün. She talked about my situation. I started working at her place. I'm doing makeup now. Maybe I'll even open my place.” Another participant (P10) stated that she had not worked before. “I loved sewing. I found a job in a nearby textile. I worked in difficult conditions; my salary was lower than that of other employees. Later, a friend said that the place he worked was looking for an employee. I currently work as a tailor in a shopping mall. My salary is also good.” The participant (P7), a nurse, said, “Currently, I am looking after the patient. First, I worked as a caregiver in a private hospital but could not get a regular salary. The family I work with are good people.” Participants stated that they generally received support from acquaintances while looking for a job. All participants also said that language proficiency made life more accessible, and they changed their positions over time.

Life satisfaction and adaptation: Participants said they were pleased to be in Turkey. A participant (P10) said, “Coming here was complete uncertainty. I was horrified when it came. I was miserable for my family and our children. I'm glad I have come here.” Another participant (P1) said, “Life was different. Everything has changed. Sometimes I miss there a lot. But I don't know if I want to go back. I am happy.” Another participant (P4) said, “... I felt empty here. I had to continue with my life with children...” A different participant (P2) described her situation as follows: “We must relearn life, takes a lot of time, everything is different, life, writing, speech, relationships, people, ... are different, but still, thank goodness.” Participants stated that they had a complex and uncertain process in general, but as they improved their language skills, they became more involved in life and felt better. Another participant (P8) said, “We would go to the Bayraklı beach or the park with his children. I would watch what people were doing and how they were behaving...” The participants' cognitive evaluations of life generally increased their life satisfaction and adaptation.

Expectations: Participants stated that they had different problems when they came. Generally, the participants talked about the difficulties they experienced in language learning and find a job, how they coped with it, and their learning processes. A participant (P8) said, “When the children came to İzmir, they had problems with their friends at school. My son wanted to work, but I wanted him to attend school. I went to school and talked to his teachers. He could not get used to it. I asked his teacher for help. Now he continues to school...” Another participant (P4) said, “When the children are happy, I am happy, too.” The

participants are happy to live here, to take care of families and children despite the difficulties, and to look at life with hope. The participants also expressed their expectations for the future.

Conclusion

The study examined what it means to be a Syrian educated working woman. The research reveals the changing lives of the participants' pre- and post-migration with different social psychological concepts. Syrians, who had to leave their country after the civil war in 2011, are a sensitive group that should be examined socially and psychologically due to their acculturation processes, past experiences, and legal status. This first period in the acculturation process is crucial for life in the host society (Damen, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2022). This study reveals the changes experienced by educated Syrian working women after coming to Turkey. It has been observed that the education level of women is an essential resource for their participation in society in the new country. As a result, it can be said that the education level of the participants affects the acculturation and adaptation process as it facilitates the acquisition of the necessary skills. Damen, Huijnk, and Dagevos (2022) found that obtaining higher education before coming to the Netherlands increases socio-cultural cohesion and identification with the host society. It has been observed that the difficulties experienced by women in the migration process do not prevent their interaction with the dominant culture, similar to the study results. Different studies (Larruina & Ghorashi, 2016; Damen, Huijnk & Dagevos, 2022) have determined that Syrian refugees interact with larger groups by learning languages. The study observed that women facilitated their acculturation process by learning the language.

Social structures can also affect individuals' acculturation. Where refugees are less accepted and discriminated against, it can strengthen ethnic group identity (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). There is increasing social psychological interest in multiple identities and how they are subjectively combined and organized (Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Manassen & Verkuyten, 2018). Intersectionality suggests that being a member of two or more disadvantaged groups (e.g., ethnic minorities and women) increases the risk of experiencing negative experiences such as discrimination (Rosenthal, 2016). Studies have indicated that women experience problems stemming from their female and Syrian identity (Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Weichselbaumer, 2020). Also found similar results in this study. It is thought that this issue will affect the adaptation process in different immigrant/refugee groups and social contexts.

Immigrants seldom migrate toward a social vacuum. The family is the primary source of support. Simultaneously, the individual adapts to the new culture and tries preserving the family and the heritage culture's characteristics, maintaining a sense of family integrity and facilitating coping with difficulties (Falicov, 2011). Living with people similar to oneself has both psychological and socio-cultural benefits. The individual feels more at home here, creates a sense of continuity in the individual, helps newcomers transform destination countries into more familiar places, and allows them to maintain their valuable group identity (Chen et al., 2022). In the study, refugee women generally reside where their families and acquaintances are. However, they have been observed to create new social networks for themselves. It is thought that the social networks of refugee working women facilitate their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. Participants stated that they were discriminated against at first, then perceived discrimination decreased. It can be said that the participants could not do their jobs and experienced document and diploma equivalence problems. This situation reduces the



opportunity for educated refugees to benefit from their intellectual knowledge. Additionally, working refugee women preserve their cultural characteristics by interacting with the new culture.

The participants lived in places with low socioeconomic levels. The socioeconomic level of an individual's place of residence affects the possibility of inequality and discrimination (Rezazadeh & Hoover, 2018; Weichselbaumer, 2020). Refugees can experience discrimination in working conditions, social networks, economic level, living conditions, health care, identity, and the immigration system. Refugees may face discrimination in one or more of these areas. The experience of discrimination negatively affects the integration of individuals. Refugee policies should reduce discrimination for cohesion (Jannesari et al., 2020). Behavior in response to perceived discrimination is complex. When faced with prejudice, the individual either defines himself more firmly to his religious and ethnic identity (Berry & Sabatier, 2010) or adopts the larger group (Luque-Ribelles, Palacios-Gálvez, and Morales-Marente, 2018). The interaction between the host group and working Syrian women should be encouraged to reduce the perceived discrimination and facilitate women's participation in society. Considering that providing Syrian women with language skills will make their lives easier is one of the most critical components of their adaptation.

This research has some limitations. There are limitations regarding the selection and inclusion of participants in the study. Women live in İzmir, a culturally and economically developed metropolis in western Turkey. This study was conducted where participants had both ethnic and host support and access to additional resources. It was a qualitative research design. It is thought that there is a need for quantitative and/or mixed-method studies on acculturation, social identity, intersectionality, discrimination, and adaptation with Syrian and with different samples. Despite these limitations, the study provides a social psychological assessment of Syrian refugee women in Turkey. It is also essential to focus on the experiences of Syrian working women living in Turkey. While less educated female participants were evaluated in studies with Syrian women (Özkarlı, 2015; Aygül & Kaba, 2019), assessed the experiences of educated participants in this study. Researchers can create new social-psychological problems by working with different groups and contributing to the development of social psychology as a social discipline.

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