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The Visibility of an Invisible Community's Labour Exploitation in an Ethnic Economy: A Comparative Study on Kurdish Movers in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Kurdish movers from Turkey are usually considered as Turkish by researchers. Therefore, very little is known about the experiences of Kurdish movers in the labour market in the United Kingdom. Drawing on field research I conducted in 2014 and 2015 about the ethnic economy and labour market conditions of Kurdish, Turkish, and Turkish-Cypriot movers in London, and this study contributes to the literature on migration through analyses of the labour exploitation of Kurds who moved to the UK from Turkey. It demonstrates that the reasons underlying the difference between Kurds and Turks and Turkish-Cypriots in terms of status and working conditions are complex. First of all, Kurdish movers in the UK are relative newcomers, have a limited grasp of English and share a strong sense of solidarity, and also a significant percentage of those Kurds left Turkey in order to escape discrimination and political violence, which makes the possibility of return “impossible”.

Keywords: *Kurdish movers; labour exploitation; ethnic economy; migration; London.*

Introduction

Research about Kurdish movers² who have migrated from Turkey to Europe must take up the issue of differentiating them from Kurds from Iraq, Iran and Syria, in addition to Turks from Turkey and Cyprus.³ In the scholarship, that has proven to be a sticking point, as studies on migration from Turkey to Europe usually lump together Kurds and Turks (see Abadan-Unat, 1976; Akgündüz, 1993; Constant et al., 2007; Euwals et al., 2010; Martin, 1991; Oğuz, 2012; Teitelbaum and Martin, 2003), and the same holds true for related studies concerning the UK (Algan et al., 2010; Dedeoğlu, 2014; Erdemir and Vasta, 2007; Küçükcan, 1999). Further indicative of this state of affairs, Kurds are not listed as a separate category in labour-related statistics, such as those produced by the Labour Force Survey and Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the UK. For instance, according to ONS'

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² I use “movers” as an umbrella term that encompasses immigrants, (un)documented migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and so forth.

³ Kurds are a transnational population without a state, the majority of whom live in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia, and hundreds of thousands of them now live in Europe (Sirkeci, 2000: 153). The homeland of the Kurdish people in the Middle East, which they refer to as Kurdistan, is divided into geographical regions: the North, located within Turkey, is called Bakur; the South, situated within Iraq, is called Bashur; the East, which exists within Iran, is called Rojhelat/Rojhilat; and the West, located within Syria, is called Rojava (Gunter, 2018). Since most Kurds from Turkey living in the UK are from regions outside of Bakur (Demir, 2012: 816), I use the phrase “Kurdish movers from Turkey”, which is more inclusive for the purposes of this study.



ethnic classification by economic activity, the “White Other” census category contains at least three distinct subgroups -Turks, Kurds from Turkey and Turkish-Cypriots- “who have very different labour market experiences and outcomes” (Virk, 2019: 116). When asked, the ONS shares data on movers from Turkey and Cyprus by economic activity. This data, however, does not include any separate information on Kurdish movers from Turkey.⁴ The categorisation of Kurdish movers as Turks or members of the Turkish-speaking population renders the specific characteristics of Kurds invisible and hence makes them a non-visible minority in the UK (Holgate et al., 2012).⁵

Because Kurds from Turkey share the same ethnic economy with Turks and Turkish-Cypriots in the UK, it can be difficult to evaluate the exploitation of Kurds in a manner that differentiates them from other groups. For that reason, in this article, I use the terms “Kurds” or “Kurdish movers” to refer to Kurdish people from Turkey who have moved to the UK as well as their children who were born there, and I employ the expression “ethnic economy” to refer to the ethnic/enclave economy of Kurdish movers from Turkey along with that of Turks and Turkish-Cypriots who have immigrated to the UK. In the ethnic economy of TCK, I am focusing on Kurdish movers. Because Kurds are different than Turks and Turkish-Cypriots in terms of their migration processes and labour market positions. The Kurds are relative newcomers and that a significant percentage of Kurds left Turkey to escape discrimination and political violence, which makes the possibility of return unthinkable. They comparatively have a limited command of English and lack of education (Sirkeci et al., 2016: 21-31). Kurdish movers’ unique migration history and process lead to distinctive results in their labour markets positions.

There are very few studies on the (labour) exploitation of Kurds in the UK (Erdemir and Vasta, 2007; Holgate et al., 2012; Karan, 2017), and most of the existing studies do not take up a comparative perspective. Karan (2017) shows that exploitation is a means of keeping businesses running in the ethnic economy, arguing that TCK shop-owners exploit the labour of workers and family members to reduce their costs and keep up with the competition, which has become increasingly fierce.

Erdemir and Vasta (2007) describe exploitative forms of solidarity in the ethnic economy of TCK, and they propose the term “exploitative solidarity” as a means of defining these exploitative forms of labour practices. Holgate et al. (2012) document cases of exploitation and systemic disadvantages among Kurdish workers and look into how first-generation Kurdish asylum-seekers have been exposed to greater exploitation in the labour market of London.

This study fits into the broader scope of this body of literature by exploring the exploitation of Kurdish movers in the UK from a comparative perspective. Empirically it contributes to the existing corpus of studies by shedding light on the exploitation of this invisible community, which, to a great extent, operates in the ethnic economy of London. By demonstrating the particularities of Kurdish movers in the ethnic economy and raising to the surface the differences between TCK, this study also provides insights about how these differences and ethnic tensions play out in the labour market.

⁴ Since there are no data on Kurds’ economic activities in regular statistical tables of the 2011 Census, I requested statistical data from ONS about the economic activities of Kurdish, Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot movers in the UK. In 07.04.2020, I received an answer from ONS Social Statistics (socialsurveys@ons.gov.uk) briefly saying that although there is data available as “INECAC05, Basic Economic Activity” on movers from Turkey (792 Turkey) in the UK by economic activity, there is no distinct subcategory for Kurdish movers from Turkey. Movers from Cyprus, however, are divided into two subcategories as “902 Cyprus (Non-European Union)” and “903 Cyprus (Not Otherwise Specified)”.

⁵ King et al. (2008: 425) criticize the use of “Turkish” or “Turkish-speaking” people to refer to Turks, Kurds from Turkey, and Turkish-Cypriots, and instead recommend the acronym “TCK” (Turkish-Cypriot-Kurdish) which is also adopted in this study.



In terms of exploitation of movers in the UK, this study also differentiates between people who are mostly first-generation movers and members of other immigrant communities who represent a substantial proportion of second/third generation migrants. Within the same scope, the study also distinguishes between movers who migrated to the UK primarily for political reasons and became refugees or asylum seekers and those who migrated for economic reasons.

In this study, one of my aims is to contribute to the literature on migration and labour markets by comparing the exploitation of Kurdish movers with that of Turks and Turkish-Cypriots in the ethnic economy. Another goal is to examine the primary factors underlying the differences in the exploitation of TCK in the UK, and I also seek to explore the relationships between the migration and exploitation of an invisible community.

Within that framework, after discussing the methods I employ, I look into the unique migration history and process of Kurdish movers and then discuss the exploitation of Kurdish movers within the ethnic economy in a comparative fashion.

Data and Methods

This study is based on field research I conducted over a span of 12 months in London in 2014 and 2015, in addition to the relevant literature and statistical data that has been compiled through the UK Census and the Labour Force Survey.

During my field research, as a means of better understanding the community of TCK movers, I not only examined the scholarly literature on the issue but also visited organisations, community centres, businesses, and homes, in addition to conducting informal interviews. I determined that the majority of the members of this community live in North London, particularly in the boroughs of Enfield, Haringey, Hackney and Islington, so I focused my research in that area.⁶ Other studies (Demir, 2012; Enneli et al., 2005; Karan, 2017; Kesici, 2016; King et al., 2008; Sirkeci et al., 2016) have also confirmed that TCK movers mostly converge in North London. This population of movers, which largely settled there as a result of the ethnic economy created by TCK movers, is so dense that some movers have stated that they can meet all their needs in certain areas, such as Green Lane Street in North London, without having to resort to speaking English. Enneli et al. (2005: 2) point to this fact and assert that the “Turkish speaking community” is one of the most self-sufficient communities in London.

In light of my preliminary research and field observations, I conducted 60 interviews with TCK, and mixed origin movers, half of whom were women and half were men.⁷ Almost all of the Kurds were first-generation (only one of the Kurdish interviewees was born in the UK), and the majority of them stated that they travelled to the UK to seek asylum because they had been contending with political problems and conflicts in Turkey.

Using semi-structured interviews, I held in-depth discussions with movers who are workers and proprietors, as well as those who are self-employed, unemployed and retired. Moreover, I met with people who are involved with the ethnic economy and community organisations. I got in touch

⁶ Cf. London Datastore. (2015). London Borough Profiles. Accessed 14.06.2015. Retrieved from <http://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/london-borough-profiles>

⁷ Of the participants, 17 of them (15 Kurdish and 2 Kurdish-Turkish) identified themselves as being Kurdish, while there were 20 who identified as Turkish and 11 as Turkish-Cypriot. The others designated themselves as being Cypriot, British Cypriot, British, Alevi, Zaza, Circassian or simply as “human”. Sirkeci and Esipova (2013: 6-7) stated that there were approximately 200,000 to 250,000 TCK movers living in the UK by 2013, with the total number being more or less equally divided among the three groups.

with the interviewees through organisations, cafes, workplaces and people involved with the community, and at times, I used the snowball method.

I designed the interviews in a way that allowed me to explore the movers' demographic characteristics, social relationships, work histories, positions within the labour market, and experiences of discrimination (as well as their perceptions of it) within the contexts of the labour market, union membership, and relations with labour associations. During the interviews, I gave the interviewees the opportunity to talk about other details they wanted to include and other situations they felt were significant. I conducted the interviews as a means of learning more about the individuals' networks of relationships and their knowledge of the community as well as discovering more about them personally.

In the course of this study, I compared the data I derived from my field research through face-to-face interviews, informal conversations, participant observations and so on with the data I obtained from the relevant literature, which was based on earlier research. I am aware that there are some differences between these migrant groups in terms of age, gender and generational background. In each interview, I asked the movers about their positioning in the labour market and about their knowledge of the labour market conditions of other movers. For example, one second-generation immigrant provided a lot of information about the labour market conditions of first-generation movers and vice versa. In this manner, I was able to explore the conditions of the ethnic economy of Kurdish movers in London as well as the labour market.

Kurdish Migration to the UK

The migration history of Kurdish people who moved from Turkey to the UK differs from that of mainland Turks and Turkish-Cypriots (Enneli et al., 2005: 2; Karan, 2017: 72; Sirkeci, 2000: 161-162). While a small number of Kurds moved to the UK in the 1960s, Kurdish migration gained momentum in the early 1980s (Sirkeci et al., 2016: 15) due to the worsening conflict between the Turkish army and the guerrilla forces of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In that process, large numbers of Kurds were tortured by the Turkish troops, leading to deaths and disappearances, and because of the state's "anti-PKK measures", many of them were forcibly driven from their towns and villages into exile (Dahlman, 2002: 281). In addition, Alevi⁸ (primarily Kurdish Alevi) suffered persecution in the cities of Malatya, Maraş and Istanbul in the 1970s.

As a result of these clashes and persecutions, there was a large number of Kurdish refugees, a great proportion of whom settled in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s (Enneli et al., 2005: 2). In the course of my interviews, Kurds stated that discrimination drove their decision to migrate, an issue that has been raised in another study (Bloch, 2013: 276). In general, from roughly 1980 onwards, the Kurds who moved to London were political asylum seekers (King et al., 2008: 426). According to the Refugee Council (1996), they were among the top ten population groups seeking asylum in the UK in the 1990s (cited in Karan, 2017: 81), and the wave of political immigration from Turkey into the UK continued through the 2000s (Demir, 2012: 816).

In the 1980s and 1990s, precisely when Kurdish immigration was on the rise, the textile and garment industry in the UK was staggering because of fierce competition, especially due to the

⁸ After Sunnis, Alevi are the second largest religious community in Turkey, the members of which speak Turkish and/or Kurdish (Yilmaz, 2016: 45-46). Today, the majority of Kurds in London are Alevi and most of them originate from Maraş, Malatya and Sivas (Demir, 2012: 824).



influx of cheap goods produced in Eastern European countries. As a result, newly arriving Kurds found it difficult to find employment or save money, which would make it difficult for them to later finance their own businesses in the ethnic economy (Enneli et al., 2005: 5; King et al., 2008: 426).⁹

The majority of the Kurdish movers, in contrast to Turks and Turkish-Cypriots, have a shorter history of immigration and work (King et al., 2008: 425-426; Sirkeci et al., 2016: 29). One Kurdish interviewee explained that when compared to Turks and Turkish-Cypriots, Kurds are relative newcomers in the UK, and she stated: *As Kurds, we're new here. Our presence only goes back about 30 or 40 years. We don't have a long history* (No. 59, aged 38, female). Even though Kurdish movers' history of migration is more recent, they have followed the path of Turks and Turkish-Cypriots, becoming part of the ethnic economy¹⁰ in the UK (Karan, 2017: 82-83).

Exploitation through the Labour Markets of the Ethnic Economy

Because of the structure of the ethnic economy of TCK, like many other migrant groups (Ojo et al., 2013: 592) they do not need a large amount of starting capital to establish businesses. Since it is relatively easy to enter the business market¹¹ within the ethnic economy as a newcomer, competition amongst proprietors is based on price rather than quality, and businesses owned by movers have to settle for lower profit margins (Rath and Kloosterman, 2000: 660-661). However, the ease of starting businesses is only made possible through exploitation within the ethnic economy, and employees and unpaid family labour are exploited in various forms and to varying degrees. Dedeoğlu (2014), Karan (2017), Kesici (2015) and Sirkeci et al. (2016) confirm that this is indeed the case for TCK's ethnic economy. The ethnic economy operates on the self-exploitation of business owners' own labour and the internal exploitation of workers, which involves extremely long working hours, low wages, unpaid family labour and informal employment. Many businesses within the ethnic economy rely on such internal and/or self-exploitation to survive in a highly competitive business environment.

The labour market of the ethnic economy is characterised by precarious working conditions including informal employment, part-time employment, lack of social security, long working hours,¹² difficult working conditions, intense work schedules, and low wages. For example, one interviewee stated,

“...when I used to work as a consultant, the majority of my clients were Turkish [and Kurdish]... Their wages were always below minimum wage, and they worked 40-50 hour weeks. They were very exploited, and I believe this to be the case for most Turkish businesses” (No. 58, aged 44, female).¹³

⁹ This was a period of transition for the small number of Kurdish immigrant workers, as they went from being employees at factories and workshops to working in the ethnic economy.

¹⁰ I define “ethnic economy” as the network of labour, production, and consumption created by movers from a particular ethnic or (in some cases) religious background in a country's broader economic structure, which has its own characteristic features.

¹¹ The ethnic economy in this case consists of small businesses and shops including takeaways, cafes, restaurants, corner shops, off-license and import-export firms, and cab companies (Kesici, 2015: 222-223).

¹² Parent-Thirion et al. (2007: 19) state that in EU countries, the agricultural, construction, hotel, and restaurant sectors have the longest working hours.

¹³ At this point it would be useful to point out that in contrast to Kurdish and Turkish movers, Turkish-Cypriots enjoy relatively better working conditions. Because they have a longer history than movers from Turkey in the UK due to the colonial relations between Cyprus and Great Britain (Robins and Aksoy 2001, 689-690). Also, in interview 20, the participant stated: *“After Cyprus [the Republic of Cyprus] joined the EU, working conditions for Cypriots changed substantially. They got better. Now we have free movement and we can come here to find work, start a business, or settle”* (No. 20, aged 58, male).

Enneli et al. (2005: 5) also highlight the prevalence of low wages, long working hours, and limited and less appealing job opportunities in the ethnic economy. The British legal and administrative structure, which is marked by limited regulation of the labour market (McDowell et al., 2009: 4) and irregular employment procedures such as “zero-hour contracts”, is one of the underlying reasons for such working conditions in the ethnic economy (Sirkeci et al., 2016: 105-107).

The UK Census 2001 indicates that while the employment rates of TCK are lower than average, rates among Kurdish movers are even lower than Turkish and Turkish-Cypriots in London. The rate of self-employment is higher for Turkish-Cypriots, but average for Turkish and lower for Kurdish movers. Nearly 48% of Kurdish employees work part-time (less than 30 hours per week), as do 34% of Turkish employees and nearly 26% of Turkish-Cypriot employees. While the general unemployment rate is 4.7% in London, it is 7.7% for Turkish-Cypriots, 9.9% for Turks, and 12.8% for the Kurdish movers (GLA 2009). Enneli et al. (2005, 10) also point out that compared to Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot movers, unemployment is higher for Kurds, and less of them have their own businesses or are experts in a particular field. My research confirms that almost a decade later, Kurds are still disadvantaged in the labour market. A thorough evaluation of this underprivileged position of Kurds in the labour market in London, including their working conditions, working hours, wages, employment status and unemployment levels, indicates that exploitation of Kurds is indeed widespread. In the ethnic economy in the UK, Kurds are exposed to more exploitation than Turks and Turkish-Cypriots because of the unique characteristics of the Kurdish community:

Immigration History and Language Skills

As noted earlier, the majority of Kurdish movers have a more recent immigration history compared to Turks and Turkish-Cypriots. As a result, they are disadvantaged in numerous ways, such as lack of formal education, insufficient English language skills, limited social networks and limited knowledge of the UK system (Bloch, 2013: 277), and as such, they cannot access employment opportunities or benefit from the legal regulations that favour workers and/or work outside of the ethnic economy. In one interview, a Kurdish solicitor, who was the only second-generation Kurdish interviewee to take part in my research and who works as a consultant for a Kurdish community organisation where she provides services to many immigrant Kurds on a daily basis, stated that most movers have a very limited grasp of English (No. 9, aged 30, female). These factors cause significant problems in business life and the ethnic economy and have a negative impact on movers' position in the labour market because they are of critical importance in terms of interacting with public institutions. Kurds' short migration history, inability to speak English, and lack of education and relevant skills also contribute to the state of widespread exploitation in the ethnic economy (Holgate et al., 2012: 601).

Weak language skills and limited knowledge of the UK system also affect the family members of self-employed business owners who are Kurdish. In the case of small family-owned businesses, younger generations who have been educated in the UK and women who have a better grasp of English are often used as unpaid labour and taken advantage of. For instance, when talking about her work history, a Kurdish woman who had worked as a piano technician/repairperson at an “English-owned business” for 6 years stated:

Later on, I had to leave work on account of my husband because he did not speak any English. He opened his own business and needed me because he did not speak the language. I quit my job to help him. We opened a restaurant. I supported him with the paperwork and



the council staff. I wrote the newspaper adverts and handled the bureaucratic side of things (No. 14, aged 45, female).

Besides, proprietors and workers who work long hours pass on their social responsibilities and other duties such as housework and childcare to other family members, usually women, and in this way, exploitative networks in the market seep into their homes through family ties.

A Disadvantaged Group: Refugees

The majority of Kurdish movers are refugees, asylum seekers and/or undocumented movers in their first years in the UK (Holgate et al., 2012: 602). Because they are in a vulnerable position, it is easier for others to take advantage of them. Because of the connection between having a residence permit and being able to enter into a work contract, movers are forced to accept poor working conditions (Perocco, 2018: 36). In such a state of forced labour (ILO, 2019), movers who do not have the necessary documentation for legitimate employment also face restrictions in terms of their right to work, barriers created by proprietors, and discrimination (Holgate et al., 2012: 602). A self-employed Kurd who moved to London as a refugee said that he worked at night for meagre wages during his first years in London. He added, *For refugees, night work is more convenient. Cheap labour for the employer would be at night, anyway* (No. 7, aged 63, male).

Kurdish and Alevi movers are forced to accept precarious working conditions in the ethnic economy because they cannot return to Turkey owing to the discrimination and pressure they face in Turkey. The majority of my Kurdish interviewees stated that they want to go back Turkey but, on the contrary of Turks and Turkish-Cypriots, they cannot do so because the conditions that drove them to migrate still exist. For example, a self-employed Kurdish interviewee said,

I would consider going back to Turkey, depending on the circumstances. I do think of going back to my homeland. I have a small business set up in Mersin... [But] political conditions in Turkey are still difficult. There is still discrimination against and abuse of ethnic minorities,... You still can't speak your own language; you are afraid to say you are Kurdish in Turkey (No.49, aged 48, male).

As an indicator of this state of affairs, Holgate et al. (2012: 602) have shown that many Kurdish workers who are documented also experience high levels of exploitation, particularly as regards long working hours and lack of paid holidays. Also, according to their survey in 2013 and 2014, Sirkeci et al. (2016: 29) have demonstrated that Kurdish movers have relatively lower income levels than Turkish movers. In my interviews, Kurds who disclosed their income mostly stated that they worked for minimum wage¹⁴ and there were some, albeit few, who said they were paid below minimum wage. I discovered that the majority of Kurds either work overtime or get a second job to make up for the deficiency in their income.

Solidarity and Exploitation

Close family and kinship relationships and the strong sense of solidarity in the Kurdish community can lead to intense exploitation. In such instances, the ethnic economy serves as a network that binds together proprietors and employees who are personally acquainted, and as a

¹⁴ When I carried out the research for this study in 2014 and 2015, there was a four-tiered system of minimum wages in the UK. The minimum wage for workers older than 21 was £6.70/hr, for those aged between 18 and 20 it was £5.30/hr, for those younger than 18 it was £3.87/hr, and for apprentices it was £3.30/hr. Cf. UK, GOV. 2017. National minimum wage and national living wage rates. Accessed June 6, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>

result, labour is provided through unspoken contracts, which both facilitates exploitation and renders it invisible. For example, based on familial or friendly relationships, proprietors can require that employees work overtime without being paid “the necessary additional hours”. One Kurdish worker summed up such the situation as follows: *So he says to me, help me out for a couple more hours, because this and that happened. So everything is based on doing favours* (No.1, aged 40, male). Most of the time, solidarity for Kurdish movers becomes a form of coercion and/or an element of control that brings into being a state of exploitation (Rijken, 2018: 204).

Erdemir and Vasta (2007: 23) and Holgate et al. (2012: 599) have also drawn attention to the connection between solidarity and exploitation, and they describe it as “exploitative solidarity”. This kind of solidarity sometimes also blurs the line between paid work and doing personal favours. For instance, some workers who work for a relative or friend during a period of “unemployment” do not think of it as a proper job, but rather as helping out in exchange for some extra cash (No.40, aged 46, male, and No.48, aged 30, male).

Conclusion

This study makes an empirical contribution to the literature on migration and labour market by taking up a comparative perspective that sheds light on the exploitation of the labour of Kurdish movers, who are an invisible community in the UK.

Because they are members of a community consisting largely of first-generation movers arrived mostly as asylum seekers who exist side-by-side with other immigrant groups that have a substantial number of second/third generations, Kurds are relegated to a more disadvantaged position, which opens them up to being exploited in the labour market.

This study concludes by arguing that if the members of an immigrant community are subjected to more exploitation than others in spite of the fact that they operate within the same ethnic economy, the causes should be sought in the migration process itself, which is the underlying reason for their disadvantaged position. Being a recent immigrant and lacking sufficient language skills and a formal education force such movers to work in the ethnic economy and accept difficult working conditions, long working hours and low-paid jobs that are exploitative. As they are refugees and/or have a refugee background because they fled state violence and discrimination, and as they are not inclined to go back their “home country”, such movers have to accept dire working conditions and undocumented jobs, which makes them vulnerable to being taken advantage of. As a result of close family relationships and a strong sense of solidarity, such movers are, perhaps surprisingly, more open to subtler and more intense forms of exploitation in the ethnic economy.

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