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## The Labor Market Integration Process and Experiences of Accessing Social Services of Turkish Women Who Migrated to Belgium Through Marriage\*

### Belçika'ya Evlilik Yoluyla Göç Eden Türk Kadınlarının İşgücü Piyasasına Entegrasyon Süreci ve Sosyal Hizmetlere Erişim Deneyimleri

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#### Özet

Türkiye’den Belçika’ya evlenmek amacıyla gelen kadın göçmenler hakkında çok az veri bulunmaktadır ve bu göçmen grubu, Belçika’daki Türk toplumu içinde en kırılgan kesimi oluşturmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye’den Belçika’ya göç eden kadınların yaşadığı sorunlar arasında dil bilmemek, işgücü piyasasına erişimde çeşitli problemlere yol açmaktadır. Ancak sivil toplum kuruluşları tarafından sunulan sosyal hizmetler, bu kadınların güçlenmelerine ve özgüven kazanmalarına yardımcı olmanın yanı sıra, işgücü piyasasına erişimlerine ve dil öğrenme fırsatlarına da önemli ölçüde katkı sağlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye’den Belçika’ya evlilik yoluyla göç eden Türk kadınlarının işgücü piyasasına uyum süreçlerini ve sosyal hizmetlere erişim deneyimlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma grubunu, Türkiye’den Belçika’nın Brüksel kentine evlenerek göç etmiş 40-70 yaş aralığında 20 kadın göçmen ile sivil toplum kuruluşlarında görev yapan 3 sosyal hizmet uzmanı olmak üzere toplam 23 katılımcı oluşturmuştur. Bu araştırmada alan çalışması ve mülakat teknikleri kullanılmıştır. Araştırma, göçmen kadınların işgücü piyasasına uyum sürecinde karşılaştıkları sorunları ve bu sorunlarla nasıl başa çıktıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca, bu süreçte sivil toplum kuruluşlarının önemli bir rol oynadığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Belçika, Evlilik göçü, Göçmen kadın, İşgücü, Sosyal hizmet.

#### Abstract

There is little data available on female migrants who have come to Belgium from Turkey to get married, and this migrant group constitutes the most vulnerable community within the Turkish community in Belgium. In this context, among the problems experienced by women who migrated from Turkey to Belgium, not knowing the language presents various problems in accessing the labor market. However, the social services provided by civil society organizations not only help these women become stronger and more confident but also contribute significantly to their access to the labor market and language learning opportunities. This study aims to examine the labor market integration processes and experiences of accessing social services among Turkish women who have migrated to Belgium from Turkey for marriage. The study group consisted of 23 participants, including 20 immigrant women aged 40-70 who were married and had moved to Brussels, Belgium, from Turkey, and three social workers employed by non-governmental organizations. This study used field research and interview techniques. The research revealed the problems faced by migrant women in the process of integrating into the labor market and how they managed these problems. Civil society organizations also play an important role in this regard.

**Keywords:** Belgium, Marriage migration, Migrant women, Labor force, Social services.

\* Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Kilis 7 Aralık University with decision number 11 dated 20 June 2025. The committee unanimously concluded that the research entitled The Position of Turkish Women in Belgium: Language and Occupational Integration complies with ethical standards

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### The Integration Process of Turkish Women into the Labor Market

In recent migration flows, migrant profiles have become increasingly diverse, encompassing particularly skilled and highly educated individuals. Other notable developments regarding current migration movements include the growing visibility of women migrants, their participation in migration not merely as family members but as independent actors, and their cross-border mobility. Consequently, migration flows no longer occur solely between peripheral and central countries, nor are migrants exclusively men driven by economic motivations. The fact that women have become significant actors in migration processes has emerged alongside both the feminisation of migration and, in parallel, the feminisation of the labour market. In addition to the diversification of migrant profiles, it is also possible to state that the reasons for migration have broadened (e.g., for family reunification, for employment, and for seeking asylum).<sup>1</sup>

Since the mid-1980s, studies have increasingly examined how gender intersects with broader macro-processes of migration. The publication of a special issue by the *International Migration Review* in 1984 on this topic marked a turning point in the field of gender and migration studies. Drawing particularly on research conducted in the North American context, Hondagneu-Sotelo notes that during this period, the earlier “migration and women” approach was gradually replaced by a “migration and gender” approach. Within the migration and gender framework, gender is understood as a set of social practices both influenced by migration and shaping migration, while research continued to be conducted primarily with women. Following the incorporation of gender into migration studies, a common trend emerged in which migration was often regarded as a source of empowerment for women and as a driving force toward gender equality. Research grouped by Hondagneu-Sotelo under the theme of “migration and emancipation” gained prominence during this period. Undoubtedly, while it is widely acknowledged that migration challenges gender relations in different contexts, as Pessar points out, the tendency to directly attribute this to women’s income generation and employment, and to interpret it as a linear relationship, raises certain conceptual problems.<sup>2</sup>

While migration brings opportunities for a better life and employment, it also gives rise to conflicts such as language problems, incompatibility, and marginalization, leading to integration issues. The responsibility of providing for the household is considered the duty of men, especially in traditional societies, while working outside the home is seen as a responsibility specific to men. As women are viewed as wives and companions, the focus of migration debates tends to be on men. However, women also experience problems finding work and participating in employment in the countries to which they migrate, just as men do. In labor markets, female migrants can be said to constitute the unskilled segment. Qualified female migrants contribute to the development of the countries to which they migrate by participating in their labor markets.<sup>3</sup> The migration and integration policies of the European Union set out the fundamental principles upon which social integration should be built. These principles generally include integration into the core values of the EU, such as employment, the language, history, institutions, and education system of the host country, as well as the labour market. They also encompass aspects such as how migrants access public and private sector services, communication between host country citizens and migrants, the expression of different cultures and religions, and political participation. In addition, the participation of migrant women in the labour market within the European Union remains notably low. To address this, the EU provides recommendations to member states aimed at better integrating migrant women into the labour market.<sup>4</sup> According to

<sup>1</sup> Saniye Dedeoğlu-Çisel Ekiz Gökmen, “Göç Teorileri, Göçmen Emeği ve Entegrasyon: Kadınların Yeri”, *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Perspektifinden Türkiye’de Göç Araştırmaları*, Göç Araştırmaları Derneği, İstanbul 2020, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ece Öztan, *Göç Bağlamında Yurttaşlık ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet: Türkiye Kökenli Amsterdamlı Kadınların Yurttaşlık Deneyimleri*, Marmara University, Institute of Social Sciences, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, İstanbul 2009, p.32.

<sup>3</sup> Seçil Karatepe-Elvin Kısacıtutan, “Fransa’da Yaşayan Göçmen Türk Kadın İş Gücünün, İş Gücü Piyasalarına Entegrasyon Süreci Üzerine Bir Araştırma”, *Trakya Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, V. 25, I. 1, 2023, p. 79-96.

<sup>4</sup> Dedeoğlu-Ekiz Gökmen, “Göç Teorileri, Göçmen Emeği ...”, p. 31.

the World Migration Report, considering that the number of migrants is 272 million, when the total number of migrant workers globally is examined, there are 68.1 million female migrants and 95.7 million male migrant workers in the world. When examining the proportion of female migrant workers within the total migrant workforce, women accounted for 41.6%, while men accounted for 58.4%.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of sufficient research and analysis on this subject to date makes it essential to focus on Turkish immigrant women. Among women's groups from various nations, Turkish working women, who attract attention with their unique problems, constitute an interesting group that warrants closer examination. They are distinguished from other immigrant groups by their unique Turkish identity. Compared to immigrant men, the outcomes are almost always unfavorable, revealing the need for Turkish women to go further and make greater efforts to adapt. Most of them have left the cocoons woven around them by traditional circles for the first time; in most cases, they are working outside their homes or fields for the first time, too. The special circumstances of their working lives, the conditions awaiting them upon their return to their homeland, and the special social conditions they encounter abroad and upon their return shape their overall experience. The examination of Turkish women's migration experiences may also reveal findings and conclusions that may be valid for other groups.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, the focus is on how Turkish women who migrated to Belgium through marriage achieve social integration in Belgium, as examined through their experiences of accessing the labour market. At this stage, particular attention is given to the role of social services provided by civil society organizations in supporting women. Therefore, data concerning migrant Turkish women workers in the Belgian context may shed light on Belgium's social policies in relation to migration and gender, as well as on possible future steps to be taken in this regard.

Belgium consists of three communities, three regions, and ten provinces, according to its constitution. It is a country where three distinct communities and a large number of foreigners coexist. The three communities are the Flemish, Walloon, and German-speaking communities, while the three regions are the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital Regions. The Flemish population mainly resides in the northern part of the country and the Brussels-Capital Region, whereas the German-speaking community lives in the eastern areas, particularly in Eupen and Saint-Vith. The Turkish community in Belgium is dispersed across various parts of the country and lives in small clusters. Turks who migrated from Afyon and Eskişehir mostly live in Brussels and Ghent; those who came from the Central and Eastern Anatolia regions generally reside in Limburg and Antwerp; and migrants from other parts of Turkey are spread across different provinces of Belgium.<sup>7</sup> The sample of this study consisted of Turkish women who migrated from Turkey to Belgium through marriage and currently reside in Brussels. The interviews were conducted in Turkish associations and Turkish-owned businesses located in neighborhoods with a dense Turkish migrant population in Brussels, Belgium. In this study, the findings obtained from field interviews were analyzed and interpreted in light of the data gathered from the literature review. Therefore, a purposive/convenience sampling method was employed, consisting of participants who were accessible to the researchers.

Before 1974, migration within the framework of labour largely consisted of men, whereas in the following years, a significant proportion of migration through marriage was composed of women. However, over time, as the gender distribution of the Turkish population living in Belgium became more balanced, the gender distribution of those migrating to Belgium through marriage also shifted.<sup>8</sup> Among those arriving in Belgium, the number of men and women has become nearly equal. Between 2001 and April 15, 2005, women accounted for 46% of those who

<sup>5</sup> *World migration report 2020: Turkish chapter 2*, from <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020-turkish-chapter-2>, Retrieved 5 June 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Seval Gürel-Ayşe Kudat, "Türk Kadınının Avrupa'ya Göçünün Kişilik, Aile ve Topluma Yansıyan Sonuçları", *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, V. 33, I. 3, 1978, p. 109-134.

<sup>7</sup> Cahit Gelekçi-Ali Köse, *Misafir İşçilikten Etnik Azınlığa Belçika'daki Türkler*, Phoenix Publications, Ankara 2011, p. 34-35.

<sup>8</sup> Gelekçi-Köse, *Misafir İşçilikten Etnik ...*, p. 106-107.

migrated to Belgium through marriage.<sup>9</sup> According to the *Monitoring socio-conomique* database, between 2018 and 2021, the number of women migrating to Belgium through marriage ranged between 250 and 500 per year. Considering the 60-year migration history of Turks living in Belgium, today there are tens of thousands of brides and grooms from Turkey residing in the country. However, brides constitute a group that is not well recognized by Belgian institutions. The fact that many of these women do not speak the language and cannot express their problems makes communication with surrounding institutions particularly difficult.<sup>10</sup>

Turkish women living in Belgium have comprised one-third of the working (active) population from the mid-1990s to the present day. In comparison, the employment rate for Belgian women is 48%. Approximately 75% of Turkish women working in Belgium (around 10,000 people) are unskilled. Nearly half of this group works as daily laborers or cleaners. This ratio has remained unchanged since 1991. Thirty-four percent of Turkish women work part-time. Four thousand five hundred Turkish women receive Belgian unemployment benefits. This figure represents 45% of the total workforce in the country. The percentage of women receiving unemployment benefits has tripled over the past 20 years. Women comprise 40% of the unemployed population in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> According to the socio-economic monitoring database, 60% of working-age women of Turkish in Belgium were economically inactive in 2022. This rate was 30% among Belgian women and 38% among men of Turkish. The employment rate is particularly low among women with low levels of education who have children and are raising them alone. This situation primarily concerns women who have settled in Belgium in the past five years. The employment rate of Turkish-born women in Belgium was 60%. However, half of Turkish-born women in employment belong to the lowest wage group, and 55% work part-time to take care of their children. According to a study investigating the integration process of Turkish-speaking immigrants in Belgium, participants believe that newcomers work in much more difficult jobs than the local population.<sup>12</sup> One participant elaborated on this situation as follows:

*Women are also oppressed in this society. The work they do as maids is considered the lowest level of work in Turkey, and since they can only do cleaning here, they feel bad because they do not have the education or language skills to work in another job. They become cynical about not having a valid diploma or knowing the language. They do not feel like human beings. After a while, they became depressed.*

Although international conventions guarantee the right to live within a family, spouses who migrate through family reunification or marriage – most of whom are women – face many social and economic problems. Women who migrate through marriage are not entitled to work in most European countries during their first years of migration; they must wait to obtain a work visa and permanent residency. This inevitably makes women more dependent on their husbands. Morokvasic, emphasizes that such regulations have a negative impact on non-citizens of European countries, mostly women.

*In the absence of legal employment opportunities, these women often turn to illegal work in restaurants, domestic services, or the ready-to-wear clothing industry. From the employers' perspective, there are obvious advantages to resorting to this type of labor. As a result, these women are the most exploited and vulnerable workers in the world. Their status as migrants is extremely precarious, and they can only remain in the country under certain conditions, either as paid workers or as dependents of paid*

<sup>9</sup> Christiane Timmerman, "Gender Dynamics in the Context of Turkish Marriage Migration: The Case of Belgium", *Turkish Immigrants in the European Union Determinants of Immigration and Integration*, Ed. Refik Erzan-Kemal Kirici, Routledge, London 2008, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Erturul Ta, "Evlilik Gyle Trkiye'den Belika'ya Gelen Gelinler ve Boanma Sorunu", *Hacettepe University Journal of Turkish Studies*, V. 11, I. 20, 2014, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Altay A. Mano, "Belika'da Trklerin 40 Yılı (1960-2000): Sorunlar, Gelimeler, Deiimler", *Mula niversitesi SBE Dergisi*, V. 1, I. 1, 2000, s. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Emel Kili-Wolfgang Jacquet, "Turkish Newcomers' Experience of the Belgian Labour Market: A Qualitative Study", *Migration and Diversity*, V. 2, I. 3, 2023, p. 413-431.



*workers. Legally, these women are defined as “dependents,” and their stay in the country is dependent on the legal status of their migrant husbands.*<sup>13</sup>

According to a study conducted in Belgium, 136 (59.1 %) of the women surveyed were married. A significant proportion of those who stated that they were married were Turkish women who had come to Belgium through family reunification or to start families. Those who have come to Belgium through marriage have a very low chance of finding work and employment. In such cases, employment is only possible in workplaces run by Turks or by the family into which they married. Turks living in Belgium generally run small-scale businesses. These businesses are mostly run by family members, who also comprise the majority of the workforce. When necessary, relatives or other Turks are employed. In Belgium, businesses run by Turks are mostly hairdressers, restaurants, caf  s, kebab shops, bakeries, grocery stores, markets, greengrocers, and clothing and furniture stores. The number of medium- and large-scale businesses run by Turks is very low. Fifty percent of the research group were housewives or unemployed. Considering that 23.5 percent of the women included in the research are students, the ratio of housewives and unemployed women is approximately 65 percent. This ratio shows that a significant proportion of Turkish women living in Belgium are unable to participate in the Belgian labor market, either voluntarily or because they are unable to find work. A significant proportion of those who stated that they were employed indicated that they worked for a private company or at their own workplace. A significant proportion of those who stated that they worked for a private company were found to be working in businesses run by Turks, as determined by interviews and observations conducted in Belgium.<sup>14</sup>

During our research, the importance of language skills in finding employment became apparent to us. The biggest problem in accessing the labor market is the lack of knowledge of French. When we look at the root cause of this, we see that women's closed lifestyles, their upbringing in a patriarchal culture, and the roles assigned to them when they come to Belgium, primarily reproduction and childcare, housework, etc., are important factors affecting foreign language skills and the female workforce. In addition, most women were married at a very young age and had a low level of education. Of the 20 women we interviewed for our study, 13 came to Belgium from the Afyon/Emirda   villages. Therefore, more than half of these women, who mostly come from rural areas, have a primary school education (11/20). The percentage of those who completed high school is 6/20, the percentage of those who completed middle school is 2/20, the percentage of those who are illiterate is 1/20, and the number of those who are employed is low (8/20). Among them, some learned a trade and worked in Turkey (1/20) and others received vocational training in Belgium (3/20), but these were in the minority. In addition, they were from rural areas of Turkey. Compared to men, women have left their communities for the first time and come to a foreign place, and they have little or no work experience. Therefore, except for a few professionals, most are forced to work in lower-skilled jobs and for lower wages. This can be attributed to their lack of knowledge of Belgian languages and low level of education in the early stages of migration. It has been observed that some work in family businesses or with relatives without being registered and without social security. When we examined women's experiences in searching for and finding work, we observed that they mostly found jobs through their relatives or worked in the businesses of the families they married into. In addition, some find employment through civil society organizations and participate in vocational training courses, albeit in small numbers. However, they mostly work in cleaning jobs and, due to family responsibilities, have worked for a certain period and are now receiving unemployment benefits. The women also stated that they were unionized and that the union protected all their rights, and that they were satisfied with the Belgian system and laws:

<sup>13</sup> Mirjana Morokvasic, “Birds of Passage are Also Women”, *The International Migration Review*, V. 18, I. 4, 1984, p. 886-907.

<sup>14</sup> Cahit Gelek  i, “Bel  ika’da Ya  ayan T  rk Kadınlarının Sosyal İ   Ya  amındaki Konumları”, *Hacettepe   niversitesi T  rkiyat Ara  tırmaları*, I. 13, 2010, p. 133-148.

*“I worked temporary jobs. I then became eligible for unemployment benefits (KK19)<sup>15</sup>. ”*

*“I started working six months after arriving. I got a job cleaning. My relative got me a job. It was the company he worked for (KK2). ”*

*“Eight years after marriage, I started working for a cleaning company. It was my father-in-law's company (KK10). ”*

During our research, eight participants were actively working, six of whom had received vocational training and were working either in their own businesses or at a workplace to practice their professions. The other two worked as cleaners. 9 of the 12 have worked in cleaning, and with a few exceptions, became eligible for unemployment benefits after working for a certain period. Therefore, 12 of the 20 participants were housewives at the time of the study. We learned that some of the women who were housewives had previously worked but had stopped working for various reasons. Participant KK11 described her experience of accessing the job market as follows:

*“When I arrived, I started working immediately. I worked in cleaning. I am a union member to protect my rights. The union said I had to go to school to receive unemployment benefits, and I had to attend language classes from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. in a distant place, but I refused because I was taking care of my grandchildren. My unemployment benefits were suspended because my workplace went bankrupt. ”*

Some women stated that although they wanted to find a job and work, they were initially prevented from doing so by their husbands' families, but were later allowed to work, although they had to share their earnings with the family:

*“When I arrived, my husband's family did not allow me to work because my husband's salary was high, and they did not want to pay more tax if I worked. Then, a woman at my mother-in-law's workplace fell ill, and my mother-in-law arranged for me to take her place doing cleaning work (KK7). ”*

*“Before starting work, I cleaned the house and gave some of my earnings to my mother-in-law. It was to pay off the mortgage, but then I got divorced and lost my rights, said one participant (KK12). ”*

### **Turkish Women's Experiences of Accessing Social Services**

In most European Community countries, social assistance programs are confronted with changes in family structure and the institutionalization of the family. In terms of formal structure, most reports draw attention to the economic vulnerability and sensitivity of single-parent families and establish a link between this situation and public assistance programs. Although it is important not to overstate the economic vulnerability of single-parent families, when the possibility of these couples reuniting over time is considered, they appear to be overrepresented in social assistance programs. An experimental study conducted in Belgium shows that although 50% of those eligible for assistance receive it, only 2% of single-parent families survive on public assistance alone. Public assistance programs focus more on family structure than on the welfare of all family members. The Belgian report states that the income guaranteed to the mother is reduced by the amount of assistance she receives for her child. Here, child assistance is not defined as support that contributes to raising the economic level of children, but as a form of assistance provided for the woman's livelihood and care activities.<sup>16</sup>

Belgium, which has adopted an open family policy within the framework of the EU's social policy, focuses on family welfare by strengthening families economically, developing

<sup>15</sup> The participants were coded and numbered as KK.

<sup>16</sup> W. Dumon, “Avrupa Topluluğu Ülkelerinde Aile Politikaları”, (Translated by M. Ruhi Esengün), *Aile ve Toplum*, V. 1, I. 2, 1991, p. 4.

families through education and counselling services, and providing non-family institutional services. Belgium has a structure that is both traditional and supportive of the family in its social policy, but also supports individuals in breaking away from the family and embarking on new lifestyles when necessary. Belgium serves as a notable example of protecting both family and individual welfare, particularly in situations such as violence and divorce, as it serves as a model for maintaining this balance. A good example of this balance can be observed in the divorce cases of migrant women whose livelihoods are highly dependent on their families. When families are not functioning well, social services provided to migrant women during divorce proceedings are informative in terms of the well-being of women and children, as well as male spouses.<sup>17</sup>

According to Gelekçi,<sup>18</sup> “associations established by Turks in Belgium have played an important role in helping Turkish women living in Belgium participate in the workforce and resolve the problems they encounter. In cities with large Turkish populations, such as Brussels, associations established by Turks vary according to the needs of the Turkish community.” Among these associations, mutual aid and solidarity associations, and associations for women are more numerous and perform important functions in the community. Impoverished single mothers are emerging as one of the primary focuses of social services. Considering the economic dependency of women who have migrated to Belgium, economic emancipation is particularly important for divorced and migrant women. Turkish women's exposure to environmental pressures in Belgium, their continuation of traditional structures from Turkey, language deficiencies among women who came to Belgium through marriage migration, and lack of communication with institutions have made it difficult for them to find work.<sup>19</sup> One of our interviewees described the situation as follows:

*“Those who come here to get married must first attend a course on marriage. With the change in visa requirements over the last three years, people are no longer getting married there, nor are those here choosing to marry someone from there. People in Anatolia have also awakened. They now want to study and have a profession. If they do not know their native language very well, they do not know either their own language or French (KK5).”*

Some of the women who participated in our study and who came from bad marriages that ended in divorce suffered from psychological disorders, but these women fought to survive on their own and took courageous steps towards building a new life for themselves. In this struggle, their efforts to learn Belgian languages and thus participate in working life and social life are very important. It has been observed that civil society organisations also support women in rebuilding their lives through social services during such processes. Through these institutions, women's participation in the workforce has been facilitated, particularly through vocational training and language courses, without fees. It has been observed that women, especially after divorce, make a conscious effort to learn about their social rights, benefit from social assistance, and meet their needs for vocational training, language training, and job placement by applying to organizations that provide these services. Women stated that their labor and union rights were fully guaranteed in their job contracts. It was observed that most of their experiences accessing social services occurred during or after divorce proceedings. Within the scope of our interviews with organizations providing social services to women in Belgium, we discuss the organizations mentioned by women in their statements within the limits of the organizations they applied to. Accordingly, the organizations women applied to for assistance were CPAS, SIMA, BON, VDAB, EYAD, and ACTIRIS. It should be noted that by applying to these organisations, women interact with other women in similar situations, and these spaces also facilitate socialisation among women. The women we interviewed said that as they attended language courses and learned to speak, they became more comfortable expressing themselves, learned about their rights,

<sup>17</sup> Gökem Kelebek Küçükarslan-Reyhan Atasü Topcuoğlu, “Boşanmış Türk Göçmen Kadınlara Sağlanan Sosyal Hizmetler: Belçika Modeli Örneği, *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi İİBF Dergisi*, V. 19, I. 3, 2024, p. 752-774.

<sup>18</sup> Gelekçi, “Belçika’da Yaşayan Türk Kadınlarının ...”, p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> Kelebek Küçükarslan-Atasü Topcuoğlu, “Boşanmış Türk Göçmen Kadınlara ...”, p. 761.

and gained confidence in themselves. Women who attend EYAD language courses say that learning and being able to speak French has boosted their self-confidence and enabled them to do many things on their own without needing help:

*I started working at EYAD four years ago. I have continued this ever since. When I quit my job and became unemployed, I had to either go to school or work. I chose to attend the course. However, the main reason was that I wanted to learn the language. I realized that I was happier when I could speak and understand the language. Attending the course gave me confidence. I can do everything, defend myself, handle official matters, go to the hospital alone, and explain my problems to the doctor. Therefore, I am happy now. My writing is not good, but my speaking is. This is because French is very difficult to write. It is nothing like Turkish. Speaking and writing are different, so I find them difficult. The words that come out of my mouth are not the same as when I write them. I can speak French at 40% fluency. Previously, I was withdrawn. I had no self-confidence, and I did not know what to do, but in the past two years, I have opened up, and people say I have become someone who takes charge of their work (KK3).*

*First, I attended a course. My husband's mother-in-law supported me and immediately directed me to a language course. I couldn't attend regularly. I was pregnant during that time and had some issues, so I couldn't be consistent, and that's why I wasn't successful. French is a very difficult language. Because there are so many verb tenses, I get confused and have trouble learning. I am attending a course again now. I went for a year before having children, but I wasn't consistent. After the children grew up and started school, I started again. Since I'm still learning French, I can correct my child's mistakes in the language. I have a happy marriage, I haven't had any problems, I haven't experienced any violence. I'm attending a course at EYAD. I've been going for two years. I've gained confidence as I speak and learn the language. I wanted to stand on my own feet and be independent. I want to be stronger in front of my children. I didn't want to be in a situation where I would have to ask my child for help just because they know the language and I don't. Since everyone is Turkish, for example, the teacher wants me to practice, but the butcher, the postman, etc.—when I go to the pharmacy, I prefer someone who speaks French. But they've learned Turkish too, and they speak Turkish. These people are usually Moroccan (KK6).*

ACTIRIS is the employment and job placement agency operating in the Brussels region of Belgium. It is a public service that aims to bring together job seekers and employers, working to promote employment within the Brussels region. Its main objective is to combat unemployment, guide job seekers, and meet the staffing needs of employers.<sup>20</sup> BON (Brussel Onthaal Nederlands)<sup>21</sup> is an institution that offers Dutch language and integration courses on behalf of the Flemish community and operates exclusively in Brussels. Participants in these courses often receive support in job placement, indicating that they are successfully learning Dutch. EYAD (Emirdağ Solidarity Association) is a Turkish non-governmental organization in Belgium, founded by people from Emirdağ. It is a local association that provides limited temporary assistance to a small number of people, without requiring special registration. The association also offers French language courses. The Public Centre for Social Welfare (CPAS – *Centre public d'action sociale*) is a public institution present in each of Belgium's 581 municipalities. Every Belgian citizen has the right to social assistance and social integration. Services provided by CPAS include financial aid, medical assistance, housing support, and legal counseling. Individuals who do not have sufficient income to live on are entitled to receive a

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.actiris.brussels>, Retrieved 5 June 2025.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bon.be/nl>, Retrieved 5 June 2025.



minimum income.<sup>22</sup> One of our interviewees stated that after divorcing her husband, she applied for social assistance and supported herself by working in cleaning jobs:

*"I started working immediately after arriving. I began working in cleaning, joining a Belgian company. Since the supervisor was Turkish, he sent me to the job. I worked continuously for three years until I obtained my residence permit. Five years after coming here, I divorced my husband and applied to CPAS. I found some informal jobs. I am a member of a union out of necessity because it is beneficial. When I was dismissed from work, the union defended me. The case lasted five years, and I won (KK5)."*

VDAB<sup>23</sup> (Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding – Flemish Employment and Vocational Training Service) registers individuals for participation in.<sup>24</sup>

We found that some of the women participating in our research received unemployment benefits during periods when they temporarily stopped working. According to Belgian law, women who are absent from employment are entitled to receive unemployment benefits for a certain period. During this time, some prefer to attend language courses to learn the language, as language proficiency is a significant barrier to finding skilled employment. Consequently, most women who lack vocational training and language skills are forced to work in cleaning jobs. Our interviewee, coded as KK7, stated that after her divorce and due to lack of education, she started working in cleaning jobs:

*When I first arrived, there was only a nominal encouragement to attend language courses, but no one actually enrolled me. Later, a woman at the place where my mother-in-law worked fell ill, and I started working in cleaning on her behalf, guided by my mother-in-law. However, I left the job after a while. Since I had worked before, I didn't have time to attend language courses. I worked in cleaning from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. After leaving the job, I was obliged to apply for unemployment benefits. That's when I started going to language courses. I attended a Flemish school for seven months but failed and remained in the same class. I told myself I would succeed and attended another school for three more months, but I still couldn't succeed. The reason was that I got nervous while speaking and found it very difficult to form sentences. They were using two types of sentence structures, which I couldn't understand. I liked the teaching method of the first school, but at the other school, the teacher spoke Flemish while using French, so I couldn't understand because I did not know either language well. Later, my employer and the job placement agency (Actiris) directed me to a French course because French was predominantly spoken there. I have been attending a language school for three years now. I am still receiving unemployment benefits. Currently, I can go to the union, municipality, and police and handle minor official procedures. However, I cannot manage important matters alone and always take someone with me. When I get home, I don't study but watch Belgian TV channels. Since I live in a Turkish neighborhood, everyone speaks Turkish, which makes learning the language take longer.*

SİMA is essentially a unit established by Turkish trade unionists. It exclusively provides educational services, such as language courses, but does not offer social assistance. There may be limited support in job placement, and it operates locally. There are five centers carrying out activities. Initially founded to serve as interpreters and provide support for Turkish workers, SİMA has since expanded its services to assist other groups and has become a professional

<sup>22</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_Centre\\_for\\_Social\\_Welfare](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_Centre_for_Social_Welfare), Retrieved 5 June 2025.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.vdab.be>, Retrieved 5 June 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Kelebek Küçükarslan-Atasü Topcuoğlu, "Boşanmış Türk Göçmen Kadınlara ...", p. 757.

association addressing the needs of all migrants. To assist people in four languages, SİMA provides information on divorce matters. For example, brochures are published to inform people where to apply and what steps to take if they experience domestic violence. It is known that interpreters working for SİMA often translate numerous documents related to divorce. The director of SİMA, a social services specialist, provides detailed information about the services offered, particularly regarding language learning and job placement:

*We provide language courses, teaching French up to the B2 level. This language training lasts for 15 months. Participants complete a 15-day internship at workplaces. If the individual lacks any qualifications, they are sent to jobs where they can become skilled workers. After the 15-day internship, the workplace provides feedback on whether the person has the ability and language proficiency to perform the job. If there are any deficiencies or issues, the individual is referred to other institutions for further vocational training. The internship takes place toward the end of the language training. They also check whether the person can perform mathematical operations, and if necessary, provide training. Courses are offered to prepare participants for the labor market and life in terms of citizenship. Additionally, basic computer skills and driving license courses are provided. Generally, courses are given to unemployed individuals or those actively seeking work because employed people cannot attend. Classes usually take place during the day. When unemployed individuals attend the course, the government pays 1 Euro per hour attended, covers transportation costs, and if they have children, provides childcare support (up to 4 Euros per day). These supports are provided as part of agreements with government institutions and allocated from the budget (KK23).*

Another interviewee, coded KK17, who is a woman and works as a social services specialist at SİMA, provides information about the types of work she performs and states that most applicants are women:

*I started working at the SİMA association in 2014. I am responsible for reception duties. This means that I direct incoming individuals either within the institution or to external services depending on their needs. If someone has a problem, I refer them to a social counselor. I also perform translation tasks. When my colleagues are unable to attend, I provide French courses. Mostly, I translate divorce decrees, court rulings, and citizenship documents. Citizenship documents are generally translated for those of military age who need to process deferments. Approximately seventy percent of divorce decree translation requests come from women, while about thirty percent come from men. People who come to reception are often sensitive, very distressed, and stressed. Because they come due to their problems, they need relief. They may face financial difficulties, health problems, or victimization issues. They often do not understand Belgium's official procedures due to the complexity and detail of bureaucracy. The social counselor guides them based on their issues, and sometimes they directly contact the institutions themselves. For example, they may be referred to a lawyer, psychologist, or police, if necessary.*

A social services specialist working at BON shares information regarding the various services provided to women for learning their rights, participating in the workforce, and acquiring language skills:

*The social guidance course and basic Dutch (Flemish) language course represent a positive starting point in the process of language acquisition. In addition to this, individual guidance is provided. A person participating in this program for a year also needs emotional support, and this helps*

*build mutual trust. It enables one-on-one engagement with the individual. In terms of employment, companies and institutions are approached and prepared to change their perspective by emphasizing that these individuals possess a variety of different skills, in order to encourage them to offer job opportunities (KK22).*

Our interviewees shared how they benefited from the services provided by certain non-governmental organizations and what kind of support they received in the process of rebuilding their lives after divorce:

*I received support from CPAS. With my father's help, I rented my first home. I began attending a language course at SÎMA during the final stages of my marriage—after much pleading and insistence. It was there that I became more aware of my rights: I learned whether I could receive assistance if I lived alone and what my social rights were. I began to overcome my fears and started learning the language. Although I was normally a bold and courageous person, I had been suppressed in that household. Even after the divorce, I continued attending SÎMA for another year. Because I was very successful, the teacher there encouraged me to enroll in university-level courses. She even accompanied me to register for a course at ULB (Université libre de Bruxelles), where I studied for a year. Later, I attended a social orientation course at BON to learn about my rights in Belgium—how to become a Belgian citizen, what social rights I had—all taught in my native language. I was then directed to a Flemish language course and continued studying at another Flemish language school after BON. Afterwards, VDAB referred me to a vocational training course where I studied both the theory and practice of childcare and elderly care for one year. Following this, I began working as a childcare assistant at my daughter's school. Since I had learned and could speak both French and Flemish, I did not experience any communication problems. Because the salary was not sufficient, I left the job, hoping to earn more. However, since I had shown strong performance, CPAS advised me not to work but to pursue higher education instead. I enrolled in a culinary program at a college, although I did not complete it. I worked for an association where I organized activities with elderly people. I also volunteered at various associations. I taught Turkish culture in the cultural field, won first place in a singing competition, and performed at many events. I produced television and radio programs. Currently, I host a radio show, run a hair salon, and perform at various festivals and public events (KK1).*

*I did not attend any courses until I got divorced. Afterwards, when I realized I didn't know the language and didn't know what to do, I enrolled in a language course and applied for social assistance. I saw that everything was difficult—I knew nothing and didn't know where to go. So, I turned to social organizations. I took a course at the Association for Kemalist Thought. The staff there helped me with official procedures, like those at CPAS. I received support by asking around. At the same time, I also continue attending a course at EYAD. Due to what I experienced, I developed psychological problems and began to suffer from physical pain as well, which prevents me from working. I have been attending courses for two years. However, I find it hard to learn and forget things quickly. I struggle with the lessons and tend to forget what I study. I can speak only a little. I cannot even make hospital appointments on my own; I rely on others for help. I cannot express myself clearly. Still, I have been trying to attend regularly for the past two years. I am currently unemployed and*

*receive financial support from CPAS. I can understand spoken French fairly quickly, but I have difficulty with writing. I am satisfied with the course and with my teacher (KK4).*

### Conclusion

This study has revealed that Turkish women who migrated to Belgium through marriage face various challenges, particularly after divorce, in areas such as language acquisition, participation in social life, and access to employment. Divorce has become a turning point for many women in their pursuit of independence. Our research found that civil society organizations and Turkish associations play an important role in supporting women to build their own futures, especially in terms of language learning and access to working life. Many of our participants reported that they began to benefit from these services either during or after the divorce process. A large number of them demonstrated significant effort and determination to learn the languages of Belgium, serving as positive examples.

Nevertheless, it remains a fact that women constitute the most vulnerable segment of the migrant community in Belgium. In the labour market, their lack of language skills and vocational training pushes them to the lowest strata. The frequent employment of women in cleaning jobs illustrates this reality. Moreover, upon their initial arrival in Belgium, restrictions imposed by their husbands and in-laws, coupled with societal pressures, posed significant obstacles to women's ability to learn the Belgian languages and to enter working life. Transitioning from domestic service roles to active participation in the public sphere is crucial for women's individuality and existence.

Furthermore, the dependency of migrant women on their husbands' legal status forces them into reliance on their spouses, hindering their social integration. To address these issues, it is essential that the Belgian government adopt social policies that take the needs of these migrant communities into account and develop measures to ensure their welfare and well-being. For women who migrate from Turkey through marriage, the development of new family policies is necessary. Migrants should be directed primarily toward integration and language courses, and, most importantly, they should be guided rapidly into the labor market. This is vital not only for improving their income levels and autonomy but also for accelerating language learning.

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<sup>25</sup> Except for the social workers, pseudonyms were given to the participants. The participants were listed with their name and surname, date and place of birth, educational background, and occupation information.

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KK19: Hayriye Beşik, 1970, Aksaray, Lise, Hemşire Yardımcısı.

KK20: Deniz Kuru, 1980, İzmir, Lise, Kuaför.

KK21: Seda Taşçı, 1955, Afyon/Emirdağ, Lise, Esnaf.

KK22: Necati Çelik, SİMA Derneği Müdürü

KK23: Neriman Ağırman, Sosyal Hizmet Uzmanı

### Extended Abstract

There is limited data on women migrants who have come to Belgium through marriage from Turkey, and this group of migrants constitutes the most vulnerable segment of the Turkish community. In this context, among the problems faced by women of Turkish in Belgium, not knowing the language brings various challenges in the process of accessing the labor market. Throughout our research, the importance of language proficiency in finding employment has become evident. The biggest obstacle to accessing the labor market is the lack of knowledge of French. Looking at the root cause of this issue, women's secluded lifestyles, being raised in a patriarchal culture, and the roles assigned to them upon arriving in Belgium -primarily reproduction, child care, and housework- emerge as significant factors affecting foreign language acquisition and female labor force participation. However, the social services provided by civil society organizations contribute significantly to empowering these women, boosting their self-confidence, and facilitating their access to the labor market and language learning. Through these institutions, women have been able to participate in the labor force -particularly via vocational training and language courses- without having to pay any fees. During our research, we found that civil society organizations and Turkish associations play an important supportive role in helping women build their own futures, particularly in learning the language and accessing working life. It has been observed that women, especially after divorce, make a conscious effort to learn about their social rights, benefit from social assistance, and meet their needs such as vocational training, language education, and job-seeking by applying to these service-providing organizations. Most of the women's experiences of accessing social services have been observed to occur during or after the divorce process. It should also be noted that by applying to these organizations, women interact with others in similar situations, and these spaces also serve as environments for women to socialize. When examining women's experiences of job searching and employment, we observed that most of them found jobs through relatives or worked in businesses owned by the families they married into. In addition to this, there are women who found employment by applying to civil society organizations and, though fewer in number, some who participated in vocational training courses. However, the majority work in the cleaning sector, and due to family responsibilities, they work for a certain period and then receive unemployment benefits. According to Belgian law, women who are out of employment are entitled to receive unemployment benefits for a certain time. During this period, some women choose to attend language courses to learn the local language, as language remains a significant barrier to finding qualified jobs. Therefore, most women who lack vocational training and language skills are compelled to work in cleaning jobs. The aim of this study is to explore the labor market integration processes and experiences of accessing social services among Turkish women who migrated to Belgium through marriage. The study group consists of a total of 23 participants: 20 migrant women aged between 32 and 62 who came from Türkiye to live in Brussels, Belgium through marriage, and 3 social workers employed in civil society organizations. The study utilized field research and interview techniques. The findings reveal not only the challenges migrant women face in integrating into the labor market and how they manage this process but also highlight the significant role played by civil society organizations in this context. Therefore, as a solution to the issues encountered, it is crucial for the Belgian government to implement social policies that take the needs of these migrant communities into account and to develop policies that support their welfare and well-being.

|                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
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| <b>Etik</b>                           | Bu çalışmada etik ilkelere uyulmuştur.  |
| <b>Ethic</b>                          | Ethical principles were followed in this study.   |
| <b>Benzerlik Taraması</b>             | Yapıldı - iThenticate   |
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| <b>Ethics Committee Approval</b>      | Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Kilis 7 Aralık University with decision number 11 dated 20 June 2025. The committee unanimously concluded that the research entitled The Position of Turkish Women in Belgium: Language and Occupational Integration complies with ethical standards. |
| <b>Telif Hakkı</b>                    | Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler.   |
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