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Mobility for Whom? Mobility for What? Changes and Challenges in Mobility in Turkey during COVID-19

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Abstract

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Turkey closed its borders and implemented stay-at-home measures, disproportionately impacting the livelihoods of daily-wage workers, seasonal workers, and refugees and asylum seekers in the informal sector.

Keywords

Turkey, COVID-19, lockdown, border closures, agricultural seasonal workers, informal workers, refugees, gender

Theme

Country report [Shock mobility]

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'I am writing this at Dusseldorf International Airport right now. Yes, we are facing a pandemic – COVID-19–which started last December in China. I still remember the news I saw from Wuhan, thinking 'Wow! People cannot leave their house at all! This is unbelievable! Is it real?' I thought and assumed, naively, that we would not get this virus in Turkey! And now I am waiting for a repatriation flight from Germany to Turkey! (Another passenger is watching a Turkish soap opera and I can hear poignant background music, which fits very well with this moment!) I came to Germany on 8 March to help my sister as she was going to have surgery on the next day. Two days before my flight, I went to Istanbul to meet one of our Italian friends who had stopped over during his flight from the UK to Lebanon.

While we were having a nice dinner on 6 March, we got the news from Italy that the region of Lombardy (where my partner is from) was in lockdown.² After learning this, I was so nervous about flying to Germany, but as there was no update about travelling between Turkey and Germany, I took the flight and after a week, Germany closed its borders, including with Turkey.³ This time I had been granted only a 30-day visa. During those two days, I only kept wondering: should I go back to Ankara or not? If I did not go back, how would my partner survive in Ankara without me (as he is Italian and we moved back to Turkey only a couple of months ago) and when might I have the opportunity to travel back again? Only three months ago, I was thinking that it would be only in China... On the other hand, it was so tough for me deciding to leave my sister, who had undergone a serious operation only a week earlier. At the same time, I was thinking, if I overstayed, would the officials help me renew my visa? If not, what kind of problems would I face because of overstaying?

In the end, because I was scared of the complicated immigration rules, I decided to take this repatriation flight... Now the plane is approaching the gate. Everyone is watching and taking photos of it. At the same time, I am taking their photos. I am being a 'sociologist' right now, writing my diary, taking my notes and photos to distract myself. From the conversations I am hearing among the passengers, I assume some are students; some, like me, came here to visit their relatives; and some are retired immigrants who live six months in Turkey and six months in Germany. Many of them are constantly talking on the phone and keeping their loved ones updated. This makes me so nervous because no one knows anything – still talking about conspiracy theories! Maybe I should stop writing and walk around a bit before taking the flight to relax! I want to believe that everything's going to be all right!' (17 March 2020, Dusseldorf Airport)

Ahmet worked as a carpenter for 20 years in Genoa, Italy. When the pandemic hit the country, he did not expect that it would unfold at this scale. Beside the risk of losing his job with elderly Italian siblings, he realized the risk of not being able to return to his village in Turkey where his family – wife, two sons, and old parents – live. Alarmed by Italy's decision to stop international flights, he travelled to Nice, the closest French city by bus, to take the earliest possible flight to Turkey. When he arrived to his village, he was less welcomed than in normal vacation times due to the suspicion of being a 'carrier of virus' from Europe. Attitudes got normalized after his 14 days of self-quarantine. Now, on one hand, he does not know whether he would be able to work again in Italy or in Turkey,

² Johnson, Miles and Davide Ghiglione. 2020. Coronavirus in Italy: 'When we heard about the lockdown we rushed to the station'. *Financial Times*. 8 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.ft.com/content/27458814-6159-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

³ Ahval News. 2020. *Turkey confirms fifth coronavirus case, suspends flights to 9 European countries*. 13 March 2020. Available online at: <https://ahvalnews.com/coronavirus/turkey-confirms-fifth-coronavirus-case-suspends-flights-9-european-countries>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

and on the other, he feels lucky when watching the news about the overwhelmed public health system and high death tolls in Italy.⁴

Ahmet's story was not unique; many immigrants (labourers, students, expatriates, etc.) around the world were in a panic to get back to their home countries or waited for governments to organise their return to their homeland.⁵ After announcing the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 11 March 2020, an increasing number of measures were taken to prevent the spread of the virus. Among the first ones taken by the Turkish government were travel bans to most European countries as their number of COVID-19 infections was relatively high.

Since that first case in March, there have been nearly 3 million confirmed cases and close to 30,000 deaths in Turkey as of 22 March 2021.⁶ The main measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as in many other countries, was the call to 'stay at home'.⁷ In Turkey, the 'stay-at-home' campaigns started in March, sometimes in the form of mandatory lockdowns and sometimes as voluntary recommendations. But this practice did not have the same effect on all segments of society. Staying at home and accepting restricted mobility (even though some people continued to be mobile due to their jobs) meant protecting their health for some, while for others it pointed to completely different problems.

During these partial lockdowns, Turkey progressively cancelled all international flights. At the same time, starting in the second half of March, the government brought back almost a hundred thousand citizens from abroad (people living or studying abroad and/or just being tourists or visiting their family members). However, while the mobility of citizens who were abroad was considered non-urgent, the movement of seasonal and service workers within the country did not get similar attention as their jobs were regarded as 'vital'.

Turkey has an intense recent migration history with European countries (out of 6.5 million citizens living abroad, 5.5 million live in European countries).⁸ Over the last two decades, the Turkish government has been engaging more with its Turkish nationals abroad, particularly the ones living in European countries, as a part of its foreign policy. Starting on 14 March 2020, the Ministry of Transportation declared a stop on all flights, initially, to and from a number of EU countries, due to the rising numbers of cases there, in a cautious attempt to prevent panic journeys back to Turkey.⁹ One week later, 46 more countries were added to the no-flight list, and President Erdoğan declared

⁴ Şahin Mencütek, Zeynep. 2020. Migrants face a dilemma during COVID-19: uncertainty at home or abroad? *Open Democracy*. 5 June 2020. Available online at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/pandemic-border/migrants-face-dilemma-during-covid-19-uncertainty-home-or-abroad/?fbclid=IwAR23J_IDwja25yXVauGaBR0uoMc-bOaDdHZtBPibly7pHC788TIXwaD7PHY. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

⁵ Scollon, Michael. 2020. COVID-19: A hard row to hoe for migrant laborers. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. 15 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/covid-19-migrant-laborers-russia-central-asia/30557391.html>. Last accessed 27 February 2021;

Gulf News. 2020. *COVID-19: Stranded expats in the UAE want to go home*. 12 April 2020. Available online at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/editorials/covid-19-stranded-expats-in-the-uae-want-to-go-home-1.70940535>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

⁶ WHO COVID-19 Dashboard: Turkey. Available online at: <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/tr>. Last accessed 13 October 2020.

⁷ Bayhan, Bahar, and Ceren Yartan. 2020. Salgın Günlerinde Konutun Anlamı [The meaning of housing in the days of the pandemic]. *beyond.istanbul*: 74-85. Available online at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DaO3euFLxnAD2XIqDzanm80JHPcim10u/view>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

⁸ Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Yurtdışında Yaşayan Türk Vatandaşları* [Turkish citizens living abroad]. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/yurtdisinda-yasayan-turkler_tr.mfa. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

⁹ Turkish Directorate General of Civil Aviation. 2020. *Bakanlığımız Tarafından Yapılan Basın Açıklaması* [Press statement from the Minister]. 14 March 2020. Available online at: <http://web.shgm.gov.tr/tr/haberler/6316-basin-aciklamasi>. Last accessed 27 February 2020.

the extension of the travel ban to all inbound and outbound international flights other than repatriation flights until the summer.¹⁰ From early June 2020 on, travel bans were gradually lifted.¹¹

Although preventive measures have been similar in many countries, we should acknowledge how different groups in different countries have been affected by COVID-19. While the government did not order a full lockdown for all citizens, since 10 April a curfew was imposed on every weekend and all national holidays, except for those working in crucial sectors (health, food supply chain, etc.) until 29 June.¹² Moreover, the government ordered a full lockdown for citizens above the age of 65 from 21 March, and under the age of 20 from 3 April.¹³

Predictions about economic crises due to COVID-19 forecast that 40 to 60 million people worldwide could fall into poverty in 2021.¹⁴ COVID-19 in Turkey has shed a light on long overlooked problems, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Refugees and asylum seekers, daily-wage earners, service sector workers, seasonal workers (in the agricultural and tourism sectors), temporary migrant workers, women, old people, disabled people, and children are the most affected.¹⁵ Workers' incomes have decreased, working hours have changed (being required to work either longer hours or different shifts), their financial difficulties have deepened, and their anxieties have increased due to health insecurity stemming from their movement between home and work. A study of 2,237 workers shows that 35.5% of the participants said that they experienced reductions in their wages as a result of fewer working hours, because of the impact of measures against the pandemic on sectors such as services, metal, textile, and security.¹⁶

In the face of reduced mobility, some groups of workers are clearly more disadvantaged than others. Among the most marginalised are refugees and asylum seekers who have been working in informal sectors. According to data released by the Directorate General of Migration Management, 2.1 million Syrian refugees are of working age (15-65) in Turkey;¹⁷ and according to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey who had been granted

¹⁰ Bortun, Vladimir, Chaimae Essousi, Deniz Pelek, Nicolas Fliess and Eva Østergaard-Nielsen. 2020. Diasporas and initial state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. *MIGRADEMO*. 16 September 2020. Available online at: <https://migrademo.eu/diasporas-and-initial-state-responses-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-3/?fbclid=IwAR3yP93pmeOcxKgxDRAR49BBDz6OybPdf64wP6bEvtXKQ6w9wvEwFUXxJQs>. Last accessed 27 February 2021;

Turkish Directorate General of Civil Aviation. 2020. *Uçuş Yasağı Bulunan Ülkeleri* [No-flight countries]. 27 March 2020. <http://web.shgm.gov.tr/tr/covid-19-tedbirler/6330-ucus-yasagi-bulunan-ulkeler>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

¹¹ Özdemir, Cevdet. 2020. Yurtdışı uçuşları başladı [International flights restarted]. *Sabah*. 12 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sabah.com.tr/ekonomi/2020/06/12/yurtdisi-ucuslari-basladi>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

¹² Turkish Ministry of Interior. 2020. *2 gün sokağa çıkma yasağı var* [There is a two-day curfew]. 10 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/2-gun-sokaga-cikma-yasagi>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

¹³ Turkish Ministry of Interior. 2020. *65 Yaş ve Üstü ile Kronik Rahatsızlığı Olanlara Sokağa Çıkma Yasağı Genelgesi* [Circular regarding the curfew for those 65 and over and those with chronic illnesses]. 21 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/65-yas-ve-ustu-ile-kronik-rahatsizligi-olanlara-sokaga-cikma-yasagi-genelgesi>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

¹⁴ Tarlan, Kemal Vural. 2020. Pandemi Günlerinde Göçmen/Mülteci Emegi: Geçmiş Bugün, Gelecek [Migrant / Refugee Labor in Days of Pandemic: Past, Present, and Future]. *Birikim Dergisi*. 30 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel/10125/pandemi-gunlerinde-gocmen-multeci-emegi-gecmis-bugun-gelecek>. Last accessed 7 July 2020.

¹⁵ DISK-AR. 2020. COVID-19 işçileri nasıl etkiledi? Salgının Çalışma Yasamına Etkileri [Summary report: How did COVID-19 affect workers? The effects of the outbreak on labour]. *DISK Yayınları* 81. Available online at: <http://disk.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/DISK-COVID-19-Alan-Arastirmasi-Rapor-8-7-2020.pdf>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Turkish Ministry of Interior, Immigration Department. 2020. *Geçici Koruma İstatistikleri* [Temporary Protections Statistics]. Available online at: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>. Last accessed 7 July 2020.

permission to work was around 50,000 people in December 2019.¹⁸ This means that only 4% of the Syrian refugee population of working age is registered to work, while the rest works in the informal sector, mainly in construction, textiles and agriculture. At the same time, 45% of the Syrian refugee population is under 18 years; the majority cannot attend school and have to be part of the informal sector.¹⁹ Recent studies show how COVID-19 impacts refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey because of the mobility policies.²⁰ ASAM (the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants) demonstrates that increasing unemployment and the lack of a regular income adversely affect the livelihood of refugees²¹ and intensify the social isolation they have been living in, negatively impacting their mental health.²²

While the measures force some groups to stay at home, others are expected to be mobile under any conditions for the sake of society and/or the economy. This is the case for seasonal agricultural workers. As mentioned, measures to fight the pandemic have caused a slowdown and/or halt in different sectors and production areas, and agricultural production is one of the most affected.²³ In Turkey, agricultural production runs from the end of March to the end of November and employs hundreds of thousands of people, whose livelihoods have been negatively affected by COVID-19 measures. In Turkey, there is no reliable data on domestic seasonal workers or irregular workers from abroad²⁴ because the individuals involved in this sector inevitably change every year due to the unstable, informal and temporary nature of the work. According to the Seasonal Labour Migration Network's 2012 report, their number is around a million. Since the spring, agricultural workers were excluded from measures, such as curfews and lockdowns. With the closure of borders with neighbouring countries, such as Georgia – which provides temporary migrant workers particularly for the hazelnut and tea harvests in the Black Sea region – landowners turned to other workers who are not normally welcome in the region and used to rely on other informal works that were lost because of COVID-19. African refugees and asylum seekers, in particular, had to become more

¹⁸ Hürriyet. 2019. Türkiye 113 bin yabancıya iş kapısı oldu [113,000 foreigners found job opportunities in Turkey]. 14 December 2020. Available online at: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/amp/ekonomi/turkiye-113-bin-yabanciya-is-kapisi-oldu-41397372>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

¹⁹ Lordoğlu, Kuvvet, and Mustafa Aslan. 2018. Görünmeyen Göçmen Çocukların İşçiliği: Türkiye'deki Suriye'li Çocuklar [Invisible Children of Migrant Labor: Syrian children in Turkey]. *Çalışma ve Toplum* 57. Available online at: <https://www.calismatoplum.org/makale/gorunmeyen-gocmen-cocuklarin-isciligi-turkiyedeki-suriyeli-cocuklar>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

²⁰ Turkish Red Crescent Society (TRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). 2020. *Impact of COVID-19 on refugee populations benefitting from the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme*. Available online at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Refugee-Populations-Benefitting-from-ESSN-Programme.pdf>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

²¹ SGDD-ASAM. 2020. *COVID-19 Salgınının Türkiye'de Mülteciler Üzerindeki Etkilerinin Sektörel Analizi* [Sectoral Analysis of the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Refugees in Turkey]. Available online at: <https://www.stgm.org.tr/e-kutuphane/covid-19-salgininin-turkiyede-multeciler-uzerindeki-etkilerinin-sektorel-analizi> Last accessed 27 February 2021.

²² Tepav. 2020. *COVID-19 krizi sürecinde Türkiye'deki sığınmacıların durumu* [Situation of asylum seekers in Turkey during the COVID-19 crisis]. Available online at: https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1590725816-0.COVID_19_Krizi_Surecinde_Turkiye_deki_Siginmacilarin_Durumu.pdf. Last accessed February 2021.

²³ Kalkınma Atölyesi Kooperatifi'nden. 2020. Fındık dalda kalmaz. Koronavirüs Salgınının Mevsimlik Gezici Tarım İşçileri ve Onların Çocuklarının. Fındık Hasadına Katılımına Olası Etkileri ve Önlemler [Hazelnuts don't stay on the branch: Seasonal migrant workers in agriculture and their children during the coronavirus pandemic. Possible effects and precautions participating in the hazelnut harvest]. Available online at: <http://www.ka.org.tr/dosyalar/file/FINDIK%20DALDA%20KALMAZ.pdf>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

²⁴ Kalkınma Atölyesi Kooperatifi'nden. 2020. Virüs mü, yoksulluk mu? Korona Virüs Salgınının Mevsimlik Gezici Tarım İşçileri ve Onların Çocukları ile Bitkisel Üretime Olası Etkisi [Virus or poverty? Possible impact of the coronavirus pandemic on crop production by seasonal migrant workers in agriculture and their children] *International Labour Organization*. Available online at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-ankara/documents/publication/wcms_743368.pdf. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

mobile than before in order to replace temporary migrant workers for the tea harvest. Even one newspaper printed a piece with ‘unusual and interesting’ images of African workers harvesting tea.²⁵

Statistics about mobility restrictions reveal that female workers have been more severely affected by the outbreak. The gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are particularly acute within the patriarchal contexts which have been worsened by poverty and loss of livelihood options. The most vulnerable group of women are the lower-class housewives who are not paid for their work, followed by women who work in the informal sector on daily wages without any insurance, such as agricultural, care or domestic workers, and who were the first to lose their jobs.²⁶ Mobility restrictions increased the burden on the shoulders of women, who were affected by gender inequalities before the pandemic. Besides the economic trajectories of COVID-19, immobility also has an impact on violence against women who have to stay at home. According to studies, lockdowns have caused an increase in domestic violence,²⁷ especially after the release of prisoners convicted of gendered violence to serve their sentences at home.²⁸

It has been over a year since something none of us would have ever imagined in our lifetimes happened. The WHO defines COVID-19 as ‘the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus’.²⁹ But beyond that, the pandemic has suspended our whole lives and changed our mobility patterns in different ways, depending on our gender, age, ethnicity, occupation and residence status. And it seems as if the scars from then are just now becoming clear.

²⁵ Doğru, Emrah. 2020. Rize'de alışılmadık görüntü! Çaylar Senegalliden [Unusual view in Rize! Senegalese tea]. *HaberTurk*. 10 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.haberturk.com/son-dakika-haberler-rize-de-alisilmadik-goruntu-caylar-senegalliden-2707446>. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

²⁶ Bayar, Ayşe Aylın, Öner Günçavdı, and Haluk Levent. 2020. COVID-19 salgınının kadınların çalışma ve hane yaşami üzerine etkileri [Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women’s work and domestic life]. *IstanPol & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*. Available online at: https://d4b693e1-c592-4336-bc6a-36c134d6fb5e.filesusr.com/ugd/c80586_86b8dec8fdb4de6afbe1bf1136fa068.pdf. Last accessed 27 February 2021.

²⁷ Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı. 2020. Koronavirüs Salgını Süresince Kadına Yönelik Şiddetle Mücadele İzleme Raporu [Combating violence against women during the coronavirus pandemic. Monitoring report]. Available online at: <https://morcati.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/koronavirüs-salgını-suresince-kys-rapor.pdf>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

²⁸ Duvar English. 2020. *Domestic violence complaints spiked in Turkey within 20 days of mass prisoner release*. 31 may 2020. Available online at: <https://www.duvarenglish.com/women/2020/05/31/domestic-violence-complaints-spiked-in-turkey-within-20-days-of-mass-prisoner-release/>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

²⁹ World Health Organization. 2020. *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Q&A*. Available online at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>. Last accessed 12 July 2020.