

**AFGHAN WOMEN IN AĞRI: A CASE STUDY OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION**

by  
FATMA ÇAKIR

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AFGHAN WOMEN IN AĞRI: A CASE STUDY OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Approved by:

Asst. Prof. Ayşecan Terziođlu  
(Thesis Supervisor)



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Asst. Prof. Ayşe Ozil



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Assoc. Prof. Didem Daniş



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Approval Date: January 28, 2020

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## ABSTRACT

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FATMA ÇAKIR

TURKISH STUDIES M.A. THESIS, JANUARY 2020

Thesis Supervisor: Asst. Prof. AYŞECAN TERZİOĞLU

Keywords: Irregular Migration, Afghan Women, Feminization of Migration, Ağrı

While many social scientists produce work on irregular migration based on male experiences, very few works address the female experiences of migration. This thesis aims to explain and analyse female irregular migrants in a host society by focusing on irregular Afghan migrant women in Ağrı, Turkey. Afghan migrants have been the largest irregular migrant community in Turkey since 2018. Although studies in this manner mainly focused on women living in the metropolis, little research was conducted in the cities of Eastern Anatolia Region based on gender issues. Within this framework, this thesis will focus on the experiences and motivations of irregular Afghan migrant women who first entered Turkey. The main contribution of this thesis is to focus on the problematic applications of the state regulations regarding irregular migration. Therefore, the narratives of informants and regulations of local authorities in Ağrı will be analyzed.

## ÖZET

### AĞRI'DA DÜZENSİZ GÖÇ VAKA ÇALIŞMASI: AFGAN KADIN GÖÇMENLER ÖRNEĞİ

FATMA ÇAKIR

TÜRKİYE ÇALIŞMALARI YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, OCAK 2020

Tez Danışmanı: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi AYŞECAN TERZİOĞLU

Anahtar Kelimeler: Düzensiz Göç, Göçün Kadınsılaşması, Afgan Kadın Göçmenler,  
Ağrı

Düzensiz göç literatürü uzun yıllardır erkeklerin göçmenlik deneyimleri üzerinden tartışılırken, kadınların göçmenlik deneyimlerini ele alan ve kadınların gözünden düzensiz göçü inceleyen çalışmalar son yıllarda gelişmektedir. 2018'den beri Türkiye'deki en kalabalık düzensiz göçmen grubu Afgan göçmenlerdir. Bu konuda yapılan pek çok çalışma büyük şehirlerde yaşayan kadınlara odaklanırken, Doğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde bulunan kadın göçmenler hakkında çok az çalışma yapılmıştır. Bu çerçevede bu tez çalışmasında, Türkiye'ye ilk kez gelen Afgan kadın göçmenlerin göç motivasyonları ve göçmenlik deneyimleri incelenecektir. Bu tezin ana katkısı devletin makro ve mikro düzeydeki düzensiz göç düzenlemelerindeki sorunlara odaklanmaktır. Bu sebeple katılımcıların söylemleri ve Ağrı'daki yerel otoritelerin düzenlemeleri analiz edilecektir.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

I have been interested in gender studies and the lives of women since I first began to grow aware of my own gender identity within patriarchal society. At some point, I realized that all people may have different choices and some people may not even define themselves as a woman or a man in a binary way. While reading about the patriarchal structure of society, I learned more about women's lives in Turkey, in part by following the news. At that time, the Turkish political narratives in the media were being heavily shaped by the issue of migration, and more specifically Syrian migration. All those political, economic, and social developments in Turkish society made me think about these women whom I had not seen before. Who were they, I wondered, and what kinds of life experiences did they have? Thus, I started to study the relationship between migration and women in 2017. Even though there are different categorizations for migration, such as asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees, many migrants arrive in Turkey through illegal ways, and this group of so-called irregular migrants constitutes the most comprehensive category. As I searched for more information about these irregular migrant women in Turkey, I realized that the largest group of irregular migrants has been Afghans since 2018. While much research has focused on the life experiences of Syrian women living in the cities of Turkey's Marmara Region, limited work has addressed the migration experiences of Afghan women in the cities of the Eastern Anatolia Region. Within this framework, this thesis explores the relationship between irregular migration and the regulations of state authorities in Turkey by examining the narratives of both female and male Afghan migrants in the city of Ağrı. Ağrı, in the Eastern Anatolia Region, is one of the first cities that irregular migrants enter in Turkey under the guidance of migrant smugglers. Most of the irregular migrants in Turkey are Afghan

migrants, and this city has an important position in understanding the process of irregular migration in Turkey.

## **1.1 The Context of the Research and Methodology**

The study of irregular migrants must start with an understanding of the concept and process of irregular migration. In that regard, the methodological procedure is a fundamental issue. It seems that the most suitable research method is field research to observe and interview migrants. The main purpose of this thesis is therefore to analyze the physical conditions of irregular migrants in the field. Their narratives and the environment in which they live will be beneficial in better understanding their migration motivations. Field research provides the participants with valuable opportunities to express their ideas and emotions as fully as possible through open-ended and half-structured research questions.

Furthermore, the police officers, staff members in the local migration office, and people working in the bus terminal in Ağrı can also express their ideas on the process of irregular migration and how it takes place in the cities of the Eastern Anatolian Region. In performing the research, I spent a considerable amount of time observing the process of irregular migration in the field; therefore, fieldwork was the most suitable research method within the framework of this thesis. My brother, who was a police officer in Ağrı until the end of 2018, became the first gatekeeper for this research. During the preliminary research, new gatekeepers in the Ağrı police center, migration office, and bus terminal also became involved. Some of them became participants in the fieldwork later on.

Official reports state that the irregular migrants in question arrive at the major industrialized cities after passing through cities in the Eastern Anatolian Region. As the city of Ağrı is a common destination in Eastern Turkey, preliminary field research was conducted there in January 2018 over the course of one week to become familiar with the research environment. Ağrı is a small city, which means that local state institutions and fundamental business

structures are close to each other. This was my first visit to Ağrı. Hence, I did my best to pay attention to the conditions of the field in order to understand the process of irregular migration. After devoting two days to making connections with police officers at the Ağrı police center with my brother's help, it became clear that most of the irregular migrants were either kept at the police center or they were at the main bus terminal to travel to major cities such as Ankara or Istanbul. As Ağrı is the first destination they reach in Turkey during their migration journey, it is important to conduct in-depth interviews with Afghan migrants before they move on to metropolitan areas and to learn about their thoughts and ideas in this step of their migration journey.

In pursuit of this goal, I utilized my personal connections, starting with my brother. The officials in the main police center were very helpful and were interested in this research. After I explained the purpose of the thesis, the police officers gave me permission to conduct in-depth interviews with irregular migrants. After the first round of field research, new gatekeepers including people working at the bus terminal and authorities in both the police center and the migration office in Ağrı also became involved as participants in the research.

The police center keeps irregular migrants in one of the buildings of the police department, which used to be the gym for police officers. This building has been used to house irregular migrants under police custody since 2017. Inside the building, at the time of the first field research, there were over 200 people separated by gender. The building comprises three separate rooms: one of them looks like a basketball court, and male migrants were kept in that hall, while police authorities separated the migrant women into two small rooms. There were about six or eight women with their children in these rooms. Apart from these women's husbands and sons, other male migrants were not allowed to enter these small rooms. Husbands were able to see their wives and children at the hall between these three rooms. Migrants would wait in these rooms all day long. When police officers detain irregular migrants, they notify the migration office in Ağrı. This office has two workers to handle documentation of all the people detained in the police center, although many other migrants are not detained or seen by police authorities. For example, there may be 1000 irregular migrants passing across the Turkish border at Ağrı, but only about 200 will be randomly

detained by police officers. This is why most of the migrants do not go through any sort of legal procedure.

Nevertheless, two officers have to prepare the documents of more than 200 people. This process may take more than two or three weeks, a period during which the migrants are kept in the building described above. There is no official removal center created by the Turkish government in Ağrı, but this separate and isolated building functions similarly to—though not exactly like—a removal center. In appearance, as a prison for migrants. Families can see each other outside of the rooms that are separated by gender. There is always a different police officer in front of the building who is charged with watching over them. He goes inside regularly, checks on their conditions, and provides food and beverages. Whoever among the police officers is guarding the front of the building is primarily responsible for maintaining order in the building. This police officer makes sure that migrants do not escape and that there is no fighting or conflict among the migrants. In my opinion, some of the main handicaps in this situation are arbitrariness, lack of information, and inefficiency. For instance, some of the police officers have no interest in the migrants and may even have prejudices against them. They may reflect those prejudices on the migrants held inside. Alternatively, many of the police officers are not aware of or do not want to deal with the basic biological needs of the women and children. All of these arbitrary or subjective behaviors create more challenging physical, psychological, and social conditions for the migrants.

After observing the conditions of this building, I began in-depth interviews, which started with half-structured research questions. The interviews were completed with the help of a local translator after obtaining the permission of the participants. It was challenging to communicate with the Afghan women, since very few of them speak any Turkish. At the beginning, they were surprised to see someone other than a police officer inside the building and they had hesitations about the research. However, most of them did decide to share what they went through in Afghanistan and how they decided to leave their home country. Their voices were recorded with their permission and they were asked about their reasons for migration, their life stories, and their experiences.

After completing those interviews with Afghan migrant women and men, and spending many hours observing their conditions in the police center, the bus terminal in Ağrı became the second research site for this thesis as the police officers stated that many irregular migrants live in or wait at the Ağrı bus terminal. It is a small bus terminal and about 15 bus companies serve this destination. Police officers and people working in the bus terminal, as well as migrants who spend time there and bus company owners, participated in this next round of interviews. Anyone involved in irregular migration or related to the process in any way is fundamental in shaping the whole picture of irregular migration in Ağrı.

Following this preliminary investigation, I visited my fieldwork site again in July 2018 for a week to gain further information about the conditions in the field and to compare the conditions of the field in summer against those observed in January 2018. I followed the same procedure and conducted interviews with irregular migrant women in the police station and bus terminal. I conducted final fieldwork in November 2019 to compare the conditions of irregular migrants by visiting the same research sites during multiple periods. As a result, I completed a total of three rounds of fieldwork in Ağrı and in-depth interviews were held with four bus company owners, six police officers, 25 Afghan women, and 25 irregular male migrants from different countries in an effort to explain the meaning and process of irregular migration.<sup>1</sup> These women are not workers and they do not have legal status in Turkey. Ağrı is the city that Afghan women first enter in Turkey; accordingly, the women whom I interviewed with semi-structured and in-depth interview arrived to the borders of Ağrı as their first point of arrival in Turkey. Hence, they are not settled and some of them are still on the move. This is why this study may open a new perspective regarding the relationship between migration and women. I will describe these procedures and methodological issues in more detail in the third chapter.

The field research showed that there are different irregular migrant groups living in Turkey. The data of the Directorate General of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü) illustrate that Afghans constitute the largest irregular migrant community in Turkish society since 2018. I reviewed the research with regard to Afghan women

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<sup>1</sup> The real names of the participants will not be used in this research in order to maintain confidentiality.

accordingly and found that most of the studies performed to date to address this population are predominantly focused on Istanbul. However, irregular Afghan migrants come to Turkey over the Iranian border, which means that their first destinations in Turkey are cities in the Eastern Anatolian Region such as Van, Erzurum, and Ağrı. I believe that research on these areas for seeing and interpreting the relationship between migration and women will make a fundamental contribution to the literature. Understanding the relationship between migration and women by focusing on their migration practices can help us to explore new dimensions of migration. Hence, the gender dimension is important. The main contribution of this research is to understand the regulations of the state regarding irregular migration on both macro and micro levels by analyzing the narratives of both migrants and officers in Ağrı.

This field research and obtained data showed that irregular migrants come to Turkey from various countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan. This observation validates the official reports of the Immigration Authority in Turkey. Even though different groups were detained by the police authorities in the police center, and they wished to reach a metropolis via the bus terminal, most of the irregular migrants coming to Ağrı via Iran are Afghans. Another interesting observation was the lack of Syrian migrants in Ağrı. According to the narratives of the police officers, there are virtually no Syrian migrants in the cities of the Eastern Anatolia Region.

## **1.2 Challenges in Doing Research and Ethical Considerations**

In addition to building a comprehensive framework on the issue of irregular migration, one of the biggest challenges in studying irregular migration is collecting data while conducting research. Data on irregular migration are often unreliable since most countries cannot collect specific information including both numbers and demographic and socioeconomic profiles (Koser 2005). This is a very well-known issue in this field of study since these migrants are mobile and most are not registered by official authorities. As a result, the affected states generally announce only approximate statistics. In addition to providing these estimated

data, contemporary nation-states have a right to decide if, and under which conditions, foreign people may legally live within their territories. As a result, each nation-state has its own unique definitions, policies, and regulations regarding irregular migrants within its borders. For instance, an irregular migrant may become a regular migrant on the condition that he or she fulfils the obligations of the host country within a specified period of time.

With this uncertainty, and taking the different regulations of nation-states into consideration, it is not surprising that the available information on irregular migration is often controversial. Therefore, research methods should be chosen wisely and must be fruitful in practice. Khalid Koser (2010) highlights the responsibilities of researchers of this issue and the awareness of ethical sensitivities while collecting information. As well as being respectful towards interviewees, it is important for researchers to remain consistent in terminologies and concepts. Therefore, I will be using the phrase *irregular migration* in this study to identify Afghan women and men in Ağrı. With respect to the changing nature of this term, I define irregular migration as follows: it simply describes moving to another country without meeting the necessary obligations of that host country. People who migrate from a home country to a host country without legal documents are considered irregular migrants, and from this perspective, the Afghan women whom I interviewed in Ağrı are regarded here as “irregular migrant women.” Migration experiences of irregular migrants also will crystallize the regulations and attitudes of Turkish government against irregular migration.

Moreover, I would like to point out the ethical considerations and my positionality as a researcher in the field. I did my best to present myself as a friend and stayed with migrants in the police center and bus terminal for long hours in order to get to know them and to understand their physical and psychological life conditions. Some of them become my friends during my three visits in Ağrı. Even though I was an outsider, they saw me as a solution to their problems. Hence they open up their minds and thought this would be helpful for their life conditions. During some of the interviews even though I get emotional, I did my best to protect some distance. I will change the names of the informants in order to maintain confidentiality.

Although the physical conditions in the field may get more difficult occasionally, migrants were very helpful in explaining themselves. This was the first time I was in a police center and bus terminal as a researcher. The process was out of my comfort zone and migrant women were very surprised that someone was in Ağrı in order to interview them. The language barrier was a serious problem but local translators were always in the research sites. At first, there may appear a hierarchy between a researcher and informants, but after a while migrants got used to seeing me and I got used to talking with them and spending time in the police center and bus terminal.

### **1.3 The Theoretical Framework and Literature**

The definition, extent, and limitations of irregular migration are all controversial. Although there are various arguments regarding the definition of irregular migration, as I will discuss in the next chapter, the most common explanation is that people who move to another country and live in that country without notifying the legal authorities are considered irregular or undocumented migrants (IOM 2019).

Within this framework, it is recognized that most Afghans in Turkey live unregistered and are categorically irregular migrants. As Maryam Ozlatimoghaddam (2012) highlights, the nature of life in transit among Afghan migrant women creates a feeling of “limbo” in their lives in Turkey. In the same manner, Fatih Karaman (2017) and Didem Daniş (2006) both underline that the position of Afghans in Turkey is invisible and complicated. One of the most significant points raised by Fatih Karaman is that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has stopped holding interviews with Afghans to decide their refugee status and their resettlement to other countries. This decision created ambiguity for Afghans and they are now isolated from education and health services.

According to Teri Murphy, Gülcihan Çiğdem and Süheyla Nurlu (2018), the invisible and isolated existence of migrant Afghans particularly affects the psychology of women. In addition to traumatic war experiences in their home country, they also struggle with the

feeling of defenselessness. This anxiety is especially strong in contexts of employment, since working Afghan women earn less but work more. As they are not legally registered in Turkey, they are not able to pursue fundamental human rights and labor rights. This leads to the exploitation of women in many different ways. Therefore, several scholars point out that working Afghan migrant women are particularly not safe or secure.

Although women migrants experience migration differently from men in many ways, social scientists highlight that the feminization of migration remained underestimated for a long time. As the flow of migration has increased enormously all over the world, migration is being feminized. In other words, the participation of women in the migration movement is increasing (Gabaccia 2016). Although some female migrants migrate for job opportunities, family reasons, or education, many of them are forced to migrate due to conflicts and wars (Harzig 2003). The theoretical framework of the “feminization of migration” can be understood by examining the case of the Afghan women introduced in this thesis. Moreover, it provides insight for understanding the relationship between migrant smugglers and the regulations of state authorities regarding irregular migration on both macro and micro levels.

#### **1.4 Significance**

Studies on irregular Afghan migrant women have mainly addressed their working conditions and life practices in metropolitan areas. On the other hand, I think that focusing on their decision-making process and understanding their migration motivations when they first enter Turkey will prove to be a fertile and vital field in understanding the experiences, feelings, and ideas of Afghan women as well as their imaginations and expectations about Turkey. Understanding and analyzing the narratives of female migrants is crucial in a host society in order to create permanent policies and gender-based regulations to address the various problems they encounter in Turkey as female migrants. Policy-makers and anyone involved in this issue can produce efficient policies by understanding the challenges of irregular migrant women since those policies are not mostly implemented in practice. Integration into

the host society and the life quality of irregular migrant women can be improved within social, psychological, political, and cultural contexts through such policies. As far as I observed in the field, the uncertainties and arbitrary implementations of authorities create issues that are more challenging for irregular migrant women. The uncertainty and irregularity of the system perpetuate the unclear position of these women in the host society. For instance, even though the police officers detain the migrant women in the police officers, the documents that are provided by the officers in the local migration office does guarantee their safety. As they are illiterate they do not understand the content of the document but think this document is their acceptance in Turkey. In such cases, while male migrants are able to express themselves, female migrants are mostly silent. The reflection of this implementation follow the migrants while they migrate to the other cities in Turkey. Authorities in other cities may not recognize their documents as legal in most cases. Furthermore, human smuggler create the fake documents and it may be difficult for the police officers to tell which document is right. This whole arbitrariness and lack of countrywide regulations increases the problems they face in a host society. When the implications of this uncertain structure are taken into account, analyzing the migration journeys and experiences of migrant women in Ağrı is particularly significant.

In this context, I want to stress the role of human smuggling and human trafficking considering the conditions of such women. As far as I could see in the field, human smuggling and human trafficking are key factors in irregular migration processes. With respect to the relationship between irregular migration and human smuggling, the literature explains that irregular migrants often make deals with human smugglers to arrive at a host country in which they either intend to live for the rest of their lives or to stay just a short time (Nations 2011). Following this global phenomenon, a similar system is seen in the case of Afghan migration to Turkey. Human smugglers transmit almost all irregular Afghan migrants from Afghanistan to Turkey or countries in Europe. The irregular migration history of Afghanistan started in the 1980s with that country's internal conflicts, driven mainly by clashes between the state authorities and various terrorist organizations including the Taleban and ISIS.

In light of these initial remarks, this thesis aims at contributing to the scholarly field of migration studies by exploring the situations of irregular Afghan migrant women in Ağrı. This thesis advocates for the expansion of migration studies by presenting women's narratives and increasing their visibility in the literature in terms of the relationship between irregular migration and women in Turkey. This study may offer a new perspective on how the policies should be applied efficiently towards irregular migrant women in improving their life conditions in a host society.

More importantly, this research reveals how the neoliberal policies of state authorities increase irregular migration rather than decreasing it. Parallel to countries of Europe, Turkish authorities claim that they are fighting irregular migration. However, the findings in the field reveal that although the Turkish government claims to be against irregular migration, the existing regulations in practice actually support irregular migration at both macro and micro levels. The most significant point in this regard is the document referred to as "T6." It basically provides freedom of travel to migrants in Ağrı. The officers in the Ağrı migration office prepare this document for the migrants detained by police officers. After a while, the officers assign each migrant to one of the cities classified by the Directorate General of Migration Management. However, most migrants go to metropolitan areas such as Ankara and Istanbul rather than the cities assigned to them by the migration office. This "T6" document is mostly known in the cities of the Eastern Anatolian Region and is not a fixed policy implemented uniformly across Turkey. After a while, the irregular migrants settle in a city and start to work as a cheap source of labor. They thus support the neoliberal system with this cheap labor. As a result, the arbitrariness starts from the bottom and continues to the top on the matter of irregular migration.

## **2. IRREGULAR MIGRATION**

In this chapter, I discuss the historical development of the concept of irregular migration by taking into account various academic approaches and policies to understand this phenomenon. After explaining different perspectives on and historical processes of irregular migration, I will briefly discuss the historical process of irregular migration in Turkey. It is significant to see how different migrant groups are defined within academic, historical, and political dialogues in both Turkey and Europe. Finally, I will explore how being an irregular migrant affects women's everyday lives in accord with their social, economic, and psychological problems regarding their legal status in their host countries.

### **2.1 Definition and Limitations of Irregular Migration**

Today, all available evidence appears to highlight that recent migration patterns are shaped by the growing importance of irregular migration in specific regions, such as North Europe and North America (Hutton and Williamson 2005). I will therefore analyze different conceptualizations of irregular or undocumented migration to understand and conceptualize this migration pattern and the motivations of the people participating in it. Acknowledging the different approaches is vital in giving meaning to "irregular migration" at both national and international levels. Since I specifically focus on the narratives of irregular Afghan migrant women, I aim to explore how this term has emerged and been shaped in the literature. With this purpose, I will initially present and discuss different scholarly

explanations of irregular migration, and then I aim to explain the historical development of this term and its reflection in the Turkish context.

According to a Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) report, which was one of the earliest reports on this issue (Hugo 2004), irregular migration should be considered as a complex and diverse phenomenon. This report points out that irregular migration creates important dilemmas for both states and the migrants themselves considering the increasing insecurity and vulnerability, particularly in the context of European countries. Most states in Europe do not have efficient policies to decrease or to control the flow of irregular migration. Hence, the report emphasizes that more efficient and comprehensive viewpoints are needed to thoroughly address the concept of irregular migration. These new approaches should consider both the interests of states and the basic human rights of irregular migrants. As seen in an early report, the GCIM started calling attention to the need to address migration issues at both national and individual levels at the beginning of the 2000s. The report uses the terms “irregular migrant” and “irregular migration” and discusses the problematic nature of their definitions.

One of the other terms used for a long time to specify this concept was “illegal,” especially by European media outlets and in some written documents. However, this term is criticized by many scholars for its connotation of “criminality” (Hastie and Crepeau 2014). People may not have the required documents or legal permission to live in another country or to cross borders, but this does not mean that they are criminals. In fact, the constant use of this term may actually lead such migrants into criminal spheres (Sciortino 2004) For instance, a migrant may be labeled as “illegal” in his or her host country, and after a while, this person may internalize the suggested criminality of this description and turn to crime when his or her legal condition in society is taken into account.

Using the term “illegal migrant” can also undermine the fundamental human rights of migrants since all people have the right to live (Ikuteyijo, Akintemi, and Aina 2011). This right to survival is one of the basic human rights and all human beings should be able to live in safe zones regardless of national and legal status. In addition to these points, the UNHCR

underlines a third factor, which is that labeling people as “illegal” may put the rights of asylum seekers at risk in irregular situations (Goodwin-Gill 2001). Such negative labels can make the lives of irregular migrants more difficult. Even though most of them lack the proper documents and permissions, they still need to be safe in their host countries as human beings.

Another term that has been used for irregular migrants is “undocumented,” but this term is also misleading in multiple ways (Van Meeteren, 2012). For example, some people may not have official documents from their home country, but they may obtain documents in the host country after a while by going through legal procedures, or vice versa. In other cases, they may have some documents, but those documents may not be valid for entering, staying, or working in another country. Some may lose their proper documents during their journey from home country to host country considering the difficult and unexpected physical situations they find themselves in. Alternatively, some may obtain documents without official permission on their way to the host countries.

Taking into account all of the different terms used to describe this issue, today the most widely accepted term that is used by different organizations such as the Council of Europe, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UNHCR, as well as by various scholars, is “irregular migration” (Kralera and Hollomey 2010; IOM 2018). The background presented here highlights the complicated nature of the terminology. It is not always easy or obvious to describe what constitutes the irregular conditions of migrants. This is why many academics and politicians struggle to describe people on the move and their limitations and rights in the receiving societies.

When all these different definitions are examined, it is seen that “irregular migration” refers to the connection between the mobility of people who are not recognized by officials and the sanctions implemented by host states. As a result, this term is multifaceted, changing over time in various societies and not always clearly described (Ambrosini 2013). It is vital to illuminate how institutions and various scholars define the term “irregular migration.” Who are these people, and why are they called “irregular migrants” A GCIM (2005) report describes this notion as follows:

“Irregular migration includes people who enter a country without the proper authority (for example through clandestine entry and entry with fraudulent documents); people who remain in a country in contravention of their authority (for example by staying after the expiry of a visa or work permit, through sham marriages or fake adoptions, as bogus students or fraudulently self-employed); people moved by migrant smugglers or human trafficking, and those who deliberately abuse the asylum system.” (GCIM)

Even though the GCIM accepts this definition, some scholars do not focus on the definition but rather on the influence of irregular migration on nation-states’ authority. For instance, some scholars consider that irregular migration is mostly seen as establishing a threat to state sovereignty and state security. Simply stated, countries have a sovereign right to control who crosses their borders, and irregular migrants threaten that sovereignty by not complying with that right of the state. On the other hand, each human should feel safe and secure wherever they live. Hence, the safety and life of an individual should come before state sovereignty and security, regardless of that individual’s home country or race. People mainly migrate irregularly due to challenging or unendurable living conditions in their home countries.

On the other hand, as a political scientist Jef Huysmans (2005) draws attention to state security by claiming that irregular migration may increase the number of terrorists in the host countries. Thus, most nation-states seek to decrease the flow of irregular migration to secure and protect their borders. Against this claim, Khalid Koser (2005) underscores that irregular migration has not had that big of an impact on most societies since it represents a quite small proportion of total migration. Considering these state-focused perspectives of academicians, it can be said that they formulate their opinions by focusing on the effect of irregular migration on the security and sovereignty of nation-states.

## **2.2 Historical Traces of Irregular Migration**

One of the leading scholars on irregular migration, Anna Triandafyllidou (2010), clarifies that the increasing number of irregular migrants in European countries is an urgent topic by providing a historical perspective. She describes the attitudes and policies of European

governments by emphasizing the security of nation-states. While governments blame each other for the outcomes of irregular migration, policy and media reports are subjective because of the lack of methodological considerations and conceptions in Europe. Anna Triandafyllidou (2010) also does not use the term “illegal” for the same reasons explained above. An “irregular migrant” is therefore a migrant who, at some point in the migration journey, contravened the rules of entry or residence.

At the same time, as a sociologist Anna Triandafyllidou (2010) and Maurizio Ambrosini (2013) clarify the progress of irregular migration in Europe by focusing on the socioeconomic and political context to explain the role of this phenomenon in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During World War I and the Great Depression of 1929, some European states started to discuss restrictions and controls on their borders. Until the 1920s, there was no use of the phrases “illegal” or “irregular migrant,” but right after the establishment of nation-states, they defined foreigners who lived illegally in the receiving societies as “illegal aliens.” Nonetheless, after World War II, Europeans mostly migrated from southern countries to countries in the Western Europe. This migration flow also showed its impacts on other continents. The increasing need for labor in the cities of Western European also came to the attention of residents of the former colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Maria Casado-Diaz, Maria Kaiser, and Anthony Warnes (2004) state that these new migration movements became an endemic feature of European labor mobility. Many people started to migrate to countries in Europe. This process took place under bilateral agreements between home and host countries. Therefore, until the late 1980s, irregular migration was not an important part of these migration movements.

As sociologists Michael Bommers and Giuseppe Sciortino (2011) cite from Luhmann (1995) and Stichweh (2000), irregular migration is neither an extraordinary social pathology nor the provisional result of unsuccessful policies in sending countries. This phenomenon is beyond these perspectives and is related to numerous issues. It is a structural characteristic of nation-states caused by the structural conditions of the contemporary world. In parallel with this, beginning with globalization and neoliberal policies, nation-states became interdependent on each other. Therefore, social and cultural networks among the regimes of the world

increased dramatically. These structural changes triggered the rise of inequalities and unbalanced income distribution all around the world and thus people began to migrate to countries in Europe after the 1970s.

Starting from the 1980s, not only did northern countries in Europe grow economically, but Southern European countries, especially Italy, also made great progress. This improvement changed the nature of migration flows in Europe. With the end of travel prohibitions, the collapse of welfare systems, the fall of communist regimes, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Southern European countries gradually started to become host countries rather than home countries. This change led to the presence of many ethnic and national minority groups in different European countries in the long term, and the need for migrant workers in developed states decreased. On the contrary, many educated European migrants had the luxury of waiting for better jobs with better working conditions. Meanwhile, low-skill occupations such as cleaning, private care, and seasonal farm work started to be filled by migrant laborers who came from Asian, African, and some other European states. In particular, the migrants from African and Asian countries did not follow the legal procedures and traveled to Europe in illegal ways in most cases (Triandafyllidou 2010; Vollmer 2014). As a result, European host societies began to give further thought in the political arena to the issue of irregularity.

By the 1990s and 2000s, these new migration flows, which had created violations of the law in several countries, had become a serious political issue. Especially after the September 11 attacks in 2001, this issue became connected to the fight against terrorism and the protection of national security, particularly in the USA (Guild 2003). Following the USA, most European states increased the strict controls on their borders and imposed more severe penalties in light of the growing public reaction. With the effect of this public pressure, European governments put into force many regulations and launched new intergovernmental cooperation with the emergence of the Frontex system in 2005. Following an “internal no-border zone” with the Schengen agreement, each member state removed internal borders within the Schengen region to work more efficiently on the management of external borders (Morehouse and Blomfield 2011).

The EU countries started to work together on this issue by defining it within the context of EU policy on irregular migration (Broeders and Engbersen 2007). However, this perspective and this fight against irregular migration were not efficient. The EU continued to expand its borders with the acceptance of new states. The introduction of new states to the EU led member states to experience significant economic recession and political transitions. All of the related political sanctions and controls in Europe gradually induced the labeling of irregular migrants as criminals and exploiters of humanitarian aid (Zetter 2007). This historical process illustrates that even though EU countries worked on the issue of “irregular migration,” they did not succeed in applying efficient policies to address the phenomenon. Even though nation-states claim to fight against irregular migration to preserve their sovereignty and security, the implementations of neoliberal policies may indicate the exact opposite. Most irregular migrants work as a cheap illegal labor force in host societies. In this case, the policies of the governments may not be as effective towards the flow of irregular migration as they are assumed to be.

By the summer of 2008, a spike arose in irregular migration to Europe in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. This unexpected development underlines that new dynamics across the world can create sudden impacts on the migration patterns and domestic policies of European nation-states. The topic of irregular migration became not only a political matter but also a public issue in both Europe and North America. Media outlets often covered the unauthorized migrants reaching Mediterranean shores, and their tragic life struggles and stories, in their efforts to arrive to European countries. With growing attention from both European politicians and societies, irregular migration gradually became a major issue needing to be resolved. It was mainly thought that irregular migration had adverse impacts in the receiving societies due to violations of the rule of law, encouraging labor exploitation, deepening poverty, and making it difficult for public services to work functionally. All of these negative representations and the lack of accurate knowledge led to increased fear and anger in host countries (Morehouse and Blomfield 2011).

In this framework, the European Union member states began to focus on eight principal problems to address the negative public opinion and the increasing pressure and tension.

These are illegal entry, false documents, false information on documents, overstaying, loss of status, being born into irregularity, absconding, and the state's failure on decisions to return. These eight paths were accepted by EU member nations as the ways in which a foreigner might become an unauthorized migrant in 2008 (European Migration Network 2009).

In the reports prepared by the EU institutions, the terms “irregular” and “unauthorized migrant” were used interchangeably. These principles were accepted by all the member states, but Greece in particular has remained a gateway to Europe for irregular migrants. In fact, Greece had the largest increase in detected illegal border crossings in 2010. It should also be underlined that, throughout 2010, such detections were mostly concentrated along the Greek and Turkish border. One of the substantial findings was that nearly half of the irregular migrants detected were Afghans (Frontex 2011). Although the detected and the predicted patterns of irregular migration in Europe had diminished until 2010 under the policies of the EU (2012), a report by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, indicated that the measures taken by EU countries did not function as well as the member states assumed. Although the 27 EU states agreed on these principles later on, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development revealed that this process eventually and inevitably turned into a lottery with the arbitrary attitudes of the nation-states (ICMPD 2009).

As clarified above, irregular migration often flows from richer countries to poorer countries, which are assumed to offer better living conditions and job opportunities for migrants. EU countries applied many policies to preserve their sovereignty and welfare regimes with the intent of reducing irregular migration. However, making the migration process more difficult and expensive did not prevent irregular migration movements. On the contrary, people continued to migrate to cities in Europe for their strong, stable political conditions and welfare regimes as expressed in the EU's well-known slogan of “security, freedom, and justice” in pursuit of better living conditions. In this regard, it can be understood why people mostly migrate to cities in Europe.

### 2.3 Causes and Effects of Irregular Migration

Apart from the perceptions and representations of irregular migrants in receiving societies, there is limited research about the reasons for migration in recent years. Castle and Miller (2003) highlight the structural issues, including developmental, demographic, and democratic problems such as civil conflicts, persecution, and unemployment that people face in a sending country. The ILO (2004) and Akasya Kansu Karadağ (2018) indicate that when people have economic, social, and psychological difficulties in their country of origin, they tend to move to more developed countries. As migration researchers Emma Herman (2006) and Ilse van Liempt and Jeroen Doornik (2006) explain that people may be desperate to leave their home countries for many reasons, but most research does not address migrants' decision-making processes. Therefore, focusing on migrants' own narratives and experiences with respect to the whole migration process from home country to host country is vital in understanding their motivations and will contribute to the process of finding solutions for making migrants' living conditions better within a humanitarian framework.

While European states have fought against irregular migration for a long time, the applied sanctions and policies could not reduce this flow. Furthermore, over the course of time, migration networks developed in alignment with technological improvements (Gelb and Krishnan 2018). Even though most irregular migrants work for lower salaries and longer hours in their receiving countries, they gradually create a link between home and host country. This connection leads to the creation of migration social networks among migrant people, and Khalid Koser (2007) highlights that these connections make the process of irregular migration easier, more accessible, and faster for incoming people. New migrant networks may create easy links for newcomers, and most irregular migrants move to another country with the help of migrant smugglers. As political scientist Bimal Ghosh (2013) underlines that in the absence of opportunities for legal migration, those seeking to emigrate mostly look for irregular ways. This situation created, encouraged, and expanded the emerging "human" markets all around the world. The UNODC and journalist Clar Ni Chonghaile (2015) argue that the increasing restrictions on legal processes in home countries

may lead migrants to seek cheaper and harder ways, including making deals with human smugglers.

Irregular migration is versatile in terms of its definitions, limitations, conceptualizations, and impacts on both state and humanitarian levels. Giuseppe Sciortino (2011) addresses these ambiguities and contradictions in a book entitled *Foggy Social Structures*. All key elements of the current migration situation are related to “foggy social structures,” which are based on the systematic attempt to escape the likelihood of detection by creating conditions that lend themselves to, or create, a camouflaged existence” (Sciortino 2011: 223). This perspective may reflect the current physical and psychological realities of irregular migrants properly and significantly in attempts to understand the migration experiences of irregular Afghan migrants. Hence, it is useful for this thesis. Beginning with the migrants’ journey from home country to host country, they lack any institutional definition in both societies. As they are not registered and they lack legal documents, they are forced to live within these foggy social structures. They are mostly seen as “ghosts” in the host society, particularly in Turkey. Even though some people consider irregular migrants as being “illegal” migrants who pose a threat in Turkey, most people generally ignore them or lack information about the life conditions of irregular migrants.

As economist Constanze Dobler (2011) and the OECD/ILO (2018) state that the existence of various informal institutions in host countries can modify the numbers, characteristics, and structural relevance of irregular migrants. These informal institutions are characterized as values, beliefs, morals, convictions, norms, and habits, and this term is used as a substitute for culture. Irregular migrants mostly live in conditions of uncertainty, speculation, exploitation, and mistrust. Their foggy existence leads to a ghostly life and this uncertainty in turn puts their lives in danger. The relationship between migration and informal existence in society shapes these foggy social structures.

With respect to the foggy existence of irregular migrants, as a sociologist Kyoko Shinozaki (2015) mentions the recent recurring deaths of asylum seekers along the southern borders of the EU, where many migrants are fleeing from conflict-ridden and war-plagued regions of

the African continent and the Middle East. Kyoko Shinozaki (2015) explains that officials cannot register irregular migrants since a mobile population is generally more difficult to “catch” than their sedentary counterparts are. Therefore, many experts think that a considerable amount of people from less developed countries are living without residence permits in the EU. Most female migrants are domestic workers and they are particularly vulnerable in the society of residence. This situation leads to a common perception of them as being dually invisible and their presumed helplessness results from this invisibility. At the same time, their structural positions are more than precarious and this makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation in host societies.

#### **2.4 Historical and Legal Processes of Irregular Migration in Turkey**

Turkey has been one of the “transit” countries for irregular migrants from Asia or Africa on the way to Europe for a long time. According to Migration and Home Affairs (2018), a transit country is a nation-state through which irregular or regular migrants pass in order to enter a receiving country. As migration scholars Ahmet İçduygu and Damla Bayraktar Aksel (2012) emphasize this position of Turkey in their report, “Irregular Migration in Turkey.” With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Turkish government implemented the ideology of nationalism in order to become a more homogeneous society. Regarding migration, the only policy that was applied was the regulations of the 1951 Geneva Convention. According to that treaty, Turkey grants refugee status only for migrants from Europe. This policy is known as a geographical restriction. Although irregular migration was not one of the biggest issues of the Republic of Turkey for a while, starting from the 1980s, and especially after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, rather than small-scale migrations, mass migrations started to the European countries, which passed over the Turkish borders. This is how Turkey became a transit country for migrants who aim to reach cities in Europe (Sert and Yıldız 2016).

The maturation of irregular migration started in Turkey due to the political and economic chaos in neighboring countries including Iraq, Bulgaria, and several Soviet republics. Almost all of these migrants were temporary migrants who stayed for a fixed time in Turkey. Over the years, the number of migrants passing through Turkey increased, and some of the temporary migrants who were supposed to migrate onwards to countries in Europe stayed in Turkey. Because of these new patterns, Turkish authorities decided to implement a more efficient policy on this issue between 1994 and 2000 (İçduygu and Aksel 2012). However, as has already been underlined for the European case, these restrictive regulations and sanctions did not work efficiently and the situation has shifted to another dimension in Turkey. With the increase of irregular migrants in Turkey, human smuggling and human trafficking started in earnest at the beginning of the 2000s. This issue has become a top political priority, and since then, Turkey is struggling to accommodate the necessary migration policies in the EU harmonization process.

As a political scientist Kemal Kirisci (2008) notes that most irregular migrants have come to Turkey from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and African countries. A survey done at the beginning of the 2000s illustrated that more than half of the migrants were single, young, poor, and uneducated males under 30 years old. Their migration motivations were shaped by social, cultural, religious, and economic difficulties in their home societies. Most of these migrants came to Turkey for better life conditions, but some of them were left in Turkey by human smugglers on purpose. Surveys of irregular migrants performed in 1995 and 2003 indicated that a great number of migrants preferred to migrate Turkey independently by themselves, not via the social channels of the receiving country. This can be seen as an important indicator of change when considering the social networks of irregular migrants today.

Since irregular migrants are unregistered and are not recognized officially by Turkish authorities, they mostly work illegally in difficult conditions. They labor in dangerous and unclean workplaces for low wages. As they do not speak Turkish fluently, they also struggle with social, physical, and psychological problems. They typically earn less for long hours of work and they often live together with other families in small living spaces. For instance,

three Afghan families may live in the same house to cover their rent and social needs. One of male interviewees in Ağrı stated that he was a cyclical migrant and came to Turkey just to work and earn money. He saves money for his family and usually lives with 18 young single males in a small apartment in Zeytinburnu, Istanbul.

Similar to the European case, as academicians Taşkın Deniz (2014) and Gökhan Aydın (2016) emphasize that Turkish data on irregular migration are contradictory despite the statistics provided by the Ministry of the Interior. In addition to the official reports of Turkish institutions, scholars examine European reports like those of Frontex in order to visualize a general picture of irregular migration in Turkey. Until the 2000s, irregular migration was described as constituting three groups by the Turkish government, which were transit migrants, cyclical migrants, and labor migrants (İçduygu and Aksel 2012). While the goal of transit migrants is to arrive in European countries via Turkey, labor migrants work in Turkey without the required documents. Cyclical migrants are those who expected to leave Turkey but were rejected by European authorities. Since this classification was created with statistics on irregular migration provided by Turkish institutions, it remains open to discussion. Each irregular migrant may not fit easily into just one of these categories. There are gray areas within this system of categorization. For instance, there are asylum seekers without legal documents. Some people from Africa may aim to migrate to countries in Asia. I do not think that it is possible to categorize migrants considering only their unrecognized position in Turkey.

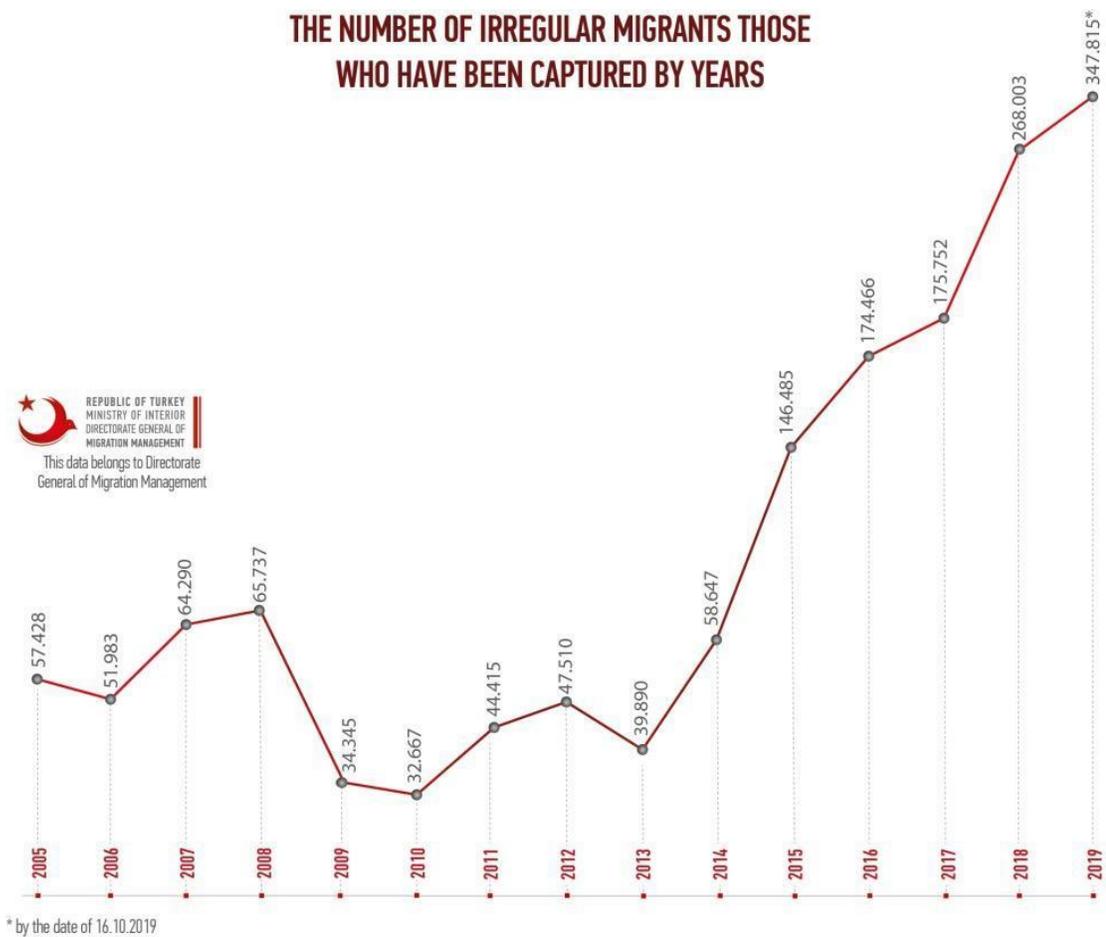
The Geneva Convention clarifies that a refugee can benefit from any social and economic facilities in Turkey legally, except political participation, because they are not citizens of Turkey. The geographical limitation described above is still in force. (İkizoğlu 2016) Amnesty International Turkey has particularly criticized this regulation, stating that the Turkish government should apply the Geneva Convention for everyone without any restrictions. Although the Turkish government did not previously illustrate considerable interest in such criticisms, right after the Syrian Civil War started in 2011 Turkey made a refugee agreement with the EU and started to host Syrian people as “asylum seekers.” This new regulation and flexibility in the law demonstrates that the Turkish authorities can make

changes to migration policy if they see it is appropriate. Considering this recent case, I assume that the law on migration can be made more comprehensive and inclusive by preparing new regulations taking into account the various problems that irregular migrants confront in Turkey because of their ghostly existence.

The Syrian case generated new discussions in terms of irregular migration in Turkey. In addition to the rising numbers of irregular migrants in Turkey, mostly from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, some Syrians also began to live in Turkey as irregular migrants rather than asylum seekers. Ela Gökalp Aras and Zeynep Şahin Mencütek (2018) explain the impact of Syrian migrants on the issue of irregular migration governance in Turkey. Turkey initially implemented an open-door policy to those fleeing the war in Syria, which was a turning point considering the policies of the Turkish government against irregular migrants from the Middle East. In the course of time, Turkey became the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world and the irregular migration rates continued to increase (Göktaş 2019). The new open-door policy was only applicable to Syrians who were legally asylum seekers and did not include other nationalities.

Besides this regulation, the geographical limitation of the 1951 Geneva Convention was not changed. Turkish authorities have always sought to protect the national borders against the conflicts in the Middle East and to internalize the EU's policy on irregular migration within the scope of Turkey's possible EU accession, which is a perspective defined as "absorption with reservation" (Özçürümez and Şenses 2011: 247) However, following this significant change in the regulations and mass irregular migration flows (Figure 1), Turkey added two new pillars of governance, the 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) and the Temporary Protection Regulation, as an extension of the bureaucratization of migration (Sert and Yildiz 2016). At the same time, the Directorate General of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü) was established under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior in order to administer migration matters. This new institution appointed a special commission to fight against irregular migration.

Figure 1. The Number of Irregular Migrants Captured by Years



The LFIP describes irregular migration in Turkey as “foreigners who enter into, stay in or exit from Turkey through illegal channels and work in Turkey illegally.” According to Figure 1 from the Directorate General of Migration Management, irregular migration has reached a peak with 347,815 captured individuals compared to past years. Afghans are the largest group among all apprehended irregular migrants according to Figure 2 (DGMM, 2019).

Figure 2. Irregular Migrants Captured in 2018

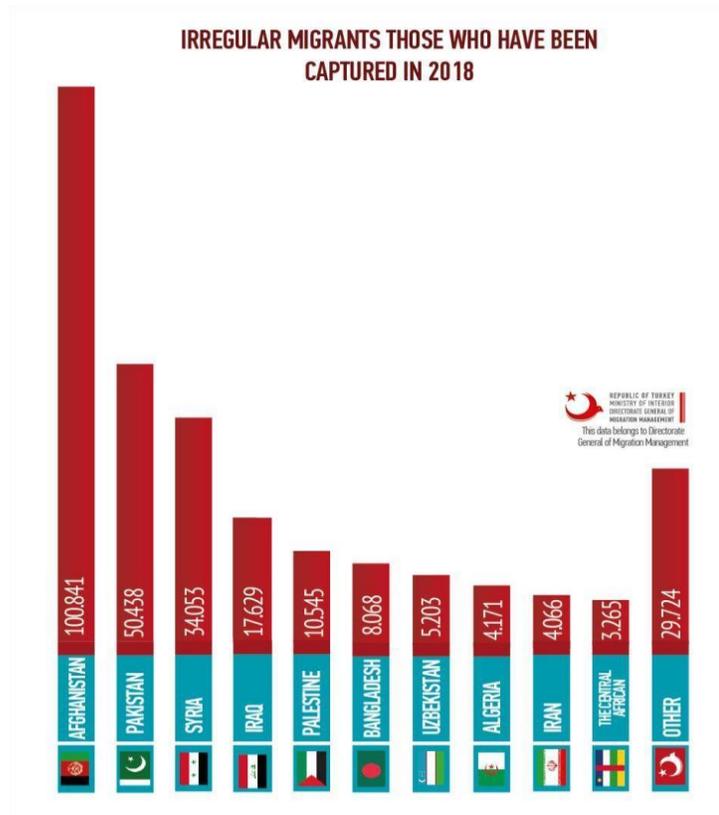
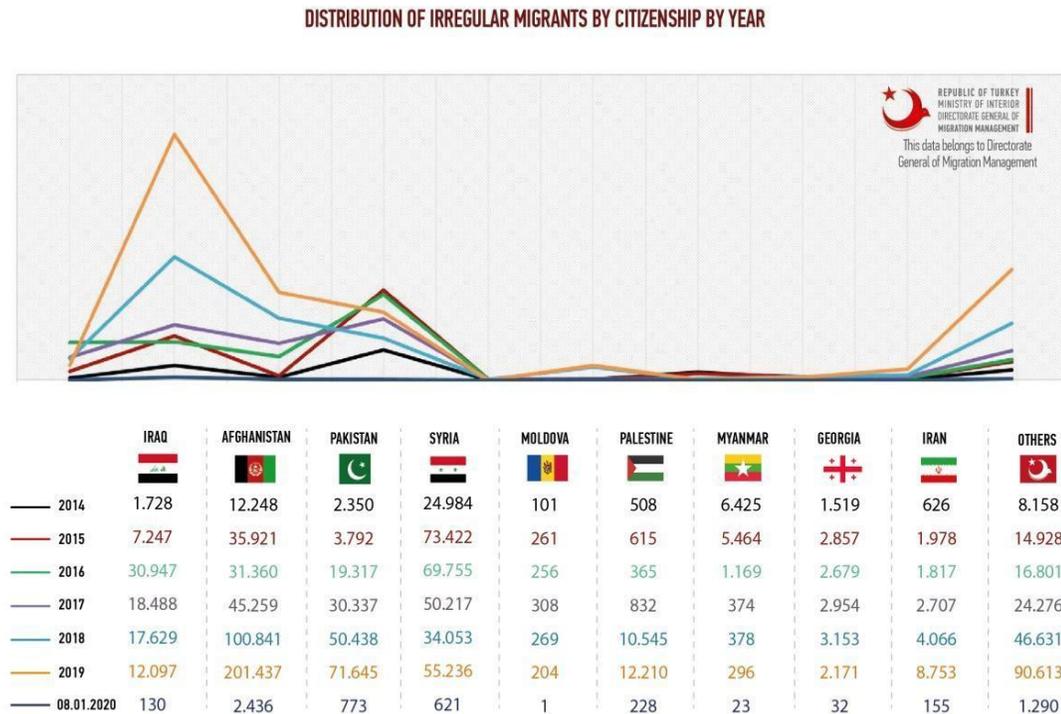


Figure 3. Distribution of Irregular Migrants by Year



In light of this information, the Turkish government’s policies were originally shaped by EU regulations on the issue of irregular migration. Starting from 2011, however, Turkey’s policies towards irregular migration changed with the establishment of new institutions addressing this issue. At the same time, as seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the largest number of irregular migrants to Turkey comes from Afghanistan since 2018. This is why it is significant to understand their narratives and motivations in studying irregular migration in Turkey.

As the flow of migration has increased enormously all over the world, scholars have begun to discuss the gender factor within irregular migration. Stephan Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller (2014) indicate that migration is feminizing. This means that with each passing year the participation of women in migration movements is increasing. Hence, I will discuss the role of irregular migrant women from this perspective in terms of their social, economic, and psychological conditions and their experiences, considering how being an

irregular migrant might specifically affect women's everyday lives. Although some female migrants choose to migrate for job opportunities, family reasons, or education, many are forced to migrate due to conflicts and wars (Harzig 2003).

A United Nations report (2000) demonstrates that many migrant women are exposed to sexual violence, economic inequalities, and violations of human rights before, during, and after the migration process. Some of the most common difficulties for women stem from not being familiar with the culture, language, and social structure of the country to which they have migrated. With regard to the multiple problems of migrant women, they are often embarrassed to speak about their problems to official authorities (Cheal 2006). Therefore, migrant women become alienated and remain silent. Their troubles and their existence become less visible. Thus, it becomes difficult to provide long-term and gender-based solutions and to observe their existence on legal grounds. Elizabeth Dartnall, Alessandra Guedes, and Kanako Ishida (2014) emphasize that the conditions of migrant women are very critical, yet there is no country that makes regulations specifically designed for migrant women. Legal policies on irregular migration should be enacted based on the narratives of irregular migrants. Male and female irregular migrants face different issues considering their genders. Thus, any regulation or policy regarding irregular migration should focus on the gender dimension in my opinion. To illustrate, some difficulties of female migrants are different from male migrants. They may work as nurses, babysitters or house workers. Even though they are workers in these houses, they are still irregular and their employers may exploit them on several accounts. Government authorities should give a work permit to those women and should control their work conditions regularly.

With respect to the different positions of nation-states and scholars, Reyhan Atasu Topcuoglu (2016) underscores that the regulations on and attitudes towards irregular migrants are unacceptable in terms of fundamental human rights in Turkey. They are deported, treated poorly, and exploited in receiving countries. This builds a culture of violence and an ongoing culture of exploitation. Irregular migration has increased as a result of globalization, and instead of the security and sovereignty of nations, politicians should focus on the experiences and narratives of migrants in order to improve their living

conditions. Policies on irregular migration should be built based on migrants' difficulties in receiving countries. Regarding the different gender dynamics, women's problems should be specifically addressed by their inclusion in politics and migration studies. To illustrate, most women are illiterate and do not understand the legal documents. This should be taken into account and there should be women police officers who speak their native language and could explain their problems comprehensively.

Considering the discussions about irregular migration and women, I will focus on the narratives and motivations of irregular migrant women in order to visualize and interpret their living conditions and expectations in Turkey. As background for that, I will first discuss the relationship between migration and women.

### 3. FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION

Although the role of women in international migration has long been underestimated, the feminization of migration is one of the core dynamics of international migration when we think about the increasing number of female migrants since the 1980s with the influence of globalization and neoliberal policies all around the world. While gender is a critical factor in understanding the drivers of migration, women have mainly been perceived as merely the wives, daughters, or mothers of male migrants (Donato and Gabaccia 2016). The migration of women was not approached as an interdependent discipline with its own dynamics in either political or academic discussions. As social scientists Fethi Tittensor and David Mansouri (2017) explain that starting with the mass migration to countries in Europe, the number of female migrants increased. As a result, scholars finally began to give more attention to this significant factor as a separate discipline in 1984. With this vital shift in the migration literature, the migration of women has started to be known as the “feminization of migration.”

Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller (1998), the leading scholars on this issue, argue that migration was feminizing for a long time, but by the 1980s, the participation of women in international migration movements had particularly increased. Women’s migration is a significant fact in global migration, because with the rise of the transnational migration of people, women’s migration flows also increased around the world. Although some scholars have criticized this approach, stating that the dominant category in migration is male migration, opposing viewpoints emphasize the particular social, economic, and psychological issues of migrant women as well as the particular policies needed to be implemented by receiving countries. For example, Habiba Zaman and Gina Tubajon (2011)

examine the case of Philippine women and come to the conclusion that Philippine women migrate to cities in Europe because of the economic difficulties they face in their home country. In addition, globalization has a great influence on the migration of Philippine women. As women learn about the better living conditions in other societies, they want to live in those societies even though they are aware that they will have to endure difficult situations as migrant women. Furthermore, Philippine women are seen as a cheap source of domestic labor in their host countries. These economic and social struggles marginalize and alienate migrant women in a receiving country (Green, 2012). Since they are not legally recognized by host countries, their existence goes unseen and remains unrepresented in political discourses. They do not have legal opportunities to defend their rights.

On the other hand, statistics illustrate that women constituted more than half of all migrants in 101 countries including Europe, Latin America, and North America as of 2013 (UNDESA 2013). In light of this information, the gender dimension of migration movements is undeniable and needs to be taken seriously. Previous research on migration is mainly built on male experiences and narratives and female migrants are represented as “passive victims” from this perspective. However, women have their independent driving reasons and agencies. They mostly migrate independently to work or to obtain better living conditions (Chammartin 2002). In this context, Christian G. T. HO (2019) examines the feminization of Caribbean migration by studying Afro-Trinidadian immigrants in Los Angeles. That study reflects another dimension of the feminization of migration, which is “international families.” Most irregular migrant women are the daughter, sister, or wife of someone back in the home country. As they communicate with the loved ones they left behind, this condition gradually shapes international families. This is a new form of family structure that is shaped by the feminization of migration.

In macro-oriented analysis, the gender relations in both sending and receiving societies play a fundamental role in forming gendered patterns of migration in different countries. This is why Erin Trough Hofmann and Cynthia J. Buckley (2013) highlight that scholars should focus on the impacts of global, state, community, and household levels of these gendered patterns. As a sociologist Saskia Sassen (2000) explains, with the rise of globalization,

especially in Latin America, the feminization of migration was mainly shaped by the sex trafficking of women and by women migrating in pursuit of nursing or domestic work. Along the same line, as political sociologists Nicola Piper (2008) and Roberto Marinucci (2007) emphasize globalization and the high demand for “feminized jobs in host countries. As is seen, those so-called feminized job types in host societies increased the feminization of migration. Migrant women are typically in demand as workers, representing a source of low-cost labor for employers, especially in neoliberal societies.

Although these factors have substantial impacts on the feminization of migration, it is also necessary to concentrate on micro-oriented levels of analysis in order to understand the migration motivations of women rather than simply seeing the external factors. It is clear that many migrant women aim to find jobs and provide for family members still living in the home country, but when the conditions of irregular migrants are compared to those of other categories, they have more difficulties considering underpaid work and long working hours. Accordingly, compared to other migration categories, irregular migrant women are more often physically, economically, and psychologically subjected to exploitation and abuse by employers in receiving countries. According to the migration scholar Gloria Moreno Fontes Chammartin (2002), this fundamental change of the increasing number of irregular migrant women in migration patterns is invisible and migrant women are silent. They are exploited and often sold into prostitution or work very long hours in host countries. Hence, measures should be taken to stop such types of exploitation.

As Gloria Moreno Fontes Chammartin (2002) remarks, the feminization of irregular migration will continue to increase since labor markets in labor-importing countries demand migrant women for cheap labor. With respect to the violence, abuse, exploitation, and human rights violations directed towards irregular migrant women, both scholars and nation-states should direct more attention towards the increasing number of female migrants. The ghostly life conditions of migrant women have caused the consolidation of cultural stereotypes related to women’s roles and their social, physical, and psychological difficulties in the arrival country. In correlation with this, irregular migrant women face more obstacles and unique barriers in host countries compared to male migrants and other migration

categorizations. This means that migrant women have different and more comprehensive problems due to their gender.

Taking into account all of these discussions and studies, I will now review the studies on the motivations, experiences, and expectations of irregular migrant women within the specific scope of the feminization of migration in Turkey. I will then present my case study of irregular Afghan migrant women in Ağrı.

### **3.1 Irregular Migrant Women in Turkey**

The Turkish government aims to maintain security and sovereignty at its borders as a nation-state, just as European countries do. In this framework, irregular migration is one of the top priorities in Turkish politics and the government attempts to prevent it. In spite of the government's efforts to fight these migration movements, however, statistics of the Ministry of the Interior's Directorate General of Migration Management (2019) illustrate that irregular migration flows have been substantially increasing in Turkey since 2013. While the number of irregular migrants detained in Turkey was 39,890 in 2013, it was 347,815 in 2019 and promised to keep increasing. The irregular migrants detained in 2018 were respectively from Afghanistan (100,841), Pakistan (50,438), Syria (34,053), and Iraq (17,629). Thus, the largest irregular migrant community in Turkey has been composed of Afghan people since 2018. Migrant smugglers have also been increasing considerably by year since 2016. In other words, irregular migration and migrant smuggling have a parallel relationship. Even though this information does not represent precise numbers of migrants, since many of them are not registered or detained by Turkish authorities, I believe that these data are vital indicators in understanding the scope and trend of irregular migration in Turkey.

While Turkish authorities provide specific information on irregular migration to some extent, they do not specify the percentage of male and female irregular migrants in total migration movements. All the same, the literature on the feminization of migration in Turkey

underscores the increasing tension in irregular migration after the collapse of Soviet Union, the immigration crisis in the countries of Europe, and the political and military conflicts in Turkey's neighboring countries starting in the 1990s. Particularly from Eurasia and the Middle East, many women began to immigrate to Turkey as well as to various European countries for the purpose of working and obtaining better living conditions for themselves, as well as for the families that they left behind. While Turkey was positioned as a "transit country" in these migration patterns for a long time, it increasingly also became one of the "receiving countries," particularly for women, in alignment with external developments (İçduygu 2006; Kaya 2008).

The visibility of irregular female migrants was raised by their occupational patterns in Turkey. Even though there is no precise information on the number of irregular migrant women in Turkey, several studies (Coşkun 2017; Erder and Kaska 2003; Kirisci and Içduygu 2009; Rittersberger and Tılıç 2015; Dinçer 2015; Toksöz and Ulutaş 2012; Keough 2008; Zhidkova and Demir 2016; Dündar and Özer 2015) point out that migrant women are more dominant than male migrants in many work areas, excluding the construction sector. The results of these studies are consistent with the global trends in the feminization of migration. Migrant women in Turkey mostly work as domestic workers, nannies, waitresses, low-cost laborers in factories and workshops, or sex workers who work illegally. These studies highlight that irregular migrant women are seen at the lowest levels of the employment hierarchy.

Considering the multilayered difficulties that irregular migrant women face, Selmin Kaşka (2005-2006) examines Moldovan irregular migrant women working as house cleaners or domestic workers in Istanbul. Almost all of them find their jobs illegally, and they face various difficulties in their work environments. Likewise, Teke Lloyd (2018) focuses on the gendered insecurities of Armenian care workers who work illegally in Turkey. That study stresses that while Armenian migrant women are irregular, they are caught in a legal limbo between belonging and non-belonging. Gendered vulnerabilities and the labor precarity of migrants increase due to this legal limbo, which arises because they do not have social and economic rights to protect their existence on a legal basis.

The difficult working conditions of migrant women affect their lives not only in the public sphere but also in the private sphere. The main responsibility here belongs to the state authorities. The state has produced its policies within a neoliberal system since the 1980s. Accordingly, in neoliberal systems, the policies of state institutions support the owners of capital. Within this framework, irregular migrant women provide cheap labor and increase the profits of capitalists (Akalın, 2019). This is a very important point in understanding the regulations of the Turkish state in practice as well as on paper. Even though the state claims to be fighting against irregular migration on paper, the officials and institutions of the state are simultaneously promoting the irregular migration flow on behalf of the neoliberal system. This silent support of the state makes the exploitation of irregular migrant women possible in the host country.

It is vital to see how the actions of the state cause multilayered difficulties in the lives of migrant women. As an example, one of the recent events in Turkey regarding this issue was the death of Nadira Kadirova (Hamsici 2019). It appears that Kadirova, from Uzbekistan, did not have a work permit even though she worked as a domestic worker for a year in the house of a Turkish member of parliament. Her close friend stated that she was harassed by her employer, Şirin Ünal, and that she was thinking of killing herself. Her relatives revealed that she was working in Ünal's house to save money for college. Her aim was to start a new life and live in Turkey. When her dead body was found on September 23, 2019, on Ünal's property, the police explained that she had killed herself with a gun. However, as the event gained media attention, many speculations and doubts arose. After a while, the Turkish government imposed a broadcast ban on this news. I assume that the media blackout was related to the political identity of Şirin Ünal. Ünal is a member of the Justice and Development Party, which is the leading political party in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Although the reason for the death remains a mystery, the lack of work permits among migrant women employed as house workers is not. The state must monitor the working conditions of these women on a regular basis, and the authorities must pay more attention to denunciations and complaints on this matter.

As the state does not pay enough attention to the rights of migrant women workers, the passive attitude of the authorities increases the invisibility of migrant women. Therefore, the visibility of those women who work illegally is also dangerous for their safety. No matter what happens to them, they generally remain silent so as not to be deported. The state apparatus supports the irregular migration flow indirectly since migrant women are perceived as cheap labor in the neoliberal system, and the deportation process becomes a political intervention that makes the identity of migrants, their labor, and migration itself more fragile.

With regard to the ethnic backgrounds of migrant women in Turkey, most irregular migrant women come from sub-Saharan African countries, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. Some of them succeed at remaining in Turkey legally in a short period of time by following the relevant Turkish laws. However, they may lose their legal status after a certain point and become irregular again. Compared to irregular male migrants, irregular female migrants experience different social, physical, and psychological issues based on their gender. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security of Turkey states that foreigners can legally work under two conditions in accordance with Law No. 4817 (Assembly 2003). First, employers of foreigners can apply for a work permit before the migrant in question arrives in Turkey. The second option is for foreigners to apply for a work permit after taking a residence permit for six months. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, most women who have work permits work in the areas of cleaning and home care services. As political scientist Gülay Toksöz (2012) emphasizes, the data of the Ministry only indicate those who have work permits, but most migrant women live in Turkey irregularly. Since many employers in Turkey do not want to go through legal processes and spend more capital and time in the employment process, most female workers remain “irregular” and often become dependent on their employers in addition to suffering from poor working conditions. Specifically, for this reason, employers want to employ irregular female migrants, who are mainly obedient, work more, and earn less.

Although the Ministry works in pursuit of creating easier processes for employers, employers still generally do not tend to go through the legal procedures. Besides poor

working conditions, scholars also emphasize that many of these women are sexually harassed and do not receive their full payments or any payments at all. They are afraid to call the police for help, as they do not want to be detained, and their employers can therefore easily intimidate them by threatening to call the police (Dinçer 2015). Even if such migrant women do want to contact authorities to ask for protection, they face a language barrier and they are afraid of being deported. This situation makes them more silent and less likely to go to the police if they face any sort of difficulties. Employers and other local people continue to commit violence and human rights violations against these women. As sociologist Emel Coşkun (2017) points out, these crimes go unpunished; in turn, this impunity perpetuates the increasing systematic violence and abuse of fundamental rights against irregular migrant women. This means that employers and other local people may easily harm irregular migrant women, and they are not safe regarding their social, physical, psychological, and economic conditions. For all these reasons, as is the case in almost all host countries, local people and employers often exploit them. Therefore, they remain “silent,” “invisible,” “vulnerable,” and “defenseless” in Turkey.

### **3.2 Irregular Afghan Migrant Women in Turkey**

The socioeconomic conditions of irregular migrant women in Turkey indicate that these women are usually working under difficult conditions. The feminization of migration affects Turkey in the same way as it does Europe, and migrant women encounter various human rights violations in social and economic life. However, their lack of a legal status worsens all of the problems that they face in Turkey. Within this context, as was stated above, the largest irregular migrant group in Turkey as of 2018 is composed of Afghans. Therefore, the motivations and experiences of Afghan migrant women are valuable in understanding the scope of the feminization of migration in Turkey.

To begin with, I want to briefly underline the migration history of Afghanistan. With the invasion of the Soviet army in the 1980s and particularly after September 11 in the USA,

mass migration movements from Afghanistan to different countries increased. Today, Afghanistan is one of the largest migrant producers of the world. Most irregular Afghan migrants go to the countries of Europe after crossing the borders of Iran and Turkey. Regarding the literature on the migration of migrant Afghan women in Turkey, Maryam Ozlatimoghaddam (2012) focuses on gender relations in the process of resettlement among families of forced Afghan migrants in an anonymous city in Central Anatolia. The findings are based on a field study and in-depth interviews with experts and asylum seekers to explore the everyday lives of Afghans within the context of gender relations. The study explores Afghans who came as transit migrants but stayed in Turkey for resettlement. While most of the women aimed to migrate to the countries in Europe for work opportunities, their transit life created a limbo in their lives in Turkey. Thus, this study draws attention to the complex and contradictory structure of gender relations in migration.

The studies of Fatih Karaman (2017) and Didem Daniş (2006) also call attention to the invisibility and the complicated positions of Afghans in Turkey. Although they are mostly visible in Zeytinburnu, Istanbul, their overall visibility is very low. On top of this, the UNHCR stopped holding interviews with Afghans for deciding their refugee status and their resettlement to other countries. This ambiguity makes it difficult for Afghans to access education and health services. They do not share the same status as Syrians, which means that they are not asylum seekers; hence, they remain illegal. Teri Murphy, Gülcihan Çiğdem, and Süheyla Nurlu (2018) reveal that these conditions have a traumatic influence, particularly on Afghan women. Compared to other irregular migrant groups that have various other reasons for migration, Afghan women have experienced war traumas aligned with feelings of defenselessness.

Furthermore, apart from irregular migrants of different ethnicities, people who come from Syria are accepted as asylum seekers on a legal basis. It may therefore be beneficial to compare the living conditions of Syrian asylum seekers and irregular Afghan migrants. Within this scope, Mehtap Erdoğan and Ayşenur Gönülaçan (2018) examine the sociodemographic characteristics of Syrian and Afghan women living in the city of Trabzon. Their data highlight the fact that the age range of these migrant women is young. They are

either divorced or have lost their husbands; thus, they are alone during the migration process from home country to host country. Although some of them participate in Turkish language courses in Trabzon, they still have a language barrier. Therefore, they are afraid to speak in the public sphere and exclude themselves from society. This isolated life causes weak neighborhood relations with local people, and they mostly communicate with people in their own community. Moreover, their education level is very low and more than half of these women are illiterate. This study stresses that as long as they have language problems, they will not only have inequality in terms of education, but their integration into Turkish society will also be jeopardized. Regarding the working lives of Afghan women, their social isolation within Turkish society also carries over into the work environment. Working women typically earn very low wages despite long working hours. Since their education level is low, they mostly work in menial jobs, similar to Afghan men, such as cleaning or working for textile companies. To obtain decent working conditions, Afghan women particularly wish to obtain work permits that will provide registered insurance.

That study also compares the perspectives of Afghan women and Syrian women, coming to the conclusion that Afghan women seem more hopeful about the future and desire to learn the Turkish language more than Syrian women do. While Afghan families seemed to have poorer life conditions compared to Syrians, they were more welcoming and extroverted towards the researchers. They live in Trabzon upon the directions of the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrant (ASAM), which is a non-governmental organization for Afghans and a social network for Syrians. However, they live in damp, old houses that are not suitable for families. Most importantly, the women aim to find a job and live in Turkey permanently.

The existing literature on irregular Afghan migrant women clearly reveals that the working conditions of Afghan migrant women are insufficient. The language barrier that can be observed in most host societies is one of the biggest challenges for their integration into Turkish society. However, most of these studies focus on Afghan women who work and live in cities located in the Marmara Region of Turkey. Within this framework, I aim to illustrate

the decision processes, hopes, motivations, experiences, and expectations of Afghan migrant women in Ağrı.

### **3.3 Case Study: Afghan Migrant Women in Ağrı**

At the beginning of 2018, I was reading about the influence and reflection of wars and traumatic experiences in women's lives. In that process, I came to realize that there are many migrant groups in Turkey besides Syrians. As seen in the literature on the migration of women, irregular migration is one of the most challenging and complicated phenomena in migration studies. The data of the Directorate General of Migration Management on this issue illustrate that the largest irregular migrant group in Turkey is composed of Afghans since 2018, but there was no official information available in this regard about gender distribution. This lack of information on the part of the Turkish government drove me to further explore the literature on this topic. Within this framework, studies on this issue are mainly based on Afghan women who already live in Turkey.

My purpose here is to focus on the motivations, decision-making processes, expectations, and migration experiences of Afghan migrant women. Although they may seem silent and invisible, the feminization of migration and studies on this issue reveal that numbers of migrant women are increasing for multiple reasons. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that it would be valuable to study the lives of Afghan migrant women in Turkey in more depth. First, I communicated with police officers who are dealing with this issue with the help of my brother, who is a police officer himself and worked in Ağrı until the end of 2018. Various police officers explained that Afghans come to Turkey over the Iranian border. Once they pass through Iran, they generally go through Ağrı, Van, or Erzurum to arrive at the cities in the Marmara Region or travel on to Europe. After I learned this, I searched the literature and saw that there is little research with regard to the feminization of migration in the cities of the Eastern Anatolian Region.

As Ağrı is one of the main cities in the Eastern Anatolian Region that irregular migrants first enter under the guidance of human smugglers, and as I had made friends there among the police center and bus terminal who could serve as gatekeepers in the city, Ağrı became the most logical field for this research. The first field research was conducted in January 2018 to understand the feasibility of the study and become acquainted with the conditions and daily routines of the city. Ağrı is a small city near the Iranian border. In the first days, I observed the city and talked with the police officers about my research. The officers in the main police center stated that they keep irregular migrants in a building that was used as a sports hall for police officers until 2017.

This building is in the same garden as the police center. A police officer always waits outside the building in case of any escape attempts or emergencies. Before I entered the building to talk with the migrants, the officers warned me that there were over 200 people in the building and I needed to be careful with them. Once I entered the building with a police officer, he helped me by explaining the system of the structure. At the same time, loud voices could be heard in the building. This building has two floors, and migrants stay on the second floor. There is a small bathroom for all migrants on the first floor. There was a heavy smell in the air; the police officer offered me a mask to cover my mouth, but I declined it. I thought this behavior may be disrespectful against migrants while I was speaking with them. This police officer was a young male in his 20s. He stated that once they catch the “illegal migrants,” they bring them to the police center. As the migration flow from Asia has been increasing, they realized that the police center itself was not big enough to hold all captured migrants together. Therefore, the police center decided to assign this building to hold irregular migrants. Once they catch a group of migrants on a bus or on the road, they bring them to this building. Following procedure, they notify the local migration office in Ağrı. There are only two people in the local migration office who will record the entry of irregular migrants and record their presence in the relevant files. Therefore, the registration process and the decision of the migration office as to whether a migrant can stay in Turkey or will be deported may take a long time.

With this information in my mind, we took the stairs to the second floor. The building was largely neglected, very cold, and in bad shape. Ağrı was already freezing in general at that point because of winter conditions. On the stairs, some laundry had been hung to dry. Some shoes were also on the stairs. Small children, teenagers, and mostly male migrants were waiting on the stairs and observing their surroundings. The second floor has three divisions. There is a large sports hall where the police station keeps only male migrants from the African continent, Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan; most of these people are from Afghanistan. The police officer called a local migrant translator who knows both Turkish and Persian. Other people in the room surrounded us and he introduced my research to the migrants. After this point, he gave me his phone number and left the building. Once the police officer assigned me a translator, he then introduced me to the two small rooms where female migrants stay. There were 12 migrant women kept in these rooms.

We went into these rooms, I explained my identity and research. I was very sensitive towards their narratives and was careful about my reactions as this is a vulnerable group. I did my best to listen to them carefully and to understand their emotions. When they agreed to be interviewed by me, I recorded their voices with their permission and asked them open-ended and semi-structured questions. These questions were intentionally open-ended for the women to express themselves as they wanted, as comfortable as possible.

Even though the rooms were tiny, there were six women in each room and almost all of them were further accompanied by their children. A good deal of water and juice was also stored in the rooms, and the rooms were freezing. Two of the women were pregnant, and all of them had some disease or had previously recovered from a disease as a result of their migration journey. The police center assigned me a local translator who works for the police officers. With the help of the translator, I communicated with the women and stayed in this building from morning to night for a week. All women had to live in these rooms together, separated from their husbands and sons. This gender dimension was approved both by the migrants and the police authorities. Their basic human needs such as food, hygiene, sleep, and other needs were not adequately met. Their main goal was to get out of the police center and reach cities in the Marmara Region, or to live in Ağrı. In addition to the language barrier,

which meant that the women could not easily express themselves to the police officers, they and their children were mostly sick and there were no sufficient health facilities. These women had been detained two weeks ago by police officers and were waiting for the decision of the migration office.

The second setting in which I observed migrants and interviewed them was the main bus terminal in Ağrı. The bus terminal is 20 minutes away from the police center and some irregular migrants wait in this terminal for transportation to other cities, particularly Istanbul and Ankara. These may be individuals detained by the authorities or those not detained by the police officers. They essentially live in the terminal since it is very cold outside. Shop owners and other local people provide them with food and some other basic needs. The aim of the migrants is to take a bus to continue their journey and reach their final destination. It can thus be said that the ones waiting in the terminal are still on the move. In most cases, they do not want to live in Ağrı. However, they struggle to buy tickets. The owners of the bus companies in this terminal rarely want to sell illegal tickets, although some of them will do so at night after the police officer in the terminal has left the area. For instance, one of the owners of a bus company in this terminal stated that some bus companies will take over 200 migrants on a bus that has a capacity of 40. Such a bus will pass through many cities before finally arriving in Istanbul. How could this be possible while there is a control point in each city on their way?

There is only one police officer working in the terminal and I interviewed him (Necati). He is very aware of the system of illegal migrant smuggling in this terminal. However, he believes that there is nothing he can do about it, as it has been taking place there for almost 30 years. By my observations, the attitudes of the police officers and officials of the migration office are arbitrary and there is no permanent regulation of irregular migration. At the terminal, I interviewed local people as well as migrant women. However, when I conducted the second and third rounds of field research, it seemed that the attitudes and ideas of the terminal's police officer had changed. Even though the police officer and some owners of bus companies blamed each other for helping and doing business with human smugglers, the police officer (Necati) asked for a more organized and better system to be designed. He

discussed the problems with the main police chief at the police center, and after a while, his efforts showed their influence. Together with the effects of some other factors, the police authorities managed to decrease the number of irregular migrants in the region by implementing more strict rules in addition to the T6 document.

I will provide the narratives of migrants in an attempt to vocalize and visualize their conditions, expectations, and thoughts as irregular migrant women on the move.

### **3.3.1 Decision to leave Afghanistan**

“I come from Afghanistan. There are wars there. I cannot live well. We are not allowed to leave home. We cannot go outside. We are escaping from the Taleban. I did not see anything but war in Afghanistan. There is no security and we are not safe. I do not feel safe in Afghanistan. The state and Taleban are fighting. The state is not protecting us. We would not come here if we could be safe. I do not know the world without the Taleban. The Taleban has been in Afghanistan for 35-40 years. It has always been there... They are attacking people, shooting them. Bombs...Suicide bombs... There are bombs everywhere. We thought we would be safe in Turkey. We came here illegally. We are entering Turkey over the Iranian border. We came here to survive. We cannot live there. Women do not have jobs and are not allowed to work. People do not give jobs to women. The conditions of women are very bad. I am a cardiac patient. I thought I would go to a doctor in Turkey. I came here with my husband. We want to be citizens of this country but it would be better if they send us to Europe. I think we cannot live here. We want to live here but they do not want us in Turkey. Hence, we have to go to Europe. I do not have a child. Here I am only with my husband. He stays in the big room. We have been kept here for a week. I saw horrible things. I am very afraid. We want to move on and get out of this building. Our only wish is to get out and survive” (Mary, married, she does not have a child, 34).

Even though the women were withdrawn at the beginning of the interviews, after a while they started to openly express their feelings. This is one of the general perspectives of the Afghan women about the conditions in Afghanistan. Almost all of the women stated that they came to Turkey in order to escape from the wars and internal conflicts in their region. In Mary’s narrative, she points out that she was not able to work and wanted to have a new life in Turkey.

Another significant point is that Mary expresses her ideas by speaking on behalf of each woman in the room. Even though the question was asked directly to her, instead of expressing her feelings clearly she chose to speak on behalf of all of them. This may indicate that she has hesitations against research and may not want to seem fragile. She was shy at the beginning and full of hatred against Turkish authorities because they put migrants in these small rooms. On that point, some may think that she knew such behavior against migrants could happen. However, I think she was not expecting to be treated as such. It is not sufficient to generalize this idea. On the other hand, Mary was very surprised and thought Turkish government would behave better and accept them. She talked about how great leader Erdogan was.

“We struggled a lot in Afghanistan. I am all in pain. We thought that we would be more comfortable in Turkey, but this is worse. We cannot breathe. The Taleban killed my mother and my father in front of my eyes. I have only my husband and child. They also killed my husband’s mother, father, and uncle. My husband got hurt. I have no one in Afghanistan. After all these troubles, we decided to come to Turkey... The Taleban invades our homes every day. There is also another terrorist group: ISIS... ISIS killed one of my relatives. They are not Afghans. They come from other countries and work for money; America brings them to Afghanistan” (Fatima, married, has two children, 24).

The main reason for leaving home in most of the women’s narratives is the influence of wars on women’s daily lives in Afghanistan. These women were mostly from the countryside and lived close to conflict zones. In addition to the Taleban, they stress the existence and influence of ISIS in their daily lives. Furthermore, Afghans not only suffer from traumatic war memories, but they also struggle with feelings of defenselessness. Even though Fatima had high expectations about Turkey, she seemed highly disappointed because of her stressful experiences in the police center.

Considering the narratives of migrants against terrorist groups, almost each one of them highlighted that there are various terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. What is the definition of a terrorist group? How do migrants define terrorists? Similar to migration, each nation state may have a unique definition of terrorism. For example, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has been accepted as a terrorist organization by the Turkish state. However,

some countries such as Russia, Brazil India and China do not define this organization as a terrorist organization. Also many Kurdish people do not support this organization in Turkey. Similar to this discourse, is it possible that migrants create their own narratives to be accepted in Turkey? Do they always mention terrorist organizations since they knew host countries will question them?

“This is my story, sister. I was working for a deputy as a soldier. However, one day the Taleban also came to my village. Our commander left us and we were caught in a trap. I survived but my four friends were killed in the village. I thought that I could not live or work in Afghanistan anymore. I had Afghan friends in Afghanistan. My wife was studying... My mother and father are not alive, but I have five siblings. I had to leave them and I escaped from Afghanistan. The Taleban does not leave us alone and always attacks our village. I left everything and my motherland. I had to... We would not leave if we didn't have to... Everyone has problems here. I thought I could work in Turkey... I am the only one who can take care of my family... Big states like America always support the conflicts in Afghanistan... I do not want to go back. I want to bring my wife here” (Amir, married, he does not have a child, 25).

A significant point about the perceptions of the irregular Afghan migrants regarding the wars is that they believe all of these conflicts and terrorist organizations are supported by the USA. Both the men and women think that there is no stable state that can protect them in their homeland from the Taleban and other terrorist organizations, and most of them believe that America provides the guns and other materials for these conflicts. This is a generally accepted perspective. Although they blame the state authorities for not protecting them against violence, they also complain about the outside forces. These narratives may be true or not, but I realized that this idea helps them to make peace with their homeland. Most of them are patriots and even though it is a little chance, they believe that the state authorities in Afghanistan are innocent to some extent.

The narratives of both men and women illustrate that their main reason for leaving their home country is conflict. Almost all of the men seem to have left Afghanistan due to economic problems that were caused by the disorder. However, the women's driving reasons are more complicated. Most of them complained about their living conditions in Afghanistan. They stated that their life conditions were not good; they were not allowed to leave home without being accompanied by a man. They were not comfortable going to

school. Women migrants may thus leave their home countries due to a combination of job opportunities, family reasons, and education.

“I left my homeland because the life conditions of women in Turkey are better. I watched Turkish TV series on television and I saw how women are free and comfortable here. I was knitting at home. I can do it here and work to earn money” (Zahra, married, she has three children, 30).

Another motive is related to family. While male migrants plan to save money to be sent to their families in Afghanistan, female migrants particularly leave to save money for their children’s futures. They want to have better living conditions for themselves as women and for their children. I should note here that I interviewed Zahra in July. She was very hopeful and calm, and she was very optimistic about the future. She had been waiting at the police center for one week. Hence, she was not angry or worried compared to the women in January. I suspect that this difference is related to both the weather conditions and the time spent in the police center. When women stay longer than they expected, they become more aggressive and pessimistic. While the first participants in January were furious about the conditions in the police center, the participants in July were calmer and accordingly answered the interview questions more calmly.

These behavioral changes of the female migrants were influenced by the conditions of the season. Furthermore, most women had diseases or had been in a hospital in January, but the participants in July rarely had diseases or any health issues. This may mean that their physical conditions affected their reactions.

Another important factor when considering their reactions to interview questions is the number of migrants in both the police center and the bus terminal. As these places get more crowded, both female and male migrants become more anxious and angrier. The group in January comprised over 200 people, but the group in July was only about 40 people. In more crowded conditions, people were more afraid and showed this in their reactions. Furthermore, since the weather in July is nicer than in January, it is easy then for migrants to be on the move. They can move faster and do not suffer from the cold. It is more difficult to be on the move in January considering the weather.

These observations were shaped by the fact that Ağrı was their first destination in Turkey. These Afghan women are not settled yet and most of them are still on the move. Their migration journey technically still continues at this stage. They do not have any classification or job title other than being “irregular migrants.”

### **3.3.2 Life conditions of women**

The life conditions and daily life struggles of women in Afghanistan are very critical in understanding their migration motivations and decision-making processes.

“We take care of children all day long in Afghanistan. I did not go to school. I was dying to go to school. However, my family did not let me. If I do not wear *chador* [a cloth that covers the whole body, including the face], my father gets angry. If I go out to the bazaar, the Taleban sees me and beats me. They say that women are not allowed to go out. The Taleban do not allow us to do anything. We can only look after our children, wash the clothes, take care of animals, and cook” (Khadija, married, she has two children, 19).

As seen in the narrative above, almost all women refer to the Taleban and its influence on their lives. As I mentioned earlier, the gender dimension shows its traces in their lives. Even though they wanted to go to school, they were generally not allowed by their parents. In addition to their parents, warring groups impose certain gender roles on Afghan women. As a result, they are constantly reproducing the norms of patriarchal society. On the other hand, some single and young Afghan women explained that they were able to study to some degree especially in big cities. However, these women did complain about the difficult conditions for young girls in the school.

Another issue they raised was about their style of dress. When I asked them to describe *chador*, they showed me its picture with the help of the translator. They mostly depended on their family and did housework.

“Life is very difficult for women in Afghanistan. They are always at home. If they do not stay home, their family argues with them and beats them. They are not allowed to go out. When they go out, people say: ‘Are you dishonorable?’ Women’s husbands, brothers, or fathers get mad and kick their wives or daughters. They can even kill them because of this. In addition, the Taleban immediately finds them if they go out. The Taleban is everywhere in Afghanistan. The ones who work for the government in the morning work for the Taleban in the evening. The state does nothing to protect people. Difficult... Very difficult... Women do not have phones. We learn the developments about our country through Facebook. Twitter is forbidden in our country. Women are illiterate. They do not even know numbers like 1, 2, 3. They also have language problems” (Khaled, married, he has two children, 23).

As seen above, the perspective of male migrants can also be helpful in understanding the social status of migrant women in Afghanistan. The narratives of both men and women show that the fighting between state officials and the Taleban is worsening the living conditions of Afghan women. Khaled remarks that women are not allowed to be in public spaces without the company of their fathers, sons, or husbands. Apart from the challenges that they encounter at home caused by religious principles, the Taleban is an important threat for women’s independent existence in public spaces. Women speak more about the difficult conditions in social life due to the strict rules of the Taleban for women than they do about their families.

“Women cannot go out or do whatever they want in public. There is always a bomb in the streets... There are 34 cities in Afghanistan. The Taleban has power in all these cities. If a woman goes out without a guardian, the Taleban can kill them. You just die... I came here with my wife [she is pregnant]. I do not want her or my daughter to live in Afghanistan. My wife was going to school, but it got very difficult. I could not find a job. We sold everything we had and decided to move to Turkey. I want my wife to work and study” (Ali, married, his wife is pregnant, 25).

Ali was in one of the small rooms with his pregnant wife and another Afghan couple. Ali and his wife, Masal (19), were very hopeful about the future. When I asked men about the migration motivations of the women, many of them were confused. They could not make any sense of it in their minds. Why are these women migrating even though it is very difficult to migrate? Therefore, Ali’s response is valuable in this framework. He began this journey

with his pregnant wife. He wants the best for his wife and unborn child. This perspective is rare since most of the men do not think migration of women is not appropriate.

The language barrier is a serious problem for women. As they are not able to communicate, they become all the more dependent on their husbands, brothers, or sons. Even though some women are single and know how to read and write, only two women were literate in total during the research period of this study. The language barrier creates a huge gap, but some of them want to go to school in Turkey and learn Turkish.

“I was pregnant. My blood pressure dropped and I hit my head. It has been seven years. One side of my body is not working. My husband left me and he is gone. I have a son and a daughter... I had another daughter and son, but my husband took them with him. I do not know where my husband is. Both my children and my husband are missing. I have no idea. [Crying.] It has been two years since he left Afghanistan. He did not come back. I had to come here. I want to stay in Turkey but it is better if we go to Europe... I do not have a phone” (Jazmin, abandoned by her husband, she has four children, 38).

Besides their language problems, most women do not have mobile phones. This decreases their connections significantly with their social networks. Male relatives typically communicate with people on behalf of the women. This is a serious concern considering the education levels of women. Unfortunately, this issue also leads to many other problems. Although some female migrants do have a phone and they are independent, this is not the case for many of them.

“Last year [2018], a woman came to my office. She was exhausted, tired, anxious... She was young and her outfit looked nice. But when you look at their soul, it is not nice. So, I was surprised and listened to her. I could not understand what she was talking about. At one point she said something like “rape”! I understood and stopped her when she said “rape.” I called the translator who works at the terminal. I saw that local people in Doğubeyazıt<sup>2</sup> harassed her in every way, promising to take her to Istanbul... I do not want to talk about the details. I called the police department and they took her. They found the rapists. It came out that they raped her multiple times...” (Necati, police officer at the bus terminal, 50).

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<sup>2</sup> Doğubeyazıt is a small town. It is one of the main centers for migrant smugglers in Ağrı.

Necati is the only police officer at the bus terminal but his actual job is traffic control. However, he also deals with other problems in the bus terminal. He has witnessed many events, but the one described here was critical for him. He followed the case until the guilty people were found. His narrative shows that the language barrier not only prevents true communication, but also makes women's living conditions worse. He did not want to talk about the details of the case, but we can assume that it was not the first of its kind and will not be the last. The woman was not able to express herself well and she was alone. We do not know her story in detail, but we do know that she faced many difficulties, could not explain herself to anyone, and did not know how to deal with these problems in the receiving country. She only spoke to Necati when he pushed her to talk. She was shy and the language barrier was another difficulty for her, leading her to be exploited by local people.

Various exploitations occur during the migration process since irregular migrants are unregistered and lack the official identities provided by the authorities in the receiving society. The woman whom Necati met did not have any documents and thus became an easy target for local people. Working migrant women are particularly exploited, both economically and socially. However, the Afghan women in this case are not workers. These women are forced to live in uncertain and foggy social structures. They are nothing but "ghosts." They may get the so-called T6 document, but this is not a document that will ensure their human rights or protect them. It is simply a piece of paper in the eyes of the government, but it promised hope for the migrants who do not understand what this document is about.

### **3.3.3 Connections with migrant smugglers**

Most women stated that their male relatives made deals with human smugglers. They go through Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Greece to Europe. Human smugglers work in several locations and they take people respectively from one departure point to another. They mostly use buses.

"We came here through Iran. Smugglers took us to the bus in Afghanistan. Many smugglers on the way control this system. They gave us their numbers and

brought us here by changing buses. They took 1200 dollars from me per person. We desperately begged for the kid, and they did not take money for him. They actually do take money for the kids, too, but we did not have it. We first came to Doğubeyazıt. They take hostages if people do not have enough money” (Naima married, she has a child, 25).

“We paid 1800 dollars for person. They are always ready, for a long time. When you find their number, you talk to them and you get on the road” (Salma, married, she has three children, 35).

This topic is fundamental in understanding the foggy situation of irregular migrants in Turkey. These women stated that legal procedures are very expensive and they are not able to afford them. Furthermore, it is difficult to get passports and visas for other countries. They do not trust the state system. The narratives of the men echoed similar feelings.

### **3.3.4 Preparation for the migration process**

“We have nothing back in Afghanistan. We do not want to go back. We want to work and start our life in Turkey. We can live in Ağrı or somewhere else. It does not matter as long as it is safe. We do not have money. If the UN helps us, we can live here. Our kids can go to school. My child is three years old” (Naima, married, she has a child, 25).

“We left everything behind. We were living in a tent in Afghanistan. We did not have a home. We left everything” (Amina, married, 35).

Many women stated that they had nothing to leave behind. Hence, they want to start a new life, as they do not have hopes for Afghanistan. Their priorities are safety and survival. They mostly left behind the old women of their families, as they believed it would be hard for them to migrate irregularly. They now wish to send money back to their loved ones after they settle and begin to earn money.

On the other hand, since they are not registered and do not have any protective rights in their existence in Turkey, they find themselves in a legal limbo. It is not certain what the Afghan

women are going to do. However, it is most likely that they will find themselves remaining in legal limbo in addition to struggling with their language barrier.

Considering their legal limbo in Turkey, their decisions and actions should be reconsidered. Almost all people migrating irregularly know someone living in Turkey. This means that they should be aware of what they will experience in Turkey to some extent. However, they believe that once they settle, everything will be fine, or at least better than in Afghanistan. Therefore, they think that they will be able to handle the problems that they will face in Turkey. In the end, they believe their living conditions will be better.

### **3.3.5 Decision on migrating to Turkey**

“We came here for financial opportunities. They should look after us. We came here to survive. We came here for our children. We thought that this is a Muslim country and Erdoğan will take care of us. I saw him on TV” (Hana, married, she has three children, 34).

In considering the decision to migrate to Turkey, one of the main points that I noticed is that almost all of the migrants have a social network. They know someone in Turkey or in Europe and want to meet them. These social networks are their main hopes and expectations for surviving in the host society. Their main goal is to reach those people they know. As it is stated earlier, globalization and neoliberal policies have increased the rates of irregular migration. Since nation-states desire cheap labor, it is not surprising to see them inviting foreign people to enter the country. Even though nation-states claim on paper that their main aim is to reduce irregular migration, the numbers of migrants increase in practice. It should be noted that television is an important factor in shaping these perspectives. Representations of Turkey in the media contribute to their perceptions and they think that the Turkish government is ready to welcome them.

“There are many human smugglers in Afghanistan... You can find one of them easily. They are everywhere... Lots of people are in this business. They earn money from this business. Our government was alright until 2013. Our country was stable somehow. We could find a job in a big city. It was easier to live economically. But the conditions

of women were still the same. They could not go out alone. I am engaged. My fiancée is in Afghanistan. My parents are in Afghanistan. I came here to save money for the bride price. I would stay if our country would be the same. Many people would. The Taleban has been in our country for the last 30 years. Therefore, people go to Pakistan, Turkey, or other countries in Europe. The situation of our economy and government has become very bad since 2013. ISIS, Taleban, and our state are fighting with each other. This is an endless war. Everybody started to migrate... I worked in Turkey two years ago and was deported once I was caught by the police. Now, I came back, because I need money... Turkey is a Muslim country and I can speak Turkish” (Hassan, engaged, 24).

On the other hand, as Hassan stresses, religion is another main driving factor for Afghan women and men. Even though they complain about the impositions of their families and the Taleban, they are generally conservative. They perceive Turkey as a good neighbor and a Muslim country. From their perspectives, European people are generally sinful and their societies are corrupt. Like many Afghan male, Hassan is able to speak Turkish fluently while most Afghan women cannot. He wants to arrive in Istanbul in order to work and save money and he is a cyclical migrant. He works and saves money and goes back to Afghanistan unlike Afghan women. All the migrants are irregular migrants at this point in the police center, but he wants to remain as irregular. Female migrants want to build a new life in a host society.

### 3.3.6 Experiences during the migration process

Figure 4. Afghan migrants in the bus terminal



“We did not take a shower in the past 15 days. We are dirty. There is no hot water. We have been wearing the same clothes for two weeks. We did not think that Turkey would treat us this way. We did not believe... We are like prisoners here. There is not enough food. The children are all sick and they do not take us to the hospital. It is very troubled here. We could not believe these conditions before, but we saw it. We are prisoners in Turkey. They should release us” (Zahra, married, she has three children, 30).

The physical conditions, especially in the police station, are very challenging for women and they identify themselves as “prisoners.” These difficult living conditions make them feel as

if they are in limbo. In this metaphor, the police building is a prison for them. Meanwhile, the police officers explain that the migrants stay in the police station for a long time because they must wait for the officers in the migration office to deal with their migration documents. This complicated bureaucratic structure increases the anxiety of the women.

“The migration office [of Ağrı] prepares the documents of the migrants. But where will they stay? The officers ask for an address! Do they have an address? No! It is obvious that they do not live here. Will they sleep under the bridge? Yes, they will. This is their address! They sleep in the bus terminal. Once they do have the T6 document...they come to the bus terminal. Migrants become very happy. They think they can buy a ticket with that document. But they do not understand what the paper says. Does this mean that they solved the problem? No! This is not the point of the policy... Those people are freezing. People con them here in every corner. They behave badly to migrants and their children. This is their life. Can you imagine? Nobody treats them nicely. Well, some people may bring food. But what about their feelings? Peace? Jobs? Money... We are drinking tea or eating whatever we want. They are starving... They left everything behind. I would do the same if I lived in their conditions. I did not believe their reasons before. However, I have been here for five years. I have seen many people. I will never forget the time I spent here... Even though this is not police work, we still have to deal with it. Only two people work in the migration office. All of these people’s papers are prepared by just two people!” (Necati, the police officer at the bus terminal, 50).

Necati attaches importance to this issue since he is the only police officer who works in the bus terminal. He believes that people should think about how migrants feel during this migration process. As the only police officer in the bus terminal, he has to take care of many issues, including the migrants. While he originally had prejudices against migrants, his ideas changed with time. He now thinks that the migrants had many problems and they are constant victims of fraud. For instance, the villagers in Doğubeyazıt force migrants to buy things from them. People do not care about their feelings and they can be exploited easily. These conditions cause them to remain silent in Turkey as a host society. Women in particular may face different challenges because of their gender. While male migrants dominate in the migration process, the vast majority of female migrants are illiterate. In addition to their social and physical problems in the police center or bus terminal, they are also silenced by these issues and by the language barrier. For instance, the physical conditions of migrant women are more challenging in winter. If they are kept in the police center, they face various

problems. The rooms are tiny and they must live together with other women. They may have contagious diseases, but they still live in these rooms together. One of the rooms is surrounded by glass walls and so anyone can see them easily. They do not have new or clean clothes. Apart from their basic needs, it is very difficult to change their clothes in this environment. Most women feel vulnerable and defenseless in the police center.

Figure 5. Inside the police center



“All the people came here with the same bus 15 days ago. We did not have enough clothes. People in the villages gave us the clothes that we are wearing now. We crossed the border and people in Ağrı gave us these clothes. We had clothes before, but we could not carry them with us. Therefore, we threw them away. It was a very difficult journey for us” (Eve, single, 19).

The villagers in Doğubeyazıt are a controversial issue. As many women explained, the villagers helped them with their clothing, but local bus company owners and police officers also stated that the villages of Doğubeyazıt are full of migrant smugglers. This is one of the main centers of that business. Migrants change buses in this location and people go through a difficult transition process. For instance, one of the local bus company owners in the

terminal stated that some women are raped and killed by people living in Doğubeyazıt. Migrant smugglers keep many migrants in various houses as hostages until they get their money. Moreover, Khaled (23) explained that local villagers forced migrants to buy new phones and phone lines. They bullied migrants and took advantage of them. These ambiguous narratives may indicate the complicated nature of irregular migration journeys.

As a young and single woman, Eve's narratives imply that she thinks these difficulties will be over soon. She is in her final destination. The difficult part is over and a new era will start for her. Hence, she is very hopeful and optimistic about the future.

### 3.3.7 Current problems and solutions

Figure 6. An Afghan migrant in the police center



“The police officers tell us that they will release us, but they do not. They should deport us or release us. They keep us here under compulsion. We escaped from the war to survive, but here is another prison. We are prisoners in this building. If we can leave this building, we can work for ourselves and earn money. My child is sick and her situation is getting worse. It is impossible to live in this

building. She cannot eat. It is impossible to drink this juice” (Nur, married, she has a child, 24).

Figure 7. Afghan migrant women in the bus terminal



Their current problem is the migration route. They want to reach the cities that they originally aimed for. This is why the migrants being kept in the police station are particularly very worried. They think that their physical conditions are not good enough to survive in such a

situation for a long time. The women also have special needs, differently from men. Migrant women particularly worry about their children's health. Hence, they want sufficient and healthy food. Otherwise, they would prefer to be deported since the police station is a prison for them.

### **3.3.8 Life expectations and future plans in Turkey**

“We came here for our children. Our children should go to school and learn. We do not understand. We do not know how to read or write. They should not be like us. They should go to school. It does not matter where we go. We can go to Istanbul or Europe. It is enough to survive and stay healthy” (Fatima, married, she has two children, 24).

“I want my children to study. This is why I came to Turkey. I could not make it, but we really want the best for our children. They want to read and learn. Our daughters cannot go to school, but our sons can. Girls are worried about this issue. They can go to school until they are 11-12 years old. After they grow a little more, their families veil the girls and they have to wear *chador*” (Khadija, she has two children, married, 19).

“I want to go to Ankara for the UN; I do not have relatives” (Laila, single, 20).

With respect to life expectations and future plans in Turkey, while male migrants choose to migrate mainly for economic reasons, the narratives of migrant women reveal a division between single and married females. Most married migrant women want to stay in Turkey for their children's well-being. On the other hand, single migrant women are focused on studying, particularly in Istanbul. Even though they state that they want to work in Turkey, their ultimate goal is to ensure better life conditions for their children.

Although their immediate aim is to have better living conditions for themselves, children have a great influence on their life expectations and their future plans in Turkey. They are mainly hopeful and they expect that once they settle and earn money, their living conditions will be better. This aspect of women is not the same for Afghan male. While female migrants stress the importance of children in their life, male migrants rarely highlight their children.

While the main motivation of male migrants is to earn money, the main consideration of female migrants is their children.

Furthermore, as it seen in the earlier narratives of the migrants, some of them want to go to the UN and explain their situation to them. It means that they are aware of the life conditions in Turkey, hence they think the UN will be their solution. At this point, it is controversial whether they know the UN has stopped making interviews with Afghans or not.

### **3.4 Role of Authorities and Local People**

Considering the narratives of these Afghan women, one of the biggest problems for them is the language barrier. They are not able to ask for something without a translator. This makes their situation worse and they are too shy to talk with the authorities in Ağrı.

“The procedure takes a long time. We are looking at whether they were involved in any criminal activity or not. We are trying to learn their identities. Now, think! They come from Afghanistan. The Taleban is in Afghanistan. What if even one person in this building is from this terrorist organization? How do we know this? I mean, we cannot trust all of them. Their conditions are good enough in this building. They get daily food and beverages. We took the ones who were sick to the hospital. They are rebelling. You should have seen how they damaged this building. They damaged this building seriously. Everything in this building belongs to our state. Our state is welcoming these people. If they are not involved in any crime, they may live in our country. But they have to wait! They want to be released or deported” (İsa, works at the migration office, 40s).

Another issue is that while the women complained about the conditions in the police center, I also realized that many police officers do not know how the irregular migration procedure works or how to behave towards the migrants. Many police officers described the Afghan migrants as illegal migrants rather than irregular migrants, and their behaviors towards the migrants can be negative. For instance, during one of my interviews, a big rebellion started in the building. Both men and women began screaming to be released. After a while, two officers from the local migration office came, also started to scream, and hit people to calm

them. They blamed the migrants for being “traitors.” I remained in this chaos and could not go out. After they settled down, some of the police officers noticed me and defended their actions. In the end, this event indicated that officers may behave as they want and migrants are not safe in this system, not only because of the attitudes of the officers, but also because of the other migrants, as people staying together for a long time do not know each other well. In these physical conditions, the women are mostly kept in the small rooms with their children. As is understood, the migrants are separated by gender, and the women are the ones who need to take care of the children.

“Why am I dealing with these people? I told you, sister, these people from the migration office are problematic. I am just here to guard you. None of my business! They can do whatever they want! I knew this was coming. They are complaining about their food because they just eat breakfast foods. What a problem! I am working for the state but they give me one meal. [Migrants] They have three meals a day. On top of that, they want hot meals. Then go home. Don’t leave your country. Why did you leave? My god!” (Hasan, police officer, 20s).

The main reason for the chaos is the lack of basic needs (food, access to doctors, hygiene) and the lack of information. People want to be released or deported. They would prefer to go back to Afghanistan rather than stay in the police center. Communication problems and the hostile behaviors of some officers increase the tension, anger and anxiety among migrants in this setting. Migrants do not know why they are kept for such a long time or what is going to happen to them.

“We do our best to keep the women and children warm in the room, so that they do not get sick. However, as you know, they come from Doğubeyazıt on foot. Hence, they become sick. For instance, yesterday there were five people in the hospital; their feet were seriously damaged due to the cold weather. Doctors treated them but then they escaped from the hospital in the morning. Think about it... I have been in Ağrı for the last six years and this human smuggling has always been happening here. I do not know why they come to Turkey. They probably want to go to Europe” (Rahim, works at the migration office, 30s).

I realized that almost all of the Afghan migrants have social networks within Turkey, mostly in Istanbul and Ankara. This means that social networks in Turkey are a driving factor in women’s decision-making processes for migrating to Turkey. Social networks are crucial

for them to start a new life and settle in Turkey. Even though economic and social issues are the main reasons for their migration decisions, women also stress the Muslim identity of Turkey. They are generally religious and hope to be welcomed as Muslims in Turkey. They were very surprised when faced with the conditions of the police center and bus terminal. For instance, one of the women underlined that the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had called out to them on television. This was very promising for her and she was shocked by the attitudes of the Turkish authorities that she met.

Authorities from the Immigration Directorate in Ağrı stated that this is human trade and that this business has been taking place in Ağrı for a long time. Local residents and the owners of bus companies explained that even though they reported illegal activities to the political authorities and made many complaints, nothing much changed. The narratives of local shop owners in the bus terminal indicate that even though the authorities are aware of these illegal actions and the existence of human smugglers in Ağrı, they do not enact more permanent and clear policies. For example, some of the bus company owners stated that they went to the offices of local politicians. They demanded that something be done to prevent human smuggling. However, human smuggling continues actively in Ağrı.

Even though police officers occasionally arrest some migrants and human smugglers, it is only the tip of the iceberg. While the local migration office is busy with one convoy, many other convoys cross the border of Turkey despite the security there. In the migration office, only two officers are working to handle all the paperwork of the migrants that are arrested by the police. The officers release the migrants in Ağrı in a week or they decide to send the irregular migrants back to Afghanistan as soon as possible. They do not have a fixed policy.



“This document means that they are released under probation. We assign migrants to other cities as determined by the migration office. These cities in which they can live are chosen by Migration Management. They have to leave Turkey in 15 days or sign their papers at the police center at regular intervals. We check their past and provide the T6 document for them... Migration offices are insufficient. Although there is a huge movement of people every day, five people work in this office. We do not have enough staff to make the process shorter. We do not focus on the realities of migration as European states do. We need to be more productive. The state is aware of this situation but does nothing. I hope the state will do something about it” (Arif, works at the migration office, 30s).

Two officers were working at the migration office in 2018, and that number became five in 2019. However, it is still not enough to handle the migration flow in Ağrı, as Arif stated. He clearly states that the document is prepared to assign the migrants to different cities. The document does not have any other function. However, it creates a complicated system. It is prepared by the migration office in Ağrı, but it may not be recognized by police officers or other authorities in other cities, because this system is, for example, only slightly similar to Erzurum’s procedure. This procedure is not a fixed policy in Turkey. Officers in other cities may not recognize this document, and smugglers also make fake documents. It is difficult to understand which documents are real and which are not.

While I was interviewing people in the bus terminal in November 2019, Necati came in and asked a migrant for his documents. The migrant showed his T6 document and Necati said that it was a fake document. He grew angry and asked for more information. It became clear that the man had come from Van<sup>3</sup> and the migration office in Van puts photos of the migrants on the documents, which is not the case in Ağrı. The man was speaking English and I translated his words for Necati. He was nearly arrested for having false documents. One of the bus companies had sold him a ticket, but the driver left people in the middle of the road. He thus came to the Ağrı terminal on foot.

“You see...here are our people. They rob migrants. They are here for five days and waiting for their bus. The driver left them in Eleşkit<sup>4</sup>... Once I interfere, they can get their tickets. How is this possible? They buy their ticket from Van but find themselves in Ağrı instead of Istanbul. They leave the migrants and take

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<sup>3</sup> Another city near Ağrı.

<sup>4</sup> A small town in Ağrı province.

their money. The bus companies have to take them or there is a penalty. They are liars and dishonest. They will see now. I will be following this bus company. They left the people but did not give their money back. When a migrant buys a ticket, the bus company brings their document to me in order to check it. I decide whether it is real or not. I can misjudge. You see, I was confused. Think about the police on the way. Look at the documents of Ağrı and Van. The document provided in Van is better, with a picture on it. This is not a police responsibility. How do I know which one is right? ... They have few people in the migration office, but our institution has 2500 police officers. This is not our duty; the migration officers should deal with it. But we have to. We need to be realistic and help people. Drivers are scared to go to jail because of human smuggling. I'll give you an example. There was a bus a couple of months ago. I checked their documents and it was fine. But then their bus was stopped in Erzincan by police officers. They called me and I said their documents are original. But they said they were false. Which [of us] is right? ... Therefore, some of the bus companies do not take migrants because they can lose their business and go to jail... Two close cities do not have a connection with each other. No one looks at their documents in Istanbul and Ankara. No link among cities..." (Necati, police officer at the bus terminal, 50).

As Necati points out, there is no fixed policy in Turkey. The T6 document is only recognized in Ağrı, and even the officers in Ağrı are not sure whether these documents are real or not. The cities in Eastern Anatolian Region with the largest numbers of irregular migrants do not have the same policies on this issue. Two neighboring cities have different types of documents. Sometimes, even if the documents are real, different police officers along a migrant's route may not know the procedure. They may act however they want. This creates an arbitrary system which migrants are forced to deal with. Most migrants think that these documents will save their lives and make them "legal" in Turkey. In fact, the intent is only to determine whether these people are terrorists or not, and even with the T6, they remain irregular on paper. They may be somewhat recognized in Ağrı, but not in the rest of the country. This uncertainty and the irregularity increase the foggy structure of these people's lives. How can migrants know when the officers do not know? This arbitrary system creates new vulnerabilities and has a butterfly effect. People become hopeful when they receive the document, but other cities do not recognize it or are not aware of it. Therefore, these holders of the T6 document may get arrested again or deported to Afghanistan.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Müşkilat (difficulties) was the word most often used in the women's narratives throughout this fieldwork. It explains all of their feelings, hopes, and experiences throughout the migration process. While holding their children, they all stated that they had to leave Afghanistan. When people have economic, social, and psychological problems in their country of origin, they try to move to another country. Even though the migrants all know someone in Turkey and they are aware of the forthcoming difficulties that they will face, they still want to leave for Turkey. They mainly explain this by their desire to have a new life. Women in particular may leave everything behind to pursue a new life, while many male Afghan migrants aim to earn more money. Thus, many of the men are cyclical migrants, while the women intend to live in Turkey for the rest of their lives.

However, the working conditions of irregular migrants are very challenging since they are not legally recognized. They cannot benefit from labor rights. They work illegally in dangerous, unclean, and generally problematic workplaces. Moreover, multiple families share a single apartment in urban settings. Considering the social, physical, economic, and psychological difficulties that these migrants will face once they are settled, they will have no choice but to bear it all. There are no gender-based regulations to protect women in public spaces.

The fundamental reason for the migration of women is the problems they face in their social and economic lives. As women, they do not feel safe or independent. They feel suppressed and insecure in their home country. Many families are broken and women migrate irregularly by making deals with migrant smugglers. These are mostly young women with their

husbands. They want to start a new life and obtain better living conditions, especially for their children.

Fear, hope, and anxiety are the strongest themes as these women vocalize their ideas and experiences. In each of their sentences, the vulnerability shines through and their feelings are expressed silently. Fear is always present in their attitudes and it increases their vulnerability. Even though they had high expectations before arriving in Turkey, once they arrived in Ağrı, they realized that Turkey was not the tolerant country of their imaginations. While some of them keep waiting at the bus terminal to depart for cities in the Marmara Region, other women are kept in the police center. They may be released and given an official document, which is the T6. This document is prepared by the local migration office, and the migration authorities in Ağrı assign the women to different cities according to the capacity of those cities. However, not all of the women arrive at their assigned destinations and they may remain irregular. The T6 document creates an arbitrary system rather than a stable environment for migrants since it is not recognized by other police authorities, especially in metropolitan areas such as Ankara and Istanbul.

A significant factor to consider in the feminization of migration and irregular migration is that even though most of the involved women are illiterate, their participation in migration is increasing. While they have no options in Afghanistan, they feel close to Turkey in terms of moral values such as religion. The procedures for legal migration are considered to be very difficult, complicated, and expensive from their perspectives. Meanwhile, illegal approaches to migration are cheaper, despite the problems encountered during the journey. As connections with human smugglers become more common in the Afghan countryside, it is easier for such women to reach out to them. At the same time, the Turkish government has been implementing neoliberal policies since the 1980s. Even though the state apparatus claims that it is working to decrease irregular migration, those efforts are only on paper. Local people and the owners of the bus companies at the terminal remarked that they went to the governorship in Ağrı many times to complain about human smuggling, yet nothing was done. As a result, it is easy to conclude that the state condones the perpetuation of the vulnerabilities of irregular migrants. They are cheap laborers, and they are silent. They

mainly work for local people in major urban areas. Therefore, they are not guaranteed social rights and they simply generate profits for capitalists who have a strong influence over the Turkish economy.

The most important point raised by this thesis as a contribution to the field of migration studies is the importance of listening to migrants. Most of the problems in this field are caused by a lack of communication. To understand and to conceptualize the limitations of the feminization of irregular migration, scholars should focus on the narratives of women. On the contrary, in Ağrı, the government merely prepares a document (T6) or deports them to Afghanistan when that is financially an option. When women receive these documents, they understand virtually nothing about them because most of the women are illiterate. The language barrier is critical, serving to decrease their integration into the host society. In this case, it is necessary to speak with them in depth instead of giving arbitrary documents. Even when they have the T6 form, they do not understand what to do or how to act. In the end, they may reach their final destination, or they may not. The essential problem for irregular migration policies is that officers of the police center and the migration office often act arbitrarily and do not always behave decently towards the migrants. They typically underestimate them and do not make efforts to communicate properly.

Some male Afghan migrants can speak Turkish fluently, and the authorities also have translators available. However, I do not believe that the existing problems arise only from the officers. The root of the problem lies in the policies of Turkey. The policies of the Turkish government regarding migration are not systematic and keep changing with time. As long as the state continues to fail to give a voice to migrants, effective policies will not be produced. As described in detail in previous chapters, I believe that this is a conscious attitude stemming from neoliberal policies. The narratives of local people indicate that migration is a business, which no one is truly in charge, and there are profits to be made out of.

In conclusion, the feminization of irregular migration is increasing, but there are no formal regulations addressing this issue. As a result, migrant women are becoming more silent and

the authorities underestimate their traumatic experiences. In the long run, these irregularities and arbitrary attitudes at every step of the migration experience create many social, economic, physical, and psychological problems at both national and individual levels. I believe that this study will contribute to a better understanding of the decision-making processes and experiences of Afghan female migrants. The cities in the Eastern Anatolian Region host the largest irregular migrant populations of Turkey. Researchers must focus more on these cities to conceptualize the extent of irregular migration in Turkey.

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## **APPENDIX A: OPEN-ENDED AND HALF STRUCTURED RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How and why did you decide to leave Afghanistan?
2. How were your life conditions as a woman in Afghanistan?
3. How did you connect with human smugglers?
4. How did you get prepared for the immigration process?
5. Why did you decide to migrate to Turkey?
6. How do you evaluate your experiences during the migration process?
7. What are your current problems and what do you do to solve them?
8. What kind of expectations do you have about your life in Turkey?
9. What are your plans in Turkey?
10. Do you plan to live in Turkey for the rest of your life?