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Balancing the Protection and Participation of Refugee Women through the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Notes from Turkey

By Ebru Demir,1 Bilge Sahin,2 and Irem Sengul3

Abstract

This article examines whether incorporating the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda of the United Nations Security Council into the international refugee regime may give refugee women greater potential to participate in decision-making processes. In addition to recognizing the need to protect women in conflict settings, the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda also promotes women’s participation in order to achieve sustainable peace. The article focuses on Turkey, which hosts the largest number of refugees globally. The article explores the extent to which the protection and participation of refugee women in Turkey are balanced in the activities of national and international actors, and it advises adopting a national action plan on refugee women in line with the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. We conducted qualitative research and carried out a field study in Turkey to engage with the article’s main research question. In the field study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from international organizations, international and national non-governmental organizations, and state institutions. We argue that refugee women’s participation is frequently reduced to a formality and is constrained by the restrictions imposed by governmental and humanitarian agencies. A national action plan that considers the rights, ambitions, and expectations of refugee women in Turkey would not only strengthen their protection from violence but also encourage their agency. Under a legally binding framework, all stakeholders—refugee women, international organizations, donors, non-governmental organizations, and the state—would be obliged to encourage refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes and mechanisms at varying levels and fields. We argue that a national action plan would challenge the traditional and patriarchal stereotypes regarding refugee women and enable all relevant stakeholders to promote refugee women’s agency in a systematic way.

Keywords: Refugee women, The Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, Turkey, Protection of women, Women’s agency

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Introduction

When refugee women came to Turkey, most of them did not accept their living conditions and told themselves that they could do more, shape their own future, and control their own lives. They did not want to live with handouts and did not accept just surviving (Interview No. 5, 27 December 2021).

This quote by a Syrian refugee woman who is a humanitarian worker in Turkey highlights that although refugee women face various challenges in their search for safety in exile, their agency in overcoming such challenges and their desire to rebuild their lives should never be ignored. Hence, refugee women not only need protection against various forms of violence they experience during their displacement, but they are also in need of support for their participation in decision-making processes. However, the extent to which international organizations, national institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) acknowledge and support refugee women’s agency and efforts to rebuild their lives is questionable.

Although protection from violence and participation in decision-making processes are inseparable from realizing refugee women’s agency, the traditional discourse on refugee women focuses solely on their protection. This discourse depoliticizes refugee women and essentializes women as weak and fragile. The global refugee regime and its key legal documents provide gender-neutral protection by leaving aside gendered power relations. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol excludes women’s specific experiences of persecution (Freedman, 2010a, p. 177). The first Policy on Refugee Women was only accepted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1990. The 1990 policy recognized that “becoming a refugee affects men and women differently and that effective [protection] programming must recognize these differences” (UNHCR, 1990, p. 7) and emphasized the “greater involvement of refugee women both as participants and beneficiaries in the projects” (UNHCR, 1990, p. 8). However, the discourse on participation is marginalized, and protection continues to be the main focus of the global refugee regime.

The demand for more meaningful participation of refugees in decision-making has recently emerged as a key trend in forced migration. Soft law instruments such as the 2016 New York Declaration and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees encouraged states to support the meaningful participation of refugees. Both call for a “multi-stakeholder approach” to refugee protection that includes the input of refugees themselves (Gidron & Carver, 2022, pp. 2-3; Milner et al., 2022, pp. 15-16). However, these soft law documents did not explicitly recognize the right to participation of refugees. Instead, they were adopted as part of a larger conversation about improving the global refugee regime by “sharing the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world’s refugees more equitably” (Harley & Hobbs, 2020, p. 206). Although there are valuable discussions on promoting refugees’ participation, such calls did not translate into legal rights and obligations.

This article’s research question is whether integrating the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda into the global refugee regime could provide a more robust driving force for refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes. The WPS Agenda provides an alternative legally binding framework that not only recognizes the necessity of protecting women during and after conflict, but also encourages women’s participation in decision-making processes for long-lasting peace. In dealing with this question, the article engages with the case study of Turkey—the top refugee-hosting country
worldwide. It discusses to what extent international and national actors’ work in Turkey prioritizes the protection and participation of refugee women in a balanced way and suggests implementing a national action plan (NAP) on refugee women in line with the WPS in Turkey.

In order to address the main research question, we adopted qualitative research methods and carried out a field study in Turkey. We adopt Catt and Murphy’s (2002, p. 3) conceptual framework for participation which states that having a voice requires the power of both setting the agenda and proposing and implementing solutions. Following this approach, during the field study, we first examined whether refugee women are able to make their voices heard and if they are in a position to set the agenda. We also questioned the extent to which these women are involved in the decision-making processes with the solutions they propose. The fieldwork was conducted in Turkey from December 2021 to March 2022. During this period, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from 15 organizations located in seven cities (Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Hatay, Diyarbakir, Batman, and Bolu), which allowed us to cover a wide range of policies in various socio-economic contexts. The organizations included UN agencies, international and Turkish NGOs, and state institutions. This article engages with the refugee women’s protection and participation challenges from the perspectives of humanitarian and state actors. Due to the increase in COVID-19 cases in Turkey at the time of the interviews, we preferred to conduct online interviews, which “encourages individuals who have time and place limitations for face-to-face interviews to participate in research” (Janghorban, 2014, p. 1).

In this article, we first discuss the humanitarian and state actors’ depiction of challenges that refugee women face in Turkey in legal, economic, and social domains. This section underlines how the humanitarian and state actors focus on refugee women’s protection needs while disregarding their participation as an urgent challenge. The second section explores the services provided by humanitarian and state actors in order to overcome refugee women’s protection needs. It scrutinizes the detrimental outcomes of separating protection and participation issues and emphasizes the importance of considering these two aspects together for supporting refugee women’s agency by adopting the WPS Agenda. The final section evaluates the extent to which refugee women have been encouraged as decision-makers by international donors and NGOs in Turkey. This section underlines that in addition to legal mechanisms and policy-making processes, it is important to question whether donors and NGOs engage with refugee women while designing the projects.

The Turkish Asylum System and Protection of Refugee Women

The Turkish asylum system is not an exception to andro-centric global refugee protection policies across the world. Refugee women in Turkey, like their counterparts elsewhere, struggle to fit into the gender-blind definition of international protection in order to have access to asylum. International protection status in Turkey comprises three main categories: refugee status, conditional refugee status, and subsidiary protection. None of these legal categories refers to gender-based persecution as a basis for obtaining international protection. Refugee status is defined in Turkish law by incorporating the gender-blind definition of the Refugee Convention/Protocol into the 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) with a geographical limitation. Accordingly, anyone who comes from a European state and who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (LFIP, 2013, Art. 61) is considered to be a refugee in Turkey. Those who satisfy the definition but come from
non-European countries are considered “conditional refugees,” and they can only stay in Turkey temporarily until their resettlement in third countries (LFIP, 2013, Art. 62). Those who cannot be qualified as a refugee or conditional refugee but face risk of torture, death penalty, or a serious threat due to indiscriminate violence if returned to their countries of origin are provided with “subsidiary protection” (LFIP, 2012, Art. 63). As of September 2022, nearly 4 million refugees and asylum seekers are living in Turkey, nearly all from non-European countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran (UNHCR, 2022). Among them, 400,000 are applicants or beneficiaries of international protection, and 3.65 million Syrian refugees have temporary protection status, which is an exceptional measure to be applied in cases of “mass influx” on a group basis (LFIP, 2013, Art. 91; DGMM, 2022; Temporary Protection Regulation, 2014). Nearly 45% of Syrian refugees are women and girls (DGMM, 2022); 22% of non-Syrian refugees are women, while 32% are children (UNHCR, 2020).

According to the Refugee Convention/Protocol’s definition and Turkish legislation, women’s specific experiences of persecution are excluded from the globally recognized categories (Freedman, 2010a, p. 177). Although UNHCR (2002) calls for the inclusion of “gender-related persecution” in the interpretation of the Refugee Convention/Protocol’s definition, such calls are non-binding and provide limited protection. In this regard, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention (2011), which was also in force in Turkey until 2021, can be considered as significant progress since it calls for recognizing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women as persecution “giving rise to complementary/subsidiary protection” (Council of Europe, 2011, Art. 60(1)); interpreting the Refugee Convention in a “gender-sensitive” manner (Council of Europe, 2011, Art. 60(2)); providing “gender-sensitive reception procedures” (Council of Europe, 2011, Art. 60(3)); and protecting victims of violence against women against refoulement (expulsion) regardless of their legal status in a country (Council of Europe, 2011, Art. 61). Nevertheless, when the Istanbul Convention was in force, Turkey did not strictly follow the Istanbul Convention’s guidance in drafting its asylum regime and did not include SGBV as a potential basis for persecution (Soykan et al., 2018, p. 16). The country withdrew from the Istanbul Convention in July 2021 which left a legal gap for refugee women’s protection in Turkey.

Interviews with humanitarian organizations and government institutions demonstrate that humanitarian workers are aware of various difficulties and hardships that refugee women face in the Turkish asylum system, and some of them also try to document them. During the interviews, all humanitarian workers accentuated their own depiction of protection challenges that displaced women experience in legal, economic, and social domains. Many humanitarian workers in Turkey remark that asylum procedures, especially refugee status determination (RSD) interviews, should be reformed by adopting a gender-sensitive approach. An experienced humanitarian worker explains that Turkey has taken important steps since the 1990s. Until then, those who apply with their families are evaluated together as a singular case. Since the 1990s, women asylum-seekers’ applications have been evaluated separately from their husbands, considering that they might be survivors of SGBV and can be afraid to tell their stories in front of their husbands or other family members (Interview No. 12, 25 January 2022). Although this is a significant gain, women asylum-seekers continue to face various other challenges during asylum procedures. Starting from their arrival, they struggle to obtain information about their rights (such as work permits, access to health, education and legal services, the right to appeal for refugee status determination decisions) or available protection mechanisms. The personnel, especially those working in provincial units, are not sufficiently trained for issues such as gender equality and SGBV. As a result, women
asylum-seekers who are survivors of violence are not well-informed about the legal mechanisms through which they “can make their complaints and ask for protection” (Soykan et al., 2021, p. 17). Women asylum-seekers arrive in Turkey after long and harsh journeys. They experience physical and psychological violence and SGBV on their way and, most of the time, become survivors of smuggling. When they finally arrive in Turkey, it becomes difficult to talk about their traumas and ask for support in the absence of encouraging reception conditions (Interview No. 7, 30 December 2021).

All women who experienced SGBV benefit from protection mechanisms in Turkey under Law No. 6284 regardless of their status. Humanitarian workers play an important role in implementing the law by disseminating information about available protection mechanisms and referring SGBV cases to relevant authorities. They call phone line 183 for sexual abuse and violence or take women to ŞÖNİM—government-funded shelters for women who are survivors of domestic violence. However, support workers question the efficacy of such protection mechanisms in practice. A humanitarian worker shared her experience with phone line 183 when she was referring to a child marriage case:

In one of the sensitization sessions, one woman approached me and said “a family is going to marry their 12-year-old daughter to her cousin. You need to do something!” After this warning, I started to see the family and tried to verify what I had been told. When I realized this was the case, I called 183. Police officers went to the family’s house and reported that they did not find evidence to indicate child marriage. They closed the case and did not do any further investigation. Two months later, I learned that the girl got married. (Interview No. 1, 2 December 2021)

Another interviewee from a UN agency reported that some ŞÖNİM workers were not supportive of women staying there and refugee women reported comments like, “I am sure she deserved it” (Interview No. 6, 28 December 2021). For displaced women who lack official registration in Turkey, access to ŞÖNİM can even be worse as they are afraid of approaching authorities due to the fear of deportation (Coşkun, 2017). Additionally, even if registered, shelters are not accessible for every woman, since women with sons over 12 or children with disabilities are not accepted to ŞÖNİM. In such a context, the individual efforts and interventions of ŞÖNİM workers become crucial. An NGO worker who closely works with ŞÖNİM is thankful that she is in contact with some great support workers in ŞÖNİM who help her whenever she refers SGBV cases. However, she also acknowledges that ŞÖNİM lacks the necessary resources and the support is not the same in every ŞÖNİM unit (Interview No. 8, 7 January 2022).

Under a gender-insensitive asylum and protection regime, refugee women and girls are incorporated into the Turkish asylum system as vulnerable and dependent beings. Both the LFIP and TPR only mentions refugee women under the section of “persons with special needs” if they are disabled, unaccompanied minors, pregnant, a single mother with an accompanied child, or survivor of torture, rape, or other psychological, physical, or sexual violence (LFIP, 2013, Art. 67; TPR, 2014, Art. 48; see Kivilcim, 2014). There are some accelerated procedures defined for “persons in need,” yet an NGO worker explains that not all refugee women in Turkey have easy access to services or protection even if they are in need. The most advantaged group is single parents or grandparents. Only these categories are prioritized in their access to services within the dominant patriarchal cultural context (Interview No. 7, 30 December 2021). Another humanitarian worker adds that in the resettlement process from Turkey to other countries, refugee women, even
if they are classified as “persons with special needs,” are not always prioritized by the Global North countries they seek to settle in. One of the interviewees states, “they prioritize those whom they consider as to be easily assimilated, not those who are in need” (Interview No. 16, 9 January 2022). Thus, we can conclude that refugee women are not incorporated into the asylum regime with a gender-sensitive approach. Instead, they are regarded as vulnerable dependents, mothers, or wives. Such an approach reproduces traditional gender roles. Moreover, such vulnerability is not necessarily translated into advantages for many refugee women in asylum/protection procedures within Turkey or in the resettlement process.

Many humanitarian workers underline the significance of refugee women’s access to meaningful income and livelihoods not only for their protection but also for their empowerment. All interviewees agree that economic and financial hardships are among the most important challenges refugee women face in Turkey. Alongside the forced migration’s effects on socio-economic impoverishment, the legal barriers in Turkey and traditional gender norms intermingle and create obstacles for refugee women’s access to resources for living a decent life. Neither international protection nor temporary protection status secures an effective right to work or opportunities for refugee women. Most refugees work in the informal sector without social security and face exploitation in the workplace (Interview No. 4, 24 December 2022). The jobs available for refugee women are generally insecure, temporary, poorly paid, and exploitative (Canefe, 2018, p. 41). In addition to the legal obstacles and exploitation, refugee women also struggle with a traditional gender norm that women should not work outside their homes.

In their empirical research on Syrian refugee women’s work experience in Turkey, Körükmez and associates (2020, p. 3) found that patriarchal gender norms in Syria prevented women from working outside their homes before their displacement (see also Cankurtaran & Albayrak, 2019, p. 97). However, most of them began to consider working in Turkey out of “exigency” to sustain the basic needs of their families (Körükmez et al., 2020, p. 3). Those who began working struggled to combine household responsibilities and employment since household responsibilities and childcare strictly belong to women in patriarchal family structures (Canefe, 2018, p. 45). Childcare becomes even harder for single women-headed households without official support. Those who have to quit their jobs become dependent on aid (Interview No. 12, 25 January 2020). One particular solution to not leaving home for refugee women is working at home on a piecework basis. As Uçar explains, engaging in a piecework job at home serves dual purposes for refugee women: they have access to income and shield themselves from the “dangers of outside” (2020, p. 39). However, working on a piecework basis has its own disadvantages, such as low payment rates (sometimes risk of not receiving any payment), temporary employment, and lack of social security.

The inability to leave the house not only affects refugee women’s access to work but also restricts their access to services that state institutions or humanitarian organizations could provide. Most interviewees underlined that they struggle with reaching out to refugee women for language classes since many women cannot leave their houses. A humanitarian worker compares the language skills of refugee men and women: “refugee men can learn Turkish since they work outside and socialize with Turkish people. Unlike women, their freedom is not restricted. While refugee men in Turkey speak Turkish fluently, women cannot” (Interview No. 6, 28 December 2021). Similarly, the UN Women’s 2018 survey highlights that 70% of Syrian women cannot speak Turkish, which has an immediate effect on their access to rights and services (p. 6). Rottman and Nimer (2021, p. 82) highlight the significance of learning the host country’s language for refugee women since it has a potential effect of transforming refugee women’s relations not only
with the host community and state but also with their own families. They also argue that learning the language facilitates access to services and rights. At the same time, though, the feeling of independence and the “symbolic capital” that refugee women gain when they become able to learn the language open up opportunities to negotiate and challenge “patriarchal and also host community structures” (Rottman & Nimer, 2021, p. 82).

In this patriarchal and restricted structure with downgrading economic conditions, refugee women and girls feel compelled to seek survival and safety via marriage, including polygamous marriages and child marriage. An NGO worker explains that especially in the aftermath of the forced migration of Syrians, when they first arrived, the first option for refugee women was to marry as second wives if they could not satisfy their basic needs (Interview No. 1, 2 December 2021). Another humanitarian worker, who is a refugee herself, explains:

In Syria, it is legal for men to marry four wives. We did not know that polygamous marriage in Turkey is legally forbidden when we first came. In Syria, you have rights, even if you are a second or third wife. In Turkey, many Syrian women suffered because of a lack of knowledge or desperate conditions that compelled them to polygamous marriages. (Interview No. 5, 27 December 2021)

Due to the poor economic conditions and feelings of insecurity, refugees regard child marriages as a viable option to guarantee their daughters’ survival and contribute to the welfare of the family (Yaman, 2020, p. 215). While some families considered marriage as a “‘better’ option for their daughters than working,” some saw marriage as a shield against SGBV (Yaman, 2020, p. 215).

As humanitarian workers demonstrate throughout the interviews, refugee women in Turkey have various protection challenges in accessing information, services, and protection from SGBV, sustaining meaningful lives and livelihoods, and integrating into public life while in exile. However, the interviews did not identify the lack of participation of refugee women as an urgent challenge; it was only after we raised the issue of participation that they began elaborating on the barriers to refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes as another problem. Although humanitarian and state actors acknowledge all the challenges as part of protection measures, some problems, such as livelihoods or language barriers, potentially have an impact on strengthening women’s agency to participate in everyday life and economic life. Hence, humanitarian organizations’ predominant focus on protection issues sidelines concerns about women’s participation. However, these two aspects are intertwined and need to be taken into consideration together, as will be shown in the next section.

The Lack of Acknowledgement of Women’s Participation Challenges

The previous section made clear that humanitarian and state actors mainly focus on refugee women through their protection needs while disregarding various obstacles they face in participating in decision-making processes. This section discusses how humanitarian and state actors approach refugee women’s participation and why incorporating protection and participation together can provide a more solid response to the challenges refugee women face.

While providing protection for refugee women is of much importance, prioritizing mere protection essentializes and depoliticizes women’s agency and prevents their participation. Women who seek asylum are included under the global refugee regime through calls for gender-specific laws and policies. However, these women themselves have little or no say in the matter.
Policymakers and legislators, without input from the women concerned, represent them by relying on pre-existing cultural norms and positions and portray women as victims. If the gendered reasons underlying the forced migration were truly understood, protective measures would be tailored to the experiences of the women who migrate while also considering their opinions and voices (Freedman, 2010b, pp. 603-604). Hence, not promoting refugee women’s participation in policies and projects cannot lead to adequate protection for refugee women. To focus solely on protection while disregarding participation does not result in effective protection, as the two must go hand in hand.

The global refugee regime’s protection-based structure is reflected in humanitarian and state actors’ work on refugee women in Turkey (EU, 2022; UNHCR, 2022) where various international and national authorities provide protection services to refugee women. These actors offer legal, economic, psychological, and protection support for survivors of SGBV. They advise and make referrals on issues such as identity cards, monetary aid, food assistance, rent support, access to health, education services, and child protection. There are also sensitization sessions on women’s rights, refugee rights, and services provided for refugees (ASAM, n.d.; IFRC, 2017; MUDEM, 2022; Support to Life, 2021a; 2022; Turkish Red Crescent, 2021; UNHCR, 2021; UN Women, 2021). Such practices offer legal advocacy in access to services and protection against violence that refugee women might encounter. International and national actors also provide livelihood assistance by offering vocational training in textiles, food production, computer skills, and social entrepreneurship for refugee women, and Turkish language courses to facilitate women’s employment opportunities (IFRC, 2021; MUDEM, 2022; Support to Life, 2021b). These activities ease refugee women’s problems regarding livelihoods, language barriers, and not being able to leave the house. However, among the services provided for refugee women, income-generation training or other support for livelihoods are not offered in every city despite the demand from refugee women. Income-generation training, for instance, can be found only in cities where refugees live in great numbers. One interviewee stated:

Refugee women often tell me that they do not want handouts, but they want a job to earn money and get whatever they need. They expressed that they do not want to be in a position where they must ask for everything from us and depend on us. Once, a refugee woman even told me that if you provided livelihood training for me, I would not be here, asking your help for protection from domestic violence. (Interview No. 1, 2 December 2021)

Refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes concerning them is minimal. Whether their needs are adequately addressed depends on individual caseworkers on the project and whether they reflect what they heard from refugee women regarding their needs and expectations. Some of the projects, especially those funded by UN agencies and international NGOs, include feedback in a more systematic way through monitoring bodies and evaluation teams that reach out to beneficiaries and complete a survey with them. While creating new projects, international and national actors can consider this feedback when they ask whether the beneficiaries were happy with the services and what more could have been done. However, such processes often turn into mere bureaucratic exercises which have little impact on the establishment of new projects. An interviewee stated that due to the timeline and bureaucracy involved at the project’s beginning, it is impossible to involve refugee women and act accordingly. However, she mentioned that once the project is approved, before implementing it, sometimes they organize focus group discussions with refugee women to get their ideas and plan the fieldwork (Interview
No. 7, 30 December 2021). Hence, refugee women participate in decision-making processes to the extent international and national actors allow them to. Their participation is merely based on feedback and is circumscribed by questions from international and national actors. Also, participants of surveys are selected by organizations, not by refugee women themselves, which further hampers women’s participation. However, refugee women’s participation is not a general concern among most international and national actors. An expert working for a UN agency stated:

Refugee women have so many needs, and while providing these needs, we do not have time or resources to work on their participation. In this sense, participation is a luxury for most refugee women. Women have fundamental problems, like not having economic independence, being subjected to domestic violence, and dealing with gendered stereotypes. They want to get help in these areas before participating in decision-making processes. (Interview No. 6, 28 December 2021)

Similarly, another expert mentioned that,

In Turkey, people do not welcome refugees and do not understand why they are here and not returning to their countries. While Turkey is at this stage, it is normal to question whether talking about refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes is necessary or not. Talking about participation outside social life is still a luxury. (Interview No. 9, 11 January 2022)

There is a general understanding that refugee women, first and foremost, need protection. Only after their protection is accomplished can their participation be considered. Achieving protection and participation is seen in a linear order. However, we argue that protection and participation are intertwined because improving women’s participation strengthens their agency, which can positively impact protection. Similarly, when refugee women have access to rights and services and are safe from violence, they can efficiently participate in decision-making (Turner & Swaine, 2021, pp. 23-24). Prioritizing protection over participation does not acknowledge this intertwined relationship and sets aside women’s agency. A humanitarian worker stated, “to achieve women’s empowerment, we need to fight violence and discrimination against women, but at the same time, we need to promote women’s participation in the community” (Interview No. 8, 7 January 2022).

Furthermore, not including refugee women in decision-making creates problems for the outcomes of international and national projects. Humanitarian and state authorities have rarely had the same experiences as refugee women and often fail to fully appreciate the latter’s needs and expectations. For instance, there are organizations which offer online courses or platforms to talk about domestic violence; however, refugee women might not have a room of their own or a private space to participate in such discussions (Interview No. 3, 24 December 2021). Similarly, international and national actors often do not realize that sending a text message or a leaflet to women about domestic violence can put women at more risk if and when these messages or leaflets are discovered by abusive husbands (Interview No. 7, 30 December 2021). Hence, exclusion of refugee women from the designing process of such campaigns can cause serious harm.

Moreover, prioritizing refugee women’s protection from violence over their participation means that protection needs might never come to an end. When international and national actors make participation dependent on the achievement of full protection, participation might never be realized. An expert working for a UN agency explained that “we can never say that we achieved
this now, and we can focus on another issue. Once we think we achieved some improvement, we are going back to the beginning” (Interview No. 6, 28 December 2021). According to another interviewee, “every time a new large group of refugees arrive in Turkey, all the national and international actors focus on protection and leave their work on participation aside” (Interview No. 7, 30 December 2021).

The global refugee regime’s protection-based focus and its approach to refugee women as vulnerable beings are not unique, as women are typically viewed as "the other" and “vulnerable” in international law and policies (Heathcote, 2011, p. 37). However, the UNSC Resolutions under the WPS Agenda offer a novel way to strike a balance between the necessity of protecting women in times of war and encouraging women’s participation in decision-making processes to establish a sustainable peace (Cohn, 2017; Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Sengul et al., 2022; Shepherd, 2018). The WPS Agenda is referred as “a ground-breaking step” because, as Otto (2009) states,

It is the first time that the Security Council formally recognized that women may be something other than victims of armed conflict who need protection. This recalibration of the Security Council’s gender narrative [shifts] from defining women solely in terms of their vulnerabilities to embracing women as political actors. (p. 16)

In 2000, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1325, which served as the WPS Agenda’s backbone. Additional UNSC Resolutions on the WPS Agenda have been implemented to enhance the legal framework on women in conflict since 2008. These resolutions have developed an agenda with the following objectives: protecting women in conflict, ending the use of sexual violence crimes as a weapon of war, increasing the participation of women in peace efforts, offering aid and recovery to women survivors, and developing NAPs and other implementation mechanisms (Tickner & True, 2018, p. 226). Although some resolutions are primarily protection-based and others are more participation-based, there is an attempt to balance protection and participation in the WPS Agenda (Shepherd, 2018, pp. 98-100). Resolutions 1325 and 1889 both recognize the connection between women’s agency and their need for protection, implying that legal protection for women may be ineffective if they are not also given access to community discussions, leadership positions, and decision-making processes (Heathcote, 2012, p. 90).

Turkey has not adopted a NAP to implement the WPS Agenda yet (Alemdar & Yinanc, 2021; Sengul et al., 2022). Turkey’s engagement with the Agenda on the political and decision-making levels has remained very limited thus far (Sarva, 2021). Nevertheless, adopting a NAP in Turkey would help to promote refugee women’s participation and balance protection and participation projects which can further lead to violence prevention. The WPS Agenda acknowledges refugee women’s experiences in several resolutions since the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children was part of the NGO Working Group that pushed for the Agenda in the first place (Shepherd, 2008, p. 388). Resolution 1325 urges gender-sensitive training initiatives for refugee programs (UNSC, 2000, para. 7). Resolution 1820 advocates the development of a strong system to protect refugee women from violence, including sexual violence (UNSC, 2008, para. 7). Resolution 1889 emphasizes meeting the needs of refugee women by offering safety and enabling full participation in peace efforts. It also recognizes the significance of refugee women’s participation, particularly in post-conflict peace processes, which may greatly aid in the establishment of lasting peace (UNSC, 2009, para. 12). Finally, Resolution 2467 acknowledges that SGBV against women makes it difficult for refugee women to access services and, as a result, suggests that steps be taken to reduce the risk of SGBV and make services available
to survivors (UNSC, 2019, para. 31). Therefore, the WPS Agenda provides possibilities to support refugee women’s participation in peace processes as well as to protect them from violence.

Balamir Coskun (2021, pp. 12-13) proposes that a potential NAP for Turkey should promote women’s participation in all municipal and national administrative decision-making processes regarding assistance programs, humanitarian aid, or gender-sensitive camp planning and organization. Hence, a NAP which incorporates refugee women’s rights, expectations, and needs in Turkey would not only strengthen their protection from violence but also reinforce their agency (Sengul et al., 2022, p. 71).

A Long Way to Go from Beneficiaries to Participants

The interviewees who work in the NGOs in Turkey criticized the legal and political authorities for not encouraging refugee women’s agency; however, these interviewees stated that their organizations also fail to consult refugee women in project design processes and simply fulfill the donors’ demands. An NGO worker maintains that not only donors but also NGOs in Turkey adopt top-down approaches: “Regrettably, we create a top-down relationship with our consultants. For me to ask refugee women, ‘what should be done here?’ I need to first abandon this approach. Perhaps then, these women would be able to sincerely answer this question” (Interview No. 3, 24 December 2021).

The top-down approach on the part of the donors and NGOs in Turkey deprives refugee women of their agency. Without a legally binding framework encouraging refugee women’s participatory roles, these women are “rendered speechless and without agency, a physical entity, or rather a physical mass within which individuality is subsumed” (Rajaram, 2002, p. 251). These labels also create a disturbance among refugee women. The categorization of refugee women as weak, vulnerable, and helpless beneficiaries of international aid reinforces the traditional stereotypes regarding refugee women. Research shows that even active participants are transformed into passive dependents once they become refugees (Ghorashi, 2005, p. 195). Host states often create an isolated atmosphere for refugees and, by treating them as weak people who are in constant need and unable to act independently, they transform even politically active individuals into passive recipients/beneficiaries (Ghorashi, 2005, p. 195). There are at least two reasons for this: first, the underlying reason for the reinforcement of traditional stereotypes is related to the justification of help. As Stein argued, there exists a “vicious spiral” in which “refugees are helped because they are helpless” and therefore, “they must display their need and helplessness” (1981, p. 327). At a point where refugees go beyond the helpless victim role and demand their fundamental rights under international human rights law, they easily become unwelcome. For host states and donors to welcome refugees and to create funding for their needs, refugees have to strip off their active roles and settle for what is considered as sufficient for them by donors and NGOs. To break this vicious spiral in Turkey, we argue that they must adopt a NAP in line with the WPS Agenda, which encourages the relevant stakeholders to include refugee women in decision-making processes and mechanisms. During the drafting process of a NAP, all key stakeholders, refugee women, international organizations, donors, and NGOs should take part on equal terms. Dialogue between the refugee women and other stakeholders would strengthen the learning process of humanitarian workers on how to encourage refugee women’s participation in decision-making. Different countries’ experiences show that the involvement of NGOs in drafting and implementing provides a platform for a participatory process (Tomić, 2015). Second, refugee women’s exclusion from decision-making processes cannot be separated from the broader issue of the de-politicization of refugees. Refugee-governing bodies often discourage any type of political
activity on the part of refugees (Omata, 2017, p. 108). When refugees attempt to politically organize, these activities can easily be considered threatening by humanitarian agencies (Turner, 2006, p. 759; Olivius, 2014). Refugees’ participation in any type of political activity or their involvement in collective movements or activities is immediately categorized as dangerous or at least suspicious. Traditionally, refugees are considered to be vulnerable, especially “politically vulnerable” individuals who need the host state’s protection (Black, 1994, p. 362).

For the status of “politically vulnerable” to be sustained, refugees are expected to remain passive and voiceless in their host countries. In such a context of the silence of refugee women, it is important to question who gets to determine their needs. According to an NGO worker in Turkey,

> Major donors such as UN or European Union are the main actors when it comes to deciding which project would be funded. They are very straightforward. They tell us “I am giving you this money for this and that purpose, and I expect you to fulfill these tasks.” We have to meet the requests and reach the expected numbers so that we can proceed with the project. (Interview No. 7, 30 December 2021)

Refugee women are not involved in the process while donors devise the call for projects. In addition, most of the interviewees reported that in Turkey, the NGOs rarely engage with refugee women while applying for projects. Unfortunately, Turkey is not a unique example of this issue; donor policies are usually top-down in conflict-affected countries, which creates criticisms in the academic literature. For instance, Pupavac (2010) argues that in conflict-affected countries, NGOs’ projects mostly focus on traditional occupations and labor-intensive handicrafts which are also prevalent in Turkey. According to Pupavac, such projects fall short of empowerment and emancipation and also depoliticize women. An international organization worker succinctly explained this issue: “Do we really help these women? We are coming up with our own agenda to the field. Maybe if we leave the agenda to women, they will create stronger projects. They know their needs better, so they would come up with better strategies than us” (Interview No. 9, 11 January 2022).

International donors offer one-size-fits-all solutions to different conflict-affected societies across the world. As a national NGO worker underlined, even “within the local,” women’s needs vary considerably; thus, “international actors such as UN, European Union are highly unlikely to establish women’s needs correctly” (Interview No. 11, 19 January 2022). A top-down approach homogenizes local discourses and obscures the diversity of local notions of “peace,” “empowerment,” and “gender equality” (Vogel, 2016). In order to obtain funding, civil society actors adapt international donors’ agendas and exclude local priorities and silence critical voices (Vogel, 2016). To be welcomed as a deserving refugee, refugees must appreciate the help host states’ and donors’ projects provide; “an angry refugee woman” (Gibbings, 2011) who challenges donors’ policies or suggests alternatives easily becomes an unwelcome refugee.

To sustain their existence and to gain a reputable social image, NGOs produce certain client identities (Gibbings, 2011, p. 19): obedient, thankful, and non-political. Refugee women are, in general, considered by NGOs as a homogenous group; however, it is important to recognize different identities since these identities might shape the way refugee women conceptualize empowerment or emancipation (Hewamanne, 2009). Similarly, projects might influence women from different social classes in different ways, and results might change from woman to woman.
(Nawaz, 2020). These issues must be taken into account while establishing the needs on the ground, and refugee women must be consulted in each phase of the projects.

It has been interesting to observe, as Reimann (2006, p. 63) phrased, “a symbiotic relationship” and interdependence among international and national NGOs and state institutions during the field study in Turkey. A national NGO worker (Interview No. 3, 24 December 2021) highlighted the hierarchy between NGOs and their donors and argued that this hierarchy does not give room for questioning the policies of the donors in Turkey. In such a context, the experiences, expectations, and needs of refugee women remain secondary to the donors’ priorities and policies. Nevertheless, this symbiotic relationship might be overruled—albeit occasionally—in the field. A local NGO worker provided an example from her own experience on this issue:

I was working with refugee women on a public health project a few years ago. At the end of a workshop, participants approached me and requested a workshop on education. They told me that this was an issue that they would want to be informed about. I, first, worked on this issue by myself and later organized another workshop specifically on education for these women. So, if you listen to them and ask what they really need, then you can increase their participation, and they can have a say in the process. (Interview No. 1, 2 December 2021)

Another striking example came from an officer who works closely with refugees in the RSD interviews. The interviewee stated that he encourages a woman officer to be in the room during the RSD interviews with refugee women (Interview No. 16, 9 February 2022). According to the interviewee, for refugee women to talk about the reasons for their flight, it is significant to create the appropriate atmosphere, and this can only be possible if there is another woman in the room. He reported that this is unfortunately not the case for all RSD interviews; it is up to the discretion of the officer concerned. For instance, as stated by Interviewee 8, the success of her work with refugee women who are domestic violence survivors depends on ŞÖNİM workers. When and if ŞÖNİM workers are open to collaboration with the NGOs on the ground, support for domestic violence survivors can be provided easier. Thus, in NGO workers’ collaboration with government officers, individual efforts and interpersonal connections play a very important role. The field study shows that individual efforts and interventions are crucial in promoting refugee women’s access to fundamental services.

Such examples demonstrate that, on the bright side, there is some flexibility on the ground, as humanitarian actors individually might encourage participation of refugee women and promote their involvement in decision-making processes. However, there are structural obstacles to the participation of refugee women in these processes, including lack of encouragement, organizational issues, mismanagement, and communication problems within the organizations (Kreitzer, 2002). These obstacles might prevent humanitarian actors from taking initiative and promoting refugee women’s participation by themselves even when they would wish to do so. For the actors to promote the agency of refugee women, a NAP in line with the WPS Agenda would provide a convenient platform where all the individual efforts of the humanitarian workers can be systematized at the national level.

As noted earlier, international efforts promote refugee women’s participation through soft law instruments. We argue that there is a need for a binding instrument for this goal to be achieved. For donors and NGOs, a NAP should be a guide to revising their funding policies and strategies. As the WPS Agenda suggests, women in conflict and post-conflict societies should be integrated
into decision-making processes (UNSC, 2000). In accordance with this, refugee women should be able to express what they need from donors. From the process of design to implementation and evaluation, refugee women should be part of every step. In compliance with their needs, expectations and experiences, donor policies should be revised and transformed in accordance with a NAP which encourages refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This article questioned the extent to which refugee women’s agency and their attempts to rebuild their lives in exile are acknowledged and supported by international organizations, national institutions, and NGOs in Turkey. During the interviews, humanitarian workers refer to various challenges that refugee women face in this regard. They mainly refer to the structural barriers to women’s agency, such as legal limitations on the acknowledgement of SGBV as the basis of persecution and restrictions on access to services and employment opportunities. They also underline the consequences of social structures and patriarchy, which reinforce the traditional roles of women as caretakers in families. Such roles prevent refugee women from having independent lives and participating in public life. Nevertheless, humanitarian workers approach all the challenges refugee women face from a protection-based discourse and respond to these problems through various projects which are all centered around protection. Although protection of refugee women is of significance, the dominant discourse surpasses the participatory role that refugee women can take in Turkey.

Refugee women’s participation is often relegated to a mere formality and circumscribed by the limitations set by humanitarian and state actors. The field study demonstrates that humanitarian and state actors prioritize protection measures which leads to a depoliticization of refugee women’s agency, prevents any meaningful participation, sets up further obstacles for protection, and is unresponsive to refugee women’s needs and expectations. However, this article has also shown that the WPS Agenda offers opportunities to enhance refugee women’s involvement in peace processes and to protect them from violence. Therefore, a NAP that takes into account the rights, aspirations, and needs of refugee women in Turkey will not only improve their safety from violence but also promote their agency.

The field data also show that in Turkey, there are humanitarian actors who encourage refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes by taking initiative. They make use of their interpersonal connections and relationships on the ground to make refugee women’s voices heard. However, without a NAP, these efforts remain scattered and unorganized. Under a legally binding framework, all stakeholders on the ground become obliged to promote refugee women’s participation in decision-making processes at varying levels and fields. We argue that a NAP would challenge the traditional and patriarchal stereotypes regarding refugee women and enable all relevant stakeholders to promote refugee women’s agency in a systematic way.

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