

Narratives of Women Victims of Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking

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Abstract:- Straddling the continents of Europe and Asia, Türkiye has stood as a central hub for migratory influxes over the centuries. Due to recent regional conflicts and crises, Türkiye has increasingly become a significant target and transit country for people fleeing their homelands for various reasons. The diverse routes utilized by irregular migrants to reach Türkiye and subsequently the European Union (EU) have engendered a multitude of revenue streams for migrant smugglers. These irregular migrants, subject to forced migration, become utterly vulnerable to exploitation as they traverse unmonitored regions during their hopeful journeys. This study is prepared to scrutinize the migration stories of women victims of migrant smuggling and human trafficking, who, in search of better living conditions, embark from their countries often located thousands of kilometers away, undergoing months of treacherous conditions and illegal crossings of numerous countries' borders, culminating in Türkiye. Additionally, the study addresses the Turkish Gendarmerie's endeavors in the battle against irregular migration, migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Within the framework of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve victimized women. In conclusion, the situation of women victims of irregular migration and human trafficking is discussed and presented by engaging with the fields of international migration and gender studies.

Keywords: Gendarmerie, Human Trafficking, Migrant Smuggling, Türkiye, Women.

1. Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon as ancient as humanity itself. Over the years, people have moved across different geographies, crossing continents and oceans; they have established various civilizations and shaped history in these regions. Thus, migrations have contributed to the birth of civilizations and coupled with cultural interactions, have paved the way for the spread of civilization globally. The concept of migration encompasses a broad field of discussion and examination. International migration is dynamic, complex, and multifaceted, and it is constantly changing. It takes different forms in different contexts and evolves in various ways. It is influenced by the conditions of the context in which it develops and transforms through interactions with changes in these conditions.

Whether forced or voluntary, migrations offer new opportunities while also leading to significant hardships. Today, migration continues to shape the world on a global scale. Discussions about migration often utilize a combination of push and pull factors. Push factors include the motivations of migrants, such as unemployment and low wages in their home countries, as well as major devastations like war, famine, political persecution, or economic collapse. Attractive migration policies in the destination countries, higher wages, lower unemployment rates, formal and informal networks available to migrants in these countries, the demand for labor, and cultural and linguistic similarities between the origin and destination countries are listed as pull factors. Although definitional differences have occurred over time, the unchanging reality throughout history is people migrating to geographies they have never known before to feel safer. This situation has led to the emergence of the concepts of regular and irregular migration. Especially with irregular migration, the restriction and control of human mobility has become one of the main agenda items.

The phenomenon of irregular migration continues to be one of the most pressing global issues, affecting not just Türkiye but the entire world. Historically, masses of people have migrated from their home countries due to war, conflict, unemployment, violence, oppression, persecution, climate change, or famine, seeking safer and better conditions in more developed nations. Regardless of the cause, migration generates certain impacts in the countries of origin, transit, and destination. Türkiye, in particular, is significantly affected by migration movements and often serves as either a transit or destination country. As migration flows move from east to west, Türkiye has become a pivotal point in these routes. According to official figures from the Ministry of Interior, a total of 245,008 irregular migrants were apprehended in Türkiye in 2023, and 285,027 in 2022. The nationality distribution of the apprehended irregular migrants shows that they predominantly come from Afghanistan and Syria. As seen, Türkiye stands as a focal point in the movement of irregular migration as a transit country [1].

Research conducted by academics, non-governmental organizations, and governments on irregular migration reveals the diverse ways in which people's migration becomes irregular. Therefore, studies on human mobility have a long history. International migration is a research area that is highly dynamic, complex, and multidimensional.

This study addresses the narratives of women who are victims of migrant smuggling and human trafficking from a gender perspective. It also includes tragic events that women irregular migrants encounter during their migration journeys. The study explores the organized dimension of migrant smuggling, the roles involved in these organizations, how migrant smugglers communicate with irregular migrants, and the responsibilities and authorities of the Turkish Gendarmerie in combating irregular migration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve women who are victims of irregular migration and human trafficking who bring their stories to light.

2. International Migration

A. Regular Migration

Migration refers to the movement of a person or a group of people across an international border or within a state. It encompasses population movements regardless of their duration, structure, or reason. This includes the migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and individuals moving for purposes such as family reunification, among others [2].

According to the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye, migration is defined as regular migration, which pertains to foreigners legally entering, staying in, and exiting Türkiye; and irregular migration, which refers to foreigners entering, staying in, and exiting Türkiye through illegal means, as well as working in Türkiye without permission, and includes international protection. [3].

As observed, human mobility is inherent in both definitions. The history of humanity essentially chronicles frequent experiences of human movement on individual, group, or societal levels, where people move to satisfy specific needs. Almost all of us move every day; even in situations where we cannot move, we dream of mobility; and we strive to overcome various distances within the context of our economic, social, or cultural limitations. However, the phenomenon of migration extends beyond this reality, leaving behind questions of 'from where to where?', 'when did the movement occur?', 'how did it happen?' and 'with whom did it occur?', to focus on answering questions such as 'why did it happen?', 'what did the migrants experience?' and 'what are the new human relationships like in the place they moved to?'. Understanding whether someone is an irregular or regular migrant involves comprehending the migrant's thoughts, feelings, living conditions, economic and cultural status, and evaluating the human relationships from before to after the mobility.

B. Irregular Migration

Irregular migration refers to human mobility that occurs outside the regulatory laws and legal frameworks of sending, transit, and receiving countries. For destination countries, irregular migration implies entering, staying in, or working in a country without the necessary permits or documents as required by legal regulations. [4].

In other terms, irregular migration is the part of cross-border human movements that are not controlled or monitored by states. Often discussed in the media, irregular migration is not just about migrant smuggling; it is an umbrella term that encompasses human trafficking, those who enter a country legally but overstay their visas, and the illegal or forced employment of legal or illegal migrants.

The terms regular and irregular migration are rooted in legal frameworks. A migration act that takes place within the legal statutes of the destination country points to regular migrants, whereas migrants who do not have a valid and legal basis to stay in the country they arrive at are classified under the irregular category. "Irregular migration," means migration that is not under any legal regulation. This term does not imply that all irregular migrants in a country are illegal or undocumented. Some regular migrants have documents fabricated by migrant smugglers, which puts them in the status of being illegal or irregular migrants.

Since the inception of migration law, there has been a substantial increase in the demand for migration, and there is an urgent need for an organization and legal framework to regulate this demand fairly and ethically. Therefore, the fundamental issue today is not just the problem of unregulated migration but also how this process will be managed. Despite the growing number of government reports and national regulations, it is not yet possible to speak of a global-scale effective international policy. The main reason for this situation is that the regulations concerning irregular migration are considered more at a regional than a global level.

The primary factor influencing the decisions of irregular migrants to embark on their journey is personal safety. However, this factor is not alone due to ongoing instability in the areas where they live. Conditions that threaten personal safety, along with daily life becoming increasingly impossible in source countries, political instability, extreme poverty, economic crises, lack of education, and conflicts within ethnic and tribal structures also play a decisive role in the decision of irregular migrants to embark. All these dynamics drive people to migrate in search of better living conditions and opportunities.

For instance, an Afghan irregular migrant mentioned, *"During the day, and for the purpose of overnight stays, we reached a ruined village house at the Iran-Türkiye border, where thirty irregular migrants crammed into a tiny room to spend the entire night." She also stated, "Syrians who are close to or familiar with the border geography can cross the border without needing a smuggler. Similarly, there are those who cross with the help of well-known guides or through friends/relatives/neighbors who are familiar with the area."* (Interview 5).

Irregular migrants from Afghanistan choosing Türkiye as a destination country have expressed that reaching Europe is now much more difficult and that, according to their acquaintances and relatives who have reached Europe, the opportunities once available there have diminished, and xenophobia has increased. Consequently, they report that they have not faced any racial discrimination in Türkiye and have been able to find jobs, particularly in agriculture and seasonal work, through relatives or acquaintances who had arrived earlier. They feel secure when they can access basic services [5].

This issue should be evaluated under two categories regarding irregular migration: Türkiye being chosen as either a target country or a transit country. Irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria who choose Türkiye as their destination country do so because they are familiar with the cultural, economic, and social conditions due to their proximity and similar cultures. They have positive information from relatives, neighbors, or friends who have previously traveled to Türkiye and are aware that they will be treated humanely. The familial connections across the border make them feel less like they are in a foreign culture; despite their irregular entry, they believe they have found refuge once they cross into Turkish territory.

3. Migrant Smuggling

Cross-border human movements encompass a wide range of activities, including people entering and exiting other countries for various reasons, migrating from their countries of citizenship to another country, settling, establishing businesses, or seeking protection, as well as being directly linked to organized crimes like migrant smuggling and human trafficking. According to the "Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air," supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, migrant smuggling is defined as "the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material

benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident." [6]

Article 79 of the Turkish Penal Code (TPC) addresses the crime of "migrant smuggling" as "facilitating the illegal entry of people into Türkiye or their exit from Türkiye for the purpose of obtaining material gain." According to Article 79 of the TPC:

For obtaining direct or indirect material benefit, through illegal means:

- a) Facilitating the entry of a foreigner into the country or enabling their stay,
- b) Facilitating the exit of a Turkish citizen or a foreigner from the country.

The term "migrant smuggler" refers to a broker who moves people illegally across an internationally recognized state border based on an agreement with them [7].

This crime inherently involves crossing a national border and thus requires physical movement. From this perspective, for the crime to occur, actions must be carried out in both a sending country and a destination country. Migrant smuggling involves consent; the irregular migrant being illegally transferred across the borders of another country consents to this action, in essence acting like a criminal violating state border policy. The implication of organized crime and danger by irregular migrants has led to migration policies increasingly being treated as a security issue.

The various routes used by irregular migrants to reach Türkiye and thereby the European Union create multiple revenue streams for such formations and organizations. Forced migrants, subjected to irregular migration, become completely vulnerable to exploitation as they pass through unmonitored areas during their journeys of hope. In regions without an official authority, state structure, or any legal ground, or where these do not function fully, irregular migrants are at the mercy of crime and terrorist organizations. Irregular migrants are coerced or persuaded to partake in other illegal activities such as drug trafficking, organ trade, forced conscription, arms trafficking, and human trafficking along routes across the world. Therefore, migrant smuggling transforms into a chain of illegal activities with multiple dynamics.

In Türkiye, especially the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian border regions are preferred as main transit routes in migrant smuggling due to the challenging geographical conditions that make these areas difficult to control (Figure-1). The tough terrain and harsh climatic conditions of this geography, along with the activities of separatist terrorist organizations, are among the factors that make combating migrant smuggling particularly challenging. Additionally, the vulnerabilities in border security measures and internal security issues of neighboring countries also constitute significant factors to be considered in the context of border security. Türkiye's western borders, on the other hand, are becoming an increasingly busy route each year for irregular migrants aiming to reach the EU. This increase in irregular migration makes migrant smuggling attractive in Türkiye, as it is globally, for illegal organizations. All of Türkiye's border provinces, and even districts, have their unique and highly variable dynamics regarding migrant smuggling. The socio-economic and cultural dimensions created by these dynamics, along with ethnic and demographic variables and security factors, including cross-border kinship relations and the activities of existing terrorist and criminal organizations, vary widely [8].



Figure-1: Türkiye's Irregular Migration Map

1. Initial Contact with the Smuggler: Irregular migrants, deciding to leave their country in pursuit of better economic conditions and utilizing the conveniences offered by the internet to contact a migrant smuggler, cross the Afghanistan-Iran border on foot and travel by road to reach the border of Türkiye.
2. Border - Journey of Desperation: Migrants staying in villages/towns near the Turkish border in Iran cross the border on foot even under harsh weather conditions. They are sheltered in "shock houses" by organizers and dispatched within the country.
3. Shelter in Metropolitan Cities: Migrants from our eastern border provinces are brought to major cities, primarily Istanbul, by various means, and accommodated in hotels/houses arranged by the organizers.
4. Dispatch to Exit Provinces: Migrants are transported from metropolitan cities to the coastal provinces of the Aegean and Mediterranean, where they will exit Türkiye, by migrant smugglers.
5. Waiting for Shipment in Coastal Provinces of the Aegean and Mediterranean: Irregular migrants housed in hotels/houses in coastal towns and districts are sent to deserted coves to board boats/fishing vessels upon receiving news.
6. Exit by Sea: Groups of irregular migrants' board boats obtained by organizers for travel to Greece and Italy.
7. Exit by Land: Groups of irregular migrants are placed into trucks/cars by migrant smugglers for travel to European countries.
8. Final Stop Western Borders: At the shores of the Aegean/Mediterranean, the boat/ship that carries irregular migrants arrives at the destination country. The money entrusted is then shared by the migrant smugglers.

During an interview under administrative supervision, 24-year-old Afghan D.S., who stated that she arrived in Türkiye with the help of a migrant smuggler, shared that she is single, was a student studying economics in his country prior to arriving in Türkiye, and has no intention of returning to Afghanistan. She mentioned that before the Taliban, her father was one of the department heads at the Ministry of Health. She expressed a desire not to live outside of Türkiye at the moment. She described his family, fragmented along the migration route, as follows:

"One of my relatives found the smuggler. The smuggler doesn't come to the border with us. He just shows us the way. We communicated via WhatsApp. I started the journey with my father. My father couldn't make the crossing from Iran to Türkiye and stayed in Iran. I have been in Türkiye for a month." (Interview 1)

In the administrative interview, Ş. A., a 27-year-old individual, stated that she is married and has a 4-year-old son. She expressed having watched videos on TikTok and YouTube suggesting an easy passage to Türkiye, but conveyed that her actual experience did not align with this perception. She mentioned:

"My spouse is also Afghan, working in a hotel in Istanbul. I am a teacher, having completed a 2-year teaching program. I do not want to return to Afghanistan. I paid a total of \$1500 to migrant smugglers, \$1000 for adults and \$500 for children. The current administration in Afghanistan demanded \$12,000 per person for a visa, which I could not afford. My father-in-law in Afghanistan found the smuggler for us. Initially, we came from Afghanistan to Iran. We came as a group, including my cousin and my uncle's son, all of whom were students in Afghanistan. We flew to Iran. We stayed at the smuggler's house for a week. We walked over the mountains for 2 nights and 2 days. There were 33 of us. We were caught in Van. The journey took 3 months." (Interview 2)

During the interview with S.N., an irregular Afghan migrant (23 years old, single, illiterate, unemployed), she expressed her desire to work and earn money in Türkiye, then proceed to Germany. She stated, *"I do not want to go back to Afghanistan. I was introduced to the migrant smuggler by someone from the same village in Afghanistan."* (Interview 3)

In the administrative interview, A.T., a 21-year-old individual, disclosed being married and employed as an obstetrician-gynecologist. She recounted;

"I came from Afghanistan due to dire circumstances and threats to my life. I was a gynecologist there. The conflict was rampant. All the doctors left. There were numerous women in need of obstetric care, and I couldn't abandon them in such a state. Then, several injured terrorists and a wounded commander arrived. The terrorists demanded, 'Leave all the patients, prioritize operating on this one and treat him.' I replied, 'There are no other doctors, I cannot perform this alone.' They insisted, 'You will perform his surgery. If the commander dies, you will die too.' Meanwhile, a woman in labor awaited, suffering from severe bleeding. Without immediate intervention, both the mother and the baby would perish. I told the terrorists, 'You leave, I will perform the surgery.' Subsequently, I intervened for the mother and the baby. During this time, the terrorist succumbed to blood loss. The terrorists alleged, 'You deliberately killed him.' They threatened, 'We will stone you to death and parade your body without delivering it to your family as a deterrent.' I had to flee. My family remained there." (Interview 4)

Women are affected differently by the insecure environment, risks, and dangers brought about by forced migration. Evaluating the security threats that adversely affect the lives of irregular migrant women brings us closer to the concept of human security. In this regard, one of the most important reasons for migration is presented as human security. Human security is closely related to the concept of forced migration. Perceptions of threat vary depending on individuals' experiences and the fear they feel. Human security aims to protect people's lives to ensure the freedom of all individuals. Human security entails safeguarding the fundamental aspects of life, protecting people from threats. Therefore, it is necessary to build processes that enable people to survive and breathe. This means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military, and cultural systems that secure people's survival, life, and dignity [9] The greatest challenge driving irregular migrant women we interviewed to migrate is the lack of security in their own countries.

D.A. was born in 1984 in the city of Meydanvardak, Afghanistan. She did not attend school. Until she got married, D.A. did not work in any job because girls were not allowed to attend school in Afghanistan. At the age of 12, she was forced to become engaged to her cousin's son by her father's decision. In these regions, girls were not given a say in marriage matters, and whatever decision the parents made was accepted. Therefore, D.A. could not speak out against her father's decision. She got married at the age of 19. D.A.'s husband passed away in 2013. After her husband's death, D.A. stayed in Afghanistan for two more years. As time passed, the pressure from the Taliban increased in the country. Taliban members were a threat to D.A. and her children. She realized she could not live in Afghanistan any longer. The fear that her children would also be killed pushed her to leave her home. She thought about going to Türkiye to save herself and her children. She sold her husband's car and borrowed money from acquaintances. She offered her younger brother to come with her to Türkiye. D.A.'s father initially objected, but he had to allow her brother to go with D.A. so that her daughter and grandchildren would not travel alone. They set out with D.A.'s three children and her brother. They first came to the Pakistan border by bus. After arriving in Pakistan, they were put into vehicles by migrant smugglers. They traveled to the Iran border with these vehicles. At the border, the migrant smuggler who brought D.A. and her group directed them to another smuggler he was in contact with. Here, they got into another vehicle and reached the Turkish border. After passing through a few hills and cliffs, they arrived in Van after five hours. However, soldiers at the border caught D.A. and her children. (Interview 9).

Irregular migrant women, after crossing into neighboring countries, which are the first and closest destinations due to security concerns, seek opportunities to transition to Western countries with better resources. Therefore, the journey of each irregular migrant woman contains unique events regardless of distance and geography, and these events help understand their reasons for migration.

4. Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is defined as one of the fastest-growing illegal activities globally. Unlike other illicit activities, human trafficking is based on the violation of victims' human rights. Practices of human trafficking commodify individuals, with financial gain obtained through the exploitation of those involved. Individuals under the control of human traffickers are treated as commodities, deprived of all forms of control over their lives. Human trafficking, along with drug and arms trafficking, is considered one of the largest three criminal activities worldwide and a major source of organized crime financing.

We can examine the reasons for the increase in human trafficking in Europe and worldwide by categorizing them into four factors. Firstly, it is the impact of globalization. As globalization increases, so do opportunities for border crossings, leading to an increase in cases of human trafficking. The desire for a more comfortable life and the willingness of individuals to work in other countries have made them vulnerable to deception. From this perspective, human trafficking is one of the dark sides of globalization. Secondly, it is technology and its use for advertising purposes. Criminal organizations, especially, utilize the internet as a tool to reach vulnerable individuals for trafficking. For example, the widespread use of the internet has transformed the traditionally street-based prostitution industry. Now, the prostitution industry has become a global market accessible from home through a computer. As a result, supply and demand can be more easily coordinated over the internet. Additionally, identifying and investigating perpetrators has become even more challenging.

The development of digital technologies and their migration to social media platforms further complicates law enforcement's job. Thirdly, there has been an increase in corruption since the end of the Cold War. Fourthly, the frequent occurrence of wars in recent times is another factor. Wars and oppressive regimes are a fundamental driving force for those wishing to flee troubled territories [10].

Especially, women are among the primary victims of human trafficking. One commonly used method to exert pressure on women in human trafficking is "indebtedness." Human traffickers persuade women initially by spending money on airplane tickets, visas, and passports for them to come to our country. They record amounts well above these expenses as debts to the women. In this way, human traffickers aim to make women dependent on them. These victimized women, who have no money of their own and are brought from one country to another through others, become frightened by the high amount of debt they are told they owe. They are told they owe a debt and are pressured to pay it off. The coercion of women into unwanted jobs starts with this debt pressure. At the same time, most women have their passports and identities seized. Victims, fearing violence, not knowing the language or laws of the country, and not knowing whom to ask for help or fearing being without passports, are forced to do the job imposed on them. The resistance each victim shows against being forced into prostitution may vary [11].

D.K., a 15-year-old victim, was forcibly intended to be married to older individuals by her father in exchange for money. The child's right to object was disregarded, and violence was inflicted upon her. Child has expressed this situation as follows:

In the 8th grade, my father took me out of school. My mother and I couldn't even look out the window. For as long as I can remember, my father gambled, lost his money, and beat my mother, my siblings, and me. My brothers went to another city to escape from my father. My father was marrying women aged between 14 and 50 with a Syrian woman. He had married a woman, and the man he married her to had given my father money. Later, this woman ran away from home, and the man she married demanded his money back from my father. After this incident, my father tried to marry me off. Some of the men who came to the house were married and in their 40s or 50s. I didn't want to get married; I wanted to go to school. When children resist against their elders, they often lose this battle. Being both psychologically and physically weak causes them to lose this battle. The situation of violence and pressure they experience leads them to accept it more quickly. When I told my father I didn't want to get married, he would beat me. He would hit me wherever he could, on my shoulders, waist, head, anywhere. My father was asking for 20,000 TL from the suitors. There were even those who offered 50,000 TL, but I didn't want it. My mother also suffered beatings from my father trying to save me. I was fed up with all of this. Finally, a man around twenty-eight years old from Istanbul came with his family to ask for me. My father asked me in front of everyone if I wanted to get married again. I just bowed my head. Upon this, my father sold me for 15,000 TL (Interview 10).

Human trafficking has diverse causes and varies between the countries of origin and destination. Some of the fundamental reasons involve exerting pressure on victims, pushing them towards migration and consequently under the control of human traffickers, while others entice potential victims with various promises.

P.A., a woman from Tajikistan, had separated from her husband two years prior. She was taking care of her two children and her sick parents. Life was challenging for P.A. One day, while walking in the market, she met a

woman who told her to come to Türkiye with her, claiming to have a great job opportunity with good pay there. P.A. arrived in Türkiye where she was greeted at the airport by two well-dressed individuals, one male and one female. They took her to a house, where suddenly a man entered the room. He demanded P.A.'s passport and phone. P.A. hesitated, but the man slapped her and repeated his demands. P.A. realized she was in for tough times. The man forced P.A. into a car and took her to another house, where they took naked photographs of her. She realized she couldn't go anywhere and was threatened that if she tried to escape, they would send the photos to her family. One day, while being forcibly taken to a client, she noticed that the car door was open. Seizing the opportunity, she threw herself out of the car and started screaming. People gathered around her. The man tried to escape, but he was apprehended by the crowd. They called the police for help. After the procedures, P.A. was identified as a victim. She expressed her desire to return to her country to the authorities (Interview 11).

N.K., a nurse from Uzbekistan, was working in her home country but wanted to settle in Türkiye. To achieve this, she discussed with her friend L.F. who informed her that she wouldn't be able to obtain a residence permit or find a job in Türkiye unless she got married. L.F. mentioned that, although he currently didn't have a prospective groom, they would introduce her to acquaintances of Y.T., the wife of M.T., an Uzbekistani couple they knew in Aksaray. Y.T. and M.K.'s father agreed to marry N.K. for 47,000 TL, and she got married. Two months later, N.K. learned that her father was ill in Uzbekistan. She told her husband that she wanted to go to Uzbekistan because her father needed her. Her husband opposed this decision. N.K.'s mother-in-law demanded her passport and ID, and when N.K. refused, she was beaten. Her belongings and suitcase were destroyed. N.K. felt like her world had turned into hell, and not knowing where else to seek help, she decided to write to the Uzbek Turkic group on Telegram. One of the female members of the group heard N.K.'s cry for help and immediately informed the gendarmerie (Interview 12).

Globally, women and girls constitute 71% of all detected victims of human trafficking. Young girls represent nearly two-thirds of all detected child trafficking victims. The Secretary-General's Report on Trafficking in Women and Girls acknowledges that trafficking in women and girls leads to more severe harm for them compared to men and boys due to specific forms of exploitation such as sexual exploitation, violence, domestic servitude, and forced marriage [12].

The factors underlying the emergence of human trafficking as a gender-based issue are complex and multi-layered. Women and girls are at greater risk due to factors such as poverty, limited employment opportunities, lack of access to economic resources, and restricted educational opportunities. This creates a fertile ground that enhances their vulnerability to human trafficking. Gender-based violence, both as a widespread human rights violation and as a factor increasing the risk of women and girls becoming victims of serious crimes such as human trafficking, exacerbates the situation. The normalization and cultural legitimization of violence against women further complicates breaking this cycle. Discriminatory labor and migration laws, gender-blind policies, and restrictions on women's ability to move and change employment limit their opportunities, pushing them into irregular and unregulated working conditions. This, in turn, creates greater vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation.

On the other hand, conflict and post-conflict environments are periods when the rule of law weakens, and fundamental human rights are disregarded. The chaos created by humanitarian crises can be counted among the factors that pave the way for human trafficking. This complex scenario underscores the critical importance of integrating a gender perspective in combating human trafficking and ensuring gender equality.

The global wave of migration, which has increased by over forty percent since the beginning of the twenty-first century, has deeply influenced the dynamics of human trafficking. However, the specific challenges faced by migrant women have tended to be overlooked in these broad-scale analyses. The gender-based difficulties and threats they encounter during migration journeys make women more susceptible to human trafficking. The concentration of migrant women in low-wage, unskilled jobs often leads them to work in informal sectors without legal protection, further rendering them vulnerable. Women working in such jobs may be subjected to gender-specific exploitation, forced labor, extortion, debt bondage, and violence. Obtaining reliable and comprehensive data and conducting research on victimized women in such organized crimes is particularly challenging.

5. Turkish Gendarmerie in the Fight Against Irregular Migration and Human Trafficking

Security is an essential public service both for societal life and the way it is provided, and it should be perceived as such. Without fulfilling this public service, the state's ability to carry out its duties in other core areas such as education, healthcare, and transportation also becomes more challenging. Particularly concerning law enforcement and internal security, every aspect of social life is either linked to security services or falls within their purview. Law enforcement activities, which are an important area from the perspective of public administration, are generally carried out by armed state institutions responsible for enforcing laws related to public order and security, albeit varying from country to country. Conducted within the framework of a public service logic, law enforcement activities exhibit a regulatory, enforcement, and often supervisory role intertwined with individuals' freedoms and lives [13].

Law enforcement forces are institutions where citizens can convey all kinds of security needs, complaints, and wishes. In this sense, they serve in one of the areas where the public most needs the power and functions of the state. Established in 1839, the Turkish Gendarmerie ranks among the primary law enforcement institutions in Türkiye. Evolving through various stages, the Turkish Gendarmerie, which has persisted to the present day, is defined as an armed general law enforcement force carrying out duties related to public order and security, as well as fulfilling tasks assigned by other laws and Presidential Decrees, according to Law No. 2803 on the Organization, Duties, and Powers of the Gendarmerie. Operating under the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye, the duties of the gendarmerie are generally categorized into three groups: civil, judicial, and military, as defined in the same law [14].

Serving as the gateway of the state to the citizens in the remotest corners of the country, the Turkish Gendarmerie carries out tasks such as combating terrorism, maintaining public order, preventing smuggling, preventing crime, and providing external security for correctional facilities and detention centers [15].

Especially during its duties aimed at maintaining public order under the category of civil tasks, the Turkish Gendarmerie, which closely interacts with the public, has seen the increasing importance of its efforts in combating irregular migration and human trafficking. Indeed, the vision set forth by the Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy to be an exemplary law enforcement force in national and international arenas, providing respected, reliable, and high-quality service with a people-centered, contemporary management and mission approach [16], clearly demonstrates its focus on individuals and thus society in the execution of its public service.

In Türkiye, border security is crucial in combating irregular migration and human trafficking. Along Türkiye's border, a 1028-kilometer wall construction has been completed, with work ongoing on a 77-kilometer section and a 211-kilometer section in the bidding phase. Lighting systems have been completed along 913 kilometers of the Turkish border, with ongoing work on 37 kilometers. Installation of camera and sensor systems has been completed along 293 kilometers, with 341 electro-optic towers built along the border and 284 thermal cameras installed. Within the jurisdiction of the Gendarmerie, from January 1 to May 19, 2021, 26,427 irregular migrants and 856 migrant smugglers were apprehended, while during the same periods in 2022, 48,050 irregular migrants and 1,488 migrant smugglers were apprehended. Sixty-three percent of apprehensions occurred in border provinces. Approximately 8,500 gendarmerie commando personnel are actively combating irregular migration along the Iranian and Syrian borders. In border provinces with Iran and Syria, 6,372 gendarmerie internal security personnel and 28,732 security guards have been deployed behind the border. In Van, where migration is prevalent, six Gendarmerie Crime Investigation Teams have been established to combat migrant smugglers. Ninety percent of migrant smugglers are linked to criminal organizations, with parts of these organizations present in every country. The Turkish Gendarmerie's goal is to prevent irregular migration and actively combat criminal organizations involved in crimes like human trafficking [17].

Preventing irregular migration and increasing deterrence is also crucial for the activities carried out by the Turkish Gendarmerie to be present on social media. For instance, the footage of operations conducted consecutively by the gendarmerie nationwide, capturing irregular migrants in their responsibility areas while crossing the border and sea illegally, by tracking them with unmanned aerial vehicles, and the coverage of these news pieces in the media shed light on the struggle against irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the experiences of irregular migrant women captured by the Turkish Gendarmerie, delving into the incidents where these women are subjected to human trafficking and various forms of exploitation in detail. Therefore, the study addresses the plight of women from two dimensions. The first involves the reasons compelling women into forced migration, while the second pertains to their exploitation by human traffickers. The findings of the study reveal the serious violations women face during the migration process, such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, violence, and deception, among others, and how they are systematically disempowered during this process. Women and girls are groups with a higher likelihood of encountering gender-specific forms of exploitation, violence, domestic servitude, and forced marriage. This leads to a high representation of women and girls among victims of human trafficking, reflecting the challenges they face in issues such as gender inequality, limited job opportunities, lack of access to financial resources, and limited educational opportunities. Interviews and data analysis indicate that women often fall into the hands of traffickers through illegal means and in desperate circumstances while seeking opportunities. Women are not only exploited economically but also physically and psychologically, with escape routes often closed off, leaving them completely vulnerable. This situation further traps them in a worsening cycle, exposing them to human rights violations and serious cases of gender-based violence. The determination and effectiveness of the Turkish Gendarmerie in combating irregular migration and human trafficking underscore the critical role of security in societal life. Such efforts reflect the vital tasks of law enforcement agencies that directly impact individuals' freedoms and lives and are crucial for maintaining public order. In conclusion, this study highlights the challenges and dangers faced by irregular migrant women, advocating for policy and practices to be reshaped with a central focus on gender perspective. Reducing gender-specific risks encountered by women in migration processes, protecting and supporting them, requires a coordinated effort at both national and international levels. These efforts should aim to make women more resilient against human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, guiding them towards a migration experience that is safer, fairer, and more dignified.

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