

GIZ Gender Competition 2023 Entry

Empowerment through Feminist Solidarity

“This program gave me strength and courage!”

Over the past decade, the gendered displacement experiences of Syrian refugee women and girls, compounded by the structural challenges they face in accessing rights and services, have resulted in a significantly low participation rate in higher education and the labour force. The PEP Project addressed this issue by implementing a holistic program tailored for women across different life cycles, adopting a gender-transformative approach. Among other interventions within the PEP Project, the Women’s Solidarity Program for Young Refugee Women stands out as a transformative model that exemplifies the potential of feminist solidarity as an empowering tool.

The project “PEP - Promotion of Economic Prospects for Refugees and the Host Community in Türkiye” is financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH Türkiye Office. The PEP Project aims to enhance the economic prospects and strengthen the resilience of vulnerable Turkish citizens and Syrians under Temporary Protection through its three components: “Employment Promotion”; “Entrepreneurship Development”; and “Strengthening the Business Environment”. Within this framework, measures taken by the project include vocational training, employment support, start-up assistance, formalizing businesses, and capacity building. Partners include chambers of industry, municipalities, and NGOs.

As an overarching objective, PEP seeks to address gender gaps in areas globally favoring men, evident in Türkiye’s labor market, TVET participation, and entrepreneurship. Turkish women’s labour market participation is 37.6%, while Syrian women’s is lower at 13.7%. NEET rates for Turkish women aged 15-24 are 30.7%, rising to 55.6% for those aged 30-34. A study by the ILO (2019) reveals a significant gender gap, with no EU country having a larger one at any age. In 2022, Syrian refugee women’s NEET rate was 82.2%, while men’s was 19.6%¹. Low female employment rates and the small number of young women in education among Syrians result in one of the highest female NEET rates in the world (ILO, 2022). Entrepreneurship among Syrian businesses shows only ten women out of 300 entrepreneurs, and women hold 5.4% of senior executive positions with 0.3% of majority shares. These figures may worsen due to the country’s deteriorating economic conditions, particularly escalating inflation.

Adopting a gender-transformative approach to employment promotion, PEP seeks to enhance the agency of refugee and host community women, enabling them to become more self-reliant. The initiative addresses structural barriers hindering women’s participation in the formal job market, establishes a conducive environment for decent employment, and encourages working women to build supportive relationships for practical assistance and encouragement. The PEP Project undertook these tasks by implementing a holistic, multi-component women’s socio-economic empowerment project at the Women Solidarity Centre of the Seyhan Municipality in Adana².

The project provides diverse pathways for different groups of women to achieve employment and income generation based on their specific needs, prospects, and expectations. This targeted approach allowed us to offer tailored services, resulting in a more significant impact. On one side, middle-aged women, who prefer to have home-based businesses, underwent vocational training courses and A1-A2 Turkish language classes. At

¹ ILO 2022, Syrian Refugees in the Turkish Labour Market, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-ankara/documents/publication/wcms_738602.pdf

² Launched with the support of GIZ Türkiye in 2018, the center has since offered numerous projects to refugee and local women, synchronizing support from various GIZ projects, including PEP.

the end of the training, many of them became producers for the Seyhan Women Cooperative, generating income through their sales.

On the other side, PEP targeted young refugee women, aged 18-30, in the early stages of their higher education and/or career development. This group includes young women transitioning from high school to university, preparing for university exams, or those who have recently graduated and were seeking employment. These women participated in an 11-week-long solidarity program, received career guidance, and attended B1 Turkish courses. The program is called the Women's Solidarity Program for Young Refugee Women. We believe it stands out as a transformative model that exemplifies the potential of feminist solidarity as an empowering tool.

The Women's Solidarity Program for Young Refugee Women: "Can we find solutions to some of our problems together?"



The objective of the solidarity group meetings was to provide safe spaces where young women could share their thoughts on challenges, fears, and expectations concerning building independent and self-sufficient lives in Türkiye. The aim was to create a network of solidarity among them to overcome challenges, with a specific focus on women's participation in the Turkish economy, women's human rights, and gender equality.

"It was great to focus on solutions instead of problems."

The program evolved into a series of weekly half-day sessions, fostering an environment where up to 15 refugee women and two facilitators engaged in open dialogue and shared experiences. The participants, totaling 80 young women in groups of 10-15, benefited from the stated advantage of having women of a similar age, between 18-30. This similarity increased the likelihood of common experiences among the group, allowing tailored sessions to address the specific needs of the participants and encouraging solidarity for common goals. The program consisted of 11 workshops for a round, beginning with Self-Introduction, Communication, Experience Sharing, Discrimination, Gender, Legal Rights, Health, Entrepreneurship, Women's Solidarity, and Evaluation, and concluding with a solidarity party.

"I understood that I am not alone, this happens to everyone."

Based on feedback from the first round's participants, the program was edited, and the Discrimination and Gender workshops were merged in the second round due to participants' similar experiences related to both topics. In response to feedback, an emotion regulation workshop was added upon the request of young women struggling to handle their anger and overcome their problems.



Throughout the program, participants attended B1-level Turkish language courses, a necessary level of language proficiency for better integration into life and a future in Türkiye. The B1 level certificate is also required by young refugees aspiring to pursue higher levels of Turkish proficiency for university education. Simultaneously, we organized career guidance seminars to encourage young women to pursue higher education and address any obstacles they might encounter when seeking job opportunities. These two-day seminars provided guidance on university department selection, CV preparation, online job search platforms, and application processes for jobs.

It was great to see women in the game standing up for themselves and not remaining silent."



"It felt good that the trainer knew what we were going through."

Many sessions in the program were designed using art and drama, such as those focusing on communication, experience-sharing, discrimination, and gender equality. Legal rights, reproductive rights, and mental and psychosocial health services were introduced by guest experts from local NGOs. Successful businesswomen from Adana mentored the young women, helping them create projects and business plans for review and potential entry into competitions at the project's end. The young refugee women had the opportunity to meet Syrian and Turkish students from Adana's Çukurova University, receiving guidance on how to apply and what to expect during and after university education.

Crucially, the workshops avoided didactic training methods that might impose external solutions on the participants. Instead, the women themselves crafted group rules, forming the foundation of a safe and judgment-free space. This intentional avoidance of a savior-saved dynamic was paramount, ensuring that the program remained a platform for collective growth rather than a conventional aid initiative. Most of the participant women were Syrian refugees, with some having obtained Turkish citizenship. However, the groups included refugee and migrant women from Afghanistan, Morocco, Iraq, and Iran.

Through plays and games, the women explored and expressed their emotions, cultivating a deep sense of solidarity. The discussions focused on communication skills, shared experiences of discrimination, and the internalization of the meaning and applications of solidarity. The overarching question guiding these conversations was powerful: 'Can we find solutions to some of our problems together?'



Four rounds of the program were implemented between January 2022 and July 2023. At the end of the four rounds, out of 80 young women, 8 were employed, 12 started their university education, 17 continued their undergraduate education, 8 continued their graduate education, and the remaining 52 received B1 Turkish language certificates to further use in their lives.

"I feel safe here, there is no racism, and we are all women."



The impact of this feminist solidarity extended far beyond the confines of the program. Women continued to nurture their newfound bonds, forming a supportive network that transcended the sessions. This solidarity manifested in practical ways, such as entrusting each other with childcare during work hours, co-renting houses, and providing emotional support during times of grief and anxiety. They became allies in navigating the complexities of Turkish bureaucracy and collaborated in the pursuit of employment opportunities. One example of finding solutions together was establishing a WhatsApp group to communicate when they don't feel safe on the street on their way back home from work or university and to call for each other's company.

Empowered by the strength of their collective unity, these women embarked on a journey to challenge the structural and cultural obstacles hindering their integration into the labour force. Motivated by the shared understanding cultivated in the program, they actively sought job opportunities, worked to strengthen their language skills, and even explored entrepreneurship options. The emphasis shifted from individual struggles to a collaborative effort aimed at dismantling barriers and creating pathways for sustainable empowerment.

In a region marked by the challenges of displacement and conflict, the Women's Solidarity Program emerged as a beacon of change, demonstrating that feminist solidarity has the transformative power to not only enrich individual lives but also challenge and reshape the broader societal landscape."

"Every woman struggles in life. We must support each other. A woman can do whatever she wants, we must never give up!"

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