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The Position of Turkish Women in Belgium: Marriage and Language Integration

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Abstract

This study examines the post-migration experiences of women who migrated from Turkey to Belgium through marriage. It focuses on their marital and family lives, social integration processes, experiences of learning Belgium's official languages, and access to the labor market. The main research question is as follows: What kinds of social, economic, and cultural challenges do women who migrate to Belgium through marriage encounter after migration, and how do they cope with these challenges? The study draws on a qualitative field study with 20 migrant women aged 32-62 living in Brussels, as well as one social work professional. By presenting empirical data from women's subjective narratives, the study contributes to the limited literature on marriage migrant women in Belgium. It offers an original contribution to migration and integration research by analyzing marriage migration at the intersection of gender, integration, and labor market access.

Keywords : Belgium, Marriage Migration, Immigrant Women, Marriage, Language

Türk Kadınının Belçika'daki Konumu: Evlilik ve Dil Uyumu

Özet

Bu makale, Belçika'ya Türkiye'den evlilik yoluyla göç eden kadınların göç sonrası deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Çalışma, bu kadınların evlilik ve aile yaşamları, sosyal uyum süreçleri, Belçika dillerini öğrenme deneyimleri ve işgücü piyasasına erişimlerini ele almaktadır. Araştırmanın temel sorusu, evlilik yoluyla Belçika'ya göç eden Türkiyeli kadınların göç sonrası karşılaştıkları sosyal, ekonomik ve kültürel sorunların neler olduğu ve bu sorunlarla nasıl başa çıktıklarıdır. Araştırma, Brüksel'de yaşayan 32–62 yaşları arasındaki 20 Türkiyeli göçmen kadın ve bir sosyal hizmet uzmanı ile gerçekleştirilen nitel saha araştırmasına dayanmaktadır. Çalışma, Belçika bağlamında evlilik göçmeni kadınlara ilişkin sınırlı literatüre, kadınların öznel anlatılarına dayanan ampirik veriler sunmakta; evlilik göçünü toplumsal cinsiyet, entegrasyon ve işgücü erişimi kesişiminde ele alarak göç ve entegrasyon literatürüne özgün bir katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Belçika, Evlilik Göçü, Göçmen Kadın, Evlilik, Dil

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Introduction

Although Turkey experienced significant economic growth after the 1950s, structural unemployment and income inequality continued to drive labor migration. In 1961, Turkey signed its first migration and labor exchange agreement with Germany. Subsequent agreements were signed with the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, and Austria in 1964, France in 1965, and Sweden in 1967. At the time of migration, 75% of Turkish workers sent to Belgium were married. Their spouses and children remained in their home country, waiting for their husbands and fathers to return permanently. However, before the onset of economic decline, the governments of countries receiving labor migrants adopted restrictive migration policies in 1974. Migrant workers demanded that their temporary residence be made permanent and that they be allowed to reunite with the families they had left behind (Gelekçi & Köse, 2011).

Initially regarded as "guest workers," Turkish migrants began settling permanently. The second phase of migration consisted of the children of workers who arrived in Belgium during the 1970s and the 1980s. In the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s, a third wave of migration occurred, primarily through marriages. According to statistical data from previous studies, Turkish migrants who came to Belgium through marriage comprise an important portion of the Turkish population in the country (Kaya & Kentel, 2008).

This form of migration initially emerged in the mid-1980s among migrant workers who were unmarried when they arrived in Belgium. Over time, this trend increased through marriages between young people from Turkey and the grandchildren of the first Turkish workers who migrated to Belgium (Manço & Gerstnerova, 2016).

The article proceeds as follows: first, the methodology and research design are presented; second, findings on marriage experiences and family dynamics are discussed; third, language learning and integration processes are analyzed; and finally, conclusions and policy implications are presented.

Methodology

This study focuses on women who migrated from Turkey to Belgium through marriage between 1974 and 2016. The scope of the study is limited to the roles of these women in their marital lives, the problems they encounter and their causes, and their process of learning the languages of Belgium. Before presenting the findings of the field research, the methodology of the study is explained, along with information on marriage migration to Belgium, to better understand the problems experienced by these women.

In the theoretical part of this study on Turkish women who have come to Belgium through marriage, information is first provided on migration from Turkey to Belgium. Then, within the framework of the findings obtained through field research and interview

techniques, the study attempts to reveal the roles of Turkish women in their marital lives, family problems and their causes, the processes of learning Belgium's languages to facilitate their integration into Belgian society, the problems encountered during these processes, and the strategies used to cope with these problems.

The data for this study were collected using field research and interview methods.[1] Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Turkish, recorded with participant consent, and analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis. Interview durations ranged from approximately 45 to 90 minutes, and all participants were anonymized using coded identifiers (KK1–KK20). The study population consisted of Turkish women living in Belgium. From this population, the sample consisted of 20 Turkish women aged between 32 and 62 who came to Belgium from Turkey through marriage and resided in Brussels, the capital city of Belgium.

According to its constitution, Belgium consists of three linguistic communities, three regions, and ten provinces. Belgium has three linguistic communities and a highly diverse migrant population. The three linguistic communities are the Flemish community, the French community, and the German-speaking community, while the three regions are the Flemish Region, Walloon Region, and Brussels-Capital Region. The Flemings live in the northern part of the country and the Brussels-Capital Region, whereas the German-speaking community resides in Eupen and Saint-Vith in the eastern part of the country. The Turkish community in Belgium is dispersed across many parts of the country and lives in small groups. Turks who migrated from Afyonkarahisar and Eskişehir mostly reside in Brussels and Ghent; those from the Central and Eastern Anatolian regions generally live in Limburg and Antwerp; and those from other regions of Turkey have settled in various provinces of Belgium (Gelekçi & Köse, 2011).

The women participating in the study were interviewed at Turkish associations located in neighborhoods with a high concentration of Turkish migrants in Brussels. This recruitment strategy may have limited participation to women connected to Turkish community networks. Given that the participants were selected based on characteristics relevant to the aims of the study, a purposive sampling method was employed. The findings obtained from these field interviews were analyzed, and conclusions and evaluations were drawn by comparing them with the data obtained from the literature review. The main research question of this study is as follows: What kinds of social, economic, and cultural challenges do Turkish women, who migrated to Belgium through marriage, encounter after migration, and how do they cope with these challenges. Accordingly, this study examines women's marital and family lives, social integration

[1] All participants provided informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained for the data used in this research: Kilis 7 Aralık University, Date and Reference Number of the Document: 24.06.2025-E.83768.

processes, experiences of learning Belgium's official languages, and access to the labor market. Belgium was selected as the research field because, in addition to being one of the Western European countries that has received a high volume of Turkish migration, it is a multilingual context and a setting where social welfare organizations operate extensively.

Previous studies on migration to Belgium have predominantly focused on issues related to Turkish migrants' mother tongues, education, and similar fields. The language use and Turkish language learning of Turkish migrants in Belgium have been examined by Gelekçi (2010), Şen (2011), Yaylacı (2012), Bekar (2018), and Solmaz and Deniz (2020). Gelekçi (2010) analyzed the factors negatively affecting the educational achievement of Turkish children and youth living in Belgium, the determinants influencing their orientation toward higher education, and whether they face discrimination in their educational lives due to being perceived as foreigners. The position of Turkish migrants within the education system has been studied by Manço (2002), while Sarıkaya (2014) examined the main educational challenges faced by children of Turkish origin in the Flemish education system. Manço (2000) analyzed the problems, developments, and transformations of the Turkish community in Belgium between 1960 and 2000. Güvenli (2022) has explored acculturation patterns and intercultural communication competence among Turks living in Belgium, while Sağdıç (2022) has examined the formation and general characteristics of the Turkish diaspora in Belgium. Hacıismailoğlu (2014) has analyzed multiculturalism programs of political parties in the Flemish region, and Gelekçi (2014) has examined the Turkish population in Belgium and its formation process.

These studies generally focus on similar topics and tend to replicate each other. The most comprehensive study on Turks in Belgium was conducted by Gelekçi and Köse (2011), who made a significant contribution to the literature by providing data across multiple domains. However, earlier studies, including those by Manço (2000) and Gelekçi and Köse (2011), while identifying the economic conditions of Turks in Belgium and their foreign language deficiencies, did not examine the marital and family lives of marriage migrants, their experiences in learning local languages, or their integration into the labor market. However, these areas are crucial for migrants' adaptation to the host country and their economic independence. By identifying post-migration challenges related to marriage, language acquisition, and labor market participation among women who migrated from Turkey to Belgium through marriage, this study represents a distinct and novel contribution that offers practical and policy-oriented recommendations for facilitating post-migration integration. Therefore, it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature. The table below presents information on the participants.

Table 1. Demographic and Migration Characteristics of the Participants

Participant Code	Year of Birth	Date of Migration to Belgium
P1	1985	2003
P2	1961	2002
P3	1975	1999
P4	1982	2003
P5	1971	2008
P6	1980	2002
P7	1983	2002
P8	1978	2016
P9	1979	2000
P10	1985	2003
P11	1965	1983
P12	1962	1981
P13	1968	2001
P14	1973	Not reported
P15	1984	2010
P16	1982	2016
P17	1965	1982
P18	1970	1992
P19	1980	2003
P20	1955	1974

Marriage Migration to Belgium in Migration Movements

By the late 1980s, family reunification had almost entirely been completed, and in the following years, migration took the form of marriage-based migration. In 2005, more than 80% of the visas issued to Turkish migrants by Belgium were related to family reunification through marriage (Perrin, 2007). This rate was 58% in 2008 and 69% in 2010 (Schoonvaere 2013). Some researchers have referred to this phenomenon as "marriages leading to migration," noting that marriage migration—particularly consanguineous marriages—is most prevalent among Turks compared to other foreign communities in Western Europe (Koşar-Akçapınar, 2007).

> A significant proportion of Turks living in Belgium have migrated from the provinces of Afyonkarahisar (primarily), Eskişehir, Kayseri, Kars, and Trabzon. Most of those residing in cities such as Brussels, Namur, and Ghent are originally from the Emirdağ district of Afyonkarahisar. Consequently, most Turks living in Belgium are either fellow townspeople or relatives. This pattern is also reflected in the marriage practices. According to a study conducted in Belgium in 2007–2008, 24% of married individuals have a spouse who is a relative, while 38% have a spouse from the same place of origin. In other words, 62% of married individuals were either relatives or fellow townspeople (Gelekçi & Köse, 2011).

Indeed, according to data reported by Manço and Gavray (2013), approximately 93% of Turks in Belgium marry other Turks among this group, three out of four spouses come directly from Turkey, and one out of four marriages is between cousins (p.28).

> In such cases, prospective spouses often do not know each other well before the wedding, even if they come from the same extended family or meet during a vacation. These marriages are frequently the result of family decisions rather than the individuals themselves. Marriage, above all, is seen as an expression of family needs and a guarantee of "cultural order." In this context, families' expectations intervene in shaping marital life: the migrant man is expected to find employment, while the woman is expected to fulfill her reproductive and educational roles and take care of elders, depending on her extended family (Schoonvaere, 2013).

Since 1991, marriage to a partner from Turkey has been the most common form of union among the Turkish migrant population in Belgium. According to Schoonvaere, between 2008 and 2010, almost 75 percent of migration from this country started with the purpose of marriage. Although this method is very common, its rate has decreased over the years (Taş & Subaşı, 2017). Today, this rate has decreased to 40-50 per cent due to new conditions imposed on marriages from outside Belgium and awareness of possible problems in these marriages. Nevertheless, the number of spouses who came to Belgium from Turkey through marriage between 2008 and 2010 was 5142 (Schoonvaere, 2013).

> There are many initiatives regarding migrant marriages, such as the accompaniment of young married couples and the prevention of fake or forced marriages. According to the 2011 legal regulations, the marriage of a person living in Belgium with someone from outside the European Union is subject to certain conditions. For family reunification, an age requirement, a certain amount of income, and sufficiently large lodging have been introduced. According to the age requirement, a person who brings a spouse from Turkey must be minimum 21 years old (Taş, 2014).

Findings of the Study

Turkish Women Who Migrated To Belgium Through Marriage

Among the Turkish immigrant community, group loyalty and social control are considered important factors. Many migrant workers came to Western Europe through social networks formed by their relatives, close friends, and fellow countrymen; thanks to them, they found jobs or started businesses and arranged places to stay. For example, despite the

end of foreign worker recruitment in 1974, many economic migrants used their social networks to come to Western Europe on tourist visas and find jobs. Today, in the ongoing migration flows involving so-called 'imported brides' or grooms, women have become as much a part of migration movements as men. On the other hand, in rural Turkey, the prevailing view is that when choosing a spouse, one should find a girl who is close and 'well-known,' who will best share and protect the family's honor, rather than marrying someone from outside the group. Generally, Turks who endure difficult living conditions and poor housing in Western Europe purchase land and build homes in their villages and towns, giving rise to a 'German' myth among the local population left behind. When Turkish immigrants return to their homeland for short periods, they are referred to as 'Alamanyalı' regardless of which European city they live in. They form a segment of society that is envied by the local population for the expensive cars and gifts they bring with them during their summer holidays and the generous amounts of money they spend, but some also accuse them of 'cultural insensitivity.' For these immigrant families, it is preferable to marry a girl raised with Turkish values from their homeland, who respects her elders and will submit to everything, rather than a second or even third generation girl raised with the 'corrupted' values of Western Europe. In this context, some scholars argue that Turkish migration to Europe has contributed to the formation of a distinct transnational social stratum (Koşar-Akçapınar, 2007).

One of our interviewees who came to Belgium through marriage shared her impressions on this matter as follows:

> "Before coming here, people from Europe seemed like they were from another world; everything seemed so beautiful and luxurious. This is because people who came to Turkey on holiday spent a lot of money. My family circle also comprised people who lived in Europe. There was no perspective on education or reading in my circle; in a sense, there was no model" (KK1). [2]

Before 1974, labor migration consisted mainly of men, whereas in subsequent years, a large proportion of migration through marriage consisted of women. However, as the gender distribution of Turks living in Belgium became more balanced over time, the gender distribution of those who came to Belgium through marriage changed in the years that followed (Gelekçi and Köse, 2011). The number of women and men coming to Belgium was almost equal. Between 2001 and April 15, 2005, women accounted for 46% of those who came to Belgium through marriage (Timmerman, 2008).

According to the socio-economic monitoring database, between 2018 and 2021, the number of women coming to Belgium through marriage has continued to be between

[2] Participants were coded as « Key Informants (KK). »

250 and 500 annually. Considering the 60-year history of Turkish immigration to Belgium, tens of thousands of brides and grooms from Turkey live in Belgium. However, brides are not well known to Belgian institutions. The lack of language skills and inability to express their problems make it difficult for them to communicate with the institutions around them (Taş, 2014).

According to field and clinical studies, these types of marriages also have certain psychological consequences for immigrants: "One of the most significant challenges of this marriage model is the separation of the spouse from Turkey from their family, social circle, and country. "Dissociation" is an important aspect of migration and can cause psychological trauma. Spouses from Turkey have experienced disappointment due to the differences between their expectations or the life they encounter in Belgium and the promises made to them" (Taş&Subaşı, 2017).

Turkish brides come to Western Europe with certain expectations. However, the living standards they find there may sometimes be lower than those in Turkey. Generally, they become more dependent on their spouses and their spouses' families because they do not work in income-generating jobs, are new to a foreign language, culture, and environment, and are far from relatives who could provide moral support. In an example from a field study conducted among Turkish imported brides living in Belgium in 2001-2002, a bride described this situation as follows:

> "I suffered a lot during my first two years here. I didn't know the language, I didn't know the people. Belgium was like an open-air prison for me… But I wanted to study and become a police officer or a teacher. When I got married and came here, no one offered me a helping hand, not even my in-laws! Later I found out that my husband had a gambling problem, and they had rushed us into marriage thinking he would settle down, become more responsible, and learn his duties, but where was that?" (Koşar-Akçapınar, 2007).

Taş (2014), who shared the data from his previous research on brides in Belgium, reinforces the same ideas:

> "Brides who imagined Belgium to be developed and modern generally did not find what they expected. Belgium's grey weather, rows of old houses, dirty streets, economic difficulties, people's clothing styles, and young people's behavior surprise the brides and disappoint them. They discovered that the 'German-Turkish' Turks they had encountered during holiday periods in Turkey and perceived as wealthy were not very wealthy. The limited economic resources of the spouse and the family they had joined prevented the brides from achieving their basic expectations of a high standard of living and access to a socially and culturally enriched life."(p.224).

One female interviewer expressed her disappointment as follows:

> "We came here by car. When we arrived, I was shocked to see the house. There was no bathroom, the toilet was shared, and we bathed in a basin in the kitchen. I had hoped for a nice place and a good house. Everywhere is buildings, the sky is pitch black, I couldn't even see where the sun was rising, and the people are different." (KK11).

We also found that most of the women we interviewed were exposed to domestic conflict because they lived under the same roof as their husbands' families. It is not difficult to understand from their experiences that the life they imagined and the life they were promised were completely different from each other. With a few positive exceptions, most women stated that the life they encountered in Belgium did not match the life they had hoped for before arriving and that their expectations were not met:

> "When people came from Belgium to the village for holidays, they kept talking about how wonderful life was there. They'd say, 'It's like one hand in oil and the other in honey; money just comes while you sit.' So, I imagined such a luxurious house. But when I got there, there wasn't even a sofa to sit on. Just a curtain between the bedroom and the living room, and the whole place was one single room. In Emirdağ, people think, 'If we go to Belgium, we'll be saved,' as if life there is guaranteed to be better. But it's not like that. Sometimes I really regretted it. If you have a problem, there's no one to talk to. And my husband—he's irresponsible. He doesn't work, doesn't care about anything. All he does is go to the coffeehouse and sleep at home, living off insurance money" (KK3).

This study also found a small number of women who were satisfied with their marriages and circumstances despite facing significant challenges. We found that these individuals are supported by their families and spouses, encouraged to pursue language education to succeed in social life, and actively engaged in the workforce. However, for some women, their marriages have resulted in divorce due to exposure to domestic violence stemming from the disappointing life conditions they experienced in Belgium. Therefore, it is important to examine the factors contributing to participants' dissatisfaction, why they have not been able to achieve the life they imagined before coming to Belgium, what they have encountered, and the consequences of these experiences. In this regard, we would like to present our findings concerning the marriage stories, challenges, social integration, and language learning processes of our participants. In this way, we aim to contribute to the discussion on the steps that can be taken and measures that can be implemented by the Belgian and Turkish governments, relevant authorities, and civil society organizations to prevent similar issues and ensure that women who come to Belgium through marriage can achieve a happier and more prosperous life.

Family Challenges Faced by Turkish Women and Their Roles in Marriage Strategies

The fact that Turks living in Belgium choose their spouses from Turkey has many positive and negative consequences. The most significant negative consequences are the difficulties experienced by those who marry in Turkey in adapting to the new cultural environment, cultural incompatibilities between married couples, family disputes, and divorces. In one of the interviews conducted with individuals whose opinions were sought regarding marriages from Turkey and the difficulties arising from these marriages, the following words were shared:

> "We have made some gains here in material terms. However, one of our biggest wounds is spiritual decline. Cultural clashes are inevitable in marriages in Turkey. This conflict leads to separation and divorce. The divorce rate is also very high among marriages in the region. Divorces are rapidly increasing" (Gelekçi and Köse, 2011).

One of our interviewees, KK17, who works as a social worker at the SİMA association, provided the following information about the type of work she does and stated that most of the applicants are women: "I mostly translate divorce decisions, court decisions, and then citizenship documents. About 70% of the requests to translate divorce decisions come from women, and about 30% come from men." In our research, we can say that seven out of the 20 participants were divorced, and the reasons for these divorces included the spouse's failure to fulfil family responsibilities, infidelity, alcohol, gambling, nightlife habits, and some women being subjected to physical and psychological violence involving their spouses' parents.

When we examined the marriage stories of these women, we found that most of them had commonalities and faced similar problems. We also observed that these problems were interconnected in a cause-and-effect relationship, leading to a chain reaction. These findings indicate an interconnected set of structural and interpersonal challenges. When their difficult marriages end in divorce during their journey in Belgium, these women enter a new process. A significant finding is that many women reported feeling helpless and abandoned because they do not know how to get help during this process, partly due to their lack of knowledge of foreign languages. Some women who suffered physical and psychological violence stated that they did not receive help from their relatives and close friends. We are faced with indifference to what has happened. This increases their feelings of loneliness and helplessness. These findings highlight participants' experiences of loneliness and helplessnes. Because many participants lacked prior knowledge of their rights and available support systems, their ability to respond effectively to difficult situations was constrained. Nevertheless, after all their difficult experiences, we observed that they were able to take more positive steps in their lives by turning to civil society

organizations. Participants were recruited through Turkish associations, as their relative social isolation made alternative recruitment strategies difficult.

Table 2. Place of Origin of the Study Group

Place of Origin in Turkey	Number
Afyon/Emirdağ District and the villages of Sığracık, Yeşilyayla, Demircili, Bağçalar, Ekizce, Güveçci, Güneysaray, Suvermez	12
Afyon/Bolvadin/Büyükkarabağ Village	1
Uşak/Koyunbeyli Village	1
İzmir	1
Manisa/Salihli	1
İskenderun	1
Aksaray/Ortaköy	1
Ankara/Altındağ	1
Konya/Yunak/Yeşilyayla Village	1

Of the 20 women we interviewed for our study, 13 came to Belgium from the villages of Afyon/Emirdağ in Turkey. Of these, 11, came from rural areas and, have a primary school education. The number who completed high school was six, 6/20, the number who completed secondary education was two, the number who were illiterate was one, and the number who are were employed was eight.

Table 3. Educational Status of the Study Group

Educational Level	Number
Illiterate	1
Primary school graduate (Turkey)	11
Secondary school graduate (Turkey)	2
High school graduate (Turkey)	5
High school graduate (Belgium)	1

Of the participants, 12 entered arranged marriages, 13 married spouses from their hometowns, and four married relatives, including cousins. Families and close relatives were influential in the decision to marry, and most marriages occurred at a young age.

Table 4. Marital Type of the Study Group

Type of Marriage	Number
Arranged marriage	12
Marriage by choice	8

Table 5. Relationship to Spouse in the Study Group

Relationship to Spouse	Number
Spouse is a relative	4
Spouse is from the same hometown	13
Spouse is neither a relative nor from the same hometown	3

The average age at marriage for these women was 18. There is only one or two months between the decision to marry and the wedding date. All divorced couples had children, and their marriages ended in divorce after approximately seven years.

> "I came here in 2003 at the age of 23 after getting married. I married my husband through an arranged marriage ceremony. I didn't know him. The visa was issued immediately, so the wedding was rushed. The engagement and wedding took place within three months of each other. I separated from my husband in 2010" (KK20).

Young brides leave their villages and towns and move into homes where they live with their in-laws, at least initially, for traditional, economic and practical reasons. Their youth, the absence of their families, and their lack of knowledge about the new country and language they have come to further increase their feelings of alienation and push imported brides to the bottom of the family hierarchy they have entered (Koşar-Akçapınar, 2007).

The women we interviewed in Belgium found themselves in the same situation as other women who had come to marry. 13 out of 20 women stated that instead of setting up a new home for themselves, they were forced to live under the same roof as their spouses' families within an existing arrangement. This appears to be one of the fundamental factors that makes it difficult for them to adapt to their new lives:

> "There were 25 people from the same family living in the house. We lived in a five-story building, but we ate together. According to tradition, brides had to eat last, so there was no food left" (KK12).

Large-scale migration to Western Europe has given rise to numerous ethnic minority groups alongside dominant groups. Western European countries have become multi-ethnic societies, and ethnic divisions have become a part of these societies. Consequently, the relationships between the different parts of society and the forms and qualities of social capital developed by these communities have become increasingly important. According to Coleman, the most effective forms of social capital are based on relationships formed at birth. The weakening of

> kinship ties also weakens this social capital. Social capital derived from kinship ties plays a functional role in both chain migration and coexistence in the country of migration. (Yaylacı, 2012).

Turks who settle abroad prepare themselves for the migration of their relatives and re-establish family ties. To do this, the main strategy is for young people to marry someone from the same region they came from, or even from the same extended family (Timmerman, Lodewyckx, Wets, 2009; Teule, Vanderwaeren, Mbah-Fongkimeh, Timmerman, 2012). In fact, the characteristics of marriage-based migration lie in the existence of networks, particularly family networks, that connect current migrants with those already settled in the destination country (Manço & Taş, 2019).

> Since the mid-1980s, the Turkish community in Belgium has implemented a strategy of family or group integration through property acquisition, developing commercial enterprises, and engaging in associations and religious activities. In this way, the arrival of married couples, the geographic concentration[3] of their businesses, their communal lifestyle, and the advantages derived from lower financial costs—thanks to contributions from family labor—have facilitated the initiation and consolidation of commercial activities (Manço, 2006).

In summary, Turks who have settled in Belgium tend to reestablish family solidarity by choosing spouses from the communities and relatives they left in Turkey. From a sociological perspective, the establishment of kinship links between settled individuals and new migrants reveals the presence of social capital in the community. As mentioned above, some researchers consider marriages with individuals from Turkey a core strategy in this context. This approach is seen as a mechanism for maintaining family cohesion, preserving cultural norms, and achieving financial stability.

Another study provides findings that support our data, indicating that among first-generation migrants, family income tends to be centralized in accordance with a patriarchal family model, and subsequent generations have continued this pattern:

> "First-generation Turks generally exhibit nuclear but patriarchal family structures. Patriarchal authority was imported, and family members' earnings were often pooled into a family account managed by the father during the early years of migration. Traditions initiated by the older generation have continued today, with first- and second-generation siblings often marrying and settling in the same building or on nearby streets" (Taş & Subaşı, 2017).

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[3] An establishment in impoverished inner-city neighborhoods or post-industrial peripheral areas experiencing commercial desertification (Manço & Ouled El Bey, 2017).

The statements of the women we interviewed reinforce these evaluations. This is because the expectation placed upon women who arrive from Turkey as brides is not only to fulfill traditional roles such as domestic duties and reproduction, but also to contribute to the family income. This often results in the exploitation of the labor of brides or grooms "imported" from Turkey, particularly within family run businesses.

This refers to a household structure in which food and resources are shared, all family members contribute economically, and the newly arrived woman assumes primary responsibility for domestic labor and childcare. In this context, it would not be an exaggeration to describe such marriages—which have systematically turned into a source of economic gain through kinship ties, now even referred to as social capital—with the expression: "one pot cooking for all, one family cashbox."

It becomes clear from the issues and experiences shared by these women that family relations were often described by participants as shaped by economic dependency and instrumental expectations. The women reported that they were treated like "maids" by their husbands' families and were deliberately prevented from working or learning the local Belgian languages out of concern, as they put it, that they might "become too aware."

Consequently, these factors led to disappointment in both their marriages and lives in Belgium, giving rise to shared stories of hardship. The findings suggest that these women often became part of family structures characterized by strong dependency and limited autonomy. KK4 states the following on this matter:

> "When I arrived in Belgium, I worked in my husband's family shop, but they humiliated me. My father-in-law and sisters-in-law would say things like, 'She doesn't know the language, she can't handle the cash register, just look at her, what good is it if she's educated, she knows nothing.' Yet I did all kinds of work. They didn't officially register me as an employee, and I didn't know that. My husband would beat me, and I constantly experienced violence. His family made me work like a servant. Even when I was sick, they made me carry cash boxes, and whenever I tried to claim my rights, my husband would use violence against me. But when he hit me, no one was around. There were no other Turks nearby, so I couldn't call for help. When I arrived, I wanted to attend a language course, but they didn't allow it. Two and a half years later, they tricked me into a divorce."

Another participant reported experiencing violence from both her husband and his family throughout the marriage and was expected to perform household duties under all circumstances.

> "The problems began. They said I didn't get up early, didn't prepare breakfast, didn't do the housework, and treated me like a servant. I experienced violence from my husband while I was pregnant. Since I had no one, I couldn't explain my situation and stayed at home all the time. When I was six months pregnant, my

> father-in-law beat me, saying, 'You're not serving, why are you just sitting?' During the postpartum period, he beat me again, asking why I wasn't going downstairs or preparing breakfast. I didn't know the language, I didn't know where to go—I was like a fish out of water. Where could I even go? Before separating from my husband, I happened to see the consulate building, inquired about citizenship procedures, and obtained citizenship. In 2010, I was forced to divorce under my husband's pressure because he had another woman in his life. Although relatives were all here, they did not help me." (KK7).

One of the most significant problems faced by so-called "imported brides" is the feeling of isolation. A striking characteristic observed in their husbands is the desire to keep their wives in a state of unconditional dependency, which stems from the family's preexisting protective instincts. In such families, for example, when the bride learns the language, her capacity for integration and her chances of success in society increase; however, this "gaining of independence" threatens the reproduction of a culture based on protection upheld by the husband and the extended family members. This, in turn, generates fear and the potential for violence. In these families, violence often originates not only from the husband but also from the father-in-law, mother-in-law, and even the sons. The language commonly used to justify such behavior includes statements such as "you belong to us" or "we saved you from the pit," which reinforce control and dependency (Kaya & Kentel, 2005).

A similar pattern was observed in a study conducted by Taş (2014) on brides. The study notes that:

> "Brides expressed their desire to learn the language, work, participate in social activities, and improve themselves. However, they were not permitted to pursue these goals. They stated that their husbands' families were afraid of their personal development and independence. The mother- and father-in-law did not perceive the bride's self-improvement as a positive opportunity to strengthen their son's situation but rather interpreted it as a risk that she might leave their son. Unconsciously, they instilled in the bride the idea that 'independence equals divorce.'"(p.229).

KK19, however, stands out as a positive example in the face of all these obstacles. The participant learned the language through courses and entered the labor market, thereby achieving her own economic independence.

> "After coming to Belgium, I wanted to attend a course to learn the language. My husband supported me, but his family did not. They would say, 'Brides don't go to school. They don't get a driver's license. They don't drive a car. They stay at home, serve, cook, and if someone from the village comes, they remain silent and serve

> them.' But since my husband supported me, I started the course. Later, I attended a vocational school for nursing assistance. I was able to stand on my own feet, but there are many women who go through these problems and cannot save themselves. These women cannot do it because they don't want to break up their families, because of resignation, lack of self-confidence, laziness, and, above all, fear."

Belgian-based families bringing brides from Anatolia are rooted not only in the desire to maintain cultural ties and traditional codes but also, in many cases, in the intention to reform their sons' behaviors—particularly to help them break away from harmful habits and become more attached to home life.

> Taş (2014) makes a similar observation: "Marriage is used by these families living in Belgium as a form of 'therapy' or as a 'problem-solving tool.' Parents aim to rehabilitate or keep a problematic child under control by arranging a marriage." This observation corresponds to the expression commonly used in Anatolia—"baş göz etmek"—referring to marrying off a problematic man or woman to manage issues. Using marriage as a tool for resolving personal or familial problems has left the brides we interviewed in a psychologically, socially, and legally vulnerable position (p.228).

> > "They drink alcohol, use cannabis, gamble, and cannot control their children. To set them straight, they bring brides from Turkey and marry them. The bride who comes is then treated like a Cinderella—used as a servant" (KK7).

> One of the factors reported by participants contributing to limited language development among migrant women was obstruction by husbands and in-laws, aimed at preventing women from gaining empowerment through language. Owing to language barriers, many women reported limited awareness of their rights or difficulty accessing them, which further isolated them under the control of their spouses. In Belgium, residency rights for migrants who marry are typically granted through the spouse. Therefore, in the event of separation or divorce—or if there is a change in the husband's legal status—this dependency may cease to exist, and the woman's legal right to remain in the country may be revoked (Küçükarslan & Topcuoğlu, 2024).

This situation places many women who migrate through marriage in a difficult dilemma. They are faced with two choices: either endure gender-based oppression and violence to maintain their right to stay in the country or escape the abuse and risk being deported (Erten, 2017).

Taş (2014) also supports this reality in his study with divorced women, sharing findings such as,

> "After divorce, brides were subjected to various forms of pressure and harassment by their ex-husbans and their families. Threats included deportation to Turkey, taking custody of their children, bans on remarriage, and false reports to the police alleging fake marriages. Some women reported that they lost their residence permits due to such complaints." Several women who participated in our study reported being subjected to similar threats before or after their divorces (p.230).

> "After a certain point, I could not get along with my husband at all. I decided to separate, but he kidnapped the children and threatened not to return them, so I could not leave. He was not working at the time; he was receiving unemployment benefits and had never held a job. He was living a nightlife and took no responsibility for his children. I eventually separated from him in 1990" (KK12).

Women whose marriages ended in divorce chose to build their lives in Belgium rather than return to Turkey. In this process, obtaining a job, working, gaining economic independence, and making efforts to learn the local languages of Belgium appeared to be their most fundamental needs—and it can be said that many succeeded in doing so. This study found that many participants concealed the problems they experienced in their marriages from their families and relatives. They did so either to avoid upsetting them or because they felt uncomfortable with how returning to their parents' home would be perceived in Anatolia. Additionally, already difficult economic conditions of their families would have made living together more burdensome. According to these women's accounts, the economic independence and social rights they gained after divorce were decisive factors in their decision to stay in Belgium. It is evident that they are generally satisfied with Belgian laws and living conditions.

> "It is difficult to return to one's father's house in the village. I cannot return to the village. My parents are already struggling; even their daughters-in-law are taking care of them. Since two families can't live under the same roof, and due to social pressure in village life, I couldn't return." (KK4).

Turkish Women's Language Learning Processes and Their Integration into Belgian Society

Integration is defined as the process by which immigrants become incorporated into society. Lockwood's theory of integration is categorized under two main headings: system and social integration. System integration refers to the adaptation of immigrants within the institutional and social systems of the host society, whereas social integration describes participation in social and cultural structures. Esser, who comprehensively examines social integration, divides this concept into four distinct dimensions: acculturation, socio-economic-political position, interaction, and identity. According to Esser, for these four forms of social integration to occur, immigrant communities and individuals must

establish personal relationships with local society. Language acquisition is crucial to this process. In the context of integration, language emerges as a prerequisite for immigrants to blend into the host society; it is an element that enables participation in social and economic life, and therefore, it lies at the center of integration policies (Demiroğlu & Yücel, 2025).

Belgium, located between the Germanic and Latin worlds, has Dutch as its primary language in the north and French in the south, with a small German-speaking region along its border with Germany. In the federal capital, Brussels, Dutch and French are official languages. Moreover, since Brussels is also considered the capital of the European Union, English and German are widely spoken, and proficiency in these languages is seen as an asset in the job market. According to a comprehensive 2008 study on Turks living in Belgium, "language problems" ranked first among the major difficulties experienced, with 54% of participants citing it as their primary issue (Gelekçi & Köse, 2011).

Within the framework of the EU's social policy, Belgium has adopted an open family policy that focuses on family welfare by economically empowering families, providing educational and counseling services, and offering services through institutions outside the family. Belgium's social policy structure is both traditional, supporting the family, and flexible, allowing individuals to step outside the family when necessary and pursue new lifestyles. Situations such as domestic violence and divorce, which affect both family and individual welfare, illustrate this balance, making Belgium an interesting case. A clear example of this balance can be seen in the living conditions of immigrant women who are highly dependent on their families; when family functioning is disrupted, the social services provided during divorce processes are informative regarding the well-being of women, children, and even male spouses (Küçükarslan & Topcuoğlu, 2024).

Since our study focuses on women residing in the Brussels region, this study found that while a minority needed to learn Flemish, the majority reported experiences related to learning French. With a few exceptions, most women began working after their divorces and received various forms of support through social services, most notably access to language courses to learn the national languages of Belgium. According to their testimonies, one of the key difficulties in learning French was its significant structural difference from Turkish and the fact that it is not pronounced as it is written. Furthermore, their educational backgrounds contributed to the challenges they faced in language acquisition.

Although many attended language courses, they reported difficulties in learning due to living in predominantly Turkish neighborhoods, where Turkish is the primary spoken language, socializing mainly with other Turks, and working in workplaces where Turkish is commonly used. In addition, the emotional toll of negative experiences, particularly those related to marriage and divorce, further hinders their ability to learn. Many stated

that not knowing the language made it difficult for them to manage their affairs independently, particularly when dealing with official institutions or paperwork, and they often required help from relatives or interpreters. Due to language barriers, they also expressed a sense of social withdrawal and hesitancy in engaging with non-Turks, which led them to spend most of their time in the Turkish community.

> "I do not know any French, and I do not attend a course because I have to take care of my children at home. I'm not working. I meet my daily needs in the Turkish neighborhood. For example, if I need to see a doctor, I prefer a Turkish one. If I have to go to a hospital, I take someone who speaks the language. If there are no relatives or friends around, I pay someone for help. However, most people who come here already have familiar connections from Turkey, such as neighbors, relatives, or people from the same hometown, so they do not have much difficulty. They rely on this when they arrive. People buy houses outside of Schaerbeek, but they spend their days in the Turkish neighborhood — in restaurants, cafes, mosques, coffeehouses, and while shopping." (KK8)

Our interviewee coded as KK9 states that due to not knowing the language, they are unable to communicate with foreigners or participate in social environments:

> "We have some interaction with Moroccans. We meet at courses, we are neighbors, we just say hello — there is no visiting each other. Because of the language barrier, I do not attend home gatherings. Other than that, I communicate with Turks."

One participant did not feel the need to learn French because most of their coworkers were Turkish:

> "If I had gone to a course when I first came here, while I was still young, I would have learned it. However, I could not attend because I was working. I didn't have time. I do not feel the need to learn the language, and even if I did, my brain cannot absorb it. I joined a language course six months ago but attended it irregularly for less than six months. We are exposed to street language, but at school, they teach formal French, so it was not effective for me. I learned some things more easily while working. I know about 5% of French. I am currently working in flower packaging. Turkish people from Bulgaria, Turks, and Moroccans work there. There are no Belgians, so I don't need the language there" (KK5).

Others stated that they learned French while working for a Belgian company:

> "I had difficulty learning French; I could not pronounce it properly. I never attended a course — I learned it through my own efforts. Since the children were going to school, I picked up some things from them by asking, 'What is this? What does it mean?' A relative from Turkey sent me a Turkish-French dictionary. I learned by

watching movies and on television. Later, when my child was nine months old, I started working at the cleaning company where my mother-in-law worked. While working there, I reinforced what I had learned by listening" (KK12).

Conclusion

This study highlights the main challenges faced by women who migrate from Turkey to Belgium through marriage during their integration processes. The findings indicate that language barriers hinder women's participation in social life and access to the labor market, and situations such as family conflicts, domestic violence, and divorce exacerbate their vulnerability. Factors such as low educational levels, dependency on spouses and families, social isolation, and lack of economic independence have placed these women in a particularly vulnerable position. Consequently, their limited language skills and lack of professional experience push them to the lowest levels of the workforce.

These women are part of a long-standing pattern of marriage migration, often without being aware of the underlying marriage strategy. It must be noted that the expectations of the women brought from Anatolia as brides were often completely different from the expectations of the families they joined, and they only realized this after experiencing painful challenges in their new lives. However, in some cases, supportive spouses and families facilitated language learning and labor market participation, enhancing women's quality of life and social integration.

This research provides an in-depth understanding of women who migrate from Turkey through marriage. Therefore, as a solution to the problems identified, it is crucial for the Belgian government to implement social policies that address the specific needs of these immigrant communities and develop measures to ensure their welfare.

Discussion and Recommendations

Considering these findings, policymakers and institutions in Belgium have a significant responsibility to ensure that Turkish immigrant women can participate more effectively in society. First, it is essential to provide access to language courses for women arriving through marriage and to guide them toward vocational training and employment programs. Prioritizing the rapid integration of these women into the labor market is important not only to increase their income levels and autonomy but also to accelerate their language acquisition.

The findings suggest that Turkish consular officials in Belgium could play an important role in providing guidance and support. They should be well-informed about the lives of these women, provide guidance on potential challenges, and engage in related support initiatives. Additionally, legal and social protection mechanisms must be strengthened to address domestic violence and other forms of coercion. As a qualitative

study based on a purposive sample in Brussels, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to all Turkish marriage migrant women in Belgium.

It takes time for women from Turkey to become aware of their rights. Therefore, the Turkish and Belgian governments, in cooperation with civil society organizations, should implement awareness-raising initiatives to facilitate women's understanding of their rights and access to social support systems. These awareness efforts should also be communicated in Turkish through local and national Turkish media. Involving Turkish associations and social workers in this process would be beneficial to the program. Steps taken in this direction will contribute not only to the individual empowerment of women but also to the social integration of the Turkish immigrant community in Belgium.

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