

## EXPLORING LEISURE CONSTRAINTS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TÜRKİYE\*

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### Abstract

One of the neglected aspects of Syrian refugees' lives is leisure and its positive role in adaptation and integration. In this study, employing the model of leisure constraints proposed by Crawford et al. (1991) as a framework, we examine the leisure constraints that Syrian refugees face in their daily lives in Türkiye. The data for this study comes from 47 in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees living in Istanbul three months before the 2023 presidential election. We found many examples representing each category of leisure constraints proposed by the framework, including constraints specific to Syrian refugees. The findings suggest that Syrian refugees are most affected by structural constraints, followed by intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. Furthermore, the findings point to the influence of social class on leisure preferences and participation and the power dynamics that can create hierarchies regarding leisure between Syrian and Turkish communities.

**Keywords:** Syrian refugees, leisure constraints, Türkiye, integration

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## TÜRKİYE'DEKİ SURİYELİ MÜLTECİLERİN BOŞ ZAMAN KISITLARININ ANALİZİ\*

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### Öz

Suriyeli mültecilerin yaşamlarının ihmal edilen yönlerinden biri de boş zaman faaliyetleri (leisure) ve bunların adaptasyon ve entegrasyondaki olumlu rolüdür. Bu çalışmada, Crawford ve diğerleri (1991) tarafından önerilen boş zaman kısıtlamaları modeli çerçeve alınarak, Suriyeli mültecilerin Türkiye'deki günlük yaşamlarında karşılaştıkları boş zaman kısıtlamalarını inceliyoruz. Bu çalışmanın verileri, 2023 Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinden öncesindeki üç aylık bir zaman diliminde, İstanbul'da yaşayan Suriyeli mültecilerle yapılan 47 derinlemesine görüşmeden elde edilmiştir. Suriyeli mültecilere özgü kısıtlamalar da dahil olmak üzere, model tarafından önerilen boş zaman kısıtlamalarının her kategorisini temsil eden birçok örnek bulunmuştur. Bulgularımız, Suriyeli mültecilerin en çok yapısal kısıtlamalardan etkilendiğini, bunu içsel ve kişilerarası kısıtlamaların izlediğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, sosyal sınıfın boş zaman tercihleri ve katılımı üzerindeki etkisine ve Türk toplumu ve Suriyeli mülteciler arasında boş zaman faaliyetleri alanında hiyerarşilerin oluşmasına yol açabilecek güç dinamiklerine işaret etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriyeli mülteciler, boş zaman kısıtlamaları, Türkiye, entegrasyon

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## Introduction

It has been more than a decade since the first group of Syrian refugees arrived in Türkiye. Today, Türkiye has the largest refugee population in the world, a large proportion of which are Syrians, putting significant pressure on the socio-economic dynamics of the country. Although there is no consensus on the permanent integration of the Syrian community, the length of time since their arrival has meant that most Syrian refugees have gone through a process of self-settlement, and few have already been granted citizenship. Many studies have been so far carried out on Syrian refugees in Türkiye (TTB, 2014; AFAD, 2013; AMNES-TY, 2014), mainly focusing on the legal, economic, security, and humanitarian dimensions, mostly underscoring the result of societal problems that also contribute to the marginalization of Syrian refugees (Yaman, 2016). Therefore, in this study, we focus on a neglected aspect of their lives in Türkiye, the leisure aspect of their lives, with special attention to the leisure constraints they face daily and emphasize the importance of leisure for integration.

The leisure experience of migrants and refugees has generally been neglected by leisure and migration studies (Horolets, 2012). Although the literature on the leisure constraints of the general population has been growing since the 1980s, the constraints related to specific populations such as migrants, refugees, disabled people, and minorities have not been given sufficient attention (Stodolska, 1998, 2000). This also applies to the literature on Syrian refugees in Türkiye. There are only a few studies exploring the leisure experiences of Syrian refugees (Baktır, 2021; Çakır, 2019.; Eres & Aslan, 2017; KAPLAN, 2023; Sezginalp Özçetin & Rottmann, 2022; Shahzeidi, 2021; Subaşı, 2021; Tarakcioglu & Ciceklioglu, 2022), yet, leisure constraints are not the focus of these studies. This paper first provides a brief historical background on Syrian refugees in Türkiye, then discusses the leisure-integration relationship with a special focus on the literature on leisure constraints. Finally, we analyze our data sample from interviews with Syrian refugees using a classical leisure constraints framework by Crawford et al. (1991) and present a discussion followed by a conclusion.

## A Historical Background

As a neighboring country of Syria, Türkiye faced an influx of Syrian refugees fleeing the civil war. Thanks to its open-door policy, the majority of the Syrian people took refuge in Türkiye, which culminated in around 4 million since 2011 (*UNHCR Turkey - Fact Sheet February 2022 [EN/TR] - Türkiye | ReliefWeb, 2022.*). Four million Syrian refugees are a turning point in Türkiye's migration history, considering that the total number of refugees since the country's establishment was around 1.7 million (İsa & Ceylan, 2019). Türkiye has to deal with the problems of Syrian refugees alone, which has also been affecting its already fragile economic

situation, putting pressure on public services and leading to a rise in anti-Syrian sentiment in society. This migratory pressure and Türkiye's status as a European Union (the EU) candidate country also necessitate substantial modifications to its existing migration regime.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, the Turkish migration regime has evolved to settle refugees of Turkish origin, favoring people of Turkish descent and culture from the territories of the Ottoman Empire (Çelik & White, 2022). With the end of the Cold War in 1991, however, the Turkish migration regime was challenged by numerous migrant groups, culminating in the arrival of Syrian refugees fleeing the civil war. The Settlement Law of 1934 is one of the main legal documents that continued to influence Türkiye's immigration policy until the 2000s, as mentioned earlier, favored people of Turkish descent and culture (İsa & Ceylan, 2019). Another important document is the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees. Türkiye is a signatory country to the Convention with a geographical limitation, meaning it is under no legal obligation to grant refugee status to asylum seekers from outside Europe (UNCHR, 2022b). When the first Syrian refugees arrived, in accordance with the geographical limitation, Türkiye first registered Syrian refugees as guests.\* Later, it adopted a temporary protection regime that provides non-refoulement and humanitarian assistance "without full access to fundamental rights" (Muftuler-Bac, 2022, 298). Syrian refugees are now subject to a legal status that prevents them from applying for asylum in another country or becoming citizens of Türkiye (Ertorer, 2021). In 2013, Türkiye passed a new law on Foreigners and International Protection (Law 6458), which enables Türkiye to pursue a more centralized immigration policy (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017), but the geographical limitation remained intact.

In 2014, the number of refugees passing through Türkiye to reach Europe reached a significant level (Murat & Papakonstantis, 2022), prompting Türkiye and the EU to implement new tools for better migration management. According to Meltem Muftuler-Bac, the 2013 Readmission Agreement, the 2015 Joint Action Plan and the 2016 Refugee Statement (known as the Turkish-EU Refugee Deal) are essential steps that have externalized the EU's migration regime towards Türkiye. The Turkish-EU Refugee Deal aims to prevent illegal migration to Europe. With the Deal, although Türkiye retains the geographical limitation, but is nevertheless obliged to take back non-European refugees who have entered the EU territory via Türkiye. However, the Deal allows the EU to designate Türkiye as a safe third country (Muftuler-Bac, 2022, 304).

Looking at the figures, the Refugee Deal, which aims to prevent undocumented migrants and asylum seekers from crossing the Aegean Sea and reaching Greece, is considered successful. Before the Deal, the number of refugees who crossed the EU was 1,049,213, and since the Deal, the total number of crossings is around 156,000 (Murat & Papakonstantis, 2022, 14).

However, the Deal has been criticized for various reasons. For example, the EU has adopted a security-based approach in this deal and “offshored” its refugee crisis to Turkey in a manner that is incompatible with human rights and refugee law (Elitok, 2019). Moreover, the deal has failed to deliver on its promise of creating a safe and legal route to leave Türkiye, trapping millions of people in Türkiye and on the Greek islands (Amnesty, 2017). This situation has led to what Mahia et al. called “double-forced migration,” which refers to refugees trapped in transition countries due to their precarious legal and economic situation (2020).

Today, only a small number of Syrian refugees, fewer than 55.000 individuals have been living in the 7 camps (Sunata & Gungördü, 2024), while the majority of them live in urban areas, which allows them to interact with the host society and use their agencies despite the associated risks, such as exploitation in the workplace due to their precarious legal status, substandard living conditions and access to education and health services, etc. (Çelik & White, 2022). The Syrian refugees were initially welcomed; the Turkish government implemented a supportive policy, and despite the high number of Syrian refugees, Turkish society also showed relatively good solidarity on this issue. However, due to their prolonged stay and the current economic situation, studies show that the presence of Syrian refugees is causing increasing concern, and they are considered one of the three biggest problems in Türkiye (Çelik & White, 2022; Erdoğan, 2022; Erdoğan, 2020; Ertorer, 2021). There are studies showing that Syrian refugees have been increasingly subjected to discriminatory attitudes, which can also be observed from the trending xenophobic hashtags such as “#IDon’tWantAsylumSeekersInMyCountry” (Ozduzen, 2020; Ozduzen et al., 2021; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021). Furthermore, despite the previous main elections, in the 2023 presidential election, Syrian refugees have been politicized more openly and harshly by the opposition parties so that the main opposition party put up banners on the streets saying “Syrians will leave” (*Syrians Worry over Turkey Opposition’s Anti-Immigrant Stance | Reuters*, 2023.). Also, there is a new political party in Turkish political life, Victory Party, that has made the issue of migrants and refugees its main party policy and has stated in its founding manifesto that it will work for the return of asylum seekers to their countries (Bahadır Türk, 2024). The exclusionary and xenophobic rhetoric used by the head of the Zafer Party, Ümit Özdağ, was so effective that the opposition candidate who wanted to win the presidential election signed an agreement with this party before the second round of the election, in which it was agreed that all asylum seekers, especially Syrians, and illegals would be sent to their countries within one year of coming to power (Michaelson, 2023).

### Leisure and Integration

Leisure is treated as a universal human experience, which appears to be a cross-cultural phenomenon in every society (Purrington & Hickerson, 2013). However, although leisure is a universal human condition, leisure participation and activities vary in each culture, and there is no consensus in the literature as to what constitutes leisure (Best, 2010). It concerns specific concepts such as free time, laziness, and work. Commonly, it is seen as the opposite of work, as a residual category, as what remains after work. However, this understanding is criticized because, for some people, work can also be a leisure activity if they like their job. Choice, freedom, and voluntarism are seen as the most important components of leisure (Rojek, 2005). Therefore, modern definitions of leisure are generally based on two main components, namely time and attitude or feeling (Quirke, 2015).

Leisure is a space where people can exercise their freedom to a certain extent. As a realm of freedom where people can choose both their activities and companies, it is a space in which identities, differences, and hierarchies are constructed. Therefore, leisure can be useful in understanding migrants' and refugees' integration, as studies show that leisure plays a positive role in the well-being of migrants and their adaptation to the receiving society (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009; Stodolska, 2015). However, we see that the role of leisure in integrating migrants and refugees has not received much attention. Ager & Strang presented a conceptual framework for a better understanding of integration as the term has been used in different meanings. They identified key domains of integration around four themes:

1. Markers and means: employment, housing, education, and health
2. Social connection: social bridges, social bonds, social links
3. Facilitators: language and cultural knowledge, safety, and stability
4. Foundation: rights and citizenships

Although shared social activities, such as sports, community groups, college classes, and religious activities, are seen as evidence of integration under the social connection theme, leisure is not considered one of the core domains (Ager & Strang, 2008). Later, this framework was updated to "Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019" for effectively devising strategies and monitoring services and the integration process by the UK Home Office (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). In this framework version, leisure is listed as a core dimension under the theme of markers and means, which means leisure is both an outcome of the integration and a means to it. Here, leisure is defined by an activity-based approach, and leisure activities are considered helpful for migrants to learn the culture of the receiving country, develop social connections and language skills, and improve their well-being (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019).

As we stated previously, leisure is a space where individuals exercise their agency; however, since individuals operate within a society, individuals face many constraints stemming from the structures of society and have to negotiate their leisure pursuits and participation. Therefore, as Peters states, leisure activities are considered social practices by which the structures of society are reproduced. Those structures not only act as constraints to leisure but also make people able to act and have leisure, making leisure a space where people are liberated, repressed, empowered, and controlled (Peters, 2011). Leisure constraints research is an important subfield of leisure studies, originally conceptualized to understand the barriers before leisure participation. Over time, however, its scope has broadened and is now seen as something that can contribute to understanding the broader factors that influence people's leisure behavior (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). Today, it has been argued that leisure constraint research has dominated leisure studies (Best, 2010).

Leisure constraints studies produced vast empirical data and conceptual improvements. An earlier conceptualization of leisure constraints was based on classifications and categorizations of leisure activities and participants but had limitations. As Crawford et al. (1991) explain, those conceptualizations can describe leisure constraints, but they fall short in explaining them, and thus they produced a classic model of leisure constraints, which we employed for this study to analyze leisure constraints that affect Syrian refugees' leisure, and accordingly their integration. They presented their framework as a modification of the model proposed by Crawford & Godbey (1987), which conceptualizes leisure barriers that affect leisure preferences and participation at three levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. While intrapersonal barriers refer to the individual factors and attributions that affect leisure preferences, interpersonal barriers arise from interpersonal interactions and impact both leisure preferences and participation.

Lastly, structural barriers refer to those factors beyond the control of individuals and act as a barrier between leisure preferences and participation. Crawford et al. (1991) modified this model by integrating these three models into a nested one. They argued that individuals confront these leisure constraints hierarchically in the following sequence: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Individuals first face intrapersonal constraints, and accordingly, their leisure preferences will be determined either in the absence of these constraints or despite them, thanks to privileges or motivation. Later, depending on the kind of activity, if there is any interpersonal constraint, for example, they face interpersonal constraints if they need a partner for an activity. If they successfully overcome these, they confront structural constraints. Leisure participation happens in the absence of structural constraints or through negotiation, and if structural constraints are insurmountable, the outcome will be nonparticipation. This framework also argued that social class plays a more powerful role in leisure participation as opposed to the previous studies that underlined socioeconomic variations.

### Method

We use an interpretative (i.e., qualitative) methodology as we are primarily concerned with how we can make sense of Syrian refugees’ leisure experiences and the leisure constraints they have been facing. Experience is a key concept here. We all speak from somewhere, as we are all socially, culturally, and economically positioned.

For this study, we conducted 47 in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees living in Istanbul three months before the 2023 presidential election. The interviews are made in Turkish, English, and Kurdish. The sample demonstrates a balanced gender representation, as participants are composed of 21 females and 26 males. Most of the participants are ethnically Arab; the rest of them is composed of 4 Turkmens and 3 Kurds. Other demographic information can be seen in the below table.

Gender	Name	Marital status	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Profession	Education	Income group	Time of arrival	City of origin	Location	Legal status
Female	Amira	Single	18	Muslim	Arab	Hairdresser assistant	Primary school	Middle	2013	Aleppo	Eyüpsultan	Temporary protection
Female	Dalia	Single	67	Muslim	Turkmen	Housewife	No school	Lower	2012	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Female	Ghada	Single	23	Secular	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Middle	2013	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Citizen
Female	Hanem	Single	34	Secular	Arab	Entrepreneur	Bachelor	Middle	2013	Aleppo	Esenler	Citizen
Female	Layan	Single	28	Muslim	Arab	Student	Master	Middle	2018	Homs	Bayrampaşa	Temporary protection
Female	Leila	Single	25	Muslim	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Lower	2020	Idlib	Avclar	Citizen
Female	Maha	Married	31	Muslim	Turkmen	Housewife	Primary school	Lower	2022	Aleppo	Eyüpsultan	No papers
Female	Mai	Married	47	Muslim	Arab	Researcher	Master	Upper	2015	UAE	Başakşehir	Passport
Female	Nadia	Single	36	Muslim	Turkmen	Housewife	Primary school	Lower	2013	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Female	Naham	Married	31	Muslim	Arab	Programmer	Bachelor	Middle	2018	Deir ez-Zur	Fatih	Citizen
Female	Noor	Married	53	Muslim	Arab	Housewife	Primary school	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Female	Nourhan	Married	50	Muslim	Arab	Housewife	Primary school	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Sultanbeyli	Temporary protection
Female	Rana	Married	37	Muslim	Arab	Housewife	Bachelor	Middle	2013	Danaa	Sultangazi	Passport
Female	Rawan	Single	29	Muslim	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Middle	2014	Deir ez-Zur	Mersin	Passport
Female	Rawya	Married	45	Muslim	Arab	NGO manager	Bachelor	Middle	2014	Damascus	Başakşehir	Passport
Female	Samar	Single	37	Secular	Arab	Painter	Bachelor	Middle	2013	Damascus	Kadıköy	Temporary protection
Female	Ruba	Single	37	Secular	Arab	Entrepreneur	Bachelor	Lower	2015	Latakia	Fatih	Passport
Female	Samira	Single	24	Secular	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Middle	2018	Damascus	Maslak	Passport
Female	Sana	Married	24	Muslim	Arab	Teacher	Primary school	Middle	2013	Aleppo	Eyüpsultan	Temporary protection
Female	Yasmin	Single	26	Muslim	Turkmen	Social worker	Bachelor	Middle	2014	Latakia	Avclar	Temporary protection
Female	Zohra	Single	28	Muslim	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Middle	2017	Idlib	Esenyurt	Temporary protection
Male	Adnan	Married	43	Muslim	Arab	Sewing machine operator	Secondary school	Middle	2015	Damascus	Eyüpsultan	Temporary protection
Male	Anna	Married	38	Muslim	Arab	Doctor	Bachelor	Middle	2018	Deir ez-Zur	Fatih	Citizen
Male	Zain	Married	35	Muslim	Arab	Real estate agent	Bachelor	Middle	2013	Yemen	Ünrmiyic	Citizen
Male	Basam	Single	23	Muslim	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Sultanbeyli	Temporary protection
Male	Fadi	Single	20	Muslim	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Lower	2018	Deir ez-Zur	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Male	Fahd	Single	34	Secular	Arab	Painter	Bachelor	Middle	2015	Damascus	Şişli	Temporary protection
Male	Faisal	Married	37	Secular	Arab	Researcher	PhD	Upper	2015	Aleppo	Başakşehir	Citizen
Male	Faris	Single	21	Muslim	Kurd	Sewing machine operator	Primary school	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Fatih	Temporary protection
Male	Ghassan	Single	21	Muslim	Arab	Student	Bachelor	Middle	2013	Suadi Arabia	Avclar	Temporary protection
Male	Hafez	Single	35	Secular	Arab	Painter	Bachelor	Lower	2016	Aleppo	Şişli	Passport
Male	Hamza	Married	29	Muslim	Arab	Reporter	Bachelor	Middle	2014	Damascus	Beşikdüzü	Citizen
Male	Hisham	Single	27	Muslim	Arab	Translator	Bachelor	Lower	2017	Damascus	Fatih	Citizen
Male	Iyad	Married	52	Muslim	Arab	Merchant	Secondary school	Upper	2014	Hama	Başakşehir	Citizen
Male	Khalil	Married	47	Secular	Arab	Doctor	PhD	Middle	1985	Aleppo	Başakşehir	Citizen
Male	Majid	Single	42	Secular	Arab	Translator	Bachelor	Middle	2019	Damascus	Şişli	Passport
Male	Majed	Married	46	Muslim	Kurd	Sewing machine operator	Secondary school	Lower	2013	Aleppo	Amarvüköy	Temporary protection
Male	Omar	Married	67	Muslim	Arab	Engineer	Bachelor	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Male	Rafiq	Married	51	Secular	Arab	Teacher	Bachelor	Middle	2011	Damascus	Üsküdar	Citizen
Male	Rami	Single	41	Secular	Arab	Translator	Bachelor	Middle	2015	Damascus	Şişli	Temporary protection
Male	Riyad	Single	19	Muslim	Arab	Mechanic	Primary school	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Male	Saif	Married	32	Muslim	Arab	Teacher	Master	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Sultangazi	Temporary protection
Male	Tarek	Single	24	Muslim	Arab	Researcher	Master	Middle	2014	Aleppo	Esenler	Temporary protection
Male	Wael	Single	33	Muslim	Arab	Accountant	Bachelor	Lower	2017	Malaysia	Esenler	Temporary protection
Male	Youssef	Single	29	Muslim	Arab	Worker in lighting sector	Bachelor	Lower	2019	Damascus	Avclar	Temporary protection
Male	Zaid	Single	18	Muslim	Kurd	Assistant in textile workshop	Primary school	Lower	2015	Aleppo	Bayrampaşa	Temporary protection
Male	Zuhair	Married	42	Muslim	Arab	NGO manager	Bachelor	Middle	2011	Sudan	Başakşehir	Citizen

Table 1: Research Sample

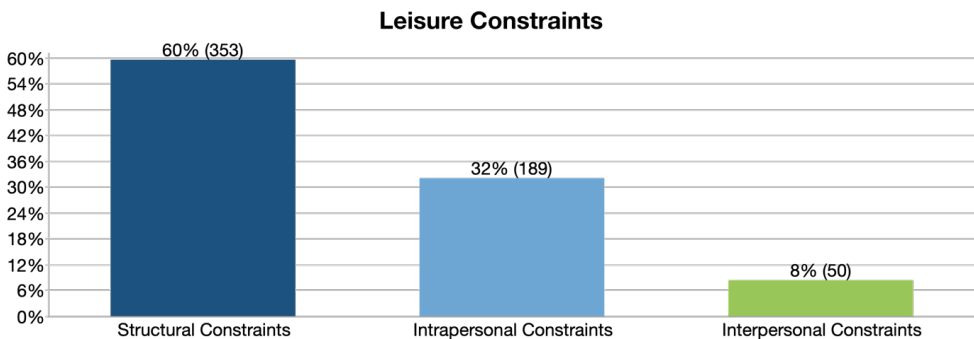
Given the increasing anti-Syrian sentiment and politicization of the issue ahead of the presidential elections, we used snowball sampling due to the difficulty of reaching potential candidates and convincing them to participate. However, with the help of intermediaries from different segments of society and personal contacts with Syrians, we were able to reach a diverse sample. All interviews were recorded with respondents’ consent and transcribed



via OpenAI Whisper, an automatic speech recognition system. The transcriptions were then subjected to a proofreading process. However, we did not correct language errors in English interviews. Later, the interviews made in Turkish and Kurdish were translated into English. The research data is organized and analyzed by MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software tool. The transcriptions were first coded and then organized into the framework proposed by Crawford et al. (1991). The study was reviewed by Yıldız Technical University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee and received ethical approval. Participants' real names have been changed for security concerns. We acknowledge that our sample cannot be generalized given that the Syrian population in Türkiye is much more diverse. Accordingly, the discussion of findings aims to lay the groundwork for further work.

### Findings

Our findings suggest that Syrian refugees are most affected by structural constraints, followed by intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. The frequency of constraints can be seen in Figure 1. However, for example, the low frequency of interpersonal constraints does not mean that they do not face those constraints, but it may suggest that they are not a priority given the significance of other constraints in their lives or that they negotiated this category of constraints and thus focus on the insurmountable constraints such as the structural ones.

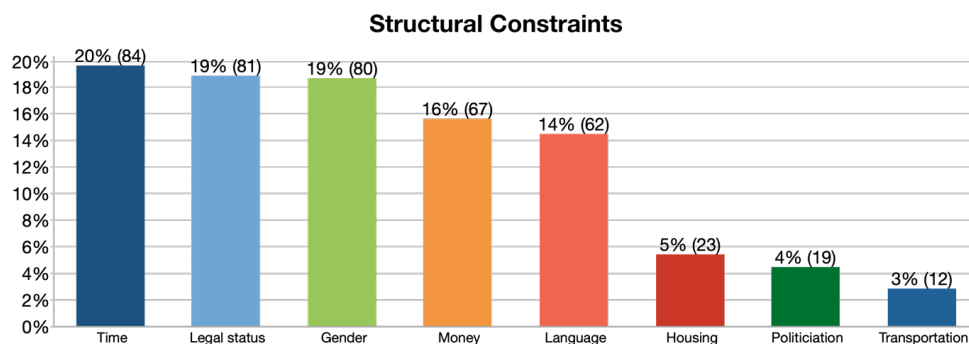


**Figure 1:** Categories of leisure constraints

### Structural Constraints

Structural constraints are the factors intervening between leisure preferences and participation, and thus, they are more easily identified since they act as barriers between participants' leisure interests and actual participation. These constraints are listed as follows: "family life-cycle stage, family financial resources, season, climate, the scheduling of work time, availability of opportunity (and knowledge of such availability), and reference group attitudes concerning the appropriateness of certain activities." (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, 124).

These are the factors beyond individual control, and it is not surprising that our participants have been mostly affected by these factors given their legal precarity as people under temporary protection. Eight structural leisure constraints have been identified from the data (see Figure 2). Lack of time and money were always stated together during the interviews, which can be considered one factor. Since time and money are common leisure constraints for the general population, we can present legal status, gender, and language as the most influential structural leisure constraints for Syrian refugees.



**Figure 2:** Frequencies of structural constraints

Most of the research participants, except for those from the upper class, came to Türkiye, leaving almost everything that they had in Syria. To make ends meet, they often have to spend most of their time working in low-paid jobs with unusual working hours, which not only leads to a lack of time, but also affects their recreational activities as it makes it difficult for them to meet their friends in the free time they do have. Some families have even resorted to child labor as a coping mechanism. Therefore, both lack of money and time are reported as the main leisure constraints in this regard. Two examples below show this well:

*“It’s only one reason. I’ll make it short for you. Lack of money. That’s it. I used to go outside to eat, but now I’m cooking because of the financial situation.” (Majd).*

*“So, we’re on the job for 15 hours. What’s left in a day?” (Faris)*

Although we refer to them as Syrian refugees in this study, they are officially defined as foreigners under temporary protection. As we have already discussed, although this allows them to access many rights, it falls short of refugee status. If Syrians under temporary protection are admitted to a third country for humanitarian reasons or resettlement, or if they leave for a third country, their temporary protection status is terminated, and domestically, they also must stay in their registered city in Türkiye. If they want to go to another city, they need to apply for a road permit each time, which is also difficult to obtain. The work permit regime

also leads them work in the informal labor market, where they are also exploited. These legal constraints obviously limit their leisure activities; for example, they cannot go on a holiday to another city even if they have money. Furthermore, most of them do not work in their registered city, and therefore, they limit their movement in the city to avoid the police. However, the most important factor that affects their leisure regarding legal issues is the fact that they feel under constant threat of being sent back to Syria, despite being all these years in Türkiye, which fundamentally affects their leisure time. Even when they participate in leisure activities, this fear of uncertainty affects their sense of leisure. Therefore, their legal status acts as the most important structural constraint in their leisure space, which is evident in the following quotes:

*“Yeah, there is another factor; it’s the residency thing because I don’t feel safe now” (Mia).*

*“For example, I look at my friends, everyone goes abroad and travels comfortably, I live like a prisoner here, sometimes I feel sad... What’s it called? It’s for a road permit. For example, they want to know the reason for traveling, they want to know. For example, to choose. For example, for treatment, for medicine, for visiting, for work, etc. But traveling, traveling. There’s nothing like that. It’s like you’re not a normal person” (Rami).*

The fact that gender norms have a negative impact on women’s leisure participation is well-documented (Best, 2010; Henderson, 2020). Syrian women face more constraints as they are both women and refugees. Furthermore, they have been subjected to the gender norms of both the Syrian and Turkish communities. In their leisure pursuits, they are also exposed to the Syrian and Turkish “male gaze.” Findings show that Syrian women are restricted in their leisure participation by their family, and especially by the father figure. Some of them even face domestic violence if they resist this restriction. Furthermore, Syrian families have security concerns for their daughters due to the bad memories in Syria and the rumors of kidnappings in Türkiye, which also restrict their freedom and leisure. Some participants did not even go out for almost a year when they came to Türkiye:

*“I can’t do anything for fun. My father won’t let me” (Amira).*

*“[Where are you going to the cafe?]*

*We can’t. It’s just my suggestion. Because they’re married too. Their husbands don’t let them. I somehow work, so I go out too” (Sana).*

Some of the female participants do not go to places where the majority is Syrian to avoid their judgement:

*“Like when you go to a place where there are a lot of Syrians. For example, in this park. When I walk there, there are a lot of Syrians. And the Syrian community here in Fatih or in Esenyurt are conservative people. For example, because I’m wearing this hoodie, they might look at me like, oh, she’s wearing too short clothes. Why is she doing her hijab like that? They criticize a lot. So, I don’t like to hear this” (Zohra).*

As for language, for migrants and refugees, language acts as a leisure constraint for two reasons; firstly, leisure activities are marketed in the official language of the receiving country, which limits their access to information regarding those activities; and secondly, even if they participate in leisure activities, the lack of language limits their socialization with locals (Horolets, 2012). After ten years in Türkiye, most of the Syrian refugees, except for old or rich Syrians, can speak more or less Turkish. However, they are afraid of being identified as Syrian due to their broken or accented Turkish, and they may face racism. Most of them are not comfortable speaking Turkish:

*“I wish that I can speak Turkish fluently, so no one see me that I am foreign” (Nagham).*

*“I mean, when people first talk, they don’t realize that I’m Syrians, but when I talk a lot, I have a dialect...”*

*[And do their behaviors change after they realize?]*

*It is changing” (Bassam).*

*“Yes. I always wanted to go to, like, dance classes and I had money in this time. But I couldn’t, like, get involved in the Turkish because I was scared, like, they won’t... I mean because I don’t speak Turkish” (Samar).*

Housing arises as an important constraint as most of the Syrian refugees live outside of the camps. Those who prefer to live in urban areas must take care of their housing needs. Therefore, those without financial resources were forced to stay in very poor standards of housing with higher rent, which led them to concentrate in poor neighborhoods that lack both leisure spaces and transportation to the main leisure spaces of the city. Most of the participants are not happy with their houses and neighborhoods and want to move to better neighborhoods:

*“I am not happy with the neighborhood. The fighting never stops. There are gunshots all the time. And the park is bad” (Amira).*

*“Houses are expensive, we can’t afford them. Look inside where we live, we’re sleeping here. That place is leaking, there is full of water, behind us is full of water” (Dalia).*

*“Like if I want to play sports, I need to like, you know, go for half an hour in the way to go somewhere where I can play basketball. And then, you know, I need to book a time maybe if it’s a busy place and so on. So, I have, I don’t do that in Istanbul because it’s too much of a hassle and it’s not very accessible for me. And also, a lot of times, like you want to do a specific sport, either you have to go somewhere far to do it for free or you have to pay for it. So that’s one thing that I stopped doing” (Ghassan).*

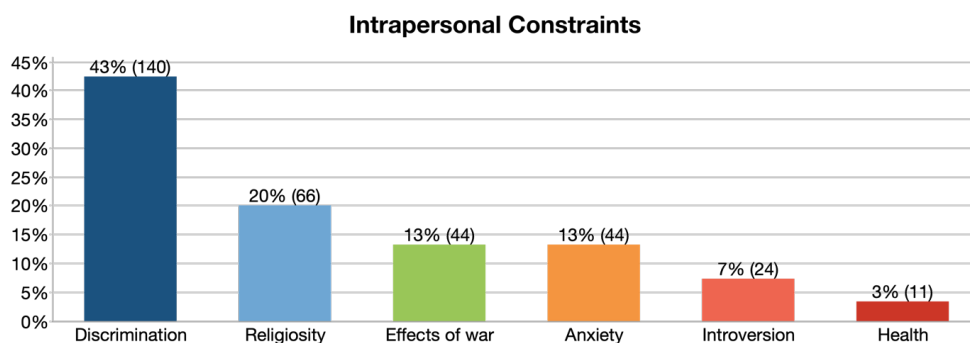
Studies show that the presence of Syrian refugees was not exploited in Türkiye by the political parties in the main elections of 2014 and 2018, while it is politicized in Europe and the US (Yanasmayan et al., 2019). However, the 2023 presidential election took place in an anti-refugee climate where they campaigned on sending the Syrians back; the opposition presidential candidate even put up posters on the streets saying, “Syrians will leave.” (Michaelson & Narlı, 2023). The interviews for this study were conducted under this condition, which made it difficult to find and persuade Syrians to participate. Most of the research participants stated their concerns regarding the rising anti-refugee sentiment and worry over their future, which altogether created a social climate where having leisure took a back seat since there were more existential problems:

*“I was going to say this, yes, now. Especially because of what happened during the election campaigns. I limited my movement a lot. I don’t take the public transportation even. There were videos of people hitting other people in the buses, beating them up. I was like, no, I don’t want to get beaten up like that. I didn’t feel comfortable to take my phone out when I was in the bus. Then, especially during the elections, seeing the signs of like, we’ve kicked Syrians out everywhere in the city. It was horrible” (Ruba).*

Our findings show that Syrian refugees face some specific structural constraints, such as legal status, language, and politicization, as well as those experienced by the general population, such as time, money, gender, and housing. However, Syrians suffer more severely from the restrictions that also apply to the general population. For example, Syrian women are subjected to gender norms stemming from both Syrian and Turkish culture. The intensity and prevalence of structural constraints are important because many intrinsic constraints are caused or influenced by structural constraints.

### Intrapersonal Constraints

As Crawford & Godbey state, intrapersonal constraints are the individual characteristics and attributes that affect leisure preferences, such as “stress, depression, anxiety, religiosity, kin and non-kin reference group attitudes, prior socialization into specific leisure activities, perceived self-skill, and subjective evaluations of the appropriateness and availability of various leisure activities.” (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, 122). Findings show that discrimination is the most influential constraint, which is followed respectively by religiosity, anxiety, the effects of war, introversion, and health (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Frequencies of intrapersonal constraints

Studies show that Syrian refugees face discrimination and xenophobia in Türkiye (Baban et al., 2017; Ozduzen et al., 2021). Also, there are studies showing that discrimination directly affects migrants and refugees’ leisure participation (Horolets, 2012). Our finding confirms these studies. Most of our participants suffer from either perceived or real discrimination in their everyday lives, which have negative impact on their leisure preferences:

*“The first time I felt angry, when I first faced like this, was when I went to Turkish Terzi (tailor), Tailor, she told me when you will go back to your home? I have been just for two months in Türkiye, and I don’t know Turkish. So, I felt bad, and I cried, and I didn’t know how to reply to her. But after that, I give a response and leave” (Nagham).*

*“In the park, my child calls another person ‘brother,’ and that person replies, ‘do not call me brother, you are Syrian’. Children are always anxious, and we are affected as a family. We don’t want to go to the park. In the park, I faced a problem for the use of the swing, another woman asking me to put him down, we called our husbands” (Rana).*

Syrian refugees are not considered to be entitled to leisure. There are many incidents in which the local people judge them in this regard:

*“We were stopping a taxi. Not for me. I was going to take a minibus to Şirinevler, but my friend was going to Eyüp Sultan. She’s already a tourist, a Tunisian tourist. We were trying to stop the taxi, and someone passed by and said yes, you are Arabs, you can pay for a taxi, we can’t, we are stranded, blah blah blah. I experienced this for a while” (Leila).*

Most of the participants complain about the subtle disapproving gaze of local people in many social and leisure settings. Syrian people are identified either by their dress or language:

*“It wasn’t really that big a deal. But, yeah, I could feel it, but not directly to me. It’s like their eyes were talking” (Ghada).*

*“For example, when I first went to the gym, everyone looked at me differently because I was Syrian.*

*[Really?]*

*You can feel a different relationship.*

*[So how did they find out you are Syrian?]*

*The type of clothing, the shape of the*

*Headscarf.” (Sana).*

One of the participants states that Syrian people are afraid to pay for their grocery by referring the banana incident when Syrian refugees began to protest by posting videos of themselves eating bananas as a reaction to the video of a middle-aged man saying that Syrians live comfortably, that he cannot eat bananas, while Syrians can eat bananas. Some of the Syrian protestors were faced with deportation due to the public reaction (*Syrians Face Deportation from Turkey over Banana Videos*, 2021.). As a result of these experiences and racist social media posts about Syrian people, most of them have avoided interactions with locals:

*“Honestly. Uh, like a few times I would hear about like, oh, there’s this place where people do this or do that, you know, there’s sports, there’s things like that. Um, or in my university campus, I would see people playing things, but I wouldn’t want to approach because I don’t feel that comfortable. And I feel like there’s always the assumption that they could be racist, that they could be rude, or they could be, they could exclude me. And I wouldn’t want that” (Ghassan).*

Most of our participants define themselves as Muslims. Studies show that Islam shapes all aspects of its followers, including their leisure preferences and participation (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006). There are certain leisure activities that are either prohibited, such as the consumption of alcohol and gambling, or supported, such as sports and physical activities that are considered good for bodies and minds, and between these two poles, there are other forms of leisure that are considered acceptable or not, depending on the dominant version of Islam in the region of residence (Walseth & Amara, 2017). A study conducted on Muslim migrants in the US shows Islam is effective on their leisure behaviors by emphasizing modesty in dressing, and behaviors, family-oriented leisure, as well as restriction in mixed-gender interactions, and prohibition of certain food and drinks (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006). In the same fashion, most of the research participants state that they avoid certain leisure activities because of their religious views. For example, most of them do not prefer to go to leisure places where they serve alcoholic drinks or to be in mixed-gender places, which is evident in the following quotes:

*"It supports and prevents. There are many activities that are forbidden in my religion. So, I don't go to the disco or the bar" (Anas).*

*"For example, dancing, cinema. I still haven't been to the cinema. Neither in Syria nor here. Because it is too mixed, too, I don't know, I don't want to go to the cinema because people walk around naked or something like that. I have religious barriers" (Tarek).*

*[Does it affect your leisure choice?]*

*Yeah, of course.*

*[For example?]*

*There was a party I guess from two months for Jason Derulo.*

*[What?]*

*Jason Derulo.*

*[Jason Derulo, OK.]*

*I was planning to go there, but I had to think about it because they like... I guess somewhere where there is alcohol and those stuff. So, I didn't go. Yeah, well, it's not normal to have someone wearing hijab in a nightclub, for example" (Zohra).*

The role of religion can also be seen in the leisure preferences of the secular participants. For example, they do not prefer going to leisure activities where the majority of the participants are religious:



*“There are some nice areas in Türkiye that I wish that, I mean, nature wise, let’s say, or maybe an ancient neighborhood or wherever, that I cannot go there because I cannot enjoy being there. If the majority of the residents there, they’re conservative. So, I don’t go there.*

*[For example?]*

*Arab zone... But the places that, you know, the Syrian cuisine restaurants here, they don’t serve alcohol. They’re conservative people and I’m not” (Majd).*

Due to the impact of the civil war in Syria and widespread discrimination in the receiving society, many of the participants developed anxiety, which negatively affected their leisure preferences. Even those granted citizenship have concerns regarding their future and have the fear of being sent back to Syria. This fear led them to restrict certain actions to avoid any problems with either the police or locals, such as not going out, keeping a low profile by not speaking Arabic and dressing like Syrians in public places, concealing their identity, etc.

*“Most of Syrian feeling not stable. They didn’t have any future there. They are waiting the days that any decision makes about returning them or forcing them to make some deal with Assad regime. Which they pay this price for. The main idea or the main subject all the Syrians are speaking about is migration. How we go out of Türkiye... Unfortunately, my husband does not feel stable, and he said, I don’t want to go out of the house because I may face something, some policeman that can make something against me. So, he tried to, if we have activities in this area, we don’t want to go far away. We don’t think to go out of Istanbul because...” (Rawya).*

There are many studies showing that Syrian refugees have been exposed to traumatic events such as loss of loved ones, physical injury, violence, rape, being forced to fight, starvation, etc., which resulted in psychological problems since most of them complained about disturbing memories and flashbacks of those events, and showed stress reactions such as sleep problems, social withdrawal, emotional outbreaks, feeling trapped and tense, and worries over the future and those left in Syria (Cantekin, 2019; Kaya et al., 2019). Our findings showed parallel results with these studies. As we stated before, leisure is composed of two aspects: time and attitude (a feeling). Most of the participants lack this feeling due to the psychological effects of war compounded by the widespread discrimination in the receiving society.

*“I watch some movies, I watch usually YouTube, Instagram but even when I watch a movie, I don’t enjoy in our inside there is burning memories when you left your home, your children’s memories when you remember your country, what happened to your country... Also, in Instagram or Facebook you say some video talking about us when you find all community against us” (Anas).*

Although they did not consider it a constraint, some participants identified themselves as introverts, which has affected their leisure preferences. They prefer home-based leisure activities. We can argue that their introversion was exacerbated by the anti-refugee sentiment in society:

*“I have more fun while I’m reading or doing something related to my interest and business rather than having these activities this kind of activities although when I’m doing them, I’m enjoying them but before going there or doing anything I’m overthinking the whole process and I prefer to stay at home just doing the things that I love” (Mai).*

*“No, for example, my little brother goes to the pub, blah blah blah. My sister even sings rap songs sometimes, not like her, but she also has a style in free life, but I mean, I don’t like such crowded nonsense places” (Rawan).*

Lastly, a few of the participants state their health concerns as factors affecting their leisure preferences. For example, those who try to keep a vegetarian diet cannot go to every restaurant, or those who do not find it healthy avoid eating out:

*“Drinking alcohol didn’t make sense to me. It actually did a lot of damage to my body. So, I realized that maybe that’s why it is forbidden in our religion” (Ghada).*

*“It’s unhealthy. I get sick every time I eat from outside” (Ruba).*

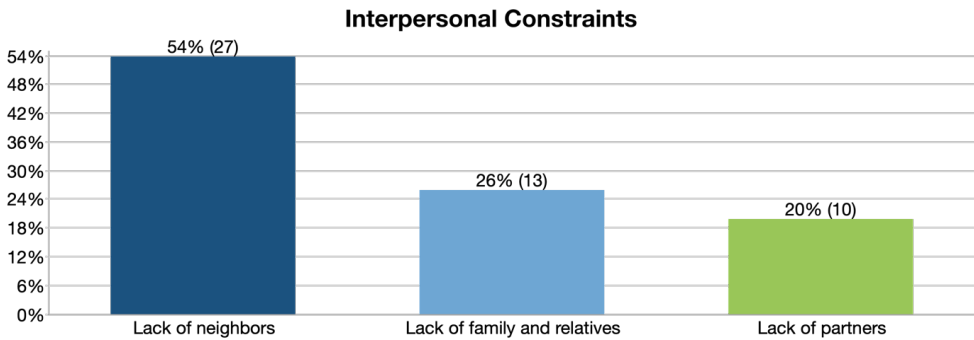
*“That’s why I go to Damascus restaurants. Falafel, chickpeas, hummus, broad beans. They have a lot of options. They are vegetarian or even vegan. They are also very satisfying” (Samar).*

Intrapersonal leisure constraints are considered to be the most powerful category of constraints; leisure preferences cannot come into being unless individuals first overcome them. Discrimination stands out as the most important constraint in this sense, which affects not only leisure preferences and participations but also the entire lives of Syrian refugees at an existential level.

### **Interpersonal Constraints**

Interpersonal constraints arise from interpersonal interaction, affecting leisure preference and participation. For example, married couples may affect each other’s leisure preferences, or someone cannot participate in a leisure activity without a suitable partner. Syrian refugees have three interpersonal constraints, namely, lack of neighbors, lack of family and relatives,

and lack of partners. They mostly mentioned the lack of neighbors, which was followed by the lack of family, relatives, and lastly partners (see Figure 4). We argue that this may be due to two factors: First, neighbors are seen as part of the family by Syrians, and second, their inability to establish a relationship with the local community may be why they need neighbors, relatives, and family more.



**Figure 4:** Frequencies of interpersonal constraints

Most participants referred to their neighbors in Syria as an extension of their family. Visiting neighbors, especially for housewives, is crucial as a leisure activity. Neighbors also play a key role in each other's leisure by helping each other. For example, they can leave their children to their neighbors to go out for leisure. Except for a few cases, most participants cannot establish good relationships with their neighbors in Türkiye and instead face negative attitudes or no interaction at all. After many failed attempts, Syrian refugees gave up and focused solely on engaging with the Syrian community. The words of Wael describe the importance of neighbors and the current situation in this regard:

*“The Turkish neighbors, they just... We don't have any activities with them, actually. Just when they see them and when they see us, they make salaam. And nothing after that. We don't have contact with them. Okay. I need that, but I feel they don't want to make this one with me. So, I respect that and I don't talk with them too much.*

*[Okay. Okay, I understand.]*

*Because, especially in Syria, the neighbors, it's like family. When you see, they also, the neighbors in Syria, they come to us and visit us in the Bayram. And we visit them. And in Ramadan, I remember when I was in Syria, in Ramadan, the neighbors sent to us food and we sent food for them. Here, I don't have that” (Wael).*

Visiting relatives is an important leisure activity for Syrian people (Altuntaş et al., 2021). Syrian refugees did not only leave behind their possessions but also members of their family and relatives, which deprived them of material and psychological support in the process of adjusting to their new environment. This also limits their leisure preferences and participation:

*“But here in Istanbul, for example, this only happens if there are relatives. But right now, I have a brother and a sister. How many relatives are there? Even if it’s a Bayram. It’s normal. It’s a normal day” (Saif).*

When Syrian refugees first arrived in Türkiye, they could not make friends due to the language barrier; then, it became a bit more difficult because of widespread discrimination and the rising anti-refugee sentiment. As a result of the above-mentioned structural and intrapersonal constraints, they also face interpersonal constraints. Most of them have developed some kind of defense mechanism in approaching people:

*“They need to approach me in order to be friends. Otherwise, I will not.” (Ruba)*

*“Yeah. So, I have kind of like a love-hate relationship with Turks. It just develops by itself, you know, seeing some racist things, seeing like how the government makes bureaucracy harder. Like that’s the thing. You realize that they’re not doing it to be more efficient.” (Ghassan).*

Interpersonal constraints have a relatively low frequency as opposed to other categories of constraints. This may stem from the fact that it may not be a priority considering the importance of other constraints, or it may be negotiated; for example, they may turn to their own ethnic group after failing to engage with local people.

### **Discussion**

Leisure is an important space for the integration of migrants and refugees where they can socialize with local people, get to know the culture, and alleviate the impact of past traumas. The framework proposed by Crawford et al. (1991) is employed in this study to analyze the leisure constraints of Syrian refugees, and we found several examples for each type of leisure constraint. Furthermore, we identified a list of leisure constraints specific to Syrian refugees. Unsurprisingly, given the legal status of Syrian refugees, structural constraints (60% of all constraints) are the most important category of leisure constraints affecting Syrian refugees’ leisure. This is followed by intrapersonal constraints (32%), with discrimination being the most frequently mentioned constraint under this category. The last category is interpersonal constraints (8%), where the lack of neighbors seems to be the most important constraint.

However, the fact that interpersonal constraints were mentioned so little as opposed to others does not mean that these constraints were not influential in the lives of the participants. A possible explanation could be that these constraints were negotiated or overcome; for example, most of the participants report that after many failed attempts to make friends with local people, they have turned to their co-ethnics to socialize. Therefore, we can say that structural constraints stand out as the most effective factors in this regard because they cannot be overcome or negotiated by Syrian refugees. Crawford et al. (1991) argue that individuals confront leisure constraints in a hierarchical manner, e.g., they first encounter intrapersonal constraints, and only after overcoming this or through negotiation, they respectively face interpersonal and structural constraints. There are studies that challenge the hierarchical nature of the framework by showing interactions between three levels (Auster, 2001; Shaw & Henderson, 2005). However, Godbey et al. respond to this challenge by emphasizing the fact that concepts can be correlated since it is impossible for any variables in social life to be unrelated (Godbey et al., 2010). Our findings also show a strong correlation between levels of constraint. For example, we struggled to decide whether discrimination against Syrian refugees should be categorized as an intrapersonal or structural constraint, given its prevalence in the social structure. We should also note that the leisure constraints we have identified may not be experienced by all respondents with the same degree of importance and power. For example, those from the upper class were more focused on insurmountable constraints, such as legal issues, as they were able to negotiate other constraints thanks to their privileges. Therefore, as Crawford et al. (1991) propose, our findings also suggest that social class is an important factor in their leisure preferences and participation. There is also a power dynamic between the Syrian and Turkish communities in terms of leisure. Syrian refugees are not seen as entitled to leisure or as having equal opportunities to access leisure, as they are often subjected to verbal harassment or disapproving gaze from the host community.

### **Conclusion**

The leisure dimension of refugees' lives and its positive impact on their adaptation and integration is under-researched area. Studies exploring Syrian refugees in Türkiye have similarly neglected this area. Therefore, in this study, we examined the leisure constraints that Syrian refugees face in their lives employing the framework proposed by Crawford et al. (1991). We found many examples representing each category of leisure constraints proposed by the framework, including constraints specific to Syrian refugees. According to our data, the structural factors are the most influential leisure constraints for Syrian refugees, which is followed by intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. Our findings suggest the importance of social class on leisure preference and participation, and the power dynamic between Syri-

an and Turkish communities that indicates the creation of hierarchies in leisure spaces. As for the research limitations, the study was carried out before the 2023 presidential election in a political atmosphere where the presence of refugees, especially Syrian refugees, was used as a tool for election propaganda. This situation has made it difficult for us to find participants in the first place and may have caused the participants to exercise self-control when expressing their opinions. Given the positive role of leisure in the integration of refugees, it is important for Türkiye, as the country with the largest refugee population in the world, to address these factors that limit the leisure activities of refugees and migrants.

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