

# Integration and Foodways Policy Briefs (2)

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## Summary

Women's food cooperatives are essential for fostering social cohesion, economic empowerment, and cultural integration among Syrian refugees and Turkish host communities. As one of our research participants stated:

*“Women's initiatives and cooperatives are emerging as important structures that strengthen solidarity between migrant and local communities, support economic independence, and enhance social cohesion. Food is not only an element that meets nutritional needs but also serves as a bridge that reinforces the bonds between societies.”*

Our findings underline how food exchanges, kitchen collaborations, and mutual learning via cooperatives can create neighborly relationships, foster hybrid cultural identities, and model sustainable integration. However, these cooperatives face ongoing challenges such as economic precarity, gendered burdens, limited infrastructure, and fragmented support from both civil society and government. Policy support for women's food cooperatives—if made holistic and inclusive—can transform individual lives and community relations, leveraging food culture as the bridge for integration.

# Integration and Foodways Policy Brief 1 – Civil Society and Local Municipalities

## Enhancing Social Cohesion through Supporting Women's Food Cooperatives

### Executive Summary

Women's food cooperatives are powerful agents of social cohesion, economic empowerment, and cultural integration for Syrian refugees and Turkish host communities. However, persistent social prejudices and gendered labor burdens threaten their sustainability and impact. Grounded in research and lived experiences from the Tübitak 1001 project, "Food, Homemaking, and Social Integration for Syrian Women in Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Hatay," this brief presents evidence-based recommendations for civil society and local municipalities that will strengthen these community-led drivers of integration.

### Project Summary

"Food, Homemaking, and Social Integration for Syrian Women in Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Hatay" is a three year multidisciplinary research project investigating how Syrian women in three Turkish cities reconstruct belonging, negotiate integration, and adapt culinary and homemaking practices in the wake of forced migration. Drawing upon interviews, mental maps, field observations, and a workshop, this research explored food, home, gender, and social cohesion after migration.

### *Challenges Identified*

- While food offers fertile ground for social interaction, prejudices, language barriers, and administrative hurdles can hinder collaboration between Syrian and Turkish women.
- Lack of childcare and family support severely limits women's ability to participate in cooperatives.

### *Research Findings*

- Shared meals and the preparation of familiar dishes (such as yaprak, mahshi, muhlkhiya, and kibbeh) evoke positive memories and a sense of belonging among Syrian refugees, recreating "sensory space-time compression" that bridges home and exile. As one woman explained,  
"I have a special memory. We were at my grandmother's house; everyone was going... she had made stuffed grape leaves, tying 5-6 of them together with string so they wouldn't fall apart in the pot. I loved going there, especially when it was crowded... now that my grandmother has passed away, that moment remains very vivid in my mind... whenever I think of stuffed grape leaves, that moment comes to mind, and it feels like I miss her and remember that moment." - Hila, Gaziantep, 34
- Women shoulder a "triple workload": physical foodwork, emotional labor for family well-being, and the cultural task of preserving heritage. This can be empowering, yet also

increases stress, especially as women often take on new roles as both primary cooks and shoppers in exile. Bayan explained her sense of her duties as follows:

“My mother only cooked the food we liked. Now, I cook for my son the food he loves, even though my husband does not eat half of the food I prepare. Therefore, I prepare for my husband the food that he loves, and I also do not deprive my son of the food that he loves... My son prefers ready-made food, but I tell him that I can make him all the food he likes. My mother used to cook us the food we loved, and we also do that for our children.” - Bayan, Istanbul, 48;

For some migrants, these pressures are draining:

"It's exhausting. I carry everything from the shopping trip myself, take care of the children, cook, and try to save money. Sometimes I cry while cooking because it's just too much." - Dunya, Istanbul, 33.

- Food exchanges create social capital and can move relationships from “bonding” within migrant groups to “bridging” with the local population. Sharing a meal or a recipe can spark new networks. As one Turkish founder of a cooperative explained,  
“When I started this project, I had my own prejudices about how I could interact with Syrians. But as I got to know them, I realized that they are just like us, very cheerful and pleasant to talk to. My prejudices were shattered... I stated that everyone is equal here and that there should be no discrimination. Both sides are the same for me.”
- Although food sharing can reduce prejudice and foster new relationships, it does not always overcome symbolic boundaries, such as negative attitudes toward spices. As one interviewee explained, a neighbor told her: “You use too much spice... she thanked us, but no longer shared food with us so that we would not share food with them.” Gastronomic racism and culinary hierarchies persist.
- Migrants blend Syrian and Turkish culinary traditions, fostering the emergence of “culinary hybridization” and “flexible continuity.”
- Cooperatives are key forces of integration, with our research participants telling us: “Women’s cooperatives are among the significant structures that contribute to social cohesion between migrant and local communities and to the increase of economic independence. The coming together of women in the kitchen stands out as one of the most important factors supporting social adaptation.”

## Policy Recommendations

### *1. Foster Social Cohesion and Cultural Dialogue*

- Municipalities and NGOs should organize regular cooking workshops, food festivals, and shared meals involving both Syrian and local communities to build trust and break down stereotypes.
- Encourage the development of neighborhood-based “third spaces” for cooking, preservation, and socializing, enabling collective preparation and reinforcing agency and community resilience.

- Collaborate with public education centers (e.g. Halk Eđitim) to provide language training (including Turkish B1 and Arabic), food hygiene, and hospitality trainings for cooperative members.
- Publicly celebrate and market hybrid dishes and multicultural food events as symbols of integration and local pride.

## *2. Address Gendered Barriers*

- In all food and integration projects, ensure access to childcare or parallel children's activities, enabling women's full participation.
- Invest in leadership programs for migrant and local women within cooperatives, and ensure democratic, participatory management structures.
- Fund and recognize mental health and social care services within food cooperatives (including peer support and parenting education), acknowledging the emotional and practical burdens placed on women.

## **Conclusion**

Women's food cooperatives hold extraordinary promise for strengthening social cohesion and economic empowerment among Syrian refugees and Turkish host communities, yet their potential is limited unless local municipalities and civil society organizations prioritize holistic, inclusive measures. Research shows that shared culinary practices evoke comfort and belonging, and also build bridges of relationship and trust, even as gendered burdens, prejudice, and limited access to childcare persist as obstacles. To truly harness the integrative power of women's food cooperatives, policy must extend beyond symbolic workshops and embrace long-term investment in infrastructural support—communal kitchens, childcare provision, language and skills training, and inclusive leadership programs. This approach enables women to practice agency not just within their families, but across social spheres. Psycho-social support and active recognition of women's triple workload are critical: only by supporting both practical and emotional well-being can cooperatives remain sustainable and transformative.

# Integration and Foodways Policy Brief 2 – National Government

## Enhancing the Sustainability of Women's Food Cooperatives for Refugee Social Integration

### Executive Summary

Women's food cooperatives are not only sources of income and skills for migrants and local women, but are also primary sites for belonging, psychosocial development, and community integration. However, economic precarity, bureaucratic constraints, and limited resources threaten their sustainability and transformative impact. Grounded in research and lived experiences from the Tübitak 1001 project, "Food, Homemaking, and Social Integration for Syrian Women in Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Hatay," this brief presents policy recommendations to the Turkish government that will ensure that women's cooperatives remain viable and impactful for years to come.

### Project Summary

"Food, Homemaking, and Social Integration for Syrian Women in Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Hatay" is a three year multidisciplinary research project investigating how Syrian women in three Turkish cities reconstruct belonging, negotiate integration, and adapt culinary and homemaking practices in the wake of forced migration. Drawing upon interviews, mental maps, field observations, and a workshop, this research explored food, home, gender, and social cohesion after migration.

### *Challenges Identified*

- Women's cooperatives face chronic funding shortages, difficulty accessing stable contracts, and insufficient institutional support, particularly for secure employment (i.e. SGK and social insurance). For example, one cooperative director explained, "The workers pressured me to provide insurance. I said I couldn't do it at the moment-it's not possible. I need to make this budget work for future purposes. I have to employ workers informally because I'm doing this for the employees."
- Many food-based integration and livelihood projects depend on short-term grants or are vulnerable to political shifts and donor priorities, hampering long-term resilience.
- Most refugee families face severe food insecurity.

### *Research Findings*

- Cooperatives are sites of integration, economic empowerment, and cross-cultural solidarity. As one of our participants noted, "The democratic management structure of cooperatives ensures the active participation of women in decision-making processes and fosters a sense of belonging."

- Cooperatives face bureaucratic and financial challenges. “Many cooperatives start but cannot continue. Yes, it's the same situation now. We are stuck in financial terms; it cannot work without support/grants.”
- Cooperatives offer dignity, connection, and healing for parents facing the daily hardship of food insecurity. As one migrant shared, “Sometimes I just tell the kids we’ll eat something later, but I know we have nothing. I don’t want them to feel the burden.” Such strategies, while resourceful, increase stress, sadness, and feelings of inadequacy among parents.

## Policy Recommendations

### *1. Strengthen the Economic Foundations of Cooperatives*

- Establish grant programs for cooperatives and facilitate access to business development services. For example, provide technical assistance for marketing (i.e. e-commerce), extending product shelf life, food safety certification, and financial literacy.
- Public institutions (municipalities, hospitals, schools) should procure food services and goods from women-led cooperatives to guarantee sustainable income streams.
- Offer incentives or gradual social insurance integration for refugee and local women workers to combat informal employment and ensure rights.
- Expand grants for food preservation equipment, kitchen expansion, and the rental or adaptation of larger shared food spaces to enable collective processes and storage (supporting communal traditions like mouneh-making).
- Address the spatial needs of migrant and low-income families in urban housing policy, prioritizing community kitchens and sufficient storage when planning refugee or social housing.

### *2. Ensure Sustainability and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration*

- Move from ad-hoc, project-based support to institutionalized, long-term funding strategies embedded in municipal and national development plans.
- Encourage collaboration between municipalities, NGOs, universities, and private sector actors to pool resources, expertise, and advocacy in support of women’s food cooperatives.
- Develop transparent tracking of social cohesion and economic empowerment outcomes to continuously refine integration strategies.

## Conclusion

Food and kitchen-based women’s cooperatives are crucial for building sustainable social bridges, economic opportunities, and cultural dialogue in migration-affected communities in Turkey. A holistic policy approach—combining financial, technical, social, and legal measures—is vital to unlock their full potential for integration and resilience