



THE STRESS OF DEBT

EFFECTS ON THE LIVES
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN
TURKEY UNDER TEMPORARY
AND INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

- MOFSS** - - - - Ministry Of Family And Social Services
- COVID-19** - - Coronavirus
- ECHO** - - - - European Union Civil Protection And Humanitarian Aid
- IFRC** - - - - International Federation Of Red Cross And Red Crescent Societies
- FGD** - - - - Focus Group Discussion
- ESSN** - - - - Emergency Social Safety Net Programme



SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Turkey hosts the world's largest refugee population¹, with over 4 million asylum seekers of which 3.5 million of these are Syrians living under temporary protection.

Turkish Red Crescent has a well-established "Kizilaykart" that initially provided cash assistance to Turkish citizens and has now transformed into a cash-based assistance platform that has also integrated refugees into the existing national social assistance network, providing different programmes such as education, basic needs, vocational training, and language courses in order to meet the needs of the vulnerable people.

The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) provides regular monthly cash assistance through Kizilaykart to 1.5 million people living under temporary protection and international protection. The cash programme is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Turkish Red Crescent and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in close cooperation with the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS).

Within the scope of the programme, various qualitative and quantitative research studies are carried out to identify the impacts of the assistance on the target group.

Focus group discussions (FGD) are one of the most important qualitative data collection methods. Since the partnership of the Turkish Red Crescent and IFRC, previous FGD themes explored the impact of the pandemic on refugees and women's participation in the economy with 247 refugees participants from six provinces across Turkey, where the target group is densely populated. The third stage FGDs, of which a detailed analysis is presented in this report were carried out in December 2020 - January 2021 and, focused on the theme 'financial stress and debt among refugees.

The post distribution monitoring report, based on data from June to September 2020, stated that 80 per cent of the households who applied to the ESSN programme were in debt, and the amount of debt doubled between the years 2019 and 2020. (TRY 1,000 in 2019, increasing to TRY 2,000 in 2020).² This high rate shows that only one in five households surveyed are living without debt. While 43 per cent of asylum seekers preferred borrowing as a coping strategy in 2019, this rate increased to 74 per cent in 2020. Therefore, borrowing stands out as the most widely used and most common method after ESSN assistance.



1 • People under temporary or international protection in Turkey. These are people forced to leave their country and who cannot return, most notably Syrians and other nationalities.

2 • IFRC and Turkish Red Crescent 2020- Cash Assistance in Times of Covid-19 Impacts on refugees living in Turkey- Findings from the post-distribution monitoring survey (round 10) on Emergency Social Safety Net applicants.

Among Syrian migrants, the average number of working members in each household does not exceed 1.2 regardless of whether they are male, or female headed households or whether they receive ESSN assistance or not. This highlights the absence of working women in majority of the households and the general unemployment situation overall. Syrian migrants, who are constituted mostly of single-income families, consider borrowing as their most important coping strategy and define it as a part of their lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic also deeply affected Syrian migrants economically, as it has most of the world. According to previous COVID-19-related research findings jointly conducted by the IFRC and the Turkish Red Crescent, debt amounts of Syrian households have increased, difficulties in meeting basic needs have increased, and at least one person in approximately 80% of households has lost their job permanently or temporarily.

To better understand and complement the above findings, this FGD aimed to explore:

- 1** • The borrowing status of the households that applied to the ESSN programme and the reasons for borrowing,
- 2** • The dynamics of debt access, repayment of the debt and debt management,
- 3** • The impact of being in debt on individuals, family and other social relations,
- 4** • The coping methods used or thought to be applied in case of not being able to access debt
- 5** • What households would prioritize and how they would feel in case of having no debt.
- 6** • The report also aimed at offering suggestions in line with its findings.

'Debt and financial stress' themed FGDs were held in December and January 2021 with 96 participants who applied to the ESSN from the cities of Ankara, İzmir, İstanbul, Hatay, Samsun, and Gaziantep where the target group is densely populated in different geographies. Due to the pandemic, the sessions were conducted online through the digital platform and were completed in 16 sessions. The participants consisted of 48 female and 48 male individuals between the ages of 20 and 68. Sixty of them were ESSN beneficiaries, and 36 of them were individuals from ineligible households who applied to the ESSN but were not entitled to have assistance or whose assistance was stopped because they no longer met the programme criteria.



KEY FINDINGS

Reasons for debt: unemployment and high household expenditures

The primary reasons for borrowing have been identified as unemployment/limited employment opportunities, working in irregular and low-paid jobs, and household expenditures being higher than family income. It was found that such factors were heightened due to the pandemic and in the wake of rising inflation. Unexpected health expenses were also observed to cause borrowing. The probability of paying off the debt was associated with the availability of a regular and reliable job, a higher and consistent salary, and the presence of two or more persons working in the household.

Perception of debt: undesirable but inevitable

Participants considered debt as undesirable and negative, but generally inevitable. They often emphasized that debt is taken out of necessity, and brings poverty, illness, anxiety, and social resentments along with it. The person in debt was compared to a sick person.

Main access to debt: borrowing from acquaintance

Debt is generally sourced from acquaintances, Syrian relatives and friends that are in a better financial situation, or from Syrian market owners or business owners. Individuals ask for debt from people that they can reach out to and within the framework of trust. Most people do not have the economic power to borrow large amounts of money. Since the amounts borrowed are mostly small, they are given debt without the expectation of security or interest, but the borrower is expected to abide by the payment date.

Men in better position to pay back debt than women

When the gender-based dynamics in accessing debt were explored, it is found that men are in a better situation than women. The general thinking was that men work or are more likely to work so their ability to pay back is higher than women and the amount of money they could borrow is larger, and since their social circle is greater as they spend more time outside than women, they have greater access to a network of people they could borrow from than women. It has been argued that women can only ask for debt from their closest relatives, and that they are more likely to access debt only when their socio-economic vulnerability is high (for example, if the woman is a poor and lonely widow). There were many participants who expressed the opinion that it is not culturally appropriate for women to have a dialogue with a lender who is not from family. Although small in numbers, some participants stated that access to debt is not related to the gender of the borrower but closely linked with abiding by the debt and paying back on time.³

Debt repayment through shared social support

Debt repayments are usually made on a weekly or monthly basis and the payment methods vary. The most preferred debt repayment methods are respectively, paying in instalments, by reducing basic needs, by borrowing from a second person, by selling goods and jewellery and by receiving advance from the workplace. There are differences in opinions as to whether a man or a woman is better at spending the borrowed debt more economically. There were shared ideas that the spouses can only overcome the debt crisis together. Debt access and repayment processes generally work within the framework of understanding and tolerance, indicating the prevalence of shared social support among individuals under temporary/international protection.

3 • OECD, Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Include, Upskill and Innovate, 2018.

Rent as most common use of ESN cash assistance

Most of the participants pay their rent first and bills thereafter with Kızılaykart. For many, it is found that due to the pandemic and increasing inflation in recent times, Kızılaykart only covers the rental costs, and sometimes not even enough for that. A small group of participants also mentioned that they used Kızılaykart to pay off their debts.

Effects of Debt: Increase stress, anxiety and depression

It was stated that debt causes stress, tension, worry, helplessness, anxiety disorder, restlessness, and depression in individuals. One of the most worrying thought for participants was that the landlord could throw them out of the house if they cannot pay their rent. In addition, inability to pay for utilities and not having access to adequate water, electricity, heating as well as the fear of not being able to provide enough food for the family were among other reasons that caused stress, anxiety, and depression. There were also participants who thought that the above concerns affect their work life and reduce their efficiency. It was also stated that high levels of worry, anxiety and fear caused physical problems. Some said being in debt triggers for example heart diseases, diabetes, blood pressure, and causes health problems such as headache, fatigue, loss of appetite, hair loss and insomnia. Such findings underlined that under the current circumstances, ESN applicants who are excluded from the programme may be under serious psychological pressure and increasingly experiencing the associated health problems.

Rising tensions in families due to stresses of debt

Being in debt was thought to cause tension among family members and even lead to divorce at some instances. Children were considered to be the group that is most affected by the negative consequences. Often not being able to meet children's wishes or needs caused parents to worry and feel angry, and parents reflected these feelings on their children, even if they didn't want to. Another important finding in which children experienced victimization related to debt induced poverty is child labour. Three of the participants stated that their children had to work at an early age due to financial difficulties. Taking into consideration the negative effects of child labour on children's physical, psychological, social, and educational development, child labour is one of the most significant maladaptive consequences of family debt.

Debt causing strained social ties

A quarter of the participants thought that debt harms their relations with relatives, friends, neighbours and other lenders. A group of participants stated that culturally, it is necessary to offer food and drinks when guests are invited, but since they cannot afford to do so due to financial difficulties, they cannot host guests and therefore their social life is quite limited. The reasons for preference to stay more at home and live less of a social life are listed as feeling embarrassed to be around the lender who are often people they know and fear of being treated in a negative way or being condemned, feeling of sadness and depression caused by the debt and reluctance to socialize. Conversely, 11 of 96 participants stated that being in debt did not have any negative effect on their social relations. Although they had some problems with the members of the family due to debt, this did not affect their relationships outside the home as their external social circle supported them.

Debt a necessity to cover basic needs

When the participants were asked how they would continue if they could not access debt and which expenditure items they would cut, majority mentioned that they would not be able to live without debt, and that debt was an inevitable necessity to meet their basic needs. It was stated that their incomes are never enough and that they must borrow money even to cover the rent, utilities, and staple food expenses. Some participants expressed that if there are more than two working people in the household, it may be possible to live without debt. In cases where it is not possible to access debt, households commonly choose to reduce either food or non-food expenses. Regarding food expenses, both the variety and the amount of food were told to be reduced, followed by reducing the number of meals. Participants explained

that the cheapest food products are bought, red meat is nearly never consumed, most of the households don't buy red or white meat, vegetables, and fruits, and even the essential food products such as sugar, butter, bread, and rice are consumed in small quantities. Non-food expenses that are thought to be reduced in the absence of access to debt were mostly expressed as clothes and shoes, diapers, cigarettes, coal, medicine/health expenditures, toys, and story books. Among participants, there were also those who used the expression "If we cannot take on debt, I will benefit from the tents or institutions that distribute aid".

Their children's needs are a top priority if debts were paid

If debts were paid off, the first thing the participants said they would prioritize would be meeting more needs for their children. This includes giving them winter pyjamas, coats, shoes, blankets and foods they are often deprived of, such as meat, fruit and yoghurt. Another group verbalised their priority as to meet the educational needs of the children such as providing phones and tablets so that they can participate in online education. Three participants said they would take their children out of work if their debts were paid off. Other plans included buying white goods or furniture that they need, renewing or repairing old appliances and furniture (such as refrigerator, washing machine, sofa bed and heater) and providing clothing. There were also statements that they would increase the amount and variety of food if they pay off their debts. Most basic food items such as rice, olive oil, sugar and cleaning materials were among expenses they would increase. There were also some who wanted to have their house renovated or who wanted to move to a new house (preferably with natural gas). Others said if they are debt-free, they would prefer to save money for bad days without making a change in spending since they know what being in debt is like. A few expressed that they would give priority to their health expenses.

What would change if they did not have debt

If participants were debt-free, they said they would feel much happier and relaxed, see themselves stronger and more confident individuals. Other references included that they would be psychologically healthier, their stress levels would reduce, they would sleep better, be able to spend time with their children more patiently, the tension between spouses would decrease, and therefore the children would be happier too, and that their walking on the street would even change. There were also statements that their social relations would be better, and they would live a more social life.



METHOD

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

By targeting the households residing in Turkey who have applied to the ESSN programme under temporary or international protection, this FGD study on the theme of debt and financial stress aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the following elements and offer suggestions regarding them:

- Reasons behind borrowing
- Dynamics in debt access, pay back and debt management
- The effects of being in debt on individuals, family and social relationships
- Coping mechanisms used or considered in case of inability to access debt
- Priorities and how they would feel in the absence of debt?

SAMPLE

The FGDs were conducted in December 2020-January 2021 and the participants were selected among people who applied to the ESSN, living in the cities of Ankara, Izmir, Istanbul, Hatay, Samsun and Gaziantep, where the target group is densely populated. These cities host 46 per cent of the total Syrian population.⁴ The participants consisted of 48 women and 48 men between the ages of 20 and 68. Of the total 96 participants, 60 were individuals who have benefited from the ESSN, and 36 were individuals who have applied to the ESSN but were not eligible for assistance or their assistance were suspended because they no longer met the programme criteria. Participants were divided into 16 focus groups according to whether they received ESSN or not, and whether they were male or female. They were randomly selected and assigned to groups regardless of the city they came from, education level or age group. It should be noted that the sample does not represent the target migrant population in Turkey.

Table 1. Focus Group Discussion Distribution of Participants

CITY	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	DISTRIBUTION
Ankara	19	20 %
Istanbul	20	21 %
Izmir	12	13 %
Hatay	12	13 %
Gaziantep	21	22 %
Samsun	12	13 %
Total	96	100 %

4 • Directorate General of Migration Management, Distribution of Syrians Under Temporary Protection by Province, <http://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCESS

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as of June 2020 the focus group discussions conducted within the ESSN programme have been held via videoconferencing on tablets/phones, using online channels. Thanks to the innovative model used, it is possible for participants living in different regions to attend the same FGD session.⁵ The discussions are carried out in the company of expert moderators and reporters who connect online. After obtaining permission from the determined number of participants through the Turkish Red Crescent 168 Call Center, the field teams go to the households that agree to participate in the meeting, and they deliver the devices at their doorstep. Physical distancing and hygiene rules are met throughout the process.

The reports prepared by the rapporteurs who took notes during the discussion are initially cross checked with the video recordings and are converted into transcripts by the monitoring and evaluation experts of the Turkish Red Crescent. These transcripts are then analysed and turned into reports jointly by Turkish Red Crescent and IFRC experts using Nvivo software.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The 96 participants were constituted of 48 women and 48 men. Some 63 per cent of the participants benefited from the ESSN programme, the remaining (37 per cent) applied but could not be included in the programme, or their assistance was stopped because they no longer met the criteria. The average age of the participants was 40, 10 per cent were in the 18-24 age group; 75 per cent in of 25-59 ages, and 9 per cent were aged 60 and above. The age of five people could not be noted due to technical problems. 85 per cent of the participants were in the working age group, that is between the ages of 18 and 59. When the education levels were examined, 4 per cent of the participants were illiterate, 55 per cent had primary school education, 29 per cent had secondary school education and 8 per cent had university-level education.



5 • Details of the innovative model used are published in the report titled 'Adapting to New Normal During COVID-19: Remote Focus Group Discussions'. http://platform.kizilaykart.org/en/Doc/rapor/Remote_Focus_Group_Discussions.pdf.

FINDINGS

REASONS FOR BORROWING

Some of the most mentioned reasons for borrowing include unemployment and having insufficient or no income, both of which virtually guarantee that expenditures will outpace income. Participants who did not have any income mostly stated that they could not work because they were women or were old, chronically ill, or disabled. Some participants also listed negative working conditions and having very few working members in the household as reasons for debt. Out of 96, 47 participants said they had to borrow money when they did not have an income, their income was irregular and low, or when their salaries were not paid on time. They could not meet their needs without debt due to high cost of living. The expenses were considered especially high for families with many children and thought to be increasing in recent times due to inflation.

“

The needs of the house are more than our monthly income, so it is never enough until the next month.

– Male, Ankara, ESSN recipient

“

If we do not take debt, we would starve to death. Everything runs on debt. We have five children. Which one will you buy for? Which one will you not?

– Female, İzmir, ESSN recipient

“

We wouldn't have borrowed if we didn't need it. But life requires it. We can only pay the bills with the debt we borrow.

– Female, Gaziantep, ESSN non-recipient

“

Previously, you could work more than 20 days. Now you work 12 days, you are unemployed for 18 days. If you don't work, you have no money. A year ago, Kızılaykart was able to both pay our rent and cover some of our expenses. Now it barely covers my house rent. – Male, Samsun, ESSN recipient

The negative effects of the pandemic on labour market were listed as another reason for debt, a view shared by 23 people across 10 out of the 16 focus groups. This group pointed toward the increasing irregularity of work, the long closures of workplaces, and the decreasing salaries and job opportunities as specific aspects of the pandemic that have negatively affected them – concerns which underscore the irregularity of the daily jobs these participants worked in. A group of fewer than 10 participants stated that they could manage themselves without debt before the pandemic, however with the pandemic they worked much less and had to borrow money.

It was stated that where debt is essential, it was needed for house rent and bills among ineligible applicants. Kızılaykart holders reported needing to borrow for basic needs such as rent, utilities and food. The view that basic needs without debt cannot be met was expressed by 72 participants in 15 of the 16 focus group discussions.

While it is thought that if more than one person in the family had a regular and average income, it could be possible to live without debt. Many of them said that they could not make a living without debt, especially since the pandemic. The participants pointed towards their decreased amount of work and increased rents, bills, and food costs as reasons for incurring new debts.



In addition, it was mentioned that the financial burden fell on the few young male members of the family. Other demographic factors that participants believed led to low salaries were the difficulty for women to have a regular income-generating job due to childcare and housework and the inability of older (60+) household members to work due to ageism in hiring practices or physical limitations. Another covid-related factor was the inability to benefit from free health services because they could not get an appointment from hospitals and health centres that were overwhelmed due to the pandemic. Some participants, who had to apply to private institutions or Syrian doctors instead of free health institutions for any health problem, mentioned that they had to spend more out of their pockets, and this caused debt.

Discussions reveal how bad debt is generally seen by the participants, and that debt is taken out of necessity, and that it brings along the possibilities of poverty, illness, anxiety, and interpersonal resentment. The general view is that debt is an undesirable but almost inevitable situation for the participants.

It was also expressed that debt drags the individual into inextricable poverty, resembles an enemy that prevents one from eating or drinking, and that it affects family relations. There are also participants who say that would prefer to beg in front of the mosque rather than being in debt.

“

We, women, would work if we could leave our children, but it is impossible. If you are going to send them to a nursery, the nursery fee is not less than 700 TRY...

– Female, İzmir, ESN recipient

“

My late father used to say that debt brings poverty. The latter gives headaches at home, and hence leads to problems.

– Male, Gaziantep, ESN recipient

“

Debt is the enemy. If a person has an enemy, he/she cannot sleep, eat, drink, or do anything. There is no Syrian who is free from debts.

– Male, İzmir, ESN recipient

ACCESS TO DEBT

Debt sources and collateral requirements

Debt is generally taken from acquaintances, Syrian relatives or friends that are in a better financial situation, as well as from Syrian market or business owners. While borrowing from Turks is rare, individuals often ask for debt from people they are acquainted with and within the framework of trust. Since the amounts borrowed are mostly small, they are given without the expectation of a security and generally without interest. However, the debtors are expected to meet the agreed upon repayment date.

“

The largest amount of money we have to borrow is when we have to change houses. For example, the landlord came and said that you will leave the house now. Here you need to pay commission and deposit to rent a new house. In this case, it is very difficult, more than 6000 TRY is required. It is no longer possible to find a house for less than 1000 TRY. You can find around 1300 and 1400 TRY and they don't accept Syrians. Again, they do not rent you a house without giving security or bringing a Turkish guarantor. Since I entered Turkey, I have debts due to the collateral and commission, as well as the high rent. – Female, Izmir, ESSN recipient

“

We take debt from our relatives, people we know or people around us. We get it for our basic needs.
– Male, Samsun, ESSN recipient

“

Last week, the grocery store owner stopped us. He asked for his debt of 400 TRY. I was able to give 50 TRY. He said 'OK, you can't buy anything from here again until you pay off your debt.'
– Female, Izmir, ESSN non-recipient

Another factor regarding access to debt is that they cannot go to a specific lender unless they pay off their previous debt to the same individual. Therefore, when more debt is needed and if the original debt has not been paid off, debt is requested from other potential lenders.

When it is not possible to borrow money from acquaintances, borrowing against a guarantor, collateral or interest was told to be possible, but this was said to be not very common.

In cases where large amounts were needed to be borrowed, for example, to start a business, examples were found from the participants pledging their assets as collateral.

“

We had to borrow money. We wanted to start a small business. We wanted to earn our daily allowance. But my spouse's business did not go well. He had to close his business and now has a lot of debt. If we cannot pay the debts, we will give our house in Syria to the person from whom we took on debt.
– Female, Istanbul, ESSN recipient

One last reference was related to the high amount of commission and collateral that the participants were expected to pay when they moved to a new house. Participants also indicated the high commission rates and high rents as reasons for debt.



When I gave birth, I needed 2000 TRY about a month and a half ago. One person refused to lend me money. I do not have any assets, neither here nor in Syria. I have no collateral to give him in Syria. Someone said if I gave him my Kızılaykart, he would lend me money. He took the Kızılaykart and said, “I will get your assistance for two months, and when your debt is over, I will return it to you.” Frankly, I have no other collateral than Kızılaykart.

– Female, Ankara, ESSN recipient

Kızılaykart as collateral

The households benefiting from the ESSN programme often stated that they generally used the cash assistance for basic expenses, however a small group of participants stated that they used it as collateral for borrowing. An assurance is often given by the ESSN recipient to the lender stating that “Kızılaykart assistance will be paid at the beginning of the month, and this is how I will pay my debt back”. Although it is rare, a case was also identified where Kızılaykart was given to the lender as a security until the debt is paid back (by 1 participant).

Gender-based dynamics on access to debt

The majority with 48 participants believed that men have better access to lending than women. On the other hand, 11 participants thought that women have easier access to debt. Those that believed men are better situated for lending attribute it to men having a more social environment due to spending more time outside the home, and therefore they have more options other than their closest relatives to ask for debt. It has been suggested that women can only ask for debt from their closest relatives, some have no acquaintances, some have a distant family but are more likely to access debt when their financial situation is very bad.

In addition, in the participant households; since those who earn money are mostly male members of the family, it is thought that the people who will pay back the debt will naturally be men. Another common thought is that while men can borrow more money, women can get less and mostly with the help of the Kızılaykart, as they cannot pay the debt back by working. For these reasons, it is thought that women’s capability to pay back debt is lower than men.

There were also views expressed that it is not culturally appropriate for women to have a dialogue with a lender outside the family. Accepted by both female and male participants, general views included that women do the domestic chores, are responsible for domestic matters and taking care of children, while men are responsible for all kinds of external business outside of home.

On the other side, one out of 9 participants thought women can access debt more easily. The reason for this was pointed as women potentially being more in need of debt because they cannot work; and lenders being more tolerant towards women. An example was provided suggesting if the woman was widowed or had an orphan in her family, as long as she paid back as promised, she



Maybe if a woman gets it from her sisters or aunt, it may be possible, but it’s harder to ask from others. First of all, no one knows the woman except relatives, because the woman is always spending her time at home.

– Male, Hatay, ESSN recipient



I think that if a man is going to borrow money, he can get more than a woman. Because the man can naturally work and pay off that debt, but woman only has a Kızılaykart.

– Male, Istanbul, ESSN recipient



The biggest obstacle for women to ask for debt is that they do not work, most of our women are housewives.

– Male, Samsun, ESSN recipient

could borrow money no different than men. Additionally, some mentioned that in cases where the pride of the man may be damaged and women have a gentler style approaching the lender, women can borrow easier.

21 participants thought both men and women had the same difficulty accessing debt. They thought if the woman is widowed or divorced, it is not a shame for her to ask for debt and suggested that the ease of access to debt is proportional to abiding by the agreed upon rules of repayment.

“

In my opinion, there is no difference between men and women. If the woman does not have a husband, if she is a widow, she will have to borrow money herself. So, there is no one to help her. The man will also borrow if he needs it.

– Male, İzmir, ESSN non-recipient



DEBT MANAGEMENT

Debt pay-back processes

Those who participated in the focus group discussions were asked questions about the debt repayment methods and processes involved. According to the answers received, payments are usually made on a weekly or monthly basis, and payment methods vary. The most preferred debt repayment strategies are respectively, paying in instalments, by reducing basic needs, by borrowing from a second person, by selling goods and jewellery, and by receiving advance from workplace.

About 21 per cent of the participants (20 of the 96) stated that they could not pay their debt completely but only in instalments due to the pandemic and irregular working conditions. Those who spent most of their earning primarily on rent and bills, said they do grocery shopping with money they borrow, that they try to pay back in instalments whenever they have some income coming in from work or other means and that they apologize the lender when they cannot make the full payment on the date agreed and ask for some additional time.

One participant stated that the day after they received payment from the workplace, they still could not pay their grocery debts, and they were called by the grocery store owner and asked to make the payment. The participants stated that in such cases, they were obliged to pay their debts by taking an advance from their workplaces. It is understood that the lenders have information such as phone numbers and home address of the borrower, mainly because the lenders are acquaintances or grocery store owners in the same neighbourhood.

Besides participants who thought that basic food expenses could not be reduced to pay debts, there were 18 participants who had to cut back on basic needs in order to pay their debts. Eight participants, on the other hand, mentioned that, they try to pay their debts by selling their assets such as household items, telephone or gold when they think reducing basic needs will not be enough. Among them, one participant said he gave his wife's ring as collateral against his debt and that eventually he had to leave the ring to the lender as repayment. A large majority however underlined that they do not have any valuable items at home to sell, and even if they wanted to sell, no one would buy them or find them worthy of money.

About 16 per cent of the participants (15 of the 96) stated that they had to borrow money from a second person to pay off their debts. If they do not have the amount to be paid back on due date, they manage the process by borrowing from another person to pay their other debt. It was stated that the lenders usually call the borrower to ask for their debts and they would only come to their homes or workplaces to collect their debts if they could not reach them by phone.

“

We were unemployed for three months due to the COVID-19 situation, there is no job in Ankara. We told the landlord that we would pay for three months' rent when we could work, then I worked and paid in instalments, alhamdulillah. We said you see the situation, we live and we pay as we go. – Male, Ankara, ESSN recipient

“

First of all, we get our wages on Saturday. If we don't pay our debt to the grocery store on Sunday, he calls and says: "You didn't come today, you didn't pay your debt". We are forced to on Monday, Tuesday, I get an advance on my wage from the boss and I give half of the wage. – Male, Ankara, ESSN recipient

“

I adjust myself according to the due date, cut our expenses as much as possible until that date, I bring the items we need little by little, I try to save money until the due date, this way I can only pay my debt. – Female, Istanbul, ESSN non-recipient

“

(For the lender) there is nothing to take so they can come and get it. When I am asked for debt, I take it from someone else and give it to him. Penalty came for water bill this month. We can't afford to pay it either, we borrowed money from my neighbour. – Female, İzmir, ESSN non-recipient

Therefore, it is understood that the debt payment process generally proceeds within the framework of understanding and solidarity, and disagreements are rarely experienced.

What people are spending on ESSN cash assistance

During the focus group discussions, the participants also mentioned about the effects of Kızılaykart on their lives. Around 55 per cent of participants (53 of the 96) stated that they paid their rent and bills with Kızılaykart. The day they withdraw money from the card, they pay their rent and use the rest for the utility bills, and they argued that the assistance lessened the increasing financial difficulties they face due to the pandemic. There were also those who said that due to the pandemic and increasing inflation, Kızılaykart is only enough for their rent and there is no money left for other expenses.

Six of the participants who benefited from the ESSN programme stated that they usually use the Kızılaykart to pay their food expenses bought on tick from the grocery store and to meet the needs of their children, while other five said they use the Kızılaykart to pay off their debts.

“

I have the Kızılaykart, we are six. The rent of my house is 700, my card is of 720 TRY. Only 20 liras remain.
– Male, Ankara, ESSN recipient

“

We cannot continue our lives without the Kızılaykart. In my opinion, I can't do it without Kızılaykart, I swear, maybe my children will be left without food.
– Female, Samsun, ESSN recipient

Gender-based dynamics in debt management

The comments revealed several perspectives on the issue of gender and household roles in debt management. While a group of participants stated that women are more consistent and thrifter, and therefore women have a greater role in spending the borrowed money, another group stated that men spend more reasonably because they go to the bazaar and bargain better. Expressing that both men and women can be wasteful in the same way, some participants stated that it is important for the spouses to support each other in the process of paying back the debt and overcoming this crisis.

“

Women are better than men in domestic economic matters. Woman knows better the economic situation of the house, its administration, the money entering the house, thus she manages it better. Men should not oppose but only provide economic support. – Male, Samsun, ESSN recipient

EFFECTS OF BEING IN DEBT

Effects on individuals' psychological and physical health

Almost all of the participants think that debt seriously affects their psychology. Particularly, the participants whose jobs have decreased due to the effects of the pandemic have difficulties in paying their accumulated debts and are exposed to debts that are increasing day by day. It has been stated that the continuation of pandemic-related disruptions has led to an increase in stress, tension, anxiety, helplessness, restlessness, and depression. The participants stated that they were most worried about the effects of stress and tension they put on their children.

One of the most stressful situations for the participants is the thought that the landlord will throw them out of the house if they cannot pay their rent. In addition, the fear of not being able to meet their needs such as water, electricity, heating and food because they cannot pay the bills are among the other factors that cause stress, anxiety and depression.

Some participants thought that such concerns impact their work life and reduce their efficiency. A few stated that stress associated with debt affects their relationships with their colleagues and employers, they cannot focus on work due to stress and anxiety, and their productivity is likely to decrease.

While high levels of worry, anxiety and fear affect people's productivity negatively, references were also made that they cause physical problems. For example, 25 out of 96 participants thought that debt triggers diseases such as heart diseases, goitre, diabetes, and blood pressure; and can cause headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite, hair loss and insomnia.



“ **Wherever you go, worry and debt are with you. You can't improve yourself; you can't improve your situation. You do not have any empty space in your head to think of something better. 90% of your brain is occupied by the thought of how I will pass this month. I think about opening a new shop, doing a new job, improving myself. We are unable to act, we are tied up. We are going backward every day.**
– Male, Hatay, ESSN non-recipient

“ **The debt causes psychological stress. My wife and I fight. My 10-year-old son started looking for a job because he saw our fights increase. He wants to work because I take my anger out on them.**
– Female, Ankara ESSN recipient

“ **My biggest fear is that the landlord will tell me to get out of the house, they will evict us. I have a lot of debt... I have no one but my children, neither a husband nor anyone else to help me.**
– Female, Istanbul, ESSN recipient

“ **We fall into depression. How will I pay the debt? How can I do it? There are no jobs, I can't work. This situation puts both me and the children under stress.**
– Male, Ankara, ESSN recipient

Effect on family relations and children

In the discussions, the effects of debt on family relations were also explored. There was consensus that stress, anxiety, and debt concerned state of mind directly affect and harm the relationship of and communication between family members. These issues were thought to put a particular strain on the relationship between spouses. Examples were given for actual divorces caused by debt and for situations where the head of household reflects his stress by shouting to his wife, or women leaving their husbands for not meeting the household needs.



Only six participants raised that debt does not have any negative effect on their family ties and the relationship among them, that spouses and children understand each other and that they try to get through their troubled days together.

One group that is considered to be affected negatively by debt is children. The incapability to meet the wishes and needs of children, who may not understand the context around financial difficulties, causes parents to become angry and feel powerless or incapable. Besides, it has been stated that children whose wishes are not fulfilled feel sadness and pressure.

Another important point in which children experience victimization related to poverty and debt is child labor. Three participants, although did not want to make their young children work, declared that they had to send their children to work at a young age in order to make a living and meet their basic needs. Taking into consideration the negative effects of child labor on children's physical, psychological, mental, social and educational development,⁶ this negative situation not only poses a risk for the child but also causes disruptions throughout the larger social and economic systems in which the child exists.

“

Debt causes problems at home. It separates family members from each other, especially if the amount of debt is high.

– Male, Ankara, ESSN non-recipient

“

We grow old thinking about debt. Now the owner of the grocery store will come, now the landlord will come, and we think he will ask for his money back.

Our electricity was cut off because we didn't pay the electricity bill last month. I sent my 10-year-old son to work, and he worked in a restaurant. My son has grown grey though he is just 10 years old.

– Female, Ankara, ESSN recipient

“

Our children have had to take on responsibilities since they were at a young age in Turkey. My 12-year-old son has been working for three years. The children are currently having online education, but I can't afford a phone.

– Female, Istanbul, ESSN recipient

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Effect on social relations

Another effect of debt is the negative impact it has on people's relations with relatives, friends, neighbours, and lenders. A quarter of the participants thought that debt harms their relationships with the grocery store owners, friends, neighbours, and relatives. They expressed that their relations with their relatives were not the same as before, because they were in debt, they moved away from the social circle and became lonely. They stated that culturally, it is necessary to offer food and drink when guests are invited, but since they cannot afford to do so due to financial constraints, they cannot host guests at their houses. This situation indicates that the participants are less socialized due to debt.

Eleven participants, who thought that debt influenced their social relations, stated that when they saw the people they owe, they experienced intense feelings of pressure, stress, discomfort and guilt due to not being able to pay their debts. These feelings were sometimes caused by the negative change in the attitudes of the lender or triggered by individuals themselves even in situations where the lender did not react as they felt incapable and useless.

Seven participants stated that they avoid facing the above-mentioned problems by limiting their social relations as much as possible and staying at home. Their reasons were expressed as being ashamed to be around the debtor, sadness caused by the debt, reluctance to socialize due to psychological exhaustion, the fear of negative treatment by debtor, and being condemned by people.

In addition to the above, 11 participants thought being in debt did not have any negative effect on their social relations. Although problems at home due to debt were acknowledged, those participants thinking was that their relationships outside home aren't affected, on the contrary, their friends, relatives, and neighbours are sources of support.

“

The borrower pays his debt, but no one believes them, he has no one, neither his brother nor his uncle. Debt is a great disaster.

– Male, Gaziantep, ESSN non-recipient

“

If you're going to go to someone you owe money to, you give up going because you are ashamed. You stay at home, you get trapped. I am always at home.

– Female, Gaziantep, ESSN recipient

“

I will not have any problems with my friends or relatives outside the house, thank goodness my debt does not affect us. When I need money, I call my friends, or the master and they bring me the money and help me right away.

– Male, Samsun, ESSN recipient

“

You will not be psychologically comfortable when you have debt. How will you go to see your brother when you are not comfortable psychologically? You will go home, you will keep silent. The subject will be debt. You can't relax when you visit - you are worried, you're always worried.

– Male, Istanbul, ESSN recipient

Effects of having no debt

The participants were asked how it would have affected themselves and their social circles if they had paid off their debts. The common discourse of almost all of them was that getting rid of debts would have a great positive effect on the psychology of people. The participants stated that if they could pay their debts, they would be free of their psychological and physiological disorders, they would be relieved by getting away from pressure and stress, and they would have the opportunity to open a new, clean page in their lives.

“

After paying off the debt, there wouldn't be stress anymore. We could fix our jobs, the education of the children. There would be psychological relief and better health.

– Male, Istanbul, ESSN recipient

“

When I have no debt, I can take my family a bit out in public. We would feel some psychological relief.

– Male, Samsun, ESSN recipient

Twenty-eight participants thought if they paid their debt, their family and social relations would have been better. In addition, it is thought that the relations between spouses would become healthy, stress and anxiety in the family would decrease, the mental health of children who are psychologically worn out would be better, and parents would have the opportunity to spend more time with their children. One participant stated that if he had paid off his debt, he thought that even the number of cigarettes he smoked would decrease, as his stress would decline, and that many things would be on track.

Besides participants thought that they would have the opportunity to see their relatives, whom they have not been able to visit for a long time, once they have the psychological and financial relief of paying off the debt.



METHODS USED IN CASE OF INABILITY TO ACCESS DEBT

Another question posed to the participants was if they could not access debt what kind of strategies they would implement/ which expenses they would cut to reduce overall spending. It was indicated that in cases when debt is absolutely inaccessible or even in cases of access to debt, one of the most used methods is to reduce food expenses. Reduction of

food expenses was mentioned by 53 participants. While it was essential for them to pay the rent and utility bills, therefore food expenses or expenses such as clothing, health, and education were mentioned where spending would be cut/reduced.

While references were made that both the variety and the amount of food would be reduced, there were also those who said they would reduce the number of meals. Participants mentioned that they already buy the cheapest possible products, they nearly never consume red meat, with occasional consumption of white meat, most households also deprive themselves of vegetables and fruits in general. Some said they could buy the leftover products from the local market, sometimes only the rotten fruit and vegetables, and they cannot buy milk for their children. It was highlighted that even the essential food products such as sugar, oil, bread, and rice are consumed in small quantities.

The number of participants who said they readily reduce or would cut non-food expenses was 8 out of 96 people. For the majority, the essential non-food expenses were completely cut or kept to a minimum. Among these products, the most mentioned ones were clothing, diapers, cigarettes, coal, medicines/health-related expenses, toys or storybooks for children. There were also those people who kept postponing their health expenditures and therefore felt their health was deteriorating, and also those who do not turn their TV or heater on, so their electricity bill does not increase. Finally, there were also participants who said they would benefit from tents or institutions that distribute aid if they could not borrow money.

“

We eat cheap food and cheap vegetables so that our debts will not increase.

We used to eat chicken once a week, we started to eat it once a month, we buy broken rice when we buy rice, we do not eat fruit, we cannot buy clothes, we reduced such expenses.

– Male, Ankara, ESN recipient

“

It doesn't matter what we eat. The important thing is that my children sleep with a full stomach.

– Female, Istanbul, ESN recipient

“

There are many things that we avoid buying, such as clothes and shoes. Like the need for a doctor or, for example, going to the dentist and getting treated. If you are going to buy painkillers, you prefer the cheapest one. Our health is getting worse and worse because we cannot get treatment.

– Female, Samsun, ESN non-recipient

PRIORITIES IN THE ABSENCE OF DEBT

Another question raised was what the participants would prioritize and what they would do if their debts were paid off. The most common answer given to this question expressed by 46 participants was to meet the needs of the children and to realize their existing plans for them. Many participants said that they would prioritize needs such as pyjamas, coats, shoes and blankets for children. One participant said that they would supply the necessary nutrients for their children by providing them meat, fruit, and yoghurt. Another group said their priority would be to buy phones, tablets, and similar equipment so that their children can participate in online education. While they underlined that it is perhaps too late for themselves, but for the next generation change was thought to be necessary as they saw their children the most important value in their lives. Being able to respond to whatever children wanted and taking them out were also among their priorities. Three participants declared that they would take their children out of work if their debts were paid off.

“

I would meet my children's needs first. Whatever they need, food, drink, clothes. For example, I have a little girl who is 3 years old, she has a blood disease, she will have eye surgery. The doctor tells me that I should always make her eat red meat. How can I find and buy red meat? ...(crying) if you buy it for one, you have to buy it for all five. If you make one eat it, you have to make them all eat it. If you have a sick child at home, you will first meet the needs of this child. The most important ones are the children. – Female, İzmir, ESSN recipient

“

When I have no debt at all, the first thing I want to buy is a tablet so that the children can have education. Knowledge is more important than food and clothing. Because I didn't have education, I would like for my children to receive education.
– Female, Istanbul, ESSN recipient

“

We wish we had a bottle of olive oil. 1 kilo of rice, that is, we wish for them. The rest doesn't matter. We can do without even fruit, milk, such things. Let's just pay for our electricity, water, and heating expenses. I'm trembling where I sit now.
– Female, Hatay, ESSN recipient



“

I have four-year-old twin daughters. One of them has a hole in her heart and a problem with her eyes. I take care of her, I bring medicine. After four years, she will have surgery on her eye and heart. I would take care of her.

– Female, Ankara, ESN recipient

“

I had a Kızılaykart in 2016. I received it for one year, then they stopped my card because my child turned 18. It is wrong here in my opinion, my daughter turned 18, they stopped the card of the whole family. In such cases, only stop the assistance of the person who turns 18 years old. At least with the assistance, the house rent could be paid. You withdraw 500-600 TRY from the card, add some more on it and pay the house rent. But now, since one person is 18 years old, the whole family's assistance has been stopped.

– Male, Hatay, ESN non-recipient

“

First of all, I am thinking of moving out of the house. In the rain the other day, the water overflowed and reached our knees, every time it rains, our house floods. That's why my little children get asthma every year in winter. That's why I would change my home first, move to a better house, but I don't have the power to do that right now.

– Female, İzmir, ESN non-recipient

Apart from the above-mentioned, other plans included purchasing/renewing white goods or furniture in case of paying off debts. 21 participants indicated they would buy or replace refrigerator, washing machine, sofa, bed, heater/stove (or coal), and general clothing items.

In the absence of debt, some said they would also increase the amount and variety of meals. For example, 13 participants said they would buy whatever item missing at home and increase the amount of rice, olive oil, sugar and cleaning materials bought.

Nine participants stated that they would have the house renovated or preferably move to a new house with natural gas heating. Others (2 participants with secondary and higher education) said, they would prefer to save money for bad days without making a change in spending as they know what debt is like.

There were also several participants who indicated that they would prioritize health spending.

Although participants were not asked, a few participants made recommendations for the ESN programme. Among these recommendations, one was the suggestion that cash assistance could be paid biweekly, not monthly, and secondly in the case of individuals turning 18 years of age, programme assistance should be stopped for the entire family but only for that for individual who turned 18. Third suggestion was that since curfews were being implemented due to the pandemic imposing restrictions to ones under the age of 20, it was underlined that people who have just turned 18, could not possibly work or earn an income, so their assistance should not be cut in such unprecedented times. One participant suggested the cash amount of Kızılaykart should at least cover the cost of rent of an eligible household.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report clearly and unequivocally demonstrates that debt is almost inevitable in the lives of refugees and migrants, even if they receive Kızılaykart assistance. It was shown that poverty and the inability to meet basic needs are the main reasons for borrowing and such conditions are often caused by unemployment, irregular employment of only a small number of individuals in each household, insufficient wages, lack of a regular income, women's unemployment, shrinking income and purchasing power of households due to the pandemic and increasing inflation.

The study showed that participants consider debt as an extremely negative situation, and acknowledges that debt could bring with it poverty, illness, anxiety and reduced social support. While there is no difficulty in accessing small amounts of debt in general, it has been determined that debts are mostly borrowed from Syrian relatives, friends and business owners without the need for collateral. Although Kızılaykart holders use the ESN programme assistance as security when borrowing, they generally set aside this cash to pay house rents and utility bills. This report showed that the debt repayment process is carried out within mutual understanding and respect, and the due of payment is tried to be met by the borrower through different methods (such as paying debt by borrowing from others or paying a debt in instalments). Findings related to debt access and management indicate that there is a high level of social capital among the participants.

The report found that the effects of debt are felt in many ways; it causes intense emotions such as stress, anxiety, fear, and worry, as well as causing physical health problems such as blood pressure, headache, weakness, insomnia, and loss of appetite. It leads to tension in the family, arguments, feelings of anger and conflict that can end up in divorce. The group that participants regretted that their basic needs could not be met and was thought to suffer the most from the tension within the family was the children. One of the concerning findings of this report was that some of the families in debt resorted to child labour as a coping strategy.

The effect of debt on social relations was described as negative by a quarter of the participants. The idea that debt is a material and moral obstacle to socialization was shared, and situations were identified in which the debtor minimized their relationships outside home with the fear of being embarrassed in front of their social circle, being exposed to negative treatment, and being humiliated by people. On the other hand, it was underlined that debt is in every migrant family, relatives and friends understand each other's situation, so they speak the same language and support each other.

The report found that if debt is inaccessible, migrants would (or they already) reduce their food expenses by reducing the amount and variety of food, and they would also cut back on non-food expenses such as clothing, diapers, cigarettes, coal, and health related costs. Among participants, there were those who said, "If we cannot borrow money, I will benefit from the tents or institutions that distribute assistance."

In a scenario where they could pay off the debt, vast majority of participants had the plans for meeting the basic needs of children and providing the necessary technological devices for their online education. Other goals in a debt-free life can be listed as renewing white goods such as a refrigerator, washing machine, or furniture such as beds; moving to a damp-free house where it is possible to have a heater; and repairing parts of the house that need repairing. Finally, when a



debt-free life was considered, the participants said they would feel happier and more relaxed, see themselves as stronger and more confident individuals, be much more relieved psychologically. Their stress would decrease, their walks would change even on the street, they would be able to go out in public, sleep better, and be more comfortable with their children. Participants considered they would be more caring and patient, living a more social life with less tension within the family, and therefore their children would also be happier.

Taking into consideration the above findings, it is concluded that the ESSN programme plays an important role in helping individuals under temporary/international protection with their struggle of maintaining their daily lives. For this reason, it is a priority for the programme to continue uninterrupted in the near future. In addition to this research, the general conclusion reached by other panel and cross-section studies observing the impact of the ESSN programme on the target audience, is that the socio-economic fragility of individuals has increased with the pandemic. In light of these, it is possible to conclude that people absolutely need the ESSN programme in order to meet their basic needs such as rent, utilities and food. The increase of ESSN monthly cash assistance per individual from 120 TRY to 155 TRY in April 2021 can therefore be interpreted as a very timely and spot on adjustment to the programme.

This report recommends that detailed studies could be carried out to understand the main causes of child labour and the alienation of children from education in families under temporary and international protection. These evaluations are important for the ESSN programme criteria to better respond to household vulnerability. Within the context of the negative effects of the pandemic on the household economy, some participants suggested that families with children who have just turned 18 but are still in education should benefit from the ESSN programme as long as they continue their education. Such complementary socio-economic criteria expressed by programme beneficiaries can be evaluated further within the ESSN programme.



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