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## Secluded Lives: Restricted Urban Practices of Migrant Domestic and Care Workers in Istanbul

Our research investigates the gendered processes of labour migration of domestic and care workers (MDWs), along with their experiences of urban life in Istanbul. As an interdisciplinary urban study in concordance with ethnographic methodologies, it further focuses on gendered drivers of migration: the home, work, and social urban environments of MDWs. The significance of our study is that it contributes to analyses of Global South–South female labour migration from a gender perspective, which has emerged as a relatively new and burgeoning field in migration studies. It is also significant in that it reveals how gender inequalities are spatialised. This is done by representing the city through the digital mapping of anonymous information from MDWs concerning their use of Istanbul.

Our findings state that the urban practices of MDWs are highly limited and restricted by

patriarchal family structures, either remote husbands or transnational communities. The fear of being a foreign woman in Istanbul, language barriers, illegal status, and the expensive costs of socialising outdoors restricted their urban social lives as well. Furthermore, the host community sometimes stigmatises foreign women as “easily exploited”, thus, most were exposed to verbal, physical, and/or sexual harassment in public spaces, which caused women to lead secluded lives. Fearing male violence, which is widespread in Turkey, they censor themselves. In this sense, gender inequalities seem to be spatialised; this can be traced through Google My Maps based on the subjective urban narratives of MDWs. It represents how urban policies remain insufficient in responding to feminised labour migration.

**Keywords:**

secluded lives; restricted urban practices; female migrant domestic and care workers; spatial-ethnography; Istanbul

## INTRODUCTION

Global mobility within the care economy has given rise to the concept of the feminisation of migration, an indication that women have become the majority of migrant populations. Therefore, the literature on migration and gender is largely concentrated on the domestic and care sector, which is organised at a global level (Hochschild 2000, Parrenas 2001, Keough 2003, 2006, 2015, Morokšavić 2004, Akalın 2007, Danış 2007, Parla 2007, Suter 2008, Kaşka 2009, Toksöz and Ünlütürk Ulutaş 2012, Teke Lloyd 2018, 2019, Pearson and Sweetman 2019). Bastia and Piper say that female migrants were once predominantly described as “associational migrants” or “trailing wives” following their spouse or partner (Bastia and Piper 2019). In these narratives, women appear largely as “singular wives in male-dominated expatriate communities” (Kofman and Raghuram 2006). Today, however, women are recognized as “primary migrants who move on their own to new countries in search of work and new opportunities” (Bastia and Piper 2019). Therefore, feminised migration refers to women’s independent mobilities and moreover to the gendered dynamics of the entire migration and resettlement processes.

In this context, Turkey, which is described as an upper-middle-income (OECD 2022) country in the Global South (Solarz 2020, Fiddian-Qasimiyeh 2020, Garcés-Masareñas 2018), has become one of the highest-receiving countries of feminised labour migration in various sectors such as domestic and care, textile, hospitality, tourism and entertainment, and the sex trade. Within these flows, starting in the early 1990s, similar to European countries, upper-middle-income families in Turkey began to employ migrant women mostly as live-in caregivers, from the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries, which have had detrimental experiences from post-communist transitions. Turkey’s geographical proximity, in addition to higher wages, a flexible visa system, and existing kin networks together with the rigid visa regulations of the European Union (Toksöz 2020) has

made the country accessible to labour migrants, causing migration patterns to become circular.

Since then, Turkey has become a state in which patriarchal practices have been established, especially between the 1950s and 1980s; care work has always been a family issue that implicitly regards women as the primary party responsible for housework and care. In the early 1990s, however, when globalization and the pace of the neoliberal market accelerated, women’s participation in the labour market began to increase in Turkey (İlkkaracan 2012). Thus, those participating in the labour market have had to buy care work, which has been highly commodified as a transnational motherhood service (Arat-Koç 2006). Today, the welfare regime in Turkey is still far from that of social states; it hardly provides care that it should be responsible for, but with a patriarchal constitution, expects women to stay at home and take care of the household and children. Women are still forced to withdraw from the labour market which can be observed from the current employment statistics: women’s participation in the labour market in Turkey is less than half that of men (TUIK 2021). Others transfer care to other women, either grandmothers or paid caregivers. Therefore, the care gap means that mostly post-Soviet migrant women take over care tasks for the sake of the participation of educated upper-middle-class women in the labour market. Compared to native-born women, migrants in the service sector are overrepresented by 17% more in Turkey (Kofman and Raghuram 2009).

According to the Foreign Work Permit Statistics (2020) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the total number of regular migrants in Turkey is 123,574, and 41,853 of them are women. Working migrant groups, where the number of women is significantly higher than that of men, migrated from Indonesia, the Philippines, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine. Domestic services (23.657), the manufacture of clothing and textile products, are the leading sectors in which female migrants pre-

dominantly work, followed by sectors such as accommodation, education, human health services, wholesale and retail trade, and food and beverage service activities. Registered workers comprise only a minority in domestic services (Toksöz 2020) since it has not been included in both Law no. 4817 Work Permits for Foreigners (2003) and Law no. 6735 International Labour Force Law (2016). For this reason, informal employment of the MDWs makes their work illegal and leaves them vulnerable without work permits which would provide them with social security and access to free healthcare. Another problem is that some post-Soviet women cannot continue their professional careers. Although the vast majority of migrants working in Turkey are either high school or university graduates (the Foreign Work Permit Statistics 2020), who are both considered skilled, the urgent need to find a job and earn money, the ease of entering the domestic and care sector, lack of information, and language barrier cause them to become deskilled.

Based on this background information, our research investigates the gendered processes of the international labour migration of domestic and care workers, along with their experiences of urban life in Istanbul. It questions the extent to which gender inequalities have been driving international labour migration processes, beyond economic reasons. The significance of this research is that it highlights and contributes to analyses of Global South–South female labour migration from a gender perspective (Bastia and Piper 2019) and contributes to the criticism of decolonising the Global South (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh 2020) which has recently been receiving migration from the Global North.

As an interdisciplinary urban study in concordance with ethnographic methodologies, our research is also significant in that it reveals how gender inequalities are spatialised through the digital mapping of anonymous information concerning the use of the city with an analytical account of gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment

encountered in public spaces in Istanbul. It provides a deeper understanding of the reproduction of gendered practices in urban areas contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and visualises how urban policies remain insufficient in responding to feminised labour migration. It also aims to contribute to the design of new urban and legal policies in order to improve female migrants' living conditions and seek legislative solutions.

We will begin by introducing our methodology, case, and the nature of our participants, briefly discussing the drivers and processes of labour migration based on women's own narratives. Following this, we will touch upon the work and home environments of MDWs in Istanbul. Finally, we will discuss migrant women's spatial practices based on the subjective mapping of their urban experiences and narratives as visualised through Google My Maps.

## METHODOLOGY

Urban theory requires that spatial form and social processes in the city be analysed together. Therefore, the methodological approach in this project can be called "building a bridge between those possessed of the sociological imagination and those imbued with a spatial consciousness" (Harvey 1973 23). The emphasis, which is that space and society cannot be separated from each other and that they form an intertwined pattern, has been formerly revealed in the comprehensive study of Henri Lefebvre (1991). Space is both the production of society and a mechanism that constantly transforms it. Spatial mapping and visual representations of urban practices, however, have not been produced in most research in migration and gender studies from a spatial perspective, even though these studies map the spatial pattern of labour migration, particularly in the domestic and care sector (Bélanger and Silvey 2020, Zein 2020, Purkis 2019, Caillo 2018, Marquardt and Schreiber 2015, Pande 2012, Silvey 2006). In order to address this gap, we carried out a digital, spatial

mapping work based on the subjective narratives and particular experiences of our participants. In this context, insights into the use of public spaces, urban practices of migrant women in Istanbul, as well as their unpleasant experiences were obtained, analysed, and represented anonymously and within the framework of ethical rules.

The OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI 2019) helped in the preparation, particularly for the second part of our semi-structured interview layout based on four themes: the process of migration; drivers of migration and experiences of gender inequality in the country of origin; biographical experiences of home and work environments; urban practices in Istanbul.

We began conducting in-depth interviews in July 2020 and accessed 28 migrant women working in a variety of sectors such as domestic and care, sex, and textile and trade, in addition to professional sectors until June 2021. In this paper, we only focus on the analysis of 12 interviews with MDWs: The majority of our interviewees are live-ins, 23–63 years old, who have migrated from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Armenia, and have stayed in Istanbul for 4 to 15 years. Although most of them have short-term residence permits, only two of them have work permits. Two of them are irregular workers who don't have residence, a work permit, or any other legal status.

## FORCED AND HIDDEN DRIVERS OF MIGRATION OF MDWs FROM FSU TO TURKEY

It is obvious that the main reason for women's migration from the former Soviet countries to Turkey is economic. Our participants underline the shrinking job market and high unemployment rates after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the regime change.

"The Russian war took place in 2006. Russia and Georgia separated. There was a restriction on bread. There was a great hunger." Georgian, live-

in elderly caregiver

Husbands, the heads of the families of the communist regime, left unskilled by the neo-liberal economy, have become depressed, with some alcoholic individuals prone to domestic violence. Women, most of whom were homemakers, although some were professionals, followed the increased care mobility that has increased with globalization, particularly for securing the education and marriage expenses of their children, paying their debts, and building a house for them.

Our findings also show that most of our participants suffered from discriminatory legislation and social practices in their countries, thus constituting hidden drivers of their migration. Common gender-based problems include: Patriarchal culture and conservative social patterns; domestic violence considered a family matter; unrecognized spousal rape; early and arranged/forced marriages; lack of the right to education; lack of legal laws to obtain a divorce or being stigmatized for obtaining a divorce; unequal division of labour and workload in the household; and restricted spatial access and social life due to marriage. These all provided us with a deeper understanding of labour migration.

"My mother and I were constantly forced to work. My father was not working and taking the money we earned. There was constant violence at home. They make daughters marry very early. Four years ago, there was a child that my family found for me. I was sexually harassed by him. I mean, he raped me. Since honour is very important in our country, I had to accept to marry him because I lost that stupid hymen." Turkmen, live-in child caregiver

Although women had to migrate to become breadwinners, escaping from the oppressive masculine environment dominated by various discriminatory practices and gender inequalities allowed most of them to feel freer and more prosperous in Turkey. In this sense, we understand that labour migration is, on the one hand, a forced migration, on the

other hand, it is an escape that offers the advantage of liberation for women. Interestingly, however, this did not change internalized normative gender roles. Most women blame their husbands for sending them to work abroad. They criticize them for not being “man enough”, not working or not earning enough money, and not being able to take care of their families and themselves. Thus, they paradoxically re-legitimize traditional gender roles.

“He was working for a while, but if he was a man like a man, he wouldn’t have sent me here.” Georgian, live-in elderly caregiver

### SECLUDED LIVES: HOME AND WORK ENVIRONMENTS OF MDWs IN ISTANBUL

Towards the end of the 1980s when transnational flows intensified (Keyder 2006), Istanbul had become one of the significant junction points in

the global web (Sassen 1991), and is listed by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC). Highly educated migrants prefer to work and live in Istanbul, perceiving it as a European city with Eastern culture. As a result, it has the highest foreign population (740,954) among Turkish cities (TUIK 2021). A Turkmen woman, however, states that she got on a plane for the first time in her life and found Istanbul too complex, crowded, and large.

While all of our interviewees applied for short-term residence permits after entering Turkey with a tourist visa, in some cases they became illegal due to the expiration of their passports or the inability to renew their residence permits. A few appealed to employment agencies to get help for legal processes to enter Turkey, however, they regretted going through them since most had negative experiences.

“When my passport expired, I could not get a residence permit. I can’t come back to Turkey if I go to Turkmenistan because our country does not allow going abroad (asking high bribes).” Turkmen, daily cleaner and caregiver

After trying temporary jobs in agriculture, food service, and textile sectors, the majority of our participants became live-ins who made substantial use of family and migrant networks. Thus, they lived wherever they found a job in Istanbul. The places where they work are either central settlements on the European side, where mostly upper and upper-middle-income groups live, welfare residences along the coast of the Marmara Sea, or rich neighbourhoods with Bosphorus views on hills on both sides. As seen in mapping research based on statistical data derived from local municipalities (Istanbul—Kent95 ), these locations are particular neighbourhoods where adult and youth populations are denser and the number of children is less. This often signals highly educated, wealthy families with one or two children who have been settled in Istanbul for generations. On the other hand, a few of them, working as day labourers, rented apartments with others from the same hometown or country. Armenians, Turkmen, and Uzbeks appear to be ethnically clustered in specific neighbourhoods.

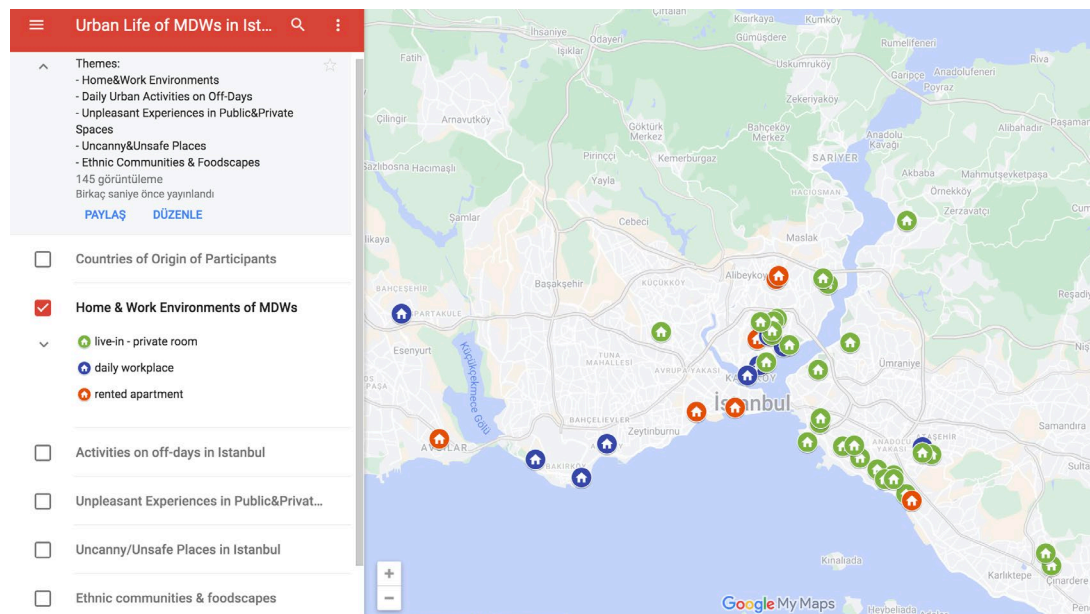
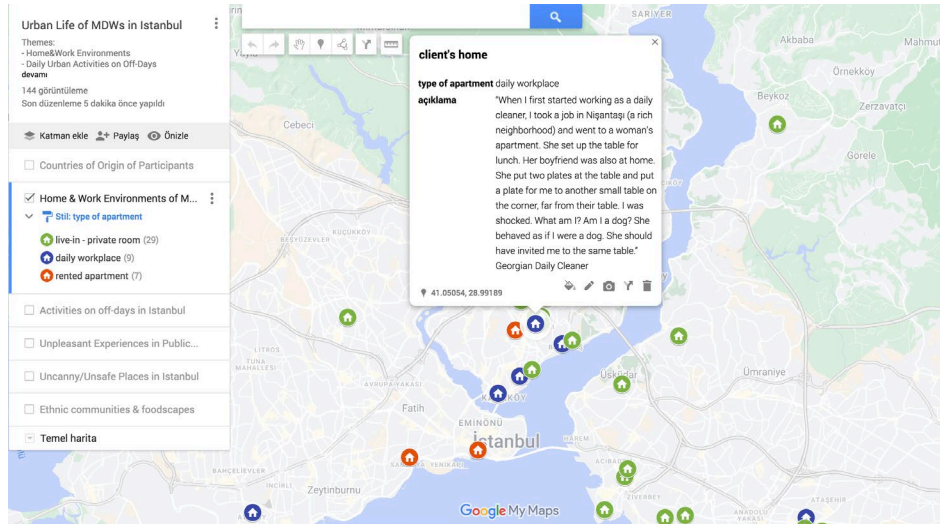


Fig 1. Thematic map on MDWs’ home and work environments in Istanbul showing rough locations of the apartments they rented, clients’ homes for daily work and live-ins’ homes/workplaces where they mostly have a room to stay.

The majority of MDWs stated that they have been responsible for “everything” in the household and drew attention to undefined tasks and a heavy workload. The fact that some employers and MDWs mutually see each other as “family members” makes migrants feel at home, while on the other hand creates an abusive environment that results in the employer not providing work permits and requesting too much work. This situation causes business and family relations to become unclear. As a workplace, the home turns into a





ambiguous, precarious space where the employee is sometimes promoted to a family member and sometimes pushed back to "low-class labour status".

Fig 2. A Georgian daily cleaner's experience of class distinction and discrimination.

Some were threatened with deportation, their passports confiscated, and their salaries unpaid. Others were subjected to employers' restrictions on speaking on the phone and were watched throughout the day by cameras placed in each room. A young Turkmen woman was subjected to both dress control by her female employer and sexual harassment from her male employer in another house. In this context, the lack of standards and supervision regarding the working and living conditions of MDWs and the privileged position of employers seems to reinforce MDWs' secluded lives. Some of our interviewees stated that they were despised for taking low-status and unskilled jobs. Although they are all skilled migrants and some have previously worked in professional sectors, they have experienced deskilling due to language barriers and the invisibility of their cultural capital.

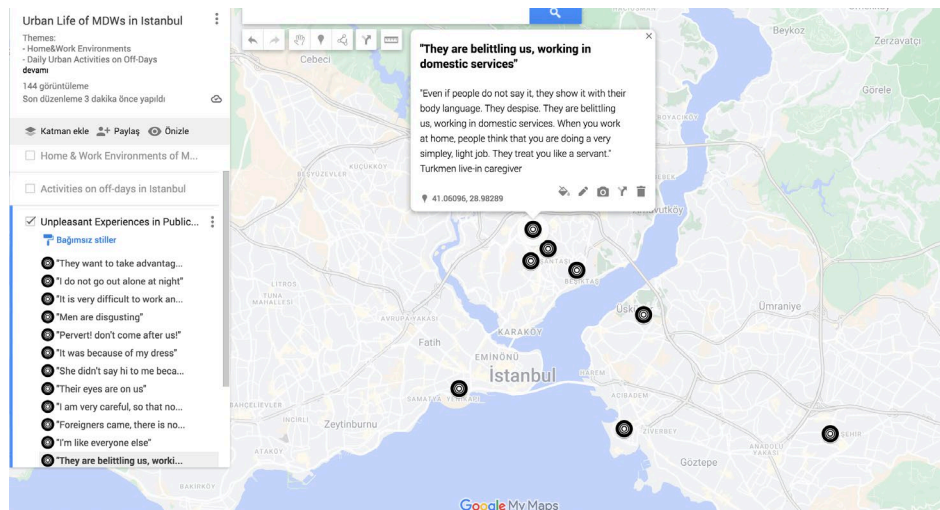


Fig 3. A Turkmen live-in child caregiver's narrative on being despised.

Although most of our interviewees talked about difficulties, they are mostly pleased with their migration experience. Women proudly mention that they got their children married and set up their houses, supported their educational costs, or built a new house for their family. They expressed that they have accomplished a difficult job and therefore became stronger.

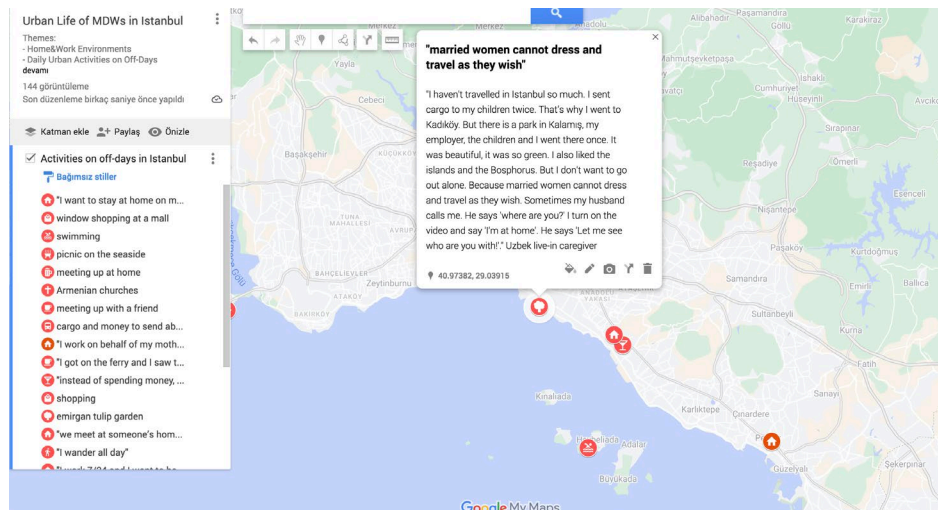
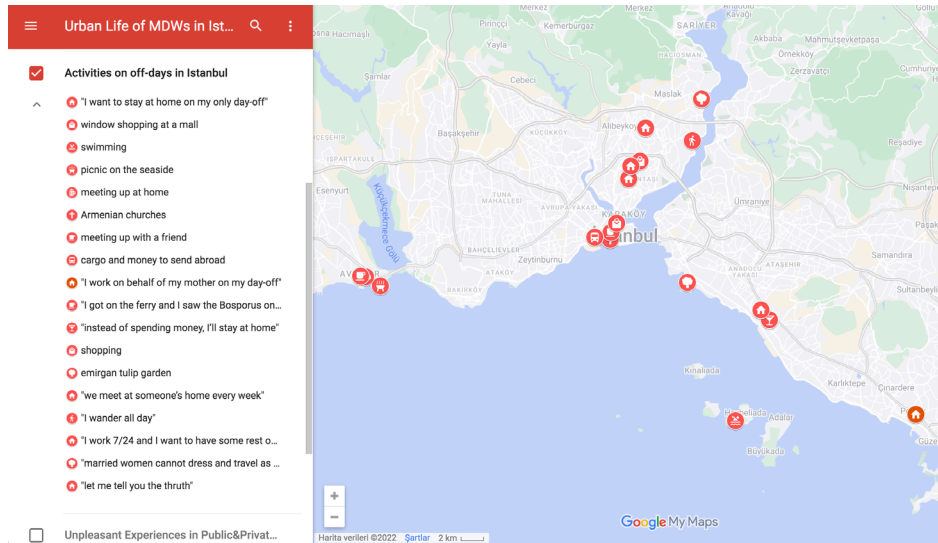
## RESTRICTED URBAN PRACTICES OF MDWs IN ISTANBUL

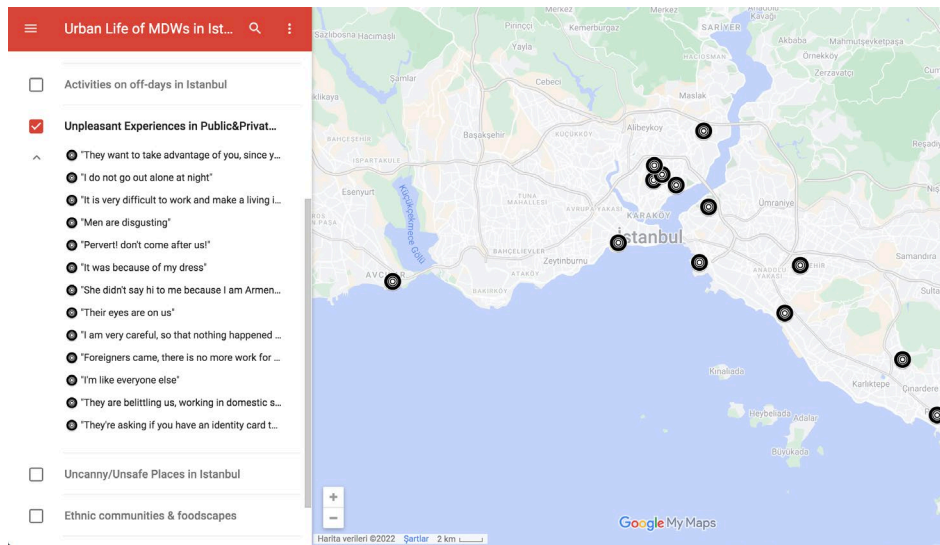
Most MDWs, whose urban practices are extremely limited, are deprived of social life due to many reasons such as the surveillance by their employers, intense working hours, lack of local knowledge, socialization costs, and the underestimation of foreign women by some Turkish men.

Fig 4. Thematic map on activities on off-days in Istanbul

Moreover, this restriction and their fear of the city are also shaped by gendered dynamics. The majority of MDWs, especially married and unmarried young women, are under pressure from their patriarchal family and kinship structures, their remote husbands, or sometimes transnational communities working as tools of surveillance and establishing a network of control. Although in academic studies they are regarded as independent subjects of feminised migration, they have been historically and socially compelled to work abroad and most are not independent individuals possessing their own agency.

Fig 5. Uzbek live-in, surveilled, controlled, and oppressed by her remote

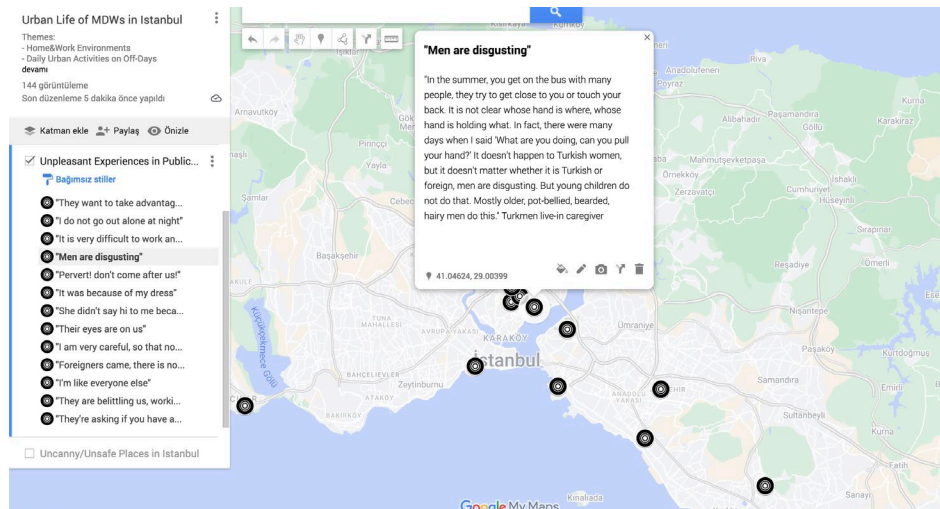




Secluded Lives: Restricted Urban Practices of Migrant Domestic and Care Workers in Istanbul

Fears of being stigmatized as sex workers by their relatives and former neighbours, or of being perceived as “needy female migrants” in Istanbul, caused their lives to become secluded. Although sympathy is directed to those of Turkic origin coming from Central Asia, the language barrier creates a perception that they can be easily exploited and deceived. Russian-speaking women have often been perceived as “Natashas” due to a history of Eastern European migrant women in the sex trade. On the other hand, middle-aged single or divorced women are more mobile and active in urban life compared with others.

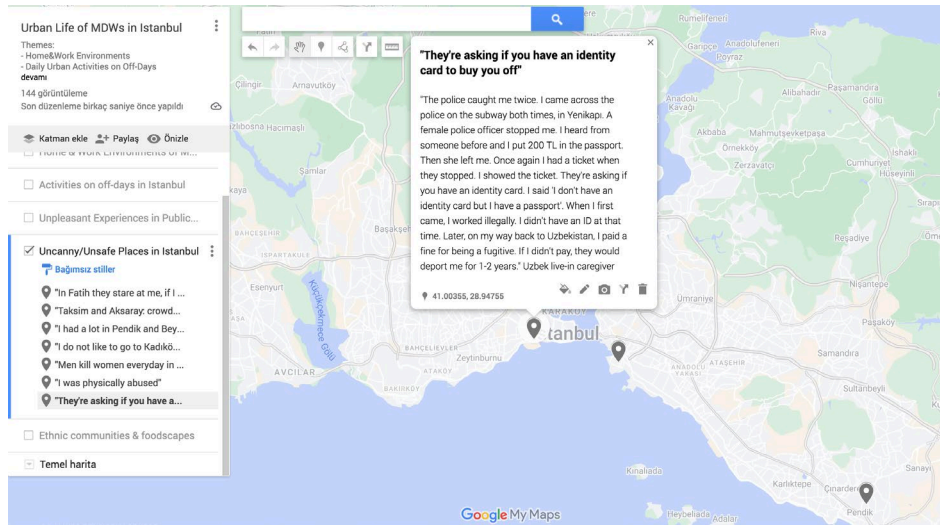
Fig 6. Thematic map on unpleasant experiences of MDWs in public and private spaces in Istanbul



Another important contributor to MDWs leading secluded lives in apartments is the increasing prevalence of male violence and murder in Turkey. Moreover, some were subjected to verbal, physical, and/or sexual harassment in public spaces, public transport, and taxis in Istanbul. Some of them do not feel safe in public places because of this fear. This situation caused them to produce their own spatial and vital tactics, mostly based on self-censoring, which ultimately legitimizes and empowers male dominance and oppression in public spaces.

Fig 7. Turkmen live-in caregiver's experience of physical sexual harassment in public transportation.



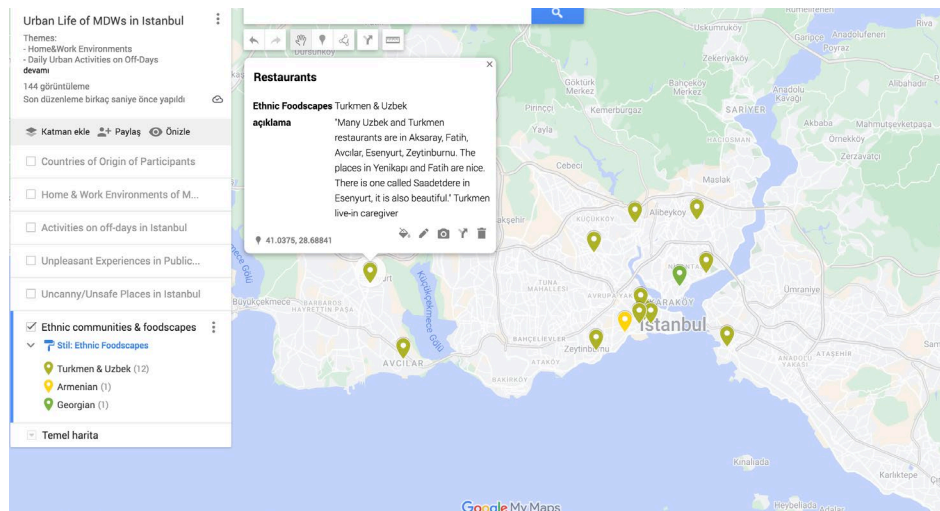


Some of those with irregular status are unable to go anywhere on their own, except the parks around their homes and cargo companies in their neighbourhoods, due to possible status checks and subsequent deportation. There are some, however, who can cope with this situation and develop tactics to move illegally around the city.

Fig 8. Irregular Uzbek live-in caregiver's response to using the city.

Since women spend all of their earnings on the education of their children and the expenses of their families, their social lives in the city are restricted. Even the cost of public transport keeps them from traveling around the city. Some women, however, still try to participate in free activities. For example, Armenians meet with others at church, Georgians meet in a shared flat on their common day off, Uzbeks and Turkmens meet for window shopping at malls or in parks and beaches to have picnics, producing alternative ways of participating in urban life and socializing. Armenians, Turkmens, and Uzbeks appear to be ethnically clustered in specific neighbourhoods with an ap-

Fig 9. Thematic map on migrant ethnic communities' foodscape





parent foodscape.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, studies focusing on the Global South–South migration (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh 2020, Bastia and Piper 2019) offer a new perspective by criticizing the location of the centre and opposing the colonization of the Global South. Our research also contributes to the analyses of South–South migration by presenting another case of post-Soviet women’s labour migration to Turkey through care mobility and the economy. The literature on MDWs, however, ignored the educational levels and skills of these women. We agree (Kofman and Raghuram 2009) that one of the reasons is the assumption and illusion that skilled women come only from the Global North. Therefore, revealing the gendered experiences of women from the Global South through the migration and resettlement process provides an important contribution to the literature.

Drivers of labour migration have been primarily defined as economic in the literature on feminised migration. Even though the primary driver to migrate is to achieve a better life, particularly for children and families, our research reveals that gender inequalities, discriminatory legislation, and social practices in countries of origin have also driven these women to migrate. Therefore, we think that labour migration is on the one hand a forced migration, and on the other hand, an escape that offers women the advantage of liberation from the oppressive masculine environment dominated by gender inequalities. We observed that despite achieving their goals, some women did not return to their home countries, but settled in Istanbul, and took their daughters with them to study abroad. Although they do not have a life independent of their cultural environments, relatives, and family members, we observed that many of them manage to open up a space in Turkey for their own individualities. Paradoxically, however, we also found that some women’s beliefs in normative gender roles have not changed.

The majority of women are employed without a work permit, and are thus deprived of basic social security and the right to retirement. Since home as a workplace is still a private space, the working and living conditions of MDWs cannot be supervised. Thus, the advantageous position of Turkish employers increases the vulnerability of MDWs. In return, they have been able to leave bad working conditions and create better working environments for themselves. Thus, MDWs in Turkey have been fighting for their rights individually.

We believe that MDWs in Istanbul lead secluded lives and are often invisible. Their urban practices and lives are very limited due to time and financial and cultural reasons. The understanding and praxis of masculine public space in Istanbul, murders of women, and the abusive manners of some men contributed to the confinement of women to their homes. Despite this, it is understood that some women strategize daily tactics that allow them to wander around the city, socialize, and spend their free time at low risk and cost.

We mapped women’s subjective, personal experiences in order to illustrate how gender inequalities are also spatial problems, as well as that private and public spaces are reproduced through gender-based dynamics. This map also reveals how urban policies and practices fail to respond to feminised labour migration. In order to develop solutions to some of the problems this research has identified, first of all, significant legal regulations and controls are required, such as the ability to obtain work permits under all conditions, monitoring working conditions and receiving feedback from domestic workers. Some of the urban-scale applications include developing a digital application for emergency assistance and complaints, adequate lighting on side streets, increasing the number of female taxi/bus drivers, establishing a complaint and camera system, and making visual announcements to lower sexual harassment and assault on public transportation. Neighbourhood centres could be established where migrant domestic workers can form solidarity groups and

meet up with other women in the city. In addition to providing public activities and opportunities, these centres could organise city tours with volunteer support, which would increase migrant women’s safe mobility and familiarity with the city.

## NOTE

[1]<https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC-List-of-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2022-23-flows.pdf>

[2]<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Istatistiklerle-Kadin-2021-45635#:>

[3] <https://www.csgeb.gov.tr/media/87487/yabanciizin2020.pdf>

[4] This article is based on a research project supported by the United Kingdom Research Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund.

[5]<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1uWLGQEX-5oajLLM2BignCpm9YOMG-cVUU&usp=sharing> (produced by the author)

[6] SIGI profiles were first developed by the OECD in 2009 and the most recent edition was published in 2019. It uses global gender data to measure and analyse different forms and degrees of gender discrimination.

[7]<https://map.kent95.org/istanbul/genel>

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