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An Intersectional Assessment of Ahıska Women's Labor Market Integration: Barriers and Enabling Factors*

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Abstract

Türkiye hosts a diverse range of migrant communities, including groups with which it shares ethnic and cultural ties. Its citizenship policies and legal frameworks extend certain privileges to Turkic-origin populations. Therefore, the Ahıska Turks, who were resettled from the former Soviet region, occupy a distinctive position within Türkiye's migration landscape. In this context, examining the labor market participation of Ahıska women through the framework of Intersectionality Theory provides valuable insight into their integration into the labor market. This study analyzes the labor market integration of Ahıska women employed in Türkiye's Beauty and Personal Care Sector. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 women in Bursa, the findings show that their sectoral participation is shaped at the intersection of gender, ethnic identity, and social class. While cultural proximity to Türkiye, social networks, professional

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expertise rooted in Soviet-era training, the sector's reliance on manual skills, low entry barriers, flexible working conditions, high professional satisfaction, and its compatibility with patriarchal family structures support labor market integration, structural inequalities such as bureaucratic obstacles, diploma equivalency problems, discrimination, and stigma limit sustainable integration. The study highlights the need for inclusive policies focused on occupational training, diploma recognition, and anti-discrimination mechanisms to strengthen Ahıska women's integration into Türkiye's labor market.

Keywords

Ahıska Turks, beauty and personal care sector, immigrant women, labor market integration, Intersectionality theory.

Ahıska Kadınlarının İşgücü Piyasasına Uyumunun Kesişimsel Bir Değerlendirmesi: Engeller ve Kolaylaştırıcı Etkenler*

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Öz

Türkiye, etnik ve kültürel bağlara sahip olduğu gruplar da dâhil olmak üzere çeşitli göçmen topluluklarına ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Vatandaşlık politikaları ve hukuki düzenlemeleri, Türk kökenli topluluklara belirli ayrıcalıklar sunmaktadır. Bu nedenle, eski Sovyet bölgesinden Türkiye'ye göç eden Ahıska Türkleri, Türkiye'nin göç yapısı içinde ayırt edici bir konuma sahiptir. Bu bağlamda, Ahıska kadınlarının işgücü piyasasına katılımını Kesişimsellik Teorisi çerçevesinde incelemek, onların işgücü piyasasına uyumuna dair değerli bir iç görü sunar. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de güzellik ve kişisel bakım sektöründe çalışan Ahıska kadınlarının işgücü piyasasına uyumunu analiz etmektedir. Bursa'da yaşayan 20 Ahıska Türkü kadınla gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanan bulgular, kadınların sektörel katılımlarının toplumsal cinsiyet, etnik kimlik, sosyal sınıfın kesişiminde şekillendiğini göstermektedir. Türkiye ile kültürel yakınlık, sosyal ağlar, Sovyet dönemi eğitimine dayanan mesleki uzmanlık ile sektörün manuel becerilere dayalı yapısı, düşük giriş engelleri, esnek çalışma düzeni, yüksek mesleki memnuniyet ve ataerkil aile yapısıyla uygunluğu işgücü piyasasına

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uyumu desteklerken; bürokratik engeller, diploma denkliği sorunları, ayrımcılık ve damgalama gibi yapısal eşitsizlikler sürdürülebilir uyumu sınırlandırmaktadır. Çalışma, Ahıska kadınlarının Türkiye işgücü piyasasına uyumunu güçlendirmek için mesleki eğitim, diploma tanıma ve ayrımcılıkla mücadele mekanizmalarına odaklanan kapsayıcı politikalara ihtiyaç olduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Ahıska Türkleri, göçmen kadınlar, güzellik ve kişisel bakım sektörü, işgücü piyasasına uyum, Kesişimsellik teorisi.

Introduction

Türkiye's geographical position as a bridge between the Asian and European continents and its surrounding multinational and multi religious structures have profoundly shaped the country through diverse migration dynamics. The late-Ottoman and early-Republican periods witnessed substantial, episodic inflows from the Balkans and the Caucasus, which were largely state-managed and tied to specific geopolitical ruptures. By contrast, from the late 1980s onward, escalating instability and armed conflicts have generated more frequent, multi-origin, and protection-seeking migratory waves. Notable examples include the forced displacement of ethnically Turkish Muslims from Bulgaria in 1989, attacks targeting Ahıska Turks in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley the same year, internal conflicts erupting during the 2011 Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian civil war, the Taliban's power grabbing in Afghanistan in 2021, the Russia-Ukraine wars between 2014 and 2022 and resurrection of Israel-Palestine hostilities in 2023. Along with all these political developments, Türkiye has evolved not merely into a border state influenced by peripheral crises, but also into a migratory nexus where east–west and north–south routes intersect, transforming from a traditional transit country into a key destination characterized by sustained immigrant settlement and acceptance (Adıgüzel 90).

The acceptance of Ahıska Turks into Türkiye, who occupy a pivotal position within contemporary migration flows, is rooted not only in recent political developments but also in historical traumas. Ahıska Turks, who were forcibly exiled from their homeland in 1944 under the Stalinist regime (Agara 13), were compelled to migrate repeatedly in subsequent time periods due to escalating ethnic tensions and exclusion in their post-Soviet host countries following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One of the most critical turning points in this chain of displacement was the mass violence and targeted attacks that occurred during the 1989 Fergana Valley events in Uzbekistan, which resulted in the renewed uprooting of thousands of Ahıska Turks (Buntürk 197). Following the Fergana Events, Ahıska Turks dispersed from Uzbekistan to the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan due to the deterioration of safe living conditions (Devrisheva 336); however, they were unable to establish long-term settlement in these countries owing to discrimination,

precarious employment conditions, and barriers to accessing citizenship rights. Therefore, in 1990, Ahıska Turks submitted official applications to Turkish authorities requesting admission and resettlement in Türkiye on the grounds of the security threats and socioeconomic hardships they faced (Zeyrek 3). Acting upon these applications, then-President Turgut Özal initiated the formal process for the admission of Ahıska Turks to Türkiye in 1990; under the Law No. 3835 on the Admission and Resettlement of Ahıska Turks, enacted on 2 July 1992, priority was granted to those living under the most difficult conditions, and the first resettlement movements were directed to Iğdır in 1992–1993. Within this framework, a total of 500 families 150 in 1992 and 350 in 1993, were brought to Türkiye, and by 1994 these families were placed in temporary resettlement centers (Aydıngün 340). The law allowed both assisted and independent migration without exceeding the designated quota, and in addition to those settled in Iğdır, Ahıska Turks who arrived by their own means settled in cities such as Antalya, Ankara, Bursa, Istanbul, Izmir, and Kocaeli. Although migration flows temporarily slowed after 1993, thousands of Ahıska Turks migrated to Türkiye as independent migrants between 1996 and 1997 (Aydıngün and Aydıngün 85).

Law No. 3835 remains in force today and has continued to serve as a fundamental legal basis for Türkiye's admission of Ahıska Turks, particularly during periods of regional crisis. Indeed, following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the intensifying conflicts in eastern and southern Ukraine directly affected approximately 3,000 Ahıska Turkish families living in the Donetsk and Crimea regions (Akpınar 336); due to the collapse of personal security. Following these developments, Türkiye accepted 677 families as resettled migrants in 2015, placing them primarily in the Üzümlü district of Erzincan and the Ahlat district of Bitlis (Akpınar 336). With the renewed escalation of the Russia–Ukraine War on 24 February 2022, Ahıska Turks once again faced severe security threats. Through evacuation operations coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a total of 928 Ahıska Turks were brought from Ukraine to Türkiye as of 16 May 2022 (Altunbaş). Subsequently, with the Presidential Decree dated 4 June 2022, it was decided that 1,000 Ahıska Turks families residing in the former Soviet region and particularly those most adversely affected by the war would be admitted to Türkiye as resettled migrants (*T.C. Resmî Gazete,* "Türkiye İhracatçılar").

Taken together, these developments are crucial for understanding Türkiye's legal and institutional arrangements concerning the Ahıska Turks. Türkiye has institutionalized a special status for this community within its migration policies, codifying "Turkish lineage" as a formal criterion (*T.C. Resmî Gazete,* "Ahıska Türklerinin" [Law on the Acceptance and Resettlement of Ahıska Turks]), and has gradually admitted Ahıska Turks into the country under the Settlement Law by prioritizing those living under the most challenging conditions.

However, institutional support for this migration does not inherently guarantee these groups' integration into Turkish society. The migration experiences of Ahıska Turks reveal the ethnicity-based asymmetries embedded in Türkiye's migration policies. Ahıska Turks continue to live within a polycentric and fragmented diaspora, enduring multifaceted vulnerabilities resulting from persistent patterns of discrimination and displacement. However, those legal privileges do not uniformly translate into equivalent social inclusion. Despite their privileged legal status, Ahıska Turks in Türkiye face barriers to formal labor market integration, due to the complex migration process and slow bureaucratic procedures. Women, in particular, confront dual challenges: the structural vulnerabilities induced by displacement and the restrictive roles imposed by patriarchal societal norms. While these challenges exacerbate barriers to their integration into the labor market, they also transform the migration process for women into not merely a spatial transition but also a search for identity, belonging, and social visibility. When these are compounded by the patriarchal structure within the Ahıska community and traditional constraints on women's public representation, they ultimately restrict Ahıska women's access to economic opportunities.

This study interrogates the labor market integration processes of Ahıska women who confront distinct inequalities rooted in gender and ethnic identity, having migrated from Russia and former Soviet states in Türkiye, despite their cultural proximity to the native population. In this study, the sectoral integration experiences of Ahıska women working in the Beauty and Personal Care Sector, particularly in the city of Bursa, Türkiye, were investigated. The research is theoretically anchored in Intersectionality Theory to elucidate the different social positions these women occupy

as both migrants and ethnic minorities. While the participants' lived experiences were analyzed through the lenses of their geographic origins and the sociostructural contexts of settlement places, their labor market participation was evaluated across dynamics such as social acceptance, cultural adaptation, discrimination, linguistic proficiency, educational background and human capital. Building on this multidimensional framework, this study acknowledges that the dynamics shaping Ahıska women's labor market experiences are not independent of one another but, rather, constitute causally interrelated and mutually reinforcing processes. Limitations in linguistic proficiency often lead to lower levels of social acceptance, and limited social acceptance, in turn, both triggers discriminatory practices and complicates cultural adaptation. Discrimination further functions as an additional barrier that prevents these women from effectively utilizing their educational backgrounds and human capital in the labor market. Moreover, the non-recognition of their diplomas in Türkiye prevents these women from being employed in their own professional fields, directing them instead toward lower-paid and more precarious positions; nevertheless, the human capital they possess enables them to adapt rapidly to new occupational domains. This process, in turn, reshapes their social acceptance and adaptation, producing a cyclical and intertwined pattern of causality. Against this backdrop, by situating its primary research question at the intersection of migration, gender, and ethnicity, this study not only delineates the unique experiences of Ahıska women but also advances a deeper understanding of their positioning within the Turkish labor market.

Gender and Migration

Contemporary migration dynamics show that women are becoming increasingly visible and influential within global migration flows. Although women have long constituted nearly half of the global migrant population (Boyd 19), migration research has generally focused on male experiences; the limited availability of sex-disaggregated data has rendered women's unique positions within migration processes largely invisible (Christou and Kofman 14). However, the growing discourse recognizing women as active agents in migration processes has made research methodologically stronger. Highlighting this transformation, Kofman ("Female" 289) emphasized for mainstream European research that *"There no longer is any excuse for the*

gender blindness of European mainstream research." This critique laid the groundwork for the theoretical shift that unfolded in the field in subsequent years; from the 2000s onward, studies began to conceptualize migration mobility as a gendered phenomenon (Donato et al. 4).

Analyzing women's migration movements requires understanding how gender relations permeate every stage of the migration cycle (Fresnoza-Flot 116). Gender shapes migrant women's access to resources, decision-making processes, and their positions within economic, social, and legal structures through the norms, roles, and expectations constructed around femininity and masculinity (Kofman, "Gendered" 2187). In this framework, migration appears as a dual process for women one that can generate empowering opportunities while simultaneously producing new challenges, particularly in cases of irregular or low-skilled migration.

Feminization of Migration

The independent migration of women with the aim of accessing better employment opportunities or expanding educational prospects is referred to in the literature as the "feminization of migration". This concept is often associated with the feminization of poverty. The increasing impoverishment of women and children particularly during periods of deep economic instability leads women to migrate in order to sustain their families' livelihoods (Etim-James 115). This process transforms not only migration dynamics but also the established gender roles at the family and community levels.

Data from the International Labour Organization indicate that women show a continuous increase within the global migrant population; in some countries, they even constitute 70 – 80% of all migrants, placing them in a decisive position within migration Dynamics (Fleury VI). The primary reason for this can be attributed to the transformation of migration policies and the changing nature of labor markets. Indeed, in the 1920s many countries placed restrictions on male migration while allowing women to migrate particularly for employment purposes (Schrover 112). In the 1940s, countries such as the United Kingdom and France admitted women migrants to be employed in low-skilled jobs (Byron and Condon 17). By the 1960s, labor mobility in Western Europe had liberalized, and women

workers particularly from countries such as Türkiye were brought to Germany (Nocera 28). Although migrant women were initially admitted predominantly to perform low-status jobs such as elderly care and domestic cleaning, in current debates on the feminization of migration, some scholars argue that the observed increase is in fact concentrated primarily among highly skilled women migrants. In recent years, the likelihood of migration among highly educated women has increased at a faster rate compared to men with similar levels of education. (Christou and Kofman 5).

Beyond labor market demand, the transformation in migration processes is closely connected to the structural inequalities that prevail in women's countries of origin inequalities rooted in historical and primordial patriarchal gender regimes. Numerous qualitative studies demonstrate that patriarchal social structures and discrimination against women constitute significant push factors in migration. Women who face risks such as child or forced marriage, domestic violence, sexual violence, or femicide migrate in order to access safer and more liberating social environments (Parish 2017). Access to a more liberal environment encourages women to participate in working life with the aim of earning their own income, becoming economically independent, and gaining greater influence in the public sphere. (Şahin 120).

Research shows that migrant women are largely disadvantaged in the working life of destination countries (Kofman et al. 47). Women who migrate in search of greater freedom or a more prosperous life often become concentrated in low-paid and insecure jobs in the labor markets of destination countries due to the intersecting effects of gender, ethnicity, and migrant status (Constable 137). Therefore, understanding the position of migrant women in the labor market requires taking into account how intersecting social categories such as gender, ethnicity, class position, and migrant status operate together. Intersectionality theory provides a strong analytical framework for examining this multidimensional structure.

Intersectionality Theory

The shift from women-centered approaches to gender-based analyses in migration studies has enabled the development of a more productive and intersectional research perspective on contemporary gendered mobilities

(Näre and Akhtar 186). Bringing multiple social categories into focus to understand intersectional hierarchies can contribute to making the inequalities, relationships, and meanings embedded in migration processes more visible. The emergence of the concept of "intersectionality" dates back to Kimberlé Crenshaw law professor at Columbia University and UCLA who introduced it during her analysis of a 1976 lawsuit concerning Black women workers. In the following period, Crenshaw published an article titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in which she explained how people's social identities can intersect in specific situations of inequality or discrimination. In brief, intersectionality is an analytical approach that seeks to examine how multiple systems of power, oppression, and privilege simultaneously shape the lives of individuals who occupy marginalized positions or become disadvantaged within power relations (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection" 145). This framework aims to show that these systems are not independent of one another but are mutually influencing structures. Following the emergence of the concept, as some scholars advocated for a more inclusive expansion of inequality categories, issues such as ethnic identity, class, gender, sexuality, generation/age, health, and disability began to be addressed within the scope of Intersectionality Theory (Amelina and Lutz 11). In this context, it should be noted that the core premise of intersectionality theory is that forms of oppression such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, or generation do not appear as singular experiences. On the contrary, these axes of inequality reinforce and intersect with one another, jointly shaping the exclusions or advantages individuals experience.

Crenshaw identifies three types of intersection: Structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality.

- *Structural intersectionality* refers to the idea that Black women, due to their position at

the intersection of race and gender, have qualitatively different experiences from white women. Additionally, it makes visible how immigrant women's experiences of domestic violence are produced in specific forms under the cumulative influence of class, race, gender, and legal status (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1264).

- *Political intersectionality* demonstrates how both feminist and antiracist politics can

contribute to the marginalization of Black or immigrant women. In a sense, the fact that existing political struggles and demands fail to take into account the situation of Black or immigrant women can be seen as the core focus of political intersectionality (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1256).

- *Representational intersectionality* focuses on the cultural construction of people with

different genders and racial backgrounds (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1245). Within this scope, it focuses on how narratives and representations in art, literature, film, television, politics, and positions of power render the positions of people with different identities invisible.

The notion of structural intersectionality provides a framework that makes it possible to explain the positions of migrant women in the labor market. At this point, structural intersectionality demonstrates that the position of migrant women in labor markets cannot be explained through a single axis of oppression; rather, it is produced through the interlocking of power lines such as racialization, gender, class position, and legal status. Intersectionality emphasizes that the reason migrant women are predominantly concentrated in low-paid, insecure and invisible jobs is not solely because they are "women" or solely because they are "migrants"; rather, gender and migrant status operate together with class, lack of legal status, language barriers, institutional exclusion and cultural stereotypes (Saucedo 357). In this sense, it is possible to state that the inequalities in the labor market are not a "single form of discrimination".

Analyzing the labor market positions of migrant women necessitates transcending a mere focus on employment levels, and it demands a holistic consideration of the structural inequalities they encounter, the gender regimes they navigate, the cultural norms and the status differentials created by migration. This study's theoretical foundation is anchored in the intersectionality approach, which interrogates the differentiating social and economic positions inhabited by women as both migrants and ethnic minorities. This research employs intersectionality theory not only

as an explanatory framework, rather as an analytical tool to navigate data collection and interpretation.

Ahıska Women in Türkiye

Ahıska women, who have been subjected to continuous migration since 1944, are hardworking people who, like men, are close to the land and engaged in agriculture (İslamoğlu and Öztürk 39; Şahin and Alper 669). Accordingly, in the regions to which they migrated, they initially engaged in agricultural activities (Orhan and Coşkun 49). As the second and third generations were born and raised on Turkish soil, the skills of Ahıska women also changed and became particularly concentrated in the service sector (Türk and Yılmaz 79). However, due to reasons such as being identified as a minority group and the fact that not all Ahıska women possess citizenship rights, it can be argued that Ahıska women are disadvantaged compared to the host population (Şahin 54).

Despite the patriarchal family structure, Ahıska women have acquired substantial academic capital in the post-Soviet context. After migrating to Türkiye under the Law on the Acceptance and Resettlement of Ahıska Turks (*T.C. Resmî Gazete,* "Ahıska Türklerinin"),this human capital, however, often remaind unrecognized. As their diplomas were not recognized, many Ahıska women were forced to work outside their professional fields in low-status jobs (Kahraman and İbrahimov 87). This necessity stems from the fact that Ahıska women are expected to contribute to the household economy. As Türk and Yılmaz (79) noted, economic participation has become an unavoidable necessity, driving them into wage labor even though existing traditions still ascribe domestic roles to women. Yet this shift does not signify a transformative rupture with patriarchal norms; rather, it largely unfolds in alignment with the system in place. Indeed, literature continues to represent Ahıska women as bound to spousal dependency, domestic labor, childcare as well as agrarian responsibilities (Akalın 31). An examination of the occupational sectors in which Ahıska women are engaged reveals their labor concentration in low-wage, insecure and gendered fields such as retail, floristry, cleaning services and textile manufacturing (Yılmaz and Mustafa 12). This situation constitutes part of the broader process termed the "feminization of migrant labor" (Herdiana et al. 102) In this context,

Ahıska women's labor concentration in Beauty and Personal Care Sectors is neither incidental nor arbitrary.

The Beauty and Personal Care Sector as a Gendered Labor Niche

Within the constraints of gendered and cultural expectations, migrant women often turn to the Beauty and Personal Care Sector as a space where their participation in the labor market remains socially acceptable (Borzoo 1). The fact that the practice of the profession requires very little language and academic skills and relies primarily on manual ability makes it possible to say that women who migrate and have expertise in any of the subcategories of the Beauty and Personal Care Sector are in a more advantageous position than migrant women who are specialized in other professions (Şahin 99). The sector is discursively constructed as a "natural" domain for female labor, enabling women to achieve economic productivity without overtly challenging traditional roles.

According to Arı and Güngör (1052), in the western cities where Ahıska Turks live in high concentration, women's hair salons are staffed by Ahıska Turkish women. Similarly, according to the findings of the study conducted by Çakıcı (62), the majority (43.7%) of Ahıska Turkish women entrepreneurs operating in the service sector own hairdressing and beauty salons. The positioning of Ahıska women in the Beauty and Personal Care Sector cannotbe attributed solely to their social structures; it is well understood that various factors also play a determining role in this process (Şahin 94). At this point, understanding the dynamics that shape the labor market experiences of Ahıska women requires an examination of intersecting dimensions of identity. As Collins and Bilge (12) assert, Intersectionality transcends the mere overlap of identities, rather, it is an analysis of the social relational systems that shape these identities. The intersectionality approach elucidates not only the ethnicity and gender based differentiation of Ahıska women but also how these differentiations guide their intertwining with the labor market, channeling them into specific sectors. Women neither exercise absolute agency in their occupational selection nor wholly submit to external pressures. Going beyond that, they carve out visibility for themselves within culturally ascribed domains. In this sense, the beauty sector can be interpreted as both a limited space of autonomy and a contested domain where migrant women's labor is commodified in new forms.

In this regard, this study's theoretical framework seeks to explain the labor market integration and sectoral positioning of Ahıska women in the beauty and personal care industry not merely through economic indicators but via the interplay of intersecting identities, social norms, cultural acceptance and institutional barriers. Intersectionality Theory provides a robust analytical foundation to both explain and articulate these complex patterns of their positioning. Thereby, the study aims to delineate constraining social norms that shape occupational preferences while also pointing out the strategic spaces of agency cultivated by women within these norms.

Method and Data

This study is theoretically informed by Intersectionality Theory, which highlights how multiple social positions interact to shape individual experiences. Reflecting this perspective, the methodological design and analytical procedures were developed to capture the intersecting structural dynamics influencing Ahıska women's lives. In line with this approach, the research explores the following question: *How are Ahıska women's reasons for migrating to Türkiye, the challenges they encounter in the labor market, their orientation toward the Beauty and Personal Care Sector, their professional satisfaction, and their institutional expectations of integration shaped through the intersection of gender, ethnic identity, class position, and legal status?*

Data Collection Process and Interview Tool

This research employs a qualitative research design to facilitate an in-depth comprehension of the impact of social phenomena on individuals. The qualitative methodology was selected for its capacity to prioritize flexible data collection strategies, which enable the context-based interpretation of participants' lived experiences (Creswell 205).

Following a qualitative research design, this research adopted the semi-structured interview method. Semi-structured interviews facilitate explanations of participants' perspectives while granting researchers the flexibility to adapt questions in response to emergent themes (Rubin and Rubin 171). The interview form was developed by synthesizing exemplars from anthropological and ethnographic studies on migration (Gericke et al.; Khan-Gökkaya and Mösko; Mawa; McGinnity et al.; Naseem and Adnan; Ruck). Certain authentic questions were integrated into the form

to align with the study's objective, and the finalized form was subjected to evaluation of three acknowledged experts, with revisions implemented per their recommendations. After the finalization of the interview form, the data collection phase commenced. The interviews were conducted between October 1, 2022 and November 9, 2022, with an average duration of approximately 75 minutes per interview.

Prior to starting fieldwork, ethical approval was secured from the Social Sciences Institute of Bursa Uludağ University (dated May 27, 2022, Session No. 2022-05, Decision No. 47). The selection of Bursa as the research site can be explained by the following rationales: (i) While there are approximately 110,000 Ahıska Turks in Türkiye, the province where they are most densely concentrated is Bursa, with around 70,000 (Şahin 77); (ii) its developed industrial and tourism sectors makes it an attractive settlement area for migrant populations; and (iii) it has the logistical convenience for accessing participants for researchers.

The selection of the Beauty and Personal Care Sector as the study's focal domain is grounded in both its structural suitability for migrant women and its empirically observed relevance to the Ahıska community. On the one hand, the sector aligns closely with gendered sociocultural norms, provides safe and women-centered spaces, entails low entry barriers, and offers flexible work arrangements factors that make it an accessible and socially acceptable labor niche for migrant women in general (Bouleau 8; Kang 165). On the other hand, consistent with the literature indicating that Ahıska women are disproportionately concentrated in this sector (Arı and Güngör 1062; Çakıcı 62), the beauty industry constitutes an empirically significant field for understanding their labor market positioning. Therefore, the sector's selection emerges from the intersection of its structural characteristics and the observable patterns of occupational clustering among Ahıska women.

Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

The primary objective of qualitative studies is to showcase the richness, difference, diversity and deviance of a subgroup representing the broader population, thereby fostering a holistic perspective (Lincoln and Guba 202; Patton 184). In studies involving migrant communities, prioritizing access to reliable informants over a large number of participants is critically

significant (Smith 60). Accordingly, several criteria were established for participant selection in this research as follows: (i) being an Ahıska woman and (ii) active employment in the Beauty and Personal Care Sector (e.g., cosmetology, hairstyling, manicure-pedicure or eyebrow design). Collaboration was initiated with the World Ahıska Turks Union (DATÜB) central office and the Ahıska Culture, Solidarity and Aid Association to facilitate participant recruitment. Because gender or demographically disaggregated data on the Ahıska Turks are not officially collected in Türkiye, it is not possible to determine the exact number of Ahıska women. This limits the ability to evaluate the sample size in proportional terms. Therefore, the adequacy of the 20 participants was assessed based on data saturation, evidenced through thematic repetition during the interviews.

Participant Profile

Among the 20 participants interviewed, 50% held employer status, 35% were employees, 10% were interns and 5% were working as freelancers. In terms of educational level, 85% possessed a high school diploma, while 15% held undergraduate degrees. Linguistic proficiency was distributed as follows: 80% were fluent in Russian and 20% in English. While the marital status of participants was varied, 60% were married and 40% represented other marital categories. The duration of residence in Türkiye was predominantly more than eight years (55%). A comprehensive demographic breakdown is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic, Linguistic and Social Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Info	Categories	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Age	15-24	6	30
	25-34	8	40
	35-44	5	25
	45-55	1	5
Education Level	High-School	17	85
	Undergraduate Degree	3	15

Marital Status	Married	12	60
	Single	3	15
	Divorced	4	20
	Widow	1	5
Number of kids	None	5	25
	1	2	10
	2	8	40
	3	5	25
Number of people living in the household	2	2	10
	3	4	20
	4	3	15
	5 and more	11	55
Number of active workers in the household	Only myself	5	25
	2	14	70
	4	1	5
Foreign Language Info	Yes	17	85
	No	3	15
Spoken Languages	Russian	16	80
	English	4	20
	Ukrainian	3	15
	Uzbek	2	10
	Kazakh	2	10
	Azerbaijani	5	25
	Georgian	1	5

Turkish Language Proficiency	I understand and speak Turkish	1	5
	I understand and speak Turkish but I can't write in Turkish	1	5
	I understand, speak and write in Turkish	18	90
Residence period in Türkiye	Less than 2 – 4 years	3	15
	Less than 4 – 6 years	3	15
	Less than 6 – 8 years	3	15
	8 years and more	11	55
Residence period in Bursa	Less than 2 – 4 years	4	20
	Less than 4 – 6 years	2	10
	Less than 6 – 8 years	5	25
	8 years and more	9	45

Data Analysis

The collected data were evaluated through thematic analysis, a methodological approach enabling the systematic coding of data to derive meaningful themes (Terry et al. 17). Interviews were analyzed through an inductive analytical framework, with codes emerging directly from the collected data (Terry et al. 241). To ensure coding consistency and validate the integrity of identified themes, each transcript underwent independent analysis by two researchers for three times, employing Iterative Thematic Inquiry (Morgan and Nica 10). Following independent coding, inter-coder reliability was assessed via Cohen's Kappa coefficient, yielding an 82% goodness of fit (Cohen 44). Discrepancies in meaning were resolved through mutual consensus, and 5 core themes and 20 subcategories were created. Table 2 shows these themes, subcategories, and associated code numbers.

Table 2
Themes, Subcategories and Number of Codes Obtained as a Result of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-Category	Number of Codes
Reasons for immigration to Türkiye	Living standards (education, health, security, income, etc.)	15
	Human affairs network	10
	Unity of culture and faith	6
Challenges experienced in Türkiye	Challenges within the Beauty and Personal Care Sector in Türkiye	22
	Disadvantages in the job search process	19
	Discriminatory behavior in work life	15
Reasons to work in the Beauty and Personal Care Sector	Working conditions, internationality and financial income	45
	Mutual reasons why women prefer to work in manicure-pedicure jobs	31
	Interest, talent and success	30
	Qualified education received	13
	Individual, family and cultural reasons	11
	Economic reasons	6
	Serving only women	3
Occupational Satisfaction	Working hours satisfaction	23
	Desires and passions	21
	Working conditions and wage satisfaction	21
	Customer relations and mutual satisfaction	20
	Overall job satisfaction	20
Institutional Expectations	Demands from Turkish authorities regarding business life	31
	Policies required for integration	23
	Total	385

Findings

This section presents the lived experiences of Ahıska women within a thematic framework, covering their migration processes, their participation in the labor market, their experiences in the Beauty and Personal Care Sector, their professional satisfaction, and their institutional expectations regarding integration. Guided by Intersectionality Theory, the findings reveal how the intersection of gender, ethnic identity, class position, and legal status shapes women's opportunities, constraints, and strategies in Türkiye.

The Reasons of Ahıska Women's Immigration to Türkiye

When examined through an intersectional perspective, the reasons for Ahıska women's migration to Türkiye indicate that the pursuit of security, ethnic and cultural belonging, economic vulnerability, and support mechanisms based on social networks intersect simultaneously with their being women, their belonging to an Ahıska minority group, and their low-income class position. These multiple positionalities remove migration decisions from being explainable solely through individual preferences and turn them into a process in which the structural push and pull factors jointly produced by gender, ethnic identity, and class reinforce one another.

First, gender distinctly shapes Ahıska women's migration responses. Women, who are responsible for the safety of children, experience the search for physical security as a more urgent necessity during periods of war and conflict. The statement *"I left Ukraine with my children due to the war" (P20)* explains how women's caregiving responsibilities heighten their perception of risk and how the motivation for security becomes intertwined with the gender dimension.

Ethnic identity and faith-based belonging emerge not merely as a cultural preference in Ahıska women's migration decisions, but as a structural security strategy shaped by the historical experiences of exclusion, displacement, and insecurity. The statement *"We wanted to live not among Christians but in Muslim lands" (P7)* demonstrates that ethnic and religious proximity transforms into a framework of protection and identity-based belonging for women.

Migration decisions are also shaped by class position. For Ahıska women who are low-income and economically vulnerable, migration to Türkiye

becomes an important strategy for seeking a more secure life. While one participant's statement, *"We came here to attain higher living standards" (P8),* clearly expresses the expectation of economic improvement, another participant's words, *"Life in Azerbaijan was too hard and we had a very low income" (P18),* demonstrate how class-based disadvantages accelerate the decision to migrate.

Finally, social networks constitute a support mechanism that intersects with these three dimensions. Kinship ties offer a "collective solidarity strategy" that reduces women's uncertainties and enables migration. The statement *"We had relatives who had lived here for years; we came here because we trusted them" (P4)* shows that these networks create a safe transition space especially for women. This situation reveals that when the vulnerabilities arising from gender intersect with the ethnic minority status and economic weakness of Ahıska women, social networks become an indispensable source of support in the migration process.

Structural Challenges Encountered by Ahıska Women in the Turkish Labor Market

The employment experiences of Ahıska women in Türkiye illustrate how the aspirations that motivated their migration become disrupted when confronted with entrenched structural barriers in the labor market. Participants consistently identified discrimination as the most prominent challenge they faced, noting that its manifestations were largely tied to ethnic and cultural prejudices. Several women described being misrecognized or stereotyped by employers, clients, or colleagues: *"In the first hair salon I worked in, the employer's family saw us as Russians and Christians because of the region we came from" (P3); "Even if I say I am Turkish, they do not see me as one of them" (P12)*; *"If your Turkish is poor and you come from Russia or Ukraine, they immediately see you as a foreigner, as a Russian" (P14).* These accounts demonstrate that exclusion in the labor market is shaped not by isolated interpersonal attitudes but through the intersection of ethnic minority status, linguistic stigma, and cultural misrecognition, revealing structural forms of disadvantage that constrain Ahıska women's integration into the Turkish workforce.

A majority of participants reported encountering significant obstacles in finding jobs upon their initial arrival in Türkiye due to their lack of established social networks. This isolation got deepened when compounded by linguistic deficits and gender constraints. The assertion of "*I face the challenge of being a woman as well as language barriers*" *(P13)* is a solid example of intersecting discrimination. Furthermore, before obtaining legal rights to work, immigrant women were frequently pushed into informal and underpaid positions. *"I received a salary below minimum wage because I am a foreigner" (P20)* illustrates how employers take advantage of migrant women's lack of legal work authorization by offering wages below acceptable standards.

Ahıska women also reported being pressured to perform tasks beyond their professional authorization in beauty salons, being denied adequate breaks, being forced into overtime work, and receiving no additional compensation despite heightened performance expectations. Moreover, many expressed that they were not allowed to choose the clients or types of services they felt comfortable providing. As one participant noted, *"It was very difficult for me to work in a place where many male customers come. In certain areas of Bursa, especially men visit such salons. I did not want to serve these customers. For that reason, the employer said he could not continue with me. So I resigned. They simply do not allow you the right to choose" (P15).* These experiences reveal how gender, migrant status, and economic discrimination operate together to produce the structural constraining mechanisms that shape the positioning of Ahıska women within the sector.

Structural challenges specific to the Beauty and Personal Care Sector hinder the labor-market integration of Ahıska women. Discriminatory practices grounded in ethnic and cultural prejudices, along with excessively long working hours and low wages imposed due to their migrant status, restrict their opportunities for upward mobility within the sector.

Reasons of Choosing the Beauty and Personal Care Sector for Employment

The Beauty and Personal Care Sector becomes a choice for Ahıska women, shaped by cultural transmission, occupational training, economic flexibility and gender norms. The growth of the beauty industry in post-Soviet countries, where many Ahıska Turks previously resided, has increased their

inclination toward this sector. As one participant noted, "*Soviet and post-Soviet culture influenced us*" *(P14),* it is highlighting the enduring impact of their heritage. Additionally, the qualified occupational training systems in these countries have significantly contributed to this sector: "*Those having training abroad are more sought-after in this profession*" *(P4).* This professional accumulated knowledge and experience enable Ahıska women to swiftly adapt to labor market gaps in Türkiye while featuring themselves as a skilled workforce.

Participants prefer manicure-pedicure related jobs due to their high profitability, widespread demand, flexibility and potential for home-office employment: "*The income is high and one can even accept clients at home*" *(P11).* Several participants characterize the beauty sector as "*easier, cleaner and more lucrative*" compared to industrial labor: "*It's cleaner, simpler and higher-paying than factory jobs" (P1).*

A pivotal rationale for working in this sector lies in its reliance on manual dexterity, rendering it geographically portable and universally applicable: *"Even without linguistic proficiency, you can readily secure employment after migrating to a new country" (P3).* This underscores the profession's global sustainability. As articulated by a participant, "Regardless of circumstances —even in times of war— women continue visiting hair salons *to get their hair done" (P13)*.

Although the motivations shaping Ahıska women's orientation toward the Beauty and Personal Care Sector vary, the broader consequences of this preference become more evident when examined through an intersectional perspective. The skills and professional experience they bring from their countries of origin enable them to be employed rapidly in Türkiye's limited labor market. At the same time, the "feminine" nature of the sector, its flexible working hours, and higher income opportunities compared to other sectors are in harmony with gender norms that position women as individuals who both contribute to household income and maintain domestic care burdens. In addition, the Beauty and Personal Care Sector stands out for Ahıska women in terms of structural accessibility. For their being an ethnic minority and their migrant status limit their entry into more institutional or language-proficiency-requiring sectors, while the profession's reliance on manual skills, its low entry barriers, a customer profile less sensitive to

ethnic identity, and its capacity to generate rapid income provide economic security for migrant women across different geographical contexts. All these dynamics are an indicator that in the occupational preferences that are effective in Ahıska women's integration into the labor market, the intersection of gender norms, migrant status, and class positions is at work.

Professional Satisfaction

Professional satisfaction constitutes an important determinant in the sustainable labor market integration of Ahıska women. Findings reveal that most participants engage in hairdressing with motivation and affective commitment. As articulated by one participant: "*This work brings me peace.. I feel good and my stress level decreases" (P14),* underscoring the role of having a job as a source of balance.

Women who work with passion maintain their commitment to the profession despite the structural challenges they face. Statements such as *"I'm not okay with the salon's hygiene standards, but I love my job" (P5)* and *"I don't consider other jobs; I am a hairdresser" (P17)* illustrate how emotional attachment to the occupation can overshadow unfavorable working conditions. This attachment also reinforces job satisfaction.

The flexibility of working hours significantly enhances the occupational satisfaction of Ahıska women who carry substantial domestic responsibilities. As one participant noted, *"I could take on more clients if I did not have kids, but I am comfortable in this way" (P15),* flexible and freelance work arrangements allow these women to balance paid employment with childcare and household duties. This structure provides the necessary time to recover from the physical and emotional demands of the profession, enabling them to sustain their participation in the sector without feeling overwhelmed.

Political and Institutional Expectations of Integration

The labor market integration of Ahıska women in Türkiye is largely shaped by public policies. Participant experiences contain strong critiques regarding the fairness and accessibility of the existing system, particularly in areas such as vocational training, credential recognition, citizenship acquisition procedures, and bureaucratic costs. Women whose certificates are not recognized in Türkiye emphasized the significant economic and social losses resulting from this situation: *"If they recognized the diplomas of Ahıska*

Turks, everyone would work in their own profession… here we have to work and earn money to support our families" (P11). Similarly, the lack of work permits forces women into informal and low-paid jobs, allowing employers to utilize migrant labor at lower cost: *"Those who do not have a work permit work without insurance and for cheap… There must be regulations on this issue" (P3).* Structural inequalities interwoven with ethnicity, gender and legal status underpin these demands and the barriers encountered, extending beyond merely economic concerns. Beyond the employment process itself, Ahıska women demand a rights based integration framework that ensures security and long-term sustainability.

Ahıska women believe that the vocational training programs provided to migrants by the Ministry of National Education do not equip them with the skills demanded by the sector; therefore, their primary expectation from Turkish authorities is the provision of "high quality training related to their profession." However, such training loses its significance without obtaining a work permit or citizenship: *"The most critical things are the issuance of work permits and citizenship" (P1).*

Structural barriers, such as the absence of credential recognition and high apostille fees, compel immigrants to retrain in new professions while at the same time, exacerbating the struggle to earn a living. Consequently, effective integration policies must extend beyond providing some programs, but they must also encompass legal and economic reforms to guarantee equal access to these initiatives.

The considerable effort Ahıska women must invest in obtaining credential recognition affects them once again as both migrants and women responsible for ensuring the continuity of household income. The absence of work permits further deepens their already weakened position associated with their Ahıska Turkish identity.

Discussion

The findings of this study, which examines the migration of Ahıska women to Türkiye and their labor market integration experiences through intersecting social positionings and structural conditions, first explain how the dynamics shaping the migration decision are reproduced after migration. Subsequently, the mobility that begins with the search for security and

belonging continues with experiences such as discrimination, informality, and loss of occupational status in the labor market. In contrast, while the Beauty and Personal Care sector produces a field of integration from certain perspectives, legal status and demands for institutional recognition continue to exist as a fundamental agenda in terms of the sustainability of integration.

When the factors determining the migration decision are examined, migrant women's search for security, need for ethnic and cultural belonging, economic conditions, and support mechanisms based on social networks have constituted a decision ground that feeds into one another rather than creating a singular field of motivation. The search for security has transformed migration into a more urgent and compulsory strategy, especially under conditions of uncertainty and risk. The literature confirms that in situations of war, access to basic necessities becomes more difficult and that this situation compels women to migrate, particularly in connection with their optimistic outlook toward their children (Robertson and Duckett 467). On the other hand, ethnic and cultural belonging has given meaning to migration as a desire to access a familiar and protected social environment. It is known that when deciding on the country to which they will migrate, women choose the areas that are most compatible with their cultural structures and most easily accessible (Lanati and Venturini 811). However, in the findings of this study, economic difficulties have made migration visible as a search for improvement and stability. In addition to these findings, the study shows that support mechanisms based on social networks increase the feasibility of the migration decision by reducing uncertainties. Many migration studies emphasize that social networks before, during, and after migration are highly important in terms of providing information, offering psychological support, and facilitating action (Ross-Sheriff 208).

Post-migration experiences reveal that migrantds' high expectations are often interrupted when confronted with the characteristics of the labor market in Türkiye and that new difficulties are produced. In this context, the fact that the most prominent among the various difficulties faced by the participants is discrimination and prejudice demonstrates that the process of integration into the labor market depends on social acceptance together with economic settlement. Relevant studies suggest that migrant women's exposure to discriminatory and prejudiced behaviors after migration is almost inevitable

(Eijberts and Roggeband 130; Erel 230). In addition, migrant women's working informally and for low wages due to the delay in obtaining legal work permits brings the concept of "labor exploitation" to the agenda, as is frequently noted in the literature (Ollus 26). Moreover, the fact that women engage in jobs outside their professions, as revealed in the findings of this study, once again demonstrates that migrant women are evaluated within the "can do any job" flexibility (Morokvasic 461) in the labor market.

The findings show that the advantages offered by the Beauty and Personal Care sector facilitate integration into the labor market from certain perspectives. First of all, Ahıska women's possession of professional qualifications in this field stands out as an important resource that shortens the time to enter employment and increases their "capacity to find a job." In addition, considering that the language barrier is an important obstacle in integration into the labor market (Ghio et al. 357), the fact that this profession is based on manual skill and therefore does not require very good language proficiency has produced an additional facilitating mechanism for women with limited language competence in entering employment.

Migrant women experience emotional satisfaction because they immediately obtain the output of the work they perform, and this satisfaction facilitates integration into the labor market. This is a finding consistent with the literature suggesting that producing a visible product in the labor process strengthens women's perception of self-efficacy and increases continuity by nurturing motivation in the daily flow of work (Esch and Stefano 248).

In contrast, the findings clearly show that migrant women's legal expectations continue and that institutional regulations are needed in terms of the sustainability of integration. In particular, expectations from policymakers regarding legal procedures such as professional non-recognition, work permits, diploma equivalency, and acquisition of citizenship exist for many migrants (Bauder 699). The fact that these procedures take a long time, are costly, or progress uncertainly leads women to be pushed into informal work. For this reason, legal reforms can be considered a precondition for integration.

Conclusion

This study examines the labor market integration processes and positioning of Ahıska women who migrated to Türkiye, with a specific focus on the

Beauty and Personal Care Sector. Hence, the study demonstrates that their integration is shaped by a combination of economic and legal barriers together with a multifaceted positioning involving ethnic identity, linguistic affinity, gender, and cultural belonging. The intersectionality theoretical framework has provided deeper insight into these women's participation in social and economic life.

Intersectionality theory shows that Ahıska women's labor market participation is not solely attributable to their ethnic identity but arises from the interplay of factors such as gender and legal status. By navigating the experiences at the intersection of ethnicity and gender-based social positioning, these women have carved significant positions within the Turkish Beauty and Personal Care Sector. Nevertheless, entrenched sectoral inequalities and structural barriers such as employer biases, low-wage regimes, long working hours, and insufficient occupational training curtail their access to equal opportunities with others. Such systemic constraints complicate the realization of durable and sustainable integration processes while reinforcing their position in this sector.

The findings further indicate that the integration of immigrant women into the sector depends upon both gender norms and personal competencies. Ahıska women conclude their occupational choices considering different elements like economic concerns and a desire to conform to social norms. The Beauty and Personal Care Sector presents itself as an arena aligned with gender norms, offering women a platform to achieve economic independence while simultaneously preserving their cultural identities. However, the structural inequalities within the sector and the discrimination encountered constrain these women's success and compel them to continue struggling for adaptation.

The findings also reveal that legal status and work permit related challenges constitute significant barriers hindering women's integration into the sector. The prolonged time and effort required to obtain work permits push women into informal employment and low-wage labor, meanwhile elevating economic and social inequalities.

In conclusion, this study underscores that the labor market integration of Ahıska women is shaped by economic opportunities, social acceptance and

cultural belonging, mediated through intersecting identities and social norms. Persistent structural barriers and gender norms endanger the sustainability of this integration. Intersectionality theory offers a critical lens to accurately interpret these women's experiences, while also advocating for restructuring migration policies to be more inclusive and egalitarian. In this context, developing policies that both facilitate immigrant women's labor market participation and reduce social inequalities will contribute to the integration process of groups like Ahıska women for more successful and sustainable results.

Author Contributions

Tamilla Şahin (70%): Questionnaire design; literature review; data and source collection; data analysis; interpretation of the findings; manuscript writing.

Yusuf Alper (30%): Preparation of the manuscript draft; critical scientific review of the manuscript; manuscript revision; final evaluation and approval of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study. There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Bursa Uludağ University (Meeting No. 2022-05, May 27, 2022; Decision No. 47).

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