

**Society for the Anthropology of Work**

# **Crafting the Entrepreneurial Self: Refugees, Displaced Livelihoods, and the Politics of Labor in Turkey**

**Fiona Murphy, Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou**

**Published on:** May 28, 2020

**DOI:** 10.21428/1d6be30e.bebc21a2

**License:** [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

On the landing page of the website for Knitstanbul, a small refugee social entrepreneurship organization based in Turkey, sits the image of a candescent orange and black crocheted child's life jacket. The life jacket, striking in its design, is a piece of craftwork produced by one of the organization's knitters for World Refugee Day in 2019. Its highly visible presence on Knitstanbul's website betokens the entanglements of this particular organization with conditions of refugeeness, conflict, and survival.



Child's life jacket. Photo courtesy of Knitstanbul.

The ways in which these conditions have become bound up with the notion of social entrepreneurship, underpinned as it is by an ethic of earning profit in order to do good or have a social impact, are at the

crux of our collaborative research in Turkey. Global organizations such as ASHOKA now lead the way in promoting a culture of social entrepreneurialism, which has become embedded in discourses of and policies for asylum seeker and refugee labor integration. Our project explores how the complex modalities of social entrepreneurship reconfigure refugees' labor lives against the backdrop of market imperatives. As such, one of the key questions we work with is how, through global forms of neoliberalism and particularly through the concept of social entrepreneurship, the idea of being entrepreneurial has permeated so many dimensions of social, labor, and kin relations in individuals' and communities' experiences of seeking asylum and refuge.

Social entrepreneurship, as a concept, spans domains of sustainability and ethical practice, business and market-driven ideology, and development and aid discourse. Definitions vary significantly, with one of the clearer understandings being advanced by James Austin and colleagues (Austin et al. 2006: 2), who describe social entrepreneurship as an “innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, and public sectors.” In our fieldwork, we have tended to confine our ethnographic focus to the social-activist end of a continuum of social entrepreneurial endeavors in Turkey, but in our broader research project,<sup>1</sup> we examine the full spectrum of this definition as it applies to Istanbul and Turkey with a quantitative survey and team-based (semistructured) interviewing.





Istanbul streetscape. Photo by Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou.

To date, Turkey is the largest receiver of refugees from Syria, with approximately 4.1 million refugees living in the country—the majority of whom live in the main urban centers. Dominant representations

of refugees tend toward images of encampment, but in recent years displaced persons have been more likely to live in urban spaces. Istanbul is a very good example of this, as a complex urban landscape that hosts the largest number of refugees out of all Turkish cities.

Turkey is party to the landmark 1951 Refugee Convention, but in the past it has limited the refugees it accepts to those originating from Europe. However, in 2013 Turkey adopted an EU-inspired Law on Foreigners and International Protection, thereby creating a legal framework for asylum in Turkey that foregrounds Turkey's obligations with respect to the concept of international protection. The status of Syrians living in Turkey is thus entangled in the complexities of different legal positionalities. Initially deemed "guests" and later allowed a status of temporary protection, Syrians face major restrictions in terms of acquiring work permits, the right to move, and citizenship. This means that many Syrians in Turkey remain unemployed or underemployed and continue to be a target for exploitative employers.

Given their limited access to the Turkish labor market, Syrians navigating an exploitative world of work have come to see entrepreneurship (especially in the food and service industry) as an attractive option. Social entrepreneurship projects, in particular, are sometimes supported and funded by the NGO and charitable sectors, carving out a middle ground for the work of social entrepreneurship in refugee spaces in Turkey. The challenges of operating a social enterprise in Turkey under the current authoritarian regime, as well as the positioning of Syrian refugees as having temporary protection with limited rights, hinder the general operation of these enterprises and, ultimately, the possibility of scaling. Navigating such complexities forms a core part of how social entrepreneurship operates in Turkey and ultimately, our effort to understand its role in refugee lives.

Narratives of entrepreneurship figure centrally in discourses regarding the rebuilding of asylum seekers and refugees' lives in their new host countries. There has been a strong global emphasis on labor integration in asylum seeker and refugee policy (as well as in some humanitarian approaches) as a means of economic survival for refugees, as with the by now well-critiqued Jordan Compact (Lenner and Turner 2019; see also Ramsey 2017). While the push for work permits and rights for asylum seekers in particular is a much needed one, we posit that an overemphasis on the economic resilience of refugees can also be read as an attempt to defer responsibility for addressing the protracted crisis situations of asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey. In many instances, such policy approaches have served merely as rhetorical flourish, failing to create strong, sustainable pathways to labor integration. In this void, it falls to NGOs, charities, and social entrepreneurship projects to backfill the realization of such goals for asylum seekers and refugees.

The role that social entrepreneurship plays in this space of policy failure, coupled with the ways in which it reconfigures the idea of the social, are particularly striking. Social entrepreneurship organizations build their value by achieving social impact of many kinds; profit is, in fact, defined in these terms. Ideas of inclusivity and democracy are often central to their remit. As such, social

entrepreneurship aims to broaden circumferences of care, solidarity, and inclusivity through being entrepreneurial and innovative in settings where there is a clear dearth of state support. Many social entrepreneurs are individuals or communities seeking to forge new (and even redeeming) projects from their political and social dissatisfaction on a given issue. Their motivation stems, in part, from a redefining of profit in terms of social achievement and responsibility as well as an ethics of encounter, solidarity, and care.

In this “rendering entrepreneurial” (Irani 2019: 17) of asylum seeker and refugee lives, we are, however, troubled by the many contradictions in how social entrepreneurship has been constructed as ameliorative. One key tension in our work is this double vision of refugee labor as, on the one hand, a neoliberal form of resilience building, and on the other, a hopeful attempt to find community solidarity and viable livelihood strategies. This tension is further deepened by the gendered and generational dynamics of how social entrepreneurship organizations operate and market their work.





A sampling of Knitstanbul goods. Photo courtesy of Knitstanbul.

Our engagement with Knitstanbul illuminates these complexities at various scales, from an individual level up to a more collective state and policy level. Knitstanbul was founded in 2014 by Malika Browne, a British writer and expat who had lived in Syria and Turkey for a number of years. As Syrians started to arrive in Istanbul in large numbers, she felt a need to reach out and develop some kind of support and assistance. It was out of this tale of ethical response and encounter that the idea of a crafting business was borne. The story of Knitstanbul is also a story of loss and recovery, of rebuilding and reconnecting in an attempt to establish a sustainable livelihood under the specter of the Syrian conflict and rightlessness in Turkey. The organization's knitters, all women, primarily produce baby knitwear, which they sell on Etsy and elsewhere on the web. Many of the knitters have young children and so



working in this way, largely from home, mitigates the need to seek costly childcare. When training events or meetings are held, children are welcomed and entertained, thereby removing one of the biggest barriers to the labor market for refugee mothers.

Our ethnographic endeavor has been to think through the messy and textured “intersubjective space between” (Jackson 2013: 5) the idea of the social enterprise and the individual practitioner of it, mapping the multiplicity of experiences that our Knitstanbul participants accumulate as they navigate bureaucratic protocols and the invention (for them) of a new entrepreneurial community of practice. We thus remain cognizant and respectful of the idea that there are real lives within ideas: in participating in an organization such as Knitstanbul, our research participants are rebuilding lifeworlds anchored in loss and survival. Knitting, missing a stitch, unraveling to repair, learning to construct patterns, the knitters are ultimately creating texts through which they can communicate with one another, with new members of Knitstanbul, and with the consumers of their goods.



Knitstanbul training workshop, March 2019. Photo by Fiona Murphy.

Indeed, our research participants articulated how the knitting business engendered a particular kind of “hopefulness.” For many of them, their engagement with Knitstanbul was a simultaneous act of crafting material objects as well as new socialities and spaces of affectivity. One of the knitters put it thus: “Without Knitstanbul, I would just stay at home, stay at home alone and do nothing. Now I have new friends and a way of making some money. We have all been through the same kinds of things, and we can talk to one another and think about our old and new lives.” This sense of grounding in a new

city, financial independence, and deepened connection was frequently conveyed to us by the knitters, as they emphasized the role that Knitstanbul has played in forging new livelihoods.

While social entrepreneurship is not a panacea and asylum seekers and refugees should not be asked to innovate their way out of their complex, restrictive situations, participating in Knitstanbul has nonetheless brought about a belief in new possibilities for many of our research participants. For some, it has even partially dispelled their sense of marginalization in their new host country. This is, however, a fraught space of possibility and hopefulness structured by contingent political forces and societal supports, which means that many asylum seekers and refugees struggle on a daily basis in the very act of making their lives more livable.

Social entrepreneurship, in spite of its characterization as both charitable and a form of solidarity-building, still involves the (re)training and crafting of the self into the figure of a successful innovator. While the traditional archetype of a social entrepreneur has been that of a “heroic individual” (Nicholls 2013: 99), becoming an innovator has been promoted in many refugee projects as a community aspiration for displaced workers. Finding themselves in an often hostile urban landscape, refugee women seize the opportunity to make income from home and avoid navigating the city. At the same time, these arrangements further underscore the gendered character of the work they can aspire to do, and it renders them into perpetual prime targets for development projects promising economic empowerment and integration.

In spite of these conditions of precarity and vulnerability, refugee women have to (re)train in order to craft products that are deemed marketable and desirable to consumers, especially in the global North. This often involves the forgetting of old or traditional patterns, learning instead to engage with “modern” techniques and designs. Moreover, this training involves the commodification of displacement itself, as the products they make are marketed to convey charitable messages connected to stories of loss and survival. It is the process of singularization (see Carrier 1991), of making a product personable by attaching the name of its maker (and traces of her story) to its label, upon which the value of these goods as commodities comes to rely.

There is strong evidence that social enterprises have become a way in which some refugees manage to generate income and to rebuild communities and sustainable futures. The Knitstanbul women have generated both important new social relationships and a reasonable income, and in so doing have engaged in a poetics of reclamation that, for many of them, has served to make their lives qualitatively better. In the process, however, they have had to reinvent themselves as entrepreneurial and innovative, not only to be able to knit but also to stitch together new worlds in a landscape where they are otherwise denied basic rights and opportunities.

## Acknowledgments

This article draws on research conducted as part of a project funded by the British Academy, a collaborative partnership between Queen's University Belfast and the Center for Migration Research at Bilgi University, Istanbul, entitled "'Counting our Losses': Refugee Social Entrepreneurships in Turkey."

## Author Bios

Fiona Murphy is a cultural anthropologist whose research focuses on Indigenous Australian politics and movements, refugee and mobility studies, and business anthropology. She has conducted research in Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey, and has a particular interest in new forms of public anthropology. She is the coauthor of *Integration in Ireland: The Everyday Lives of African Migrants* (2012) and has published in journals including *American Anthropologist*, the *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, and *History and Anthropology*.

Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou is a political anthropologist at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests lie at the intersections of migration and diaspora, conflict-induced displacement, and the politics of memory and loss. She has conducted fieldwork in Cyprus, the United Kingdom, and Turkey, and has published on topics including the connections between memory and history in the Cypriot conflict, the transnational role of diasporas in peace-building, youth migration and precarity in Southern Europe, and refugees and the politics of representation in Turkey.

## References

- Austin, James, Howard Stevenson, and Jane Wei-Skillern. 2006. "[Social and Commercial Entrepreneurship: Same, Different, or Both?](#)" *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 30(1): 1-22.
- Carrier, James. 1991. "[Gifts, Commodities, and Social Relations: A Maussian View of Exchange.](#)" *Sociological Forum* 6(1): 119-136.
- Irani, Lilly. 2019. *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 2013. *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lenner, Katherine, and Lewis Turner. 2019. "[Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labour Market in Jordan.](#)" *Middle East Critique* 28(1): 65-95.
- Nicholls, Alex. 2013. "[Editorial: Heroes.](#)" *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* 4(2): 109-112.

Ramsay, Georgina. 2017. *Impossible Refuge: The Control and Constraint of Refugee Futures*. New York: Routledge.