

EXPLOITATIVE SOLIDARITY: INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT AND THE PARADOX OF KINSHIP AMONG TURKISH MIGRANTS IN THE UK

Abstract

This qualitative study advances the concept of exploitative solidarity to explain how co-ethnic support networks can reproduce labour exploitation among Turkish-speaking immigrants in the United Kingdom. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 migrants in London and Leicester, the analysis demonstrates how kinship and compatriot ties that facilitate entry into employment frequently evolve into asymmetrical labour arrangements marked by excessive working hours, unpaid labour, and the absence of contractual protection within enclave businesses. Contrary to assumptions that strong ties foster mobility, relational proximity often consolidates informational asymmetries and dependency, particularly where limited English proficiency restricts access to alternative networks. Within the present sample, gender mediated these dynamics, as men more frequently converted linguistic and occupational capital into exit pathways, while women's incorporation remained structured through marital and kinship dependency. By theorising how solidarity becomes a vehicle of constraint within bounded ethnic labour markets, the study contributes to debates on migrant incorporation, informal employment, and relational precarity in advanced economies.

Keywords: Labour Exploitation, Informal Employment, Turkish Immigrants, Migrant Networks, Language Proficiency, Gendered Vulnerability

1. INTRODUCTION

Global economic integration and transnational mobility have intensified cross-border labour flows while expanding migrants' reliance on social networks for settlement and employment (Al Ariss et al., 2012). Within this context, informal employment and labour exploitation remain persistent features of contemporary migration regimes (Groutsis et al., 2023; Yabanci, 2025). The International Labour Organization defines informal employment as work not recognised or protected under legal and regulatory frameworks, characterised by heightened vulnerability (ILO, 2002). Without formal contracts or state registration, workers face limited capacity to organise or assert rights (Mishra, 2014; Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2002). For migrants, restricted language proficiency and limited institutional familiarity intensify dependence on employers and co-ethnic intermediaries, creating conditions in which exploitation may emerge within relationships framed as trust and solidarity (Özbilgin et al., 2025).

The United Kingdom represents a key destination within this landscape. Although the state has introduced regulatory measures to curb unauthorised employment and labour abuse (Crawford, Leahy, & McKee, 2016; Flex, 2017; Immigration Act, 2016), formal enforcement coexists with entrenched informal labour markets embedded in ethnic enclave economies. Access to integration programmes and formal employment pathways often presupposes linguistic competence and institutional literacy, resources unevenly distributed among newly arrived migrants.

Extensive scholarship has examined migrant incorporation and labour market outcomes in the UK (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2005; McCollum & Findlay, 2015; Kofman, Roosblad, & Keuzenkamp, 2009; Clark & Shankley, 2020; Dustmann & Frattini, 2014), yet Turkish-speaking migrants remain comparatively underexplored (Gümüş, 2015; Erdemir & Vasta, 2007). This gap is analytically significant because Turkish migration to the UK is internally differentiated, encompassing students, family reunion migrants, asylum seekers, entrepreneurs under the Ankara Agreement, and work visa holders. Concentration in sectors such as catering and small retail creates bounded co-ethnic labour markets in which entry into employment is frequently mediated through kinship and compatriot ties.

Focusing on Turkish-speaking migrants, this study examines how co-ethnic networks that facilitate labour market entry can simultaneously reproduce dependency and informalisation. It analyses how solidarity becomes conditional, hierarchical, and capable of transforming legal workers into undocumented labourers through informational asymmetries and constrained mobility. By situating labour exploitation within enclave-based relational structures, the study interrogates the assumption that strong ties inherently foster incorporation and instead conceptualises how solidarity may operate as a mechanism of constraint within migrant labour markets.

1.1 Context: Communitarian Entrapment and Labour Exploitation in the UK

The United Kingdom constitutes a stratified terrain of migrant incorporation in which language proficiency, recognition of qualifications, and precarious legal status intersect with internal hierarchies within migrant communities (Kamasak et al., 2019). For Turkish-speaking immigrants, labour market entry is frequently mediated through co-ethnic

networks during early settlement. Although these ties facilitate access to employment, they may also consolidate dependency. Solidarity among relatives and compatriots can harden into communitarian entrapment, binding migrants to asymmetrical labour relations within enclave economies (Özbilgin et al., 2025). Limited English proficiency, exposure to racism, and legal uncertainty further restrict exit options (Groutsis et al., 2020). Under such conditions, social capital becomes stratified and conditional, enabling exploitation to operate through kinship and trust rather than overt coercion.

2. THEORY: EXPLOITATIVE SOLIDARITY AND THE PARADOX OF STRONG TIES

This study develops the concept of exploitative solidarity, first noted by Erdemir and Vasta (2007) and extended here through a relational lens (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). It captures the transformation of close-knit migrant ties grounded in kinship, shared language, and national origin from mechanisms of support into asymmetrical labour relations. Engaging Granovetter's (1973) argument that weak ties expand opportunity, the analysis shows that strong ties with relatives and co-nationals may instead consolidate dependency when migrants lack linguistic, legal, and institutional capital. Relational proximity that facilitates labour market entry can simultaneously discipline and constrain, binding newcomers to enclave-based employment with limited exit options.

The concept of negative social capital refers to conditions in which membership of a social network produces harmful outcomes for individuals, including excessive claims on members, restrictions on individual freedom, and downward levelling pressures (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Woolcock, 1998). The concept names these harmful outcomes, yet it does not specify the relational mechanism through which a tie that once enabled access to work later blocks movement out of it.

The concept of bounded solidarity describes the situational strengthening of in-group cohesion among immigrants who face common adversity in the host society (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). It explains why solidarity emerges and intensifies within the group, yet it remains largely silent on how that solidarity may be converted into asymmetrical labour relations.

Exploitative solidarity builds on both concepts yet identifies a distinct relational mechanism. Following Erdemir and Vasta (2007), it refers to the exploitation of a disadvantaged compatriot within a relationship that is framed and experienced as solidarity, and it locates the source of that exploitation in barriers, such as limited language proficiency, that trap the newcomer within the tie.

The central theoretical proposition of this study is therefore the following: exploitative solidarity captures the transformation of a relational resource that facilitates labour market entry into a mechanism that restricts labour market exit. This transformation operates through unequal access to information, institutional knowledge, material resources, and alternative networks, which converts the trust and obligation embedded in kinship and compatriot ties into instruments of dependency and control. Whereas negative social capital names the harmful outcomes of network membership and bounded solidarity explains the intensification

of in-group cohesion, exploitative solidarity specifies the processual mechanism through which the tie that opens the door to employment progressively closes the door to leaving it.

Solidarity is conventionally framed as an ethical bond structured around mutual obligation (Pusterla, 2021). In enclave labour markets, however, it may operate through hierarchy and conditionality. Exploitative solidarity encompasses not only economic extraction but also emotional and legal subordination, as newcomers internalise expectations of loyalty toward those who facilitated migration, even when such ties undermine autonomy and rights. Gender mediates these dynamics, as women's incorporation is frequently structured through marital and kinship dependency, narrowing opportunities for skill acquisition and mobility. This perspective locates exploitation not solely in host-state regulation but within stratified co-ethnic relations.

Research on ethnic enclaves and immigrant niche formation has long emphasised the opportunity-generating capacity of co-ethnic networks (Waldinger, 1994, 2005). Studies of ethnic economies similarly highlight how co-ethnic firms facilitate entry into otherwise inaccessible labour markets (Clark & Drinkwater, 2000; Galster et al., 1999). Yet recent evidence indicates that co-ethnic networks can also structure and distort the information environments on which diasporic communities depend, with consequences for members' capacity to act beyond the community (Nguyễn et al., 2023). Turkish-speaking migrant networks in the UK illustrate how strong ties can enable incorporation while reproducing vulnerability through informational asymmetry and bounded opportunity structures.

2.1 Exploitation in the framework of Solidarity of Immigrants

Labour exploitation is a persistent feature of migration regimes, affecting both documented and undocumented migrants before and after movement (Bustamante, 2002). Vulnerability is unevenly distributed and intensifies where migrants lack linguistic, educational, and institutional capital (Lange & Rijken, 2018). By contrast, migrants with recognised skills and language proficiency possess greater capacity to convert human capital into labour market mobility (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003). Recent arrivals without such resources often depend on kinship and compatriot networks for employment (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964), creating conditions in which informational asymmetry and hierarchical relations can structure work arrangements. Under these circumstances, newcomers may accept inferior pay and conditions relative to other workers (Surak, 2013).

Informal employment should be distinguished from forced labour, which involves coercion and deprivation of freedom under threat (ILO, 1930; Plant, 2012). Exploitative labour relations in enclave economies more commonly operate through dependency, constrained choice, and limited exit options rather than overt physical compulsion. Cash-in-hand arrangements, excessive hours, and absence of insurance render workers institutionally invisible and reduce their capacity to sanction employers (Amo-Agyei, 2020; Boswell & Straubhaar, 2004). Where qualifications are unrecognised and language proficiency is limited, foreign-born status may further depress bargaining power (Katungi, Neale, & Barbour, 2006).

Close ethnic relationships frequently mediate entry into such work settings. Employers may frame co-ethnic labour as loyal and motivated, legitimising informal arrangements that

prioritise flexibility over protection (Standing, 2014). Migrants who overstay visas or shift into irregular status face additional constraints, yet even those who enter legally may remain embedded in narrow enclave labour markets dominated by relatives and compatriots. In these bounded environments, newcomers occupy subordinate positions within internal hierarchies and often perform work avoided by other groups (Venturini, 2004).

Dependence on earlier arrivals can further normalise subcontracting and segmented employment structures (Jewell, 2006). Sectoral concentration reinforces this pattern. Turkish migrants in the UK are heavily represented in catering, small retail, driving, and hairdressing, occupations characterised by low formal qualification requirements (Erdemir & Vasta, 2007). Such niches provide rapid entry but may limit upward mobility. Language proficiency plays a decisive role in shaping exit possibilities. English competence correlates with improved employment and earnings trajectories (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003), yet acquisition is uneven across origin groups and gender (Bloch, 2009). Where linguistic and social integration remain restricted, migrants are more likely to remain confined within co-ethnic labour circuits.

All participants in this study migrated for economic reasons, though their intentions varied. Some sought permanent settlement, others temporary income generation, and some entered as students before shifting into work, a pathway noted by Erdemir and Vasta (2007). Across these trajectories, reliance on existing networks structured early employment and shaped exposure to informal labour relations.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study examines how Turkish immigrants enter the UK labour market through kinship and compatriot networks and how these ties may evolve into exploitative arrangements. Although employment is central to migrant incorporation, access to work does not guarantee integration. Many participants held the right to work yet remained confined to enclave-based jobs structured by dependency and restricted mobility.

Exploitation was operationalised through sustained working hours exceeding statutory limits without contractual protection, restriction of movement, denial of paid leave, inadequate or withheld wages, and absence of formal employment contracts. All participants experienced at least one of these conditions. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Several respondents recognised their situation as exploitative yet perceived limited alternatives due to linguistic barriers, legal uncertainty, and dependence on co-ethnic employers. All had possessed legal residence status at some stage, but many became embedded in informal or undocumented employment through enclave-based labour arrangements. The analysis centres on work relations within the Turkish-speaking community rather than formal immigration status.

None of the participants reported physical compulsion. Coercion operated instead through threats, informational asymmetry, economic dependency, and constrained exit options. Some described saving money while waiting for opportunities to leave; others internalised the belief that departure would result in greater insecurity. Under such conditions, employment relationships cannot be characterised as fully voluntary, as choice was structured by relational dependency and limited institutional access (See Table 1 for participant demography).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

3.1 Procedure and Analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 Turkish-speaking migrants who had experienced exploitative labour conditions. We recruited participants through purposive and snowball sampling via community organisations, workplaces, and cultural associations. We carried out all interviews face-to-face in Turkish between May 2022 and January 2023 in London and Leicester, two major sites of Turkish enclave formation. Interviews lasted between 40 and 135 minutes and we recorded them with informed consent. We use pseudonyms throughout.

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 55 and followed different legal trajectories, including documented residence and periods of irregular status, a pattern observed across European labour markets (Boswell & Straubhaar, 2004). Despite these differences, all participants described labour exploitation mediated through co-ethnic networks. The sample includes 11 men and 4 women. Limited access to female participants shapes the gendered interpretation of findings. The analysis seeks analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness within a bounded enclave labour market.

We adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine lived experience and meaning-making (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). We transcribed interviews and analysed transcripts alongside field notes through iterative reading and coding. Since all interviews were in Turkish language, we completed all analyses in Turkish to preserve participants' original meaning-making, which is central to IPA. Only the final excerpts were translated into English by the bilingual research team. We adopted a meaning-based approach to capture the emotional weight and cultural nuances accurately, rather than a word-for-word translation. Authors iteratively reviewed and cross-checked translations to ensure their validity and mitigate potential meaning loss. A further bilingual scholar, whose first language is Turkish and who is fluent in English, reviewed the translations to address minor discrepancies between the original and the translated versions. Following this review, the team reached a full consensus on the final translations, and no conceptual clarity was lost during translation.

Our analysis proceeded in two steps that reflect the movement in IPA from the idiographic to the shared. In the first step, we analysed each transcript on its own terms, generating emergent themes that remained close to the participant's language and meaning-making. In the second step, we compared these idiographic accounts across cases and clustered recurrent emergent themes into higher-order patterns (Borwick et al., 2013), which yielded the master themes presented in Table 2. The five dimensions of exploitative solidarity elaborated in the discussion, namely Entry, Dependency, Constraint, Exploitation and Exit, are second-order analytic abstractions that we developed as researchers from these cross-case patterns. They are interpretations of shared relational dynamics grounded in idiographic evidence, and they carry the epistemological status of researcher-constructed themes rather than claims about a uniform lived sequence. This two-step approach enabled us to trace recurring trajectories of dependency, betrayal, adaptation, and exit while preserving experiential detail (see Table 2 for the thematic framework of exploitative solidarity).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

4. EXPLORING THE LAYERS OF ETHNIC ENTRAPMENT AND LABOUR EXPLOITATION

4.1 Structural Barriers: The Interplay of Language and Financial Despair

This study examines the working conditions of Turkish-speaking migrants who entered the UK through chain migration and secured employment through relatives or acquaintances. Both documented and undocumented participants described how enclave-based entry into work narrowed their social and occupational horizons. Language proficiency structured this confinement. Limited English restricted interaction beyond co-ethnic circles and channelled newcomers into workplaces where Turkish dominated daily communication. Working exclusively within these environments reduced incentives and opportunities to acquire English, reinforcing dependency on the same networks that facilitated entry.

Financial pressure intensified this pattern. Newly arrived migrants prioritised immediate income over language acquisition or skill development, particularly when they needed to cover living expenses or remit money. This short-term survival strategy deepened reliance on co-ethnic employers and consolidated bounded labour circuits. Social networks thus functioned simultaneously as entry mechanisms and containment structures.

Adem (Male, 46) secured his first job through contacts he had established in Turkey before migration. When asked how he navigated employment and language barriers during his early years in the UK, he responded with visible frustration.

“These have wasted eight years of my life.” When he was asked how the process evolved, he replied and continued *“When I came here, like many, I didn't speak the English language. Then I started working at the pizza shop of a Turkish friend who I knew. My English didn't improve, and I couldn't do anything either. Some time passed. I needed to renew my visa. I reported this issue to my employer whom I know as a close friend. 'We'll sort it out,' he said. I trusted him. After some time passed, I reminded him again. 'Don't worry, we'll sort it out?' he said again. I saw that it didn't work, I tried to get my work done by asking other Turkish people. I had to live as a fugitive in this country for about 8 years because of that man. This man made me suffer because of my language and way of speaking. He exploited my labour. I could not find another job because there were no other acquaintances at that time. I trusted the man. But he hurt me very badly.”*

Adem's account illustrates how informational dependency structured his vulnerability. He relied on his employer for guidance on visa renewal and lacked independent access to institutional advice. His experience was not isolated. Several participants described how relatives or co-ethnic employers withheld or delayed information regarding passport renewal and legal procedures, reinforcing asymmetrical control over bureaucratic knowledge. Ayten (Female, 50) described a similar trajectory when reflecting on her arrival in the UK.

“When I was engaged, my current husband sent an invitation letter for me, and I came with it for only 6 months. But I could not go back again. I've tried to handle my other work here. In fact, my husband didn't even get married for a few years. So, it wasn't clear what I was.”

Respondents did not experience social isolation in the absence of ties. They operated within vertically structured networks organised around employers and senior community figures. These actors controlled access to information about legal rights, visa procedures, and alternative employment. Findings from this sample indicate that the uneven distribution of bureaucratic knowledge produced dependency. Constraint therefore arose not from weak community connection, but from hierarchical configuration within co-ethnic networks.

4.2 The Illusion of Solidarity: Deception and Strategic Misinformation

Adem and Ayten's accounts reveal how dependence on compatriots generated frustration and mistrust within intimate networks. Several participants reassessed relationships with relatives, friends, and even spouses after recognising patterns of control. Kadir (Male, 45) responded by narrowing his social world to his immediate family and limiting contact with other Turkish migrants.

Irregular work arrangements sometimes enabled migrants to remain in the UK and sustain income in the short term (Erdemir & Vasta, 2007). At the same time, employers exploited irregular status to reduce labour costs through low pay, absence of insurance, and avoidance of social contributions (Boswell & Straubhaar, 2004). Participants frequently reported that employers withheld or delayed information about visa renewal and legal procedures, leaving them to discover problems only after deadlines had passed. Employers thereby confined newcomers to enclave workplaces and restricted access to alternative opportunities.

Across the cases in this study, misinformation operated as a mechanism of control. Within this sample, employers exercised gatekeeping power over bureaucratic knowledge, particularly concerning visa status and employment rights. Trust functioned not only as social capital but also as a disciplinary resource. Exploitative solidarity thus emerged through informational asymmetry within co-ethnic labour markets rather than through overt coercion alone.

4.3 Communitarian Entrapment and the Cycle of Exploitation

Some participants exited exploitative arrangements after acquiring language proficiency or transferable skills, while others delayed departure until they secured alternative employment. Those who accumulated linguistic and occupational capital converted it into mobility. Their exit created vacancies subsequently filled by newly arrived co-ethnics with fewer resources. This pattern produced a cyclical dynamic that several respondents described as exploitation in turns. Earlier arrivals facilitated newcomers' migration and initial settlement, often on the expectation that they would work within the same enclave businesses. Where newcomers lacked independent networks, they remained bound to those who sponsored or employed them. Assistance therefore operated conditionally. Support enabled entry while simultaneously structuring dependency. Under such conditions, solidarity concealed asymmetrical exchange.

Adem (Male, 46) reflected on this pattern when he observed:

“Look at the Turkish shopkeepers! nearly all of them try to take their relatives here. Why? Do they like them? I don’t think so, they do it because the previous ones left their jobs. So, they need a new one to exploit.”

Future employers often facilitate newcomers’ arrival in the UK, embedding assistance within anticipated labour exchange. Participants in this study suggest that once inside enclave workplaces, newcomers remain tied to these environments until they recognise the asymmetry of the arrangement, by which point exit options may already have narrowed. This pattern reflects a cyclical reproduction of vulnerability within bounded labour markets. As earlier migrants accumulate linguistic and occupational capital, they move into more secure positions and vacate roles that newly arrived co-ethnics then occupy. The turn-taking dynamic does not depend on overt malice. It normalises structural dependency as those who control information, language, and local knowledge consolidate advantage over successive arrivals.

4.4 Fragmented Ties: Betrayal of Trust and the Rise of Mistrust

When newcomers recognised exploitative conditions and secured alternative employment, many severed ties with the relatives or acquaintances who had facilitated their migration. Initial gratitude often gave way to rupture once dependency became visible. Hasan (Male, 28) recalled how he valued his relatives’ invitation and hospitality upon arrival in the UK, before reassessing the relationship in light of his work experience. He explained:

.... “When I came, some of my relatives were already here. They called and invited me, so I became happy and trusted him. But I regretted it. I wished I had never come and I had not known them, I started to work with them. I was working 7 days a week. But they were giving me only 200 pounds a week. What should I do with that much money now? Should I pay my rent, and feed my family? Or what? I didn’t have insurance either. I was very angry, but I couldn’t express myself and find a new job because I don’t speak English. I had no other choice. As soon as I find a new job I quit the job and cut my relationship with them completely”.

Hasan (Male, 28) eventually withdrew from his relatives after recognising the asymmetry of the arrangement. The rupture extended beyond employment and reshaped his orientation toward trust within the community. He no longer assumed that kinship guaranteed reciprocity.

Ahmet (Male, 27) described a similar trajectory when reflecting on his experience. He explained:

“I came here as a student and I had to work to cover my expenses. I started to work in my uncle’s pizza shop. In the beginning, there was no chance for me and I accepted to do what my uncle wanted me to do. Honestly, I didn’t even think that I would be exploited. I just worked for my good purpose. But after a while, I noticed that I was not allowed even to take a rest. The more I did the more he wanted me to do. Even though I became ill and my hands were swelling up. I was forced to do more. Whenever I asked to take a rest and visit the doctor my uncle told me “You are young and you will be fine.” As far as I learned the ways and improved my language, I left my uncle’s shop. But I learnt that I should not trust anyone even though they are my relatives.”

Hasan (Male, 28) and Ahmet (Male, 27) both described labour exploitation within kinship-based employment. Limited alternative work and restricted social capital compelled them to remain in these positions temporarily. Once they accumulated savings and improved their language skills, they exited both the workplace and the relationship. Their accounts reveal that the rupture stemmed not only from harsh conditions but from the breach of trust embedded in familial ties.

Not all participants experienced the trajectory solely as loss. Some used enclave employment as a transitional stage to acquire language competence and occupational skills. Cezmi (Male, 48), who entered the UK without a work visa, described how he navigated exploitative conditions while learning the trade. When reflecting on this period, he explained:

“I came here in an illegal way. That is not important anymore because I managed and arrived. But I started working with my relatives who helped me to come here”.

When asked about the type of work he undertook, he responded:

“What can I do? Of course, I did what I proposed. I didn’t have any chance to be selective and I had to accept the salary otherwise what can I do? I tried to learn the language and the job. So now I’m quite good on both”.

Many participants followed a similar trajectory of dependency, yet outcomes diverged over time. Some, like Cezmi (Male, 48), converted exploitative entry into skill acquisition and linguistic competence. He developed occupational expertise and now holds the status of usta within the enclave economy. Language improvement and trade mastery expanded his bargaining power, enabled more selective employment choices, and ultimately allowed him to establish his own business, which he has operated for six years.

These cases show that co-ethnic ties function as critical entry channels into enclave labour markets, even when they embed asymmetry. At the same time, migration decisions did not always depend on relatives alone. Networks structured incorporation, but individuals navigated them in uneven ways depending on accumulated capital and timing.

4.5 Gendered Disempowerment: The Passive and Dependent Immigrant

Within this sample, gender structured exploitative solidarity through spousal dependency, restricted mobility, and the fusion of reproductive and productive labour within family-run businesses, reflecting the intersectional character of hostility and solidarity within disadvantaged communities (Kamasak et al., 2020). Women in this study entered co-ethnic enterprises primarily through marital or kinship ties rather than as autonomous workers, which narrowed their bargaining power and constrained access to alternative networks. Several women described remaining in these arrangements while searching for viable exit routes. Ayten (Female, 50) explained:

“I have no guarantees here. I don’t have any relatives either. I’m so bored. I want to go to Turkey. But my husband doesn’t do my paperwork. I haven’t been to Turkey for 10 years. I work here from morning to night. Look at me, my two fingers are bleeding, but he does not take me to the doctor either.”

Ayten's (Female, 50) account illustrates how limited qualifications and restricted language proficiency can confine women to enclave workplaces controlled by spouses or relatives. Within these settings, they become institutionally invisible and drift into forms of undocumented labour despite prior legal status (Gastaldo et al., 2012). Dependency operates through both economic reliance and constrained mobility. Sabriye (Female, 44) described a similar position, relying entirely on her husband-employer within the family business. When asked whether she attempted to learn the language or acquire new skills, she responded:

"How can I learn the language? I'm in the kitchen from morning to night I do and prepare everything."

Sabriye (Female, 44) has lived in the UK for six years yet remains unable to communicate in basic English, which confines her to workplaces and social settings organised around family members. Zeynep (Female, 33) and Emel (Female, 38) described similar patterns of incorporation, assisting husbands within enclave businesses and relying on kinship ties for economic survival, even when their degree of restriction differed. Gendered entry pathways structured these trajectories from the outset. All female participants migrated through marital or family dependency and entered roles already defined by relatives. These arrangements limited decision-making autonomy, restricted spatial mobility, and reduced opportunities for skill acquisition. Exploitative solidarity therefore operated not only through labour extraction but through gendered control over movement, information, and economic participation. Given that the sample includes only four women, we present this gendered contrast as a pattern that emerged within the present sample rather than as a generalised trajectory among Turkish migrant women.

4.6 Pathways of Response: A Typology of Post-Migration Adaptation

Many participants described periods in which they overstayed visas or slipped into irregular status. Once documentation lapsed, employment shifted into fully informal arrangements. Workers avoided visibility, moderated claims to rights, and refrained from challenging employers for fear of exposure. Without valid documents or national insurance registration, employers paid wages off the books and withheld social contributions, reinforcing exclusion from formal labour protections. Irregular status narrowed bargaining power and compelled acceptance of conditions that documented workers might contest.

At the same time, several participants reframed undocumented work ambivalently. Although they initially associated irregularity with exploitation, some later viewed tax avoidance as a short-term economic advantage. Informality did not always coincide with undocumented status, as some workers with legal residence also preferred cash-in-hand arrangements to maximise immediate earnings. This ambivalence reveals how exploitative solidarity operates within a field shaped by both coercion and strategic adaptation. When asked about not paying taxes, Adem (Male, 46) responded:

"We deserve it, we already have spent a lot of money to get this position."

Emre (Male, 37) framed the situation in similarly pragmatic terms. He explained:

“Why should I pay a new tax? I just earn some amount of money with which I could only afford”.

Yakup (Male, 42), Hamza (Male, 55), and Rıdvan (Male, 35) expressed similar views and acknowledged the short-term financial advantage of undocumented employment. This arrangement created a form of constrained consent in which employers reduced labour costs while workers prioritised immediate income. The balance of benefit remained uneven, as employers avoided insurance contributions and formal obligations, while workers absorbed legal risk and long-term precarity.

Undocumented status did not exclude migrants from the enclave labour market. The findings indicate that employers often preferred irregular workers because cash-in-hand arrangements lowered expenses and increased flexibility. Such practices operated largely outside formal regulation and relied on trust-based or kinship-mediated relations within the Turkish-speaking community. Where workers rejected these terms, they typically sought alternative employment through the same enclave networks, reproducing the cycle of dependency rather than escaping it.

5. DISCUSSION

Migrants arrive with heterogeneous resources, aspirations, and legal trajectories. Turkish-speaking participants entered the UK through kinship and compatriot networks that facilitated employment but confined them to bounded enclave labour markets. These networks provided housing, information, and initial income, yet also structured dependency for those with limited linguistic and occupational capital. The analysis therefore focuses on migrants whose incorporation unfolded within narrow co-ethnic circuits where mobility required resources they did not initially possess.

Our findings on tax avoidance and the preference for cash-in-hand payment suggest an intricate relationship between constraint and agency. It is not possible to categorise all participants into a single group. Some participants chose not to register for social security to avoid taxes or to receive social benefits. Others were initially planning to return to Turkey after accumulating sufficient savings. These participants reported that social security registration was unnecessary in the UK and they refused to be registered. Instead, they preferred receiving the insurance premium as cash payment. This means that participants were not passive victims; they exercised bounded agency and engaged in pragmatic compliance in the face of insecure conditions. We argue that temporary financial gains lead migrants to form informal arrangements by negotiating economic and moral issues. In other words, migrants deliberately accept exploitative conditions as a planned adaptation within a severely constrained opportunity structure. Moreover, they act in that way because they intend to take marginal gains while preparing for future escape, rather than out of blind loyalty.

Our analysis suggests that the pathways into the UK labour market vary among participants, yet recurrent relational dynamics cut across these varied pathways. We conceptualise exploitative solidarity through five analytically distinct and potentially overlapping

dimensions, namely Entry, Dependency, Constraint, Exploitation and Exit. We present these dimensions in the order in which they most commonly unfolded in participants' accounts, yet they do not constitute a uniform sequential trajectory. Participants moved through them at different speeds, experienced several of them simultaneously, and in some cases revisited earlier dimensions after attempted exits. The five dimensions therefore serve as an analytic vocabulary for the relational workings of exploitative solidarity rather than as a stage model of a generalised migrant career.

The first is Entry, in which initial migration and labour market insertion are facilitated by co-ethnic ties regardless of the legal pathway or the original motivation. The newcomers rely heavily on existing social relations and bounded solidarity to secure their first employment within the host country.

Upon arrival, the initial trust and support frequently translate into Dependency, the second dimension. Migrants frequently encounter severe language barriers and the non-recognition of their prior qualifications. These structural limitations prevent them from accessing the mainstream labour market, forcing them to rely exclusively on the Turkish-speaking enclave for both economic survival and social interaction.

The third dimension is Constraint, in which the network becomes a tool of control. The facilitation of entry transforms into constraint through enclave dynamics, as informational asymmetry operates as an instrument of control and social networks serve as a mechanism of entrapment. Several participants perceived that co-ethnic employers in similar sectors communicated closely and would decline to hire each other's former workers. We report this as a perception articulated by participants rather than as an observed practice among employers, since our data derive from workers' accounts and do not include employer interviews. Whether or not such agreements exist in an explicit form, the anticipation of a negative reference or of being blacklisted within the community operated as a real constraint, as participants who considered leaving a job curtailed their own mobility in response to this expectation.

Exploitation, the fourth dimension, emerges where participants are trapped by the threat of being unemployable within the only network accessible to them; as a result, they experience desperation and helplessness. If there are no alternatives, they are compelled to submit to asymmetrical labour relations, such as accepting excessive hours and unpaid labour.

Breaking the cycle of exploitative solidarity requires specific resources. We found that Exit, the fifth dimension, is achieved only when the individual accumulates sufficient social, economic, and cultural capital (such as English language proficiency, occupational mastery, and independent financial savings) to bypass the co-ethnic network and integrate into the broader labour market.

Migration scholarship often frames mobility as a pursuit of recognition and emancipation (Groutsis et al., 2020). The findings show that recognition does not follow automatically from border crossing or formal work authorisation. Enclave hierarchies mediate incorporation and may reproduce misrecognition within migrant communities. Divergent trajectories across

participants resonate with the concept of migrant diversity, which highlights variation in legal status, skills, and incorporation pathways within national-origin groups (Özbilgin et al., 2024).

Language proficiency structured these trajectories. Limited English restricted interaction beyond co-ethnic settings, constrained access to alternative employment, and reinforced reliance on enclave employers. Legal work rights alone did not secure labour market integration. Within our sample, migrants required linguistic competence, transferable skills, and independent networks to exit asymmetrical arrangements. Participants who accumulated such capital moved into more secure positions, while those who lacked it remained exposed to exploitative conditions.

Within our sample, gender intensified these inequalities. Men more frequently described endurance strategies oriented toward eventual mobility, whereas women's incorporation often unfolded through marital dependency and restricted mobility. Female participants entered predefined roles within family-run businesses and faced structural barriers to skill acquisition and labour market diversification, a contrast we frame as a pattern within the present sample of eleven men and four women rather than as a generalised trajectory among Turkish migrants.

Legal status further shaped vulnerability. Some participants regularised their position through citizenship or visa extension, while others moved between documented and undocumented statuses. Misinformation regarding bureaucratic procedures compounded risk. Formal work authorisation did not eliminate exposure to exploitation where informational asymmetry and enclave dependency persisted.

Exploitative solidarity does not presume deliberate predation by co-ethnic employers. It reflects structural conditions within bounded labour markets in which economic survival, legal uncertainty, and unequal access to information organise relational practices. This perspective shifts analysis from individual blame toward systemic reproduction of vulnerability within enclave economies.

By conceptualising exploitative solidarity, this study challenges the assumption that ethnic networks inherently generate upward mobility. Co-ethnic ties facilitate entry into labour markets yet may simultaneously consolidate hierarchy and inequality. Solidarity within migration systems operates as a contingent and stratified process that can enable movement while reproducing precarity (Özbilgin, 2026).

6. CONCLUSION

This study analyses how labour exploitation unfolds within co-ethnic networks among Turkish-speaking migrants in the UK. Research on ethnic enclaves has long emphasised their capacity to generate opportunity (Waldinger, 1994, 2005). The findings instead highlight their ambivalence. Strong ties facilitate labour market entry yet reproduce dependency where linguistic, legal, and institutional capital remain unevenly distributed. Exploitative solidarity captures the relational mechanisms through which support transforms into constraint.

Stratified incorporation through relational networks echoes patterns observed in other Turkish diasporic formations (Özbilgin et al., 2025), though within different occupational fields. Engaging Granovetter's (1973) distinction between strong and weak ties and Tilly's (2007) analysis of trust networks, the study shows that proximity does not guarantee mobility. In bounded enclave labour markets, strong ties consolidate informational asymmetries and reinforce hierarchy. Informal employment therefore reflects not only deregulated labour markets (Standing, 2014) but asymmetrical co-ethnic relations that structure access to bureaucratic knowledge and legal status (Boswell & Straubhaar, 2004; Lange & Rijken, 2018). Participants navigated these conditions through varied trajectories that resonate with Erdemir and Vasta's (2007) earlier insights and Levitt's (2001) observations on mistrustful solidarity. Gender further shaped these pathways, particularly through marital dependency and restricted mobility.

Exploitative solidarity reframes ethnic networks as relational fields that enable incorporation while reproducing stratification. The Turkish case illustrates a broader dynamic in which enclave structures embed opportunity and precarity simultaneously. Recognising this duality advances debates on migrant incorporation, informal labour, and the relational production of legal vulnerability.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research has several limitations. First, we relied on purposive and snowball sampling within a particular ethnic community in the UK, which may introduce network bias. We sought to capture a specific segment of the Turkish-speaking community. Within this approach, we excluded isolated individuals and those who successfully integrated outside co-ethnic networks. We prioritised analytical depth over statistical representativeness. The second limitation is the gender imbalance within our sample. This imbalance reflects the gendered structure of economic migration as much as a sampling constraint. Since women's labour is invisible within the community, they are unpaid helpers in their husbands' workplaces not formal workers. While men in our sample could accumulate enough capital to cut their ties with employers, women often could not do the same, as they were largely dependent on male relatives. This renders men's waged exploitation more visible, while women's unpaid labour for their spouses deepens their disadvantage, obscures their exploitation, and devalues their work. The third limitation is the reliance on self-reported retrospective data. These types of narratives are naturally interpretive and may be shaped by subsequent events. This means that feelings of betrayal or exploitation might colour recollections of past events. Finally, absence of triangulation from other resources such as employer interviews is another limitation. This study captures the subjective lived experiences of individuals rather than an objective labour practice of the Turkish speaking community. Future research may build on these findings by including other actors to unravel the complex moral economy of enclave labour markets in the UK.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Author Contribution Statement

The authors contributed equally to the paper.

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Table 1: Participant Profiles

	Name	Gender	Marital status	Age	Education	Profession	Location
1	Adem	Male	Married	46	Primary School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester
2	Ayten	Female	Married	50	Primary School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester

3	Kadir	Male	Married	45	High School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester
4	Hasan	Male	Married	28	High School Graduate	Builder	Leicester
5	Ahmet	Male	Single	27	Undergraduate	Student	London
6	Cezmi	Male	Married	48	Primary School Graduate	Restaurant Owner	Leicester
7	Sabriye	Female	Married	44	Secondary School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester
8	Emel	Female	Married	38	High School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester
9	Ömer	Male	Single	42	Undergraduate	Driver	Leicester
10	Cengiz	Male	Married	45	Undergraduate	Driver	Leicester
11	Yakup	Male	Married	42	High School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	London
12	Rıdvan	Male	Single	35	High School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester
13	Emre	Male	Married	37	Primary School Graduate	Pizza Shop Worker	Leicester
14	Hamza	Male	Married	55	Primary School Graduate	Driver	London
15	Zeynep	Female	Married	33	Undergraduate	Daily Task	Leicester

Table 2: Master themes and Sub themes of Exploitative Solidarity

Master Themes	Sub themes
Structural Barriers: The Interplay of Language and Financial Despair	Experience of linguistic isolation and voicelessness Experience of financial urgency overtaking skill development Experience of unrecognized pre-migration qualifications Experience of forced dependency on co-ethnics due to language barriers

The Illusion of Solidarity: Deception and Strategic Misinformation	- Experience of manipulated trust by close friends - Experience of false promises regarding legal status - Experience of strategic misinformation as a control mechanism - Experience of wasted life and lost time due to deception
Communitarian Entrapment and the Cycle of Exploitation	- Experience of hidden-conditional solidarity - Experience of exploitation in turns - Experience of entrapment through fear of authorities - Experience of inability to exit due to lack of alternatives
Fragmented Ties: Betrayal of Trust and the Rise of Mistrust	- Experience of profound betrayal by family members - Experience of mistrustful solidarity - Experience of social withdrawal and isolation from the community - Experience of regret for trusting kin
Gendered Disempowerment: The Passive and Dependent Immigrant	- Experience of spatial confinement - Experience of total dependency on male relatives/husbands - Experience of physical neglect and lack of access to healthcare - Experience of learned helplessness and lack of agency
Pathways of Response: A Typology of Post-Migration Adaptation	- Experience of resistance (severing ties immediately) - Experience of instrumental adaptation (learning the trade to become <i>usta</i> (master)) - Experience of normalizing undocumented status - Experience of resigned acceptance