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"Access Gaps as Drivers of Vulnerability"— Access to social services for refugees through the lens of vulnerability: An intersectional analysis in Türkiye

Hande Albayrak [1], Ozan Selçuk [2,*], Görkem Kelebek Küçükarslan [3] and Gökçe Ceylan [4]

[1]Department of Social Work, Kocaeli University, Umuttepe / Batı Yerleşkesi, Kocaeli, 41380, Türkiye
[2]Department of Social Work, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Menderes Bulvarı, No. 580, Rize, 53020, Türkiye
[3]Department of Social Work, Sivas Cumhuriyet University, Merkez Kampüs, Sivas, 58140, Türkiye
[4]Department of Social Work, Maltepe University, Büyükbakkalköy Yolu Sk., Maltepe, İstanbul, 34857, Türkiye

*Corresponding author. Department of Social Work, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Menderes Bulvarı, No. 580, Rize, 53020, Türkiye. E-mail: ozan.selcuk@erdogan.edu.tr

Abstract

This study investigates the vulnerabilities arising from refugees' legal and social status in Türkiye, focusing on barriers to accessing social assistance, care, protection, and shelter services. Using an intersectionality framework, it examines how overlapping identities and systemic obstacles compound refugees' marginalization and exacerbate their vulnerabilities within social service provision. This study employs a phenomenological approach within qualitative research to explore the experiences of professionals working with refugee populations in Türkiye. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty-three professionals selected via purposive and snowball sampling methods across six different cities in Türkiye. Three main themes emerged through thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The findings show that refugees' access to

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services in Türkiye is shaped by legal status, nationality, gender, age, and disability, resulting in unequal access to rights. Despite the expansion of social assistance mechanisms, structural barriers persist; additionally, social assistance programs lack an intersectional approach and remain largely family-oriented. Furthermore, fragmented and limited provision of care, protection, and shelter services further deepens vulnerability, particularly among women, children, persons with disabilities, and older refugees.

Keywords: refugees; vulnerability; social services; social work; intersectionality.

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Introduction

The global refugee crisis, fueled by conflicts, inequalities, and restrictive asylum policies, foregrounds vulnerability in humanitarian and social work. While often seen as inherent fragility, Judith Butler's theory (2004, 2015, 2016) reframes vulnerability not as inherent fragility, but as a relational, socially produced condition of human interdependence. While universal, vulnerability is unevenly distributed, shaped by systemic inequalities.

Butler (2004) defines precarity as a politically induced deprivation of fundamental life assurances like housing, healthcare, or legal status. Undocumented migration expands a low-paid, expendable labor force, linking migration to the precariat refugees in Türkiye embody this precarity; their harm arises from legal, bureaucratic, and societal systems that marginalize them (Coşkun and Eski 2020; Bulgurcuoğlu and Atasü Topcuoğlu 2023). Injurability, the capacity to be harmed, is a related concept. Butler (2004) highlights that while all lives are vulnerable, policies and discourses render some more injurable, leading to heightened risks of violence, exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion among refugees.

Vulnerability is rarely isolated. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1991) reveals how overlapping oppressions, including gender, disability, age, and legal status, create distinct marginalization. Building on this framework, a dual intersectional approach highlights the interplay of gender, nationality, and class, enabling the examination of the overlapping disadvantages and privileges that influence the relationship between agency and social structure at both institutional and individual levels (Rosa 2025). The refugee experience is influenced by multilayered vulnerabilities arising from various social affiliations, with vulnerability viewed as a dynamic process shaped by multiple social markers, rather than a fixed identity. Flamand et al. (2023) stress the importance of this perspective in understanding vulnerability as context-dependent.

Intersectional dynamics highlight the dual marginalization experienced by refugees with disabilities, resulting in unique barriers to accessing services and legal protections (Rajni 2020). In the Turkish context, this is

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particularly evident as Syrian refugee women face increased gender-based violence, limited health and economic access (Albayrak et al., 2022; Ercan and Afyonoğlu 2023), exacerbated by COVID-19 (Cankurtaran et al., 2022). Refugee women with disabilities confront dual marginalization, restricting service access (Karadağ Avcı and Şengül 2024). Stigmatizing sociocultural ideas further reinforce discrimination against women with disabilities, who endure a doubly marginalized status as both women and persons with disabilities. This condition results in individuals being overlooked in typical service designs, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion that cannot be resolved by disability or migration policies alone. Refugee children with disabilities experience neglect in education and healthcare (Bayraklı 2024; Kaya and Yıldız 2023), and elderly refugees face exclusion, isolation, and limited support (Kelebek Küçükarslan and Albayrak 2023). Across diverse contexts, studies show that intersecting identities—including gender, race, class, health status, sexuality, and legal status—produce compounded marginalization that shapes refugees' exposure to exclusion and barriers to protection and services (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001; Chulach and Gagnon 2013; Lee and Brotman 2013; Ayoub 2017; Zavratnik and Krilić 2018). Refugees' intersectional vulnerabilities are shaped not only by their identities but also by service providers' perceptions and practices, making multidimensional analyses essential for inclusive policy development and improved access to services and support (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001; Lee and Brotman 2013).

Türkiye's legal framework for refugees, primarily the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) Law No. 6458 (2013) and Temporary Protection Regulation (2014), often operates on charity based rather than rights-based principles. Due to a geographic limitation in the 1951 Geneva Convention, only European asylum seekers gain full refugee status; others receive temporary or conditional protection, significantly impacting service access (İçduygu and Millet 2016). Implementation faces discretionary decisions, inconsistencies, and bureaucratic barriers, hindering access to essential services like healthcare and education (Baban et al., 2017; Erdoğan 2020).

In Türkiye, social services for refugees are delivered by government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Collaborative efforts support key programs in child protection, women's support, psychosocial assistance, and vocational training, often via Social Service Centers (SSCs) and specialized support centers. Social workers in Türkiye navigate a fragmented, politically charged environment where NGOs face funding limitations, scrutiny, and hostility toward refugees (Ercan and Afyonoğlu 2023). They advocate for systemic reforms addressing structural inequalities, including inclusive and disability aware policies, improved specialized service access, and gender sensitive, trauma-informed, culturally responsive practice. Social work education must evolve to prepare practitioners for essential rights-based advocacy.

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This context presents profound ethical challenges for social work, such as balancing legal constraints with human rights obligations and responding to unequal service access among vulnerable groups. By focusing on the individual, traditional interventions may obscure the structural roots of vulnerability. Butler's perspective redefines vulnerability as a structural condition requiring collective responsibility and systemic change. A rights-based, intersectional approach compels practitioners to engage critically with systems perpetuating inequality (Dominelli 2018). In Türkiye, this means recognizing service access as a moral and legal obligation grounded in human dignity and justice. Social workers must challenge systemic hierarchies and advocate for inclusive policies prioritizing the most marginalized (Kaya and Yildiz 2023).

Grounded in Butler's vulnerability theory and Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, this study critically examines how social service access gaps in Türkiye drive refugee vulnerability. Based on in-depth interviews with frontline professionals, the research explores how legal frameworks, institutional practices, and societal attitudes intersect with individual characteristics like gender, disability, age, and sexual orientation to shape refugee experiences. This study seeks to answer:

- What vulnerabilities do the legal and social status of refugees reveal?
- What vulnerabilities are experienced by refugees in accessing social services (social assistance, care, protection, and shelter services) through an intersectionality perspective?
- How do social service access challenges lead to vulnerabilities?

This study contributes to scholarship advocating for structurally informed, rights based, and intersectional social work, moving beyond reactive service provision toward systemic advocacy for justice, dignity, and inclusion. It positions social work as a critical site of resistance and transformation, where practitioners are caregivers, advocates, and agents of change, committed to dismantling forces that render some lives more injurable, precarious, and ultimately less grievable, meaning less valued, protected, and easily forgotten in public memory and policy.

Methodology and research process

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine lived experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to them (Creswell 2013; van Manen 2016). Phenomenology was chosen for its suitability in exploring both what is experienced and how it is experienced, particularly where vulnerability emerges through everyday interactions with institutional and service systems. Here, it provides an analytical framework for examining refugees' encounters with legal, institutional, and social

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services as interpreted by migration professionals, enabling the identification of shared experiential patterns and how barriers to access are translated into vulnerability.

Through purposive sampling, key informants were contacted based on the research team's civil society experience in the field of migration, and the activities of relevant institutions were evaluated in terms of case management and advocacy work. Additionally, within the scope of purposive sampling, criterion sampling was applied by selecting participants with direct experience or academic research on issues of refugee discrimination. The study focused on key informants rather than a general migrant population. To make visible the experiences of different refugee groups and ensure diversity among participants, interviews were planned in cities with high refugee populations, such as Ankara, Gaziantep, and Istanbul. However, during fieldwork, interviews were also conducted in cities such as Yalova, Eskişehir, and Kırıkkale, where key refugee groups receive services, and mobile professionals operate, since certain services were only offered in specific locations. These cities were included in the study because, in some of them, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) minorities are subject to residence requirements, and in others, disability-focused projects are implemented. Snowball sampling was also employed to allow interviewees to refer to other relevant individuals. Therefore, the study group also included local authorities, legal experts, human rights advocates, activists, and academics. In-depth interviews were conducted with professionals working with diverse refugee groups across racial, ethnic, age, language, gender, sexual orientation, and migrant backgrounds, whose intersectional positionalities connect lived experience and practice. Their stance reflects an "outsider-insider" perspective (Dwyer and Buckle 2009): they observe and assist refugees professionally (outsider) while gaining insight into community dynamics through shared identities or advocacy (insider). Including these perspectives was vital, as providers' intersectional positions shape service delivery and interpretations of refugee vulnerability, informing inclusive policy development.

Ethical approval (No. 556189) was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Social and Human Sciences at Kocaeli University in February 2024 to conduct the interviews. A pilot study with three participants was carried out to test the clarity and functionality of the interview questions. Using a semi-structured interview guide developed by migration researchers and grounded in the relevant literature, interviews were conducted with thirty-three participants working across various organizations and cities. The interviews continued until data saturation was reached, which refers to the point at which narratives begin to repeat. Due to participants' heavy workloads, eighteen interviews were conducted face-to-face (in Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Ankara), while fifteen were conducted online, as per participant requests. The average duration of the interviews was ninety-four minutes. Face-to-face interviews were held in participants' workplaces or in cafes.

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Prior to the interviews, ethical protocols including confidentiality, voluntariness, and anonymity were explained, and informed consent was obtained. Trust was facilitated by the researchers' established presence in the field and prior professional experience. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized using alphanumeric codes (e.g. P1, Social Worker, INGO), with roles generalized and organizational names omitted to protect participants' identities and professional standing. All data were stored in secure, password-protected digital archives accessible only to the research team.

The participants

The socio-demographic information of the thirty-three participants interviewed in the research varies. Twenty of the participants work in seven different national NGOs and thirteen in nine different international NGOs. The occupational distribution of the participants is nine social workers, four psychologists, seven sociologists, one physiotherapist, one dietician, seven lawyers, and four activists. The professional experience of the participants in the field of migration ranges from two to twenty-five years, with an average working time of approximately 8.5 years. In terms of education level, twelve of the participants are bachelor's degree graduates, seven are master's degree graduates, nine are master's degree students, three are doctoral students and two are PhD graduates. Most of the participants work in Ankara (13) and Gaziantep (10); the others are in Kırıkkale (2), Yalova (1), Istanbul (6), and Eskişehir (1). The gender distribution is twenty-two women, nine men, and two non-binary individuals. The client groups that the participants intensively work with are distributed as follows: thirteen participants work with children, eight with women, five with disabled and elderly people, four with internally displaced persons (IDPs), and three with SOGI minorities. However, the participants also worked with refugee groups in different provinces and with different intersectionality. In addition to their experiences in their current cities, the professionals participating in the study contributed to the research by talking about the practices in different provinces based on their previous experiences.

Analysis

As a result of the transcription process, 507 pages of interview data (an average of 15.36 pages per interview) were produced. Thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, with researchers engaging in multiple readings of the transcripts. This process was carried out in six phases based on Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis approach. Each transcript was read at least twice to make initial observations and take preliminary

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notes related to the analysis. In the second phase, initial coding of the data was performed. During this stage, efforts were made to generate as many codes as possible to minimize potential data loss and to comprehensively reflect each participant's experiences. In line with the research aim, the initial round of coding resulted in forty-two codes derived from 284 pages of quotations from thirty-three participants.

In the third phase, relationships among the identified codes were examined, leading to the formation of twenty-six categories based on sixty pages of quotations. These interrelated categories were then grouped under three overarching themes. In the fourth phase, the coherence and validity of the themes were reviewed. During this process, the themes were refined by merging, separating, or repositioning the associated categories to optimize thematic clarity. In the fifth phase, final names were assigned to each theme. These labels were carefully chosen to most accurately reflect the content and meaning of the themes. In the final phase, which involved reporting, quotations that best illustrated the study's findings were identified from the sixty pages of participant narratives. A rights-based perspective will guide both the interpretation of participants' narratives and the overall analysis of the interviews. The selected excerpts were assessed in terms of their alignment with the research objectives and the relevant literature.

Results

Hierarchy of vulnerability based on access to rights according to legal and social status designation

Refugee experiences are complex and influenced by demographic and personal characteristics, including ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, and child status. However, most fundamentally, asylum application processes for determining legal status in Türkiye are complex and inconsistent, leading to barriers to basic services. The refugee statuses in Türkiye, particularly Syrian refugees under temporary protection (TP), create significant inequalities and vulnerabilities among refugees. This distinction between those under TP and those with international protection (IP) can lead to discrimination and limited access to legal rights, social assistance, health services, and employment opportunities. This situation leads to a lack of structural assurance for the sustainability of life and tensions within refugee communities.

> *Unfortunately, these vulnerable groups are sometimes left behind in terms of access to rights or in terms of sustaining their own live… Some approach it with the mindset of "they should just leave," seeing them as a burden, and treat the services they provide as if they are doing a favor.… Others, on the other hand, say "let's not further victimize those who are already victims"*

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> *and try to help - often influenced to some extent by their religious beliefs.* (P25, sociologist, NGO)

> *The international protection status made a very fundamental distinction between Syrian refugees and non-Syrian refugees… It created tensions between refugee groups.* (P2, political scientist, INGO)

Unregistered/unauthorized registration or registration in different provinces limits access to basic rights, while disruptions in the appointment system of provincial directorate of migration management (PDoMM) and long waiting times make it difficult to seek rights. The limited validity of identification documents across provinces restricts access to essential services and deters rights claims due to fear of deportation. Additionally, Türkiye's "waiting" status and the lack of clear guidance led many to miss application opportunities.

> *For example, I could not report to the SSC those without ID cards or those registered in a different province, because a person with an Ankara ID card cannot live in Istanbul… If this is detected, it has to be reported to the police centers and then the police take that family to take them to their own city.* (P24, social worker, NGO)

Refugees' experiences in Türkiye differ significantly based on factors such as their country of origin and legal status. Refugee experiences from different countries also vary, with Afghan refugees experiencing increased vulnerability due to lack of identification and access to basic information, while Iranian refugees have more developed legal and intellectual backgrounds. Syrian refugees, categorized into two groups, face unique challenges in their migration processes due to their group affiliation and awareness level. Within these majority groups, the refugee experience of groups such as Yazidis, Kurds, Abdals, Dom, and Bahá'ís varies within their own communities, and they are more vulnerable, unequal, and inferior. This vulnerability, influenced by multiple intersectionalities, exposes individuals with special needs to more negative impacts throughout the migration process. For example, P13, an Iranian migrant, describes how discouraging registration procedures and the rejection of applications produce structural barriers at the intersection of refugee identity and the state's security-oriented policies, drawing on their own migration experience to empathetically relate these processes to refugees' lived experiences.

In Türkiye, access to services for refugees is influenced both by the structuring of the social welfare system around a familialist approach and by the subjective and discriminatory attitudes of public personnel. Türkiye asylum procedures are influenced by the concept of the "acceptable family," with priority given to families and single women with children, while young single men face higher rejection rates. Registration processes marked by misinformation, clerical errors, and accessibility barriers—particularly for persons with disabilities—create serious identity and bureaucratic challenges. Inconsistent practices across provinces, combined with political, xenophobic,

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and homophobic prejudices, further undermine equal access to protection. However, SOGI minority, Arab, Kurdish, and Iranian participants discussed barriers to service access from their lived experiences and advocacy perspectives, applying intersectional approaches (feminist, queer, class-, and ethnicity-based). Similar patterns were observed among those working with long-term refugees with disabilities, SOGI minorities, and refugee children.

> *It is extremely rare for a single young Afghan man to have his asylum application accepted. However, if the applicant is part of a family, a single woman, pregnant, or has a child, the application is much more likely to be accepted.* (P7, lawyer, NGO)

> *Refugee-phobia in Türkiye has intensified, and in the current political climate -where the state is increasingly concerned with potential electoral consequences- there appears to be a top-down tendency to discourage registration and to favor the rejection of applications.* (P13, sociologist, INGO)

In Türkiye, certain refugee groups, such as those who speak Turkish, relatives of martyrs, victims of war, and single mothers, are often idealized as "acceptable refugees" and perceived as "ideal victims." This idealization facilitates their access to housing, employment, and social assistance. In contrast, groups that do not fit this ideal, such as individuals from different religious or cultural backgrounds, those who rely on social aid despite being physically able to work, single men and women, SOGI minority groups, and persons with disabilities, are often marginalized. This dynamic creates a hierarchy of vulnerability within service provision, resulting in unequal access to rights and resources among refugee populations.

Vulnerability due to the paradox of access to social assistance

The experiences of refugees related to social assistance, as an aspect of social services and protection, are addressed under this theme. Social assistance mechanisms for refugees in Türkiye, such as Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations (SASFs) and Provincial Directorates of Family and Social Services (PDoFSS) and Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) which is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Turkish Red Crescent along with government agencies, have improved their response capacity over time; however, various structural problems in implementation and access still persist. In particular, discretionary power, lack of transparency, limited quotas, and non-objective application-distribution criteria in SASFs trigger debates on inclusiveness and accountability.

> *In practice, significant disparities can be observed. The financial assistance currently provided to refugees is no longer sufficient, and certain vulnerable groups are being overlooked. In particular, those without legal identification are excluded from programs such as the ESSN.* (P30, sociologist, INGO)

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The adoption of dependency criteria and familial ideology in aid evaluation disadvantages refugees with atypical family structures or those outside dominant social norms. Consequently, social assistance is provided on the initiative of international organizations and SASFs in some provinces. The fact that participation in employment in ESSN applications causes a sudden interruption of aid creates new vulnerabilities by creating a paradox of low wages and insufficient aid. This paradox, the fact that social assistance is cut off in case of employment, causes refugees to work unregistered. On the other hand, due to the deteriorating economic conditions in Türkiye, social assistance is given mainly to refugee groups, which causes a reaction from the host community. Changing discourses and economic conditions make refugees hesitant to make it visible that they are receiving social assistance.

> *The eligibility criteria are predominantly based on vulnerability and dependency. For instance, requirements that once included having three children have now shifted to five, further narrowing access. A woman is often expected to have lost her husband to qualify. The entire framework is built around a narrative of dependency, combined with discretionary power in decision-making. There are families who receive support solely based on such discretion. This highlights the need for a rights-based, rather than a charity-based, approach.* (P32, sociologist, NGO)

In the access of persons with disabilities to social assistance, it is a common practice, despite the lack of a legal basis, to deprive those who receive social cohesion assistance from critical support such as home care pension. This process is further complicated by the ambiguity of authority between social services and SASFs, especially for refugees. This leads to the loss of rights of refugees due to the misinterpretation of the principle of equal and fair distribution of assistance without duplication.

> *At the moment, the only thing disabled people can get is a home care pension under the social cohesion allowance. … For example, there are people who receive a home care pension if they cannot receive social cohesion assistance. … But we know those who receive it in other provinces.* (P18, social worker, NGO)

Legal gaps in the current social-aid system and differences in implementation between provinces work against individuals experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities (poverty, refugee status, disability, old age, and gender identity), triggering protection problems such as child labor, child and early/forced marriage, and risk of sexual exploitation.

> *There is a certain amount of aid received, but it is not clear who benefits from this aid and how much, and resources are never enough because there is no plan for services. And this leads to other very serious protection problems such as child labor and child marriage.* (P16, psychologist, NGO)

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In addition, the diversity of rights-based and faith-based paradigms in social service provision undermines the equal distribution of services; discrimination based on legal status and leaving inter-agency cooperation to the judgment of staff undermines the principle of legal equality by causing differentiated service provision between provinces and regions. As the host community experiences increased impoverishment and political discourses worsen, erroneous perceptions that refugees receive state assistance contribute to the cultivation of adverse attitudes toward them.

> *We already have problems in the country. We want these resources to be allocated to us. We are trying to correct misconceptions. With these misunderstandings, discrimination is already reinforced. …. Now when we see a rich Syrian, we say wow, they live better than us. They have money. When they are poor, we say that only the poor come to us and we find a handle for everything.* (P27, social worker, NGO)

Vulnerability due to limitations in access to social support services

This theme examines care, protection, and shelter within social support services. These integrated services for refugee women, children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly in Türkiye aim to ensure their physical, psychological, and social safety, provide daily living support, and secure adequate housing. Vulnerable groups face various challenges accessing these services.

Lack of institutional coordination in responding to urgent needs of unregistered individuals delays identification and exacerbates their vulnerability. Earlier practices of providing an address for those at risk initially prevented formal protection needs. However, address confidentiality during registration now also applies to refugees.

> *For refugee women residing in shelters or women's shelters, address declaration is required. … We also discussed this with the Violence Prevention and Monitoring Center (VPMC) … She was able to complete the process by using the address of the SSC. However, VPMC is not always cooperative when it comes to refugee women. … Subsequently, within a month or two, the MERNIS (Central Population Management System) system was updated to allow address confidentiality and restraining orders to be visible for individuals under temporary protection as well.* (P23, sociologist, NGO)

The migration process exposes single women, mothers, and SOGI minorities to heightened risks of violence, neglect, abuse, exploitation, harassment, and nonpayment of wages. Lack of specific legal protections deepens their vulnerability. While victims can theoretically access shelters, practical difficulties often prolong or prevent effective access. Issues like address confidentiality, capacity limits, fear of provincial transfer, and

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discriminatory attitudes restrict service access. Some of our participants, who openly identify as SOGI minorities and as activists, produce unique solutions in their case management processes by adapting the practical strategies of the local SOGI minority community to the refugee experience. The element of "intergroup solidarity" that stands out in this approach serves as a collective resistance mechanism to overcome the obstacles faced by refugees.

> *In contexts where families consist of single mothers and their children and lone women … are frequently subjected to sexual exploitation by individuals who claim to be offering help but act with self-serving motives. Current regulations do not include any specific provisions aimed at supporting them.* (P5, social worker, INGO)

> *Unfortunately, I have observed that women who have been subjected to violence and seek refuge in shelters often experience another layer of violence within these institutions, in addition to the discrimination and abuse they face outside. I have witnessed numerous cases where women abandoned what might have been the safest option available to them and left the shelter shortly after their arrival.* (P1, social worker, INGO)

Women attempting to file complaints against abusive spouses face justice barriers due to deportation fear and legal recognition problems, such as unofficial marriages or spouse absenteeism. This deprives them of justice and leaves them vulnerable to violence. Lack of translation, cultural acceptance of violence, and insufficient multiculturalist practices reinforce human rights violations and restrict safe space access. Due to their feminist identities and networks within the women's movement, some participants are mobilizing both local women's communities and professional partners in NGO/INGOs to address the housing crises faced by refugee women. The prominent element of "solidarity among women" here creates a strong collective support network against the gender-based challenges faced by refugee women.

> *They appear to be married, but there is no official documentation. How they will get divorced is a grey area. … Documents need to be brought from Syria, then certified at the consulate, or notarized translations need to be made–things like that significantly prolong the process, and many cases end up unresolved.* (P27, social worker, NGO)

Care and shelter-based social service interventions are hindered by inefficient identification of unaccompanied minors under the Child Protection Law, due to resource and capacity shortages. Failure to take urgent protection decisions, provincial variations in the 183 hotline, and service deficiencies at Child Support Centres (ÇODEMs) deepen inconsistencies. Age determination problems, unreliable bone tests, and perjury by those over eighteen complicate child status recognition. Inadequate interpreter and child-friendly counseling, public personnel workload, and staff shortages negatively affect social investigation and follow-up.

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> *You can also see that the 183 helpline doesn't work in some places. … So when a multilayered intervention is needed -one that includes legal processes alongside protective measures- it's generally necessary to refer individuals to institutions under the MFSS. But even that varies by province.* (P6, lawyer, INGO)

Inadequate law enforcement response to neglect and abuse, and cultural practices like forced child and early/forced marriage and child labor, often override children's rights. The legitimization of child abuse through court or parental permission for child marriages, and the possibility of citizenship through marriage, exacerbate this issue.

> *There were times when I had to fight at the police station just to get the child referred to the Child Monitoring Center (CMC). But very quickly, with a psychologist coming from the prosecutor's office and the SSC, it was concluded that there was no need for CMC, and the case was brushed aside.* (P25, sociologist, NGO)

Reports of educational neglect often fail to result in effective intervention due to shortcomings in follow-up, such as non-enforcement of protective decisions, inadequate implementation by Ministry of National Education (MoNE) staff, and limited family engagement. Inadequate protection and school resources (Selçuk and Güzel 2025) severely hinder children's right to education. They face multidimensional problems: language barriers, age-inappropriate placement, integration difficulties, and discrimination. Prejudices of public personnel and school administrators, neglect of non-Turkish speaking children, misclassification, lack of guidance, and peer bullying increase educational vulnerability. The "lost generation" phenomenon highlights lifelong disadvantages from educational uncertainties.

> *The process is similar for cases of educational neglect… We report these cases to the SSC, and there is a communication line under the MoNE that directly informs the mukhtar and the school principal. It's a follow-up system managed by them. They visit the family at home and invite them to the school. They provide the necessary information, but what follows is usually a series of negative outcomes.* (P24, social worker, NGO)

> *There is already a lost generation in Türkiye. Those who arrived at the beginning of the crisis -for example, children who were 6 or 7 years old and about to start school- couldn't begin their education because at that time, there was no clear plan for how schooling would be arranged. By the time the system was in place, those children had reached the age of 11 or 12, and some of them were expected to start from first grade. If there is an adult working in the family and conditions are still extremely difficult, children are often pulled out of school. For example, if a family has three children, they might choose to send only one to school while expecting that child to take care of the others. The remaining children are either kept at home or married off, and so on…* (P2, political scientist, INGO)

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Children with disabilities can be referred to special education via Guidance and Research Centers (GRCs). However, many families cannot access these services due to financial constraints, limited institutional capacity, paid education, and transportation barriers.

> *For children with disabilities, there is a referral mechanism -such as referrals from Guidance and Research Centers (RAM)- to access special education. However, I believe that, just like with Turkish children, the process doesn't run smoothly in practice, and fees are being charged for special education.* (P24, social worker, NGO)

The risks for refugees with disabilities are heightened by inherent vulnerability and language barriers in seeking assistance, making children with disabilities particularly vulnerable to abuse. The societal perception that disabled individuals cannot defend themselves or report mistreatment further exacerbates these risks.

Older refugees often struggle to adapt, resisting the new culture and language while clinging to their own. Overprotective family approaches, common in extended families, hinder their independence. Caregiver shortages and responsibilities like caring for grandchildren increase their burden. Low registration rates, mirroring national and global trends, prevent access to identity documents and asylum procedures, rendering them officially invisible and depriving them of basic rights. This limits their access to complaint mechanisms and ability to report abuse.

Access to social services for disabled and elderly refugees is limited by cultural preferences (family care) and discriminatory service provision. While some support under Law No. 2022, like disability and elderly pensions, is not provided to refugees, home care allowance and access to care centers under social cohesion assistance are legally possible. However, long waiting times and placement uncertainties persist due to capacity problems and economic insufficiencies in nursing homes and care centers.

> *They also face challenges such as overcrowded nursing homes or very limited quotas in care centers, and it is often said that they are placed at the bottom of the waiting lists.* (P18, social worker, NGO)

Refugees' access to rights and public services in Türkiye is severely hampered by administrative flaws, lack of inter-agency coordination, and inadequate integrated mechanisms. While social service legislation defines the state as the primary actor, NGOs play a crucial complementary role in delivering services that protect refugees from social risks, including psychosocial support, emergency financial aid, legal counseling, identification and guidance, education, and social cohesion activities. Public institutions' requests for information from NGOs reflect a desire to monitor their role, while NGOs also buffer social tensions. However, findings indicate that reduced international funding for NGOs has led to service closures, intensifying refugees' structural vulnerabilities.

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Discussion

This study reveals how access gaps in Türkiye's social services system function as structural drivers of vulnerability for refugees, shaped by the interplay of legal frameworks, institutional practices, and societal attitudes through an intersectional lens. Building on the findings, it further examines how the legal and social status of refugees generates specific forms of vulnerability, and how these are compounded by intersectional barriers to accessing social services—such as social assistance, care, protection, and shelter—ultimately deepening the multidimensional disadvantages faced by refugee populations.

This study demonstrates that refugee experience is a dynamic process shaped by intersecting identities rather than legal status alone, reinforcing understandings of vulnerability as processual (Markard 2016; Flamand et al., 2023). It further highlights how intersectional solidarity—mobilized by SOGI and feminist service providers through community-based resistance—can mitigate exclusion (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001; Lee and Brotman 2013), while showing that barriers emerge not only from identities but from institutional perceptions. Finally, the insider positionality of refugee and minority service providers offers critical leverage for challenging structural inequalities within service systems.

While the LFIP formally establishes rights for refugees, the practical delivery of services remains fragmented, inconsistent, and shaped by discretionary practices. Legal status distinctions, particularly the divide between TP and IP, create a stratified hierarchy of access to essential services such as healthcare, education, psychosocial support, and legal aid. Asylum-seekers under subsidiary protection particularly face challenges in accessing services due to the absence of long-term legal status and the persistence of legal uncertainty (Selçuk and Güzel 2025). Yet legal status is only one layer of a more intricate matrix of vulnerability. Refugee experiences in Türkiye are far from homogeneous; they are shaped by the intersection of legal frameworks, national origin, and diverse socio-cultural identities. For instance, Afghan refugees often face heightened precarity stemming from a lack of formal identification and limited access to reliable information, whereas Iranian refugees may benefit from stronger legal literacy and educational capital. Among Syrians, who constitute the largest refugee population, variations exist based on political affiliation, awareness levels, and social positioning. Within these larger national groups, sub-communities such as Yazidis, Kurds, Abdals, Dom, and Bahá'ís endure compounded forms of marginalization and exclusion, not only from host society institutions but sometimes from their own ethnic or national groups. These intersecting layers of disadvantage intensify the vulnerabilities of individuals with special needs, leaving them disproportionately exposed to systemic neglect and inequality throughout the migration and integration processes.

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This pattern mirrors what İçduygu and Millet (2016) describe as "pseudo-integration," where legal recognition does not translate into meaningful inclusion. These access gaps are not random; they reflect and reproduce hierarchies of vulnerability, privileging "ideal" refugee profiles such as widowed mothers and war victims while marginalizing others such as single men, SOGI minority, persons with disabilities, and unaccompanied minors (Karadağ Avcı and Şengül 2024). Refugees who fit the idealized profiles of "deserving" aid recipients are more likely to access services, whereas others face systemic neglect. This resonates with Zetter's (2007) analysis of how bureaucratic labels can function as mechanisms of exclusion rather than protection, while also illustrating the unique ways in which Türkiye's socio-political context reinforces such hierarchies of vulnerability.

The intersectional nature of refugee vulnerability emerges as a critical theme in this study. Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality offers a vital lens to understand how overlapping axes of identity, including gender, age, disability, and legal status, produce compounded disadvantage. The experiences of refugee women with disabilities, for example, reveal how gendered ableism shapes access to services, leaving their needs largely unrecognized within policy frameworks. This finding aligns with the work of Karadağ Avcı and Şengül (2024), who argue that the convergence of gender and disability-related discrimination exacerbates exclusion for Syrian refugee women in Türkiye. The systemic neglect of SOGI minority refugees in Türkiye exemplifies how entrenched heteronormative and family-centric values structure service delivery, as Ercan and Afyonoğlu (2023) highlight institutional blind spots in meeting the needs of SOGI minorities. Buğra and Keyder's (2006) analysis of Türkiye's familialist welfare regime elucidates how privileging traditional family forms marginalizes those who fall outside the normative "acceptable family" model, including single adults, non-heteronormative families, and individuals without children. This paradigm is embedded within asylum and social welfare procedures, which prioritize nuclear families and single mothers with children, while disproportionately disadvantaging young single men and others who do not conform to this ideal. Compounding these structural exclusions, registration processes are fraught with misinformation, clerical errors, and accessibility barriers, particularly for persons with disabilities, further limiting refugees' access to essential services. Additionally, inconsistent implementation across provinces, alongside pervasive political, xenophobic, and homophobic prejudices, entrenches systemic inequities, undermining equitable protection and reinforcing the marginalization of vulnerable refugee populations.

Importantly, this study also highlights the paradox of social assistance in Türkiye, where programs such as the ESSN are designed to provide support but often entrench precarity. As the European Commission (2020) and Erder and Kaşlı (2020) have shown, the conditionality of aid and the

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discontinuation of support upon employment create disincentives for formal labor participation, perpetuating cycles of dependency and informal work. Complex legal and bureaucratic barriers surrounding work permits exacerbate these challenges, suggesting the need for policy reforms that promote more flexible and continuous support mechanisms (Atasü-Topcuoğlu 2019). The narratives of frontline professionals illustrate how these structural contradictions reinforce what Butler (2016) terms a state of injurability, where certain lives are rendered more expendable and left more exposed to harm. This injurability is not a static condition but a product of systemic inequalities embedded in policies, practices, and social attitudes that fail to recognize and respond to the diverse needs of refugee populations.

The paradox of social assistance further exacerbates precarity: while aid is apparently designed to alleviate hardship, it is often conditional, temporary, and based on a familialist ideology that disadvantages non-traditional family structures. For example, the cessation of aid upon employment forces many refugees into informal labor, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion (Knappert et al. 2024).

While the study focuses on structural barriers, it is crucial to acknowledge that refugees themselves are not passive recipients of aid but actively navigate and resist the constraints they face. Research in other contexts, such as Malkki's (1996) seminal work on refugee agency and Betts et al.'s (2017) analysis of refugee-led initiatives, emphasizes the importance of understanding how refugees exercise agency in the face of systemic exclusion. Although this study centers on the perspectives of professionals, the findings hint at refugees' strategies for survival, including engaging in informal work, seeking support through informal networks, or leveraging social capital. While this study provides a professional interpretation through an "outsider-insider" lens, future research should employ participatory action research (PAR) or co-produced methodologies to allow refugee populations to transition from research subjects to co-researchers. By ensuring findings are driven directly by unmediated voices, subsequent studies can more explicitly explore how individuals contest the systems that marginalize them. This approach would offer a more nuanced picture of vulnerability, effectively balancing the analysis of structural constraints with the power of individual resilience.

Conclusion

This study reveals that access to social services in Türkiye is shaped by a stratified system of precarious legal recognition, rather than a uniform refugee status. Drawing on vulnerability and intersectionality frameworks, the findings illustrate how legal status operates as a primary axis of exclusion, particularly for those without registration or those displaced from their registered province. Legal vulnerability is further compounded by

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intersecting identities—such as gender, origin, disability, family status, and sexual orientation—producing layered forms of marginalization.

This research emphasizes the importance of a "dual intersectional approach" (Rosa 2025) for understanding the multi-layered disadvantage faced by refugees by shifting focus from individuals to the interaction between service systems and their political logics. It argues for restructuring refugee reception through a holistic, process-oriented framework that centers diverse needs and the intersectional positions of refugees, as a basis for building an inclusive, rights-based regime beyond stigmatization and structural discrimination.

Beyond legal frameworks, access to services is also shaped by professional discretion and subjective moral evaluations, often informed by religious or nationalistic biases. A key contribution of this study is the critical examination of the paradox embedded in social assistance systems. While programs like ESSN aim to alleviate poverty, their conditional design—especially the withdrawal of aid upon employment—discourages formal labor market participation and entrenches informal work and dependency. The use of familialist and dependency-based eligibility criteria excludes individuals outside normative family models, while regional inconsistencies and a lack of transparency point to the absence of a standardized, rights-based protection system. These structural limitations not only reproduce vulnerability but also obstruct refugees' long-term economic integration.

In the domains of care, protection, and shelter, the study highlights significant institutional gaps. Refugee women face revictimization within shelters and barriers to legal redress, while children encounter fragmented protection systems, exposing them to risks such as early marriage, labor, and school dropout. Despite Türkiye's commitment to international human rights norms, implementation remains uneven and shaped by political, cultural, and institutional constraints.

While the analysis centers on systemic exclusion, it also acknowledges refugee agency. Refugees often navigate these constraints through informal networks, alternative survival strategies, and selective engagement with formal systems—demonstrating that vulnerability is both structurally produced and individually negotiated.

The findings raise critical implications for the field of social work. Practitioners in Türkiye operate within constrained systems that often reproduce the very inequalities they aim to challenge. There is a pressing need for transformative, justice-oriented social work practice—one that moves beyond crisis response and engages with the systemic production of vulnerability. This entails advocating for inclusive policies, resisting hierarchies of deservingness, and centering dignity and equality in all service provision. Ultimately, intersectional vulnerability should be recognized not as an exception but as a defining feature of forced migration, guiding the development of equitable and inclusive social service systems.

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