



Career Construction Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women in Turkish Higher Education: Opportunities and Obstacles

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the career construction and higher education opportunities and challenges faced by Syrian refugee women in Türkiye through semi-structured interviews with 40 women enrolled at a public university. Findings reveal significant challenges in career construction and higher education stemming from the intersectionality of gender and refugee status, including job market discrimination, increased housework and caregiving responsibilities, and moral concerns about independent women. The study also identifies opportunities for empowerment through women's rights, autonomy, equality, and self-sufficiency. It contributes to refugee studies, higher education, and integration by acknowledging the transformative potential of education and employment for Syrian refugee women.

KEYWORDS

Syrian refugee women; college students; higher education; career construction

SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION CODES

J15; I23; J24

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude explore les opportunités et les défis en matière de développement de carrière et d'éducation supérieure auxquels sont confrontées les réfugiées syriennes en Turquie, à travers des entretiens semi-structurés avec 40 femmes inscrites dans une université publique. Les résultats indiquent des défis importants en ce qui concerne le développement de carrière et les études supérieures, qui découlent de l'intersection entre le genre et le statut de réfugié, notamment la discrimination sur le marché du travail, l'augmentation des tâches ménagères et des responsabilités en matière de soins, ainsi que des préoccupations morales à l'égard des femmes indépendantes. L'étude identifie également des possibilités d'empouvoirement à travers les droits des femmes, l'autonomie, l'égalité et l'autosuffisance. Elle contribue aux études sur les réfugiés, à l'enseignement supérieur et à l'intégration en reconnaissant le potentiel transformatif de l'éducation et de l'emploi pour les réfugiées syriennes.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Syrian crisis, which began in 2011, has caused significant forced displacement, affecting over 16 million people (UNHCR, 2024a). Türkiye hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in Europe, approximately 3.2 million individuals (UNHCR, 2024b),

following the Republic of Türkiye's adoption of an "open-door" policy that granted Syrian citizens temporary protection status (Kirişçi, 2014).

Host countries' responsibilities extend beyond providing refugees with essential services such as education, employment, health care, and integration (Caballero-Anthony,

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2016) to addressing barriers that limit refugee women's participation in education and the labour market, as recognized by international institutions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; UNHCR, 2023). Higher education institutions play a pivotal role by offering specialized knowledge and skills essential for specific careers (van Vianen et al., 2019), thereby enhancing refugee women's employability. This employability is crucial for achieving financial autonomy, improving access to health care and childcare, fostering independent decision-making, advancing professionally, and promoting social justice. It also reduces dependency on public aid, challenges stereotypes, and showcases their potential (Najjar et al., 2018).

Statistics indicate that Syrian women participate less in higher education than their male counterparts in Türkiye (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2024), largely due to cultural norms, early marriages, and families prioritizing males for education—factors that underscore significant gender disparities (Ateşok et al., 2020). Women refugees face unique disadvantages, such as the burden of familial duties and domestic chores, patriarchal norms, and prevailing moral perceptions, which affect their education, career development, and job market opportunities—barriers not encountered by men refugees (Knappert et al., 2018). When economic constraints force families to choose, male family members are often prioritized for higher education due to their perceived role as financial providers (Fincham, 2022).

Although studies have explored the connections between higher education, employment, and refugee integration in Türkiye (Arar et al., 2020; Ateşok et al., 2020; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Kondakci et al., 2023; Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017), the specific career construction challenges faced by refugee women

students remain largely unexplored in this context.

This study investigates the challenges and opportunities faced by refugee women students in their professional development through higher education in Türkiye, using the framework of career construction theory (CCT). It examines how Syrian refugee women utilize psychosocial resources, as conceptualized by Hogg (2016) and Yan and Berliner (2011), to navigate barriers, capitalize on opportunities, and integrate their past and present experiences into future career aspirations within Türkiye's higher education system.

This article comprises seven additional sections. The next section presents statistics on higher education and labour force participation rates among Syrian refugees in Türkiye. "Theoretical Framework and Significance of Study" provides a concise review of CCT, identifies the research gap, and highlights the study's significance through a literature review. The section titled "Methodology" outlines the methodology and details the steps undertaken during the field study. The "Findings," "Discussion," and "Policy Recommendations" sections discuss the findings, provide an analysis, and offer policy recommendations. A final section concludes the paper.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN TÜRKİYE

Before the Syrian war, the university enrollment rate among people aged 18–23 in Syria was 12.5% in 2003 and 20.8% in 2009 (Buckner & Saba, 2010). During the prewar period between 2002 and 2006, women's participation rates in vocational and higher education showed slight fluctuations between 40% and 50%. In 2006, the participation rates of women and men in higher education were

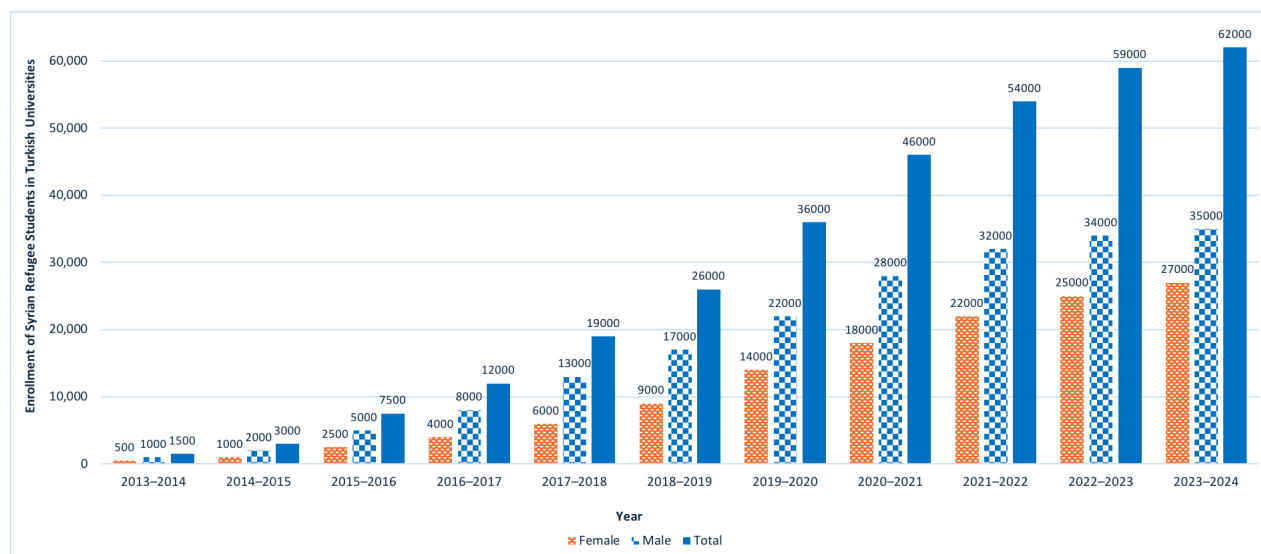


Figure 1

Number of New Syrian Students Enrollments to Turkish Universities per Year

exactly 50% (Sobh, 2008, cited in [Almelhem et al., 2022](#)).

Syrian refugees' enrollment in Turkish universities has been steadily increasing ([Figure 1](#)), facilitated by Turkish government initiatives such as reduced tuition fees, free Turkish language courses, and scholarships ([Cin & Doğan, 2021](#)). Türkiye holds the unique distinction of being the only country that offers education to refugees in their native language. Despite increasing numbers, Syrian refugee women consistently have lower participation rates than men. According to statistics from the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), Syrian women have historically had lower enrollment rates than their male counterparts in Turkish universities. In the 2020–2021 academic year, only 18,082 women (38.08%) were enrolled, compared to 29,400 men (61.92%). However, by the 2023–2024 academic year, this gap had narrowed, with 27,567 women (45.35%) and 33,183 men (54.65%) enrolled ([YÖK, 2024](#)).

From a social justice perspective, transitioning to the workforce is essential for refugee women, as it empowers them and facilitates their integration into society. Employment

offers economic independence, disrupts cycles of dependency and vulnerability, and enhances their families' well-being. It also enables refugee women to reclaim their agency and identity, often undermined during displacement. Participation in the labour market allows them to apply their skills and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose in their new communities. Moreover, meaningful employment can alleviate the psychological effects of trauma by boosting self-esteem and promoting social connections ([Zacher, 2019](#)).

Until 2016, Syrian refugees in Türkiye lacked formal employment rights. Between 2016 and 2024, Türkiye issued 508,215 work permits to Syrian refugees, with women comprising only 6.5% and men 93.5% of the recipients ([Republic of Türkiye, 2024](#)). The proportion of women receiving work permits remains strikingly low (see [Figure 2](#)).

The labour market participation rate in Türkiye for individuals aged 15 and above was 53.1%, with women at 35.1% and men at 71.4% ([TURKSTAT, 2023](#)). The participation rate for Syrian women in Türkiye parallels that of Turkish women, consistently lagging

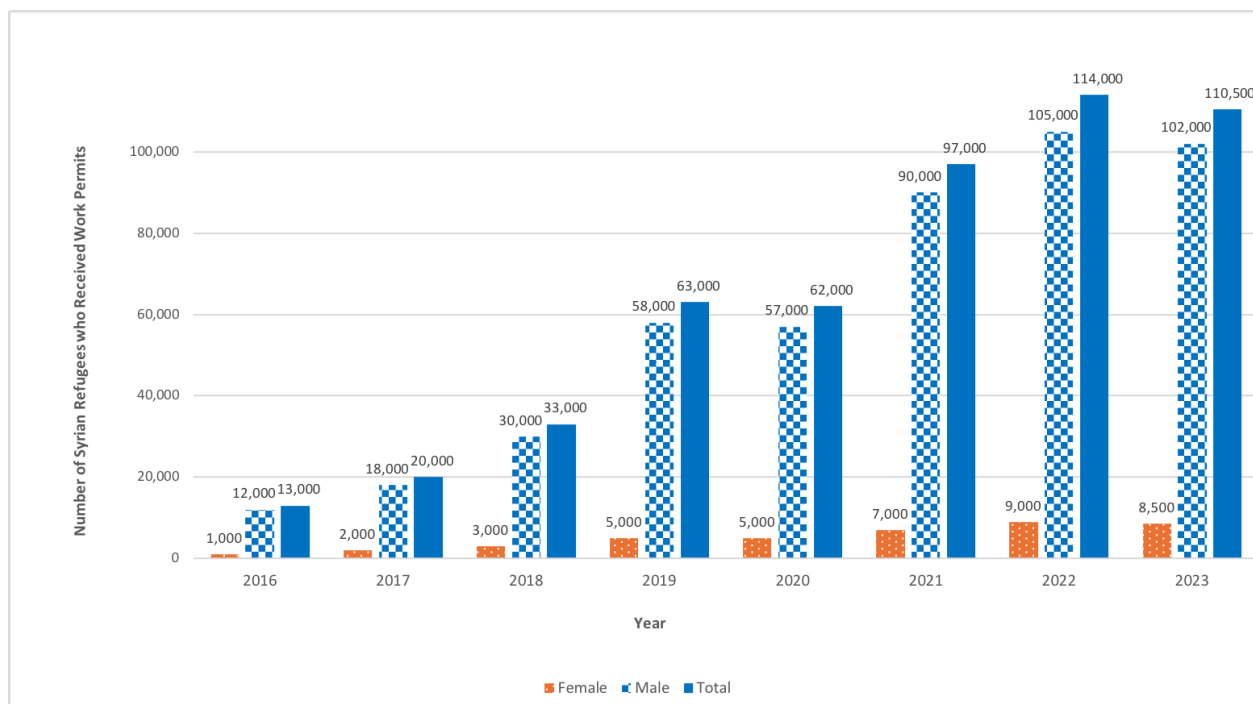


Figure 2

Number of Syrian Refugees with Work Permits by Year

behind Syrian men. Among Turkish women, labour market participation increases significantly with higher education. Specifically, the rates are 13.9% for illiterate women, 27.1% for those with less than a high school education, 36.1% for high school graduates, 43.0% for vocational or technical high school graduates, and 68.8% for higher education graduates (TURKSTAT, 2023). These figures highlight the critical role of education in enabling refugee women to access and sustain employment in Türkiye's labour market.

In Türkiye, the labour force participation rate for refugee women was 14%. OECD data highlight significant disparities in employment outcomes between refugee and non-refugee women, with 23% of refugee women employed in low-skilled roles compared to 8% of native-born women (OECD, 2023).

Similarly, within the European Union, 26% of refugee women are employed in low-skilled jobs, compared to 16% of native-born

women (OECD, 2020). These figures emphasize the limited professional opportunities and restricted labour market access for refugee women globally, underscoring the need for further investigation into their career development pathways.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The literature identifies several key obstacles that Syrian refugee university students face in integrating into the workforce, including obtaining essential documentation and certification, financial difficulties, language barriers, family dissolution, and psychological trauma (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2020). Other barriers include lack of access to academic and career counselling (Ateşok et al., 2020; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017), unrecognized qualifications, social stigma, insufficient social capital (Wehrle et al., 2019), economic constraints, and challenges with

social integration (Arar et al., 2020; Bloch, 2013; Kondakci et al., 2023). Additionally, uncertainty regarding refugee status (Jackson & Bauder, 2014), lack of work permits, limited access to the labour market (Chen & Hong, 2016), employment barriers in high-status white-collar professions (Fincham, 2022), lack of career goals or work experience (Amundson et al., 2011), and movement restrictions further hinder career construction plans.

Moreover, immigrants and refugees are often forced to accept precarious, hazardous, and labour-intensive jobs with long hours and low wages (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Schultheiss & Davis, 2015). While these challenges are common to all immigrants and refugees, socio-cultural factors impose additional barriers to women's career development (Hamilton Volpe & Marcinkus Murphy, 2011).

Despite the expanding body of literature on refugee populations, the specific challenges and opportunities faced by Syrian refugee women in Türkiye regarding higher education and career development remain underexplored. While previous research has highlighted barriers to education and employment for refugees, few studies examine how these challenges uniquely affect Syrian refugee women within the conservative Syrian society. Additionally, the intersectional issues arising from the dual challenges of being both a refugee and a woman are often overlooked, leaving a gap in understanding how these women navigate such complex contexts. This gap in the literature is particularly significant considering the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and political challenges faced by Syrian refugee women, which set them apart from male refugees or those originating from other regions.

Cultural and contextual factors significantly influence refugee women's career construction processes (Çuhadar et al., 2024).

CCT acknowledges that individuals' career development is deeply intertwined with their socio-cultural and economic environments. The concept of psychosocial resources, central to CCT, offers a valuable framework for understanding how Syrian refugee women in Türkiye navigate the complexities of their multiple identities and roles within intricate socio-cultural and economic contexts (Savickas, 2005). These resources—including social support, coping strategies, and personal attributes accumulated over time—are essential for career adaptation and development (Rudolph et al., 2019; Zacher, 2019).

Syrian refugee women in Türkiye encounter cultural and language barriers, economic uncertainties, political instability, and the long-lasting effects of traumatic experiences. Moreover, factors such as marital status, number of children, cultural background, and language proficiency play a significant role in shaping their career construction processes, aspirations, and outcomes (Mkwananzi, 2018).

This study addresses these gaps by applying CCT to examine the career construction processes of Syrian refugee women in Türkiye. Through semi-structured interviews and consensual qualitative research analysis, it offers insights into how these women navigate their educational and career journeys. The emphasis on narrative identity and psychosocial resources within CCT provides a fresh perspective on their adaptive strategies and support systems.

The application of CCT in this study offers valuable theoretical insights, highlighting the transformative impact of education and employment in fostering empowerment, autonomy, and self-sufficiency among Syrian refugee women. Their narratives illustrate how access to these opportunities enables them to reconstruct their identities and strengthen their agency, aligning with exist-

ing research on the empowering effects of education and employment for marginalized groups (Okolie et al., 2020; Patton & McMahon, 2014). Furthermore, CCT's constructionist framework illuminates the dynamic interplay between refugee women's past experiences, current vocational challenges—such as skill gaps, job market competition, and career transitions—and their future aspirations, providing a nuanced understanding of their career development (Bimrose et al., 2015; Collins & Arthur, 2010).

Given the identified gaps and significance of CCT, this study aims to answer the following research question:

What are the challenges and opportunities experienced by Syrian refugee women in Türkiye concerning their career construction and pursuit of higher education?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology (Hill et al., 1997), which is well suited for examining phenomena by considering the context and participants' perspectives. This method categorizes similar data elements to describe patterns, draws conclusions by synthesizing smaller units into larger themes, and ensures reliability through consensus among multiple coders of qualitative information.

The research design included individual interviews guided by a semi-structured questionnaire, with data transcribed and coded for analysis. This approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of underlying patterns and offers a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). It provides valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities Syrian refugee women encounter in constructing their careers in the host country.

The study's limitations should be acknowledged, particularly its focus on university

students in Mardin Province in Türkiye, which may limit the generalizability of the findings due to variations in nationality, education level, and duration of residence. Additionally, the exclusion of women who lacked access to or dropped out of higher education introduces selection bias.

The methodology also presents challenges that could influence the interpretation of the findings. While in-depth interviews provide valuable insights, they may not effectively capture the prevalence or frequency of certain themes within a broader context. The cross-sectional design, which provides a snapshot of a single moment, risks overlooking the evolving dynamics of these challenges over time. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for social desirability bias and recall inaccuracies, further complicating the interpretation of the results.

Participants

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Initially, women who had migrated to Türkiye after the Syrian civil war were enrolled as students, and volunteers for the research were purposively recruited. Following 27 interviews, these participants suggested others who were unaware of the research, resulting in 23 additional contacts, 13 of whom agreed to participate. This process culminated in 40 in-depth interviews, providing diverse perspectives and valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by Syrian students in Türkiye. Syrian refugee students constitute 15.28% (1,570) of the student body and 84.71% (8,703) of the international students at Mardin Artuklu University (YÖK, 2024). Table 1 details participants' ages, with pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

Table 1*List of Participants*

Name	Age	Name	Age
Fatima	21	Zahra	46
Zeynep	20	Farida	20
Aisha	37	Nesrin	30
Mariam	19	Hale	26
Leyla	19	Azza	17
Huda	18	Mune	19
Selma	26	Dunia	17
Nur	19	Fidaa	19
Nare	23	Amina	20
Idil	23	Esma	34
Selva	18	Hatice	20
Nisa	22	Rana	21
Rojda	22	Hafsa	19
Suna	18	Mune	34
Azra	27	Susa	23
Maysa	20	Sarah	20
Nura	20	Rabia	25
Gulan	24	Hala	23
Cemile	35	Arwa	22
Hanan	25	Lina	22

Data Collection Instrument

In this study, two questionnaires were administered on the university campus to collect comprehensive data from participants. The first questionnaire gathered demographic information, including age, department of study, marital status, and citizenship status. The second, a semi-structured questionnaire that was used for spoken interviews, was designed to explore the research topic in greater depth. This format allowed researchers to elicit participants' answers to specific questions while encouraging open dialogue and the exploration of related ideas. Its flexibility enabled the refinement of questions and the inclusion of follow-up inquiries based on participants' responses,

ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

The interview questions were developed based on a comprehensive literature review on refugees, refugee women, career construction, and related challenges and opportunities (Atesok et al., 2020; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Fincham, 2022; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017) and were refined through a pilot study with two interviewees who provided feedback. A semi-structured interview form consisting of 21 questions—including both yes-or-no and open-ended questions—was used to explore refugee women's experiences with higher education, their career development, and the interconnections between these aspects,

as well as their sentiments, viewpoints, and actions.

Following the pilot study, an expert suggested language modification for one specific question, which was subsequently approved by both experts. The original question—Do you think that, despite your potential, you might be assigned to work in positions below your capacity due to your identity?—was revised due to misinterpretation. Instead, the following question was adopted: Despite the education you have received, do you think that you will be forced to work in jobs below your capacity due to your roots? Do you think this situation can change? The interview questionnaire was then finalized. Some additional interview questions are:

- Do you think you are more disadvantaged because of your gender in terms of finding a job and career development? If so, what methods and strategies would you use to tackle this inequality?
- How can being a university graduate and Turkish citizen affect your future career plans and expectations?
- Does the education you receive affect your individual qualities (e.g., your self-confidence)?

The interview protocol was translated from Turkish to Arabic and reviewed by a language expert and an academic specializing in the literature. The translation aimed to provide participants with the Arabic text for better comprehension if verbal expression was insufficient.

Procedure

The university's Ethics Review Board approved this study. Individual interviews were conducted in the researchers' offices, with participants receiving the questions in Arabic beforehand. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about their rights regarding privacy, anonymity, voluntary participation, data retention, and security. Written

informed consent was obtained, including the option to withdraw at any time.

Interviews were conducted in Turkish or Arabic by one of three researchers. A researcher fluent in Arabic conducted 14 interviews with participants who lacked sufficient fluency in Turkish, while the other two researchers conducted 26 interviews with participants fluent in Turkish. The Arabic versions of the interview questions were available during all interviews.

Interview recordings were securely stored on Microsoft OneDrive and permanently deleted after transcription and analysis to ensure anonymity and data protection. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to safeguard participants' identities.

Data Analysis

In this study, CQR methods were utilized for data analysis, enabling researchers to understand participants' perspectives, identify recurring statements, and uncover underlying phenomena related to opportunities and challenges faced by refugee women during their career construction stages. Key themes for each code were derived from participants' responses, enhancing comprehension and facilitating independent interpretation of their feedback. Through this process, the researchers reached a consensus on the opportunities and challenges experienced by refugee women university students in Türkiye during their career development.

Audio recordings were transcribed into text for analysis. One researcher initially coded the text, while discrepancies were resolved collaboratively by the others. Categories were organized into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives, with adjustments—such as merging themes or creating subthemes—made as the analysis progressed. After individual coding, the three

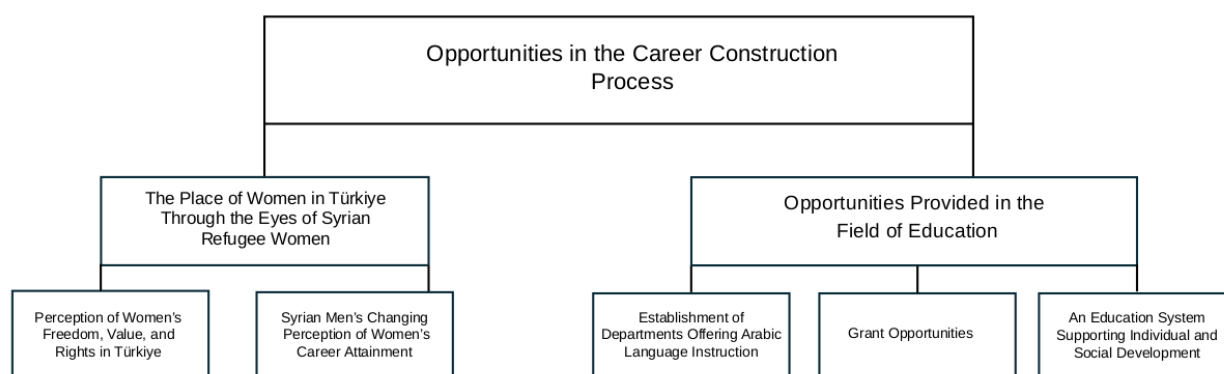


Figure 3

Opportunities in the Higher Education and Career Construction Process

researchers worked together to finalize the themes through consensus.

Ensuring trustworthiness is critical, as it demonstrates confidence in the quality of data, analysis, and interpretation. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—were applied in this study. Dependability was enhanced by allowing participants to review and approve interview transcripts, resulting in three participants making corrections. Credibility was strengthened by coding the data twice and discussing results with the interviewers. To minimize researcher bias, the team actively exchanged interpretations and corrected any inconsistencies. Confirmability was ensured through the inclusion of relevant quotes that accurately conveyed participants' opinions. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings on the opportunities and obstacles that refugee university students faced in their career construction process, based on their interviews.

Opportunities in the Career Construction Process

Refugee women's testimonies revealed that their arrival in Türkiye at an early age eased their integration into the education system. Participants highlighted scholarships, Foreign Student Exam (YÖS) exemptions, a sense of freedom, and women's rights as key factors facilitating their career advancement. The following section presents themes and subthemes derived from observations on job opportunities in Türkiye.

Figure 3 was created based on the thematic coding findings. The left-hand column represents personal factors, and the right-hand column represents structural factors. The subthemes in both columns are comprehensively analyzed in the following section.

The Place of Women in Türkiye Through the Eyes of Syrian Refugee Women

This section presents the findings regarding participants' perspectives on the status of women in Türkiye. Participants noted that the Turkish government provides greater protection to women than Syria did, irrespective of socio-economic status. Women in Türkiye have equal access to legal rights, including inheritance, divorce, and alimony,

and enjoy a higher workforce participation rate compared with women in Syria. These findings are examined under three subthemes: perceptions of women's rights and liberation in Türkiye, the value attributed to women in Turkish society, and the evolving attitudes of Syrian men towards women's career advancement.

Perception of Women's Freedom, Value, and Rights in Türkiye: Most participants believed that Türkiye offered better conditions, particularly in terms of legal protections and career opportunities for women. Seventeen participants stated that they did not view being a woman in Türkiye as an obstacle to their careers, as women's identities are respected and valued in Turkish society.

We love our country, but working conditions in Syria are very difficult, and only a few women are employed. We have become accustomed to living freely in Türkiye. In Syria, a woman cannot act independently or make decisions for herself, which is why I do not want to return. (Hale, 26)

Women are supported to study and work in Türkiye, which makes me feel comfortable. Here, men and women are treated equally, unlike in Syria. The legal system in Türkiye protects women's rights, ensuring equality between men and women, which is not the case in Syria. (Amina, 20)

Syrian Men's Changing Perception of Women's Career Attainment: A small number of participants observed that some Syrian men refugees in Türkiye modified their attitudes towards women's education and employment, thus supporting these opportunities.

Syrian men have become more positive about women's education and employment. After visiting Europe and Türkiye, they started to view the situation more favourably. They see women working and understand that it is neither illegal nor immoral. They now believe that if women work, they will not engage in wrongdoing or deviate from moral values. Fewer individuals hold the belief that pursuing education will lead women astray. (Hatice, 20)

Opportunities Provided in the Field of Education

This section explores the perspectives of Syrian refugee women university students on career development opportunities in education, focusing on three subthemes: Arabic-instructed departments, grant opportunities, and an education system that fosters individual and social growth. Arabic-instructed programs help women overcome language barriers, granting access to higher education and employment opportunities while highlighting their career potential. Supportive university environments integrate practical job skills with academic knowledge, improving career prospects for refugee women. Amid the financial strain of forced displacement, grants and scholarships play a crucial role in facilitating access to education for many refugees.

Establishment of Departments Offering Arabic Language Instruction: Ten participants identified inadequate Turkish language proficiency as an institutional barrier, and over half of the students were enrolled in Arabic-instructed departments.

I am studying in an Arabic-instructed department because I am not fluent in Turkish. To enroll in a Turkish language department, one must pass the Foreign Student Exam (YÖS). However, due to my limited Turkish proficiency, I did not take this exam and instead enrolled in the Arabic department. (Selma, 26)

Grant Opportunities: Most participants indicated that continuing their studies without scholarships was highly challenging. Although scholarships are crucial for the education of Syrian refugee women, only three participants reported benefiting from them.

My financial situation is terrible. I would not have been able to study without a scholarship. (Idil, 23)

An Education System Supporting Individual and Social Development: Eight participants

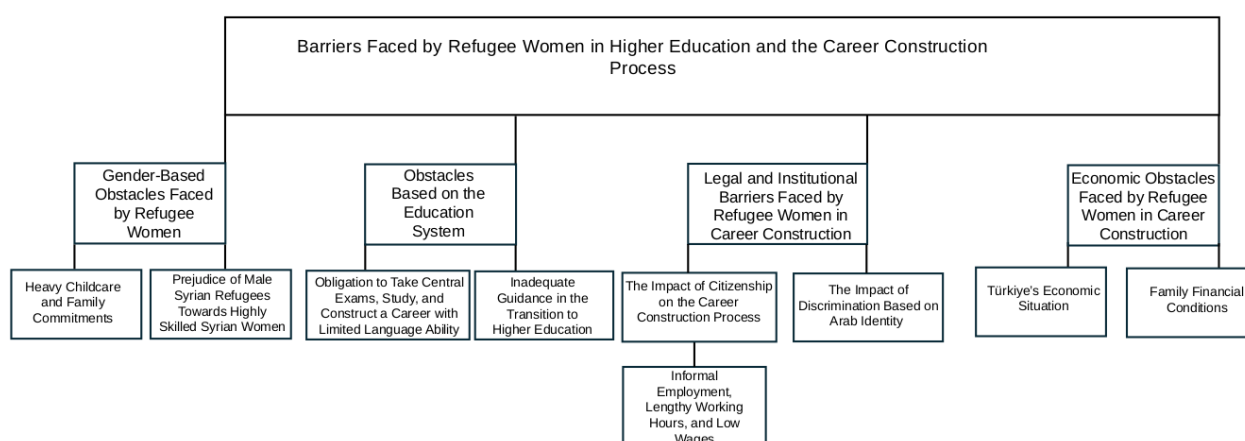


Figure 4

Barriers Faced by Refugee Women in Higher Education and the Career Construction Process

stated that higher education in Türkiye focuses not only on knowledge transfer but also on personal and social development.

Education in Syria is challenging. Children are treated as adults, and it is rare to find students with an average grade of 90. Professors at Syrian universities are stricter compared to those in Türkiye. Schools in Syria focus solely on strict learning, lacking personal and social aspects. However, education in Türkiye is better due to the availability of educational events, services, and student support. (Zeynep, 20)

Barriers Faced by Refugee Women in the Career Construction Process

Participants identified various obstacles hindering career development for refugee women in Türkiye, including language barriers, citizenship and legal status issues, work permits, educational disruptions, high tuition fees, credential recognition, licensing and certification challenges, financial constraints, work commitments, caregiving responsibilities, and restrictive family dynamics (Figure 4). Analysis of the interview data revealed four primary themes: gender-based challenges, barriers within the educational system, legal and institutional obstacles, and economic setbacks.

Gender-Based Obstacles Faced by Refugee Women in Career Construction

The findings of this study indicate that refugee women often face barriers to professional advancement stemming from gender-related challenges. Eighteen participants highlighted that traditional gender roles frequently constrain women, with family obligations and responsibilities discouraging them from pursuing education and career development.

Heavy Childcare and Family Commitments: Eight participants with children stated that family responsibilities—including childcare, elder care, and housework—significantly influenced their choice of university and department, ultimately affecting their career advancement.

Men believe that a woman's primary duty is to perform household chores, often expressing views such as "Women should be at home, not at work." They prioritize women's roles in the following order: family, household responsibilities, and education. Men generally perceive work as acceptable only if it does not disrupt the smooth functioning of the household, reflecting the high value placed on domestic order within the family. (Aisha, 37)

Prejudice of Male Syrian Refugees Towards Highly Skilled Syrian Women: Participants

noted that Syrian men's attitudes towards women's employment varied across families. Fourteen participants reported that while some families supported women's career development, others did not.

Our society is conservative. Women who wish to work often face restrictions from male family members due to jealousy, as they believe a woman's primary role is to be a homemaker. Ignorance is widespread; while some people support women's education, others view female university students with disdain, often displaying rudeness and disrespect. This creates significant challenges for women pursuing higher education. (Lina, 22)

Obstacles Based on the Education System

Participants highlighted major challenges within the education system, including inadequate guidance services and the requirement to take the university entrance exam despite limited language proficiency.

Obligation to Take Central Exams, Study, and Construct a Career with Limited Language Ability: Twenty-five participants chose the department with Arabic instruction to avoid the YÖS exam due to their limited proficiency in Turkish. Eleven participants reported that their language limitations led them to change their career plans.

I am studying in the Arabic-instructed department due to my inadequate Turkish language skills and the requirement to pass the YÖS exam for Turkish programs. Since I couldn't pass the YÖS, I enrolled in the Arabic-instructed department. (Amina, 33)

I wanted to study in the Department of Law, but studying law in Turkish would have been too difficult for me, so I decided to study Business Administration and Management. (Leyla, 19)

I wanted to study in the Department of Pharmacy, but I gave up because the department does not offer courses in Arabic. (Rana, 21)

Inadequate Guidance in the Transition to Higher Education: Twenty-three participants reported a lack of access to institutional information about higher education or career

guidance. To address this gap, they relied on self-directed research, online resources, and advice from friends or relatives with university experience to make informed decisions about their fields of study and choice of institution.

High schools should offer classes for the YÖS because this exam differs in content from the university entrance exams for Turkish students. However, there are no teachers in schools familiar with the YÖS. As a result, we have to study independently or attend private courses, which many of us cannot afford due to financial constraints. (Rana, 21)

Legal and Institutional Barriers Faced by Refugee Women in Career Construction

Participants' statements highlighted the legal and institutional obstacles faced by refugee women, such as discrimination based on Arab identity and lack of Turkish citizenship.

The Impact of Citizenship on the Career Construction Process: Most participants believed that obtaining Turkish citizenship would positively impact their career development, while only a few felt it would not influence their professional goals. The perceived benefits included greater job opportunities, access to insurance, eligibility for public sector jobs through the Public Personnel Selection Exam (KPSS), protection from discrimination, higher wages, property ownership, and freedom of travel.

After obtaining citizenship, there will be no distinction between us. Citizenship benefits my career by enabling me to take the KPSS, improve my working conditions, and become a civil servant. (Hale, 26)

Once we obtained Turkish citizenship, we were no longer different from Turks. This allows us to become civil servants, work in the public sector, and earn the same income as Turkish citizens. Although they do not earn more, our labour is less costly than theirs. (Farida, 20)

Informal Employment, Lengthy Working Hours, and Low Wages. Informal employment is a structural problem in the Turkish economy.

It is accepted that the informal economy has reached 40% of economic activities. Moreover, the hardship in obtaining Turkish citizenship and work permits for the majority of Syrian refugees pushes them to work informally (Gulek, 2022). Participants highlighted that the lack of Turkish citizenship forces many into informal employment with low wages and poor working conditions, significantly limiting the career prospects and overall physical and mental well-being of Syrian refugee women in Türkiye.

While working, we are not officially registered; it is unfair. You cannot defend your rights. If you were in an accident, you would be unable to file a claim. (Zeynep, 21)

There is a lot of ruthlessness that forces Syrians to work under unfavourable conditions. Working conditions are harsh, and Syrians are not treated fairly. (Aisha, 37)

We face discrimination in areas such as health insurance, licensing, and retirement benefits. (Mune, 19)

The Impact of Discrimination Based on Arab Identity on Career Construction: Participants expressed concerns that discrimination stemming from the intersection of their Arab-refugee-Syrian identity significantly hindered their career aspirations. Many noted that such discrimination prevented Syrian refugee women from fully utilizing their education and skills to build sustainable careers. Persistent negative stereotypes and biases eroded their confidence and deterred them from pursuing certain professions.

We face job discrimination. Many participants mentioned that Turks often say, "We are tired of them; let them go. We have been unemployed since they came," reflecting fears that we might take their jobs. (Sarah, 20)

Economic Obstacles Faced by Refugee Women in Career Construction

This section evaluates the economic barriers refugee women face in career development,

focusing on both national and household financial contexts.

Türkiye's Economic Situation: In Türkiye, high inflation and unemployment hinder Syrian refugee women's career progress, restricting access to stable, fulfilling jobs and often compelling them to reassess their career paths. This creates a mismatch between education and job market demands, adversely affecting long-term career satisfaction and growth. More than half of the participants stated that Türkiye's current economic conditions negatively impact their career aspirations.

Before coming to Türkiye, I wanted to study in the Department of Architecture, but I realized that architecture and engineering do not promise a bright future here. Therefore, I chose to study Arabic Language and Literature instead. (Fatima, 21)

There are limited job opportunities for Syrians in Türkiye, and many cannot work in their chosen fields of study. The current economic situation may further affect employment opportunities and salaries. (Hafsa, 19)

Family Financial Conditions: Nearly all participants stated that their families' poor economic conditions and financial constraints significantly influenced their decisions about university attendance and academic department selection.

Due to my family's below-average financial status, I must start working immediately after graduation. We are a large family; my father is elderly, and I have two older brothers who both work to help us make ends meet. (Nur, 19)

I would like to study medicine, but the tuition fees are very high. I want to finish quickly to support my family, as I have younger siblings. (Farida, 20)

DISCUSSION

Education and employment are critical for empowering young refugee women, fostering integration through economic independence, cultivating social connections,

and restoring purpose and meaning after migration-related loss (Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2023). Syrian refugee women in Türkiye have access to limited opportunities for higher education and career planning, along with more diverse obstacles compared with men. However, this study reveals that women strategically plan their career development to overcome these obstacles, often selecting academic majors aligned with their circumstances.

Gender significantly shapes the career development and higher education participation of refugee women (UNHCR, 2019). However, many participants reported experiencing greater autonomy in pursuing professional goals in Türkiye compared to when they were in Syria. Enhanced independence, self-esteem, and agency—stemming from improved women's rights, increased public participation, and a stronger sense of freedom—contributed to better vocational outcomes by reducing societal and gender-based barriers. Consistent with CCT, refugee women in this study adapted to Türkiye's freedom-oriented environment by revising and advancing their education and career plans, facilitating integration. Studies suggest that both men and women refugees perceive women as having more freedom in Türkiye (Doğangün & Keysan, 2022; Karameşe, 2023; Yalim & Critelli, 2023). Migration-induced social interactions compel refugee women and men to renegotiate their roles and responsibilities, thereby adopting new roles within the family and in broader social contexts (Fincham, 2022; Yalim & Critelli, 2023).

We reached similar results to those of Doğangün and Keysan (2022), Fincham (2022), Karameşe (2023), and Yalim and Critelli (2023)—that Syrian refugee women's education and employment prospects in Türkiye have been influenced by changing gender roles

shaped by the freedom-oriented environment. This environment has enabled Syrian women to pursue career aspirations and overcome traditional obstacles, with Syrian men becoming increasingly accepting of women working in various roles. This aligns with the CCT perspective, highlighting adaptability in response to a socio-cultural framework's influence on career development.

This study reveals that limited Turkish proficiency is a significant barrier to refugees' higher education pursuits and transition to the workforce, consistent with Cin and Doğan's (2021) findings. Türkiye stands out as the only country providing refugees with the opportunity to study in their native language by introducing Arabic-instructed higher education programs for those with high school diplomas. These programs help refugee women overcome language barriers, improve employability, and integrate socio-economically into Turkish society. Over half of the study participants chose these programs, exhibiting pragmatism consistent with CCT.

The gender roles of Syrian refugees are shaped by traditional Arabic customs and Sunni Islamic beliefs, positioning women as future child-bearers and guardians, and men as protectors and providers. These cultural norms impose societal expectations that prioritize household duties over education and careers, restricting refugee women's personal and professional aspirations. Forced migration disrupts extended family structures, reducing the critical socio-economic support, childcare, and daily work assistance necessary for pursuing higher education and career plans (Doğangün & Keysan, 2022). Our study's findings align with this, revealing that roles as housewives, caregivers, and members of conservative communities, along with discrimination due to refugee status, further restrict educational and employment oppor-

tunities (Burke et al., 2023; Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2023). Participants who were mothers highlighted the challenges of balancing maternal responsibilities with academic and professional obligations. Many selected academic fields such as Arabic literature and language that aligned with their career goals while accommodating socio-cultural contexts, family responsibilities, and financial needs, enabling remote work opportunities consistent with CCT.

Refugees often lack access to detailed information on educational systems, career opportunities, and support mechanisms in host countries (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). Within the CCT framework, career counselling is vital for supporting refugee women in articulating and navigating their disrupted vocational paths (Savickas, 2005). However, few participants utilized these services, relying instead on peers, family, or online searches, which often lack accuracy and depth. Without proper guidance, students face challenges in navigating higher education, selecting suitable majors, accessing scholarships or grants, and aligning their education with career aspirations.

Scholarships offer both financial support and skill development opportunities that significantly enhance career construction (Arar, 2021; Wehrle et al., 2019). However, in this study, only three students were awarded scholarships. In Arabic society, men are traditionally seen as breadwinners and typically receive greater financial support for education and careers, highlighting the heightened importance of scholarships for refugee women. While Türkiye's scholarship program awards scholarships to approximately 5,000 international students annually, by 2022, it received nearly 165,500 applications from 171 countries. This significant gap between availability and demand has resulted in in-

tense competition and frustration among applicants (Wu, 2022).

CCT posits that career development is influenced by external factors, including a country's economic conditions. Economic hardships may compel Syrian refugee women to prioritize short-term financial necessities over long-term career development, thereby hindering their professional growth and reinforcing cycles of poverty. Financial status plays a pivotal role in these women's career development, influencing access to education, vocational training, and basic needs. Intersectionality theory highlights how gender, refugee status, and economic standing intersect to shape experiences of discrimination and opportunity (Crenshaw, 2013). Due to financial constraints and societal norms prioritizing men as primary earners, Syrian refugee women face unique challenges in education and career planning. These limitations often confine them to low-skilled jobs to support their households or finance their brothers' education, stifling their aspirations (Sieverding et al., 2018).

Discrimination against refugees is a global phenomenon (Van den Bergh & Du Plessis, 2012). It often arises from cultural and social differences, creating employment barriers that prevent refugees from obtaining jobs aligned with their skills and qualifications. Güney (2022) found that local populations frequently blame immigrants for economic difficulties, a sentiment echoed in our findings. Participants in this study reported experiencing discrimination tied to their Syrian identity when applying for part-time jobs or internships.

Syrian refugee women face similar educational challenges to those encountered in refugee education worldwide. However, informal employment and labour exploitation are more prevalent in Türkiye compared to EU countries. Participants emphasized

the importance of Turkish citizenship in addressing these issues, viewing it as essential for job security, fair wages, and equal competition with native workers. They believe citizenship protects them from workplace discrimination, ensures equal treatment under labour laws, and fosters a supportive work environment—critical for long-term socio-economic stability and community resilience. Furthermore, participants noted that obtaining Turkish citizenship significantly impacts their career trajectories by granting access to job opportunities and sectors, such as civil service positions, typically restricted to noncitizens due to legal barriers.

The complex bureaucracy that must be navigated to obtain work permits undermines the personal agency of Syrian workers in Türkiye, pushing many into informal, low-wage employment (UNHCR, 2021). This barrier disproportionately affects women, confining them to low-paid, low-status jobs, limiting career growth, and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, exclusion, and abuse due to the intersection of gender and refugee status. Economic insecurity further exacerbates this issue, restricting their ability to report discriminatory incidents (Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2023; Zacher, 2019).

CCT highlights the importance of career adaptability—the ability to navigate challenges such as discrimination and exercise agency in overcoming obstacles. Syrian refugee women demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness by utilizing their skills and networks to improve their circumstances. Many participants emphasized their unwillingness to accept labour exploitation or wages lower than those of Turkish workers, regardless of their citizenship status. This awareness of workplace exploitation reflects their agency and values while illustrating the impact of cultural norms and social context on their career preferences.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Numerous stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, international organizations, and academic bodies, play a crucial role in supporting refugee women's participation in higher education and the workforce. Policy-makers and educators should prioritize creating equitable and supportive environments by reducing economic barriers, providing language and career guidance, and addressing childcare and family responsibilities (Bloch, 2013; Galera et al., 2018).

Governments can adopt policies such as offering tax incentives to businesses that employ university-educated refugee women, streamlining residency and work permit processes, and reducing tuition fees for refugee women to symbolic levels to improve access to higher education. Universities should develop inclusive programs tailored to the specific needs of refugee women. Collaborative initiatives integrating Syrian and Turkish students through language and career guidance projects can foster mutual understanding and co-operation. Gaining deeper insights into refugee women students' experiences would enable universities to better support disadvantaged groups, assist immigrant-serving organizations in providing targeted services, and guide governments in crafting policies that promote immigrant integration and support marginalized youth (Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2023).

Additionally, scholarship support for refugee women university students should be expanded. Regular data collection on the distribution of scholarships between men and women refugees is essential to assess the impact of financial aid on their career development.

CONCLUSION


This study contributes to refugee studies by examining the higher education experiences and career transitions of Syrian refugee women in Türkiye through the lens of CCT. Drawing on interviews with 40 Syrian women students, it identifies key barriers—including language challenges, cultural norms, financial constraints, and discrimination—while highlighting citizenship as a critical factor in accessing employment and achieving equitable wages. The lack of adequate academic support underscores the need for targeted interventions, whereas opportunities such as Arabic-instructed programs, supportive university environments, and increased awareness of women's rights highlight the resilience and autonomy of refugee women in navigating their educational and professional pathways. These findings carry significant implications for improving academic and career outcomes and for informing evidence-based policies aimed at fostering integration.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in expanding the application of CCT to the experiences of Syrian refugee women, contextualizing the theory within the unique challenges faced by refugee populations from conflict zones. It also enriches the fields of refugee studies, higher education, and integration by addressing intersectional barriers and opportunities shaping refugee women's career trajectories.

Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policy-makers, educators, and social service providers. Understanding the specific barriers and facilitators to career development for Syrian refugee women can guide the creation of targeted support programs and interventions. These efforts are crucial for improving Syrian refugee women's access to higher education, advancing career development, and promoting

integration. Well-designed policies can yield positive short- and long-term outcomes, enhancing well-being and fostering social cohesion for both refugees and host communities.


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