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Career experiences of educated Syrian women in Türkiye

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Abstract

This study examines the career experiences of educated Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye, focusing on how forced migration has reshaped their professional trajectories and labor market participation. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 24 Syrian women residing in a temporary accommodation centre in Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye. The study explores the effects of displacement on participants' pre-existing occupational backgrounds, the barriers encountered in accessing or re-entering the labor market, and the strategies and support mechanisms that shaped their efforts to rebuild professional futures. The interview data were analyzed using descriptive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that forced migration disrupted women's prior career trajectories and limited their access to qualified employment. Participants reported barriers related to legal insecurity, work permit restrictions, the non-recognition of qualifications, language difficulties, gendered family responsibilities, and discrimination. At the same time, social networks, NGO-supported activities, and vocational or educational opportunities provided partial support for adaptation and professional continuity. The women also articulated future-oriented aspirations related to teaching, public employment, language learning, technical skill development, and legal stability. Overall, the study suggests that the career experiences of educated Syrian women are shaped by the interaction of structural constraints and individual agency within the specific context of temporary protection in Türkiye. The findings highlight the importance of coordinated policies addressing legal access, the recognition of degrees, language and vocational support, childcare, and broader social inclusion to strengthen sustainable career development and labor market integration.

Introduction

Migration is a defining reality of the contemporary world; however, the experiences of displaced populations are shaped not only by conflict and forced mobility but also by the legal, social, and economic conditions of host countries. In this regard, the Syrian displacement crisis has had particularly far-reaching consequences for Türkiye, which has hosted one of the largest Syrian populations since the outbreak of the war in 2011 (Beine et al., 2021; İçduygu & Millet, 2016). Consequently, understanding the experiences of Syrian women in Türkiye necessitates an analysis of both forced migration as a general phenomenon and the institutional and labor market conditions that structure everyday life under temporary protection.

In the Turkish context, Syrians are granted "Temporary Protection" status under the 2014 Temporary Protection Regulation rather than formal refugee status. This legal framework provides access to fundamental rights, including healthcare and education, but also creates a distinct labor market dynamic in which access to formal employment remains contingent on specific work permits, often producing a condition of legal liminality that affects career

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continuity for educated professionals. Syrians are not legally recognized as "refugees" due to the geographical limitation maintained under the 1951 Geneva Convention. Instead, they are granted legal stay under the Temporary Protection Regulation introduced in 2014 (Directorate General of Migration Management [DGMM], 2025). While this framework provides access to essential public services such as healthcare and education, formal employment remains contingent upon bureaucratic procedures, employer sponsorship, and work permit regulations (Karadeniz, 2023; Demirci & Kırdar, 2023). In practice, many Syrians continue to work informally. Furthermore, women under temporary protection often encounter cumulative barriers, including childcare responsibilities, limited mobility, language proficiency gaps, and the non-recognition of prior qualifications. Consequently, their labor market participation is shaped by the interplay between individual educational backgrounds and the structural inequalities inherent in the legal and economic environment.

These conditions are particularly salient for educated Syrian women, whose professional trajectories are frequently disrupted by forced migration and subsequently redefined within a landscape of constrained opportunities. While some women attempt to re-enter the labor market through informal work, vocational training, social networks, or NGO-supported initiatives, others remain excluded from formal employment despite possessing substantial professional qualifications and degrees. These dynamics vary significantly based on residency; for instance, women in temporary accommodation centers often face more stringent restrictions on mobility and employment access compared to those in urban settings (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority [AFAD], 2014; DGMM, 2025). In this regard, the Turkish context is pivotal for understanding how educated Syrian women navigate professional adaptation and career transformation under temporary protection.

Throughout this process, Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye have experienced socio-economic precarity and legal insecurity, alongside psychological distress—including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress—as documented in existing literature (Alpak et al., 2015; Acartürk et al., 2021). Consequently, access to social security systems and protection mechanisms is vital for facilitating social integration and mitigating gendered inequalities (Seyfert & Alonso, 2024; Eggerman et al., 2023). Simultaneously, these women encounter intersecting barriers rooted in traumatic experiences, familial loss, economic hardship, and discrimination (Alhayek, 2015; Al-Hamad et al., 2024). Such constraints collectively diminish not only labor market outcomes but also women's professional self-efficacy, social participation, and long-term career planning.

On an everyday level, language barriers, cultural ambiguity, and institutional disparities may impede women's participation in education, employment, and broader social integration (Krystallidou et al., 2024; Theodosopoulos et al., 2024; Doust Mohammadi et al., 2024). Conversely, migration may also generate circumscribed new opportunities, specifically through access to education, vocational training, and alternative modes of economic participation (Doğangün & Keysan, 2022; Khatib et al., 2024). For some women, these avenues facilitate the reconstruction of disrupted professional pathways; for others, structural barriers continue to eclipse available support mechanisms. This dichotomy between constraint and adaptation is pivotal for understanding the career experiences of educated Syrian women in Türkiye.

Against this background, the present study investigates the career experiences of educated Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye. Specifically, it explores the extent to which forced migration has altered their occupational trajectories, the systemic barriers encountered within the labor market, the coping strategies developed to mitigate these challenges, and the support mechanisms that facilitate their efforts to reconstruct professional futures. By focusing on women residing in the Dulkadiroğlu Refugee Accommodation Center, the study provides a context-specific account of how this particular institutional environment shaped participants' reported career opportunities and constraints.

Although publicly available statistics describe the broader Syrian population under temporary protection in Türkiye, they fail to distinguish the specific subgroup of women who held professional careers in Syria and are currently seeking to re-enter professional employment. Accordingly, this research should be viewed not as an aggregate analysis of a statistically enumerated population but as a context-specific qualitative investigation of educated Syrian women's career trajectories within a temporary accommodation center.

Research questions

In line with the aim of the study, the following research questions guided the analysis:

- How did forced migration affect the pre-existing career trajectories of educated Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye?
- What legal, social, cultural, and gender-related barriers do these women encounter in their efforts to access or re-enter the labor market?
- What strategies and support mechanisms do they use to cope with these barriers and reconstruct their professional lives?
- How do these women evaluate their future career goals, migration decisions, and policy expectations within the context of temporary protection in Türkiye?

The following section reviews the recent literature on Syrian women's educational attainment, labor market participation, and integration challenges in Türkiye and comparable host-country contexts, thus establishing the conceptual and empirical framework for this study.

Literature review

International and comparative scholarship on refugee women's labor market integration

Refugee women's labor market integration has been extensively examined in relation to structural, legal, and gendered obstacles across various host-country contexts. International scholarship consistently demonstrates that language barriers, the non-recognition of qualifications, discrimination, legal precarity, and caregiving responsibilities significantly impede women's access to stable and dignified employment (Cheung & Phillimore, 2017; Al-Hamad et al., 2024; Flavel et al., 2024). Even when women possess advanced educational degrees and prior work experience, displacement frequently results in disrupted careers, downward occupational mobility, and a concentration in informal or low-paid sectors (Koch et al., 2023; Nassar, 2024). Comparative research further suggests that integration outcomes fluctuate according to national policy frameworks and labor market conditions. In certain contexts, integrated language and vocational support can enhance women's employment pathways; conversely, in others, legal restrictions, insufficient institutional recognition of degrees, and gendered familial expectations continue to stifle labor market participation (Kosyakova et al., 2023; Spehar, 2021). Collectively, the international literature identifies a recurring set of impediments while illustrating that these challenges manifest in context-specific forms depending on host-country structures.

Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye

These broader patterns are particularly salient in Türkiye, where Syrians reside under a distinctive policy framework of temporary protection rather than formal refugee status, a distinction rooted in the geographical limitation maintained under the 1951 Geneva Convention. Promulgated in 2014, the Temporary Protection Regulation provides a legal basis for residence and access to essential public services, such as healthcare and education (DGMM, 2025). However, temporary protection does not inherently guarantee equitable access to formal employment. Labor market participation remains contingent upon work permit procedures, employer sponsorship, and administrative approvals, which continue to circumscribe access to stable and formal employment for many Syrians (Demirci & Kırdar, 2023). In practice, informal employment remains widespread, and women under temporary protection often encounter compounded disadvantages related to childcare, mobility, language proficiency, and the non-recognition of prior qualifications. Within this framework, temporary protection in Türkiye offers legal residency and partial social rights

while maintaining significant structural limitations regarding labor market access, long-term security, and socio-economic integration. Consequently, the Turkish context is pivotal for understanding how educated Syrian women navigate employment, adaptation, and professional transformation.

Demographic characteristics and educational conditions of Syrian women in Türkiye

Demographic indicators concerning Syrian women in Türkiye underscore the structural inequalities inherent in social integration processes. As of February 2025, women constitute approximately 48.45% of the Syrian population under temporary protection in Türkiye (DGMM, 2025). Longitudinal evidence suggests that many Syrian women have encountered constrained educational access, early marriage, and disparate participation rates across educational levels, particularly in secondary and higher education (AFAD, 2014; UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF, 2023; UNHCR, 2024). Such patterns are pivotal, as they fundamentally determine women's long-term access to formal employment, vocational mobility, and broader social participation.

Existing literature further indicates that low levels of educational attainment and early familial responsibilities are often correlated with restricted labor market participation and more arduous integration trajectories. In this regard, Syrian women's educational experiences in Türkiye are inextricably linked to broader issues of gender dynamics, household obligations, and socio-economic inequality (Pinedo, 2024; Demirci & Kırdar, 2023). Consequently, educational access serves not only as a demographic indicator but also as a determinative factor in women's prospective occupational opportunities.

Syrian women's labor force participation and structural challenges in Türkiye

The labor force participation of Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye remains suboptimal, with many women predominantly engaged in informal, precarious, and low-paid employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020; Pinedo, 2024). Research indicates that the Turkish labor market is characterized by employer-dependent work permit procedures, limited formal opportunities, and sectoral segmentation, all of which stifle women's access (Karadeniz, 2023). Although the issuance of work permits has increased over time, by 2024 they were still not widespread, and employment insecurity persisted (Gulek, 2024). Furthermore, regulations limiting the proportion of Syrian employees within a workplace, coupled with the administrative and financial burdens imposed on employers, continue to disincentivize formal hiring and reinforce informalization.

In addition to these structural impediments, women under temporary protection in Türkiye encounter language-related difficulties, discrimination, the non-recognition of degrees, and familial constraints that further complicate their labor market integration. As international research suggests, language barriers and cultural divergence remain significant obstacles to employment for women under temporary protection (Al-Hamad et al., 2024; Cheung & Phillimore, 2017). In the Turkish context, however, these challenges are exacerbated by the specific institutional conditions of temporary protection, informal labor market structures, and gendered household obligations. This suggests that women's labor market experiences should be interpreted through the dual lens of general refugee integration literature and the specific legal and socio-economic realities of Türkiye.

Support and integration initiatives in Türkiye

Concurrently, recent studies and institutional reports indicate that women under temporary protection may access partial support through NGOs, language courses, vocational programs, and project-based interventions designed to enhance employability and social cohesion (Demirci & Kırdar, 2023; KADEM, 2021). In Türkiye, initiatives aimed at augmenting employment opportunities for both Syrians and host communities—alongside gender-specific language and vocational training—have sought to bolster women's skill acquisition and social participation. Such interventions can cultivate professional confidence, increase visibility, and facilitate incremental engagement with the labor market.

However, the literature also suggests that such support mechanisms often yield limited long-term impact when systemic conditions—including legal precarity, informal employment, and gendered care burdens—persist. Furthermore, opportunity structures vary significantly between urban environments and temporary accommodation centers, where mobility, institutional access, and employment pathways are frequently more circumscribed (AFAD, 2014; DGMM, 2025). Consequently, support mechanisms must be evaluated not only in terms of their availability but also in relation to the socio-spatial context in which women attempt to utilize them.

Research gap and contribution of the present study

Although existing literature provides significant insights into refugee women's labor market participation, two distinct gaps remain. First, much of the extant scholarship is either comparative or policy-oriented and often fails to capture the nuanced, context-specific dynamics of women's lived career experiences in Türkiye. Second, relatively few studies focus exclusively on educated Syrian women to examine how forced migration reshapes their pre-existing occupational trajectories, professional continuity, and support networks. Furthermore, there is a lack of research exploring their future aspirations and policy expectations within a clearly defined institutional setting.

By focusing on educated Syrian women residing in a temporary accommodation center in Türkiye, the present study addresses this research gap, offering a context-sensitive qualitative account of career disruption, adaptation, and constrained opportunities under temporary protection. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by synthesizing labor market barriers, support mechanisms, gendered responsibilities, and women's future-oriented strategies within a unified analytical framework.

Collectively, the literature underscores the necessity of examining refugee women's labor market experiences through the dual lens of broader comparative scholarship and context-specific national conditions. The subsequent section delineates the methodological design employed to investigate these dynamics among educated Syrian women residing in a temporary accommodation center in Türkiye.

Methods

Research design

This study employed a basic qualitative research design to investigate the career experiences of educated Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye. Basic qualitative research aims to explore how individuals interpret their experiences and construct meaning within a particular social context. A qualitative, interview-based approach was deemed appropriate, as it facilitated an in-depth and context-sensitive examination of participants' experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes within their specific social and institutional settings (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). In alignment with the research objectives, this design enabled a detailed exploration of how forced migration has altered women's professional trajectories and how they interpreted the legal, social, cultural, and gender-related constraints shaping their employment opportunities. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry is particularly suited for investigating complex social processes in situ, especially when the objective is to generate a rich understanding of lived experiences rather than to produce statistical generalizations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Consequently, the qualitative framework adopted in this study provided a robust methodological basis for examining the multilayered career experiences of educated Syrian women within the unique context of a temporary accommodation center.

Participants and sampling

The study group comprised 24 Syrian women under temporary protection residing in a temporary accommodation center in Dulkadiroğlu, Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye. Criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling strategy, was employed

to select information-rich participants capable of elucidating the research phenomenon (Patton, 2014). Participant recruitment and in-depth interviews were conducted between May and July 2025, following ethical approval. The authors conducted the original data collection specifically for the present study. Therefore, the study does not involve the secondary analysis of data previously collected for another study or research project. For the purposes of this study, "educated Syrian women" refers to women who had completed or pursued higher or vocational education in Syria before displacement. This definition included women with prior professional experience as well as university students and recent graduates who had been preparing to enter a professional field. Accordingly, participants were required to have completed or pursued formal higher or vocational education in Syria and either to have prior professional experience or to have been preparing to enter a professional field before displacement. All participants had subsequently encountered barriers to continuing their education, maintaining their previous careers, or entering qualified employment in Türkiye. These criteria ensured that participants shared comparable experiences, thereby facilitating a rigorous exploration of the "career experience" phenomenon (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

The ages of the Syrian women in the study group ranged from 22 to 60. Their educational backgrounds were diverse, encompassing university degrees and specialized vocational training across various disciplines. The cohort included professionals educated in fields such as mathematics, primary education, theology, and Arabic language and literature, as well as those with technical qualifications in agricultural engineering, anesthesia, and nursing. Regarding migration timelines, the participants arrived in Türkiye at different intervals, with a notable concentration in 2012 ($n = 11$). Other arrival years included 2011 ($n = 1$), 2013 ($n = 3$), 2014 ($n = 1$), 2015 ($n = 6$), 2016 ($n = 1$), and 2017 ($n = 1$). In terms of educational attainment, the vast majority held university degrees or had pursued higher education in their respective fields, while a smaller segment had completed secondary education or were in the final stages of their undergraduate studies at the time of displacement. This diversity reflects varying levels of educational capital while maintaining the study's focus on educated Syrian women. Geographically, the participants represented several regions in Syria: the largest group originated from Aleppo ($n = 11$), followed by Idlib ($n = 5$), Hama ($n = 3$), Latakia ($n = 2$), Damascus ($n = 2$), and Homs ($n = 1$). At the time of the study, the majority ($n = 22$) remained outside the labor force; only two participants were engaged in employment—one as a private tutor and another as a teacher within the temporary accommodation center.

Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using descriptive thematic analysis. This approach was selected to identify, organize, and describe recurring patterns in participants' accounts while retaining close attention to the context and meaning of their experiences. The analysis was intended to provide a context-sensitive description of participants' career experiences rather than to generate a formal theory.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to support familiarization with the data. Meaningful segments related to the research questions were identified and assigned initial codes. Codes reflecting similar experiences or ideas were compared and grouped into broader categories. These categories were subsequently reviewed, refined, and organized into higher-order themes representing participants' pre-war professional backgrounds, post-migration career transformations, employment barriers, support networks, coping strategies, and future aspirations.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers compared coded excerpts across participants to identify recurring patterns as well as divergent experiences. The resulting themes were presented through descriptive narratives supported by selected verbatim quotations and concise summaries of participants' accounts. The numerical values reported in the figures represent the number of coded references within the relevant analytic domain, not the number of participants. Because a participant's account could contain more than one relevant coded segment, the frequencies may exceed the total number of participants.

Data analysis commenced following the completion of data collection in July 2025 and was completed before the manuscript was initially submitted on 26 October 2025. This was the primary analysis of data collected specifically for the present study rather than a secondary analysis of previously collected data.

Data collection tool

In this study, a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of the career experiences of educated Syrian women. Creswell (2013) defines semi-structured interviewing as a method "focused on a particular topic while allowing the interviewer to pursue emerging themes and responses in greater depth" (p. 155). Patton (2014) similarly describes this approach as a technique "based on a predetermined set of questions while providing flexibility for new questions that may arise during the process" (p. 426). Furthermore, Yıldırım and Şimşek (2021) emphasize that such instruments are designed to "enable participants to describe their experiences in their own words," offering the opportunity to explore novel themes that may surface during the dialogue (p. 221).

To develop the interview protocol used in this research, a consultative meeting was held with two academics specializing in migration studies, one social worker stationed in a temporary accommodation center, and a field practitioner experienced in working with Syrian populations. During this collaborative process, a series of questions was generated to elicit participants' lived experiences. These draft items were subsequently piloted with a subset of participants under expert supervision, after which the final version of the instrument was produced. The finalized protocol comprised 15 questions, strategically structured around key thematic axes: Pre and Post War Career Trajectories, Encountered Barriers and Coping Strategies, Support Mechanisms, Familial and Environmental Influences, Job-Seeking Strategies and Professional Value Perceptions, Future Aspirations, and Policy Recommendations.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the credibility of the study, member checking, constant comparison, and thick description were employed. Thematic summaries and descriptive narratives generated during the analysis were shared with a subset of participants to elicit feedback and validate the findings. Any inconsistencies or omissions identified through this member-checking process were revised to ensure alignment with participants' original statements (Creswell, 2013, p. 197). Furthermore, a constant comparative method was utilized across interview accounts to identify recurring patterns, nuances, and divergent perspectives during the analytic process (Patton, 2014, p. 666). Participants' lived experiences were delineated with extensive contextual detail and supported by illustrative verbatim quotations. This approach ensures thick description, allowing readers to discern how the findings gained meaning within their specific milieu, thereby bolstering the study's contextual transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure dependability, techniques such as intercoder agreement, audit trails, and comprehensive process reporting were employed. The coding process was independently replicated by a second qualitative researcher; an intercoder agreement rate exceeding 85% was achieved, thereby confirming the consistency of the analytical findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021, p. 312). Each stage of the analysis was meticulously documented in an audit trail, providing a transparent, step-by-step account of how initial codes were synthesized into categories and subsequent themes (Patton, 2014, p. 666). Furthermore, internal triangulation was achieved by systematically comparing data across diverse participants and thematic clusters. Collectively, these rigorous procedures bolstered the credibility and transferability of the qualitative descriptive analysis, establishing a robust methodological foundation for interpreting the experiences of Syrian women residing in a temporary accommodation center in Türkiye.

Results

This section delineates the findings regarding the career experiences of educated Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye. Collectively, the data indicate that forced migration disrupted participants' pre-existing professional trajectories and significantly impeded their access to qualified employment. Throughout the interviews, women articulated a complex web of interconnected barriers, including legal precarity, work permit restrictions, the non-recognition of degrees, language barriers, discrimination, and gendered familial obligations. Conversely,

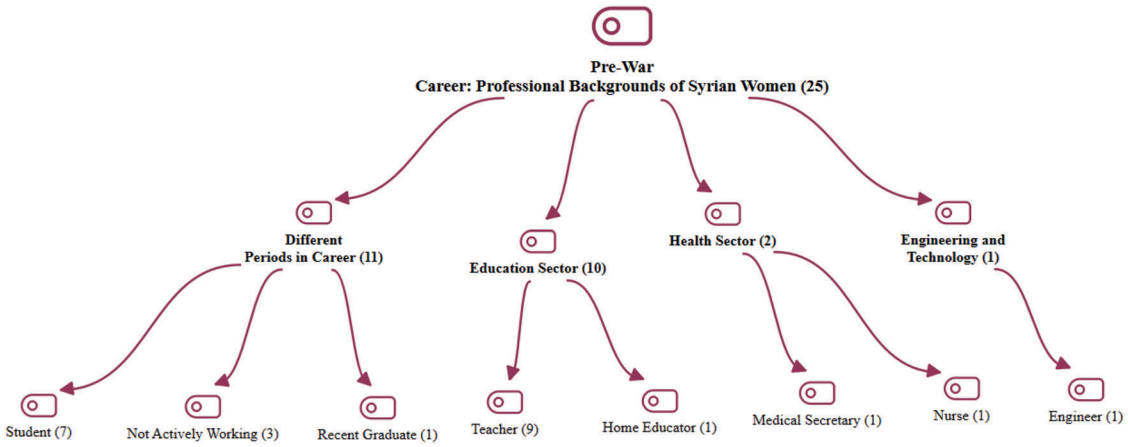

Fig. 1 Pre-War Professional Backgrounds of Syrian Women under Temporary Protection.

participants also identified various mechanisms of adaptation and support, such as social networks, NGO-led initiatives, vocational training, and informal employment strategies.

The findings are systematically organized to reflect the primary dimensions of participants' career experiences. This section initiates with an analysis of women's pre-war professional status and their subsequent post-migration career transformations. It then transitions into a detailed exploration of systemic barriers, support mechanisms, job-seeking strategies, and lived workplace experiences. The narrative concludes by addressing participants' future aspirations, migration-related decision-making, and specific policy expectations. Collectively, these findings respond to the study's research questions by illustrating how educated Syrian women articulated the disruption of their professional trajectories, the structural impediments they encountered, the adaptive strategies they devised, and the future-oriented meanings they ascribed to labor, stability, and integration within the Turkish context.

The figures within this section are designed to visually synthesize the primary themes and sub-themes that emerged from the qualitative interview data. The numerical values presented in parentheses denote the frequency with which specific codes or sub-themes occurred throughout the analytical process. These frequencies are utilized descriptively to illustrate the relative prominence of particular issues and should not be misconstrued as statistical generalizations. Consequently, each figure serves as an analytic representation of a distinct dimension of participants' career trajectories, providing a clear overview of how educated Syrian women navigate the complexities of temporary protection in Türkiye.

Figure 1 illustrates the professional diversity and sectoral distribution of Syrian women prior to their arrival in Türkiye. The findings demonstrate that a significant number of participants possessed well-established or burgeoning professional trajectories before displacement, particularly within the education and healthcare sectors. Several participants articulated a long-term commitment to the teaching profession, signifying that their pre-migration occupational identities were foundational rather than incidental. For instance, one participant stated, "I worked as a teacher for 25 years" (Participant 14), while another noted, "I worked as a teacher for 6 years" (Participant 1). Such accounts indicate that teaching was not merely a job category but a core component of their professional continuity and expertise. Furthermore, the data reveal that the participants did not constitute a homogeneous occupational group; beyond education, the cohort included professionals with technical qualifications in healthcare and other specialized fields. As one participant succinctly noted, "I was a nurse" (Participant 23). This diversity is analytically significant, as it underscores that these women entered displacement with differentiated forms of educational and professional capital rather than a uniform labor profile. Variation was also evident in the participants' career stages. While some had solidified stable professional identities, others were students or recent graduates at the threshold of their careers. One participant poignantly expressed this abrupt interruption: "I had just graduated, and then the war started" (Participant 6). Such narratives illustrate that forced migration disrupted not only ongoing careers but also anticipated futures and emerging vocational pathways. Taken together that pre-war professional diversity serves as the analytical foundation for understanding the magnitude of occupational displacement. Participants' subsequent difficulties in

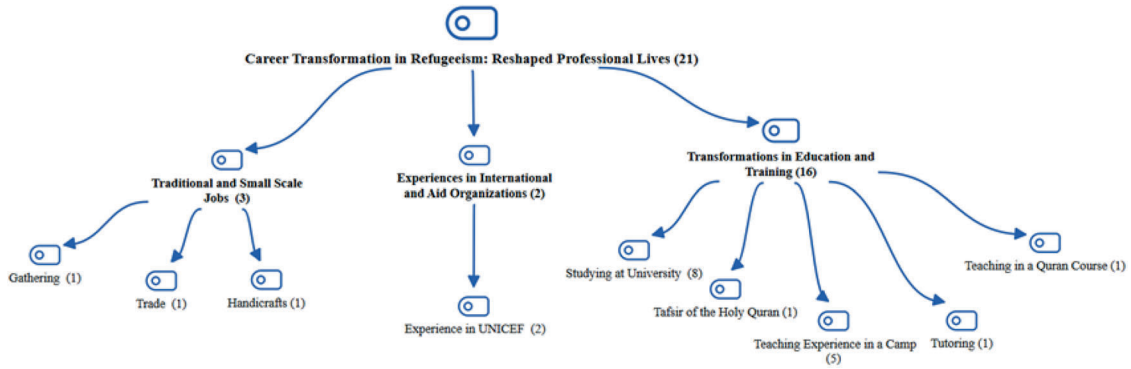

Fig. 2 Career Transformation Following Forced Migration: Reshaped Professional Lives.

accessing qualified employment appeared to reflect the disruption of their previous educational and professional trajectories, together with the legal, linguistic, institutional, and familial barriers described in their interviews.

As illustrated in Fig. 2, career transformation denotes the multifaceted reconfiguration of women's occupational trajectories following forced migration. This encompasses disruptions in professional continuity, significant shifts away from attained professions, downward occupational mobility, and a transition into informal or survival-based labor. Furthermore, it includes proactive attempts to reconstruct professional identities through alternative educational or employment pathways. This transformation unfolded primarily across three domains: formal and informal education, traditional small-scale economic activities, and limited engagement with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as illustrated in Fig. 2. Within the educational sphere, many participants endeavored to preserve or reconstruct their professional identities by engaging in teaching-related activities within temporary accommodation centers or other informal settings, often as a strategy to bypass the non-recognition of their formal degrees. One participant articulated this persistence of professional identity as follows:

"After coming here, I worked as a classroom teacher in the camp for 5 years." (Participant 3)

Similarly, another participant highlighted how teaching continued in an alternative institutional setting:

"I worked as a teacher in a Quran course outside the camp." (Participant 1)

Concurrently, career transformation frequently necessitated a departure from previously established professional trajectories toward informal, survival-oriented forms of labor. Traditional activities, such as handicrafts and small-scale domestic production, emerged as vital livelihood strategies under conditions of acute economic precarity. For many women, these activities represented a de-professionalization process, where their academic degrees and specialized expertise were sidelined in favor of immediate economic necessity. As one participant stated:

"I made beadwork and knitting and sold them." (Participant 4)

For some women, this shift also meant downward occupational mobility, as they were unable to continue in their original professions and instead adapted through partial or substitute forms of work. One participant illustrated this clearly:

"I could not continue engineering; I only gave private lessons." (Participant 19)

Although less prevalent, engagement with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) represented a distinct pathway of career transformation. These opportunities signify a circumscribed form of integration into formal or semi-formal employment structures, often providing a rare space where participants could utilize their professional qualifications and linguistic skills. However, such roles were frequently perceived as transitory and project-dependent. For instance, one participant reported:

"I worked at UNICEF for one year." (Participant 10)

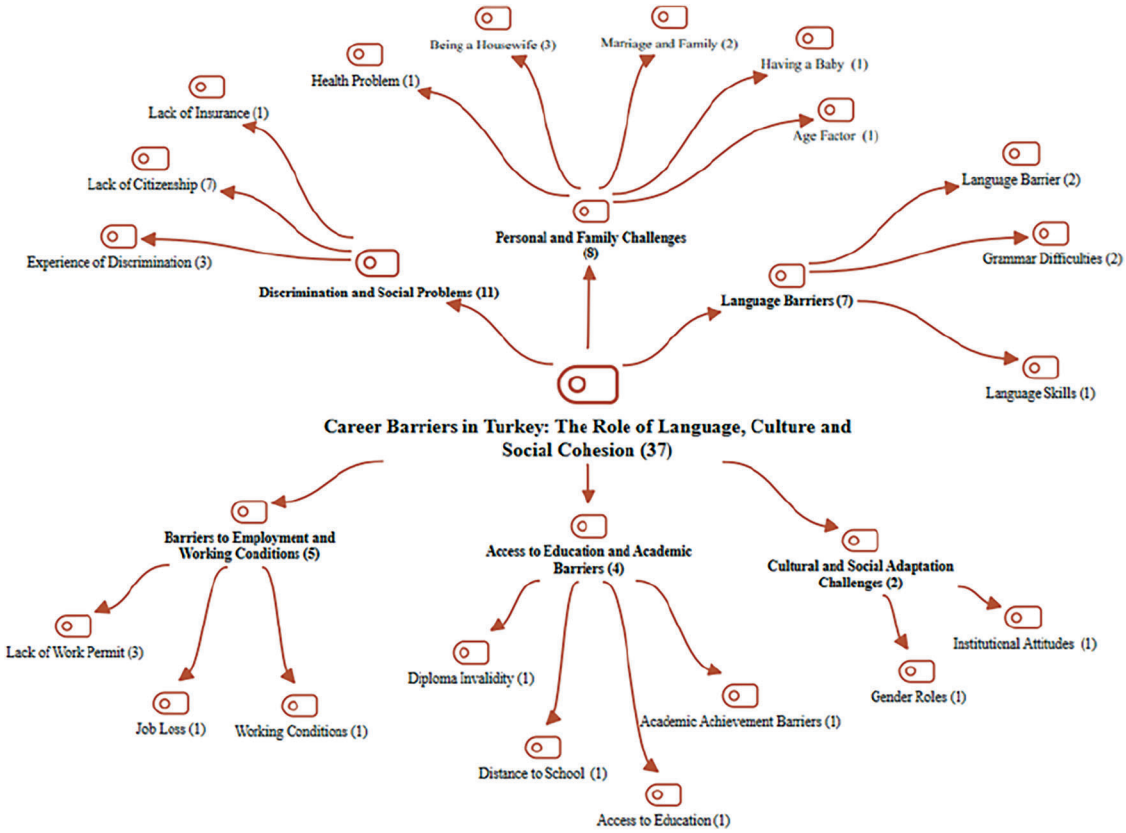

Fig. 3 Career Barriers in Türkiye: The Role of Language, Culture, and Social Integration.

The findings demonstrate that career transformation among Syrian women in Türkiye reflects a complex interplay between resilience and structural constraint. While participants proactively sought to reconstruct their professional lives through alternative pathways, these efforts were frequently undermined by downward mobility, informalization, and persistent structural barriers—most notably the non-recognition of their academic degrees. In this regard, career transformation should be understood not merely as a shift in employment, but as a negotiated response to the legal, social, and economic limitations within the host context. It represents a continuous effort to reconcile their pre-migration professional qualifications with the precarious realities of the Turkish labor market.

Figure 3 delineates the primary barriers encountered by participants in accessing or re-entering the labor market, addressing the research question regarding legal, social, cultural, and gender-related constraints. The findings indicate that these impediments were shaped by the symbiotic interaction of legal precarity, discrimination, familial obligations, linguistic limitations, and institutional exclusion. Legal and institutional barriers emerged as particularly decisive. Participants consistently identified the absence of work permits, lack of citizenship, and inadequate social protection as systemic factors circumscribing their access to formal employment. As one participant articulated, "The biggest obstacle is not having a work permit" (Participant 1), while another noted, "There is no citizenship, no language, and no work permit" (Participant 2). Discrimination also manifested as a formidable barrier in both professional and educational spheres. One participant remarked, "They did not employ Syrian teachers" (Participant 11), and another explained, "At university, a lecturer treated [me] badly because [I am] Syrian" (Participant 20). Furthermore, domestic and familial challenges significantly stifled women's career trajectories. Childcare responsibilities and traditional household expectations limited their ability to pursue professional development or maintain employment. One participant noted, "I could not work because I have a baby" (Participant 6), while another observed, "I could not learn Turkish because I have to take care of the children" (Participant 15). These linguistic barriers, in turn, eroded professional confidence and restricted access to high-quality labor opportunities. As one participant remarked, "I know little Turkish, and because I am a housewife, I could not improve it" (Participant 14). Crucially,

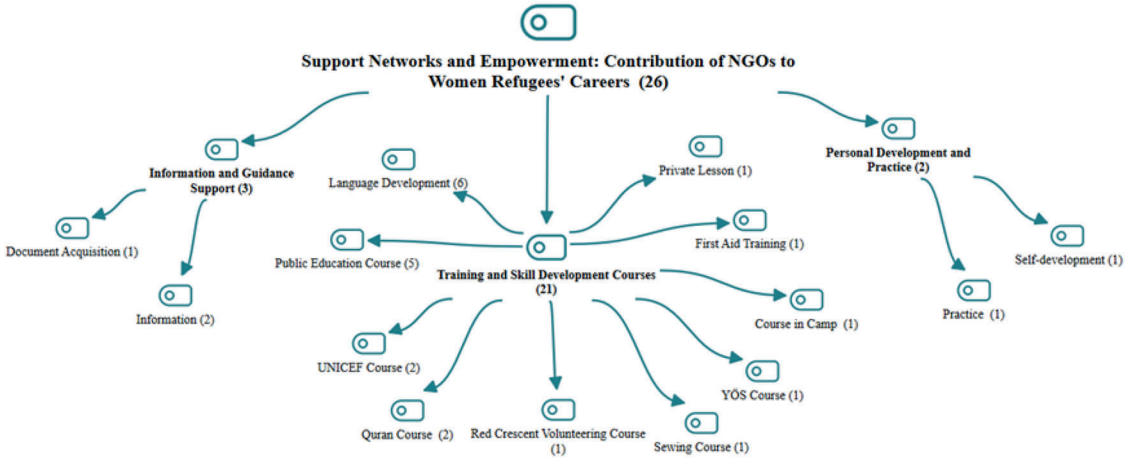

Fig. 4 Support Networks and Empowerment: Contributions of NGOs to the Careers of Women under Temporary Protection.

institutional obstacles—most notably the non-recognition of degrees and restricted access to higher education-severely undermined women's professional continuity. One participant expressed this structural exclusion clearly: "I could not work because her degree was not recognized" (Participant 17). The results demonstrate that the career barriers faced by Syrian women in Türkiye are not the result of isolated factors but represent the cumulative effect of legal restrictions, discrimination, and institutional opacity. These interconnected impediments not only constrain access to qualified employment but also complicate the broader processes of socio-economic integration.

Figure 4 illustrates the pivotal role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in facilitating participants' adaptation, learning, and partial professional continuity following displacement. NGO-led support functioned across three primary domains: information and guidance, vocational training and skill development, and psychosocial empowerment. Participants indicated that these organizations served as essential intermediaries, helping them navigate complex bureaucratic procedures and access services that were otherwise opaque. Vocational training emerged as the most prominent dimension of this support. Participants frequently referred to language courses, public education programs, and UNICEF-supported initiatives. For instance, one participant noted, "I attended a public education course" (Participant 5), while another stated, "I took a sewing course" (Participant 4). These accounts suggest that such programs bolstered both technical qualifications and personal confidence amidst disrupted career trajectories. For a subset of women, NGO-linked structures also provided circumscribed but meaningful employment opportunities. One participant shared, "I worked at UNICEF for one year" (Participant 10), while another explained the strategic shift: "We could not work in public institutions [due to legal barriers], so we started working with UNICEF, first as volunteer teachers and later as support staff" (Participant 21). This narrative highlights how NGOs offered a platform for professional agency when the formal labor market remained inaccessible due to the non-recognition of degrees. However, the findings also underscore that such opportunities were often transitory and project-dependent. While NGOs functioned as vital support structures by offering resources, visibility, and psychosocial relief, they ultimately could not dismantle the overarching structural barriers that impede access to stable, qualified employment. For example, one participant stated, "I attended a public education course." (Participant 5), while another noted, "I took a sewing course." (Participant 4). These accounts suggest that such activities supported both skill development and confidence in the face of disrupted career trajectories. For some women, NGO-linked structures also created limited but meaningful employment opportunities. One participant stated, "I worked at UNICEF for one year." (Participant 10), and another explained, "We could not work in public institutions, so we started working with UNICEF, first as volunteer teachers and later as support staff." (Participant 21). These narratives show that NGO involvement could provide partial professional continuity when formal labor market entry remained restricted. At the same time, such opportunities were often temporary and project-based. The findings indicate that NGOs functioned as important but partial support structures. They offered women resources, visibility, participation, and psychosocial

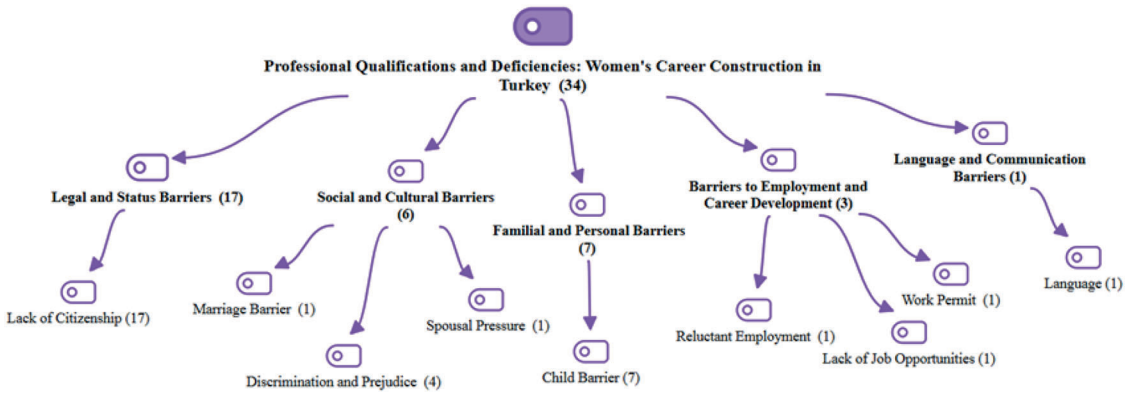

Fig. 5 Professional Competencies and Deficiencies in the Career Structures of Syrian Women in Türkiye.

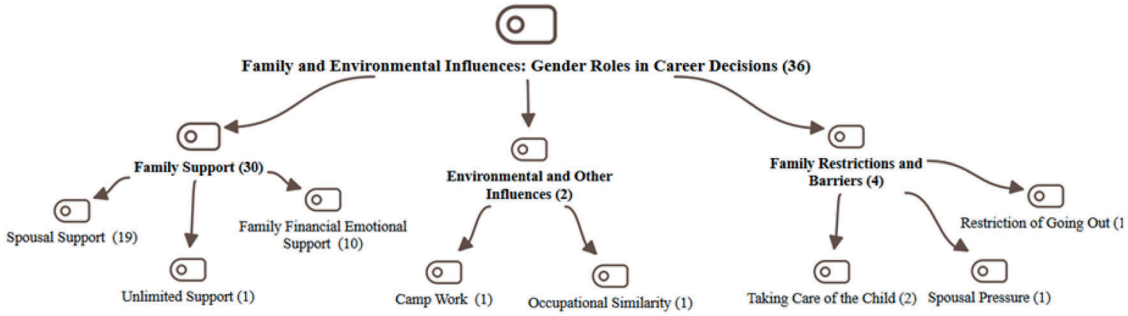

Fig. 6 The Influence of Family and Environmental Factors on Syrian Women's Career Decisions through Gender Roles.

support, yet they did not remove the broader structural barriers related to legal status, work permits, and access to stable employment.

Figure 5 illustrates that the career construction of Syrian women in Türkiye is shaped by the complex interaction between individual professional qualifications and the cumulative weight of legal, social, cultural, and structural impediments. While Fig. 3 outlined the breadth of these barriers, Fig. 5 underscores how they collectively stifled women's capacity to mobilize their skills, sustain their professional identities, and engage meaningfully with the labor market. Legal and status-related precarity emerged as the most decisive constraints. Participants consistently identified the absence of citizenship and work permits as systemic factors restricting access to formal employment and entrenching a dependence on insecure, informal labor. As one participant succinctly stated, "There is no citizenship, no language, and no work permit" (Participant 2). Linguistic limitations further exacerbated this exclusion, hindering women's ability to articulate their competencies and adapt to professional environments. One participant observed, "I know little Turkish, so I could not improve [her professional standing]" (Participant 14). Simultaneously, social exclusion and gendered familial obligations further eroded women's career development. The intersection of discrimination, prejudice, and childcare responsibilities narrowed employment pathways and compromised the practical conditions for professional continuity. As one participant remarked, "They did not employ Syrian teachers" (Participant 11), while another explained, "I could not work because I have a baby" (Participant 6). These findings suggest that, within the study context, academic degrees and professional qualifications alone were insufficient to secure labor market integration. Instead, women's career trajectories were dictated by the convergent effects of legal insecurity, language barriers, and institutional exclusion. Collectively, these interconnected constraints created formidable obstacles to economic autonomy, professional fulfillment, and sustainable social integration.

Figure 6 illustrates that familial and environmental factors play a dualistic role in shaping the career trajectories of educated Syrian women, functioning concurrently as catalysts for support and mechanisms of constraint. These findings demonstrate that women's professional pathways are mediated by gendered domestic relations as well as the

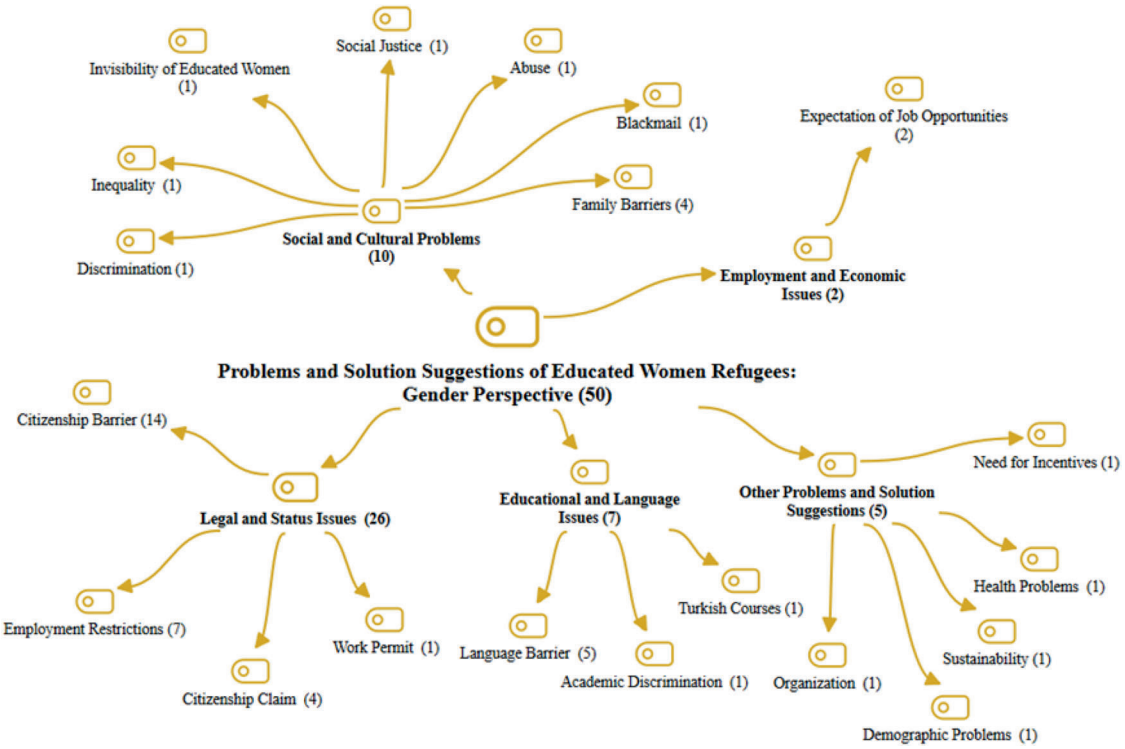

Fig. 7 Challenges and Proposed Solutions for Educated Syrian Women under Temporary Protection: a Gender Perspective.

specific opportunities and limitations inherent in their immediate social milieu. On the supportive axis, familial encouragement emerged as a pivotal enabling factor in women's educational and professional persistence. Participants underscored the significance of emotional, financial, and practical backing from spouses and kin. One participant articulated, "My family supports me in every way" (Participant 8), while another emphasized, "My husband supports me, and that gives me strength" (Participant 21). Environmental factors also modulated these pathways, with participants highlighting both the localized opportunities within Temporary Accommodation Centres and the occupational clustering observed in their surroundings. Conversely, traditional gender roles and domestic restrictions imposed substantial impediments on women's career development. Childcare obligations, limited mobility, and spousal gatekeeping significantly curtailed their ability to engage in formal labor or pursue further professional qualifications. One participant stated, "I could not work because I have a baby" (Participant 6), while another noted, "My husband does not allow me to work outside" (Participant 2). These findings suggest that for educated Syrian women, career-related decision-making is a continuous negotiation between agency and restriction within the domestic sphere. Even when women possess high-level academic degrees, their professional participation remains contingent upon the supportive or restrictive alignment of their familial and social environments.

Figure 7 demonstrates that educated Syrian women under temporary protection navigate a web of interconnected challenges spanning legal status, education, employment, and social integration, while simultaneously articulating concrete solutions to enhance their long-term prospects. This figure highlights both the pervasive barriers encountered and the policy-oriented responses deemed essential by the participants. Legal and status-related precarity emerged as the most critical challenges. Participants consistently identified the acquisition of citizenship and work permits as the primary conduits to formal employment and socio-economic security. As one participant articulated, "The biggest problem is not having citizenship" (Participant 1), while another noted, "There is no work permit, so it is very difficult to find a job" (Participant 15). Linguistic and institutional barriers also featured prominently; as one participant explained, "The language barrier is the most formidable obstacle for us" (Participant 2). Furthermore, socio-cultural impediments, such as discrimination and gendered familial constraints, were described as compounding factors. One participant stated, "I experienced discrimination because I am Syrian" (Participant 21). Alongside these grievances,

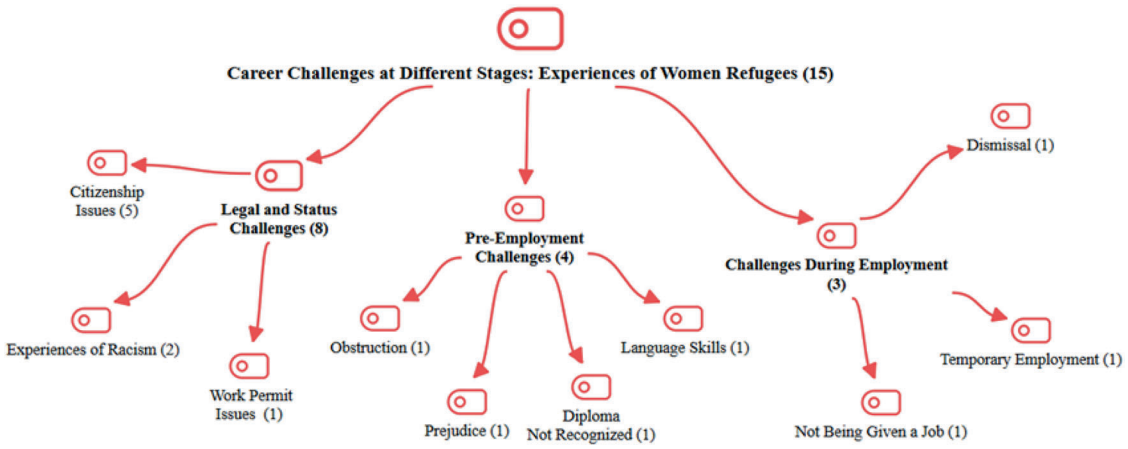

Fig. 8 Career Challenges at Different Stages: Experiences of Women under Temporary Protection.

participants proposed robust, solution-oriented suggestions. A central demand was the provision of citizenship, viewed as a fundamental prerequisite for equal rights, legal certainty, and stable professional trajectories. One participant expressed this succinctly: "If we get citizenship, everything will be easier" (Participant 13). Participants also emphasized the necessity for expanded Turkish language programs, enhanced access to higher education, and systematic vocational support. More broadly, their recommendations encompassed social justice, structured support mechanisms, financial incentives, and sustainable healthcare access. These findings suggest that participants perceive their challenges as deeply entrenched and believe that substantial improvement requires a coordinated multi-sectoral intervention across legal, educational, economic, and socio-cultural domains. For these women, the recognition of their academic degrees and professional identities is inextricably linked to the resolution of their legal and status-related uncertainty.

Figure 8 shows that the career trajectories of educated Syrian women are shaped by formidable barriers emerging across three interrelated stages: the legal stage, the pre-employment stage, and the employment stage. Rather than representing isolated difficulties, these stages reflect a cumulative process in which constraints at one level intensify disadvantages at subsequent phases. At the legal stage, systemic precarity regarding citizenship and work permits emerged as the foundational barrier, restricting access to formal labor from the outset. As one participant articulated, "The biggest problem is not having citizenship" (Participant 1), while another noted, "There is no work permit, so it is very difficult to find a job" (Participant 15). At the pre-employment stage, participants encountered obstacles that marginalized them even before they could enter the labor market. These included the non-recognition of academic degrees, pervasive discrimination, and linguistic limitations. One participant expressed this structural exclusion clearly: "I could not work because her degree was not recognized" (Participant 17). Others highlighted the social climate, stating, "I experienced discrimination because I am Syrian" (Participant 21), and "The language barrier is the most formidable obstacle for us" (Participant 2). Finally, at the employment stage, those who managed to enter the workforce reported persistent instability, including precarious contracts and arbitrary dismissals. One participant poignantly described this vulnerability: "We worked until 2021, but then they dismissed Syrian workers" (Participant 3). The results demonstrate that the career challenges faced by Syrian women unfold as a continuous "staged" exclusion. Legal insecurity constrains the initial entry, pre-employment barriers weaken the mobilization of professional qualifications, and employment-stage obstacles undermine career continuity. This structure implies that sustainable labor market integration necessitates a holistic intervention that addresses the specific hurdles within each of these three critical phases.

Figure 9 illustrates the diverse strategies employed by educated Syrian women to navigate employment opportunities in Türkiye through a combination of formal and informal resources. These pathways included camp-based initiatives, social networks, institutional channels, and sector-specific connections. A significant entry point emerged through the temporary accommodation center (TAC) environment and its immediate surroundings. Participants indicated that camp-based relations—facilitated through management or informal educational structures—served as

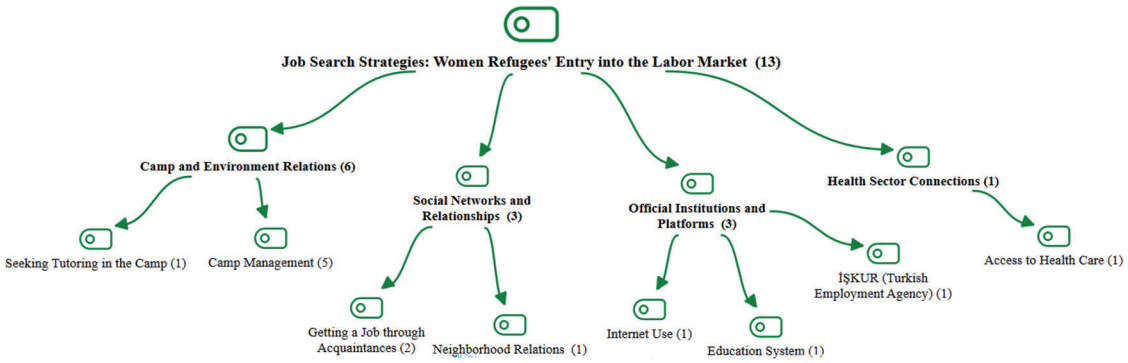

Fig. 9 Job Search Strategies of Women under Temporary Protection.

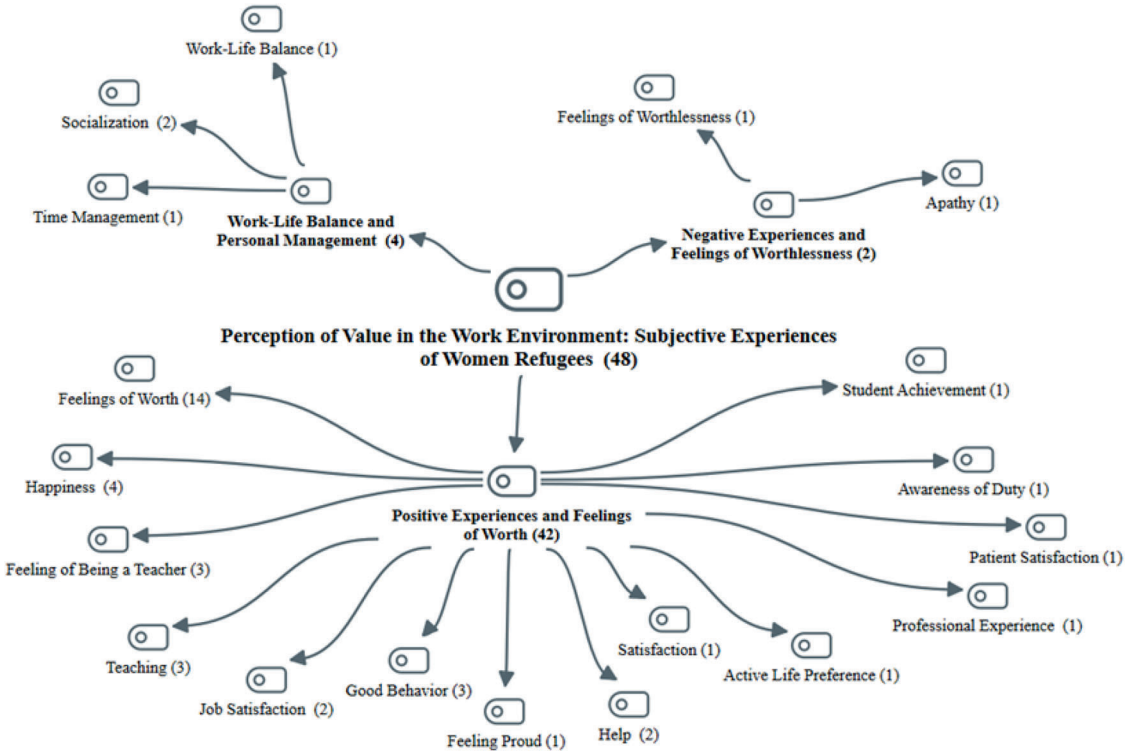

Fig. 10 Perceptions of Value in the Workplace among Women under Temporary Protection.

vital localized labor markets. One participant noted, "I gave private lessons in the camp" (Participant 11), while the same individual added, "I worked in the camp school for three years" (Participant 11). These accounts suggest that for some women, the TAC environment provided a protected, albeit circumscribed, space to exercise their professional qualifications in educational roles. Informal social networks also emerged as a primary mechanism for labor market access. Participants frequently relied on "word-of-mouth," neighborhood ties, and community networks to bypass formal bureaucratic hurdles. As one participant explained, "I found a job through acquaintances" (Participant 9). While formal platforms such as İŞKUR and internet-based searches were utilized, they were often perceived as less accessible or effective than these organic social connections. From these results that women's entry into the labor market was shaped by their ability to mobilize social and environmental capital under constrained conditions. Even in the absence of formal degree recognition, participants demonstrated significant agency by leveraging localized networks to maintain a semblance of professional continuity.

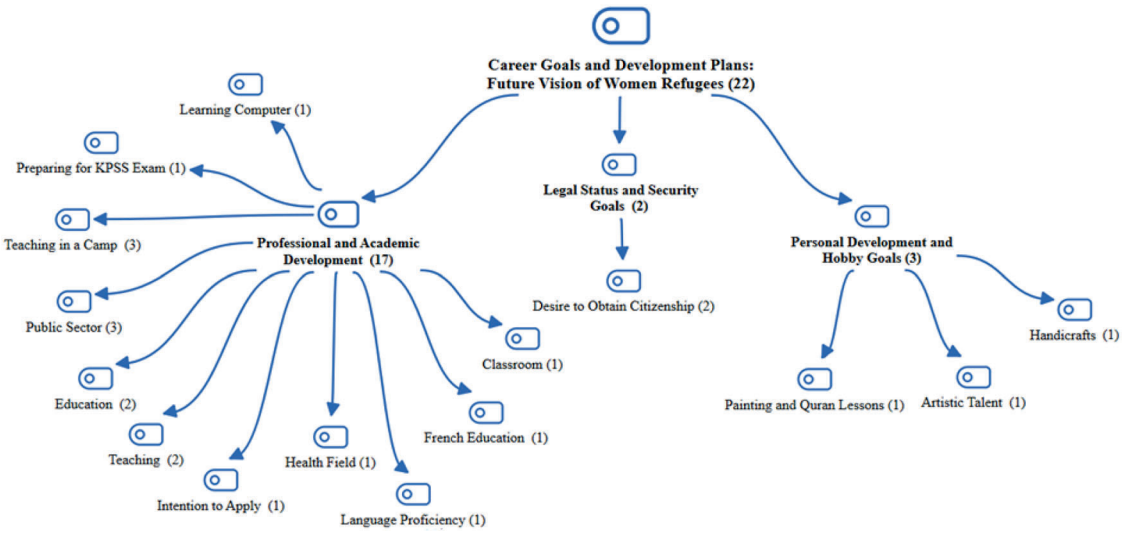

Fig. 11 Career Goals and Development Plans of Women under Temporary Protection.

Figure 10 demonstrates that for educated Syrian women, the workplace serves as a critical site of both recognition and devaluation. Their perceptions of professional worth are shaped by a dualistic structure of experiences that directly influence their identity reconstruction and broader integration. On the positive axis, participants reported a profound sense of empowerment when able to contribute meaningfully and receive professional validation. Such experiences revitalized their professional identities, which had often been suppressed since displacement. One participant succinctly expressed this regained agency: "I feel valuable when I work" (Participant 3). Similarly, another highlighted the symbolic importance of reclaiming her status by stating, "I feel like a teacher again" (Participant 8). These findings suggest that for women with high-level academic degrees, labor is not merely an economic necessity but a vital source of dignity and self-realization. Conversely, participants also articulated experiences that precipitated feelings of devaluation and "professional invisibility." Challenges in maintaining work–life balance, coupled with structural exclusion, contributed to emotional exhaustion and a sense of worthlessness. As one participant noted, "Sometimes I feel worthless in the workplace" (Participant 12), while another described the psychological toll: "I lost my motivation because of the difficulties I faced" (Participant 6). These narratives indicate that women's workplace experiences are defined by a dynamic tension between professional inclusion and systemic marginalization. While positive encounters reinforce confidence and social belonging, negative experiences erode motivation and the desire for professional continuity. Ultimately, the workplace appears as a contested arena where participants negotiate their identity and professional standing—often struggling to align their prior qualifications with the precarious realities of their current employment in Türkiye.

Figure 11 shows that educated Syrian women under temporary protection maintain robust, future-oriented aspirations despite the formidable structural barriers they encounter. Their trajectories cluster around three strategic domains: professional and academic advancement, personal development, and legal security. Professional and academic development emerged as the most prominent sphere of aspiration. Participants frequently articulated a resolute desire to reclaim their attained professions, particularly in education, or to secure stable employment within public institutions. One participant poignantly stated, "I want to work as a teacher again" (Participant 3), while another emphasized her goal of institutional integration: "I want to work in the public sector" (Participant 11). These goals are often underpinned by proactive efforts to align their prior qualifications with local requirements, such as language acquisition or exam preparation. As one participant noted, "I am preparing for the KPSS [Public Personnel Selection Examination]" (Participant 8), highlighting a direct attempt to validate her professional standing within the Turkish system. Beyond formal labor, personal development and hobby-based aspirations also featured in the narratives. Engagement in artistic practices and the cultivation of individual talents suggest that participants' future plans encompass a holistic sense of self-actualization. Furthermore, legal status remains a fundamental prerequisite for

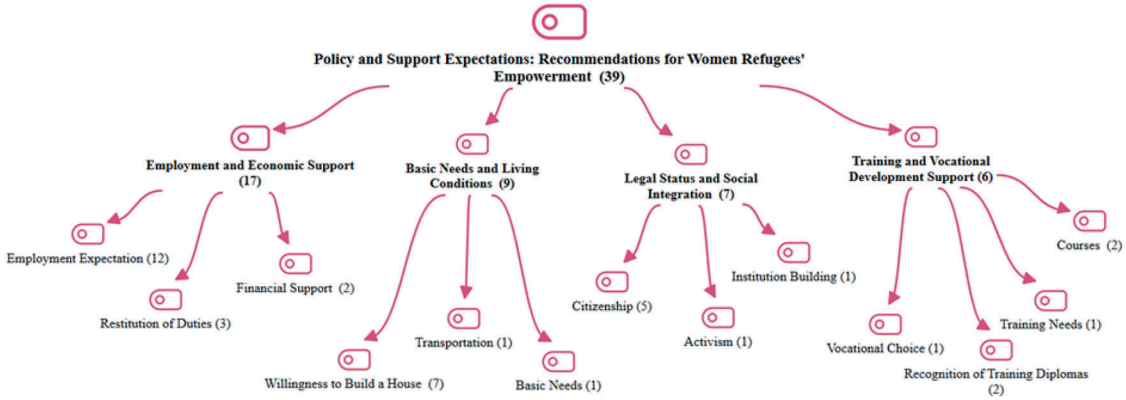

Fig. 12 Policy and Support Expectations for the Empowerment of Women under Temporary Protection.

these aspirations; as one participant succinctly expressed, "If I get citizenship, I can build a better future" (Participant 13). From these results that the future plans of educated Syrian women are driven by a quest for professional continuity and stability. Their aspirations reflect a persistent effort to transform their academic degrees from "frozen assets" into active tools for social and economic integration in Türkiye.

Figure 12 illustrates that educated Syrian women under temporary protection articulate a comprehensive set of policy expectations and support needs essential for their career development and socio-economic integration in Türkiye. These expectations are strategically clustered around four thematic pillars: employment and economic empowerment, legal status and social inclusion, vocational advancement, and foundational living conditions. Employment and economic support emerged as the most urgent area of expectation. Participants emphasized the necessity for equitable labor market access and robust financial assistance to facilitate self-reliance. As one participant articulated, "We need more job opportunities to build our lives" (Participant 9), while another noted, "Financial support is very important for us [to bridge the gap to formal work]" (Participant 5). Legal status and institutional inclusion were identified as the primary catalysts for change. Participants consistently identified the acquisition of citizenship as the fundamental prerequisite for exercising their rights and accessing stable employment. One participant expressed this succinctly: "If we get citizenship, everything will be easier" (Participant 13). Furthermore, vocational advancement through the recognition of academic degrees and specialized training was highlighted as a critical demand. Participants underscored that such institutional interventions are necessary to validate their prior qualifications and rectify the current state of professional invisibility. One participant stated, "We need courses and training to improve [and validate] ourselves" (Participant 6). Collectively, these findings indicate that the policy expectations of educated Syrian women transcend immediate survival needs. They represent a broader demand for a

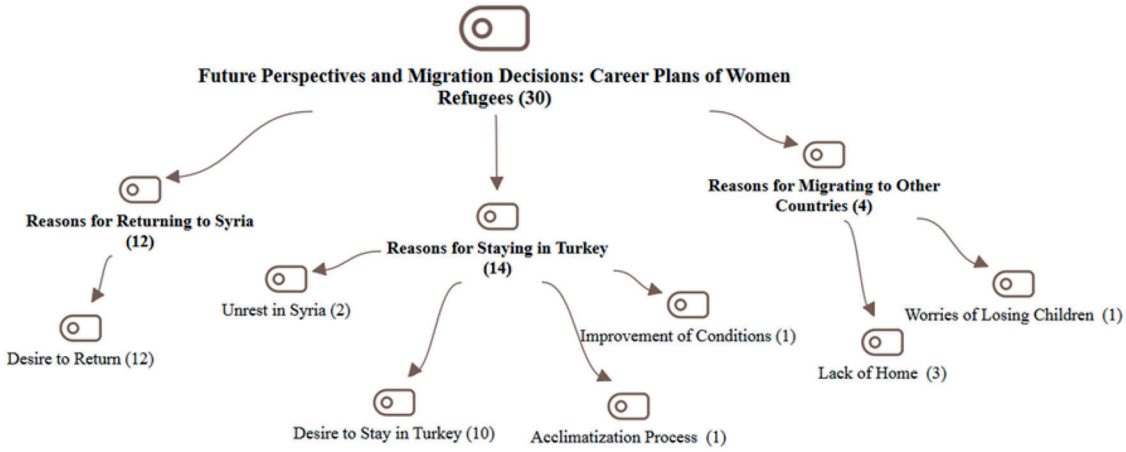

Fig. 13 Future Perspectives and Migration Decisions of Women under Temporary Protection.

coordinated multi-sectoral framework that addresses the structural barriers to qualified employment, legal security, and sustainable social integration.

Figure 13 delineates the migration-related future perspectives of educated Syrian women under temporary protection. The findings indicate that participants' decision-making processes are multifaceted, shaped by a confluence of emotional attachment, security concerns, adaptation experiences, and long-term aspirations. A significant segment of the cohort expressed a profound desire to return to Syria, primarily driven by a sense of belonging and an enduring attachment to their homeland. As one participant poignantly stated, "I want to return to my country" (Participant 12). However, participants concurrently emphasized that persistent instability and systemic insecurity in Syria remain prohibitive to such a return. One participant explained, "There is still war and instability, so I cannot go back" (Participant 2), highlighting the tension between emotional longing and the pragmatic reality of safety. Conversely, other participants articulated a clear intention to remain in Türkiye, a decision frequently associated with improved living conditions and successful adaptation to the host society. One participant noted, "I want to stay in Türkiye and build my future here" (Participant 10), suggesting a commitment to reconstructing her life and professional standing within the Turkish context. In addition, some participants viewed onward migration to third countries as a viable alternative, often motivated by chronic housing instability and concerns regarding their children's long-term well-being. "We do not have a stable home here" (Participant 7), and "I worry about my children's future" (Participant 15) were representative of this precarious outlook. These findings suggest that migration-related trajectories are not determined by a single factor but are the result of competing considerations between return, settlement, and onward movement. These perspectives provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent Discussion, which interprets these results in relation to the specificities of the Turkish temporary protection regime and the broader global literature on refugee women's labor market integration.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the career trajectories of the educated Syrian women who participated in this study were substantially disrupted following forced migration. Participants' accounts indicate that their efforts to enter or re-enter qualified employment were constrained by intersecting legal, institutional, linguistic, and gender-related barriers. Within the specific context of the Dulkadiroğlu Refugee Accommodation Center, these factors appeared to shape participants' opportunities to maintain or reconstruct their professional identities. These findings should be interpreted as a context-specific account of the 24 participants rather than as representative of all Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye. The following discussion interprets these empirical results through three interrelated theoretical lenses: the capability approach, everyday racism, and gender relations.

First, the findings strongly resonate with the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000), which emphasizes that resources and professional qualifications do not automatically translate into meaningful opportunities unless individuals are able to convert them into valued functionings. Although many participants possessed advanced academic degrees, extensive professional experience, and clear aspirations for self-improvement, they remained largely unable to transform these assets into stable employment. This interpretation aligns with recent research in Türkiye, which argues that the labor market incorporation of Syrians is fundamentally mediated by legal status, sectoral segmentation, and the persistence of informal work arrangements (Demirci & Kırdar, 2023; Karadeniz, 2023). In this respect, the findings suggest that women's capabilities were constrained not by a deficit of motivation or skill, but by external structural barriers—most notably the non-recognition of degrees, limited access to work permits, and restricted childcare support. Within the Turkish context, the participation of women under temporary protection is dictated by a precarious balance between individual qualifications and employer-dependent permit procedures. Building on this point, temporary protection is analytically significant in this study because it functions not merely as a legal category, but as a "structuring condition" that shapes labor market engagement in multifaceted ways. While providing legal stay and partial access to public services, the regime does not ensure equitable access to formal, qualified employment. Participants' accounts suggest that their career trajectories were shaped by a temporary protection framework that provided legal stay and access to certain public services while leaving access to formal and qualified employment

subject to additional legal and administrative conditions. For the participants in this study, this perceived legal uncertainty appeared to complicate long-term career planning and increase reliance on informal employment, NGO-supported initiatives, and family networks. These accounts indicate that Türkiye's temporary protection framework is an important contextual factor when interpreting participants' employment experiences. Comparative research would be needed to determine how these experiences differ from those observed under other protection frameworks.

Second, the findings point to the relevance of everyday racism (Essed, 1991) in understanding exclusion from employment and education. Participants' accounts of discriminatory treatment in workplaces, schools, and hiring processes suggest that labor market integration is shaped by both formal regulations and routine forms of exclusion operating through prejudice, stereotyping, and unequal treatment. These experiences indicate that Syrian women's qualifications are not always assessed on equal terms in the host context. This interpretation is in line with recent research showing that migrant and refugee women frequently encounter layered exclusion in labor markets due to the intersection of migration status, gender, and social stigma (Al-Hamad et al., 2024; Flavel et al., 2024). In Türkiye, where access to formal employment remains highly regulated and informal employment is widespread, such discriminatory dynamics may deepen vulnerability and weaken women's confidence in pursuing long-term professional goals.

Third, the findings align closely with the framework of gender relations (Connell et al., 2002), particularly regarding the impact of childcare, domestic labor, and spousal dynamics on professional aspirations. Participants' narratives underscore that labor market participation is not merely an individual choice but a socially mediated process shaped by gendered expectations within the family. In Türkiye, participants described these barriers as being compounded by restricted mobility and limited access to childcare support, which disproportionately affects women under temporary protection. Consequently, women's career trajectories remain embedded in a broader gendered division of labor, where care work and household obligations often take precedence over the utilization of their professional qualifications. This is consistent with global research indicating that refugee women's employment pathways are frequently constrained by the "triple burden" of displacement, motherhood, and domesticity (Cheung & Phillimore, 2017; Spehar, 2021). At the same time, the findings highlight that family structures operate as a dualistic environment: while supportive spouses can act as catalysts for confidence and educational continuity, traditional family-based restrictions often narrow women's autonomy. In this sense, even women with advanced academic degrees must engage in a continuous domestic negotiation to maintain their professional standing, suggesting that gendered family relations were an important factor shaping the educational and employment opportunities reported by participants.

The findings concerning career transformation further deepen this theoretical interpretation. Following displacement, a significant number of women were forced to deviate from their original occupational trajectories, transitioning into informal, transitory, or survival-based labor. The accounts of participants residing in the Dulkadiroğlu Refugee Accommodation Center suggest that the institutional and spatial characteristics of this setting shaped their access to mobility, employment, education, and support services. Because the study did not include an urban comparison group, differences between center-based and urban-dwelling women should be examined in future comparative research. For some participants, post-migration transformation manifested as teaching within TACs, providing private tutoring, or engaging in NGO-led initiatives. For others, it necessitated a shift toward handicrafts or other small-scale, home-based economic activities. For several participants, these occupational changes appeared to involve an interruption of professional continuity and a degree of occupational deskilling. This aligns with broader international patterns where refugee women's employment pathways are characterized by dequalification and informalization rather than the direct continuation of their pre-migration professions (Koch et al., 2023; Nassar, 2024). Participants' accounts of career transformation reflected both their efforts to adapt and the structural constraints they reported encountering. For many, the necessity to reconstruct their professional identity under such constrained conditions means that their academic degrees and specialized expertise remain "on hold," effectively sidelined by the immediate demands of economic survival.

Participants reported that NGOs and informal support networks provided important, although limited, assistance in their efforts to develop skills and reconstruct their professional lives. NGO-led courses and project-based initiatives were described by participants as useful but partial sources of skill development and social participation. However,

their long-term impact remains inhibited as long as broader legal and labor market barriers persist. Language programs, public education courses, and vocational training initiatives bolster participants' professional confidence and employability. Within the capability framework, these mechanisms should be understood as enabling conditions that expand women's "room for maneuver," even if they cannot fully dismantle overarching structural impediments. Within this study, NGOs appeared to function as useful but incomplete sources of support, particularly where formal employment and qualification-recognition pathways remained limited.

The findings further underscore the necessity of interpreting women's experiences within the specific parameters of the Turkish temporary protection regime. Participants' narratives indicate that legal status was an important contextual factor in their reported access to education and employment and in their ability to make longer-term career plans. The persistent emphasis on citizenship, the recognition of academic degrees, and access to secure employment reflects the enduring salience of legal precarity in Türkiye. Furthermore, participants reported significant economic strain and psychological distress inextricably linked to displacement and professional loss, echoing established research on the mental health of Syrian populations in Türkiye (Alpak et al., 2015; Acartürk et al., 2021). These accounts suggest that participants experienced labor market exclusion not only as an economic difficulty but also as an issue connected to dignity, belonging, and psychosocial well-being. For some participants, being unable to use their professional qualifications appeared to weaken their sense of professional recognition and complicate their efforts to reconstruct their identities in Türkiye.

Participants' future aspirations and policy expectations further reinforce the multidimensional nature of integration. Women's proactive plans to enhance their Turkish language proficiency, seek citizenship, prepare for competitive public employment (e.g., KPSS), and pursue further vocational training suggest a strategic, long-term investment in professional rebuilding. Their expectations from public institutions and NGOs—specifically regarding the recognition of academic degrees, legal security, and gender-sensitive welfare measures like childcare and transportation—indicate that integration is experienced as a coordinated process requiring robust structural support. These findings align with recent scholarship emphasizing that refugee women's labor market participation cannot be sustained in a vacuum; it must be linked to comprehensive employment policies that integrate legal status with social protection (Seyfert & Alonso, 2024; Al-Hamad et al., 2024). In this sense, the participants' demands for vocational guidance and financial incentives are not merely requests for aid, but are instead calls for the removal of institutional "gatekeepers" that prevent the full utilization of their professional qualifications. Participants' accounts suggest that longer-term legal clarity, accessible qualification-recognition procedures, and more secure employment pathways may support professional continuity and socio-economic participation. The present study does not, however, evaluate the legal or policy feasibility of replacing the temporary protection framework.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the career experiences of educated Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye cannot be understood through labor market participation alone. Rather, they reflect the interaction of constrained capabilities, everyday exclusion, and gendered social relations. The women in this study were not passive recipients of structural conditions; they actively sought to preserve, adapt, and reconstruct their professional trajectories. However, these efforts were shaped by a context in which legal insecurity, discrimination, and domestic responsibilities repeatedly narrowed the range of opportunities available to them. For this reason, sustainable integration requires more than employability-oriented interventions. It requires policies that address legal access, recognition of qualifications, anti-discrimination, childcare, and long-term institutional support within the specific realities of women under temporary protection in Türkiye. The study makes three main contributions to the literature. Empirically, it provides a context-specific account of the career experiences of educated Syrian women residing in a temporary accommodation center in Türkiye, a setting that remains less visible in existing research on refugee women's labor market integration. Theoretically, it shows that women's career trajectories can be understood through the interaction of constrained capabilities, everyday exclusion, and gendered social relations, rather than through employment status alone. From a policy perspective, the findings indicate that sustainable labor market integration requires coordinated interventions that address legal insecurity, recognition of qualifications, language and vocational support, childcare, social protection, and longer-term institutional inclusion. Taken together, these contributions strengthen the relevance of the study for ongoing debates on refugee women's employment, social integration, and gender-sensitive policy design in Türkiye and comparable host-country contexts.

This study contributes to the broader literature by demonstrating that temporary protection operates not only as a legal status but as a structuring mechanism shaping labor market participation, professional continuity, and long-term agency among refugee women.

Policy implications

The policy implications presented here are derived from the accounts of 24 educated Syrian women residing in one temporary accommodation center and should therefore be interpreted as context-specific recommendations rather than broadly generalizable policy conclusions. Participants' accounts suggest that clearer qualification-recognition procedures, accessible language and vocational programs, and improved guidance concerning formal employment could support their efforts to enter or re-enter qualified occupations. Participants also identified childcare, transportation, health insurance, and legal certainty as factors affecting their ability to pursue education and employment.

These findings indicate that closer coordination among relevant public institutions, local authorities, NGOs, and international organizations may help reduce fragmented access to employment and support services. However, the present study did not evaluate the effectiveness, cost, or feasibility of particular policy interventions. Further comparative and policy-focused research involving women in different residential settings, service providers, employers, and relevant public institutions is needed before broader policy conclusions can be drawn.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It involved a purposive sample of 24 educated Syrian women residing in a single temporary accommodation center; therefore, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all Syrian women under temporary protection in Türkiye. The study relied on retrospective, self-reported accounts, which may have been influenced by recall and social-desirability bias. Where translation was required, some linguistic or culturally specific meanings may also have been lost.

The study included only participants' perspectives and did not collect data from family members, employers, NGOs, accommodation-center personnel, or public institutions. Its cross-sectional design also prevented observation of changes in participants' careers over time. Finally, the frequencies shown in the figures represent coded references rather than participant numbers or statistical prevalence, and the interpretation of the qualitative data inevitably involved researcher judgment. Future longitudinal and multi-stakeholder studies conducted in different residential settings could provide a broader understanding of these career experiences.

Conclusion

This study examined the career experiences of educated Syrian women under temporary protection residing in a temporary accommodation center in Türkiye. The findings show that forced migration disrupted participants' pre-existing occupational trajectories and reshaped their professional lives under conditions of limited opportunity. Before displacement, the women had diverse educational and professional backgrounds, yet after arrival in Türkiye many were unable to continue along their previous career paths and instead had to adapt to new and often constrained employment conditions.

The findings further suggest that these career trajectories were shaped by the interaction of structural constraints and women's active efforts to adapt. Participants' experiences indicate that professional continuity was influenced by both their individual qualifications and the broader institutional, legal, and social environment in which those qualifications were interpreted and used. At the same time, the study highlights women's agency and resilience, as participants described various ways of sustaining aspirations, developing skills, and seeking alternative pathways toward professional stability.

The findings suggest that the career experiences reported by the 24 participants were shaped by an interaction of career disruption, individual adaptation, and constrained opportunities within the specific context of the Dulkadiroğlu Refugee Accommodation Center. Within the specific context of a temporary accommodation center in Türkiye, participants' accounts indicate that more coordinated and gender-sensitive forms of support may assist career development and social participation in comparable settings. In relation to the research questions, the study shows how forced migration disrupted women's pre-existing professional trajectories, what barriers they encountered, what strategies and support mechanisms they used, and how they articulated future plans and expectations under temporary protection. At the same time, important questions remain regarding how these dynamics differ between temporary accommodation centers and urban settings and how women's longer-term career trajectories evolve over time. Future research may compare the experiences of women residing in temporary accommodation centers with those living in urban settings in order to better understand how context shapes career trajectories under temporary protection.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University on 11 April 2025 (Approval No. E-72321963-050.04-409426; Decision No. 7, Session 2025-7). The study titled "Career Experiences of Educated Syrian Women in Türkiye" was approved to be conducted with Syrian women residing in the Dulkadiroğlu Refugee Accommodation Center. Participant recruitment and data collection commenced only after ethical approval had been granted. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality and anonymization procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The consent included permission for the anonymized use of the interview data for research and academic publication. Because the data were collected and analyzed specifically for the present study, no separate secondary analysis was undertaken. Participants provided informed consent for the anonymized use and publication of their interview data in academic publications. No personally identifiable information is included in the manuscript.

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