WHEN SCARS (!) BECOME ART

RESEARCH REPORT ON THE EFFECTS OF DISCRIMINATION ON THE WELLBEING OF MARGINALIZED YOUNG PEOPLE

TURKIYE

KARGENC ENVIRONMENT SPORT CLUB

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Well-being and Discrimination of Marginalized Young People in *Türkiye*

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0. Executive Summary

This research was conducted within the framework of the "When Scars (!) Become Art" project to explore the impact of discrimination on the mental health and social inclusion of disadvantaged youth in Türkiye, with a focus on Roma, migrant, and refugee/asylum-seeking populations. The study aimed to address a persistent gap between the inclusive objectives of national policy frameworks and the real-life experiences of marginalized youth. While Türkiye has developed strategic documents such as the Roma Strategy Document (2023–2025) and the Integration Strategy and National Action Plan for migrants and refugees (2018–2023), systemic barriers in education, housing, employment, and healthcare—particularly mental health—remain deeply entrenched.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining a quantitative survey with 122 young individuals from disadvantaged groups and qualitative in-depth interviews with youth and youth workers. The quantitative component examined variables related to perceived discrimination, psychosocial wellbeing, worldview, and social connectedness using standardized psychological instruments. The qualitative component explored participants' personal experiences with discrimination, emotional impacts, coping mechanisms, and the types of support needed.

Findings from the quantitative component revealed that refugee/asylum-seeking youth reported the lowest mental health scores and highest levels of internalized discrimination. While group identity did not significantly predict overall wellbeing in regression analysis, it did correspond to variations in mental health outcomes. A strong belief in a benevolent, fair, and controllable world (referred to as "Image of the World") emerged as the most significant positive predictor of wellbeing. Interestingly, a stronger sense of one's "Place in the World" negatively predicted wellbeing, possibly indicating that increased awareness of one's marginalized social status can exacerbate psychological distress.

The qualitative findings provided deeper insight into these dynamics. Both Roma and refugee youth reported discrimination in schools, workplaces, housing, and public spaces. Roma youth highlighted the impact of antigypsyism, which takes the form of ethnic segregation and stereotyping in education, while refugee youth—particularly Syrians—faced language barriers, xenophobia, and difficulties accessing essential services. Psychological consequences included depression, anxiety, trauma, and social withdrawal. Many youth suppressed their ethnic identity in response to societal stigma, leading to further isolation and loss of cultural continuity. Coping strategies were largely informal, relying on personal resilience, religious practices, and community or family support, highlighting the inadequacy of institutional responses.

Youth workers confirmed these experiences, describing multilayered discrimination across all areas of life. They emphasized the intersectionality of ethnicity, legal status, gender, and religion in shaping exclusion. A major concern among practitioners was the absence of culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services, particularly for Arabic-speaking refugee youth. Youth workers also reported significant emotional fatigue and institutional neglect, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable, well-resourced, and rights-based service delivery frameworks.

The research underscores a major gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation. While Türkiye has articulated policy goals around inclusion and youth empowerment, these initiatives remain poorly enforced, fragmented, and insufficiently tailored to the complex needs of marginalized youth. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are limited, making it difficult to hold institutions accountable or to assess progress.

Based on these findings, the study calls for immediate action from policymakers, civil society, and international actors. There is an urgent need to develop inclusive and intersectional policies grounded in human rights and informed by the lived experiences of marginalized youth. This includes scaling up language-accessible mental health services, addressing structural barriers in education and employment, and creating opportunities for meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes.

1. Introduction

Background and Context

The present study emerges within the broader framework of the "When Scars (!) Become Art" project, which seeks to explore the complex interplay between discrimination, mental health, and social inclusion among disadvantaged youth—specifically Roma, migrant, and refugee/asylum-seeking populations—in Türkiye. This initiative aligns with previous policy-oriented research that identified substantial gaps between legislative ambitions and the lived realities of marginalized youth. Despite various national strategies—such as the Strategy Document for Roma Citizens (2023–2025) and the Integration Strategy Document and National Action Plan (2018–2023) for refugees and migrants—systemic barriers persist in education, employment, housing, and health services, including mental health care. Unlike migrants and refugees who face exclusion linked to legal status and xenophobia, Roma face antigypsyism, a historically entrenched form of racism that affects them regardless of citizenship or residence.

Building on the earlier phase of the project, which conducted a critical document analysis of relevant legislation, academic literature, and policy initiatives, this study extends the inquiry by incorporating field research aimed at capturing the real-life experiences of discrimination and its psychosocial impacts on young people. The previous report underscored how Roma youth continue to face educational segregation, labor market exclusion, and substandard housing, while refugee and migrant youth experience language barriers, legal precarity, and insufficient mental health support. In both groups, the intersectionality of ethnicity, age, gender, and legal status was shown to deepen their marginalization.

In response to these findings, the current research employs a mixed-methods approach to assess both the prevalence of discrimination and its psychological effects, while also identifying the institutional and community-based support systems available—or lacking—for marginalized youth and youth workers. In doing so, this study aims to contribute empirically grounded insights that can inform future policy interventions, capacity-building strategies, and rights-based social inclusion efforts.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several key reasons. First, it provides a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of how discrimination—both structural and interpersonal—impacts the mental well-being of disadvantaged youth in Türkiye. While previous policy documents and academic studies have outlined the systemic nature of exclusion, they often lack first-hand narratives and psychosocial data that reveal the emotional and cognitive toll on young individuals. By integrating qualitative interviews with youth and youth workers, and quantitative measures related to mental health, social connectedness, and perceived discrimination, this study offers a holistic view of how marginalization operates on multiple levels.

Second, the study highlights the limitations of existing support structures. Although Türkiye has implemented policies targeting Roma inclusion and refugee integration, our findings indicate a pronounced gap in the practical implementation of these strategies. For instance, Roma youth still report discrimination in schools and workplaces, while refugee youth—particularly Syrians—struggle with the absence of language-accessible mental health services and educational opportunities due to financial and legal constraints.

Third, this study holds potential policy relevance. By identifying both risk factors (such as internalized discrimination, poor housing, and xenophobia) and resilience mechanisms (like family support, religious coping, and community solidarity), it generates actionable recommendations for rights-based, culturally sensitive, and youth-centered interventions. These findings can inform the design of inclusive policies, social service provision, and targeted outreach programs led by government institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners.

Finally, the research contributes to the collective effort of centering marginalized voices in the formulation of public policy. In line with the mission of initiatives such as Romani Godi, which emphasizes the importance of memory, rights advocacy, and cultural preservation for the Roma community, this study reinforces the importance of participatory approaches in tackling systemic inequalities. By making visible the lived experiences of young Roma, migrants, and refugees, it strengthens the case for intersectional, inclusive, and equity-driven social policies in Türkiye.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose and design

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of discrimination on the wellbeing of disadvantaged youth.

We used a mix-methods design, involving:

- A quantitative cross-sectional study of the effects of discrimination on the wellbeing of youngsters. This component involved the application of a questionnaire on a sample of youngsters from disadvantaged groups (Roma, migrants, and refugees/asylum seekers);

- A qualitative investigation regarding the type of support needed by the youngsters from disadvantaged groups and the youth workers to improve the quality and efficacy of the support services. This component involved conducting a series of in-depth interviews with youth workers and youngsters from disadvantaged groups.

The main and secondary variables included in the questionnaire:

1. Discrimination: Forms of discrimination encountered, Self-reported ethnicity, Perceived Ethnic Discrimination

2. Image of the World: Benevolence of the world, Benevolence of people, Justice, Controllability
3. Place in the world: Social connectedness, Internalization of Discrimination, Self-worth, Self-controllability
4. Wellbeing: General (Satisfaction with life, Mental health), Specific (Depression, Anxiety, Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination)

The main themes of the interviews:

a. Impact of discrimination on youngsters' wellbeing
b. Barriers in disadvantaged youngsters access to adequate support
c. Support measures needed by youngsters to overcome the negative effects of discrimination
d. Support measures needed by youth workers to provide adequate services to disadvantaged youngsters

2.2. Participants:

2.2.1 Quantitative Research Participants

Age Percantage

- 15-20 yaş — 34%
- 21-25 yaş — 38%
- 26+ yaş — 29%
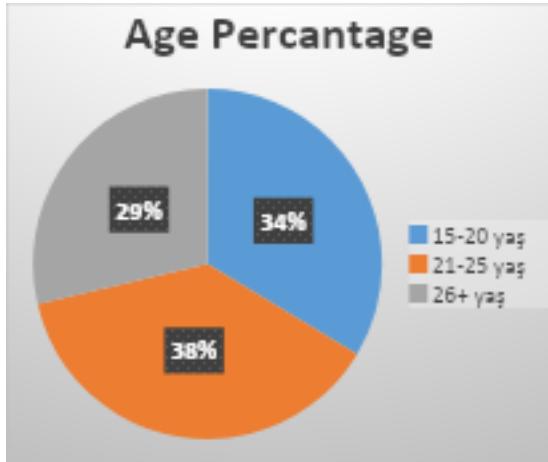
Among the demographic data obtained in the study, the age variable was divided into three groups as 15-20 years, 21-25 years and 26+ years. There are 41 people between the ages of 15-20, 46 people between the ages of 21-25, and 35 people aged 26 and over. When the percentage graph of the age independent variable is analyzed, it is seen that the 21-25 age group has the largest share with 38%, while the 26 and over age group has the smallest share with 29%.

When the independent variable of gender is analyzed, 69 of the participants are female and 53 are male. When the percentage graph of the gender variable is analyzed, 57% of the participants are Female and 43% are Male.

The demographic data obtained in the study were divided into three groups as "Has a job", "Has a job but looking for a job" and "Unemployed". While there were 47 participants who stated that they had a job, the number of those who had a job but were looking for a new job was 35. Out of the total sample group of 122 people, 40 people stated that they were unemployed. When the percentage graph of the

employment status variable is analyzed, the highest percentage is 38% of the respondents who stated that they have a job, and the second highest percentage is 33% of the respondents who stated that they are unemployed.

When the table above showing the frequency and percentage distribution of the participants according to their education levels is analyzed, it is seen that university education constitutes the largest group with a rate of 64.8% (79 people). This indicates that the educational level of the sample group is high. Individuals with a high school diploma or lower are 29.5% (36 people) in total. The proportion of those with postgraduate education (master's and doctorate) is quite low (5.8%), and from this point of view, it can be said that the number of those who continue their academic career is limited.

Although 61.5% (75 people) of the respondents who were assessed to be citizens of their country of residence were citizens, there was a significant 37.7% of respondents who indicated that they were not citizens. This may indicate that the survey may include an international sample or that the migrant population has a significant share. The presence of the "Other" category (0.8%) may indicate that there are individuals with special status (refugees, temporary residence permit holders, dual citizens, etc.). The Syria group constitutes the largest proportion of the participants who are not citizens of their country of residence. This situation can be considered as the effects of the Syrian war. It is seen that other groups have almost the same proportion.
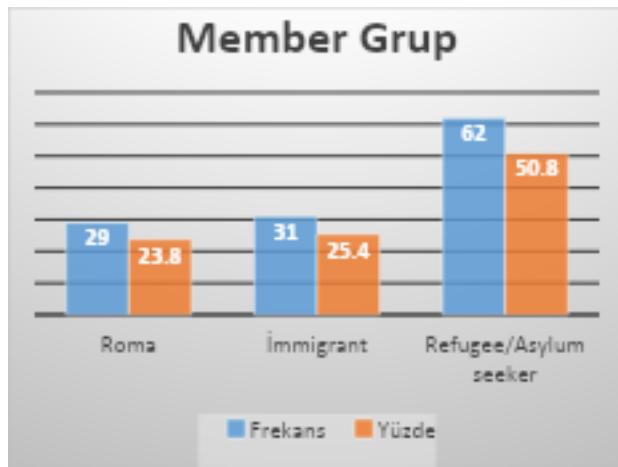
Member group variable consists of "Roma", "Immigrant" and "Refugee/Asylum Seeker" groups. Refugee/Asylum Seeker group has the largest proportion, Immigrant is in the second place and Roma is in the third place.

The group with the highest rate is Muslim (17.2%), except for the group that did not want to specify their ethnic identity. Roma (13.9%) and Arabian (2.5%) groups also have relatively higher rates compared to other groups. According to the data in the table, most of the respondents (54.1%) preferred not to indicate their ethnic identity. This may suggest that individuals may be sensitive about sharing their ethnic identity or prefer to remain anonymous. There were also individuals who did not identify themselves within a specific ethnic identity, such as "I don't feel belong any group" (0.8%).

2.3. Tools and measures

The questionnaire comprised 139 items, as follows:

- Social and demographic profile of the participants - 11 items;

- Forms of discrimination encountered - 6 items;

- Self-reported ethnicity - 1 item;

- Ethnicity-related stress scale (ERS) (Contrada et al., 2001), Perceived Ethnic Discrimination subscale - 17 items;

- Structure of the World Assumption Scale (WAS) (Bulman, 1989), subscales Benevolence of the world, Benevolence of people, Justice, Controllability, Self-worth, Self-controllability - 32 items;

- Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R) (Lee, 2001) - 20 items;

- Internalization of Discrimination Scale (Rodriguez, 2024) - 7 items;

- The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS-5) (Diener et al., 1985) - 5 items;

- The Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5) (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992 apud. Have et al, 2024) - 5 items;

- Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS21) (Antony et al., 1998) - subscales Depression and Anxiety - 14 items;

- Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale (TSDS) (Williams, 2018) - 21 items.

The interview with the disadvantaged youngsters comprised 7 close-ended questions (regarding their social and demographic profile) and 11 open-ended questions about their experiences with discrimination, the effects felt and the support they accessed or needed to overcome the situation.

The interview with the youth workers comprised 9 close-ended questions (regarding their social and demographic profile) and 11 open-ended questions about their clients' experiences with discrimination, the effects felt and the support they accessed or needed to overcome the situation, as well as the resources needed by the youth workers themselves to provide adequate support to their clients.

2.3. Analyses

SPSS was used to analyze quantitative data:

- Independent Sample T-test: The difference between the averages of "World Image", "Place in the World" and "Well-being" according to gender variable was analyzed and no significant difference was found.
- One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA): The effect of variables such as Membership Group (Roma, Migrant, Refugee/Asylum Seeker), age group, education level, employment status, citizenship, income, skin color and personal perspective on psychosocial indicators were analyzed. In the analyzes where significant results were obtained, Post Hoc Gabriel test was applied to determine the direction of the differences between the groups.
- Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationships between variables such as membership group, world image, place in the world and well-being; positive or negative significant relationships were found between some variables.
- Multiple Linear Regression Analysis: The variables predicting the participants' well-being were examined; the effects of world image, place in the world and membership group on well-being were tested. In addition, separate models predicting world image and perception of place in the world were created. Significant regression models were obtained in terms of goodness of fit and the effects of variables were evaluated through beta coefficients.
- All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. A significance level of $p < .05$ was accepted.

For the analysis of qualitative interviews with a total of 20 people:

- Print application was used to transcribe the interviews of the participants who gave consent for the interviews to be recorded (only 7 of the participants gave consent for the interviews to be recorded).
- Notes were taken during the interviews of the participants who did not consent to the recording of the interviews.
- Coding was performed using Nvivo and the interviews were analyzed.

2.4. Limitations of the Study

This study aims to examine the effects of discrimination on the well-being of disadvantaged youth through quantitative and qualitative methods. However, the study has several limitations listed below:

1. Sample Size and Representativeness

The quantitative component of the research is limited to 122 participants. While this sample size allows for certain statistical analyses for the targeted marginalized groups (Roma, migrants, refugees/asylum seekers), the generalizability of these results to the marginalized youth population in Turkey is limited. Especially given the size of the population, it limited the detailed analysis of the specific experiences of these groups.

2. Ethnic Identity Disclosure and Invisibility

A significant proportion of participants (54.1%) chose not to disclose their ethnic identity. This limits the ability to examine ethnic-based discrimination, antigypsyism, xenophobia and may result in the invisibility of certain forms of ethnic marginalization. The reluctance to disclose ethnic identity may reflect a fear of stigma, a desire for privacy, or a lack of trust in institutions. Also, many Roma avoid openly identifying due to fear of stigmatization and antigypsyist prejudice, which can lead to their underrepresentation in research.

In Turkey, there are four groups of Romani people: Dom, Lom, Rom, and Abdal. During the survey, access to the Lom and Abdal communities could not be achieved. These communities are part of the Romani people and experience multifaceted exclusion.

3. Possibility of Internalized Discrimination

Some participants—especially those from groups that have experienced long-term systemic discrimination, such as Roma and refugee youth—may have internalized discriminatory treatment. As a result, they might perceive discriminatory behavior as "normal" or "deserved" and may not report it as a negative experience. This internalized discrimination can affect self-esteem, feelings of belonging, and future expectations, leading to an underreporting of actual discrimination experiences.

4. Limited Conceptual Awareness of Discrimination

Some participants may lack a clear understanding of what constitutes discrimination. Without sufficient conceptual awareness, they may fail to identify or report subtle forms of discrimination, such as institutional barriers or indirect exclusion. This can lead to underestimation of the prevalence and impact of discrimination in the findings.

5. Closed-Ended Structure of the Survey

The quantitative survey primarily relied on closed-ended questions, which limited participants' ability to elaborate on their personal experiences of discrimination. As a result, nuanced and context-specific dimensions of discrimination may have been overlooked. Although the qualitative interviews provided some depth, the limited number of transcribed interviews restricted the richness of this component.

6. Limited Use of Audio Recording in Interviews

Only 7 participants consented to having their qualitative interviews recorded. For those who declined recording, interviewers relied on handwritten notes, which may have resulted in the omission of critical details or subjective interpretation during transcription and analysis. This affects the consistency and completeness of the qualitative data.

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7. Cross-Sectional Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time. As a result, it cannot establish causal relationships between discrimination and wellbeing; rather, it identifies associations among variables. Longitudinal research would be needed to assess changes over time and causal pathways.

8. Self-Reporting and Social Desirability Bias

All data were self-reported, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants might underreport sensitive issues such as discrimination, mental health concerns, or trauma symptoms due to fear of judgment or stigma. This may particularly affect data reliability in relation to internal or stigmatized experiences.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Component

In line with the findings obtained, when the experiences of the individuals regarding the types of discrimination they have faced throughout their lives are analyzed, it is seen that the participants stated that they were discriminated against mostly in terms of Racial and Ethnic discrimination and the least in terms of Sexual Orientation or Age. It should be noted that this result is limited to the accessible sample.

Analysis

In response to 17 questions regarding issues participants might face due to their ethnic background, 90 or more participants selected the "never" option for each question, indicating that they had not been exposed to these issues.

Upon examining the table showing the results of the normality tests, the total arithmetic means of *Image of the World*, *Place of the World*, and *Wellbeing* are presented along with their kurtosis and skewness values. Since these values fall within the ±2 range, the data is considered to be normally distributed. Therefore, parametric tests were used in the analyses (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006; Field, 2000; 2009; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014).

When examining the "Gender" variable, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the means of *Image of the World*, *Place of the World*, and *Wellbeing* differed significantly. The significance (p) values were found to be greater than 0.05: *Image of the World* sig. = .407, *Place of the World* sig. = .982, and *Wellbeing* sig. = .065. Accordingly, no significant differences were found based on gender.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether *Mental Health* scores differed significantly by "Member Group." The ANOVA values revealed significant differences: *Mental*

Health (F = 6.876; p = .002), with p-values less than .05. A Post Hoc Gabriel test was used to determine which groups differed. A significant difference was found between *Refugee/Asylum Seeker* and *Immigrant* groups, with immigrants scoring 4.19 points higher on the mental health inventory than refugees.

A one-way ANOVA was also conducted for *Internalization of Discrimination* by Member Group. The results were significant (F = 5.306; p = .006), and Post Hoc Gabriel testing showed that significant differences were found between *Refugee/Asylum Seeker* and *Immigrant* groups.

However, no significant differences were found for *Depression* (F = .330; p = .719) and *Anxiety* (F = .100; p = .905) by Member Group.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to assess differences in *Image of the World*, *Place of the World*, and *Wellbeing* by **Age**. Results showed no significant differences: *Image of the World* (F = .160; p = .853), *Place of the World* (F = 1.464; p = .233), and *Wellbeing* (F = 1.181; p = .310).

Similarly, no significant differences were found when analyzing **Education Level**: *Image of the World* (F = 1.135; p = .346), *Place of the World* (F = 1.756; p = .114), and *Wellbeing* (F = 2.133; p = .055).

For **Employment Status**, one-way ANOVA results showed no significant differences: *Image of the World* (F = .144; p = .866), *Place of the World* (F = .456; p = .635), and *Wellbeing* (F = 1.284; p = .281).

In the analysis of **Group Membership**, no significant differences were found in the means of *Image of the World*, *Place of the World*, or *Wellbeing*: (F = 1.140; p = .323), (F = .437; p = .647), and (F = .830; p = .438), respectively.

For **Citizenship**, no significant differences were found: *Image of the World* (F = 1.188; p = .308), *Place of the World* (F = 1.660; p = .194), and *Wellbeing* (F = 2.130; p = .123).

A significant difference was found between *Place of the World* scores based on **Skin Tone** (F = 4.306; p = .003), while *Image of the World* (F = 1.959; p = .105) and *Wellbeing* (F = 1.900; p = .115) showed no significant differences. Gabriel post hoc testing indicated that the difference occurred between the groups "Much Darker," "Much Lighter," and "About the Same."

Regarding the **Outlook** variable, only *Wellbeing* showed a significant difference (F = 3.653; p = .029). Gabriel post hoc test results indicated the difference was between "Much More Different" and "About the Same" groups. No significant differences were found for *Image of the World* (F = 2.687; p = .072) or *Place of the World* (F = 1.134; p = .325).

For the **Income** variable, only *Wellbeing* showed a significant difference (F = 3.653; p = .029), with Gabriel post hoc test revealing the significant difference between the "Much More

Different" and "About the Same" groups. No significant differences were found for *Image of the World* (F = 2.687; p = .072) or *Place of the World* (F = 1.134; p = .325).

Correlation

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between "Member Group" and "Mental Health." A significant negative correlation was found (Pearson correlation = –.028, r = .001, p < .001). As the Member Group variable increases (from "Roma" to "Immigrant" to "Refugee/Asylum Seeker"), total mental health scores decrease. For example, the Roma group (29 participants, 23.8%) had the highest mental health scores, while the refugee/asylum seeker group (62 participants, 50.8%) had the lowest.

No significant relationships were found between "Member Group" and:

- *Internalization of Discrimination* (r = .325, p > .005)

- *Depression* (r = .935, p > .005)

- *Anxiety* (r = .989, p > .005)

A significant positive relationship was found between:

- *Image of the World* and *Wellbeing* (r = .001, p < .001)

- *Image of the World* and *Place of the World* (r < .001, p < .001)

- *Place of the World* and *Wellbeing* (r < .001, p < .001)

Multiple Linear Regression

A multiple linear regression was conducted to determine whether *Image of the World*, *Place of the World*, and *Member Group* predict *Wellbeing*. A significant regression model was found: F(3, 118) = 10.979, p < .001, with the independent variables explaining 19% of the variance in *Wellbeing* (R² adjusted = .19).

- *Image of the World* positively and significantly predicts *Wellbeing* (β = .40, t = 4.70, p < .001).

- *Place of the World* negatively and significantly predicts *Wellbeing* (β = –.38, t = –4.38, p < .001).

- *Member Group* does not significantly predict *Wellbeing* (β = –.07, t = –.79, p = .433).

Among the predictors, *Image of the World* has the strongest positive effect on *Wellbeing*.

A second regression was conducted to predict *Image of the World* using *Place of the World*, *Member Group*, and *Wellbeing*. A significant model was found: F(3, 118) = 13.930, p < .001, with an R² adjusted = .24.

- *Place of the World* positively predicts *Image of the World* ($\beta = .42$, $t = 5.18$, $p < .001$).

- *Wellbeing* positively predicts *Image of the World* ($\beta = .39$, $t = 4.70$, $p < .001$).

- *Member Group* does not significantly predict *Image of the World* ($\beta = -.08$, $t = -.96$, $p = .339$).

This indicates that increases in *Place of the World* and *Wellbeing* are associated with increases in *Image of the World*.

Finally, a regression was conducted to examine whether *Member Group*, *Wellbeing*, and *Image of the World* predict *Place of the World*. No significant regression model was found: $F(3, 118) = 12.009$, $p > .005$.

Main Findings

It should be noted that the main findings refer to the results of the sample. It is worth underlining that one of the limitations is the limitation of the sample. The sample is limited compared to the population and does not focus on experiences, as the questions are closed-ended (experiences will be covered in the next section).

- Ethnic discrimination was largely not reported by most participants.
- Refugees/asylum seekers report significantly lower mental health and higher internalization of discrimination compared to immigrants.
- Skin tone, income level, and personal outlook affect how individuals perceive their place in the world and their wellbeing.
- Image of the World is the strongest positive predictor of wellbeing.
- Place of the World, negatively predicts wellbeing, suggesting that a stronger perceived position in society may paradoxically correlate with lower wellbeing (potentially due to higher expectations or societal pressures).
- Member Group has no direct effect on wellbeing in regression, although group-based differences were seen in mental health.

3.2. Qualitative component

Interview with Youth

Discrimination as a Multi-Level Challenge: The participants (Roma and refugee, escipacially Syrians,) report systemic and interpersonal discrimination, ranging from schools to workplaces, housing markets, and public spaces. On the other hand, Roma participants reported discrimination in schools and workplaces, reflecting structural antigypsyism that restricts their opportunities across generations. Discrimination is not limited to personal interactions but is often reinforced by structural barriers (like legal status complications and lack of financial aid). Importantly, schools, intended as safe learning environments, emerge as spaces of exclusion and

trauma for these youth. The intersectionality of being young, refugee, and often female amplifies vulnerability.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences: Discrimination profoundly impacts participants' mental health, resulting in anxiety, depression, trauma, and a pervasive sense of social alienation for both groups Roma and Refugees. Nearly all participants mention social withdrawal, loss of confidence, and in some cases, suicidal ideation or hopelessness. Educational discrimination, particularly language-based bullying, is present in almost all refugee respondents and increases insecurity and limits academic achievement, which in turn affects future opportunities and well-being.

Coping Strategies and Resilience: Religion, family and personal resilience are used as coping mechanisms, especially when refugee respondents are facing serious challenges. Among refugees, religious practices (e.g. prayer) provide comfort, while trusted friends and family serve as limited support systems. However, the reliance on personal resilience reflects the lack of systemic support, leaving young people to fight discrimination largely on their own. Roma participants, on the other hand, specifically mentioned family and peer support and stated that they prefer to act as a community as a coping mechanism. (They did not directly say that this was a coping mechanism, but that it made them feel comfortable and prepared for reactions from people in this way.) This solidarity shows that Roma communities respond to antigypsyism with resilience and collective strength, which deserves recognition alongside accounts of harm.

Structural and Support Deficiencies: A major theme across interviews is the absence of appropriate psychological, social, and educational support. Especially concerning is the lack of Arabic-speaking mental health professionals, leaving participants unable to articulate their traumas effectively. Furthermore, financial barriers to higher education (higher tuition fees for foreigners, lack of scholarships) prevent many from achieving upward mobility. These gaps indicate urgent systemic failures in social inclusion policies.

Identity, Belonging, and Future Outlook: For refugees/syrians: Participants exhibit complex feelings about their identity. Many feel "in-between"—neither fully integrated into Turkish society nor fully connected to their home culture. Some even express internalized discrimination, avoiding speaking Arabic or revealing their background. Despite this, there are glimmers of hope and connection, especially through supportive individuals (teachers, friends). However, feelings of non-belonging and alienation dominate.

1. Themes and Codes Identified Across Interviews

Theme	Sub-themes / Codes	Frequency	For who	Examples from Interviews

Experiences of Discrimination	School-based discrimination	High	Roma / Refugee	Teachers and peers making derogatory comments, excluding behavior.
	Workplace discrimination	Medium	Roma /Syrian	Denial of jobs due to being Syrian /Roma, lower salaries.
	Housing discrimination	Medium	Roma /Syrian	Denial of renting houses to Syrians/Roma
	Public discrimination (social life, public spaces)	High	Roma / Refugee	Verbal harassment on transport, negative stereotypes.
	Media and systemic discrimination	Medium	Roma / Refugee	Fear of public discourse reinforcing negative stereotypes.
Impact on Mental Health & Wellbeing	Depression, anxiety, stress	High		Descriptions of isolation, fear, low self-worth.
	Trauma	Medium		Reference to persistent psychological distress.
	Social withdrawal, loss of trust	High		Avoiding public spaces, fear of making mistakes, isolation.
	Educational struggles	High		Language barriers(jnot mention from Roma), negative teacher interactions.

Coping Mechanisms	Religious practices	Medium	Refugee	Prayer, Quran reading as a refuge.
	Social support from family/friends	Medium	Roma /Refugee	Conversations with trusted friends, siblings.
	Self-reliance/inner strength	Medium	Roma	Developing personal resilience, positive thinking.
	Avoidance and withdrawal	Medium	Refugee /Roma	Avoiding interactions, suppressing experiences.
Support Needs and Gaps	Lack of institutional/organizational support	High	Refugee /Roma	Absence of psychological, educational, financial aid.
	Language-accessible mental health support	High	Refugee	Difficulty accessing Arabic-speaking psychologists.
	Financial/scholarship needs for education	High	Refugee /Roma	Tuition barriers, lack of targeted scholarships.
	Legal/systemic needs (residency, equal rights)	Medium	Refugee /Roma	Residence issues, limited access to stable work.
Identity and Belonging	Struggles with identity and national belonging	High	Refugee	Feeling foreign, loss of home identity, confusion over belonging.
	Self-worth, self-confidence erosion	High	Roma /Refugee	Low confidence due to repeated discrimination.
	Connection to Turkish society	Medium	Refugee	Mixed experiences with Turkish friends/teachers.

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Perceptions of Discrimination Causes	Prejudices and ignorance	High	Refugee	Seen as "stealing jobs, houses, rights."
	Societal fear and competition	Medium	refugee	Fear of refugees' presence and success.
	Media and political influence	Medium	refugee	Implied negative public discourse shaping attitudes.

Interviews With Youth Worker

Interviews with youth workers revealed that discrimination against marginalized youth—particularly Roma, Syrian refugees, and Yazidis—is systemic, multilayered, and deeply entrenched across all areas of life, including education, employment, housing, and social integration. These young people experience compounded exclusion due to intersecting identities such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. Roma youth frequently face antigypsyist profiling in public spaces, a practice rooted in systemic racism rather than individual bias. Meanwhile, refugee and migrant youth, especially those under temporary protection, struggle with language barriers and are often confined to exploitative, informal labor markets. Discriminatory practices span multiple domains: educational access is hindered by bullying and exclusion; employment opportunities are limited by discriminatory hiring and informal work conditions; housing options are restricted by landlord refusals and segregated living environments; and social participation is weakened by isolation and exclusion from public life. Gender-based discrimination also emerges prominently, particularly affecting women from Roma and refugee communities.

The psychological consequences of such discrimination are severe. Youth workers consistently reported widespread symptoms of depression, anxiety, trauma, and an overall decline in life satisfaction among the young people they support. These mental health challenges are exacerbated by a chronic lack of access to psychological or psychosocial services, particularly those that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Many youth internalize negative stereotypes, resulting in low self-esteem and reduced aspirations. To shield themselves from public humiliation and microaggressions, many withdraw from social interaction, leading to deeper isolation and disconnection.

This process is further accompanied by an erosion of trust in institutions, society, and even peers. Many young people no longer perceive the world as a safe, fair, or welcoming place, fostering fatalism and diminishing their belief in equal opportunities. This lack of trust reinforces a cycle of marginalization and prevents full integration into broader society. Additionally, both Roma and refugee youth are reported to suppress their ethnic or religious identities to avoid

discrimination, leading to internal conflict and a loss of cultural continuity. This identity suppression—paired with internalized stigma—contributes to alienation from both their communities and society at large, resulting in a narrowing of life goals to avoid further disappointment.

Youth workers also face significant challenges in supporting these young people. Many expressed frustration over chronic underfunding, institutional neglect, and the absence of long-term, rights-based frameworks to guide their work. Emotional exhaustion and burnout are common, as workers are left to navigate complex systemic barriers with limited resources. While education, advocacy, and positive media representation are seen as essential tools for combating discrimination, these are often underutilized or unsupported by broader policy structures. Youth workers remain highly committed to their roles but are frequently left without the institutional backing necessary to create meaningful and sustainable change.

4. Discussion

The results of this mixed-methods study—comprising both quantitative and qualitative data—highlight the pervasive, multidimensional impact of discrimination on the mental health and social inclusion of disadvantaged youth in Türkiye, particularly those who identify as Roma, refugees, or migrants. These findings not only reinforce prior research but also contribute new empirical insights into the psychosocial realities of marginalized young people. The implications for policy, practice, and future research are considerable.

The findings confirm that antigypsyism in Turkey drives Roma exclusion in education, housing, and employment, much as xenophobia shapes the experiences of refugees. These forms of racism operate differently and need to be addressed with tailored strategies. Also, it show that systemic and interpersonal discrimination remains a dominant and debilitating force in the lives of Roma and refugee youth. These findings are consistent with previous literature (e.g., Ekmekçi, 2016; Çetinaya & Evci, 2022; Kırkayak Kültür, 2020) and illustrate that marginalization occurs at multiple intersecting levels—legal, economic, educational, and social. Quantitative data show that ethnic discrimination remains prevalent, especially for refugees and Roma, despite some participants not openly disclosing ethnic identity. This supports the hypothesis that internalized discrimination, fear of stigmatization, and invisibility influence reporting behavior. Qualitative interviews with both youth and youth workers further substantiate this by describing how young people often downplay or normalize discriminatory experiences, particularly when systemic discrimination is longstanding and institutionally reinforced. In educational settings, both groups reported exclusion, bullying, and limited support, corroborating findings from Dereli (2020) and Romani Godi (2022). For refugees, language barriers were the most cited obstacle, while Roma youth pointed to ethnic segregation and teacher prejudice. These findings indicate that current inclusion strategies, such as Turkey's Harmonization Action Plan or the Roma Strategy Document, are insufficiently implemented and do not address root causes like ethnic stereotyping or school-level discriminatory practices.

One of the most concerning findings from both datasets is the significant psychological toll that discrimination takes on youth. Despite the presence of some migrant mental health services (e.g., Migrant Health Centers, IOM-led initiatives), the study shows a notable gap in access, especially to culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health care. Quantitatively, refugees and asylum seekers reported the lowest mental health scores and the highest levels of internalized discrimination, while regression analysis found that a positive worldview significantly predicted wellbeing, echoing the theoretical frameworks of Diener et al. (1985) and Lee (2001). However, paradoxically, a stronger sense of "place in the world" negatively predicted wellbeing—suggesting that as young people become more socially aware of their marginalization, their psychological distress may increase. This highlights the emotional burden of navigating a society where belonging is conditional or contested. Qualitative narratives illustrate that depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms, and social withdrawal are widespread and often untreated. Roma youth cope through familial and communal solidarity, while refugee youth often turn to religious practices, further indicating the lack of institutional psychosocial infrastructure.

Both refugee and Roma youth express ambivalence about their identity. Many refugee participants reported suppressing their ethnic backgrounds or avoiding speaking Arabic in public—reflecting the findings of Karadağ & Oğutlu (2020) and Cantekin & Gençöz (2017) on internalized stigma and cultural dislocation. Roma participants also described hiding their identity to avoid stigma in higher education and employment (Diler, 2008). This identity suppression may is both a coping mechanism and a sign of deep societal exclusion. Importantly, the study finds that such disconnection fosters a lack of social trust, which in turn erodes civic participation and the desire for political engagement. These findings mirror the underrepresentation of young Roma in decision-making spaces and the broader invisibility of refugee youth in policy-making, reinforcing conclusions by Romani Godi (2022) and the Women's Refugee Commission (2020).

The discussion of policy performance reveals a critical gap between legislative ambitions and lived realities. While Türkiye has launched various strategies (e.g., Roma Strategy 2023–2025, Harmonization Strategy for Refugees), the field data show that youth-specific needs remain largely unmet. The Roma Strategy includes references to youth empowerment, cultural activities, and professional development seminars. Yet, discrimination in schools, housing insecurity, and employment barriers remain entrenched. Similarly, while the Integration Action Plan for Refugees and Migrants proposes pathways to education and employment, these are undermined by legal hurdles, xenophobia, and economic precarity. Notably, the mental health needs of these groups are absent or marginal in both policy domains, despite clear evidence of high psychological vulnerability. Moreover, there is a lack of monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the success of policy implementation—an omission that limits transparency and accountability. Without measurable benchmarks, civil society and community-based organizations cannot effectively advocate for course correction.

In sum, this study validates previous claims of systemic exclusion while adding a robust body of qualitative and quantitative evidence to the discourse. Discrimination remains a defining feature of the lived experiences of Roma, refugee, and migrant youth in Türkiye, undermining their mental health, sense of belonging, and future aspirations. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires urgent, inclusive, and intersectional reforms centered on dignity, equity, and justice.

5. Conclusion

This study, conducted within the framework of the "When Scars (!) Become Art" project, explored the multifaceted nature of discrimination and its impact on the mental health and social inclusion of disadvantaged youth—specifically Roma, refugee, and migrant populations in Türkiye. Using a mixed-methods approach, it revealed how both interpersonal and structural forms of exclusion shape the daily realities of these young people. Roma youth reported experiences of antigypsyist segregation in schools, barriers in employment, and exclusion in housing, which reflect long-standing systemic racism rather than cultural differences, while refugee youth—particularly Syrians—faced language barriers, legal uncertainty, and limited access to mental health services. In both cases, discrimination extended beyond individual interactions to reflect deeper institutional and systemic failures.

Quantitative findings showed that refugee/asylum-seeking youth had the lowest mental health scores and highest levels of internalized discrimination. The strongest positive predictor of well-being was a positive worldview, whereas a heightened sense of one's place in society paradoxically correlated with lower well-being, possibly due to increased awareness of social marginalization. Group membership (Roma, migrant, or refugee) did not directly predict well-being but had indirect effects through psychological indicators.

Qualitative data reinforced these results, revealing frequent identity suppression, social withdrawal, and feelings of disconnection from both their own communities and broader society. Many youth avoid revealing their ethnic or linguistic identity to escape stigma, which in turn affects their sense of belonging and self-worth. The lack of institutional psychological and educational support, particularly language-accessible services and financial aid for higher education, emerged as a recurring issue.

The study finds a clear gap between the ambitions of national policies—such as the Roma Strategy Document and the Integration Action Plan—and their practical implementation. While these policies aim to promote inclusion, persistent discrimination in schools, labor markets, and public discourse continues to undermine these efforts.

In conclusion, this research highlights the urgent need for inclusive, rights-based, and culturally sensitive interventions. Policymakers, practitioners, and civil society organizations must prioritize long-term strategies that are responsive to the lived experiences of marginalized youth. Supporting community-based initiatives will be crucial in ensuring that these young voices are not only heard but meaningfully represented in the formulation of future policies.

Social Inclusion

The research conducted within the "When Scars (!) Become Art" project reveals that despite the presence of strategic policy documents and legislative frameworks in Türkiye—such as the Roma Strategy Document (2023–2025) and the Integration Strategy for Migrants and Refugees (2018–2023)—there remain significant and persistent barriers to achieving genuine social inclusion for marginalized youth, particularly young Roma, migrants, and refugees.

Across all domains examined—education, employment, housing, participation in decision-making, and access to justice—the reports consistently highlight structural inequalities, systemic discrimination, and social exclusion that undermine the wellbeing and opportunities of marginalized young people. The data and qualitative insights indicate that these youth face a compounded disadvantage: they experience not only ethnic and cultural discrimination but also legal, economic, and institutional barriers that impede their integration and full participation in society.

For young Roma, entrenched patterns of exclusion manifest in segregated and inferior educational environments, limited access to the labor market, substandard housing, and marginalization from civic and political life. Discriminatory practices—ranging from teacher bias to exclusion from public services—contribute to poor educational and employment outcomes and perpetuate cycles of poverty and social marginalization.

For migrant and refugee youth, the path to social inclusion is similarly fraught with challenges. Legal precarity, language barriers, and xenophobic attitudes severely restrict their access to education, formal employment, healthcare, and social services. The findings also underscore the intersectional nature of exclusion, whereby factors such as legal status, gender, and skin color further exacerbate vulnerabilities. Refugee and asylum-seeking youth report the lowest mental health outcomes and highest internalized discrimination scores, reflecting the psychological burden of systemic exclusion.

Moreover, the research underscores the invisibility of certain groups within the migrant and refugee population—such as Dom communities from Syria—who experience compounded discrimination due to both their ethnic identity and migrant status. Their lack of legal documentation and deep socio-economic marginalization demand urgent, targeted policy interventions.

A critical gap identified across both reports is the limited availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services, which undermines both the psychological wellbeing and broader social integration of marginalized youth. The absence of structured platforms for meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes further deprives these groups of agency and voice in shaping the policies that affect them.

It is evident that social inclusion cannot be achieved through fragmented or symbolic measures. A holistic and intersectional approach is needed—one that addresses structural inequalities, actively combats discrimination, and fosters inclusive environments in all areas of public life.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Inclusive and Culturally Sensitive Mental Health Services

- Establish youth-friendly mental health services that are culturally and linguistically accessible, particularly Arabic-speaking psychologists for refugee youth and counselors familiar with the experiences of Roma, Dom, and Lom communities.

- Integrate mental health professionals into schools and community centers frequented by marginalized youth.

- Expand trauma-informed training for teachers, social workers, and youth workers to recognize and respond to signs of distress effectively.

2. Enhance Anti-Discrimination Measures in Education and Employment

- **Explicitly recognize antigypsyism and xenophobia as a structural form of racism in Türkiye** and include it in all anti-discrimination laws and strategies.
- Monitor and sanction antigypsyist practices in schools, housing, and public services.
- Enforce anti-discrimination regulations in schools with robust monitoring mechanisms and accountability frameworks.
- Promote inclusive curricula that reflect the histories and contributions of Roma, Dom, and Lom communities, as well as migrant groups, to combat stigma and stereotypes.
- Provide targeted employment support—such as vocational training and mentorship programs—for Roma, Dom, Lom, and refugee youth, including legal pathways for refugees to access formal labor markets.

3. Expand Access to Higher Education and Scholarships

- Remove or reduce financial barriers for marginalized youth by increasing access to scholarships, tuition waivers, and preparatory programs.
- Implement quota systems or targeted outreach for Roma, Dom, Lom, and refugee students in universities and vocational institutions.
- Support inclusive admissions policies that consider systemic disadvantage alongside academic performance.

4. Support Youth Workers and Community-Based Interventions

- Allocate sustainable funding to grassroots organizations and youth initiatives working directly with marginalized communities, especially **community(Roma,refugees etc.)-led organizations** that promote youth leadership, cultural pride, and community resilience.
- Provide institutional support and mental health care for youth workers who are at risk of burnout due to emotional labor and resource scarcity.
- Facilitate capacity-building workshops for youth workers to develop effective, rights-based responses to systemic discrimination and antigypsyism.

5. Promote Participatory Policy Design and Monitoring

- Ensure Romani communities, refugee, and migrant youth are actively involved in policy-making processes affecting their lives through consultations, advisory roles, and participatory evaluation.
- Develop transparent monitoring and evaluation tools to assess the implementation of national strategies, with disaggregated data on youth by ethnicity, legal status, and gender.
- Encourage collaboration between state institutions, civil society, and international organizations to ensure coordinated and inclusive interventions.

6. Combat Media Stereotyping and Promote Positive Representation

- Launch awareness campaigns that explicitly challenge **xenophobic and antigypsyist** narratives in mainstream media.
- Support initiatives that give Romani communities and refugee youth platforms to tell their own stories through art, journalism, and digital media.