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GENDER ASYMMETRY AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY OF NEET WOMEN: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OVER 10 YEARS USING WEB OF SCIENCE DATABASE (2016–2025)

The phenomenon of NEET youth (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) represents a significant challenge in contemporary socio-economic policy. A pronounced gender asymmetry characterises this group, with women facing a substantially higher risk of exclusion from educational and employment opportunities due to structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers. This article aims to systematise the determinants and principal drivers of vulnerability among NEET women through an analysis of recent scholarly literature and to identify primary directions for developing gender-responsive employment policies. The study adopts an intersectional analytical perspective, conceptualising NEET women's vulnerability as the result of intersecting gender, age, socio-economic, and cultural inequalities. Methodologically, the research employs a systematic review of academic publications following PRISMA protocol guidelines. The final sample comprises 69 articles from the Web of Science (Core Collection) database, published between 2016 and 2025. The analysis identifies three interconnected clusters of vulnerability factors affecting NEET women: (1) demographic and familial factors, such as early motherhood and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work; (2) psychosocial factors, including stigmatisation and diminished self-esteem; and (3) economic and educational factors, such as the gender pay gap and skill mismatches in the labour market. The findings indicate that conventional, universal employment interventions are insufficiently effective for this demographic. The scholarly contribution of this research is the development of a comprehensive analytical framework for examining female vulnerability within NEET status, thereby expanding theoretical understanding of gender-differentiated youth exclusion. The practical significance lies in substantiating the need for a shift toward gender-responsive employment policy, including the development of robust childcare infrastructure, mechanisms for flexible educational and occupational reintegration, and comprehensive social support measures.

Keywords: NEET youth, women, gender inequality, social exclusion, labour market, sociology of professions.

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NEET санатындағы әйелдердің гендерлік асимметриясы және әлеуметтік осалдығы: Web Of Science деректер қорына 10 жылдық жүйелі талдау (2016–2025)

NEET жастар феномені (білім алмайтын, жұмыс істемейтін немесе кәсіби даярлықтан өтпейтін жастар) қазіргі әлеуметтік-экономикалық саясаттағы маңызды мәселелердің бірі. Бұл топқа тән айқын гендерлік асимметрия байқалады: құрылымдық, институционалдық және әлеуметтік-мәдени кедергілерге байланысты әйелдер білім алу және жұмысқа орналасу мүмкіндіктерінен айырылу тәуекеліне анағұрлым көбірек ұшырайды. Мақаланың мақсаты – соңғы ғылыми әдебиеттерге талдау жасау арқылы NEET санатындағы әйелдердің осалдық факторлары мен негізгі қозғаушы күштерін жүйелеу және гендерлік жауапты жұмыспен қамту саясатын әзірлеудің басым бағыттарын анықтау. Зерттеу NEET санатындағы әйелдердің

ерекшелігі, әлеуметтік-экономикалық және мәдени теңсіздіктердің тоғысуы ретінде тұжырымдай отырып, интерсекциялық аналитикалық перспективаны қолданады. Әдіснамалық тұрғыдан зерттеу PRISMA хаттамасының нұсқауларын сақтай отырып, академиялық жарияланымдарға жүйелі шолуды қамтиды. Қорытынды таңдама 2016-2025 жылдар аралығында Web of Science (Core Collection) деректер қорында жарияланған 69 мақаладан тұрады. Талдау NEET санатындағы әйелдерге әсер ететін осалдық факторларының өзара байланысты үш кластерін анықтады: (1) ерте ана болу және төленбейтін күтім жұмысының шамадан тыс жүктемесі сияқты демографиялық және отбасылық факторлар; (2) стигматизация және өзін-өзі бағалаудың төмендеуін қоса алғандағы психоәлеуметтік факторлар; (3) еңбек нарығындағы гендерлік жалақы алшақтығы және біліктілік сәйкессіздігі сияқты экономикалық және білім беру факторлары. Зерттеу нәтижелері әмбебап жұмыспен қамту шараларының бұл демографиялық топ үшін тиімділігі төмен екенін көрсетеді. Бұл зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы NEET мәртебесіндегі әйелдердің осалдығын зерттеудің кешенді аналитикалық негізін әзірлеу болып табылады, бұл жастардың гендерлік сараланған шеттетілуін теориялық тұрғыдан түсінуді кеңейтеді. Практикалық маңыздылығы бала күтімі инфрақұрылымын нығайтуды, білім беру және кәсіби реинтеграцияның икемді тетіктерін әзірлеуді және кешенді әлеуметтік қолдау шараларын қарастыратын гендерлік жауапты жұмыспен қамту саясатына көшу қажеттілігін негіздеуде жатыр.

Түйін сөздер: NEET жастар, әйелдер, гендерлік теңсіздік, әлеуметтік шеттетілу, еңбек нарығы, кәсіптер социологиясы.

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Гендерная асимметрия и социальная уязвимость женщин категории NEET: систематический анализ данных Web Of Science за 10 лет (2016–2025)

Феномен NEET-молодежи (не обучающиеся, не работающие и не повышающие квалификацию) представляет собой серьезный вызов для современной социально-экономической политики. Данная группа характеризуется выраженной гендерной асимметрией: женщины подвержены значительно более высокому риску исключения из образовательных и профессиональных возможностей вследствие структурных, институциональных и социокультурных барьеров. Целью настоящей статьи является систематизация детерминант и основных факторов уязвимости женщин в статусе NEET на основе анализа современной научной литературы, а также определение приоритетных направлений разработки гендерно-чувствительной политики занятости. В исследовании принята интерсекциональная аналитическая перспектива, концептуализирующая уязвимость женщин NEET как результат пересечения гендерного, возрастного, социально-экономического и культурного неравенства. Методологически исследование основано на систематическом обзоре академических публикаций в соответствии с протоколом PRISMA. Итоговая выборка включает 69 статей из базы данных Web of Science (Core Collection), опубликованных в период с 2016 по 2025 год. Анализ позволил выделить три взаимосвязанных кластера факторов уязвимости, затрагивающих женщин NEET: (1) демографические и семейные факторы, такие как раннее материнство и непропорциональная нагрузка неоплачиваемого домашнего труда; (2) психосоциальные факторы, включая стигматизацию и снижение самооценки; (3) экономические и образовательные факторы, такие как гендерный разрыв в оплате труда и несоответствие навыков требованиям рынка труда. Результаты исследования показывают, что стандартные, универсальные меры вмешательства в сфере занятости недостаточно эффективны для данной демографической группы. Научная значимость исследования заключается в разработке комплексной аналитической базы для изучения женской уязвимости в статусе NEET, что расширяет теоретическое понимание гендерно-дифференцированного исключения молодежи. Практическая значимость заключается в обосновании необходимости перехода к гендерно-чувствительной политике занятости, включающей развитие надежной инфраструктуры по уходу за детьми, механизмы гибкой образовательной и профессиональной реинтеграции, а также комплексные меры социальной поддержки.

Ключевые слова: NEET молодежь, женщины, гендерное неравенство, социальное исключение, рынок труда, социология профессий.

Introduction

Contemporary socio-economic transformations in both developed and developing economies are characterized by increasing employment instability, labor market segmentation, and growing institutional uncertainty. These processes most profoundly affect youth as a socially sensitive group in the transitional phase toward adulthood and economic independence. In academic discourse, one of the key indicators of social exclusion and the risk of youth marginalization is the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category, which encompasses young people not engaged in formal education, paid employment, or vocational training. Within the framework of social work, this status is conceptualized not merely as economic inactivity, but as a marker of accumulated social deprivation, diminished access to resources, and constrained social mobility.

The analysis of gender asymmetry within the NEET category is of particular significance. International empirical studies provide evidence of a structural predominance of women in this group, indicating the reproduction of gender-based forms of social vulnerability (Azzopardi et al., 2019). While male entry into the NEET status more frequently correlates with human capital deficits, skills mismatch in the labor market, or cyclical unemployment, the female trajectory into the NEET category is largely determined by institutional and socio-cultural mechanisms of inequality. Primary among these are early marriage, early motherhood, a disproportionate distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, limited access to childcare services, and the pressure exerted by patriarchal family systems (Lüküslü & Çelik, 2022).

In the context of Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries, the issue of NEET women acquires a conceptual dimension driven by the concurrent processes of modernization and the persistence of traditional gender norms. Women find themselves in a situation of “dual normative pressure”: on the one hand, there is an increasing demand for human capital accumulation and labor market competitiveness; on the other hand, the social expectation of prioritizing reproductive and familial roles remains prevalent. Such ambivalence creates a zone of heightened risk for social vulnerability and restricted economic autonomy.

The objective of this study is to systematize and analytically synthesize the factors of social vulnerability among NEET women based on publications indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) database for

the period 2016-2025. The scientific significance of this research lies in the comprehensive synthesis of fragmented empirical findings and the development of a structured model of vulnerability factors, whereas its practical significance pertains to the potential application of these findings in designing social and labor support programs. This approach facilitates a shift from reducing the problem to mere economic indicators toward a comprehensive analysis of the psychosocial, institutional, and structural determinants of social exclusion. To achieve the stated objective, the following research tasks are addressed: (1) analyzing the dynamics and geography of publication activity concerning the issue of NEET women; (2) conducting thematic clustering of vulnerability factors (family-reproductive, institutional, structural-economic, medical, and psychosocial); and (3) assessing the impact of global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, on the exacerbation of the gender gap within the NEET category. The methodological framework of the study is grounded in the principles of evidence-based practice, systematicity, and transparency in data selection. The utilization of the PRISMA protocol ensures the reproducibility of the analytical procedure and enhances the validity of the generalized conclusions.

Literature review

This review is situated at the intersection of several research domains, enabling the identification of dominant theoretical frameworks: the exploration of individual risk factors contributing to youth alienation, and the assessment of institutional variables shaping the demographic characteristics of the NEET population across various geopolitical contexts.

The bulk of empirical research on the NEET phenomenon focuses on identifying the structural and socio-demographic determinants that heighten the probability of youth social exclusion. Within the risk-oriented framework, particular attention is paid to the initial conditions of socialization and the unequal distribution of social capital. Consistent risk factors include low parental educational attainment, limited familial cultural and economic capital, migrant or immigrant status, and residing in single-parent or socially unstable households (Pemberton, 2008). In the terminology of social work, these characteristics are conceptualized not as individual deficits, but as manifestations of structural inequality and the intergenerational transmission of vulnerability. The classical interpretation of the NEET phenomenon relies on human capital theory (Beck-

er, 1964), according to which youth disengagement from education and employment is viewed as a consequence of insufficient investment in skill development, or as a result of a skills mismatch in the labor market. Within this logic, the NEET status is primarily interpreted as a derivative of individual competency deficits or the institutional inefficiency of the educational system.

However, contemporary empirical studies indexed in the Web of Science database (Wang, 2025; Kesikoglu et al., 2025) demonstrate the limitations of reducing the problem to the human capital model, particularly concerning women. The data indicate that attaining higher education does not guarantee young women sustainable integration into the labor market. This challenges the universality of the assumption regarding a linear relationship between educational attainment and the probability of employment. Specifically, a study by Wang (2025), based on Chinese data, reveals a pronounced gender asymmetry in the returns on educational investments: for women, a significant reduction in the risk of entering the NEET category is primarily associated with graduating from prestigious universities, whereas for men, holding a secondary vocational degree serves as a sufficient factor for successful labor market integration. This finding points to the existence of a structural stratification of opportunities and the gender-differentiated “profitability” of human capital.

In contemporary research, a central position is occupied by the concept of the “motherhood penalty,” alongside the analysis of the disproportionate distribution of unpaid care and domestic work. Within the framework of gender-responsive social policy, this phenomenon is viewed as an institutionally entrenched mechanism for the reproduction of inequality. Research by van Vugt et al. (2025), conducted using data from European Union countries, demonstrates a statistically significant correlation between the availability of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions and the likelihood of mothers transitioning into NEET status. In contexts of limited accessibility or high costs of preschool services, women are forced to temporarily or permanently exit the labor market, forming the category of so-called “inactive NEETs.” Lüküslü and Çelik (2021) introduce the concept of the “legitimization of inactivity” into academic discourse, allowing for a reconceptualization of the NEET status within the context of culturally conditioned norms of the gender order. Using Turkey as a case study, the authors demonstrate that for young wom-

en, a period of economic and educational inactivity can be interpreted as a socially acceptable phase of “preparation for marriage” and participation in the so-called marriage market. Consequently, the NEET status acquires normative validity and loses its characterization as a social deviation. Conversely, for men, analogous inactivity is more frequently viewed as a sign of deviance, failure, or an inability to fulfill the “breadwinner” role. Such an asymmetry in evaluation endows the exact same status with divergent social meanings depending on gender.

The comparative analysis (Table 2) demonstrates that, despite the universality of the NEET category, the configuration of vulnerability factors is regionally specific and determined by a combination of institutional architecture, gender order, and social policy models: (1) in EU countries, the vulnerability of NEET women is primarily mediated by a deficit in care infrastructure and psychosocial risks, indicating the need to expand ECEC services and mental health support programs; (2) in Central and East Asian countries, socio-cultural mechanisms regulating female employment normatively and institutional restrictions on mobility play a key role; (3) in Latin America, the factor of early motherhood is amplified by the impact of institutional instability and violence, forming a cumulative vulnerability; (4) in post-Soviet countries, the impact of macroeconomic transformations and the erosion of the state childcare system remains significant, reproducing gender segregation in employment. Thus, gender asymmetry within the NEET structure is not universally determined by a single factor, but is formed through the interaction of macroeconomic, institutional, and cultural contexts. For social work practice, this necessitates the development of context-sensitive and gender-responsive interventions that account for the specificities of regional social policies and models of familial responsibility.

Particular attention in this review is given to publications from 2022-2025 that address the consequences of the pandemic. The term «Lockdown Generation» has become established in international literature (Zudina, 2024). Studies prove that the pandemic exacerbated gender asymmetry: the closure of schools and kindergartens led to a massive exodus of young women from the employment sphere. Meanwhile, during the crisis, men more frequently remained in the «unemployed NEET» category (actively seeking work), whereas women transitioned into the «inactive NEET» category (having dropped out of the labor force), making their future reintegration significantly more challenging (Yolvermez, 2025).

Table 1 – Comparative analysis of vulnerability factors by region

Region / Analytical cluster	Dominant structural and institutional factors	Key sources
European Union	High cost and/or limited availability of early childhood education and care (ECEC); the «motherhood penalty»; mental health risks; structural and cyclical youth unemployment.	van Vugt et al. (2025); Tanton et al. (2021)
Central and East Asia	Patriarchal gender norms; cultural legitimization of female inactivity; institutional barriers to labor market access; restrictions related to the household registration system (<i>hukou</i>) and internal migration.	Wang (2025); Lüküslü (2021)
Latin America	Early parenthood; institutional instability and fragmented social protection; gender-based violence; high share of informal employment.	Liu et al. (2023); Orozco (2024)
Post-Soviet Space	Macroeconomic shocks and labor market instability; degradation of preschool care infrastructure; gender-based occupational segregation; limited availability of flexible employment.	Zudina (2024)

Contemporary sociological thought (Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019; Tapan et al., 2025) insists on the necessity of intersectional analysis. For women, the NEET status is frequently complicated by ethnicity or migration status. For example, young migrant women in Europe face a «triple barrier»: a lack of social networks, language barriers, and discrimination based on gender/religion (Zanfrini & Giuliani, 2023). Studies focusing on Syrian refugee women (Tapan et al., 2025) note the phenomenon of «brain waste» (talent waste), where highly educated women fall into the NEET trap due to the inability to validate their qualifications in a new country. The literature review reveals that the female NEET experience is the outcome of a complex intertwining of macro-structural crises, meso-level familial obligations, and micro-level psychological attitudes. This corroborates the hypothesis that addressing this issue requires a multimodal approach extending beyond the mere provision of vocational skills training.

Materials and methods

This study adheres to the general principles of a systematic literature review. More precisely, this research can be conceptualized as a “systematic review of literature.” It adopts a broader perspective, incorporating studies with various research designs, including narrative, descriptive, and statistical approaches. The methodological framework of this paper is structured in accordance with the principles of systematic analysis and the qualitative synthesis of secondary data. To ensure the objectivity and reproducibility of the results, the study utilizes the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic

Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol (Tricco et al., 2018), which serves as the gold standard for review articles in high-impact journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus.

The empirical foundation of this research comprises publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) scientometric database. The selection of this platform is justified by its selective indexing policy, which is grounded in stringent peer-review criteria, international citation metrics, and editorial transparency. Utilizing WoS ensures the representativeness of the academic discourse and a high degree of reliability for the included sources.

Search Strategy. The search strategy was formulated using Boolean operators to enhance the precision and relevance of the sample: TS = (NEET AND women). The search was conducted within the “Topic” field, which encompasses article titles, abstracts, and author keywords. This approach facilitated the capture of publications wherein the issue of NEET women is conceptually central rather than peripheral.

Inclusion Criteria. The selection of publications was based on the following criteria:

1. **Timeframe:** 2016-2025. The selection of this ten-year period is driven by the necessity to analyze recent transformations in the youth labor market, including the impact of economic digitalization (the Fourth Industrial Revolution) and the COVID-19 pandemic as a global structural shock.

2. **Document Type:** Exclusively original research articles. Review articles, conference proceedings, editorial materials, and letters were excluded to ensure the empirical depth of the analysis.

3. **Publication Language:** English and Russian, representing the primary languages of international

and post-Soviet academic communication in the field under study.

4. Subject Area: Sociology, labor economics, social psychology, public health, and related disciplines that analyze the social determinants of vulnerability.

The publication selection process underwent four formalized stages:

1. Identification: The initial automated search yielded 114 potentially relevant records.

2. Screening: At this stage, the authors screened titles and abstracts for alignment with the study's focus (gender asymmetry in the NEET population). Papers mentioning the term NEET only tangentially or focusing exclusively on male samples were ex-

cluded. A total of 28 papers were removed during this phase.

3. Eligibility: A full-text review of the remaining 86 articles was conducted. Studies with a highly specialized clinical or biomedical focus lacking an analysis of socio-economic and institutional factors (e.g., genetic studies devoid of social context) were subject to exclusion.

4. Inclusion: The final analytical corpus comprised 69 articles, establishing the empirical foundation for thematic coding, cluster analysis of vulnerability factors, and subsequent substantive synthesis.

Results and discussion

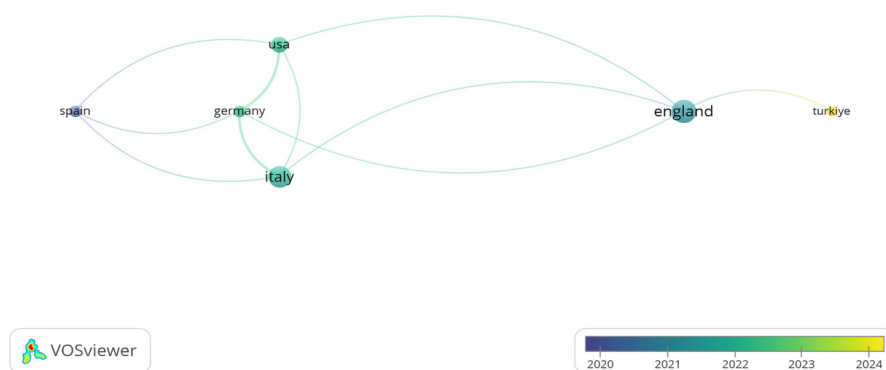


Figure 1 – Dynamics of publication activity by country

Figure 1, which illustrates the annual number of Web of Science publications for the query “NEET women” over the period 2016-2025, allows for the identification of three key phases in the evolution of research interest.

1. Phase of Inertial Analysis (2016-2018) During this period, the topic of female inactivity remained on the periphery of sociological discourse. The annual number of articles did not exceed 5-7 units. Content analysis of the works from this stage (e.g., Andrade & Järvinen, 2017) reveals that researchers approached the NEET category as gender-neutral. The primary emphasis was placed on the general risks of “risk behavior” and the socio-economic status of parents, without accounting for the specific barriers encountered distinctly by women.

2. Phase of Conceptual Transition (2019-2020) The graph in Figure 1 indicates a moderate growth in publications. This stage is characterized by the emergence of studies criticizing the universal-

ity of the NEET concept. Articles from this period (Zuccotti & O’Reilly, 2019) began to integrate an intersectional approach, arguing that for women, ethnicity and family structure serve as more potent predictors of exclusion than for their male peers. A publication in *The Lancet* (2019) acted as a catalyst, linking the NEET status with global reproductive health metrics.

3. Phase of the “Pandemic Surge” and the New Paradigm (2021-2025) The most significant vertical spike in publication activity indicates a radical shift in the academic agenda. An analysis of Figure 1 shows that over 60% of the entire sample was published post-2021. This is a direct consequence of the pandemic, which exposed the fragility of female employment. Studies by Zudina (2024) and Yolvermez (2025) corroborate that, amidst the crisis, young women were pushed out of the labor market into the “inactive NEET” category due to the shutdown of social infrastructure.

The growth in 2024-2025 is also explained by the advent of longitudinal studies tracking cumulative disadvantage. Contemporary authors (van Vugt et al., 2025) are shifting from a mere acknowledgment of unemployment to an analysis of “institutional betrayal”—a situation where state support measures (e.g., the Youth Guarantee) *de facto* ignore the needs of NEET mothers.

The trajectory presented in the graph confirms the hypothesis that the issue of NEET women has transformed from a niche topic within the sociol-

ogy of youth into a central problem of global social policy. The exponential growth in the number of publications in recent years points to the academic community’s recognition of the fact that without addressing gender asymmetry, it is impossible to effectively reduce the overall level of youth exclusion.

This dynamic provides the rationale for transitioning to the next stage of the analysis: identifying the geographical and thematic clusters that detail this quantitative growth.

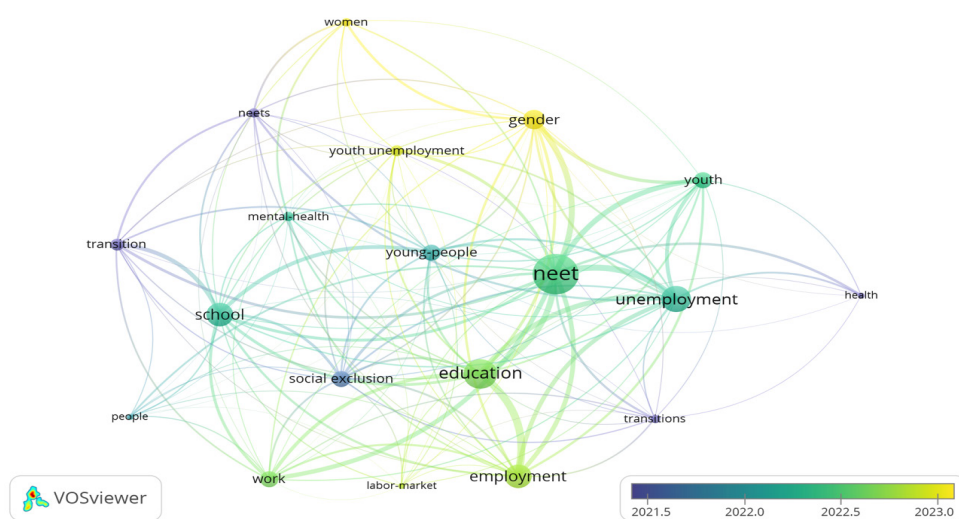


Figure 2 – Keyword analysis and thematic clustering

A co-word analysis was conducted using VOSviewer software to map the conceptual landscape of the publications. This approach facilitates the identification of robust semantic clusters and the determination of dominant trajectories in both theoretical and empirical developments related to the topic. The network visualisation (Figure 2) illustrates the density of connections between concepts, their frequency, and their centrality within the research discourse.

The Cluster of Normative Legitimisation of Inactivity. The densest and most central cluster includes the terms “Turkey”, “gender”, “marriage”, “family”, and “transition to adulthood”. The high degree of interconnectedness among these concepts suggests that, in several transition economies with persistent patriarchal norms-Turkey being the most representative case in the analysed sample-the NEET status for women is not regarded as a mar-

ginal deviation but as a socially normalized stage of the life cycle.

Within this cluster, NEET status is analysed through the lens of family and marriage institutions. The inactivity of young women is often characterised as a “prescribed” period for preparing for marriage and fulfilling reproductive roles, which aligns with the concept of legitimising inactivity. As a result, cultural normalisation of economic dependence is observed. From a social work perspective, this cluster illustrates the mechanism of normative institutionalisation of gender vulnerability, wherein:

1. The NEET status acquires positive social validity.
2. Women’s economic dependence is represented as compliance with traditional expectations;
3. The transition to adulthood for women is structured around marriage rather than occupational autonomy.

This distinction fundamentally differentiates the female trajectory from the male trajectory, in which NEET status is more frequently problematized as a deviation from the “breadwinner” gender role and is perceived as a social risk.

Spatial Interpretation of the Network Map

An important analytical parameter of the co-word map is both the density of connections within clusters and the distance between nodes, which reflects the degree of conceptual integration among topics in academic discourse. Figure 2 demonstrates a significant distance between the “Education” cluster and the “Employment” cluster.

From a bibliometric perspective, this finding indicates a weak correlation between the two research trajectories: educational determinants and labour market integration of NEET women are primarily examined within parallel rather than integrated theoretical frameworks. Human capital theory posits that education should serve as a linear predictor of employment. However, the observed semantic distance reveals an empirical gap between the accumulation of educational capital and the actual opportunities to translate it into economic autonomy. For women, this gap is especially pronounced and can be interpreted as a manifestation of:

- Structural discrimination in the labour market;
- Gender-based occupational segregation;
- Institutional barriers (motherhood, caregiving burden);

- The devaluation of women’s educational capital.

Therefore, the spatial isolation of these clusters reflects not only academic fragmentation but also a tangible structural misalignment between education and employment in female trajectories of transition to adulthood.

The Cluster of Psychological Well-being. The visualisation also identified a relatively autonomous cluster associated with the categories “mental health”, “depression”, “well-being”, and “psychological distress”. Its separation from the central economic nodes (“employment”, “labour market”, “income”) indicates that the psychosocial consequences of NEET status are often analysed in academic discourse independently of economic and institutional factors.

From a social work perspective, this fragmentation is problematic because:

- Psycho-emotional risks emerge as a consequence of structural inactivity;
- Economic dependence exacerbates anxiety and depressive symptoms;
- The lack of cross-sectoral interventions impedes sustainable reintegration.

In summary, the distance between clusters reflects a disciplinary divide between labour economics and psychology, while in social practice, these dimensions constitute an interconnected system of cumulative vulnerability.

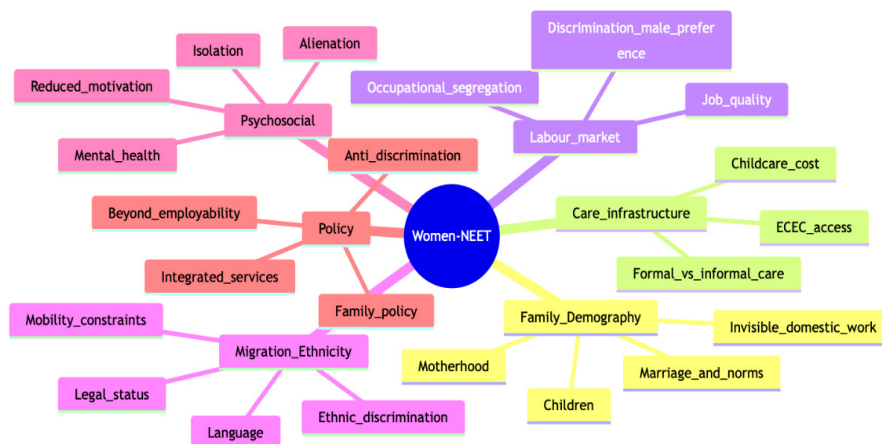


Figure 3 – Analysis of vulnerability factors among NEET women

The network analysis indicates that contemporary research discourse has shifted from focusing solely on economic indicators to analysing gendered life trajectories. The “broken elevator” visualisation

offers empirical evidence that conventional upskilling programs are likely to remain ineffective for women unless socio-cultural barriers between education and employment are addressed (Figure 3).

A systematic content analysis of a selected corpus of 69 academic publications enabled the identification of key mechanisms shaping vulnerability among young NEET women. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, the 10 most-cited and representative studies from the Web

of Science database were selected to form the theoretical core of the systematisation.

Table 2 presents a matrix of the primary determinants of social exclusion, grounded exclusively in empirical data derived from the representative sample.

Table 2 – Matrix of determinants of NEET status among women

No.	Authors, Year	Region / Focus	Dominant Determinants	Key Mechanism of Social Exclusion
1	Azzopardi et al., 2019	Global / adolescent health	Gender inequality; early marriage; limited access to employment.	Cumulative burden of disease and demographic factors restricting economic autonomy.
2	Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016	Sweden / long-term effects	Early labor market detachment.	«Scarring effect»-the entrenchment of the social exclusion trajectory.
3	Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019	UK / intersectionality	Parental social status; ethnicity; gender.	Intergenerational transmission of inequality; differentiated impact of parental unemployment.
4	Contini et al., 2019	Italy / longitudinal analysis	Motherhood (older females).	Transition to economic inactivity rather than unemployed status.
5	Redding et al., 2017	Spain / gender-based violence	Adolescent motherhood; structural inequality.	Association of NEET with early motherhood status and the risk of IPV (Intimate Partner Violence).
6	Rodriguez-Modroño, 2019	Spain / structural inequality	Migrant background; household type.	Gender-ethnic segmentation of the youth labor market.
7	Haj-Yahya et al., 2018	Israel / socio-cultural norms	Patriarchal pressure; conflict between tradition and modernization.	Normative restriction of educational and occupational self-realization.
8	Sveinsdottir et al., 2018	Norway / risk of disability	Psychological distress; bullying; relationship problems.	Early work disability due to psychosocial maladaptation.
9	Klug et al., 2019	Germany / vulnerability trajectories	Low educational attainment; migrant background; motherhood.	Formation of a «closed» inactive NEET trajectory.
10	Salvà-Mut et al., 2016	Spain / school dropout	Low qualification (ISCED 0-1); economic crisis.	Gender-differentiated effect of educational dropout.

Analysis of the core publications reveals that trajectories into NEET status are distinctly gender-differentiated. Female and male models of inactivity differ significantly in both underlying causes and institutional consequences. A longitudinal study by Contini et al. (2019), based on Italian data, demonstrates a fundamental divergence in life trajectories. For young men, NEET status predominantly aligns with the classical model of unemployment, representing a temporary phase of active job searching within a volatile labour market. In contrast, among older female youth, particularly those with children, a transition into economic inactivity rather than registered unemployment is more characteristic.

In social work terminology, this represents a shift in status from “job seeker” to “labour force

dropout.” Women are effectively reallocated to the sphere of unpaid care and domestic work, which institutionally entrenches economic dependence and limits opportunities for subsequent reintegration. Consequently, motherhood functions not only as an individual choice but also as a structural mechanism of exclusion that transforms short-term vulnerability into a persistent trajectory of inactivity.

A distinct analytical dimension concerns socio-cultural barriers. In societies with pronounced patriarchal norms, the high proportion of NEET women results from normative pressure, which may be interpreted as a form of “gender struggle” (Haj-Yahya et al., 2018). Young women must reconcile their educational and career aspirations with the expectations of families and reference groups. In

this context, the renunciation of occupational self-realisation serves as an adaptation strategy to the prevailing gender order.

This issue is not limited to traditional societies. Research by Klug et al. (2019) demonstrates that even in institutionally developed European countries such as Germany, childbirth significantly increases the likelihood that women will exit employment and enter a persistent inactive NEET trajectory. This evidence suggests that structural barriers—including labour market segmentation, insufficient employment flexibility, and unequal distribution of caregiving—persist even under conditions of formal gender equality. Collectively, these findings support the view that the female NEET trajectory is more often associated with institutionally and culturally mediated reallocation of roles, rather than a human capital deficit, thereby reproducing gender asymmetry in access to economic autonomy.

The findings of this study necessitate a critical reevaluation of conventional methods for addressing youth unemployment. For decades, policymakers and public administrators have relied heavily on Becker's (1964) seminal human capital theory. The prevailing assumption was that the most effective strategy to extract an individual from the NEET status was simply to equip them with new skills or enrol them in retraining programs. However, data from the Web of Science indicate that this linear approach is largely ineffective when applied to young women.

A degree alone does not guarantee social mobility for women. A paradox emerges: a young woman may possess a high level of education, yet external institutional barriers effectively neutralise its value. The primary underlying cause is not a deficit of knowledge or competencies among women, but rather the pronounced conflict between employment and motherhood. The “motherhood penalty,” extensively discussed by contemporary scholars (van Vugt et al., 2025; Contini et al., 2019), transforms previously active female job seekers into economically inactive homemakers.

This situation is severely exacerbated by macroeconomic crises, a dynamic most vividly illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is no coincidence that the term “Lockdown Generation” has entered the academic lexicon. Following the closure of schools and childcare facilities, the entire burden of domestic and caregiving responsibilities fell disproportionately on women. This generates an effect of “cumulative disadvantage”: the longer a woman remains out of the workforce due to familial obliga-

tions, the more rapidly her professional skills erode, concurrently increasing the risk of prolonged depression and psychological isolation (Sveinsdottir et al., 2018).

Although most articles in the database focus on experiences in Europe or the Middle East, these findings are highly relevant to Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region. The mechanism of the “legitimisation of inactivity” (Lüküslü & Çelik, 2022; Haj-Yahya et al., 2018) is particularly applicable in this context. In this region, young women often navigate an environment of double standards: while the state and economy expect civic engagement and professionalism, family and society continue to regard the role of a non-working *kelin* (daughter-in-law) or mother as not only normative but also prestigious. As a result, a large, hidden cohort of NEET women emerges. Although their socio-economic situation may appear stable, in the event of divorce or economic shocks, they are left highly vulnerable to poverty, lacking both professional experience and a financial safety net.

Moreover, NEET status should not be analysed in isolation. The application of an intersectional approach is essential (Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019). A woman's ability to navigate unemployment is strongly influenced by her socio-economic background, including migration from rural to urban areas, parental income level, and the breadth of her social networks. Universal support programs are likely to be insufficient in such complex contexts.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the status of women in the NEET category cannot be interpreted as individual occupational failure or motivational deficit. Instead, it serves as an indicator of structural gender asymmetry and institutionally reproduced social vulnerability within the labour market. A systematic review of Web of Science publications from 2016-2025 concludes that the female trajectory of social vulnerability is shaped by three interconnected clusters of factors: a deficit in caregiving infrastructure (such as limited availability of early childhood education and nurseries), normative pressure from traditional gender paradigms, and institutional inflexibility in educational and labor systems, which impedes the reconciliation of parenthood and employment.

Whereas for young men the NEET status more frequently correlates with macroeconomic shocks, cyclical unemployment, and employment crises, the

primary mechanism of vulnerability for women is their displacement into the sphere of unpaid reproductive and care work. Consequently, a persistent trajectory of economic inactivity is formed, accompanied by a decline in social capital and limited opportunities for reintegration.

Drawing on a synthesis of international experience, the following strategic trajectories are proposed:

Institutional strengthening of care infrastructure. The priority area for funding should be expanding the availability of nurseries and preschool institutions. Investments in the early childhood development system serve not only as a social measure of family support but also as a critical mechanism for expanding women's economic autonomy and preventing long-term inactivity.

Development of flexible employment models. Regulatory and economic support is essential for employers implementing flexible work arrangements (such as part-time employment, remote work, and adaptive schedules). Such a policy lowers barriers to reconciling parenthood with professional activity and facilitates sustainable reintegration for mothers.

Targeted cross-sectoral support for vulnerable groups. For women experiencing cumulative vulnerability (single mothers, internal migrants, young women lacking familial support), a comprehensive accompaniment model is required. This must include: employment assistance, psychological support and stigma reduction, legal counselling regarding rights and access to social services, and the development of social adaptation skills.

In summary, overcoming gender asymmetry within the NEET structure requires a paradigm shift from narrow economic interventions to systemic social policies aimed at dismantling institutional barriers and fostering the development of young women's capabilities. Only under these conditions can long-term marginalisation and the intergenerational reproduction of vulnerability be prevented.

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