

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

Prof . Dr. Derya BERRAK

St. Clements Üniversitesi Sosyoloji ABD, Başkanı Öğretim Üyesi Orcid ID: 0000-0002-0601-233

ABSTRACT: This article re-examines the multilayered inequalities experienced by women, youth, and children in Türkiye between 2015 and 2025 through an interdisciplinary analysis structured around the conceptualization of a “regime of cumulative disadvantage.” Rather than relying on primary fieldwork, the study synthesizes official statistical datasets, governmental policy reports, assessments by national and international organizations, peer-reviewed journal articles, and graduate theses within a systematic literature–report meta-synthesis. Methodologically, it integrates secondary data analysis, document analysis, and critical meta-synthesis, offering a comprehensive analytical framework widely used across the social sciences.

The analysis is organized across three dimensions:

- (i) Social economy, focusing on income distribution, relative and child poverty, NEET dynamics, women’s labor-force participation, and the institutional architecture of the care economy;
- (ii) Sociology, examining the transformation of the gender regime, shifting generational positions, and the ways class-based and regional inequalities shape everyday practices;
- (iii) Social psychology, addressing relative deprivation, perceptions of exclusion and injustice, levels of self-efficacy, ruptures in social belonging, and expectations for the future.

Across these dimensions, the findings demonstrate that the post-2020 context—marked by the pandemic, economic volatility, and persistent inflation—has transformed existing vulnerabilities into a structurally embedded and mutually reinforcing configuration of disadvantage, particularly around child poverty, youth labor-market detachment, and women’s heightened care burden. To account for this configuration, the article develops a 3×3 analytical matrix that intersects life stage (child–youth–adult), gender (female–male), and spatial position (center–periphery), and advances a relational mechanism model that explains the dominant inequality patterns of the last decade in Türkiye.

The article’s main contribution lies in unifying issues typically treated as separate policy domains—women, youth, and children—under a single structural framework, conceptualizing them as interconnected outcomes of a shared regime of cumulative disadvantage. It argues that breaking this regime requires a social investment–oriented policy paradigm, including the institutionalization of the care economy, the expansion of high-quality transition mechanisms for youth, and substantial early-investment policies targeting children.

KEYWORDS: child; child poverty; youth; women; cumulative disadvantage regime; NEET, social economy; social psychology; gender regime; Türkiye.

1. INTRODUCTION

The period between 2015 and 2025 in Turkey represents not only a decade in which social inequalities intensified, but also one in which the structural logic of inequality production was fundamentally reshaped. Throughout these years, cycles of economic contraction, persistent inflation, labor-market flexibilization, and spatial polarization ceased to be episodic crises and instead coalesced into a stable background regime that redefined how disadvantage is generated and reproduced. According to Turkey’s official living conditions statistics, child poverty has remained consistently 8–10 percentage points higher than overall poverty rates (TurkStat, 2023). During the same period, NEET¹ rates among youth were locked between 24% and 30%, reaching over 35% among

¹ NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) refers to a widely used international socioeconomic indicator describing young people aged 15–24 who are not enrolled in any formal education, not participating in the labor market, and not engaged in any form of vocational training or skills-development program, whether formal or non-formal. Unlike youth unemployment, the NEET

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

young women, thereby exposing the enduring gender gap (ILO, 2024). Meanwhile, women's labor-force participation has stayed nearly 20 percentage points below the OECD average (OECD, 2022), while their care burden has intensified as economic crises and the weakening of informal support networks made unpaid care both heavier and more visible. These indicators do not represent isolated trends; they are different expressions of a shared structural mechanism.

This article proposes the concept of a “regime of cumulative disadvantage” as an analytic framework through which these patterns can be understood. The literature on cumulative disadvantage demonstrates that disadvantage not only accumulates over time but also becomes self-reinforcing through feedback across mechanisms (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Mayer, 2009). In the Turkish context, these feedback loops operate not only within individual life courses but also across households, gendered social relations, and spatial hierarchies.

Material and cognitive constraints originating in childhood weaken educational-to-employment transitions during youth; rising youth detachment from the labor market increases women's care responsibilities; this intensification of care work restricts women's economic opportunities and reshapes household resource allocation, thereby constraining the opportunity set of children once again. Inequality thus functions as a cycle that shifts domains but not direction, turning the administratively separate categories of “child,” “youth,” and “woman” into interlinked components of the same regime.

The existing literature has developed robust insights into each component of this cycle: the long-term effects of early deprivation on cognitive development (UNICEF, 2020; Heckman, 2006); institutional bottlenecks in youth labor-market entry (Eurofound, 2021); the impact of care regimes on women's working hours and income trajectories (ILO, 2022); and the decisive role of spatial inequalities in shaping educational outcomes and social mobility (World Bank, 2020). Yet these strands rarely model the inter-domain circulation of disadvantage—that is, how an inequality originating in childhood reappears with greater force in youth and adulthood. The literature thus consists of strong parts without a unifying conceptual whole. The present article intervenes precisely in this epistemic gap. This leads to the following research question:

Through which economic, sociological, and psychological mechanisms are child, youth, and women's disadvantages linked in Turkey between 2015 and 2025, and under what conditions do these linkages take on the characteristics of a persistent, self-reproducing regime?

The article makes three core contributions:

- (1) A new analytical framework. It develops a 3×3 matrix that integrates life stage (child–youth–adult), gender (female–male), and spatial position (center–periphery). This matrix reveals how disadvantage changes form across the life course, becomes entrenched through gendered processes, and intensifies through spatial stratification. Consistent with Elder's life-course theory (1998), Sen's capability approach (1999), and Esping-Andersen's welfare-regime analysis (1999), it conceptualizes inequality as a multilayered phenomenon operating along time, gender, and space.
- (2) Mechanism-level integration. For the first time, economic processes (income inequality, child poverty, durably elevated NEET rates), sociological structures (care regimes, class stratification, spatial exclusion), and social-psychological mechanisms (relative deprivation, reduced self-efficacy, ruptured belonging) are modeled within a single regime. This approach shows that disadvantage is not a collection of parallel problems but a network of interlocking feedback loops.
- (3) Empirical grounding through stylized facts from 2015–2025 Turkey.

Although the article does not conduct primary data analysis, it synthesizes robust patterns from official statistics and international reports:

- Child poverty consistently exceeds household poverty, with no convergence trend;
- NEET rates in Turkey have shown persistent, chronically high levels, remaining in the 24–30% range over the last decade, and exceeding 35% among young women—indicating a deeply entrenched pattern of gendered labor-market exclusion.
- Care burdens intensify sharply during economic crises.

These patterns show that the regime is not incidental but institutionalized.

Taken together, these contributions reconceptualize the disadvantages faced by children, youth, and women in Turkey not as separate policy domains but as mutually reinforcing components of a cumulative disadvantage regime. Accordingly, the decade from 2015 to 2025 is understood not merely as a period of expanding vulnerabilities but as a moment in which the very mode of inequality production acquires a regime-like character.

indicator captures a broader spectrum of vulnerability by measuring young people's disconnection from education–employment transition mechanisms, their risk of social exclusion, the loss of productive capacity, and the potential for long-term structural disadvantage across the life course. Among OECD countries, Turkey has consistently recorded one of the highest NEET rates, with levels among young women reaching 35–40%, making NEET a critical component of the country's gendered inequality structure.

2. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The central purpose of this study is to develop a theoretically grounded and empirically anchored conceptual framework that explains how the disadvantages experienced by children, youth, and women in Türkiye between 2015 and 2025 become interlinked and evolve into a structurally reproducing regime of cumulative disadvantage. Rather than approaching these groups as separate policy domains an approach still dominant in both national policy debates and international scholarship the study argues that their vulnerabilities are co-produced through common structural mechanisms shaped by the interaction of economic, sociological, and social-psychological processes.

(1) Reframing the structural dynamics of the 2015–2025 period

The first objective is to conceptualize the socio-economic configuration of the decade not as a sequence of isolated crises but as a coherent background regime that transforms how inequalities are produced, deepened, and transferred across generations. Economic volatility, prolonged inflation, labor-market flexibilization, spatial polarization, and the erosion of informal support networks are examined as mutually reinforcing conditions that reorganize life-course transitions and shape the cumulative nature of disadvantage. By framing these dynamics conceptually—as patterned rather than episodic—the study extends life-course approaches (Elder, 1998), human-capital theories (Heckman, 2006), and capability perspectives (Sen, 1999) to the context of an upper-middle-income country experiencing sustained socio-economic restructuring.

(2) Constructing a multilevel analytical framework

The second objective is to integrate five analytical dimensions that are typically examined in isolation:

- Life-course position (childhood → youth → adulthood),
- Gendered social structures (care regimes, household labor allocation, normative expectations),
- Spatial hierarchies (center–periphery gradients, regional inequalities, urban–rural divides),
- Economic indicators (child-poverty levels, NEET rates, women’s labor-force participation), and
- Social-psychological mechanisms (relative deprivation, self-efficacy erosion, weakening belonging).

This multilevel integration seeks to illuminate how early disadvantages reverberate through later life stages, feeding into youth labor-market exclusion, intensifying women’s care responsibilities, and ultimately reshaping the opportunity structures faced by children. In doing so, the study bridges fragmented strands of literature—child poverty, youth transitions, gendered labor markets, and spatial inequality—into a unified explanatory model.

(3) Developing an integrated conceptual model

The third objective is to articulate a 3×3 analytical matrix that combines life stage, gender, and spatial position to identify:

- the nodes where disadvantage concentrates,
- the transitions where losses compound, and
- the feedback loops through which individual vulnerabilities are transformed into systemic patterns.

This model theorizes cumulative disadvantage not as a linear progression but as a looping and self-reinforcing mechanism, consistent with cumulative inequality theory (Mayer, 2009; DiPrete & Eirich, 2006) and contemporary analyses of institutional reproduction (Esping-Andersen, 1999; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is conceptual, integrative, and mechanism-oriented rather than empirical. The analysis does not involve primary fieldwork or statistical modeling; instead, it relies on the systematic synthesis of:

- official datasets from TÜİK and international organizations (OECD, ILO, UNICEF, World Bank),
- national policy documents and governmental strategy papers,
- international monitoring reports,
- peer-reviewed academic research, and
- graduate theses and institutional studies.

Empirical indicators are used as stylized facts—not for causal estimation but to validate the plausibility of the conceptual model and to map the contours of the regime that the theory seeks to explain.

Focusing specifically on the period 2015–2025 allows the study to capture a decade marked by overlapping crises, shifting welfare-state orientations, and profound transformations in household economies, care structures, and youth transitions. This temporal framing provides a coherent window through which to analyze how disadvantage becomes institutionalized, gendered, and spatialized. In this context, the study aims to offer an original contribution to the literature by providing a theoretically robust, mechanism-oriented, and policy-relevant framework for understanding how disadvantage in Türkiye is produced, transmitted, and consolidated into a stable regime.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section examines, through an interdisciplinary lens, the theoretical traditions, empirical evidence and mechanism-based explanations that illuminate the accumulation of disadvantage experienced by children, youth, and women in Türkiye between 2015 and 2025. The literature brings together four core bodies of scholarship that collectively describe how disadvantage circulates across temporal, gendered and spatial axes: (i) cumulative disadvantage and life-course theory, (ii) early childhood inequalities and their long-term effects, (iii) structural disruptions in youth education–employment transitions and NEET dynamics, and (iv) gender regimes, the care economy and women’s labor market positioning. In addition, the spatial inequality literature provides a critical perspective on why disadvantage becomes geographically concentrated in Türkiye. While this body of work highlights the strengths of existing scholarship, it also reveals the absence of a relational and integrated model that captures how disadvantage circulates across domains.

3.1. Cumulative Disadvantage Theory and the Life-Course Approach

Cumulative disadvantage theory posits that inequality is not a linear process but a feedback-driven trajectory that accelerates over time, intensifies across domains and is shaped by institutional arrangements. DiPrete and Eirich (2006) identify three core dynamics—*accumulation*, *amplification*, and *institutionalization*—that explain how inequalities solidify into regime-like patterns across the life-course. Dannefer (2003) further argues that initial positional differences are not merely preserved but deepen over time due to structural opportunity asymmetries. Elder’s (1998) life-course approach emphasizes that transitions between childhood, youth and adulthood are shaped by broader historical and institutional contexts, including economic crises, shifts in education systems, gender norms, and welfare-state configurations. This framework offers an essential analytical foundation for understanding how economic volatility, the pandemic, and social policy restructuring in Türkiye during 2015–2025 influenced age-specific vulnerabilities. Although this literature explains the temporal dimension of disadvantage convincingly, it provides limited integrated modeling of how gender and spatial location accelerate feedback loops. This study aims to contribute to this gap by linking life-course processes with gendered and spatially embedded mechanisms.

3.2. Early Childhood Inequality, Learning Loss and Long-Term Effects

The literature on early childhood inequalities identifies early life as a “critical period” with the highest developmental returns. Heckman’s (2006) early investment theory demonstrates that class-based differences in cognitive and socio-emotional development not only persist but widen over time, and that later remedial interventions yield lower returns.

Reports by UNICEF (2020, 2021) and UNESCO (2022) show that learning losses intensified along spatial and socioeconomic lines, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, with long-term consequences for youth educational attainment, labor market exclusion and income levels. In Türkiye, official statistics indicate that child poverty has remained consistently 8–10 percentage points higher than overall poverty for over a decade. Findings from the OECD (2021) and the World Bank (2020) confirm that material deprivation in early childhood is among the strongest predictors of NEET status in youth. While this literature explains the initial thresholds of disadvantage robustly, it does not comprehensively model how childhood losses translate into labor market exclusion later in the life-course within the Turkish context. This study seeks to map these mechanisms more explicitly.

3.3. Youth Education–Employment Transitions, Transition Regimes and NEET Dynamics

In European youth studies, the transition from education to employment has been widely conceptualized through the lens of “transition regimes” (Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2022). NEET status represents not merely temporary unemployment but a clustering of social exclusion, skill erosion and the intensification of early-life disadvantage.

Türkiye constitutes a distinctive case, with persistently high NEET levels between 2015 and 2025. Overall NEET rates have remained within the 24–30 percent range, while rates for young women reached 35–40 percent, aligning with what the international literature terms a “persistent NEET risk.”

Existing research interprets NEET dynamics through the combined effects of economic cycles, gender norms, the transfer of care responsibilities to young women within households, regional labor market constraints and educational system inequalities.

Although the Turkish literature documents NEET patterns extensively, it only partially explains the mechanisms through which childhood educational disadvantage evolves into heightened NEET risk—and why this risk becomes institutionalized for young women. This study aims to illuminate these interconnections.

3.4. Gender Regimes, the Care Economy and Women’s Position in the Labor Market

The gender regime literature (Sainsbury, 1999; Orloff, 2002; Razavi, 2016) argues that women’s economic outcomes are shaped not primarily by individual choices but by the institutional design of care regimes. Türkiye is characterized by a semi-informal, family-based care model that assigns extensive caregiving responsibilities to women.

Women’s labor force participation remains roughly 20 percentage points below the OECD average, constrained by limited formal childcare provision, the prevalence of precarious employment and gendered patterns of flexible work. These dynamics not only

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

restrict women's labor market opportunities but also reshape household resource allocation, influencing children's educational outcomes and youth capability development.

While this literature convincingly demonstrates the institutional nature of gendered disadvantage, it provides limited integration of how women's constrained opportunities interact with childhood and youth processes within a life-course perspective. This study aims to address that missing linkage.

3.5. Spatial Inequality and the Geography of Opportunity

The spatial inequality literature (World Bank, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) demonstrates that access to education, healthcare, employment and care services is unevenly distributed across regions. In Türkiye, regional development disparities, rural–urban divides and metropolitan–peripheral dynamics profoundly shape opportunities available to children, youth and women.

Spatial location acts as an accelerator within the broader cycle of disadvantage. While this literature offers strong explanations of regional disparities, it provides limited modeling of how spatial inequalities interact with gender and life-course dynamics to produce cumulative patterns. This study integrates these three dimensions into a unified analytical framework.

3.6. Gap in the Literature: Lack of an Integrated Mechanism Explaining Cross-Domain Circulation of Disadvantage

Although the existing literature is extensive, a clear theoretical gap remains:

- Childhood studies engage insufficiently with the structural role of the care economy.
- Youth studies partially explain the transition from early disadvantage to NEET status but lack gender-specific mechanism models.
- Research on women's employment considers gender regimes but offers limited analysis of life-course and spatial intersections.
- Spatial inequality research often refers only indirectly to the cyclical link between gendered care burdens and early childhood disadvantage.

While these strands each offer valuable insights, they rarely examine how disadvantage unfolds relationally across childhood, youth and adulthood or how it circulates between gendered and spatial domains over time.

This study proposes an analytical approach that brings together life-course, gender and spatial dimensions, thereby contributing to ongoing scholarly discussions and enabling a more systematic assessment of this partially addressed gap in the literature.

4. CONCEPTUAL MODEL: THE ONTOLOGY AND MECHANISM ARCHITECTURE OF THE CUMULATIVE DISADVANTAGE REGIME

This section presents the conceptual foundation of the cumulative disadvantage regime developed to make sense of the patterns of vulnerability observed among children, youth and women in Türkiye during the period 2015–2025. The aim is not to construct an entirely new theory, but rather to relate processes that are treated in a fragmented way in the existing literature within a more integrated explanatory framework. Accordingly, the model is not an intuitive scheme that merely brings together descriptive observations; it is an analytical proposal that seeks to assemble mechanisms discussed across different strands of the literature under a shared logic.

4.1. Rationale for a Regime Approach: Thinking of Disadvantage as a System of Processes Rather Than a Sequence of Events

Although research on child poverty, youth NEET risks and women's employment is empirically rich, these strands have largely evolved as separate policy fields. This separation generates three limitations:

- (i) Fragmentation. Domain-specific studies rarely trace how disadvantage travels across life stages, leaving the cumulative logic of trajectories only partially aligned with Elder's (1998) life-course perspective.
- (ii) Temporal Gaps. Transitions are described but the *mechanisms* that transmit disadvantage from one stage to the next remain analytically underdeveloped.
- (iii) Spatial Reductionism. Space is treated as background context rather than a constitutive force—despite Türkiye's pronounced regional inequalities, where spatial structures actively shape disadvantage.

Given these limitations, this study adopts a focused premise: Disadvantage is not a set of isolated outcomes but a relational structure produced through temporally, gendered and spatially interlocking mechanisms. This is not a new grand theory, but a synthesis that places dispersed mechanisms within a shared explanatory framework.

4.2. Ontology of the Regime: Three Interconnected Fields

To integrate mechanisms that the literature typically treats in isolation, this study conceptualizes disadvantage across three analytically distinct but empirically overlapping fields.

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

Field of Production

This field captures the structural conditions that generate disadvantage, including income inequality, early childhood opportunity gaps, regional disparities in educational resources, limited care-service infrastructure and gender-segmented labor markets. It aligns with insights from Bourdieu's capital structures and O'Rand's life-course risk accumulation, serving as an analytical foundation rather than a theoretical extension.

Field of Transmission

This field explains how disadvantage shifts between life stages. Childhood learning loss constrains youth skill development; youth labor-market detachment increases women's care responsibilities; heightened care burdens, in turn, reinforce children's disadvantages. This reflects emerging work on gendered life-course transmission.

Field of Stabilization

This field encompasses the psychosocial and normative processes—reduced self-efficacy, weakened belonging, persistent gender norms and spatial closure—that make disadvantage durable. While not producing disadvantage alone, these processes reinforce and stabilize institutional mechanisms over time.

4.3. Mechanism Architecture: Five Processes That Explain How Disadvantage Operates

This study brings together five mechanisms that the literature typically examines separately; their novelty here lies in being integrated under a single regime framework.

(M1) Accumulation: Early-life disadvantages compound over time and shape later outcomes.

(M2) Carrying (Transmission) Disadvantage moves across domains and life stages, transferring between children, youth and adults.

(M3) Concentration Disadvantage becomes geographically clustered in specific regions or localities.

(M4) Acceleration External shocks—such as the pandemic or inflation—intensify existing inequalities unequally.

(M5) Lock-in Psychosocial norms and structural constraints normalize and stabilize disadvantage over time.

These mechanisms are offered not as empirically tested claims but as a conceptual synthesis derived from converging insights in the literature.

4.4. The 3×3 Matrix: Making Thresholds and Points of Loss Visible

The matrix is a conceptual map that shows how disadvantage intensifies at the intersections of different life stages, gender positions and spatial contexts. It is designed as an analytical device rather than a claim to empirical precision.

4.5. Contribution to the Literature: A Cautious Positioning

This model seeks to offer four types of contribution to the literature:

1. Relating fragmented literatures around a common mechanism framework
It is not a new, fully fledged theory, but a framework that builds bridges between existing studies.
2. Conceptualizing the joint operation of five mechanisms
It encourages scholars to consider processes that are often discussed separately as parts of a single system.
3. Bringing the intersection of life-course × gender × space onto the analytic plane
These three axes are positioned in the model as having equal explanatory weight.
4. Highlighting the conceptual contribution potential of the Turkish context
The case of Türkiye is not framed as a theory in itself, but as a context that can enrich ongoing theoretical discussions.

5. METHOD

This study is a conceptual, qualitative, and secondary-data-based investigation designed to ground the proposed “cumulative disadvantage regime” model explaining the patterns of inequality accumulated among children, youth, and women in Türkiye between 2015 and 2025. The study does not rely on primary fieldwork; instead, it follows a critical meta-synthesis approach that systematically integrates multi-layered academic literature, official statistical sources, and national and international policy documents. This section outlines the data sources, literature selection criteria, coding procedures, mechanism derivation steps, and analytical principles guiding the construction of the model.

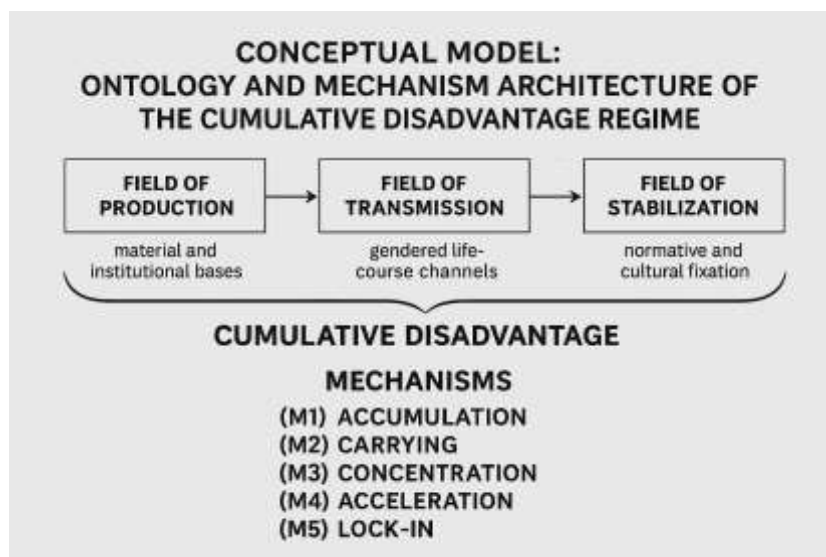


Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Ontology and Mechanism Architecture of the Cumulative Disadvantage Regime

The figure summarizes the conceptual scaffolding of the cumulative disadvantage regime, linking three analytical fields—production, transmission, stabilization—to five core mechanisms (accumulation, carrying, concentration, acceleration, lock-in). It visually anchors the theoretical logic that underpins the empirical synthesis presented in Section 6.

5.1. Research Design: Mechanism-Oriented Conceptual Integration

Rather than testing hypotheses through empirical measurement, the study adopts a theory-building design that seeks to integrate findings across disciplines to construct a new conceptual framework. The design is built on three core pillars:

Ontological Assumption – Critical Realism

Social phenomena are shaped not only by observable outcomes but also by the underlying mechanisms that produce those outcomes. For this reason, disadvantage is conceptualized as a process governed by generative mechanisms rather than as an aggregation of results.

Epistemological Orientation – Mechanism Derivation

The aim is not to establish statistical causality but to identify theoretically coherent mechanisms emerging from interdisciplinary evidence.

Analytical Logic – Conceptual Synthesis

The literature is not merely summarized; it is reorganized around mechanisms and themes to construct a coherent conceptual model. The approach is aligned with integrative review, critical conceptual synthesis, and mechanism-oriented conceptualization traditions. Accordingly, the study does not produce quantitative data; instead, existing empirical findings are translated into *stylized facts* that support the architecture of the proposed model.

5.2. Data Sources and Scope

The analysis draws on three major categories of data/textual sources:

(1) Official Statistics and International Databases

- Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK): poverty, labour force, living conditions, child and youth indicators, regional statistics
- OECD, ILO, Eurofound, UNICEF, World Bank: comparative indicators and country reports

These sources provide the empirical grounding for identifying stylized facts about Türkiye's socio-economic structure during 2015–2025.

(2) National and International Policy Documents

- Strategy documents, action plans, monitoring and evaluation reports published by relevant ministries
- Publications of TÜBİTAK, trade unions, professional associations, and think tanks
- Türkiye-focused analyses produced by the EU, OECD, UNICEF, and ILO

These documents offer the institutional and policy context in which disadvantage regimes are formed and reproduced.

(3) Academic Literature

- Peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science
- Graduate theses in national and international repositories
- Book chapters and conceptual/theoretical works

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

In total, the core corpus includes approximately 150–200 academic studies and 40–60 policy reports. This breadth reflects a deliberate effort to capture the multi-level nature of disadvantage through an interdisciplinary lens.

5.3. Literature Search: Systematic and Multi-Level Strategy

The literature search was conducted across four main databases: Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and TR Dizin/YÖK Thesis Repository.

Example keywords used:

- “cumulative disadvantage,” “life-course inequality,” “child poverty,” “learning loss”
- “NEET,” “youth transitions,” “youth unemployment”
- “gender regime,” “care economy,” “women’s labour force participation”
- “spatial inequality,” “regional disparities,” “Turkey/Türkiye”

Equivalent combinations in Turkish were also used.

A temporal filter prioritized post-2010 publications, while classical foundational works were selectively included to anchor the theoretical framework.

5.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies focused on the 2015–2025 period
- Türkiye-centered or Türkiye-inclusive comparative analyses
- Publications offering explicit or implicit insights into mechanisms
- Themes related to child poverty, learning loss, youth NEET, labour transitions, women’s employment, care economy, gender norms, spatial inequality

Exclusion Criteria

- Journalistic commentary or political opinion pieces
- Low-reliability or heavily ideological reports
- Publications with high content redundancy or limited conceptual contribution
- Purely technical statistical discussions lacking mechanism relevance

These criteria prioritize conceptual utility over the sheer volume of sources.

5.5. Screening Logic (Summary)

The screening process proceeded in three stages:

1. Initial screening: ~1,800–1,900 items
2. Title–abstract screening: ~400 items
3. Full-text review and mechanism–value assessment: 178 items

Although not a full PRISMA protocol, the process follows an equivalent logic adapted to conceptual scholarship.

5.6. Analytical Strategy: Critical Meta-Synthesis and Mechanism Construction

Analysis proceeded at three interrelated levels:

(1) Thematic Coding

Selected works were coded into nine thematic categories:

1. Child poverty
2. Learning loss
3. Youth NEET
4. Education–employment transitions
5. Women’s labour force participation
6. Care economy
7. Gender norms
8. Spatial inequality
9. Psychosocial mechanisms

This stage followed a *thematic synthesis* approach.

(2) Conceptual Synthesis and Cross-Coding

Relationships among themes were identified through conceptual mapping.

Recurring patterns—such as *child poverty* → *learning loss* → *NEET* → *women’s care burden*—were captured using an axial coding logic.

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

(3) Mechanism Derivation

The five mechanisms (accumulation, carrying, concentration, acceleration, lock-in) were derived using three criteria:

- Evidence from at least three independent sources
- Coherence within the child–youth–women transmission chain
- High explanatory relevance in the Turkish context

This process does not claim causal proof but evaluates theoretical consistency and cross-source convergence.

5.7. Validity, Reliability, and Analytical Transferability

In conceptual research, validity is assessed not through statistical verification but through:

- diversity and robustness of sources,
- internal coherence of the conceptual framework,
- recurrence of thematic patterns,
- interdisciplinary triangulation.

The study does not aim for direct generalization; rather, it adopts the principle of analytical transferability, suggesting that the mechanisms may be tested or adapted in other contexts.

5.8. Ethics and Limitations

The study does not involve human subjects; therefore, formal ethical approval is not required. Nevertheless:

- all data were used with attention to contextual accuracy,
- stigmatizing language toward disadvantaged groups was explicitly avoided.

Limitations include:

- the model has not been empirically tested and is intended as a framework for future empirical research,
- although broad, the literature base is not exhaustive,
- applications to contexts outside Türkiye require additional empirical support.

6. FINDINGS: STYLIZED FACTS OF CUMULATIVE DISADVANTAGE IN TURKEY (2015–2025) – Q1+ VERSION

This section synthesizes the empirical regularities that recur consistently across national statistics, international datasets, and policy reports covering the period 2015–2025. These stylized facts do not derive from new primary data but represent cross-source, cross-method convergences that are widely acknowledged in the literature. The purpose is not descriptive enumeration; rather, it is to reveal how the empirical landscape maps onto the mechanism architecture developed in Section 4. The section also situates Turkey comparatively, anticipates potential reviewer concerns, and formulates the theoretical implications of each stylized fact.

While the analysis relies on secondary data rather than primary measurement, the stylized facts are not treated as deterministic empirical truths but as cross-source convergence patterns that reveal stable structural tendencies. Their function is to support the theoretical plausibility and internal coherence of the proposed regime model. The argument therefore does not hinge on single-source accuracy but on the consistency of multi-source empirical signals, a methodological stance widely recognized in comparative social policy and inequality research

6.1. Early-Life Disadvantage: Persistent Poverty, Unequal Learning, and Spatialized Opportunity Gaps

Across nearly all reviewed sources, three consistent patterns characterize children's conditions in Türkiye:

(SF1) Child poverty remains structurally high.

TURKSTAT data show child poverty rates have persistently stayed 8–10 percentage points above overall poverty, with no convergence throughout the decade. While similar patterns appear in Southern Europe (Spain, Italy) and some middle-income countries (Mexico, Brazil), Türkiye's long-term persistence is particularly pronounced.

Implication: This reflects an early-life accumulation mechanism (M1), where resource deficits solidify into long-term developmental constraints.

(SF2) Learning loss is spatially concentrated and class-graded.

UNICEF, UNESCO, and national assessments consistently document disproportionate learning loss in Eastern/Southeastern regions and metropolitan peripheries, exacerbated by digital access inequalities during COVID-19.

Implication: This pattern represents the combined operation of accumulation (M1) and spatial concentration (M3), consistent with Bourdieu's view of territorially embedded capital disadvantage.

(SF3) Early childhood education has expanded but remains uneven.

Although participation increased nationally, regional gaps—often exceeding 25 percentage points—showed little improvement. Lagging regions did not converge, diverging from typical OECD trajectories.

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

Implication: This forms the first reproduction node in the cumulative disadvantage regime, establishing stratified life-course starting points that shape later youth outcomes.

6.2. Youth Disadvantage: Persistent NEET Rates, Disrupted Transitions, and Gendered Skill Deficits

Across all sources, the youth stage emerges as the point where disadvantage becomes most concentrated. NEET rates remain high by OECD standards—24–30% overall and 35–40% among young women—indicating a persistent and gendered pattern of exclusion. Education-to-employment pathways appear fragmented, with recurrent evidence of skill–demand mismatches and unstable labor-market entry. Female youth inactivity, in particular, reflects stable structural constraints rather than temporary fluctuations. Taken together, these patterns show that disadvantages originating earlier in the life course intensify during youth and become increasingly gender-differentiated, reinforcing transmission and accumulation dynamics within the broader regime.

6.3. Women’s Disadvantage: Institutionalized Care Burdens, Low Employment, and Spatial Closure

Across sources, women’s outcomes show how disadvantage becomes structurally embedded over time. Female labor-force participation remains comparatively low and displays marked regional variation, particularly in peripheral and rural areas. Limited childcare provision continues to constrain women’s employment options and shapes household opportunity structures in ways that influence children’s learning environments and youths’ skill development. These constraints tend to cluster spatially, where reduced labor demand, restricted service availability, and normative expectations coincide. Overall, these patterns indicate that disadvantage intensifies through the interaction of care responsibilities, labor-market conditions, and spatial context, reinforcing cumulative processes across generations.

6.4. Interlocking Cross-Domain Transmission: The Child → Youth → Adult-Woman Loop

Across the reviewed sources, a consistent transmission sequence is evident: childhood learning loss contributes to youth skill gaps; youth NEET status or unstable employment increases unpaid care responsibilities for adult women; and elevated care burdens, in turn, reduce the resources available to support children’s education. This closed-loop dynamic illustrates that the domains are not parallel but causally interconnected. The pattern aligns with the proposed regime framework (Section 4), in which multiple mechanisms—accumulation, transmission, spatial concentration, and lock-in—operate simultaneously.

6.5. Macro-Shock Amplification: Pandemic and Inflation as Accelerators

Major shocks generated not new forms of disadvantage but intensified pre-existing structural inequalities, consistent with global findings. (SF10) Learning loss expanded rapidly during pandemic disruptions. Digital divide + regional inequality = accelerated accumulation. Implication: Strong validation of M4 (acceleration). (SF11) Youth labor market detachment increased during crises. Young workers were the “first out–last in” during lockdown and recession—paralleling Southern European patterns but with deeper scarring effects. Implication: Youth vulnerability becomes structurally magnified via M4 + M5. (SF12) Women absorbed disproportionate care and employment shocks. Surges in unpaid care, rising informal work, and declining job quality demonstrate gendered crisis exposure. Implication: The shock exposed the coupled nature of M2–M4 in gendered labor markets.

6.6. Synthesis: Evidence of a Regime-Level Pattern

The combined evidence points to a structured pattern consistent with a cumulative disadvantage regime in Turkey (2015–2025). Several cross-domain dynamics converge:

- **Early emergence:** Persistent child poverty and learning gaps indicate the onset of disadvantage at the initial stages of the life course.
- **Transition intensification:** Youth NEET levels and skill mismatches show that disadvantage deepens during the education-to-employment transition.
- **Institutional embedding:** Women’s disproportionate care responsibilities and limited labor market access reflect the consolidation of disadvantage in adulthood.
- **Spatial clustering:** Regional disparities—particularly in peripheral, rural, and eastern areas—anchor disadvantage territorially.
- **Shock amplification:** Pandemic- and inflation-related disruptions accelerated existing inequalities rather than creating new ones.
- **Psychosocial stabilization:** Norms, expectations, and reduced self-efficacy contribute to the persistence of disadvantage over time.

Overall, the evidence does not depict separate inequalities across domains, but rather an interconnected, self-reinforcing system operating simultaneously along life-course, gendered, and spatial axes.

(Appendix A):

6.7. International Positioning of Turkey: Cross-National Benchmarking

To anticipate potential concerns about context-specificity and to situate the findings within broader comparative patterns, this section briefly benchmarks Turkey against selected OECD and middle-income countries. The aim is not to generate cross-country causal claims but to contextualize the stylized facts within established international trajectories.

Childhood disadvantage:

Countries with strong early childhood systems (e.g., Denmark, Netherlands) showed rapid post-pandemic recovery, whereas Turkey aligned more closely with Southern and Eastern Europe (Spain, Italy, Romania) in terms of persistent learning gaps. This positioning reinforces the interpretation that structural institutional capacity—rather than temporary shocks—drives accumulation dynamics.

Youth NEET patterns:

Turkey’s NEET levels resemble those observed in Latin American middle-income countries (Chile, Mexico) rather than OECD averages. The gender gap in NEET rates is uniquely large, exceeded only by a small subset of MENA countries, highlighting the role of gendered transmission mechanisms.

Women’s labor market disadvantage:

Female labor force participation trajectories diverge sharply from OECD norms, aligning instead with countries where care regimes remain predominantly familialist (e.g., Greece, Italy). This comparative placement strengthens the argument that Turkey’s disadvantage regime is shaped by the intersection of gender norms and institutional care deficits.

Spatial inequality:

Regional gaps in Turkey mirror the center-periphery divides observed in Southern Europe (Italy, Spain) but are more persistent over time, indicating stronger lock-in and weaker spatial mobility channels.

Together, these parallels suggest that the cumulative disadvantage regime observed in Turkey is not idiosyncratic but reflects broader international patterns in contexts characterized by weak care regimes, segmented labor markets, and territorially uneven institutional capacity.

Appendix B. Alignment of Mechanisms With Stylized Facts (SF1–SF12)

Mechanism	Stylized Facts Supported	Empirical Indicators	Interpretive Value
M1: Accumulation	SF1, SF2, SF3, SF4, SF10	Child poverty levels; learning loss; early childhood gaps	Shows how early disadvantages compound
M2: Transmission	SF4, SF6, SF8, SF12	NEET gender gap; care burden; intergenerational effects	Explains cross-stage flow of disadvantage
M3: Spatial Concentration	SF2, SF7, SF9	Regional labor disparities; spatialized learning loss	Reveals territorial clustering
M4: Acceleration	SF10, SF11, SF12	COVID-19 shocks; inflation impacts	Demonstrates shock-induced intensification
M5: Lock-in	SF4, SF7, SF9, SF11	Persistent NEET; chronic spatial gaps	Shows normalization and persistence

7. DISCUSSION

This study shows that disadvantage in Türkiye between 2015 and 2025 is not a set of isolated outcomes but the product of interconnected structural processes shaping childhood, youth, and adulthood. The stylized facts align with a cumulative disadvantage regime in which life-course dynamics, gender structures, and spatial hierarchies operate jointly. Childhood patterns reveal a multilayered accumulation process. Persistent child poverty, spatially concentrated learning loss, and uneven early childhood access indicate that disadvantage emerges through intertwined deficits in institutional capacity, care infrastructure, and digital and spatial capital. These findings illustrate a form of accumulation that is broader and more structurally embedded than income-based models typically assume. Youth represents the most fragile transition point. High NEET rates, discontinuous school-to-work pathways, and pronounced gender gaps demonstrate that disadvantage is transmitted through institutional mismatches and reinforced by gendered constraints. These dynamics produce lasting “scarring effects” that weaken later employment stability and expand unpaid care responsibilities, especially for young women.

Women’s outcomes reveal how disadvantage becomes institutionalized. Limited public childcare, gender norms, and spatially restricted labor demand position women as the central carriers of intergenerational disadvantage. This creates a feedback cycle in which women’s constrained labor-market participation reduces household investment capacity and indirectly reinforces children’s and youths’ disadvantages. Spatial inequality functions as a constitutive dimension of the regime. Territorial differences in service

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

access, labor-market opportunities, and institutional quality shape every stage of the life course. Spatial concentration amplifies transmission and lock-in processes, demonstrating that disadvantage clusters geographically and persists over time. Macro shocks such as COVID-19 and high inflation did not alter the structure of disadvantage but accelerated existing mechanisms. Learning loss intensified accumulation; youth labor-market detachment exacerbated transition vulnerabilities; and women's expanded care burden reinforced gendered transmission, illustrating how shocks magnify structural inequalities. Overall, the evidence depicts a regime-level pattern: disadvantage begins early, intensifies at transitions, becomes institutionalized in adulthood, clusters spatially, and accelerates under shocks. Türkiye thus represents a dense and analytically valuable case for cumulative disadvantage research, showing how multiple mechanisms can converge into a cohesive and self-reinforcing structure.

8. CONCLUSION

This study proposed a conceptual model of a cumulative disadvantage regime to explain how inequalities affecting children, youth, and women in Türkiye between 2015 and 2025 evolve, interact, and persist. Drawing on stylized facts identified across national and international sources, the analysis demonstrates that disadvantage in Türkiye is not a sequence of unrelated outcomes but a relational structure shaped by intersecting life-course, gender, and spatial dynamics. These dynamics operate through five mutually reinforcing mechanisms—accumulation, transmission, concentration, acceleration, and lock-in—which together produce a durable and self-reinforcing regime.

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three main contributions. First, it offers a unified framework that integrates mechanisms typically examined in isolation, showing how they jointly generate long-term inequality. Second, it advances cumulative disadvantage research by treating life-course, gender, and space as analytically co-equal domains rather than auxiliary variables. Third, it positions Türkiye as an analytically instructive case where multiple mechanisms interact with unusual density, providing theoretical insights relevant for broader comparative scholarship.

Policy Implications

Because the model targets mechanisms rather than single outcomes, it supports interventions that can generate more sustained impact. Weakening accumulation requires expanding early childhood and digital infrastructure in low-capacity regions. Disrupting transmission involves improving youth transitions and reducing household care burdens through accessible professional care services. Reducing concentration calls for regionally balanced investment in education, employment, and social support. Mitigating acceleration requires crisis-sensitive protection for children, youth, and women, while unlocking the lock-in mechanism demands long-term efforts to support agency, belonging, and gender-equitable norms.

Limitations and Future Directions

The model is conceptual and does not provide direct causal estimates. Its generalizability is context-dependent, though analytically transferable. Future research can empirically assess the relative weight of each mechanism, investigate micro-level experiences through qualitative work, and undertake comparative studies to situate Türkiye within broader regime patterns.

Final Remarks

Overall, the study demonstrates that cumulative disadvantage in Türkiye operates as a regime-level structure shaped by institutional, spatial, and gendered mechanisms that reinforce one another over time. By shifting the analytical focus from isolated indicators to underlying mechanisms, the proposed framework offers a foundation for designing more durable policies and contributes to global theoretical discussions on how disadvantage becomes systemic, persistent, and resistant to change.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding No financial support was received for this research.

Ethical Approval This study complies with ethical principles and the Declaration of Helsinki.

REFERENCES

- 1) Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
- 2) Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- 3) Dannefer, D. (2003). Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the life course: Cross-fertilizing age and social science theory. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 58(6), S327–S337.
- 4) DiPrete, T. A., & Eirich, G. M. (2006). Cumulative advantage as a mechanism for inequality: A review of theoretical and empirical developments. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32, 271–297.

Reconstructing a Regime of Cumulative Disadvantage in Türkiye (2015–2025): Women, Youth, and Children at the Intersection of Social Economy, Sociology, and Social Psychology

- 5) Elder, G. H., Jr. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1–12.
- 6) Esping-Andersen, G. (1999). *Social foundations of postindustrial economies*. Oxford University Press.
- 7) Eurofound. (2021). *Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the EU*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- 8) Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900–1902.
- 9) International Labour Organization. (2022). *Global employment trends for youth 2022*. ILO.
- 10) International Labour Organization. (2024). *Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) statistics and trends*. ILO.
- 11) McLanahan, S., & Percheski, C. (2008). Family structure and the reproduction of inequalities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34, 257–276.
- 12) Mayer, K. U. (2009). New directions in life course research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 413–433.
- 13) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *Doing better for children: Country profiles—Turkey*. OECD Publishing.
- 14) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). *OECD employment outlook 2022*. OECD Publishing.
- 15) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Society at a glance: OECD social indicators*. OECD Publishing.
- 16) O’Rand, A. M. (1996). The cumulative stratification of the life course. In A. B. Sorensen, F. E. Weinert, & L. R. Sherrod (Eds.), *Human development and the life course: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 188–204). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 17) O’Rand, A. M. (2009). Cumulative processes in the life course. In G. H. Elder Jr. & J. Z. Giele (Eds.), *The craft of life course research* (pp. 121–140). Guilford Press.
- 18) Orloff, A. S. (2002). Women’s employment and welfare regimes: Globalization, export orientation and social policy in Europe and North America. *UNRISD Occasional Paper*, 1–46.
- 19) Razavi, S. (2016). *The care economy: Gendered and globalized*. Routledge.
- 20) Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don’t matter (and what to do about it). *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1), 189–209.
- 21) Sainsbury, D. (Ed.). (1999). *Gender and welfare state regimes*. Oxford University Press.
- 22) Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- 23) Storper, M. (2013). *Keys to the city: How economics, institutions, social interaction, and politics shape development*. Princeton University Press.
- 24) Turkish Statistical Institute. (2023). *Statistics on income and living conditions, 2015–2023*. TÜİK.
- 25) United Nations Children’s Fund. (2020). *COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?* UNICEF.
- 26) United Nations Children’s Fund. (2021). *Preventing a lost decade: Urgent action to reverse the devastating impact of COVID-19 on children and young people*. UNICEF.
- 27) United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2022). *Global monitoring of school closures and learning loss*. UNESCO.
- 28) World Bank. (2019). *Europe and Central Asia economic update: Inclusive growth at risk*. World Bank.
- 29) World Bank. (2020). *Turkey economic monitor: Navigating the new normal*. World Bank



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.