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Empowering Vulnerable Populations: Protection, Support, and Adaptation

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The Conditions of Help: An Editorial

Vulnerability is not a fixed condition. It is a meeting point – where individual lives, social structures, institutional realities, and historical forces converge. Some people arrive at this intersection because of age, disability, or illness. Others are brought there by war, economic precarity, displacement, or the quiet but persistent weight of discrimination. What makes this convergence a matter for social work is the recognition that vulnerability is not simply endured; it is shaped, deepened, or alleviated by the response's societies construct around it.

This thematic issue of *Social Work and Society* brings together ten original studies that approach vulnerability from multiple disciplinary angles and across diverse national contexts – Ukraine, Bulgaria, Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, India, and the Philippines, among others. The collection spans the micro and macro levels of analysis: from the counselling session and the classroom to national policy frameworks and cross-country comparative models. Its unifying concern is not vulnerability per se, but the conditions under which protection, support, and adaptation become possible.

The issue is organised thematically into four clusters. What follows is a brief orientation through the terrain these articles map.

1 The Infrastructure of Help

Before vulnerable populations can be effectively supported, the professionals charged with that must themselves be adequately prepared. Two articles in this issue examine what happens when they are not – and what structural interventions might change this.

The issue opens with a study on social workers and counsellors operating under conditions of social instability. Its findings are sobering: half of surveyed practitioners rated their professional preparedness at no more than three out of five, three-quarters lacked a permanent supervisor, and fewer than half had pursued formal training since completing their degree. What the study offers beyond these figures, however, is an analysis of the structural and procedural factors that sustain these gaps – and a modelling of how targeted supervision and digital training interventions could meaningfully close them.

A complementary perspective is offered by the study on school-based social work in Albania, which turns from the question of professional preparedness to the question of professional method. Tracking 68 pupils over seven months at a secondary school in Tirana, the research demonstrates that a layered intervention model produces statistically reliable improvements across emotional, behavioural, and academic domains. Individual counselling reduced emotional difficulties and aggressive behaviour by over two points on the scale; group training improved communication and cooperation by nearly six points; supplementary lessons raised

average grades by close to two points. The precision of these results, confirmed through statistical significance testing, makes a strong case for evidence-based, multicomponent approaches in school social work.

2 Family and Recovery

Children are among the most exposed members of any society undergoing profound disruption – whether through war, displacement, disability, or institutional failure. Three articles in this issue attend to the specific contours of that exposure and to the interventions designed to address it.

The Ukrainian experience with the "Children and War. Teaching Recovery Techniques" programme offers a rare longitudinal window into a psychosocial intervention tested first during a period of relative stabilisation (2014–2021) and then in the radically altered conditions following February 2022. The programme's documented capacity to function across offline, online, and blended formats – reaching children dispersed by mass migration and active conflict – speaks not only to its design but to the considerable organisational effort behind its adaptation. For practitioners and policymakers considering how to sustain psychosocial support under emergency conditions.

A different but related form of institutional responsibility is examined in the study from Kyrgyzstan on inclusive education and rehabilitation services for children with developmental disabilities. Through regulatory analysis, comparative institutional review, and family environment data, the research documents the wide gap between legislative commitments and lived experience. Private metropolitan facilities significantly outperform rural public centres in resource availability; 42% of parents report difficulties from specialist shortages; financial constraints and the absence of adapted infrastructure compound these barriers. Against this picture of fragmentation, the study argues for updated policies.

The third article in this cluster shifts the lens to adolescents and to the somewhat different challenges of social development in contemporary society. Surveying 30 adolescents in Bishkek, it maps a set of findings that will resonate far beyond Kyrgyzstan: the dominance of passive, screen-mediated leisure; a gap between formal school activities and what young people actually find meaningful; low engagement in social initiatives; and a persistent sense that adults fail to offer genuine understanding. The study's recommendations articulate a vision of adolescent development that takes young people's own priorities seriously.

3 Societal Dimension

Vulnerability does not only manifest in individuals or families; it can take on a societal scale. Two studies in this issue examine how whole populations navigate crisis and how public health strategies can contribute to long-term social well-being.

The study on Ukrainian society under martial law offers an empirical portrait of collective resilience in one of the most tested societies of our time. The data are striking: 60% of respondents rated their psychological resilience highly, 75% valued participation in social initiatives, and 80% affirmed the relevance of sustainable development principles even in wartime. The study does not simply document resilience as an existing quality; it analyses what sustains it – civic mobilisation, grassroots initiatives, effective government-public communication – and draws on comparative evidence from Poland, Germany, and Sweden to propose concrete adaptations.

A quite different register of public health is explored in the Bulgarian study on HPV vaccination uptake. Surveying 264 mothers of primary school children in Varna, the research reveals that only 52% correctly understood primary prevention, and that willingness to vaccinate was closely tied not to economic barriers – financial constraints accounted for just 11% of refusals – but to psycho-emotional ones: fear of side effects (39%) and fear of pain (36%). Vaccine safety perceptions were almost evenly divided, with 48% considering vaccines safe and 43% regarding them as unsafe. These findings reframe the public health challenge around empathetic communication and parental trust rather than access and information alone.

4 Representation of Difference

The final cluster brings together three studies that address structural inequality and its cultural mediations – in law and family life, in public discourse, and in the media.

The comparative study on gender roles in repatriate families across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, India, and the Philippines examines what happens to the distribution of domestic authority and economic responsibility when families return from labour migration. The four cases illuminate strikingly different dynamics: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan display a combination of idealised traditionalism and expanding female economic autonomy; India sees egalitarian attitudes acquired abroad renegotiated within extended-family hierarchies; the Philippines exhibits economic role inversion alongside the formal persistence of male leadership. The result is a rich account of how "tradition" is not simply inherited but actively renegotiated when families move away and come back.

The study on equality and justice in South Korea, Sweden, and Albania engages the question of structural inequality at the level of public policy and civic awareness. Through survey and comparative analysis, it demonstrates how disparities in access to resources, rights, and opportunities generate social tensions across otherwise very different national contexts, and argues that educational and awareness-raising initiatives play a critical role in building the inclusive institutions that can address them.

The issue closes with a study on gender representation in digital media in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which asks how the platforms that increasingly shape public consciousness reproduce or challenge prevailing stereotypes. Analysing 50 media items and drawing on expert interviews with journalists and media analysts, the research finds that over 60% of content portrays women in conventional roles centred on appearance or motherhood, and that despite the growth of female presence in blogs and social media, these new spaces have not substantially disrupted the patterns of stereotypical representation. Commercial interests and the absence of gender-sensitive content standards emerge as the primary structural obstacles.

Reading these ten studies together, several recurring themes become visible. One is the gap between formal commitments and operational realities. A second is the primacy of relationship – between practitioner and client, parent and child, institution and community – as the medium through which vulnerability is either compounded or addressed. A third, perhaps the most hopeful, is the consistency with which the studies find that what helps is what acknowledges people as agents rather than cases: individualised approaches, and structures that create space for people's own capacities to emerge.

None of these articles offers a simple solution to the conditions they describe. What they offer instead is something more durable: careful empirical attention to specific contexts, honest accounting of what does not work alongside what does, and grounded arguments for why

particular interventions are likely to make a difference. This is, in the end, what responsible scholarship looks like when its subject is the lives of people who have the least margin for error.

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