THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN MENTAL HEALTH IN TÜRKİYE: THE QUIET POWER OF AN EMERGING DISCIPLINE

Türkiye'de Sosyal Hizmetin Ruh Sağlığı Alanındaki Rolü: Gelişen Bir Disiplinin Sessiz Gücü

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving role of social work professionals in Türkiye's mental health field through a structured qualitative literature review. Drawing on national academic and institutional sources published between 2010 and 2024, the research investigates the current landscape of mental health services, the contributions and challenges of social workers, and interdisciplinary collaboration models. A simplified PRISMA-based screening process was employed to ensure transparency and methodological clarity. The findings indicate that while community-based mental health services such as Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) have expanded, systemic challenges—such as unclear job descriptions, inadequate specialization in education, and limited inclusion in policymaking—continue to hinder the effectiveness of social workers. The review highlights that social workers provide critical psychosocial interventions, lead case management efforts, and enhance social integration, particularly among vulnerable populations. To address these challenges and structure the role of social workers more strategically, this study introduces the Integrated Psychosocial Empowerment Model (IPEM). This model is built upon three pillars: Case-centered empowerment, ecological integration, and justice-based advocacy. Rather than serving as a rigid framework, IPEM is designed to be adaptable across settings including CMHCs, hospital-based programs, and rehabilitation centers. The study concludes that recognizing social workers not merely as auxiliary staff but as essential actors in mental health systems is vital for achieving sustainable, person-centered, and socially inclusive services in Türkiye.

Keywords: Social work, mental health, community-based services, psychosocial support, case management

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının ruh sağlığı alanındaki dönüşen rolünü yapılandırılmış nitel bir literatür taramasıyla incelemektedir. 2010–2024 yılları arasında yayımlanmış ulusal akademik ve kurumsal kaynaklara dayanılarak, ruh sağlığı hizmetlerinin mevcut yapısı, sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının katkı ve sorunları ile disiplinlerarası iş birliği modelleri ele alınmıştır. Literatür seçim süreci, şeffaflık sağlamak amacıyla sadeleştirilmiş PRISMA protokolüne dayandırılmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular, Toplum Ruh Sağlığı Merkezleri (TRSM) gibi toplum temelli hizmetlerin yaygınlaştığını ancak görev tanımı belirsizlikleri, eğitimde uzmanlaşma eksiklikleri ve politika oluşturma süreçlerinde temsil sorunları gibi yapısal engellerin sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının etkinliğini sınırladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının özellikle kırılgan gruplarla yürüttüğü vaka yönetimi, psikososyal destek ve sosyal uyum çalışmalarının kritik önemde olduğu belirlenmiştir. Bu

ihtiyaçlara yanıt olarak, çalışmada Bütünleşik Psikososyal Güçlendirme Modeli (IPEM) önerilmiştir. IPEM modeli, vaka merkezli güçlendirme, ekolojik bütünleşme ve adalet temelli savunuculuk olmak üzere üç temel üzerine kuruludur. Bu model sabit bir müdahale protokolü yerine, TRSM, hastane ve rehabilitasyon merkezleri gibi farklı hizmet ortamlarına uyarlanabilir esnek bir yapı sunar. Çalışma, sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının yalnızca destekleyici personel değil, ruh sağlığı sistemlerinin temel aktörleri olarak tanınmasının, sürdürülebilir ve birey odaklı hizmetlerin inşasında kritik olduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal hizmet, ruh sağlığı, toplum temelli hizmetler, psikososyal destek, vaka yönetimi

INTRODUCTION

The concept of mental health refers to a state of well-being that encompasses not only individual internal balance but also social, cultural and economic dimensions. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as the state of being able to realize one's own potential, cope with the usual stresses of life, be productive and contribute to society (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021-2023). This definition reveals that mental health is directly linked not only to the psychological state of the individual, but also to the social environment, economic opportunities and the relationship with the society in which they live. As a result, it has become imperative that interventions for mental health are not only limited to the clinical level, but also expand to include the individual's living spaces.

At this point, the discipline of social work offers a multi-layered intervention approach in the field of mental health, bringing a perspective that focuses on the individual's psychosocial needs, social support networks and social integration processes. Social work is a profession that develops empowerment-based, human rights-oriented and social justice-oriented interventions to ensure the full participation of individuals and groups in social life (Moore et al., 2016). Social workers, especially in the field of mental health, target not only the symptoms of illness but also the holistic well-being of the individual in individual, family and social contexts.

For many years, mental health services in Türkiye have been structured within the framework of a hospital-centered approach, mainly under the influence of the biomedical model. Schizophrenia and similar severe mental illnesses were tried to be managed through long-term hospitalizations and medication-based treatment methods; however, this approach was far from supporting individuals' participation in social life and deepened social isolation and stigmatization processes (Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023). Since the 2000s, a paradigm shift has been targeted in mental health services in Türkiye; a shift towards community-based service models that take into account not only the clinical well-being of the individual but also his/her social functionality and social integration has begun. In this transformation process, Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) were put into practice as one of the institutional structures of the intervention approach that addresses the individual together with his/her environment (Mutlu, 2024).

CMHC structures aim to support individuals with mental illness outside the hospital, regain their social roles and increase their social functionality. In this context, social workers play active roles in case management, psychosocial support, family counseling, group work and social integration processes in CMHCs (National Mental Health Action Plan). However, observations and research in the field show that social workers often work in these structures without professional autonomy and with unclear job descriptions (Abendstern et al., 2020).

The relationship between social work and mental health is not unique to the clinical field. A wide range of social problems such as domestic violence, addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, migration and refugees also have a profound impact on mental health. In Türkiye, especially after the refugee crisis, social workers' interventions in the field of mental health and psychosocial support have made the critical role of the profession in this field more visible (Nişancı et al., 2020). Despite this, the limited representation of the social work perspective in policy-making processes and professional capacity deficiencies narrow the scope of its impact in the field.

This study aims to comprehensively address the functions, contributions and structural problems faced by social work graduates in the field of mental health in Türkiye. In particular, the unique contributions of social work in the field of mental health will be evaluated through CMHC practices, hospital-based services, interventions carried out in rehabilitation centers and work with vulnerable groups. At the same time, current structural deficiencies, gaps in the literature and international examples of good practices will be discussed and policy and practice recommendations for the future will be developed.

A qualitative literature review method was adopted in the study. As a result of searches in databases such as TR Index, Google Scholar, DergiPark, YÖK National Thesis Center, academic articles, field research and policy documents published between 2010 and 2024 were systematically examined. Thus, Türkiye's current situation at the intersection of social work and mental health will be analyzed on a scientific basis.

Therefore, it is envisaged that when the "silent power" of social work in the field of mental health is made visible, permanent and strong improvements in the quality of life of individuals and social welfare can be achieved.

Beyond its practical function, the discipline of social work is grounded in several core theoretical frameworks that inform its practice in mental health. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner) emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual well-being with family, community, institutional, and policy environments. The empowerment perspective focuses on strengthening individual agency and resilience in the face of psychological and social adversity. Meanwhile, the social justice framework positions social workers as active agents in reducing structural inequalities and advocating for vulnerable populations. These models guide the holistic, context-sensitive approach adopted in this study,

particularly in evaluating the evolving role of social work professionals in Türkiye's mental health system.

METHOD

This study employs a structured qualitative literature review, designed in alignment with general principles of systematic review protocols such as PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). While not all PRISMA standards are fully applied due to the qualitative and conceptual nature of the research, a transparent and criteria-based framework has been followed to ensure analytic clarity and methodological rigor.

The review focuses on academic and institutional publications between 2010 and 2024 that examine the intersection of social work and mental health in Türkiye. Publications were included if they had full-text access, were written in Turkish, and were published in peer-reviewed journals, official government documents, or academic thesis repositories. Materials were excluded if they focused solely on biomedical perspectives without addressing the role of social work, or if they were editorials, inaccessible theses, or non-scholarly articles.

The literature search was conducted using four major platforms: TR Index, DergiPark, the YÖK National Thesis Center, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations such as "sosyal hizmet," "ruh sağlığı," "psikososyal destek," "toplum ruh sağlığı merkezi," "vaka yönetimi," and "disiplinlerarası iş birliği." Boolean operators, phrase matching, and year filters were used to refine the search and focus on recent national developments.

The initial search identified 84 sources. After screening titles and abstracts for relevance, 46 sources remained. Following the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 full-text academic publications, national reports, and official documents were included in the final review. These were systematically examined through thematic synthesis and categorized into five core themes: (1) the structure of mental health services, (2) the professional duties and contributions of social workers, (3) interdisciplinary collaboration, (4) systemic and institutional challenges, and (5) good practices and international comparisons.

While this review does not include components such as coding software or meta-analysis typical of fully quantitative systematic reviews, its structured methodology enhances the transparency, replicability, and theoretical depth of the findings. The study aims not only to map the current landscape of social work in Turkish mental health services but also to critically highlight areas for future development in theory, policy, and practice.

The selection and screening process followed a simplified PRISMA-based structure, as summarized in the table below:

Table 1. Literature Screening and Selection Process

Screening Stage	Number of Sources
Records identified through database search	84
Records after title and abstract screening	46
Full-text sources assessed for eligibility	30
Studies included in the final review	30

Source: Author's design based on simplified PRISMA structure.

FINDINGS

Structure of Mental Health Services in Türkiye

For many years, mental health services in Türkiye have been shaped within the framework of a hospital-centered model. While this model evaluated the mental problems of the individual on a biomedical axis, it pushed social, cultural and environmental factors to the background (Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Health Services, 2023; Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023). This narrow perspective on mental health has led to the perception of the individual only as an organism to be treated; critical elements such as social functioning, family relationships and quality of life have been largely ignored (Moore et al. , 2016; WHO, 2022).

As the biopsychosocial model gained strength in the world, it was realized that the approach focusing only on the clinical symptoms of the individual was inadequate in Türkiye, and the process of transition to community-based mental health services began (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021-2023). Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) have been one of the most important building blocks of this transformation. Established in 2011, CMHCs were put into operation to support individuals diagnosed with severe mental disorders in an out-of-hospital setting, improve their social skills and ensure their reintegration into society (Ministry of Health, 2024-2028 Strategy Plan).

As of 2023, around 180 CMHCs were actively serving across Türkiye (Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023). These centers offer holistic interventions such as case management, individual counseling, group therapies and family support programs. However, regional inequalities observed in the field show that significant problems continue to exist in terms of the quality and accessibility of services (Mutlu, 2024).

The insufficiency of CMHCs in rural areas limits individuals' access to services, which increases the risk of chronicity in mental illnesses (Ünübol & Hızlı Sayar, 2019). In addition, the insufficient number of social workers, psychologists and other support staff working in the centers leads to a decrease in service quality (Boland et al., 2019).

Hospital-based mental health services still play an important role, especially in cases requiring crisis intervention. However, the lack of adequate support systems in the social adaptation processes of

individuals after discharge increases hospital readmission rates and creates a serious obstacle to individual rehabilitation (Abendstern et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016).

Although initiatives such as Healthy Life Centers (HLC) established within the scope of preventive and preventive mental health services are promising, the coverage of mental health services in these centers is still limited (Ministry of Health, 2024-2028 Strategy Plan). The effectiveness of programs developed to combat addiction and work with risk groups is tried to be increased in cooperation with universities and research centers (Ünübol & Hızlı Sayar, 2019; Sánchez Echevarria, 2016).

Looking at Türkiye's current mental health service structure, although important steps have been taken towards transition to a community-based model, it is seen that more holistic strategies are needed for this process to be fully institutionalized and spread equally throughout the country (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021-2023; WHO, 2022).

Duties and Roles of Social Workers

The job description of social workers in the field of mental health requires focusing not only on the clinical needs of the individual, but also on holistic areas of life such as social functioning, access to environmental resources and social integration (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016). In Türkiye, social workers working in CMHCs, psychiatric wards and some primary care centers develop intervention plans that support individuals' social functioning, assume a leadership role in case management processes and work directly with families (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021–2023; Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023).

While creating the intervention plan, factors such as the individual's social support network, economic status, education level and social participation potential are taken into account; thus, clinical treatment processes are strengthened in the social context (Moore et al., 2016). Case management practices, on the other hand, enable the creation of a holistic support plan that covers not only the short-term clinical needs of the individual but also long-term quality of life goals (Abendstern et al., 2020).

Psychosocial support activities carried out by social workers increase individuals' capacity to cope with traumas and facilitate their social adaptation processes (Nazar, 2018; Poopedi & Bila, 2023). In this context, Yılmaz (2024) emphasizes that the existential therapy approach offers an effective tool for coping with the meaning of life, anxieties and psychological integrity of the individual in social work practices. Psychosocial support programs, especially with women, youth and refugee groups, offer remarkable examples in terms of demonstrating the field effectiveness of social workers (Nişancı et al., 2020; Sánchez Echevarria, 2016).

Working with the family has a critical role in improving the social environment of the individual. As emphasized in the study by Kangasniemi et al. (2022), significant improvements in the mental well-be-

ing of individuals are observed when family support systems are strengthened. Similar trends are also observed in field practices in Türkiye.

Post-discharge support services facilitate the integration of the individual into the social environment in the post-hospital period and reduce hospital readmissions (Moore et al., 2016; Nişancı et al., 2020).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Location

The effectiveness of mental health services gains strength not only through individual professional contributions, but also through teamwork in which experts from different disciplines act with a common mind. Multidisciplinary teams are at the center of holistic intervention models that take into account not only biological disorders but also psychological, social and environmental dimensions of the individual (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021–2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Similarly, Tadić et al. (2020) emphasized that social workers in primary health care teams make strategic contributions to interdisciplinary cooperation and increase the effectiveness of psychosocial intervention processes.

In Türkiye, especially within the structure of Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs), the interdisciplinary team approach has become visible in the field. Teams consisting of psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses and social workers assess the multidimensional needs of the individual and structure interventions accordingly (Moore et al., 2016; Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023). In this structure, social workers assume unique responsibilities such as strengthening the individual's social support systems, leading social integration processes and facilitating access to environmental resources (Kangasniemi et al., 2022).

However, field experiences show that the theoretically envisioned roles of social workers are not always fully realized in practice. As Abendstern et al. (2020) found, in some cases, social workers showed limited participation in decision-making processes within the team and their role remained at a supportive level. A similar picture is also observed in field practices in Türkiye (Mutlu, 2024).

Although the case management, psychosocial support and social empowerment perspectives offered by social workers offer unique contributions to teamwork, the predominance of clinically oriented approaches causes these unique contributions to lose visibility from time to time (Boland et al., 2019; Hussain & Ashcroft, 2020).

However, in some good practice examples, it is also seen that social workers have gained effectiveness in the roles of case coordinator or intervention leader within the team (Nişancı et al., 2020). These experiences show that increasing the visibility of social work within interdisciplinary teams has positive effects not only in terms of professional identity, but also on the integrity of the services provided and individual well-being (Ashcroft et al., 2024).

Systematic recognition and strengthening of the unique contribution of social work in interdisciplinary collaboration are among the key elements that will increase the success of community-based mental health models (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).

Challenges Encountered

Social workers working in the field of mental health in Türkiye face various structural, institutional and professional challenges in their professional practice. These challenges directly affect not only individual professional satisfaction but also the quality, inclusiveness and sustainability of services (Ministry of Health, 2024–2028 Strategy Plan; National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021–2023).

One of the primary problems is the uncertainty of job description. In Türkiye, the roles of social workers in institutions such as CMHCs are mostly defined in general terms, which has led to serious uncertainties regarding the division of labor and sharing of responsibilities in the field (Mutlu, 2024; Nişancı et al., 2020). Field observations reveal that the roles of social workers are defined more flexibly and open to interpretation than the roles of other professional groups (Abendstern et al., 2020).

Insufficient human resources stands out as one of the main structural problems that directly affect the quality of mental health services. Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2 (2023) data reveals that the number of social workers working in Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) is quite limited in the face of intense demand for services in the field. This lack of personnel prevents individual intervention processes from remaining superficial and long-term rehabilitation goals from being pursued in a healthy manner (Boland et al., 2019).

On the other hand, working with individuals struggling with severe mental illness, suicidal thoughts or dementia requires advanced expertise and structured training programs (Mercedes Bern-Klug & Restorick Roberts, 2021). The limited availability of mental health-focused specialty training, especially at the undergraduate level, makes it difficult to effectively intervene in traumatic experiences, addiction cases and acute crisis situations encountered in the field (Hussain & Ashcroft, 2020; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). This situation limits the development of the holistic intervention capacity of social workers and makes the need for an in-depth approach in service delivery more visible.

The fact that the social work perspective is not visible enough in mental health policies defines a more structural problem area. The fact that health policies are still shaped around a medical-oriented model limits the visibility of psychosocial intervention opportunities offered by social work and prevents the contribution of the professional discipline from being fully appreciated (Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Health Services, 2023; WHO, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers' work with refugees, the elderly, and homeless individuals epitomized the unique contribution of this professional group in times of crisis (Nişancı et al., 2020). Danış, Duyan, Karataş, and Özdemir (2024), on the other hand, analyzed the experiences of

loneliness, detachment from life and mental deterioration experienced by adolescents with disabilities during the pandemic, and drew attention to the vital importance of social workers' work with these groups. However, the fact that these contributions have not been adequately reflected in policy documents reveals the need for more systematic steps to increase the institutional visibility of social work (WHO Türkiye Report, 2022).

In order to increase the effectiveness of social workers in the field of mental health in Türkiye, the need for clarifying job descriptions, aligning staffing plans with the demand for services, systematically structuring mental health-specific specialization areas in education programs, and ensuring the active participation of the social work discipline in policy-making processes is becoming more evident day by day (Acar et al., 2024).

Good Practice Examples and Emerging Areas

With the development of the community-based service approach in the field of mental health in Türkiye, various examples of good practices that demonstrate the effectiveness of social workers in the field attract attention. Individual intervention plans, group-based psychosocial support activities and family counseling practices carried out within Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) are among the leading examples of success (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021–2023; Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023).

In particular, case management processes carried out by social workers within the CMHC structure reduce the hospitalization rates of individuals and increase their social participation skills (Abendstern et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016). In case management, social workers make holistic plans by taking into account the social environment, economic status, education level and employment potential of the individual, ensuring that services are not individual-oriented but social adaptation-oriented (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).

In addition, psychosocial interventions with refugee groups, women and youth have also created unique success stories in the field. In particular, the support work carried out with refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic is an important example for social workers to demonstrate their flexible and creative intervention capacity in times of crisis (Nişancı et al., 2020). Such work has strengthened not only the individual's psychological resilience but also their social integration skills (Poopedi & Bila, 2023).

Programs developed in the field of combating addiction are also among the remarkable areas of development. The Türkiye Addiction Risk Profile and Mental Health Map (Ünübol & Hızlı Sayar, 2019 TURBAHAR) study conducted by Üsküdar University emphasized the importance of social work perspective in identifying risky groups and targeting preventive services (Ünübol & Hızlı Sayar, 2019). In this direction, psycho-social resilience programs carried out with individuals at risk of addiction in centers such as CMHC and HLC increase the effectiveness of community-based preventive services (Mutlu, 2024).

International literature also has examples of good practices that support the effectiveness of social workers in mental health services. Especially in European studies, it has been revealed that social workers strengthen social integration processes beyond increasing individual well-being in community-based interventions (Bark, Dixon & Laing, 2023; Stone et al., 2021). In a study conducted in Norway, the positive effects of social workers working in child welfare services on mental health and quality of life were systematically identified (Geirdal, Nerdrum & Olkowska, 2024).

In the Turkish context, collaboration models established by social workers between universities and public institutions also stand out among the developing areas. Mental health-focused certificate programs at universities, supervision-supported fieldwork, and professional development programs specific to areas such as addiction, trauma, and crisis intervention have been important initiatives that increase the effectiveness of social workers in the field (Ashcroft et al., 2024; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019).

All these examples reveal that the discipline of social work has gone beyond being merely a supportive element in the field of mental health and has become an active actor that is individual-oriented, rights-based and aims at social integration. Psycho-social interventions carried out by social workers directly contribute not only to maintaining individuals' well-being after illness, but also to increasing their social participation and strengthening their sense of social belonging (Abendstern et al., 2020; Hussain & Ashcroft, 2020).

In order for mental health services to evolve into a more inclusive, sustainable and community-centered structure in the coming period, there is a critical need to systematically document, model and disseminate these examples of successful practices across the country (Acar et al., 2024; WHO, 2022).

General Evaluation

When evaluated in the light of the data obtained, it is noteworthy that the good practices carried out by social work graduates in the field of mental health in Türkiye have shown a significant increase in terms of both quantity and quality. In recent years, the active roles of social workers, especially in CMHC practices, crisis intervention studies and community-based rehabilitation programs, have made significant contributions to the multidimensional nature of mental health services. This development is closely related not only to the increase in professional capacity but also to the transformation of social perception towards mental health services. However, it is observed that the existing good practices have not yet been institutionalized at the national level and a homogeneous service standard cannot be established in different regions. Regional differences, inequalities in institutional capacity and lack of professional staff are the main obstacles to the dissemination of these positive examples.

At this point, a more holistic integration of the social work discipline into the mental health system will not only contribute to individual well-being, but will also directly support the long-term sustainability and inclusiveness of community-based mental health services. The psycho-social support models of-

fered by social workers enable individuals to be empowered in their own living environments without being dependent solely on clinical intervention, and this process directly increases the social adaptation capacity of the individual. Therefore, strengthening the role of social workers in mental health services serves as a strategic tool in the evolution of services into a person-centered and rights-based structure.

On the other hand, when the performance of personnel who do not have an undergraduate degree in social work is evaluated in the field of mental health, it is seen that they can produce effective results in certain service areas; however, they exhibit significant inadequacies when it comes to multi-layered approaches covering the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of interventions. This deficiency limits holistic assessment processes and long-term well-being goals in mental health services, which should focus not only on the symptoms of the disease but also on the multifaceted life context of the individual. However, undergraduate social work education enables the development of a holistic approach in the field by providing the competence to systematically analyze not only the pathological condition of the individual, but also his/her social identity, economic conditions, cultural context and environmental interactions.

Within this framework, it becomes increasingly evident that professionals working in the mental health field need more than just short-term in-service training. What's truly essential is a comprehensive and practice-oriented education built upon a strong theoretical foundation. Social workers graduating from undergraduate programs bring not only clinical insight but also a holistic understanding that supports both personal recovery and broader social integration. Their interventions contribute meaningfully to helping individuals access employment, participate more actively in community life, and ultimately experience greater life satisfaction. In this sense, psycho-social support models crafted by social workers are not supplementary—they are fundamental tools for enhancing both individual and collective well-being.

If Türkiye truly aims to build more effective and inclusive mental health policies, it must start by genuinely recognizing the deep and enduring impact social workers have in this field. Their contribution is not just an additional layer of support—it is foundational. And yet, their expertise too often remains at the periphery of institutional systems, undervalued and underutilized. What's needed is not just acknowledgment, but deliberate action to integrate their knowledge and experience into the very core of mental health structures.

Embedding social workers more systematically into these systems would do more than improve service delivery. It would signal a shift toward a more human-centered, resilient approach to mental well-being—one that values relational care as much as medical intervention. In this light, every policy decision that strengthens the professional standing of social workers becomes far more than a bureaucratic improvement. It becomes an investment in the emotional fabric of society, in the quiet but essential work of healing, supporting, and reconnecting individuals with their communities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that while community-based approaches in mental health services have become increasingly prominent in Türkiye, structural and institutional deficiencies persist. Practices within Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs), including psychosocial interventions and case management processes, reveal that social work has become a visible and effective actor in the mental health field. However, issues such as uneven service distribution, staff shortages, and the lack of clearly defined professional roles continue to limit the potential of these models (Ministry of Health, 2024–2028 Strategy Plan; Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023).

The data suggest that social workers in mental health settings go beyond clinical support to engage in multi-level interventions that enhance social functionality and contribute to overall life satisfaction (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016). This positions the social work discipline not merely as an auxiliary profession but as a strategic component of broader social welfare. Nonetheless, field observations and reports indicate that this potential is not systematically supported, and social workers often remain in the shadow of clinically dominant professionals (Abendstern et al., 2020; Mutlu, 2024).

In the Turkish context, ambiguous job descriptions, insufficient human resource planning, and the continued dominance of medicalized mental health paradigms stand out as key barriers to the effectiveness of social workers in the field (Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Health Services, 2023; National Mental Health Action Plan, 2021–2023). Although the contribution of social workers became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly in psychosocial support for vulnerable populations—this visibility has yet to be fully translated into institutional policy frameworks (Nişancı et al., 2020; WHO Türkiye Report, 2022).

Comparative analysis with international literature indicates that the development of social work practice in Turkish mental health services remains at an early stage, especially when contrasted with models in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. In the U.S., social workers are often entrusted with independent psychotherapy, lead case management roles, and directly participate in policy-making processes (Ashcroft et al., 2024; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). In the U.K., they are recognized as central figures in organizing community-based interventions and play decisive roles in interdisciplinary decision-making structures (Abendstern et al., 2020; Stone et al., 2021).

For Turkish social workers to assume similarly central roles, job descriptions in mental health contexts must be clearly articulated, professional visibility enhanced, and specialization areas within undergraduate education significantly strengthened (Hussain & Ashcroft, 2020; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). The inclusion of advanced modules in areas such as addiction recovery, trauma-informed care, crisis intervention, and support for victims of violence would considerably improve the quality and scope of field-level interventions (Bark, Dixon & Laing, 2023; Rumping et al., 2019).

Furthermore, it is increasingly critical that social workers engage not only in clinical support roles but also in policy design, service model development, and human rights-based advocacy (Acar et al., 2024). Achieving this necessitates elevating the institutional position of the social work profession within mental health systems and securing its independence and authority in interdisciplinary structures.

These findings also align with foundational theoretical perspectives in social work. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a multilayered framework to understand how individuals with mental health conditions are shaped by their interactions with family, institutional, and societal environments. Social workers operating in CMHCs often facilitate access, advocacy, and integration across these layers. The empowerment framework highlights their role in fostering autonomy, dignity, and self-efficacy, particularly during post-discharge recovery. Finally, the social justice paradigm provides a critical lens through which to examine systemic disparities in access to mental health services, especially in rural or underserved areas. Together, these theories reinforce the necessity for integrated, rights-based, and context-sensitive mental health interventions in Türkiye.

Overall, the growing visibility of social workers in Türkiye's mental health field is a positive development. However, unless this presence is supported by sustainable policy frameworks, systematic professional recognition, and institutional commitment, the long-term social impact of social work interventions will remain limited and fragmented.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past decade, social workers in Türkiye have made substantial progress in the field of mental health, both in terms of their practical contributions and the academic understanding of their role. As the focus of mental health services has gradually shifted from institutional settings toward community-based approaches, social workers have assumed more visible and integrative responsibilities. Their involvement now extends well beyond supportive functions, encompassing case management, psychosocial counseling, community reintegration, and early intervention. In many instances, social workers have become essential actors in the functioning of multidisciplinary teams, addressing complex needs that clinical care alone cannot fulfill.

Despite this progress, the profession continues to face significant systemic challenges. The institutional status of social workers remains precarious, with unclear job definitions, overlapping responsibilities, and inconsistent professional recognition. These issues lead to ambiguity, inefficiency, and a lack of confidence in their role across different service units. Moreover, the shortage of qualified personnel, deficiencies in educational curricula, and limited inclusion in national-level mental health planning hinder the potential impact that social workers could achieve within Türkiye's evolving mental health system.

Given that mental health must be addressed not only through biomedical interventions but also through psychosocial and sociostructural dimensions, strengthening the role of social workers is critical to enhancing both individual and collective mental well-being. In this regard, the distinct contributions of social work—centered on empowerment, advocacy, and relational care must be recognized not as auxiliary support but as foundational to an inclusive, sustainable, and person-centered mental health framework.

To provide a theoretical and practical response to these identified gaps, this study proposes the Integrated Psychosocial Empowerment Model (IPEM). This model offers a holistic framework built upon three pillars. The first is case-centered empowerment, which prioritizes agency and self-determination in therapeutic processes. The second is ecological integration, which links interventions across micro, meso, and macro systems. The third is justice-based advocacy, which supports social workers in identifying and addressing structural inequalities in access to mental health services. Rather than serving as a rigid intervention protocol, IPEM is designed as an adaptable structure that can be tailored to various service settings including CMHCs, rehabilitation facilities, and hospital-based programs.

For the successful implementation of IPEM and the general advancement of the profession, the following strategies are recommended. First, job descriptions of social workers in CMHCs, psychiatric units, and preventive mental health services must be explicitly defined, emphasizing their roles in case management and community-based psychosocial support (Abendstern et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016). Second, the number of social workers in mental health units must be increased, with appropriate staffing models to reduce caseload burdens and professional burnout (Karaman et al., 2023; Türkiye Mental Health Profile 2, 2023). Third, undergraduate education must be enriched with specialization modules in addiction recovery, trauma-informed practice, crisis intervention, and support for victims of violence (Dursun et al., 2022; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019).

Fourth, social workers must be actively involved in mental health policy-making, ensuring that their perspective is embedded in the design of services and legislative reforms (Acar et al., 2024). Fifth, structured and equitable interdisciplinary models must be developed to strengthen collaboration and decision-making across teams (Bark, Dixon & Laing, 2023). Sixth, examples of good practices carried out by social workers in various mental health settings should be systematically documented, disseminated, and utilized as national learning tools (Mutlu, 2024; Poopedi & Bila, 2023).

Seventh, stronger partnerships must be established between academic institutions and field practice environments, including supervision-based internships and collaborative research projects (Geirdal et al., 2024; Rumping et al., 2019). Eighth, international models from countries such as the U.S. and U.K. should be critically examined and adapted to Türkiye's unique cultural and institutional context (Ashcroft et al., 2024; Stone et al., 2021). Lastly, the psychosocial roles of social workers during crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic must be formally acknowledged and integrated into national emergency response strategies (Nişancı et al., 2020; WHO Türkiye Report, 2022).

By advancing these strategies and adopting the IPEM framework, Türkiye can take significant steps toward building a more inclusive and resilient mental health system. Within this envisioned system, social work will not remain peripheral but will be recognized as central to achieving sustainable well-being. The Integrated Psychosocial Empowerment Model (IPEM), as presented in Table 2, consolidates the key theoretical principles discussed and offers an adaptable framework for implementation across multiple mental health service settings.

Table 2. Integrated Psychosocial Empowerment Model (IPEM): Core Pillars and Application Areas

Model Pillar	Core Concept	Application Contexts
1. Case-Centered Empowerment	Focuses on enhancing individual agency, autonomy, and participation in care processes.	CMHCs (Community Mental Health Centers), individualized care planning, post-discharge interventions.
2. Ecological Integration	Frames mental health interventions across multiple systems: micro (individual), meso (family/community), macro (policy/social structure).	Hospital-based mental health units, community outreach programs, multi-agency collaborations.
3. Justice-Based Advocacy	Emphasizes structural change, rights-based service access, and advocacy for vulnerable populations.	Policy engagement, mental health legislation input, refugee and minority group interventions.

Source: Author's own theoretical model.

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