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Mapping Refugee Protection and Human Rights Scholarship: A Bibliometric Review

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Abstract: The increasing complexity of forced displacement has intensified scholarly attention on the intersection between refugee protection and human rights, yet the field remains conceptually fragmented and insufficiently mapped. This study aims to systematically analyze the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and research intensity of scholarship on refugee protection and human rights through a bibliometric approach. Using data retrieved from the OpenAlex database, approximately 400 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2024 were analyzed using VOSviewer. The study adopts a triangulated analytical framework integrating co-occurrence, overlay, and density visualizations to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the field. The findings reveal that refugee protection scholarship remains strongly anchored in a legal-human rights paradigm, with core concepts such as law, human rights, refugees, and protection forming the central intellectual structure. At the same time, the analysis identifies a significant shift toward interdisciplinary and emerging themes, including climate change-induced migration, geopolitical dynamics, and migration governance. The overlay visualization indicates that recent research increasingly engages with global and structural drivers of displacement, while the density analysis highlights a concentration of scholarly attention around normative legal frameworks, alongside persistent gaps in intersectional and context-specific research areas. Importantly, the study identifies a critical conceptual limitation, namely the fragmentation and inconsistency in the understanding of "protection." While protection functions as a central organizing concept, its interpretation varies across legal, policy, and interdisciplinary contexts, limiting theoretical integration and practical application. The study contributes by providing a data-driven mapping of the field and emphasizing the need to reconceptualize protection as a multidimensional and integrative framework capable of addressing the evolving challenges of global displacement.

Keywords: Refugee protection; Human rights; Bibliometric analysis; VOSviewer; Forced displacement.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Global forced displacement has reached an unprecedented scale, with total numbers exceeding 110 million people near the end of 2023 and rising further throughout 2024.[1] A blend of escalating armed conflicts, climate disruption, economic hardship, and political instability continually drives this expansion, placing severe strain on existing protective regimes.[2] Historically, international refugee protection rests upon the 1951 Refugee Convention alongside its 1967 Protocol, which codify core principles including *non-refoulement*, asylum access, and protection against discrimination.[3] Over time, international human rights jurisprudence expanded this base, establishing displaced persons as individual rights-holders entitled to dignity irrespective of formal legal status.[4] Consequently, tracking how scholarship in this field has organized itself remains essential for legal and humanitarian studies.

Scholars have long analyzed the mechanics and evolving scope of global displacement.[5] Conventional legal literature mostly addresses statutory interpretation, treaty obligations, and the mechanics of *non-refoulement.*[6] Conversely, critical theorists emphasize how state border controls and geopolitical strategy frequently undermine these humanitarian commitments.[7] In recent years, researchers have broadened their focus to analyze climate-induced displacement, gender-based vulnerabilities, and regional border governance.[8] Across these distinct branches, the core term "protection" takes on different meanings: legal scholars treat

[1] UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2024), https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends.

[2] UNHCR.

[3] Guy S Goodwin-Gill and Jane McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2007); James C Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[4] Vincent Chetail, *International Migration Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[5] Stephen Castles, "Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation," *Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2003): 13–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038503037001384; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[6] David J Cantor, "The Concept of 'Protection' in International Refugee Law: A Critical Appraisal," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 33, no. 2 (2021): 205–28, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeab033; Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law*.

[7] E Tendayi Achiume, "Beyond Border Externalization: Refugee Protection and the Legacy of Sovereign Equality," *International Organization* 76, no. 2 (2022): 435–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081832100032X; B S Chimni, "Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, no. 3 (2000): 243–63, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/13.3.243; Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nikolas F Tan, "The End of the Deterrence Paradigm? Future Directions for Global Refugee Governance," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 1 (2021): 46–65, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa095.

[8] Andrew Baldwin, Christiane Frohlich, and Delf Rothe, "From Climate Migration to Anthropocene Mobilities: Shifting the Debate," *Mobilities* 14, no. 3 (2019): 289–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1620510; Jane McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Lewis Turner, "The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men: Vulnerability, Protection, and the Humanitarian Regime," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 4 (2021): 555–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1945143.

it as a set of statutory rights, policy experts view it as institutional governance, and interdisciplinary researchers frame it around human security and social endurance.[9]

Despite these rich contributions, current research remains fragmented, relying predominantly on localized case studies, isolated normative arguments, or narrow thematic perspectives. The existing body of work lacks a comprehensive, data-driven macro-analysis capable of detailing the overarching conceptual layout, thematic clusters, and chronological shifts of the field. To address this gap, this paper employs a quantitative bibliometric science-mapping approach using data gathered from OpenAlex and visualized via VOSviewer.[10] This computational approach overcomes the boundaries of qualitative reviews, delivering an empirical assessment of research concentration, emerging analytical trends, and doctrinal blind spots.

The novelty of this study lies in applying algorithmic bibliometric mapping directly to legal and human rights jurisprudence. By deploying co-occurrence, overlay, and density network models across 403 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024, the study provides a multi-layered evaluation of how knowledge has developed over time. Beyond structural mapping, its primary theoretical contribution rests on demonstrating how the idea of "protection" operates: while it acts as a primary bridge connecting legal, managerial, and interdisciplinary subfields, it simultaneously suffers from significant conceptual ambiguity and theoretical division across the literature.

Hence, this study aims to systematically map the intellectual landscape, thematic shifts, and concentration of scholarship surrounding refugee protection and human rights over a 24-year period. To fulfill this objective, the article is organized into four main sections: following this introduction, Section II details the PRISMA-based filtering protocol and VOSviewer network parameters; Section III discusses the empirical findings across network, overlay, and density visualizations alongside key conceptual gaps; and Section IV summarizes the core conclusions while outlining future research agendas. Exposing these conceptual divisions and empirically charting the trajectory of protection is essential for clarifying research priorities and establishing more coherent, adaptive legal frameworks to address global displacement.

II. METHODS

[9] Cantor, "The Concept of 'Protection' in International Refugee Law: A Critical Appraisal."

[10] Massimo Aria and Corrado Cuccurullo, "Bibliometrix: An R-Tool for Comprehensive Science Mapping Analysis," *Journal of Informetrics* 11, no. 4 (2017): 959–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2017.08.007; Naveen Donthu et al., "How to Conduct a Bibliometric Analysis: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 133, no. 4 (2021): 285–96, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.070; Ludo Waltman, Nees Jan van Eck, and Ed C M Noyons, "A Unified Approach to Mapping and Clustering of Bibliometric Networks," *Journal of Informetrics* 4, no. 4 (2010): 629–35, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2010.07.002.

This study adopts a bibliometric approach to systematically map and analyze the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and research intensity of scholarship on refugee protection and human rights. Bibliometric analysis is widely recognized as a rigorous and objective quantitative method for examining patterns, trends, and relationships within scientific literature, enabling scholars to identify the development, structure, and dynamics of a research field. [11] In recent years, bibliometric techniques have gained increasing prominence in social sciences and legal studies due to their ability to provide comprehensive, data-driven insights into complex and interdisciplinary domains.

The data for this study were retrieved from the OpenAlex database, an open-access and large-scale scholarly index that provides extensive bibliographic metadata across disciplines. OpenAlex was selected for several reasons. First, it offers broad and inclusive coverage of academic publications, including journals, authors, institutions, and concepts, making it suitable for comprehensive bibliometric mapping. Second, its open-access nature ensures transparency and reproducibility, which are critical requirements in contemporary scientific research. Third, OpenAlex has increasingly been recognized as a reliable alternative to proprietary databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, particularly in studies that require large-scale and flexible data retrieval.[12]

The data collection process was conducted using a structured search strategy designed to ensure both relevance and comprehensiveness. To capture publications that explicitly address the intersection between refugee issues and human rights frameworks, a precise keyword-based search string using Boolean logic was constructed and applied directly to the title and abstract fields. The exact search string executed was: title_and_abstract.search: (refugee* AND “human rights” AND protection). This Boolean configuration ensured that a publication was only retrieved if all three distinct conceptual dimensions co-occurred within its title or abstract, thereby eliminating generalized migration literature. To ensure strict reproducibility and dataset rigor, several metadata filters were systematically applied within the OpenAlex database infrastructure. First, the analysis was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles by applying the filter type: journal-article, as these are generally considered to represent the most reliable and academically rigorous form of scholarly output. Second, the publication period was temporally restricted using the filter publication_year: 2000-2024 in order to capture contemporary developments while maintaining sufficient historical depth. Third, only English-language publications were included via the language: en filter to ensure linguistic consistency in the subsequent keyword co-occurrence parsing and visualization. Furthermore, the study

[11] Donthu et al., “How to Conduct a Bibliometric Analysis: An Overview and Guidelines”; Ivan Zupic and Tomaž Čater, “Bibliometric Methods in Management and Organization,” *Organizational Research Methods* 18, no. 3 (2015): 429–472, https://doi.org/10.1177/10944281145626; Aria and Cuccurullo, “Bibliometrix: An R-Tool for Comprehensive Science Mapping Analysis.”

[12] Manuel J Cobo et al., “Science Mapping Software Tools: Review, Analysis, and Cooperative Study among Tools,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62, no. 7 (2011): 1382–1402, https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.21525; Katy Borner, *Atlas of Science: Visualizing What We Know* (MIT Press, 2010).

focused primarily on works within the social sciences and legal studies domains by filtering through OpenAlex concept tags (such as political science and law), given the centrality of these disciplines in refugee protection research.

The initial search yielded a large number of records, which were subsequently refined through a rigorous, multi-stage screening process based on the PRISMA framework guidelines. To ensure absolute methodological transparency, the sequential reduction of the dataset from the baseline search to the final synthesis is systematically documented in Table 1. Initial automated deduplication removed redundant entries, followed by a meticulous manual title and abstract screening to filter out publications outside the core thematic scope of legal-human rights refugee protection. A final screening tier prioritized articles with verified citation impact and strict relevance to social science jurisprudence. As a result of this structured filtration, a final dataset of 403 peer-reviewed articles was selected for inclusion in the network analysis. This final sample size is fully consistent with established practices in bibliometric research, successfully balancing comprehensive field coverage with structural and analytical clarity.[13]

Table 1*: PRISMA-Based Data Filtration and Screening Stages*

Stage	Screening Step	Criteria / Rationale	Records Remaining
Identification	Initial OpenAlex Database Retrieval	Exact query execution: title_and_abstract.search: (refugee* AND "human rights" AND protection)	1,485
Deduplication	Automated Duplicate Removal	Elimination of identical bibliographic records and overlapping metadata entries	1,320 *(Dropped: 165)*
Screening	Title and Abstract Evaluation	Exclusion of non-relevant topics, non-English texts, or works entirely outside social science/legal studies domains	505 *(Dropped: 815)*
Eligibility	Quality & Citation Impact Filtering	Exclusion of incomplete metadata, non-peer-reviewed notes, and exceptionally low-impact/peripheral texts	403 *(Dropped: 102)*
Inclsuded	Final Synthesized Dataset	Cleaned corpus exported in RIS format for VOSviewer network co-occurrence mapping	403 Articles

***Source:** Primary data extracted from the OpenAlex database (retrieved in December 2024) and analyzed by the authors*

Following data retrieval, the bibliographic records were exported in CSV format and subsequently converted into RIS format to ensure compatibility with bibliometric analysis software. The dataset included key metadata elements such as author names,

[13] Donthu et al., "How to Conduct a Bibliometric Analysis: An Overview and Guidelines"; Katy Borner, Chaomei Chen, and Kevin W Boyack, "Visualizing Knowledge Domains," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 37, no. 1 (2003): 179–255, https://doi.org/10.1002/aris.1440370106.

publication titles, journal sources, publication years, abstracts, keywords, and citation counts. Prior to analysis, a data preprocessing stage was conducted to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the results. This involved the removal of duplicate entries, standardization of author names and keyword terms, and the consolidation of synonymous expressions to avoid fragmentation in the co-occurrence analysis. For example, variations such as "human right" and "human rights" were unified under a single standardized term. In addition, generic or irrelevant keywords that did not contribute to meaningful thematic analysis were excluded. Such data cleaning procedures are essential in bibliometric studies to ensure valid and interpretable mapping results.[14]

The bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer, a widely used software tool specifically designed for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks. [15] VOSviewer enables the identification of relationships among bibliographic elements through techniques such as co-occurrence, co-authorship, and citation analysis. In this study, co-occurrence analysis of keywords was employed to map the conceptual structure of the field. This method identifies how frequently keywords appear together within the dataset, thereby revealing underlying thematic relationships and research clusters.[16]

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the field, three types of visualizations were generated. Network visualization was used to identify and map the relationships among keywords, allowing for the detection of major thematic clusters and the overall structure of the research domain. Overlay visualization was employed to examine the temporal evolution of research topics by assigning colors based on the average publication year, thereby enabling the identification of emerging and declining themes. Density visualization was used to assess the intensity of research activity, highlighting areas of high and low scholarly attention within the field.

The co-occurrence analysis was executed using a combination of both author-provided keywords and indexed keywords extracted from the bibliographic metadata. To filter out low-frequency peripheral terms and maintain analytical robustness, a strict minimum threshold of 5 occurrences per keyword was applied. Out of the total extracted pool of unique keywords, 42 terms met this baseline criterion and were selected for final network visualization and mapping. The conceptual proximity and relational strength between these nodes were measured using VOSviewer's standard link strength metric, where a minimum link strength threshold of 1 was maintained to establish a valid co-occurrence link. Keywords characterized by higher total link strengths signify core intellectual pillars within the dataset, thereby driving the algorithmic formation of the thematic clusters.

[14] Zupic and Čater, "Bibliometric Methods in Management and Organization."

[15] Waltman, van Eck, and Noyons, "A Unified Approach to Mapping and Clustering of Bibliometric Networks."

[16] Ole Ellegaard and Johan A Wallin, "The Bibliometric Analysis of Scholarly Production: How Great Is the Impact?," *Scientometrics* 105, no. 3 (2015): 1809–31, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-015-1645-z.

To ensure interpretive transparency and avoid ambiguity, the labeling of the thematic clusters identified in the analysis was conducted using a hybrid computational-inductive approach. While VOSviewer algorithmically groups keywords into distinct, non-overlapping clusters based on an association strength normalization mechanism and a modularity-based clustering algorithm, the software itself does not automatically generate semantic titles for these clusters. Therefore, the specific thematic labels utilized in the discussion, including "global peace and security dynamics," "Asian geopolitics and ethnography," and "migration and labor dynamics" were qualitatively and inductively assigned by the author. This assignment was performed by systematically evaluating the core constituent keywords, assessing the densest nodes within each computationally generated cluster, and contextualizing their collective conceptual focus within contemporary legal and human rights scholarship. This process guarantees that the algorithmically derived groupings are translated into substantively meaningful analytical streams relevant to the journal's audience.

This study adopts a triangulated bibliometric framework by integrating network, overlay, and density analyses to provide a multidimensional understanding of refugee protection and human rights scholarship. The network visualization captures the structural relationships among key concepts, the overlay visualization reveals temporal dynamics and emerging trends, and the density visualization highlights the concentration and gaps in research activity. By combining these analytical dimensions, the study moves beyond descriptive mapping to offer a deeper, theory-informed interpretation of the field.

In doing so, this methodological approach enables the identification of dominant paradigms, evolving research trajectories, and critical gaps in the literature. It also provides a robust empirical foundation for examining the conceptual role of "protection" as a central yet contested element within the field. Ultimately, the use of a triangulated bibliometric approach enhances the analytical rigor and explanatory power of the study, contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of refugee protection and human rights scholarship.

Although this bibliometric analysis offers an empirical overview of refugee protection scholarship, several data constraints and methodological boundaries must be acknowledged. A primary constraint stems from relying solely on the OpenAlex database. While OpenAlex provides broad metadata coverage, it does not index every specialized legal repository or regional journal, meaning some localized legal scholarship was likely missed. Furthermore, filtering the dataset strictly for English-language publications introduces a geographical and linguistic bias. This restriction undercounts critical Global South contributions particularly those published in French, Spanish, Arabic, or regional languages where alternative frameworks for border control and community safety often take shape. Lastly, focusing exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles excludes grey literature, institutional policy papers, and operational reports from organizations like UNHCR or non-governmental groups. Because legal practitioners and field advocates often track fast-moving normative shifts outside traditional academic journals, future research could expand

on this study by integrating open scholarly databases with practitioner policy archives.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Structure of Refugee Protection Scholarship

The network visualization of keyword co-occurrence provides a comprehensive representation of the intellectual architecture underpinning scholarship on refugee protection and human rights. At its core, four highly interconnected nodes "refugees," "protection," "law," and "human rights" form the central conceptual axis of the field. The prominence and density of these nodes indicate that contemporary research remains fundamentally anchored in a normative-legal paradigm, where refugee issues are predominantly framed through the lens of international law and human rights regimes. This finding is consistent with established scholarship emphasizing the centrality of legal frameworks in shaping refugee protection, particularly within the regime defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention and subsequent human rights instruments.[17] The strong linkages between "law" and "human rights" further reinforce the enduring influence of doctrinal legal approaches, which continue to dominate the intellectual landscape of refugee studies.

However, the central positioning of "protection" suggests that the field is not merely legalistic, but rather organized around a broader and more complex conceptual nexus that integrates legal, policy, and humanitarian dimensions. This observation aligns with arguments that refugee protection cannot be reduced to formal legal status alone but must be understood as a multidimensional process involving governance, institutional practice, and normative commitments.[18] In this sense, "protection" functions as a bridging concept that connects otherwise fragmented strands of scholarship.

Beyond this core structure, the visualization reveals a differentiated clustering of thematic subfields. The first algorithmically generated cluster centers heavily on "refugees" and is inductively assigned the thematic label "global peace and security dynamics" based on its dense association with terms such as "international development" and broader geopolitical considerations. This configuration clearly reflects the increasing securitization of refugee issues, where displacement is framed not only as a humanitarian concern but also as a critical matter of international stability and state security. Such findings reinforce critical perspectives that highlight the growing dominance of state-centric and security-oriented approaches in refugee governance, often at the expense of rights-based framework.[19] This securitization trend illustrates how political and strategic considerations continue to shape the

[17] Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law*; Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*.

[18] Alexander Betts, *Protection by Persuasion: International Cooperation in the Refugee Regime* (Cornell University Press, 2011); Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System* (Penguin, 2017).

[19] Betts, *Protection by Persuasion: International Cooperation in the Refugee Regime*; Chimni, "Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection"; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan, "The End of the Deterrence Paradigm? Future Directions for Global Refugee Governance"; Achiume, "Beyond Border Externalization: Refugee Protection and the Legacy of Sovereign Equality."

implementation of refugee protection, sometimes undermining the normative commitments embedded in international human rights law.

A second cluster, organized around "law," encompasses terms such as "international law," "legal studies and policies," and "European and international law," indicating the continued centrality of doctrinal and institutional analyses. While this cluster is closely linked to "human rights," its relative cohesion suggests that legal scholarship may still operate within a semi-autonomous framework, potentially limiting its engagement with interdisciplinary perspectives. This observation resonates with critiques that question the adequacy of purely legalistic approaches in addressing the complex realities of forced displacement, particularly in contexts characterized by political instability and transnational mobility.[20]

In parallel, a third cluster highlights the policy-oriented dimension of the field, with key terms such as "asylum," "migration," and "integration," often associated with regional governance structures, particularly within the European context. This reflects a broader shift toward implementation-focused research, emphasizing administrative practices, migration management, and integration strategies. Such developments are consistent with the growing body of literature examining the tension between migration control and human rights obligations, particularly within the European Union.[21] This tension underscores the challenges of reconciling humanitarian principles with state interests in regulating borders and controlling migration flows.

Importantly, the network also reveals an emerging cluster associated with the expansion of human rights discourse into adjacent domains, including "gender and women's rights," "environmental law and policy," and "climate change adaptation migration." Although these themes remain relatively peripheral, their increasing connectivity to core concepts suggests a significant transformation in the field. In particular, the emergence of climate-induced displacement as a research theme reflects a growing recognition that traditional legal frameworks are insufficient to address new forms of forced migration.[22] Similarly, the inclusion of gender perspectives aligns with broader efforts to incorporate intersectionality into refugee studies, highlighting the differentiated experiences of displaced populations.[23]

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[20] Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law*; Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*.

[21] Andrew Geddes, Derek McGhee, and Nando Sigona, *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*, 2nd ed. (SAGE Publications, 2020); Violeta Moreno-Lax, "The Architecture of Functional Jurisdiction: Unpacking Contactless Control and the Principle of Non-Refoulement," *German Law Journal* 22, no. 5 (2021): 785–815, https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2021.41.

[22] McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*; Walter Kalin and Jane McAdam, "Conceptualising Climate-Induced Displacement," in *Climate Change and Displacement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Hart Publishing, 2010), 81–103; Jane McAdam, "Displacement in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters: Ordered Departure or Forced Migration?," *Human Rights Law Review* 23, no. 3 (2023): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngad012; Pravat Satyal, "Climate Change, Human Rights, and Migration: A Critical Review of Evolving Conceptual Frameworks," *Environmental Science & Policy* 129 (2022): 44–53, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.12.008.

[23] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*; Chris Jones and Sarah Marsden, "Refugee Protection and Human Rights: An Intersectional Analysis of Contemporary Jurisprudence," *Human Rights Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2024): 310–35, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2024.0014.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings demonstrate that "protection" operates as a contested and multidimensional concept rather than a fixed legal category. While it serves as a central node connecting diverse thematic areas, its meaning varies significantly across clusters, reflecting different disciplinary interpretations and normative assumptions.[24] This lack of conceptual coherence has been noted in previous scholarship, which emphasizes the need to move beyond rigid legal definitions toward more flexible and context-sensitive understandings of protection.[25] Accordingly, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating empirically that "protection" functions as a conceptual bridge across legal, policy, and humanitarian domains, while simultaneously revealing the fragmentation that characterizes its interpretation.

Furthermore, the overall structure of the network reveals a persistent imbalance in scholarly attention. Core areas such as legal frameworks, asylum systems, and refugee status determination remain dominant, while emerging issues particularly those related to climate change, gender vulnerability, and Global South perspectives are comparatively underdeveloped. This imbalance suggests that current research may not fully capture the complexity of contemporary displacement dynamics, thereby limiting its explanatory and normative reach. As noted in the literature, there is a growing need to expand the scope of refugee studies to include non-Western perspectives and alternative epistemologies.[26]

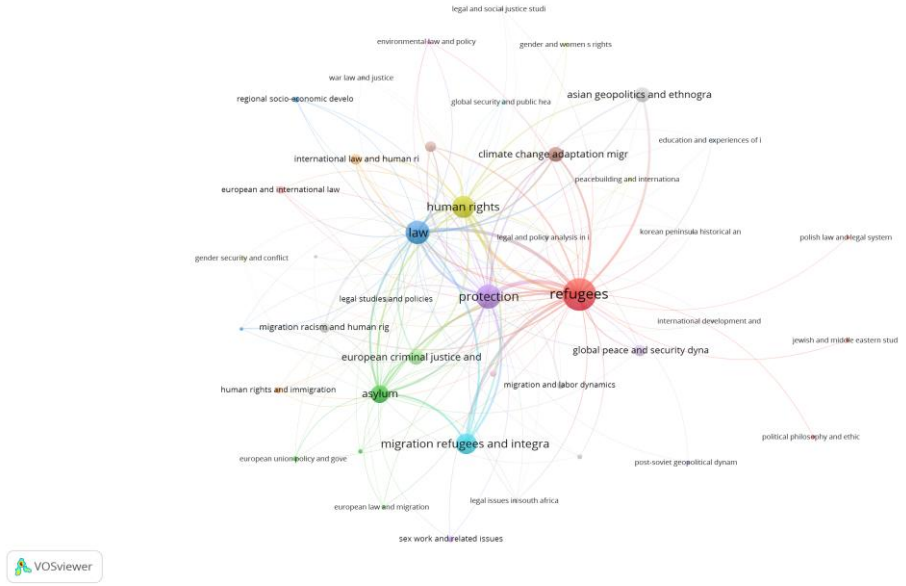
In conclusion, the visualization not only maps the current configuration of refugee protection and human rights scholarship but also reveals its underlying structural tensions and developmental trajectories. While the field remains grounded in legal and human rights frameworks, it is increasingly shaped by global and multidimensional challenges that demand more integrative approaches. The absence of a unified conceptualization of "protection" underscores the urgency of developing a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of reconciling legal, policy, and humanitarian dimensions. Such a framework is essential for advancing both academic understanding and practical responses to the evolving realities of forced displacement in the contemporary world.

[24] Turner, "The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men: Vulnerability, Protection, and the Humanitarian Regime."

[25] Betts, *Protection by Persuasion: International Cooperation in the Refugee Regime*; Cantor, "The Concept of 'Protection' in International Refugee Law: A Critical Appraisal"; Vincent Chetail, "The Architecture of International Migration Law: A Long-Term Perspective on Legal Fragmentation," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 36, no. 1 (2023): 113–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S092215652200056X.

[26] Chimni, "Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection."

Figure 1. Network Visualization



Temporal Evolution of Research Themes

The overlay visualization provides a dynamic and temporally sensitive representation of the evolution of research themes within the field of refugee protection and human rights, offering critical insights into how scholarly attention has shifted in response to changing global conditions. By applying a color gradient based on the average publication year, the visualization enables a distinction between earlier-established research domains and more recent or emerging areas of inquiry. Nodes represented in darker blue tones correspond to earlier phases of scholarly development, while green to yellow hues indicate more contemporary research trajectories. This temporal mapping not only reflects chronological progression but also reveals deeper transformations in the conceptual and epistemological foundations of the field.

At the center of the visualization, foundational concepts such as *law*, *human rights*, and *protection* exhibit a relatively earlier temporal signature, confirming their role as the enduring normative and analytical core of refugee scholarship. These concepts are closely associated with the legal-institutional paradigm that has historically dominated the field, rooted in international refugee law and human rights frameworks. The prominence and temporal stability of these nodes suggest that early research was primarily concerned with defining legal categories, establishing normative principles, and clarifying the obligations of states toward displaced populations. This observation aligns with the classical literature on refugee law, which emphasizes rights-based protection mechanisms, particularly the principle of non-refoulement and the formal recognition of refugee status.[27] In this sense, the early phase of the field can be understood as largely doctrinal, focusing on legal interpretation and normative consistency.

However, the overlay visualization clearly indicates that the field has undergone a significant transformation, marked by the emergence of new thematic areas that extend beyond traditional legal frameworks. Concepts such as *climate change adaptation and migration*, *Asian geopolitics and ethnography*, and *migration*

[27] Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*.

and labor dynamics appear in more recent temporal zones, reflecting the increasing diversification and interdisciplinarity of refugee research. This shift suggests that contemporary scholarship is moving away from a strictly legalistic understanding of refugee protection toward a more complex and multidimensional perspective that incorporates environmental, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors. The growing prominence of climate-related migration, in particular, represents a critical turning point in the field, as it challenges the adequacy of existing legal definitions and highlights the limitations of current protection regimes.[28]

This evolution also reflects a broader epistemological shift, wherein refugee protection is no longer viewed solely as a legal obligation but increasingly as a governance issue embedded within global systems of power, mobility, and inequality. The appearance of themes such as *global peace and security dynamics* and *international development* indicates that refugee studies are becoming more closely integrated with international relations and global governance frameworks. This integration suggests that refugee protection is being reframed as a matter of strategic importance, linked to issues such as regional stability, economic development, and transnational cooperation. Such a shift is consistent with recent scholarship that emphasizes the "governance turn" in migration studies, where the focus extends beyond legal norms to include policy coordination, institutional arrangements, and political negotiation.[29]

Despite the expansion and diversification of the field, the overlay visualization reveals a notable degree of asymmetry in the development of research themes. While certain areas have experienced rapid growth and increasing scholarly attention, others remain relatively marginal or underdeveloped. Topics such as *regional socio-economic development*, *gender and security*, and *localized legal contexts* are positioned at the periphery of the network and exhibit weaker temporal intensity. This uneven distribution suggests that the field is evolving in a selective manner, with certain themes being prioritized over others. Such imbalance may reflect broader structural biases in academic research, including geographic concentration, funding priorities, and disciplinary boundaries. It also indicates the presence of significant research gaps, particularly in relation to intersectional, context-specific, and Global South perspectives on refugee protection.

A particularly important finding emerging from the overlay visualization is the evolving role of the concept of *protection*. While this concept remains centrally positioned within the network, its temporal distribution indicates a shift in meaning and application over time. In earlier phases of research, protection was primarily conceptualized in legal and normative terms, closely tied to state obligations and institutional frameworks. In contrast, more recent scholarship appears to reinterpret protection in a broader and more fluid manner, incorporating dimensions such as social inclusion, environmental resilience, and human security. This transformation reflects an ongoing process of conceptual expansion, driven by the increasing complexity of displacement and the recognition that legal mechanisms alone are insufficient to address contemporary challenges.

[28] McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*; Baldwin, Frohlich, and Rothe, "From Climate Migration to Anthropocene Mobilities: Shifting the Debate."

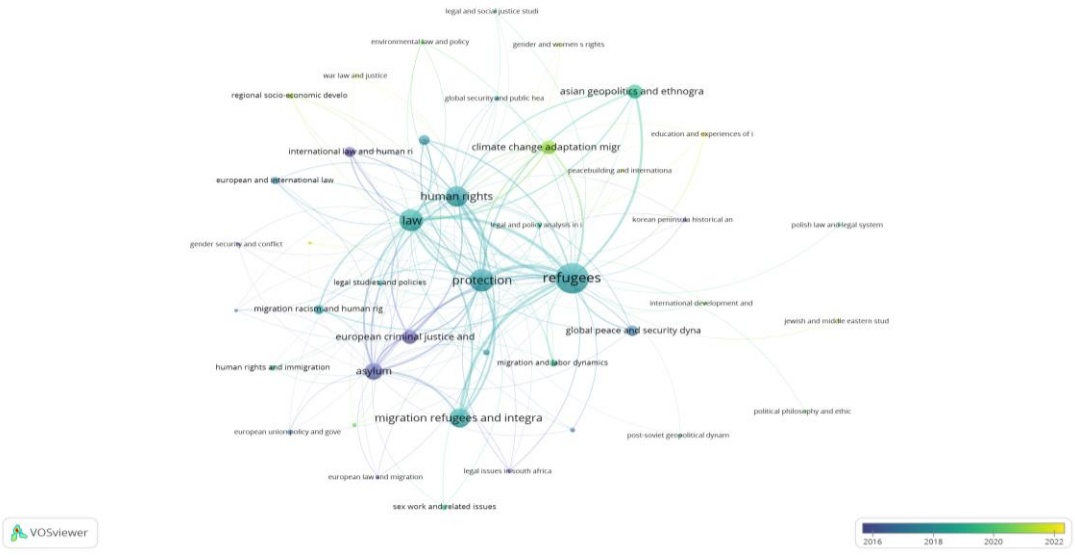
[29] Geddes, McGhee, and Sigona, *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*; James Milner, "The Politics of Global Refugee Policy: Power, Knowledge, and the Global Compact on Refugees," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 1 (2022): 21–40, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab103.

However, this conceptual evolution is not accompanied by a corresponding increase in theoretical coherence. On the contrary, the visualization suggests that the concept of protection remains fragmented and contested, with different strands of research employing divergent definitions and analytical frameworks. This lack of conceptual clarity poses significant challenges for both academic research and policy formulation, as it undermines the ability to develop integrated and effective protection strategies. In this regard, the findings of the overlay analysis reinforce the central argument of this study, namely that there is a critical need for a more unified and theoretically grounded understanding of protection that can bridge existing disciplinary divides.

Furthermore, the temporal layering of themes reveals that the field is not simply expanding but also undergoing a process of reconfiguration, where older paradigms coexist with emerging perspectives in a complex and sometimes tension-filled relationship. The persistence of legal and human rights frameworks alongside newer interdisciplinary approaches suggests that the field is characterized by a form of layered evolution rather than linear progression. This coexistence creates both opportunities and challenges: while it allows for greater analytical diversity, it also increases the risk of fragmentation and conceptual inconsistency.

In sum, the overlay visualization provides compelling evidence that the field of refugee protection and human rights is experiencing a profound transformation, driven by both internal scholarly developments and external global pressures. The shift toward interdisciplinary and globally oriented research reflects the need to address increasingly complex forms of displacement, while the persistence of foundational legal concepts underscores the continued importance of normative frameworks. However, the lack of conceptual integration, particularly in relation to the notion of protection, highlights a critical limitation that must be addressed in future research. By revealing these temporal and conceptual dynamics, the analysis not only enhances our understanding of the field but also points toward the need for a more cohesive and adaptive framework capable of responding to the evolving realities of forced migration.

Figure 2. Overlay Visualization



Research Intensity and Thematic Concentration

The density visualization provides a comprehensive representation of the concentration and intensity of scholarly activity within the field of refugee protection and human rights, highlighting areas of both high and low research attention. Unlike network and overlay visualizations, which focus on relational structures and temporal evolution, the density map emphasizes the relative frequency and co-occurrence strength of keywords, thereby offering a spatial interpretation of research prominence. In this visualization, areas represented in bright yellow indicate high-density zones, reflecting topics that have received substantial scholarly attention, while darker blue areas signify lower-density regions, corresponding to underexplored or emerging areas of inquiry.

At the center of the density map, the most prominent and intensely researched themes include *refugees*, *protection*, *law*, and *human rights*. These core concepts form the primary intellectual nucleus of the field, indicating that the majority of scholarly work remains concentrated on the intersection between legal frameworks and human rights principles in addressing refugee issues. The high density of these nodes suggests that research has consistently focused on normative and institutional dimensions, particularly the legal obligations of states, the protection of refugee rights, and the implementation of international legal instruments. This central concentration reflects the enduring dominance of a legal-human rights paradigm, where protection is primarily conceptualized through formal frameworks and institutional mechanisms.[30]

The strong clustering of *law* and *human rights* around *protection* further reinforces the argument that refugee protection continues to be deeply anchored in normative legal discourse. The spatial proximity and density intensity among these concepts indicate a high degree of co-occurrence, suggesting that they are frequently examined together within the literature. This pattern reflects the traditional orientation of refugee studies, where legal analysis and human rights advocacy are closely intertwined. However, the intensity of this cluster also raises important questions about the potential over-reliance on legal frameworks, particularly in light of the increasing complexity of contemporary displacement.[31]

Beyond the central core, the density visualization reveals secondary zones of scholarly activity, particularly around themes such as *asylum*, *migration refugees and integration*, and *European criminal justice*. These areas, while less intense than the central cluster, still exhibit relatively high density, indicating sustained academic interest. The prominence of *asylum* reflects ongoing concerns with access to protection mechanisms and legal status determination, particularly within regional contexts such as Europe. Similarly, the presence of *integration* highlights the growing recognition that refugee protection extends beyond immediate legal safeguards to include long-term social, economic, and political inclusion. These themes suggest an expansion of the field toward post-arrival dynamics, where

[30] Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (Polity Press, 2011); Castles, "Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation."

[31] Hein de Haas, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework," *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 1 (2021): 8, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4; Matthew J Gibney, *The Ethics and Politics of Asylum: Liberal Democracy and the Response to Refugees* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

protection is understood not only as a legal status but also as a process of inclusion and adaptation.[32]

In contrast, the outer regions of the density map are characterized by significantly lower levels of research intensity, indicating areas that remain relatively underexplored. Topics such as *regional socio-economic development*, *gender and security*, *political philosophy and ethics*, and *localized legal systems* appear in darker zones, reflecting limited scholarly engagement. The marginal positioning of these themes suggests that, despite the growing interdisciplinarity of the field, certain perspectives particularly those related to intersectionality, local contexts, and normative theory have not been fully integrated into mainstream refugee research. This uneven distribution of research attention points to structural gaps in the literature, where certain dimensions of refugee protection remain insufficiently examined.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the density visualization is the moderate yet increasing prominence of themes related to *climate change adaptation and migration* and *Asian geopolitics and ethnography*. Although these topics do not yet reach the intensity of the central cluster, their presence in lighter density zones indicates that they are gaining traction within the scholarly community. This trend reflects a broader shift toward recognizing the role of environmental and geopolitical factors in shaping displacement patterns.[33] The inclusion of these themes suggests that the field is gradually expanding beyond its traditional legal focus, incorporating insights from environmental studies, political geography, and international relations. However, their relatively lower density compared to core legal themes indicates that this transition is still in progress and has not yet reached full conceptual integration.

The density map also reveals a spatial fragmentation of the field, where clusters of research activity are not uniformly distributed but instead form distinct zones of concentration. This pattern suggests that while the field is expanding, it is doing so in a segmented manner, with limited integration between different thematic areas. For example, while *migration and labor dynamics* and *global peace and security dynamics* are present, they are not as densely connected to the central cluster, indicating weaker integration with core legal and human rights discourses. This fragmentation underscores the absence of a unified analytical framework that can effectively bridge different dimensions of refugee protection.

Importantly, the concept of *protection* occupies a central and high-density position within the visualization, confirming its role as a key organizing principle of the field. However, the density pattern also reveals that protection is primarily associated with legal and institutional contexts, with relatively weaker connections to emerging themes such as environmental displacement, socio-economic integration, and global governance.[34] This suggests that while protection remains a central concept, its application is uneven and context-dependent. The lack of strong

[32] Oliver Bakewell, "Relaunching Migration Systems," *Migration Studies* 2, no. 3 (2014): 300–318, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnu018.

[33] Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

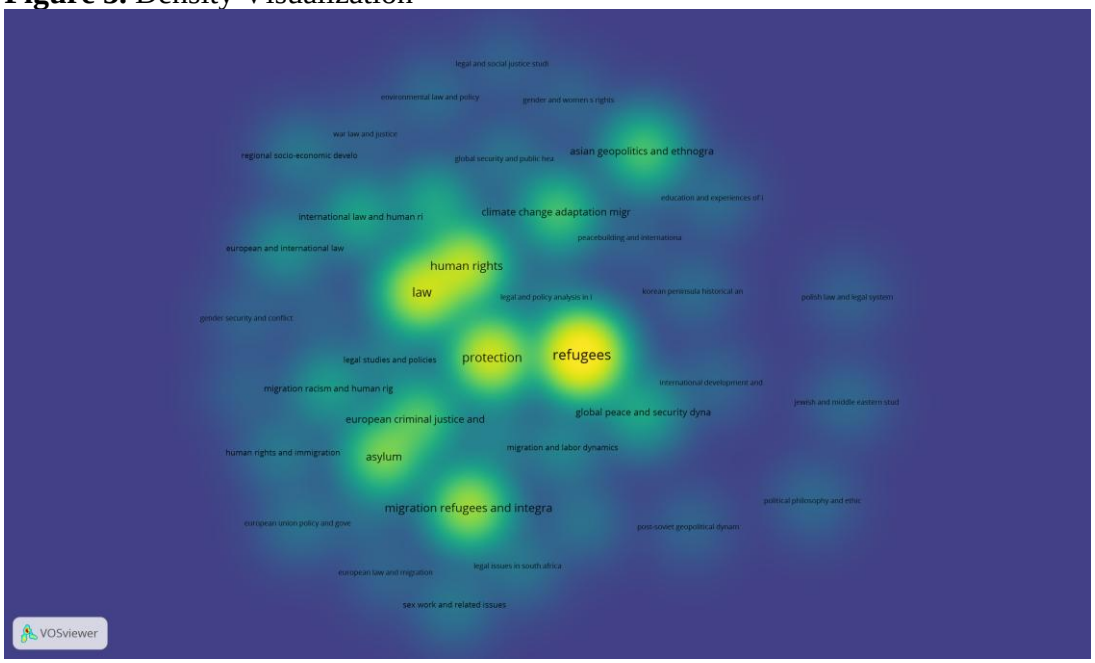
[34] Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, "Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe's 'Migration Crisis,'" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 48–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224.

density connections between protection and newer interdisciplinary themes highlights a critical conceptual gap, where the evolving realities of displacement are not fully reflected in the dominant understanding of protection.

From a theoretical perspective, the density visualization indicates that the field of refugee protection and human rights is characterized by both concentration and imbalance. On one hand, the strong central cluster reflects a well-established and cohesive body of knowledge grounded in legal and human rights frameworks. On the other hand, the presence of low-density peripheral areas points to significant gaps and opportunities for further research. This dual structure suggests that while the field has achieved a high level of maturity in certain areas, it remains underdeveloped in others, particularly those that require interdisciplinary integration and context-specific analysis.

Overall, the density visualization provides compelling evidence that the field is both highly concentrated and unevenly developed. The dominance of legal and human rights themes underscores the continued relevance of normative frameworks, while the emergence of new topics reflects an ongoing process of transformation. However, the lack of balanced development across different thematic areas highlights the need for a more inclusive and integrative research agenda. In particular, there is a pressing need to expand the conceptualization of protection beyond its traditional legal boundaries, incorporating insights from environmental studies, socio-economic analysis, and global governance. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive and adaptive understanding of refugee protection that is better aligned with the complexities of contemporary displacement.

Figure 3. Density Visualization



Policy Recommendations and Practical Implications

Translating these bibliometric patterns into concrete policy requires closing the rift between formal legal doctrine and day-to-day migration management. The high concentration of research around legal terms, paired with the conceptual

fragmentation of "protection" across different disciplines,[35] reveals that international mechanisms often operate in isolated silos. Rather than treating protection merely as a static legal status granted at the border, international actors and national agencies need to adopt integrative frameworks that connect immediate safeguards such as *non-refoulement* with long-term socio-economic inclusion, access to legal labor markets, and community stability.[36]

The recent temporal surge in climate-related migration scholarship highlights another urgent policy priority: updating protective mechanisms to address environmental displacement. Because the 1951 Refugee Convention was not designed to accommodate climate risks, individuals fleeing environmental disasters often fall into a legal vacuum. To resolve these normative gaps, international bodies and state authorities should rely more heavily on regional human rights agreements, flexible soft-law mechanisms, and multilateral initiatives like the Global Compact on Refugees to create recognized legal pathways and adaptive protection statuses for ecologically displaced communities.[37]

Finally, addressing the peripheral position of Global South contexts and intersectional dynamics in the literature requires a fundamental shift in how global displacement is governed. International policy remains heavily weighted toward Western administrative models, which frequently overlook localized legal traditions and the nuanced ways factors like gender, age, and socio-economic status intersect during crises.[38] Institutional donors and international organizations must therefore decentralize their operational strategies, ensuring that field interventions, asylum determination procedures, and policy design directly incorporate non-Western legal perspectives and community-led protection networks.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric mapping of refugee protection and human rights scholarship, systematically analyzing its intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and research intensity between 2000 and 2024. For readers of legal studies and human rights journals such as Mimbar Yustitia, this bibliometric approach serves as an invaluable empirical tool; it transcends conventional qualitative legal reviews by providing an objective, macro-level diagnostic of how international instruments are operationalized and how human rights norms evolve, cluster, or fragment across decades of peer-reviewed

[35] Cantor, "The Concept of 'Protection' in International Refugee Law: A Critical Appraisal."
[36] Betts and Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*.
[37] Kalin and McAdam, "Conceptualising Climate-Induced Displacement"; McAdam, "Displacement in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters: Ordered Departure or Forced Migration?"; Milner, "The Politics of Global Refugee Policy: Power, Knowledge, and the Global Compact on Refugees."
[38] Achiume, "Beyond Border Externalization: Refugee Protection and the Legacy of Sovereign Equality"; Turner, "The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men: Vulnerability, Protection, and the Humanitarian Regime."

jurisprudence. The triangulated visualizations demonstrate that while the field remains firmly anchored in a foundational legal-human rights paradigm with the core concepts of law, human rights, refugees, and protection forming its central axis it is simultaneously undergoing a profound transformation toward interdisciplinary and globally oriented themes, including climate change-induced migration, geopolitical dynamics, and migration governance.

Despite this thematic expansion, the analysis identifies a critical conceptual limitation: a significant fragmentation and inconsistency in the understanding of "protection" across legal, policy, and interdisciplinary contexts, which severely limits theoretical integration and practical policy application. Because refugee protection functions as a dynamic, layered, and highly contested concept rather than a fixed legal category, there is an urgent necessity to reconceptualize protection into a multidimensional framework capable of bridging existing disciplinary divides. Moving forward, future legal scholarship and policy-oriented research must expand to incorporate underrepresented Global South perspectives, address intersectional vulnerabilities, and develop adaptive normative mechanisms that can effectively resolve the protection gaps exposed by contemporary global displacement.

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