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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Harnessing AI to Enhance Inclusion for Refugees with Disabilities: Mitigating Bias, Promoting Equity in Humanitarian and Resettlement Efforts

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This reflection article draws on the combined perspectives of artificial intelligence (AI) practitioners, disability scholars, and migration researchers to consider how emerging technologies can support inclusion for refugees with disabilities. Grounded in lived experience and cross-disciplinary collaboration, we explore how large language models and other AI tools are being introduced into humanitarian and resettlement work. Our reflections focus on the opportunities these tools create for improving communication, accessibility, and service coordination, alongside the risks of algorithmic bias and the erasure of disability identities. We argue that ethical and participatory design, where people with disabilities and displaced communities are active partners, is essential to ensure AI supports rather than undermines equity. By linking technological innovation with the realities of forced migration and disability, this paper offers insights from the field on how global and local actors can use AI to strengthen inclusion without reproducing structural inequality.

Introduction

Rising wars and conflicts have forcibly displaced 123.2 million people, which is about 1 in every 67 individuals worldwide (UNHCR, 2025). In response, humanitarian organizations are increasingly using and experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance aid delivery and social services for forcibly displaced individuals (Beduschi, 2022; Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022; Kreutzer et al., 2025). AI offers new tools to enhance inclusion by automating translations, personalizing assistive technologies, predicting needs, or optimizing refugee resettlement matches. However, poorly designed and used algorithms could perpetuate or even worsen the marginalization of refugees with disabilities (RWDs) who already face increasing challenges (Kreutzer et al., 2025; Rfat et al., 2024, 2025).

As scholars and practitioners working at the intersection of disability, migration, and technology, we have seen how RWDs remain largely invisible in these innovations. Although the exact rate of disability is unknown among forcibly displaced individuals, the estimate could be as high as 36% among certain groups such as Syrians (UNOCHA, 2021). They frequently face intersecting barriers, including inaccessible services and healthcare, as well as discrimination in education and employment (Rfat et al., 2024; Rfat, Zeng, & Trani, 2023; Tofani et al., 2023). Ensuring disability inclusion in refugee assistance is a moral imperative and central to global commitments such as the Global Compact on Refugees and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006; UN, 2018).

In this reflective article, we draw on our interdisciplinary collaboration to consider how AI is reshaping humanitarian response. We share insights from research, field experience, and cross-sector dialogue on the opportunities and risks of integrating AI into refugee assistance. We argue that while AI holds great potential to improve service delivery and accessibility, it also risks reinforcing systemic marginalization unless explicitly guided by rights-based, inclusive principles. We conclude by proposing strategies that ensure AI-driven humanitarian and resettlement efforts uphold equity, safeguard human rights, and center the dignity and agency of RWDs.

Refugees with Disabilities: Vulnerabilities and the Need for Inclusion

Refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities have consistently emerged as some of the most overlooked and underserved individuals (Mirza et al., 2024; Rfat, 2025; Rfat et al., 2024). Disability becomes a critical issue during humanitarian crises, as individuals may acquire new impairments due to violence, exposure to explosive devices, or other conflict-related injuries (Buscher & Pearce, 2014). As a result of conflict, persecution, or disasters, they have been forced from their homes and contend with the challenges imposed by inaccessibility and marginalization. Studies show that these individuals often experience multiple compounding disadvantages, including worse health outcomes, lower educational attainment, and greater difficulties accessing services and livelihoods compared to other refugees (Elder, 2015; Mirza, 2012; Rfat, Zeng, & Trani, 2023; Women's Refugee Commission, 2008). They also encounter societal and environmental barriers that exacerbate isolation, for instance a lack of sign language interpreters or wheelchair inaccessibility in temporary shelters (Engelman & Izquierdo, 2025). Alarmingly, many RWDs do not receive needed health and rehabilitation services (Mirza, 2012; Mirza et al., 2024; Rfat, Zeng, Yang, et al., 2023a). Yet, addressing their needs is fundamental to international commitments on inclusive development and humanitarian response.

Despite growing recognition of these issues, data on RWDs remains scarce (Rfat et al., 2023b). This lack of data has hindered planning and resource allocation. For example, in Italy, only 10 out of 20 regions had specialized services for RWDs, and merely 2% of available refugee

housing spots were reserved for persons with disabilities (Tofani et al., 2023). A significant barrier was the absence of a standardized vulnerability assessment to identify and support individuals with disabilities. Such gaps underscore why global frameworks, like the Global Compact on Refugees (2018), call for better inclusion of persons with disabilities and improved data disaggregation by disability status. In short, RWDs have been invisible in many systems and face a double burden of invisibility and inaccessibility.

Amid these challenges, AI and digital innovations are considered part of the solution (Ineli Ciger, 2023; Mohamed & Smith, 2024). If used thoughtfully, AI could help identify RWDs who might otherwise be overlooked, tailor assistance to their needs, and scale up inclusive services even in resource-constrained settings. However, the same technologies could reinforce bias or create new barriers if used carelessly. The following section reflects on both the promise and the risks we see in emerging AI applications.

AI Applications for Inclusive Humanitarian Assistance

Across humanitarian settings, artificial intelligence is beginning to reshape how assistance is planned and delivered. We have seen these technologies used in very different ways- from tools that translate and simplify communication to systems that guide where refugees are resettled. Each application brings its own promise and tension for disability inclusion.

AI-powered translation and speech tools, for example, are already helping break language exclusion. AI-driven natural language processing (NLP) tools, such as chatbots and digital assistants, provide critical information in multiple languages and in accessible formats (Rocca et al., 2023). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has piloted AI chatbots in its Signpost project to offer real-time information vetted by local organizations for accuracy and sensitivity (Beaty, 2025). Complex queries are escalated to human staff, ensuring AI supplements rather than replaces human judgment. This approach supports RWDs who may find it challenging to visit information centers, as they can query the chatbot remotely (Beaty, 2025). Speech recognition and transcription, another NLP application, enable deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals to participate in conversations or education (Miao et al., 2021). Text-to-speech and translation algorithms assist individuals with vision impairment or refugees with limited education by converting written information into audio in their native language (Fernando et al., 2025). Carefully used, NLP technologies can enhance information accessibility for refugees with diverse linguistic and sensory needs.

Other projects use computer vision (CV) algorithms, which enable computers to interpret images and videos, and are being applied to assist refugees with visual or mobility impairments. For example, AI smartphone apps can act as digital eyes, helping individuals with vision impairment to recognize objects, read texts, or navigate unfamiliar environments using their phone's camera (De Oliveira Schultz Ascari et al., 2021). In refugee camps or urban settings,

such tools (e.g., Microsoft's Seeing AI or Google's Lookout) could help someone independently identify landmarks, signage, or hazards (Holliman-Lopez, 2024). Another innovative application is the use of CV and digital fabrication to enhance mobility aids. A recent project in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh utilized Information and Communication Technologies tools, including camera recordings and 3D printing to co-design improved crutch tips and other assistive devices for refugees with disabilities (Hussain & Brown, 2024). Engineers collected video data on how refugees with mobility impairments navigated the camp terrain using crutches, then used computer-aided design to prototype more durable crutch shoes (tips) to be 3D-printed on-site. Despite facing numerous challenges, this project ultimately succeeded in developing and disseminating customized assistive technology solutions to multiple refugees (Hussain & Brown, 2024). This kind of participatory innovation captures what ethical AI could look like: technology grounded in collaboration rather than imposed from outside.

Resettlement involves assigning refugees, often from camps or host countries, to a more permanent community in a third country (UNHCR, 2022). Traditionally, this is a manual process performed by officials, which can be ad hoc or constrained by limited information. In recent years, researchers have developed algorithmic matching systems that account for refugees' backgrounds (skills, health, family composition, etc.) and the characteristics of potential host communities (services available, labor market, cost of living, social support) to recommend placements where refugees are most likely to integrate successfully (Mohamed & Smith, 2024). From a disability inclusion perspective, algorithmic matching could be tailored for specific support needs. For example, ensuring that a refugee who uses a wheelchair is resettled in a city with accessible public transportation and disability services, or matching a Deaf refugee to a community where sign language interpretation is available. Ethically designed algorithms could help counter human bias by systematically including specific criteria that may get overlooked by a caseworker. Some real-world pilot projects are moving in this direction. For instance, Canada's refugee sponsorship programs and NGOs, such as Pairity, have begun to use algorithms to pair refugees with suitable sponsor groups and local resources (Gandhi, 2023). Early indications suggest that, when implemented correctly and with ethical guardrails in place, these tools can both improve resettlement rates and the quality of matches, ultimately benefiting vulnerable refugees, including those with disabilities (Ineli Ciger, 2023).

Finally, education and livelihoods are emerging areas where AI offers tailored learning support for refugees who have experienced interrupted schooling. Personalized learning platforms, often driven by AI algorithms, can adapt to a student's pace and level, which is particularly helpful for refugees who may have interrupted their education or have specific learning needs. Some initiatives are deploying AI tutors and chatbots to teach languages or job skills in refugee camps (Beaty, 2025; Kesarwani, 2024). Encouragingly, the humanitarian sector is paying more attention to digital inclusion. In 2024, UNHCR's Innovation Service launched a project in Poland to enhance online information access, specifically for refugees with visual impairments.

This refugee-led project is developing best practices and tools to make various communication channels more accessible, which could benefit an estimated 38,000 Ukrainian refugees with vision disabilities in Poland. Such initiatives illustrate a growing recognition that technology-based solutions in migration contexts must be inclusive by design (UNHCR, 2024).

In summary, AI applications across various domains are being tested to enhance the inclusion of RWDs. From augmentative communication devices that give nonverbal refugees a voice to resettlement algorithms that factor in disability needs, the potential benefits are significant. AI can analyze data at scale to uncover needs that might otherwise be overlooked, and deliver personalized assistance in a way that traditional humanitarian programs often struggle to achieve. Nevertheless, as the next section discusses, these technologies also carry risks.

Risks of Bias and Exclusion in AI Systems

As powerful as AI can be, its blind spots often mirror those of the societies that create it. In humanitarian and migration contexts, these blind spots can have serious consequences for RWDs. AI systems can amplify societal inequities, particularly for people with disabilities. Disability data is often poorly captured or excluded from training sets, resulting in models that perform poorly for users with disabilities (Cabrera et al., 2023). Voice recognition AI may fail for individuals with speech conditions, while computer vision may not recognize wheelchair users without specialized training data (Beduschi, 2022; Drage & Frabetti, 2024). Excluding or narrowly defining disability data can result in models that either ignore or inadequately represent disabled users (Land, 2023; Tilmes, 2022). Experts suggest collecting comprehensive, ethically sourced data and involving individuals with disabilities in defining fair outcomes (Land, 2023; Mohamed & Smith, 2024). Many AI fairness frameworks currently focus more on race and gender, neglecting disability (Trewin, 2018). This can result in fewer resources for accessible facilities or lower prioritization of applications from individuals with disabilities, thereby exacerbating inequity.

A growing concern is the use of AI in decisions that impact refugees' rights and opportunities, such as refugee status determination (RSD) or resettlement selection, without transparency or accountability (Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022). An example is the use of machine learning to predict the outcome of asylum cases or flag inconsistencies in applicants' stories. If these systems replicate the biases of current RSD processes, they could further disadvantage RWDs (Amoroso, 2024; Gadekar & Singh, 2025; Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022). Credibility assessments in asylum interviews are subjective; claimants with specific disabilities (e.g., PTSD, intellectual disabilities, or communication disorders) may struggle to narrate a coherent story and thus be unfairly deemed non-credible (Späth, 2025). Automated credibility scoring AI, if naively trained, may wrongly associate trauma or cognitive impairments with deception, leading to discrimination against disabled refugees (Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022). According to Kinchin and Mougouei (2022), legal analysis AI will only benefit refugees in RSD if it does

not replicate such problems in the current system. They highlight that factors like memory gaps or inconsistent recall are often due to trauma and might be misinterpreted by AI unless explicitly designed to account for the complexity of the refugee experiences. Similarly, in refugee resettlement, if algorithms prioritize those refugees who are predicted to have the best economic outcomes, they might implicitly disadvantage RWDs who face labour market barriers (Mohamed & Smith, 2024; Rfat, Zeng, & Trani, 2023). Algorithmic matching, which focuses narrowly on employment, can reduce people's lives to economic metrics and overlook their personal aspirations and the social contributions of RWDs. In practice, this could lead to ethical issues. For instance, should an AI ever recommend against resettling a refugee because a disability might make integration harder? Such a suggestion would be ethically fraught and likely unlawful under non-discrimination principles.

Privacy is another unresolved tension. Many AI applications rely on large amounts of personal data, including biometric data, health information, and behavioral data (Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022). RWDs might be especially vulnerable if such data is misused. For example, some countries have considered using AI for border lie detection, employing video analysis of facial micro-expressions (Mohamed & Smith, 2024). Apart from questions of scientific validity, such systems could misinterpret a facial tic or atypical behavior caused by a neurological condition as "suspicious," thereby flagging individuals with disabilities (Brandsen et al., 2024). Moreover, amassing refugee data (including medical records, disability status, and location) creates a "honeypot" of sensitive information (Michael et al., 2019). If breached, this could expose RWDs to stigma or targeting. A hostile actor obtaining these datasets might identify and persecute individuals with certain conditions. Even in the absence of a breach, there is concern about function creep, as data collected for humanitarian purposes may be shared with immigration enforcement to inform adverse decisions, such as visa rejection (Faith et al., 2022). These scenarios underscore the importance of robust data protection measures. Humanitarian organizations, such as the IRC, are aware of this risk and have implemented safeguards in their AI deployments. Agencies are increasingly mindful that privacy by design must be a core element of any AI tool that deals with vulnerable populations. Without solid governance and clear consent, innovation risks becoming surveillance.

Finally, another risk is that AI tools, if not designed with accessibility in mind, will further marginalize those with disabilities. A mobile app for aid registration might be useless to a blind refugee if it is not screen-reader compatible or to a refugee with a cognitive disability if the interface is too complex (Almufareh et al., 2024). Furthermore, due to their past experiences, marginalized populations may hesitate to trust new technology. Consequently, AI systems must be developed within a robust data governance framework and adhere to compliance requirements to earn the trust of marginalized communities (Almufareh et al., 2024; Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022). Stakeholders can use the disability data justice framework to inform their initiatives to develop AI systems that prioritize the needs of people with disabilities (Swenor, 2022).

AI systems can inadvertently replicate societal biases without deliberate safeguards. This is especially true for marginalized groups, such as RWDs, who have not been at the forefront of AI development historically. As AI adoption in migration management accelerates, there is a genuine risk of discrimination biases hidden in code that quietly disadvantage RWDs in decisions ranging from aid access to asylum adjudication. Recognizing these risks is the first step; the next is to implement strategies to mitigate bias and foster equity.

Promoting Equity: Strategies for Inclusive and Ethical AI

Ensuring that AI fulfills its promise of inclusion for RWDs, rather than reinforcing biases, requires a multi-pronged approach. Researchers, practitioners, and disability advocates are converging on several key strategies and principles to guide the ethical use of AI in humanitarian contexts.

One lesson from practice is the value of co-creation. AI tools should include RWDs in all stages, problem identification, data collection, design, testing, and deployment. The Rohingya mobility-aid project, discussed earlier, demonstrated the value of this approach by involving refugees with disabilities to ensure that the assistive devices were culturally appropriate and met users' needs (Hussain & Brown, 2024). Similarly, UNHCR's Poland refugee-led initiative to improve digital information access for refugees with visual impairments acknowledged that those with lived experience of disability are best positioned to pinpoint accessibility gaps and solutions (UNHCR, 2024). An inclusive design ethos involves integrating accessibility features from the start, like built-in options in a refugee services app. When AI developers include users with disabilities in the design process, systems tend to be more accessible, relevant, and trusted.

Data remains another frontier. Addressing algorithmic bias requires using diverse and representative data to train AI, one that reflects all human conditions, including those with disabilities (Kinchin & Mougouei, 2022; Land, 2023). For example, augmenting datasets with more examples of individuals with disabilities or synthetic data simulating various assistive device users and speech pattern characteristics can help create more inclusive AI. However, it is not just about the quantity of disability data, but quality and context. Data collection should be intentional: for example, if developing an AI to assign resources to at-risk refugees, the training data must include labels and definitions of vulnerability that explicitly incorporate disability status and intersectional factors. The AI ethics community suggested conducting *bias audits* on AI models before deployment (Landers & Behrend, 2023). These audits, for example, will assess whether a model's recommendations vary for a refugee with one disability compared to one without, while holding other factors constant. If disparities are found, developers must adjust the model or inputs, a process sometimes referred to as "debiasing" (Murikah et al., 2024: 11). Additionally, using explainable AI techniques can help identify biased logic, for example, revealing that a resettlement algorithm was implicitly assigning lower scores to refugees with gaps in employment, which could correlate with disability. As the International

Committee of the Red Cross notes, any AI deployed in humanitarian action should be carefully evaluated to ensure it does not become a tool of exclusion, contrary to the principles of humanity (Beduschi, 2022).

Governance is equally vital. Robust ethical guidelines and oversight mechanisms are needed to govern the use of AI in refugee contexts. On the international stage, there are encouraging developments. For example, the European Union's proposed AI Act classifies AI used in migration/asylum decisions as “high risk," mandating strict transparency, risk assessment, and oversight (Ineli Ciger, 2023: 16). This aligns with calls from legal scholars that AI applications, such as resettlement algorithms, should undergo human rights impact assessments (Ineli-Ciger, 2023). Refugees should be informed when AI is used in decisions about them, and avenues for appeal or human review should be guaranteed by the "human-in-the-loop" principle (Kinchin, 2024: 23). Humanitarian organizations are creating their own AI ethics guidelines that emphasize fairness, accountability, and inclusion. For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a Data Protection Policy and principles for using AI (UN, 2022; UNHCR, 2015). The humanitarian sector can also draw on disability rights frameworks, like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), which obligates states and agencies to consult with people with disabilities and ensure access to new technologies on an equal basis. Any AI system impacting RWDs should be evaluated for compliance with the CRPD's principles of reasonable accommodation and non-discrimination.

The complexity of deploying AI ethically in humanitarian settings requires collaboration across various domains. Technologists, humanitarian practitioners, disability advocacy groups, and refugees themselves each hold a piece of the puzzle. By involving these stakeholders, organizations can better foresee ethical challenges and culturally adapt the technology. Moreover, once an AI system is used, it must be continuously monitored and evaluated for its impact on equity. This includes establishing feedback mechanisms for refugees, including those with disabilities, to report problems or biases they encounter. If a chatbot is providing incorrect or offensive responses, users need a way to flag these issues so the system can be corrected. In refugee camps, community focal points or disability representatives could be empowered to collect such feedback. Humanitarian organizations should conduct periodic reviews of AI-assisted programs to ensure that RWDs still benefit from AI and that the technology has increased refugee access to services.

Conclusion

AI is not a panacea for the challenges faced by RWDs. Still, it is an increasingly powerful tool which, if guided by humanitarian and human rights principles, can enhance inclusion and equity in refugee assistance. Recent years have seen a surge in creative applications, from translation chatbots that provide information access to Deaf refugees to data-driven matching

algorithms that optimize resettlement placements to assistive devices created to restore mobility. These innovations carry the hopeful vision that the benefits of the AI revolution can extend to even the most vulnerable displaced people. At the same time, sobering lessons from early deployments and research remind us that technology is a double-edged sword. Biased algorithms or surveillance-driven approaches could just as easily harm those they intend to help, reinforcing the biases and exclusions we seek to eliminate. Each example reminds us that technology itself is neutral; it is the intentions, ethics, and relationships around it that determine whether it empowers or excludes.

Going forward, a few guiding tenets are clear. First, centering the voices of RWDs is non-negotiable; they must be active participants in designing and governing AI solutions that affect their lives. Second, AI systems should be subjected to rigorous, routine audits ensuring equity, transparency, and accountability. Where an AI cannot meet the standards of fairness or explainability, its role should be limited or reconsidered. Third, policy and legal frameworks must keep pace with technological advances, explicitly safeguarding the non-discrimination, privacy, and dignity rights of persons with disabilities in the use of AI for migration or humanitarian purposes. Encouragingly, a growing body of scholarship covers legal analyses of refugee AI systems and computer science research on assistive tech in camps, filling gaps and guiding best practices. This academic insight, combined with field experience, can inform better standards and training for practitioners deploying AI. Fourth, local, national, and international stakeholders must invest in data collection efforts to ensure that AI is provided with equitable data reflecting the realities of refugees' disabilities.

Harnessing AI to enhance inclusion for RWDs requires patience, resources, and a commitment to ethical principles. Stakeholders must embrace the opportunities presented by AI while addressing its legitimate concerns. Successfully implemented, AI quickly processes thousands of refugee inquiries and identifies marginalized groups needing support, expanding humanitarian responses beyond traditional methods. However, fairness and human connection must not be sacrificed. Equitable AI amplifies compassion and expertise rather than bypassing them, ensuring RWDs are better served by informing humanitarian decisions rather than making them alone. Achieving this level of equity in AL requires continual learning and adaptation, aligning with the humanitarian ethos that all people deserve the opportunity to rebuild their lives with dignity. By mitigating bias and embedding equity into AI, we can strive toward a future where no refugee is left behind. For us, this reflection piece is less about a conclusion than an invitation to continue building and bridging disciplines, and to ensure RWDs are not included in the future of AI but are leading its direction.

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