Challenges and Responses: A Qualitative Study of Unaccompanied South Sudanese Refugee Children in Jewi, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges affecting unaccompanied refugee children in Jewi refugee camp, located in Gambella, Ethiopia, and it examines the institutional responses to these challenges. Employing a constructivist philosophical stance and a single case study design, the research utilized purposive sampling to collect data from unaccompanied children, their caregivers, and social work practitioners. Data were collected through interviews with twenty unaccompanied refugee children and five key informants, supplemented by a focus group discussion involving twenty-four children, equally divided by gender (twelve males and twelve females). Thematic analysis identified tribal conflict, geographical proximity, and family disintegration as the primary drivers of child migration to Ethiopia. Although the children have access to education and basic healthcare, the findings indicate persistent hardships. These include environmental and psychological challenges, restrictions on extracurricular engagement, cultural disparities, rigid gender norms, limited training opportunities, and inadequacies in health services. The study advocates for sustained stakeholder engagement to safeguard child rights and facilitate family reunification. It also calls for unified coordination among service providers to enhance their delivery mechanisms. Additional recommendations include gender-sensitivity training, psychosocial support, and vocational programs for refugee children.

Keywords: Unaccompanied Refugee Children, Institutional Responses, Thematic Analysis, Child Protection, Service Delivery

INTRODUCTION

Armed conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa threatens human life, causing large-scale displacement. The 2011 North African political upheaval caused widespread destruction and forced displacement (UNHCR, 2015). Similarly, South Sudan's 2013 civil conflict displaced millions internally, with many fleeing to neighboring countries (Alex et al., 2016). Many of these displaced people arrived in Ethiopia, with a large number settling in Jewi refugee camp.

Unaccompanied refugee children are vulnerable group among the displaced. Derluyn and Broekaert (2008) note their challenges, such as culture shock and exploitation by other camp groups. A lack of parental guardianship increases their risk of psychological distress, social isolation, and developmental setbacks.

Research has explored how unaccompanied refugee children adjust in various host countries. Eunson (1995), studying children in conflict, stressed the need to foster autonomy in these minors. The author argued that providing decision-making tools builds their independence and resilience. Bean et al. (2006) studied the integration of these children in the Netherlands, comparing them to undocumented Latino minors in the United States of America. Their work underscores institutional support's vital role in protecting rights and promoting well-being. Lopez (2010) broadened the discussion by analyzing the migration routes of these children to Europe, calling for a global rights protection framework.

Molla and Berhanu (2018) studied the pre-return experiences of Ethiopian unaccompanied and separated migrant children in Yemen, finding pervasive emotional distress, rights violations, and limited health service access. They advocate for robust social work interventions, stronger international child protection, and more research on the rights of Ethiopian child migrants. Arega's (2021) study of Eritrean unaccompanied minors in Ethiopia found a high prevalence of posttraumatic stress symptoms. It revealed strong correlations between cumulative trauma, limited psychosocial support, and adverse mental health outcomes.

"Unaccompanied children" are minors without biological parents or legal guardians at the assessment point (Nugent, 2006). In Ethiopia, the prolonged South Sudan conflict has caused a major refugee influx into Gambella, with Jewi camp as a primary settlement. This population includes unaccompanied children, who face distinct vulnerabilities from a lack of familial support and adult supervision.

Despite growing research on unaccompanied refugee children globally, few studies address the lived experiences and institutional responses for unaccompanied minors in Jewi refugee camp. This study fills that gap by examining the factors behind the surge of these children, the challenges they face, and the institutional interventions used to help them. The study subsequently addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors drive the migration of unaccompanied refugee children, and what are their primary challenges in the host country?

2. How effective are institutional interventions in addressing the challenges faced by these children?

3. What innovative approaches have institutions implemented to support unaccompanied refugee children?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Creswell (2009) outlines four main research paradigms: positivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. This study adopts a social constructivist paradigm, well-suited to understanding individuals' lived experiences within their social contexts. This approach allows for an exploration of the subjective realities of unaccompanied refugee children, interpreting meaning from the participants' own perspectives (Creswell, 2009; Fisher, 2010). Grounded in this paradigm, the research provides a systematic, context-sensitive analysis of service accessibility and the challenges faced by unaccompanied South Sudanese refugee children.

Creswell (2007) outlines three case study designs: single, multiple, and intrinsic. This research used a single case study to conduct an in-depth investigation to challenges affecting unaccompanied refugee children. Yin (2003) recommends this design for exploratory research, highlighting its strength in using multiple evidence sources for triangulation. This approach is appropriate for a qualitative study aiming to explore participants' authentic voices rather than imposing researcher assumptions. Consequently, the design captures the complexity of individual experiences and institutional responses within a specific humanitarian setting.

Inclusion Criteria

Save the Children International (SCI) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) helped establish the study's inclusion criteria for children, caregivers, and social workers. They provided a list of unaccompanied children and key informants, facilitating access to participants. Selection was based on an individual's duration of residence in Jewi camp to ensure sufficient experiential knowledge. This purposive sampling strategy captured diverse perspectives relevant to the research focus.

Sampling Techniques

This study used purposive sampling to recruit participants. The sample included unaccompanied South Sudanese refugee children (12-17 years old), their caregivers, and social workers. This approach selected persons with

direct experience relevant to the research. As Pandey and Pandey (2015) note, a defined sampling frame improves coverage of the target population.

The study interviewed twenty unaccompanied refugee children and five key informants, and held a focus group with twenty-four children to foster group dialogue. While Creswell (2007) suggests 4-5 participants per case, this study followed Kumar's (2011) principle of data saturation. This approach deems a sample adequate when new interviews cease to yield new information, ensuring the data is rich enough to meet the research objectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data came from direct observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, offering a comprehensive view of participants' experiences. Secondary data from document reviews provided essential contextual and institutional insights.

The analysis adopted Kumar's (2011) thematic analysis framework; a method well-suited for qualitative data. This process involved identifying emergent themes from raw notes, determining their relationships, and clustering them to build a coherent interpretation. Recurring topics were systematically coded and color-highlighted for clarity and cross-source comparison.

Ethical Consideration

To ensure ethical integrity and build trust, a detailed informed consent form was developed. This form clarified the researchers' identities, affiliations, and the study's purpose to promote transparency. Following approval from Addis Ababa University's School of Social Work, the research proposal was submitted to Save the Children International and the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS) for further authorization to conduct participant interviews.

Given the sensitivity of working with unaccompanied children, this research adopted the ethical framework proposed by Hopkins (2008), which outlines three key stages: building rapport, maintaining rapport, and securing informed consent. Guided by this framework, the study first built rapport with service providers, social workers, and caregivers. Second, we maintained continuous engagement with participants and stakeholders to ensure they fully understood the research objectives and its purpose. Third, we explained the informed consent form and emphasized their right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

The study prioritized inclusivity and sensitivity, adhering to guidelines that mitigated gender bias and avoided harmful language or practices related to sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, or disability. These measures protected participants from harm and upheld principles of respect, dignity, and equity.

FINDINGS

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The in-depth interview comprised 20 participants ranging in age from 14 to 17 years. The age distribution was skewed toward younger adolescents, with 15-year-olds constituting the largest proportion (35%), followed by 16-year-olds (25%) and 17-year-olds (15%). A slight male predominance was observed, with males representing 55% of the sample and females 45%.

Geographically, the majority of participants (45%) originated from Upper Nile State, while substantial proportions hailed from Jonglei State (35%) and Unity State (20%). Academically, all participants were enrolled in primary education, with grade levels spanning from 2 to 6. Second grade was the most frequently reported (30%), followed by third grade (25%); grades 4, 5, and 6 were equally represented, each comprising 15% of the sample.

A significant finding was the absence of a reported caregiver relationship among the participants. Regarding displacement duration, the vast majority (70%) had resided in the camp for three years, a quarter (25%) for two years, and a small minority (5%) for one year. For a comprehensive overview, see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participants Information

No	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	State of origin	Educational level	Relationship with caregiver	Years spent in the camp
	Nyapal	14	F	Jonglie State	3rd grade	No	2
	Nyakong	14	F	Upper Nile State	2nd grade	No	3
	Deng	17	M	Jonglie State	5th grade	No	3
	Mat	15	M	Upper Nile State	4th grade	No	1
	Biel	15	M	Upper Nile State	6th grade	No	2
	Chang	17	M	Jonglie State	6th grade	No	3
	Rebecca	17	F	Upper Nile State	6th grade	No	3
	Sarah	15	F	Upper Nile State	5th grade	No	3
	Nyajuok	15	F	Upper Nile State	2nd grade	No	3
	Mary	15	F	Upper Nile State	4th grade	No	3
	Ruot	14	M	Jonglie State	2nd grade	No	2
	Gatluak	16	M	Jonglie State	3rd grade	No	3
	Makuach	16	M	Jonglie State	3rd grade	No	3
	Riek	14	M	Jonglie State	2nd grade	No	2
	Panyok	16	M	Unity State	2nd grade	No	3
	Tang	16	M	Unity State	3rd grade	No	3
	Nyakang	14	F	Unity State	3rd grade	No	2
	Nyanchiew	15	F	Unity State	2nd grade	No	3
	Koang	16	M	Upper Nile State	5th grade	No	3
	Nyamal	16	F	Upper Nile State	4th grade	No	3

Source: Researchers' Field In-depth Interview, 2017

Regional Distribution of Refugee Populations in Ethiopia

According to UNHCR (2023), Ethiopia hosts refugees across numerous camps in nine regions. In Gambella region, several camps are operational. Nguenyiel camp, established in November 2016, accommodates 112,000 individuals. Tierkidi camp, established in June 2014, has a population of 72,442. The study site, Jewi camp, was established in March 2015 and houses 67,896 refugees. Kule camp, which began operations in February 2014, shelters 52,954 people. Pinyudo, the region's oldest camp established in January 1993, has a population of 51,239. Okugo camp in Dima opened in February 2014 and hosts 13,948 refugees. Pinyudo-Two, an extension of Old Pinyudo camp established in December 2016, accommodates 11,392 individuals.

The regional distribution of refugees in Ethiopia shows significant disparities. Gambella region hosts the largest share at 41.17% of the national total. The Somali region follows with 32.29%, reflecting its border proximity and migration history. Benishangul-Gumuz and Addis Ababa host 8.50% and 8.22%, respectively, the latter primarily comprising urban refugees. Afar region hosts 6.26%, while the remaining regions—Amhara, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP), Oromia, and Tigray—collectively account for less than 3% of the refugee population. This distribution highlights a concentration in border regions and urban centers.

Demographically, 53% of refugees in Ethiopia are female and 47% are male. By origin, 44% are from South Sudan, 32% from Somalia, 18% from Eritrea, and the remainder from other countries. All population figures are based on data from September 2023. For a detailed overview of refugee distribution across regions, refer to Figure 1 below.

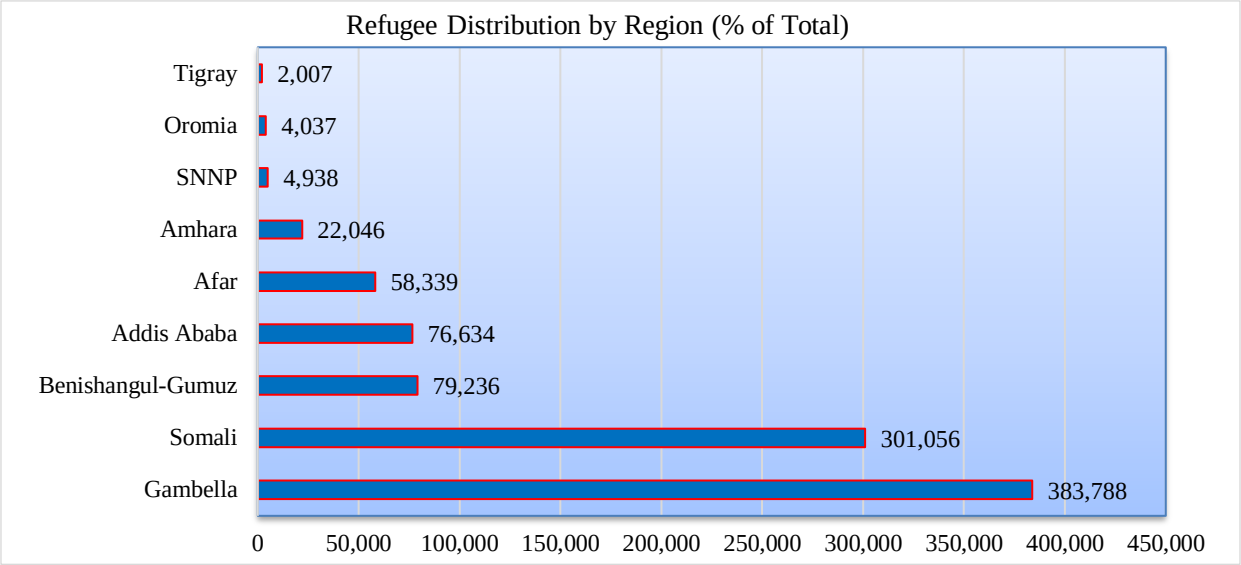

Figure 1: Distribution of Refugee Population Across Ethiopian Regions

Source: UNHCR, 2023

Drivers of Displacement and Lived Experiences of Unaccompanied Refugee Children

Data from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with male and female unaccompanied children identified armed conflict in South Sudan as the main reason for their migration to Ethiopia. Respondents cited several interrelated drivers, including ethnically targeted violence, the proximity of the Ethiopian border, and the family disintegrations. Document analysis corroborated these accounts, confirming that majority of the refugee population in Jewi camp originated from the Greater Upper Nile region, which comprises Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile States.

The escalation of hostilities in Nasir County of Upper Nile State deepened civilian fears. Participants construed the conflict as a tribal conflict between Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups. The initial control of Nasir by Nuer-dominated opposition forces, loyal to First Vice President Dr. Riek Machar, and its subsequent takeover by government troops, heightened the sense of vulnerability among Nuer civilians. For children exposed to such trauma, remaining in a volatile area that repeatedly changed hands between warring factions became worrisome. A participant, Changach (age 14, a pseudonym), described the sudden eruption of violence in Nasir following the conflict in Juba. His testimony illustrates the chaotic nature of their flight:

When war erupted in Juba, we did not anticipate its escalation to Nasir. Life continued normally until precisely 8:00 a.m., as we were walking to school. Upon nearing the school, we heard gunfire. In the ensuing chaos, we rushed home only to find it abandoned. Our group of students attempted to stay together, but within hours, the intensifying violence forced us to scatter.

The conflict caused mass displacement and resulted in a significant loss of life. According to humanitarian agencies, the 2013 crisis claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions. The ongoing struggle between the South Sudan People’s Defense Force (SSPDF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO) continues to undermine security and exacerbate child displacement.

Focus group data revealed that many children experienced prolonged separation from parents. The journey to Ethiopia was described as unsafe, marked by walking barefoot, hunger, and fear of wild animals. Female participants often articulated traumatic experiences. In response, a female caseworker was engaged to conduct sensitive interviews with unaccompanied female minors.

While footing to Ethiopia, the journey imposed severe physical and psychological burdens, including exhaustion, dehydration, and distress. These findings underscore the role of armed conflict in driving the influx of unaccompanied children into Ethiopia and highlight the impact of displacement on their well-being.

The Plight of Unaccompanied Refugee Children in Jewi Camp Amidst Geopolitical Shifts and Humanitarian Constraints

Emergent geopolitical shifts have increased political and economic instability globally. This has strained donor agencies financially, limiting their ability to support programs for unaccompanied refugee children. Protracted crises in the Middle East and Ukraine have diverted international attention from acute humanitarian needs in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly South Sudan. The withdrawal of key donors, such as the United States, has further reduced resettlement opportunities for unaccompanied children.

Despite declining international funding, Save the Children International (SCI) remains committed to protecting these children. SCI has developed criteria for matching unaccompanied minors with foster caregivers, tailored to adversities faced in camp settings. This approach aims to optimize limited resources. Placements prioritize the child's best interests, considering familiarity with caregivers and the availability of trained foster parents. All caregivers must complete SCI-approved child protection training.

Nevertheless, reports indicate persistent challenges in foster care. Many children face restrictions on social and recreational activities, which are crucial for emotional well-being beyond formal education. Interviews and focus group discussions reveal that some caregivers prioritize their biological children, neglecting unaccompanied minors. Children in Zone 'D' of Jewi camp expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage in sports and community activities. Although a child-friendly space exists, many minors report being denied access due to household duties.

Cultural barriers also hinder adjustment. Moving to a new cultural environment affects academic performance and emotional health. Boys often express themselves more freely, while girls tend to be reserved, especially on sensitive topics like menstruation. For instance, Makuach, a 16-year-old, noted that female peers rarely participate in class. Sarah, aged 15, explained:

In our [South Sudanese] culture, it is inappropriate for girls to discuss menstruation with men other than intimate friends. Speaking with a foreign teacher is even more intimidating. I often skipped classes during my period out of shyness. This caused me to miss exams I could not retake. I do not blame the teachers—they are unaware of my reason, but I cannot explain it to them.

Qualitative data indicate neglect in addressing the needs of unaccompanied girls. While basic provisions like shelter are prioritized, access to water and firewood remains inadequate. Cultural norms assign these labor-intensive tasks to girls, increasing their domestic burden. This dynamic not only hinders their educational attainment but also exposes them to potential exploitation and gender-based violence. Field observations documented young girls, some as young as 12-year-old, grinding or preparing food for large families, suggesting labor exploitation within foster care arrangements.

Structural challenges in refugee camps exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Settlements are often overcrowded and under-resourced, making daily life hard. Although agencies like the UN work to meet basic needs, resource scarcity fuels tensions between refugees and host communities. Such pressures influence policy, often resulting in small land allocations for both farming and housing. Shelters built by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are inadequate, with some housing over ten people—double the internationally recognized standard of five persons per household. The Gambella region, hosting nearly 400,000 refugees—including over 60,000 in Jewi camp—exemplifies these strains.

The previously manageable situation in Jewi camp has degraded due to renewed conflict in South Sudan. The collapse of the 2018 ceasefire between the SPLM-IO and SSPDF by February 2025 precipitated a significant escalation of hostilities. This included joint aerial bombardments by South Sudan's government and Ugandan forces on counties including Nasir, Ulang, Fangak, Mayom, and Longechuk, which caused civilian casualties and widespread fear. The deteriorating security situation was further exemplified by two key events: the death of White Army leader Tor Gile Thoan on 4 March 2025 as a consequence of fighting in Nasir County, Upper Nile State, and the assassination of Lt. Gen. David Majur Dak Thel during a failed United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) evacuation plan on 7 March 2025.

Since March, approximately 187,000 people have fled to neighboring countries: about 75,000 to Sudan, 45,000 to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), 38,000 to Ethiopia, and 30,000 to Uganda (UNHCR, 2025). A substantial number are expected to seek refuge in Jewi camp, intensifying the humanitarian crisis.

Institutional Responses to Challenges Affecting Unaccompanied Refugee Children

The challenges affecting unaccompanied refugee children appear insurmountable. A range of institutional actors have mobilized to mitigate these challenges. In the context of Jewi camp, unaccompanied minors have access to basic services. During focus group discussion, the children expressed appreciation for the safety and security afforded to them. They also appreciated the essential services. A group of organizations plays pivotal roles in this situation. The UNHCR administers monthly food distributions, the IOM oversees shelter provisions and the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS) maintains the overall security within the camp.

Save the Children International initiated the Child Rights Club (CRC). This was in response to the multifaceted vulnerabilities of unaccompanied children. The CRC is a dedicated and inclusive space for refugee minors. It is furnished with materials that encourage recreational engagement. These materials also facilitate informal learning. This is delivered by trained professionals and collaborating partners. The principal objective is to cultivate awareness around harmful traditional practices. These include early child marriage and the extraction of lower teeth. They also include culturally embedded facial markings for boys in some Nilotic communities. Simultaneously, the initiative seeks to foster self-confidence among participants. It equips children with knowledge of their rights and also empowers them to disseminate information among their peers.

The CRC may initially appear superficial to external observers. Closer observation reveals a compact yet methodically organized entity. The club is furnished with requisite materials. It is administered by a clearly articulated code of conduct. For instance, a procedural manual delineates acceptable and prohibited behaviors. This ensures a shared framework of expectations for staff and children. Documentation indicates that over 150 minors have received training. This training occurred across five CRC centers within Jewi camp. Empirical observations underscore the transformative potential of education. Children affiliated with the CRC exhibit high levels of proactivity and openness. They also show greater verbal articulation. Their non-member counterparts often encounter difficulties in self-expression. Moreover, service providers offer a secure and nurturing environment. This environment encompasses health and shelter. They also prioritize the continuity of educational services during emergencies.

In relation to material support, some used clothing had been distributed. However, the persistent influx of new arrivals has impeded equitable distribution. This has resulted in competition among officials and service providers. Community leaders are also part of this competition. One local leader reported repeated attempts to raise concerns. These concerns were about the quality of clothing and delays. Yet these efforts have not yielded substantive feedback from local officials. These officials liaise with service providers. Community leaders expressed a sense of duty to report observed shortages through established staff channels. However, they voiced considerable frustration regarding the perceived ineffectiveness of these communications. Consultation with a local staff member verified the persistence of these issues, thereby substantiating the leaders' concerns. As articulated by a staff member, Michael (age 41):

We interact with the unaccompanied children on a daily basis, so we really understand what they need. We've been relaying their requests concerning the clothes to the service providers; unfortunately, we never received any positive responses. It seems like the delay in getting clothes might be linked to the ongoing influx of refugees from South Sudan. The service providers could be focusing more on the new arrivals from South Sudan instead of addressing the needs of those who are already here.

Unaccompanied minors fleeing conflict zones face more than material needs. They grapple with psychological distress. This distress includes trust deficits, anxiety, and trauma. These conditions are largely attributable to the absence of their biological parents. In response, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) initiated a telecommunication-based tracing program. This program targets children who retain memory of their biological parents' contact information. The initiative facilitates familial reconnection. The ICRC, in collaboration with SCI, has also established a database - the Child Protection Management Information System

(CPMIS). It contains detailed information on unaccompanied refugee children. This includes their state, county, payam, and boma. In South Sudan, the governance structure comprises a hierarchical system of administrative divisions. The primary levels, in descending order, are the state, county, payam, and boma. Each tier is led by a specific authority: a Governor heads the state, a commissioner governs the county, a Payam Administrator oversees the payam, and a Boma Administrator leads the boma.

DISCUSSION

This study illuminates the complex realities faced by unaccompanied South Sudanese refugee children in Ethiopia. It situates their experiences within a framework of regional responsibility, historical ties, and established theoretical models of migration and development. The findings demonstrate that the children's journey is shaped by a confluence of macro-level political drivers, meso-level social networks, and micro-level psychological adaptations. These factors interact dynamically within the specific context of the refugee camp environment.

The forced migration of unaccompanied minors to Ethiopia is, first and foremost, a consequence of large-scale political instability, a phenomenon well-documented in other contexts, such as the movement of Syrian children to Europe (Trovato et al., 2016). Ethiopia's role as a host nation is underpinned by its regional commitments and a historical legacy of peacebuilding, exemplified by its mediation in Sudanese conflicts, which continues to position it as a beacon of hope for South Sudanese refugees. Beyond state-level diplomacy, the migration trajectories are influenced by pre-existing ethnolinguistic continuities, as observed with the Anyuak and Nuer communities spanning the border. This finding resonates strongly with migration theories that posit social capital and interpersonal networks as critical factors in migration decisions (Massey et al., 1993; Castles & Miller, 2009). These transnational ties likely serve as a "pull" factor, guiding children towards specific destinations where cultural and kinship linkages offer a foundational, though incomplete, sense of familiarity.

Upon arrival, however, the initial safety provided by the camp is quickly tempered by the psychological and cultural shock of resettlement. This experience aligns with Abur's (2019) research on South Sudanese refugees in Australia, confirming that cultural incongruence is a universal challenge that can impede integration, regardless of the host country's development status. The provision of comprehensive support services within camps is widely recognized as a critical mitigating factor for refugee well-being (Abur, 2016; Førde & Jarawan, 2007; Abur & Spaaij, 2016; Eunson, 1995). Conversely, inadequate services are correlated with heightened stress and poorer mental health outcomes (Jensen et al., 2014), underscoring the urgency of durable solutions for unaccompanied minors who face profound challenges in adapting to unfamiliar cultural landscapes (Abur & Mphande, 2019).

A key finding of this study is the gendered dimension of these challenges. Female unaccompanied minors face distinct vulnerabilities, including risks of gender-based violence and limited access to reproductive health services, while male minors are more susceptible to forced recruitment and labour exploitation. The implementation of gender-sensitive programming in the camp, including tailored counselling and safe spaces, represents a crucial alignment with contemporary child protection models. The practice of assigning caregivers based on the child's best interests, as observed in Jewi camp, is a direct application of structured, evidence-based frameworks aimed at safeguarding children from harm, as outlined in the systematic review by Isokuorttia et al. (2020).

The camp environment itself, while born of adversity, emerged as a significant developmental ecosystem. Participants reported acquiring academic and environmental competencies through interactions within the camp's diverse social fabric. This observation is powerfully explained by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory, which posits that human development is propelled by continuous, reciprocal interactions with layered environmental systems. The refugee camp, therefore, is not merely a holding space but a dynamic microsystem that actively shapes the children's development.

Most notably, despite experiences of trauma and stress, the children demonstrated remarkable positive adaptation, a phenomenon best understood through the lens of resilience theory (Van Breda, 2018). Their ability to engage in educational and community life underscores the capacity of vulnerable individuals to overcome

adversity by drawing upon inner strengths and external support systems. This finding advocates for a strength-based approach in humanitarian practice, guiding practitioners to identify and foster existing resilience assets within the refugee community rather than focusing solely on deficits.

In conclusion, the experiences of unaccompanied South Sudanese children in Ethiopia are complex. Their journey is driven by conflict and facilitated by social networks, their resettlement marked by cultural shock yet mitigated by structured support, and their development shaped by the camp's ecological system. Ultimately, their demonstrated resilience highlights the importance of policies and interventions that not only protect but also empower, recognizing the camp as a potential site for growth and positive adaptation amidst profound hardship.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings underscore the critical imperative to address the challenges affecting unaccompanied refugee children. Although institutional frameworks have been developed to respond to their needs, the magnitude of these challenges remain substantial. This situation necessitates a coordinated and strategic response from donor communities to provide both financial and technical support. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on refugee child welfare and provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners operating in humanitarian and child protection sectors.

Therefore, the following implications for social work practice and policy are proposed:

- Formalize collaborative frameworks among various stakeholders working across different jurisdictions to standardize procedures, improve service consistency, and ensure child safety throughout migration routes.
- Incorporate feedback from beneficiaries and establish monitoring and evaluation systems to maintain program relevance and accountability.
- Invest in the continuous professional development of staff and volunteers, equipping them with the necessary skills to offer psychologically safe, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive support.
- Allocate resources towards enhancing the abilities of host communities, foster families, and community-based organizations to create sustainable, culturally relevant protective environments that encourage social integration.
- Support policies that expand access to resettlement and family reunification, guided by longitudinal studies to grasp the long-term impacts of displacement.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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