

Trapped in Predatory Odysseys: The Cycle of Slavery and Exploitation for Unaccompanied Minors

5. Child and human rights approaches to address the intersection of child maltreatment with structural racism, discrimination, disinformation, colonization, denialism, and bias-commemorating the 75th

Migration and refugees

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Abstract text

Globally, immigration is a topic of high political and public contention. The intersection of immigration and politics has become more prominent in recent years, fueling the rise of various political parties and ideologies in both the global north and south. Examples include Brexit, driven by immigration concerns, and the election of President Donald Trump, who campaigned on building a wall to stop immigration through the U.S.-Mexico border. In South Africa, anti-immigration, xenophobic attacks continue, as seen in the recent Operation Dudula. Similarly, the UK's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda reflects a growing trend towards restrictive immigration policies, as in Denmark's 'zero refugees' stance. Amidst these developments, the specific issue of child [im]migration, particularly unaccompanied minors, receives limited attention. Media reports often highlight the plight of these children, such as rescues in the English Channel or detainment in the U.S., yet their personal stories are frequently overshadowed in broader immigration discussions. This paper, drawing on participatory action research conducted in Malawi with children and young people who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation, aims to fill this gap. It documents the narratives of unaccompanied minors, exploring their migration journeys within and across borders and their experiences of such movements. The focus is on sub-Saharan Africa, a significant source region for migration, yet understudied in the context of unaccompanied child migration. This paper dives deeper into the personal accounts of children and young participants, examining why and how they become unaccompanied and their experiences in this state, including involvement in prostitution. It reveals that the initial act of leaving often sets a vicious cycle of exploitation, entrapping them in slavery and commercial sexual exploitation. Despite this evidence, this paper will show that there remains a lack of effective policy and practice interventions to safeguard these children, raising critical questions about their dignity and rights; resulting into generational exploitation for unaccompanied minors.