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African Human Mobility Review

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Editorial

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On behalf of the editorial team, we are pleased to present Volume 11, Number 2, 2025, of the African Human Mobility Review (AHMR). This issue features original, high-quality research papers, exploring diverse aspects of human mobility across Africa. With the support of the Editorial Board and a global network of interdisciplinary scholars, AHMR continues to offer timely and relevant scholarship that informs evidence-based policymaking and deepens the understanding of migration on the continent.

We extend our sincere thanks to all contributors, authors, our publisher, and the anonymous reviewers whose rigorous efforts uphold the journal's academic integrity. This issue includes five peer-reviewed articles that foster original research, stimulate policy dialogue, and provide a platform for examining current trends, migration dynamics, and critical issues shaping mobility in Africa. Our commitment remains to elevate AHMR's global presence and scholarly impact with each publication.

The first article by Tigist Solomon, Darge Wole, and Abebaw Minaye is entitled "Knowledge of and Attitudes toward Child Trafficking in Wolaita Sodo, Southern Ethiopia: Insights from the Origin Community." Using a mixed-method research approach, this study explores knowledge and attitudes toward child trafficking among residents of Wolaita Sodo Town, southern Ethiopia. The findings reveal that the majority of participants lacked adequate knowledge about child trafficking, with the qualitative results supporting this finding. Residents showed empathy and a willingness to prevent trafficking but often viewed migration as an opportunity, thus complicating awareness. The study recommends targeted education, community campaigns, school programs, and local engagement to improve understanding. Future research should examine broader prevention strategies, policy frameworks, and cultural factors, while incorporating victims' lived experiences to deepen insight into child trafficking and enhance community-driven solutions.

The second article by Inês Raimundo and Victor Agadjanian is entitled "Rowing Against Climate Adversity and Lack of Family Support: The Everyday Lives of Migrants' Wives in Rural Mozambique." Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines rural women's experiences in the face of climate adversity and declining family support. For decades, these women relied on income from their husbands' migrant labor in South Africa to sustain farming and household needs. However,

reduced labor migration and increasing climate shocks had severe impacts on their livelihoods. Traditional support from family, neighbors, and churches diminished, leaving many isolated and without alternative income. The study indicates that rural women regularly suffer various types of stress and physical illnesses. The study also reveals that the worsening situation has serious psychosocial effects, deepening rural women's vulnerability and limiting their children's educational opportunities.

The third article by Kevin Oduor, Edwin Abuya, and Martin Ouma is entitled "Constraints and Prospects of Faith-Based Refugee Protection in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya." Using a qualitative research design, this article explores the challenges, solutions, and opportunities specific to faith-based organizations (FBOs) engaged in refugee protection. Drawing from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations conducted at Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, the study highlights FBOs' unique role as consistent, early responders to conflict and displacement. Unlike broader studies on refugee protection, this article focuses solely on FBOs, emphasizing their recognized importance in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The findings reveal that while FBOs face unique obstacles, these can be addressed through strategic and operational adjustments. Their contributions remain highly valued by refugees, host communities, and humanitarian actors. The study calls for stronger collaboration between FBOs, the UNHCR, and states, including increased support for Islamic FBOs in Kakuma. It also recommends expanding research into FBOs' roles in urban refugee settings and addressing issues of inclusion and perceived discrimination in camp environments.

The fourth article, authored by Perfect Mazani is entitled "Cross-Border Solidarity: Migrant-Led Associations as Spaces of Epistemic Resistance and Food Security Innovation in South Africa." Using household surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews, this paper examines how migrant-led social movements serve as sites of agency, resilience, and resistance against marginalization imposed by state policies and academic narratives. These nationally connected solidarity networks support food security, livelihoods, and socio-emotional well-being through group savings, mutual aid, and rotating credit schemes. Focusing on South African communities, the research shows these associations as both survival strategies and collective acts of resistance that challenge dominant migration discourses. Embedded in migrants' daily lives, these networks create new governance and care practices rooted in trust and reciprocity, fostering social belonging and epistemic justice. Finally, the study calls for the developers of migration and food security policies to recognize migrants as active agents and for a decolonial, inclusive approach led by migrant knowledge and solidarity practices.

The fifth article by Sky Kruger and Shazia Sader is entitled "Strengthened or Sidelined? An Evaluation of Pledges to Eradicate Statelessness in the Southern African Development Community." Based on a review of literature on the Global Compact on Refugees and the development turn in forced displacement, this paper examines statelessness in the Southern African Development Community (SADC)

region. It focuses on the underexplored pledging system and its role in addressing statelessness. The paper finds that the pledging system's impact depends largely on states' political will to enact inclusive laws and improve civil registration. However, the system lacks enforcement, monitoring, and mandatory reporting, thus limiting its effectiveness. Despite some progress, the pledging system has yet to secure sufficient resources or broad multi-stakeholder engagement. The study calls for urgent state commitment and collaboration to eradicate statelessness in the region.

Finally, I invite researchers, academics, and students to connect with us and explore new, impactful research areas that hold increasing social and practical significance across diverse disciplines. We look forward to receiving original and valuable contributions that advance knowledge in this journal. A heartfelt thank you goes to our dedicated editorial team, anonymous reviewers, and all authors who have submitted their work to our journal. Your efforts and commitment are greatly appreciated and essential to the continued success and growth of our publication.

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Knowledge of and Attitudes toward Child Trafficking in Wolaita Sodo, Southern Ethiopia: Insights from the Origin Community

Tigist Solomon[1], Darge Wole[2], and Abebaw Minaye[3]

Abstract

Child trafficking is a serious violation of children's rights under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Research on this issue in Ethiopia is limited, with few studies assessing public awareness and attitudes. This study aims to examine the knowledge and attitudes of residents in Wolaita Sodo town regarding in-country child trafficking using a mixed-methods approach with 448 participants. The research team collected data through structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. For data analysis, the researchers used SPSS 26.0 software, applied descriptive and inferential statistical analysis wherever applicable, and analyzed qualitative data thematically. The findings revealed that the majority of participants (55%) lacked adequate knowledge about child trafficking, with the qualitative results supporting this finding. In contrast, 55.9% of participants exhibited positive attitudes toward child trafficking. A significant correlation was found between knowledge levels and attitudes, with education and personal experiences playing a critical role. Multivariate analysis revealed that individuals with a first-degree education or higher were 3.25 times (1.21-8.81, p<0.05) more likely to possess a good knowledge of child trafficking compared to those who were less educated. Additionally, individuals with trafficked family members had 3.36 times (1.59-6.81) greater knowledge of child trafficking. In a similar vein, participants who had a first degree or higher educational qualification were 2.31 times (1.29-4.34, p<0.05) less likely to harbor negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-trafficking initiatives compared to their less-educated counterparts. Furthermore, individuals with family members who had been trafficked were 0.44 times (0.47-0.27, p<0.05) less likely to display negative attitudes than those without such experiences. Despite their positive attitudes, most participants lacked comprehensive knowledge of child trafficking, highlighting the gap between awareness and actionable understanding. This suggests that positive attitudes may not translate into informed action without adequate knowledge. The study recommends targeted educational initiatives to bridge this gap and improve public understanding and engagement.

Keywords: child, in-country trafficking, awareness, attitude, multivariate analysis, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

Child trafficking is a grave injustice that strips children of their rights, safety, and future. "Child trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child for exploitation, regardless of the use of illicit means, either within or outside a country" (UN, 2000). Traffickers prey on children's vulnerability, driven by profit and an industry that thrives in secrecy. The true scale of the problem is difficult to measure, as many cases go unnoticed, leaving many children trapped in cycles of exploitation. It violates fundamental human rights, which are guaranteed to children under international law, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Faulkner, 2023).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) estimates in its 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons that a substantial proportion of identified trafficking victims are children, constituting almost one-third (28%) of identified cases. It remains a pervasive issue across Africa, particularly in East Africa, where poverty, conflict, and weak institutional responses exacerbate the problem. It constitutes a complex transnational challenge, wherein countries function as origin, transit, and destination points for victims. Intra-regional and international migration patterns are exploited, leading to the movement of vulnerable individuals across borders. According to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (UNODC, 2024), in East Africa, children make up 69% of detected victims. Studies have systematically attributed the pervasive issue of child trafficking in Africa — and East Africa in particular — to a constellation of socio-economic factors. For instance, research by Terre des Hommes Netherlands (2024) and Munialo (2018) found that economic hardship, limited educational opportunities, and displacement due to conflict contribute collectively to a situation in which children are rendered particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Such vulnerabilities facilitate their recruitment into forced labor, domestic servitude, and sexual abuse, all of which result in severe physical and psychological trauma, the loss of childhood, and prolonged social exclusion.

Over the past decade, both national and international communities have done a lot in the fight against this crime, with transnational trafficking emerging as a notably critical aspect of the problem (Mapp, 2020). On the contrary, in-country trafficking has not received much attention, despite remaining attractive to perpetrators due to the ease with which children can be relocated without the need for legal documentation. The absence of stringent border controls allows traffickers to operate their businesses at minimal costs (Rahel, 2016; Mengstie, 2018). This issue is especially significant in Ethiopia, where child out-migration is a common practice. For example, in regions such as the Wolaita zone, child trafficking is intricately linked with migration dynamics in which marginalized children, particularly those affected by poverty, displacement, or migration, are disproportionately targeted.

Several studies (e.g., Gecho and Worku, 2018; Kastro and Dullea, 2018; Tadesse and Mengistu, 2021) indicate that southern Ethiopia, particularly the Wolaita zone, has become a major source of child migrants, many of whom face risks of exploitation

and trafficking. While economic hardship, notably limited agricultural resources, small landholdings, and food insecurity, is a key driver (Zergaw and Asale, 2019; Kassa, 2021; Tsegay, 2021), migration is also deeply embedded in the region's cultural and social practices in which families often view migration as a path to economic success, sometimes overlooking the risks involved (Candido et al., 2016).

Children's migration in southern Ethiopia cannot be fully explained through the traditional "push-pull" framework, as it is shaped by complex social and cultural dynamics beyond economic hardship. Their migration decisions are influenced by aspirations, family expectations, peer pressure, institutional structures, and prevailing sociocultural narratives. Research highlights children's agency in migration, showing that they participate actively in decision-making rather than being passive actors. Numerous studies (e.g., Kerilyn and Fransen, 2018; Zeleke, 2020; Genovese et al., 2021; Van der Gaag et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2022; Hitzer et al., 2025) underline children's agency in making decisions related to their migration.

Studies indicate that a significant number of Ethiopian youths express a desire to migrate, with urban centers being the most preferred destinations, reflecting broader socio-economic trends. In this regard, Schewel and Fransen's (2018) analysis of data from the Boyden et al. (2016) longitudinal study in Ethiopia, found that two-thirds of the participating youth expressed a desire to migrate. Among these young individuals, nearly 60% identified specific preferred destinations, favoring predominantly urban areas in Ethiopia. The findings illustrate a clear gradient in migration aspirations, with larger urban centers emerging as the most appealing destinations for young people. This trend reflects broader socio-economic and structural influences on patterns of internal migration.

While some children migrate without parental knowledge (Zeleke, 2020), others are encouraged by their families, often due to financial pressures or the promise of remittances (Gecho and Worku, 2018). Social influences, including peer encouragement and brokers, further drive migration, often without full awareness of the associated risks. A lack of knowledge about trafficking and exploitation increases children's vulnerability to forced labor, abuse, and homelessness (Abraha and Woru, 2021).

Generally, much attention has been given to this issue over the past decade by both national and international communities, as documented by extensive research and literature. While the international trafficking of children to destinations such as the Middle East, South Africa, and Europe is well recognized, in-country child trafficking continues to pose a significant problem. Despite being a lucrative opportunity for traffickers, this form of trafficking remains underexplored and insufficiently addressed by scholars, governmental bodies, and non-governmental organizations dedicated to combating this problem.

Moreover, despite extensive research on child trafficking, most studies focus on its scale, causes, victims' experiences, and government responses, leaving a gap in understanding the knowledge and attitudes of origin communities. This perspective

is crucial in combating child trafficking in Wolaita Sodo, as societal perceptions can either enable or resist trafficking. Without insight into the community's awareness, misconceptions, and attitudes, interventions may prove ineffective. Given the urgency of the issue and the lack of data, this study aims to explore this community's perspectives, assessing the knowledge, prevailing attitudes, and associated factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge of and attitudes toward trafficking

Child trafficking represents a severe violation of human rights, involving the exploitation of children for purposes of forced labor, sexual exploitation, or illegal activities (Skeels and Bashir, 2024). It robs children of their safety, education, and future, often ensnaring them in cycles of abuse and poverty. Despite national and international efforts to combat this crime, child trafficking and migration persist. This is a widespread problem in Ethiopia, driven by factors such as poverty, lack of awareness, and inadequate law enforcement (Mengstie, 2018; Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2023).

Gaining insight into the knowledge and attitudes of communities regarding child trafficking is essential for effective prevention and intervention strategies (Hynes, 2013). Studies (e.g., Kastro and Dullea, 2018) highlight that communities play a crucial role in identifying victims, reporting cases, and providing support to survivors. Thus, by examining their knowledge and attitudes, policymakers and organizations can tailor educational campaigns, strengthen legal frameworks, and enhance protective measures. Numerous studies (e.g., Gezie et al., 2021; Tekalign, 2021) have shown that gaps in knowledge and misconceptions about trafficking, attitudes, beliefs, norms, values, and societal structures contribute to the prevalence of child trafficking in Ethiopia.

Cultural practices, including traditional child fostering, early marriage, and migration play a critical role in shaping children's behaviors and decisions. Many are influenced by peer pressure and societal expectations to seek employment in urban areas, which renders them particularly vulnerable to traffickers who promise them lucrative job opportunities. This dynamic significantly contributes to child trafficking in Wolaita and intensifies the overall susceptibility of children (Gebu and Ararso, 2016; Gecho and Worku, 2018; Kastro and Dullea, 2018). Moreover, poverty and limited economic opportunities elevate the risk of trafficking, while broader issues of discrimination and societal inequalities exacerbate the problem.

Social challenges, such as family conflicts, exposure to violence, low levels of awareness, and limited education play critical roles in facilitating child trafficking (Tefera, 2019; Tekalign, 2022). The movement of children, whether through migration or trafficking, is driven by a complex interplay of economic imperatives and sociocultural norms, particularly those related to gender roles and child labor, which can inadvertently normalize and facilitate trafficking. For instance, Candido

et al. (2016) highlight that migration within the Wolaita community is deeply rooted in cultural and social practices. Complementing this perspective, research by Zewdie et al. (2024) shows that migration is widely perceived as a pathway to achieving economic success and social mobility. In many rural areas, child-labor migration is considered essential for household survival.

However, these cultural norms mask the significant risks that migrant children face. Studies, including those by Van der Gaag et al. (2021), reveal that migrant children are frequently subjected to various psychosocial challenges, such as exploitation and harassment. Moreover, many child migrants endure harsh working conditions characterized by employer mistreatment, underpayment, and frequent breaches of contractual agreements, leading to wages that are often lower than promised or not provided at all (Balcha, 2018; Zewdie et al., 2024).

Research indicates that traffickers play a significant role in placing migrants in exploitative labor conditions, including low wages. The relationship between traffickers and suppressed wages is typically intertwined within a broader network of intermediaries that facilitate labor migration and employment. Traffickers, along with brokers, recruiters, and employers, are often complicit in systems that exploit workers and perpetuate conditions of forced labor. In many instances, traffickers prey on vulnerable individuals, including children, by promising them well-paying jobs. Once these individuals are recruited, they may find themselves trapped in exploitative circumstances where their wages are withheld, reduced, or manipulated to ensure their ongoing dependency. This practice can be part of a larger framework of exploitative labor, in which intermediaries benefit from the vulnerabilities of these workers (Fernandez, 2013; Paraskevopoulou et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a lack of knowledge, education, and community tolerance further intensifies the issue. Thus, understanding attitudes and knowledge about this problem is crucial for identifying misconceptions and empowering communities to recognize and report suspicious activities. The literature suggests that inadequate knowledge plays a significant role in the continued prevalence of child trafficking within vulnerable populations. For instance, Martinho et al. (2021) found that knowledge gaps regarding trafficking processes, including recruitment strategies and victim mobility, were prevalent among the Portuguese community. Similarly, Exeni McAmis et al. (2022) conducted a study examining healthcare professionals' awareness and preparedness in identifying victims of human trafficking. Their findings revealed that respondents generally assessed their knowledge of trafficking as ranging from average to below average.

Numerous studies (e.g., Azage et al., 2014; Botchkovar et al., 2016; Sabita et al., 2021) have shown that vulnerable populations, especially those at an increased risk of trafficking, often have limited awareness regarding the issue. Sabita et al. (2021) found significant gaps in knowledge among participants, with nearly 40% demonstrating an inadequate knowledge of trafficking. Similarly, Davy and Metanji (2022) conducted a survey aimed at assessing the knowledge, attitudes, and engagement of

youth in anti-trafficking initiatives across four regions in Albania. They discovered that 40% of respondents believed that trafficking occurs within the country, while 51% acknowledged its prevalence in foreign nations. This study further highlighted that, although participants had a solid awareness of the risks associated with human trafficking, notable gaps still existed, particularly regarding recruitment strategies and less-commonly recognized forms of exploitation.

Research consistently demonstrates that various factors significantly influence individuals' knowledge of and attitudes toward societal issues. Studies conducted by Davy and Metanji (2022), Cunha et al. (2019), Sharapov (2019), Exeni McAmis et al. (2022), and Wangsnes (2014) highlight the impact of key variables such as gender, place of residence, educational attainment, and socio-economic status on people's understanding and perspectives. These factors not only determine individuals' level of knowledge but also shape their attitudes, responses, and engagement with pressing social concerns. For example, Davy and Metanji (2022), alongside findings from Cunha et al. (2019), indicate that women generally possess a greater knowledge of human trafficking and exhibit more favorable attitudes toward combating the problem, compared to men.

In contrast, Sharapov (2019) and Mobasher et al. (2022) found that men exhibited significantly higher levels of knowledge regarding trafficking than women. Furthermore, research by Mazumdar and Mukherjee (2022) suggests that girls possess limited knowledge about child trafficking. However, other studies have found no significant differences between genders regarding knowledge of trafficking (see Wangsnes, 2014; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022).

Research indicates a positive correlation between educational attainment and knowledge of and attitudes toward child trafficking. In essence, individuals with higher education levels are generally better informed about the complexities of child trafficking and are more likely to adopt critical perspectives regarding its underlying issues. Findings from various studies (e.g., Azage et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2019; Sharapov, 2019) revealed that those with higher educational qualifications possess a more comprehensive understanding of trafficking in persons, including its root causes, prevalence, and ramifications. Building on prior research, Adhikari et al. (2023) further highlight the significant role that sociodemographic factors play in shaping individuals' knowledge of human trafficking. Their findings reveal that aspects such as education level, economic status, and place of residence are linked positively to possessing sufficient knowledge of the issue. This suggests that individuals with greater access to education and financial stability, as well as those residing in more resourceful environments, are more likely to develop a deeper awareness of human trafficking, its causes, and its consequences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employed the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) model as a theoretical framework. The KAP model is a well-established tool for understanding

and predicting human behavior in various contexts, including public health (Poddar et al., 2022), environmental conservation (Wang et al., 2013), education (Wagithunu, 2014; Moti et al., 2016), gender equality (Jahan, 2021), and risk communication (Mushi et al., 2021). In this study, the model is applied to the domain of child trafficking to examine the knowledge of and attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking activities.

The concept of child trafficking knowledge encompasses the information, awareness, and understanding that individuals possess regarding issues related to child trafficking. For example, research indicates that the prevalence of child trafficking in Wolaita zone is linked significantly to a lack of comprehensive knowledge on the problem (Gecho and Worku, 2018). Although there is general awareness of human trafficking among the population, existing evidence does not demonstrate a profound understanding of the severity of its impact on victims' livelihoods and overall quality of life. Lack of knowledge can lead to misinformation and increased vulnerability among at-risk groups (Wangsnes, 2014).

Attitude is an important psychological and social construct in the fight against child trafficking. A community's attitude toward a particular issue encompasses its emotional responses, behavioral tendencies, and underlying beliefs, which may be either positive or negative. In the context of child trafficking, the collective attitude of a community plays a fundamental role in shaping its perceptions about the problem and the victims, responses, and level of engagement with efforts to combat the phenomenon. The disposition of individuals within a community toward child trafficking significantly influences their willingness to acknowledge its severity, support preventive measures, and contribute to interventions aimed at mitigating its adverse effects. For instance, in some communities, exploitative migration practices may be normalized, causing the severity of the issue to go unnoticed due to cultural beliefs (DiRienzo and Das, 2017).

Additionally, Munialo (2018) highlights that cultural acceptance of migration can unintentionally raise trafficking risks, as families might overlook potential dangers. The practice aspect explores the behaviors and actions that arise from knowledge and attitudes, such as prevention strategies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems for victims. The current research focuses specifically on knowledge and attitudes, recognizing that a community's knowledge of and attitudes toward trafficking are vital to addressing the issue effectively. Without sufficient knowledge, awareness, and shifts in attitude, changes in behavior are likely to be limited. The practice component, which explores how residents' level of engagement in preventive practices is the focus of a separate article currently under review in another journal, enables a more comprehensive examination of community responses to trafficking.

METHODOLOGY

Study design and population

A mixed-methods study was conducted in Wolaita Sodo town, the capital of the Wolaita zone, located approximately 380 kilometers southwest of Addis Ababa, from January to April 2022. Based on the 2007 population census by the Central Statistics Agency (CSA), the town's population was estimated at 132,000. This area was purposefully selected, since the town has been characterized as a source of child trafficking to urban centers and, to a lesser extent, rural areas. The study population comprised residents who had lived in the town or had been residents for a minimum period of six months. This population is deemed relevant due to their direct exposure to local issues, with their awareness shaped by community interactions and influenced by sociocultural norms. Their familiarity with trafficking patterns and the contributing factors enables them to offer reliable insights into the ongoing persistence of this problem in the town. Furthermore, they have access to pertinent information sources, which ensures that their responses reflect a well-informed understanding of trafficking.

Sample size and sampling technique

The quantitative study employed a multi-stage sampling technique to select participants from Wolaita Sodo town. This involved the random selection of one kebele (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) from each of the town's three sub-towns, resulting in three kebeles. The researchers then used systematic random sampling to select every 35th individual from the resident lists of these three kebeles, which collectively had 15,476 residents. The sample size for the study was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula, considering the population size and desired level of precision.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$
$$n = \frac{15476}{1 + 15476(0.05)^2} \approx 390$$

Assuming a 95% confidence level and p =0.5, we get the sample size as 390 individuals. In addition to these 390 individuals, the researchers added 15% to the sample size to ensure an adequate sample in case some participants dropped out or provided incomplete information; the final sample size was 448. The selection of 448 households was carried out using a systematic random sampling method to ensure representation from the broader community, rather than targeting only households that have experienced child trafficking directly. The aim of the study is not limited to examining trafficked children or households with first-hand experiences; instead, it seeks to assess the knowledge and attitudes surrounding child trafficking within origin communities. Given Wolaita Sodo's role as both a source and transit hub

for trafficked children, residents, regardless of their direct involvement, were likely to have encountered or developed perceptions of trafficking through community interactions, media exposure, or indirect experiences.

In the study, 448 individuals completed a questionnaire, which was complemented by interviews with two adult and five child key informants, and discussions with eight participants in focus groups. The researchers employed a purposive sampling method to select participants for both the interviews and the focus group discussions (FGDs).

Measures

This study used qualitative and quantitative data collection tools to complement the results from different sources. The internal child trafficking knowledge tool was adopted for this study from items used in the Trafficking Awareness Survey (2003) and Sharapov's study (2019). The researchers took careful steps to ensure its reliability, accuracy, and relevance within the study's specific context. To ensure the study's effectiveness and cultural relevance, the research team translated questions into the local language while preserving their original meaning. The content was modified to fit local customs and beliefs, promoting honest responses. Response scales were adapted to align with culturally appropriate ways of expressing attitudes, enhancing accuracy. The researchers conducted a pilot test with a sample of the target population to identify and resolve comprehension challenges and refine the survey for clarity and relevance.

The instrument has two sections: the first evaluates sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, socio-economic status, years of residence, and education), while the second assesses knowledge of internal child trafficking. Following the initial compilation of items, the structure and validity of the instrument were evaluated using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). A Promax rotation was applied, yielding five distinct factors, which collectively accounted for 66.05% of the variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.82, indicating a strong basis for factor analysis, while the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$), confirming the suitability of the dataset for factor extraction. Additionally, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78, ensuring reliability in measurement.

The principal component method provided initial communality estimates, with five factors having eigenvalues greater than 1 retained in the final solution. The five extracted factors were: knowledge of the definition of child trafficking (24.87% variance; eigenvalue = 3.48), knowledge about the victim's profile (16.92% variance; eigenvalue = 2.37), knowledge about the psychosocial plight trafficked children experienced (8.83% variance; eigenvalue = 1.47), knowledge about the vulnerability to child trafficking (8.50% variance; eigenvalue = 1.23), knowledge about the traffickers (6.91% variance; eigenvalue = 1.15).

Similarly, the child trafficking attitude scale was developed for this study. After initial item compilation, an exploratory analysis with Promax rotation extracted three factors, explaining 64.35% of the variance. KMO was 0.82 and the Bartlett test was significant (p < .001), indicating factorability. The items were face valid and verified by a panel of experts. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .83, which indicates satisfactory internal consistency. Moreover, the study used 11 semi-structured interview guides for key informants, 10 for child interviews, and 10 semi-structured FGD guides for FGDs to facilitate effective discussions and encourage sharing of personal experiences. Moreover, the knowledge items were face valid and verified by a panel of experts.

Data analysis

The study employed concurrent triangulation to embed the quantitative findings with qualitative findings. The qualitative data analysis was done side by side and followed Creswell's (2014) spiral model. The research team initially transcribed and organized data from interviews and FGDs and subsequently conducted a thorough reading of all transcripts to gain an overarching understanding of the data. Concurrently, memos were written to capture initial insights and emerging themes. Finally, the researchers analyzed the patterns and relationships between these themes to draw meaningful interpretations. The research team analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS software, focusing on descriptive statistics and logistic regression to assess the association between variables while calculating odds ratios at α 95% confidence interval (CI).

Ethical considerations

Before the study, participants or their guardians provided informed verbal consent after the researchers briefed them on the objectives. The research team interviewed only those who consented and collected data anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The study obtained ethics approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Addis Ababa University to protect participants from potential harm.

RESULT

Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants

Out of 448 study samples, 444 participants completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 99.10%. As shown in Table 1, among the respondents, 269 (60.2%) were male, 103 (23.0%) had completed high school, 18.8% had post-secondary training, and 7.2% had first degrees or higher. The demographic analysis reveals significant insights into the socio-economic characteristics of the study participants. The majority (53.2%, or 238 participants) reported a monthly income ranging from 2,600 to 6,500 ETB, indicating a concentration within this income bracket. Additionally, the majority (92.9%) had resided in the town for over four

years, suggesting strong community ties and potential familiarity with local socio-economic dynamics. In terms of self-perceived socio-economic status, a notable distribution emerged: 15.4% considered their status better than most people, 45.6% viewed it as comparable to the majority, and 29.3% perceived their socio-economic status to be in a lower position. These findings underscore the varied economic experiences within the community and highlight the importance of socio-economic factors in shaping individual and collective perspectives.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants

Variable	Label	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	269	60.2
	Female	175	39.1
Education level	Illiterate	70	15.7
	Read and write only	86	19.2
	Grades 1–8	69	15.4
	Grades 9–12	103	23.0
	Post-secondary training of less than 3 years	84	18.8
	First degree and above	32	7.2
Socio-economic status	Better than most people	69	15.4
	Same as most people	244	45.6
	Worse than most people	131	29.3
Income per month	<1,000	36	8.1
	1,001–2,500	150	34.3
	2,501–6,500	238	53.2
	>6,500	20	4.4
Residential period	.5–4	29	6.5
	>4	315	92.9

Source: Authors' own work

Knowledge of in-country child trafficking

As depicted in Figure 1, the majority of participants (243 or 55%) scored below the mean for adequate knowledge of internal child trafficking, indicating a knowledge gap in this area.

Figure 1: Level of knowledge of internal child trafficking
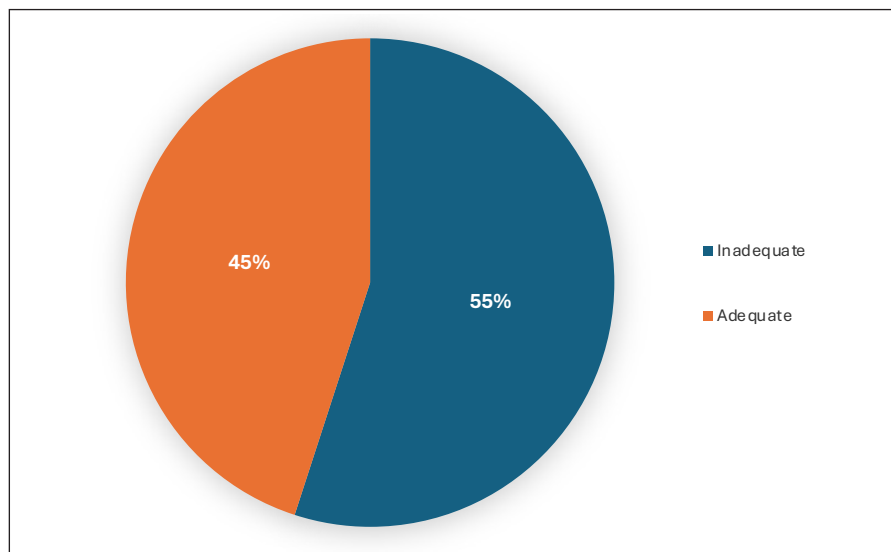
Source: Authors' own work

Participants scored an average of 8.57 (SD = 3.53, Min = 3, Max = 14) out of a possible 14 points on their knowledge of internal child trafficking. The highest scores were in knowledge of victims (M = 2.15, SD = 1.41), followed by knowledge of vulnerabilities (M = 2.07, SD = 0.89), and traffickers and their methods (M = 1.63, SD = 0.62). In contrast, lower scores were noted in defining internal child trafficking (M = 1.45, SD = 1.32) and understanding the psychosocial struggles faced by children (M = 1.06, SD = 0.80).

The findings highlight a significant gap in knowledge in defining the features of in-country child trafficking among participants. When presented with its definition encompassing the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of children within national borders for exploitative purposes, 314 (70.2%) of participants failed to recognize it as accurate. Similarly, when presented with the statement, "In-country child trafficking involves the exploitation of a child," 255 (57.4%) of the participants incorrectly rated it as false, despite its factual accuracy. When asked to assess the statement, "In-country child trafficking may involve abuse of power or a position of vulnerability," 252 (56.4%) participants incorrectly rated it as false.

Participants demonstrated a reasonably solid knowledge of several key indicators of child trafficking. Specifically, 231 (51.7%) correctly recognized that abused child domestic workers are victims, 263 (55.5%) identified that children forced to work excessive hours fall under trafficking, and 277 (62.6%) acknowledged that wage withholding constitutes exploitation. These figures indicate a generally

high awareness, particularly regarding forms of financial exploitation. However, it is noteworthy that 259 participants (57.1%) did not recognize that children working to repay a loan can also be considered victims of in-country child trafficking. Participants' knowledge of the abuse encountered by trafficked children was assessed using separate items on physical and psychological abuse. Results revealed that 177 (62.0%) of participants correctly identified that victims frequently experience physical abuse, while 181 (62.8%) acknowledged that psychological abuse is likewise prevalent.

The study also assessed participants' knowledge regarding vulnerability factors for in-country child trafficking using three items rated as correct or incorrect. The item stating that children from urban areas are vulnerable was rated as correct by 63.8% (n = 285) of participants, while 68.7% (n = 307) agreed that children from poor families are most at risk. The highest recognition was observed for the statement that children from poor families are more vulnerable, with 74.0% (n = 331) rating it as correct.

Finally, the study assessed participants' knowledge regarding traffickers and recruitment techniques using two distinct items. One item addressed the identification of potential recruiters, stating that acquaintances, strangers, friends, neighbors/family friends, relatives, and private companies could be involved, while the other examined the tactic of recruiting children through false promises. The results indicated that 352 participants (78.7%) correctly identified the potential traffickers and 374 participants (84.2%) accurately recognized false promises as a recruitment strategy (see Table 2).

Table 2: Knowledge of internal child trafficking

No	Categories	Correct		Incorrect	
		N	%	N	%
A.	**Knowledge about the definition of child trafficking**				
1.	In-country child trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of children within a country for exploitation	130	29.3	314	70.7
2.	In-country child trafficking involves the exploita-tion of a child	189	42.6	255	57.4
3.	In-country child trafficking may involve abuse of power or a position of vulnerability	192	43.0	252	56.4
B.	**Knowledge about the victims' profiles**				
4.	Victims of in-country child trafficking are children forced to work to repay a loan	185	41.4	259	57.9
5.	Victims of in-country child trafficking can be child domestic workers who are abused by their employers	231	51.7	213	47.7
6.	Children who are forced to work longer hours than was promised can be victims of in-country child trafficking	263	58.8	181	40.5

7.	Working children who do not receive wages or have their wages withheld by their employers are victims of in-country child trafficking	277	62	167	37.4
C.	**Knowledge about the psychosocial plight experienced by trafficked children**				
8.	In most cases, victims of in-country child trafficking experience physical abuse	277	62	167	37.4
9.	In most cases, victims of in-country child trafficking experience psychological abuse	281	62.9	163	36.5
D.	**Knowledge about the vulnerability to child trafficking**				
10.	Children from urban areas are vulnerable to in-country child trafficking	285	63.8	159	35.5
11.	Children from rural areas are most often vulnerable to in-country child trafficking	307	68.7	137	30.6
12.	Children from poor families are more vulnerable to in-country child trafficking than other children	331	74.0	113	25.3
E.	**Knowledge about the traffickers and techniques**				
13.	Acquaintances, strangers, friends, neighbors, family friends, relatives, and private companies could be among recruiters	352	78.7	92	20.6
14.	Children are recruited into trafficking through false promises	374	84.2	70	15.7

Source: Authors' own work

Similarly, the findings from the FGDs indicate a significant knowledge gap regarding child trafficking. The data from FGDs indicate that the participants tended to conflate child trafficking with child exploitation, labor, and forced begging. For example, (FGDP1) said, "Child trafficking is when children migrate from their town/village and work for others for free or very little." Equating child trafficking with migration and related concepts was evident among most of the participants.

In a similar vein, the child participants were asked questions concerning what child trafficking is, whether they have — or anyone they know — ever experienced or witnessed child trafficking, who the recruiters are, and the tactics used by the traffickers.

Of the five participants asked, two reported that they had heard about child trafficking. A 16-year-old male participant who migrated from Boditi village to Sodo when he was just 12 years old, shared his understanding of child trafficking in the following way: "Child trafficking is the exploitation of migrant children. It is when employers make children earn money but pay them a little while keeping the rest of the money for themselves."

Regarding the gender of trafficked children, participants were asked in the semi-structured questionnaire which gender is more trafficked in their locality. As

depicted in Figure 2, the majority (66.8%) indicated that both boys and girls were perceived as vulnerable to child trafficking, 24.3% of participants identified girls as being more frequently trafficked in their local communities, whereas 9% reported boys as the most frequently trafficked gender.

Figure 2: Vulnerability to child trafficking based on gender
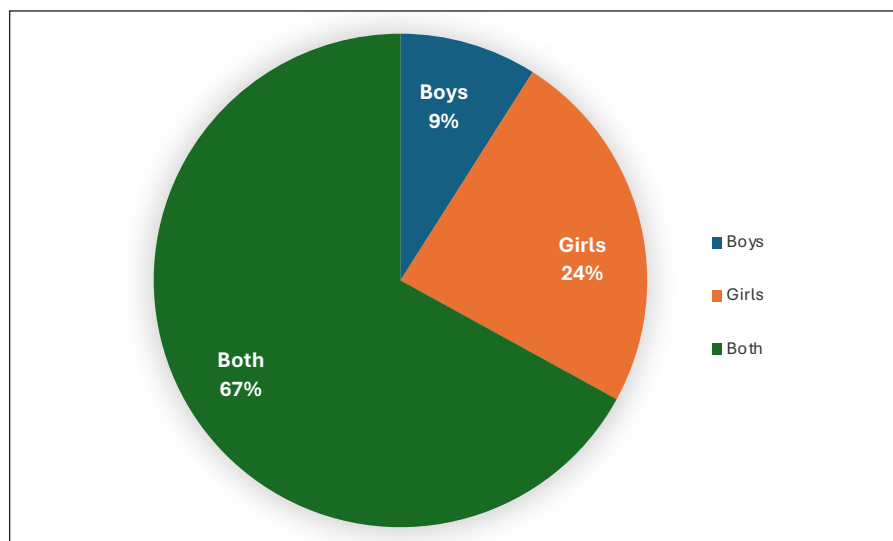
Source: Authors' own work

Key informants indicated that children from impoverished rural families, school dropouts, or orphans are at high risk of trafficking. They further added that street children, those from dysfunctional or abusive households, and children with disabilities are also among those at high risk of trafficking. For instance, one of the key informants, a police officer from a child protection unit, narrated the following:

> Children of poor rural families are always at risk. Many disadvantaged rural families are willing to send their children away, hoping that their children will get an opportunity for education and new skills. Some send [them] away with the hope of getting economic support from the remittance (KI1).

The FGD findings confirm the above findings, emphasizing similar characteristics of children. Seven out of eight FGD participants noted that being an orphan increases children's vulnerability to trafficking due to the lack of parental care, making them more susceptible to exploitation. Both boys and girls are at significant risk of trafficking; however, the nature of exploitation differs by gender. Boys are more frequently trafficked to fulfill specialized roles that demand particular skills or

physical attributes, while girls are exploited predominantly for domestic labor and related services.

The interviewed children reported experiencing a range of exploitative practices, including wage theft, long working hours, physical and psychological abuse, and denial of medical care. In this regard, a 15-year-old child participant shared his experience of trafficking and reintegration:

> I was taken to Hawassa by a maternal relative who assured my parents that he would provide me with an education in exchange for my assistance. He pledged to enroll me in school and meet all my basic needs. However, these promises were entirely false. Instead, he transferred me to another individual who subjected me to extensive labor as a weaver, requiring me to work from early morning until late at night. After several months, I was eventually rescued by labor inspection officers from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (CI5).

The results of the study also showed that traffickers often use family, friends, close and distant relatives, neighbors, and brokers to recruit children by exploiting children's dreams of a better life elsewhere. According to one of the child participants,

> There are some individuals (facilitators) who are considered "big brothers." These individuals come back to the village during the "Gifata" with children who previously migrated from different areas (CI3).

Moreover, the findings of the FGDs and key informant interviews indicate that traffickers employ deceptive tactics to attract children and convince parents with promises of better opportunities in urban areas. However, reality often contradicts these promises, leading to exploitation and profound disappointment. The understanding of child trafficking among participants varied, with some providing detailed explanations and others focusing on specific aspects.

Sources of information

The data collected from participants showed that multiple media platforms serve as channels for information regarding internal child trafficking. As shown in Table 3, more than one-third (35.6%) of the participants cited radio programs as primary sources, followed by social networks (30.6%) and television programs (17.4%). The internet (6.7%), documentaries (5.4%), and movies (3.1%) also served as sources of information and played a role in raising awareness among participants. The findings highlight the significant role of various media platforms in disseminating information about internal child trafficking.

Table 3: Sources of information

No		Frequency	Percent
1.	I personally know someone who was trafficked	137	30.6
2.	Someone I know told me about it	2	0.4
3.	I watched a news program on TV	78	17.4
4.	I watched a documentary on TV	24	5.4
5.	I watched a film on TV	14	3.1
6.	I listened to a program on the radio	159	35.6
7.	I read about it on the internet	30	6.7

Source: Authors' own work

Participants' attitudes toward internal child trafficking

For 10 items to assess attitudes toward child trafficking, the scores ranged from 22 to 46 (mean = 3.08, SD = +.50). The majority of the participants, n = 248 (55.9%), tend to score above the mean in attitudes measure scores. The overall attitudes of the residents of Wolaita Sodo town concerning internal child trafficking are illustrated in Table 4. More than half of the respondents (233 or 52.4%) expressed their concern about in-country child trafficking, and 225 (50.6%) believed that the indicators of child trafficking in Wolaita Sodo town are easily identifiable. The majority of participants exhibited a positive attitude toward taking action, showing an interest in attending workshops focused on identifying and preventing child trafficking, as well as a willingness to report suspected cases to the authorities. However, nearly half of the participants expressed a negative attitude toward the victims of child trafficking.

Table 4: Attitudes of participants toward in-country child trafficking

No	Items	SA	A	DK	SDA	DA	Mean	S. D
		F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)		
1.	In-country child trafficking is a serious problem in Wolaita Sodo town	50 11.3	184 41.4	104 23.4	76 7.1	30 6.75	3.47	0.91
2.	If I suspected a child was being trafficked, I would be hesitant to report it to the authorities for fear of being wrong	38 8.6	176 39.6	135 30.4	88 19.8	7 1.6	3.33	0.94
3.	It is not difficult to identify a child-trafficking situation in Wolaita Sodo	97 21.8	168 37.8	133 30	46 10.4	0 0	3.71	0.93
4.	Children who end up being trafficked do so by their own choice	30 6.8	138 31.1	97 29.7	132 41.4	47 10.6	3.15	0.93
5.	If those trafficked children were poor to start with, at least now they have a job	25 5.6	101 22.7	117 26.4	191 43	10 2.3	2.86	0.98
6.	People I know say children who are trafficked deserve what they get	40 9	109 24.5	91 20.5	180 40.5	23 5.2	2.49	1.13
7.	I would be willing to report suspected cases of child trafficking to the authorities	60 13.5	176 39.6	139 31.3	68 15.3	1 0.2	3.51	0.92
8.	I would be willing to display informational materials about child trafficking in my home or business	38 8.6	101 22.7	114 25.7	186 41.9	5 1.1	2.96	1.02

9.	I would be interested in attending a workshop on how to identify and prevent child-trafficking	83 18.7	154 34.7	142 32.0	65 14.6	0	3.57	0.96
10.	I would feel comfortable talking to my neighbors about child trafficking prevention	107 24.1	141 31.8	161 36.3	34 7.7	1 0.2	3.72	0.92

Note N= 444, SA= strongly agree, A= agree, DK= don't know, DA= disagree, SDA= strongly disagree. The decision was based on a weighted average of 33.38/10= 3.34

Source: Authors' own work

While some participants viewed child trafficking as voluntary migration driven by opportunities, others recognized it as trafficking. Despite their concerns, some participants justified it as beneficial migration. For example, FGD participant 3 reported:

> Migration benefits children differently. In addition to earning money of their own and developing their social network, it also helps them to be self-reliant, since they have to do a lot of things by themselves. I believe that it helps children to be strong and self-reliant and helps them build other qualities that would help them in their adult life.

The movement of children, often perceived as a pathway to better opportunities, can sometimes result in their exploitation. Societal perceptions, shaped by misleading narratives and idealized expectations, may obscure the challenges children face. However, these experiences can be significantly more difficult than initially anticipated. Participants in FGDs expressed concerns about the severity of the issue, whereas the interviewed children framed their experiences as migration journeys, emphasizing their resilience, despite facing abuse and exploitation. Child interviewee 3, a 16-year-old female, said the following:

> When a child leaves home, the burden on the family is somehow eased, since you entirely depend on your parents for every need, whether they are capable of providing it for you or not. On the other hand, some children are brave enough to make savings in all the hardship and exploitative conditions they have been through, and they make some contributions at critical times. Some of them saved for a couple of years to buy their family cattle, which can help them produce better on their farm.

The interviewed children value independence and self-reliance, even if it comes at the cost of their well-being. Despite the hardships, they view their experiences as educational and beneficial, believing it has helped them understand urban life and the value of their labor in generating income. This underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of child mobility and the challenges faced by vulnerable individuals.

Factors associated with knowledge of and attitudes toward child trafficking

Multivariate logistic regression analysis shows that education level, having trafficked family members, and information sources are significantly associated with knowledge of child trafficking. Participants with a first degree and above are 3.25 times (1.21-8.81) more likely to have good knowledge of child trafficking than those with lower levels of education. Those with trafficked family members are 3.36 times (1.59-6.81) more likely to be knowledgeable. Additionally, those who reported knowing someone who had been trafficked are 1.41 times (1.44-1.85) more likely to be knowledgeable than those who relied solely on the internet as a source of information. Those who followed television news are 1.58 times (1.38-1.76), more likely to be knowledgeable than those who relied solely on the internet as a source of information, while those who reported movies as a source of information are 1.75 times (1.44-1.85) more likely to be knowledgeable than those who relied solely on the internet as a source of information. Those who identified the radio as their primary source of information are 1.34 times (1.35-1.79) more likely to have higher levels of knowledge of child trafficking than those who relied solely on the internet (see Table 5).

Moreover, having adequate knowledge of child trafficking, education level, family history of trafficking, and information sources were associated with positive attitudes toward child trafficking and anti-trafficking activities. Participants with a first-degree education or higher were 2.31 times (1.29-4.34) less likely to hold negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices compared to those with lower education levels. Those with trafficked family members were 0.44 times (0.47-0.27) less likely to exhibit negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices than those without trafficked family members. Similarly, participants with an adequate level of knowledge were 1.26 times (0.86-1.85) less likely to have negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices compared to those with inadequate knowledge.

Furthermore, participants who reported knowing someone who had been trafficked are 4.87 times (3.86-6.85) less likely to hold negative attitudes than those who learned about child trafficking from the internet, while those who reported learning about child trafficking through watching television news are 3.27 times (2.88-3.75) less likely to hold negative attitudes. Moreover, those informed by a wide range of media sources are less likely to have negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices than participants who identified the internet as their sole source of information. Those who reported learning about

child trafficking from television documentaries are 3.78 times (2.42–4.63) less likely to have negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices than participants who identified the internet as their source of information, whereas those who reported learning about trafficking from movies are 2.59 times (1.43-3.85) less likely, and those relying on radio programs are 1.82 times (1.65-1.97) less likely to hold negative attitudes compared to those who reported learning about child trafficking from the internet.

Table 5: Factors associated with knowledge of and attitudes toward child trafficking

Variables	Knowledge OR 95% CI		Attitude OR 95% CI	
	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower
Better than most people (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Same as most people	0.87	0.37–20	0.39	0.51–3.01
Worse than most people	0.77	0.32–1.84	1.94	0.88–7.68
Level of education *				
Illiterate (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Read and write only	0.90	0.354–2.29	0.31	0.49–2.87
Primary education	0.99	0.49–1.98	0.41	0.61–3.30
Secondary education	1.08	0.50–2.32	0.29	0.08–3.81
College diploma	0.88	0.40–1.94	1.16	0.66–2.43
First degree and above	3.25	1.21–8.81	2.31	1.29–4.34
Knowledge**				
Inadequate (Ref.)			1	1
Adequate			1.26	0.86–1.85
Have trafficked family members**				
No (Ref.) **Yes**	1 3.36	1 1.59–6.81	1 0.44	1 0.456–0.271
Sources of information*				
Internet (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Knew someone trafficked	1.41	1.27–1.89	4.87	3.86–6.85
Television news	1.58	1.38–1.76	3.27	2.88–3.75
Television documentary	1.45	1.57–1.89	3.78	2.42–4.63
Television movies	1.75	1.44–1.85	2.59	1.43–3.85
Radio	1.34	1.35–1.79	1.82	1.65–1.97

**=p<.01, *=p<0.05, Ref. = reference category
Source: Authors' own work

DISCUSSION

Regarding child trafficking knowledge, residents presented an inadequate level of knowledge, with a lower score in knowledge about the defining features of in-country child trafficking. In contrast to previous studies (e.g., Gonçalves et al., 2019; Davy and Metanji, 2022; Adhikari et al., 2023) where participants displayed a good knowledge of the issue, the participants of the current study obtained a lower score on overall knowledge of child trafficking, in accord with other studies (see Gezie et al., 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022; Mazumdar and Mukherjee, 2022).

Significant gaps in understanding persist, as many study participants did not recognize the defining features of in-country child trafficking. The qualitative findings, except for the key informant interview results, all lend support to this finding, which shows the common misconception that trafficking is synonymous with migration, child labor, and forced labor, with some individuals even equating child labor with child trafficking. However, it is important to note that not all instances of child labor equate to child trafficking. This finding aligns with numerous previous findings (e.g., Winrock International Cambodia, 2012; Gecho and Worku, 2018).

Consistent with the earlier findings of Sharapov (2019), participants displayed a good knowledge of the victims' characteristics. In line with previous studies, the current finding shows that a significant majority (79%) of participants recognized the fact that traffickers can come from diverse sources, including acquaintances, strangers, friends, neighbors, family friends, relatives, and private companies. The current finding also aligns with previous research by Gecho and Worku (2018) that revealed that individuals within a child's immediate social environment such as friends, peers, brokers, relatives, family members, and neighbors often serve as key agents in the trafficking process in the Wolaita zone as well as with findings of Sabita et al. (2021) and Manju et al. (2024). However, these findings contrast with those of Davy and Metanji (2022), where only 48% of participants recognized that family members might also act as traffickers.

Regarding information sources, numerous channels provide information, including mass media and social networks. The findings reflect the unique information ecosystem and media consumption habits of the study population. Primary sources, including trusted local institutions and community organizations, appear to be the principal channels for information on child trafficking. This likely stems from these sources' ability to offer reliable, context-specific insights, which resonate deeply within the community. Additionally, the significant role of social networks (30.6%) highlights the importance of interpersonal communication, where word-of-mouth and personal connections play a vital role in shaping understanding. In contrast, the relatively lower influence of television, the internet, documentaries, and movies may indicate both regional media preferences and variations in access or trust in these formats, further emphasizing that information dissemination is context-dependent.

The study also explored factors influencing knowledge about child trafficking, specifically focusing on gender and socio-economic status. It found no significant differences linked to these variables, which aligns with the findings of Exeni McAmis et al. (2022) and Wangsnes (2014). This outcome contrasts with earlier research by Davy and Metanji (2022), Cunha et al. (2019), and Gonçalves and Matos (2021), all of which indicate higher trafficking knowledge among females, and Mazumdar and Mukherjee's (2022) finding, which reported a lower level of knowledge among female participants.

In contrast to previous findings of Azage et al. (2014) and Adhikari et al. (2023), which reported a positive association between socio-economic status and knowledge, the current study did not reveal any significant differences based on the socio-economic status of the participants. This discrepancy may be attributed to the larger sample sizes used in the earlier studies, compared to the smaller sample size observed in the current study for each group. Furthermore, individuals with higher education levels had significantly more knowledge about internal child trafficking compared to those with lower educational status. This supports previous findings (Botchkovar et al., 2016; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Sabita et al., 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022; Mazumdar and Mukherjee, 2022) but contradicts Wangsnes (2014), which found no significant differences based on education level.

Knowledge of internal trafficking is also associated with factors such as having family members who have been trafficked and sources of information, in which those who have trafficked family members seem more knowledgeable than those who do not. Participants who reported knowing someone who had been trafficked, coupled with their reliance on television news and movies seem to have more knowledge than those who used the internet as their primary source of information. This finding is in line with the findings of Thainiyom (2011), Shrestha et al. (2015), and Sharapov (2019).

Regarding attitudes toward child trafficking victims and anti-child trafficking practices, the residents expressed a higher level of concern about child trafficking in their locality and showed empathy toward victims. It challenged harmful beliefs, such as children's complicity and victim-blaming, while highlighting a willingness to engage in preventive measures. However, the perception of migration as a normal practice complicated the understanding of child movement. This finding is analogous to earlier work on attitudes toward human trafficking (e.g., Botchkovar et al., 2016; Sharapov, 2019; Davy and Metanji, 2022).

Nevertheless, the qualitative findings highlight participants' disagreeing attitudes toward child trafficking, where it is often confused with migration and seen as a way to escape poverty and an opportunity to gain skills and knowledge. This finding aligns with previous studies (Walakira et al., 2015; Zewdie et al., 2024) that indicate that sending children to towns and cities to improve household income is common.

Consistent with previous findings, significant associations were found between demographic factors and attitudes toward child trafficking, revealing that education level, knowledge of trafficking, perceived socio-economic status, having family members who had been trafficked, and information sources were associated

positively with attitudes toward the issue (Oyeleke et al., 2018; Sharapov, 2019; Davy and Metanji, 2022). Conversely, this study's findings contradict several others (see, for example, Winrock International Cambodia, 2012; Cunningham and Cromer, 2014; Rajji, 2015; Botchkovar et al., 2016; Mazumdar and Mukherjee, 2022).

The finding of the study indicates that there is a statistically significant association between knowledge and attitude. Participants who possessed adequate knowledge about child trafficking tended to have a desirable attitude toward victims of trafficking and a willingness to engage in preventive practices. This finding is supported by previous findings (e.g., Winrock International Cambodia, 2012; Cunningham and Cromer 2014; Sharapov, 2019; Omoregbe and Aghahowa, 2023) that indicate that good knowledge about human trafficking is associated positively with a desirable attitude toward phenomena, and individuals with adequate levels of knowledge about trafficking were less likely to blame the victim for their situation. On the other hand, the current findings do not support some previous findings. For instance, research by Rajji (2015) revealed that despite awareness of the negative consequences of human trafficking, positive attitudes toward the practice persisted. Similarly, Mazumdar and Mukherjee (2022) found that individuals demonstrated a higher level of knowledge about child trafficking but failed to exhibit the corresponding attitudes and behaviors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined knowledge and attitudes among the residents of Wolaita Sodo town, southern Ethiopia. It found that many residents had inadequate knowledge about child trafficking. Misconceptions remained prevalent, as many participants conflated trafficking with migration, child labor, and forced labor. Nevertheless, respondents exhibited a solid grasp of the issue's dynamics, including the vulnerabilities that lead to the phenomenon, the profiles of traffickers, and their methods.

Education level played a crucial role in shaping knowledge, with a direct correlation between higher education and better knowledge. However, factors such as gender and socio-economic status did not appear to significantly affect knowledge levels. Information sources proved to be vital, with trusted local institutions and interpersonal networks being the most relied-upon resources. In contrast, media formats such as television and the internet had a less significant impact.

The study underscores a significant concern and empathy among residents regarding child trafficking, highlighting their willingness to engage in preventive measures while challenging harmful beliefs such as victim-blaming and the notion of children's complicity. However, misconceptions persisted, particularly surrounding migration, which was frequently perceived as an opportunity rather than a potential trafficking risk. Divergent attitudes further complicated understanding, as some participants equated child mobility with economic escape, reflecting cultural norms that support sending children to urban areas for better financial prospects.

Moreover, demographic factors such as education level, knowledge of trafficking, perceived socio-economic status, and personal experiences with trafficked individuals were positively correlated with attitudes toward the issue. Individuals with good knowledge displayed more supportive attitudes toward victims and were less inclined to blame them, reinforcing the connection between education and awareness.

To address the knowledge gaps surrounding child trafficking, awareness campaigns must clarify misconceptions and educate the public about this phenomenon's defining characteristics. Incorporating trafficking education into formal curricula can enhance understanding, while community-based information channels and social networks can improve outreach efforts. Using various media platforms, such as television and film, can further boost awareness. Providing educational resources to support victims and their families can empower communities in the fight against trafficking.

To enhance residents' understanding of child trafficking and foster positive attitudes toward victims, targeted educational programs should be developed to dispel misconceptions, particularly regarding the distinctions between migration and trafficking. Community awareness campaigns should focus on dismantling harmful beliefs, such as victim-blaming and should promote protective behaviors. As knowledge is closely linked to attitudes, integrating trafficking education into schools and public forums will help bridge these awareness gaps. Additionally, leveraging trusted local institutions and social networks can make information more accessible.

Recognizing that personal exposure significantly influences attitudes, support programs for victims should include structured education for affected families to strengthen community advocacy. Finally, collaborations between law enforcement, policymakers, and social organizations can enhance anti-trafficking initiatives and foster broader engagement within the community.

Future research should broaden the scope of this study by including prevention components, such as legislation and policy, capacity building, victim support and rehabilitation, and collaboration and coordination. Additionally, it should include other contextual factors, such as cultural beliefs and practices, previous trauma or victimization, social support networks, risk perception, lack of legal protection, access to services, and stigmatization and discrimination. Moreover, future research should incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of trafficked children.

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Rowing Against Climate Adversity and Lack of Family Support: The Everyday Lives of Migrants' Wives in Rural Mozambique

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Abstract

There are numerous studies on the participation in migratory work by men from the Gaza Province, whether to the mines in South Africa or Mozambican cities, in particular the city of Maputo. However, studies that analyze the psychosocial conditions of migrants' wives about their relationships with their family, friends, neighbors, and their teenage children are still incipient. For this reason, we assert that this study is typical of sub-Saharan Africa and reveals the vulnerability of middle-age and aging women. In all these studies, there are common aspects that characterize the vulnerability of married women, widows, or single women with or without children. They live within a patriarchal context that determines who brings the bread, whom they marry, how many children they should have, their role as caretakers of the family, and the roles of the ones who take care of the farm and the elderly. The dominant patriarchal system in southern Mozambique determines a man's masculinity based on his ability to perform work that generates income for his family. The literature shows that the generational masculine ideology among men in traditional communities begins from childhood and is perpetuated from generation to generation, with the man marrying as many women as he can afford. The female harem is necessary to guarantee the perpetuation of the name or nickname of that lineage. What we endeavor to demonstrate in this article is that all the women's statements, whether in the focus group discussions (FGDs) or individually, reflect the burden of patriarchal relations still dominant in rural Gazan society. We also show that the organization of labor during crisis situations results in a cascade of events that include: women lacking food and other necessities; women forced to sever their relationships with their in-laws, grown and undergrown children, peers, and relatives. This results in stress and other health-related issues, as well as diminished confidence in planning for the future. The paper aims to respond to these questions: (1) What help do women receive from their children, family, and friends when they have a migrant husband? What kind of help does a migrant wife or ex-migrant wife provide to others? (2)What help do women receive from their children, family, and friends when they have a non-migrant husband? (3) To what extent does this contribute to women's well-being? (4) What help do mothers give their children?

Keywords: migrants' wives, climate adversity, family support, rural Mozambique

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INTRODUCTION

There are several studies on men migrating from the province of Gaza, whether to the mines in South Africa or to Mozambican cities, in particular the capital city, Maputo (De Vletter, 2000; Matusse, 2009; Raimundo, 2010; Saíde and Pitrosse, 2012). However, research that analyzes the psychosocial condition of migrants' wives about their relationships with their children, family, friends and neighbors is still incipient. For this reason, we believe that this study is relevant to much of sub-Saharan Africa and reveals the vulnerability of middle-aged and aging women. In all these studies, there are common aspects that characterize the vulnerability of married women, widows, or single women with or without children. They live within a patriarchal context that determines who provides the food, whom they marry, how many children they should have, their role as caretakers of the family, and the role of those who take care of the farm and the elderly.

The dominant patriarchal system in southern Mozambique determines a man's masculinity based on his ability to perform work that can generate income for his family. As WLSA (1997; 2014), Uchendu (2008), Raimundo (2008) and Raimundo et al. (2023) point out, the masculine ideology among men begins from childhood and is perpetuated from generation to generation, with the man marrying as many women as he can afford. The female harem is necessary to guarantee the perpetuation of the name or nickname of that lineage.

This article aims to respond to the following questions: (1) What support do women married to migrants receive from their children, family, and friends? (2) What kind of support do migrants' wives or ex-migrants' wives provide to others? (3) How is this support different from support provided and received by non-migrants' wives? (4) To what extent does this support contribute to women's well-being?

STUDY BACKGROUND

This article is based on several years of meticulous data collection on the reproductive situation and coping strategies of women of reproductive age since 2006. The findings presented here are part of the project, "Women's social ties and psychosocial well-being in a resource-limited patriarchal setting: A longitudinal perspective," which is a continuation of our studies on women married to migrants and those married to non-migrants. These sequential studies, focusing on the same women since 2006, hold significant implications for our understanding of women's reproductive health and coping strategies during crises.

We have studied these women in rural communities in four districts of Gaza Province since they were between 18 and 40 years old (Agadjanian et al., 2012; Raimundo, 2013; Martins-Fonteyn et al., 2016, 2017). The new wave of the project was designed from the perspective of studying the critical importance of the relationship between women and their children, family members, neighbors, and

church members in contexts of change in the rural economy, increasingly affected by the reduction in the migratory work of spouses to South Africa.

Rural southern Mozambique has depended on migratory labor for the mines of South Africa for three centuries (De Vletter, 2000; Gaspar, 2011) and is undergoing transformation for several reasons, including the reduction in labor recruitment in South Africa. On the other hand, although studies show that parental migration delays girls' marriage (Chae et al., 2017; Agadjanian et al., 2021), it is a fact that when the young women get married, they pay less attention to their mothers, who have cared for them for long periods. For this reason, the study intended to evaluate how this abandonment of mothers by their children has a psychosocial impact on the lives of rural women who suffer the burden of caring for young children and the absence of their husbands. We also collected information about women whose husbands no longer migrate. We evaluate the support that husbands provide their wives when they are at home and absent and how this affects their psychosocial well-being. As the province is affected by extreme weather events, we also wanted to assess the support that these women receive from and give to their children, families, church members, and the community.

FEMINIST THEORY IN THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS OF RURAL WOMEN, WIVES OF MIGRANTS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

In dialogue with Mason's (2021) thinking about the meaning of sociological theory, we posit that it is an ongoing effort applied to understanding the organizational structure of a society and its institutions. However, it can be transformative and difficult to access and understand. This is what we see in the rural family structure in Mozambique as a consequence of the social and economic transformations of recent years that have transformed Mozambique from a centralized economy to neoliberalism (Hansine et al., 2024).

Crossman (2024) argues in his functionalist theory that the family institution exists because it plays a vital role in the functioning of society. In line with this theory, we examine the relationships between family members, between spouses, and the roles of each person in society and in the family. This foregrounds the study of social relations between men and women within the context of work, the family, and in society in general. This structure represents the social organization of work based on the sexual division of labor, where males are positioned in the productive sphere while females are relegated to the reproductive sphere (Andrade et al., 1998; Curado, 2008; Crossman, 2024; Salzinger and Gonsalves, 2024). This constitutes the complementary division of tasks. Here, according to Curado (2008), this social division of labor has two organizing principles: the principle of separation, that is, there is men's work and women's work. The second principle is that of hierarchy, where men's work is accorded higher value than women's work. However, Salzinger and Gonsalves (2024) state that feminist postcolonial theory emerges as a theory of how gender operates in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, problematizing

binary gender and relations of domination, an assumption defended by Jose (2012), whose work highlights women's empowerment in a context in which women are forced to accept their role of subordination to men.

This study, which focuses on women whose husbands are labor migrants or former migrants, highlights the complexity of the situation of these women in both circumstances. In the absence of their husbands, they must guarantee their families' livelihoods (Yabiku et al., 2011), and in this process, their lives become intertwined with their in-laws, children, neighbors, and community church members. Furthermore, women are required to adapt to the changing realities around the drastic reduction of the workforce in South Africa. Moreover, they must find ways of coping with the harmful effects of climatic events as well as the transformation of the Mozambican economy. They increasingly find that what was common and manageable during the last three decades is no longer in place. Most notably, the practice of women supporting one another, as well as their own children, has been eroded, as revealed by the women during the focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews.

Our understanding of the dynamics of relationships between women and their husbands, children, other family members, neighbors, and church members was enhanced by the application of feminist interview research, in which the co-author participated in FGDs with some women from the Chibuto District. Reinharz (1998) considers this a methodological technique used by feminists. Notwithstanding the importance of recognizing the importance of knowing the other side of the psychosocial history of women, this study did not include any men in the interviews.

SOCIAL TIES AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING AMONG RURAL WOMEN: A STUDY CONTEXT

According to the research project, the main objective is to contribute to understanding midlife women's vulnerabilities and corresponding coping strategies in low-income patriarchal rural settings, specifically in southern Mozambique, where society is patriarchal par excellence (WLSA, 1997; Bagnol, 2008; Tvedten, 2011, 2014). The main argument in this type of society is that because of migratory work, women and their children are forced to adopt various strategies to reduce their vulnerability due to the prolonged absence of their husband, partner, or father because of migratory work. Funke et al. (2020) point out that these communities live in challenging climatic environments due to drought, cyclones, and floods that regularly affect those districts. Some coping strategies include *xitique*[3] and *xicoropa*.[4]

Much of the information we bring into analysis refers to this particular study and is data from several years of data collection since we started in 2006. This data helped us understand the scenario of households in rural areas and, consequently, the pressure women endure in the face of an almost hostile climate and children who need assistance. Many of their children are already over 18 years old, and some are

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[3] Informal credit system (personal communication).
[4] Harvest assistance system (personal communication).

married. The data used in this study was collected through a survey of 1884 women, FGDs (initially in two communities of Chibuto) and interviews of 74 women who were selected from the survey sample.

Southern Mozambique, a society deeply rooted in patrilineal norms, sustains its economy through agriculture, cattle-rearing, and fishing (Raimundo, 2008; Tvedten, 2011). In this societal structure, men hold more authority than women, and households led by men tend to be in better condition than those led by women (WLSA, 1997, 2014; Tvedten, 2012; Raimundo et al., 2023). This societal context forms the backdrop of our study, where we delve into the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of midlife women in this patriarchal rural setting.

In the patriarchal systems of southern Mozambique, the man is the breadwinner and, therefore, as Castel-Branco (2020), Bagnol (2008), Covane (2001), Vletter (2000), WLSA (1997, 2014) observe, the man is the one who migrates in search of work and money to feed his family and help their family members. Meanwhile, some studies acknowledge women as breadwinners in cross-border trade (Raimundo, 2010; Chikanda and Raimundo, 2017). First (1977) noted that initially, migratory work to South Africa was limited to the provinces of Gaza, Inhambane, and Maputo. However, in recent times, workers have been recruited from other parts of Mozambique (Saíde and Pitrosse, 2012), bringing about transformations in these societies. That said, in communities where women still do not go out to look for monetary alternatives when their partners are absent for long periods, they expect to receive help from their older children or other family members. When this does not happen, the psychological pressure is enormous and has adverse effects on the individual's well-being and the satisfaction of their needs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research process was conducted sequentially. It began with two FGDs in the Chibuto district, followed by in-depth interviews administered to 74 women in the four districts of Gaza Province (Chibuto, Chókwè, Guijá, and Manjacaze). The first author conducted the FGDs, and the in-depth interviews were conducted by a team of trained interviewers. The primary purpose of the FGDs was to refine the research instruments, particularly about the type of questions to be asked. The in-depth interviews, conducted in two parts, focused on various aspects of a woman's life, including her relationship with her husband, physical and mental health, and psychosocial well-being. Surveys, semi-structured interviews, and FGDs were used with women whose main characteristics included the following: aged between 35 and 60; being married, previously married, separated, divorced, or widowed; with children; and living in the study community. During the interviews and FGDs, we sought to preserve respect for the rights of each interviewee or study participant. Issues such as the importance of the participation of each woman selected for the study as well as how the interviewers behaved toward the interviewee (for example, body language) and during the interview, command of the Changana (the language

spoken in the Gaza Province) language, trust, confidentiality, and not questioning opinions ensured the success of data collection. Respondents were assured that every opinion was valid and that there was no right or wrong answer. Through the signed consent form, we guaranteed them the freedom to be part of the study and assured them of confidentiality and anonymity.

The article is based on qualitative information that resulted from the FGD discussions and individual interviews. The FGDs took place before the interviews to adapt the interview script prepared by the researchers. The interviews were carried out in two different sessions. The FGDs consisted of the following questions:

- The first session consisted of questions on social relationships and the exchange of support, and the second session consisted of questions about physical and mental health and psychosocial well-being, which were always connected with their relationship with their children, and whether this relationship changed as their children grew up and formed their own homes.
- The second group of questions focused on the social support mothers should offer their adult children by indicating differences in contexts, for example, a married daughter or a daughter living in their community, or their home, or outside the community. This complex exploration aimed to uncover the type of obligations and duties that mothers still had in relation to their married children.
- The third group of questions concerned the social support exchanges with other community members, in-laws, their children, family members, neighbors, friends, and church members. From the experience of one of the authors of this article, who grew up knowing that their family is not just their family but their neighbor, and with their neighbor, they can ask for salt, fire, or in the absence of money, they can pay for products or wait until it was time for harvesting cashew nuts to sell and repay the money borrowed.
- We wanted to know how relationships had changed between mothers and their grown children over the years in widowed, separated, or abandoned instances, or eventually in cases where their children got married or moved to other communities.

Regarding the individual interviews, we tried to find out the following:
- Relationship with husband/permanent partner.
- Characteristics of and relationships with biological adolescent and adult children (i.e., children born before 2010).
- We explored the interviewees' characteristics and relationships with "almost-children", that is, individuals born before 2010 whom they considered as their own children, despite not being their biological mothers.
- Relationship with their adult family members.
- Relationship with husband's family.
- Relationship with other wives of the husband/partner (in a polygamous union).

- Relationships with non-family members, such as friends and neighbors, people with whom they work or conduct business.
- Relationship with church members.

In reference to the second part of the interview, we sought to know the following:

- Mental health status and problems.
- Feelings and emotions.
- The impact of extreme weather events and agricultural pests on their lives.
- Access to and use of information and communication technologies.
- Perceptions and expectations about life in general and the future.

In our study, we had to follow some women who had changed residences and settled in the city of Maputo (face-to-face interviews) and others in South Africa (through telephonic interviews). Therefore, we anticipated that there may be a bias in reality, as these women no longer experienced rural reality.

Since both FGDs and interviews were undertaken in Changana, we translated verbatim into Portuguese. After reading the translations, we grasped the real meaning. The interviews were recorded using codes and transcription to guarantee confidentiality and prevent women from being tracked. For the analysis, we did content analysis, where we tried to find the meaning of what they said, considering the context of the study.

RESULTS

The lived experience of being a migrant's wife in rural southern Mozambique

In southern Mozambique, the fact that women are married through bridewealth (*lobolo*[5] in Changana) often leads men to seek employment through labor migration to South Africa or in urban areas such as Maputo (Raimundo, 2008; Pinho, 2011; Penvenne, 2019). Penvenne (2019) states that a woman is paid *lobolo*, which means that the man can have that woman as his wife, and her children would live and work in his home. That practice is known to be virilocal. Some of these women, whose husbands or fathers died in migration, were marginalized and vulnerable to sexual abuse.

A lonely woman who does not have a husband or a male protector is considered a vulnerable woman. This situation continues to affect most of the women we interviewed, with a more significant psychosocial impact on them. Interviewed women said that the current situation is aggravated for women because it is complex, due to poverty. The suffering is widespread, with people having nothing to wear or to

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[5] In southern Mozambique, marriage is an exchange of services and goods between families in which the tools – the compensation obtained by the woman's family – establish the union between the two families. *Lobolo* serves both the woman's brother and the father, who "acquires" the wife. It, therefore, has a double material meaning: material and symbolic. By transferring power from the woman's family to the husband's family, transferring to the husband's relatives the responsibility for the maintenance of the woman and making the woman the collective "property" of the new family, *lobolo* legitimizes inequality (Andrade et al., 1998: 49).

eat, highlighting the lack of basic necessities and invoking a sense of empathy in the audience: "We have no one to take care of us."

However, a married woman also has the duty of taking care of her husband, according to this statement:

> Yes, I can talk about it – the journey of my life with him, of loving and caring for each other. As I sit in my backyard at home with *madala* [elder], these marriage things make me obligated to my husband. I tried to go out to do other things, but I couldn't, so I returned and sat with my *madala*. However, *madala* does not see; his eyes are dead [blind], poor thing [*Mbuia Nguana*]. (Interview, 16 November 2023).

Support networks for women with migrant husbands: Receiving help from children, family, friends, and the church

Unlike in urban areas, rural women are still very dependent on a man and his employment status, as the breadwinner. Our extensive research on the wives of migrants has uncovered a significant differentiation between being a wife of a migrant laborer and being a wife of a man who is not a migrant laborer. Paradoxically, it is the woman whose husband is a migrant laborer who seems to have more support than the woman whose husband is not; as the popular saying in Gaza goes: "The water of the river goes to the ocean where there is already water and not to the desert."

Studies also demonstrate that it is this woman who has a high social-status migrant husband who is "sitting well," as respondents say, and then the rest because they have someone who "wears pants" as he can provide for his family. Even the occasional work that men do in South Africa transforms them into providers, as one interviewee shared:

> Where he can do odd jobs, he can give us money, but the money is not much; it gives us food and soap.

However, when these men are at home without paid work, they demonstrate their adaptability by seeking local alternative sources of income. As one interviewee shared:

> I also support him by going to the farm. I get things from the farm; at that time, when we get things [from] the farm, he goes to work on other things at home.

To ascertain the well-being of these wives of migrant workers, we asked them from whom they got support and whether they paid *lobolo* or not. We found a range of different situations regarding who supported them. Their husbands should be the ones to take care of them, as per customary law. However, in many cases, these women have to rely on friends or neighbors, as this woman said:

> I am fortunate to have a strong relationship with my neighbors. They are the ones who usually support me even when I am not at home. When I am out, I am confident about leaving my children as even now, they are there, looking

out for them. This sense of community support is comforting and reassuring in our lives.

Even though this general trend of lacking support persists in some communities, it is important to hear the personal experiences of those affected. As one woman shared,

> I am saying that I have support from my neighbors. The reason for this statement is that even if I do not have anything to put on the fire, while they do, they can give it to me. So, I believe we live well. Yes, because they know our friend has nothing to eat.

Occasionally, in-laws play an essential role in the absence or presence of their son. A married woman's family is formed by her in-laws, as by *lobolo*, she belongs to that family. However, with the change in the economy in rural areas and the increase in poverty, these relatives disappeared and no longer paid attention to that woman, especially the widow, which contradicts the tradition that a widow still belongs to that family until she gets married again.

The widows declared themselves as not having a family because of their widowed status. This happens in the case where the relatives passed away, as one participant said:

> My family all died. I have no family. My family members are my children. I have no family here with my body if they all died.

Some rely on their children:

> When it comes to advice, they support me. For example, I told you that we advise children when there is something they are not doing right, and they tell me I will support them; we support each other, educate children, you see.

They also trust in the church:

> So, I also, when there are things that are pressing on my neck [things that I can't find a solution for], for them, and I see that this isn't right, when I can't do it as I'm alone, I go to church, as I pray. I present it at church, so they can support me to counsel these children.

Tragically, the most prevalent situation is where women lack support from their children and husbands. As one woman lamented,

> Nothing! They haven't given me anything yet.

The relationships between sons and daughters and their mothers change over time. According to those interviewed in the FGDs, the main issues are as follows:

> In our times, children listened to their parents more than they do today. Young people skip stages these days and get married prematurely. On the young

women's side, they establish multiple relationships, get pregnant very early, and are not able to identify who the child's father is.

Mutual aid in rural communities in Mozambique is common. This social support is offered during weeding or harvesting on the farm or through monetary loans, advice, and in situations of need. The support often occurs between family members, church members, and neighbors. However, it is expected that this support exists between sons and daughters, especially in cases of children who already have some financial income. Nonetheless, that support is more significant among women who have secure income, for example, from remittances sent by their migrant husbands, than those who do not have a secure source of income. In these types of situations, the woman who asks her children for support is not necessarily asking for money but to resolve domestic problems. For example, a woman, when asked about her sources of support for health issues, shared this:

> My children who live with me assist. I have a child who resides with me, and my daughter-in-law creates conditions to take care of me, including work in the *machamba* [farm], as I was incapacitated and unable to do anything at the time.

The woman can also ask her neighbors or community residents for support during harvesting. Under these circumstances, she can pay them, or she will repay someone in need on the next occasion. In Mucotwene, aid can come from the community, or as the inhabitants believe, that the greatest help of all can only come from God, as illustrated by this testimony:

> Even though there is someone to support, the most significant thing is to deliver to God. When you seek human support, you may receive conflicting ideas that only add to your confusion. However, when you align with God, you will find that things improve and pass. Instead of listening to the opinions of people that can fill your head, focus on the improvement that comes from God's guidance.

Meanwhile, about the friends, she said:

> The friends I live with, in most cases we support ourselves during ceremonies and, in some cases, in the *machamba*, especially when I have a big bush. I say friends, and we will clean it. I have money, and I give them back, too. It happens to me, too. I support when someone has a bush or needs support with family issues or from the household.

She expects to receive support from her family in the event of illness or death. One of the women said this about the family's support:

> When we have problems, we bring the family together. We sat down, talked, and agreed. When I talk about the family, I refer to the family members who are my husband's parents. If necessary, my parents, too, usually participate.

Sometimes, there is still a traditional relationship structure in which the mother advises her married daughters regarding relationships with children. This is the case with one interviewee, who spoke of the support she receives from her children and the support she provides to them:

> I support them. Supporting them means praying for them because nothing is easy in their lives. All things require patience.

This mutual respect is a testament to the depth of their bond. In general, women in the category of traditional mother-daughter relationships are socially and economically stable. However, only a small percentage of women were found in this category during the study, indicating its rarity in contemporary society.

The interviewees expressed their tiredness with their children in this scenario. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for their children to give them any support. On the contrary, they are the ones who support their children even though they have nothing to offer, as they said. This selflessness is a clear demonstration of the love and sacrifice in the relationship.

The contribution of socio-economic support structures to women's well-being

Well-being can mean many things, but in Changana, the word well-being means *kutsamissekile* or "well seated" (verbatim translation). When someone is well seated, it means they cannot fall (personal comment). However, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) considers well-being as a concept of subjectivity. In this article, based on current data, we considered social connections, and some look at environmental quality conditioned by the climate conditions.

The main concern of the United Nations (UN), as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, is that countries must ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages (UN, 2015). Moreover, the UN indicates factors that can impair good health, which include the environment, access to healthcare services, access to good quality services, water of good quality, financial hardship, and the limitations of countries, particularly those in development. Understanding health in the context of our study means going beyond physical health and considering the social aspects, which means understanding women's emotions as migrants' wives and understanding the nature of their marriage – whether formal (civil registration) or traditional (*lobolo*). That is to say, if that man followed the formalities or the rules. In this regard, the interviewees cited instances where the male partners did not follow the rules, which in Changana means *cupola*, or that the woman was regarded as an intruder in that family because he did not pay *lobolo*. As an "intruder," she was not deserving of aid.

In any circumstance of a woman needing support, whether she has a migrant husband or not, support is essential and contributes to social and psychological well-being. Although there are differences in social status between women with migrant husbands and women whose husbands either were migrants or are no longer

migrants, it was possible to demonstrate through several interviews that regardless of their position, there are always moments when they need social support. The fact that the husband is a migrant does not necessarily mean that he provides appropriate assistance. On the other hand, a migrant husband does not always earn enough to send money to his family. There are also cases where the man is in South Africa, but, "He is sitting. He does not work or does occasional work. So, there is no way for him to [provide] support."

However, the money that is sent is sometimes administered by the mother-in-law or the husband's family, as we saw in earlier stages of the study. In this instance, the contribution is regarded as social support in general.

These statements suggest a certain conformity on the part of the woman, a situation that significantly deteriorates the living conditions of her and her immediate family, such as her children or almost-children.

Nonetheless, our research uncovered instances where husbands provided support to their wives. This was observed mainly in cases where the couple lived together, and the husband's job had ended or been interrupted by illness. For instance, one wife shared,

> My husband supports me with many things, especially when we take the hoe and go to the farm with me. We cultivate the lowland [*bilene*] and the uplands [*ntlavene*]. Because when we get corn there, we get it. In the forests, we grow corn, cassava, and sweet potatoes; it supports us here in the backyard. He cut reeds, put bundles [*ti nhandza*] of reeds. When people come to buy, they buy, and we can take that money to support us with what is needed here in the backyard.

The relationship between mothers and children

When asked if her husband is a migrant worker, one of Chihaquelane's interviewees said,

> My husband works. It is in Cape Town. He works when he can in the construction area. I relate very well with him. There is communication between us and the brothers; we also speak well with them. When we make a mistake, we resolve the problem among ourselves.

Meanwhile, a woman from Chalucuane, whose husband is not a migrant, said the following about resolving health problems and other problems:

> I didn't do anything; he wasn't in South Africa; he was here at home, then he went to South Africa when the situation worsened.

Therefore, going to South Africa is a mechanism to minimize marital problems, whether in the economic or social areas. Working itself brings about positive changes in the marriage situation, as a woman from Chalucuane said.

Continuing with our findings, we postulate that one of the significant transformations recorded in rural areas is that daughters, who in the past provided support to their mothers, no longer do so. This scenario upsets the mothers, who no longer know what to do. There are several reasons for this new way of life for daughters and their relationship with their mothers. The reasons are as follows:

> Life is more difficult for them from my point of view. Nowadays, some young women have to have implants, which later cause health problems and prevent them from getting married later. Nowadays, young women make life decisions on their own. As mothers, it is difficult for us to see the life they lead. Young women today respond to the government's call to prevent early pregnancy and forget to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Meanwhile, their sons behave as follows:

> Young people leave because they are tired of their mother and do not want to support her; young people are often pressured by their wives to leave their mother's house. Sometimes, they leave because the family is enormous and the space is too [small]. When they become adults, children raised only by their mothers are induced by their parents to accuse their mothers of being witches and abandon them. On the other way, our sons drink a lot, do not have a job, and most are on antiretroviral treatment, and all of these are violent towards their families.

A good relationship between children and their mothers can only exist when the mother is mature, as per the following statement:

> What makes the difference, is the mother's maturity and maintaining a productive dialogue with her children. It is essential that mothers do not interfere in the lives of married adult children and that mothers establish an understanding between the mother, the sons, and the daughter-in-law.

Social support received from children by women with migrant and non-migrant husbands

Migrant work is dominant in rural families in southern Mozambique. Several generations of families have always lived off migrant work, whereas the women who remained behind played a crucial role in farm work, a role that is often underappreciated. So, it is not surprising that women with migrant husbands are seen by society as being the ones who are doing well. Migratory work gains more importance in arid and semi-arid areas of the Gaza Province, such as the districts under study, where drought does not guarantee sustainable agriculture capable of feeding the family throughout the year. The various testimonies clearly show that women with migrant husbands are in better conditions than the others, especially when this man sends money to, for example, hire someone to help clean the forest, deforest, or even, in some cases, harvest. The tangle of relationships developed in these communities, whether with children, relatives, non-relatives, or church members, should not be neglected. What

stands out is that in the four districts, women are in a situation of extreme vulnerability due to their high dependence on their husbands' work and expect to have support from children and other relatives. One respondent explained:

> When I, the mother, have things that require their advice, I encourage them to support me because the big person supports the little one, and the little one supports the big one. Until now, the teaching is that children, even when they are 6 or 12, have a say among you in the backyard when you live together. It is necessary to give them a speech; to speak, they can. Because you can leave, this child won't support me at all, while there will be a word to support you big ones here in the yard.

Support provided by women with migrant and non-migrant husbands to their children

The support that women give to their children, whether their husbands are migrants or non-migrants, varies significantly. However, there is a saying that, "Where you eat, two can eat, regardless of whether you have income or not."

Also, anyone can give support, as the women themselves said. Support may not necessarily be financial; it can be through life advice:

> We advise our daughters to know how to behave at home. There are also cases where they support build[ing] a home (*kuyahkela a munti*) or make an excellent farm to prevent plagues or cure some diseases.

It is a considerable burden when a woman raises her children without their father or support from other family members, including in-laws. This situation creates anxiety and stress because they feel helpless in caring for or providing assistance to their children, as one said:

> My daughter has already left school, as she studied for [the] seventh [grade], and so, the money for me to pay for her further studies couldn't do it. I didn't have money. So, I told my daughter to learn to cultivate, like me, her mother who lives off managing a hoe. (Nalaze, 20 November 2023).

Furthermore, they get stressed when they lose their houses due to wind or rain, according to the same interviewee:

> What kills me hard, is suffering with the house, my friend. You see, our homes here in our community are not good. When there is rain, there is this: it collapses. You can find something to do. But where capacities are low, you can't do it. The heart hurts, yes. Even more serious is that there is no support in this nature.

Scholars of psychoanalysis such as Santos and de Souza Minayo (2020) and de Macedo Bezerra (2018), quoting Sigmund Freud, demonstrate that mothers are more attached to their children than fathers. This relationship continues into adulthood, marriage, or outside the parental home. A mother always bears her child's pain.

Regardless of the support she may or may not receive from her child, she will always do her best to support them. One participant explained:

> We advise them to go to church and to pray. My children are mine. It doesn't matter the age. When they are sick or lack the money to go to the hospital, I must support them. I give them money to go to the hospital because there is a hospital nearby, but there is another one where you have to take a bus and go to Chibuto. So, when I have money, I have to give it. (Mucotuene, 11 November 2023).

Critical shifts in post-independence Mozambique: Shortage of assistance and interpersonal connections

After independence, many mutual aid, support, and assistance practices changed. These changes were exacerbated by the neoliberal economy that Mozambique began to adopt from the 1990s onward (Hansine et al., 2024). Even more so, poverty and the effects of extreme weather events appear to be factors in these transformations in rural areas. That situation hinders any possible aid, as related by a woman of Nalazi:

> [It] happens nowadays when I have concerns here at my house, they don't even approach me, they don't come.

There are many explanations for the relationship between mothers and their children and vice versa; each is valid, depending on the context. The interviews reflect the entire post-independence Mozambique journey, which includes the 16-year war, forced displacement, and integration between people of different origins. This complex situation, as one of the women highlighted, underscores the importance of reciprocity in community support:

> Why don't they support me? I'm at a loss. They don't assist me because of their lack of work habits. They're idle. So, without a job, I also realize what can you do? Can you aid others when you have nothing to sustain yourself? You go, the person until you support him is because you also take it, take it, then, you can support your other brother to be well.

INTERSECTION OF WOMEN'S HEALTH, CLIMATE SHOCKS, AND SPOUSAL ABSENCE IN RURAL MOZAMBIQUE

Following the interview guide, we discuss three kinds of health problems: physical, spiritual, and mental, which are shown to be the most critical for rural women. Regarding their physical health, our interviewees indicated that headaches, uterine pain, and fever constitute the primary diseases.

Rural women's narratives on the impact of extreme weather events on physical health

Living amid significant economic challenges, the absence of a breadwinner and a rural environment devastated by extreme weather events render rural women's situation even more complicated. That situation worsens when they do not have systematic support and cannot support their families. Common illnesses reported are malaria and body aches, as stated by this interviewee from Nalaze:

> I sometimes have pain, but then it gets better. I go to the hospital, and it gets better.

Asked about whom she goes to when she is sick, she replied:

> In a situation of illness, I go alone. No one accompanies me to the hospital. I haven't gotten sick of not being able to handle anything yet. I get sick, finding that my head hurts. I go to the hospital; I have Metical (Mozambican currency) to pay. I hand it in, and they give me pills, and I take them. And it ends up getting better. (Nalaze, 20 November 2023).

Another reported physical illness is pain in the uterus and feet, according to an interviewee from Matola-Rio, Maputo. This woman is from the Guijá district but changed her residence to Maputo. She said the following:

> This year was challenging because my husband was at home and did not work. So, now I had to do something. Now I see it does not seem very easy when you don't work. I've been experiencing persistent pain in my uterus and feet. It's a sharp, stabbing pain that makes it difficult to move. I went to the hospital; I went everywhere; they gave me pills. I always take tablets; I apply balm when the temperature changes. The one who supports me is my husband, who accompanies me to the hospital. But my uterus has been hurting; I went for a test, and those tests thought that maybe it was cancer, but the results showed that it was not cancer; it just hurt the uterus. Yes. It hurts. I only got the balm part. (Matola-Rio, 22 December 2023).

Impact of spiritual issues on rural women's health

Many interviewees believe in spirits and feel mistreated by them. The leading cause of these spirits is a woman who has yet to go through the *lobolo* ritual, which still needs to be completed. Bagnol (2008) points out that although *lobolo* is no longer a compulsory practice among some families, it is a moral duty to compensate the bride's family for the creation and for the fact that her family is losing someone who helped them. When the *lobolo* does not occur, evil spirits can torment this woman and generate social disagreements. As one interviewee said:

> Attacks from spirits occur frequently. It has happened to me, but I quickly throw them away. I don't keep them in my heart. Otherwise, it could give me illnesses that I no longer get. (Nalaze, 20 November 2023).

Rural women's narratives on mental health

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reports that mental health disorders and anxiety are increasingly prevalent among adults of working age, often stemming from social issues like inequalities. It also highlights a significant barrier to addressing these issues – societal taboos. This was evident in our interviews, where many participants viewed mental health through the lens of a "madness disease." Yet these women are keenly aware of the daily challenges that contribute to their anxiety and stress. One interviewee from Matola-Rio poignantly expressed this, stating:

> I can say that it doesn't exist, but when you think about it too much, it causes illnesses. Just thank God when I wake up. I had mental health problems when I lost my father and mother, but then it passed in my heart because people helped me to comfort me in those problems. (Matola-Rio, 22 December 2023).

WOMEN'S COPING STRATEGIES IN RESPONSE TO EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS: IMPORTANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

Climate change, with its diverse and unique impacts on different regions, presents an opportunity for positive change through effective disaster risk reduction (INGC et al., 2003). The Atlas for Disaster Preparedness and the Response in the Limpopo Basin (2003), the Master Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction 2017–2030 (República de Moçambique, 2017), and Pereira et al. (2018) all point to the Limpopo Valley, particularly the Gaza Province, as a disaster risk zone. This region is characterized by cyclical floods and prolonged periods of drought, with a very high risk due to the influence of subtropical high pressures, leading to erratic and unreliable rainfall (INGC et al., 2003).

Currently, climate change has a greater impact on communities than before. In the recent past, people helped one another in different ways, such as offering a cup of flour or maize or even doing some work at a neighbor's or friend's *machamba*; however, these days those relations have been broken. One participant's statements illustrate these changes:

> Our *machamba*, dependent on the rain, struggles under the intense heat. In the absence of external aid, our community's support is crucial. When we come together as a family, we can navigate the complexities and support each other. In the absence of such unity, and with no other work to be found, we must rely on our own resourcefulness from the break of dawn.

The migratory work of men, often viewed through the lens of masculinity or family economy, has changed as a response to the adverse impacts of climatic events and economic change. This work becomes a crucial alternative when agriculture is rain-fed, and women lack food reserves. The phrase "every man for himself and God for all" takes on a practical meaning in extreme crises.

Psychosocial stress escalates hopelessness and frustration among those who have been hit by climate extremes and the economic crisis. The situation is compounded as spouses either stop working or engage in occasional work, leaving men without the support they need in these dire circumstances. When asked how they cope with climatic events, some women in different communities responded, "Sit down." Others rely on the resources they manage to store or the goodwill of family members. However, it is clear that even in extreme crises, the solidarity networks that once provided support within the community are diminishing.

Xivunga or *matsoni*, a type of traditional support in rural areas, is a beautiful example of mutual benefit. Low-income households tackle complex jobs such as *kurimela* (doing farming for someone), providing agricultural services in exchange for food or money (WLSA, 1997, 2014). Even when a woman is without money, she can still survive by offering *kurimela* in exchange for it. In such a situation, both she and the farm owner can benefit. However, the current crisis has limited these opportunities, making their situation even more challenging. These transformations have significantly altered kinship relationships, particularly in the context of extended and explicit families. In the past, it was common for children to visit their mothers and assist with fieldwork. However, currently, even their own husbands find it challenging to provide the same level of support.

Under extreme climatic events, solidarity among women and support from others in rural areas are more crucial than ever. As these events become more frequent, women may witness more and more broken relationships, as their children no longer take care of them. Additionally, their husbands, who work in precarious conditions, can no longer support them. Extreme climatic events disturb their livelihoods, and in the immediate future, they will no longer be able to handle the situation. As a consequence, they will be in extreme psychosocial straits.

THE NEW LABOR MIGRATION STANDARD CAUSED BY EXTREME CLIMATIC EVENTS: IMPACTS ON MIGRANTS' WIVES

The recurrent extreme climatic events, namely droughts, floods, and cyclones in the Limpopo Basin, have led to increased migration, as the studied districts are in the so-called risk zone to climatic events that induce forced migration (INGC et al., 2003). Therefore, despite the reduction in migratory work, men from these districts, with or without a work contract, seek means of crossing the border in search of ways to support their families. The study shows that those who suffer the most are the women who are affected by extreme drought or those found in the riverside areas of the Basin. It is these districts, particularly Guijá, Chókwè, and Chibuto, that are most adversely affected by the floods (INGC et al., 2003; Funke et al., 2020).

South Africa is the country that continues to receive Mozambican migrants, either as cross-border migrants or as irregular or undocumented individuals who once fled the 16-year war and in the process escaped the effects of floods and droughts (Funke et al., 2020). However, while climatic events are sharpening and

men opt for migration, it is evident that this is no solution. Once these men are in South Africa, they are not readily integrated into formal work due to their irregular migration status, resulting in their inability to remit adequate money or food home.

CONCLUSIONS

This work is based on data collected as part of the "Women's Ties and Psychosocial Well-being" Project in all four rural districts, highlighting that women struggle daily because of the break of their relationships with their relatives and children. The interviews unveiled the importance of a male presence in rural areas, as women often rely on them, primarily for financial support. However, we also witnessed a shifting landscape, where some women were actively seeking employment to secure their income while others contemplated a departure from their communities.

- Throughout the interviews, it was evident that rural women regularly suffer various types of stress and physical illnesses; their primary coping mechanism is the occasional support they receive.
- The significant reduction in the type of aid was justified by the scarcity of a means of livelihood. Despite their best efforts, women can only provide limited support to their children, often in the form of advice. Few women receive support from their children.
- Having a husband who is a migrant who remits money makes a big difference in the rural communities of the Gaza Province, as it provides a crucial financial lifeline that supports these families in coping with the challenges of rural life.
- The situation worsens due to climatic factors – lack of rain, inundations, and floods – and a shortage of jobs for their children, who hardly feed their families.
- Poverty is widespread, and inequalities are increasing among women dwellers, including their children, regardless of whether they are married or not, or living with them or not.
- As wives of migrants, these women were doing well, as they could provide material support not only to their children (even as grown-ups) but also to other family members and neighbors. They had the means to offer psychological or associated support. However, with their husbands losing their jobs in South Africa and other cities, they were limited in providing support to others.
- Support from their children has also diminished because of the transformations in rural areas where children regard their mothers as burdens with multiple needs.
- Whatever prevailing support between mothers and their children should continue. This mutual support is not just a necessity but a shared responsibility that both parties should strive to uphold.

It is evident that rural areas have been affected by the reduction in labor recruitment to South Africa over the last few decades. These women have always depended on the migrant work of their husbands. The income from this work was used to improve

agricultural activities through the purchase of work instruments and the payment of people who support them by cultivating or harvesting. These women received support from family, neighbors, and church members during this period. The reduction in migratory work and the harmful effects of extreme weather events are indicators that their aid has been reduced. Neither the children nor the closest relatives support them any longer. Isolation, the lack of alternative income, and the lack of support from others have powerful psychosocial impacts on these rural women. Relationships deteriorate because mutual support has become nonexistent. This situation affects women and their children, who have limited opportunities to study. When their children get married because they do not have work, it eliminates any potential support that mothers were hoping for, rendering their lives even more precarious.

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Constraints and Prospects of Faith-Based Refugee Protection in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

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Abstract

This article investigates three distinct elements of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in refugee protection: their challenges, the appropriate solutions, and the opportunities available for FBOs to leverage. Knowledge about the three elements is critical in helping FBOs function effectively and efficiently. Unlike the relevant existing literature, the article focuses on issues that relate specifically to FBOs, not those that extend to almost all refugee-protection actors. The focus is on FBOs because they are usually the first responders to conflict-related crises, maintain their presence throughout all stages of a conflict, and are identified by the Global Compact on Refugees as key players in protecting refugees. The research collected data from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya using focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and general observations of the refugee environment. It analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis. The results indicate that specific challenges exist for FBOs in refugee protection. Nevertheless, these challenges are not beyond resolution; they merely necessitate a shift in strategy or perspective. Despite the various challenges outlined, the contributions made by FBOs remain substantial and are valued highly by refugees, host communities, and other humanitarian entities. Furthermore, there is considerable potential for enhancing the operational effectiveness of FBOs.

Keywords: faith-based institutions, refugee protection, challenges, opportunities, Kakuma refugee camp

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"Altering the defining characteristics of the FBOs to address particular challenges would also entail relinquishing certain advantages associated with those attributes."

(Field interview with UNHCR officer, 23 June 2022).

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of World War II, there has been a continual rise in the number of refugees globally (Adesina et al., 2022). In particular, the number of African refugees is increasing at an unsustainable rate. At the same time, durable solutions and humanitarian aid continue to dwindle (Mbiyozo, 2024). Many African states now follow global trends in adopting increasingly securitized approaches to refugee protection (Klein, 2021). As a result, many refugees face various forms of marginalization and are compelled to live precariously in informal enclaves of towns and cities or refugee camps and settlements.

Indeed, the vast number of refugees involved poses a substantial problem that hinders the state's ability to accept and protect them (Christophersen, 2023). This article contends that there is a need for robust and efficient refugee-protection assistance from non-state organizations that understand the complexities of refugee protection. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are one such category of these institutions.

FBOs are distinguished by their profound religious convictions and objectives, which guide their approach to service provision and community engagement (Jahani and Parayandeh, 2024). Similarly, their dedication to promoting human dignity and the sanctity of life serves as their primary driving force (Goldsmith et al., 2006). As a result, they are uniquely positioned to promote refugee protection significantly and distinctively.

The central question, therefore, concerns how to enhance their effectiveness. This article contributes to the existing literature on this topic by analyzing FBOs' challenges, proposing solutions to these issues, and identifying potential areas for them to capitalize on. The study provides a foundation for developing in-depth and comprehensive research on the work of FBOs in refugee protection.

This paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction is the theoretical framework. It guides the study's thematic analysis and situates the findings within broader scholarly debates. This section is followed by the literature review, which first explores refugee protection in Kenya and subsequently assesses the literature regarding the roles of FBOs in refugee protection. The fourth section outlines the study's methodology, detailing how fieldwork research was conducted in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. The fifth section presents and discusses the research findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study, offers recommendations, and identifies areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contingency theory

The research employs contingency theory as a framework to enhance understanding of the challenges faced by FBOs, the most suitable solutions for these challenges, and the opportunities that FBOs can exploit. Contingency theory posits that the most effective method for managing an organization depends on the specific circumstances or context in which the organization operates. It asserts that a universal management approach does not exist and that various management strategies are suitable for different scenarios (Vaszkun and Koczkas, 2024).

This theory's central premise is that an organization's effectiveness is attained by ensuring an appropriate alignment between its subsystems (such as strategy, structure, and behavior) and the surrounding contextual elements (Ganescu, 2012). As such, the theory is suitable for determining how to improve FBOs' effectiveness in refugee protection, considering the context in which the organizations operate.

The contingency approach in management originated in the 1950s. It was developed by scholars such as Tom Burns, Joan Woodward, Paul Lawrence, and Jay Lorsch. These researchers examined the connections between organizational structure and environmental conditions, highlighting the necessity of aligning management practices with particular situational factors (Vaszkun and Koczkas, 2024). These pioneering theorists questioned conventional management methods, such as scientific management and bureaucracy, which aimed at determining the best way of managing organizations without considering contextual circumstances (Bryman et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, contingency theory presents certain limitations. One such limitation is its lack of a definitive framework for determining the optimal management practices suitable for specific circumstances. Another drawback is that the theory is heavily influenced by context, making it difficult to generalize its findings to different scenarios (Luthans, 1973).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Refugee protection in Kenya

Kenya ranks as the fifth-largest refugee-hosting state in Africa and the thirteenth-largest globally (World Bank, 2024). As of January 2025, the country hosted 829,211 registered refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR Kenya, 2025). Most of the refugees in Kenya live in refugee camps, with a minority living in urban areas (DRS, 2025). For this reason, the study focuses on FBOs working in refugee camps. The Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, established in 1991 and 1992, respectively, are recognized as two of the five largest refugee camps worldwide (Halakhe et al., 2024).

Since achieving independence in 1963, Kenya has established numerous policies designed to safeguard the rights of refugees. The legal framework for refugee protection in Kenya is anchored in its constitution and related statutes. The country

officially ratified the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention on May 16, 1966, followed by the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees on November 13, 1981. Furthermore, Kenya ratified the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention on Refugees on June 23, 1992 (Amatsimbi, 2024). The latest and most comprehensive domestic legislation is the Kenyan Refugees Act of 2021. Along with many other rights, the Act grants refugees the freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to financial services if fully implemented (Halakhe et al., 2024). Consequently, the country has made considerable progress in enhancing its refugee-protection framework.

FBOs in Kenya's refugee camps are actively involved with both refugees and host communities. They participate in various initiatives, including health care, livelihood support, water and sanitation, education, psychosocial services, food aid, shelter provision, responses to sexual and gender-based violence, spiritual guidance, child protection, and resettlement assistance (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015). FBOs account for almost 30% of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) official implementing and operational partners in Kenya, playing a crucial role in the camp management system. They are undoubtedly key players in the protection of refugees in Kenya's refugee camps. Nevertheless, their involvement as faith-based entities presents a fair share of challenges (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015).

Although numerous studies address refugee protection in Kenya (see, for example, Iverson, 2016), a limited number discuss the involvement of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in this context. Even fewer studies have examined FBOs' specific contributions, challenges and opportunities in this area. This article addresses this gap. The literature closely related to this study's subject matter includes the contributions of scholars such as Stoddard, Marshall, and Parsitau.

Stoddard and Marshall's (2015) report outlines the contributions of various faith-based actors involved in refugee protection. It also examines the place of religious beliefs in refugee protection. The report does not focus on FBOs in refugee camp environments but on those operating in urban settings, particularly in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. It also does not address the difficulties faced by FBOs but rather the challenges encountered by refugees.

Parsitau's (2011) article investigates how FBOs assist in integrating displaced individuals into their new environments. It also explores the place of religious faith in coping with displacement. While it outlines the roles and challenges of FBOs, its primary focus is on internally displaced persons, rather than refugees.

Role of FBOs in refugee protection

This study adopts the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) definition of FBOs as "organizations that derive inspiration and guidance for their activities from the teachings and principles of religious faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith" (UNHCR, 2023). Further, it defines refugee protection as "all actions aimed at ensuring the equal access to and enjoyment of

the rights of individuals of concern to UNHCR, in accordance with humanitarian, human rights and refugee law" (UNHCR, 2005).

This article focuses on FBOs for several reasons. First, it is because of their distinctive motivation as refugee-protection agencies. Unlike other refugee-protection actors, they are driven not solely by humanitarian principles but also by a conviction that their religious beliefs compel them to assist those in need (Ferris, 2011). Secondly, they are usually the first responders to conflict-related crises, providing immediate protection in the form of physical space before the UNHCR and other refugee-protection agencies intervene (ACT Alliance et al., 2018). Additionally, FBOs typically maintain their presence throughout all stages of conflict and are frequently among the final entities that vacate the area. They continue their efforts even after the media has departed and financial resources have dwindled (UNHCR, 2014).

Another key reason for focusing on FBOs is because the UNHCR and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) identify them as key players in protecting refugees. The UNHCR's (2023) "Guidance Note" highlights FBOs' unique and important role in delivering protection, advocacy, humanitarian assistance, and solutions to refugee-related matters. The GCR, a refugee-protection framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing (Sulewski, 2020), recognizes FBOs as key contributors to peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities (UNHCR, 2022).

Previous research on FBOs has concentrated primarily on their contributions to development (Olarinmoye, 2012; Haynes, 2013; Occhipinti, 2015; Islam, 2018) and their involvement in the provision of social services (Tarpeh and Hustedde, 2020; Glatzer et al., 2024). Studies focusing on the challenges and prospects of FBOs in refugee protection are scarcely existent. However, the research conducted by scholars like Nagel, Orji, and Mencütek is closely connected to the topic addressed in this article.

Nagel's (2023) study examines a range of refugee-support initiatives provided by religious groups. It does not focus on FBOs' challenges or the opportunities they could harness. Similar to this study, Nagel's research is analyzed through qualitative content analysis of interviews with refugees and immigration officials. However, the fieldwork was not conducted in a refugee camp or within an African context. Instead, it was done in Germany, where the circumstances surrounding refugees may differ significantly from those in developing countries.

Nkwachukwu Orji's (2011) article investigates the contributions of Christian and Muslim FBOs in safeguarding the displaced population in Jos, a city situated in north-central Nigeria (Orji, 2011). In contrast to this study, which centers on refugees, the article focuses on internally displaced persons. Additionally, it primarily explores the framework of relief operations, funding sources, criteria for selecting aid recipients, and the types of services FBOs provide. It does not address these organizations' challenges or strategies to enhance their effectiveness.

Mencütek's (2020) study investigates the capabilities and limitations of FBOs created by refugees. The research is based on the case of Şanlıurfa, a Turkish border province accommodating half a million Syrian refugees. Its primary emphasis is on the function of FBOs in alleviating tensions and conflicts between the refugee populations and the local communities.

A comprehensive examination of the literature has revealed the dearth of studies that focus on either the challenges FBOs encounter or the opportunities they can leverage. The existing literature predominantly highlights FBOs' role in protecting refugees' rights. When this literature references the challenges faced by FBOs, it does not explicitly address the challenges unique to FBOs. Instead, it discusses issues that affect nearly all refugee-protection actors (Olarinmoye, 2012; Islam, 2018; Zhang, 2024).

This article stands out by specifically investigating the challenges, potential solutions, and opportunities for refugee protection unique to FBOs. For instance, the issue of limited resources is a concern that impacts nearly all refugee-protection stakeholders, including the UNHCR. It therefore falls outside the scope of this analysis. This research is also unique in that it gives weight to the voices of the refugees. In other studies (Nawyn, 2017; Mencütek, 2020), the research has mainly focused on capturing the voices of refugee-protection and immigration officers.

METHODOLOGY

Study area

This article bases its analysis on primary data from the Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei integrated settlement (see Figure 1). The researchers identified this camp as a suitable study area primarily due to its notable success in fostering peaceful coexistence among individuals from 13 different nations within a 12-square-kilometer area (ReliefWeb, 2012). The camp is Kenya's most diverse refugee camp and one of the largest multi-ethnic refugee sites globally (Lutheran World Federation, 2015). This diversity enriched the research process and findings (Almouzni, 2024), providing a suitable context to examine the adaptive capacity of FBOs, in line with the contingency theory. This is particularly because the theory emphasizes context-dependent organizational effectiveness.

Figure 1: Map showing the location of Kakuma refugee camp
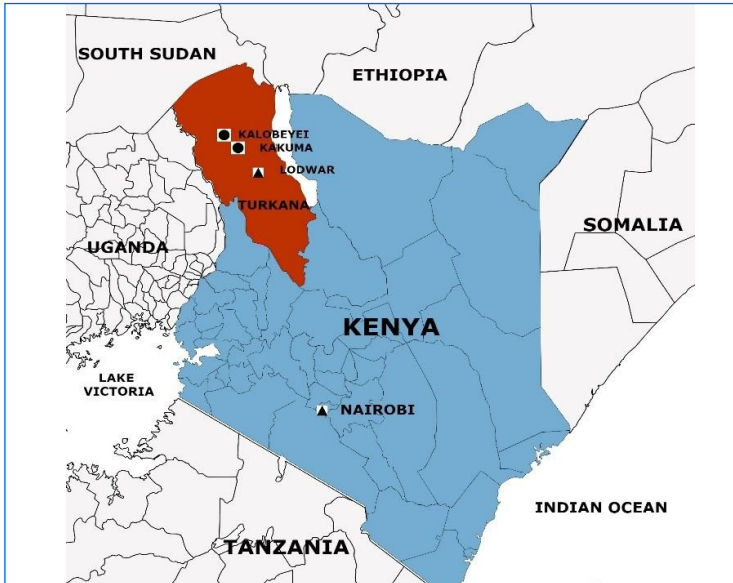
Source: Luseno, Tracy and Oluwaseun, Kolade. 2021. Displaced, Excluded, and Making Do: A Study of Refugee Entrepreneurship in Kenya. *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies.* https://images.app.goo.gl/MJxvEoTfskh75cMN9

To address the challenge of overcrowding in the Kakuma refugee camp, the Turkana County Government, the Kenyan State Government, the UNHCR, and the local community decided to establish the Kalobeyei integrated settlement in 2015 (UN-Habitat, 2018). This settlement adopted a different approach from the camp: integrating the refugees and the host community to foster self-reliance. Nevertheless, the experiences of refugees and the refugee-protection programs in the Kalobeyei integrated settlement are similar to those in the Kakuma refugee camp. For this reason, the camp and the Kalobeyei integrated settlement are collectively referred to in this article as the Kakuma refugee camp.

Data collection

The researchers collected data directly from the refugee community through six focus group discussions (FGDs). Each group consisted of eight participants. The six categories of FGDs comprised refugees of South Sudanese origin, refugees of Somali origin (these two nationalities are the predominant groups in the camp), refugees of various other nationalities, refugees living in the Kalobeyei integrated settlement, female refugees, and refugees with disabilities.

The study also gathered data from 34 key informants using key informant interviews. To enrich the study with a wide range of perspectives, the informants

comprised officers working with FBOs, secular non-governmental organizations (SNGOs), Kenya's Department of Refugee Services (DRS), the UNHCR, as well as community and religious leaders (see Table 1). The study selected participants likely to offer valuable insights regarding the research question. The third data collection method involved the general observation of the refugee and host communities. Secondary data played a vital role in validating and enriching the primary data (Ajayi, 2023), thus enhancing the depth and breadth of analysis. This multi-method approach was well-aligned with the contingency theory's emphasis on responsiveness to contextual complexity.

Table 1: Details of research respondents

Respondents' Description	Data Collection Technique	Number of Respondents Sampled
FBO officials	Key informant interviews	15
UNHCR officials	Key informant interviews	3
Secular NGO officials	Key informant interviews	5
Department of Refugee Services officials	Key informant interviews	4
Religious and community leaders	Key informant interviews	7
Refugees	Focus group discussions	48
Total Number of Respondents		**82**

Source: Authors' own work

The researchers gathered insights from officers associated with each of the eight FBOs operating in the Kakuma refugee camp (see Table 2), as these organizations were the primary focus of the study. As much as the study focuses on FBOs, the researchers sought the insights of officers working with SNGOs to obtain balanced, comprehensive, and reliable data. They engaged with respondents from four SNGOs in Kakuma: Humanity and Inclusion (previously known as Handicap International), Waldorf, COHERE, and Peace Winds Japan.

Table 2: FBOs in Kakuma refugee camp and their leading roles

No.	FBO	Main Roles and Services Provided
1.	World Vision International	- Water, health, and sanitation services (WASH) - Livelihood programs
2.	African Inland Church-Health Ministries	- Health, nutrition - Water, health, and sanitation services (WASH)
3.	Lutheran World Federation	- Primary and preschool education - Sustainable livelihoods
4.	Finn Church Aid	- Early childhood development and primary school education
5.	DanChurchAid	- Livelihoods and climate resilience programs - Life skills development - Peacebuilding and protection
6.	Salesians of Don Bosco	- Vocational education - Livelihood programs
7.	Jesuit Refugee Services	- Education and vocational training - Pastoral services
8.	National Council of Churches of Kenya	- Shelter and infrastructure - Reproductive health and HIV/AIDS services

Source: Authors' own work

Data analysis

The researchers used qualitative content analysis to examine the data. This data analysis method involves the subjective interpretation of data content through a systematic process of coding and the identification of themes or patterns. This analytical approach facilitates the comprehension of social realities through the perspectives of the research participants (Shava et al., 2021). The researchers employed Microsoft Word, a word processing program, to identify recurring themes and to conduct open coding, that is, coding the material without relying on a pre-established code list. This approach consisted of several stages: engaging in close reading to gain familiarity with the content, generating preliminary codes, identifying themes, refining and reviewing the initial themes, and conducting the final analysis. The analysis process was not linear but involved revisiting certain steps and refining themes. The codes emerged organically from the text rather than being artificially imposed on the text, thereby maintaining the authenticity of the participants' perspectives and expressions. This inductive coding process also aligned with the contingency theory,

which discourages rigid frameworks and instead supports adaptive and context-sensitive interpretation.

Ethical considerations

To ensure adherence to ethical standards in research, the researchers obtained approval from Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation and the University of Nairobi. They also made every effort to conduct research that upheld essential principles such as confidentiality, privacy, and, where appropriate, anonymity. The research participants provided verbal and written informed consent to participate. Furthermore, the research process, findings, conclusions, and recommendations aimed to promote public welfare.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges encountered by FBOs in refugee protection

The findings of this research illustrate the intricate and context-dependent challenges FBOs encounter in refugee protection. Therefore, the results support the fundamental assertion of the contingency theory: that an organization's effectiveness does not depend on a one-size-fits-all approach but is contingent upon its alignment with the surrounding environmental factors. Kakuma's distinct religious, cultural, and institutional environment offers advantages and limitations influencing FBO operations.

Perception of Islamic refugees on Christian-based FBOs

Rather than immediately pointing out the problems faced by FBOs, some respondents felt obliged to point out that most of the Muslims in the camp were not reluctant to accept assistance from Christian FBOs. For example, a Muslim respondent of Somali descent remarked:

> First, we must commend the Christian FBOs here in Kakuma. Regardless of their Christian affiliation, they provide services to everyone with genuine commitment and without hesitation (FGD, 16 June 2022).

A female refugee of Ethiopian origin expressed her admiration, stating:

> We are in awe of the way the Christian FBOs in the camp dedicate themselves to serving the community; they neither show discrimination towards non-Christians nor pressure anyone to convert to Christianity (FGD, 13 June 2022).

This finding contrasts with previous literature that identified proselytism as one of the significant setbacks of FBOs (Bickley, 2015). The literature suggests that FBOs tend to prioritize individuals who shared their religious beliefs (Kraft, 2016). This finding indicates that FBOs may have finally chosen to confront the issue of discrimination that has been historically linked to them.

Nonetheless, some refugee respondents expressed concern about the lack of Islamic FBOs, despite the presence of numerous Muslim refugees in the camp. They believed that the identity of Christian FBOs imposed specific constraints on their ability to effectively engage with and address the needs of the Muslim community. As a result, they felt that Islamic FBOs would meet the unique needs of the Muslim refugee population more effectively. A Muslim refugee posited:

> We know that they genuinely strive to be impartial, but since they are Christian, they predominantly perceive issues through a Christian lens and interpret them from a Christian viewpoint. Christianity is a core aspect of their identity, which imposes certain limitations, regardless of how trivial they might appear (FGD, 16 June 2022).

Muslim refugees in Kakuma viewed themselves as excluded from development initiatives aimed at religious institutions. They believed that their cultural and religious values were not adequately acknowledged in the FBOs' decision-making processes. For instance, while some Christian FBOs had taken the initiative to establish Christian worship centers, there was a noticeable lack of support for establishing mosques. A Muslim refugee respondent affirmed:

> While we sincerely appreciate the efforts of Christian FBOs to be as impartial as possible, we still desire to have Islamic FBOs. These will comprehensively address our spiritual and cultural needs (FGD, 16 June 2022).

Additionally, the Muslim refugees expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited employment opportunities for Muslim humanitarian workers in these organizations, particularly in light of the substantial number of Muslim refugees present. They perceived this situation as a form of discrimination, albeit not overt:

> How we wish that the FBOs would develop a method for effectively balancing professionalism with considerations of religious diversity in their recruitment processes! (FGD, 16 June 2022).

Perceptions of discrimination extended to the selection of venues for meetings, training sessions, and aid distribution. According to refugee respondents, hosting these events in church environments, although practical for Christian FBOs, inadvertently discouraged some Muslim refugees from engaging fully in the activities. One respondent suggested:

> FBOs should choose socially suitable venues, such as community centers or communal spaces … that reflect an understanding of the diverse backgrounds of their service beneficiaries (FGD, 20 June 2022).

The feedback indicates that, although Christian FBOs are generally praised for their impartial service to all refugees, their nature as religious entities inevitably shapes public perception. The contingency theory provides insight into these perceptions

by demonstrating how the religious identity of FBOs, which is fundamental to their mission, may restrict their adaptability in multi-faith settings.

Personnel challenges

One of the key challenges that the UNHCR and the DRS officers identified, is the need for FBOs to maintain a careful balance between employing individuals committed to the religious tenets of the FBOs and ensuring that the workforce is competent and devoted. In the words of a UNHCR officer:

> FBOs struggle to balance, ensuring that their human personnel are competent to deliver high-quality services while remaining aligned with the organizations' core values and principles (field interview, 29 June 2022).

This finding aligns with Couldrey and Herson's (2014) assertion that FBOs frequently prioritize hiring based on a person's religious affiliation to the church. This approach raises questions about the capacity of FBOs to adequately meet the varied needs of refugees, particularly those that surpass specific religious contexts. The contingency theory's emphasis on internal alignment with external conditions helps illuminate this tension. FBOs must balance preserving their religious ethos and adapting staffing strategies to meet complex operational demands.

According to UNHCR and DRS officials, FBOs face a significant challenge with high staff turnover. Due to their altruistic goals and heavy reliance on donations and volunteers, many FBOs struggle to offer competitive salaries. Their relatively low compensation packages often affect employee motivation, prompting staff to seek more lucrative job opportunities elsewhere. This high staff turnover ultimately disrupts continuity and hinders the capacity of FBOs to be effective. High staff turnover, linked to limited remuneration, further illustrates the difficulty of sustaining effective teams in resource-constrained settings — a common contingency that shapes organizational behavior. A DRS officer affirmed:

> While volunteers' involvement and dedication are essential, recruiting a more reliable and seasoned team is equally important to guarantee the effective administration of key programs (field interview, 27 June 2022).

Collaboration gaps

A notable concern of the research participants pertained to collaboration gaps stemming from interdenominational disparities. They argued that the various denominations (such as Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican and Catholic), with their different operating philosophies, structures, and resource mobilization strategies, contributed to an environment of competition for resources and influence. An SNGO officer made the following comment:

Given their shared religious principles, we expected the various FBOs present to function cooperatively. However, denominational differences appear to be a divergent element (field interview, 25 June 2022).

This unhealthy competition hinders knowledge sharing among the refugee-protection entities. Indeed, previous literature has noted that a significant challenge for FBOs involved in development and humanitarian assistance is deriving strength from common spiritual values while ensuring that their approach remains consistent (Urban Institute, 2001).

Apart from collaboration challenges within the different FBOs, another challenge noted was the existence of collaboration gaps between FBOs and SNGOs. The explanations for these gaps were related to identity differences and a general fear of the unknown. An SNGO officer reported:

I cannot definitively identify the reasons behind our challenges in engaging with FBOs. There appears to be a pervasive sense of mistrust that indicates a potential incompatibility (field interview, 25 June 2022).

These collaboration gaps underscore the necessity for proactive initiatives to bridge the divide between secular and faith-based sectors (Ferris, 2005). Establishing trust and fostering open lines of communication can address these issues and facilitate collaborative partnerships that use the strengths of both FBOs and SNGOs in supporting the refugee community.

Bureaucracy

One recurring theme was the pervasive bureaucracy in FBOs. The respondents noted that bureaucracy was most prominent in well-established church institutions, particularly those affiliated with the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Lutheran Churches. A refugee living with a disability lamented:

Delays in decision-making processes and a lack of responsiveness make it difficult for refugees to receive essential services on time (FGD, 28 June 2022).

As a result, numerous refugees felt frustrated. This highlights the punitive cost of cumbersome processes and the need for a more agile approach to refugee protection. Moreover, it prompts questions about whether the well-intentioned organizational structures of FBOs impede their goal of providing exceptional assistance to the impoverished. The contingency theory contends that hierarchical and rigid structures are less effective in dynamic or uncertain environments, such as refugee camps. Here, flexibility and rapid responsiveness are essential.

Managing unreasonably high expectations

FBO officers mentioned the challenge of meeting the exceptionally high expectations of refugees. The religious nature of FBOs leads to the presumption that these institutions can address all the needs of the refugees. An officer working with the DRS observed:

> Some refugees set themselves up for disappointment, since they hold unreasonably high expectations of the FBOs (field interview, 27 June 2022).

These "over-expectant" refugees fail to comprehend that FBOs face numerous constraints and that their activities are restricted to specific mandates. In agreement with this finding, Moyer et al. (2011) present a scenario where individuals anticipated receiving free handouts from certain FBOs solely due to the latter's classification as religious entities. These individuals were ultimately disheartened upon realizing that these FBOs were concerned primarily with promoting education and empowering farmers.

Refugees with disabilities also articulated their expectations. They regarded their needs as urgent and specific, necessitating prompt action from FBOs. They contended that FBOs are well-positioned to advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities, as they are grounded in essential values such as compassion, tolerance, and empathy. A refugee with a disability commented:

> I can assure you that our circumstances would have been markedly different had there been two or three FBOs dedicated to addressing the needs of refugees with disabilities. The population of refugees with disabilities is significant, making it astonishing that we are left to navigate these challenges on our own. If FBOs are unable to assist us, then who will? (FGD, 28 June 2022).

Inability to pursue income-generating ventures

A notable challenge that existing literature scarcely addresses is that the mission and values upheld by certain FBOs limit their ability to pursue and capitalize on emerging income-generating opportunities. These FBOs are committed to preserving their status as not-for-profit organizations. A notable instance was when the UNHCR indicated its willingness to have all its vehicles serviced and repaired by the Automotive School of the Salesians of Don Bosco. However, the Salesians of Don Bosco rejected this opportunity, as it would have represented a commercial involvement. A UNHCR officer opined:

> For many, this situation represented a missed opportunity. It could have offered Don Bosco's automotive engineering students valuable internships and job placements, while also enhancing Don Bosco's capacity to support a greater number of refugees (field interview, 23 June 2022).

Conflict of interest

One unique challenge not mentioned in the field but addressed in the literature is the reconciliation of scriptural doctrines with the realities of everyday life. Issues related to ethics have proven complex in their implementation. The positions of certain FBOs and religious institutions on issues such as reproductive health; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) movement; abortion; and women's leadership are often controversial (Couldrey and Herson, 2014).

Another significant challenge identified in the literature, although not encountered during the field research, is the conflict of interest between certain FBOs and their affiliated churches. Conflicts arise when FBOs, as agencies of a parent church, formulate priorities or approaches that diverge from those of their parent church (Ferris, 2011). Challenges associated with doctrinal stances and the misalignment between FBOs and their parent churches further illustrate how internal dynamics obstruct responsiveness to external requirements. From a contingency viewpoint, effectiveness relies on addressing these tensions through contextually suitable methods, maintaining core values while adjusting implementation to fit local circumstances.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGES FACING FBOS IN REFUGEE PROTECTION

Address the perception of Muslim refugees

Concerning the issue of perceived discrimination by Christian FBOs toward Muslim refugees, the refugee participants stressed the importance of Islamic FBOs establishing a presence within the camp. This necessity arises from the absence of Muslim FBOs, in light of the significant population of Muslim refugees residing there. Furthermore, the refugee participants advocated for consistent outreach efforts toward the Muslim community in the camp. One respondent explained:

> The Muslim population constitutes a vital segment of the camp's overall refugee demographic and, as such, warrants considerable attention and support (FGD, 20 June 2022).

The respondents emphasized that the outreach programs should sensitize the refugees about the FBOs' desire to serve people of all faiths and cultures. Socially appropriate outreach programs would resonate strongly with refugees from diverse cultures and succeed in encouraging those hesitant to seek assistance from FBOs. According to a DRS officer:

> Christian FBOs may even reach out to Muslim refugees by using mosques and community radio stations (field interview, 27 June 2022).

Furthermore, the respondents stated that FBOs must demonstrate unequivocally that they have no hidden agenda. They should emphasize that their mission is centered on supporting those in need. A refugee participant of Congolese origin remarked:

> FBOs must manifestly demonstrate that they have no interest in proselytization (FGD, 18 June 2022).

Related literature illustrates the case of the Lutheran World Federation, a Christian FBO, which initially faced resistance from the Dadaab refugee community in Kenya. Eventually, upon showing genuine respect for the Muslim faith, the FBO was welcomed warmly and granted extensive access to the Muslim community in the Dadaab refugee camp (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015).

Another pivotal recommendation relates to the physical spaces used by FBOs as aid distribution centers and training facilities. The respondents suggested that FBOs refrain from using religious institutions for these purposes. This practice had fostered feelings of discrimination among refugees of varying faiths. A UNHCR respondent explained:

> Adopting more neutral facilities, such as community centers, for such engagements would denote FBOs' commitment to serving all refugees, irrespective of their religious or cultural backgrounds (field interview, 23 June 2022).

Enhance the diversity of FBO personnel

FBO officers opined that FBOs should tackle the perceptions of discrimination effectively. In their view, FBOs should enhance the diversity of their staff to reflect the religious and cultural demographics present in the camp. The revelation that Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) had employed a Muslim Human Resources Manager in the camp illustrated that FBOs had already begun hiring staff from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The respondents believed that this approach would convey their commitment to promoting inclusivity effectively. They also recommended that the recruitment policies and procedures of the FBOs be transparent and fair, aiming to attract qualified personnel from various backgrounds.

Manage bureaucratic processes proficiently

The respondents indicated overwhelmingly that addressing the challenge of bureaucracy would transform rigidly structured entities into agile stewards of refugee protection. They further suggested that bureaucracy could be managed effectively by prioritizing human connection over paperwork, simplifying organizational processes, and enhancing the FBOs' responsiveness to the needs of refugees. A refugee respondent suggested:

> FBOs must consistently and creatively regenerate themselves to respond swiftly and effectively to refugees' needs (FGD, 20 June 2022).

The recommendation aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of managing bureaucratic processes proficiently for the success of any organization (Bonsu, 2024).

Manage the elevated expectations of refugees

On the need to carefully manage elevated expectations of the refugee population, the respondents felt that FBOs should open communication channels with the refugees. The FBOs' perceived generosity and abundance of resources contributed to the refugees' unrealistic expectations and demands. A DRS officer posited:

> To bridge the gap between societal expectations and FBOs' actual capabilities, these organizations need to be transparent about their strengths and limitations (field interview, 27 June 2022).

Certain refugees' unrealistic expectations illustrate the perceived capabilities and moral standing of FBOs. The contingency theory agrees that these expectations should be addressed through clear communication strategies that align stakeholders' perceptions with the actual capacities available. Refugees must comprehend the limitations of resources and mandates within which FBOs function.

Promote collaboration between FBOs and other refugee-protection stakeholders

In addressing the challenge of interdenominational disparities that hinder cooperation among different FBOs, the participants recommended fostering a collaborative spirit. This approach involves the collaboration of FBOs linked to diverse religious beliefs to achieve shared objectives. They asserted that such a strategy would enhance cooperation and reduce harmful competition. Furthermore, consolidating resources and expertise would ensure efficient delivery of services to the refugee community.

Furthermore, they expressed that FBOs should organize and conduct joint developmental projects with Muslim communities. They contended that collaborative efforts would greatly aid in addressing urgent issues such as sanitation, education, and health. In addition, such joint endeavors would cultivate a sense of shared purpose and achievement. An FBO officer commented:

> Interfaith cooperation, particularly between Christian FBOs and Muslim institutions, would significantly contribute to establishing trust and credibility (field interview, 14 June 2022).

Participants specifically suggested partnerships between Christian FBOs and Islamic financial institutions to enhance access to financial services that comply with Sharia law. The respondents identified a gap in this area and expressed that such collaboration would encourage Muslim refugees to engage with FBOs without hesitation or skepticism. Consequently, this would support the economic empowerment of Muslim refugees, thus promoting their self-sufficiency.

Ensure competitive remuneration

Concerning the issue of high staff turnover, the respondents underscored the importance of competitive remuneration. They emphasized that offering a competitive compensation package is essential for attracting and retaining a skilled and motivated workforce capable of addressing the needs of refugees effectively. Fundamentally, this recommendation indicates that the motivation of staff and volunteers in FBOs is shaped not only by their religious beliefs but also by other factors, such as remuneration.

Preserve the positive inherent traits of FBOs

A significant viewpoint that emerged was that some challenges faced by FBOs could not be addressed effectively, as these issues stemmed from the inherent characteristics of the institutions. Consequently, tackling such challenges could be counterproductive. For instance, the reluctance to pursue income-generating ventures was due to the FBOs' commitment to maintaining their altruistic mission and focus on service provision. A UNHCR officer explained:

> … altering the defining characteristics of the FBOs to address particular challenges would also entail relinquishing certain advantages associated with those attributes (field interview, 23 June 2022).

REFUGEE-PROTECTION OPPORTUNITIES FOR FBOS

Globally, FBOs have made substantial contributions to refugee protection (Abboud, 2017). Their unwavering commitment to assisting individuals in need, along with the strong relationships they have cultivated with refugees over time, has enabled them to make a significant impact on the protection of refugees (Mencütek, 2020). Moreover, FBOs have the potential to explore specific areas of their expertise further (Borja et al., 2021). In addition, FBOs have, on certain occasions, missed opportune chances to leverage their unique strengths (Pinckney et al., 2020). This section, therefore, examines the opportunities for FBOs to leverage their strengths to address the unmet needs of refugees living in the camps.

Specialize in addressing the psychosocial, moral, and spiritual challenges

The necessity of addressing the emotional and mental health needs of refugees is a significant theme that repeatedly surfaced in the field. As stated by one community leader:

> … the refugees' experiences, more often than not, included suffering, violence, displacement and loss of property, livelihoods, identity, family and friends (field interview, 30 June 2022).

These unfortunate experiences left them with profound emotional and psychological scars (Renner et al., 2024). As such, most refugees need to find healing from traumatic

experiences to enable them to progress and make meaningful contributions to their well-being and that of their communities (Fegert et al., 2018).

A considerable segment of the refugee population said that FBOs are particularly well-equipped to offer vital psychosocial support. The respondents acknowledged that the FBOs dedicated to mental and emotional health care for refugees were performing admirably. Nevertheless, they also voiced concerns about the scarcity of available service providers. In this regard, a Burundian refugee respondent remarked:

> A greater number of FBOs should allocate resources and focus on providing psychosocial support to the displaced. By doing so, FBOs can create a pathway towards a safer, more stable, and improved future for refugees in search of safety and hope (FGD, 18 June 2022).

A female refugee respondent also suggested:

> FBOs should collaborate closely with mental health-care experts to enhance the development of culturally and religiously sensitive programs that adequately address the psychosocial needs of refugees (FGD, 13 June 2022).

The existing literature endorses this recommendation. It demonstrates that mere material assistance is insufficient for the impoverished to advance and attain self-reliance. The literature acknowledges that individuals benefit significantly from emotional support and reassurance from their faith and the associated communities. However, most humanitarian assistance institutions have overlooked the crucial psychosocial role of spirituality in bolstering the refugees' coping mechanisms (Couldrey and Herson, 2014).

Additionally, the respondents noted that FBOs have the potential to use their societal influence to tackle various family-related challenges, including parenting, financial responsibilities, domestic violence, early marriages, child abuse, and reproductive health. This capability stems from their long-standing respect for the family unit and commitment to promoting essential family and societal values. A community leader attested:

> There is a general feeling that FBOs are best suited to address moral societal issues, especially those affecting our youth … the issues consist of challenges such as pre-marital sex, addiction, peer pressure, drug and substance abuse, and gender-based violence (field interview, 30 June 2022).

Similarly, FBOs were considered best-placed in ensuring that the refugee population had access to spiritual guidance and moral support. A female refugee confirmed:

> For myself and numerous others in similar circumstances, religious faith is a vital source of comfort, strength, hope, and resilience (FGD, 13 June 2022).

In this regard, Clarke and Ware (2015) agree with the assertions that religious practices and rituals, including meditation, spiritual reflection, and the observance of liturgy, are therapeutic tools that help refugees manage their challenging circumstances.

Specialize in fostering cohesion

Another significant theme that emerged was advocacy for peace and social cohesion. There are occasional moments of tension and the destabilization of social structures within the camp environment. Due to their moral standing and strong connections with local communities, FBOs were identified as the most appropriate entities for facilitating peacemaking and conflict-resolution efforts. A refugee living with disability submitted:

> FBOs are uniquely suited to initiate and facilitate discussions among competing refugee groups, enhance awareness of the various cultures represented within the camp, and nurture a sense of community among the inhabitants (FGD, 28 June 2022).

Apart from tensions and conflicts between different refugee groups, the refugees and host communities competed for scarce resources like water and firewood. On multiple occasions, this competition resulted in violent conflicts. The respondents recognized FBOs as having significant potential to foster social cohesion between refugees and host communities. According to an SNGO officer:

> The capacity of FBOs to simultaneously interact with refugee and host communities is a valuable asset for addressing and managing conflicts (field interview, 25 June 2022).

Specialize in the creation of child-friendly spaces

The respondents noted that FBOs were best suited for creating child-friendly spaces in the refugee camps. They confirmed that FBOs (such as Jesuit Refugee Services, Lutheran World Federation, and World Vision International) created child-friendly spaces for children to play, learn, and socialize. The FBOs did this excellently, but the demand for the service exceeded capacity. As such, the respondents suggested that more FBOs should strive to create child-friendly spaces, as this service provides refugee children with a sense of normality and stability. At the same time, these facilities opened up time (a critical resource) for the parents to fend for their families.

Strive to preserve the authenticity of FBOs' identity

Finally, the participants emphasized that the efficacy of FBOs is fundamentally anchored in their core principle of honoring each individual's intrinsic dignity and worth. This principle shaped their identity and drew partners and volunteers to endorse their efforts. Rather than completely adhering to the expectations of various individuals, FBOs ought to maintain their unique identity while seeking alternative

approaches to earn the trust of those who do not align with their beliefs. A DRS officer pointed out:

> FBOs should remain authentic to their identity, as this sets them apart from all other organizations involved in refugee protection (field interview, 27 June 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings reveal that FBOs face unique obstacles in refugee protection. However, these obstacles are not insurmountable; they require a change in approach or viewpoint. Additionally, these challenges offer FBOs the chance to improve their operations and achieve considerably better outcomes than their present situation. Notwithstanding the numerous challenges outlined, FBOs' contributions to refugee protection remain substantial and highly valued by refugees, host communities, and other refugee-protection entities. Even so, there exists great potential for enhancing FBOs' operational effectiveness.

The article recommends that FBOs take advantage of the opportunities highlighted in the article. It further urges states and the UNHCR to collaborate and support FBOs in their efforts toward refugee protection. Lastly, it encourages FBO donors and partners to reaffirm their commitment to supporting FBOs, given their substantial capacity to enhance the refugee-protection framework. Specifically, the article calls on the UNHCR and donors to provide the necessary resources for Islamic FBOs' entry into Kakuma refugee camp by 2026.

One limitation of the adopted theory is that it is heavily influenced by context, making it difficult to generalize its findings across different scenarios. Consequently, as the scope of this study was limited to FBOs operating within refugee camps, a potential avenue for future research is FBOs involved in refugee protection in urban areas. Furthermore, a significant challenge identified was the perception of discrimination stemming from the absence of Islamic FBOs in a camp populated by numerous Muslim refugees. Future studies could examine refugee camps that include Islamic FBOs.

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Cross-Border Solidarity: Migrant-Led Associations as Spaces of Epistemic Resistance and Food Security Innovation in South Africa

Perfect Mazani[1]

Abstract

In the midst of closure and securitization of border regimes, climate-change displacement, and entrenched inequalities, migrant communities are not just surviving but creating new sites of resistance, creativity, and adaptation to their worlds in crisis. This paper explores how migrant-solidarity organizations function as epistemic spaces of invention and resistance in South Africa among Zimbabwean, Pakistani, and Cameroonian migrant communities in Parow Valley, Summer Greens, and Kensington (Cape Town). Based on 250 household surveys and 12 qualitative in-depth interviews, the paper explores how migrant-led social movements become sites of agency, social resilience, and resistance to marginalization habitually employed by state policy and academic scholarship. These forms of solidarity networks, which are essentially national in scope, maintain food security at a household level, access to livelihood, and socio-emotional well-being. Group savings, mutual support, and rotating credit associations enable these networks to build adaptive capacities to deal with uncertain migration status and socio-economic risk. They constitute resilient, informal social safety nets for food, income, and affective resources that go beyond what formal mechanisms can provide. By situating migrant practice and epistemologies, the paper challenges hegemonic discourses that position migrants as passive. Instead, it positions everyday solidarities at the site of politicized invention and resistance. It situates where these practices intersect with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 (zero hunger), SDG 8 (decent work), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). It establishes a decolonial, plural migration knowledge positioning migrants as co-producers, policy entrepreneurs, and change agents.

Keywords: migration research, solidarity economies, food safety, epistemic justice, migrant agency, decolonial praxis, South Africa, SDGs

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is increasingly grasped less as the movement of individuals from one point to another but as a complex, sociopolitical phenomenon determined by power relations, borders, and global inequalities. As the increase in restrictive border regimes persists, global climate change effects become more pronounced, and socio-economic disparities grow larger, the dominant debate on migrants continues in large part to focus on their vulnerability and dependency (Crush, 2001; Moyo, 2024). This structure, however, ignores the agency, resilience, and creativity of migrant populations, especially in South Africa – one of the major destination countries for migrants in the African continent (Hlatshwayo and Vally, 2014; Ncube and Bahta, 2022).

Migrant populations, typically marginalized in receiving countries and in global narratives as a whole, are mobilizing in solidarity groups as critical spaces of collective care-making, knowledge production, and social resistance (Awumbila et al., 2023). These solidarity masses, which are highly organized along national lines, are key to addressing the full range of migration challenges, notably food security, marginalization from formal livelihoods, and marginalization from state welfare regimes (Pande, 2020). Anything but minimalist survival tactics, these masses are sites of epistemic resistance that actively challenge prevailing hegemonic discourses of migration and development. They are sites at which migrant-led knowledge systems flourish, yielding practical answers to the universal dilemma of migrants and, in the process, constructing transnational solidarities beyond the expectations of the state and the academy (Pande, 2012).

This paper discusses how such migrant-led solidarity organizations function as spaces of agency, resistance, and innovation. It draws on empirical evidence from Kensington, Summer Greens, and Parow Valley (Cape Town), where Zimbabwean, Pakistani, and Cameroonian migrant groups pursue different forms of collective action in response to food insecurity and promote socio-economic activities. This research resists the prevalent imagining of migrants as passive recipients of provision or victims of migration policy. Rather, it highlights their role as strategic agents of knowledge production and innovators in the establishment of food security.

This paper contends that while contemporary migration is driven by world inequalities, climatic factors, and increasingly militarized borders, hegemonic accounts frame migrants as weak, helpless, and in need of humanitarian intervention. However, these negative images are shrinking and one-dimensional. This research counters the dominant narratives by foregrounding migrants' agency and collective resilience. It argues that migrant-organized solidarity groups are not merely survival strategies but sites of successful resistance, invention, and knowledge production. The paper re-maps migration as a deeply political and epistemic practice, rooted in the generally mundane practices of resilience, mutuality, and world-making.

Drawing on the relevant literature, this paper contributes to the critical scholarship on migrants in South Africa by examining how migrants use resilience

practices of solidarity, collective agency, and social innovation to challenge the hegemonic accounts of passivity and dependency. In a mixed-methods investigation of migrant associations in Cape Town, this paper tracks how migrants counter structural exclusion and reshape their socio-economic realities, staking their claim to belonging. In so doing, the paper contributes to the body of knowledge by making visible the interface of food security interventions, collective agency, and epistemic resistance in South African migrant-led solidarity spaces.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research used a mixed-method design, incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods in analyzing migrant-organized solidarity group practices, networks, and systems of knowledge. This is consonant with the study conceptualization with regard to the possibility of the simultaneous exploration of both the material realities (e.g., the outcomes of food security) and the epistemic dimension of migrant lives – how migrants create, share, and act on their own knowledge sets to make themselves heard and confront marginality (Fricker, 2007; Awumbila et al., 2023). Quantitative surveys mapped wider trends in food security and membership belongings, while qualitative interviews documented lived experience, cultural practice, and social innovation behind migrant solidarity. The mixed-methods design is thus not simply methodological, but epistemological – it turns mainstream knowledge production processes around by centering migrants' voices and practices as valid sources of knowledge and resilience.

The research was conducted in three Cape Town suburbs – Kensington, Summer Greens, and Parow Valley, which were chosen purposively, as they are home to high numbers of migrant communities, notably Zimbabweans, Pakistanis, and Cameroonians. The suburbs are therefore optimal to examine the intersection between migration, solidarity, and food security. Migrant communities in the suburbs are organized along either national or ethnic lines. The national or ethnic affiliations are spontaneous systems of governance and sites of living together, where everyday sharing of information, co-sponsorship, and survival mechanisms are enacted. These coping mechanisms are displays of epistemic agency, whereby the migrants counter the exclusion by creating alternative systems of knowledge and belonging.

Fieldwork and data collection

The research employed a mixed-methods design for the 6-month study period. While the quantitative data constituted a 250-household-survey of migrant livelihood access, food security, and membership in the association, the qualitative data involved 12 in-depth interviews with leaders and members of the association. The research team also carried out participant observation during association meetings, savings meetings, and food-sharing activities.

The sample consists of 250 migrant families, purposively selected to give a representative sample of diverse migrant experiences and socio-economic statuses. The sample was heterogeneous by age, gender, and migration history, with a first-priority selection of current affiliated solidarity association members. The research team conducted in-depth interviews with 12 important informants that included solidarity association leaders, community organizers, and key members of the association to determine their roles and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to provide their experiences and opinions on their own terms while also leading the interview into some areas like food security, mutual care, sharing knowledge, and community governance.

Furthermore, participant observation of group meetings, savings meetings, and community events enhanced the researcher's insights into how solidarity groups interacted. As an ethnographic procedure, the researcher could see firsthand how resources and knowledge were mobilized within these networks and how power, trust, and solidarity were negotiated.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis
The study used descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine the household survey data gathered from 250 migrant households. It used a statistical package (SPSS): (a) to calculate frequencies and percentages of significant variables such as food insecurity, income levels, family size, and association membership; (b) to create cross-tabulations to determine whether there were relationships between variables (for example, food security and association membership); (c) to use chi-square testing and logistic regression to determine whether migrant-led solidarity association membership had correlations with such outcomes as dietary diversity, meal frequency, and household coping that were statistically significant. Additionally, the researcher gender-disaggregated the data to determine whether male-headed and female-headed households engaged differently with solidarity organizations.

Qualitative analysis
The researcher used thematic coding to analyze and code data from the 12 in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes using thematic coding. To code repeated themes throughout the data set, the researcher employed NVivo (or manual coding).

Thematic categories included:

- Food security practices: Community cooking, food-sharing practices, community gardens.
- Mutual aid and care: Emotional support, emergency lending, shared childcare.
- Epistemic practices: Knowledge sharing, traditional farming practices, language bridging.

- Resistance and agency: Advocacy work, storytelling as resistance, symbolic actions of cultural preservation.

The research team then analyzed these topics alongside the broader literature on epistemic justice, solidarity, and migration. Furthermore, the study used epistemic justice-informed interpretative theories to observe how everyday practices are resistance performances and knowledge construction. The researcher also reflected on how closely such bottom-up practice aligns to international development paradigms and specifically the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ethical issues

Ethical concerns were a top priority at every point in the research process. The researcher informed the subjects adequately with regard to the purpose, procedure, and potential risks of the research and reassured them of their anonymity and confidentiality. The research team endeavored to ensure all participants' awareness of the study's aims and objectives and made efforts to hear the silenced groups, particularly women and poor migrant people. Since the research deals with sensitive issues related to migration, vulnerability, and legal status, it was imperative to create a non-judgmental and empathetic research environment. The University of the Western Cape's Ethics Committee approved the ethical requirements of the study. The research team obtained informed consent from all the participants and maintained the protection of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntariness during the study.

MIGRATION AND SOLIDARITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is a centuries-old host of migrants from across the African continent and beyond (Owen et al., 2024). Its comparative prosperity, job openings in the urban towns, and historic connections with the surrounding countries have rendered it a welcoming host to immigrants in search of enhanced livelihood. However, South Africa's xenophobic, restrictive immigration policies involving control of its borders and exclusion of foreigners have contributed significantly to the production of precariousness for migrants (Mazani, 2022). Exclusionary space and heightened levels of record unemployment, poverty, and inequality have compelled migrants to survive on their own networks and resources.

In this context of hardship, solidarity associations of migrant communities have served as lifelines. These networks, often operating along national or ethnic lines, form the basis for a range of solidarity activities, such as informal savings schemes (e.g., rotating credit associations), mutual assistance in food and health-care dispensation. They are particularly important in the case of food insecurity, itself commonplace among migrants, since they have limited access to formal employment, social welfare, and housing. Along with material support, they are also

a space of social solidarity and emotional warmth that allows the migrants to belong and feel integrated into the host society.

Migrant epistemologies and resistance

Epistemic resistance is courageous and deliberate in opposing unjust, oppressive social and epistemic norms, particularly when few others have similar intentions or with whom one is in resistance (Beeby, 2012). It is resisting powerful systems of knowledge that disempower or misrepresent particular groups and claim other ways of knowing and being. This type of resistance is a matter of resisting the structures and practices on which epistemic injustice relies like silencing, disentitlement to knowledge-making processes, and being on the periphery and undervalued (Medina, 2013).

Migrant epistemologies' creation, dissemination, and use of knowledge by the migrants in their everyday lives are at the core of migrant-solidarity associations. These epistemologies are fashioned by migrants' everyday lives and the imperative to navigate more than one, and sometimes contradictory, sociopolitical space (Safouane et al., 2020; Ríos-Rojas et al., 2022). Migrants generate practical knowledges of survival, resource management, and making community into their everyday lives (Hlatshwayo and Wotela, 2018; Mazani, 2022). This is disseminated informally along lines of kinship, social networks, and shared practice and is a counter-hegemonic knowledge that challenges the dominant discourses about migration as a linear and one-way process of loss and exposure.

Migrant-solidarity groups thus are spaces of epistemic resistance, where systems of counter-knowledge and practice are not only preserved but actively fostered (Awumbila et al., 2023). In organizing by shared needs and resources, migrants push against structural inequalities that deny them access to state provision and also against academic discourses that seek to represent migrants as passive victims (Pande, 2020). Through such organizations, the ability of migrant communities to innovate, adapt, and survive in the face of adversity is instead brought into view.

Migration, food security, and development

The role of migrant-solidarity organizations in reducing food insecurity is therefore pertinent to global development agendas as well. Food insecurity, so vital to migrants, since they are excluded from the formal economy and welfare states, is one of the most pressing problems in the Global South, according to Rugunanan (2022), but also among migrant enclaves in the Global North. By providing mutual support systems, group savings schemes, and food-sharing programs, such organizations provide realistic solutions to the challenges that hinder their members from accessing food at times of economic uncertainty.

For supporting the SDGs, notably SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), migrant-led programs

are a sustainable, equitable, and community-driven model of development. Besides ensuring basic survival, they are the building blocks of long-term resilience that allow migrant populations to deal with the hazards of migration and build adaptive capacities in the face of socio-economic and environmental uncertainties.

LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL MODELS

Literature across food security, solidarity networks, and migration studies has increased exponentially in recent years, offering novel insights regarding how migrants can make sense of complex socio-economic situations (Rugunanan, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2022). While much of the written academic literature has traditionally viewed migrants as victims, new research has focused on migrant agency, resilience, and creativity under difficult circumstances. This review integrates a range of theoretical frameworks and empirical research, no less focusing on migrant-led solidarity organizations, epistemic resistance, and food security in South Africa.

The criticism further reveals how these networks function not merely as survival tactics but as sites of transformation that reorganize power dynamics, construct collective identity, and enable sustainable development. By connecting the micro-politics of migrant everyday life to broader structural injustices, the literature deconstructs the multifaceted nature of global migrant resilience and collective struggle.

Migration and solidarity networks

Migrant-solidarity networks are the focus of attention in migration studies because the networks expose this social and economic coping strategy used by migrants in host countries. Migration is not only an individual process but a social process in which the migrants use the social network for information, financial, and emotional support (Blumenstock et al., 2025). These networks are particularly significant for forced migration scenarios, in which migrants may be marginalized or discriminated against by state-provided services and may be marginalized from society. Solidarity networks are, in exclusion contexts, parallel social networks through which migrants may be autonomous and agentive. They arise out of historical migratory streams, kinship, and communing cultural practices that cut across borders.

The exercise of "solidarity" among migrant groups is a form of non-formal expression of solidarity, ranging from rotating credit clubs and savings associations to other forms of collective action. They are vital to their survival, according to Mazani (2022), as they enable access to resources that otherwise would be unavailable to the migrants due to their irregular status or due to not having access to the formal labor markets (Keles et al., 2022). In addition, solidarity networks can make migration shift from the forced to the collective agency form, which gives a sense of belonging and shared ownership (Awumbila et al., 2023). These networks yield social capital more than immediate economic returns, as arenas for the practice of citizenship, skills transfer, and the reproduction of culture. This is what makes solidarity a survival

politics and political praxis that resonates in the context of dignity of migrants against xenophobia in host countries. In South Africa, in particular, a report by Mazzola and De Backer (2021) outlines how solidarity organizations provide vital services such as the supply of food, health treatment access, and legal aid to migrants.

These organizations are most vital among marginalized communities where government help is unavailable or inaccessible. In the same vein, Moyo and Zanker (2020) chronicle how migrant-based movements upset the state's hegemonic form of discourse on migration and make an argument about migrants being less reliant but rather stakeholders in their own right in their communities. These types of contributions continue to be unaddressed in hegemonic policy discourses that threaten to pathologize migration. However, in the logic extended by solidarity networks, migrants are assumed to be co-producers of local economies and social ecologies. Moreover, the adaptive capacity of these types of networks is better mobilized and culturally sensitive than that of state-led interventions and therefore critical to urban resilience strategy.

Food security and migrant economies

Food security is the greatest problem that confronts migrant communities, particularly in instances of economic marginalization. Food insecurity punishes migrant communities who may not have easy access to formal employment and social welfare systems. In South Africa, where poverty and unemployment are pervasive, migrants participate in the informal economy – in the majority of cases, as low-skilled and vulnerable labor (Dunn and Maharaj, 2023). This at-risk group has been behind the development of intricate food-sharing networks, most often headed by migrant women, who are primarily responsible for the care of much of the household's food and feeding. The women's activities form the backbone of most solidarity associations, in turn solidifying the feminization of food security and collective resilience.

Through his research, Olawuyi (2019) demonstrates that informal networks improve food security, particularly in times of economic crisis among Southern African communities. Migrants will typically pool resources using solidarity associations to ensure the members are provided for during times of hunger. Importantly, locally based food-sharing businesses and communal saving schemes can be accessed by migrants to purchase food in bulk; hence, the accessibility to everyone.

These social networks do not only respond to emergency food needs; on the contrary, they are also expressions of participatory economies as an alternative to neoliberal market culture. By organizing cooperation rather than competition, solidarity associations become platforms for alternative development paradigms anchored on equity and care.

The food security contribution of migrant-solidarity networks is also founded on the food sovereignty concept, which underscores people's rights to make choices about their own food systems. Byaruhanga and Isgren (2023) depict how food sovereignty

challenges neoliberalism in food security by promoting local and community-based modalities. The South African migrant-solidarity groups, by their congregation food-sharing practice, are setting the example of such values, which serve as a strong and lasting counter-hegemony to state-led food security interventions.

This framing also situates migrant communities as not merely reactive but active actors constructing new geographies of food. These are based on cultural capital, seasonal repetition, and obligations to one another, thereby making localization and democratization of food possible. Migrant food economies are thus material and symbolic subversions, claiming presence, purpose, and permanence in otherwise hostile city spaces.

Epistemic resistance and knowledge production

Epistemic resistance is the act of resisting hegemonic ways of knowing and systems of power that marginalize specific groups (Frega, 2013). In the case of migration, epistemic resistance smashes the stereotypical role of migrants as recipients of assistance and instead situates them as knowing subjects that generate their knowledge. Migrant-organized solidarity networks are central epistemic sites of resistance, for they construct knowledge from the migrants' experiences and distinct ways of coping with displacement, marginalization, and economic insecurity (Awumbila et al., 2023). They are transmitted through narrative, ritual, body practice, and through everyday survival practice. These knowledges, though often ignored, still hold boundless explanatory and transformative power.

Epistemic justice is a term coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), who states that members of oppressed groups need their knowledge to be legitimated and authenticated; this theory is supported and underscored by Catala (2015). In the context of migration studies, it is important that the epistemologies, experiences, and survival strategies of migrant communities should be accepted as legitimate knowledge (Iosifides, 2016). This is a departure from hegemonic discourses on migration that rarely recognize migrants' existing knowledge, which they already possess or gain through their material objective conditions. Solidarity groups, in organizing spaces of collective learning and knowledge sharing, are such arenas where this epistemic resistance is invoked. These are unofficial sites of academies, where migrants negotiate structural imbalances, improvise new ways of earning a living, and challenge prevailing policy orthodoxy. Oral reservoirs and lived pedagogies that take place there form a counter-hegemonic epistemology – an imperative need of academic and policy universes.

Scholars such as Amelina (2022) and Celikates (2022) assert that the knowledge production of marginalized groups is not simply a survival strategy but a counter that repositions the locus of power. In ethnographic studies of the everyday lives of South African migrant communities, this research shows how such solidarity groups not only counter state and academic hegemonies but also construct new forms of knowing and being that shape wider political and social change.

This reshaping of migrants as epistemic agents puts at the forefront the politics of recognition and shifts the spotlight from deficiency to contribution. It also requires rethinking development praxis so that migrant priorities, knowledge, and understanding become the very core of policymaking and social transformation.

Theoretical models: Resilience and epistemic justice

This paper addresses two core theoretical models: resilience theory and epistemic justice. Resilience theory, used by Holling (2001) and others, is a foray into explaining how any system – ecological, social, or economic – operates resiliently toward stress and shocks. In the context of migration, resilience theory provides a tool for examining how migrant communities react with adaptive responses in conditions of exclusion, marginalization, and environmental pressure. Migrant-led solidarity organizations exemplify the resilience model because they enable migrants to act in concert against the pressures of migration by sharing resources and supporting one another (Barglowski and Bonfert, 2023). They construct useful anticipatory forms of resilience whereby communities do not merely react to crises but actually prepare to engage positively with latent uncertainty. This temporal aspect of resilience is pertinent where structural exclusion is ever-long-term and cyclical instead of episodic.

Epistemic justice enables subordinated groups to participate in the creation of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). Via a case study of migrant-led solidarity associations, this study demonstrates how these groups create new, productive knowledge that can be harnessed to shape broader social, political, and development practice. By integrating the two lines of thought, this paper considers how resilience and epistemic justice are conversely balanced in the context of migrant-solidarity organizations in South Africa. Resilience is not only material or social adjustment, but the act of regaining the ability to voice one's definition of experiences and responses to adversity (Folke et al., 2010; Ungar, 2011). Migrant associations practice anticipatory resilience through the creation of their own knowledge systems, strategies, and narratives – through epistemic resistance and advocacy for epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2011). Resilience is practiced both as a survival and knowledge-production process. It is here that various discourses of belonging, community, and development are created collectively among migrants outside of state or humanitarian dominant discourse (Medina, 2013; Barglowski and Bonfert, 2023).

These two theories were chosen over other perspectives because they capture both the structural and the epistemological dimensions of solidarity among migrants. Resilience theory captures how migrant societies adapt and endure in the face of system shocks (Holling, 2001; Berkes and Ross, 2013), while epistemic justice captures the importance of voice, recognition, and knowledge de-hierarchization (Fricker, 2007). Combined, they provide a general idea of how migrant organizations manage to survive but, in fact, recreate their social worlds and redefine marginalization on both a practical and a theoretical basis (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Awumbila et al., 2023).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Field research among 250 migrant families and 12 in-depth interviews conducted in Parow Valley, Summer Greens, and Kensington (Cape Town) produced a number of important findings concerning the role of solidarity associations in solving food insecurity, community resilience, and knowledge production. Qualitative findings indicate the importance of bottom-up movements within the migration process to change migrants from being passive victims to showing their capacity and agency to take control of their situation to organize themselves. The way in which migrant-led initiatives are not only reactive but also highly adaptive and initiative-taking in becoming systems-based on cultural origins and visionary planning is a testament to their work as transformative agents in the development of alternative economies and community resilience.

The quantitative aspect of the study revealed that 68% of the interviewed households were food insecure and ranged from being moderately to severely food insecure. Within the households, those with membership in solidarity associations were three times more likely than those without membership to report having access to stable meals and diversified diets. Female-headed households indicated greater use of shared food systems and savings groups.

The intersecting and multiple data from the three research sites provided a rich perspective on how migrants react to exclusionary systems and rebuild social infrastructures with collective power. The study brings to the fore how such migrant communities operate at the nexus of innovation, solidarity, and survival and build resilience microcosms in the face of marginalization.

Food security and solidarity associations

The strongest finding of this research is the pivotal role played by solidarity associations in alleviating food insecurity among migrants. The research revealed that about 80% of the families interviewed relied on some form of collective food-sharing mechanism, either institutionalized group savings associations or group savings associations. These mechanisms allowed the migrants to pool resources and get food at a reduced cost, and even the most vulnerable members of society were able to fulfill their food needs.

Quantitative evaluation of 250 migrant families, as shown in Figure 1 reported 68% of the households to be experiencing chronic food insecurity, and members of the association were significantly likely to have regular access to meals. Membership in the association was strongly associated with more varied diets and frequency of meals by chi-square analysis ($p < 0.05$). Logistic regression made association membership to be three times as probable to have regular access to food. Female-headed households, according to gender-disaggregated figures, had a greater level of participation in solidarity associations. Cross-tabulations further revealed the direction of the fact that low incomes were linked with greater dependency upon

such networks. Overall, the evidence confirms the statistically significant impact of migrant-led associations for better food security outcomes.

Figure 1: Relationship between solidarity-association membership and household food security
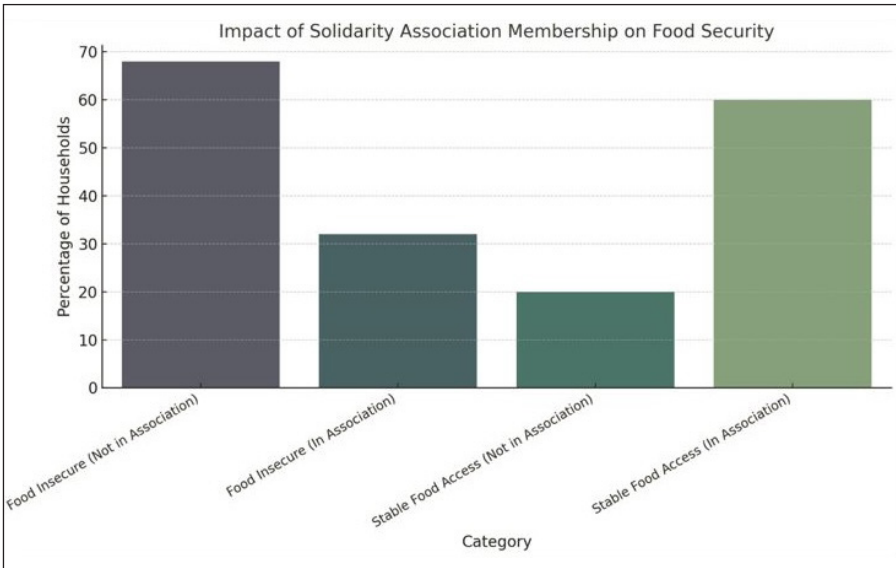
Source: Author's compilation (2025)

The prevalence of the practice is a signal of a larger community culture where the well-being of the many takes precedence over survival at the individual level. Food-sharing arrangements were not charitable acts but institutionalized social agreements grounded in reciprocity, trust, and responsibility. The migrants outlined how the networks facilitated security, dignity, and belongingness as crucial psychosocial cushions in the face of an oppositional sociopolitical environment. For others, the relationship provided a surrogate welfare system providing some security and relief unavailable in official state structures.
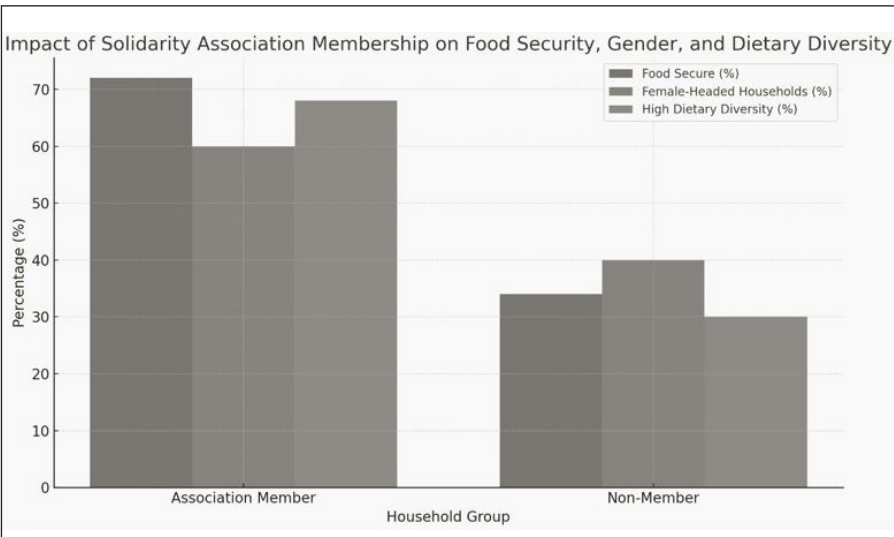
Migrant-solidarity associations are created as a form of social protection and security in host countries by migrants as safety nets due to the exclusion of these migrants from the host country's mainstream economy and social services (Barglowski and Bonfert, 2023). Apart from food-sharing programs, the majority of solidarity associations also undertook group purchases of staple foods that were handed out to members within routine periods. This was particularly common among Zimbabwean migrants, who reported being more exposed as regards food, since they lacked official employment and state welfare.

Within the migrant-solidarity associations in this study there were bulk-buying programs. Such buying programs were typically funded through capital raised collectively by revolving savings associations; hence, members had reduced costs at the market and paid less for transport. Occasionally, associations would hire local wholesalers on direct contract, both signing terms that were favorable to their respective interests. Quite often, choices about bringing the food to members would be collaborative, involving committees or elected delegates organizing planning and making access available, thus helping to extend principles of transparency and participatory democracy.

The roles played by solidarity associations extend beyond social belonging; these are instrumental support networks that enable members to navigate exploitative market relations and buffer themselves from the volatility of food prices. Through resource pooling, information exchange, and mutual support, the associations create shock-absorbing buffers that insulate migrant households from both immediate economic shocks and food insecurity.

Figure 2 shows percentage disparities between solidarity association members and non-members for three indicators: food security, representation of female-headed households, and high dietary diversity. The results are that membership in the solidarity association is associated with increased food availability, increased representation of female-headed households, and increased dietary diversity.

Figure 2: Comparative impact of migrant-solidarity association membership on household food security, gender representation, and dietary diversity

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

Knowledge production and epistemic resistance

The second profoundly important finding is that the solidarity associations organized by migrants are spaces of epistemic resistance. From the interviews conducted, the associations were not only spaces of material assistance but also spaces of knowledge exchange and innovation. The migrants revealed that they would usually share tips on work opportunities in the region, accommodation, and legal rights, among others, with coping mechanisms for managing climate stressors such as flooding and drought.

These knowledge exchanges were consistently facilitated by meetings, WhatsApp groups, casual mentoring, and skills-sharing workshops. This assisted these organizations in facilitating codification and sharing of experiential, actionable, and experience-based place-specific community-based knowledge that they had earned. These migrants did not have to rely on outside agents for information; rather, they created their own epistemic infrastructure that was more adaptive and efficient in meeting their needs.

These solidarity networks also facilitated the passing on of survival and cultural wisdom, whereby several generations passed on food-preserving methods, knowledge of agriculture, and savings practices. This sharing of knowledge processes, too often overlooked in mainstream texts on migration, highlights the migrant as a knowledgeable producer of knowledge who reconstructs their future through learning and reciprocal aid.

In these solidarity associations, older women in particular became central to intergenerational learning as seed-saving experts and trainers in herbal medicine, but more significantly, as the depository for cooperative food-cooking practices. They were not merely caregivers but epistemic and cultural anchors whose labor supported the reproduction and innovation of food habits in new environments. Highlighting their lives, this study discloses gendered aspects of epistemic resistance, which were typically hidden from view within male-stream accounts of migration.

Moreover, these networks were also informal campaigning spheres, where migrants could document their past and share complaints. This in itself was political narrative, establishing individual sufferance, collective memory, and mobilization. As they gained traction, these narratives started subverting institutional imaginings of migrants as voiceless and inarticulate. Instead, they were a diverse and changing population with the capacity to think strategically, mobilize support, and develop political awareness.

Table 1 summarizes the dominant qualitative themes of 12 in-depth interviews and participant observation of Zimbabwean, Pakistani, and Cameroonian migrants involved in grassroots solidarity initiatives in Cape Town. The themes are located within the practical, epistemic, and political functions of the organizations, covering food security programs and intergenerational knowledge sharing to modes of resistance and counter-education networks. All the themes are supplemented with direct quotes from the participants and analyzed to illustrate the contribution of the associations in the development of resilience, self-organization, and daily activism.

The table shows that migrant-led organizations are not only sites of support but also sites of epistemic resistance and political engagement.

Table 1: Themes and illustrative quotes from migrant-solidarity association members in Cape Town

Theme	Quotations	Interpretation/Implication
Food Security Strategies	"We buy in bulk and share -save us all money." (Zimbabwean participant)	Group strategies are a shield against price shocks and unemployment.
Knowledge Exchange & Learning	"The older traders teach us how to handle various customers and merchandise." (Pakistani participant)	Intergenerational mentoring as experiential learning.
Epistemic Resistance	"We teach our own children since schools do not take them." (Zimbabwean leader)	Immigrants set up parallel education systems in inhospitable environments.
Political Agency & Advocacy	"We wrote a letter to the ward councillor requesting clean water." (Cameroonian leader)	Migrants self-organize local government in order to achieve rights and recognition.

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

Agency and resistance

According to this study, migrant-led solidarity groups were established as powerful voices of resistance against state policy and hegemonic migration discourses. In their collective action, these groups counter the migrant story of passive victimhood or being mere recipients of assistance. Instead, they create affirmation of the agency of migrant groups in fashioning and shaping their own survival strategies, along with resisting for greater social inclusion and recognition. Their collective effect includes collective mobilization of resources in rotating savings associations, labor exchange in hidden food economies – like communal cooking and street vending, and mutual sharing of communal knowledge – like seed-saving, herbal medicine, and cooperative childcare. Beyond allowing room for survival, these groups create solidarity economies and reproduce social networks at the core of resilience.

This is a three-dimensional resistance – economic, social, and epistemic. Migrants resist not only by protest but by everyday practice of survival, redefinition of community, and assertion of their right to belong. Different associations formed alliances with local civic society organizations, religious institutions, and sympathetic policymakers to struggle for changes in housing, documentation procedures, and access to health care. They acted as proto-political institutions, training their members

to become citizens and social activists. According to Mottiar (2019), in South Africa, Durban protests were accompanied by more concealed, ordinary resistances. The migrants and dispossessed populations sometimes express themselves through visible protests, primarily in opposition to extreme grievances such as xenophobic attacks or harassment from the police. Shack dwellers, for example, practice protest as a routine and culturalized form of resistance. However, most migrants and undocumented workers such as street vendors employ predominantly "everyday resistance" – less audible, less explicit acts challenging power relations through everyday survival strategies without challenging the authorities. This is three-dimensional resistance – economic survival strategy, social redefinition of community, and epistemic claims to membership – with protest as important but not the sole mode of resistance.

In interviews, some migrant leaders described a desire to connect their networks with other networks and to campaign for policy change that would bring benefit to the overall health of all migrants, not just those directly around them. These findings bring to the fore the political significance of action led by migrants and how it can potentially be an input in broader discussions surrounding the management of migration, food security, and social justice.

These hopes are solidarity-based aspirational politics rather than the struggle for mere survival. The migrant leaders articulated visions of just city planning, democratic policymaking, and the acceptance of their organizations as legitimate actors in development. Their struggle for food justice, access to land, and decision-making at the local level highlight the intersectionality of their struggle as bridging migration with discussions of democracy, equity, and human rights.

These groups' material and symbolic practices intersect to produce what scholars such as Piacentini (2014) refer to as "everyday resistance" practices that are mundane but with the potential for transformation. Through the establishment of community gardens, rotating credit associations, or schools, these practices refuse exclusionary models and posit a model for more just urban potentialities.

Migrants introduce intergenerational knowledge and skills that challenge exclusionary regimes as well as hegemonic discourses. Pakistani businesspeople, for instance, are prepared to transfer entrepreneurial as well as survival skills to second-generation migrants to hand over to the third generation. Zimbabwean diaspora in South Africa, once more, since they are not documented and hence cannot offer access to public education to children of the migrants, have devised their own education system. Some of the schools offer the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) curriculum and provide students with a chance to sit for final examinations in Zimbabwe, while others run Cambridge programs. These "solidarity schools," as they are otherwise known, provide unofficial learning such as language, budgeting, and work-skills training. These are examples of epistemic resistance: migrants making and disseminating knowledge outside formal state-directed systems themselves. Migrant associations are therefore not only survival networks, but knowledge-generating fields and political struggle sites. They build other knowledges

from experience on how to get around, how to survive on savings in exclusionary economies, and how to access education in the midst of structural exclusion. In this way, migrants position themselves as epistemic actors in themselves – knowledge-making intentionally relevant to development, food security, and justice. These everyday acts of caretaking, narrative, networking, and advocacy are small acts of resistance against the dominant discourse that attempts to portray migrants as needy and powerless.

As this study illustrates, resistance of this kind is not oppositional but rather reconstructive; migrants are constructing alternative care and support systems that compensate for systemic failure. This has significant practice and policy implications, contending that migrant communities need not only to be consulted but need to be actively included in urban government and food-policy spaces.

Integration of data (mixed-methods triangulation)

This study brought together in triangulation these quantitative and qualitative strands to build validity and to gain a better understanding based on evidence from these. For instance: quantitative analysis indicated that association members were less food insecure. Qualitative interviews explained how and why: through bulk purchasing, savings groups, and emotional support. These qualitative results were compared with appropriate literature and explicated applying resilience theory that focuses on social networks and collective agency in helping migrants cope with adversity, and epistemic justice theory focusing on migrants' knowledges and daily practices of resistance that reverse exclusion and reclaim their right to belong. This synthesis allowed the study not just to recognize what is happening statistically, but to understand the lived experiences and underlying meanings behind the patterns.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that migrant-solidarity associations in South Africa are important for addressing social resilience provision, food insecurity, and social-spaces provision for migrant epistemic resistance and knowledge production. The solidarity associations are an attempt to be not only a survival strategy but also a type of collective agency that resists mainstream migration discourses and offers innovative solutions for migrants' socio-economic challenges.

The qualitative data gathered throughout Parow Valley, Summer Greens, and Kensington demonstrates that migrant networks are embedded in the everyday lives of migrants, creating long-term reactions to exclusion, precarity, and invisibility. Rather than depending on external assistance, these networks use internal resources, trust, information, and reciprocity to create new forms of governance, care, and economic survival.

The research has brought to the fore migrant epistemologies and everyday practices of solidarity, making visible grassroots movements' political stakes and

providing migrant communities with an opportunity to bring about changes in social, political, and economic realms. The conclusions that this research indicates relate to the necessity to view migrants not so much as recipients of aid but rather as agents and the necessity for migration and food security policies to be more inclusive, decolonial, and epistemology-led by migrants. The theorization of solidarity, thus, not just as a political project but as social practice, is a gesture of critical juncture in the scholarship of migrant agency. Solidarity organizations are sites of invention and resistance, inventing new social belonging while resisting structural violence.

This paper is the result of a scholarship that has called for an epistemic turn in migration and development policy. It resists dominant hierarchies that downgrade migrants to objects to be controlled rather than co-performers of policy and practice-making. In a moment of climate crisis hegemony, heightened xenophobia, and food systems breakdown, exclusionary policy works to enhance inequality and forestall pragmatic solutions.

At the heart of this work is a recognition that migrant-led movements are not just survivalist. They are incubators of alternative futures, where imaginations of care, dignity, and reciprocity in direct opposition to existing regimes of extraction and domination are cultivated. Our empirical findings illustrate how migrant-solidarity networks embody resilience by building flexible networks that cushion the shocks of the system while practicing epistemic justice through the production of knowledge that challenges exclusion and marginalization (Holling, 2001; Fricker, 2007).

These mobilizations hold valuable lessons for the redesign of urban development, humanitarian intervention, and postcolonial governance toward justice, autonomy, and collective flourishing. Foregrounding agency and migrant knowledge, this paper illustrates how transformation can be seen at the borders on the grounds of agency, reframing dominant political and social narratives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy integration

International institutions and governments need to include migrant-led solidarity action within regional and national migration policy, foregrounding food security. It reflects the migrant communities' ability for agency and innovation that implies more efficient policy interventions at the root causes of food insecurity and marginalization.

This entails charting existing solidarity networks, bringing migrant associations into policymaking, and institutionalizing cooperation with community-based organizations. Migration policy regimes must move beyond containment and surveillance to enable social protection systems to acknowledge and complement migrant-led initiatives. Integration needs to entail legal reforms reducing bureaucratic barriers to association, mobility, and access to food systems for undocumented migrants.

Grassroots network support

Grassroots solidarity networks must be supported, for instance, through resources, capacity building, and technical assistance. Grassroots solidarity networks are essential to the resilience of migrant communities and are able to contribute to disaster response, climate adaptation, and social cohesion.

Investment in local infrastructure, such as communal storage, gardens, and kitchens, can extend the reach of such networks. Donors and agencies must also shift from top-down models of development aid to long-term accompaniment models that build local agency. Organizing such aid to be gender sensitive as well as inclusive of marginalized migrant groups (e.g., migrants, refugees, youth) will enhance the transformative potential of such networks.

Epistemic justice in migration studies

Migration studies must practice epistemic justice in recognizing that migrants are knowledge producers just like researchers instead of being mere research subjects. Research methodologies must be more participative and co-produced so that migrant voices are heard and knowledge systems of migrants are given serious consideration. This entails developing research that works actively with migrants at every phase, from problem-definition and data-gathering to analysis and dissemination. Researchers are also required to interrogate critically their positionality and power within the research process and try to redistribute such power using collaborative designs. Academic departments and journals need to increase epistemic horizons by making space for the knowledges produced by migrant scholars, activists, and community practitioners.

Decolonizing migration discourse

Migration scholarship needs to move toward more decolonial trajectories that disengage from the dominant discourses of migration and recognize diversity of migrant experience. This requires reforming migration policy, border control regimes, and representation of migrants in policy and academic discourse. Decolonization, therefore, involves not only a recasting of the analytic imaginary but also an institutional change of heart. Decolonization involves the deconstruction of epistemic hierarchies that favor Global North knowledge and place migrant voices from the Global South at center stage as explanatory and leading migratory systems. Moreover, media, education, and development planning must avoid representing migrants only in terms of risk, crisis, or burden and promote instead their contributions, innovations, and rights.

Apart from these initial recommendations, this study suggests the following additional policy issues in the future:
- Intersectional policy solutions: The migration policies cannot be decoupled from other issues such as housing, health care, gender justice, and climate

change. Policymakers need to adopt intersectional solutions that appreciate how different vulnerabilities intersect in shaping the migrant-community experience.

• Cross-border cooperation: In as much as most existing solidarity organizations are transnational, regional institutions like the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) should facilitate forums for cross-border cooperation, information sharing, and harmonized protection strategies for migrants. Cooperation can enhance best practices and develop advocacy for migrants' rights.

• Urban inclusion strategies: Migrants' perspectives need to be incorporated into urban planning, especially in the slums and food systems. Local food councils, participatory budgeting, and land-use policy design can operationalize migrant agency at the urban level.

• Monitoring and accountability: Establishing independent monitoring mechanisms for assessing migrant-inclusive policies is critical. These need to incorporate migrant voices in their design and oversight to bring responsiveness and accountability.

Overall, this work outlines the transformatory capacity of migrant-led solidarity associations as system-level change agents. They are less about coping mechanisms. Instead, they are more blueprints for a more equitable, participatory, and resilient world. In a world under threat from cross-cutting crises – economic, ecological, and political – there is much to learn from these: care, autonomy, and co-living by communities. Supporting and strengthening such migrant-led movements is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic imperative for building more equitable futures.

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Strengthened or Sidelined? An Evaluation of Pledges to Eradicate Statelessness in the Southern African Development Community

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Abstract

Since 2018, there has been a significant mobilization of developmental funding mechanisms and efforts to facilitate greater burden-sharing among refugee-hosting states and address protracted displacement. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) of 2018, seeks to harness this developmental approach – in particular, multi-stakeholder participation and a system of pledge-making – for the benefit of refugees and the communities that host them. Multi-stakeholder participation and pledge-making are common tools of a developmental approach to forced displacement more broadly, as well as statelessness, with the pledging system aiming to galvanize cross-sectoral collaboration, facilitate more predictable funding and provide a mechanism for the tracking of progress. Yet this system is still nascent and it remains unclear whether the long-term progress its enabling framework envisions is currently unfolding. This paper assesses whether the pledging system, as an operationalizing mechanism of the GCR and its framework, has contributed toward the efforts to eradicate statelessness in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Statelessness in the SADC – as is the case globally – remains a significant issue and an obstacle to accessing basic services and rights. The true scale of statelessness has consistently been difficult to gauge due to the lack of data collection on statelessness by most countries. While states in the region have taken steps to eradicate statelessness, the role that the pledging system plays in this endeavor has received little attention. The pledging system may be able to facilitate multi-stakeholder participation where there is already an impetus, but it is unclear whether it can address the systemic issues, such as discrimination, that underpin statelessness. Further, the pledging system is still in the early stages of configuring measures for transparency and accountability.

Keywords: statelessness, Global Compact on Refugees, burden-sharing, Southern Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (hereafter "GCR") (UNHCR, 2018) is a voluntarist and non-binding commitment by various stakeholders – state and non-state – to establish and operationalize a collective framework for burden-sharing. Appearing in no substantive provision of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter "UN Refugee Convention"), burden-sharing has remained a lacuna in the international refugee protection framework. States in the Global South host the vast majority of refugees with middle- to low-income countries bearing most of the load while the Global North has persistently engaged in efforts to deter those seeking asylum and circumvent their obligations. The GCR is an attempt to address these imbalances by providing a platform for, among other things, various stakeholders to pledge assistance to affected populations. Questions exist as to whether this nascent project can make substantial progress toward burden-sharing. While the GCR is focused on refugees, other displaced communities and stateless persons are and can be included within its mandate.

A person is stateless if they are not considered a national by any state under the operation of its laws, as per Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention. Without the vital link between an individual and their state, a person cannot access basic rights and services that they need to live a normal life. Stateless persons are largely left unprotected and unnoticed. In the Southern African Development Community (hereafter "SADC") – consistent with a more global pattern – there is insufficient data on the number of stateless persons. This makes it difficult for states to adequately design policy and improve infrastructure to include stateless persons. There have been several encouraging improvements in the region to eradicate statelessness; however, these rely on participation across spheres of government and significant resources.

This paper explores to what degree the GCR and its pledging system have been able to contribute to the adoption of measures to eradicate statelessness in the SADC region. Central to the GCR and the pledging system is a developmental approach – long-term funding directed at expanding national and local infrastructure to include non-nationals and to offer greater opportunities for self-reliance. To that end, the GCR has facilitated or accompanied several stateless-specific events that used the pledging system and functions against the backdrop of a larger, global effort to eradicate statelessness. The focal point of this effort is the Global Alliance to End Statelessness launched in 2024 as the successor of the decade-long IBelong campaign. By embracing a multi-stakeholder approach, the pledging system may be able to strengthen state adherence to human rights norms through normative standards (Arnold-Fernández, 2023: 8). However, the pledging system must still navigate its voluntarist and non-binding nature among rising levels of protracted displacement and statelessness.

The discussion is divided into three parts. Part I reflects on the Global Compact by outlining its structure, aims and objectives, the approach it has taken, and the role of the pledges. Eradicating statelessness, while not a major feature of the GCR, has

nonetheless been accompanied by the system of pledge-making and monitoring that the GCR's framework uses. Part II provides an overview and analysis of the situation of statelessness in the SADC region, providing a discussion of the regional frameworks that aim to address statelessness. There are several systemic issues that cause and exacerbate statelessness, such as gender discrimination, that the pledging system has to contend with. The focus of Part III is on examining the steps taken toward addressing statelessness in the SADC region. Part III shows that the pledging system has contributed to several measures taken to end statelessness, although there are still issues with low implementation and a lack of multi-stakeholder effort. It is also argued that, while the pledges play a role in sustaining momentum and providing an opportunity for review, they are often hamstrung by the slow processes of legislative reform, accession to binding instruments, and nationwide documentation drives.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a literature review of the existing publications on the GCR and the development turn in forced displacement responses. It engages with existing literature on statelessness in the SADC region. The paper contributes to an understanding of the interactions between the Global Compact and developmental funding, on the one hand and statelessness in the Southern African region, on the other. Central to this is an analysis of the pledging system, which is currently not well traversed in the literature. This paper engages with reports and articles that describe the early steps taken to address statelessness to understand what role, if any, the pledging system plays in the region. Measuring the material impacts of developmental funding and the pledges requires long-term systemic analysis, which is not undertaken by this paper.

PART I

THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES, DEVELOPMENT, AND STATELESSNESS

The global distribution of refugees displays significant imbalances among host nations, as 69% of refugees originate from just five countries – Venezuela, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, South Sudan – four of which are in the Global South (UNHCR Global Trends, 2025). While imbalances may, to some extent, be inevitable in the short term, given that most refugees flee to neighboring countries, the Global South has consistently hosted the vast majority of refugees, estimated at 85% (Schewel and Debray, 2023). Mitigating these distributional imbalances is the aim of burden-sharing, which describes international cooperation to lessen the immediate burdens on host nations of large refugee flows. Along with this geographical element of burden-sharing, there is also a temporal element, as refugee situations are increasingly protracted. Humanitarian funding has been stretched thin in this context, as it provides mostly short-term crisis-oriented responses. The international refugee framework has long

recognized this and has sought to leverage developmental funding mechanisms and programs that allow more long-term and cross-sector funding (Miller, 2019). Given that forced displacement more generally has reached unprecedented levels and is also increasingly protracted, international institutions have embraced and encouraged a humanitarian-developmental nexus in responding to the challenges of forced displacement. Developmental approaches emphasize expanding local and national infrastructure and creating more socio-economic opportunities for those living in protracted displacement (Kelley, 2022).

In response to these major challenges, both equitable burden-sharing and more predictable funding are central principles of the GCR. Adopted in 2018 by 193 states, the GCR is a non-binding commitment to establish and operationalize a collective framework for burden-sharing. The absence of such a framework has been described as the "perennial gap" in international refugee protection, existing since the adoption of the UN Refugee Convention (Türk, 2018; Triggs and Wall, 2020). The GCR's main goals are fourfold: to ease the pressures on host countries; to enhance refugee self-reliance; to expand access to third-country solutions; and to support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity (UNHCR, 2018). The GCR also envisages the development of resettlement places and complementary pathways for admission to third countries and other actions that states can take at the national level in support of the objectives of the GCR. In addition to states, the GCR engages with a wide range of actors, such as international and regional organizations, multilateral development banks, as well as those that have traditionally been marginalized in global multilateral processes, such as civil society organizations (CSOs), municipalities, the private sector, and refugees themselves. To operationalize this participation, stakeholders make pledges – a description of an issue that a pledge maker has identified, a statement of intent to address this issue, and a commitment of resources thereto.

Pledge-making and multi-stakeholder participation are not in and of themselves new initiatives, yet the GCR is combining and consolidating them in ways that may hold promise. Additionally, the displacement–development framework has mobilized vast amounts of funding through international institutions. This includes $2 billion in loans and grants to low-income refugee-hosting states through the World Bank Group's International Development Association Refugee Sub-Window, hundreds of millions of dollars committed to development projects through regional development banks and an uptake in initiatives and financing from the private sector (Miller, 2019; Kelley, 2022). These amounts are undoubtedly significant, as is their potential to expand local infrastructure and foster more opportunities for forcibly displaced persons and their host nations, yet this may allow states in the Global North to fund projects in the Global South without dismantling their policies built on deterrence and restriction (Chimni, 2018). Further, Hathaway (2018) argues that the GCR's non-binding nature and lack of enforcement leave it overly procedural and aspirational and may keep intact the significant imbalances that it supposedly

seeks to address. While the GCR is non-binding, it exists within an institutional framework of international cooperation and political commitments that align with developmental goals (Gilbert, 2019).

The GCR is one component of a larger, multilateral and coordinated effort toward addressing protracted and large-scale refugee situations and forced displacement. Several large-scale movements of refugees and migrants in 2014 and 2015 highlighted the inadequacies of the international protection framework as receiving states, mostly in the Global North, responded with deterrence and restriction. Forced displacement was growing in scope and severity in many regions and the majority of receiving states were in the developing South, as mentioned above, yet it was the influx of Syrian refugees into Europe – labeled as a "refugee crisis" by European states – that precipitated several convocations by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (Ferris and Donato, 2020). The mandate of these convocations was to develop a framework for equitable and predictable funding as well as greater burden-sharing. This led to the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the main substantive outcome of which was the codification of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). The CRRF is designed to realize the goals of equitable and predictable funding, self-reliance, and multi-stakeholder participation that are elements of a developmental approach toward forced displacement. Beginning in 2017, the CRRF and its humanitarian–developmental approach was used in various pilot projects in 15 states and the lessons learned therein would inform the GCR.

This larger effort therefore represents a network of compacts, initiatives, funding mechanisms, and other innovations across various sectors geared toward bolstering a developmental response to forced displacement as well as statelessness. In addition to the GCR, out of the New York Declaration came the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (hereafter "GCSORM") with its own mandate. Measures to reduce statelessness feature in the GCSORM, for example, the harmonization of travel documents, ensuring gender equality in the conferral of nationality to children, increasing birth registration, and providing nationality to children born in another state's territory, especially where a child would otherwise be stateless (UN, 2018). The CRRF commits to working toward immediate birth registration of refugee children upon reception and assisting in ensuring access to marriage, death, and birth certificates and other documentation. It also calls for the collection of data on both displaced populations and the implementation of the framework itself to allow not only for a more accurate picture of statelessness but to inform and refine policy.

There is currently no compact dedicated to statelessness, although the existing framework does contain provisions on the eradication thereof. The GCR encourages the establishment of a global network of universities, academic alliances, and research institutions on "refugees, other forced displacement and statelessness issues" working toward "research, training and scholarship opportunities" in line with the goals of the GCR (UNHCR, 2018). The GCR also calls for the establishment

of and referral to statelessness status determination procedures as well as the capacity building of national civil registries to prevent the risks of statelessness "including through digital technology and the provision of mobile services, subject to full respect for data protection and privacy principles" (UNHCR, 2018). The GCR and CRRF acknowledge that statelessness is both a cause and consequence of refugee movements and encourage states to accede to the 1954 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (hereafter "1954 Stateless Convention") and the 1961 UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (hereafter "1961 Stateless Convention"). Further, it encourages states, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other stakeholders to contribute resources and expertise to support the sharing of "good, gender-sensitive practices for the prevention and reduction of statelessness" and the development of national, regional, and international action plans to end statelessness (UNHCR, 2018).

THE PLEDGING SYSTEM

The developmental approach, as sketched above, contains certain common tools – multi-stakeholder participation, local and national infrastructural expansion and an emphasis on self-reliance – that are increasingly unfolding in the institutional response to forced displacement. Included in this set of tools, is the system of pledge-making. Pledges can take the form of financial, material, or technical assistance. Additionally, pledges may provide for resettlement places, complementary pathways for admission to third countries, and "other actions that States have elected to take at the national level in support of the objectives of the global compact" (UNHCR, 2018). Various stakeholders, individually and in cooperation, such as states, regional intergovernmental organizations, multilateral development banks, education institutions, CSOs, faith-based actors, the private sector, and others make pledges of assistance to refugees and hosting communities. To monitor the progress of these pledges and the GCR as a whole, the Compact established a Global Refugee Forum that takes place in Geneva every four years for UN Member States and relevant stakeholders to announce pledges made, take stock of past pledges and consider opportunities and challenges for burden-sharing. The first and second of these took place in 2019 and 2023, respectively. Additionally, the GCR provides for a biennial meeting of high-level officials in between the forums as a means of "mid-term review." These make it possible for the pledging system to be used as an indicator for the success of the GCR (Gilbert, 2019).

Several forums have been convened for the purpose of announcing and stock-taking pledges made toward statelessness. This includes the UNHCR's Ministerial Intergovernmental Event on Refugees and Stateless Persons in 2011 and the High-Level Segment on Statelessness in 2019, which were held at the midpoint of the IBelong campaign. The 2019 High-Level Segment was announced in tandem with the GCR to address statelessness and is thus more explicitly part of the GCR's framework than the 2011 event. The eradication of statelessness thus follows suit

with the GCR by adopting pledging as a core mechanism for the operationalization of multi-stakeholder participation and burden-sharing. The stateless-specific events appear to be ad hoc events rather than quadrennial like the forums, raising concerns as to whether momentum will be maintained. While the GCR initially contributed to greater awareness and global mobilization toward the eradication of statelessness, Alexander (2024) argues that this has since waned. She notes, for example, that the burden of global advocacy since the 2019 High-Level Segment has fallen on civil society who have considerably less resources and reach than the UNHCR (Alexander, 2024: 139). A further mechanism for stock-taking is the publicly available online dashboard that collects and displays data on the implementation of pledges.

As of February 2025, 15.71% of pledges are listed as fulfilled – 522 pledges out of 3,322 – 2.35% are in the planning stage and 30.46% are in progress. The vast majority of pledges – 51.48% – are listed as "N/A," reflecting pledges where implementation data is not available or has not been reported. The pledging system is still nascent and there remain questions on its efficacy as a whole. Pledges often contain broad commitments to improvement but do not specify or quantify the financial or material contributions. Some states made pledges that contained funding commitments that had already been made under other initiatives (InterAction, 2021: 11). Pledges have been made without specifying timeframes, rendering it unclear whether the pledge was describing previous efforts, ongoing efforts, or commitments to future efforts. Assessed against the GCR's main criteria – greater funding and multi-stakeholder participation – pledging has thus far fallen short. Of the pledges made at the 2019 Forum, only one sixth were financial commitments and 70% were made by the main refugee-hosting countries surrounding Venezuela and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Najmah Ali notes that "donor countries, like the US and those in the EU, comprised solely 13% of all top crisis-related pledges, failing to show meaningful solidarity with those states hosting the vast majority of the world's refugees" (Ali, 2022). This raises concerns as to whether the pledging system can contribute to measures taken toward eradicating statelessness. The following discussion contextualizes this within the SADC region.

PART II

STATELESSNESS IN THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN
DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY

A stateless person is defined in Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention as someone who is not considered a national by any state under the operation of its law. The legal recognition of nationality is a vital link between individual persons and the state to which they belong (Mbiyozo, 2019). Nevertheless, belonging to a particular state is not always available to all persons on the African continent. The consequences of statelessness are far-reaching, as stateless persons are unable to access socio-economic rights, such as housing, education, employment, and health care. Without valid and

legal documentation, stateless persons' freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention is compromised. Further, stateless persons face severe psychological impacts, as they are unable to live a normal life (Warria and Chikadzi, 2022).

The very nature of statelessness makes it difficult to assess its scope accurately. On the one hand, the UNHCR reported in 2023 that there were 4.4 million stateless persons globally (UNHCR Global Trends, 2023). This figure is heavily caveated, as it is based on data from 95 countries that report data on statelessness, with the UNHCR stating that half of all countries do not report any data on statelessness. In 2020, the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (hereafter "ISI") published that there were around 15 million persons globally who were stateless (ISI, 2020). Thus, it is not possible to put an exact number on the stateless population, and any official estimate is likely far less than the true number. Data collection is a key concern for the GCR and its larger framework, as discussed earlier, yet this goal is complicated by many of the systemic challenges that cause and exacerbate statelessness.

Stateless persons within the African continent form part of a vulnerable group of persons who are faced with several forms of human rights abuses. Some of the largest estimated stateless populations in the world are found in Southern Africa with conflict exacerbating already high numbers of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in the DRC and Mozambique (UNHCR Global Trends, 2023). Statelessness in the Southern African region is primarily attributed to colonial histories, long-term forced displacement and migration, discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, and discriminatory gender laws that do not allow women to pass their nationality to their children on the same grounds as men (Manby, 2009). Further contributing to the issue is the lack of provisions for nomadic and cross-border populations, deficient dual nationality laws, the denial of access to naturalization, provisions with regards to state succession, a lack of access to nationality documentation, abusive withdrawal of citizenship, and poor civil registry systems (Manby, 2009).

Structural discrimination in society is a leading cause of statelessness globally, particularly discriminatory gender laws (Manby, 2009; Beninger and Manjoo, 2023). In several African countries, as is the case in many other countries, direct discrimination is found in patriarchal nationality laws that fail to ensure that women have equal rights in conferring nationality to their children as men. Furthermore, an unregistered marriage is likely to result in an unregistered birth. In countries upholding discriminatory nationality laws against women and where women are barred from conferring their nationality to the child, the lack of a marriage certificate will mean that the child may become stateless. Numerous scholars have brought attention to the lack of literature regarding gender and statelessness, which is troubling, as gender discrimination is the main cause of statelessness (Beninger and Manjoo, 2023). There have, nonetheless, been judicial challenges to discriminatory nationality laws. In Botswana, the Court of Appeal presided over a milestone judgment in Attorney-General v. Dow (1992) where it approved a woman's right to pass on her citizenship to her children and spouse.

Statelessness also results from the arbitrary deprivation and denial of nationality, as is the case when a person who has been deprived of their nationality is not eligible to acquire another nationality or does not possess another nationality (Manby, 2009). In the case of Modise v. Botswana (1997), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (hereafter "ACHPR") held that Article 5 of the African Charter – which guarantees the right to dignity and recognition of legal status – finds application in matters where the government deprived persons of their nationality, which results in them being stateless. The ACHPR reinforced this decision in the case of Amnesty International v. Zambia (2000). Additionally, statelessness can result from processes of political restructuring, particularly those that involve racist or xenophobic campaigns by states. In Côte d'Ivoire, persons eligible for Ivorian citizenship who had migrated to Côte d'Ivoire had their right to citizenship revoked as a part of the Government's campaign to achieve ethnic purity (AU, 2015). Decolonization has also strongly influenced many people's nationality and is responsible for statelessness or leaving persons with a disputed claim to citizenship in various parts of the world. Many new nations were created when states gained independence from colonial empires. During the process of enacting new legal frameworks, governments had the liberty of determining who they considered as citizens. In the process, certain groups were privileged more than others depending on religious, ethnic, or historical considerations. A lack of provisions for nomadic and cross-border populations whose identities did not fall squarely within the new borders has also led to statelessness (Mbiyozo, 2022).

Statelessness can occur through legal gaps in citizenship laws. For example, where no provision is made for foundlings or poor civil registry systems that lead to a lack of birth registration (Manby, 2009). In 2011, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (hereafter "ACERWC") made a groundbreaking decision when the Kenyan government's refusal to grant citizenship to children of Nubian descent was challenged. In OBO Children of Nubian Descent in Kenya v. Kenya (2011), it was argued that this denial resulted in the gross violation of their human rights and a violation of Article 6 of the African Children's Charter. Since independence, Nubian communities had become stateless and Nubian children were deprived of the right to nationality and the documentation that enabled access to education and health care. The ACERWC found that this discrimination was in violation of "African human rights standards" and it used a human rights approach to address the discrimination caused by statelessness. Addressing the major root causes of statelessness entails states and regional bodies playing a central role in legislative, policy, and other reforms.

REGIONAL FRAMEWORK ON NATIONALITY IN AFRICA

The current African framework on the right to nationality is quite limiting. The 1986 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (hereafter "African Charter") is silent on the right to a nationality, but it makes provision for procedural rights in

circumstances where critical rights are violated. However, Article 5 of the African Charter makes provision for the right to the recognition of one's legal status. Article 6 of the 1999 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (hereafter "African Children's Charter") provides for the right to be registered immediately after birth, asserts that every child has the right to a nationality, and underscore that states have the responsibility to ensure that children born within their territory, who are not granted the nationality of another state, acquire nationality. The African Children's Charter, however, does not make provision for the right to a nationality of origin. The 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (hereafter "Protocol on the Rights of Women"), in Article 6(g)-(h), guarantees both men's and women's rights to acquire the nationality of their partner and transmit it to their children. Therefore, the Protocol on the Rights of Women reinforces that African women have the right to gain a nationality and to acquire the nationality of their husbands and supplements the degree of protection.

In 2013, the ACHPR adopted a resolution on the right to a nationality, which delegated the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons to undertake a study on nationality laws in Africa. The "Right to Nationality in Africa" was published in 2014 (AU, 2014). The findings of the study reiterated the urgent need to develop a further Protocol to the African Charter to address the various issues of nationality and statelessness in Africa. On 17 February 2024, almost 10 years later, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa (hereafter "Nationality and Statelessness Protocol") was adopted by the ACHPR in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The adoption of this Protocol was truly revolutionary for the African continent and a step in the right direction to end statelessness in Africa. This Protocol is now a binding document, and the objectives of the Protocol are laid out in Article 2:

> Promote, protect and ensure respect for the right to a nationality in Africa; Ensure that statelessness in Africa is prevented and eradicated; Determine the general principles for the prevention, the elimination of the risk of statelessness and eradication of statelessness in Africa; and Promote the aspirations of the African people for an African citizenship.

State parties to the African Charter are encouraged to sign and ratify the Nationality and Statelessness Protocol to facilitate its entry into force. Beyond regional efforts, the eradication of statelessness receives institutional support through global initiatives.

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS TO ERADICATE STATELESSNESS

In the last 10 years, there have been great efforts to eradicate statelessness. The UNHCR's Global Action Campaign to Eradicate Statelessness, known as the IBelong campaign and that ran from 2014 to 2024, brought to light the issue of statelessness. Many of the SADC countries have taken steps to amend the gaps in their legislation

and grant stateless persons a nationality. Since the end of the campaign, the Global Alliance to End Statelessness was launched on 14 October 2024 at the High-Level Segment on Statelessness in Geneva, building on the foundational successes of the IBelong campaign. The 2024 High-Level Segment on Statelessness was held to launch the Global Alliance to End Statelessness and was not used to make or monitor pledges. It is thus not included in the analysis of pledges made toward statelessness in this paper. The Global Alliance to End Statelessness is the latest initiative, with the goal of finding solutions to end statelessness through a multi-stakeholder approach. The Global Alliance, with the UNHCR as its Secretariat, brings together a range of actors, such as governments, regional bodies, UN agencies, and other essential stakeholders to collaborate, share expertise and good practices, and ensure that the rights of stateless persons are upheld. The Global Alliance thus shares certain mechanisms with the GCR, such as a multi-stakeholder approach, which is discussed alongside the pledging system in the next section.

PART III

PLEDGE-MAKING IN THE SADC: EARLY ANALYSIS

The GCR, as discussed above, does not deal extensively with statelessness. It has been supplemented by ad hoc stateless-specific events that used the pledging system. Nonetheless, pledges toward ending statelessness have been made at the previous two Global Refugee Forums as well as the High-Level Segment on Statelessness. Long-term and systemic analysis of these pledges is required to fully appreciate the extent to which there has been a material impact on ending statelessness in the region. The following section offers a step toward this by evaluating the role that the GCR and the pledging system played in the measures adopted thus far. It will be shown that states are currently playing the most significant role in offering pledges to address statelessness. While this is encouraging, as Part II showed, statelessness often hinges on discriminatory laws; this also reveals a potential lack of multi-stakeholder collaboration. Part II also discussed some of the major developments toward the goal of eradicating statelessness in the SADC region that are not explicitly connected to pledging. Part III adds to this discussion to effectively analyze the role of the GCR's framework in addressing statelessness.

In 2011, the UNHCR held a Ministerial Intergovernmental Event on Refugees and Stateless Persons that used pledge-making. A total of 62 states and the African Union (AU) made stateless-related pledges. South Africa and Tanzania pledged to become state parties to both statelessness conventions, while Madagascar and Zambia pledged to become parties to the 1961 Statelessness Convention (UNHCR, 2011). Mozambique noted that it was in the advanced stages of acceding to both conventions. Mozambique, Zambia, Namibia, and the DRC pledged to conduct studies and awareness campaigns on statelessness, and the latter two countries pledged to undertake civil registration projects (UNHCR, 2011). Before the 2019

High-Level Segment, 10 of the 16 SADC countries[3] held a Preparatory Meeting where they reflected on achievements thus far. Mozambique noted that it had become a state party to both conventions and Namibia reported that it had improved birth registration and increased the number of registration points – its birth registration rate went from 67% in 2011 to 88% in 2019 (UNHCR, 2019). States also outlined pledges that would eventually be made at the 2019 High-Level Segment, some with amendments or alterations.

At the 2019 High-Level Segment, held at the midpoint of the IBelong campaign, 11 Southern African states made a total of 46 pledges toward eradicating statelessness. This included the non-SADC Republic of Congo. A treaty-signing event was held where Angola acceded to both Statelessness Conventions. Most pledges were aimed at ensuring that no child is born stateless, granting protection status to stateless migrants and facilitating their naturalization, birth registration, acceding to Statelessness Conventions, and the improvement of qualitative and quantitative data on stateless populations. These reflect Actions 2, 6, 7, 9, and 10, respectively, of the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. Five of the 21 CSOs that made pledges were based in Southern Africa (UNHCR, 2020: 18). These kinds of regular forums can serve an important accountability function, as they provide intervals for which states can use as timelines. They can, in addition, catalyze legal commitments and policy changes.

Between the Global Refugee Forums, the 2011 event and the 2019 High-Level Segment, 15 of the 16 SADC countries had submitted pledges related to statelessness. Seychelles has not made statelessness-related pledges. Mauritius made pledges at the Preparatory Meeting only and reported on progress made thereto. The highest number of state pledges dealt with accession to the Statelessness Conventions, data collection, and strengthening birth registration. In addition, states committed to: engaging in law reform; raising awareness and sensitization; establishing statelessness determination procedures; facilitating access to naturalization; and developing a National Action Plan to end statelessness. The GCR's online dashboard shows that 51 pledges dealing with statelessness have been made by the Southern African region, 30 of which were by states. This does not include pledges made to the Southern African region from outside the region. The 2019 High-Level Segment pledges are not included on the dashboard; as a result, the total number of pledges made is closer to 100.

Pledge implementation thus far in the region has shown some progress toward the eradication of statelessness through legislative reform and documentation drives. In Botswana, legislative reform has been introduced to amend the Refugee (Recognition and Control) Act to allow for the issuance of identity cards to refugees and members of their families, in pursuance of its pledge made at the 2019 Forum. In 2021, Botswana drafted a National Action Plan and has been in discussion with the UNHCR to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on statelessness. Mozambique

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[3] Botswana, Comoros, DRC, Madagascar, Seychelles, and Tanzania did not participate.

has undertaken various exercises to provide documentation, birth registration, and national IDs in collaboration with the UNHCR and the Catholic University of Mozambique – an example of effective multi-stakeholder collaboration. Since 2021, more than 45,000 identity documents and birth certificates have been issued to both those displaced by ongoing conflict and host communities. Additionally, several projects have been launched in Mozambique, with funding and infrastructure from the Vodafone Foundation and the Instant Network School, to expand access to digital education services for refugees.

The following section thematizes the pledges made by SADC states toward addressing statelessness at the Forums and the 2019 High-Level Segment and highlights examples of pledge implementation. There is still a lack of reliable implementation data on the pledges made at the 2023 Forum and on the long-term impacts of the 2019 pledges; thus, more research is required. Emphasis in this section is placed on pledges that have been fully or partially implemented, unless mentioned otherwise, as this reflects this paper's aim. As mentioned below, most pledges have not been implemented; therefore, this is not a comprehensive report of all of the pledges made.

THEMATIC PRIORITIES OF PLEDGES

Develop and strengthen systems for the identification and protection of stateless migrants

Most stateless persons remain in the country of their birth; however, some move and become migrants or refugees. The majority of persons are not recognized as stateless; resultantly, they are faced with serious human rights violations due to their lack of legal status. In terms of the 1954 Statelessness Convention, states should establish procedures to determine who is stateless. In this way, stateless migrants will be able to acquire legal status in the country in which they find themselves and be able to enjoy basic human rights. Statelessness determination procedures are recommended for stateless persons in migratory situations. It is not a suitable procedure for situations with large-scale in situ stateless populations. In terms of a long-term solution, states are encouraged to facilitate the naturalization of recognized stateless persons.

Zambia, one of the CRRF pilot countries, in implementing its pledge at the 2019 High-Level Segment toward greater access to birth registration and certification for persons born in the territory, has undertaken exercises to register births and issue birth certificates and refugee documents at the Mohebi, Mantapala and Mayukwayukwa refugee settlements. This involved the introduction of a new system to register and issue birth certificates on the spot (UNHCR, 2022). In service of its pledge at the 2019 High-Level Segment, the DRC registered 1,278 children, including 609 girls and 669 boys, of whom 512 were internally displaced children, 457 were repatriated children, and 309 were children from host communities (UNHCR, 2024). Eswatini committed to preventing and eradicating statelessness by conducting a

nationwide "mop-up" exercise to register and issue nationality documentation to those entitled to it to ensure legal identity and facilitate inclusion by 2022. Further, this would assist in identifying stateless people and those at risk of statelessness and consider legal, policy, and administrative reforms that will address and end the statelessness situation by 2024. Eswatini launched its national "mopping-up" exercise as well as regional exercises in Shiselweni and Lubombo. These exercises are ongoing and over a thousand people have been issued with documents.

Introduce provisions in the nationality law to prevent statelessness and ensure effective implementation of these safeguards

The majority of stateless persons have not held a nationality since birth; this often occurs due to the gaps in states' nationality laws. Each country has its own laws that make provisions for the acquisition or withdrawal of a nationality. However, if the laws are deficient regarding the right to a nationality, persons can be barred and left stateless. The 1961 Statelessness Convention stipulates three crucial protections that states are required to introduce in their nationality laws to prevent childhood statelessness. These are, to grant nationality to children: born on the territory if they would otherwise be stateless; born abroad to nationals if they would otherwise be stateless; and found on the territory to unknown parentage, known as "foundlings." A number of states are not signatories to the 1961 Convention and those states that have ratified the 1961 Convention have not yet included these safeguards in their nationality laws. Lesotho pledged to enact by 2020 the bill on nationality that grants nationality to children of unknown origin found in its territory and provides for a safeguard to grant nationality to children born on the territory who would otherwise be stateless, although this has not yet occurred. However, in 2018, Lesotho enacted constitutional amendments that allow for equality in the conferral of nationality on spouses (Eighth Amendment to the Constitution Act, 2018: section 40).

Improve quantitative data on stateless populations

Only a handful of countries report on quantitative data on stateless populations, while some of the countries globally with a large suspected stateless population do not report on statelessness at all. There are several ways how statistics and information on the situation of stateless populations can be gathered, using a range of methods, including analyses of civil registration data, population censuses, and targeted surveys and studies. The Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics developed the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (hereafter "IROSS"), which was submitted to and unanimously endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2023. IROSS seeks to improve the quality of data on statelessness by providing guidance on the production, coordination, and dissemination of stateless-related statistics. In late 2022, commissioned and assisted by the UNHCR, Malawi validated and published a national study on statelessness

and the risks of statelessness, which it pledged to do in 2019. Although Angola made no explicit pledge to do so, released its study on statelessness and risks of statelessness in 2022 (Lungu, 2022).

National surveys of this sort are crucial to a state's response and action plan toward statelessness to first establish the scope of the problem. Several countries in the SADC region still require complete and comprehensive national surveys of this sort; South Africa's survey is set to be completed in 2027, while Zimbabwe's survey still requires field research. Eswatini's national study, which had been earmarked for completion in 2021, required interviews with focus groups, which were hampered by COVID-19 restrictions and internal unrest. While the preliminary report was discussed at a validation workshop, it was decided that more interviews were to be conducted. These national studies are often reliant on UNHCR funding for completion. Where national surveys have not yet been completed, any potential plans to address statelessness are thwarted, as states do not have accurate data upon which to build their policies.

Strengthen institutional coordination on statelessness

States are encouraged to develop a national action plan to end statelessness, which includes the identification and protection of stateless persons, as well as the prevention and reduction of statelessness. A national action plan would highlight the key objectives, activities, and actors responsible for implementation. To this end, national inter-ministerial taskforces or working groups on statelessness are established to facilitate coordination across ministries and levels of government. Namibia pledged to adopt a National Action Plan to End Statelessness by June 2020. A National Committee on Statelessness (NCS) comprising stakeholders; Offices, Ministries and Agencies (OMAs); UN agencies; and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was established to spearhead the implementation of the proposed plan. Malawi adopted a National Action Plan on the Eradication of Statelessness in 2023, supported by the UNHCR, to implement various actions of the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. In the same year, Zambia updated and adopted its National Action Plan to End Statelessness, which, among other things, recommends amendments to the Citizenship Act No. 33 of 2016 and the National Registration Act Chapter 126, to establish a statelessness determination procedure and raise the maximum age by which foundlings would be presumed to have Zambian nationality.

PROGRESS BEYOND PLEDGING

While one of the GCR's main forms of operationalization is the pledging system, it exists within a larger framework of events, campaigns, multi-stakeholder participation, and funding mobilization. Global and sustained campaigns to eradicate statelessness, such as the Global Alliance, function with their own mandate and institutional structure that have significant overlaps with other initiatives like the

GCR. Efforts made toward the eradication of statelessness are often manifestations of pre-existing national, regional, or international projects that may or may not be expressed through a pledge. Mauritius, for example, reported at the Preparatory Meeting in 2019 that 99.7% of children were registered at birth, and that all cases of late birth registration were referred to and solved by the Civil Status Office and the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare.

Many of the Forum pledges made in the region were by the UN Country Team (UNCT), who committed to support or continue supporting governments. Their work is facilitatory, and progress often reflects ongoing efforts and not necessarily novel initiatives made through the pledging system. This facilitatory relationship shows that there is collaboration between states and development actors – a key aim of the GCR. Yet in the case of statelessness, states must maintain a central role in addressing systemic exclusion. The UNCT in Angola helped launch a registration and documentation exercise in 2023 to pave the way for greater access to services as well as social and economic integration. In Luanda, 1,041 refugees with expired documentation had been re-registered (UNCT, 2023: 25). Further, authorities announced that all asylum seekers processed before 2015 would be automatically recognized. Beginning in 2020, legislative reform was introduced to allow the civil registration and issuance of ID cards to about 4 million unregistered individuals who hold a voter's card and appear in the electoral roll (Offerman, 2022: 9).

States engage in regular legislative reform to address gaps in their nationality laws that have the effect of reducing statelessness. While reform such as this is situated within the larger global and regional efforts to eradicate statelessness and institutionalize multi-stakeholder participation, the pledging system is not necessarily a sine qua non for this reform. A major cause of statelessness is discriminatory nationality laws that result in direct or indirect exclusion. While not in line with any specific pledge, Madagascar in 2019 removed gender discrimination from its nationality law and allowed women to confer nationality on their children on an equal basis with men. Gender discrimination in the conferral of nationality is one of the leading causes of statelessness and takes concerted legislative effort to alleviate. However, as the pledging system and the GCR are voluntarist, the system's ability to galvanize legislative and policy reform that is not already in progress may be muted.

The pledging system is designed for the making and monitoring of pledges and other progress. As pledging and the GCR are voluntary, there is no institutional form of accountability or enforcement. Pledges can thus be made and remade at succeeding events, without making any progress. In 2011, Zambia pledged to accede to the 1961 Statelessness Convention, then again in 2019 at the High-Level Segment and has still not become a state party. The implementation of pledges is often hamstrung by the slow incrementality of bureaucracy and the mercuriality of changing administrations. The vast majority of pledges made toward statelessness in the Southern African region are listed as in the planning stage or in progress. Arguably, as the GCR is built atop a developmental approach, progress should be measured in the long term. However,

the pledging system is a means to make incremental progress through smaller, achievable deliverables, but the low implementation rate reveals early concerns of unsustainability. The GCR's dashboard shows that pledge-making spikes in the years of the Forums, yet the rate of implementation has remained below 30%.

CONCLUSION

The degree to which the GCR and the pledging system can make progress in eradicating statelessness is largely a function of how receptive a state is to addressing the issue. States with a pre-existing commitment to enact more inclusive nationality legislation, expand their civil registration systems, and take other steps toward eradicating statelessness may reap great benefits from the pledging system and the momentum of the GCR. However, the pledging system will play a minor role in states that do not have the same commitment or political will. Further, the pledging system has no monitoring or accountability authority. Moreover, there is no obligation to report on the implementation of pledges, let alone to make pledges. It is evident that the pledging system may be largely facilitatory and unable to galvanize large-scale burden-sharing. The voluntarist nature of pledging also means that the implementation rate of pledges has remained low; yet it is important to note that a developmental approach requires long-term analysis.

There remains an urgent need to eradicate statelessness. States in the SADC region are encouraged to adopt stateless-determination legislation and undertake national surveys on statelessness and associated risks to better outline the scope of the problem. These steps require political will but also financial and other resources. Addressing statelessness also requires active participation and collaboration from multiple components of government at every level, as well as non-state actors that can contribute the necessary resources. Early evidence shows that the pledging system is not adequately securing resources and multi-stakeholder participation for eradicating statelessness in all cases, but there are, nonetheless, some important measures being taken toward this goal.

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Corrigendum

Corrigendum: Author's Name and Affiliation Correction

Navigating Passports and Borders: The Complex Realities of Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa

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One of the authors' names was missing and one of the affiliations was not updated. Authors' names and affiliations list should be corrected as follows:

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