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Safeguarding migrant and refugee children: a critical contemporary challenge

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This paper investigates the pivotal role of psycho-social support in bolstering the mental and spiritual well-being of migrant and refugee children. It highlights the necessity to shield these vulnerable groups from spiritual abuse within humanitarian efforts. Remarkably, an estimated 117 million people are currently displaced by conflict, violence, war, and natural disasters, and as of 2023, nearly half of them are under the age of 18. The call, therefore, for culturally sensitive, effective interventions is manifestly urgent. Our research underscores, in order to highlight, the significance of *professionalizing* faith-based and local faith actors to advocate for standards that mitigate the risks of religious exploitation and safeguard the children's spiritual identity, practices, and beliefs. We highlight the existing gaps in the literature and propose a framework for further research. Our focus is on the effectiveness of the Global Compact on Refugees and the impact of local versus global policies on the protection and well-being of migrant and refugee children. Our analysis extends to humanitarian agencies' and caregivers' best practices and prevention strategies. It further emphasizes the importance of safeguarding neutrality at all times and promoting community reintegration. Our findings call for a concerted effort to enhance professionalism among those working with refugees in humanitarian frameworks, prioritizing children's spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the rights of children on the move. It advocates for policies and practices that recognize their vulnerability and potential for resilience.

KEYWORDS

children on the move, religious freedom, freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), refugees and migrants, unaccompanied minors, humanitarian support for refugees, child welfare, forced conversion

1 Introduction

The global crisis arising from child displacement demands an integrated approach in order to safeguard the rights and well-being of migrant and refugee children. This paper delves into the needed *professionalization* of psycho-social support, emphasizing the prevention of spiritual abuse. Drawing on the historical context of child migration and contemporary dynamics of displacement, we examine the roles of key international players and organizations in the complex challenges that displaced children face.

"*Professionalism*" is a term that calls for brief analysis and words of explanation. Considering earlier paradigms, most notably the Hippocratic Oath, professionalism underscores the paramount importance of one's dedication to duty, the priority accorded to

the advancement of knowledge, to empirical research, and adhering to the highest levels of accuracy, objectivity, and thoroughness. Professionalism also entails respect not merely for the identity but also for the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of the end receiver of services, always prioritizing the needs and interests of the recipient over the provider of services.

This is to be emphasized: whether one is a patient, student, or recipient of often sophisticated and highly specialized services, which may be hard to evaluate, primacy must be accorded. Not only do they merit respect, but their sensitivities, needs, and identity must be protected against possible encroachment. This is especially true of minors and young adults, who are vulnerable and overly susceptible to the influence of elders. In light of the age-long practice of religious proselytization, it is imperative to highlight the distinction and needed separation of master from disciple, teacher from student, and doctor from patient in what is often an asymmetrical relationship of one-sided dependency. Migrants and children are particularly vulnerable and must be sheltered from all plausible risks of abuse and indoctrination, as these too often come with hidden and dubious ideological, religious, economic, or political objectives.

Drawing on historical and contemporary migration dynamics, including the significant roles of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations International Organization on Migration (IOM), and United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), this paper highlights the complex landscape migrant and refugee children are called upon to navigate. Despite international efforts, these children remain disproportionately vulnerable to a myriad of risks (UNICEF, 2023; IOM, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). These include trauma, exploitation, and trafficking, with spiritual abuse emerging as a critical concern. This vulnerability necessitates a nuanced understanding of the challenges to their religious identity and the potential for faith-associated risks.

2 Case study: the faith action for children on the move global partners forum

In October 2018, the Faith Action for Children on the Move—Global Partners Forum was convened at the General Curia for the Society of Jesus in Rome, Italy. This assembly represented a collaborative effort among 14 organizations, which included ACT Alliance, ADRA International, Anglican Alliance, Arigatou International, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), Mennonite World Conference, Micah Global, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, World Evangelical Alliance, World Council of Churches, and World Vision International (World Vision International, 2024).

The Forum's primary objective is to foster a dialogue among religious and faith-based organizations, communities, and child advocates regarding the growing challenges children face in migration (Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, 2018). Additionally, the event has been intended to develop a unified action plan to address *three* principal themes:

- 1) Provision of spiritual support to aid healing and resilience among children and caregivers;
- 2) Establishment of a

comprehensive protection continuum for children in migration; and 3) Advocacy for the construction of peaceful societies, thus opposing and combatting xenophobia, racism, and discrimination.

Specifically, the Forum has featured diverse Christian representation, with a few Muslim leaders and a single Jewish representative, to facilitate an exchange of religious perspectives on global migration. The group lacked representation from the non-Abrahamic faiths entirely. Discussion of the risks some religious practices pose to vulnerable populations the examination of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) was absent.

A significant historical reference that was discussed was the case of Père Bruno, whose efforts during World War II saved 400 Jewish children while also safeguarding the children's religious and communal identities (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005). He taught the children in his care Judaism and nurtured their Jewish identity and practice. By comparison, thousands of Jewish children across Europe were baptized during this period and lost their connection to Judaism (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024). Many adults are starting to uncover their history through deathbed confessions and DNA tests that uncover their genetic links to the Jewish people (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008). The scale and scope of this problem are still murky decades after the war, and significant efforts have been made to open the writings of Pope Pius XII to gain greater insight into the historical occurrence. This reminder from the Holocaust underscored the critical need for effective safeguarding measures in contemporary contexts.

The Forum served as a pivotal platform for the researchers, highlighting the dire need for concerted efforts to protect the spiritual well-being and freedom of religion of children on the move. The gathering uncovered a significant gap in the existing literature on best practices regarding safeguarding measures and evaluations to protect the FoRB of migrant and refugee children. Examining the current literature revealed that this topic merits more profound investigation. There is an urgent need to enhance safeguarding protocols, training, education, monitoring, and evaluation.

3 Methodological framework for a systematic literature review on the freedom of religion and belief risks for migrant and refugee minors

Researchers have employed a systematic literature methodology to examine threats to the FoRB often experienced by migrant and refugee minors in humanitarian settings. The core objective of this systematic literature review was to assess the existing research on FoRB risks to migrant and refugee minors within humanitarian contexts. Additionally, we have aimed to identify research gaps signaling the need for further investigation into comprehensive safeguarding strategies.

We have examined scholarly articles, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reports, policy documents, and legal frameworks. The review has concentrated on the intersection of humanitarian aid and child welfare among migrants and refugees and the specific risks posed to their FoRB, with a particular focus on proselytism. This process has further evaluated the efficacy of existing safeguarding measures. Furthermore, it has spotlighted literature gaps, marking areas needing further research.

4 Global migration crisis: an analytical overview of displacement and the plight of refugee children

Human migration has been a constant occurrence throughout recorded human history. Over time, it has evolved from the prehistoric exodus from Africa to the complex and intricate patterns observed today. Various factors have driven this phenomenon, including the pursuit of resources, safety, and economic opportunities. Such factors have also shaped human civilization, impacting the development of nations and cultural landscapes through time, from the Middle Ages and the Age of Exploration to the mass movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The cataclysmic events of World War II led to displacements on an unprecedented scale, prompting the creation of pivotal international organizations. Established to address the pressing needs of affected populations, UNICEF (est. 1946), IOM (est. 1951), and the UNHCR (est. 1950) among others have evolved to meet the challenges of growing global migration and displacement (IOM, 2021; UNHCR, 2023a; UNICEF, 2024).

4.1 The dynamics of contemporary migration

A critical understanding of the distinction between migrants and refugees is essential, placing particular focus on the vulnerabilities faced by young members of this population. By the end of 2023, an estimated 114 million people were displaced by conflict, violence, and natural disasters, nearly half of them under the age of 18, representing a substantial segment of the global refugee population (UNHCR, 2023b; UNICEF, 2024). This highlights the profound impact of forced displacement on children, who also face the challenges of regional migration. Current estimates indicate that there are 36 million child migrants (UNHCR, 2024).

Organizations, including UNICEF, have been crucial in advocating for the rights and protection of migrant and refugee children. They have emphasized the need for access to shelter, education, healthcare, and other vital services (UNICEF, 2023). The increasing number of displaced children and the modern complexities surrounding their condition necessitate enhanced international cooperation and robust policy-making to protect these vulnerable groups.

4.2 The profile of child displacement

Conflicts, violence, and climate-related disasters exacerbate the magnitude of child displacement, illustrating a dire reality. Marked by the protracted nature of displacement, children are too often left in limbo for their entire childhood (Development Aid, 2023). The magnitude and persistence of this problem call for immediate global action and the development of sustainable solutions. Advocacy for the prioritization of displaced children's rights, safe migration pathways, and family reunification must be at the forefront of efforts by entities such as UNICEF.

Displaced children encounter a range of risks. These include physical violence, sexual exploitation, and lack of access to essential

services, which are all exacerbated by the scarcity of comprehensive data for targeted support (UNICEF, 2005). International organizations tirelessly work to ameliorate these conditions through humanitarian aid, policy advocacy, and the implementation of protective programs (UNHCR, 2012).

Global response to the migration, displacement, and refugee crisis, with a particular focus on children, calls for concerted efforts. The historical evolution of such organizations as UNICEF, IOM, and UNHCR highlights the complex nature of migration issues. It is understood that migrant children, especially unaccompanied minors, have different vulnerabilities than adults, requiring different mental health psycho-social supports (MHPSS) (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2014). It underscores the imperative for international collaboration to address the needs of vulnerable populations amid ongoing displacement challenges.

4.3 Vulnerabilities and needs of displaced children: a comparative analysis with adults

This section explores the unique vulnerabilities and needs of displaced children, highlighting how these differ significantly from those experienced by adults. Children on the move, including migrants, displaced individuals, and refugees, face varying challenges that stem from their developmental stage, dependency on adult care, and legal status. This analysis draws upon health data, psychological research, and humanitarian reports to delineate the multifaceted risks these young individuals encounter during displacement. This section synthesizes insights from key international organizations. These include UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, Save the Children Canada (2015), and Plan International, reflecting a consensus on the challenges confronting child migrants and highlighting the imperative for targeted responses.

“Children on the move” encompasses a broad category of minors who migrate, are displaced, or seek refuge due to various drivers, including conflict, violence, poverty, and climate change. Their journey and experience starkly contrast with those of adults (International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, 2023). Children, particularly the younger demographic, exhibit increased physical vulnerability during migration due to their developmental needs (International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, 2023). Key concerns include malnutrition, hunger, disease, illness, bodily injuries, and exhaustion. Displaced children are at a critical stage of their mental and emotional development, making them particularly susceptible to psychological trauma, PTSD, depression, and anxiety, along with related developmental delays and behavioral issues (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2014).

The inherent dependency of children on adult care and protection introduces additional vulnerabilities. Children on the move often find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings without the stable support of family or community, thus making them susceptible to exploitation, including trafficking and sexual abuse. This disruption, compounded by the absence of education and healthcare, further exacerbates their vulnerabilities, hindering their development and long-term well-being (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2014).

Lack of legal status or awareness of their rights can expose children to exploitation, detention, and substandard living conditions, depriving them of essential services and protection (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2014). This legal invisibility

complicates their access to assistance and heightens their vulnerability to rights violations. Remedial efforts must encompass access to nutrition, healthcare, education, and legal protection, thus ensuring a holistic approach to safeguarding their rights and facilitating their recovery and integration.

4.4 Vulnerabilities of separated and unaccompanied minors in migration contexts

Separated and unaccompanied minors represent a highly vulnerable subgroup within the migrant population; forced migration often results from conflict, persecution, or the disarray of migration processes (IOM, 2019). Lack of adult protection capacity increases the likelihood of exploitation, necessitating a focused examination and response to their specific needs.

Addressing their needs through targeted interventions and supportive legal frameworks is critical to safeguarding their rights and ensuring their well-being and integration into a host society. Efforts to protect and support separated and unaccompanied minors must prioritize child protection and well-being, incorporating mechanisms for family tracing and reunification where possible. Appointing legal guardians or advocates, providing access to mental health and psycho-social support, and ensuring inclusive educational opportunities are crucial steps in mitigating risks and supporting their development.

Establishing legal and policy frameworks that recognize and address the unique needs of unaccompanied minors is essential. Such frameworks should facilitate access to asylum, protect against detention and exploitation, and ensure that the children's welfare principles guide all procedures involving these minors (IOM, 2019).

The lack of a protective familial environment subjects unaccompanied minors to increased risks of trafficking forced labor, and sexual exploitation. Desperation in their quest for basic necessities often makes them easy targets for predators. The instability inherent in their migration journey inflicts a substantial psychological strain. Many suffer from anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The absence of a supportive family structure compounds this. These children frequently encounter obstacles in accessing critical services. Without advocates, their rights to healthcare and education are often neglected, impacting their overall well-being and future prospects.

Reception centers should incorporate child-friendly spaces, offering safe environments for play, socialization, recreation, learning, and psychological recovery, facilitating the creation of a semblance of normalcy amidst upheaval. It is imperative to provide immediate health assessments and care, including mental health services, to address any untreated conditions and to provide support for their physical and psychological recovery. Ensuring access to education and language support is crucial for the integration and stability of unaccompanied minors, aiding in the establishment of routine and fostering a sense of belonging (UNHCR, 2002, 2022).

Countries like Norway, Sweden, Germany, Finland, and Canada exemplify best practices in creating supportive environments for refugee children (The Refugee Council, 2024). These include child-friendly spaces, immediate access to education, legal advocacy, and robust healthcare systems emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to reception and integration (UNHCR, 2022).

The distinct vulnerabilities of unaccompanied minors necessitate a concerted, multidisciplinary approach to ensure safety, well-being, and integration into the host communities. By implementing comprehensive support structures and adhering to international guidelines on child protection, we can mitigate the risks these children face and foster conditions conducive to their development and future well-being.

4.5 Trauma exposure and inadequate mental health support in displaced children

This segment critically analyzes the trauma exposure of displaced children, particularly refugees and asylum seekers. It highlights the exacerbation of vulnerabilities due to insufficient mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS). Drawing on insights from UNHCR, WHO, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), it underscores the multifaceted origins of trauma in experience by such children and the resultant complex layers of psychological impact.

Displaced children face a unique constellation of challenges that predispose them to significant trauma. Pre-migration experiences, an arduous journey to safety, and instability often encountered upon arrival intertwine to create a complex trauma profile that is often inadequately addressed by existing MHPSS frameworks.

Exposure to violence, war, persecution, and natural disasters in their countries of origin plant the seeds of trauma, with potential long-term effects on mental health. A perilous journey to safety introduces additional trauma through dangerous crossings, exploitation, and violence, further compounded by the risk of witnessing death and enduring injuries. Upon reaching a host country, the uncertainty surrounding legal status, safety, and future prospects often perpetuates a state of chronic trauma and insecurity. Lack of protection in host countries places children at risk of re-traumatization through abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Language barriers, informational deficits, and distrust towards authorities impede access to necessary MHPSS, hindering healing (World Health Organization, 2023).

Displaced children, particularly those on the move, face heightened risks of labor and sexual exploitation due to their vulnerable status, absence of protective oversight, and often dire circumstances surrounding their displacement (UNHCR, 2013). International organizations, including the UNHCR, UNICEF, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and a wide array of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are actively engaged in efforts to identify, report, and address instances of labor trafficking involving refugee children. These organizations collaborate extensively with national governments to fortify legal frameworks, bolster protection mechanisms, and support affected individuals. This collaborative approach is crucial to developing comprehensive strategies that safeguard the rights and well-being of displaced children, allaying the risks of exploitation and trafficking they face.

Sexual exploitation of children on the move is a severe and pervasive issue, according to reports from UNHCR, ECPAT International and Human Rights Watch (Hawke and Raphael, 2016; Guajardo, 2019; UNHCR, 2022). The perpetrators can be individuals in positions of power, such as smugglers, law enforcement officers, peacekeepers, or members of the local community, but also other refugees (UNHCR, 2021).

In the process of reviewing the available literature, the religious and spiritual well-being of refugee and migrant children is not contemplated, measured, or evaluated. Indeed, the evidence underscores a pressing need for a more comprehensive enhancement of MHPSS for displaced children that includes spiritual abuse (UNHCR, 2018; World Health Organization, 2023). This demands an integrated, multi-sectoral response. Strategies must encompass increasing accessibility to services, ensuring the spiritual, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness of support, and integrating trauma-informed approaches within all stages of migration. Enhancing MHPSS services is crucial to fostering resilience and facilitating the recovery and integration of displaced children into host communities.

4.6 The gap in research—freedom of religion and belief, the risk for spiritual abuse

The ongoing global migration crisis has heightened vulnerabilities among displaced populations, with children enduring particularly severe risks. Pre-eminent among these risks is spiritual abuse and exploitation, detrimentally impacting the psychological, emotional, and spiritual welfare of refugee and migrant children. The threats to the religious identity of children on the move are significant and must be mitigated. This research articulates the nature and consequences of spiritual abuse perpetrated at times by *faith actors*. Preventive measures and practices, similar to those that already exist to safeguard against other forms of abuse (Chowdhury et al., 2020), are needed to preserve the spiritual integrity of these vulnerable children.

The distressing experiences of children on the move extend beyond the physical and emotional hardships to encompass threats to their spiritual well-being. Amidst the upheaval of migration, maintaining religious identity and its related practices poses significant challenges. It is often exacerbated by environments that marginalize them or discriminate against their faith (Kraft, 2015). The complex landscape of spiritual abuse and exploitation encountered by these children has been shared through interviews that retell harrowing stories with shared experiences about stolen faith, broken spirits, and ruptured religious identities (Petersen and Jensen, 2019).

The moral imperative to safeguard children from all forms of abuse must include spiritual abuse under the guise of Freedom of Religion and Belief by actively preventing proselytization and forced conversion.

“On the one hand, religious freedom has opened the world of religion to people; but at the same time, it has also created a vague, or ‘grey’ area where abuse can flourish under the banner of so-called ‘freedom’. The freedom of religion is not an absolute freedom. It must function within the boundaries of the other basic human rights and common law, otherwise there will be clashes between competing rights as guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 18 and the European Convention of Human Rights Article 9. The elements of the right to freedom of religion can be summarised as follows:

A person has the right and freedom to choose any religion.

Participation in a religion must be a free and voluntary act of will on the part of the person.

No unethical method or coercion may be used in order to induce or force any person to participate in a religion. Freedom of religion can easily be misused in order to entrap people in a system and culture that is abusive”. (Pretorius, 2011)

As per the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the term “child” refers to “every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (UNICEF, 1989). For the purpose of this study, children under the age of 18 are too young to legally consent and any conversion of a child would be tantamount to spiritual abuse. For children on the move, who are more vulnerable than other children, it is incumbent on those serving in humanitarian settings to take extra measures to safeguard their religious identity.

Displacement subjects children to environments that may not only be indifferent to their religious beliefs but may actively undermine or exploit them. These challenges range from direct persecution and discrimination to subtler forms of spiritual abuse, including the manipulation of religious belief by faith actors for exploitative purposes (Bowers Du Toit, 2019). Furthermore, the disruption of community networks and limited access to places of worship significantly hinder the ability to observe religious practices, thus contributing to a sense of isolation, alienation, and spiritual disorientation (Hertzberg, 2015; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2022).

Spiritual abuse, in the context of displaced children, entails manipulation, coercion and exploitation of their beliefs and practices, often for the benefit of the perpetrator. It can be manifested through forced participation in religious activities, the use of spiritual justification for abusive behavior, or the exploitation of the children’s quest for belonging during tumultuous times. Such abuse often stems from power imbalances, wide age differentials, and asymmetrical relations in knowledge, experience, influence, and power. Abuse can take the form of manipulation by authority figures, leading to profound psychological and emotional damage, including lasting and enduring mistrust of religious institutions, leading to spiritual disorientation (LeBlanc and Koenig, 2019).

Spiritual abuse among displaced children can have lasting repercussions on their development and overall well-being. Beyond the immediate psychological distress, such exploitation can erode trust in religious institutions and figures, potentially leading to a profound crisis of faith. The manipulation of spiritual beliefs exacerbates the vulnerability of these children, making them more susceptible to further abuse and exploitation.

Recruitment by religious groups, faith actors, and *cults* poses a substantial risk, particularly for unaccompanied minors in search of inclusion, community, and identity (Hadding et al., 2023). These groups often exploit the vulnerabilities of displaced populations, promising a sense of inclusion and belonging while bent on exploiting their members’ resources. Recognizing and addressing the hidden intentions behind such recruitment efforts is crucial in protecting children from spiritual exploitation (UNODC, 2017).

The dangers and risks of spiritual abuse, particularly among displaced and refugee children, are significantly high (UNODC, 2017). Yet, they represent often overlooked aspects of the global migration crisis. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the nuances of spiritual vulnerability and a commitment to protecting the spiritual rights of displaced populations.

Through targeted prevention strategies and the pursuit of best practices, it is possible to mitigate the risks and ensure that the spiritual needs of displaced children are met with sensitivity, professionalism, and respect (UNHCR, 2015). Collaboration among child protection agencies, humanitarian organizations and faith communities is essential in crafting a protective environment that honors religious diversity and the children's spiritual integrity.

To date, there is no available research on FoRB and spiritual abuse specific to migrant and refugee children. There are no known instruments in use to measure or report incidents of spiritual abuse of children in humanitarian settings. No assessment tools or methodologies to measure the scope or scale of spiritual abuse amongst this population have been identified (UNHCR, 2015). However, countless stories and interviews with humanitarian aid workers, refugees, and migrants detail the pervasive problem of spiritual abuse spanning the globe (UNHCR, 2015). The prevalence of stories raises the alarm that this abuse of power and position in the name of religious freedom demands future research. Once evaluated, the risks to children on the move necessitate the development of safeguarding measures that honor and protect their right to belief and religious practice.

4.7 Reintegration as a path towards resilience, rehabilitation, social cohesion, and inclusive communities

The global escalating migration crisis underscores the critical importance of effectively reintegrating refugees, migrants, and displaced children, including unaccompanied minors, into host communities. This process is pivotal for the children's personal development and well-being, fostering resilience and social cohesion within host societies (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Navigating the delicate balance between mitigating risks of alienation and seizing opportunities for integration while upholding respect and neutrality with regard to the distinct needs of vulnerable groups is central to successful reintegration efforts (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). The intricate interplay of opportunities, challenges, and unbiased, professional decision-making forms the foundation of this discourse.

Reintegration offers displaced children a critical opportunity to *reclaim a sense of belonging* and stability, which is pivotal to their development and well-being (World Health Organization, 2023). Facilitating access to shelter, education, healthcare, and psychological support is also vital for the children's holistic development (World Health Organization, 2023). Effective reintegration strategies contribute to the cultural diversity of host communities, enhance social cohesion, and foster an environment characterized by genuine mutual respect and understanding (World Health Organization, 2023). The challenges of language and cultural differences, as well as the social stigma attached to an immigrant or refugee status, represent significant hurdles to the integration process. The trauma associated with displacement and loss of support networks complicates the emotional well-being of these children (UNHCR, 2018).

Ensuring proper nurture and stability in housing, education, community connections, and legal status is crucial for successful reintegration. The absence of family nurturing and support amplifies the risks of assimilation and loss of religious identity among

unaccompanied minors, underscoring the need for targeted safeguarding measures (UNHCR, 2021). Through culturally sensitive assessments, professionals must wholly focus on the needs and best interests of displaced children, guided solely by an understanding of the children's backgrounds, past experiences, and preferences. It is essential to involve children in decisions regarding their care, education, and integration prospects, balancing their autonomy with proper adult safeguarding.

A multifaceted strategy combines the strengths of both integration and assimilation perspectives. It is essential for the effective reintegration of refugees, migrants and displaced children and minors into host communities. Professional, unbiased decision-making that fully prioritizes the children's well-being, development, dignity, and rights must be a priority. Fostering stable and secure environments that protect children from uncertainty and risk must be an explicit objective. Empowering children by enabling them to have a voice in their reintegration journey and advocating for their prospects and needs should be respected and addressed.

The reintegration and inclusion of displaced and refugee children into host communities is a complex yet critical endeavor essential for building resilient, diverse, and cohesive societies. Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires a solid commitment to inclusive, unbiased decision-making, safeguarding against uncertainties and empowering children with agency. Collaborative efforts among governments, NGOs, communities, and children must be guided by professionalism, neutrality, objectivity, and respect. This approach benefits displaced children and enriches host societies, promoting a harmonious future where diversity and unity coexist (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

Reintegrating displaced and refugee children into communities is a complex but crucial endeavor that holds the promise of fostering resilient, diverse, cohesive, and cooperative communities and societies. Overcoming the myriad of challenges requires a commitment to professional, unbiased decision-making and program implementation, safeguarding against uncertainty, and empowering children with agency. Addressing these issues effectively and creatively can pave the way for more inclusive and supportive communities for displaced children worldwide.

5 Conclusions and recommendations for further research

An examination of the available literature sought to encompass policies and training pertinent to the protection of children in refugee and humanitarian settings. It demonstrates a well-established foundation in Mental Health and Psycho-social Support (MHPSS) and the deterrence of prevalent forms of child maltreatment. These include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as exploitation. Oversight of these strategies and protocols is robust, facilitated by regulatory entities across both governmental and civil society sectors, with incidents of abuse, particularly among unaccompanied minors, being reported and investigated with considerable diligence.

However, in the realm of safeguarding against spiritual abuse, proselytization, forced conversion, and the infringement on refugees' or migrants' freedom of religion, belief, and practice, the literature is sparse. Few policies are identified within government-operated

refugee camps for reporting incidents of this form of abuse and exploitation. See [European Center for Law and Justice \(2022\)](#) and [World Evangelical Alliance \(2021\)](#) for a discussion of an exception in Greece as well as the [Pew Research Center \(2021\)](#) for an overview of national bans on religion-related groups. Training on how to prevent spiritual abuse or recognize when it has occurred is notably lacking, with minimal evaluative research available. None of the existing studies, policies or protocols are specific to the unique needs of children.

Instances of coerced or forced conversion persist across various settings despite legal prohibitions in such host countries as Greece, underscoring the persistence of this form of abuse. The prevalence of this form of abuse must be measured and evaluated to understand the breadth and depth of the problem in its entirety.

The ongoing threat to the religious identity and practices of migrating children, including during phases of reintegration, illuminates the heightened complexity of their plight and the consequent urgent need for comprehensive monitoring, research, policy development, training, and evaluation efforts to combat spiritual abuse affecting millions of children globally.

To prevent spiritual abuse effectively, a multi-dimensional strategy is essential. This strategy should encompass education on rights for children, professionalization of caregivers and aid workers with training to recognize abuse signs and the establishment of secure spaces for spiritual practices that uphold respect for religious diversity and guard against coercive practices. Prioritizing children's spiritual needs is fundamental to their overall well-being.

The world has witnessed a dramatic increase in the size of migrant and refugee populations, which is greatly exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts, forced displacement, and migration crises. The urgency of addressing this form of abuse has thus been magnified. This research underscores several of the existing literature gaps, offering a basis for future studies. These include evaluating the Global Compact on Refugees' effectiveness and the commitments made by faith-based organizations, examining the dichotomy between local and global reintegration strategies, and assessing the implementation of existing policies. Understanding the roles of host governments, the professionalization, and the capacity-building of religious, ethical, and moral engagements within refugee and humanitarian contexts remains a pivotal area for continued investigation.

Key measures for protecting the spiritual welfare of displaced children include provisions for cultural and religious sensitivity training for caregivers, forming peer support groups, and forging partnerships with local faith communities committed to child protection. It is crucial to develop explicit policies and procedures for preventing and addressing spiritual abuse and empowering children by educating them about their rights and reporting mechanisms.

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An assessment measuring the prevalence of spiritual abuse in refugee and humanitarian settings must be prioritized by government, civil society, and faith groups alike. Future research endeavors should focus on interventions for the prevention of proselytization and forced conversion, as well as support and treatment strategies for this form of trauma among this group of children. Cross-disciplinary and cross-border collaborative research is vital for developing scalable, evidence-based prevention training and interventions tailored to this vulnerable demographic's unique needs.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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