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Trapped in a State-of-Nowhere: Bhutanese Unaccompanied and Separated Refugee-Children in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the lived experiences of Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee children (UASC) residing in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, narrative interviews, and policy analysis, the study explores how these children navigate protracted displacement, legal statelessness, and institutional neglect. Framing the analysis within critical childhood studies, intersectionality, and decolonial thought, the paper reveals how refugee children are rendered both politically invisible and administratively excluded, despite humanitarian narratives of care. It argues that Bhutanese UASC live in a "state-of-nowhere," where they are denied legal identity, citizenship, psychosocial support, and meaningful inclusion in protection frameworks. The findings expose epistemic and structural violence embedded in current refugee governance and call for a shift toward rights-based, child-centred, and regionally coordinated responses. The study contributes to migration and childhood scholarship by centring the agency and voices of refugee children in one of South Asia's most protracted and overlooked displacement contexts.

Introduction

The Bhutanese refugee crisis is one of South Asia's longest and least reported displacement situations. Since the early 1990s, over 100,000 ethnic Nepali (Lhotshampa) were expelled from Bhutan under the 1985 Citizenship Act and the "One Nation, One People" policy, which stripped them of citizenship and rights, labeling them "illegal immigrants" (Hutt, 2003; Rizal, 2004a). Many fled to eastern Nepal, where seven UNHCR-supervised camps were established. Although most were later resettled in countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia, over 6,500—many of them children—remain in Nepal (UNHCR, 2023).

Among them, unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are especially vulnerable. Defined by UNHCR (2008) as individuals under 18 without parental or customary care, UASC face heightened risks of abuse, neglect, and psychosocial harm. They emerge from causes such as displacement-related family separation, orphanhood, abandonment, or strategic separation during resettlement. Camp life has also disrupted kinship networks, worsening their situation (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Despite their vulnerability, UASC have been largely overlooked in academic and policy discourse. While existing research explores the legal and political aspects of statelessness and displacement (Manly & Persaud, 2020; Marie-Laure, 2020), little attention is paid to children's

lived experiences. Remaining refugees in Nepal are still stateless, with no path to citizenship or durable solutions. They face legal work bans, limited access to higher education, restricted movement, and inherited statelessness (Southwick, 2015; UNHCR, 2023).

The significance of this study lies in its focus on the lived experiences of Bhutanese UASC who remain in refugee camps in Nepal—long after the international community has moved on. In focusing on this group, the paper seeks to highlight the hidden costs of unresolved refugee-hood, including the structural and epistemic violence[1] inflicted upon children relegated to a "state-of-nowhere." Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, narrative interviews, and analysis of institutional discourses, this paper critically examines how these children navigate legal invisibility, psychosocial insecurity, and institutional abandonment.

This study investigates how Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee children (UASC) in Nepal experience and respond to statelessness and protracted displacement, and how humanitarian, legal, and policy frameworks shape—or obscure—their agency and vulnerability. The ethnographic evidence presented here also offers operational insights for humanitarian planning—illustrating how protection systems can be redesigned to integrate child-centred participation, psychosocial care, and locally embedded coping networks. Grounded in critical childhood studies, intersectionality, and decolonial thought, it reframes understandings of refugee children in such contexts. The central research question guiding this study is: *How do Bhutanese UASC in Nepal experience and respond to statelessness and protracted displacement, and how do humanitarian, legal, and policy frameworks shape their agency and vulnerability?* The novelty of the study lies in its integration of critical childhood and decolonial perspectives within South Asia's most overlooked refugee context. While earlier works emphasized policy and legal dimensions, this paper foregrounds children's lived epistemic experiences and their micro-practices of resilience—areas seldom explored empirically.

By situating Bhutanese UASC within wider debates on statelessness, humanitarian governance, and childhood, the study contributes to scholarly and policy discourses. It argues for moving beyond technocratic child protection models to address the political, historical, and epistemological dimensions of displacement, ultimately highlighting that these children's experiences reflect political failures of the international protection regime—not just humanitarian concerns.

Historical and political context

The crisis of Bhutanese refugees, particularly those of Lhotshampa origin, is deeply rooted in the ethno-nationalist politics of the Bhutanese state. The Lhotshampa are ethnic Nepali who settled in southern Bhutan as early as the late nineteenth century and became an integral part of Bhutan's multiethnic society. However, by the late twentieth century, they were increasingly viewed by the Bhutanese monarchy as a demographic and cultural threat to the Drukpa identity that the state sought to consolidate.

This exclusionary vision was formalized through the Bhutan Citizenship Act of 1985, which introduced stringent requirements for citizenship, including proof of residence in Bhutan prior to 1958 and documentation of land tax receipts—documents that many Lhotshampa lacked due to historical marginalization (Hutt, 2003). Concurrently, Bhutan launched the "One Nation, One People" policy, or *Driglam Namzha*, which enforced cultural assimilation by mandating the wearing of traditional northern dress and the use of the Dzongkha language in public life (Rizal, 2004). These measures were not only tools of cultural hegemony but also preludes to mass disenfranchisement and expulsion.

Bhutan, nestled between China's Tibetan region and India, is often described as a land of enduring happiness and serenity—where even traffic lights are considered too impersonal. Bhutan is often celebrated internationally as one of the happiest countries in the world, according to indices such as Gross National Happiness and recent media analyses (Herison, 2024). Ruled since 2006 by the popular young monarch, His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, Bhutan remains largely untouched by mass tourism and continues to be celebrated as one of

the happiest countries on Earth (Herison, 2024). Its commitment to free education and health-care, strong communal values, and a deeply spiritual life rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, combined with its breathtaking natural beauty, have cultivated a society where citizens feel grounded, content, and connected (Herison, 2024). Despite all of its seeming tranquillity, Bhutan has a very sad history.

Although the ethnic crisis in Bhutan came to light only a few decades ago as a result of the Royal Government of Bhutan's policy of "One Nation, One People" and Driglahun; Nmizhu (Revival of Traditional Bhutanese Culture). However, it has historical origins, reaching back to the nineteenth century, when Bhutan began its development phase (Khanal, 2001). The Dorji family, one of Bhutan's influential aristocratic lineages closely aligned with the monarchy, managed labour recruitment during the kingdom's early modernization period. Due to labour constraints at the time, the Dorji family[2] sent around 60,000 Nepali labourers to Bhutan to clear the land. Following that, these labourers were given plots of land to possess and farm. Since then, there has been a steady influx of Nepali into Bhutan, the most of whom arrived as contract labourers and eventually settled in southern Bhutan (Khanal, 2001).

The government did not include Nepali from southern Bhutan in any aspect of national affairs until the 1950s because it was easy for the Bhutanese government to use them as labourers (Karat, 2001). Bhutanese of Nepali ancestry were denied civil and political rights, and a dictatorship had reduced them to the level of 'stupid animals' as some say this. The expression reflects oral testimonies cited in Human Rights Watch and Rizal (2004), who documented degrading rhetoric used by local officials against Lhotshampas during the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, ethnic Nepali decided to organize a protest movement against the Royal Government's discriminating policies, establishing a political platform known as the Bhutan State Congress, through which they submitted a memorandum to the Maharaja of Bhutan, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck[3] in 1953. The Maharaja recognized the importance of incorporating them into Bhutan's national mainstream. This statement reflects a significant shift in Bhutan's approach to its ethnic Nepali population, the Lhotshampas. By recognizing the importance of incorporating them into the national mainstream, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck acknowledged that political stability, social cohesion, and nation-building required the inclusion of all ethnic communities. Previously marginalized and often excluded from full citizenship and political participation, the Lhotshampas faced systemic discrimination. The king's recognition implied a move toward granting them legal rights, representation, and opportunities to participate in Bhutan's economic, social, and political life. This was a crucial step toward creating a more inclusive Bhutanese state and integrating minority communities into the country's modernization and governance processes.

As a result, he made the judicious decision to implement the Bhutanese Nationality Act in 1958, which provided equal and complete Bhutanese citizenship to all Nepali who had resided in the Kingdom prior to 1958. Thus, the process of accommodating persons of Nepali ancestry in Bhutan began in 1959-60.

Between 1960 and 1970, Bhutan experienced a period of initial integration for its ethnic Nepali population, the Lhotshampas. Following the 1958 Citizenship Act, which granted full citizenship to those who could prove residence before 1958, the government sought to incorporate Lhotshampas into the national fabric (HRW, 1990). Policies encouraged participation in governance and civil administration, while educational and vocational programs prepared them for roles in the emerging bureaucracy and infrastructure projects (Panday, 2010; Shakya, 2013). Lhotshampas contributed significantly to the development of local governance and modernization initiatives during this period.

From 1970 to 1980, Lhotshampas continued to play active roles in Bhutan's civil service, education, and infrastructure development. Some rose to influential positions within the bureaucracy, supporting national development efforts, including road construction, agricultural initiatives, and school administration (Panday, 2010). Scholarships and educational opportunities allowed Lhotshampas to pursue higher studies in Bhutan and India, helping cultivate a skilled workforce

for the country's modernization (Upreti, 2004). Intermarriage policies were also promoted to foster social cohesion between Lhotshampas and the dominant Ngalop community (Shakya, 2013).

However, from the early 1980s, the government increasingly viewed the growing Lhotshampa population as a demographic and cultural threat. Policies shifted toward enforcing cultural conformity through the "One Nation, One People" campaign, which emphasized the use of Dzongkha, traditional Ngalop dress, and Buddhist cultural norms, marginalizing Nepali language and traditions (Panday, 2010). Lhotshampas were required to carry citizenship documents, and their legal status came under strict scrutiny (Upreti, 2004).

This tension culminated between 1985 and 1993. The 1985 Citizenship Act required Lhotshampas to provide documentary proof of residence in 1958, or risk losing citizenship (HRW, 1990). Thousands were declared illegal, stripped of their rights, and subjected to forced eviction. By 1993, over 100,000 Lhotshampas had fled or been expelled, creating a significant refugee population in Nepal and India (Upreti, 2004). Those who remained faced political disenfranchisement and cultural suppression, effectively ending the earlier period of integration (Shakya, 2013).

Through a series of policies, legislative measures, and systematic segregations, by 1994, Bhutan had effectively expelled all Lhotshampas from the country. Even though the journalist and the roughly 120,000 Bhutanese refugees were never guaranteed safe passage, shelter, or food, they fled to Nepal from Bhutan for refuge. In 1990, Nepal established makeshift camps along the Mechi River, which flows north to south along the Indian border in the city of Assam. The police escorted the refugees out of the Indian Territory and into Nepal (Ikram, 2005, p. 110). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees came in 1991 after a formal request from the Nepali government.

Aspiration for monoethnic identity, the desire for a society or nation composed of a single homogeneous ethnic group, can have profound consequences, often leading to displacement and the emergence of refugees. When such aspirations gain momentum, they tend to marginalize and exclude ethnic and cultural minorities, triggering a cycle of discrimination and oppression. As minority groups are denied their rights and pushed to the fringes of society, they face the threat of forced migration as a means of escaping persecution and seeking safety elsewhere. As the pursuit of monoethnic identity intensifies, policies and actions aimed at consolidating the dominant ethnic group's power can lead to violence and conflicts, further exacerbating the plight of marginalized communities. Forced displacement becomes an unfortunate consequence, as entire populations are uprooted from their homes and forced to seek refuge in foreign lands to escape persecution and secure basic human rights. As such, in the 1980s, Bhutanese authorities launched efforts to forge a unified national identity, including a 'one nation, one people' strategy that promoted a national language and attire that differed from those of Nepalese Bhutanese.

Between 1988 and the early 1990s, the Bhutanese government began systematic expulsions of the Lhotshampa population, accusing them of being "illegal immigrants" and "anti-nationals." Over 100,000 people—nearly one-sixth of Bhutan's population at the time—were forced to flee the country, facing arbitrary arrests, torture, land confiscation, and statelessness (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Ringhofer, 2002). Most sought refuge in eastern Nepal, where the government of Nepal, in coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), established seven refugee camps in Jhapa and Morang districts.

The refugee camps, initially intended as temporary shelters, became sites of protracted displacement. With Bhutan refusing repatriation and Nepal unwilling to provide citizenship or integration pathways, the refugees remained in a legal and political limbo for decades. In 2007, after nearly two decades of stalled bilateral negotiations between Bhutan and Nepal, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) initiated a large-scale third-country resettlement program, one of the largest of its kind globally (UNHCR, 2017). Between 2007 and 2016, more than 113,500 Bhutanese refugees were resettled in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (IOM, 2019).

However, despite the program's scale, over 6,500 individuals remain in Nepal, many of whom are the most vulnerable—including elderly individuals, stateless persons, and unaccompanied and separated children (UNHCR, 2023). Of these, approximately 2,200, about one-third, are children below 18, including an estimated 150 unaccompanied or separated minors (UNHCR 2023). These children often face inherited statelessness, as neither Bhutan nor Nepal grants them citizenship, effectively denying them access to rights, identity documentation, and protection. The denial of nationality to children born in exile contravenes international human rights instruments such as the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasize the right of every child to acquire a nationality (UNHCR, 2014a).

The legal limbo in which these refugee children live has far-reaching implications. They are ineligible for higher education in Nepali institutions, cannot legally work, and have no pathway to citizenship in either Bhutan or Nepal. Many are also excluded from future resettlement efforts, as international attention has shifted away from the crisis. Their lack of legal identity and recognition leaves them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and psychosocial trauma—trapped in what can be aptly described as a "state-of-nowhere."

Thus, this historical and political context forms the backdrop for analyzing the lived experiences of unaccompanied and separated Bhutanese refugee children in Nepal. It underscores how state-engineered exclusion, prolonged statelessness, and humanitarian fatigue converge to perpetuate structural and epistemic violence against some of the most invisible populations in the global refugee regime.

Literature review

Research on Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) in Nepal underscores the intricate interplay between cultural norms, social perceptions, and institutional practices in shaping children's experiences and vulnerabilities. Evans (2007) demonstrates that prevailing concepts of childhood within Bhutanese refugee communities often position children as passive, dependent, and subordinate to adult authority. These perceptions limit children's participation in decision-making and reinforce tokenistic involvement, which fails to acknowledge their evolving capacities. Nevertheless, Evans notes that providing children with meaningful opportunities for engagement—such as reporting abuse or advocating against harmful practices like early marriage—can foster skill development, confidence, and social agency, gradually transforming community attitudes and promoting recognition of children as legitimate stakeholders.

Building on this, Evans and Mayer (2013) explore the tension between global child protection frameworks, such as UNHCR standards, and the local social norms of Bhutanese refugee communities. Their ethnographic research highlights that while international policies aim to safeguard children, they often overlook the protective strategies embedded within extended family networks and culturally normative practices. Young refugees frequently interpret practices like early marriage as socially necessary rather than rights violations, emphasizing the need for participatory, culturally sensitive approaches that integrate children's and communities' perspectives into protection strategies. The authors argue that community-led initiatives, rather than top-down interventions, are more effective in promoting sustainable child protection in protracted displacement settings.

Johansen and Kessy (2013) complement this perspective by emphasizing the heightened vulnerability and social exclusion of separated children in Bhutanese camps. Patriarchal norms, particularly those restricting women from keeping children upon remarriage, contribute to child separation, while UNHCR's Best Interest Determination (BID) guidelines provide limited protection, failing to address underlying structural and cultural drivers. Their study highlights intersectional marginalization, showing how ethnicity, gender, religion, and social status compound children's vulnerability and restrict access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and psychosocial support.

Kinch (2008) further investigates the dual concepts of invisibility and vulnerability among UASC, illustrating how structural gaps and under-resourced protection mechanisms exacerbate marginalization. Her qualitative study identifies critical gaps in coordination among humanitarian actors, insufficiently tailored interventions, and the limited inclusion of children's voices in decision-making. Kinch emphasizes the need for rights-based, context-sensitive, and participatory approaches that strengthen institutional capacity while empowering children, arguing that protection strategies must consider both systemic barriers and the lived experiences of refugee children to be effective.

Collectively, these studies reveal that meaningful protection for Bhutanese UASC requires a multifaceted approach that balances international child protection standards with local cultural knowledge, participatory engagement, and institutional reforms. Integrating cultural understanding, fostering children's agency, and addressing structural vulnerabilities are essential for developing interventions that are both effective and respectful of the social realities of refugee communities. The literature highlights that sustainable child protection must be flexible, context-specific, and inclusive, ensuring that UASC can exercise their rights, develop their capacities, and participate meaningfully in shaping their own lives and communities.

Methodology

Verification and Validation of Children's Responses: To ensure the reliability and validity of the information provided by child participants, the study employed multiple strategies. First, triangulation was used by cross-checking children's accounts with information from guardians, camp-based staff, social workers, and NGO/INGO personnel. Second, interviews were semi-structured and repeated, allowing researchers to clarify responses, probe inconsistencies, and explore emerging themes in depth. Third, the research team applied age-appropriate and trauma-informed questioning techniques, ensuring that children fully understood questions and could provide accurate responses. Additionally, reflexive journaling by researchers and peer debriefing sessions helped identify potential biases or misinterpretations, while consultations with local experts and community leaders provided cultural and contextual validation of the children's accounts. Together, these measures ensured that the study's findings were both credible and grounded in the lived experiences of the participants.

This study uses a qualitative, ethnographic design centred on the lived experiences of Bhutanese UASC in Nepal, addressing their historical marginalization and epistemic erasure. Emphasizing narrative, context, and reflexivity, it amplifies voices often excluded from migration discourse and explores both individual experiences and institutional responses to structural violence and prolonged displacement.

Ethnography enables a deep, contextual understanding of how Bhutanese UASC navigate daily life in refugee camps and institutions that both protect and regulate them. It captures issues like statelessness, access to services, psychosocial wellbeing, and humanitarian interventions through open-ended, inductive inquiry grounded in the everyday experiences of children and stakeholders (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

This approach views children not just as protection subjects but as social actors who navigate their environments with resilience and agency. It examines institutional responses—from camp management to NGO and UNHCR frameworks—and their intersections with broader systems of exclusion, surveillance, and humanitarian governance. The goal is to critically unpack how structural violence shapes the lives of Bhutanese UASC and its implications for refugee protection and rights.

Ensuring Voluntary, Age-Appropriate, and Trauma-Informed Interviews: The researcher ensured that all interviews were conducted ethically and safely by implementing multiple safeguards. Participation was strictly voluntary, and children were informed of their right to decline or withdraw at any point without consequences. Interviews were age-appropriate, with questions and explanations tailored to the developmental stage of each child, and conducted in Nepali to

ensure comprehension. The research team employed trauma-informed practices, such as allowing breaks, avoiding distressing prompts, and providing emotional support where needed. All sessions were conducted in private, safe locations within the refugee camps, such as designated rooms or quiet outdoor spaces, to ensure confidentiality and minimize external disturbances. Additionally, the presence of trained research assistants familiar with local culture helped maintain a supportive environment, fostering comfort and trust for open dialogue.

The study took place over 12 months (May 2023–April 2024) in Beldangi and Sanischare refugee camps in southeastern Nepal, which house the remaining Bhutanese refugees not resettled abroad. Researchers conducted 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews: 15 with unaccompanied and separated Bhutanese children (ages 12–17), selected ethically with support from child protection officers; 9 with guardians and informal caregivers; 4 with NGO/INGO staff (including UNHCR, IOM, Save the Children, and Lutheran World Federation); 2 with camp administrators and community leaders; and 2 with social workers and educators involved in refugee welfare. All interviews were voluntary, age-appropriate, trauma-informed, and conducted in safe, private settings.

Two Nepali-speaking research assistants, one male and one female, aged between 22 and 24 years respectively, were recruited from Kathmandu to support data collection, primarily by conducting participant interviews. They were selected based on their health-related qualifications, prior survey experience, and proficiency in Nepali and English, including local dialects, with preference given to individuals from the study area to facilitate trust and efficient fieldwork. Their language skills and cultural familiarity helped build rapport with participants, which was particularly effective given their age, ensured clear communication, and created a comfortable environment that encouraged open and candid dialogue. Practical considerations, such as mobility in remote regions, were also taken into account. Overall, the selection prioritized cultural and linguistic alignment with the study population to ensure high-quality data collection and effective research implementation. After conducting the interviews in Nepali, they translated the responses into English for analysis. Each session lasted 45–60 min, enabling in-depth discussions on themes such as legal identity, service access, psychosocial wellbeing, perceptions of home, aspirations, and gaps in humanitarian response. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded using NVivo.

To complement interview data, the study included a comprehensive review of policy documents and reports from sources such as UNHCR, IOM, NGOs, and Nepal's refugee policies. This document analysis provided macro-level context and helped triangulate interview findings regarding institutional practices affecting Bhutanese UASC. Due to the vulnerability of UASC, the study followed strict ethical protocols. Ethical approval was obtained, with written consent from guardians (when available) and oral assent from children. Participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw. For child participants, written consent was secured from guardians when available, and oral assent was obtained directly from the children. Researchers ensured that children fully understood the purpose of the study and what participation involved by explaining it in age-appropriate language and in Nepali, using clear and simple terms. Participants were informed of their rights, including the voluntary nature of participation, the option to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the confidentiality of their responses. This approach ensured that children were both informed and comfortable, fostering an environment in which they could provide open and honest responses. Trauma-informed methods were used in interviews, with psychological first aid and mental health referrals available. Identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and safeguarding protocols were in place for any disclosures of abuse, following child protection guidelines. The researchers and RAs did not have formal training as child psychologists; however, they were trained in child protection principles, trauma-informed approaches, and age-appropriate interviewing techniques prior to data collection. This training ensured that they could ethically and sensitively engage with children, recognize signs of distress, and facilitate open communication. Additionally, support from child protection officers in the camps helped guide the process, ensuring that children's responses

were interpreted carefully and that interviews remained safe, comfortable, and developmentally appropriate. These measures helped the research team gather meaningful and reliable data while minimizing the risk of harm or misunderstanding.

Positionality and reflexivity

This study acknowledges the positionality of the researchers as global academics with connections to both the South Asian region and international policy frameworks. While this dual positionality facilitated access and trust-building, it also necessitated ongoing reflection on power dynamics, representation, and the ethics of knowledge extraction (England, 1994). The insider–outsider dynamic was particularly relevant during interactions with children and camp-based workers. To mitigate potential biases and avoid imposing externally derived analytical frameworks, the researcher employed reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and periodic consultations with local experts and community leaders. These practices helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived realities rather than the researchers' assumptions (Rose, 1997). The study recognizes the inherent limitations of short-term fieldwork and acknowledges that no single project can fully capture the diversity of experiences among Bhutanese UASC. Nevertheless, the methodology was designed to amplify silenced voices and provide a platform for children's perspectives to inform both academic inquiry and policy reform.

Theoretical framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework (See Figure 1) to critically examine the condition of Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee-children in Nepal. The framework synthesizes insights from critical childhood studies, Agamben's concept of "bare life,"
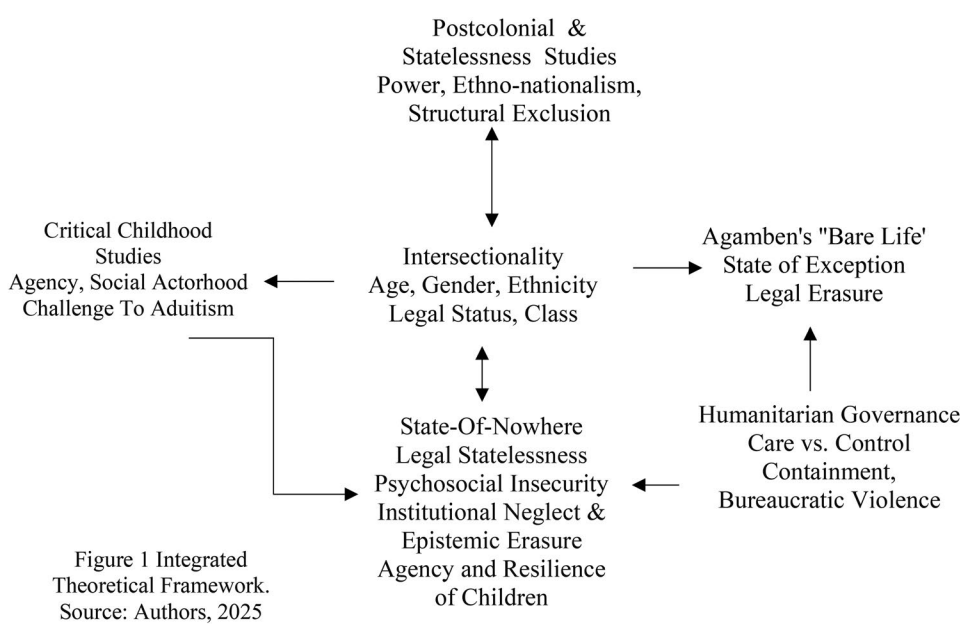

Figure 1 Integrated Theoretical Framework. Source: Authors, 2025

Figure 1. Integrated theoretical framework. The framework synthesizes critical childhood studies (agency and child actorhood), Agamben's concept of bare life (legal erasure and state of exception), *postcolonial and statelessness studies* (historical production of exclusion and ethno-nationalism), and *intersectionality* (overlapping axes of identity and vulnerability). These dimensions intersect within humanitarian governance regimes that oscillate between care and control, producing the condition termed the "state-of-nowhere." This conceptual nexus illuminates how Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee children experience and negotiate multiple, interlocking forms of structural and epistemic violence while exercising resilience and agency within protracted displacement.

postcolonial and statelessness studies, and intersectionality theory to explore how these children experience, negotiate, and resist the complex interplay of statelessness, protracted displacement, and humanitarian containment.

Critical childhood studies

Critical childhood studies challenge the conventional paradigms that view children solely as passive subjects in need of protection. Rather than seeing childhood as a natural and universal stage, scholars in this field underscore its social construction, embedded within specific cultural, political, and historical contexts (James & Prout, 1997). This framework calls into question adult-centric models that frame children as apolitical and dependent, offering instead an understanding of children as social and political actors with agency.

In the context of Bhutanese refugee camps, unaccompanied and separated children are often framed through humanitarian discourses of vulnerability and dependency, reinforcing adultist hierarchies (Rosen, 2007). However, empirical evidence shows that these children navigate complex realities with remarkable resilience and agency—engaging in peer caregiving, informal education, and survival economies. Recognizing their agency reframes refugee children not merely as recipients of aid but as individuals actively shaping their own lives within structural constraints (Boyden, 2003).

State of exception and bare life

Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of "bare life" provides a compelling lens to understand how unaccompanied and separated refugee children in Nepal exist outside the normative protections of citizenship and law. According to Agamben, refugees occupy a legal and political space wherein they are excluded from both sovereign protection and political community, reduced to mere biological existence.

The refugee camps in Nepal function as what Agamben terms "zones of indistinction," spaces where the rule of law is suspended and the political subject is stripped of legal personhood. Bhutanese children born in camps or separated from caregivers face compounded exclusion: denied nationality by both Bhutan and Nepal, they exist in a prolonged state of exception. These children, stateless and unrecognized, are not merely lacking documents; they are structurally positioned outside the social contract that confers legal identity and rights (Agamben, 1998). Their condition highlights the humanitarian paradox: while international frameworks aim to protect refugee children, they simultaneously reinforce regimes of surveillance, dependency, and containment that perpetuate their legal and political erasure (Ticktin, 2011).

Postcolonial and statelessness studies

The production of statelessness among the Lhotshampa population must be understood through a postcolonial lens that critiques the role of the modern nation-state in defining citizenship along exclusionary lines. Statelessness is not an accident or oversight but often a deliberate act of statecraft designed to consolidate power and enforce ethno-nationalist ideologies (Rubenstein & Jenkins, 2015).

In Bhutan, the denial of citizenship to ethnic Nepali was justified through cultural homogenization policies such as the "One Nation, One People" doctrine, which weaponized identity to purge populations deemed foreign or disloyal (Hutt, 2003). Postcolonial theorists argue that such practices are a continuation of colonial logics that inscribe racial, linguistic, and cultural hierarchies into the structure of the state (Mamdani, 2001).

For refugee children, these legacies manifest in intergenerational statelessness and epistemic marginalization. As children born in exile, often without official documentation or recognition, they inherit the legal non-being imposed on their parents. Statelessness becomes a

transgenerational condition—produced and sustained by postcolonial state practices and the inertia of international bureaucracies (Blitz & Sawyer, 2011).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality offers a critical tool for understanding the overlapping forms of oppression faced by Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee children. Intersectionality posits that individuals experience social realities through the interplay of multiple identities—such as gender, ethnicity, age, and legal status—that cannot be disentangled or analyzed in isolation. In the refugee camp context, children are not only vulnerable because they are minors, but also because of their ethnicity (as Lhotshampa), their statelessness, their displacement, and their separation from caregivers. Girls, in particular, face gender-specific vulnerabilities, including heightened risks of child marriage, exploitation, and reduced access to education and healthcare (UNHCR, 2014).

An intersectional lens makes visible how protection regimes often fail to account for these layered experiences. Humanitarian responses frequently standardize vulnerabilities, leading to interventions that overlook how age, gender, and statelessness intersect to exacerbate exclusion (Freedman, 2015). Recognizing these intersections is essential for designing more responsive and equitable protection mechanisms.

Together, these theoretical approaches illuminate the multifaceted nature of epistemic and structural violence endured by Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee children in Nepal. Critical childhood studies reframe the agency of children, Agamben's concept of bare life reveals their legal erasure, postcolonial critiques expose the state-driven production of statelessness, and intersectionality uncovers the compounding effects of identity-based exclusion. This integrated framework offers a powerful analytical foundation for examining the political, legal, and humanitarian failures that continue to trap these children in a state-of-nowhere.

Empirical findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, drawing on qualitative data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with Bhutanese UASC, guardians, social workers, NGO personnel, and camp administrators in Nepal. These findings are interpreted in relation to the study's objectives and research questions and are analyzed through the theoretical lenses of critical childhood studies, Agamben's notion of "bare life," postcolonial critiques of statelessness, and intersectionality. Together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how Bhutanese UASC navigate statelessness, displacement, and institutional marginalization, and how their lived realities reflect broader patterns of structural and epistemic violence.

The normalization of family separation

One of the central findings of this study is the normalization of family separation in the context of protracted displacement. Many Bhutanese UASC experienced long-term or permanent separation from their biological parents due to a combination of forced migration, resettlement dynamics, and camp-based living arrangements. While formal frameworks often frame family separation as exceptional and temporary, in practice it has become an entrenched aspect of life in the camps.

This condition is emblematic of what Agamben (1998) terms a "state of exception," wherein children are subjected to humanitarian governance structures that suspend normative protections without offering meaningful alternatives. Institutions, NGOs, and informal caregiving systems often assume the role of surrogate families. However, these substitutes—though sometimes effective—are rarely formalized, leaving children in precarious legal and emotional conditions. This illustrates how refugee children become "bare life": biologically alive but politically unrecognized.

Anatomy of the camps

The administration of Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal was historically overseen by the Refugee Coordination Unit (RCU), a governmental authority under the Nepali Ministry of Home Affairs. Operating primarily in the districts of Jhapa and Morang, the RCU was responsible for implementing government policy across the seven refugee camps established in the early 1990s. Each camp maintained an RCU office, staffed by two Nepali government employees, to manage day-to-day administrative duties. The district-level RCU office, based in Chandragadhi, Jhapa, served as the central coordination point for broader policy directives and operational oversight.

Supporting this administrative structure was the Central Management Committee (CMC), the main organizational body responsible for the internal governance of the camps. The CMC coordinated a range of essential services and social functions, including the registration of vital statistics (births, deaths, and marriages), the distribution of food rations, basic health programming, and the mediation of community disputes such as familial or neighborly conflicts.

At the height of the refugee influx in 2007, the seven camps—Beldangi I, Beldangi II, Beldangi II Extension, Goldhap, Khudunabari, Sanischare, and Timai—collectively housed approximately 108,000 Bhutanese refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2007). These camps were spread across Jhapa and Morang districts in southeastern Nepal. The distribution of refugees at that time was as follows: Beldangi I: ~18,600; Beldangi II: ~22,600; Beldangi II Extension: ~11,600; Goldhap: ~9,600; Khudunabari: ~13,200; Sanischare: ~21,200 and Timai: ~10,400. A small number of refugees—estimated in the hundreds—lived outside the camps (COR, 2007). The population was nearly evenly divided by gender, with children under the age of 18 comprising just over 35%, including 8% under the age of five. Approximately 7% of the camp population was over the age of 60.

Following the large-scale third-country resettlement program initiated by UNHCR and IOM in 2007, the number of Bhutanese refugees remaining in Nepal has drastically decreased. As of 2022, approximately 6365 individuals remain, residing primarily in two camps—Beldangi and Sanischare—both located in Jhapa District (Giri, 2015). These remaining refugees face an uncertain and precarious future (Giri, 2018). While they were formally offered two options—voluntary repatriation to Bhutan or local integration in Nepal—neither path has proven viable. The Nepali constitution does not grant citizenship to the refugee population, and the Government of Nepal has consistently maintained that it lacks the capacity or political will to integrate them. Consequently, the vast majority remain in limbo, "trapped between a rock and a hard place" (Giri, 2018). This prolonged statelessness is further complicated by the fact that the notion of a singular refugee experience is inherently misleading. Among Bhutanese UASC, trajectories and challenges are shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, language, religion, age, and gender. For example, linguistic differences can affect children's ability to communicate with aid providers, ethnic identity may influence their inclusion or marginalization within camp communities, and age and gender shape both vulnerabilities and coping strategies. These intersecting factors highlight the heterogeneity of experiences among Bhutanese UASC, illustrating how legal and political frameworks that treat refugees as a homogeneous group fail to capture the nuanced realities of displacement and everyday life in the camps.

Nepali

Demographically, the Bhutanese refugee population is predominantly ethnic Nepali, comprising approximately 97% of the camps' residents. The remaining minority includes ethnic groups such as the Sharchop, Drukpa, Urow, and Khenpga. Nepalese is spoken by nearly all refugees, either as a first or second language, while around 35% of the population has a functional command of English, according to UNHCR estimates (COR, 2007). Religiously, the camps reflect a diverse spectrum of belief systems: 60% identify as Hindu, 27% as Buddhist, and around 10% adhere to Kirat, an indigenous animist tradition. Christian minorities, although small, represent between 1% and 7% depending on the camp. This complex tapestry of ethnic, linguistic, and religious

diversity illustrates not only the heterogeneity of the Bhutanese refugee population but also the need for nuanced, inclusive, and rights-based approaches to refugee management—particularly for those still living in protracted displacement.

Between 2007 and 2025, the Bhutanese refugee situation in Nepal has undergone significant demographic changes while many structural challenges have persisted. In 2007, approximately 100,000 refugees resided in camps in southeastern Nepal, predominantly ethnic Nepali (Lhotshampa), alongside smaller minorities such as the Sharchop, Drukpa, Urow, and Khenpga (COR, 2007). By 2025, extensive third-country resettlement programs reduced the camp population to around 7,000, leaving primarily the elderly, children, and families with special needs (UNHCR, 2025; Bhutanese Refugees, 2025). Linguistic and religious patterns have remained largely similar, with Nepali widely spoken, around 35% possessing functional English, and a religious composition of Hindu majority, Buddhist, Kirat, and small Christian minorities. Despite the reduced numbers, the legal and political context has remained unchanged: refugees continue to be denied citizenship by the Nepali government and face protracted statelessness, limited rights, and social marginalization, underscoring the enduring vulnerability of those still residing in camps (The Guardian, 2025a). These trends highlight that while resettlement has transformed the scale of displacement, the structural inequities and intersecting vulnerabilities based on ethnicity, language, religion, age, and gender remain critical concerns.

Lived reality and bureaucratic violence

Another key empirical insight concerns the lived experience of statelessness. For Bhutanese UASC, statelessness is not merely a legal designation but a condition that shapes daily interactions, identity formation, and access to basic rights. The absence of nationality results in the denial of legal documents, thereby excluding children from education, employment, banking, and other state services (Blitz & Sawyer, 2011). The bureaucratic routines of documentation and legal registration become sites of exclusion rather than inclusion.

This aligns with postcolonial critiques of statecraft, where citizenship is weaponized to enforce ethnic homogeneity and political loyalty (Rubenstein & Jenkins, 2015). Bhutan's historical expulsion of the Lhotshampa and Nepal's reluctance to offer citizenship converge to produce multi-generational statelessness. Children born in camps inherit their parents' exclusion, illustrating how legal liminality is perpetuated across generations. From a decolonial perspective, this reflects the lingering effects of colonial border-making and identity regulation that continue to shape migration and refugee governance (Mamdani, 2001).

Institutional ambiguity and humanitarian containment

The findings reveal that Bhutanese UASC are subject to a humanitarian regime marked by institutional ambiguity. UNHCR and affiliated NGOs provide services such as education, health care, and child protection. However, these services are inconsistently delivered, often tied to external funding cycles and donor priorities. Mental health services, in particular, are inadequate relative to the psychosocial needs of UASC.

This echoes Ticktin's (2011) critique of humanitarianism, where care is conditional, episodic, and often complicit in the depoliticization of refugee suffering. While refugee children are targeted for protection, the framing of this protection tends to reduce them to passive victims, stripping them of agency and context. This limits the scope of long-term planning and community integration, reinforcing dependency on shrinking humanitarian assistance.

Agency within constraints

Despite these structural limitations, Bhutanese UASC demonstrate considerable agency. They form peer networks, engage in informal work, pursue education where possible, and participate in community activities. This supports the central claim of critical childhood studies: that children are not passive recipients of adult decision-making but are capable social actors who

navigate constraints with creativity and resilience (Boyden, 2003; James & Prout, 1997). Peer groups provide emotional support and act as informal governance systems in the absence of parental care. These child-centred networks serve as vital sources of resilience, underscoring the limitations of adult-centric humanitarian frameworks that fail to recognize or support child-led initiatives. This finding challenges the humanitarian tendency to define children solely through their vulnerabilities and instead highlights their strategic and affective contributions to community life.

Intersectional vulnerabilities

The study also found that vulnerabilities among Bhutanese UASC are not homogenous but are shaped by intersecting identities. Age, gender, legal status, and family configuration interact to produce varied experiences. For instance, adolescent girls face heightened risks of child marriage and gender-based violence, while younger boys are more likely to be involved in exploitative labour.

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) helps illuminate these differentiated experiences by foregrounding how social categorizations interlock to produce compounded forms of marginalization. Protection mechanisms that adopt a one-size-fits-all approach[4] risk ignoring these nuances, thereby reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to mitigate. A rights-based approach must, therefore, be intersectionally informed to address the specific and overlapping vulnerabilities of different sub-groups within the UASC population.

Epistemic erasure

Finally, the study identifies a pattern of epistemic erasure, where the knowledge and lived experiences of UASC are excluded from formal policy discussions and academic discourse. Refugee children are rarely consulted in decisions that affect them, and their perspectives are filtered through adult or institutional interpretations.

This reflects broader critiques in the literature regarding the epistemic violence embedded in migration and refugee studies (Haraway, 1988; Santos, 2014). Policy frameworks often rely on quantifiable indicators—such as the number of children enrolled in school—while ignoring the qualitative dimensions of identity, belonging, and aspirations. Consequently, refugee children remain largely invisible in the formulation of policies designed to support them.

The empirical findings confirm the central arguments of this study: that Bhutanese UASC are trapped in a complex web of statelessness, institutional neglect, and epistemic marginalization. These findings align with the study's methodology, which prioritized deep ethnographic engagement and participatory research. They also validate the theoretical framework, demonstrating how concepts like bare life, intersectionality, and postcolonial statelessness are not merely abstract but are embodied in the daily lives of refugee children. Addressing these injustices requires not only institutional reform but also a paradigm shift toward rights-based, decolonial, and child-centric models of refugee protection.

For Bhutanese UASC in Nepal, family separation is not only a result of forced migration but also a prolonged reality shaped by displacement policies and social fragmentation. Many UASC interviewed during this study recounted being separated from their parents during the initial displacement or during later waves of third-country resettlement. Some were orphaned due to illness or abandonment, while others were strategically left behind by parents or guardians who prioritized resettlement opportunities for other family members, believing that the child would eventually join them (UNHCR, 2014). Such separations have long-term psychosocial implications. Many children expressed feelings of abandonment, betrayal, and emotional isolation. One 15-year-old boy in Beldangi camp stated, "My parents left for America when I was nine. They said I'd follow. But years have passed, and I am still here." These accounts reveal how protracted family separation leads to a deep sense of uncertainty and loss of trust in both familial and institutional systems.

Educational, psychosocial, and legal challenges

Access to education remains one of the central challenges for Bhutanese UASC. While primary education is available within the camps through NGO-supported initiatives, access to secondary and higher education is severely limited. Legal documentation, required for admission to Nepali schools outside the camps, is often unavailable to stateless children (Southwick, 2015). Even within the camp system, educational facilities suffer from underfunding, limited materials, and a shortage of qualified teachers.

As of 2025, the educational, psychosocial, and legal challenges faced by Bhutanese UASC in Nepal remain largely unchanged from 2015. While primary education continues to be available within the camps through NGO-supported initiatives, access to secondary and higher education is severely limited, as legal documentation required for admission to Nepali schools outside the camps is often unavailable to stateless children (KIOS, 2025; Southwick, 2015). Even within the camps, educational facilities face underfunding, shortages of qualified teachers, and limited materials. Psychosocial support remains insufficient, with many children and educators dealing with trauma that affects learning and engagement. Additionally, children born in camps cannot obtain birth registration certificates or refugee identification cards, further restricting access to education and essential services (Rising Nepal Daily, 2025). These persistent challenges highlight the ongoing need for targeted, rights-based interventions to address the educational, psychosocial, and legal needs of Bhutanese UASC in protracted displacement.

Psychosocial distress is another key issue. Many children reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma stemming from both displacement and familial separation. While some NGOs offer mental health services, these are typically under-resourced and episodic. One adolescent girl in Sanischare described feeling "invisible," noting that "no one checks how we are doing unless we break down." The lack of consistent psychosocial support underscores a critical humanitarian gap (Save the Children, 2015).

Legally, Bhutanese UASC are in a state of liminality. They are denied citizenship by both Bhutan and Nepal, rendering them stateless. This legal invisibility means they cannot acquire national identity documents, open bank accounts, legally work, or benefit from rights typically afforded to children under national child protection laws (UNHCR, 2017).

Survival strategies

Despite these structural constraints, Bhutanese UASC exhibit remarkable resilience. Many engage in informal labour such as agricultural work, tailoring, or assisting in local shops to support themselves or their foster families. Others rely on remittances from relatives who were resettled abroad, although this support is inconsistent and often insufficient.

Peer networks play a vital role in navigating everyday challenges. These informal support systems provide emotional comfort, share resources, and act as substitutes for absent family structures. Children often refer to each other as "brothers" and "sisters," forming bonds that substitute for biological kinship (Boyden, 2003). Additionally, informal kinship systems, such as caregiving by extended family or community elders, provide some stability, though without legal guardianship these arrangements are not recognized by formal protection mechanisms.

Role of NGOs and UNHCR

UNHCR and NGOs such as Save the Children and Lutheran World Federation have implemented programs targeting UASC, including case management systems, psychosocial support, and foster care placements. However, field observations and interviews revealed several protection gaps. First, there is a shortage of trained social workers and child protection officers to monitor and support UASC consistently. Second, guardianship frameworks are often informal or ad hoc, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation or neglect.

Mental health support is especially lacking. Programs that exist are short-term, project-based, and subject to funding cycles. Children with deep psychological trauma often go unrecognized

until crises emerge. UNHCR staff acknowledged this gap, citing "shrinking resources and donor fatigue" as key limitations. Without sustained funding, institutional support becomes sporadic, exacerbating dependency on a humanitarian system that no longer has the capacity to deliver consistent care (UNHCR, 2023).

The politics of invisibility

Statelessness among Bhutanese UASC produces a profound form of legal and existential invisibility. Without nationality, these children are denied access to rights, services, and legal recourse. Their identity is unrecognized, and their belonging remains perpetually deferred. Many children expressed not knowing which country they belong to or if they will ever have a place to call home.

The three "durable solutions" to refugeehood—resettlement, repatriation, and local integration—are largely unavailable to Bhutanese UASC. Resettlement options have largely ended since 2016; Bhutan refuses to accept returnees; and Nepal does not offer pathways to citizenship or permanent residency (Blitz & Sawyer, 2011). Consequently, these children remain trapped in a state-of-nowhere, caught between closed doors, bureaucratic neglect, and policy inertia. This condition is not only a legal anomaly but also an expression of epistemic violence, whereby children's experiences, knowledge, and aspirations are rendered irrelevant in policy discourses that prioritize numerical targets and donor reporting over lived realities (Ticktin, 2011).

Rights-based and decolonial framework

The findings of this study call for a shift away from protectionist and paternalistic approaches toward a rights-based and decolonial framework that recognizes refugee children as active political and epistemic agents. A child's right to nationality, education, psychosocial support, and participation in decisions affecting their lives must be placed at the centre of all interventions and policymaking processes. Regional cooperation is essential for addressing statelessness among refugee children. South Asian regional bodies such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) must develop concrete protocols to ensure legal identity and citizenship pathways for children born in exile. Nepal, in particular, should be encouraged to initiate legal reforms that grant long-term refugees and their children a recognized legal status and eventual access to citizenship (Manly & Persaud, 2020).

Long-term psychosocial support must be prioritized as a core component of humanitarian programming. Donors and implementing agencies need to provide sustained funding for mental health services tailored specifically to the needs of refugee children. Trauma-informed care models, life skills education, and community-based counselling services should be institutionalized as ongoing programs rather than being treated as short-term or peripheral initiatives (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012).

Finally, advocacy at the policy level must centre the perspectives and participation of refugee children themselves. These children should be meaningfully consulted in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their lives. Their voices, lived experiences, and aspirations must be integral to refugee governance and humanitarian response frameworks (Hart, 2008). Only by recognizing refugee children as full rights-holders and political actors can more just, inclusive, and effective protection systems be built. These measures require not only financial investment but also a paradigm shift—one that moves beyond viewing refugee children as burdens to be managed and toward recognizing them as rights-holders, knowledge producers, and political subjects.

Discussion

This study reveals how Bhutanese unaccompanied and separated refugee children (UASC) in Nepal inhabit a condition best described as being "trapped in a state-of-nowhere"—an existential

and legal liminality shaped by protracted displacement, inherited statelessness, and systemic neglect. The discussion that follows synthesizes the empirical and theoretical insights, articulating how this paper contributes a novel understanding of care, agency, and structural violence in one of South Asia's most overlooked refugee contexts.

The findings from ethnographic interviews and institutional analysis show that Bhutanese UASC experience a complex convergence of vulnerabilities—legal, psychosocial, and structural— yet exhibit resilience in navigating this precarious terrain. Statelessness, as the study demonstrates, is not only a legal anomaly but a lived, everyday form of marginalization that strips children of rights, protection, and a sense of belonging. As one boy in Beldangi camp reflected: "I don't know which country I belong to. I was born here, but I am from nowhere." This legal ambiguity reinforces a form of bureaucratic violence (Blitz & Sawyer, 2011), wherein the absence of nationality translates into denied access to education, health care, or documentation. However, against this backdrop, children engage in survival strategies—peer caregiving, informal labor, and self-organized learning—demonstrating not only vulnerability but also agency. These children are not simply victims of forced displacement; they are co-constructors of transitory kinship, knowledge, and resistance.

From "bare life" to intersectional statelessness

The paper employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that weaves together critical childhood studies, Agamben's notion of "bare life", postcolonial critiques of statelessness, and intersectionality theory. Each of these frames reveals distinct yet overlapping dimensions of refugeehood as experienced by Bhutanese UASC.

Agamben's concept of "bare life" (1998) elucidates how refugee camps become legal black holes where children are simultaneously governed and abandoned. Denied citizenship and rights, these children become bodies to be managed, not subjects to be heard. This was poignantly captured by a 14-year-old in Sanischare: "They [NGOs] say they care for us, but I feel like a file in their office—only opened when needed."

Critical childhood studies challenge this depoliticizing gaze by positioning children as active agents. Instead of viewing them as apolitical dependents, the study reframes them as individuals negotiating state and humanitarian regimes through informal work, peer bonds, and self-representation. This aligns with Boyden (2003), who calls for recognizing children's agency even in contexts of acute vulnerability. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) allows the analysis to move beyond one-size-fits-all categorizations of "vulnerable child." The empirical data reveal how age, gender, legal status, and displacement interact to create layered exclusions. Adolescent girls, for instance, face risks of child marriage and sexual exploitation, while younger boys are more likely to enter exploitative labor circuits.

These theoretical insights are grounded in the lived realities of Bhutanese UASC. Their voices challenge the neat categorizations of humanitarianism and underscore how legal erasure becomes a daily lived experience. Agamben's "zone of indistinction" is not a metaphor—it is the refugee camp where identity is contingent, rights are suspended, and futures remain deferred.

Moreover, while policy frameworks often treat statelessness as an abstract administrative failure, the children's testimonies reveal it as a form of epistemic violence (Santos, 2014)—where their experiences are rendered invisible in international and national discourses. A 16-year-old orphan shared: "They talk about us, but they never talk to us." This disconnect reveals a key theoretical and empirical insight: the absence of legal recognition begets not only material deprivation but ontological uncertainty—a void of identity and belonging that children must constantly navigate.

This paper fills a crucial gap in the migration and refugee studies literature by: Centering the lived experiences of stateless UASC in South Asia, a demographic often excluded from both policy and academic debates; Bridging critical childhood studies with political theory, notably Agamben's state of exception and postcolonial critiques of statelessness; Foregrounding children's

voices and agency in navigating layered exclusions—challenging the dominant protectionist discourses that infantilize refugee children; Conceptualizing the refugee camp as a site of both containment and informal resistance, where humanitarian care and neglect exist in tandem. While studies on unaccompanied refugee children often focus on Central America, Europe, or Africa (UNHCR, 2014), this paper provides a rare lens on South Asia. It also challenges the technocratic vocabulary of refugee governance—by showing that even well-intentioned humanitarian interventions may inadvertently reproduce exclusion.

For refugee children across the globe, especially those rendered stateless or left out of durable solutions, this study echoes a fundamental truth: paperless lives are precarious lives. Whether in Bangladesh's Rohingya camps, Kenya's Kakuma settlement, or detention centers in Europe, the struggles of UASC echo a global pattern of invisibilization and abandonment. The paper highlights the need for grassroots peer-led care systems—networks that refugee children themselves create to survive. Humanitarian actors must learn from these organic strategies, support them institutionally, and stop seeing children merely as passive recipients of care. "We take care of each other," said a 15-year-old girl. "No one else really does."

The implications for the global refugee regime are significant. The current model—predicated on the three durable solutions of resettlement, repatriation, or local integration—is crumbling in the face of humanitarian fatigue, rising statelessness, and state inaction. Bhutanese UASC are caught in the crossfire of closed doors, unfulfilled promises, and dwindling attention. This paper is a clarion call for refugee regimes to move beyond lip service and implement rights-based, child-centred policies that transcend bureaucratic tokenism. Legal identity must not be a privilege—it is a right. Psychosocial care should not be a project-based afterthought—it must be integral. And most crucially, refugee children must be heard not just in interviews but in policy-making halls where the future of protection is shaped. The ball is in the court of states and humanitarian actors. Continuing to kick the can down the road will only deepen the structural violence against refugee children. It's time to stop treating UASC as ghosts in the system and start recognizing them as rights-holders, political actors, and bearers of lived knowledge.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the profound challenges faced by Bhutanese UASC in Nepal, revealing a stark reality of protracted displacement, legal statelessness, and systemic neglect. By centring the voices of these children, the research underscores their resilience and agency, while simultaneously illuminating the structural and epistemic violence that renders them politically invisible and administratively excluded. The findings clearly indicate that family separation, originally a consequence of forced migration, has become an institutionalized norm within the refugee camp system, perpetuating a cycle of uncertainty and emotional trauma. This normalization not only affects the immediate psychosocial well-being of UASC but also perpetuates intergenerational patterns of exclusion and statelessness.

The study's adoption of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework—drawing on critical childhood studies, Agamben's notion of "bare life," postcolonial critiques, and intersectionality—offers a nuanced understanding of how these children navigate their intertwined vulnerabilities. It highlights the urgent need for rights-based, child-centred, and regionally coordinated approaches to refugee protection that prioritize the voices and needs of UASC.

To address the injustices uncovered, stakeholders—including policymakers, NGOs, and humanitarian organizations—must adopt a more comprehensive, holistic approach that recognizes the complexities of identity and the lived realities of children. This shift could involve enhancing educational opportunities, improving mental health services, and re-evaluating institutional practices that currently marginalize the voices of refugee children. Ultimately, the plight of Bhutanese UASC is a compelling call to action for all involved in refugee governance. By recognizing and acting upon the lessons learned from their experiences, we can create more inclusive

and effective frameworks that not only provide immediate humanitarian assistance but also foster long-term resilience and integration within host societies.

Notes

1. Epistemic violence refers to the embodied dimensions of the epistemic racism/sexism that is constitutive of colonial modernity's abyss, with regard to both epistemology and real-world politics (Brunner, 2021).
2. The Dorji family is one of Bhutan's most prominent aristocratic lineages, tracing its ancestry to the 12th century. The family's influence extended through strategic marital alliances, notably with Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, one of Bhutan's Queen Mothers. Their residence, Bhutan House in Kalimpong, India, served as a key centre for trade and diplomacy with British India. Through political leadership, royal connections, and sustained contributions to governance, law, and culture, the Dorji family has profoundly shaped Bhutan's modern history and state formation (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH, 2017).
3. He became the Maharaja of Bhutan in March 1952 following the death of his father, King Jigme Wangchuck.
4. A "one-size-fits-all" approach refers to a strategy, policy, or solution that is applied uniformly to all individuals or situations without considering their unique needs, contexts, or circumstances. Such an approach assumes that a single solution will work equally well for everyone, which can be ineffective or even harmful in diverse settings. For example, in refugee education programs, providing the same standardized curriculum to all children in a camp—regardless of age, prior schooling, language skills, or trauma history—may benefit some students but leave others struggling. Children with interrupted education, limited language proficiency, or psychosocial needs may fail to keep up, highlighting the necessity of adapting teaching methods, materials, and support services to the specific circumstances of different groups.

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