



# SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED FOREIGN MINORS' TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONALIST APPROACH

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Forced migration research and policy was, for a long time, centred around one homogenous concept of a displaced person. This universal understanding of the term depicted an able-bodied, heterosexual (and in most cases European) refugee man, leading to the **blanket application** of policy and aid deemed appropriate for this homogenous group. In light of this failure to respond to individual situations and needs, a second 'refugee figure' emerged in the 1970s with the Women in Development (WID) movement: the refugee woman. By identifying this intersection of gender and displacement, the international community began to advance towards more nuanced forms of protection, consolidated through the UNHCR 1990 Position Paper on Gender-Related Persecution and the 1991 Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014: 389). Yet the inclusion of women refugees as a recognised group addressed only one factor shaping the experiences of displaced persons (gender), while failing to recognise the heterogeneity within the categories 'men' and 'women' (Yacob-Haliso 2016). By applying an intersectionalist lens, a better understanding can be gaged about the way in which a multitude of **identity markers**, such as ethnicity, age, and religion, and the corresponding forms of oppression and power relations, such as xenophobia, agism, and religious discrimination, interact with each other and with the category 'displaced person' to shape experiences of **forced migration**.

The term 'intersectionality' (Kimberly Williams Crenshaw 1989) emerged in the context of the race- and gender-based marginalisation of African American women through the institutionalised racism and patriarchy experienced in their everyday lives (Saunders et al. 2016). After gaining much momentum in feminist literature, the concept gained popularity in other areas of research, including migration studies, while still maintaining its original charge and purpose. This article will focus, in particular, on the role of intersectionality in shaping support for **unaccompanied foreign minors** (UFMs) in their transition to adulthood.

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## INTERSECTIONALITY AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The intersectionalist lens is particularly relevant to the study of displaced persons due to the ways in which our identities and the power relations we are subject to are strongly affected by "**processes of accelerated social change**, including conflict and displacement" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 204: 397). The situational change (particularly for those who cross international borders) means entering into new power structures on the one hand, but also challenging those that dominated in one's home society. In any situation involving the confrontation with an unfamiliar culture, a person is exposed to new ideals about society and identity which may not always be compatible with her or his own. In the case of UFM's, the confusion and disruption such confrontations may bring about risk being multiplied as minors and neo-adults are simultaneously confronted with the challenges associated with becoming an adult.

Turner (1991:5) describes how the camp environment in particular can significantly influence power relations, as some identity markers are removed or become invisible. Turner explains how class relations are challenged through their intersection with displacement, describing the relative invisibility of class in refugee camps, where an individual may live side by side with members of a (formerly) different class. The way that certain identity markers can be **removed** or made invisible through **displacement** can have significant consequences on an individual's self-esteem when their self-ascribed identity is based on factors such as class, social group, or occupation. Equally, newly imposed markers (such as the legal status of being a 'refugee' or the social status of being a 'foreigner') can mean displaced persons exist within new power relations or are forced to adapt to new positions within the existing ones.

A similar effect is evident even as displaced persons are integrated into receiving societies: qualifications gained in

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their countries of origin might not be recognised; the possessions and reputations that may have offered status before, may no longer be visible; and limited language skills may prevent them from assuming roles and power relationships they had assumed in their countries of origin. For young asylum seekers and refugees, these provide significant hurdles to accessing education, building relationships with the local community, and entering the labour market, among other things. By nature of being '**unaccompanied**', there is a further risk that UFM's may be forced to confront these without adequate support. By understanding how the displacement process can influence social structures associated with different identity markers, we can better understand the challenges that UFM's experience and the behavior they adopt in response to these.

## LOOKING BEYOND THE LABEL

In the case of UFM's, policy makers may be guided by the title "unaccompanied foreign minor", which immediately identifies three clear and intersecting identity markers that must be responded to in the design of UFM support mechanisms. Yet just as Monture (2007: 199) explains that we must look beyond the 'race-class-gender trinity' to consider other (perhaps less visible) forms of oppression, policy makers and practitioners should similarly **look beyond** the "unaccompanied-foreign-minor" trinity to offer the most individualised support. Critically, these three elements (U-F-M) are transient and reflect an identity given to UFM's by external actors, they should not be assumed to represent how a young displaced person chooses to identify themselves, nor should they be the sole elements on which an assumption of young migrants' needs are made.

There are manifold elements of identity beyond this label, such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity, or sexuality, and each of these elements, as well as each intersection of these elements, can play a role in an individual's personal

**transition to adulthood.** Effective support and protection must be subject to thoughtful consideration of, and dialogue with each UFM on, the impact of these during their delicate and uniquely-paced transition to adulthood.

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