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## Unaccompanied migrant girls: navigating religious girlhood in the UK

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# Unaccompanied migrant girls: navigating religious girlhood in the UK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focusses on unaccompanied migrant young women from Sub-Saharan Africa and the social workers who encounter them in the UK. Taking an intersectional approach, and drawing on notions of black girlhood, it explores how unaccompanied girls may attempt to re-centre their religious identities within diversely religious-spiritual-secular spaces. Drawing on data from research carried out by the first author, the article considers how girls continually adapt their religious practices in new gendered/racialised spaces, and explores the meanings attached to religious practice by social workers and by girls themselves. The paper argues social workers may benefit from resources to develop their religious literacy, and that organisations may benefit from drawing on post-colonial frameworks to critically examine social work responses to black, unaccompanied girls.

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**KEYWORDS** Migration; gender; social work; religion; unaccompanied; girlhood

## Introduction

Unaccompanied children are those under 18 who are “separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so” (IOM 2011, 11). Although UNHCR (2023) estimates women and girls make up 50 per cent of refugee, displaced or stateless populations, girls form a minority of unaccompanied young people in almost all regions of the world and are rarely the focus of research. Hence, there are calls for more “interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological cross fertilization when it comes to the study of racialized, refugee young women” (Miled 2020, 10). When she is considered, the “refugee girl” is commonly constructed in terms of passivity, vulnerability

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and post-colonial rescue, but young women are not passive in migration. Instead, they are continually navigating different notions of what it means to be a girl, for themselves and for others (Larkin 2022).

The global context of girls' migration, however, is highly problematic with more walls and fences at national borders than at any time in modern history. Borders are not just barriers, but gendered and racialised spaces where *bordering practices* identify particular bodies as unwelcome (Weitzel 2018), and the post-colonial power relations underpinning many migration decisions is overlooked (Danewid 2017). The fences erected across Europe since 2016, for example, reflect a "geography of externalisation and exclusion" (Teloni and Mantanika 2015, 190). Religion, as an intersecting identity, does not operate independently of race in these surveillance spaces, but infuses racial profiles that sustain western hierarchies of religious faiths (Purkayastha 2012). Children and young people who cross borders are not exempt from such practices but they can also be constructed in binary ways, as the "innocent victim in need of rescue" or the "dangerous stranger" (Chase and Allsopp 2021). Such constructions can obscure the agentic creativity and resilience young migrants use to cross borders and survive dangerous journeys (Clayton, Gupta, and Willis 2019). More than this, westernised notions of childhood "innocence" can frame agentic acts as evidence of adulthood, used to argue that children are adults lying about their age (McLaughlin 2018).

Globally, it is social workers who are often involved in assessment processes at reception points and providing access to accommodation and support for unaccompanied minors. In the UK, where the research presented in this paper took place, the Children Act 1989 charges local authorities to provide unaccompanied children with care, protection and support, and they become "looked after" in foster care or residential services within the state care system (Gupta 2019). However, decision-making for young migrants is becoming increasingly centralised away from frontline social work organisations. The UK Nationality and Borders Act 2022 gives the Home Office powers to override the decisions of social workers in relation to migrant children in their care, and the Illegal Migration Act 2023 seeks to limit children's applications for international protection on the basis of "illegal" arrival (as defined by the British state). Notions of "best interests" of young migrants can become framed by such political narratives and by resource constraints (Humphris and Sigona 2017), so social work in this context is complex and highly politicised work.

There is evidence of skilled, social work advocacy with young migrants even in bureaucratic organisations (Drammeh 2019; Larkin and Lefevre 2020), but social workers can struggle to champion the rights of young migrants when organisations foreground practices of control and surveillance (Chase and Allsopp 2021). When anti-immigration agendas and bureaucratic responses dominate, it is essential that social work continually examines how

it responds to young migrants, if it is to hold to its claims of social justice and anti-racist practice (Bhatti-Sinclair 2011). This paper aims to contribute to this important debate by focussing on social work with girls migrating to England from Sub-Saharan Africa, exploring the meanings social workers and girls attach to girls' religious practices, and considering the implications for social work practice with young migrants.

## Theoretical framework

Girlhood Studies explore how age and gender may intersect for all females (cis or trans-gender) in experiences of *girlhood* (Rentschler and Mitchell 2016). Girlhood is theorised as praxis – a “situated, collective, relational event, intimately connected to place” (de Finney 2016, 29), where girls’ “embodied every-day acts of presence” (de Finney 2016, 22) are entwined in relations of power. The term “girls” is used to mean girls and young people who identify as female. This is not intended to infantilise young women but to analytically explore how notions of girlhood may impact girls’ migration.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) has become analytically important in considering the diverse racial, class and gendered experiences of people living within dynamics of multiple inequality (Bernard 2022; Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015), and so an intersectional framework is used to consider the shifting ways unaccompanied girls may understand and embody their identities. It is recognised, however, that intersectional analyses can overlook how race and gender are mutually bound together in colonial systems of knowledge (Crawley 2022), and so notions of black girlhood (Boylorn 2016; Halliday 2019; Jean, Neal-Barnett, and Stadulis 2022) are utilised to examine how girls from Sub-Saharan Africa navigate their lives in the UK at the intersections of age, gender and race. Agency is understood as action structured within a context but not determined by it, formed through participants’ “reflexive deliberations” (internal conversations) about their situation and their own concerns (Archer 2010).

### **Context: intersections of girlhood, religion and migration**

Since 2009, girls from Sub-Saharan African states have formed the majority of females under 18 claiming asylum independently in the UK, or entering the country through resettlement schemes, Somalia, Eritrea and Nigeria being the main countries of origin from this region for asylum-seeking girls (Home Office 2023). In 2022, 96 per cent of unaccompanied young people in the English care system were boys (UK Govt. 2023) and migrant girls can be an invisible minority within European care systems. The reasons girls migrate and become separated from family members are multifaceted but can be highly gendered (Larkin 2022). Carrion et al. (2018) argue migration

can be a “a strong mechanism of empowerment” (Carrion et al. 2018, 46) for African girls, as it can reduce the economic inequality they experience, but African refugee girls can also experience “triple intersecting disadvantages ... as refugees, as females, and as youth” (Yacob-Haliso 2016, 56). When young people migrate, their individual aspirations, their hopes for future lives, can be powerful motivators even in the context of separation and adversity (Chase and Allsopp 2021). Aspirations can be shaped by values learned from parents (Mendoza Pérez and Morgade Salgado 2019), which may then become individualised following separation and migration. Research with migrant girls highlights the complex strategies they employ, not just to survive, but to try to achieve aspirational goals such as education and a secure legal status (Kohli and Kaukko 2018; Larkin 2022). Social workers may have their own aspirations for young migrants but they can also be working to bureaucratic models of positive “outcomes” for young people which focus on quantifiable results and risks (Meloni and Humphris 2021).

When black girls migrate from the Global South, they can find themselves navigating post-colonial, racialised constructions which frame black girls as “dangerous bodies” (Evans-Winters 2017), as bodies “without hope and without capacity” (de Finney 2016, 21). The sexualisation of black girls’ bodies grounded in colonial narratives, for example, can mean social workers may be more likely to see black girls as complicit in their sexual exploitation rather than as survivors (Constance-Huggins, Moore, and Slay 2022). The agency of black girls can itself be framed as a transgressive act, seen as indicating a maturity a girl may not yet possess, and black girls can then experience “adultification” from professionals which removes the impetus to provide protective interventions (Hines and Menefee 2022). An intersectional approach from a Global North perspective can mean certain identities are foregrounded and some identities overlooked altogether (e.g. tribal or political allegiance). Multiplicities within identities can also be minimised when bordering practices foreground the categorisation of young people on the basis of age and immigration status, obscuring the complex meanings girls may attach to other aspects of their identity, such as religious faith.

Religious persecution is recognised as one of the leading causes of global displacement (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2021), and children can make independent claims for asylum on this basis. Attention is now being paid to the gendered ways religious persecution may be experienced and enacted, and the interplay of identifying as female and a person of faith (Dadhania 2023; Sommers 2020), although much of the work so far relates to adult women. The cultural, political and social contexts in their countries of origin may shape how girls’ embody religious identities and understand their religious faith before migration. Chandler (2020) argues that when women are denied religious freedoms they are often denied other “freedoms” such as access to education or economic

participation. Yet, Njoh and Akiwumi (2012) argue a complexity of gendered relations, noting that religious practices can have both negative and positive impacts on “women empowerment” in Africa. When girls move across borders, these meanings can shift and girls can respond agentially to these changing contexts. Grabska (2020), for example, notes how family obligations felt by refugee Eritrean girls in her research were linked to their “religious orientations”, and found many of the girls changed their religious affiliations in Sudan if they felt this would help achieve their aspirations.

While not all young migrants claim asylum due to religious persecution, if they claim at all, religion may still be central to their everyday lives. Internationally, research has begun to highlight the complexity of religious practice for young migrants, during and after migration. Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) found religious faith was a feature of the coping strategies used by all the unaccompanied young migrants in their study in Ireland, and separated girls in Brook and Ottemöller’s (2020) study used religious practice to maintain cultural identities and form new communities in Norway. Practiced (or Lived-out) religious belief has been identified as a protective factor for the mental health of young people in post-migration Somali communities (Im and Swan 2022). Mosques and churches can be “significant spaces of belonging” (Drammeh 2019, 174) for young migrants. Chase and Allsopp (2021) note, for example, the importance of the impromptu church built in the Calais “Jungle” camp. This “belonging”, however, means different things to individual young people (Drammeh 2019).

### ***Religious identity: recognising contentions***

“Religion”, “spirituality” and “faith” are contested terms, each holding multiple, differentiated meanings, (though often erroneously used interchangeably). They are not easy to define in universal ways due to diverse variations across and within cultures, countries, traditions, denominations, and also between individuals within them (such as varying individual positions within worldviews to issues from closed/traditional/exclusive to open/inclusive) (Canda, Furman, and Canda 2019; Paul Victor and Treschuk 2020). There are enduring but also evolving traditional forms and diversifying mixes of religious, spiritual and secular worldview belief preferences within the UK, and other European and Western societies (Pew Research Center 2018). The 2021 Census of England and Wales shows adults identifying as Christian as the largest number but having declined from 2011 to less than half the population (46.2 per cent, 27.5 million people). Minority religious groups have increased in number: Muslim (3.9 million, 6.5 per cent), Hindu (1.0 million, 1.7 per cent), Sikh (524 thousand, 0.9 per cent), Jewish (271 thousand, 0.5 per cent). “No religion” was the second most common response, increasing by 12 percentage points to 37.2 per cent (22.2 million), although

researchers of the “non-religion group” show a miscellany of positions revealing a varying secularity (anti-religious, disinterested and culturally/ethically/spiritually sympathetic (such as prayer to a higher being, afterlife)) (Lee 2015; Waite 2022).

The UK’s religious plurality has increased rather than diminished with the diversity of international migrating flows of people, displaced people and increased interest in religion worldwide such that some argue that, from a global perspective, we are in a post-secular era (Taylor 2007). From a migration perspective, an added layer of contested complexity is that “religion” was deeply embedded in European colonial practices across the globe. Notions of Christianity introduced into Sub-Saharan Africa cultures by Europeans foregrounded individual “belief, knowledge, and churchlike community”, over the multitude of relational and embodied forms of spirituality practiced across the continent (Meyer 2021, 161). Religious traditions themselves recognise such plurality, intercultural diversity and colonisation.

Scholars from global theology, black theology, feminist theology and intercultural theology have argued for a paradigm shift away from a “Western/Eurocentric-as-normative model” towards “an open system [of theological discourse] that develops perspectives and actions that can capture and adequately engage in their varying dimensions ... approaches that honour the integrity and complexity of local context and experience, and agency, while searching for non-dominative forms of the “universal” and the “global” shared in common” (de Vries 2016; Pieterse 2017, 139). There is increased visibility for such postcolonial perspectives that question the authority and associated power structures of Western white male-dominated approaches to give more voice to women and persons of colour (Maddix 2018). Feminist theologians point to strong patriarchal masculine authority within religious traditions that historically, and in some international cultural contexts still legitimate marginalisation, subordination and violence against women (Jule and Pedersen 2006). In migration from Africa to Europe, separated girls move across such spaces where the meanings of religious practice, race, gender and the power-dynamics which sustain these understandings, can be shifting around them.

### ***Social work and religion***

Article 14 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that state parties should “respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (UN 1989). In the UK, discrimination on the basis of religion is illegal under the Equality Act 2010, and the 2018 Global Statement of Ethical Practice calls on social workers to consider people’s “spiritual dimensions” and to challenge oppression towards religious beliefs (IFSW 2014). There is no consensus, however, on the extent to which notions of spirituality



should be foregrounded in social work. A number of African social work scholars have been calling for more explicitly “spiritually sensitive practice” which rejects individualism, concerned that Western frameworks of secular social work have lost sight of the structured spiritual basis of people’s lives across many African nations (Tusasiirwe, Nabbumba, and Kansime 2022).

Social work has a conflicted history regarding the integration of religious and spiritual concerns in practice, particularly in more highly secularised countries such as the UK. Social work, as a profession, emerged from a confessional Christian heritage and was then influenced by secularising Post-Enlightenment Western ideas, for example, embracing psychological and social scientific epistemologies (see Gray 2008; Woodcock Ross 2019). Hence, researchers find social workers not communicating with people about the influence of their religious or spiritual beliefs routinely in their work, often viewing it as an “optional add-on component” (Canda, Furman, and Canda 2019; Furness and Gilligan 2014). With this apparent lack of religious literacy, current practice can neither grasp that there are differences in reality/truth-claims between secular and religious worldviews, nor grasp the depth of moral commitment that some people hold to the existential obligations associated with such worldviews (see Woodcock Ross and Wright 2021). When separated girls meet social workers, therefore, the *meaningfulness* of the communication about their religious identity, such as their living out of everyday lives according to a transcendent purpose/being, could not just be misunderstood, but regarded by secular-liberal-humanist social workers with discomfort, if not scepticism. Within the UK context of a rise in reflexive liberal individualism and a social landscape of increased religious diversity, organised religion and traditional religious dogma are questioned for supposedly imposing oppressive, prescriptive relations which may restrict personal “liberating” lifestyle choices (Gray 2008).

So, how might an unaccompanied girl negotiate her identity if her worldview begins to diversify (whether by choice or circumstance), becoming differentially and idiosyncratically patterned as she interacts with peoples’ other religious and spiritual worldviews in a pluralist UK context? If the terms of (communicative) engagement with her are set by a social worker whose worldview is secular or religious or spiritual, might there be a potential danger of an inadvertent colonisation/misinterpretation of the meaning of religion for the girl? Social workers do gather a range of information about young migrants, which includes their religious faith, but broad categories may miss the potential significance of different religious schools of thought. Data systems may offer a category of Muslim, for example, but are unlikely to ask whether the person comes from Shia or Sunni traditions. It is in the micro-space of social work practice that the separated girl and her social worker may develop a more detailed and complex understanding of religious identity.

## Research methodology and methods

This paper uses data from a small-scale, practice-near qualitative study (Froggett and Briggs 2012), completed as part of doctoral research by the first author. Data was collected from 8 participants in England between 2017 and 2018 – 3 separated girls and 5 social workers (Table 1). The social workers were all qualified to English regulatory requirements, all had direct practice experience with unaccompanied young women, and worked within state-provided services in rural and urban locations in south of England. The girls who participated directly were aged between 14 and 21, and had all spent time in the English care system – out-of-home care provided by the state – as “unaccompanied migrants”. The girls were contacted through their social workers, who were themselves recruited through professional networks. Girls who had come to the UK less than 6 months before the project began were excluded. Anonymity can be important for young women who have been trafficked and for whom identification may pose a risk (Crawford 2017) and so, in line with the ethical agreement, girls’ nationality is not always identified. The participants were:

### Table of participants

Data were gathered over a twelve-month period, using unstructured, creative interviews, where the researcher starts with an open question and images are created by the participant (Mannay 2016), in this case through drawing. Some data were previously published as findings drawn from doctoral research (Larkin 2022). This paper draws on a new inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the data to identify meanings attached to religious

**Table 1.** Table of participants.

| Participant | Role           | Age       | Gender | Religious faith                             | Statutory Organisation  |
|-------------|----------------|-----------|--------|---|-------------------------|
| Grace       | Separated Girl | 21        | Female | South Sudan Muslim (no stated denomination) |                         |
| Salam       | Separated Girl | 18        | Female | Christian (National Church)                 |                         |
| Mia         | Separated Girl | 16        | Female | Christian (no stated denomination)          |                         |
| Alice       | Social Worker  | Not given | Female | Not stated                                  | Children’s Asylum team  |
| Eva         | Social Worker  | Not given | Female | Not stated                                  | Children’s Asylum team  |
| Chris       | Social Worker  | Not given | Male   | Not stated                                  | Children’s Asylum team  |
| Susan       | Social Worker  | Not given | Female | Not stated                                  | Leaving Care Team (18+) |
| Elaine      | Social Worker  | Not given | Female | Not stated                                  | Children’s Asylum team  |

practice. The aim was to develop rich, rigorous qualitative research which could lead to analytical generalisability – the development of “insightful, inductive generalizations regarding the phenomenon under study” (Polit and Beck 2010, 1453).

### ***Statement of ethics***

Ethical clearance was given through the Local Authority Research Governance processes and by the Social Sciences & Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Sussex (Application ER/RL267/2, 2016).

### **Limitations of the research**

Statistical generalisability would not be possible within a study of this scope and size (Robson 2011) and was not the goal. The sample was not intended to be representative and other perspectives may have emerged from a larger sample. The research included young women speaking English as a second/third language, and an interpreter was present in one interview, so there is an increased chance of some words being miscommunicated and some cultural cues being missed.

## **Research findings: navigating religious black girlhood**

### ***Religion as a moral compass***

For Mia, Salam and Grace, coming into England as unaccompanied girls meant navigating new social and cultural norms without the guidance of parents or extended family members to support this transition. When they encountered ideas or expectations that troubled them, the girls sometimes looked to religious teachings to guide their actions. These religious frameworks could be part of girls’ “trans-national life worlds” (Kutscher and Kress 2018, 5), a way of maintaining a connection to a value-base they associated with lost parents or community leaders they could no longer access: “my Dad was like just tell me to read all the time the Bible ... just trust the Bible” (Salam).

Religious guidance was intertwined, however, with cultural values. A Eurocentric understanding of religious practice within social work services, which distinguished girls’ religious practice from their Sub-Saharan African identities, could overlook the ways in which religious values were culturally situated. Salam, a Christian, believed she needed to be present in church in order to receive God’s support and intervention in her life. Salam had been unable to safely practice her denomination of Christianity in her country of origin where it had been banned by the state, and she wanted to attend a

Christian church in the UK. Initially, she was taken to an Anglican church by her white foster carer but Salam found these services unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Her social worker gave her information about a denominational church led by people from her country of origin, who embodied their faith in ways more meaningful for Salam: “everyone was like happy ... they pray ... they loud ... I was like what? ... is for real? ... I just get in the corner and then I cried” (Salam). It was religious practice in this cultural space that Salam identified as providing the moral guidance she was seeking: “I came in this church so ... you don’t have someone to look after you ... to tell you the good thing and the bad thing ... it’s very hard” (Salam)

Being able to access religious texts as a source of guidance, in a language the girls could read, was seen as important by the participants. For the social workers, the provision of religious texts was seen as part of their duty to promote children’s right to religious practice (Article 14 UNCRC). Grace’s social worker brought her a copy of the Quran and a prayer mat that she used at home and school, both spaces where Grace felt comfortable to pray: “I born as a Muslim and I love my religion and every day I pray ... I do all the traditional prayer of my religion (Grace)”. Access to religious texts also provided an opportunity for girls to seek guidance, to discuss their faith with others in more complexity and to feel a spiritual connection to their beliefs. This could be particularly important when girls had not previously had access to religious texts, either because they were not able to access these as young women (as in the case of Grace), or because these were banned by state regimes (as in the case of Salam):

back home even to just get the Bible it was really hard ... to get the Bible ... not even just to read and then pray ... to get blessing from God (Salam)

Salam’s Bible enabled her to revisit the teachings of her faith, but the girls also looked elsewhere for knowledge and to situate religious teachings within UK cultural practices. Grace read the Quran, for example, but she also talked to teachers, friends and her social worker in her desire to “help myself to grow in the right way”. Grace spoke of how the “right way” for a Sudanese, Muslim girl in the UK differed from constructions of religious girlhood in her country of origin: “I change a lot of ideas that I got from my country”. To achieve her aspirations of completing education in the UK and having choices about where she lived, for example, Grace was adopting a more pluralist perspective:

a lot of people they do not believe in any religion and still we live in UK together so it not affect who I am ... in my country they’re not going to accept that but I accept all the religion ... I chose to come here so my choice is to accept other people’s religion ... what their opinion or what they think about everything ... because they’re going to respect me back

Drawing on religion as a lived-out, faith-based moral compass did not simply equate, then, to girls reaffirming a set of values which they adopted unquestioningly. While they welcomed religious guidance, the girls were also aspirational, continually weighing up what was possible for them in England as an African, unaccompanied young woman. Religious teachings and cultural values were intertwined and the process of adaption to UK cultural spaces could involve the girls in new interpretations of religious teachings.

### ***Religion as individual identity***

The social workers most frequently framed religious practice as an expression of individual identity they had a duty to support, and as a largely private, individualised matter. Rather than instigating discussions with girls about the meanings of their lived-out-faith, social workers provided practical support – religious texts, information and transport – they perceived would sufficiently enable a girl to practice her faith. Religious identity could be taken into account in some of the decisions social workers made about girls. In the UK, for example, young migrants are often accommodated in shared houses where the majority are boys, and Susan talked of finding a different form of accommodation for a Muslim young women on the basis of her religious identity: “she was saying ‘I couldn’t share with a boy ... I’m a practicing Muslim that just wouldn’t be something that I’d want to do’” (Susan)

Social workers could understand religious faith as one strand within the complex identities of each individual girl, embedded within cultural and national identities: “everyone’s got their own individual personalities but there are cultural traits ... if you’re not aware of you might miss things or misinterpret what’s being said” (Chris). There was no discussion, however, of any resources that supported social workers to develop their knowledge of religious practices in girls’ countries of origin. While the social workers had some broad understandings of the major faiths, they could see such generic knowledge as unhelpful in understanding personal faith: “I work with a lot of Muslim young people ... it means different things to different people as any religion [or] faith does” (Susan). Westernised notions of the teenager could also underpin some social workers’ understanding of religion as adolescent experimentation for the purposes of identity development, as a temporary interest that may pass. When the vicar contacted Alice to say that Hester had stopped attending church a few months after her baptism, for example, Alice reflected:

it’s not life changing you can just opt out or choose another religion, it’s not really so terrible down the line ... she’s a teenager ... she can’t be the first that’s kind of wafted in and wafted back out of your church. (Social Worker)

Seen through this lens, any changes in religious practice or attendance could be interpreted as an indication of a girl’s ambivalent or transient commitment

to religion. However, while the girls in this study described periods of “trying out” different religious spaces in search of forms of religious girlhood they wanted to adopt, their religious faith remained central to their lives through these changes. Importantly, the girls wanted social workers to value their religious faith and engage with the meanings faith had for them in its developing diversity: “she respectful my religion ... she respect who I am ... if you want to accept me just respect me and give me chance to show you how I am” (Grace). Some social workers did attempt to understand more about a girl’s faith. Eva spoke of Helen, an Eritrean young woman from a country where openly displaying her religious faith, and attending church, could expose her to violence. Eva said attending a national church with Helen had led to her developing richer understanding of the significance of Helen’s faith in her life:

we went to her church and it was amazing the feeling of you could see that she belonged there and how peaceful she looked there ... her body language and the way she was (Eva)

The number of bureaucratic processes that needed to be followed after a girl’s arrival, however, and the priority of arranging accommodation, education, health care and legal advice, were seen as barriers to social workers developing individualised understandings of girls’ lives: “when you start working with young people there are so many meetings ... when you get all that bit over then you can really actually start the work with them” (Elaine). Young migrants can also be making agentic choices about what to communicate to social workers in a context of mistrust, disbelief and inconsistency (Chase 2010; Larkin and Lefevre 2020). Salam talked of the challenges of disclosing anything about herself to others, particularly to people in positions of authority: “I don’t trust anyone ... I don’t trust anyone at all” (Salam). Grace, in contrast, spoke of finding a voice in England that enabled her to discuss aspects of her identity with others, finding moments to resist some of the ways she was being framed:

I live in the UK.. why I am not going to say what I want? ... is good to share your things with people so they can know you and they can think about ... like idea of asylum-seeker or you from where ... or your religion (Grace)

### ***Religion as gendered practice***

While religious faith was something girls often wished to maintain, and there were no examples of girls entirely rejecting their religious faiths in this study, they recognised they had come to embody their religious identities in the UK differently than in their countries of origin. British constructions of gender and age could impact girls’ decision making and the relationships they formed or resisted in religious/cultural spaces within the UK.

Girls who had experienced violence in their countries of origin, for example, did not always want to connect with adults from their country outside of the church or mosque, and male adult's accents and embodied presence could remind girls of previous harms. Salam mistrusted male figures of authority and made a clear distinction between sharing religious spaces with members of her church and entering private or community spaces with them. For Salam, expressing her religious faith within a church was a key coping mechanism, but she resisted the idea that religious faith was a conduit to building relationships within a wider community. To be present in the church Salam was continually balancing the guidance and support she received from shared religious practice with her sense of psychological and physical safety. She joined in with activities related to religious matters but moved herself away from encounters with adults that started to move beyond this:

I don't trust people from my country ... if they ask me about the Bible I say ok ... I'm the first ... I will go ... but you meet like a friend outside from the church ... you have like tea or something ... they say "at Christmas time do you want to come dinner?" ... I just say no I don't want to go (Salam)

Grace, a Muslim young woman, was similarly concerned about any space where there may be male authority figures, which included the local mosque: "I'm so scared from men". She spoke of how gendered power dynamics in her country of origin had directed which spaces she could enter as a girl and what she wore in public:

in my country for example I should wear a hijab ... I'm not allowed to go out or outside my home in my country without a hijab cos it would be like "why you do that?" and the main religion in our country is Islam and Islam you should wear a hijab all the time ... but in here ... no one can ask me why I wear a hijab or not so it is my choice and is more freedom ... in my country I do not have that freedom (Grace)

Grace wanted to maintain her Muslim identity but was wary of attending an English mosque. She may, of course, have found a range of responses in the mosque, but she believed similar notions of Muslim girlhood would dominate and so avoided attending. Grace had been in England for over a year at the time of this research, but was still unsure which forms of Muslim girlhood were possible for her in the UK. She was actively looking for representations of her faith on social media, in community spaces and in reality television: "these people ... they born here but they are Muslim ... it is going to be positive to know where I am" (Grace). This did not mean, however, that Grace rejected her African identity. Moreover, her social worker affirmed the importance of Grace developing a positive sense of herself as a black, African girl and introduced her to a group of young women from Eritrea and Sudan. Whilst they were of different

religious faiths, Grace welcomed developing a sense of her own gendered, African, Muslim identity as she learnt more about the similarities and differences across girls' experiences and perspectives: "I meet them a lot and I still keep touch with them ... sometimes we not agree with a lot of things ... but still we respect each other".

### **Religion as risk**

Although religion was largely framed as an enriching and supportive element of some girls' identity, there were examples of religion being seen as a form of risk. While social workers spoke of respecting girls' individual, privatised religious practices (albeit in the aforementioned practical matter), some social workers expressed some mistrust in the power structures of organised religion. Alice, for example, framed a vicar's request to baptise Hester, a recently arrived girl who did not share his language, as potentially coercive. If Alice had been able to discuss the meaning of Hester's baptism, she may have been more able to understand Hester's agentic decision-making and (if this was indeed the case) any potential risks. In framing religion as a risk and Hester as a vulnerable child, the agency she may have used to choose baptism was potentially overlooked:

she'd got involved in the local church very quickly ... I had Father [name] ringing me ... wanting to baptise her ... and I did say on one level that's fine, she's old enough, she's of sound mind, she's in a position to determine her own religion and she's already said that she's Christian and she wants to do this ... however I've got slight concerns ... she'd been there a month, she didn't speak any English, how do you know she's understanding all these classes? ... I don't think that's informed consent but nevertheless she was desperate to do it, she had a broad understanding of Christianity ... I did think on another level Father [name] wanted another bum on seats. I don't know if that's an amazingly cruel way of me looking at it (Alice)

It was Islam, when linked with racialised constructions, however, which was most frequently framed in terms of risk. Western Islamophobic narratives can frame black Muslim people as the "manipulative enemy" to be feared (Green 2019). This mistrust, and the othering that can accompany it, could be found in the framing of the mosque as a racialised place of unknowable cultural practices and a site of potential danger. Elaine, a white English social worker, described the response of a white foster carer when an Eritrean Muslim girl went to a local mosque with another foster carer:

a family that was in the mosque as well ... apparently it's not unusual this is what they do ... they take the children home with them and then come back in the morning ... about three or four in the morning ... you know she [foster carer] said "I was devastated. I didn't know where she was ... who took her?" (Elaine)



Living within state care, in spaces which are expected to respect children's freedom of religious practice (UN 1989), does not automatically protect Muslim girls from racialised Islamophobic narratives. A few weeks after Grace's arrival, the children of her first foster carer began to make comments that Grace found difficult to understand:

they told me "Muslim people kill people, you kill people" they say that to me ... I don't know that ... I never kill anyone ... they say "not you but the Muslim people and you're Muslim" ... I want to live in peace and I didn't see anything in this life as these people (Grace)

Grace told her social worker what had been said and she was moved to a carer who respected her faith and her African identity, but these initial comments undermined the emerging sense of safety Grace had begun to feel in England: "I can't go out because I'm thinking maybe people they're not going to like me anymore". Grace, however, responded agentically by choosing how to make her African, Muslim faith visible and began to embrace a more humanist-liberal view of religion as a private matter. She drew on this to try to develop more control over when her religion was foregrounded and when it was not: "you need to talk to me like who I am, not about my religion". Yet, although Grace talked of finding her own voice, her clothing, presence, accent and language were continually questioned by other young migrants in her school, and by adults and young people in public spaces: "they start say to me "why are you wearing that"". As a black girl who wore a hijab, Grace carried a visual marker of her religion and her body was seen as a valid object of public scrutiny and comment, often seen through a gendered/racialised lens. As she moved between spaces, Grace was continually navigating being framed as either "too Muslim" – thereby posing a potential risk to English bodies – or "not Muslim enough" – thereby undermining Islam through her personal embodiment of the Muslim faith.

### **Discussion: migration, religious girlhood and social work**

The girls in this study wanted social workers to value and engage with their religious identity as black, African young women. There were multiple examples of social workers practically supporting girls' religious practices, seen as part of their duty of care. It was Eva, the social worker who resisted the notion of the church as an "unknowable", risk-laden space and attended a service with Helen, that developed richer understandings of the complex meanings religious faith had for her. Not all girls, nor all social workers, may welcome this, however, and the bureaucratic demands of neo-liberal, resource-restricted social work can prevent such "whole person" practice (Cosgrove and Pyles 2023). Moreover, this research also suggests that understanding religious practice as located in the church or the mosque may

overlook how religious faith can be embedded in the everyday practices of some black African girls.

Ameena (2015) notes that blackness is an unstable “political and cultural position” which changes across time and place, and this data shows how girls’ embodiment of religious, black girlhood can change following migration. Religious spaces were racialised and gendered and religious practices promoted particular ideas of black girlhood, some of which were adopted by the girls and some which were rejected. Franklin-Phipps (2022) argues black girls create ways of existing in geographical spaces but this self-protection is always “disciplined and surveilled” (Franklin-Phipps 2022, 3). Unaccompanied black girls can, additionally and simultaneously, be surveilled by immigration regimes (Chase 2010) and scrutinised as children living in care systems (Stabler et al. 2023). They can be framed, by different people at different times, in multiple ways – as the vulnerable refugee girl in need of protection (Larkin 2022), as the “dangerous Muslim” (Green 2019) or the victimised black women in need of rescue by white feminism (Crawley 2022). As seen in the data, unaccompanied girls can act agentially to, variably, continue to collectively practice their faith and make visible their religious identity, or to adopt a pluralist, privatised approach to manage the racialised ways they are being framed by others. As they navigated life in the UK, the girls could be moving between these forms of situated, embodied girlhood (de Finney 2016), resisting marginalising external gazes in “moments” of resistance (Glapka 2018).

The findings also suggest there are dangers that liberal, secular, humanist worldviews, when coupled with a lack of religious literacy (Woodcock Ross 2019), can miss the central significance religious faith may have for some unaccompanied girls. While none of the social workers said they explicitly identified with a religious faith, their worldviews in relation to age, gender, race and religion could impact their practice. There was little evidence, however, of any resources or reflective organisational spaces (Ruch 2012) that supported social workers to explore wider social and organisational narratives related to religion and its intersection with gender and race. The significance of religious practice in girls’ lived-out identity, post-migration, may then be misunderstood and insufficiently supported. More than this, practice which is not examined through a critical and post-colonial social work lens (Cosgrove and Pyles 2023) may reinforce western hierarchies of religious faiths (Purkayastha 2012) which can exclude and marginalise.

## Conclusion

Social work claims a unique perspective in its understanding of the “intersectionality between dominant discourse, sociopolitical structures and lived experience” (Newcomb et al. 2023, 1095), which would make it well placed to engage with the complexity of life as a black, unaccompanied girl. The

profession is grappling, however, with the extent to which social work practice can be seen as “white saviourism”, and where it can foreground practices that critically engage with the entanglement of oppressive structures and individual lives (Cosgrove and Pyles 2023). At a time when anti-immigration political narratives are increasing across Europe, and becoming further embedded in law and policy, this research suggests social work in the Global North may gain from drawing on post-colonial frameworks to more critically examine its responses to black, unaccompanied girls.

This paper adds to both Girlhood Studies scholarship, and to religion-in-social-work studies, in its discussion of black girlhood and intersecting religious faith in the context of migration and social work, and its exploration of the agentic ways unaccompanied girls from Sub-Sahara Africa can navigate lives at the intersections of gender, race and youth. Internationally, social work has a key role to play in the lives of young migrants and the findings, although context-specific, are relevant for social work as a global profession. These findings support calls for social workers to reflect on their own worldview and more actively develop their religious literacy (Woodcock Ross 2019), if they are to engage with the complex and individualised meanings that black, African girls may attach to religious faith.

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