How Long Must They Be Alone?: The Experience of Unaccompanied Minors and Implications for Social Work Practice

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Unaccompanied minors often face severe trauma during their preflight lives as well as during the course of their migration. These traumatic experiences can have negative psychosocial impacts on the minors, and hostile reception policies in destination countries exacerbate their hardships. Though social work services are traditionally undervalued in the areas of asylum and resettlement, the discipline has much to offer in terms of practice, programming, and policy. The complexity of circumstances in which children become unaccompanied, as well as the diverse needs of the children themselves, mean that no single country, discipline, or agency can solve the problem individually. Complementary skills should be coordinated and international mandates must be established in a concerted effort to respond to this issue. There is a need for more research to determine the psychosocial issues of unaccompanied minors and identify best practices for social workers in destination countries to provide direct services and advocacy for this population.

Unaccompanied minors are strong, resourceful, and resilient. However, these qualities are often challenged by circumstances beyond their control, such as violent conflict, oppression, persecution, trafficking, and severe deprivation. Unaccompanied minors are separated from their parents and family members as a result of multiple deaths and chaotic circumstances during flight. At times they are pushed away for their own safety and well-being. Their experiences during flight can often be as harrowing as what they experienced in their preflight lives. Following these traumatic experiences, unaccompanied minors arrive to host countries and are often treated with hostility and encounter harsh, punitive policies. As such, these children are deprived of universal human rights as well as rights specific to children that were agreed upon in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The increase in the phenomenon of unaccompanied minors is fueled by globalization. James Midgley (1997) describes globalization as "a process of global integration in which diverse peoples, economies, cultures and political processes are increasingly subjected to international influences" (p. xi). The ef-

fects of global interdependence are given wide recognition in economic and environmental spheres; however, global interdependence is not as well understood as a force impacting social work practice (Healy, 2001). With the increase in globalization and greater access to international transportation and communication, forced migration continues to cause individuals to leave the turmoil of their home countries and seek refuge in foreign lands. Many of those displaced are children, defined as human beings below the age of eighteen years (United Nations, 1989). Unaccompanied minors who reach Western nations generally arrive alone, or sometimes in sibling groups, from various distant parts of the world (Kohli, 2007). Amongst them are children who are trafficked and others who are trying to flee from the collapse of civil order and extreme poverty in their nations of origin. Unaccompanied minors are often separated from their parents due to emergency and conflict. They experience numerous atrocities and human rights violations in their home countries and then experience further distress during their flight. When children seeking asylum attempt to resettle in a foreign country, they seek a stable life of balance and peace (Kohli, 2007). This is a complex process, and children often need someone to guide them through difficult circumstances. Unaccompanied children need social workers to provide them with care and protection that will help them with resettlement in new territories and assist them in their efforts to reach their full potential. While social workers are traditionally undervalued in the arena of asylum and resettlement services, their professional background provides significant knowledge and skills to help the unaccompanied minor population.

Definition of Unaccompanied Minors

According to the definition of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 1994), unaccompanied minors are those separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children are young people below 18 years old who have applied for asylum and who have gained temporary admission to the host country while their claim is considered. These definitions are frequently conflated. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'unaccompanied minors' will be used primarily, and the term 'unaccompanied asylum seeking children' will be used specifically when referring to youth who have arrived in a destination country and are requesting asylum status.

The Experiences of Unaccompanied Minors

The displacement of children across borders has occurred for several decades, sometimes to countries located at great distance from their homelands. The phenomenon of displaced children increased dramatically during the social upheaval associated with World War II and has continued to persist during subsequent violent conflicts. International migration patterns demonstrate that wars in particular generate great numbers of displaced children. The majority of these children move to neighboring countries (Kohli, 2007), and many minors are displaced within their own countries. Although this paper focuses on unaccompanied minors who seek asylum in Western countries, the backgrounds of minors who seek asylum in Western countries and those who are displaced internally or to neighboring developing countries are similar.

Unaccompanied minors are exposed to myriad risks. They arrive in the asylum country alone for various reasons. Perhaps their parents were killed or separated from them during flight or their families sent them away to avoid military recruitment and seek a better life (Seugling, 2004). The primary reasons unaccompanied minors leave their countries of origin include experiencing or witnessing violence, rape or other sexual violence, forced military recruitment, war, persecution, political instability, and trafficking (Thomas, Nafees, & Bhugra, 2004). Exposure to these atrocities and subsequent ordeals can create significant developmental problems for children. While some youth have shown their resilience (Geltman et al., 2005), there is a lack of longitudinal research regarding the outcome of former unaccompanied minors during adulthood.

Case Study of an Unaccompanied Minor

The experiences of Fauziya Kassindja, an unaccompanied minor, are documented in the novel Do They Hear You When You Cry? (Kassindja & Bashir, 1998). Fauziya's idyllic childhood in Togo, West Africa ended with the death of her father. Forced into an arranged marriage to an older man when she was 17 years old, Fauziya was informed that she must undergo the tribal ritual of female genital mutilation (FGM). Instead of adhering to the cultural practice that had killed and maimed many other young females, Fauziya fled Togo in fear only hours before the ritual was scheduled to take place. Through the financial support of some of her female family members, Fauziya escaped to Germany for a brief period before traveling to the United States to seek asylum.

Upon her arrival to Newark International Airport in New Jersey, Fauziya informed the immigration officers that she traveled with a false passport and was

seeking political asylum (Kassindja & Bashir, 1998). The officers immediately interrogated Fauziya about her story and expressed their disbelief. They instructed Fauziya to remove her clothes while she was searched, then she was handcuffed and transported to Esmor Detention Facility in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Fauziya was treated like a criminal and suffered insults and indignities throughout the 16-month stay in detention centers and jail. The frequent ordeal of strip searches and the inability to cover her nudity was a violation of her beliefs as a Muslim. She suffered loneliness, depression, injustice, humiliation, and deterioration of her mental state through a system that is often hostile and unsympathetic to those who are fleeing adversity and seeking asylum. During much of her time in detention, Fauziya was still a minor, but she was locked in facilities with adult women, some of whom were incarcerated for committing crimes.

After a long and tumultuous 16 months, Fauziya attained asylum status (Kassindja & Bashir, 1998). Fauziya's cousin who was living in the United States hired an attorney to represent Fauziya in her asylum hearing. With the support of a team of lawyers, Fauziya received political asylum, and her case served as the precedent to recognize FGM and other such gender based violence acts as qualifying criteria for female asylum. While Fauziya's story is one of many, it speaks to the mechanical process through which most unaccompanied minors seeking asylum endure. The range of experiences to which unaccompanied minors are exposed is wide and varied. Those who are not as fortunate as Fauziya often lack adequate legal representation and support systems. Unaccompanied minors frequently undergo expedited removal, returning them to the dangerous situations from which they came without receiving an opportunity to speak with anyone in the asylum country aside from immigration officers.

Psychosocial Impact

Of the estimated 18 million refugees around the world, approximately half are children (Sourander, 1998). Minors without parents are especially disadvantaged because they must endure traumatic events without the support of parental protection and guidance. Goodman (2004) points out that parents often serve as buffers to mediate the effects of negative experiences in a child's life, and the presence of family and community support are seen as requisite for the successful coping of children who have been traumatized by war or violence. Goodman also states that several reports have indicated a high incidence of behavioral problems, depression, somatization, and suicide attempts among unaccompanied asylum seeking children. While research demonstrates the psychosocial

needs of the unaccompanied minor population, such an evaluation has not been made standard protocol by all governments regarding the reception of minors.

Sourander (1998) performed a study that examined the traumatic events and behavior symptoms of 46 unaccompanied minors who were awaiting placement in an asylum center in Finland. He evaluated the children through their completion of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and found that they had experienced multiple losses, separations, persecution and threats. His study evidenced that younger age was associated with increased psychiatric symptoms, as younger children are more vulnerable to emotional distress and have less established coping strategies than older youth. The most common symptoms of the population were related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. When interviewed, most of the children reported somatic complaints and uncertainty about their future, and some expressed suicidal thoughts. Exposure to multiple stressors greatly decreases a child's ability to cope successfully. Despite evidence of the occurrence of severe symptoms, all minors do not receive psychosocial services given the absence of a formalized evaluation component in some circumstances.

Unaccompanied minors have the capacity to recover and adjust to life after arrival in a Western country (Kohli, 2007). Promoting the psychosocial well-being of unaccompanied minors involves finding ways to regenerate a lost sense of belonging and volition in their own lives (Kohli & Mather, 2003). Detaining the unaccompanied minors in jail-like settings where they are removed from the community abolishes any sense of agency in their own lives. Detention without access to mental health services further exacerbates psychosocial difficulties.

Hostile Reception Policies

After facing traumatic life events, most unaccompanied minors arrive in their destination countries suffering from tremendous stress as they strive to survive. They subsequently encounter immigration officials at ports of entry who often treat them with hostility (Reijneveld, De Boer, Bean, & Korfker, 2005). Western nations have become increasingly punitive with their treatment of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003). Upon arrival in the United States or other destination countries, many of these young people are detained. They frequently remain in detention throughout the long process of waiting for hearings. It is not uncommon for the period of detention to extend beyond a year. Studies show that unaccompanied asylum seeking children who are placed in restrictive settings report more emotional problems than minors who

are placed in settings where they are allowed greater autonomy (Reijneveld, De Boer, Bean, & Korfker, 2005). Those children who are suffering from symptoms of PTSD, particularly those who have been victims of torture, and other mental health issues need access to psychological services (Sourander, 1998). Placed in detention facilities, these minors are often confined in secure environments for administrative purposes and live alongside others who are incarcerated for committing crimes. In addition, many are stigmatized and face serious discrimination in the new host country (Christie, 2003).

Currently there is no international protocol mandating how governments should serve the unaccompanied minor population aside from vague guidelines developed by the UNHCR. Western countries develop their own policies for dealing with these minors, and the policies often vary by locality within a country (Mitchell, 2003). Though governments claim to apply the principle of the child's best interest concerning treatment of unaccompanied minors, Engebrigtsen (2003) points out that most decisions are made in the interest of the country. DeGruijter and Rijkschroeff (2005) describe an effective program for unaccompanied minors in The Netherlands called 'Choices and Opportunities' which encourages community integration. This program focuses on the strengths and capacities of the youth rather than on their problems, and aims to involve unaccompanied minors with recreation and service activities in their community in order to develop the support networks they lack. However, the method of encouraging community participation among unaccompanied minors is rare, and the majority experience social isolation in foreign countries.

Most Western countries have legal proceedings that are administrative and adversarial, bringing children with limited skills in the local language to hearings against trained trial lawyers (Nugent, 2005). The majority of children are unrepresented in removal hearings due to a dearth of pro bono or government-appointed attorneys. Unlike citizens, unaccompanied asylum seeking children are not automatically appointed attorneys to represent them at their hearings (Nugent, 2005). These children rarely have anyone to speak on their behalf, and are treated as detainees first and children second. The systems dealing with unaccompanied minors tend to be punitive rather than protective, and therefore fail to address the needs of this population. Hostile reception policies are detrimental to the well-being of unaccompanied minors.

In recent years the United States has made some efforts to improve the treatment of unaccompanied minors. Section 462 of H.R. 5710, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 transferred responsibility for the care of unaccompanied foreign-born children from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)

within the Department of Justice to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). This transfer removed the fundamental conflict of interest when the INS served as both jailer and caretaker of unaccompanied minors. While this transfer of responsibility is a positive step in providing effective care for unaccompanied minors, many more steps need to be taken to ensure more compassionate treatment for this population. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2005), each year over 80,000 unaccompanied minors seek entry into the United States, but only a fraction of those children remain in the country. Most are deported back to their country of origin, typically within 72 hours. In 2004, 6,200 unaccompanied minors entered into federal custody in the United States through the ORR, and this number is expected to increase in future years. More efforts should be undertaken within and across destination and sending countries to create policies that promote the well-being of these children.

Human Rights Framework

The notion of human rights is one of the most powerful in contemporary social discourse. Human rights are particularly important in the context of social workers and others in human services professions (Ife, 2001). Rayner (2004) asserts that every society should have policies in accordance with human rights. She states that detention is intended to be a punishment for convicted criminals and not an administrative method of handling a class of people. Rayner also discusses the reality that few nations have thoroughly implemented the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). The United States and Somalia are the only two member nations that have not yet ratified this treaty. The Convention spells out the basic human rights of children: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to have protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are: non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival, and development; and respect for the views of the child. Policies pertaining to unaccompanied minors should uphold these principles as children are among the most vulnerable victims of human rights violations, and unaccompanied minors are particularly at risk for abuses. Article 22 of the Convention (United Nations, 1989) asserts that special protection shall be granted to a refugee child or to a child seeking refugee status. This special protection is absent in the policies of Western asylum countries.

Maloney (2002) describes efforts made at the Transatlantic Workshop on Unaccompanied/Separated Children, convened by Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration, which focused on identification of the nature of migration and creation of appropriate policies and international frameworks to protect these children. Conferences such as this one should be replicated and expanded. The increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors and the research indicating the detrimental effects of hostile reception policies support the need for an international protocol of established procedures and practices to support the needs of unaccompanied minors. All countries have a responsibility to develop and enforce national and international policies that are based on a human rights framework and respect the universal rights of each individual and child.

Social Work with Unaccompanied Minors

Under the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 1996), social workers have an ethical responsibility to their clients that includes recognizing and understanding culture and its effect on human behaviors and societies. Social workers should be prepared to understand the reality of social diversity and the nature of oppression and persecution. Through understanding the connection between the ethics of the social work profession and the human rights framework, social workers can apply human rights to the profession through ethical principles (Reichert, 2003). The internationally recognized and accepted perspective of human rights is able to supply more power to the application of social work ethics.

Further research must be undertaken to determine the most effective interventions and placements for unaccompanied minors. There is a particular need for longitudinal studies that follow groups of unaccompanied minors through adulthood to observe how different environments influence their internal and external functioning. Each study that has been completed to examine the treatment of unaccompanied minors supports less restrictive settings, and host countries must heed these findings. The body of research should include studies of various placements, such as foster care, group homes, and return to country of origin. In addition, attention should be given to cultural phenomena that could aid or impede resilience in these youth (Geltman et al., 2005).

Social workers have important roles to play in ameliorating the treatment of unaccompanied minors and thereby improving their mental health. Social

work education should provide training on effective strategies for working with unaccompanied minors and in recognizing issues relevant to their development (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003). Social workers are increasingly placed in positions where they work directly with the unaccompanied minor population, particularly in group home settings and establishing foster care or other residential placements for the minors. Social work professionals should be prepared for this responsibility and demonstrate their effectiveness in assisting unaccompanied minors in order to be given more opportunities to work with this population. Social workers have the opportunity to guide the minors through the process of seeking asylum and resettling in a foreign land, and are more adept at meeting the needs of these minors than the immigration officials who historically have been responsible for this population.

Unaccompanied minors are often hesitant to talk to mental health practitioners about their experiences. This reluctance to disclose personal information may arise out of an association of social workers with other authority figures whom they fear (Kohli, 2006). They remain silent due to a lack of trust developed through persecution as well as a resistance to discuss experiences filled with pain and guilt (Kohli, 2006). Such obstacles to communication can be overcome by a social worker making efforts to establish a warm, empathetic relationship with the minor (Sourander, 1998). According to Kohli (2006), an unaccompanied minor's choice to remain silent can be viewed as part of healing and managing hurt, and as such, the process is both burdensome and protective for the child. When unaccompanied minors talk, they often do so reluctantly and tell 'thin stories' that are constructed as an acceptable entry mechanism in compliance with international conventions related to the status of asylum. Through building a therapeutic relationship, the young people feel safer to tell more detailed stories.

Unaccompanied minors have experienced multiple losses, and their most common symptoms are related to PTSD, depression and anxiety (Sourander, 1998). Exposure to multiple traumatic stressors greatly decreases a child's ability to cope effectively. Social work services for unaccompanied children should be child-centered and culturally sensitive. Younger children are particularly at risk and in need of psychosocial services. Lustig et al. (2004) assert that unaccompanied minors' reactions to stressors may be mediated by the presence of coping strategies, belief systems and social relations. They determined that more research needs to be undertaken relating to interventions with the unaccompanied minor population, specifically taking into account effectiveness and cultural relevance.

Social workers are accustomed to complexity in providing services to meet the needs of clients. Due to their concentration on a variety of service levels, social workers are in a position to move closer to a multi-dimensional understanding of the complicated needs of unaccompanied minors. However, social work skills are often undervalued in the context of providing resettlement services and other services to youth and adult asylum seekers (Kohli, 2007). Social work practitioners are able to show a depth of understanding about the reasons children flee their homes and seek asylum. They can also strategize about how policies can be organized to maximize the chances of positive outcomes for unaccompanied minors. Social workers must advocate for unaccompanied minors on the macro level in addition to providing interventions for their specific individual needs. Only by providing a voice for the rights of unaccompanied minors can they be prevented from slipping through the cracks of an unjust system.

Conclusion

Globalization has created new relationships within and between countries. Interactions are increasingly determined by mobility rather than inhibited by national borders. The advent of globalization has literally changed the way in which the international community operates. While globalization has helped to facilitate the exchange of information and thereby advanced many societies, it has also exacerbated the plight of the world's most vulnerable. Social workers increasingly should be prepared to work with individuals and groups who have diverse identities. The complex needs of unaccompanied minors that arise from the circumstances of their mobility require social workers to expand their range of tasks and services (Christie, 2003). Since national policies treat asylum seeking children less favorably than native children, social workers also need to support unaccompanied minors on the macro level. Cemlyn and Briskman (2003) maintain that too often social workers focus on managing the current system instead of challenging it. The complexity of circumstances in which children become unaccompanied, as well as the diverse needs of the children themselves, mean that no single country, discipline, or agency can solve the problem individually. Efforts to assist the population of unaccompanied minors must be coordinated among those in different countries, disciplines and agencies to provide them with an opportunity to overcome the atrocities of their past and to develop brighter futures.

International organizations, governments, agencies and service providers should adhere to the following recommendations in order to improve the well-being of unaccompanied minors:

- Establish and enforce internationally accepted policies for aiding unaccompanied minors that are in accordance with the perspective of human rights and the rights of the child as per the UNCRC.
- Unaccompanied minors should be provided with care in a safe residential setting that includes access to health, mental health, educational and legal services.
- Countries should appoint legal counsel as well as guardians ad litem for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Age determinations should be undertaken more carefully in order to avoid the frequent errors when minors are mistaken as adults and wrongfully detained.
- Countries need to learn from each other about how to manage issues of prevention, protection and durable solutions. International attention must be given to using best practices to assist unaccompanied minors.
- Social work education should emphasize the impacts of globalization and the ethical responsibility for cultural competency.
- Social workers should view the phenomenon of forced migration and its consequences, such as the prevalence of unaccompanied minors, on micro, mezzo and macro levels.
- Social workers should align themselves with non-governmental organizations and other child protection organizations to advocate for the development of progressive policies in relation to asylum seeking children.
- Social workers should gain more holistic knowledge of policies and systems and embrace a global analysis in order to help unaccompanied minors through a human rights perspective.
- Social workers should also build alliances with other activist groups so that they can work together to create change on the macro level as well as improve lives for individual unaccompanied minors.
- Continued longitudinal research should be undertaken to determine best practices in providing services to unaccompanied minors that will most improve their life trajectories as well as improving policies to decrease the phenomenon of their migration.

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