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Whose Story Is It? Media Portrayals of Children in Conflict and Migration Contexts

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Abstract

This paper examines media portrayals of children in contexts of conflict and migration, interrogating the narratives, visual representations, and framing strategies employed in both global and local media. Using secondary data, the paper explores how children are often depicted as passive victims, security threats, or symbols of hope, rather than as agents with voices and rights. It investigates whose perspectives dominate the storytelling, whether those of journalists, governments, aid agencies, or the children themselves, and the implications of such representations for public perception, humanitarian response, and policy advocacy. The paper calls for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and child-centred reporting frameworks that recognize children not merely as subjects of pity or fear, but as individuals with agency, resilience, and stories worth telling on their own terms. This paper has shown that mainstream media often depict children through reductive frames, either as passive victims or as security threats, thus stripping them of agency and voice. These portrayals are frequently influenced by geopolitical interests, cultural biases, and editorial agendas that prioritize sensationalism over complexity. While some media efforts attempt to humanize children and highlight their resilience, structural limitations and editorial conventions often impede more balanced storytelling. A child-rights-based and ethical media framework is therefore essential to ensure that children's experiences are accurately and respectfully represented.

Keywords
Whose Story, Media, Portrayal, Children, Conflict and Migration

I. Introduction

The media plays a vital role in shaping public understanding of global crises, particularly those involving vulnerable populations such as children. In the context of conflict and migration, children are frequently portrayed through reductive frames that emphasize their victimhood, innocence, or symbolic value, often at the expense of their individuality, voice, and agency. These portrayals raise important questions about narrative ownership, representational justice, and the ethical obligations of journalists and media organizations in conflict reporting. As humanitarian crises intensify across regions like the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Central and Latin America, the representation of children in media has become both a strategic and contested site of global discourse (Chouliaraki, 2013; Allan & Mortensen, 2019).

Children in conflict and migration contexts are typically depicted as passive sufferers or idealized symbols of purity and hope, serving broader geopolitical and humanitarian narratives (Orgad, 2012; Moeller, 2002). Such representations, while often intended to evoke empathy or mobilize support, can also erase the complex lived experiences of these children, reducing them to objects of adult interpretation. Scholars have critiqued these

practices as contributing to what Cohen (2001) calls the "spectacularization of suffering," wherein media audiences are emotionally moved but politically disengaged. As Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle (2012) argue, the emotional appeal of imagery involving children often overshadows the structural causes of conflict and displacement, leading to superficial understandings and short-lived public concern.

Moreover, media portrayals of children in migration and conflict zones as noted by (Onyejelem et al (2025) are often shaped by the institutional logics and ideological imperatives of news organizations, aid agencies, and governments. These actors influence the production and circulation of specific narratives that align with political agendas or funding priorities, frequently without the consent or participation of the children themselves (Malkki, 1996; Pupavac, 2001). As a result, children are not merely misrepresented, they are systematically excluded from the storytelling processes that affect their lives and futures. This exclusion contradicts the core tenets of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which asserts the right of children to express their views freely in matters affecting them.

Studies by Lundy and McEvoy (2012) have called for a shift toward more participatory and ethically grounded forms of media production that acknowledge children's agency and subjectivity. Approaches such as child-led storytelling and participatory video have been employed in humanitarian communication to center the perspectives of displaced and conflict-affected children (Couldry, 2010). Yet, these practices remain marginal within mainstream journalism, which continues to rely heavily on adult-driven narratives that frame children as either tragic victims or potential threats, particularly in security-focused reporting on refugee flows and child soldiers (Wall, 2010). Onyejelem et al (2025) note that the way child abuse is portrayed in Nigerian media, including news stories, investigative journalism, and social media activism, has the ability to influence legislative changes and inspire public action. But there are issues with sensationalism, ethical reporting, and the real influence on policymaking because media coverage frequently differs in terms of consistency, accuracy, and depth.

This study therefore interrogates the dominant modes of representing children in media coverage of conflict and migration, with a particular focus on narrative ownership: whose voice is amplified, whose perspective is legitimized, and whose story is ultimately being told. It draws on content and discourse analysis of selected news articles, visual media, and humanitarian campaigns to examine the discursive patterns and power relations embedded in portrayals of children. By interrogating the representational practices of various media platforms, the study seeks to highlight the ethical implications of such portrayals and advocate for more inclusive, rights-based, and child-centered approaches to media coverage.

In an age of global media saturation and rising humanitarian need, the question "Whose story is it?" is not merely rhetorical. It demands a rethinking of journalistic norms, ethical standards, and representational frameworks to ensure that children are not just subjects in the news, but active participants in the construction of their own narratives. This shift is necessary not only to uphold their rights but also to foster more accurate, humane, and socially responsible media engagement with the realities of conflict and migration.

II. Review of Literatures

Framing Theory

Framing theory remains one of the most influential and enduring conceptual tools in media and communication studies, offering a powerful lens to examine how issues are constructed, interpreted, and communicated to the public. Originating from the sociological work of Erving Goffman (1974), who described frames as interpretive structures that help individuals "locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space, the theory has since been expanded across disciplines to explain how media, political actors, and cultural institutions shape meaning. Framing, as applied in communication research, involves the selection and salience of certain aspects of a perceived reality to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). This selective emphasis profoundly influences public perception and policy outcomes by foregrounding specific narratives while backgrounding others.

In media studies, framing is distinct from but often linked to agenda-setting, as it goes beyond the selection of topics to explore how those topics are presented. While agenda-setting tells audiences *what* to think about, framing influences *how* they think about it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Entman's (1993) seminal synthesis of the framing concept provided a foundational vocabulary and analytical framework that has guided empirical studies across political communication, journalism, public relations, and health communication. His four core functions of frames, problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation, and remedy suggestion have been central to identifying how frames operate in media texts and audience reception.

Framing theory has proven particularly relevant in studies of news media, where journalists, editors, and institutional logics play a critical role in constructing dominant narratives. Tuchman (1978) showed how media frames are shaped by professional routines, organizational constraints, and ideological assumptions. Gitlin's analysis of the anti-war movement in the U.S. demonstrated how mainstream media marginalized dissenting voices by framing activists as deviant or irrational. Such studies reveal how framing serves hegemonic functions, privileging certain power structures and worldviews while delegitimizing others. More recent scholarship has extended framing analysis to transnational issues such as terrorism, migration, climate change, and public health, showing how frames not only influence national discourse but also mediate global understanding.

The versatility of framing theory lies in its adaptability to various domains. In political communication, frames are used by politicians and interest groups to influence public opinion and policy preferences. Iyengar (1991) differentiated between episodic frames, which focus on individual events, and thematic frames, which provide broader social contexts. His research showed that episodic framing can lead audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals, whereas thematic framing encourages structural interpretations. This has profound implications for how citizens assign blame or demand policy interventions on issues such as poverty, crime, and health inequality.

In health communication, framing theory has been instrumental in understanding how media coverage of diseases, vaccination campaigns, and mental health affects public attitudes and behaviors. For example, studies on the framing of HIV/AIDS in African media have highlighted how metaphors of contagion and morality influence stigma and public discourse (Dutta, 2008). Similarly, the framing of COVID-19, as a global health emergency, national security threat, or economic disruption varied across media systems

and political contexts, shaping public compliance and governmental responses (Ogbodo et al., 2020). These studies underscore how framing not only reflects but also actively constructs social reality and public rationality.

Despite its utility, framing theory is not without critique. Scholars have pointed out conceptual ambiguities and inconsistencies in the operationalization of frames. There is ongoing debate over whether frames are located in texts, in the cognitive schemas of audiences, or in communicative practices between senders and receivers (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The proliferation of frame definitions and typologies, ranging from conflict, human interest, responsibility, economic consequences, and morality has raised concerns about analytical clarity and theoretical coherence. Furthermore, the rise of digital and participatory media environments complicates traditional framing analysis, as user-generated content, algorithms, and interactivity reshape how frames are constructed, contested, and circulated (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013).

Audience-centered research within the framing paradigm has shown that reception is not always linear or predictable. Individuals interpret media frames through the lens of their pre-existing beliefs, experiences, and sociocultural contexts. The concept of "frame alignment" thus becomes essential, recognizing that for a frame to be persuasive, it must resonate with audiences' existing values and interpretive frameworks. This insight is especially important in understanding communication strategies in social movements, advocacy, and counter-hegemonic media, where success often hinges on the strategic use of culturally resonant frames (Snow & Benford, 1988).

Framing theory also intersects with critical and cultural approaches that interrogate whose voices are privileged and whose experiences are excluded in dominant frames. Feminist, postcolonial, and critical race scholars have used framing analysis to expose how media systematically marginalizes or stereotypes vulnerable groups such as women, migrants, and ethnic minorities (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). For example, the framing of African countries in Western media often reinforces narratives of poverty, corruption, and dependency, ignoring local agency and structural inequalities. These critiques call for a more reflexive, ethical, and inclusive approach to frame analysis that accounts for power relations and media accountability.

Framing theory offers a robust and multidimensional framework for analyzing the construction and influence of media messages. It provides insights into how communicators shape meaning, how audiences process information, and how power circulates through discourse. While the theory continues to evolve, particularly in response to digital media transformation and epistemological critiques, its core premise, that media frames shape how people make sense of the world, remains a cornerstone of communication scholarship.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Representation and Narrative Ownership

The concepts of representation and narrative ownership have become central to contemporary discussions on media, identity, power, and agency. Representation, as Hall (1997) posits, is not merely about how the world is reflected in language or media, but how meaning is constructed through systems of representation, including images, discourse, and cultural practices. Narrative ownership extends this idea by interrogating who has the right or power to tell stories, particularly those of marginalized communities, and what implications such ownership has for social justice, political recognition, and epistemic equity.

In postcolonial and decolonial studies, representation has long been contested terrain. Spivak's (1988) seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlights the epistemological violence inherent in allowing dominant groups to speak for and about the oppressed. Scholars have demonstrated how the West historically represented the East through orientalist discourses that served colonial interests. These representations not only mischaracterized the "Other" but also denied them the agency to narrate their own experiences. The politics of representation thus remain a critical concern, particularly in humanitarian, development, and crisis communication contexts where the Global South is often rendered voiceless or passive in dominant media narratives.

Narrative ownership, therefore, entails a shift from being subjects of stories to authors of one's own experiences. It interrogates the power dynamics that define who construct narratives and how these narratives are circulated, legitimized, or contested. In the age of digital media, some scholars argue that narrative democratization is more possible than ever, with platforms enabling subaltern voices to emerge and counter hegemonic representations (Udupa & Dwyer, 2022). However, the affordances of digital platforms are unevenly distributed and often shaped by algorithmic logics that still privilege certain narratives over others (Noble, 2018).

In contexts of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian emergencies, narrative ownership becomes even more urgent. Chouliaraki (2013) argues that Western media representations of suffering often dehumanize or depoliticize victims by turning them into passive subjects of pity rather than agents of resistance or resilience. Similarly, Orgad (2012) notes that global narratives about crises frequently erase local voices, even when they are integral to understanding the complexity of these events. As a result, media portrayals may reproduce colonial imaginaries of helplessness and saviourism rather than empowering storytelling from within the affected communities.

Feminist and intersectional scholarship further critiques how representation and narrative ownership intersect with gender, race, and class. Hooks (1992) emphasized that when people from marginalized identities do not control their own image production, their stories are co-opted and distorted. This misrepresentation contributes to systems of domination that thrive on erasure and misnarration. More recent works in African and Indigenous media studies stress the importance of local storytelling traditions, community media, and participatory content creation as means to reclaim narrative authority. These approaches center the epistemologies and lived experiences of historically excluded groups and resist externally imposed frames of meaning.

Efforts toward narrative reclamation have been increasingly visible in movements like #OwnVoices in literature, #LetUsTellOurStories in journalism, and participatory storytelling initiatives in development communication (Tacchi et al., 2015). These movements stress that narrative power is not only about self-expression but also about self-determination, cultural survival, and political transformation. In academia and practice alike, the emphasis is gradually shifting toward ethical storytelling, narrative justice, and co-creative media approaches that challenge extractive and asymmetrical forms of representation.

The literature reveals that representation and narrative ownership are deeply interwoven with issues of power, identity, and justice. While there is increasing recognition of the importance of amplifying marginalized voices, systemic structures within media, academia, and global discourse often continue to inhibit genuine narrative autonomy. The challenge for scholars, journalists, and development practitioners lies not only in diversifying representations but in transforming the conditions that determine who get to tell stories and how those stories shape the world.

3.2 Child Rights-Based Approach to Media

The child rights-based approach to media (CRBAM) is an evolving interdisciplinary framework that places the rights of children, particularly as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), at the core of media practices, policies, and representations (Nwafor et al., 2024). This approach integrates the principles of participation, protection, provision, and non-discrimination to assess how children are portrayed in the media, how they access and use media, and how they are affected by media content and structures. It shifts the narrative from viewing children merely as passive consumers or subjects of media coverage to recognizing them as rights holders and active media participants.

A foundational principle in CRBAM is the right of children to be heard and to participate in matters affecting them, as articulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC. Scholars argue that media platforms can play a critical role in fulfilling this right by giving children space to express their views and share their experiences (UNICEF, 2018; Third et al., 2014). However, empirical studies reveal a persistent adult-centric bias in media systems where children's voices are often filtered, marginalized, or tokenized, particularly in news and policy discourses. The infantilization or victimization of children in crisis reporting, humanitarian narratives, and conflict journalism further undermines their agency and distorts public perception (Chouliaraki, 2013).

A CRBAM also advocates for ethical representation practices that respect children's dignity, privacy, and identity. Article 16 of the UNCRC guarantees the child's right to privacy, yet studies show that children's images are frequently used in fundraising campaigns, reality TV, and digital content without informed consent or adequate safeguards. The rise of "sharenting" and digital surveillance exposes children to new forms of privacy violations and data exploitation, prompting scholars to call for more robust child protection mechanisms in digital media governance. In particular, the General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in the digital environment (UNCRC, 2021) reaffirms the responsibility of states and media institutions to ensure that digital technologies uphold rather than undermine children's rights.

The provision pillar of the CRBAM also emphasizes equitable access to media and digital literacy. Children's rights to information, education, and leisure (Articles 17, 28, and 31) are increasingly mediated through digital platforms, yet disparities in digital inclusion persist along lines of geography, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status (Onyejelem, 2023). In many parts of the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, inadequate infrastructure and restrictive media policies exacerbate digital exclusion for children, thereby compounding structural inequities (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). A rights-based approach calls for inclusive media ecosystems where children not only access but also critically engage with content that is culturally relevant, age-appropriate, and empowering.

Furthermore, the CRBAM aligns with the broader movement for participatory media, which seeks to democratize content production by involving children as co-creators of media. Studies from participatory journalism and child-led media projects illustrate how involving children in storytelling can foster self-expression, civic engagement, and psychosocial development. However, such initiatives require ethical facilitation, media literacy education, and the dismantling of adultist norms that often gatekeep decision-making spaces. The tension between protection and participation is a recurrent theme in the literature, with scholars urging a nuanced balance that respects children's autonomy while safeguarding their well-being (Collin et al., 2011).

Media regulatory bodies and child advocacy organizations have attempted to institutionalize CRBAM principles through codes of conduct, guidelines, and ethical standards. For example, UNICEF and Save the Children have issued comprehensive toolkits for ethical reporting on children, emphasizing accuracy, consent, context, and non-stigmatizing language. Yet implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in commercial media environments where sensationalism, clickbait, and advertiser interests often take precedence over children's rights. The commercialization of childhood, through advertising, branded content, and influencer culture, raises urgent questions about the commodification of children's identities and the erosion of their rights in digital economies (Steeves & Regan, 2014).

In the context of conflict, migration, and humanitarian crises, CRBAM gains further significance. Research shows that children in these contexts are often portrayed as voiceless victims or passive recipients of aid, reinforcing stereotypes and stripping them of their subjectivity. A rights-based approach advocates for narrative justice, where children's lived experiences, resilience, and coping mechanisms are represented with nuance and agency. This also calls for participatory research and media projects that elevate the voices of displaced, marginalized, or stateless children within their sociopolitical realities (Tufte, 2017).

Overall, a child rights-based approach to media integrates legal, ethical, sociocultural, and technological considerations. It urges media institutions, practitioners, educators, and policymakers to foreground children's rights in content creation, dissemination, regulation, and education. While promising models and frameworks exist, actualizing CRBAM requires structural reforms, intersectoral collaboration, and sustained advocacy to challenge power asymmetries in both traditional and digital media landscapes.

3.3 Children as Subjects of International Law and Media Policy

The positioning of children as subjects of international law and media policy reflects a critical evolution in global normative frameworks, where children are no longer viewed as passive dependents but as rights-holding individuals with agency, voice, and legal recognition. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child remains the cornerstone of this transformation, offering a comprehensive legal framework that obliges state parties to recognize and uphold the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. Within this framework, children are treated not merely as beneficiaries of protection but as autonomous legal subjects entitled to participation, protection, and provision in all areas of public and private life, including media engagement and representation (Freeman, 2011; Onyejelem et al., 2021).

In international law, the codification of children's rights reflects a paradigmatic shift from welfare-based approaches to rights-based governance, situating the child as a subject with legal personality. Article 12 of the UNCRC affirms children's right to be heard in matters affecting them, which has implications for media policy, access to information, and participatory communication. This principle of participation intersects directly with the global media ecosystem, as media serves as both a space and a tool for children's civic expression and cultural identity. However, despite legal recognition, the operationalization of these rights is uneven and complicated by political, economic, and cultural constraints. Scholars have highlighted the dissonance between normative legal frameworks and practical media policies, particularly where children's participation is symbolic rather than substantive (Hart, 2008).

Media policy at the international level, though influenced by legal instruments such as the UNCRC and its General Comments, often remains guided by national priorities,

industry pressures, and market logics that may sideline children's rights. For example, while Article 17 of the UNCRC obliges states to ensure that children have access to diverse and appropriate media content, studies reveal that regulatory bodies frequently fail to enforce quality standards or age-appropriate programming, especially in low-income and conflict-affected countries (Takala, 2020). Moreover, the digital environment introduces new legal complexities. Children's data rights, digital consent, exposure to harmful content, and algorithmic manipulation are areas where international law has struggled to keep pace with technological developments. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 25 (2021) attempts to address these challenges by offering a rights-based interpretation of children's entitlements in digital environments, emphasizing inclusion, safety, privacy, and empowerment.

One of the central debates in media policy is the balance between children's rights to freedom of expression and the duty to protect them from harm. International law supports both Articles 13 and 17 of the UNCRC affirm the child's right to information and expression, while Article 19 underscores the right to protection from all forms of abuse and exploitation, including in the media. This dual imperative often results in a policy paradox, where protectionist measures, such as age restrictions or content bans, may unintentionally curtail participation rights. In this context, media literacy becomes a critical legal and policy tool that mediates between these rights, enabling children to navigate risks while engaging meaningfully in digital spaces. Yet, international legal mandates for media literacy remain soft and largely dependent on state initiative and civil society advocacy (Tobler, 2023).

Children's visibility in international legal discourse is also influenced by geopolitical and economic power relations that shape global media governance. Global South contexts frequently face structural disadvantages in translating international child rights norms into effective media policies due to weak institutions, limited infrastructure, and competing development priorities (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). In humanitarian and conflict settings, international legal norms mandate the protection of children from harmful media exposure and exploitative coverage, yet violations persist, with children often portrayed through reductive or victimizing lenses that strip them of agency. This raises questions about the effectiveness of international legal standards without enforcement mechanisms or accountability structures that include children as stakeholders in policy-making processes.

A growing body of literature supports a shift toward child-inclusive and child-responsive legal and policy mechanisms. Scholars and advocacy organizations argue for the institutionalization of child impact assessments in media regulation, the establishment of children's media ombudspersons, and the inclusion of children's voices in regulatory bodies (Hammarberg, 2015). These approaches reflect the principles of evolving capacities and best interests of the child (Articles 5 and 3 of the UNCRC), acknowledging that children's involvement in legal and policy decisions should be context-sensitive and developmentally appropriate.

Moreover, the emergence of digital rights coalitions and youth-led media advocacy has begun to challenge the traditional hierarchies of international law and policy-making. Initiatives such as the 5Rights Foundation and #MyDigitalWorld exemplify how children and adolescents are asserting themselves as legal and political actors in the media landscape. Their participation pushes international institutions to move beyond protectionist paradigms and recognize children as contributors to knowledge production, governance, and media reform. These developments align with the broader shift in

international human rights law toward participatory justice and the decolonization of child rights discourses (Onyejelem & Oboko, 2024).

While international law has formally recognized children as rights-bearing subjects with specific media-related entitlements, translating these legal standards into coherent, inclusive, and effective media policies remains an ongoing global challenge. Realizing the full potential of children's legal subjectivity in media policy requires structural reforms, inclusive governance, ethical frameworks, and cross-sectoral collaboration that genuinely center children's voices and interests.

IV. Conclusion

The question of narrative ownership in media portrayals of children in conflict and migration contexts remains central to understanding how public perceptions, policy responses, and humanitarian actions are shaped. This paper has shown that mainstream media often depict children through reductive frames, either as passive victims or as security threats, thus stripping them of agency and voice. These portrayals are frequently influenced by geopolitical interests, cultural biases, and editorial agendas that prioritize sensationalism over complexity. While some media efforts attempt to humanize children and highlight their resilience, structural limitations and editorial conventions often impede more balanced storytelling. A child-rights-based and ethical media framework is therefore essential to ensure that children's experiences are accurately and respectfully represented. Thus, reclaiming the narrative requires a deliberate shift towards participatory storytelling that includes the voices of children themselves, enabling the media to contribute not only to awareness but also to justice and dignity in humanitarian reporting.

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