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PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION OF ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN IN SWEDEN.

PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS

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Abstract

Title: Participation and Social Inclusion Of Asylum Seeking Children in Sweden. The Professionals' views

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Keywords: Child participation, social inclusion, asylum seeker, CRBA, child-focused organizations.

This thesis investigates how professionals working in child-focused organizations in Sweden interpret and implement child participation and the social inclusion of asylum seeking children. Using a Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), the study employs qualitative methods to critically examine how rights articulated in policy are translated into everyday professional practice.

Using a multiple-methods design, the research combines semi-structured interviews with four professionals and a comparative document analysis of key national, international, and civil society documents, including the UNCRC, UNICEF and Save the Children reports. The study is guided by Hart's Ladder of Participation, Shier's Pathways to Participation, and Critical Theory. These theoretical frameworks together gave an in depth explanation of the interplay between rights, institutional power, and professional practice.

The findings show a strong commitment for child participation in both policy documents and professional practice. However, there is a gap that exists between policy objectives and practice, particularly in the participation of refugee and asylum-seeking children. The interview data revealed five main themes: recognition of children as experts in their own lives, systemic participation gaps, the "limbo" caused by legal uncertainty, moral dilemmas in professional practice, and policy silence. These themes emphasize how structural, legal, and organizational obstacles sometimes hinder asylum seeking children's meaningful participation in decisions that affect them.

The study adds to important discussions in social work and children's rights by highlighting the need for more adaptable and inclusive frameworks that can make refugee children's participation truly meaningful and protected in day-to-day practice rather than just being symbolically acknowledged in policy.

Forward

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise. (Angelou, 1978)

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the world has seen a significant rise in global displacement, with children constituting a substantial portion of the forcibly displaced population. Displacement refers to the forced movement of people from their homes, typically due to conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters. This can occur within a country's borders (internal displacement) or across international borders, in which case individuals often seek asylum or are recognized as refugees (European Union, 2024). Forcibly displaced persons may be uprooted with little warning and face great uncertainty about their safety, legal status, and future. For children, displacement can be particularly devastating, as it often disrupts their access to education, healthcare, family structures, and stable living conditions, exposing them to heightened risks of exploitation, trauma, and long-term developmental challenges.

According to UNHCR's latest statistics, over 43.3 million children worldwide are displaced due to conflict, tyranny, environmental disasters, or poverty (UNHCR, 2023). Many of these children seek safety in Europe, and Sweden has emerged as a prominent destination, particularly during the 2015 migration wave, when it received the highest unaccompanied adolescents per capita in the EU, including those who arrive unaccompanied or become separated from their families (Lundberg and Dahlquist, 2012). These children frequently come to Sweden after traumatic trips, confronting several and interconnected vulnerabilities including trauma, developmental needs, and unstable legal status (Crul et al., 2019).

As a result of increasing displacement, the Swedish government, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has assumed responsibility for the care and support of displaced children. In the Swedish context, participation and inclusion are considered essential components of care provision, in line with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes children's rights to be heard, to take part in decisions affecting them, and to be included in the communities where they live. These organizations are responsible not just for children's immediate well-being, but also for upholding their rights to participation and inclusion under the UNCRC. The convention upholds the premise that the child's best interests should come first (United Nations, 1989, Article 3), the right to be protected from discrimination (United Nations, 1989,

Article 2), and the right of children to participate in all matters that concern them (United Nations, 1989, Article 12). Article 22 expressly requires that children who are refugees or asylum seekers receive the proper protection and humanitarian aid in order to fulfill all of their rights under the Convention (United Nations, 1989). Since 2020, the UNCRC has been incorporated into Swedish legislation, strengthening the legal foundation for upholding children's rights in both policy and practice (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023).

Child participation and social inclusion are regarded as vital parts of a rights-based and child-centered approach in social work and human rights, particularly. However, the application of these concepts remains difficult, most especially in the case of refugee children (Skauge, Storhaug and Marthinsen, 2021). While these concepts are regularly mentioned in national and organizational policy, their actual application is sometimes unclear. Social work practitioners are expected to understand and carry out these responsibilities in institutional settings impacted by resource constraints, bureaucratic demands, and the broader socio-political debate on migration (Wimelius et al., 2016). These difficulties are further complicated by the children's imprecise legal status, which can limit their access to resources and opportunity for meaningful participation in choices that influence their life (Saarnik, Sindi and Toros, 2024; Skauge, Storhaug and Marthinsen, 2021).

I became interested in this topic through my personal experiences with asylum-seeking children during my academic and volunteering engagements in Gothenburg. I encountered children who were unsure of their rights and futures, children who were attending school, yet felt alienated from Swedish peers, or who were navigating life in limbo while awaiting asylum decisions. These experiences led me to question how policies and laws aimed at protecting refugee children are translated into their everyday realities. Are their voices truly being heard? Are they genuinely included in the communities they now live in?

To be clear about my stance, I recognize having a personal and professional connection to the issue of refugee children's rights on participation and social inclusion. I have consciously approached the research with an open mind and avoided preconceived assumptions about the professionals involved, even if this experience has shaped my interest and expanded the scope of my understanding. To reduce potential bias and preserve analytical integrity, I used ethical research methods throughout the study, which includes continuous self-reflection. My goal is to investigate how professionals understand and implement child participation and inclusion

for refugee children in practice, while keeping in mind the power dynamics that may influence both their behavior and my interpretations. I have not ventured into this research to seek validation for any preconceived mindset or for confirmation of any certain story.

The integration and well-being of refugee children in Sweden have been the subject of several research (Lundberg and Dahlquist, 2012; Wimelius et al., 2016; Crul et al., 2019; Skauge, Storhaug and Marthinsen, 2021, etc), but little is known about how professionals in child-focused organizations think about and implement inclusion and participation for this target group. There is also a lack of research examining how these practices align with or diverge from the principles laid out in policy or legislative frameworks. This gap is particularly important given the increased legal emphasis on child rights in Sweden and the need for more responsive and rights-based approaches to refugee children's integration.

I. Problem Statement

In order to promote refugee children's rights and well-being in accordance with social work values and international human rights standards, it is important to examine how professionals understand and implement the principles of child participation and social inclusion when working with refugee and asylum seeking children. Without a comprehensive understanding of these concepts, efforts to align policy with practice is at the risk of being overwhelmed and subdued by structural and contextual barriers that constrain refugee children's participation and inclusion. This study is therefore necessary to illuminate the professional practices and institutional mechanisms that shape refugee children's experiences, and to contribute to the development of more inclusive and rights-based social work practices within the Swedish context.

II. Aim

The aim of this research is to explore how professionals who work in child-focused organizations in Sweden conceptualize and implement child participation and social inclusion for children on the move. This study also examines key policy documents centered around the UNCRC to give an understanding of the gap between professional day-to-day practice and intended policy goals. By analyzing policy documents and professional perspectives, the study seeks to provide insight into the mechanisms that shape refugee children's participation and social inclusion within the Swedish community.

III. Research Questions

1. How do professionals conceptualize participation and inclusion for asylum-seeking children?

2. How do child rights policy documents describe participation and inclusion for refugee children, and how do these descriptions align with the professionals' interpretations and practices?

3. What structural barriers do professionals view as limitations to refugee children's participation and inclusion?

IV. Concepts used in this thesis

A short definition of key concepts as used in the research

- **Refugee Children:** This thesis uses the definition of refugee children as minors who have been forced to flee their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, or violence and who meet the criteria for refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2023).
- **Children on the move:** All children who migrate for a variety of causes, such as refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, or those displaced by social, economic, or environmental factors, are included in the broader term "children on the move." Children in transit, asylum seekers, and those who might not yet have legal protection are all included in this group (Save the Children, 2016). The concept also emphasizes the constant change and often unstable nature of children's migration experiences and the need for policies that ensure protection throughout the migration process (Derluyn and Broekaert, 2008). This concept is used interchangeably with asylum seeking children to make the text more dynamic.
- **Migrants:** Are Individuals who travel from one nation to another, regardless of their legal status, migrating reasons, or intended duration of stay (IOM, 2019). In this thesis, the term migrant is used with caution, and where applicable, it is replaced with more explicit legal terms such as asylum seeker or refugee.

- **Asylum seeker:** Is a person who is seeking protection from persecution but has not yet been legally recognized as a refugee. During this process, individuals often live in legal uncertainty, with restricted rights and limited access to participation in the host society (IOM, 2019; UNHCR, 2024). Asylum seekers may eventually be recognized as refugees but during this process, they have a transitional legal status that influences their access to social services, education, and social inclusion.
- **Child participation and social inclusion:** According to Article 12 of the UNCRC, child participation means allowing children to have the right to freely express their opinions on any issue that affects them and to have those opinions accorded the weight that is appropriate for their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989). Social inclusion involves the processes and outcomes through which children, particularly those from marginalized groups such as refugees, are able to participate fully in society, including in education, health, and community life (Crul et al., 2019).

2. Literature Review

In accordance with Bryman (2012), reviewing existing literature is an essential step in the research process, as it provides insight into the current body of knowledge, helps situate the study within its academic context, and highlights gaps that allow the researcher to develop arguments aligned with the research questions.

To gather relevant literature for this study, the database system of the University of Gothenburg was used to gather previous research, specifically, ProQuest Social Sciences was the search engine being used. The search process was in two parts.The first search process was directed by specific keywords linked to the research focus, including social work, participation and inclusion, child rights, asylum seeker, refugee children, CRBA and Sweden's child rights policies. The second search involved a physical visit to the Social Science library of the university of Gothenburg so as to be able to get more books and articles on the topic of child rights in Sweden and refugee children.

This literature review examines three interconnected areas that are essential to this topic. It first examines participation and inclusion as a child's right. Second, it concentrates on the Swedish context, looking at how social inclusion and participation are handled in national policy and in important institutions, especially child welfare and education. Lastly, it examines research on how professionals, particularly social workers and other frontline practitioners, interpret and implement inclusion and participation for refugee children. This review also offers a starting point for understanding the institutional and systemic factors that influence the chances for participation and inclusion of refugee children. It also aids in identifying important gaps that this thesis seeks to fill, and points out the insufficient attention given to the viewpoints and actions of professionals.

I. Child Rights on Participation and Inclusion

Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, child participation has become a key component of the worldwide conversation on child rights. Children have the right to freely express their opinions on any issue that affects them and to have those opinions regarded seriously in light of their age and maturity, according to Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). The creation of this global policy has impacted policy and practice all across the world, motivating welfare systems and child-focused groups

to establish structures that allow children's opinions to be valued and heard. According to scholars like Lansdown (2009) and Lundy (2007), participation is a fundamental right as well as a way to improve outcomes, and it needs to be approached intentionally, systematically, and responsibly.

According to Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie and Vandevelde (2009) they agreed that child rights have moved from just seeing children as passive recipients of care and protection to seeing them as active social actors and rights-holders. Nevertheless, research continuously reveals a discrepancy and gap between policy goals and reality, even with the legal framework established by the UNCRC. Skauge et al (2021) and Vis et al. (2010) point out that participation is frequently defined vaguely in child welfare contexts, which results in inconsistent implementation.While Vis et al. (2010) emphasize the health and wellbeing dimensions of participation, Skauge et al. (2021) build on this by reviewing conceptual inconsistencies that limit effective practice. Professionals may be unclear about what participation should actually entail in practice, or they may encounter organizational and structural limitations that make it difficult for them to effectively facilitate it. Although the term "participation" is often used, how it is applied differs based on institutional priorities, the resources that are available, and the attitudes of professionals on the involvement of children (Lundy, 2007).

Child participation and inclusion is made more difficult in the case of migration. In addition to their age, children of refugees and asylum seekers may experience numerous layers of exclusion because of their migration status, language problems, trauma histories, and lack of familiarity with social structures. Derluyn and Broekaert (2008) highlight the psychological implications associated with exclusionary systems, while Bhabha and Schmidt (2007) argue that legal protections frequently overlook children's developmental requirements. Together, these studies highlight how the legal and psychological components of inclusion work together to marginalize asylum-seeking and refugee children. Children's apparent temporary residence and their uncertain legal status further limit participation and may result in their exclusion from policy making and service delivery (Padyab et al., 2020). Despite these insights, little research has examined how child participation is being interpreted specifically within organizations that support refugee children. While studies recognize structural barriers

to participation (Saarnik et al, 2024), they do not fully explore how professionals interpret and implement child participation policies in practice.

II. Child Participation and Social inclusion For Refugee Children in Sweden

In 2015, there was a major political shift in Sweden that fundamentally changed the country's asylum policy. Prime Minister Stefan Löfvén made a public statement on Europe being open to asylum seekers. This was quite a short-lived political shift as the Prime Minister came back that same year and declared the necessity of breathing from the refugee crisis, characterizing the situation as a logistical strain on municipalities that needed to be prevented from collapsing (Kazemi, 2015). The Temporary Aliens Act, a regulation intended to bring Sweden's refugee reception to the EU minimum level, was introduced right after this new declaration (Kazemi, 2015). According to Kazemi (2015), choosing to tag an occurrence as a "crisis" generates a sense of urgency that permits governments to bypass customary political processes and enact drastic actions. The administration was able to swiftly abolish long-standing asylum laws and enact legislation that significantly reduced the right to asylum and family reunion because of this fabricated emergency, the narration shifted from migration being a humanitarian concern to national and economic security (Kazemi, 2015). This situation has led to a more emotional and traumatic situation for children on the move, for example, Wernesjö (2012) points out the emotional well-being of these children through psychiatric and medical lenses, framing their difficulties as arising from past trauma and parental separation, which positions them as an especially vulnerable group. Kazemi (2015) also mentioned the fact that the political turn around sort of painted or described the unaccompanied minors in negative ways that further created are more restrictive and accommodating.

Sweden is known for its progressive social welfare model, and has presented a valuable case for examining the intersection of children's rights and migration. In 2020, the incorporation of the UNCRC into the Swedish law created a stronger normative foundation for ensuring children's rights across all sectors (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023). However, research highlights a persistent gap between these policy ideals and everyday practice. Lundberg and Dahlquist (2021) found that while Swedish social services advocate for child

participation, implementation is often disintegrated and inconsistent. They attribute this to organizational constraints and the varying attitudes of professionals (Lundberg and Dahlquist, 2021). Similarly, Pålsson and Wiklund (2021) critique the trend of "performative" child participation within child-focused organizations. They argue that participation is frequently used symbolically to signal alignment with international standards rather than being genuinely embedded in practice. Their concept of "decoupling" illustrates how organizations may adopt participation policies in form but not in substance, creating a disconnect between declared values and lived realities (ibid).

This policy-to-practice gap is particularly visible among marginalized groups such as refugee children and children with disabilities. Crul et al. (2019) emphasize that despite legal frameworks emphasizing the importance of children's voices, structural limitations such as limited resources, lack of professional training, and dominant adult-centric norms continue to hinder meaningful participation. These findings suggest that inclusive practices require more than legislative mandates; they demand targeted support systems and a transformation of institutional cultures (Crul et al., 2019).

Social inclusion is another key dimension of refugee children's well-being and integration. Schools, in particular, are positioned as central arenas for fostering inclusion. Bunar (2017) examined the experiences of Syrian refugee children in Swedish schools and found that although educational access is formally guaranteed, cultural barriers, language difficulties, and limited individualized support impede full inclusion. The study recommends a shift toward more culturally responsive and personalized education approaches to support the holistic integration of refugee or asylum seeking students.

Similarly, Svensson and Eastmond (2013) explored the role of social networks in promoting inclusion for refugee children in Swedish schools. Their findings revealed that many refugee students struggle to establish meaningful relationships with their Swedish peers, leading to persistent feelings of exclusion. The authors advocate for structured school activities that foster peer interaction and mutual understanding as a pathway to more inclusive environments. Social inclusion is critical to the health and development of refugee children. In Sweden, educational institutions play an important part in the process. Bunar (2017) investigated how various policies and educational systems influence the participation of Syrian refugee children in Sweden. The study discovered that, while education is available,

obstacles such as language hurdles and cultural differences prevent complete inclusion. The study concludes that personalized support and intercultural education are required for effective inclusion.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that while Sweden has developed progressive policies to support child rights which includes integration and inclusion, their translation into everyday experiences remains uneven. Refugee children, in particular, continue to face systemic barriers to meaningful participation and inclusion. This underscores the importance of examining how professionals interpret and enact these policy dictates within the organizational settings where such children are served.

III. Role of Social Work

The part being played by social workers in the realization of human rights as emphasised by Ife (2012), presents human rights as not just legal statutes, but as a moral compass and a "narrative framework" that anchors social work practice in principles of human dignity, support, and social justice. Ife's approach also encourages a "discursive and critical way" of applying these principles of human rights, taking into account the complex contexts in which social work is practiced, the dynamics of social work practice across different backgrounds, settings and systems (Ife, 2012). A crucial conceptual link between the principles of human rights and the practical day-to-day activities of social work is offered by this framework. It gives room for the criticism of public policy based on basic moral short-comings rather than just legal or administrative problems. Ife's approach on the promotion of a rights-based practice, encourages social workers to actively defend the rights of their service users and to challenge laws that violate human dignity (Ife, 2012).

Social work is essential in assisting refugee children and fostering their social integration. However, there are obstacles to ensuring that these children's voices are heard and appreciated during the social work process. Less research has been done on the professional application of participation and inclusion principles and the lived experiences of children. A few studies look at how professionals understand and apply participatory principles, despite the fact that many focus on children's perspectives and access to resources. Padyab et al. (2020) emphasizes that workers on the front line (i.e social workers) frequently find it difficult to strike a balance between organizational realities and policy objectives, particularly when there

is legal ambiguity. This opinion is supported by Saarnik et al. (2024), they demonstrate how procedural standards can unintentionally silence children even by well-meaning practitioners. Voronka and Grant (2021) take a more critical perspective, claiming that involvement is often absorbed into bureaucratic performance rather than transformational activity. Similarly, Pålsson and Wiklund (2021) cite organizational obstructions and ambiguous national guidelines as contributing factors to the problem. Instead of being incompatible, these viewpoints complement one another to show the range of difficulties faced by professionals, from structural limitations to more profound epistemological conflicts regarding what participation and inclusion

This study expands on the literature previously mentioned by focusing on the viewpoints of professionals working in child-focused organizations in Sweden. Although children's rights, participation frameworks, and the integration of refugee children have all been the subject of previous study, there is still a significant knowledge gap about how professionals operationalize these rights at the organizational level. By investigating how professionals understand and implement participation and inclusion policies and how these practices conform or do not conform to the legal and ethical standards established by the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), this thesis helps close that gap. This study provides understanding of the structural factors that either facilitate or impede the meaningful participation and inclusion of asylum seeking children in Swedish society.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

According to Bryman (2012), theory is considered to be an essential component of social science research since it offers a robust framework, support, and a more profound meaning to the investigation. It provides a framework for analysing the relevant complexity of the research topic, guiding the research questions, data collection and analysis. This thesis employs three theoretical perspectives, which includes: the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), Model of child participation, and Critical Theory. These theories will be used to define what participation and social inclusion looks like for asylum seeking children in Sweden.

l. Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) serves as the foundation for the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), an ethical framework that highlights children's rights and their right to actively participate in decisions that impact their life (United Nations, 1989; Lansdown, 2009). In particular, Article 12 of the UNCRC requires duty-bearers, including governments, organizations, and professionals, to make sure that children's opinions are accorded the significance that they deserve based on their maturity and age (United Nations, 1989). Therefore, CRBA does more than just treat children as recipients of support and care, it positions them as social actors with autonomy whose opinions need to be taken into account when designing policies, services, and institutional procedures (D'Cruz and Stagnitti, 2008).

CRBA emphasis on accountability procedures is one of its main contributions. UNICEF states that the CRBA mandates that organizations conform their practices, frameworks, and results to the principles of children's rights, such as participation, nondiscrimination, best interests of the child, and survival and development (Skelton, 2007). According to Lundy and McEvoy (2012), this rights-based approach provides a critical lens through which to assess whether organizations that engage with children, especially refugee children, are effectively fostering their inclusion and participation in addition to ensuring their welfare.

The CRBA serves as the basis for this study's evaluation of the organization's conception and execution of social inclusion and involvement for refugee children. It aids in determining if

refugee children are viewed and treated as active rights holders and whether their voices are included into organizational procedures. This approach is used to assess how professionals perceive participation: are they promoting participation as a formality or as an ethical and legal duty according to children's rights? In the case of refugee children, this is especially crucial because their uncertain legal status may result in their exclusion from decision-making processes or in being seen as passive users of services rather than active participants (Lansdown, 2009; Saarnik, Sindi and Toros, 2024).

Also the choice of the organization for this study was motivated by CRBA. Participation is more likely to be incorporated as a fundamental principle into the programs, policies, and professional cultures of organizations that follow a rights-based approach. As a result, the framework serves as both an analytical tool and a starting point for identifying organizations that assert that they support child participation and inclusion. Additionally, it offers a standard by which to measure whether these words and documents are carried out, especially when dealing with children from underrepresented communities like refugees.

While CRBA establishes the obligation for child participation, models such as Hart's Ladder of Participation (1997) and Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001) offer practical tools to evaluate how that participation is enacted in real-world settings. These models will be further discussed in this paper.

II. Models of Child Participation

The two prominent models of child participation are Hart's Ladder of participation (1997) and Shier's Pathways to participation (2001). According to Hart (1997) the ladder symbolically depicts various degrees of involvement or participation rights being given to children by adults, with the greatest steps denoting true empowerment and the lowest steps showing that children's involvement is insignificant or even detrimental. Child participation is depicted as an eight-rung ladder and reflects the several levels of participation that children can have in adult-controlled decision-making processes. From non-participation (e.g., manipulation, decoration, and tokenism) to more authentic and significant forms of participation (e.g., being informed and consulted, adult-initiated participation shared with children, and, lastly, child-initiated decisions shared with adults), each rung of the ladder represents a level of participation (Hart, 1997). The lower rungs of the ladder described children who seem to be

participating but actually have little to no impact. He explained tokenism as the practice of giving children a limited voice that lacks real authority or follow-through, while manipulation is the use of children to support adult causes without providing an explanation and lastly, decorating is the use of children to promote a cause without comprehending it (Hart, 1997). These forms are condemned for being shallow or even harmful. As the model progresses, it emphasizes more authentic forms of participation. At the middle rung, adults actively seek children's views and provide them with the necessary information to form and express opinions. At the highest rung, adults and children collaborate to make shared decisions, and children are given meaningful space to influence outcomes (Hart, 1997).

Expanding upon Hart's participation approach, Shier's (2001) Pathways to Participation goes beyond the rising acknowledgement of children's right to voice their opinions, which is guaranteed by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Unlike Roger Hart (1997)'s ladder, which is more of a descriptive and evaluative tool, Shier's (2001) model is more directed at practitioners and aware of the need for professionals and organisations to self-reflect and evolve their participation practices. Five progressively higher levels of participation are suggested by Shier (2001): (1) children are given a voice, (2) they are assisted in expressing their opinions, (3) their opinions are considered, (4) they participate in decision-making, and (5) they share authority and accountability for decision-making. These phases of involvement provide an entry point for varying degrees of participation and an ascending level of engagement (Shier, 2001). Shier added three elements of readiness, namely, "openings," "opportunities," and "obligations" which makes the framework especially applicable to not just at an individual level but is most applicable at professional and organizational level. Practitioners are urged to consider if they have established the capacity (opportunities), the space (openings), and the ethical or professional duty (obligations) necessary to facilitate children's engagement at each level of participation (Shier, 2001). Shier's model is used in this study to examine how the organizations in question are institutionalized and reflect on participation, as well as whether it creates the framework required to effectively involve refugee children in decisions that impact them.

III. Critical Theory

Critical Theory, particularly informed by Foucault's (1980) concept of power relations. Foucault (1980) was of the opinion that power is not limited to the marxist point of view of power as possessive, rather he described power as a relational and universal force that circulates across society in a less obvious, but no less potent way, rather than just being a possession. Power is more than just authority or regulations, it also influences our perceptions of reality, our identity, and the way we view the world (Tobore, 2023). Foucault's concept of "power/knowledge" demonstrates the interdependence of knowledge and power, since knowledge is produced by power and helps to maintain it. Therefore, power is not limited to politics, it goes further to shape our lives in ways we may not be aware of by operating through conventional systems like healthcare, education, religion etc (Foucault, 1980).

It emphasizes that policies and practices are not neutral but are shaped by power dynamics that can reinforce exclusion and marginalization (Foucault, 1980). Drawing from Foucault's (1980) work, critical theory provides an important lens for analyzing how structural power dynamics shape and sometimes limit the implementation of children's rights within institutional settings.

This theoretical point of view stresses that power is embedded in discourse, professional norms, and institutional practice and not only in visible behaviors but also in the way information is produced and legitimized. Based on this viewpoint, participation is neither a neutral nor fundamentally empowering action, the institutional players have the ability to either facilitate or restrict it, often in line with larger social and political goals (Foucault, 1980).

Critical theory is especially helpful in this study's context for analyzing how professionals deal with the conflict between policy principles and day-to-day organizational realities. It enables the research to examine whether participation is implemented in a way that transforms or gets appropriated into bureaucratic processes that uphold pre-existing hierarchies. Organizations may involve children in what Hart (1997) refers to as "tokenism" processes that seem participatory but actually have little real impact. This is especially significant for refugee children, who could be partially or symbolically included in organizational choices because they are perceived as both politically sensitive and vulnerable.

Furthermore, this study uses critical theory to examine not just what is stated in practice and policy, but also what is not stated and why. It draws attention to the ways that organizational documentation and professional narratives may use depoliticized language, ambiguity, or silence as protective measures that unintentionally further marginalize refugee children.

This study explores how participation and inclusion of refugee children in Sweden is conceived and performed in relation to power, voice, and vulnerability through a critical lens. It investigates whether refugee children are viewed as subjects of care whose voices are mediated or muted by professional opinion, or as individuals with rights. Critical theory will provide a more thorough examination of the institutional and discursive obstacles that could impede the achievement of child participation and inclusion. It can be concluded that this framework complements the CRBA and participatory models previously discussed.

4. Methodology

I. Method(s)

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by the principles of social work and human rights. A multiple-methods approach was employed to capture refugee children's rights to participation and inclusion in Sweden. This was seen through the lenses of policy documents and professionals' views. This approach enhances the depth, validity, and credibility of the findings by triangulating data from different sources and methods.

Multiple qualitative methods were used to explore the research questions. These included semi-structured interviews with relevant professionals (e.g. migration expert, project coordinator etc), and a document analysis of relevant policy texts such as organizational agenda, policies and national guidelines implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Each method contributed a unique perspective: interviews offered insight into individual experiences and interpretations whereas policy documents revealed the normative frameworks shaping these experiences.

This research benefited more by making use of multiple methods of qualitative research for a deeper and more complex knowledge of how children's rights are perceived and implemented in real-world situations, this is often known as methodological triangulation. For instance, it was possible to evaluate the degree of agreement and discrepancies between declared rights and actual practices by comparing the responses of professionals in interviews with institutional policies.

Overall, the multiple-methods design was crucial in understanding the realities of refugee children's rights in practice from the perspective of professionals and documents, thus aligning with the study's commitment to social justice and human rights.

II. Sample

A purposive sample of professionals from different child-rights based organizations that work with children and refugee communities in Sweden. In order to make sure that participants had relevant experience and hands-on experience putting child-related policies into practice, purposeful sampling was employed (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). Participants included a project coordinator, child rights advisor, Managing Director, and migration expert, all of whom work

with refugee or asylum-seeker children. These professionals were chosen based on their direct involvement in designing or implementing policies and programs related to child participation and social inclusion.

Initially, the plan was to interview about 10 professionals from different organizations across Sweden. About 4 organizations were reached out via emails telling them about the study and the research aim with the interview guide included. Two organizations were open to being a part of the study while the rest replied with the fact that it is bad timing for them to be a part of the study, some mentioned they would be interested to read about the study after it is done as it is a timely and interesting study for them.

For this study, 4 professionals make up the sample size, which guarantees a variety of viewpoints while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis. To be more open about the sample size, 3 professionals are from the same organization and 1 participant from another child-focused organization. **Participant 1** works as a Project Manager at an internationally recognized child-rights organization. **Participant 2**, who also works with an international child-rights based organization, is a migration expert who works with asylum seeking children and their families, advocates for proper integration of migrants into the Swedish community and system. **Participant 3,** works in the same organization as Participant 1 and 2, a child rights activist and advocate. Lastly, **Participant 4** is a CEO of a civil society that caters and advocates for the refugee community in Gothenburg.

This research was centered on understanding how child-focused organizations in Sweden work with child participation and social inclusion of children on the move. Participants were chosen according to their positions within the organization and how involved they were with child participation and inclusion of refugee children in Sweden. Their positions range from project coordinator, migration experts, child rights activist etc. This method enables a more thorough comprehension of the difficulties professionals encounter when putting policies into practice.

For the document analysis, sample includes 4 key texts selected using purposive criteria: relevance to child participation and refugee inclusion, institutional origin (international, national, or civil society), and policy influence. These include:

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)

- UNICEF Sweden 2023 Annual Report
- Civil Society Report to the UNCRC Committee (2022)
- Save the Children Sweden's Barnrättsagenda 2025–2028

While there are a legion of legal documents and reports on child rights and refugee discourse, the above documents were chosen for this study because:

- The UNCRC convention gives the foundational idea of what child rights is and how it protects all children, inclusive of children on the move. It is only worthy to have like a genesis thought behind the child rights and help to understand the premises of child rights for refugee children.
- Unicef Sweden is an organization that can be seen as a major actor or stakeholder when it comes to advocating for the rights of asylum seeking children and their families in Sweden. Decided to analyse the last annual document being published by the organization at the time when this study was being done to understand the perspective of the organization and how it has worked with the target group of the study.
- The Civil Society report to the UNCRC Committee is a document that can be seen as a voice of all human rights/ child rights based organizations in Sweden. Since I can't get to interview professionals from all of these human rights organizations, it makes a lot of sense to analyse a document that captures what they stand and advocate for.
- Save the Children Sweden's Barnrättsagenda 2025–2028 is a document that contains the plan and agenda of a child-rights organization in Sweden for the next 3 years. The analysis of this document was to show how much attention is currently being given to the realization of participation and social integration for children on the move considering how this subject is being currently politicalized.

In general, the documents were chosen for their legal, policy importance and their anticipated impact on the realisation of children's rights, particularly for children on the move.

III. Data Collection

There were two approaches used for data collection:

Firstly, based on thematic analysis principles, the interview analysis used a comparative and interpretive method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While trying to understand how child rights to

participation and social inclusion for children on the move is being prioritized and translated into practice by professionals, this further involved reviewing four key documents from international, national, and civil society sources, with a focus on how child participation and inclusion, particularly for refugee children, are conceptualized and operationalized. Using the CQCA (which would be further expanded on in the next section), the documents were analyzed in relation to the UNCRC, particularly Articles 2, 3, 12, and 22, as the articles served as the framework guiding the operations of these child rights based organizations.

The documents selected for analysis included a purposive sample of international policy texts, legal frameworks, and guidelines/reports from key child-focused organizations. Special attention was given to documents referencing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was incorporated into Swedish law in 2020 (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023). Inclusion criteria were based on relevance to child welfare, migration, education, and participation rights.

The analysis followed a structured, multi-step process. First, documents were read in their entirety to establish familiarity with content, tone, and context. Second, initial coding was conducted inductively to identify recurrent themes and key concepts related to participation, inclusion, and rights-based language. Codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories (e.g., "symbolic vs. substantive participation," "conditional inclusion," "professional discretion," and "child voice"). Third, a comparative lens was applied to identify similarities and differences in how these themes appeared across different types of documents (e.g., national vs. international, legal vs. organizational).

Emerging reflections were captured in analytical themes, especially when idealistic discourse lacked practical remedies. The document analysis served both a descriptive and critical function. It not only mapped how refugee children's rights are framed within Swedish policy but also interrogated the extent to which these rights are actionable and responsive to professionals' realities. This analytical strategy aligns with the study's broader commitment to social justice, by revealing the institutional and discursive conditions under which children's rights are either upheld or undermined.

The second part of the data collection is the semi-structured interview (see appendix 2, pg 59-60). Those interviewed were professionals who work with child-rights especially with

refugee children. Their perceptions of current policies, the difficulties they have in guaranteeing social inclusion, and their understanding of child participation were the main topics of the interviews. Interviews were conducted online using Teams software, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility which enabled participants to reflect deeply on their practice. Interview data provided rich, contextual insights that complemented the themes and concepts found in documents analysis.

IV. Analysis

The analysis is in two parts, since this study is making use of both materials from documents and interviews. The document analysis is being done using the CQCA method, while the interview is being done using the thematic analysis method. Each of these methods is being adopted for this study because of how much result would be gotten. To sort of tie the knots together, the analysis also finds a common ground between the document and interview material using a critical analysis method, to juxtapose and drive home the goal of this study.

Critical Analysis of Documents

In this study, Critical Qualitative Content Analysis (CQCA) was used to examine documents that may foreground power relations, social structures, and ideologies shaping professionals' views and experiences of child participation and integration. Unlike conventional content analysis, CQCA seeks to uncover not only obvious content but also the underlying meanings, silences, and contradictions within the text (Schreier, 2012). The method was chosen for its alignment with the study's critical orientation and was guided by the theoretical frameworks that informed the study.

The analytical process began with careful transcription and close reading of the documents material, followed by open coding to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and expressions. Codes were then grouped into preliminary categories, which were further refined through iterative analysis. Attention was given to how language constructs meaning, reinforces or resists power, and reflects broader socio-political contexts, particularly in relation to migration. Using this method was quite helpful in bringing out the major themes.

Thematic Analysis of Interview

Thematic analysis was used to examine interview data collected from interview participants. This followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase model, the analysis involved an iterative process of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, definition, and final writing. Interview transcripts were read multiple times to identify significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful silences related to children's participation and inclusion.

Both inductive and deductive methods of coding were used. The participants' own experiences served as the basis for the inductive codes, which captured phrases like "left out" children or professionals who were having trouble integrating children in migrant contexts. Deductive coding concentrated on concepts like tokenism, limbo belonging, and procedural involvement and was influenced by theoretical frameworks, especially the Child Rights-Based Approach, Hart's Ladder, and Shier's model of Participation. Key themes that connected professional experiences with more general structural and institutional issues impacting the rights of refugee children in Sweden were established through repeated stages of analysis and taking notes in order to track themes and trends.

Critical Analysis of Documents in Relation to Interview Material

To investigate how the results of the document analysis matched or deviated from the real-life experiences of refugee children and professionals, a critical comparative analysis was carried out in addition to thematic analysis of the interviews. This technique entailed contrasting the narratives obtained from interviews with policy discourse, for example, where rights frameworks were strongly articulated in documents but weakly implemented in everyday professional contexts.

This critical dialogue between policy and practice highlighted the concept of "decoupling" (Pålsson and Wiklund, 2021), where institutional commitment to children's rights exists on paper but is inconsistently enacted in day-to-day practice. The triangulation of interviews and documents thus served to expose structural and cultural barriers that undermine meaningful participation and inclusion.

The study offers a multi-layered view of how children's rights for refugee children are stated, negotiated, and occasionally weakened in institutional practice by combining the two sets of data analysis.This approach aligns with the study's aim to interrogate the gap between formal rights frameworks and lived realities, in line with a social work and human rights perspective.

V. Ethical Considerations

The University of Gothenburg granted ethical permission for this research as part of the requirement for the Masters Programme in Social Work and Human Rights. Every participant received detailed information about the aims of the study, the methods used, and their rights, such as the fact that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could leave at any time without facing consequences. Prior to the start of the interviews, informed consent was acquired through a consent form sent before the interview and verbally at the start of the interview. Interview transcripts were anonymised and safely preserved, and any identifying information was left out of the final report to preserve participant privacy and identity.

It was decided not to incorporate refugee children as direct participants due to the delicate nature of working with refugee groups. This was founded on the moral principle of avoiding challenging situations for children who are already at risk. Rather, the study concentrated on comprehending the professional and institutional processes influencing their participation and social inclusion in Sweden.

The research adhered to the ethical principles established by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2020), including informed consent, confidentiality, and the minimization of harm. In addition, the study drew on Bryman's (2016) reflections on ethics and politics in social research to remain aware of the researcher's own role and potential influence on the data.

5. Analysis of Policy Documents

All child rights based organizations in Sweden have the UNCRC as the baseline for their operations and programme. The goal is to look deeply into what organizational policies really say about child participation and inclusion. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishes fundamental rights and a foundational framework for dealing with children, including provisions that emphasize child participation and inclusion. These principles are particularly critical for migrant children, who often face systemic barriers to meaningful engagement in decision-making processes and inclusion in host societies. All child rights based organizations in Sweden have the UNCRC as the baseline for their operations and programme majorly because the UNCRC got adopted as a law in Sweden in 2020 (Sahlberg et al., 2020). But it is important to critically examine if there is truly a translation of the law into the day-to-day operation of the child rights organization to be sure they are not just trying to be seen as acceptable to the public. Combining both document analysis and interview analysis gives a great way of understanding the gap between policy and practices when it comes to the fulfilment of the rights of a child to meaningful participation and inclusion. This section is being divided into themes that would be used as a correlation with findings from the interview analysis.

5.1 United Nations Child Rights Convention (1989)

The oldest and well known international convention on children's rights is the UNCRC, which was enacted in 1989 and is legally enforced by states that have signed the treaty. The convention outlines every person under the age of eighteen (18) civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. As mentioned earlier in this paper, in January 2020, the Convention was incorporated in Swedish legislation, strengthening Sweden's state responsibility to protect and uphold children's rights in a number of areas, such as social welfare, education, including asylum processes (Sahlberg et al., 2020; UNICEF Sverige, 2022a). This document is being critically analysed to bring out themes that are most related to children on the move and its translation into lived experiences.

5.1.1 Participation As a Right Or Rhetorics?

This theme is centered or derived from article 12 of the UNCRC. Article 12 engraved the right to participation, stating: “States Parties shall assure to the child… the right to express

those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 12). This is one of the most common articles cited when talking about child rights. Nonetheless, this article comes with the question of how to determine the age for maturity? How can children's voices be a part of the decision making process? etc.

Although this clause seems progressive, looking at it from a Critical Qualitative Content Analysis (CQCA) point of view uncovers hidden inconsistencies and omissions. Although it is unclear how it will be implemented, Article 12 upholds children's right to be heard. The concept of "due weight" leaves interpretation up to adults and institutions, which could strengthen power dynamics in hierarchies where children's opinions are suppressed or filtered out. The Convention does not ensure advancement to higher levels of actual decision-making, according to Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992). Instead, since adults are ultimately in charge of determining appropriate weight, it runs the risk of legitimizing tokenistic conversation under the pretense of participation.

There is quite no clarity given to the execution of the practice in the day-to-day lived experiences for both children and professionals that work with this article. It can be agreed that this article lacks specific implementation procedures and recommendations, particularly in complicated institutional contexts like asylum or migration systems (Lundy, 2007). Professionals frequently interpret (using their individual discretion) and include the concept of participation when working with children differently because of the lack of clear procedural steps in place that explains how Article 12 can be translated into practice (Vis et al., 2010). It doesn't say, for instance, whether children should have attorneys, whether interviews should take place in child-friendly settings, or how their views should affect outcomes. Despite the formal right to be heard, research indicates that in Sweden, legal uncertainty and adult-centric institutional cultures often exclude children seeking asylum from decision-making processes that directly affect their life (Lundberg and Lind, 2017).

This theme can be connected to the models of child participation, which sort of give a clearer view to how organizations and professionals can translate article 12 into practice. These models give a form of framework to which child-rights-based organizations can score and determine the level and the extent to which they include child participation in their operation. Participation should be seen as a right, and it goes beyond trying to tick boxes for the sake of

bureaucracy, the voices or opinions being rendered by children need to be translated into action.

In Sweden, the law requires that children participate in choices about custody, care, and residency, the Swedish Children and Parents Code has incorporated the concepts of Article 12 (Riksdag, n.d.). However, how migration law and child welfare policy interact will determine how effective this law is for children in Sweden who are refugees or asylum seekers. In reality, participation frequently turns into a symbolic process that is limited to cursory consultation with no real impact on decision-making (Pålsson and Wiklund, 2021). A child might be or can be asked to express their opinions, but there might not be a way to guarantee that they are taken into account in the final decision, especially if the decision is motivated by national migration policies rather than the child's best interests.

5.1.2 Protection of Refugee Children

Children who apply for refugee status must receive "necessary protection and humanitarian aid" in order to exercise their rights under the convention and other international agreements, according to Article 22 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989, Art. 22). State parties are expressly required by this article to guarantee that children who are refugees or asylum seekers are granted the same rights as all other children under their jurisdiction, irrespective of their national origin or legal status. Importantly, Article 22 also emphasizes the value of interagency cooperation, calling on states to cooperate with non-governmental organizations and international organizations like the UN in order to provide unaccompanied minors with the proper care, support family reunification, and obtain protection (United Nations, 1989, Art. 22).

The protective framing of Article 22 largely frames refugee children as dependents who are at risk. Not to say that protection is not important, but the article makes no mention of participation which gives a perception that refugee children are objects of care rather than active drivers of action. Going further to understand this from the standpoint of Critical Theory, article 22 demonstrates the power dynamics of how legal frameworks both empower and constrain, so children are theoretically entitled to rights, but adult and state authorities hold a solid hold on power (Foucault, 1980; Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). The power dynamics produces dominant narratives where refugee children are recipients of humanitarian assistance rather than active actors or voices.

This article represents a view of children's rights for refugee children. It acknowledges that protection and aid are necessary for the fulfillment of all other rights, such as participation, healthcare, and education. To be more practical, this implies that in addition to being protected from violence, refugee children need also receive assistance in navigating frequently complicated and exclusive procedures. Nonetheless, there are still disparities in how Article 22 is applied in different countries. For example, asylum-seeking children in Sweden may formally hold the same rights as other children under the UNCRC, but in practice, their opportunities for participation are severely limited by precarious residence permits, restricted access to welfare services, and the uncertainty created by shifting migration policies. Treating children as a homogenous group can be seen as the Convention reproducing what Foucault would call a “regime of truth,” in which the claim of universal rights conceals the uneven distribution of power and access to those rights (Foucault, 1980).

Concluding the analysis of UNCRC (1989) in regards to participation for refugee children or children on the move, the UNCRC is both supporting and minimizing in the sense that it offers the fundamental legal basis for protection and participation, but refugee children are branded to be passive participants rather than active participants due to its vague wording and protection framework.

5.2 UNICEF Annual Report (2023)

Details of UNICEF Sweden's national and international advocacy activities for children's rights, with a focus on migrant children, are included in the organization's 2023 annual report. UNICEF Sweden, a significant player in Sweden's child rights scene, raises its focus on structural disparities in access and participation, especially for children involved in the asylum process.

5.2.1 Unequal Access To Rights

The unequal implementation of children's rights based on geographic location within Sweden is one of the report's most notable discussions. This is significant to children who are refugees or asylum seekers, whose lives are frequently influenced by the political environment and available resources in the municipality where they are.

Unicef Sweden in its 2023 report shows the varying disparities and unequal rights experiences for children as a result of the autonomy given to municipalities to determine to what capacity it can meet the provisions of the child's rights, especially for children on the move (UNICEF Sverige, 2023). A typical example of this situation is the right to education for all children including refugee children, this provision is not considered to be a responsibility for the municipalities to act when children on the move do not attend schools when they come into Sweden (UNICEF Sverige, 2022b). While UNICEF Sweden was able to partner with a technology organization to provide mobile education for children on the move to be able to access education on the go, not all refugee children that come or are in Sweden would or have access to this program because of the municipality they are camped in (UNICEF Sverige, 2023). The other areas where the disparities in accessing the child rights include health, asylum process, access to social services and access to the legal system which has a more adverse effect on the children on the move because of their vulnerable situation (UNICEF Sverige, 2016).

The report pointed out the lack of uniformity in the realization and execution of the child rights in the local level (municipalities) even though the UNCRC has been adopted and incorporated into the Swedish law (UNICEF Sverige, 2022a).

5.3 Report From Civil Society Organizations Working With Child Rights

A coalition of Swedish civil society organizations, including UNICEF Sverige and Save the Children Sweden, worked to compile this report, which was submitted as a shadow report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. It provides an unbiased and critical evaluation of Sweden's adherence to the UNCRC, with a particular emphasis on children who are refugees or asylum seekers. The paper presents evidence from fieldwork, policy evaluations, and consultations with professionals and children, drawing on the vast expertise of NGOs and advocacy groups.

5.3.1 Systemic Exclusion of Refugee Children from Participatory Structures In Sweden

Despite Sweden's formal adherence to the UNCRC's principles of participation (Article 12), non-discrimination (Article 2), and the best interests of the child (Article 3), the actual application of these rights is still uneven and fragmented, especially when it comes to migration-related issues.

UNICEF annual report (2023), this report observes that there are geographic variations in the quality of services and possibilities for participation because the access to rights is frequently reliant on municipal ability and resources. Children in certain municipalities may receive specialized support and access to participation structures due to this decentralized model, whereas children in other municipalities may only receive little participation (UNICEF Sverige, 2023; UNICEF Sverige, 2022a). The UNCRC's goal of equal and universal protection is incompatible with these disparities (this further reinforces the reason why UNCRC (1989) as part of the documents analysis was important to this study). The report conceptualizes inclusion and participation mainly in terms of service access, which unintentionally hides the structural legal and political obstacles that lead to marginalization of refugee children in Sweden. In this way, the report emphasizes inequality, but it does so through a technical viewpoint that runs the risk of simplifying systematically excluded refugee children by framing it as a neutral issue of service delivery rather than as the result of strict migration policies.

The systematic exclusion of refugee children that was highlighted in the report is a lack of transparency and clarity in the way the best interests of the child principle is used when making legal decisions. According to the report, "assessments of the best interest of the child are rarely documented in a meaningful manner,”(UNICEF Sverige, 2023) even when the UNCRC is referenced in court proceedings. This raises important questions about whether the UNCRC's Article 3 principle of best interest of the child is actually being applied or is just being mentioned in passing.

It is frequently unclear how courts have conducted these evaluations, what particular elements were taken into account, and how those best interests were balanced against conflicting policy aims like administrative efficiency or migrating restriction. This ambiguity compromises children's rights under the law and their ability to fully participate in decisions that impact

them (UNICEF Sverige, 2022a). Procedural fairness and children's rights as rights holders are ultimately affected when there is a lack of clear documentation, which leaves children and their legal representatives unable to comprehend, challenge, or appeal decisions (ibid). Theories of participation shed light on this limitation: in Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), such a framing corresponds to the lower rungs where children are consulted or included in superficial ways, without any transfer of decision-making power. Likewise, in Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001), this reflects the earliest stages of engagement, where adults listen but retain full control.

This can also be analysed through the lens of critical theory, in the sense that these systemic deficiencies point to a deeper structural or systemic imbalance and institutional rigidity where state interests, particularly in the context of migration regulation, take precedence over children's rights, according to this quote "Children that are victims of human trafficking in Sweden are too often denied their rights. One of the reasons for this is that many child victims of human trafficking and exploitation are not recognized as victims of crime. The children are simply seen as undocumented" (UNICEF Sverige, 2022a, pg 22).

A child's place in the system becomes unstable when legal actors are unable to adequately evaluate their best interests due to a lack of time, clarity, or institutional mandate. This can be backed up by the argument made by Voronka and Grant (2021), that even when institutions are created to encourage inclusion, they frequently perpetuate dominating power hierarchies. In the framework of migration, refugee children are often exposed to bureaucratic procedures that put efficiency, compliance, or migration control ahead of the welfare of the children. More than just a methodological shortcoming, this structural silence exposes an exclusion that restricts the visibility of refugee children in the legal and social systems.

The report's biggest strength is its openness to address systemic causes of exclusion, in contrast to the UNICEF 2023 annual report's more technical approach. The statement that "Sweden now has a new Aliens Act, which is one of the strictest in the EU" (UNICEF, 2022a, pg 4) is one example of how it directly criticises Sweden's asylum system. The document highlights the ways in which systematic exclusion has become rooted in national policy by pointing to laws and political discourse as constraints.

5.4 Save the Children Sweden 2025-2028 Agenda

The Barnrättsagenda 2025–2028, published by Rädda Barnen (Save the Children Sweden), presents a strategic vision for ensuring children's rights in accordance with the UNCRC. This section examines the extent to which the agenda addresses the unique vulnerabilities of this group and highlights gaps that may hinder their full participation and inclusion in Swedish society.

5.4.1 What About Refugee Children?

It is worthy to note that Rädda Barnen, when it comes to advocating for child rights, is a huge voice in Sweden. In light of this, there is a level of expectation from it, going into the organization's agenda on the focus of the organization from 2025 till 2028. At first reading, this appears to align closely with the ideals of the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), suggesting a commitment to embedding children's voices in decision-making structures. Yet, when examined through a Critical Qualitative Content Analysis (CQCA), the glaring question emerges: What about refugee children?

While the agenda did not clearly state the programmes and activities that are targeted towards refugee children in Sweden, it is focused on seeing children as significant stakeholders in situations that concern. This focus is in line with UNCRC Article 12 and is consistent with the organization's CRBA, which sees children as active participants in determining the policies and decisions that impact them rather than just passive recipients of services (Lansdown, 2009).

Despite the ideological strength of the agenda, it lacks practical operationalization, especially for children who are refugees or asylum seekers. The agenda's focused strategies noticeably omit these children, who also confront other obstacles like uncertain legal status, language marginalization, and cultural displacement. Could the omission be intentional? While the agenda mentions that children's participation is right and a resource to the society, it remains unclear how this principle will be operationalized for asylum-seeking children within Sweden's immigration and welfare frameworks (Rädda Barnen, 2024).

The organization's CRBA focus on giving the most vulnerable children priority in advocating and programs contradicts with this omission. Children who are refugees or asylum seekers

receive no specific emphasis in the Agenda, while being one of the most marginalized groups in Sweden. Only a passing reference to their involvement is made, in the context of integration paths and the necessity of supporting inclusion of children with migrant origins (Save the Children, 2024). Without providing specific procedures for how their voices will be heard or their rights protected in environments created by restrictive migration laws, this ambiguous terminology reduces refugee children to a subcategory within larger participation aims. This keeps refugee children at the bottom of Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), where they are acknowledged in words but not included in actual decisions. According to Shier's Pathways (2001), the organization does not go farther to ensure refugee children have a say in choices, even while it indicates that it is willing to listen.

The lack of significant attention on refugee children reflects an organizational exclusion. The Save the Children Agenda refrains from identifying the legislative and political frameworks that continuously bar refugees or children on the move from participation in participatory structures, in contrast to the Civil Society Report (2022), which clearly criticizes Sweden's Aliens Act and its effects on children. Since NGOs frequently strike a compromise between activism and the requirement to uphold government partnerships, this omission can be interpreted strategically.

But from the standpoint of Foucault (1980), it shows how institutional discourses perpetuate systemic silences. The Agenda runs the risk of strengthening the very systems that marginalize refugee children by avoiding a direct confrontation with asylum policy. Insteadn of being viewed as a pressing right, refugee children's participation is essentially downplayed in the narrative and postponed to a future objective.

6. Interview Study Results and Analysis

Presented in this chapter are the results of semi-structured interviews with professionals that work in organizations that focus on children. Using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013), the goal of the study was to investigate how child participation and social inclusion are understood and used in real-world situations, particularly for children who are refugees or asylum seekers. The 3 research questions serve as the basis for the analysis as they were used as heading for different sections of the interview guide. As a reminder, the research is trying to answer the following questions:

1. How do professionals conceptualize participation and inclusion for asylum-seeking children?
2. How do child rights policy documents in Sweden describe participation and inclusion for refugee children, and how do these descriptions align with the professionals' interpretations and practices?
3. What structural barriers do professionals view as limitations to refugee children's participation and inclusion?

In line with the research design, both interviews and policy documents were analyzed. However, this chapter focuses on the interview data, presenting five key themes that emerged through thematic analysis. The themes reflect a patterned response across participants rather than the perspective of a single individual. The themes also reflect both the strong professional commitment to advancing children's participation rights and the practical barriers that complicate their full realization, particularly for refugee children. Each theme is supported with illustrative quotes from interview participants and followed by an interpretive analysis linking the findings to the study's theoretical framework, i.e the CRBA, models of child participation and critical theory, as well as relevant academic literature.

6.1 Professionals endorse children as 'experts', channelled through adult-managed system

This theme answers the research question on how do professionals conceptualize participation and inclusion for asylum-seeking children? A dominant theme across all interviews was the

belief that children should be regarded as experts in their own lives. Participants emphasized that meaningful participation begins with recognizing children not as passive recipients of care but as active knowledgeable agents capable of contributing to decisions that affect them. This perspective reflects a clear commitment to a CRBA, which positions children as active rights-holders whose voices should shape both services and policies (Lansdown, 2009). While this principle of seeing children as experts in their own situation is a widely acceptable practice, applying it while working with refugees or children on the move is often faced with constraints from the system.

Participants described various ways in which their work integrates children's perspectives, stressing the importance of not assuming adult authority over children's lived realities. As one interviewee reflected when asked what their perspective is on child participation and inclusion,

> …but more like, because they're experts on their own situation and we can't say that we have a child rights approach without having the approach of the actual kid, right?" (Interview Person 1).

Also this quote from another participant:

> …you don't come as an expert to do something for them, rather you do it together because you share knowledge" (Interview Person 3).

These statements come off as the practical interpretation of the Article 12 of the UNCRC, which affirms every child's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and obliges adults to give those views due weight according to the child's age and maturity (UNCRC, 1989). Rather than viewing participation as a procedural requirement or just trying to tick boxes, the professionals interviewed viewed participation as a critical part of a good ethical practice when working with children. A participant mentioned:

> It's also about asking how do you want to get involved? Some of them might not want to write a report, but they want to give input. So, it's about flexibility and what makes sense for the child. (Interview Person 1)

Also this Participant mentioned that:

> Just by maybe asking questions is not enough. You have to provide the right tools for these youth, you know, and children to be able to give their to their opinion.(Interview Person 3)

These statements reflect the approach found in Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001), which stresses the importance of not only creating opportunities for children to participate but also ensuring that those opportunities are accessible, meaningful, and adapted to the child's preferred mode of participation (Shier, 2001). Similarly, Hart's Ladder of Participation (1997) warns against tokenistic involvement of children in the decision making process and calls for structures that allow for authentic child-initiated participation, which some participants mentioned creating projects and programmes that involve the children deciding how they want things to be done. An example of this is the project being mentioned by a participant which is establishing youth councils or project-based forums.

> We're gonna create the council and they are gonna tell us what? What do the kids in the area need? What are they missing? Here is the budget we can support you with if you wanna do some advocacy work in the area. Or do you wanna meet politicians? Talk with them? (Interview Person 1)

This initiative indicates a willingness to move beyond tokenistic consultation toward forms of shared decision-making that Hart's Ladder (1997) would categorise as higher rungs, where children are given real influence. Such initiatives show an effort to institutionalize participation at the local level. However, while this model appears inclusive in principle, there was limited discussion across the interviews about how refugee or asylum-seeking children who often face language, cultural, and legal barriers are intentionally reached or included in these participatory structures. When the participant that mentioned the establishment of the youth councils for children was asked if there is a similar programme for children on the move, the reply is this:

> You know, sometimes you meet them three weeks, sometimes you meet them months, sometimes years. It's so different. So maybe it has been sometimes hard to create those platforms, even though that shouldn't be (Interview Person 1)

This is quite an honest answer from this participant on the limitations to working with refugee children when it comes to the topic of meaningful participation and involvement of children. This also signals a potential limitation in the universality of the participatory practices described. However, deeper probing revealed significant limitations in how these participatory practices include refugee and asylum-seeking children. This candid response reveals a structural exclusion. While Swedish-born or permanently resident children may consistently participate in councils, refugee children are frequently absent because instability in residence status, housing, or placement makes them appear “unsuitable” for institutionalised participation.This can be connected to the arguments of scholars like Skauge et al. (2021) and Saarnik et al. (2024) who are of the opinion that participation tends to be unevenly distributed which often reflects pre-existing inequalities like in the case of children on the move. Institutions may appear inclusive on the surface, but fail to develop strategies to reach those on the margins.

Through a critical theory lens, we can ask whose children are seen as experts and whose knowledge is institutionalized. As Voronka and Grant (2021) argue, participation is often determined by bureaucratic and normative arrangements that gives more privilege to some voices over others. From the interviews it can be deduced that usually the ones who are most easily integrated and involved in participatory settings are Swedish-born or children with secure status.

Moreso, the interviews draw attention to a conflict between the selective application of participation and its ethically upright support. Although professionals show a strong commitment to acknowledging children as experts, their methods frequently include adult-managed formats, such as workshops, surveys, and consultations, which reframe children's opinions into forms that are readable by the organization. The degree to which children's input can impact programming is occasionally limited by donor requirements, as Interview Person 3 pointed out: "...we cannot always change programs based on it because of donor requirements." Here, it is observed that institutional frameworks serve as filters, converting the input of children into results that are in line with financial and administrative interests. Children's voices are acknowledged but concurrently reconstructed in ways that uphold adult authority and institutional legitimacy, which is a reflection of what Critical Theory refers to as the operation of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980).

From this analysis, it can be concluded that refugee children are rarely incorporated into these structures. This is not due to a lack of professional intent, but rather because structural barriers like bureaucratic filtering, donor frameworks, and volatility make their involvement seem impossible. As a result, participation is both domesticated and validated: domesticated through adult-managed instruments that consistently leave out the most marginalized. Children's rights to participate are universal in theory but selective in reality, with immigrant children being disproportionately excluded. This highlights a significant paradox.

6.2 Legal and Emotional Ambiguity as a Barrier to Participation

According to the report, limbo as a state of emotional and legal uncertainty shapes the lives of children who are refugees or asylum seekers. On the one hand, this highlights a contradiction between professionals' practices of delaying participation until residency status is obtained and policy objectives of universality (RQ2). It also draws attention to limbo as a systemic constraint that consistently limits children's participation chances and jeopardizes their UNCRC rights (RQ3).

This theme stood out strongly from the interviews is the concept that children who are refugees or asylum-seekers live in a state of emotional and legal ambiguity, a "limbo" that significantly impairs their capacity to participate and feel accepted in Swedish society. Participants explained how young kids are frequently torn between systems and uncertain about their legal status, which limits their ability to participate actively in life decisions. This state of in-between-ness was viewed as a social and emotional experience that influences how children on the move negotiate their rights, relationships, and sense of identity in addition to being a legal concern. This theme came out from answers given by participants when being asked on how they work with children on the move despite their legal status. One of the participants gave a scenario:

> …a top politician, come out and say if you live 30 years here, you're born here for 30 years, you will never be Swedish, you know, and and this affects them. This breaks those children. Their belief in belonging. Break their belief in that

> that they will be part of the society or recognized or acknowledged or be or treated as an equal or fairly you know." (Interview Person 3)

This quotation reveals concepts of exclusion which undermine the desires for equal participation and integration of refugee children into the Swedish community. This can be the interpretation to which Critical Theory emphasizes how power is used not only through laws but also through words, rules, and silence (Foucault, 1989). Even individuals who are born or nurtured in Sweden experience emotional fear as a result of the discursive framing of children as permanent outsiders. The participants' testimony that these discourses directly undermine children's faith in society and reduce their willingness to participate in participatory institutions is significant in this study.

The state of impermanence outlined above is more than just a logistical problem. It portrays the underlying institutional instability that disproportionately harms children in migration. Their lived experiences are broken into pieces across time and environment, and the ability to access education, the community, and to have any kind of meaningful participation. This point was also echoed by a participant who referred to the broken governance structure:

> …with the migration, since it's national… local municipalities can decide on some things, but not who's going to stay, who's going to leave… So we have to support children through this, even when we don't know the outcome…but they need us more than ever. We need to be there, support them. Psychosocial support, you know." (Interview Person 1)

The conditions described represent a significant systemic failure to uphold core rights enshrined in the UNCRC specifically Article 12, the child's right to say what they think should happen and be listened to, and Article 22, the right for children who are refugees or seeking refugee status to have appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance (United Nations, 1989, Article 12 and 22). These rights are well articulated in the Swedish law but are undermined when refugee and asylum seeking children live in a state of legal and emotional disability. If a child's voice is not heard in migration decision-making, or if the policy-makers on the national-level create policies that could outshine local efforts to engage children in participatory processes, then Article 12 is not truly being implemented. This way, the

child's voice becomes either symbolic or procedural, i.e they are heard, kind of, maybe, but not affecting anything.

From the perspective of the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), the prolonged state of instability is a systematic violation of fundamental rights guaranteed by the UNCRC. While Article 22 acknowledges refugee children's right to special protection and humanitarian aid, Article 12 ensures children's right to voice their opinions and have them considered seriously (UNCRC, 1989). According to participant testimonies, these rights are compromised when migration laws structurally silence refugee children's voices.

6.3 Institutional Mechanisms Reproduce Participation Gap

This theme addresses RQ3 (What structural barriers limit participation and inclusion?). The interviews revealed that refugee children's participation is consistently constrained by bureaucratic systems characterised by complexity, delay, and risk-averse practices. Professionals described how unclear responsibilities, multi-layered approvals, and protective frameworks often result in the safest option being to exclude children altogether.

Participants emphasized that a persistent challenge was the lack of clarity about accountability and responsibility. As one expert mentioned: "sometimes no one knows who is responsible for authorizing activities with children…the safest thing is to do nothing until we get clarity" (Interview Person 3). Lack of clarity creates rigidity rather than flexibility. From the standpoint of Critical Theory, this demonstrates how power is used through procedural vagueness rather than through outright restriction (Foucault, 1980). This lack of clarity means that participation is perpetually delayed for children who are refugees. Because the danger of acting without permission surpasses the necessity of hearing children's voices, professionals' hesitancy results in refugee children's rights being suppressed.

Another crucial revelation is how donor requirements and organizational logics affect participation for refugee children. Interview Person 3 mentioned that "We have to balance donor expectations, legal risks, and organisational policies…sometimes it's just easier to work with children who already have clear status." Interview Person 2 emphasized this

dynamic: “We know participation is important, but in practice we focus on those we can guarantee will stay in the programme.” These claims demonstrate how organizations give preference to children who are administratively manageable and technically excluding those with uncertain legal status. The fact that donor frameworks directly influence whether children are deemed "participatable" makes this finding significant. While literature acknowledges inequalities in participation (Skauge et al., 2021), The interviews here show how funding and administrative convenience actively institutionalize exclusion.

This theme also explains the “decoupling” between what the policy says and the translation of the policy to day-to-day practice. From the interviews, participants agreed and attested to the need for a strong child participation in practice, but they also mentioned political, organizational and legal factors are impediments to the full implementation of child participation for refugee children. Participants mentioned that while their organizations formally embrace child participation but the actual practices are often inconsistent or superficial. A participant noted:

> it's always a challenge to have a writing on a paper on a strategy or a policy and to adopt it into real life...that many policies are taken on, but not really put into serious action. (Interview Person 2)

This quote shows how aspirational discourses continue to be distant from reality. Although policies may claim to be inclusive, experts on the ground perceive them as meaningless commitments. Since their precarious condition makes them the least likely to benefit when legislation remains symbolic rather than enforced, this gap, in this case, is especially severe for refugee children (Pålsson & Wiklund, 2021; Vis et al., 2010). This is a serious flaw from the standpoint of the CRBA, the UNCRC's Article 12 guarantees children's right to be heard in all decisions that impact them and requires adults to give their opinions the weight they deserve (United Nations, 1989, Article 12). Moreso, the participants further expanded on how organizational structures affect the application of child participation and inclusion when dealing with refugee children. Like a participant mentioned:

> I don't feel it's super clear for me where to start. Who decides? Who to ask? You know, it's a very big organization, very administrative, very like many leads and everything”. (Interview Person 1)

This was the answer of the participant when being asked about the challenges they face in the application of child participation for refugee children. This comment reveals how even committed professionals feel disempowered within bureaucratic systems. When frontline staff are uncertain about where authority lies, refugee children's voices risk falling through institutional cracks. This reflects an internal contradiction of a situation where organisations embrace participation rhetorically, yet their internal complexity obstructs professionals from making it real in practice.

Oftentimes, children on the move are lost in the gap due to organizational bureaucracy and it becomes complicated for professionals to navigate their way through it. Moreso, this theme can be connected to critical theory, it can be agreed that there is an institutional power imbalance in the organizational system that sort of downplays the efforts professionals can put into making the voice of refugee children count in the participation and inclusion process. Systems tend to legitimize participation only when it aligns with bureaucratic logic, often sidelining those with unstable social positions (Voronka and Grant, 2021).

6.4 Balancing Protection and Participation

By exploring how protection is prioritised over active participation, this theme sheds light on how professionals conceptualise participation (RQ1) and exposes protection itself as a structural barrier to inclusion (RQ3).

A recurring dilemma highlighted by many professionals is the internal conflict between a desire to uphold children's rights and the fear that encouraging participation may unintentionally cause harm. This concern is particularly taken into serious consideration when working with refugee children, who often come from diverse backgrounds and have fled conditions such as war, persecution, or environmental disasters. Children on the move often have psychological trauma. As a result, professionals fear that inviting these children to participate, even with the best intentions, could trigger painful memories or re-open emotional wounds they are trying to move past. These traumas contribute to a more careful or limited approach to participation, even with legal and ethical frameworks that encourage more inclusive practices. According to this participant:

> Oh, can we interview your children? Your meeting? And I'm like, it's so hard, even if we are going to interview on our own, like the kids we meet. I mean, oh, the process, the risk assessment. (Interview Person 1)

From the above quote, it can be seen that there is a form of fear on the part of professionals when it comes to engaging and handling the vulnerable situation of refugee children. Interview Person 3 expressed this tension even more directly: “We worry about retraumatizing them, so sometimes it feels safer not to ask too much.” (Interview Person 3)

This hesitation represents an honest but troublesome conflict between the UNCRC's Article 12 right to be heard and Article 22, right to protection (United Nations, 1989, Art 12 and 22). Children must be identified as having rights and be able to participate in choices that impact them, but the CRBA also stipulates that involvement must be meaningful, voluntary, and suitable for the child's developing abilities (Lansdown, 2009). However, in reality, this frequently causes professionals to fall back on protectionist thinking, being on the side of non-engagement as a precaution against potential harm. Participation and inclusion rights for children on the move are recognized in theory but applied with limitations, leading to a type of ethical dilemma.

The dilemma is made worse by inadequate institutional frameworks. As another professional clarified:

> One of the problems with this is that we don't have a really sharp monitoring system or the laws are not sharp enough on children's inclusion and participation. (Interview Person 4)

Professionals lack the means and self-confidence necessary to consistently pursue child participatory approaches due to the absence of clear guidelines or legal demands. Participation becomes a choice that is driven more by personal principles than through organizational support or expectation, having its true roots in institutional practices. This analysis shows how professional hesitancy is exacerbated by unclear institutional instructions. Participation becomes a matter of personal choice rather than an organizational obligation in the absence of robust monitoring systems or regulatory restrictions.

Interview Person 2 went further, noting: “You do it because you believe it’s right, but it is not demanded by the system. That means it’s uneven. Some colleagues never do it.” Here, the rights of children are transformed from entitlements to preferences. Participation is reframed as an ethically voluntary decision up to the goodwill of individual professionals rather than as an unavoidable statutory obligation. The core principle of the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), according to which children's rights must be institutionalized and independent of individual motivation, is compromised by this (Lansdown, 2009). Professionals themselves unintentionally affirm that the system has not successfully included participation structurally when they characterize it as something "you do because you believe it's right."

Without examining the institutional factors that make involvement problematic in the first place, it is impossible to fully understand the anxiety of doing harm from the lens of critical theory. Just as Voronka and Grant (2021) have pointed out that systems of participation frequently perpetuate adult power and purposefully leave out underprivileged populations. In this instance, refugee children are particularly vulnerable to exclusion under the pretense of protection due to their unclear legal status and institutional invisibility. This is also in line with symbolic compliance being mentioned by Pålsson and Wiklund (2021), in which involvement is encouraged verbally but lacks the operational clarity required for successful execution.

The fact that experts themselves recognize this discretionary paradigm as problematic is distinct in the results obtained. The interviews show that practitioners are highly aware of how institutional vagueness leaves them unsupported and how this vagueness actually translates into uneven participation for refugee children.

6.5 Migration politics generate policy silence and deprioritizing refugee children’s participation

Understandably, this theme might come off as a little strong or accusational, but it does not stop the fact that it was a theme that showed the level of power being used by the state to push a political agenda about migration as a topic. The theme answers RQ2 (How do policy descriptions align with professional interpretations and practices?), by exposing how political caution reshapes the meaning and practice of children’s rights at the organisational level.

Policy silence refers to the purposeful avoidance of direct interaction with proper participation and inclusion of children who are refugees or asylum seekers. From the interviews, it was pointed out that although children's rights are defended in speech, conversations about immigration and legal status are frequently avoided or relegated to higher governmental levels. This illustrates a type of institutional silence that is influenced by corporate posture, political cautiousness, and bureaucracy. Quotes from a participant:

> Now we are facing a lot, a lot of resistance when it comes to the area of migration, it's not like before. (Interview Person 1)

also this quote:

> So then it becomes like a question we need to influence a national level, but we don't get to influence the national level right now because of the politics is as it is actually. And I don't want to be political because we are not. (Interview Person 1)

The widespread opposition that professionals face while attempting to elevate the rights of refugee children is encapsulated in these quotations. It implies that while past times permitted more candid dialogue, the atmosphere of today is characterized by skepticism and seclusion. As a result, organizations deliberately take a neutral stance, portraying themselves as non-political even when the topics they deal with are fundamentally political.

Another layer of policy silence arises from the allocation of authority between national and local levels. Professionals pointed out that critical decisions about refugee children's status fall outside their jurisdiction. A participant mentioned that:

> But with the migration, since it's a national, how can I say like it? It's very some things that the local like Municipality they can decide on but they can't decide on who's gonna stay, who's gonna leave and what's the rights of of migrant kids like regarding their status like citizenship. La, la, la. (Interview Person 1)

While the above quotes give a sense of political neutrality on the part of the child-rights based organizations on the topic of migration, the avoidance is not nonpartisan, rather, it is a subtle exchange of power. Although they reject political involvement, professionals admit

that migratory decisions are political. Reputational risks, funding withdrawal, and backlash can be avoided through refraining from explicit advocacy. However, from the standpoint of Critical Theory, neutrality is never neutral. But rather, it perpetuates current power structures by permitting state agendas to rule without opposition (Foucault, 1980). Organizations unintentionally help to silence the participation of refugee children by refusing to challenge migration policies.

Professionals also admitted that organisations strategically avoid naming refugee children explicitly in programmes or proposals. Participant 3 explained:

> It is politically sensitive to focus only on refugee children. Funders prefer us to say ‘all children’ because it looks less controversial.(Interview Person 3).

This comment demonstrates how political sensitivities influence conversation. Through the use of universal language, such as "all children," organizations are able to retain their legitimacy and financing access. However, this universalism ignores the particular risks faced by children who are refugees. According to the CRBA, this is a violation of UNCRC Article 22, which provides specific protection for refugee children.The rhetoric of inclusion masks a practice of exclusion, leaving those most in need invisible within the category of “all.”

Participant 2 added: “We know refugee children need extra support, but if we write that too directly, the project may not be accepted. So we keep it broad, and then try to work with them inside the project.” (Interview Person 2). This illustrates the price of silence as well as how experts try to overcome limitations. Organizations neglect to provide resources, institutions, or accountability mechanisms that are suited to the requirements of refugee children when they do not specifically identify them. This situation is unique because of the professionals' open admission that silence is a deliberate tactic, a type of institutional self-preservation that directly jeopardizes the rights of immigrant children.

This policy silence must be viewed as a power mechanism through the lens of critical theory. Silence is a habit that upholds prevailing agendas, not a nothingness. Organizations preserve their legitimacy in politically restrictive environments by avoiding direct reference to refugee children, but at the expense of the same children

they proclaim to assist. Particularly relevant in this context is Foucault's concept of "silences and contradictions" (Foucault, 1980), which states that the hierarchies of legitimacy that control organizational discourse are revealed through the unsaid unique needs of refugee children.

6.6 From Policy to Practice: A Comparative Reflection

This section presents an overview summary of findings from document analysis and professional interviews, with the goal of determining how well the principles of child participation and social inclusion outlined in policy are translated into organizational practice, especially for refugee and asylum-seeking children. While policy documents such as the UNCRC, UNICEF Sweden's 2023 report, the Civil Society Shadow Report (2022), and Save the Children Sweden's Barnrättsagenda 2025-2028 express strong standards relating to children's rights, the interviews reveal the practical, organizational, and political constraints that frequently interfere with their implementation.

There is participation as a right versus participation in practice. Child participation is described as a universal right under the UNCRC, primarily in Articles 12 and 22. The Save the Children agenda promotes this by stressing children's expertise in their own lives (Rädda Barnen, 2024), also UNICEF Sweden seeks fair access to participatory structures across municipalities (UNICEF Sverige, 2023). However, during interviews, professionals commonly stated that, while their organizations support participation in principle, real execution is fragmented and uneven. Again, this can be connected to Pålsson and Wiklund (2021), there is a "decoupling" of policy and practice, where rights exist but are not implemented (Pålsson and Wiklund, 2021). Professionals highlighted circumstances in which participation was handled as a checkbox activity, missing the depth or responsiveness required or expanded by Shier (2001) for rights-based participation, especially for refugee children whose participation may be perceived as politically sensitive or logistically difficult.

Furthermore, while the documents analysed emphasize the significance of inclusion, few provide clear recommendations for how to achieve it, particularly in complicated institutional situations like migration. The Civil Society Report criticizes this lack of clarity, citing varying application among municipalities and ambiguous guidance on balancing the child's best interests with other legal and administrative concerns (UNICEF Sverige, 2022b). Interviews

reflect the ambiguity. Practitioners reported difficulty negotiating corporate bureaucracies and the lack of an explicit direction or procedural roadmap to encourage participation of children on the move. Critical Theory helps make sense of these patterns by stressing how organizational structures frequently reinforce centralized power hierarchies, even within rights-based frameworks, thereby restricting professionals' ability to contribute genuinely on behalf of vulnerable children.

Even though the documents' analysis emphasized the significance of protecting children's rights, they failed to address the emotional and ethical challenges that professionals face in the field. Interview participants, on the other hand, indicated feelings of anxiety between the responsibility to support child participation and the fear of retraumatizing already vulnerable children. Professionals who work with refugee children expressed caution about involving children in decision-making processes that may expose them to emotionally unpleasant memories. This mirrors what can be seen as the distance between standards and lived realities, in which the emotional labor and ethical risks involved in participatory practice are rarely acknowledged in policy discourse.

7. Discussion

This study sought to investigate how child-focused organizations in Sweden perceive and implement child participation and social inclusion for refugee children through the lenses of policy documents and professional experiences. While the language of rights-based participation is well established in Swedish policy frameworks which is particularly after the UNCRC was incorporated into national legislation in 2020, this study reveals major contradictions between those conceptual objectives and refugee children's lived reality.

7.1 Key Findings

When combined, the results from the three research questions show a recurring theme, the involvement of refugee children is supported in theory but undermined in reality. Research Question 1 asked how professionals conceptualise participation and inclusion. According to professionals interviewed, children are "experts in their own lives," which is consistent with CRBA principles (Lansdown, 2009) and participation models like Shier's Pathways (2001) and Hart's Ladder (1992). However, this framing was used unevenly when viewed through the lens of Critical Theory. Children who met institutional requirements had the easiest time participating, whereas refugee children were excluded because of their presumptions of vulnerability and precarious legal status. Research question 2 asked how policy descriptions align with professional interpretations. While documents from UNCRC, UNICEF Sweden and Save the Children Sweden articulate strong commitments to participation, professionals revealed that these remain largely aspirational. Recognising rights is insufficient without mechanisms that make them practicable (Lundy, 2007). For refugee children, these mechanisms were inconsistent or absent, producing a symbolic rather than transformative form of participation. Lastly, research question 3 asked what structural barriers limit participation. This is where the picture becomes clear. Participants described bureaucratic lack of clarity as a waiting game, in which refugee children are kept in limbo and action is delayed due to unclear duties.

In Sweden, the law requires that children participate in choices about custody, care, and residency, the Swedish Children and Parents Code has incorporated the concepts of Article 12 (Riksdag, n.d.). However, how migration law and child welfare policy interact will determine how effective this law is for children in Sweden who are refugees or asylum seekers. In

reality, participation frequently turns into a symbolic process that is limited to cursory consultation with no real impact on decision-making (Pålsson and Wiklund, 2021). A child might be or can be asked to express their opinions, but there might not be a way to guarantee that they are taken into account in the final decision, especially if the decision is motivated by national migration policies rather than the child's best interests.

A recurring theme in both the document and interview analyses is strong verbal support for child participation as a right. Professionals that were interviewed unanimously agreed that children should be treated as experts in their own lives, citing key principles from CRBA (Lansdown, 2009) and participation models such as Hart's Ladder (1992) and Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001). However, when viewing participation through the lens of Critical Theory (Voronka and Grant, 2021), the study demonstrates that many participatory circumstances are systematically slanted to favor children who already match institutional standards, placing immigrant children on the sidelines.

One of the most striking discrepancies shown in this study is the continuing policy-practice mismatch. Policy documents from UNICEF Sweden and Save the Children stress involvement, inclusion, and equity. According to Lundy (2007), a rights-based approach necessitates both the recognition of participation rights and the development of supportive environments that allow for the meaningful exercise of those rights. There appears to be a gap between the agenda's principles and its practical establishing priorities, as seen by the absence of specific implementation methods for refugee children.

Scholars like Pålsson and Wiklund (2021) contend that when child participation is not supported by operational and organizational processes that guarantee genuine influence, it frequently turns into a symbolic activity. Participation has the risk of becoming aspirational rather than transformative when it is widely promoted but poorly targeted, particularly for marginalized populations like refugee children. However, professionals identified bureaucratic delay, organizational uncertainty, and national political resistance as important impediments to putting these policy expectations into action. Interviews and document analyses revealed the problem of "decoupling," in which policy exists in form but not in function (Pålsson and Wiklund, 2021).

Another prominent issue was the limbo of belonging, which described how legal uncertainty has a significant impact on refugee children's sense of identity and ability to participate actively. While Article 22 of the UNCRC (1989) offers protection to asylum-seeking children, its practical execution is contradictory. The interviews revealed that children frequently withdraw from participation spaces, not out of a lack of interest but because of a basic disconnect with the systems around them. It is quite difficult to guarantee that refugee children are treated as experts and right holders (this theme would still be analysed later in this paper) rather than as passive beneficiaries of aid, even though several states, like Sweden, have enacted specific protections for them (Bhabha et al., 2007). Adding to this, political discourse not only excludes refugee children from policy discussions, but also erodes their subjective willingness to participate. Participants clarified how national leaders' public declarations that refugee children would "never be Swedish" are internalized and undermine the sense of belonging that these children feel.

However, one unexpected but powerful finding was the strategic silence around migration as a whole, which affected the participation of refugee children. While the topic was recognized as significant and current, some organizations declined to participate in the research, frequently claiming that "it wasn't a good time," but expressing an interest in reading the final report. Although these reactions were non-confrontational, the pattern of disengagement could represent a larger environment of strategic silence in civil society.

This hesitation might be explained in regard to the changing relationship between Swedish civil society organizations and the state. CSOs in Sweden have traditionally functioned under a framework that supports both collaboration with public institutions and the airing of criticism. However, new research indicates a shift toward a more complex dynamic. According to Arvidson et al. (2018), while Swedish CSOs are expected to act as critical critics and advocates, there is an emerging trend in which organizations deliberately refrain from criticizing public authorities, a behavior that deviates from conventional standards and may indicate underlying pressures or constraints.

Additionally, Feltenius and Wide (2019) analyze the marketization of Swedish civil society, pointing out that CSOs are increasingly reliant on state funding and subject to performance-based evaluations (Feltenius and Wide, 2019). This dependency can lead to self-censorship, in which groups avoid politically controversial themes in order to retain

financial stability and good relationships with supporters. Such dynamics are especially important in the context of migration and refugee crises, which have been extremely politicized in recent years.

Connecting this key finding to critical theory, this type of institutional silence is not neutral, it rather reinforces existing power structures by limiting the space for criticism or structural scrutiny. While organizations may fundamentally support children's rights, their institutional orientation may limit their ability to fight migration policies that disproportionately impact children with unstable legal status. As a result, even within rights-based frameworks, refugee children's participation risks being marginalized, not just in practice, but also in public conversation.

7.2 Limits of Study

This study, while providing valuable insights on the implementation of child engagement and inclusion for refugee children in Sweden, has limitations. A variety of methodological and contextual factors could have influenced the depth of the findings.

The research had a bit of a set-back with recruiting enough professionals. It seemed like even though it was an interesting and timely topic to talk about, organizations that work with child rights and children on the move may be avoiding to talk about it and do not want to face a bit of a conflict of interest with the current government. This may create a form of strategic silence about the topic. An additional reason for the difficulty in recruiting participants for this study may be that they are professionals with high workloads to manage on a day-to-day basis..

Firstly, the study used a small and purposeful sample of professionals (n=4) from child-focused organizations in Sweden. While qualitative methodologies stress depth over breadth (Creswell, 2013), the sample size limits the research's generalization. It is possible that the perspectives and practices described by participants do not entirely represent those of professionals working in other organizations.

Moreso, the policy documents being used for the analysis were restricted to publicly available materials. Internal implementation guidelines, reports or critical evaluations that could provide more insight into organizational processes were not accessible as they are considered

confidential. As a result, the document analysis may focus on the ideal or ethical elements of public policy documents rather than its actual reality (Bowen, 2009).

Finally, language was a subtle constraint. Some of the important documents examined were written in Swedish, necessitating translation and interpretation. While efforts were made to maintain the original meaning, nuances in terminology, particularly those relating to child participation and inclusion, may have been lost or misinterpreted.

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List of Attachments

Appendix 1

Consent Form

Child Participation and Social Inclusion of Asylum Seeking Children in Sweden

Informed Consent Form

I have read (or had read to me) the information about the project.
I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my participation in the research project.
I understand that I have the right to decide whether or not to participate in this research project and that I can change my decision.
I understand that only the researcher will read what I share and that the researcher will rewrite my statements so that others will not know that I participated in the research.
I consent to the interview with me being recorded and transcribed.
I understand that the transcript of my interview will be stored in a secure location so that others cannot access it.

I agree to participate in this study:

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I'm keen on learning more about how the organization works with child participation and social inclusion specifically for asylum seeking children in Sweden.

I want you to keep in mind that this is an informal conversation, and there are no right or wrong answers. Feel free to share your thoughts and experiences. Also, it is important for you to know that everything you share will remain confidential, same as your identity, and you can skip any questions or stop at any time.

Do I have your permission to proceed?

1. How does the organization conceptualize and document child participation and social inclusion for refugee children?

- How do you conceptualize child participation and social inclusion?
- What key policies or guidelines depict the organization's view to these concepts?
- In your experience, how well do these policies translate into real-life practices?

2. How are child participation and social inclusion policies interpreted and implemented by professionals in the organization's everyday practice?

- What are some ways the organization encourages children on the move to participate in activities and decision-making?
- Can you share an example of a successful initiative promoting refugee children's participation?
- What challenges do you as a professional face when implementing participation and inclusion policies?

3. How do professionals perceive and respond to the challenges refugee children face in achieving social inclusion, given the uncertainty surrounding their legal status?

- How does the uncertainty around asylum seeking children's legal status affect their participation and inclusion?
- What strategies does the organization use to navigate these challenges?
- Have you noticed any gaps between policy intentions and actual practice? How do you think they could be addressed?
- If you could change one thing to strengthen child participation and social inclusion, what would it be?

Closing

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences! I really appreciate your time. Would you be interested in receiving a summary of the research findings when it's done? Just as a reminder, everything we discussed will remain confidential. Thanks again!