

Re-Imagining Social Work Ethics: Bordering and Resistance

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Abstract: This article explores how Swedish migration reforms (2015–2018) reshaped social work with young migrants, initially defined as unaccompanied minors in policy. Based on qualitative interviews with eight professionals and four young migrants, and analysis of policy documents, the study applies critical border theory and the new sociology of childhood. These perspectives are used to explore ethical dilemmas and the evolving notion of professionalism within the context of restrictive migration policies. It finds that policy discourse shifted from portraying unaccompanied minors as vulnerable to framing them as independent or even threatening, legitimizing exclusion from housing, education, and welfare services. Social workers were expected to enforce these bordering practices but, in some cases, resisted through acts of solidarity, advocacy and the strategic use of discretion. Such resistance re-defined professionalism from bureaucratic neutrality toward engaged allyship, creating fragile spaces of belonging for excluded youth. The findings stress the political nature of social work and its ethical responsibility to challenge exclusionary policies in pursuit of justice and human rights. By re-imagining social work ethics, this study highlights the potential for social workers to advocate for vulnerable populations and challenge harmful policies through acts of solidarity and civic duty.

Keywords: Social work ethics; critical border thinking; solidarity; unaccompanied minors

Introduction

Historically, social work has been constructed within the tension of care and control, state power and emancipatory approaches (Payne, 2006; Dominelli, 2002). As a profession dedicated to social justice and human rights, social work faces significant challenges in the context of restrictive migration policies that re-shape access to welfare services for parts of the population (Healy, 2017). The temporality and uncertainty experienced by refugee migrants is not unique to them but reflects a broader condition of precarity under austerity, increasingly affecting populations worldwide as a consequence of global capitalism (Ramsay, 2019). Increasing securitization of borders and the rise of neo-liberal and anti-immigrant sentiments have however profoundly affected the practice of social work and the notion of rights (Moreno-Lax, 2018; Atak, 2013). Racism in Swedish social work manifests through culturalization, where the problems of immigrant clients' are explained in terms of cultural deficiency, reinforcing "us versus them" hierarchies and legitimizing exclusion while obscuring structural factors such as poverty, discrimination, and marginalization (Eliassi, 2015). With restrictive migration policy, the marginalized position of the non-citizen produce new bordering practices and professional dilemmas, which studies from other European countries has shown (Ataç, 2019; Kuschminder & Dubow, 2023). The Netherlands was one of the first EU countries to implement policy that denied rejected asylum seekers access to welfare services, which resulted in increased homelessness in this category of the population (Ataç, 2019). Individuals with conservative and authoritarian ideologies are more likely to believe asylum seekers make false claims and threaten the in-group, which strengthens

support for restrictive and exclusionary asylum policies (Mancini, Caricati, Di Bernardo, & Vezzali, 2020). Among social workers, these beliefs shape their professional stance: those who distrust their clients tend to maintain greater distance, whereas those who choose to believe them are more likely to adopt relational or therapeutic strategies (Kohli, 2006). Twenty years ago, social work scholars highlighted the pseudo-border control function assigned to social workers, arguing that migration must also be understood as a central concern within the field of social work (Collett, 2004). Social workers are often unprepared to deal with both the practical and ethical issues raised where migration policy intersect with social welfare (Hayes & Humphries, 2004; Righart, 2018). In Sweden, this became palpable during 2015, when unprecedented numbers of refugee migrants arrived and the social democratic-green government coalition introduced a number of restrictions, both in regards to asylum rights and access to welfare services (Kazemi, 2021). This article explores how social workers and young migrants who were affected responded to the shifts in policy during this period.

- What was perceived as ethical dilemmas and how were these challenges met?
- How can political, ethical, and social dynamics during the time period of 2015 to 2018 be understood through the experiences of social workers and young asylum seekers?

Through qualitative interviews with social workers and asylums seekers who were initially defined as unaccompanied minors by the Swedish Migration Agency, the article draws on critical border theory in and examines the role of social workers as both enforcers and resistors of border policies, and furthermore, through which act social work holds a potential to overcome the bordering practices upheld by state policy.

Methods

This article draws on empirical material from a doctoral research project combining post-structural policy analysis and qualitative interviews (Kazemi, 2021). Twelve participants (eight professionals and four young migrants) provided insights into practices and experiences through individual interviews. They were recruited through a social media group where civil servants such as social workers, teachers, custodians and health care workers organized together with young asylum seekers who had been or risked being rejected in the asylum process. Seven legislative bills and parliamentary proceedings were analyzed alongside empirical data. These reforms specifically targeted unaccompanied minors, spanning from 2005, when this category was first defined in Swedish law, to 2018, when an amendment to the new restrictive Aliens Act introduced an exception for some of the minors who had arrived in Sweden as asylum seekers during 2015. All interview excerpts, policy quotations, and references from the original article are retained verbatim. Interviews were ethically approved by the Ethics review board in Gothenburg in 2016. The recordings were transcribed manually, anonymized, and translated from Swedish or Persian to English (Kazemi, 2021). This article has undergone language editing with artificial intelligence. The application was used solely for the purpose of improving language clarity and grammar.

Ethical reflections

Before the phd-project, I spent about eight years in social work practice, mainly with unaccompanied minors and child welfare issues. Being the child of refugees myself, migration policy has always been present in my personal life. Given my experiential proximity to the field, a formalized structure was applied for entering and exiting the research setting (Lalander & Johansson, 2012). I used information letters, contacted participants

exclusively through my professional channels rather than personal ones, and established parameters for the interviews regarding time, as well as the handling of transcripts and recordings to protect participants' integrity (Swedish Research Council, 2024).

However, an ethical approach cannot be reduced to formalized routines and checklists (Rossiter, Prilleltensky, & Walsh-Bowers, 2000). Ethical judgments are made continuously, at every decision point: whom to interview, which questions to ask, and how findings are to be presented. In many cases, participants chose to take part in the project to voice concerns or highlight perceived injustices, with the hope of contributing to change. It is the researcher's responsibility to honour these testimonies without compromising scientific principles. Conversely, social engagement with the issue of human rights may be framed as an ethical imperative for the researcher, one that is necessary for the study to be relevant at all (Houghton, 2015; Houghton, 2017). In this article, such engagement is realized through the adoption of a critical theoretical perspective, which situates the findings within a broader discussion of the target group and the challenges participants face (Mattsson, 2020). The sociology of childhood and critical border studies provide conceptual tools to understand the subject positions constructed for child migrants during this specific context. Yet, advancing a socially critical argument can place participants in a precarious position (Husband, 2002). In this project, asylum seekers shared deeply personal accounts of the strategies they relied upon to remain safe from border police and officials of the Migration Agency. The professionals who participated likewise disclosed moments when they had quietly defied their employers' directives to protect the young people in their care. Certain details of these testimonies are deliberately withheld, ensuring that individuals may continue to use such strategies without exposure. For the professionals, these choices are fraught with risk, particularly in contexts where unwavering loyalty to their organizations and employers is expected. Safeguarding their confidentiality therefore extends beyond concealing individual identities; it involves protecting them from potential repercussions associated with their participation.

For a researcher, there is always an ethical dilemma in how to do justice to the knowledge entrusted to you. One way I have sought to address this is by keeping the question alive, even though nearly a decade has passed. The experiences of young migrants in 2015 exemplify a moment where policy shifts collided with professional ethics; an intersection that resonates far beyond this specific case. Similar tensions recur whenever new crises and polarizing conflicts arise, forcing questions of human rights to the forefront and placing social workers on the front line, where they must take a stance and act. The issues illuminated in this article therefore remain relevant, both for social workers and researchers in Sweden and in international contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework weaves together insights from the new sociology of childhood and critical border thinking with social work research, while also drawing on political philosophy and critical citizenship studies. (Prout & James, 2003; Lavalette & Cunningham, 2002; Alanen, 1988; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Romero, 2008; Dominelli, 2016; Agamben, 1998; Isin, 2008; Butler, 2009). Through this integration, the study adopts a constructionist perspective that interrogates how childhood, borders, and citizenship are produced, contested, and re-imagined within shifting socio-political contexts. Access to rights and the discursive practices of dehumanization are examined through the lens of *grievability*, a concept that explores how policies and public discourse render certain lives visible, grievable, and worthy of protection, while consigning others to invisibility and neglect (Butler, 2009). With the new sociology of childhood as its point of departure, this

study approaches the very notion of childhood as a social construction (James & James, 2004; Prout & James, 2003). Within this framework, children are understood not merely as passive recipients of care but as social agents, endowed with capacities and rights (Qvortrup, 1993).

The study employs Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) WPR-framework for policy analysis, which examines how phenomena are socially constructed as particular problems and how certain policy solutions come to dominate. Complementing this, the Logics of Critical Explanation is used to deconstruct social practices, political acts, and fantasies articulated in processes of political change (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This approach moves beyond description to explain how policy both shapes and is shaped by dominant discourses (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Within this theoretical lens, the term "unaccompanied minors" is not a neutral designation but a contingent subject position produced through policy. It is an identity that emerges, and can also be undone, within discursive practices that blur boundaries between care, control, and exclusion. In this article, the demographic group is referred to as young migrants, while the term unaccompanied minors is retained when citing policy or participants.

Policy Context and Findings

Between 2005 and 2018, Swedish policies concerning unaccompanied minors underwent several significant reforms. Initially an unarticulated demographic category, unaccompanied minors were first defined in legislation regulating the appointment of legal guardians, aiming to strengthen protection and access to adult support. Based on the same view of these children as particularly vulnerable, responsibility for their housing was gradually transferred from the Migration Agency to municipal social services, first to a selection of municipalities and later to all 290 municipalities in Sweden.

In the rhetoric surrounding these reforms, ideals of integration and universalism were emphasized, while at the same time the distinctiveness of this group was constructed in contrast to other children. This dual position, as both particularly vulnerable and as children with the same rights as others, was increasingly challenged during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. At that point, the way unaccompanied minors were described shifted: from being portrayed primarily as vulnerable to being framed as particularly independent and, eventually, as a potential threat. The following section examines these discursive shifts and explores how social workers responded to them in practice.

Theme 1: From Vulnerability to Independence

From the 1970s onwards, European and Scandinavian refugee policies shifted from perceiving refugees as potential risks to framing them as traumatized victims requiring care and protection. This construction homogenized diverse refugee experiences into a single identity of suffering. Research and policy discourses increasingly portrayed refugees, especially children, as inherently vulnerable, emphasizing loss, identity disruption, and the need for psychosocial support (Stretmo, 2014). Within this framework, unaccompanied minors were distinguished from adult asylum seekers by their dual status as both refugees and children. Their vulnerability was linked not only to experiences of war and displacement but, above all, to separation from parents, which was constructed as particularly damaging (*ibid*). In the policy debate vulnerability was emphasized:

We all have a question which must be answered: can anyone ever be so vulnerable as a child without parents or other relatives in a foreign country? (Parliament Proceedings 2004/05: 131)

However, the very special living conditions of the unaccompanied child mean that further demands must be made on the person to be appointed a custodian for such a child. Therefore, as the investigation suggests, it should be stated directly in the law that, in his decision, the chief guardian must attach special importance to the vulnerable situation which the child is in (Prop 2004/05: 136 p. 35).

Such representations created obligations for social workers. This separation became a defining marker that positioned unaccompanied minors as the most vulnerable among refugees and thus as deserving of special measures, such as child-sensitive asylum procedures, separate reception facilities, and psychiatric support.

This rhetoric stands in stark contrast to that of a decade later, when the discourse shifted to emphasize independence, as the following quote by the Minister for Children, the Elderly and Gender Equality in the Swedish government 2015 serves to illustrate:

The unaccompanied minors are often very motivated and capable. They want to study and establish themselves in the country. Many municipalities testify that they [the unaccompanied minors] serve as inspiration for other children in school. Not everyone has the qualified need for care offered within HVB. Therefore, the government has today decided to propose a new form of housing in the Social Services Act: Supported Housing. The amendment to the Act is proposed to enter into force on 1 January 2016 (Regnér 2015).

HVB are institutional facilities that provide housing and care on a voluntary placement basis, staffed by trained professionals and operated by municipalities, private companies, or civil society organizations delivering services on behalf of the municipality. In 2016, a reform enabled municipalities to place minors in units with less staff and reduced provisions, justified by the claim that unaccompanied minors were particularly independent. In practice, this resulted in a scaling back of services and a transfer of responsibility from the state to the individual. This discursive shift aligns with neoliberal logics, where protection is made conditional upon the subject's perceived ability to demonstrate self-reliance, adaptability, and economic potential (Shamir, 2008). Within this framework, support is no longer an entitlement based on inherent vulnerability. By redefining vulnerability to capacity, the policy repositions these children outside the moral frame of protection, framing them less as recipients of care and more as autonomous subjects expected to manage their own risks.

Theme 2: Ethical Dilemmas for Social Workers

Through the reforms implemented after 2015, unaccompanied minors, although initially incorporated into the Social Services Act and associated with social logics of vulnerability and children's rights, were placed within a legal and discursive "bracket" that gradually excluded them from services and benefits to which they had previously been entitled. Examples include the denial of residence permits to approximately half of the 35 000 asylum-seeking minors through the application of retrospective legislation (Swedish Migration Agency, 2025). Age assessments were conducted using methods widely criticized by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (CommDH, 2018:4) as well as experts in pediatric medicine and children's rights (Lundberg, 2017). Financial aid and housing were withdrawn for those whose asylum claims had been rejected (Lundberg & Kjellbom, 2018). For social workers, this shift meant that clients who, under previous legislation, had been entitled to support as "particularly vulnerable" were now excluded from the very services designed to protect them. In addition, social workers, legal guardians, teachers, and other

welfare professionals were expected to contribute to deportations, which further heightened the tension surrounding their ethical decision-making. As one of the participants in this study noted, there were significant discrepancies between municipalities and schools concerning who was entitled to enrol in upper secondary education, creating further ambiguities in access to rights.

My municipality and some other municipalities had decided that the young persons without residence permits were not allowed to enrol in national programs in upper secondary education. I can understand it if they don't let a 19-year-old start, because it will be an uncertain future and you don't know if they will be able to finish the program. But if you're 18 you have the same chance as Swedish young persons to do it. So my school made an attempt to accept them in anyway. I think it works well that the school does what it can to enable these kids to continue studying (Emma).

Teacher Emma describes in the above quote how professionals found themselves in situations where they were required to exclude clients and students from services they had previously been entitled to receive. Through these acts of exclusion, professionals became implicated in the implementation of bordering policies. At the same time, they retained a degree of discretion, allowing them to include clients or students in cases where the rules were ambiguous and open to generous interpretation. Social worker Johanna described the difference before and after the reforms:

Johanna: It's hard for them at school. Why should they go to school and learn Swedish? That's not useful to them in Afghanistan. Why should I get attached to my foster family? Why should I become attached to the staff at my HVB housing?

Me: And how do you answer then, as a social worker?

Johanna: The usual answer is that you should take hold of what you get. You'll always learn something and you never know. You will probably get an opportunity to stay. We have tried to motivate them. You know, the Upper Secondary Education Act. You never know. There will be better times. Keep fighting. That's what we say. There is nothing else to say.

The transition from policies of integration to those of deportation entailed an expectation that social workers would contribute to border enforcement by encouraging and preparing young people for return to their countries of origin. Johanna, however, adopted an alternative strategy by fostering hope for change and the possibility of remaining in Sweden. Social workers, like other street-level bureaucrats, occupy a dual position as both agents of state control and potential platforms for advocacy and resistance (Lipsky, 2010). Through their everyday practices, they may either reproduce or contest bordering mechanisms. This study documents numerous instances in which social workers engaged in acts of resistance, advocating for young migrants and challenging restrictive policies. Such actions ranged from participation in social movements to the provision of informal support and the strategic use of professional discretion to promote more inclusive practices. While professional ethics can guide practitioners in choosing to advocate for their clients, there is far less formal recognition or support addressing the psychological strain placed on individuals who navigate these ethically fraught contexts:

Anna: I'm totally broken. I have my husband take care of everything at home, to support me so I can do this.

Me: Yes

Anna: I get up and I chat with suicidal kids in the middle of the night. And there are so many of us who have been doing this for several years now, who feel so bad. So it is huge. Suddenly there will be a large group of old ladies that someone has to take care of.

Me: Yes, yes, but then...

Anna: And they do not understand either (gets teary-eyed, close to crying).

In nearly all interviews, the themes of ethical stress and psychological overwhelm emerged prominently. The professionals and activists described themselves as emotionally exhausted and, in many cases, experiencing a profound sense of grief upon realizing that the Swedish state treated the individuals they cared for in such ways. The young people, on the other hand, expressed gratitude for the support they received, but several also described withdrawing from relationships to avoid making their Swedish friends sad or placing additional pressure on them. In certain accounts, actions produced hope and re-shaped relations, from the distanced professional-client dichotomy to allyship where social workers and young migrants organized together in advocacy. The clearest example in the interviews referred to the demands of exception from the retrospective new Aliens Act, which resulted in the Upper Secondary Education amendment:

Me: Can you ... now it is, today, in about twenty minutes, they will be voting on this upper secondary education law.

Lisa: Yes! It's very exciting.

Me: Is it something that you have talked about at work or that the young people are informed about or think about or anything like that?

Lisa: Oh, they are very well informed. They, well I think I have never met such educated (allmänbildade) and politically interested Swedish young people as these. They keep a close eye on the situation. But they mostly just say that it is not worth hoping. They are very pessimistic.

Social worker Lisa portrays the commitment of the young people, as well as her own involvement, not as the work of a neutral state representative but as the actions of a subject actively resisting perceived injustices. As the boundaries between social worker and client blurred, the space for agency among the excluded and disqualified young individuals expanded. They acted as political subjects, claiming a form of citizenship even in the absence of legal recognition within the state's social order. Through these acts, the law itself was subtly bent, opening pathways for them to remain in the country and to access the human rights that had previously been denied to them.

Theme 3: Crisis Narratives and Exclusion

While the figure of the unaccompanied minor was initially portrayed as highly independent and resourceful, other and more negative stereotypes such as delinquent youth and welfare scroungers emerged through the concept of crisis (Lems, Oester, & Strasser, 2020). A

discursive chain of equivalence linked the figure of the unaccompanied minor to the broader narrative of the 2015 migration crisis (Lems, Oester, & Strasser, 2020). The crisis narrative permeated restrictive policy changes that may have otherwise faced criticism for being inhuman. Costs and numbers of children placed in institutional care were central arguments in favor of reforms that downsized rights and services. Media reports highlighted that municipalities struggled to meet the housing needs of unaccompanied minors (Mrad & Sallinen, 2015). The situation was frequently framed as a “crisis” (Dahlgren, 2016). In September 2015, IVO (the authority responsible for inspecting institutional housing) announced that individual rooms would no longer be a standard requirement for unaccompanied minors (Mrad & Sallinen, 2015). This decision marked the beginning of service reductions which, although framed as a technical measure, both symbolically and materially restricted access to rights. Viewed through the lens of grievability, young migrants were positioned as less deserving of sympathy and of what are considered universal needs (Butler, 2009). In this context, human rights were effectively reduced to citizen rights, with non-citizens stripped of their entitlement to welfare services. Crisis discourses served to legitimize exclusion, reframing care as a financial burden and reinforcing notions of what subjects were vulnerable and grievable.

A few years later, as the new and restrictive policies had significantly reduced the number of asylum-seeking minors, the “Supported Housing” (stödboende) model was expanded to other client groups within social services, including young people placed in institutional care for addiction recovery or behavioral problems. Consequently, what was initially introduced as a temporary cost-saving reform during a time of crisis evolved into a permanent policy that reduced access to adult supervision and care, also for children who are residents and citizens of Sweden.

Exclusion manifested in multiple and intersecting forms, operating not only through formal policies but also through everyday bordering practices. As discussed in the previous section, the denial of access to education serves as one example of how rights were gradually eroded. Housing is another example:

Me: I mean, do you have any friends or relatives anywhere else in Sweden?

Navid: In the previous town there are some, but well, they don't have a place of their own where I could stay either. They are under age. One day, two days, three days, what should I do on the fourth day? First of all, to go to another town, I need to buy a ticket, a bus ticket, and I don't have the money. Then, the rest of my friends who were in that town are now spread out, just like me. They were rejected and were sent to [name of town] and they went there. One or two of them were accepted and well, we can't all go there and stay all year. You have to think of something. Even now, if I went to [name of town], it's further away from other countries. Because if I wanted to go to France for example, it's closer from here. I planned on going to a church in [town] a while ago. A lady made a post about it, but in these past three days, during the festivities, she wrote those without a residence permit card should be cautious, as police in plain clothes would come and get them. She said they had taken a boy and he was in Kabul the next day. She said it's better not to go out at all. But like this, at home, you go crazy.

In this account, Navid bears witness to how the increased deportability shapes what he can and cannot do in his daily life. He recounted that several of his friends received help from friendly strangers, but for his own situation, he was hesitant to do so, both because of the risks involved, and because he did not want to be a burden. Psychologist Johan touched on the

theme of handling exclusion. He described that it takes a certain capability to be able to connect with others and to mobilize support.

So people who are around these young persons and have been affected by them try to help in many cases. But not in all cases. It is also important to have the mental health and the ability to make these contacts with people who then become willing to help. Some individuals, the ones I meet, do not have that ability. They have felt so bad about themselves and rather pushed people away during the time they have lived in HVB homes and have a very small network, and they have suffered very badly. There are several young persons that I have had with whom I have also lost contact. I have no idea where they are today (Johan).

This puts light on the limits of the kindness of strangers, in terms of access to human rights. Compassion has limitations when it comes to tackling inequalities, as it partly relies on the status of the “helper,” who possesses both the means and the intention to offer assistance (Woodward, 2004). In the Swedish context, however, the compassion-driven activism in reaction to deportations proved to be life-saving for numerous children and young people. In the excerpt below, rejected asylum seeker Said from Afghanistan recounts his experience of being denied housing with other young people, a consequence of new age-assessment routines. His testimony illustrates how bureaucratic techniques, under the guise of objectivity, can reposition individuals outside the moral frame of protection:

Me: So first you were in a centre for minors?

Said: Yes, a centre for minors. Then, when I turned 18, or they changed my birthdate at the Migration Agency by 3 months, and it wasn't my fault, it was their own mistake. According to them, I would have turned in July last year, but I became 18 in October, so they changed it by 3 months and sent me to the adult centre. And the people who lived there were very different. They were 28, 29, 30 years old, people I couldn't live with. I actually tried to work in an internship, so I had to sleep at night (...) The guys came at midnight and started smoking, and I couldn't sleep with the smell of smoke, or with the noise. They would watch television at night, smoke water pipes.

As Said explained in the interview, the age estimation was carried out by a single officer at the Migration Agency, a practice referred to as “ocular assessment”. This procedure, where the officer visually judged a person's age, echo a colonial gaze that looks at rather than sees the subject reducing the individual to an object of suspicion and control (Said, 1978, s. 324). While the age and identity of asylum seekers have long been sites of delegitimization, the new legislation institutionalized this logic, enabling the exclusion of unaccompanied minors from previously granted rights such as housing, adult supervision and access to education. The reform was underpinned by an economic rationale and a political narrative portraying adult migrants as falsely claiming youth to secure greater entitlements:

The Government considers that it is not appropriate for adult asylum seekers to live together with unaccompanied minors in accommodation adapted for children. Resources set aside for children should also not go to adult asylum seekers. From both a child rights perspective and an economic perspective, the current system is therefore unsatisfactory (Prop. 2016/17:121 p 12).

While economic considerations were central, children's rights were also invoked as a justification for the reform. Drawing on phantasmatic logics that portrayed Middle Eastern

men as dangerous, policymakers argued that it was unsafe for children to share housing units with adults. This rationale, however, failed to address the reverse situation, exemplified by Said, who was relocated to a facility housing men twice his age.

For asylum seekers denied under the new restrictive rules and ineligible for the exception rules in the Upper Secondary Education Act, both housing and financial aid were withdrawn. Consequently, individuals who, prior to 2015, might have received permanent residence, housing, financial support, family reunification, and access to education, now found themselves stripped of all these rights. Ultimately, these measures were articulated as strategies to reduce the number of asylum seekers entering Sweden and to reinforce the primacy of the rule of law.

A yes must be a yes, and a no should be a no. If Sweden, as a country governed by rule of law, budges from this, it will have a legally insecure asylum system where legitimacy is undermined (Parliamentary Proceedings 2017/18:125, Svantesson, E.).

In the above quote, the Member of Parliament from the right-wing Moderate Party opposed the amendments to the Upper Secondary Education Act, arguing that the young people concerned had already received rejections and should therefore be deported to Afghanistan. This position reflected a broader bipartisan consensus, as the governing Social Democrats also pursued policies aligned with the EU minimum standards for asylum acceptance.:

Sweden has taken the greatest responsibility in relation to our population, while other EU countries have done very little. Sweden needs a respite. Swedish legislation will adapt to the EU minimum level to make people apply in other countries (Löfven, 2015)

This shift reflects a political logic that prioritizes border control and national security over humanitarian considerations (Fassin, 2011). As frontline practitioners, social workers embody this tension, navigating the conflict between their ethical commitment to care and the institutional demands to implement restrictive policies.

Me: How has it been at a cost? Do you mean emotionally or has it been time-consuming?

Emma: No, the time does not matter that much, it's more the psychological pressure, not knowing from one day to the next if the border police will be outside school or if we will succeed with this. It was black as night. He was going to his fourth meeting for return (återvändandesamal) in February and we had managed to get this process started and finally we got the new review. If I hadn't had the financial resources, we wouldn't have been able to do this either. There are no unaccompanied minors who can afford all that. (...) I don't regret it for a second. It was worth all of it. Now I have at least saved one. I will try to help the others to save more.

Me: And it sounds as if you have inspired your colleagues to do the same?

Emma: Yes, it feels a bit that way. There was no hesitancy from their side. They took on the young persons.

Emma's account illustrates how bordering practices reshape both the meaning of childhood (who is recognized as a child?) and the terms of professional engagement, redefining how care and responsibility toward that individual can be enacted. Her decision to shelter a student in her own home was initially concealed and framed as a breach of institutional rules. When

revealed, it triggered a domino effect where colleagues also began to act beyond formal boundaries. What was once coded as unprofessional transformed into an ethical stance of emancipatory practice. This shift exposes the contingency of meaning associated with the idea of unaccompanied minors in policy. Policies that render these young people as a threat to society blur the boundary between care and control, requiring professionals to navigate ethical dilemmas that exceed formal guidelines. In doing so, their professional identity is reconstructed. Instead of remaining impartial state agents, they become allies and socially engaged agents, aligning themselves with the young people they support. This transformation resonates with feminist and anti-racist perspectives that view social work as inherently political, requiring practitioners to confront intersecting oppressions and advocate for justice (Crenshaw, 2013; Dominelli, 2017).

Paradoxically, the restrictive reforms and resulting exclusions blurred the figure of the unaccompanied minor. When previously framed as particularly vulnerable, these young people were granted rights but positioned primarily as passive recipients of care. Under the new regime of exclusion, however, a different subject emerged: the young migrant became both an object of exclusion and a subject of solidarity, simultaneously a child and a non-child. In the networks of activism and mutual support that arose, they were no longer merely service recipients but co-creators of relationships and spaces of resistance, becoming housemates, friends, and allies to their former case workers. The interviews reveal how ethical principles materialize in practice under these conditions: social workers, custodians and teachers mobilized discretion not as neutrality, but as resistance. While this resistance often focuses on individual cases, by helping the particular young person they knew, it is also embedded in collective networks and activism, as in campaigns for the Upper Secondary Education Act. These practices altered institutional borders and served to re-imagine professionalism as a space of ethical and political contestation, where care itself became an act of resistance.

Discussion

Almost a decade has passed since the 2015 reforms of Swedish migration policy. During this period, marked by a global pandemic, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine, and the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the restrictions once framed as temporary crisis measures have become normalized and permanent. When the interviews for this article were conducted, participants were engaged in both individual cases and the collective cause of advocacy for the Upper Secondary Education amendment. Yet these efforts and the reform, in the best case, helped those who met the long list of criteria, leaving the structural erosion of migrant rights untouched. Today, new asylum seekers in Sweden face the permanent Aliens Act and further restrictions regarding protection and access to family reunion. With anti-immigrant sentiment rising across Europe, it is thus urgent to reflect on the role of social work in relation to state migration policy. Should social workers participate in deportation practices endorsed by a majority of the political parties? If yes, how does this align with the profession's ethical mandate, as articulated by the Swedish Association of Social Workers and the International Federation of Social Work, to advocate for clients' rights, empower them, and promote a just distribution of welfare resources (SSR, 2017; IFSW, 2018)?

“Vi står inte ut, men slutar aldrig att sluta kämpa” was the largest of the professional networks that had turned to activism, with thousands of members registered in its Facebook group at the time. However, these numbers represent only a fraction of Sweden's social work and welfare professionals overall. The participants in this study belong to that small fraction; those who chose to engage on behalf of their clients. They were recruited through social media groups where professionals openly aligned themselves with activist causes, perceiving it as their

ethical duty to step across the imagined boundary between professionalism and activism in order to do what they considered morally right for both their profession and the individuals they served.

By contrast, it can be assumed that the vast majority of social workers neither welcomed clients into their homes nor openly contested restrictive policies; at best, they remained neutral, upholding the boundaries of their professional role. Yet neutrality, in the context of border regimes, is never uncomplicated in relation to the ethical standards of social work, which call for social worker to pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people (National Association of Social Workers, 2025). Drawing on critical border thinking, neutrality itself becomes complicit in the reproduction of borders.

In my years as a social worker, I witnessed colleagues call the Migration Agency to report that children were speaking other European languages, revealing time spent in other countries. Such calls were enough to set the bureaucratic machinery in motion, resulting in their transfer under the Dublin Regulation to the margins of Europe, to states where reception systems had failed and the children risked abuse. Today's debate on reception- and deportation centres are shaped not only by international agreements but also by private welfare companies operating within neo-liberal logics that marginalise human rights, privileging efficiency and profit over care (SOU, 2018:22, s. 504; Symmonds, 2024; Burkhardt, 2024; Rise, 2021). In this landscape, the question of who can represent whom becomes critical, as the neo-liberal state logic positions the social worker as its agent, the child as its object, and the border as an unquestionable rule as if given by nature.

The analysis in this article shows how restrictive migration reforms not only altered the rights of young migrants but also transformed the conditions of social work practice and the space where client-professional relations were formed. Initially, the young migrants were framed as particularly vulnerable, entitled to support yet cast as passive recipients of care. Post 2015, they were redefined through disparate yet overlapping discourses of independence and distrust, legitimizing their exclusion from services. This discursive shift blurred the figure of the unaccompanied minor both as a refugee and a child: no longer a protected subject, excluded by policy yet emerging as an active participant in networks of solidarity.

For social workers and other welfare professionals who met young migrants in their daily life, these shifts reshaped not only the meanings attached to unaccompaniedness but also the very notion of professionalism. Social workers, teachers, and legal guardians were expected to support bordering practices by closing cases, removing children from school enrolments and terminating access to housing services. However, for many, this posed ethical dilemmas leading to the mobilization of critical practices and to actively use discretion as a space of resistance. In this process, professionalism was re-articulated from bureaucratic neutrality toward an engaged allyship with young migrants. Acts such as taking students/clients into private homes or participating in activist networks demonstrate how ethical principles were enacted through practices that defied institutional norms. These acts of solidarity disrupted the boundary between service and advocacy, professional and personal, citizen and non-citizen, thus illustrating how ethics and politics converge in everyday social work. The accounts in this article demonstrate that access to rights is shaped not only by legal status, but also by practices of inclusion and exclusion that determine who is recognised as a rights-bearing subject and who is rendered disposable. Through allyship and activist spaces, young asylum seekers who were legally non-citizens, positioned outside the state's political community,

found hope and pathways toward a changed status. In those encounters where professionals challenged borders, new, if fragile, spaces of belonging emerged.

Implications for Social Work

This article engages with borders in a dual sense: as the physical and legal demarcations that include or exclude individuals from the imagined community of the state, and as the professional and moral boundaries that govern notions of right and wrong. These borders are not static lines but shifting terrains, simultaneously material and symbolic, shaping who is allowed to belong and who is cast outside. They seep into the everyday practices of social work, where decisions made in offices echo through the lives of those positioned at the periphery of rights. In tracing these borders, the article also lingers on their fragility, how they are contested, transgressed and occasionally softened by acts of care that resist the faceless order of bureaucracy, referred to as the *banality of evil* by Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 1977).

The acts of those who stepped beyond the imagined line between professionalism and activism reveal something else: that the border is not fixed but contingent, and that ethical action may lie precisely in its transgression. Since the time of this study, the debate on the so-called Denunciation Act (a new law obliging social workers to report undocumented or deportable individuals to border police or the Migration Agency) has further illuminated the ethical tensions inherent in the profession when intersected with migration policy. The social workers' union, SSR, voiced strong criticism against this law, which ultimately led to exemptions for social workers and certain other welfare professionals (SSR, 2025).

Social work operates within a socio-political field where diverse political interests and agents continuously produce tensions and conflicts; it is never an apolitical practice. In such a field, the figure of the neutral civil servant is not only ineffectual but potentially harmful, reduced to one who uncritically follows orders. At the same time, a profession where every individual acts solely on personal conviction or so-called "gut feeling" cannot provide a sustainable framework either. While Arendt argued that the Holocaust against European Jews in the 1940s was largely carried out by civil servants who were not ideologically driven but merely followed orders, propelled by the routines of bureaucratic machinery, others, such as Seyla Benhabib, contend that ideology did serve as a fuel, motivating the acts of genocide (Benhabib, 2000). Against this background, how are we to understand and handle the issue of ideology in social work practice? This study contributes by offering perspectives from welfare professionals and young asylum seekers, illustrating how this ethically fraught terrain can be navigated through a collectively formulated moral compass – one grounded in universal human rights principles and shaped in dialogue with those directly affected by policies and interventions.

The findings highlight that social work is not a neutral practice but a site where power, ethics, and politics intersect. When migration policy and social work construct lives as ungrievable, professionals face the ethical challenge of either reproducing or contesting these bordering practices. Social work education and policy must therefore move beyond formal guidelines, acknowledging the political stakes embedded in everyday decisions. Strengthening collective strategies, through professional networks, alliances with civil society and advocacy, can expand the capacity to resist exclusionary policies. Recognizing social workers not only as service providers but as subjects in struggles over rights and belonging is essential to reaffirm the profession's relevance and its commitment to justice.

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