

Education desires and conflict impacts in refugees' decisions to leave

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Abstract

In this article, we set out to unpack, explore and contribute to new understanding of how conflict and education emerge and intertwine in refugees' reflections about their decisions to leave conflict-affected areas. We draw on a unique survey data set (n = 1008), with South Sudanese respondents, collected in two refugee settlements in Northern Uganda (2022), with structured and open-ended questions. We address three questions: (1) How do education-related factors emerge in refugees' reflections about leaving conflict-affected areas? (2) How do education and conflict interact in refugees' decisions to leave? and (3) What are the roles of education as desired for oneself and also for one's children, in relation to migration decision-making? We draw on literature about education and migration-decisions, in and out of conflict, and apply recent theorization of migration drivers complexes, temporally approached as predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers. The article contributes to deepen understanding of agency throughout displacement, specifically in relation to people's desire for education, for children, oneself, or both. Our findings also have implications for humanitarian response, in efforts to improve support for civilians affected by conflict, specifically focusing on provision of education (for both children and adults), wherever people may find themselves.

Keywords: education; conflict; migration; refugees; decision-making; children; parents

1 Introduction

The point of departure for this article are findings from our research with South Sudanese refugees, on their reflections about coming to Northern Uganda, where a common perspective was that they had “*left because of war to go to school.*” We set out to unpack, explore, and contribute to new understandings of the varying ways in which conflict and education emerge and intertwine in refugees' reflections about their decisions to leave their places of residence.

The interaction between conflict impacts and education desires in migration decision-making is in a sense intuitive in conflict contexts: because of the threat of violence, you may feel compelled to leave. Simultaneously, due to conflict, schools may not be open, or safe to attend if they are, which may also lead to a decision to leave. Factors related directly to conflict, and factors related to education as set within a context affected by conflict,

violence, or insecurity, appear as self-evident reasons for people to decide to leave (see also Talleraas et al. 2024).

Indeed, in conflict research, it is well documented that conflict affects education opportunities and attainment, as violent conflict disrupts development and sets back socioeconomic conditions in war-affected societies (Poirier 2012). Meanwhile, the impacts of conflict on education are conflict specific (Ajogbeje and Sylwester 2024), with human capital loss as particularly noticeable in weak states, whereas the general impacts of low-intensity conflict on education are often negligible (Unfried and Kis-Katos 2023). Nevertheless, it may be expected that lacking educational opportunities, deteriorating prospects for access to schooling, and concerns over schooling quality affect people's decisions to stay or leave (Adhikari 2013). It is therefore relevant to consider how direct and indirect impacts and experiences of conflict operate alongside those related to a desire for education but importantly also to consider how they may interact, potentially boosting one another, in different ways.

Highlighting the relevance of educational desires in refugees leaving decisions may challenge common assumptions about what "leaving conflict" entails. Of course, in extreme cases of forced migration, in the face of life-threatening violence, people are displaced often at very short notice, and desperately search for safety as refugees or internally displaced persons (Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2011). In such contexts, the direct and indirect impacts of war in destroying societal infrastructure are often left un-interrogated, as attention turns to urgent humanitarian crisis response. Yet, research shows that migration also in conflict-affected contexts involves agency, even if constrained, and that new opportunity structures may be discovered or invented (Harpviken 2009; Lubkemann 2016; O'Byrne and Ogeno 2020).

Therefore, considering what we refer to as "education desires" alongside "conflict impacts" in refugees' decisions to leave, emerges as relevant and necessary. This will improve current understanding of who leaves conflict-affected areas, who does not, and why. Our advancement of current knowledge on this takes seriously both agency and ability, while drawing on theorization on "migration driver complexes" (Van Hear et al. 2018) to allow for the inclusion of direct and indirect impacts of conflict.

Our analysis centers on those who did leave, focusing on the intertwining of direct and indirect impacts and experiences of conflict *with* the desire for education in decisions to leave. We find that desire for education can be split into desire for education for oneself, for one's children or both, which we explore further as key to understanding future aspirations among refugees (Aden et al. 2023). Conceptually, this article contributes to unpack the desire for education as relevant to decision-making about leaving in contexts varyingly affected by conflict. Through this we seek to open new avenues for thinking about human agency in conflict, including at various junctures of displacement. We suggest this has implications for humanitarian response, in efforts to improve support for civilians affected by conflict, specifically focusing on provision of education for children and adults, wherever people may find themselves.

This article draws on a unique survey data set ($n = 1008$), collected in two refugee settlements in Northern Uganda (2022), including structured questions and open-ended questions. Through analysis of select structured questions and open-ended responses, we gain access to South Sudanese refugees' reflections about their migration decision-making process. While we draw on the case of South Sudanese refugees who have come to Uganda, we propose that these insights are likely to be relevant for understanding mobilities and immobilities among populations affected by conflict globally.

The next section presents the article's conceptual framework, building on existing knowledge about decisions to leave conflict-affected areas. We draw on theorization of migration driver complexes, foregrounding predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers (Van Hear et al. 2018), to develop new understanding of the intertwining of

conflict and education related factors in refugees' decisions to leave. Next, we introduce the educational contexts of South Sudan, and for refugees in Uganda, before we present our methods and data. The analysis is divided into three sections, each addressing a research question: (1) How do education-related factors emerge in refugees' reflections about leaving conflict-affected areas? (2) How do education and conflict interact in refugees' decisions to leave? and (3) What are the roles of education as desired for oneself and also for one's children, in relation to migration decision-making? We conclude with a discussion of our findings and the article's contributions.

2 Conflict impacts and education desires in refugees' decisions to leave

So far limited attention has been paid specifically to the role of desire for education as a contributing factor in decisions to leave conflict-affected areas. Meanwhile, the salience of education, not least for children, is much discussed in research conducted in refugee camps and settlements, as the field of *refugee education* is testament to (Dryden-Peterson 2016; Aden et al. 2023). However, the extent to which desires and expectations regarding education influence the decision to leave has not yet been sufficiently addressed. This article seeks to fill this gap by examining desires for education¹ for oneself and one's children, as a proactive driver in the initial decision to leave conflict-affected regions, and not only as an opportunity embraced upon reaching safety, which is often relevant in addition.

In unpacking the roles of education and conflict in South Sudanese refugees' reflections about their decisions to leave, we draw on existing scholarship on migration decision-making in conflict-affected areas (Harpviken 2009; Lubkemann 2016). Research on what it is *about* conflict, that makes people leave or stay, has shown that the intensity and duration of conflict matters, as does the proximity of violence and insecurity, underscoring the significance of sub-national level studies (Holland and Peters 2020; Talleraas et al. 2024). Meanwhile, robust data on mobility and immobility in conflict-affected areas are sparse, complicating analyses of the exact ways in which specific types of exposure to conflict and violence impact decisions to leave (Turkoglu and Weber 2023; Talleraas et al. 2024).

In conflict-settings marked by livelihood insecurities more generally, it has been found that resources and networks, access to information, and other socioeconomic factors also contribute to explaining who leaves and who stays (Schon 2019). Furthermore, conflict research has well established that societal infrastructures are severely hampered or destroyed in violent conflict. Schools, represent key infrastructure, as buildings and institutions, are early victims in many conflict-settings (Agbor et al. 2022), with severe impacts on educational attainment (Gates et al. 2012), worsened in high-intensity conflict areas (Akbulut-Yuksel 2014). In addition, conflict also disrupts educational attainment as children fear walking to school due to exposure to violence, potential forced recruitment or the presence of landmines (Machel 1996; Unfried and Kis-Katos 2023; Ajogbeje and Sylwester 2024). Despite this, in existing research on *decisions to leave* conflict-affected areas, the role of lacking educational provision has not yet received systematic attention.

Meanwhile, education in emergencies has emerged as a sub-field of research at the intersection of humanitarianism and education (Burde et al. 2017). To understand how education desires may intertwine with other direct and indirect impacts of conflict in people's decisions to leave, we would ideally need to know much more about the above issues. Unfortunately, current knowledge on education in emergencies, such as during a conflict, and for displaced populations, only to a limited degree addresses these issues. Instead, such research focus on documenting the lack and insufficiency of education options available, and emphasize crisis-response solutions. Some of this work also intersects with studies of refugee education, not least refugee education in contexts of protracted displacement (Dupuy et al 2022).

Increasing attention is being paid to the types, funding and performance of schools providing education to refugees, including refugee-led initiatives (Aden et al. 2023). This research is often forward-looking, and foregrounds refugee children and youth (Dryden-Peterson and Horst 2023). Simultaneously, there is a widely acknowledged challenge in providing education along the lines of what children's rights suggest, to displaced children, also compared to the imperfect realities of education provision to non-refugee children. Meanwhile, less is known about the realities of education—and lack thereof—for children who are internally displaced, or who might remain immobile in conflict-affected areas. However, a study from Burundi found that having been a refugee, as compared to remaining or being internally displaced, increased the likelihood of having completed primary education, signaling the potentially positive role of education in displacement (Fransen et al. 2018).

Turning to the role of education desires in relation to migration decision-making in general, we find that research on this, too, is surprisingly sparse. When included, education is often linked with underlying economic factors (Dustmann and Glitz 2011) and has hardly been explored independently, with a few notable exceptions (Schewel and Fransen 2018; Müller-Funk and Fransen 2023). A reason may be the predominant adult-centric focus in migration studies, particular in quantitative research on migration drivers, which risks overlooking the role of children's education.

When education is accounted for, it is seen as a factor that influences skill-levels of migrants, pre-migration (Czaika 2018). Thus, the desire for education does not appear much in research about migration decision-making, and especially not for conflict-related or refugee migration. However, in studies on life aspirations, it is acknowledged that these may include education and/or migration, as means and ends (Koo 2012). Meanwhile, in migration aspiration research, education, in terms of existing or past skill levels, has largely been used as a control to help shed light on different migration aspiration levels (Schewel and Fransen 2018). Research on international student migration is an area rich with insights on migration where education is a key driver, yet the focus is often on future aspirations, continued mobility or brain drain (King and Raghuram 2013; Czaika 2018).

Meanwhile, how international student migration might be associated with migration from conflict-affected regions, remains largely unknown. However, Brotherhood (2023) finds that the role of agency is dynamic for his international student migrant interviewees, foregrounding the salience of the education-migration nexus. We thus suggest the need for further attention to insights on the education-migration nexus from contexts which are *not* conflict affected (Robertson 2013), for better understanding of migration decision-making in conflict-affected regions, in particular combining attention to education desires and conflict impacts together. We recognize the contrasting conditions which underlie migration from contexts which are varyingly (un)affected by conflict, but suggest that our understanding of migration decision-making also in conflict-affected regions, may benefit from an openness to the roles of human agency and education desires, as well as specific iterations of conflict impacts.

In order to contribute to better understanding how impacts of conflict and individuals' education desires shape migration decision-making, we draw inspiration from work which has explored causes, drivers, or determinants of migration, including push-pull accounts (Massey et al. 1993; Carling and Collins 2018; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). We seek to understand the intertwining of conflict impacts and education desires, in ways that encompass different elements which, alone or taken together, directly or indirectly, influence migration decisions. In contexts primarily marked by forced migration, such as in South Sudan, it is important to capture the interplay between factors that for different people at different times might hold different significance (e.g., war vs. poor harvests), but also human agency and structural dimensions (e.g., own educational ambitions vs. accessibility of schools) (Raleigh 2011; Bakewell and Bonfiglio 2013).

Therefore, we draw on [Van Hear et al.'s \(2018\)](#) typology of migration driver complexes, where they distinguish between predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers. They suggest that *predisposing* drivers (like economic or political differences) set the context, *proximate* drivers (such as economic downturns or security issues) directly impact decisions, *precipitating* drivers (like sudden violence) trigger migration, while *mediating* drivers (e.g., policies or networks) facilitate or constrain migration decisions. As we show in the analysis sections, the intertwining of conflict impacts (direct and indirect) with education desires, appear mostly jointly, with different weighting of factors. We find various migration driver complexes, where predisposing and proximate, as well as precipitating and mediating, differently interact in refugees' decisions to leave.

3 Displacement, conflict and education: South Sudan and Uganda

South Sudan, where 72 per cent of the population is under 30 years,² has faced significant challenges since gaining independence in 2011. Prolonged political conflicts and civil wars have severely hindered development, especially in the education sector, where millions of children have seen their schooling disrupted. Due to cut in state funding and unstable private funding, the enrolment at all levels, but particularly primary, have been affected ([UNICEF 2020](#)).

In 2003/2004 only about 400 000 children, a quarter of the school age population, were in school. By 2008, South Sudan had the world's lowest education rate, with only 27 per cent of the population having basic education ([Hodgkin and Thomas 2016](#); [Mayai 2022](#)). Following the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) government's rise to power in 2005, educational access expanded, and by 2013, over 1.3 million students were enrolled in primary and secondary schools ([Hodgkin and Thomas 2016](#)). However, the 2013 Education and Management Information System (EMIS) reported that 73 per cent of men and 84 per cent of women over 15 were illiterate ([UNICEF and Education Cluster 2017](#)). Although theoretically free, primary education often relies on community donations for materials, books, and even teachers' salaries and meals, which remain low and unstable.

The situation worsened dramatically with the outbreak of the civil war in December 2013. A 2022 study shows that during the civil war, schools in war zones saw an average yearly enrollment decline of 18.5 per cent ([Mayai 2022](#)). As one of the many consequences of the war, schools could either be closed, destroyed or taken as shelter by armed forces ([Hodgkin and Thomas 2016](#)). Between 2013 and 2017, 161 schools were occupied by combatants, and 800 were targeted in attacks ([UNICEF 2020](#)). Seven of South Sudan's ten states were directly affected by the war: Western Bahr el Ghazal, Unity, Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, Jonglei, Lakes, and Upper Nile ([Mayai 2022](#) p.31). In Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile, conflict led to the closure of 70 per cent of 1200 schools, forcing about 400 000 children out of education ([Hodgkin and Thomas 2016](#)).

Meanwhile, neighboring Uganda hosts the largest number of refugees in Africa, an estimated 1.645 million people of whom 57 per cent are children ([UNICEF 2024](#)). The largest refugee group is the South Sudanese with nearly 950 000 refugees living in Uganda ([UNHCR 2024b](#)). While Ugandan laws allow refugees the same access public services as Ugandan nationals, including free primary education, a study found that 57 per cent of refugee children did not have access to education. Schools were overcrowded, with an average student-teacher ratio of 85:1, versus the already high national average of 43:1 ([Schulte and Kasirye 2019](#)). In addition, some public schools charge fees for school uniforms and supplies, making it hard for low-income families to access education.³ Another challenge for refugee students is that it is often hard to document education from their home countries. In some areas refugees are treated like other foreigners and charged fees to take the primary leavers' exam, to access the secondary schools ([Ministry of Education and Sports 2019: 16](#)).

Both South Sudan and Uganda face significant challenges in providing consistent educational opportunities due to conflict and displacement. In South Sudan, war has disrupted schooling and damaged infrastructure, while in Uganda, overcrowded refugee-hosting areas struggle to accommodate the educational needs of displaced children, as well as those from host communities. In both contexts, access to education is critical not only for immediate stability, but also for future recovery, whether for those displaced, trapped in conflict zones, those returning to rebuild their communities, or host populations in Uganda.

4 Methods and data

To explore migration decision-making processes out of conflict, we conducted a survey with South Sudanese refugees, residing in two distinct settlements within the Rhino Camp in Northern Uganda; Tika and Omugo ($n = 1008$). The research conducted with the [project name removed for peer-review] was carried out in accordance with the Norwegian Research Act, including data protection and personal data measures and a notification form submitted to Sikt (Norway), research ethical reflection and discussion following the research Ethical Guidelines for the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH), and relevant research ethics approvals from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and Office of the Prime Minister's office in Kampala, Uganda, for the research conducted in Northern Uganda.

Survey data was collected in 2022 using Open Data Kit survey software installed on tablets, including structured survey and open-ended audio-recorded questions. To obtain variation across ethnicity and geographical areas of South Sudan, participants were selected by first listing all blocks and randomly selecting 10 blocks in Omugo and 5 blocks in Tika, before randomly selecting households in each settlement based on a complete listing. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and travelling restrictions, the survey's development and implementation were made possible through collaboration with local partners in Northern Uganda. Training for the enumerators was conducted in Kampala, with virtual input from two of the authors. The survey interviews were done in languages commonly spoken in South Sudan: Nuer, Dinka, Juba Arabic, Bari, Kakwa, and English.

In the analysis, we make use of both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data analysis builds on responses to seven open-ended audio-recorded questions (see appendix). All open-ended questions were translated from the respondent's language into English and transcribed. The transcribed responses were then coded using NVivo, a software program for qualitative analysis. We built a codebook with codes, representing themes that came up when reviewing the material. After test coding, the codebook was revised and implemented to "tag" or code the specific themes that came up in the open-ended questions. Some examples of these are: "education," "gender," "future," "return," "witnessing violence" and "routes and journey."

In the first round of coding the open-ended answers, we found that education was frequently discussed. Interestingly, education was not something we asked about specifically in the open-ended questions, but when the respondents shared about their reasons for leaving, initial journeys, and their thoughts about the future, this was a recurring theme. For all quotes from this material, we use pseudonyms. We also draw on descriptive statistics from the structured survey questions, primarily as percentage distribution of responses to questions relating to importance of conflict and education as drivers of migration-decisions, but also descriptive statistics on background characteristics and socioeconomic conditions.

To account for the level of education, we included a variable for whether the respondent had completed primary school education or not. Of the 1,008 respondents, 42.8 percent had started, but not completed primary education, while 6 percent had completed primary education. 8.7 percent had lower/junior secondary education, while 5.5 percent had upper/senior secondary education. 34.5 percent had no formal education.

The information collected through the survey is mainly retrospective, where most respondents arrived in the settlement some years ago, on average five years prior to the survey. This time lapse introduces a temporal bias, as respondents were required to recall and articulate past experiences. The narratives that we analyze in this article are based on memory, and some of the topics we asked about may not have been articulated before by the refugees. The data thus face the challenge of recall bias, common to retrospectively collected data on movement (Vickstrom and Beauchemin 2024). A related bias lies in the temporal closeness to the pandemic when the survey was conducted (2022), in so far as school closures in 2020–2021, may have increased respondents' perception of the salience of education.

The analysis of the open-ended as well as the structured questions has sought to account for the reality of recall bias, while noting that important moves—e.g., out of conflict-settings—tend to be less prone to such biases, although some recall bias always remains (Smith and Thomas 2003). We have also reflected during analysis on how to interpret refugee statements on the salience of education which are either unclear about *when* it became important, or see education as key *prior* to as well as *after* the move. A few respondents also discussed education as only *becoming* salient for them in Uganda, sometimes linked to their children reaching school age then, or because of changing outlooks. In the first section of the analysis below, we discuss this temporal interplay further.

Doing research with refugees requires much ethical consideration at all stages. We worked closely with South Sudanese research assistants who were not only skilled in language, but had field competence, and a deeper understanding of the conflict and situation of the refugees. They were the enumerators in the field and translators and transcribers for the open-ended questions. The survey data (2022) and related data processing and analysis which we draw on in this article have been supplemented with insights from a field visit to Uganda (2024), including discussions with NGOs and refugee-led organizations in Arua, and with leaders in the refugee settlements, reflecting on preliminary insights, allowing for reactions from a local perspective.

5 Education-related factors in refugees' narratives about their decisions to leave

In this first part of our analysis, we show the prominence of education-related aspects in refugees' narratives about their decisions to leave. When sharing her reasoning behind the decision to leave, Mary, a survey respondents' reflections mirrored that of other respondents in mentioning education:

Why I left South Sudan was because my children were not in school and there was also fear of war. I come here so that my children can study. (Mary, age 32, from Aluakluak in Yirol, Lakes State)

Mary stresses the salience of education in two ways. First, her children were not in school due to conflict, which may be due to schools not being open and operational, or due to security risks associated with trying to reach schools, but in either case—no school is as a direct consequence of the ongoing conflict. Second, she also says that the reason why she came to Northern Uganda was “so that my children can study,” which reflects how the hope of education in Uganda functioned as a pull factor. This was clearly linked with the push dynamics of not having access to education in South Sudan, largely due to conflict. Moreover, Mary also mentions the “fear of war,” which, as we return to, intertwines the impacts of conflict and education, not only through how conflict directly or indirectly affects education provision, but also because conflict as such, is a key factor affecting decisions to leave.

Explaining his decision-making process, another respondent, John, echoed Mary's narrative. Yet, his perspective was that of a younger person who himself had attended school before fleeing to Uganda:

When the war broke out, the schools were closed, and my parents decided we should come to Uganda and study. (John, age 20, from Morobo, Central Equatoria state)

While he does not detail the relative importance of the outbreak of war versus the closing of the school, his choice of mentioning both signifies that, from his perspective, these factors interplayed in his family's decision-making process. When looking at John's answers to the structured survey questions, we learn that he had completed lower/junior secondary education before leaving, and that he and his family came from Morobo in Central Equatoria state in 2017, at the time of spike in violence in the area. Thus, we hypothesize that his prior education had been important for him, but that it ended abruptly due to the increase in conflict. The importance of his own education was re-iterated in another open-ended question:

I don't know what will happen in future, but I just put my mind on studies because it will help me in future. (John, age 20, from Morobo, Central Equatoria state)

Education-related factors emerged in John's narrative in intertwined ways: As part of the reasoning about the decision to leave South Sudan by his parents, where we see the interaction of the direct impacts of the conflict, as well as the matter-of-fact statement on the implications: "the schools were closed," which also influenced the decision to leave. In his case, as someone young who had been going to school in South Sudan, and who had reached lower/junior secondary education, the absence of availability of schooling due to the war, appears as central to the factors shaping the family's decision to leave for Northern Uganda. Meanwhile, we also see that education emerges in his hopes for the future, reflecting a faith in the promise of the benefits that education may offer looking ahead.

As further discussed below, narratives where education interacts with direct and indirect impacts of conflict, and decisions to leave, were mentioned concerning the past, the present situation in Rhino camp, and in reflections on the future. The varying salience of education at different points in time, pre- and post-migration, was foregrounded by Paul, stating:

We were not intending to come to Uganda, because one time we were in Rhino camp [in Uganda] and we suffered of hunger those days of the first refuge [previously]. But the issue of school for the children made us to come to Uganda [again]. (Paul, age 45, from Yondu, Morobo, Central Equatoria state)

As several studies have shown, cross-border mobilities between South Sudan and Northern Uganda are historically rooted and remain quite common, also among refugees (Leopold 2009; Huser et al. 2019; O'Byrne and Ogeno 2020; Vancluysen 2022). Paul illustrates the different ways in which crossing the border into safety from violence, might entail suffering and hunger in the refugee settlements in Uganda, which for him and his family meant return to South Sudan. However, later, and in his words closely linked to the "issue of school for the children," re-migration to Northern Uganda was nevertheless seen as necessary.

For Mary, John and Paul, alongside and often intertwined with impacts of conflict, education emerges as a salient part of shaping their decisions to leave South Sudan. These examples illustrate a general pattern among our South Sudanese refugee respondents, namely that concerns about schooling are closely intertwined with the impacts of violence,

insecurity, and conflict. The ways in which these individuals—as many other respondents—explained their active decision-making about leaving, underlines the importance of individual agency in these processes. This is parallel to Van Hear et al.'s (2018) discussion about Afghans moving to Iran and Somalis moving to South Africa, showing the high degree of agency involved in migration decisions in contexts described as “forced migration.” Likewise, in conflict settings like South Sudan, most people do not leave, which can be explained by the fact that for many people this is not possible, and by the fact that different people assess situations differently—due to subjective elements and socioeconomic positioning—and people exert agency within the scope that is possible for them, in varying ways (Bakewell 2021; Hagen-Zanker et al. 2023).

6 Unpacking conflict and education as interacting drivers in decisions about leaving

As our findings above show, conflict and education-related factors emerge as salient in refugees' decisions about leaving. Drawing on ideas about migration driver complexes framework (Van Hear et al. 2018) introduced above, the second part of our analysis further unpacks the ways in which education and conflict—alone or together—appear to operate as predisposing, proximate, and precipitating drivers in refugees' decision-making. Starting with findings from our structured survey questions, where refugees reported on their views of the relative importance of education-related versus conflict-related factors, we first discuss how we might interpret these as either predisposing or proximate drivers, or both. Second, we turn to our open-ended survey questions where responses shed light on how conflict-related and education-related factors interact, and we scrutinize how this *interaction* itself may function as a *precipitating* driver, cumulatively playing a key role in the final decision to leave South Sudan.

When asked whether they had considered leaving their place of residence earlier, before the period where they made the decision to leave which had brought them to Uganda, approximately 25 per cent of our respondents said they had considered leaving in the past. When we asked these respondents about the reasons for considering leaving in the past, allowing multiple response options, 48 per cent answered that this was *to escape the conflict*, and 38 per cent *to avoid feeling threatened*. This underscores that impacts of conflict had been present in many people's consciousness for a long time, either passing, or as a more constant backdrop to their lives in South Sudan. Meanwhile, it is striking that an even higher number of respondents, namely 61 per cent, said that they had considered leaving because of a *desire to send their children to school*, and 28 per cent because of *own educational aspirations*. Meanwhile, some 48 per cent reported that they had considered leaving in the past *looking to improve their future prospects*. This underlines the role of conflict and education as *predisposing* drivers, as a part of the general context in which migration decisions later were made.

We also asked all the 1008 respondents what affected *where* they went, once they had taken the decision to leave. To this, 81 per cent indicated that education options played an important or very important role in the decision about where to go. While this emphasizes the role of agency, not only in the refugees' decisions to leave, but also in where to go, it also highlights how education-related factors elsewhere might function as a *predisposing* drivers. Considering Uganda's educational system, which is known for its liberal refugee policies and access to education, in comparison to the lack of stability and quality of educational options in South Sudan, the importance of education in deciding where to go is not surprising. Yet, given that as many as 81 per cent of our respondents mentioned education as a factor influencing this decision, this may also underline that education played a role as a *proximate* or *precipitating* driver, as schooling opportunities gradually worsened or more suddenly disappeared, due to the conflict.

Thus, we suggest that among these South Sudanese refugees, both conflict-related and education-related factors can be understood as *predisposing* drivers, part of the general context, and as *proximate and predisposing* drivers, with more direct impact on migration decision-making. To shed further light on the relative role of conflict and education, as well as the interaction between the two, we now turn to our open-ended survey questions. Here, the role of considerations about education for children was clear both in responses about decisions to leave and about where to go. One of our respondents *Joyce* shared a common view:

We came here because the education system of Uganda is stronger than the one of South Sudan, so I bring my children to study. (Joyce, age 35, from Torit, Lafon County, Eastern Equatoria State)

Joyce's statement follows the logic of predisposing migration drivers closely, and we find, much like [Van Hear et al. \(2018\)](#), that how people in conflict contexts consider the pros and cons—the push and pull—of leaving, combines considerations about human security—from escaping violence, through to livelihoods considerations, but also, as is our focus, an important role for education. In contexts of long-term violent conflict and low levels of human development, such as in South Sudan, *predisposing* drivers of migration are thus likely to be of particularly high relevance, due to persisting inequities between areas of origin and potential areas of destination.

While on the one hand, Joyce's above statement might be understood as a “proactive” migration decision, rather than a “reactive” one ([Richmond, 1993](#)), we argue it makes more sense to understand this as potentially more than reflective of predisposing drivers. Another of our respondents, *Grace*, summarizes the devastating impacts of war on societal infrastructure, as intertwined with direct realities of war, culminating in decisions to leave:

We moved to Uganda because there are no schools due to the fighting, no health care, people are being killed, the youths were forcefully recruited to the army and if one resist he or she will be killed, that is the reason why we decided to migrate to Uganda. (Grace, age 25, from Kajo-Keji, Central Equatorial state)

Here, we find that what might be *predisposing* drivers (access to schools elsewhere) are intimately intertwined with both *proximate* drivers (‘there are no schools due to the fighting’) and *precipitating* drivers (‘if one resists he or she will be killed’) of migration. Furthermore, we also see that the possibility of going to Uganda—borders which can be crossed, knowledge that there is some form of support there, and a great likelihood of presence of some extended networks there, all also point to the relevance of *mediating* drivers here. While education figures as a predisposing and proximate driver, the statement reveals how this interacts with conflict and other elements, playing roles as drivers.

In several of the open-ended responses, we also find that the desire for education is closely intertwined with impacts of conflict, both when linked to the inequities between South Sudan and Uganda, and when linked to the impacts of conflict on access to education, its quality, and human security considerations in South Sudan. As *Sarah*, another respondent, told us:

I wanted to study in Uganda because the standard of education is very low in South Sudan and the security is not okay. So, I wanted to study in Uganda and also, I wanted to be safe, and my family (Sarah, age 63, from Yei, Central Equatorial State)

As *Sarah's* statement illustrates, the role of predisposing and proximate drivers of migration intertwine, and with the words “*I wanted to be safe, and my family*” we recognize the

totality of impacts of conflict on human security, which bridges proximate with precipitating drivers, in this specific decision to leave. We also find that the “pull” factors of immediate safety and educational opportunities in Uganda can be seen as an underlying element of general opportunity structures, and thus as predisposing drivers, mirroring the findings above. Yet, as Rebecca reflects on, below, oftentimes the roles of precipitating drivers are crucial, reflecting the salience of time and the accumulation of different considerations, crystalizing in a given moment:

We decided to move as a family because there is no school in South Sudan and sometimes our children could be ambushed in class and killed, [and] food shortage that is why we migrated to Uganda (Rebecca, age 35, from Lasu, Yei, Central Equatorial State)

In some cases, precipitating drivers, like sudden school closures or spikes in violence, were discussed, and as [Van Hear et al. \(2018\)](#) consider in relation to journeys, we also find that precipitating drivers may be identified in the context of people on the move internally in South Sudan, and when deciding to go to Uganda, due to untenable security conditions, and the lack of educational opportunities, they find themselves with as internally displaced:

The decision to come to Uganda, was from us as a family. We all had a meeting with my father, mother and the children and decided to move to Uganda in order to bring the children to study. That time of the war, there were no schools, we ran to the bush. We saw there were no schools, and we were in the bush that is why we came to Uganda, so that the children can get to school. (Rose, age 36, from Yei in Central Equatorial State)

As the above analysis shows, different aspects of living in conflict are discussed in overlapping and contrasting ways by refugees, indicating how subjective experiences matter in refugees’ decision-making processes about leaving. We find that sequencing plays a role, but not necessarily in linear ways, meanwhile, temporal dimensions are key to a better understanding of refugees’ decisions to leave conflict-affected areas ([Schon 2019](#)), including the roles of educational opportunities herein. Links between realities of displacement—and initial reasoning about leaving conflict-affected areas have previously been discussed by [Lubkemann \(2016\)](#) drawing on the contexts of Liberia and Mozambique, and arguing for fresh perspectives on the interpretation of opportunity structures that become available, due to displacement.

In the context of long-term experiences of conflict in South Sudan, and decisions to leave and go to Uganda, the roles of education-related and conflict-related factors as interacting drivers are evident. As our analysis has shown, education-related factors and conflict-related factors are related, and both can be part of predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers. Meanwhile, we find that they can additionally be constitutive of these drivers together through their interaction, illustrating the value added of a framework that considers migration driver complexes, including push-pull-plus aspects ([Van Hear et al. 2018](#)). This better allows for the non-linear and cumulative dimensions of the sum-total of factors underlying refugees’ decision-making about leaving, including agency, to come to the fore.

7 Education desires for children and for oneself in refugees’ migration decisions

In this third analysis section, we follow-up on a theme which emerges above, namely the roles of education both as desired for one’s children and as desired for oneself, in relation to migration decision-making. Addressing questions about decision-making must necessarily involve some reflection on who is making decisions, for and/or on behalf of whom. Therefore, we briefly discuss the role of families and individuals, and of parents and children, in refugees’ decisions to leave, including gendered aspects.

As the two above sections have shown, people refer to their children's education to a large extent, but also sometimes to their own education, in the context of reflecting on their decisions to leave. As referred to in the previous section, 61 per cent of our respondents said that children's education was important when previously considering leaving South Sudan, while 28 per cent had been motivated to get an education for themselves.⁴

The below statement from Deng is quite typical. It relates the decision to leave South Sudan (push) and come to Uganda (pull), to a high extent to hopes for access to education for one's children:

In South Sudan, schools were not accessible and I came to Uganda so that my children can access education. (Deng, age 24, from Morobo, Central Equatorial State)

Meanwhile, many refugees who are adults may not themselves have been able to take or finish the education they wanted to while young. Therefore, the desire to pursue education for oneself may run parallel with desires for education for children. Alfred from Juba, in his late thirties, explained that he had moved so that he could be closer to family, but also to send his children to school. When asked about the future he believed it was best to stay in the settlement in northern Uganda, to "*protect the life of my children so that they can study.*" He also stated that if he was to migrate further, he would go to another country to ensure both a better education for his children, and also to get an education for himself. Similarly, Emmanuel, a 25-year-old man originating from the Lake states, was motivated to leave to improve prospects both to send his (young) children to school, and to get an education for himself. He said: "*I decided to come here because of war and I also come here to study.*" (Emmanuel, age 25, from Yirol in Lake states).

As illustrated by Alfred and Emmanuel, prospects for education, not only for one's children, but also for oneself, was a recurring theme in our open-ended data. This pertained both to decisions to come to Uganda, but also when asked about hopes for the future. These reflections offer insights into the agency of refugees at different stages of displacement (O'Byrne and Ogeno 2020). Among our respondents, almost a third were considering moving elsewhere in the future. Among these, 48 per cent considered further movement to access schooling for children, while 26 per cent did so to get an education for themselves (multiple response options possible). These findings underscore the salience placed on education, not just for children, but also for young and older adults, potentially as *predisposing* drivers, also in decision-making regarding onwards migration. At times this make take the shape of *precipitating* or *proximate* drivers, as discussed above, but also as *mediating* drivers, considering networks and opportunities. This reveals a complex interplay between initial migration drivers and considerations for onward movement. We find an unfulfilled desire for education, in particular among those who wish to continue their own education, where education-related factors appear as significant for where imagined futures are located. Yet, this is also often intertwined with considerations about children's future education (Aden et al. 2023; Dryden-Peterson and Horst 2023; Müller-Funk et al. 2023). We thus suggest need for further attention to agency in relation to the education-migration nexus, also in the case of refugees (Brotherhood 2023).

Given the low levels of education among our respondents (see Methods), and the median age of 32 years (IQR = 25–40), the apparent priority given to education is interesting. In discussions with practitioners in Rhino Camp (fieldwork 2024), some highlighted that the increase in opportunities for children's education over time in Uganda, may have strengthened refugee parents' aspirations for children's education. Some research also suggests that displacement may ease access to schooling, thus leading to more educational *enrolment* than would have been expected prior, not only to displacement, but also to conflict (Fransen et al. 2018). Meanwhile, the *quality* of education in displacement remains debated (Benhura and Naidu 2021; Aden et al. 2023).

Echoing global data,⁵ we find that primary education for refugee children is relatively available in refugee settlements in Uganda, but both secondary education and education for young adults is largely not. Indeed, only 0.8 per cent of refugees in Uganda have secondary education, according to available data (Vemuru et al. 2016), and access to secondary education for refugees remains very limited (Kasirye-Büllesbach 2019; Tulibaleka 2022). Thus, refugees' aspirations for onward migration to get more education are likely to be linked to the limited availability of secondary education for refugees in Uganda. The lack of secondary education opportunities, and ways for adults to complete interrupted education, is an area where further efforts are needed, underscoring the need for a more holistic approach to humanitarianism in protracted displacement.

This situation is furthermore highly gendered: only half as many refugee girls as boys attend secondary school in Uganda (UNCHR 2024). Among our survey respondents, we find that 6 per cent of our female respondents answered that education for children was a reason for considering migrating previously, while only half of the male respondents reported the same. Regarding getting an education for themselves, 36 per cent of men said this mattered, compared to 24 per cent of the women. These results may reflect both prevailing gender norms in South Sudan, resulting inequities in educational attainment, as well as early marriages, and limitations on women's participation and influence in South Sudan. Simultaneously, these findings also indicate the promise of life improvements which many people place in getting education, for themselves, but notably also as parents for their children, which appears to be the case in particular for mothers among our respondents.⁶

Returning to the matter of who is making decisions and for whom, we found that decisions to leave were referred to as individual, collective, or as made by a specific family member. When asked about this, 57 per cent of respondents reported that they had decided themselves, their own interpretation being that this was more their own individual-level decision than a collective one. However, 18 per cent of respondents reported that the decision to leave was a collective family decision, while 21 per cent reported that the decision was made by someone else who was living in their household at the time, typically another family member. Often this would be a parent, if the respondent was a young adult at the time of the survey, for instance a 20-year-old respondent, who had left with their family members five years earlier.

When it comes to gender differences in who made the decision to leave, our data perhaps surprisingly reveal almost negligible gender differences, where 59.1 per cent of men and 56.4 per cent of women answered that the decision to leave was made by themselves. Decisions attributed to another household member or made jointly were again very similar, with 20.9 per cent of women compared to 20.3 per cent of men reporting another household member made the decision, and 18.7 per cent of women versus 17.5 per cent of men reporting a joint household decision.

We draw attention to these responses for three reasons. First, because there is an interesting *variation* whereby for a fifth of respondents, the decision was collective, for another fifth, made by another person, but for almost six of ten respondents, in their own words, it was their own decision to leave. Second, because gender differences are almost absent in these descriptions of migration-decisions, perhaps challenging assumptions about refugees' self-perceptions when it comes to their agency. And third, because this in sum underscores the salience of refugee's agency in decisions to leave, although there is of course much more to understand about individual-and-collective dynamics of such decision-making processes in conflict settings (see also Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Hagen-Zanker et al. 2024).

8 Conclusion

The main contribution of this article lies in new knowledge about the role of education, as intertwined with impacts of conflict, in refugees' decisions to leave conflict-affected areas.

This underscores refugees' agency in migration decision-making and foregrounds the right to education which (protracted) conflict often denies the realization of.

We contribute to deepening the understanding of agency throughout displacement, specifically in relation to people's desire for education, for one's children and for oneself, sometimes both. A mixed-methods approach contributes to increase knowledge through a particular case, here drawing on the experiences of South Sudanese refugees in settlements in northern Uganda, including broad patterns (descriptive statistics), but also how refugees narrate their reflections about the decision to leave South Sudan to come to Uganda (open-ended responses). In contexts of "forced migration" it is often assumed that there are constraints placed on agency, which is often the case to some extent (Erdal and Oeppen 2018). However, increasingly it is recognized that there is some scope for agency, even within constraints (Viga and Refstie 2024). Methodologically, we see the value in, but also the limitations of, data such as our own, with refugees' retrospective reflections about migration decision-making processes, often five or more years back in time, with the necessary caveats this entails. However, we suggest a clear value-added of documenting the salience which refugees place on the desire for education, in the midst of conflict impacts, and being able to do so quantitatively and qualitatively.

The article addressed three research questions, first, on how education-related factors emerge in refugees' reflections about leaving conflict-affected areas; second, on how education and conflict interact in refugees' decisions to leave; and third, on the roles of education as desired for oneself and also for one's children, in relation to migration decision-making. Our findings indicate that for many refugees, education desires are not merely a backdrop, but active components that, together with other drivers, critically inform decisions to leave. Education desires are also key to understanding refugees' future aspirations, for oneself and for one's children, where there may be gendered variation (Dryden-Peterson and Horst 2023; Müller-Funk et al. 2023).

Employing the notion of migration driver complexes (Van Hear et al. 2018) has allowed us to reflect on how conflict-related factors (e.g., the destruction of infrastructure, or fear of atrocities) and education-related factors (e.g., the closure of schools, or danger on the way to school), both overlap and intertwine, as drivers that might be understood as predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating migration out of conflict-affected contexts. Extending Van Hear et al.'s (2018) "push-pull-plus framework," we suggest the need for further attention to the *time-dimension* and to the *interaction* of factors that shape migration driver complexes, inclusive of drivers which function as predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating. We note that both conflict-related factors and education-related factors, and the perceptions of these separately and jointly, are changeable over time. In light of our findings, *the role of cumulative impacts of conflict*, sometimes in non-linear ways, and including a broad range of factors such as education needs and desires, stand out as an important area for further investigation. We suggest these insights can contribute toward more comprehensive understanding of decisions about leaving conflict-affected contexts, usefully approached as migration driver complexes.

Better knowledge about migration decisions in conflict-affected contexts would also contribute to more sophisticated understanding of decisions about staying, and the circumstances under which the common experience may be that there is de facto little choice involved for conflict-affected populations. A broad engagement with human security allows for inclusion of factors spanning direct and indirect impacts of conflict, including education, as well as health and livelihoods. Further research might consider which factors are more likely to be salient as predisposing, proximate, precipitating, or mediating drivers, under which circumstances, and in relation to particular time-horizons. As such, our findings also have implications for humanitarian response, for improving support for civilians affected by conflict. More specifically there is a need for humanitarian actors to focus on the provision of quality education in conflict, whether people stay or leave, but importantly beyond

primary levels, and inclusive of adults whose education has been interrupted. Such humanitarian efforts should reach any place where people may find themselves in displacement, as immobile or trapped populations, those who are considering return, or settlement, and those pursuing onward movement, and always inclusive of other people who also live in these specific places (Burde et al. 2017; Benhura and Naidu 2021; Dupuy et al. 2022).

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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Ethical approval

This research conducted with the [project name removed for peer-review] was carried out in full accordance with the Norwegian Research Act, including data protection and personal data measures and a notification form submitted to Sikt in Norway, research ethical reflection and discussion following the research Ethical Guidelines for the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH), and relevant research ethics approvals from the Office of the Prime Ministers office in Kampala, Uganda, for the research conducted in Northern Uganda.

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Notes

1. Education here includes opportunities for schooling of children, furthering or completing young adults own education, or both—and thus relate to children, youth, and young adults, and to primary, as well as secondary and higher education levels (Pherali and Abu Moghli 2021).
2. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/07/south-sudan-new-world-bank-financing-to-boost-access-to-income-generating-opportunities-for-youth-and-women>
3. <https://www.wideworldsug.org/ugandas-education-system/>
4. We do not have survey data about the gender of respondents' children and can therefore not offer insights about potential differences in considerations and responses, based on the gender of respondents' children, although this would have been interesting in order to better understand potentially changing gender norms as regards girls education.
5. <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/migration> (last accessed 22 September 2024)
6. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/education-and-female-youth-displacement-south-sudan-and-kurdi-stan-region-iraq> and https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/BAF-Gender-Conflict-Sensitivity-and-Transition-in-South-Sudan_14072022.pdf (last accessed 3 April 2024)

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