Statistics made available by the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) make it possible to follow first-decision outcomes in asylum cases concerning unaccompanied children (types of residence permits granted, percentage of rejections, etc.). Yet, we know little about differences in asylum decision outcomes for unaccompanied children coming to Sweden. Therefore, we wanted to find out how gender, country of origin, and asylum reports are associated with the likelihood of being granted residency. Asylum decisions concerning unaccompanied children were first coded inductively. These codes were later merged into larger categories that were analyzed quantitatively by logistic regression analysis. The data sample consisted of one calendar year of asylum decisions issued by the SMA. Results show that fewer girls than boys were granted asylum, and in fact, girls have an overall lower prospect of being granted residency. Results also display statistically significant gender differences in reported reasons for seeking asylum.

Keywords: unaccompanied children, separated children, refugee girls, asylum reports, refugees, Sweden

Introduction

Already in the 1980s, researchers concluded that ‘unaccompanied’ and/or ‘separated’ refugee children (hereafter unaccompanied) seek asylum after having to act in response to armed conflicts, inequality, and exploitation, as well as multiple forms of violence, abuse, and discrimination (Ressler et al. 1988; Von Bethlenfalvy 1983). More recent studies highlighting children’s agency have also suggested that children can have their own personal migration agenda, including ambitions to
improve their living conditions and futures (see e.g. Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016). This means that children’s reasons to leave their countries of origin can include both voluntary and involuntary components (Bhabha 2014). Nevertheless, as we shall see, what unaccompanied children report concerning their reasons for seeking protection become of major importance for asylum decision outcomes in Sweden, where the present study has been conducted.

Overall, boys have been over-represented among unaccompanied children seeking asylum alone in the Global North. In Sweden, boys have commonly accounted for about 75 per cent of unaccompanied children annually (Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö 2017). Ayotte (2000: 17) has suggested that the often-higher percentage of boys seeking asylum alone could be partly explained in three ways. The first concerns gendered patterns of conflict situations that sometimes affect boys in distinctively dangerous ways. The second explanation proposes that patriarchal family structures could lead to sons being prioritized to be sent abroad. The third explanation notes that international travel risked being a dangerous endeavour for a girl travelling alone or without male company. Ayotte (2000) also offered that numerical differences between boys and girls could depend on the country of origin and the backdrop to their flight. To our knowledge, research comparing the conditions for unaccompanied boys and girls in the asylum systems of destination countries is limited and no studies have examined general gendered trends in decision outcomes when children seek asylum. Consequently, it is pertinent to address how gender-based differences influence asylum procedure concerning children.

Against the backdrop that the ideal image of a refugee can be described as a middle-adulthood male that has been visible in his political activities, a norm mirroring dominant political and socio-cultural understandings of refugeehood, political activity, and agency (see e.g. Edwards 2010; Hyndman 2010; Piper 2006), the issue of children as asylum seekers has offered challenges to international refugee law and asylum policy (Bhabha 2014; Crawley 2011; Hedlund 2016; Pobjoy 2017). Bhabha (2014) has concluded that child persecution can be understood in three different ways. First, children may be persecuted for reasons that are not specific to children; for example, persecution for religious reasons. Second, child persecution may be exclusively child-specific; for example, it may relate to female genital cutting or child soldier recruitment (Bhabha 2014). Third, child persecution may concern valid asylum claims that are recognized specifically because the individual is a child and not an adult, i.e., the asylum status would not have been granted for the same asylum report if the applicant had been an adult; this could relate, for example, to the severity or impact of threat or violent experience (Bhabha 2014). Pobjoy (2017) has argued for enhanced use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations 1989) in order to develop child-centered analyses of the Refugee Convention’s (United Nations 1951) open-ended concept of persecution. Further analyses of this kind could contribute to advancement in the area of children’s rights as refugees and asylum seekers, which was a relationship not well explored before the CRC was adopted in 1989 and thereafter came into effect in 1990 (Bhabha 2014).
In addition, not much attention was given to the rights of women and girls in relation to international refugee law before the 1990s (Edwards 2010). Indeed, it has been suggested that women and girls face more obstacles in global migration than men due to unequal gender power allocation (Bhabha et al. 1985; Oishi 2005; Piper 2006). Studies from, for instance, the UK further indicate that women have a vulnerable position in asylum procedure as they are met with disbelief when reporting their claims (Dorling et al. 2012; Querton 2012). Spijkerboer (2000) has emphasized that unequal gender relations are in fact key aspects in all asylum cases concerning women while challenging the assumption that women are numerically discriminated against in asylum procedures. Wikström and Johansson (2013) have offered that male asylum seekers may encounter difficulties in being credible as ‘victims’, specifically in relation to dominant Western feminism’s understanding of patriarchal dynamics, where the tendency is to focus on men as potential perpetrators. This insight is relevant as unaccompanied children, boys in particular, risk being perceived as sexual predators, criminal perpetrators, future social service cases, or security threats: views that relate to both anti-immigrant and anti-youth discourses (Bryan and Denov 2011; Hirvonen 2013).

In Sweden, statistics made available online by the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) on a regular basis make it possible to follow the outcomes of asylum applications made by unaccompanied children (types of residence permits granted, percentage of rejections, etc.). Yet, we know little about whether there are differences in asylum reports between boys and girls, and to what extent gender impacts the likelihood of being granted residency when comparing the effects of their asylum reports, country of origin, and age.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine differences in asylum decision outcomes for unaccompanied children coming to Sweden. More specifically, we wanted to find out how gender, country of origin, and asylum reports are associated with the likelihood of being granted residency.

In order to achieve this, we undertook a regression analysis of a data sample from the SMA.

Background Knowledge

The SMA processes all applications for residence permits in Sweden, as the first instance. When the SMA assesses that enough information has been collected, a decision is made by a case officer (rapporteur) and a decision-maker, who reach their conclusion after discussing the circumstances at hand. They share a mutual responsibility for the decision. Rejected decisions can be appealed to one of four public administrative Migration Courts in a due process where applicants and their public counsel meet the SMA as counterparts. The final instance is the Migration Court of Appeal in Stockholm, which, however, only grants review permits for cases when the legal queries therein are deemed to require further
clarification. This means that most appealed asylum cases do not go beyond the Migration Court level. A previous snapshot by (Hedlund 2017) showed that, for example, the Migration Court of Stockholm overturned about 7 per cent of appealed asylum cases concerning unaccompanied children, while the SMA’s decisions were confirmed in about 93 per cent of appeals. It can therefore be surmised that the SMA plays a key role in shaping policy in practice through the everyday work of its frontline officials (see e.g. Lipsky 1980). In addition, Zamboni (2019) has argued that the Swedish model for migration law development following the 2015 ‘migration crisis’ gives preference to the administrative level, that is, the SMA as the first instance. He argues for increased judicial legislative policy.

With regards to the relationship between asylum procedure and countries of origin, refugee and asylum status determination is primarily directed towards examining individual reports of persecution and similar threats targeted at the specific person, which makes individual assessments key components of the asylum system (Johannesson 2017). However, the SMA is a distinctly top-down organized authority, which means that country-specific information and other instructions for case processing clearly travel in the same direction (Norström 2004:90). Indeed, qualitative research studying how SMA case officers build argumentation about credibility has indicated that the element of individual assessment in unaccompanied children’s asylum cases is limited in practice (Hedlund 2017).

Methods

Data and Ethics

The data were collected as part of a larger research project about unaccompanied children in the Swedish asylum context linked to the first author’s PhD candidacy (see Hedlund 2016). The Stockholm Regional Board of the Central Ethical Review Board approved the project on 15 June 2012 (Registration number 2012/907-31/5) with an update application including the design of the current study being approved on 12 October 2017 (Registration number 2017/1924-32). The Swedish Ethical Review Authority also approved an update application on 18 December 2019 (Registration number 2019-05548) in relation to the first author’s change of academic affiliation.

Following the initial ethical vetting mentioned above, the SMA supplied one calendar year (2011) of first decisions ($N = 2368$) in unaccompanied children’s asylum cases in 2013 upon request. Other studies based on this dataset with the associated ethical updates are (Hedlund 2017, Hedlund and Wimark, 2019, and Hedlund and Åhlund 2020). In the context of the decade between the Swedish Aliens Act (2005) coming into force on 31 March 2006 and the restrictive migration legislation introduced in 2016 via the so-called Limitation Act (2016) following the rapid increase of asylum applications in 2015, the year 2011 represents a relatively ‘average’ year with regard to the distribution of the countries of origin and share of boys and girls of the unaccompanied minors seeking asylum that
year. Moreover, the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rose rapidly in the years following 2011, which in turn led to more decisions being issued. For example, a total of 4334 asylum decisions were issued by the SMA in cases concerning unaccompanied children in 2014 (Swedish Migration Agency 2020). This made the 2368 decisions supplied by the SMA for the year 2011 a manageable number for continued detailed coding and analysis after the first author’s PhD project had been completed.

Of the 2368 decisions, 47 were doubles or had been misplaced, which means that 2321 were analyzable and therefore constitute the data sample.

Coding

In each analyzed decision, SMA case officers have summarized the reasons presented by unaccompanied children that had contributed to them leaving their places of origin to seek asylum in Sweden. Firstly, the applicant’s country of origin, gender, and age on the date of the decision, and whether the decision was approved or denied, were coded. The country of origin, called ‘Citizen of [Country]’ by the SMA in the preamble to each decision, was used for the coding. In cases where a child had been born and/or raised in a country where he or she did not hold citizenship, the SMA had used the parents’ supposed formal citizenship as a point of departure, but would also explain the legal reasoning about citizenship categorization in cases where, for example, children had stated that their parents had different or dual citizenships. This means that, for example, children born and/or raised in Iran by Afghan parents without citizenship there had been registered as citizens of Afghanistan as a general rule.

Secondly, the case officers’ summaries of the asylum reports were coded inductively. The coding work was logged through memo-writing to guarantee that the categories of reasons were grounded in the actual decisions. In order to be able to compare the different asylum reasons presented in the data sample, codes were merged into seven overarching categories that are further explained in the next section.

Categories

The categories identified were named Extensive Social Hardship, Unnatural Death or Disappearance of Family Member(s), Ethnicity-Related Reasons, Forced Recruitment, Paternalistic and Sexual Violence, Religious Reasons, and Political Activity. Even if some of these categories’ names may appear to correspond to grounds in the Refugee Convention (United Nations 1951), it should be emphasized that the categories were constructed based on inductive codes and coding patterns, and not legal definitions.
Extensive Social Hardship

This category was based on the widest pattern of codes identified in the data. These were reports provided by the children that were primarily connected to legal status (e.g. Afghans reporting undocumented residence in Iran), poverty, or child abuse/neglect. Sexual abuse was, however, not included in this category as it formed part of another pattern of codes that is further explained in the category of Paternalistic and Sexual Violence below.

Overall, the most commonly described problems in this category were lack of social networks such as loss of parents or other caregivers due to abandonment, death by natural causes, workplace accidents, or inheritance conflicts related to land disputes. Regular physical and psychological abuse by any family member or other caregiver was also included in this category, as well as neglect and the effects of (parental/caregiver) substance abuse.

In addition, the parent’s/caregiver’s and/or the child’s unemployment or inability to find stable employment was frequently reported, as well as descriptions of slave-like working conditions. In addition, blackmail, threats related to debt collection, and accusations of alleged crimes of which the child is wrongly accused were also coded as Extensive Social Hardship.

Unnatural Death or Disappearance of Family Member(s)

This includes deaths of parents, other primary caregivers (often grandparents), or siblings from unnatural causes, such as murders or bomb attacks. The children frequently described these types of violent deaths as their ultimate prompt to decide to leave the country of origin. Disappearances of family members are included in this category only if the child appeared to have interpreted them as forced or involuntary. Abandonment or getting lost on a travel route to Sweden due to commotion would instead be coded as Extensive Social Hardship (above).

Ethnicity-Related Reasons

This entails reports concerning ethnic and racial persecution or discrimination. A geographically distinctive finding is that a majority of Afghani background children reported experiences of racial persecution for being Hazara. Afghani Hazara was coded as Hazara exclusively if the claim had been presented in that way. If a Hazara child had additionally reported that persecution or discrimination was related to, for example, a Shiite Muslim background, the claim was coded separately as the category Religious Reasons (below) as well. Yazidis and Mandaeans were automatically coded as both an ethnicity and a religion, as reports of ethnic reasons were deemed to be overlapping with the category Religious Reasons.

Forced Recruitment

Overall, this category entails reports that a state actor, political group, or organized criminal network had demanded that the child would join, most commonly
for armed combat or related activities. Distinctive geographical patterns seemed to suggest that many Eritreans (both boys and girls) declared that they sought refuge from conscription to military service, Somali boys had stated that they fled *Al-Shabaab*, and Afghan boys expressed fears of being forcibly recruited by the Taliban or Kochi people to participate in armed battle or to commit suicide-bombings.

**Paternalistic and Sexual Violence**

Overall, the most common reports or subcategories included in this article’s concept of paternalistic and sexual violence were reports of rape or other sexual abuse, as well as forced marriages. The term ‘paternalistic’ was selected as it was commonly reported by children that, e.g., forced marriages, were proposed by parents, other relatives or paramilitary groups as a ‘benevolent’ action, such as for ‘traditional’/’cultural’ reasons or for protection; however, the child had declared it to be a reason to leave. In addition, statements of honor-related violence, mainly due to alleged or revealed infidelity or premarital sex, were included in this category, as well as fear of female genital cutting.

Less common subcategories within this category seemed to be reports of blood feuds between families due to an alleged assault or killing of a family member, persecution due to sexual orientation or gender identity (see instead Hedlund and Wimark 2019), or expressions of fear to be trafficked for sexual purposes. In addition, some Afghan boys reported that they had been forced or had been afraid of being forced to perform dancing and sexual services (a practice known as *bacha bazi*) for warlords.

**Religious Reasons**

Reports of threats or discrimination on religious grounds were collected in this category. Also, reasons based on assigned religious affiliations, such as neighbours or authorities believing (wrongfully or not) that a child or his/her family had converted, were included in this category.

**Political Activity**

To be identified in this category means that political engagement was explicit and self-defined, i.e., the child needed to report political persecution due to activities such as membership in a political group, participating in demonstrations, or distributing political material. It may, however, be pointed out that in some instances, SMA case officers treated the category described above as Forced Recruitment to formulate decisions granting full refugee status based on assigned political sympathies; in particular, this seemed to be the case when the child or the child’s parents had rejected recruitment by the *Al-Shabaab* in Somalia.
Statistical Methods

Variables

The identified categories of reasons, defined above, were used as variables in the regression analysis. In addition to the categorized reports described above, the data provided by the SMA include background variables such as decision outcome, gender, age, and country of origin. Our application of concepts such as sex, age, and country of origin is based on the descriptions in the decisions, as registered by the SMA. In order to get satisfying sizes \( (n) \) for country of origin the nine most common countries \( (n > 20) \) were coded separately, while the somewhat common countries \( (n = 11–19) \), the least common \( (n < 10) \), and those of stateless, unknown or under investigation were collapsed into three separate categories (see Appendix). Moreover, the approval rate is included.

Analysis

The analyses consist of descriptive statistics as well as logistic regression models (SPSS version 25). Table 1 describes the distribution of gender, age, and asylum in the sample, and reported reasons. Binary logistic regressions were then performed (results are shown in Table 2) on denied \((=0)\) or approved \((=1)\) residencies for each country (Yes, they stated e.g. Afghanistan, otherwise No) and for the two sexes separately, controlling for age. Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of the stated reasons (based on the coded categories above) for seeking asylum, and how these reasons are used by the two sexes. Thereafter, Table 4’s estimates of categories of asylum reports were included in binary logistic regression models, with the dependent variable of denial \((=0)\) or approval \((=1)\) for each asylum reason (Yes, they reported e.g. Paternalistic and Sexual Violence, otherwise No) and for the two sexes, controlling for age.

Descriptive Data of the Sample

In order to describe the children’s background, we analyzed the sample’s characteristics in respect of gender, age, country of origin, and reasons for seeking asylum.

As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Sweden in 2011 were boys, and the median age was 16 years. Most were granted asylum, but overall, fewer girls than boys received a positive response. Moreover, there was variation in reported reasons even though many had stated several of them and thus all were coded.

As shown in the Appendix, the most common stated country of origin overall was Afghanistan followed by Somalia. Next came Eritrea and Iraq. When dividing the most common countries of origin by gender notable differences between boys and girls became evident, and origin is in turn also associated with differences in the likelihood of receiving a residence permit. This is shown in Table 2.
### Table 1.

**Distribution of Gender, Age, and Asylum (N = 2321. Year 2011.)**

|                  | Sex |     |     |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
|                  | n   | Per cent |   |
| Sex              |     |     |     |
| Girls            | 327 | 14.1 |   |
| Boys             | 1994| 85.9 |   |
| Age (median) 16 years |     |     |   |
| Asylum (yes)     |     |     |   |
| Girls            | 242 | 74.0 |   |
| Boys             | 1740| 87.8 |   |
| Reported reasons* |     |     |   |
| Extensive social hardship | 1720 | 74.1 |   |
| Unnatural death or disappearance of family member(s) | 1126 | 48.5 |   |
| Ethnicity-related reasons | 970 | 41.8 |   |
| Forced recruitment | 476 | 20.5 |   |
| Paternalistic and sexual violence | 429 | 18.5 |   |
| Religious reasons | 260 | 11.2 |   |
| Political activity | 130 | 5.6  |   |

*Reasons add up to over 100 per cent due to the fact that many have reported several reasons for asylum.

### Table 2.

**Logistic Regressions on Receiving Asylum (No/Yes) for Each Country of Origin**

| Country of Origin        | Girls | Boys | All |
|--------------------------|-------|------|-----|
| Afghanistan              | 7.28***| 20.78***| 17.83***|
| Somalia                  | 8.24***| 2.62** | 3.18***|
| Eritrea                  | 17.13* | ns   | 12.74**|
| Iraq                     | ns    | 0.14***| 0.17***|
| Serbia                   | 0.02***| 0.03***| 0.02***|
| Iran                     | ns    | 0.03***| 0.04***|
| Ethiopia                 | ns    | ns   | 0.33***|
| Mongolia                 | ns    | 0.03***| 0.05***|
| Yemen                    | no girls | ns | ns |
| Somewhat common countries| ns    | 0.05***| 0.74***|
| Least common countries   | 0.20***| 0.08***| 0.09***|
| Stateless/unknown        | ns    | 0.21***| 0.39***|

Girls and boys. Odds ratios (95% CI) (N = 2321). Asterisks are used to indicate the level of statistical significance of the findings in the tables. ***(=0.001. ***(=0.01 * *(=0.05 ns, non-significant odds.
Table 2 shows that there is a significantly increased likelihood of receiving a residence permit for all unaccompanied children coming from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Eritrea. The chances are the same for girls from any of these three countries, while for boys only Afghanistan and Somalia (not Eritrea) provided a higher likelihood of being granted a residence permit. Not only is the country of origin different for girls and boys respectively but also the stated reason to apply for asylum, as shown in Table 3.

The categories in Table 3 are broad but reduce some of the complexity in the SMA case officer’s decision and show that the most common category for unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Sweden was Extensive Social Hardship, such as e.g., lack of social networks, unemployment, or slave-like working conditions. Another common category was Unnatural Death or Disappearance of Family Member(s), followed by the category Ethnicity-Related Reasons (meaning that they had been persecuted or discriminated against due to ethnicity in the country of origin). One out of five children stated that they feared being forcibly recruited into, for example, military service, political groups, or criminal networks, i.e., the category Forced Recruitment. The Paternalistic and Sexual Violence category includes slightly less than one in five children, and entailed, as mentioned above, issues such as rape/sexual abuse and honor-related violence. About 11 per cent stated persecution or discrimination related to religious beliefs (the category Religious Reasons). Less common reasons for asylum concerned the category Political Activity (in the strict sense of the term relating to self-defined political engagement).

However, there are statistically significant gender differences in reported reasons for asylum; for example, reports related to ethnicity and racism (Ethnicity-Related Reasons) were stated by about one in five girls but by almost half of all the boys, and unnatural death or disappearance of family members was reported by about one in four girls but by over half of all boys. What stands out is that the most common category for girls is Paternalistic and Sexual Violence (61.2

| Reported reasons                               | Girls | Boys | All  | Sig. differences (p-value) |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|------|------|---------------------------|
| Extensive social hardship                       | 54.7  | 77.3 | 74.1 | 0.000                     |
| Unnatural death or disappearance of family member(s) | 28.4  | 51.8 | 48.5 | 0.000                     |
| Ethnicity-related reasons                       | 21.7  | 45.1 | 41.8 | 0.000                     |
| Forced recruitment                              | 13.5  | 21.7 | 20.5 | 0.001                     |
| Paternalistic and sexual violence               | 61.2  | 11.5 | 18.5 | 0.000                     |
| Religious reasons                               | 9.2   | 11.6 | 11.2 | 0.201                     |
| Political activity                              | 6.1   | 5.6  | 5.6  | 0.690                     |
per cent) while the most prevalent category for boys is Extensive Social Hardship (77.3 per cent). A related question is then of course whether these reported reasons for seeking asylum are associated with the approval or rejection of the children’s applications, and whether this differs between girls and boys.

The different categorized asylum reports and the dichotomized variable indicating if the application was approved or rejected were entered into logistic regression models. The results are shown in Table 4.

As shown by Table 4, the probability of receiving a residence permit was significantly lower for girls than for boys. Overall, reporting experiences relating to the category Unnatural Death or Disappearance of Family Member(s) increased the probability of receiving a residence permit, as did stating reasons associated with the categories Forced Recruitment or Ethnicity-Related Reasons. For both girls and boys, the categories Forced Recruitment and Unnatural Death or Disappearance of Family Member(s) were associated with an increased chance of getting asylum, but for girls, the category Paternalistic and Sexual Violence also increased the likelihood. For boys, on the other hand, reports relating to the category Ethnicity-Related Reasons increased the likelihood of approval.

Summary of Results

All in all, most unaccompanied children were granted asylum but the data indicate an overall gender difference in the probability of being granted a residence permit, girls having a generally lower probability. In fact, gender is the most important variable when examining differences among general trends that can be analyzed quantitatively, even when controlling for age. However, a factor that seems to affect differences in outcomes between boys and girls is the country of origin. Overall, children from Afghanistan, Somalia, or Eritrea had an increased likelihood of receiving a residence permit, but when separating boys and girls another pattern emerged, suggesting that the same countries are positively related to being...
granted a residence permit for girls, but for boys, only Afghanistan and Somalia provided a higher likelihood of gaining a residence permit.

Another factor is what reasons girls and boys respectively state when seeking asylum; most common for all was to state Social Hardship, but this category was not significantly associated with a positive outcome for boys or girls.

There are statistically significant gender differences. The most frequently reported reasons among girls were related to the category Paternalistic and Sexual Violence, which significantly increased the likelihood for them to be granted residency. Most reasons reported by the boys related to Social Hardship, which followed the general reporting trends for all, and it was a category not significantly associated with a positive outcome, as mentioned above. Interestingly, relatively few of the children had reported reasons related to Forced Recruitment, but this category showed a significant positive relationship to chances of obtaining a residence permit for both sexes. Statistically significant gender differences were also found, as a fifth of the girls and almost half of all the boys reported having reasons related to ethnic discrimination or racism (Ethnicity-Related Reasons). Also, reasons relating to the category Unnatural Death or Disappearance of Family Member(s) were reported by about a quarter of the girls but by over half of all boys.

Discussion

This article confronts the issue of differences between unaccompanied boys and girls in the asylum procedure. More specifically, it focuses on the likelihood that they have of being granted asylum in Sweden. The key finding in this study is that unaccompanied girls are less likely to be granted residency in asylum procedure than boys; in other words, their ‘odds’ are more precarious. Another important conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that reports relating to the category Social Hardship are the most commonly stated reasons overall, but this is negatively associated with an approved asylum application for girls and not significant for boys. Instead, reports linked to the categories Forced Recruitment, Unnatural Death of Family Member(s) and Ethnicity-Related Reasons greatly improved the odds of an approved asylum application for all. This is also true if we look at only boys, but the same category of reasons does not give the girls better odds. Moreover, most girls state reasons related to the category Paternalistic and Sexual Violence, while these reasons give lower probability than those mentioned above. This could imply that the reasons considered most important by these unaccompanied children are not the best reasons to be granted a residence permit in Sweden. By contrast, for example, reasons associated with the category Forced Recruitment (only stated by about a fifth in the sample) raise the likelihood of being granted residency. This discrepancy could be understood as the SMA attributing different weights to different categories of reasons and to the gender of the children that claim those reasons. Hence, in Swedish asylum case procedure concerning children, it appears easier for boys to be seen as victims of reasons related to Forced Recruitment than for girls to be seen as victims of Paternalistic and
Sexual Violence, which suggests that Spijkerboer’s (2000) proposition that gender is an overall factor in asylum cases holds currency also when children seek asylum alone.

The results to some extent contradict Wikström and Johansson’s (2013) conclusion that male asylum seekers may encounter difficulties in becoming credible as ‘victims’; however, the analyzed cases in that study concerned adult males and not children, which may explain some of the divergences.

What is somewhat surprising is that even though male asylum seekers have been said to encounter difficulties in achieving credibility as victims, the opposite seems to be the case in our study, where boys seeking asylum seem to be seen as in greater need of protection and possibly more vulnerable than the girls. Consequently, the results presented here further substantiate research that has argued that women and girls face more obstacles in migration than men due to unequal gender power allocation (Bhabha et al. 1985; Oishi 2005; Piper 2006).

Even though it is relevant to critically assess how unaccompanied boys are being portrayed and/or perceived (Hirvonen 2013), the results of this study also suggest a need to further examine how gendered perceptions of agency and vulnerability influences asylum procedure for unaccompanied girls.

Moreover, this study suggests that increased attention to principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination is necessary in asylum procedure concerning unaccompanied children while recognizing that the specific patterns of asylum reports may differ between boys and girls. Further integration of child-centered regulations into migration law and policy might also lead to more equal assessments of unaccompanied children as a whole and between boys and girls. This study therefore supports Pobjoy’s (2017) conclusion that we need to enhance the use of the CRC (United Nations 1989) in order to develop child-centered analyses of the Refugee Convention’s (United Nations 1951) concept of persecution.

In addition, further analyses of the kind presented here are needed in other destination-state contexts to examine to what extent the patterns identified here can be found elsewhere. If possible, these analyses should be focused on a longer period of time to see if patterns change or if they are stable over time.

The practical implications for policy and practice are that it is necessary to further develop guidelines, routines, and training about asylum-seeking children’s need for protection and how it relates to attitudes toward persecution and protection. To what extent can low probability of approval mean that children’s reports are not seen as complete asylum claims, and to what extent are asylum reports undervalued because the applicant is a child? Investigative techniques relating to girls’ situations might need specific attention, and country-specific information used in decision-making should include the particular and diverse conditions for girls in the countries of origin. Questions about the specific conditions for children in asylum procedure are issues that have to be brought to the fore to gain a better understanding of how to practically engage with both refugee and asylum law and children’s human rights combined. In this way, it may be possible to improve the conditions for unaccompanied minors in asylum procedure in general, and the precarious odds of unaccompanied girls in particular.
The results also have implications for research. Moving forward, the results presented here indicate that there are other possible underlying factors that might explain differences in proportions of boys and girls from different countries of origin in the data. To gain further insight into these questions, more research into the children’s life histories, and how their possibilities to travel developed is necessary. Furthermore, mechanisms that might affect differences in asylum decision outcomes between boys and girls need to be further explored. For example, we need to know more about how gendered assumptions concerning children influence decision-making, whether there are differences in how girls and boys report their claims for asylum, and how their statements are interpreted and documented by case officers. This could be captured using qualitative methods, such as ethnographic and linguistic approaches.

The writing of this article commenced in September 2018 and finished on 19 May 2020.

**Limitations**

A limitation is that we did not use different combinations of categories but one asylum category at a time, which makes it impossible to say which combinations can lead to which outcomes.

**Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by the research initiative Children, Migration, Integration (CMI) at Stockholm University. The authors would particularly like to thank Professor Magnus Nermo at the Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, for invaluable comments on an earlier version of this draft.

**Bibliography**

ALIENS ACT (2005) ‘Utlänningslag (2005:716) [‘Aliens Act’]. Stockholm: Ministry of Justice.

AYOTTE, W. (2000) Separated Children Coming to Western Europe: Why They Travel and How They Arrive. London: Save the Children.

BHABHA, J., KLUG, F. and SHUTTER, S. (eds) (1985) Worlds Apart: Women under Immigration and Nationality Law. London: Pluto Press.

BHABHA, J. (2014) Child Migration and Human Rights in a Global Age. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

BRYAN, C. and DENOV, M. (2011) ‘Separated Refugee Children in Canada: The Construction of Risk Identity’. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies 9(3): 242–266.

ÇELİKAKSOY, A. and WADENSJÖ, E. (2017) ‘Policies, Practices and Prospects: The Unaccompanied Minors in Sweden’. Social Work & Society 15(1): 1–16.

CRAWLEY, H. (2011) ‘Asexual, Apolitical Beings”: the Interpretation of Children’s Identities and Experiences in the UK Asylum System’. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 37(8): 1171–1184.

DORLING, K., GIRMA, M., and WALTER, N. (2012) Refused: The Experiences of Women Denied Asylum in the UK. Report. London: Women for Refugee Women.

EDWARDS, A. (2010) ‘Transitioning Gender: Feminist Engagement with International Refugee Law and Policy 1950–2010’. Refugee Survey Quarterly 29(2): 21–45.
HEDLUND, D. (2016) Drawing the Limits: Unaccompanied Minors in Swedish Asylum Policy and Procedure. PhD Dissertation. Stockholm: Department of Child and Youth Science, Stockholm University.

HEDLUND, D. (2017) ‘Constructions of Credibility in Decisions concerning Unaccompanied Minors’. International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care 13(2): 157–172. 10.1108/IJMHC-02-2016-0010

HEDLUND, D. and ÅHLUND, A. (2020) ‘Language Has a Home: how Case Officers Make Use of Language Analysis in Asylum Decisions’. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. Published Online.10.1080/1369183X.2020.1762552

HEDLUND, D. and WIMARK, T. (2019) ‘Unaccompanied Children Claiming Asylum on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity’. Journal of Refugee Studies 32(2): 257–277. 10.1093/jrs/fey026

HIRVONEN, K. (2013) ‘Sweden: When Hate Becomes the Norm’. Race & Class 55(1): 78–86.

HYNDMAN, J. (2010) ‘Introduction: The Feminist Politics of Refugee Migration’. Gender, Place & Culture 17(4): 453–459.

JOHANNESSON, L. (2017) In Courts We Trust: Administrative Justice in Swedish Migration Courts. PhD Dissertation. Stockholm: Department of Political Science, Stockholm University.

LIMITATION ACT (2016) ‘Lag (2016:752) om Tillfälliga Begränningar av Möjligheten Att få Uppehållstillstånd i Sverige.’ [‘Act (2016:752) on Temporary Limitations to the Possibility of Being Granted Residence in Sweden’]. Stockholm: Ministry of Justice.

LIPSKY, M. (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

LIPSKY, M. and CORREA-VELEZ, I. (2016) ‘Unpredictability, Invisibility and Vulnerability: Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Minors’ Journeys to Australia’. Journal of Refugee Studies 29(3): 295–314.

NORSTRÖM, E. (2004) I väntan på asyl: Retorik och praktik i svensk flyktingpolitik [Waiting for Asylum: Rhetoric and Practice in Swedish Refugee Policy]. PhD Dissertation. Umeå: Boréa Bokförlag and the Division of Ethnology, Lund University.

OISHI, N. (2005) Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies, and Labor Migration in Asia. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

PIPER, N. (2006) ‘Gendering the Politics of Migration’. International Migration Review 40(1): 133–164.

POBJOY, J. (2017) The Child in International Refugee Law. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

QUERTON, C. (2012) “I Feel like as a Woman I’m Not Welcome”: a Gender Analysis of UK Asylum Law, Policy and Practice’. London: Asylum Aid.

RESSLER, E. M., BOOTHBY, N., and STEINBOCK, D. J. (1988) Unaccompanied Children: Care and Protection in Wars, Natural Disasters, and Refugee Movements. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

SPIJKERBOER, T. (2000) Gender and Refugee Status. Aldershot: Ashgate.

SWEDISH MIGRATION AGENCY (SMA) (2020) ‘Statistik om asylsöknings-Asyl’ [‘Statistics concerning asylum applications’] https://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Statistik/Asyl.html (accessed 16 September 2020).

UNITED NATIONS. (1989) ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child’. 1577 UNTS 3, 20 November 1989 (entry intro force: September 1990). New York, NY: UN General Assembly.

UNITED NATIONS. (1951) Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. 189 UNTS 150, 28 July 1951 (entry into force: 22 April 1954). Geneva: UN Conference of Plenipotentiaries.

VON BETHLENFALVY, P. (1983) ‘Migrants in an Irregular Situation in the Federal Republic of Germany: The Psycho-Social Situation of Unaccompanied Minors from Areas of Armed Conflict in Berlin, West’. International Migration 21(2): 238–259.

WIKSTRÖM, H., and JOHANSSON, T. (2013) ‘Credibility Assessments As’ Normative Leakage’: Asylum Applications, Gender and Class’. Social Inclusion 1(2): 92–101.

ZAMBONI, M. (2019) ‘Swedish Legislation and the Migration Crisis’. The Theory and Practice of Legislation 7(2): 101–133.

Unaccompanied girls with precarious odds 15
**APPENDIX Distribution of Girls and Boys Respectively, by Country of Origin**

| Country of origin | Total | Girls | % | Boys | % |
|-------------------|-------|-------|---|------|---|
| **Most common**   |       |       |   |      |   |
| Afghanistan       | 1527  | 68    | 20.8 | 1459 | 73.2 |
| Somalia           | 236   | 74    | 22.6 | 162  | 8.1 |
| Eritrea           | 73    | 42    | 56.8 | 31   | 2.7 |
| Iraq              | 71    | 18    | 5.5  | 53   | 2.7 |
| Serbia            | 35    | 18    | 5.5  | 17   | 0.9 |
| Iran              | 26    | 5     | 1.9  | 21   | 1.1 |
| Ethiopia          | 27    | 21    | 78.6 | 6    | 0.3 |
| Mongolia          | 23    | 7     | 2.7  | 16   | 0.8 |
| Yemen             | 20    | 0     | 0    | 20   | 1.0 |
| **Somewhat common**|       |       |   |      |   |
| Algeria           | 17    | 13    | 76.5 | 40   | 23.5 |
| Kyrgyzstan        | 17    |       |   |      |   |
| Kosovo            | 11    |       |   |      |   |
| Morocco           | 13    |       |   |      |   |
| Syria             | 13    |       |   |      |   |
| Vietnam           | 12    |       |   |      |   |
| **Least common**  |       |       |   |      |   |
| Albania           | 2     | 48    | 5.5 | 109  | 14.7 |
| Angola            | 5     |       |   |      |   |
| Armenia           | 3     |       |   |      |   |
| Azerbaijan        | 4     |       |   |      |   |
| Bangladesh        | 2     |       |   |      |   |
| Belarus           | 3     |       |   |      |   |
| Benin             | 1     |       |   |      |   |
| Bosnia            | 1     |       |   |      |   |
| China             | 1     |       |   |      |   |
| Congo-Kinshasa (DRC) | 10 |       |   |      |   |
| Djibouti          | 6     |       |   |      |   |
| Egypt             | 1     |       |   |      |   |
| Equatorial Guinea | 2     |       |   |      |   |
| El Salvador       | 1     |       |   |      |   |
| Ivory Coast       | 1     |       |   |      |   |
| Gambia            | 3     |       |   |      |   |
| Georgia           | 2     |       |   |      |   |

(Continued)
## Unaccompanied girls with precarious odds

(continued)

| Country of origin   | Total N | Girls n | % | Boys n | % |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---|--------|---|
| Ghana               | 2       |         |   |        |   |
| Guinea              | 5       |         |   |        |   |
| India               | 2       |         |   |        |   |
| Jordan              | 3       |         |   |        |   |
| Kazakhstan          | 9       |         |   |        |   |
| Kenya               | 9       |         |   |        |   |
| Lebanon             | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Libya               | 7       |         |   |        |   |
| Macedonia           | 4       |         |   |        |   |
| Mali                | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Nepal               | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Nigeria             | 9       |         |   |        |   |
| Pakistan            | 3       |         |   |        |   |
| Rwanda              | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Russia              | 10      |         |   |        |   |
| Senegal             | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Sierra Leone        | 2       |         |   |        |   |
| Sudan               | 2       |         |   |        |   |
| Tajikistan          | 8       |         |   |        |   |
| Tanzania            | 7       |         |   |        |   |
| Togo                | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Tunisia             | 3       |         |   |        |   |
| Turkey              | 5       |         |   |        |   |
| Uganda              | 6       |         |   |        |   |
| Ukraine             | 1       |         |   |        |   |
| Uzbekistan          | 4       |         |   |        |   |
| Stateless/unknown   | 45      |         |   |        |   |

| Received asylum (yes) | Girls n | Per cent | Boys n | Per cent |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|--------|----------|
| Most common           |         |          |        |          |
| Afghanistan           | 64      | 26.4     | 1415   | 81.3     |
| Somalia               | 70      | 28.9     | 153    | 8.8      |
| Eritrea               | 41      | 16.9     | 31     | 1.8      |
| Iraq                  | 10      | 4.1      | 27     | 1.6      |
| Serbia                | 1       | 0.4      | 3      | 0.2      |
| Iran                  | 1       | 0.4      | 4      | 0.2      |
| Ethiopia              | 13      | 5.4      | 3      | 0.2      |
| Mongolia              | 2       | 0.8      | 3      | 0.2      |
| Yemen                 | 0       | 0        | 18     | 1.0      |
| Somewhat common       | Girls in total 7 | Per cent 2.9 | Boys in total 21 | Per cent 1.2 |
| Least common          | Girls in total 21 | Per cent 8.7 | Boys in total 44 | Per cent 2.5 |
| Stateless             | 12      | 5.0      | 18     | 1.0      |