

Telling the *gendered* story: the construction of migrant subjectivities in UNHCR's animated information campaign

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Abstract

This article explores how the UNHCR exercises productive power through gendered knowledge in migration governance. Using multimodal semiotic analysis of twelve animated films from the *Telling the Real Story* campaign, we examine how public information campaigns (PICs) on irregular migration risks balance humanitarian protection and border control through gendered depictions. While PIC research is expanding, it often overlooks the role played by gender in the campaigns' content. Our analysis shows that TRS's animated films legitimize and reward female migrants' agency only when aligned with UNHCR's institutional goals, while pathologizing male mobility by consistently framing it as a threat or failure. These representations emerge across four themes: family (entrepreneurs vs caregivers), violence (aggressors vs victims), professional aspirations (money vs education) and autonomy (independent vs dependent). We argue that such discourse reinforces gender essentialisms, mainly through different renderings of migrant agency, legitimizing both humanitarian and securitizing migration governance while potentially undermining migrant empowerment.

1. Introduction

How does the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) exercise productive power (the power to shape what is considered normal or possible in global politics through discourse) through gendered knowledge production in migration governance? This paper addresses this question through a multimodal (verbal, visual and aural) semiotic analysis of a public information campaign (PIC) designed to deter irregular migration. Focusing specifically on the UNHCR, we argue that these campaigns—now a central component of the global governance of migration—represent a critical site where the organization navigates competing mandates through a binary deployment of gender. By analysing its *Telling the Real Story* (TRS) campaign, we demonstrate how humanitarian discourse legitimizes certain forms of migrant agency while pathologizing others through gendered representations.

Received: 8 March 2025. Revised: 24 November 2025.

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Our analysis makes three key contributions to understanding power dynamics in migration governance. Theoretically, we extend feminist scholarship on productive power by showing how humanitarian organizations construct and deploy gendered knowledge to simultaneously advance protection and control objectives. Empirically, we provide the first systematic analysis of how animated narratives in PICs construct gendered subjects through multimodal communication. Methodologically, we develop an analytical framework that connects verbal, visual and aural (auditory) tropes to broader dynamics of power in humanitarian governance.

PICs represent a critical site for examining how migration-related organizations exercise productive power through knowledge production. These campaigns, which aim to inform prospective migrants about journey risks and alternatives to irregular migration, emerged in the 1990s as tools of remote migration control in post-Soviet Europe, Southeast Asia and Central America (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007). Since the early 2000s, and particularly following the sharp increase in Syrian asylum seekers in 2014/15, European states have increasingly commissioned PICs targeting audiences in Africa and the Middle East (Heller 2014; Dennison et al. 2025). Between 2017 and 2024, under the framework of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the European Commission allocated €44 million specifically to awareness-raising campaigns addressing the risks of irregular migration. Beyond AMIF, additional funding mechanisms—often involving national contributions from various European states—have supported similar initiatives, including *Migrants Talk to Migrants* by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR's TRS. In this context, both IOM and UNHCR have emerged as key implementers of such campaigns, despite inherent tensions between the deterrent aims of PICs and the humanitarian protection mandates of these organizations. Through initiatives like TRS, these international agencies attempt to navigate and reconcile their normative commitments to protection with the migration control priorities of their donors and political stakeholders (Koch 2014; Lavenex 2016; Giancaspro 2025; Green and Pécoud 2025). These campaigns operate as strategic impact documentaries, integrating storytelling with strategic communication to achieve specific policy objectives through carefully crafted emotional appeals (Nash and Corner 2016).

Our dataset, consisting of twelve animated short films, offers a unique window to explore the role of discourse in reflecting broader epistemic systems producing and perpetuating gendered stereotypes about migration. The campaign produces gendered subjects whose agency is selectively recognized or denied depending on whether it aligns with UNHCR's conceptualization of safety, which is attainable only through institutional pathways. This research is driven by growing academic interest in PICs and their embedded knowledge-power dynamics. While much literature covers migration securitization and PICs' deterrence goals, little attention is given to their interplay with gendered representations of migrants and migration. This gap is crucial, considering UNHCR's humanitarian role in ensuring equitable protection within complex political, social and economic landscapes.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first review literature on PICs and on how gender operates in migration governance, focusing particularly on the selective recognition and denial of migrant agency. We then develop our theoretical framework, combining insights from feminist scholarship with approaches to analysing multimodal discourse. After describing our methodology, we present our findings organized around four key themes: family relations, violence, professional aspirations and autonomy. We conclude by discussing how gendered representations serve to legitimize both humanitarian and securitizing aspects of migration governance, with implications for how we understand institutional power and migrant agency.

2. Information campaigns, productive power and gender in migration

Despite their growing prominence, scholarship on migration campaigns is recent and lacks a unified terminology. Labels include *migration-information campaigns* (MICs), emphasizing context (Pagogna and Sakdapolrak 2021; Brändle and Tolochko 2023; Van Dessel 2023; Giancaspro 2025);

information campaigns targeting migrants, focusing on audiences (Trauner et al. 2022); and broader terms like *information* or *awareness(-raising) campaigns* (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007; Heller 2014; Rodriguez 2019; Cappi and Musarò 2023). Some highlight deterrent aims, using terms such as *deterrence campaigns* (Browne 2015; Bishop 2020). Dennison et al. (2025: 2) propose migration communication campaigns (MCCs) for all initiatives aimed 'to inform, persuade, or motivate behavioural changes regarding migration'.

In this work, aligned with Watkins (2017) and Zeweri (2024), we favour the concept of *public information campaigns* (PICs). PICs are *public* as they involve public institutions among their funders and implementers and *informative* as they claim to provide correct and useful information on irregular migration. Two fundamental assumptions underlie this definition: (1) public funds imply a promotion of behavioural changes benefiting target populations and society; (2) the informative purpose suggests a single correct system of knowledge, mastered by providers but unknown or disregarded by targets. This definition captures both the campaigners' ambitions and the contradictions PICs face, widely addressed in critical scholarship.

PICs are considered a 'network of media practices designed to forward practices of governmentality' (Heller 2014: 309) externalizing migration management, that is pushing it outside the national or supranational borders. These campaigns operate as soft power strategies that strategically mobilize emotion-laden messages to influence migrant decision-making, extending border enforcement into intimate spaces such as homes, schools and churches in sending, transit and receiving communities (Williams 2020; Williams and Coddington 2023). However, this externalization practice disregards that some may still choose to migrate despite full knowledge of challenges (Cham 2024) and ignores the existence of restrictive visa policies met by citizens from non-OECD countries when moving to OECD countries (Mau et al. 2015), as well as their effects on the increase in irregular migration (Czaika and Hobolth 2016). Moreover, most campaigns adopt a broad, undifferentiated approach that risks ineffective or even harmful communication with vulnerable target populations. (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2018; Giancaspro 2025).

Moreover, PICs are intentionally framed as humanitarian efforts and de-linked from state geopolitical goals to increase their affective potential and reception in target communities, while simultaneously using gendered emotional appeals to counter cultural ideologies around family reunification and mobility (Williams 2020; Williams and Coddington 2023). These campaigns function as affective governance, targeting not only migrants but also their wider familial networks, particularly emphasizing maternal responsibility and financial stewardship to depoliticize migration decisions as personal rather than structural choices (Williams and Coddington 2023). These campaigns often use melodramatic narratives to present refugee suffering as inevitable consequences of individual choices rather than state policies, employing gendered tropes that absolve governments of responsibility for deaths at sea or other migration-related harms (Dehm and Silverstein 2020). Dehm and Silverstein's (2020) critical analysis of the film *Journey* (Ghorbankarimi 2015) reveals how PICs employ gendered narratives of maternal love and de-structive masculinity to construct refugee subjectivities that reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal ideas about migration decision-making.

To understand how PICs exercise power through knowledge, we draw on the literature on discourse and its role in global governance. Foucault (1975, 1976) shows how discourse disciplines behaviour and suppresses resistance, functioning as performative action (Austin 1962) and discursive practice (Foucault 1969). While security studies often use speech-act theory to examine language's reality-shaping power, this relies on intentionality and audience acceptance (Bello 2022). Given PICs' truth-claiming nature, we instead adopt Barnett and Duvall's (2005) framework, which views power as more diffuse. They identify four types: compulsory (coercion), institutional (norm-setting), structural (hierarchical roles) and productive power, referring to how discourse and knowledge create meaning, intentionally or not. Productive power helps explain gender's use in security logics, where even well-meaning efforts can reinforce harmful hierarchies (Berry & Lake 2021). Knowledge systems are shaped by Epistemic Communities of Practice: networks of politicians, professionals and experts who determine how knowledge is generated

and applied internationally (Adler & Faubert 2022). These communities fundamentally influence global governance (Adler & Bernstein 2005), legitimizing migration knowledge that shapes policies across state and non-state actors.

This understanding of productive power contextualizes gender's role in humanitarian governance. Critical feminist scholarship highlights how representations of migration often reinforce problematic power relations through gendered and radicalized discourse. While research in the late twentieth century and early 2000s began addressing women's migration (Frada 2023), it was largely framed by white feminism, often portraying women from the Global South as disempowered victims in need of rescue (Crawley 2022), thereby obscuring colonial legacies.

Migration studies traditionally assumed migrants were predominantly young, economically motivated men, with women seen as dependent rather than autonomous agents (Pedraza 1991). The concept of vulnerability illustrates these dynamics: while European asylum policies address vulnerable groups, especially women, such categorizations often essentialize their experiences, reducing their agency (Freedman 2019). Conversely, male refugees are depicted as perpetrators of violence or as emasculated troublemakers (Olivius 2016). Research reveals more elaborate realities that challenge these stereotypes. Women often prioritize education and personal security as key drivers for migration (Anastasiadou et al. 2024) and tend to rely on established family networks during migration journeys, while men often depend on acquaintances in destination countries (Davis and Winters 2001). High-skilled female migrants play a significant role in brain drain from low-income countries, highlighting the need for nuanced analysis of their contributions (Anastasiadou et al. 2024). However, gender-based discrimination in labour markets remains a major barrier (Smith and Floro 2020).

An intersectional framework that interweaves gender with other factors, such as race and class, helps illuminate how overlapping identities shape migrants' experiences into distinct forms of discrimination or privilege. Women migrants face compounded barriers, including caretaker roles and limited access to economic and social resources (Morokvašić 2014). Single women crossing borders are often stigmatized, perceived either as sex workers or dependent on men (Morokvašić 2014). Gender-disaggregated data reveal how pre-migration factors and post-migration employment patterns differ significantly by gender, with women preferring service and care sectors while men predominate in manufacturing and construction (Anastasiadou et al. 2024).

Public information campaigns (PICs) on irregular migration often reinforce these gendered stereotypes, framing women as passive victims or caregivers needing protection. Female refugees are commonly depicted with religious symbols and victimization frames, while male refugees are presented as threats (Amores et al. 2020). This binary representation reflects assumptions about refugee hood as a feminized, passive subject position, while men are paradoxically viewed as both threatening and capable of maintaining agency despite displacement (Turner 2019). These patterns echo earlier critiques of anti-trafficking campaigns that used victimizing images of female bodies to discourage migration while paradoxically contributing to their eroticization and objectification (Andrijasevic 2007). Media and campaign underrepresentation further diminishes women's visibility and agency, often conflating female refugees with children (Enloe 2014).

Gendered migration discourse intensified after events like the 2015 Cologne sexual assaults, reinforcing narratives involving migrant men as patriarchal threats (De Hart 2017). This discourse is particularly evident in social media, where selective focus on male refugees often delegitimizes their protection claims while reinforcing stories about 'women left behind' needing salvation (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016). Such discourse racializes Muslim men as threats requiring regulation (Yurdakul and Korteweg 2021) and aligns with the trope of 'saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1988: 296), reinforcing patriarchal and racialized power structures.

This securitization of migration, framed as humanitarianism, reinforces victim/villain dichotomies while obscuring structural inequalities (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). Contemporary humanitarian discourse increasingly emphasizes refugee 'entrepreneurship' and self-reliance,

marketing certain refugee groups as economically productive while marginalizing others who cannot meet these neoliberal ideals (Turner 2020). Such approaches rely on essentialist assumptions about women's roles, instrumentalizing their empowerment for security objectives rather than as an end in itself (Brown 2023). The resulting policies position women contradictorily: as vulnerable subjects needing protection, as maternal figures preventing radicalization and as potential peace agents (Cook 2020; Berry and Lake 2021).

While feminist interventions have successfully claimed space for refugee women within protective rights mechanisms, these gains remain limited by geopolitical realities and increasingly restrictive border regimes (Oswin 2001). Women face heightened risks of violence during their journeys and systemic barriers in asylum processes, problems exacerbated by the lack of safe, legal pathways to protection (Freedman 2016).

In conclusion, the literature underscores how gendered representations in migration discourse serve multiple political functions, from justifying border control to reinforcing cultural hierarchies. These representations shape the epistemic substrate of global migration governance while obscuring the structural inequalities and policy decisions that create and perpetuate vulnerabilities. Critical scholarship calls for moving beyond simplistic victim/villain dichotomies to recognize both the layered power relations that shape migration and the agency of migrants themselves in navigating these systems.

3. Theoretical and methodological framework

Drawing on feminist theorizations of 'instrumentalized' forms of agency (McNay 2016), we analyse how the campaign's humanitarian face operates through selective recognition of women's agency (primarily when aligned with institutional objectives), while its securitizing face works through the denial or pathologization of certain forms of agency (particularly regarding irregular migration). This analytical approach allows us to understand how the UNHCR navigates its competing tasks of protection and control through gendered narratives that simultaneously construct some migrants as legitimate subjects requiring protection and others as threats requiring regulation.

Tropes are symbolic devices used to convey meaning beyond the literal. The meaning of linguistic signs has traditionally been understood as comprising a denotative, literal component that directly links to its referent object, and a connotative one involving personal, cultural, emotional and contextual associations. Nevertheless, this stark distinction between the two constituents has been challenged by several postmodernist and critical thinkers (Barthes, Derrida, Hall, Butler, among others), in favour of the key role held by connotation in actual communication. The main point shared by all these authors consists of a fundamental rejection of objectivity and, hence, of the neutrality of language, which conveys ever-changing ideologies rather than fixed meanings by means of linguistic devices such as metaphor, allegory, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche and so on. Tropes contribute to the epistemic construction of knowledge systems and reinforce existing power dynamics within and beyond a community of practice.

Moreover, tropes are rendered explicit in texts, which represent the starting point to infer how a social phenomenon is thought of and acted upon, that is to grasp coherent worldviews that contribute to larger discursive formations. Hence, texts are both products and producers of discourse. They can be multimodal, as they do not only involve verbal language—written and oral texts—but also non-verbal elements. Multimodality, as explored by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), examines how different semiotic modes—such as images, sounds, gestures, layouts, etc.—interact to construct meaning, by means of mode-specific devices (composition, framing, colour, etc.). Given that examining the interplay of different semiotic modes within a text can offer deeper insight into how tropes are constructed and meaning is conveyed, the analysis will proceed by identifying gendered thematic discourses emerging from the data and situating them in relation to accompanying visual and auditory elements.

Applying this multimodal approach to our dataset requires attention to the specific affordances of animation as a medium. Honess Roe's (2016) examination of animated documentary reveals how animation's capacity for abstraction and universalization enables particular forms of humanitarian communication while simultaneously raising questions about audience engagement and emotional distance. This aligns with broader shifts in humanitarian communication from emotion-oriented appeals toward post-emotional styles that privilege low-intensity emotions and technologized forms of engagement (Chouliaraki 2010). Contemporary humanitarian campaigns increasingly function as strategic impact documentaries, where emotional engagement is central to fostering audience connection and motivating specific civic actions rather than serving purely informational purposes (Nash and Corner 2016). Animation's ability to simplify complex realities into symbolic representations makes it particularly suited to PICs' goal of conveying universal messages about migration risks, yet these same qualities can facilitate problematic generalizations about migrant experiences. The medium's visual grammar—including character design, colour palettes and movement patterns—works alongside narrative content to naturalize particular understandings of gender and agency.

Rangan's (2017) critique of participatory humanitarian media provides crucial insights into how documentary forms reproduce colonial power relations through their claims to represent suffering others. Her concept of 'immediations'—the documentary tropes of evidencing attributes of humanity in their immediacy—illuminates how humanitarian organizations exploit the circumstances of disenfranchised individuals while claiming to empower them. This dynamic reflects broader patterns in how migrant voices are conditionally recognized within European/Western imaginaries, where they are granted visibility but not genuine agency (Georgiou 2018). In the context of UNHCR's animated PICs, this dynamic manifests through animation's apparent objectivity, which masks the constructed nature of gendered migrant archetypes presented as factual rather than ideologically produced. The technological mediation of animation shapes not only what stories are told but how audiences understand the relationship between representation and reality, making it a particularly powerful tool for producing humanitarian knowledge about migration that appears neutral while advancing specific political agendas.

Finally, while considering meaning as constructed across three interrelated sites—production, text and reception—corresponding to the *site of production*, the *image itself* and the *site of its audience* within the visual mode (Rose 2001), in parallel with Giancaspro (2025), this study focuses primarily on the films' textual dimension. Although a more extensive analysis of production and reception contexts could enrich the semiotic understanding of the campaign, such an investigation falls beyond the scope of this paper and is left to future research. Our adoption of this interpretive stance, however, necessitates a careful reflection on our own positionality as researchers. As scholars who consider themselves migrants, based in European institutions analysing representations of migrants from the Global South, we acknowledge the potential bias and privilege of our perspective. Our work is guided by feminist commitments to challenging power hierarchies and amplifying marginalized voices, while remaining mindful that our own position within academia shapes how we interpret and represent these discourses. We approach this analysis with an awareness that discussing gendered representations risks inadvertently reproducing harmful stereotypes, even as we seek to critique them. While we aim to highlight how humanitarian discourse can perpetuate problematic power dynamics, we acknowledge our own embeddedness in systems of knowledge production that have historically contributed to these dynamics. We are particularly conscious of Rajaram's (2002) critique of the 'ethnography of distance' that characterizes humanitarian representation, where researchers and aid workers are positioned as objective authorities while refugees are depicted as collective, voiceless entities.

4. Research design

The study consists of a qualitative multimodal semiotic analysis of twelve animated short films produced by the UNHCR and published on YouTube as part of the TRS campaign between 2017

and 2023 (a complete list of the films, along with their corresponding titles as referenced throughout the analysis, is provided in [Supplementary Table S1](#)). The campaign is funded by the European Union and the UNHCR operational reserve and targets communities in Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia. It ‘aims to communicate with communities about the dangers of onward irregular movement [...] to combat misinformation about the journey towards Europe and inform people about other options available to them’ ([Telling the Real Story n.d.](#)). From the videos published on the campaign’s YouTube page, this analysis focuses exclusively on the animated productions, excluding those based on live-action footage. This methodological choice stems from the premise that animated videos—though inspired by real events—draw more extensively on the narrative and visual imagination of their creators than on the direct representation of ‘reality.’ As such, animation conveys internal, emotional or symbolic dimensions of experience rather than claiming objectivity through indexical footage ([Honesty Roe 2013](#); [Etem 2020](#)). This creative flexibility may offer more precise insights into the campaigners’ underlying epistemological frameworks and the ways in which they construct knowledge about the subjects represented. Although, as stated on TRS’s YouTube channel, the stories are based on real events allegedly experienced by the narrators, no reference is provided to the original interview sources.

The films feature content in Amharic, Tigrinya, Arabic, Somali and English. All of them are accompanied by English subtitles, which have been transcribed into .rtf files. Relevant screenshots were captured from each video, and detailed notes on the visual and auditory components were recorded across multiple viewings. The analysis focused particularly on tropes related to the multimodal depiction of characters, settings, tone and mood, as well as the development of the plot. All films narrate stories of individuals (young men, young women and children) who leave their homeland and face the possibility of migrating irregularly by relying on smugglers. Those who undertake this path fail utterly, whereas those who align with prescribed safe pathways advocated by humanitarian organizations manage to achieve stability and hope.

While we acknowledge that intersectional analysis would provide additional insights into how power dynamics shape representations in PICs, we have chosen to focus primarily on gender as a category of analysis for several theoretical and methodological reasons. First, our focus on gender aligns with our investigation of how humanitarian organizations navigate competing tasks through binary deployments of specific identity categories. Gender emerges as a particularly salient organizing principle in UNHCR’s TRS campaign, where gendered representations serve to legitimize both humanitarian protection and border control objectives.

Second, while the subjects depicted in these animations are indeed radicalized, the campaigns analysed specifically target audiences in Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia—contexts where racial difference operates differently than in the European destinations these PICs seek to discourage migration toward. Within the campaign’s target regions, gender rather than race functions as the primary differentiating category through which migrant agency is selectively recognized or denied. Third, our analysis of twelve films from a single campaign provides sufficient depth for examining gender dynamics but would require a broader corpus of materials from multiple campaigns and contexts to adequately address the complex intersections of gender, race, class and nationality in humanitarian representations.

The analysis followed an inductive approach. Coding was conducted in three stages: first, elements linked to the characters’ gender—both in their representation and in the development of the plot—were identified inductively; second, these gender-associated elements were organized into thematic categories; and third, related themes were consolidated into broader macro-themes.

5. Semiotic analysis of gendered tropes

The analysis examines how the animated films construct and naturalize particular forms of gendered agency through four interconnected themes. Drawing on feminist critiques of gender essentialism ([Sjoberg and Gentry 2007](#)), we examine how the films simultaneously deny and

instrumentalize migrant agency through binary gendered representations. While acknowledging that gender encompasses more multi-dimensional and fluid realities, our analysis necessarily focuses on the stark masculine/feminine binarism presented in these films, as they systematically erase non-dichotomous gender expressions. Through themes of family, violence, professional ambitions and autonomy, we trace how these tropes selectively recognize certain forms of agency while stigmatizing others, thereby reinforcing both the humanitarian and securitizing aspects of migration governance.

5.1 Family: entrepreneur versus caregiver

Family is a recurring theme in all the films, symbolizing what migrants leave behind, their longing, or their motivation to migrate, whether through financial support or family reunification. A major symbolic dichotomy in relation to this theme involves male characters as entrepreneurs/adventurers, against women as caregivers. Young men express their desire to leave either because they see no future in their country (Ali, Fig. 1) or because of their business-oriented mindset (Said, Fig. 2). Their attitude toward family is utilitarian, driven by personal aspirations with no sense of responsibility towards their relatives. In *Said*, family only appears when the principal character is held prisoner by traffickers, as the only means to freedom (Fig. 3). Ali's fatherless family appears at the beginning as a female silhouette serving him food and drinks (Fig. 4), and, again, when they are asked to pay the ransom. In both cases, this latter event eventually causes their families' financial ruin (Fig. 3). The sombre musical score that accompanies the ransom-payment scenes underscores the emotional toll that these failed adventurers transfer onto their caregiver mothers, whose despair is visually foregrounded through explicit gestures of suffering (Fig. 3).

Although families paying ransoms to free their children are a leitmotif of all these films, those featuring women and children as principal characters also heavily involve their families at a pre-migration stage. This is to either explore backgrounds about family violence (*Zahra & Nura*, *Antonia* and *Bereket*), forced child marriages (*Amina & Sahra*), loss of a parent (Siddik's story in *Animation Film*, *Bereket*, *Selam* and *Antonia*) or war (*Yusef*). At this stage female characters are consistently portrayed as caregivers taking care of their families and household chores (Fig. 5). Sometimes caregiving even continues throughout the migration process, as in the case of *Bisrat* and *Zahra*: both are forced to labour by traffickers, and the latter keeps protecting her little cousin *Nura* throughout the journey (Fig. 6). The inability to fulfil caregiving roles generates guilt



Figure 1. Ali's reasons for leaving the country. © UNHCR

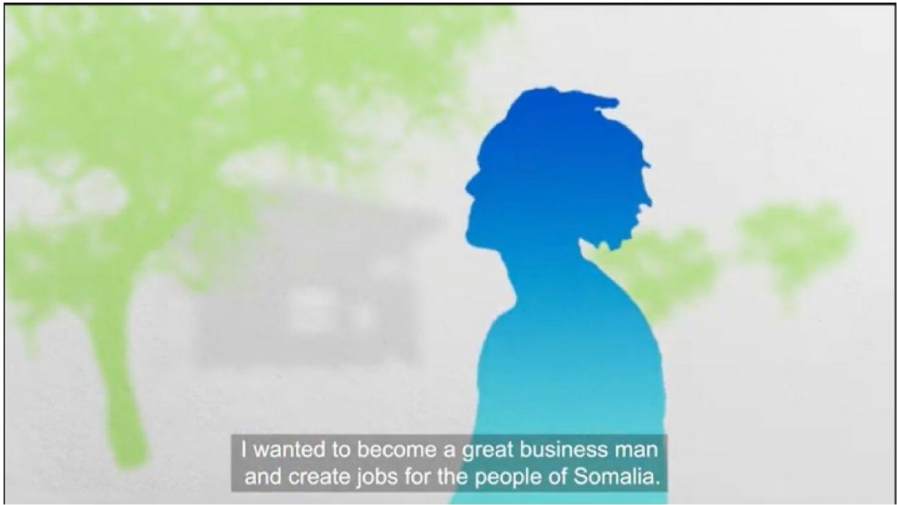


Figure 2. Said's reasons for leaving the country. © UNHCR



Figure 3. Ali and Said's ransom requests. © UNHCR



Figure 4. A female silhouette serving Ali food and drinks. © UNHCR

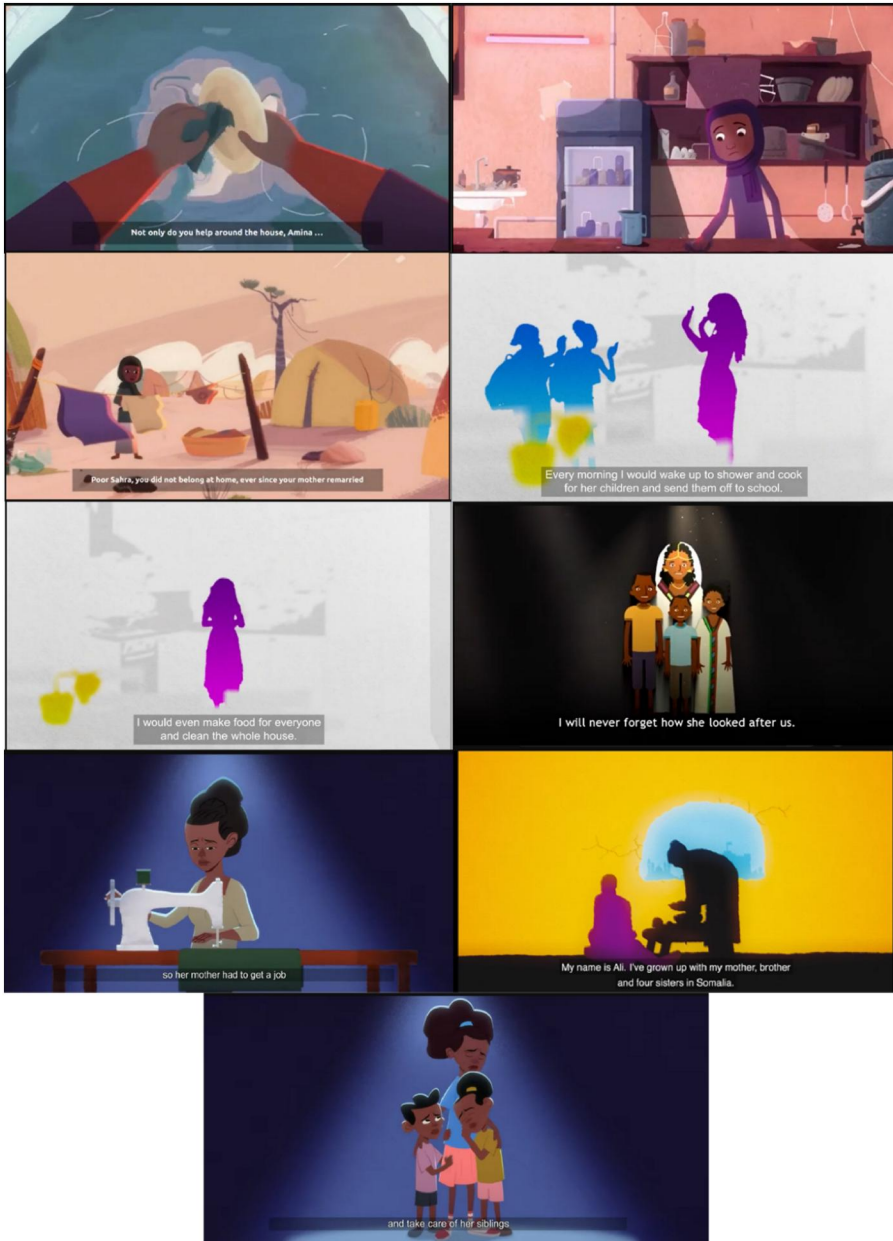


Figure 5. Female characters as caregivers. © UNHCR

and pain in Zahra, as well as in those loving mothers who have not been able to prevent their daughters from leaving (see *Amina & Sahra*).

Furthermore, several stories include an initial loss, injury or complete absence of a parent. The triangulation of missing parents' and children's gender produces gendered expectations on the unfolding of the stories that are consistent with a male-entrepreneur/female-caregiver distinction. The loss of a mother is never accompanied by a deep investigation of the reasons for leaving, but departure is taken for granted, as the family bond is severely compromised (as in

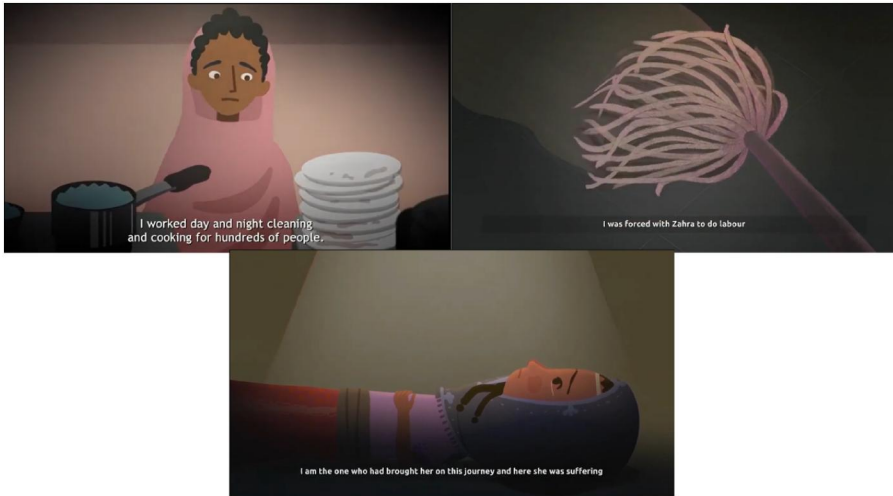


Figure 6. Caretaking during migration. © UNHCR

the case of Siddik in *Animation Film*, who lost his mom as a child, or *Antonia*, who is mistreated by her stepmother). On the other hand, the loss of a father, extensively explored in the films, leads to more convoluted effects. When the child is a male, his journey is portrayed either as the only way to help a mother in danger (*Bereket*) or as a personal entrepreneurial path (as in the cases of Said and Ali). Differently, in *Amina's* case, her father's injury becomes a compelling reason to support her family at home ('You also must work for the family because your father is injured'). The narrative, presented through her mother's perspective, frames *Amina's* dedication to caregiving as a reflection of her strength, while her eventual decision to leave is seen as an act of weakness ('You are strong, *Amina*. But even the strongest have moments of weakness. I understand'). In the second part of *Amina & Sahra*, *Sahra's* situation mirrors *Antonia's*, with roles reversed (her mother remarries after her husband's death and *Sahra's* stepfather mistreats her). However, it lacks the same merciful and empathetic tone of narration and final sense of hope. Although she is considered a victim of her misfortunes ('You're not a burden ... You're a victim'), she is also deemed guilty of leaving and dragging *Amina* into a hopeless journey ('Are you filled with guilt, poor *Sahra*?'). The raw style of the narration and the melancholic music accompanying it suggest no sign of redemption for her.

In *Selam*, the migration process is entirely omitted, and the film concludes with her teacher discovering UNHCR's guidelines for family reunification. Here the teacher's wife attends to her caregiving duties by handing him a UNHCR flyer (Fig. 7). Likewise, it is two female characters, rather than male ones, who advise and help *Yusef* reunite with his family (Fig. 8). One of them is a wise elderly woman whose son had relied on a smuggler and lost his life; the other one is a young UNHCR staff member who explains to *Yusef* the—lengthy—legal procedure to family reunification. In these cases, caregiving extends beyond the family bond, becoming even more strongly associated with the female gender of the characters. The same pattern can be found in *Bereket*, when the young boy is allowed to embark on a boat to Europe only after his female friends (*Bisrat* and *Mihret*) have collected money and convinced the smugglers to let him go (Fig. 9).

5.2 Violence: aggressor versus victim

Under the theme of physical and psychological violence, two main gender-related tropes are found: men as aggressors and violators and women as saviours, victims or martyrs. The primary antagonists of these narratives—smugglers and human traffickers—are overwhelmingly



Figure 7. The teacher's wife handing him a UNHCR flyer. © UNHCR



Figure 8. Female characters helping Yusef. © UNHCR

represented as men. They are depicted as unscrupulous characters, with scars, cigarettes and weapons, reinforcing their ruthlessness and violent nature. Visual elements such as shadows, red-coloured silhouettes, cash and weapons signify their power and greed (Fig. 10). These men are framed as villains whose actions commodify human lives, reducing migrants to mere tools for financial profit. The recurrent association of money with male characters extends beyond the roles of smugglers and traffickers (for a more in-depth analysis of this issue, refer to the following section). Interestingly, while the films present Western states' border closing during the COVID-19 pandemic as a matter of fact or even justify it as a measure to contain the spread,



Figure 9. Bisrat and Mihret helping Bereket. © UNHCR

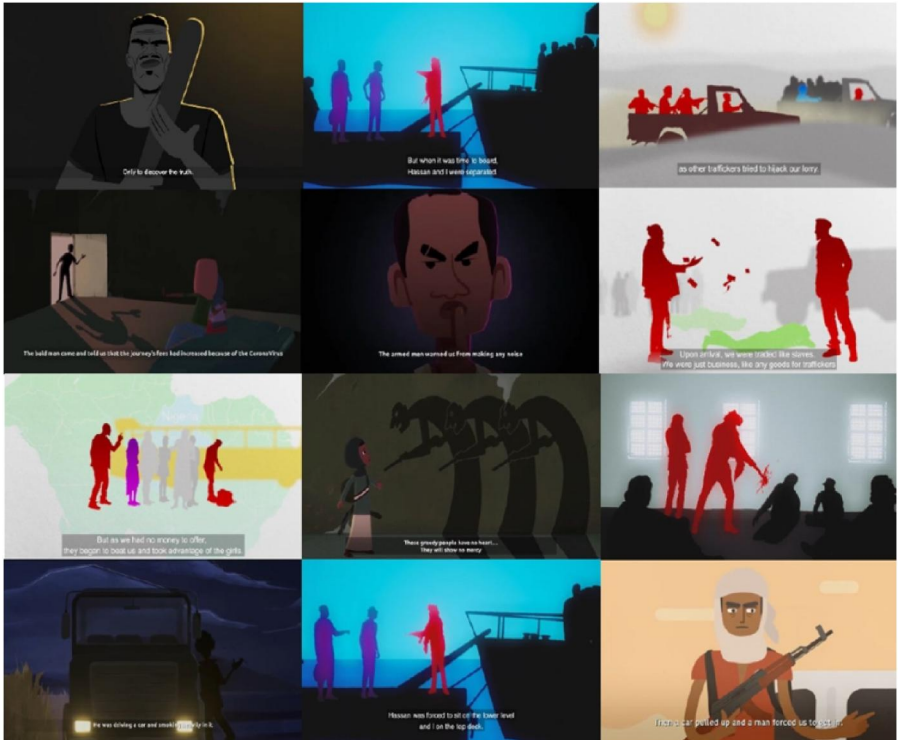


Figure 10. Visual representations of male characters. © UNHCR

smugglers' reactions to the pandemic (e.g. increased fees due to stricter border control in *Zahra & Nura* or curtailments in the management of migrants as in *Bisrat*) are dismissed outright as fraud. This one-sided portrayal emphasizes smugglers' role as irredeemable and inexcusable perpetrators of harm.

Besides financial extortion, indiscriminately affecting male and female migrants, specific expressions of violence are strictly connected to the victims' gender. While sexual harassment and forced labour are exclusively suffered by women, men are mostly subject to torture and abandonment. Nonetheless, female migrants' adversities and mistreatments are more complex and visible during the journey as well as in the pre-migration stage. Indeed, male violence also involves familial settings, where fathers, stepfathers and uncles are often depicted as oppressive figures to women and children. They are either portrayed as ominous shadows or visually erased, thus communicating the idea of an invisible but insurmountable danger (Fig. 11).

Besides the principal characters, positive and supportive male figures are almost exclusively represented by humanitarian workers. This juxtaposition shows a further dichotomy within male roles, subdividing them into predators or protectors based on their alignment with institutional or moral authority. Conversely, women embody resilient, caring and maternal figures. Mothers recognize their children's reasons for leaving, while enduring the emotional strain of separation, as synthesized in a gloomy sequence from *Amina & Sahra* showing a procession of mourning mothers vanishing into the desert (Fig. 12). They are the ones who pick up the calls from traffickers demanding ransom payments and the ones who choose to sacrifice their houses and well-being to secure their children's safety. This selfless act of sacrifice positions them as martyrs, enduring both the violence of male aggressors within the family and the broader societal challenges of migration. Visual cues involving the representation of hands and feet further reinforce women and children's vulnerability to men's violence. Their subjugation to men is

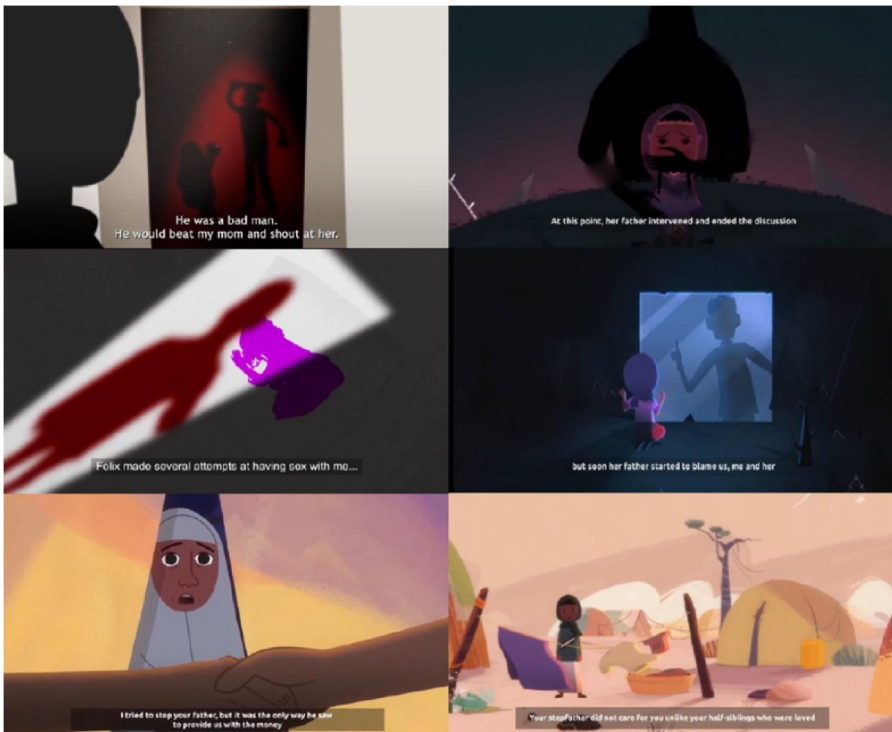


Figure 11. Male violence in familial settings. © UNHCR

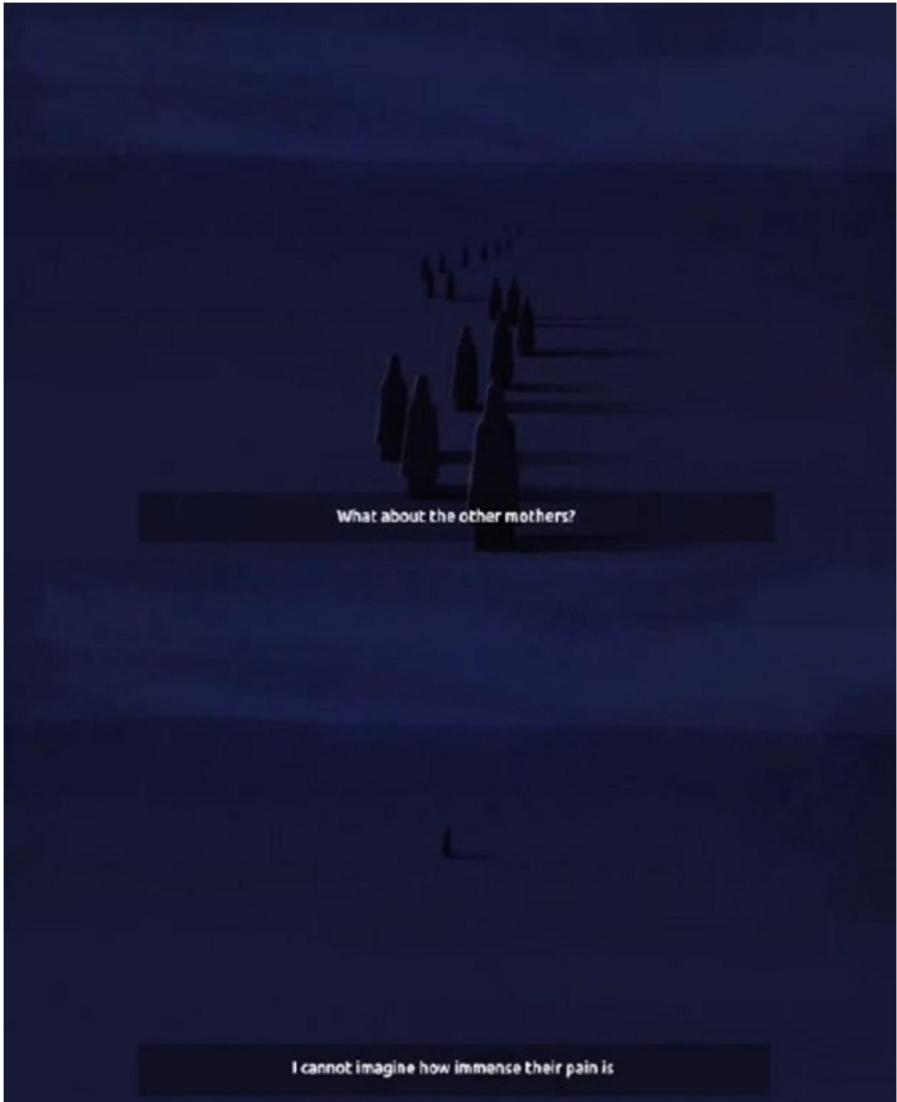


Figure 12. Procession of mourning mothers. © UNHCR

conveyed by depicting them either barefoot (Fig. 13), 'crushed' beneath male feet (Fig. 14), or dominated by overbearing male hands (Fig. 15). The use of music enhances this power dynamic, with tense, sinister tones accompanying scenes of male aggression, while softer, melancholic melodies underscore women's suffering. In this context, the innocent tattoo on Bereket's child-like hand and his unfulfilled desire to protect his mother symbolize the inherent inability to resist masculine violence through individual means (Fig. 16). The only effective tools capable of countering such violence are those wielded by humanitarian organizations, visually conveyed by strong arms saving migrants from drowning (Fig. 17).

Two notable exceptions contrast with the binary gender-based distinction described in this section: the figures of the *aunty* in *Zahra & Nura* and in *Antonia*. The first entrusts her nieces to a smuggler relative who will ferry them to Europe; the second, Madam Akube, the aunt of one of



Figure 13. Barefoot female characters. © UNHCR



Figure 14. Female characters and male feet. © UNHCR

Antonia's friends, runs a prostitution ring in Italy and deceitfully involves Antonia in it. Nevertheless, although these two characters are the verbal initiators of a spiral of abuse, physical violence is always performed by male enforcers, thus reflecting a broader discourse that ties physical dominance to masculinity.

5.3 Professional ambitions: money versus education

Another gendered contrast concerns the characters' professional ambitions. In this regard, education provides a pervasive trigger for young women, whereas men tend to be driven by money. Men's financial concerns connect to both their inner entrepreneurial spirit (the trope of the *entrepreneur*) and smugglers and traffickers' motivations (the trope of the *aggressor*). Indeed, they move both evil characters in performing their activities and young migrants in embarking on the journey. Ali's dream to become a great businessman is the most evident example of such a claim (Fig. 2). He considers Europe the right place to gain professional training, with the goal of returning to Somalia to start a business. His conceptualization of Europe involves a gender-equal environment with safe and friendly people (a man and a woman coloured in green), surrounded by office buildings. In *Said*, money is less central (he initially expresses the desire to pursue university), but the lack of money is mentioned as one of his concerns once he reaches Europe. Eventually, neither Said nor Ali succeed in achieving their goals, and their journeys end in utter failure, either in the solitude of an indifferent Europe or in the shame of returning home empty-handed (Fig. 18) (for a deeper discussion on male failure, see the next section).

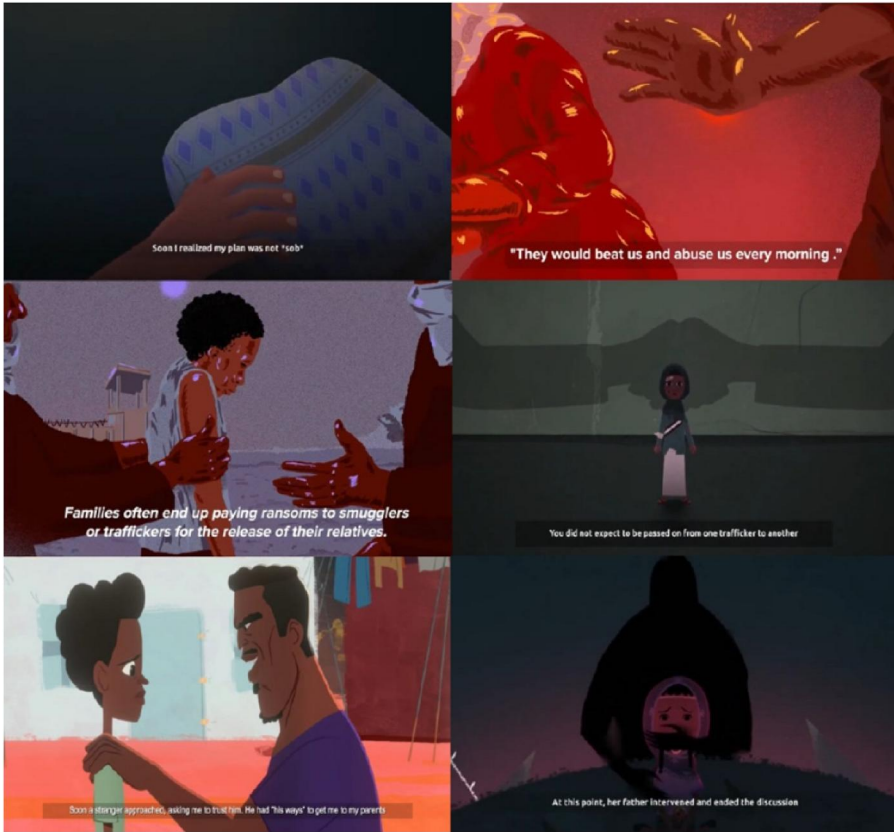


Figure 15. Male hands exercising violence and control. © UNHCR



Figure 16. Bereket's tattoo. © UNHCR



Figure 17. Humanitarian organisations saving migrants from drowning. © UNHCR

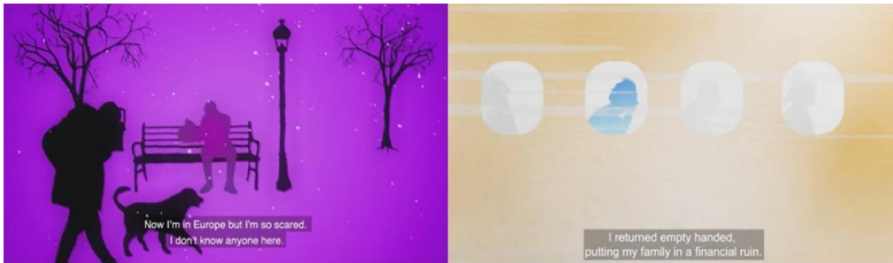


Figure 18. Final outcomes of Said and Ali's stories. © UNHCR

On the other hand, the theme of money is completely absent from those films featuring young women as their principal characters. Even in *Lwam*, whose principal character is driven by a proactive attitude that completely excludes family from the storytelling ('[...] when I saw all my classmates go one by one, I couldn't imagine staying behind alone'), schooling constitutes both *Lwam's* and her friend *Selam's* main objective (when in Europe the latter laments not to have started schooling yet). Furthermore, this narrative concludes on a positive note, as *Lwam* successfully gains access to education in a refugee camp, avoiding the perilous experiences endured by her peer. As compared to a business-oriented motivation, education represents a more affordable purpose, as well as a means to achieve empowerment and self-development, if it is attained through humanitarian organizations' guidelines. This is underlined, in the final part of the film, by *Lwam's* active engagement in class, accompanied by a vibrant soundtrack that permeates the scene with an aura of success (Fig. 19).

Education is portrayed as a critical resource, a pathway to empowerment or, conversely, a vulnerability when it is absent. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the *Lwam*, *Amina & Sahra*, *Selam*, *Antonia*, *Zahra & Nura* at different stages of their migration process. At the pre-migration stage, education is presented as a goal that can be attained only by leaving (Fig. 20), given the impossibility to pursue schooling in the place of origin (Fig. 21). Such impossibility is either due to family exploitation (*Antonia*), depopulation resulting from emigration (*Lwam*) or, as in the case of *Amina*, the intersection of gender, poverty and familial obligations. In *Selam*, education is not merely a theme but the very setting of the narrative. Although no migration is performed, her whole story revolves around school and is told by her teacher, Mohamed, who tries to help her reunite with her father. It is noteworthy that in this film, the UNHCR functions as a secondary educational resource for Mohamed, providing him with knowledge about the mechanisms of family reunification, which he subsequently conveys to his student. The pursuit of schooling continues for *Amina* and *Nura* also during the migratory process, by means of their asylum applications (Fig. 22). From serving as an incentive and a justification for embarking on a risky journey, the trope of education, with the support of the UNHCR, is reconceptualized as a symbol of hope and stability against uncertainty.

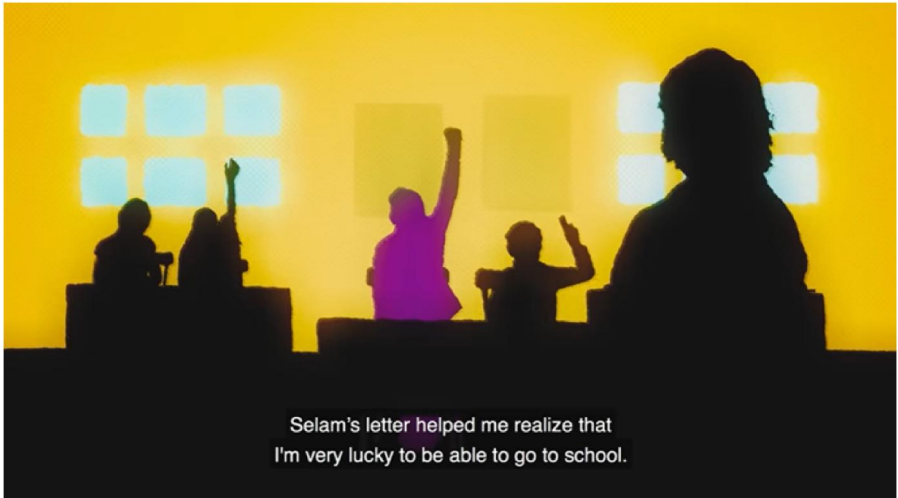


Figure 19. Final outcome of Lwam's story. © UNHCR



Figure 20. Educational expectations. © UNHCR

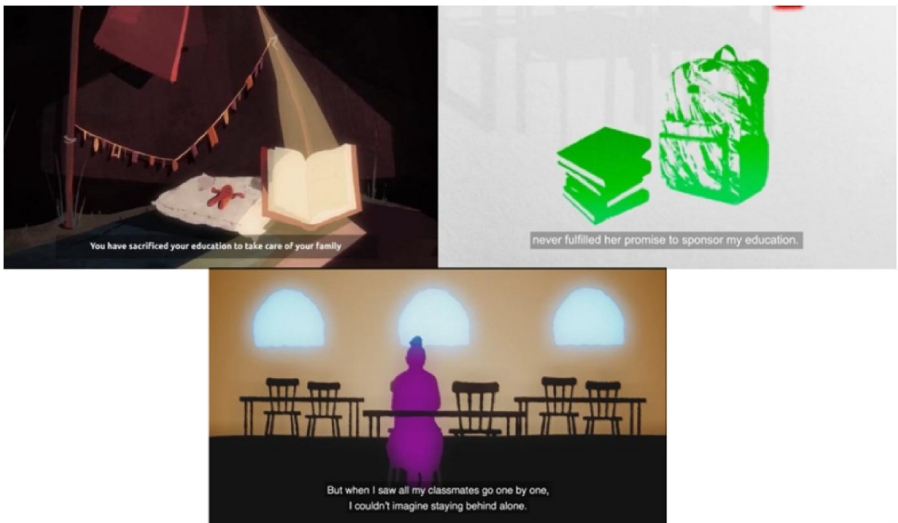


Figure 21. Impossibility of schooling in the country of origin. © UNHCR



Figure 22. Amina and Nura's asylum applications. © UNHCR

At the end of the migration process, only external support (UNHCR's) can restore opportunities previously denied, both in the place of origin and during the journey. Education thus becomes a symbol of rebirth and empowerment for Amina and Lwam. Conversely, Antonia's narrative underscores the dangers to which an uneducated woman can be exposed. When she realizes that her educational aspirations are thwarted, her descent into exploitation begins. Her lack of education exacerbates her vulnerability to manipulation (believing she is travelling to South Africa when she is actually being trafficked to Libya), superstition (magical oaths), blackmail, mistreatment and, eventually, prostitution.

5.4 Autonomy: independent versus dependent

The last gendered binary regards the concept of autonomy. The analysis reveals a persistent framing of men as autonomous and goal-driven, while women are depicted as actors constrained by or dependent on external factors. These portrayals align with broader stereotypes about gender roles, emphasizing men's agency in migration while framing women's journeys as marked by vulnerability and reliance on external support.

Men (Ali and Said) are often depicted as proactive decision-makers possessing more freedom of action along their migration path. Their decision to search for a smuggler and leave the country arises more from initiative-driven actions than from compelling external reasons. Accordingly, while war is presented as an external cause for fleeing within the Somali borders (from Mogadishu to Adado), Said's choice to leave the country derives from his entrepreneurial aspirations (Fig. 2) and his friends' description of their beautiful new life in Europe. Likewise, Ali is initially moved by the outbreak of war, but his departure comes from the rational consideration that he could see no future for himself there. Both cases show active research of smugglers that only involves male characters. The films do not delve deeply into the emotions or sufferings of the characters during the journey; rather, they describe the events by portraying the protagonists in constant motion and by often resorting to a lively soundtrack. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds, they are destined to lose their freedom to smugglers, traffickers and detention centres, ultimately culminating in inevitable failure, shame and loneliness (Fig. 18).

On the other hand, women are more strongly constrained by and dependent on external factors. Rather than an individual choice, their departure constitutes a necessary reaction to social and systemic threats: Lwam cannot pursue schooling if her class is empty; Zahra, Nura and Amina flee from female genital mutilation (FGM); Antonia escapes beating and sexual harassment; Selam does not even attempt to join her father, as the quest is pursued by her male teacher. Gender-related threats (such as rape and forced labour) add up to the dangers faced by all migrants in the films, inflicting greater harm on women and increasing their reliance on external assistance. The narration style assumes a stronger oneiric and symbolic atmosphere, accompanied by gloomy and melancholic music, which contributes to making the women's situation more tragic. The only help is provided by humanitarian organizations, rescue boats and refugee camps, representing the only means to survive the journey. In this regard, it must be noted that the only time in which a NGO offers help to a male migrant (Said) this is not at all



Figure 23. Said's return. © UNHCR

perceived by him as assistance, but as a humiliation, an offence, albeit necessary, to personal pride (Fig. 23). In general, the only movies that end up positively are the ones where personal initiative is suppressed in favour of humanitarian organizations and wise advisors, a pattern that, in a distinctly paternalistic manner, occurs exclusively when the migrant depicted is a woman. Nevertheless, when female characters, like Nura and Sahra, display moments of agency, their actions are often framed negatively, as selfish or misguided. This is even more evident in *Antonia*, where the protagonist is never given the chance to meet supporting characters and, overwhelmed by unlucky circumstances, keeps making wrong choices that lead her into a spiral of abuse. Only at the end, she is able to escape, but ambiguity remains regarding whether she has definitively freed herself from Madam Akube (Fig. 24).

A separate discussion is warranted for films featuring male children, who exhibit traits aligned with both masculine and feminine patterns. Both Yusef and Bereket are actively focused on their goals (reuniting with their family and reaching Europe to support their mothers); however, they both display extreme vulnerability and remain at the mercy of external events and figures. Here too, the decisive factor lies entirely in external support: for Yusef, this enables him to achieve his goal (thanks to the intervention of the UNHCR and the guidance of a wise elderly woman), while for Bereket, it ensures at least his survival (thanks to the intervention of a rescue boat).

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study examined the *Telling the Real Story* (TRS) campaign through a critical multimodal semiotic lens, revealing how it deploys gendered discourses to advance institutional objectives. Our analysis found that TRS animated films consistently construct migrant agency in highly selective ways, reinforcing humanitarian organizations' dual imperatives of protection and deterrence. In general terms, female characters enhance UNHCR's humanitarian image, while male characters justify its role in controlling 'unwanted' migration. The former are presented primarily as victims—especially of sexual violence—or as idealized students and caregivers when they conform to state-sanctioned paths (e.g. pursuing education via legal migration routes). Their agency is celebrated only when it aligns with protective interventions. Male characters, by contrast, are frequently cast as failures, threats, or emotionally volatile figures, especially when pursuing irregular migration independently.



Figure 24. Antonia's escape from Madam Akube. © UNHCR

The analysis of the corpus reveals eight recurring gendered tropes, organized around four interrelated thematic domains. First, within the theme of family, male characters are typically depicted as entrepreneurs or adventurers, whereas female characters are framed as caregivers, responsible for preserving familial cohesion. Second, under the theme of violence, men are portrayed predominantly as aggressors, while women are cast as victims in need of protection. Third, the theme of professional ambitions delineates men as primarily motivated by financial gain, in contrast to women, whose aspirations are more frequently aligned with education. Finally, the theme of autonomy reinforces a binary distinction between active, independent male characters and passive, dependent female ones. Together, these tropes construct a gendered discursive architecture that naturalizes unequal roles and responsibilities across all stages of the migration process. This 'epistemic regime' (Adler and Bernstein 2005) legitimizes certain gendered identities while marginalizing others, either through negatively coded hyper-visibility or through complete invisibilization. In doing so, the campaign reflects and reinforces existing inequalities within both humanitarian discourse and migration governance.

Our findings resonate strongly with feminist critiques of migration governance. Women are portrayed as protectable subjects only when they embody passive victimhood or seek empowerment through authorized pathways. Men are denied vulnerability, their agency either pathologized or framed as deviant. This selective recognition of agency is a hallmark of McNay's (2016) distinction between 'instrumentalized' and 'realized' (embodied and lived through socially embedded experience) agency.

Moreover, the victim/villain dualism obscures the structural drivers of migration and silences more nuanced discourses of resistance, resilience and community-based decision-making. As feminist scholars have long argued (Enloe 2014; Freedman 2019), such simplifications strip migrants—especially women—of political subjectivity, reifying essentialist roles and ultimately reinforcing patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. Similarly, the erasure of non-binary gender identities and sexual orientations, including those of the LGBTQIA+ community, undermines nuanced vulnerability assessments and contributes to the legitimization of control-oriented governance. In this regard, it is important to note that TRS goes beyond Enloe's conflation of women and children into the undifferentiated category of 'women and children' (Enloe 2014). Rather, it constructs a graduated continuum of vulnerability and agency shaped by the intersection of gender and age. This spectrum positions adult men at one end as autonomous and resilient actors, while women and female children occupy the opposite end as inherently vulnerable and subject

to uncontrollable circumstances. Male children are situated between these poles, depicted as fragile yet aspirational and purpose driven. This appears to be the only instance in which gender characterization transcends a strictly binary framework.

From a postcolonial perspective, TRS reinforces racialized hierarchies in how migrant bodies are represented and valued. Migrants from the Global South are often portrayed as lacking rational agency or in need of enlightenment through Western humanitarianism. This not only mirrors colonial logics of 'civilizing missions' but also aligns with critiques of contemporary humanitarianism as a form of benevolent control (Spivak 1988; Rajaram 2002). The repeated framing of migration as a misguided personal choice—rather than a rational response to global inequalities, conflict, or restrictive mobility regimes—further individualizes responsibility and obscures structural conditions. As in Ali and Said, irregular migration becomes a moral failing of the individual rather than a symptom of geopolitical exclusions. These narratives express and reinforce a neoliberal understanding of responsibility, which redirects attention from state and collective obligations toward individual migrants (Varsanyi 2008). Thus, they not only delegitimize collective strategies and diasporic knowledge networks, but also reinforce stereotypes of migrants as irrational and impulsive (often male) actors.

The use of animation as the central medium in TRS is not incidental, it plays a critical role in shaping the campaign's ideological force. Animation's inherent abstraction, simplification and capacity for symbolism allow it to construct racialized and gendered archetypes with minimal visual realism, thus appearing neutral and universal while masking deeply political content (Honest Roe 2013, 2016; Williams 2020). These animated texts are multimodal artefacts, combining storytelling, music, colour schemes and character movement to produce meaning. This interplay of semiotic modes operates not just aesthetically but politically. Multimodality allows ideological framings to be conveyed subtly through verbal, visual and aural channels—for instance, by depicting female figures as visually soft and passive, accompanied by melancholic soundtracks, or by linking male characters to themes of darkness, failure and aggression. These design choices encode emotional cues that guide the viewer's moral judgment without overt didacticism.

TRS does more than tell stories: it participates in the production of authoritative knowledge about who migrants are, what motivates them and what futures are available to them. These films embody what Barnett and Duvall (2005) describe as productive power: the capacity to shape social meaning and political reality through discourse, representation and symbolic authority. Drawing on Foucault's (1975) notion of discourse as a form of disciplinary power, TRS emerges as a site where migration subjectivities are constructed and governed. The use of narrative tropes, such as the victimized woman or the ruthless male smuggler, serves not only to inform, but to constitute the very categories of deserving and undeserving migrants. These tropes carry epistemic weight, making certain identities legible to humanitarian actors and policy-makers, while rendering others invisible or threatening.

TRS must ultimately be understood as a strategic tool within broader systems of migration governance. As literature on PICs makes clear, these campaigns are not neutral information efforts, but instruments of remote migration control designed to manage behaviour at a distance. TRS exemplifies this logic, positioning the UNHCR not only as a humanitarian actor but as a gatekeeper of legitimate migration. In the specific case of the UNHCR, whose institutional mandate centres on the protection of refugees, this dynamic is particularly problematic, as it reinforces a gendered hierarchy that stratifies asylum seekers based on presumed worthiness of international protection.

These campaigns function as soft power mechanisms, designed to persuade rather than coerce. Yet their emotional appeal and authority-laden discourses exert significant influence over how migration is perceived, how migrants are treated and which policy responses are legitimized. Beyond the aforementioned issues arising from a strictly binary conception of gender, the reductive portrayal of men as financially motivated, often morally suspect figures risks delegitimizing the provision of support for male migrants. Conversely, the depiction of women as

virtuous yet passive and non-threatening reinforces the notion that the ideal refugee is a submissive, harmless woman—thereby narrowing the spectrum of subjectivities considered worthy of protection and acceptance. Moreover, beyond the gendered dimensions of representation, TRS frames institutional intervention as the sole safe and rational course of action, thereby delegitimizing local knowledge, community-based responses and alternative migratory imaginaries. In doing so, the campaign sustains a top-down governance model in which grassroots and migrant-led initiatives are marginalized, and protection is extended only to those who conform to pre-established categories and behavioural norms.

While this study provides valuable insights into the system of knowledge performed in TRS' animated films and its connections to UNHCR's role as a leading international organization in migration and asylum, it is important to mention certain limitations and possible areas for further research. Firstly, the analysis has been confined to a specific subset (animated films) of the campaign, which includes several other videos (mostly interviews with migrants and returnees), an ad-hoc website and on-site events and activities. Future research should expand the dataset to include a broader range of materials and additional PICs, involving diverse types of implementing actors. This should be done both in an aggregate and comparative manner, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the productive power exercised by the epistemic community shaping global migration management through awareness-raising campaigns. In this regard, further research should connect these findings to a wider spectrum of humanitarian actions revolving around irregular migration. This would enable a deeper exploration of the relationship between knowledge production and the actual implementation of migration policies.

Additionally, although the current analysis attributes accountability for the video content exclusively to the TRS's main implementer (the UNHCR), it is known that the production of PICs generally involves a sophisticated network of actors, including communication agencies and other entities contributing to content production. Future studies should map the system of actors involved in the campaigns' development, thus clarifying their respective roles and responsibilities. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping the design and purpose of PICs, as well as deeper insights into the interaction of possibly conflicting perspectives within the epistemic community of practice.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Journal of Refugee Studies* online.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare none.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any public or private funding agency. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The authors enable double-anonymised peer review.

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaf079>

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