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Framing Refugees' Socio-Economic Rights in Kenyan Media: A Case Study of Kakuma Refugee Camp

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Abstract

This study examines how Kenyan media frame the socio-economic rights of refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp, highlighting the strategies employed in reporting and the extent to which coverage informs public awareness and policy. While prior research has focused on humanitarian or security portrayals, little attention has been given to socio-economic rights, such as access to education, healthcare, employment, and livelihoods. Guided by agenda-setting theory, the study analyses how media narratives influence public perceptions and policy discourse. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 150 media reports published between 2020 and 2025, with 50 reports purposively sampled for relevance to socio-economic rights. Findings reveal that Kenyan media predominantly frame refugees through humanitarian and security lenses, portraying them as dependent or vulnerable, with limited attention to their agency, contributions, or legal entitlements. Rights-based reporting is sporadic and largely event-driven, often linked to donor-supported initiatives rather than sustained public sensitisation. The study highlights structural and institutional challenges, including limited journalist training, resource constraints, and editorial priorities, which hinder comprehensive reporting on socio-economic rights. These framing patterns shape public understanding, reinforce stereotypes, and influence policy responses, often prioritising immediate aid over sustainable development. The study concludes that adopting rights-based and developmental-oriented journalism could enhance visibility of refugees' socio-economic contributions, promote inclusion, and foster informed public advocacy. Collaboration between media, government, and NGOs is recommended to strengthen capacity, ensure ethical reporting, and support consistent coverage of refugees' socio-economic rights.

Keywords: Agenda-setting theory, Kenyan media and Kakuma camp, policy awareness, refugees' socio-economic rights.



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INTRODUCTION

The representation of refugees' socio-economic rights in the media is a critical area of inquiry, particularly in contexts where large refugee populations exist, such as Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Kakuma Refugee Camp has been a home to refugees for a long time, making it suitable for this study. The study aimed to identify the strategies used by the media to raise awareness of refugees' socio-economic rights. It further examined how Kenyan media frame these issues, the approaches used to sensitise the public, and the extent to which coverage highlights both challenges and opportunities. The portrayal of refugees in the media has always oscillated between human-interest stories and depictions of crisis, impacting audience empathy and policy advocacy (Bourbeau, 2020). However, this negative portrayal of refugees makes it difficult for refugees to have access to better living and opportunities in Kenya. The study examined the challenges media organisations face in accurately and sensitively representing refugees' socio-economic rights. Factors such as political biasness, resource limitations, and societal stereotypes can hinder comprehensive reporting (Hyndman & Giles, 2017).

By exploring these dimensions, the study aimed to underscore the need for more balanced and inclusive reporting that not only raises awareness but also fosters advocacy for the socio-economic rights of refugees in Kenya. More importantly, this study explored the representation of refugees' socio-economic rights in Kenyan media, focusing on the framing of these rights, the strategies employed by the media to raise awareness, and to assess the extent to which news reports highlight socio-economic challenges and opportunities in Kakuma refugee camp. By analysing the media portrayals, the research shed light on the critical role the media played in shaping public understanding and policy regarding refugees living in Kenya.

In Kenya, the media has played a dual role in the representation of refugees' rights, on the one hand, and, on the other, has the potential to amplify refugees' voices and shed light on their socio-

economic contributions. According to Njoroge and Muli (2022), strategic storytelling and advocacy journalism have been employed to raise awareness about refugees' challenges and rights. However, the media often negatively portrays refugee issues, focusing on crisis and security threats rather than on the positive contributions refugees make to society (Kamau, 2020). In Kakuma Camp, the Film Aid organisation used to show Films about refugees' life experiences. This inconsistency in representation can immortalise wrong perceptions and hinder public support for refugees' rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Framing

Media framing theory suggests that how issues are presented influences how audiences interpret and respond to messages, depending on how they perceive them. Framing selects certain aspects of reality while excluding others, thereby shaping public understanding and policy discourse. In refugees' studies, scholars have shown that media coverage always emphasises crisis, vulnerability, and dependency rather than structural inequalities or rights-based claims (Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazzi, 2022). Such a framing can influence whether refugees are perceived as passive recipients of aid or as rights-based individuals entitled to socio-economic protections. As a result of these framings of refugees' issues in Kakuma, the refugees' access to better opportunities in Kenya has been affected. (i.e., free movement, better education, healthcare services and employment opportunities.

Research on refugee representation in Kenya indicated that mainstream media frequently align with dominant political narratives, especially those related to national security and migration control. In contrast, grassroots and refugee-led media often emphasise personal experiences, livelihood struggles, and issues of social integration, as illustrated by coverage of refugees in Kenya and the impact of global refugee policies. This divergence highlighted the importance of examining whose voices are amplified in media messaging and how socio-economic rights are positioned, either as humanitarian concerns or as legal entitlements.

Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazi (2022) further argued that media portrayals of suffering often rely on emotional and embodied storytelling, while such approaches can generate empathy, they may also depoliticise structural issues, shifting attention away from systemic barriers to employment, education, healthcare, and economic participation in the Kakuma refugee camp context. This theoretical lens is structural socio-economic injustice.

Media Presentation of Refugees in Kenya

Media representation of refugees in Kenya has been complex and evolving, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics. Initially, Kenyan media depicted refugees, especially those from Somalia, with empathy during the period of mass displacement due to war and drought, as seen in the 1990s and early 2000s. During these times, refugees were often portrayed as victims in need of international protection and humanitarian aid (the new humanitarian, 2016). However, the narratives changed significantly in the subsequent years, especially after security incidents linked to terrorism. Media coverage began to associate refugees with security threats, reinforcing government narratives that blamed the refugee camps for hosting terrorists. This led to public support for policies aimed at shutting down camps like Dadaab and Kakuma, despite evidence that refugees were not significantly involved in terrorism –related activities (The New Humanitarian, 2016).

In recent years, there have been numerous nuanced and hopeful portrayals, especially with the introduction of initiatives like the Shirika plan. This plan, endorsed by both the Kenyan government and the UN agency (UNHCR), aims to transform refugee camps into integrated settlements, promoting self-reliance and great integration with host communities. Media coverage of the Shirika plan highlights it as a progressive shift away from restrictive encampment policies towards a model that supports economic inclusion and mobility for refugees (Refugees International, n.d). Moreover, organisations like UNESCO have been advocating for better media representation of refugees, emphasising the importance of objective reporting that fosters

understanding and solidarity. They argue for coverage that shows refugees' contributions and the challenges they face in their livelihoods in the camps, thereby countering stereotypes and fostering more informed public discourse (UNESCO, 2021). These positive roles played by the media in Kenya have a gap that needs to be filled so that refugee communities can fully understand their rights and the importance of the media's role.

This study shows that one article analysed from humanitarian reports noted that “media stories on livelihood and self-reliance have increased slightly in recent years, partly due to UNHCR communication partnerships with refugees’ leaders.

Media and Refugee Representation in Kenya

In the Kenyan media context, media representations of Kakuma refugee camp reflect a mix of humanitarian, securitised, and development discourses. A study by Oduor and Kamau (2018) on Kenyan newspapers showed that refugee issues are often episodic, tied to events such as conflict, donor visits, or protests, rather than consistently framed as part of ongoing human rights concerns. Additionally, limited resources and editorial priorities mean that coverage of socio-economic rights is always secondary to security and political framing. When media cover rights-based themes, they tend to focus on exceptional success stories or NGO interventions, potentially reinforcing a narrative that socio-economic empowerment is the result of charity rather than a guarantee (UNHCR, 2023). And despite growing attention to refugee rights and media framing, there remains a gap in empirical studies focusing specifically on Kakuma and how Kenyan media portray refugees’ socio-economic rights issues there.

Most studies generalise across refugee camps or fail to disaggregate different types of rights in media discourse. To address this gap, the study will analyse how Kenyan media frame socio-economic rights in reporting on Kakuma and explore why specific narratives, humanitarian, political, or developmental, take precedence. Therefore, this study will ultimately use socio-economic rights as rights and as a means to

perform the necessary analysis. However, these research findings corroborated the existing studies that the Kenyan media had largely employed a humanitarian and security threat-framed approach, while rights-based approaches were limited. According to the literature review and the content analysis of news reports, it was found that Kenyan media had limited coverage of these socio-economic rights, including healthcare, employment, education, and livelihoods. This gap may reduce public knowledge of socio-economic rights and hinder policy advocacy.

Strategies Used by the Media to Sensitise on Refugees' Social and Economic Rights

The media is instrumental in influencing public perception and policy decisions related to refugee rights. According to Njoroge and Muli (2022), various strategies, such as storytelling, advocacy journalism, and partnerships with NGOs, have been employed to raise awareness of refugees' socio-economic rights. They emphasise that personal narratives and human-interest stories are effective in fostering empathy and public support (Njoroge & Muli, 2022). Moreover, Obi (2023) argues that digital platforms have expanded the reach of refugee narratives, enabling a wider range of voices to be heard. This democratisation of media offers refugees the opportunity to share their experiences directly, challenging dominant narratives often perpetuated by mainstream outlets (Obi, 2023). However, despite these strategies, many media outlets still struggle to maintain a consistent focus on socio-economic rights, prioritising crisis-oriented coverage over comprehensive discussions, and this is the gap this research seeks to explore.

Representing refugee socio-economic rights in the Kenyan media, shedding light on their struggles, raising awareness, and putting pressure on policymakers to take meaningful action. By reporting on the experiences, challenges, and achievements of refugees in Kenya, media outlets can effectively shape public opinion and generate empathy towards their cause (MC Gee et al., 2021). Additionally, the media can amplify the voices of refugees, providing them with a platform to share their stories and

perspectives. Through comprehensive coverage and investigative reporting, the media can expose any violations or abuses of refugee socioeconomic rights, bringing attention to the need for accountability and justice. Furthermore, media sources can provide vital information to refugee populations in camps, serving as a lifeline for accessing news, policy updates, and resources. By truthfully representing refugees' experiences and promoting their rights, the media can foster a more inclusive and compassionate Kenyan society in which refugees receive fair treatment and access to opportunities. Media can also influence policymakers and advocate for changes in legislation or policies that impact refugees. Overall, the media can use its power to educate, inform, and engage the public on refugee socioeconomic rights in Kenya. This report primarily discusses how the media present general refugee rights in Kenya, but this study specifically examines the portrayal of refugee social and economic rights in the Kenyan media, particularly in the Kakuma refugee camp. Based on the Content reports, findings revealed that Kenyan media rarely implement structured sensitisation strategies; instead, it mostly reports on event-driven stories influenced by donor-sponsored projects.

Media and Policy Response

The media has played a very important role in how Refugees are portrayed and, consequently, in how their socio-economic rights are understood. According to Behnam (2019), media representation can significantly influence public attitudes towards Refugees, always framing them as a burden rather than people with rights and needs. In Kenya, where media portrayals have historically focused on crises or security issues surrounding Refugees, this framing can exacerbate challenges (Kariuki, 2020). Kakuma Refugee Camp presents a vital case study of its size and diverse population. Research indicates that the media often concentrate on issues of poverty, crime, and dependency in the Camp, overshadowing the socio-economic rights of Refugees (Lindley, 2016). This narrow focus can reinforce low social narratives, impacting the Refugees' struggle for basic rights. On the other hand, Refugees have a set of socio-economic rights under international law,

including the rights to work, access to education, and an adequate standard of living (UNHCR, 2011). However, the portrayal of Refugees in Kenyan media has given insufficient coverage to these rights, emphasising humanitarian assistance rather than empowerment.

Consequently, the framing of Refugees' socio-economic rights in the media narratives contributes to public misconceptions regarding their capacity for self-reliance. A study by Musuva et al. (2022) suggests that the media often lacks depth in coverage of Refugees; socio-economic rights, focusing on immediate humanitarian responses while neglecting the long-term socio-economic rights and needs of Refugees. This superficial coverage can lead to policies that prioritise emergency relief over sustainable development, further perpetuating cycles of dependency and poverty among the refugee population. In other words, the media's presentation of Refugees' socio-economic rights can influence policy decisions and spark public discourse. Research by Mwangi (2018) indicates that when media coverage highlights the agency and contributions of refugees, there can be a more favourable public response that counteracts long-standing prejudice. A balanced representation can influence policymakers to consider refugees' rights more seriously, aligning with international frameworks that advocate for Refugees' rights. Conversely, when media narratives focus on issues of insecurity or economic strain caused by refugees, public opinion can lean towards restrictive policies.

A study by Kamau and Ngugi (2020) found that sensationalised reporting about refugees' contributions to fears about resource allocation can eventually lead to policies that undermine refugees' rights and limit their socio-economic opportunities. The findings showed that, as one UNHCR report explained, journalists are partnering with local media industries to train them in human-interest reporting and inclusion narratives, but the impact is limited by turnover and editorial constraints.

Using Storytelling and Documentaries to Raise Awareness

The use of storytelling, documentaries, and other platforms has proven effective in raising awareness and mobilising support for refugees in Kenya. These methods provide powerful tools for humanising the refugee experiences and influencing public perception and policy. Storytelling through personal narratives allows refugees to share their experiences directly, fostering empathy and understanding.

Organisations such as UNHCR and other NGOs operating in refugee camps frequently document these stories and share them on their websites and social media, allowing refugees to access and understand them. By giving refugees a voice, these narratives help break down stereotypes and highlight the resilience and humanity of displaced persons. Again, local initiatives often use storytelling in community engagement projects. For instance, the organisation Film Aid International conducts storytelling workshops in refugee camps such as Dadaab and Kakuma, where refugees can create and share their own stories through film, radio, and print media. This not only empowers refugees but also educates local communities about the refugee crisis.

In addition, documentaries are a powerful medium for raising global awareness of the conditions and challenges refugees face in Kenya. Films such as "Warehouse" and "Longest River" provide in-depth looks at life in the refugee camps and the broader implications of displacement. These documentaries often gain international attention and draw support from global audiences and policymakers. Advocacy and policy influence regarding documentaries can shape policy by highlighting the urgent needs of refugees and the impact of current policies. They often include interviews with refugee aid workers and experts, representing a comprehensive view of the situation. It can prompt international organisations and governments to take action, such as increasing funding for refugee programs or implementing more humane immigration policies.

In summary, the use of storytelling, documentaries, and other platforms in Kenya not only raises awareness about the plights of refugees but also mobilises support and influences policy. These methods are essential for building a more informed, compassionate society that supports and advocates for refugee rights. The report of storytelling and documentaries is more about refugees sharing their challenges in the media through these platforms, but this study would like to look at why the media in Kenya is not doing much in coverage on refugee social-economic issues in Kakuma refugee camp, rather than generalising on all issues affecting refugees everywhere in Kenya. This study showed that journalists in Kenya mostly acknowledged a limited collaboration with non-governmental organisations such as UNHCR and Film Aid Kenya, which occasionally conduct workshops on ethical refugee reporting only.

Challenges Faced by the Media in Highlighting Socio-Economic Issues of Refugees

Media organisations faced numerous challenges in accurately representing refugee rights issues. These include limited access to refugee communities, political pressures, and the complexities of humanitarian reporting (Nyambura & Waweru, 2022). The two scholars have shown that journalists often lack adequate training in refugee issues, leading to reliance on stereotypes and sensationalism in their reporting. Furthermore, structural constraints, such as funding limitations and editorial policies, can hinder comprehensive coverage of refugee rights (Muriuki & Karanja, 2021). The challenge of balancing ethical journalism with the need to attract viewers often leads to a focus on dramatic narratives that do not reflect the realities refugees face.

Journalists and media houses may face censorship or intimidation when reporting on sensitive issues, including refugee rights. This can result in self-censorship to avoid repercussions. Human Rights First (2023) highlights that media freedom is declining globally and threats to journalists' safety are increasing, particularly in backsliding democracies and resistant totalitarian regimes. According to the US Department of State (2021), the

intimidation and violence against journalists resulted in significant self-censorship. Additionally, the Associated Press (2024) indicates that increasing crackdowns on media freedom in Bangladesh have led to a significant number of journalists refraining from reporting on sensitive topics, including refugee rights.

The government's emphasis on national security, especially in the context of terrorism, always frames refugees as potential security threats, complicating advocacy efforts. Media narratives often link refugees to terrorism, influencing public perception and policy decisions. According to the Council of Europe (2016), media coverage of the refugee crisis in 2015 shifted from humanitarian narratives to security discourse, emphasising fears of terrorism associated with refugees. Nevertheless, the Ethical Journalism Network (2017) discusses how bias against sections of refugees often seeps into media coverage of major news events, including those involving refugees and terrorism.

Limited access to information, where journalists often face difficulties in accessing refugee camps and obtaining accurate information from the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), can be due to bureaucratic hurdles or security restrictions. According to the US Department of State report (2023), journalists in Algeria encounter significant bureaucratic challenges due to complex procedures that hinder effective reporting on sensitive issues such as refugees. In Somalia, as Human Rights Watch (2024) notes, humanitarian agencies and journalists struggle to reach refugees due to bureaucratic barriers, including lengthy administrative procedures and arbitrary taxation. Similarly, according to the European Union (2024), journalists in Palestinian territories are constrained by severe restrictions on movement, while dozens are banned from travel and covering refugee issues.

There is a lack of specialised training for journalists on refugee issues and human rights, leading to superficial or biased reporting that fails to effectively advocate for refugee rights. The Ethical Journalism Network (2017) highlights that many media

practitioners have limited knowledge and technical understanding of migration, compounded by a shortage of information and data to guide reporting on refugee issues. Internews (2010) notes that many journalists lack training in human rights, and therefore cannot provide reliable, consistent coverage of refugees' rights.

On the other hand, ethical reporting on refugee issues necessitates sensitivity to trauma and privacy concerns, which can be challenging to navigate; journalists may face ethical dilemmas and legal challenges. The Journal of Refugee Studies (2021) discusses the ethical challenges of reporting on refugees, noting that journalists must balance the public's right to know with the potential harm news reports can cause to vulnerable populations.

Media coverage of these policies is critical because it can lead to conflict with government authorities. Journalists and media houses may face censorship or intimidation when reporting on sensitive issues, including refugee rights. This can result in self-censorship to avoid repercussions. The government's emphasis on national security, especially in the context of terrorism, always frames refugees as potential security threats, complicating advocacy efforts. The finding revealed a limited collaboration with non-governmental organisations such as UNHCR and Film Aid Kenya, which occasionally conduct workshops on ethical refugee reporting only. These initiatives have helped improve journalists' understanding of Refugees' Socio-Economic realities, and they rarely help journalists report objectively because of fear of negative repercussions like imprisonment or torture.

Understanding Socio-economic Rights in Refugee Contexts

Socio-economic rights encompass access to education, healthcare services, work, housing and an adequate standard of living. According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These rights are inherent to all individuals, including refugees, and must be realised progressively (United Nations, 1966). In the refugee context, these are not merely humanitarian

concerns but legal entitlements protected by international and domestic law (Harrell-Bond, 2002). The 1951 Refugee Convention and the African Union's Kampala Convention further reinforce the legal standing of these rights, obligating refugee-hosting countries to provide refugees with access to basic services and opportunities for self-reliance. Scholars argue that framing socio-economic entitlements as a right helps challenge narratives that present refugees as passive recipients of aid (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004).

In the Kenyan context, Article 43 of the Kenyan 2010 constitution recognises socio-economic rights for every person, including non-citizens. Yet the implementation gap persists, particularly in refugee-hosting areas like Kakuma & Dadaab (Juma & Kagwanja, 2003). In Kakuma Refugee Camp, this study highlighted the lack of comprehensive reporting on refugees' livelihoods, which raises awareness but often lacks contextual information on the structural causes or potential solutions. The report also indicated that media coverage tends to focus on the problem and rarely follows up on long-term development efforts or policy reforms due to limited knowledge of refugees' issues and insufficient resources, as shown by the news reports analysed.

Gaps Analysis

Despite the growing body of research on media representation of refugees, gaps remain with limited in understanding the impact of media strategies, framing, and the extent to which the news reports highlight socio-economic challenges and opportunities on policy changes and public attitudes through content analysis of various articles on, broadcasting, or online reports to identify trends in the coverage of refugee's socio-economic rights. Empirical studies, such as those by Muriuki and Karanja (2021), show that while media can influence perceptions, the direct correlation between media narratives and changes in public policy is under-explored. Their findings indicate that media portrayal can shape public opinion, yet the pathways through which this influence occurs require further investigation. Additionally, Kamau's (2020) research

highlights the lack of longitudinal studies examining the effects of media coverage on refugee rights over time. Understanding these dynamics may offer valuable insights into optimising media strategies to better promote socio-economic rights. This research indicated that the news reports analysed revealed limited systematic application in Kenyan media coverage, especially in Kakuma Refugee Camp, where media sensitisation programs are sporadic and not rigorously evaluated.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by agenda-setting theory, which originated in the 1970s and was primarily advanced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. The aim of the theory is to guide research by explaining how prioritizing issues in the media may affect public awareness and policy responses regarding refugees' socio-economic rights. Their seminal study during the 1968 presidential campaign in the United States revealed that the media significantly influence the public agenda, determining which issues are seen as important by emphasizing certain topics while downplaying others. This foundational research established the relationship between media coverage and public perception (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Shaw are the primary proponents of agenda-setting theory. Their subsequent research expanded on the ideas, showing how media not only tell people what to think but also shape how they think about those issues. Additional scholars, including Walter Lippmann and subsequent communication researchers, have helped develop and refine the theory.

Over the years, agenda-setting theory has evolved to encompass various dimensions, including second-level agenda-setting, which examines how media framing shapes public perceptions of issues. This development emphasises the role of media in shaping not just the issues but also the attributes associated with them. Moreover, the growth of social media has created new agenda-setting dynamics, allowing audiences to shape media priorities and, in turn, be influenced by them. This theory comprises two levels: the first focuses on the importance of specific

issues, while the second addresses the attributes associated with those issues as framed by the media.

Agenda Setting Theory explains how the media influences the public's perceptions of important issues. Its key tenets include; 1-Media selection: 2-the media's choice of which issues to cover and how to represent them, 3-Public agenda: 4-the media's agenda or the issues it focuses on, 5-Saliency: the media's prominence of an issue, 6-Framing: the media's choice of how to frame an issue i.e. the angle or perspective from which it's presented. Media reports significantly set the agenda for discussion, debate, and audience opinion, covering and emphasising issues to influence public discourse. Henry et al. (2023) argue that the media's role in emphasising specific topics influences public perception, aligning societal priorities with media reports. McCombs and Valenzuela (2021) suggest the correlation between media coverage and public concern, highlighting how media priorities shape societal issues.

In the context of this study, the theory helped determine whether the various media outlets' messaging features advance the sharing of information on refugees' socio-economic rights and whether these messages dominate the agenda and shape the audience's opinions and attitudes about these rights. During data collection and analysis, the study sought to determine the frequency of socio-economic rights-related messages by refugees in the media and how they shape engagement, interactivity, and mobilisation for refugees' rights issues. This study used the Saliency tenets: the media's prominence of an issue and the public's perception of it.

Overall, agenda-setting theory provided a robust framework for analysing the media's impact on societal attitudes towards refugees, making it an ideal foundation for this research. This theory also informed the study by exploring how Kenyan media portray the socio-economic status of refugees in Kakuma. By applying this lens, the research critically assessed not just the content of media

narratives, but also the structures, strategies and discourses that shaped them.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was adopted, with content analysis serving as a key qualitative method. Using a case study approach, the research explored the representation of refugees' socio-economic rights in Kenyan media, particularly in Kakuma refugee camp. This approach was appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of media representation (Yin, 2018). Data analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes and patterns to emerge naturally during the coding process. Media material was systematically coded and categorised to identify key themes related to representation. The sample consisted of selected media content from specified Kenyan media outlets, selected based on defined inclusion criteria, including relevance to refugee issues, publication period, and accessibility. The study analysed media reports published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure consistency and relevance.

The study also used a descriptive approach, which allowed for greater interpretation and understanding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1999), those who use qualitative research obtain satisfactory results and appropriate answers to the research questions being investigated. Therefore, this design was chosen for its ability to provide an overall picture of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Economic Reality in Kakuma Refugee Camp

To assess media framing effectively, it is essential to compare narratives with empirical socio-economic realities. Kakuma refugee camp, situated in Turkana County, Kenya, is home to refugees from multiple nations. It has evolved into a complex socio-economic environment where humanitarian assistance intersects with the informal market and limited livelihood opportunities. Sackett (2024) examined how economic instability, funding fluctuation, and regulatory constraints undermined refugee self-reliance in Kakuma Refugee Camp. This study highlighted structural barriers, including

restricted labour mobility, limited access to formal employment, and dependence on humanitarian aid. These findings suggested that socio-economic precocity is not merely a result of individuals' capacity, but it is shaped by broader policy and institutional frameworks. If media narratives frame refugees primarily as dependent or economically inactive, such a portrayal may obscure these systemic constraints.

Similarly, Kinyajui and Obedo (2025) explored gendered access to livelihood assessments in Kakuma, Kenya, demonstrating that socio-economic rights are unevenly distributed within the camp. Refugee women faced additional challenges in accessing credit, land, and entrepreneurial opportunities. These findings underscore the importance of international analysis in media studies: framing that homogenises refugees as a single vulnerable group may erase gendered inequalities and differential access to economic rights. Bau (2025) contributed to understanding the communicative ecology of Kakuma refugee camp by analysing how young refugees access and circulate information. The study argued that information itself functions as a form of aid, influencing perceptions of opportunities, mobility, and entitlement. This insight is particularly relevant for media framing analysis because it highlights the interconnectedness of global media narratives, humanitarian communication, and local communication networks. Media framing does not operate in isolation; the interest in the ground communication practices that shape how refugees understand their socio-economic position.

Humanitarian Framing Versus Rights-Based Framing

A key tension in refugee representation is the distinction between humanitarian and rights-based framing. Humanitarian framing emphasises compassion, emergency response, and aid provision. While this approach can mobilise international support, it may also inadvertently reinforce images of dependency and vulnerability (Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazi, 2022). In contrast, a rights-Based framing situated refugees as holders of socio-economic rights under international and national legal frameworks. In

Kenya, media discourse surrounding refugee camps has historically been shaped by debates over security, encampment policies, and repatriation. Such narratives can overshadow discussions of socio-economic rights, including the right to work, access to education, and participation in economic life. A comparison of mainstream and grassroots media coverage indicates that refugee-led outlets tend to emphasise daily economic challenges and aspirations more prominently (as seen in coverage of refugees in Kenya and the impact of global refugee policies). This indicates that media framing is not monolithic but contested and multi-layered.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Based on the findings, the study draws the following conclusions: Dominance of Humanitarian and Security Framing: Kenyan media largely depict refugees in Kakuma as dependent victims or security threats rather than active socio-economic agents. This type of framing shapes public perceptions, often leading to sympathy without empowering public advocacy for refugees' socio-economic rights. Weak institutional commitment to refugee sensitisation: Kenyan media organisations lack sustainable strategies to educate the public about refugees' socio-economic rights. Kenyan media often focus mainly on donor-initiated programs rather than refugees' socio-economic rights within national communication frameworks.

Underrepresentation of Refugees' Socio-Economic Rights and Opportunities: Although refugees in Kakuma actively participate in trade, education, and entrepreneurship, the media in Kenya often provides less coverage of these positive activities. These aspects received minimal coverage. The media has rarely connected such initiatives to broader policy or human rights frameworks.

Need for Rights-Based and Developmental-oriented Journalism: The study concludes that adopting a rights-based framing approach could significantly improve the visibility of refugees' contributions and promote social inclusion among refugees and host communities. Balanced reporting can help shift

national narratives from dependency to empowerment of refugees' livelihoods.

Recommendations: Journalists should adopt a rights-based approach to reporting on refugees, framing stories around empowerment, inclusion, and human rights rather than focusing solely on humanitarian needs or security threats. Media in Kenya should enhance training and capacity-building by collaborating with organisations such as UNHCR to equip journalists with knowledge of refugee law, socio-economic rights, and ethical reporting practices, thereby enabling informed and sensitive storytelling. It is also essential to increase refugee participation in media narratives by including their voices directly in news stories, allowing them to present their own experiences and perspectives. Media outlets should invest in long-form journalism and feature reporting, allocating space for documentaries, investigative series, and feature stories that explore refugee livelihoods and integration, moving beyond episodic event coverage.

Policymakers and humanitarian agencies should develop national communication strategies for refugee inclusion, with the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) and the Ministry of Information working alongside media councils to promote accurate, rights-based reporting on refugee issues. Strengthening partnerships with local media houses is also crucial, with UNHCR, NGOs, and government agencies collaborating with journalists through fellowships, grants, and joint campaigns that highlight refugees' socio-economic contributions. Furthermore, humanitarian agencies and government departments should facilitate access to accurate, timely, and accessible data for journalists covering refugee-related stories, thereby enhancing the depth and accuracy of reporting on refugees' socio-economic rights.

For effective implementation, a multi-stakeholder task force including government agencies, media regulators, journalists' associations, and refugee representatives should be established to design and oversee the strategy. Clear editorial guidelines and toolkits for journalists reporting on refugee issues,

aligned with human rights standards, should be developed, alongside regular training workshops, fellowships, and capacity-building programs for media practitioners. Refugee inclusion messaging should also be integrated into national public awareness campaigns across radio, television, and digital platforms.

Monitoring and evaluation should be strengthened by defining measurable indicators, such as the number of trained journalists, the frequency of rights-based refugee coverage, and the reduction of misinformation incidents. Periodic media content analysis should assess the tone, accuracy, and framing of refugee-related reporting, while feedback mechanisms, such as public complaints channels or media review panels, should address harmful or misleading coverage. Annual progress reports should

be published to ensure transparency and accountability.

Future research should focus on comparative studies of media representation in camps such as Kakuma and Dadaab to identify regional differences and national trends. Studies assessing how Kenyan audiences interpret refugee news coverage and how framing influences public attitudes towards refugees are also recommended. Longitudinal research could track how refugee representation evolves over time in relation to Kenya's changing refugee policies and global migration trends. Additionally, analysing digital media is important for understanding how social media and online journalism influence refugee narratives, advocacy, and community engagement in Kenya.

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