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Conflict, drought, and displacement: determinants of return intentions among South Sudanese refugees

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Abstract

Refugees' return decisions are shaped by past trauma, present conditions, and future aspirations. This study examines how pre-flight reasons and exile circumstances influence return intentions and timing among South Sudanese refugees. Using UNHCR's 2019 Regional Intention Survey for 6,547 households across six asylum countries, the analysis develops an integrated framework linking pre-displacement experiences, host-country contexts, and individual vulnerabilities. Multinomial and binary logit models reveal that displacement drivers create durable path dependencies: refugees fleeing generalised violence show higher return propensity, while those experiencing targeted persecution face persistent barriers even amid improved security. Drought-displaced refugees remain undecided. Host-country policies significantly shape outcomes: progressive regimes like Uganda reduce the likelihood of return by facilitating local integration, while restrictive environments like Ethiopia act as push factors. Exile duration introduces non-linear dynamics, with return intentions peaking at 4–6 years before declining as exile capital accumulates. Heterogeneity emerges by pre-flight occupation, gender, and legal status. Agricultural workers demonstrate strong short-term return intentions, whereas professionals delay or forgo return. Legal documentation reduces return intentions by enhancing integration prospects.

Keywords Return intentions, Forced displacement, South Sudanese refugees, Host-country policies, Multinomial logit

JEL codes J61, F22, Q54, D74

Introduction

The drivers and implications of refugee return remain among the most complex challenges in forced migration studies. Unlike voluntary migration, repatriation decisions are shaped by traumatic displacement histories, security conditions in both host and origin countries, and uncertain livelihood prospects (Alrababah et al., 2020). These decisions are further complicated by protracted displacement crises, where exile often exceeds a decade, reshaping refugees' identities and connections to home (Ehrkamp et al., 2018; Marlowe, 2017; Stefanovic et al., 2015). South Sudan exemplifies these complexities.

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Despite multiple peace agreements and organised repatriation efforts, spontaneous return rates remain low (Eidelson & Horn, 2008; Macdonald & Porter, 2021; O'Byrne & Ogeno, 2021), revealing limitations of traditional repatriation models that overlook long-term psychological and socioeconomic transformations (Ghosn et al., 2021; Posselt et al., 2019).

As of 2024, over 2.3 million South Sudanese remain displaced, making this one of Africa's largest refugee situations. The country's trajectory from post-independence hope to recurring conflict has produced distinct displaced cohorts with different return perspectives (Macdonald & Porter, 2021; Verwimp & Maystadt, 2015). Those fleeing ethnic violence face different considerations than those displaced by generalised insecurity or climate-related livelihood collapse (Admasu, 2021; Gerver, 2018). Adding complexity, refugees are hosted across countries with vastly different asylum policies, from Uganda's progressive model to Sudan's more restrictive environment, shaping adaptation and return outlooks in divergent ways (Bakhit, 2024; World Bank Group, 2016).

The decision to flee and the decision to return are not symmetrical. Flight occurs under immediate threat, while return involves long-term reflection during which refugees acquire new skills, build relationships, and develop aspirations (Von Lersner et al., 2008; Yu, 2016). Many develop *exile capital*, which encompasses language abilities, education, or work experience that may be non-transferable to their origin country (Árendás et al., 2022; Efendi et al., 2021). The more successful refugees become in exile, the harder return becomes, as reintegration may require sacrificing what they have gained (Dadush, 2018; Verwimp & Maystadt, 2015). Prolonged displacement can also lead to identity shifts, where returning no longer aligns with their transformed sense of self (De Haas, 2021; Marlowe, 2017).

Long-term displacement has created new demographic realities, including generations born and raised in exile with no direct experience of their homeland (Abbink, 2005; Ahrens & King, 2023; Bloch, 2020). Host country policies vary widely: Uganda grants land and work rights, while Kenya maintains an encampment-based model (O'Byrne & Ogeno, 2021). These differences provide valuable cross-contextual variation for examining how asylum regimes influence refugees' long-term decisions (Bellino & the Kakuma Youth Research Group, 2018; Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021). South Sudanese displacement thus presents a uniquely rich context for understanding return decision-making in protracted refugee settings (Árendás et al., 2022; Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011).

Return intentions vary significantly by flight reason, gender, age, education, and exile duration (Alrababah et al., 2023; Van Tubergen et al., 2024). Women often weigh safety, healthcare, and children's schooling more heavily (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Elderly refugees may feel stronger emotional ties to their home but face practical constraints. More educated refugees are likelier to seek resettlement elsewhere. Importantly, return interest peaks in the middle phase of exile and declines significantly afterwards (Muggeridge & Doná, 2006). These patterns challenge assumptions of refugee uniformity and underscore the need for differentiated, context-sensitive return policies (Marlowe, 2017; Van Tubergen et al., 2024).

Existing research tends to fall into two camps: macro-level analyses focused on political conditions, and micro-level studies emphasising refugee narratives and identity (Belloni, 2019; Dustmann et al., 2017; McConnachie, 2022). Few studies integrate these approaches or apply them systematically to African contexts (Ahrens & King, 2023).

Moreover, most rely on single-country data, limiting cross-contextual comparisons (Fasani et al., 2022; Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022). This study addresses these gaps by drawing on a large, cross-sectional dataset of South Sudanese refugees across multiple countries and displacement durations, enabling comparative analysis of how flight reasons, host-country environments, and exile duration jointly shape return intentions.

This study makes several novel contributions. First, it develops an integrated framework that links pre-flight trauma, host-country contexts, and future aspirations, a combination rarely combined in prior studies. Second, it leverages a unique multi-country dataset capturing cross-national variation in asylum regimes and exile duration. Third, it introduces temporal analysis distinguishing short-, medium-, and long-term exile populations. Fourth, it examines how intersecting vulnerabilities (gender, age, disability) create differential patterns in return considerations. Combining rigorous analysis of 6,587 refugee households with targeted qualitative insights provides generalizable patterns and a nuanced understanding of decision-making processes. These contributions have direct policy relevance for designing repatriation programs that account for refugees' diverse experiences and evolving perspectives.

Using UNHCR's 2019 Regional Intention Survey across six asylum countries, this study finds that pre-flight displacement drivers and host-country contexts significantly shape return intentions and timing. Refugees fleeing generalised violence show higher return propensity, while those experiencing targeted persecution exhibit persistent barriers even amid improved security. Drought-displaced refugees exhibit lower return intentions and are more likely to be undecided. Progressive asylum regimes reduce the likelihood of return by facilitating local integration, while restrictive environments act as push factors. Exile duration introduces non-linear dynamics, with return intentions peaking at 4–6 years before sharply declining. Legal documentation reduces return intentions by enhancing integration prospects.

Literature review

Theory

Return intentions among refugees, particularly in protracted displacement settings, can be understood through structuration theory, the capability-aspiration framework, and the concept of exile capital. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) posits that refugees are not merely passive victims but active agents navigating complex political, social, and institutional environments. Return decisions are continually renegotiated through interactions with host communities, aid agencies, and evolving conditions in countries of origin (Bakewell, 2010; Healey, 2006). The capability-aspiration framework (Carling, 2002) distinguishes between the desire to return and the actual ability to do so, constrained by legal status, financial resources, and perceived safety. This helps explain why intentions often decline over time: the longer refugees remain in exile, the more they build lives that make return practically and psychologically difficult (Carling & Erdal, 2014; Ghosn et al., 2021).

Exile capital (Bakewell, 2008), the social, educational, and professional resources acquired in exile, further complicate return decisions. These assets are often context-specific and may not transfer to countries of origin. Paradoxically, the more successful refugees become in exile, the less likely they are to repatriate, challenging traditional views of return as the natural endpoint of displacement (Harima et al., 2021; Hunkler et

al., 2022). Together, these frameworks emphasise how structural constraints, individual agency, and accumulated capital shape evolving return intentions. In the South Sudanese context, these theories help explain why return remains limited despite repeated peace efforts.

Empirics

South Sudan's displacement crisis represents one of Africa's most entrenched refugee situations. Return intentions are not fixed but evolve through dynamic interactions involving flight motivations, host-country conditions, and exile duration (Macdonald & Porter, 2021; Schiltz et al., 2019). A critical finding is path dependency created by displacement reasons (Gerver, 2018). Refugees fleeing targeted violence or persecution display a distinctly different repatriation calculus than those displaced by generalised violence, environmental disasters, or economic adversity (O'Byrne & Ogeno, 2021). Studies indicate that individuals who experienced personalised trauma exhibit return intentions 20–30% lower, even where peace agreements exist (Hovil, 2010; Komakech & Garimoi Orach, 2022). Conversely, those displaced by hunger or drought show greater flexibility, indicating willingness to return if livelihood conditions improve.

Host-country context plays a crucial role in shaping return trajectories (Betts et al., 2017). Refugees in Uganda's settlements, which emphasise self-reliance through economic integration, often develop strong local attachments that diminish the urgency of return, despite persistent emotional ties to South Sudan (Ahimbisibwe, 2019; World Bank Group, 2016). In Sudan's urban areas, refugees express intentions to return but face practical barriers, such as difficulties with documentation (Marlowe, 2017). In Kenya, the restrictive encampment system has led educated refugees to increasingly opt for third-country resettlement rather than repatriation (Bakewell & Bonfiglio, 2013). These differing asylum regimes illustrate how national policies structure refugees' long-term adaptation strategies, either facilitating or constraining the possibility of return.

Temporal dimensions reveal how refugee outlooks shift over time. During initial displacement, return intentions may peak as refugees maintain transnational connections. However, as children enter host-country schools, livelihoods become established, and social networks solidify, return intentions decline (Oliver & Boyle, 2020). This decline is particularly pronounced among younger refugees, who increasingly perceive host countries as home (Paul et al., 2022), and is even more evident for children born in exile who lack direct homeland experience. Gender intersects powerfully with these dynamics. Women face compounded vulnerabilities upon repatriation (Admasu, 2021), with safety concerns and children's services dominating their considerations (Hovil & Lomo, 2015). Widows and single mothers face additional barriers, often, depending on camp-based support systems unavailable upon return.

Pre-flight occupation is strongly associated with return intentions, with distinct patterns across occupational groups. From a capability-aspiration perspective (Carling, 2002), occupation shapes both the desire to return and the practical ability to do so. Agricultural workers exhibit higher return propensity, consistent with land access constraints and seasonal livelihood cycles (Verwimp & Maystadt, 2015). Their assets are place-specific and non-transferable, creating, in structuration theory's terms, an "anchored" return calculus (Giddens, 1984). In contrast, individuals with transferable professional skills are more likely to delay return, potentially reflecting opportunities for

skill accumulation or secondary migration (Omata, 2013). For these refugees, exile capital (Bakewell, 2008) is portable and may increase in value with longer host-country stay. Those without formal employment prior to displacement show elevated return intentions, which may reflect economic exclusion in host countries that makes return a more viable option (Belloni, 2019). These patterns suggest substantial heterogeneity in return decision-making by livelihood background and illustrate how pre-displacement endowments interact with exile conditions to shape repatriation horizons.

Paradoxically, refugees who achieve significant economic success in exile encounter the most substantial barriers to return (Bakewell, 2008). Omata and Gidron (2025) show that “exile capital” skills, networks, and urban livelihoods can strongly disincentivise return, as these assets may not transfer to South Sudan. The more embedded and successful refugees become, the more difficult repatriation becomes without sacrificing valuable resources. O’Byrne and Ogeno (2021) document “pragmatic mobilities”, diverse, irregular, multilateral movements complicating binary return/stay frameworks. Macdonald and Porter (2021) assert that the conceptualisation of return must be re-examined in light of these flexible, multi-sited realities. Emerging research highlights how digital connectivity reshapes traditional notions of return. Younger refugees maintain real-time, cross-border connections with South Sudan through social media and mobile money networks, creating what scholars term “virtual return.” These digital practices allow refugees to remain connected to their homeland and negotiate hybrid identities, further complicating return and staying decisions (Marlowe, 2017; O’Byrne & Ogeno, 2021).

Conceptual framework

This section presents a conceptual framework to analyse the relationship between displacement experiences and return intentions among South Sudanese refugees. Drawing on theories of forced migration, social adaptation, and transnationalism, the framework demonstrates how displacement drivers, host country conditions, and exile duration collectively influence return decisions (Alrababah et al., 2023). Particular attention is given to intersecting vulnerabilities, including gender, age, and disability status, that create differential patterns of return consideration across refugee populations (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Figure 1 presents this conceptual framework, illustrating the pathways from displacement drivers through host-country contexts to return intentions and timing outcomes.

Displacement decisions emerge from complex interactions between conflict dynamics, livelihood pressures, and environmental factors. Conflict-induced forced migration is shaped by multifaceted drivers (Sarzin, 2017), while environmental pressures increasingly intersect with violent conflict, forming multi-causal displacement trajectories (Morales-Muñoz et al., 2020). Refugees who experience direct and targeted violence possess fundamentally different motivations and constraints in their return calculus compared to those displaced by generalised insecurity or environmental stressors (Ghosn et al., 2021). The specific type of displacement experience establishes psychological and material boundaries that influence intentions even years after initial flight (Bogic et al., 2015).

Return intentions are assessed along three key dimensions: plan, place, and timing. The plan reflects refugees’ willingness to return, based on perceptions of security and

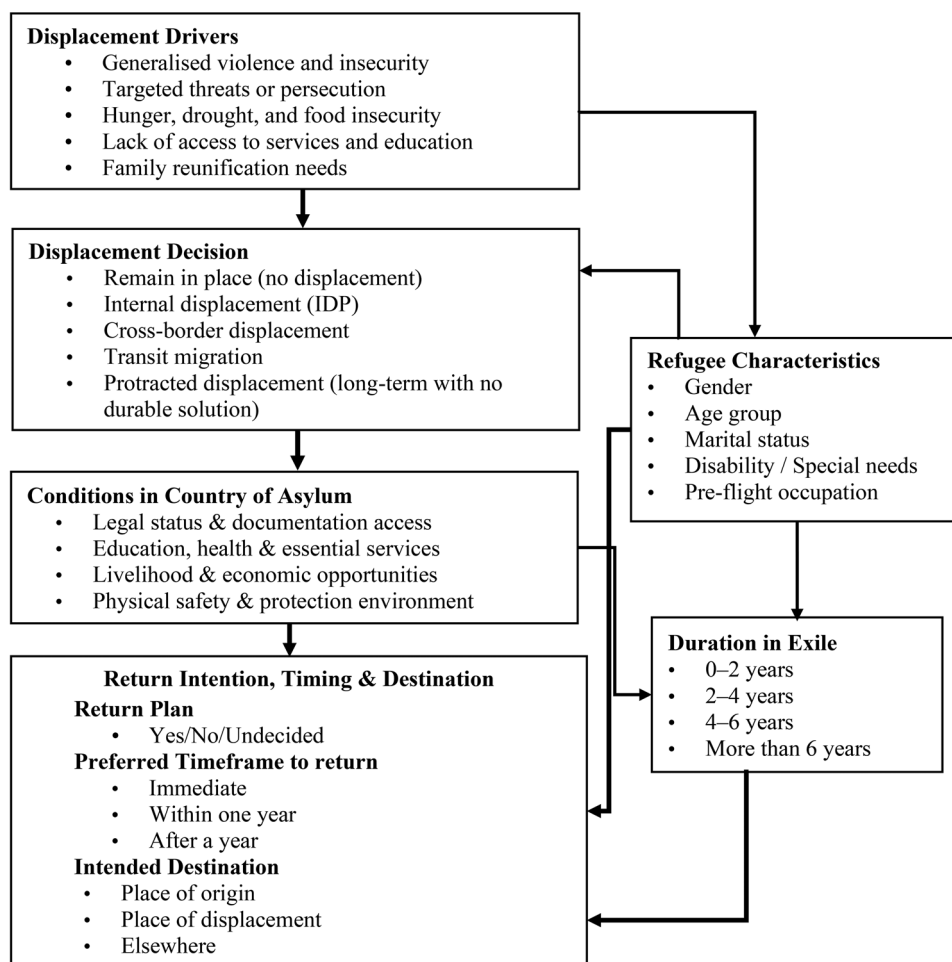


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

livelihood prospects. Place indicates the intended destination. Timing captures whether return plans are immediate (within 12 months), medium-term (1–3 years), or indefinite. Refugees with disabilities or chronic illnesses often express strong emotional ties to their homeland while facing practical barriers to physical return (Abbas et al., 2018). Gender consistently mediates return intentions: female refugees frequently prioritise children's safety and access to education, demanding more robust assurances about social service restoration than their male counterparts (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Youth and generational dynamics also produce differing temporal trajectories and aspirations within family units (Doná & Veale, 2011).

The framework maps key drivers of displacement and adaptation during exile, distinguishing among short-, medium-, and long-term displacement experiences, and linking them to differential return and settlement outcomes. It underscores how gender, age, and disability status moderate these trajectories (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Based on this framework, the following hypotheses are proposed. Refugees displaced by generalised violence (H1) are more likely to express a desire to return than those fleeing targeted persecution or environmental disasters. Refugees in host countries with progressive asylum policies (H2) are expected to exhibit lower return intentions than those in restrictive regimes. Those in prolonged exile (H3) are less likely to return than

recently displaced refugees. Refugees with special needs (H4) are more likely to express an intention to return, despite facing greater barriers. Female refugees (H5) are more likely than males to express a desire to return when conditions in their country of origin are perceived as stable. Finally, livelihood type influences return timing (H6): agricultural workers (H6a) are likely to prioritise immediate return, informal workers (H6b) are more likely to stay longer, and students (H6c) are inclined to return upon completing their studies.

Data and methodology

This study draws on data from the Regional Intention Survey of South Sudanese Refugees conducted by UNHCR in 2019 across six asylum countries: Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda, with a total sample of 6,547 refugee households (UNHCR, 2019a). The survey captures demographic characteristics, displacement histories, living conditions, and future intentions regarding repatriation, local integration, or resettlement. Sample distribution is as follows: Kenya (57.25%), Uganda (10.52%), DRC (10.66%), Ethiopia (9.84%), CAR (8.57%), and Sudan (3.16%). The sample is not geographically representative of the overall refugee population, with refugees in Kenya overrepresented and those in some other countries, such as Uganda, underrepresented.

The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: displacement characteristics, return intentions, and vulnerability factors. Displacement characteristics encompass the reasons for displacement (generalised violence, home attacks, individual targeting, hunger/drought, education, family reunification, persecution, security concerns), the duration of displacement, and the host-country context. Return intentions are measured through categorical variables (plan to return, remain, or undecided) and temporal measures (within 12 months, after 12 months, or no plans). Vulnerability factors include gender, age, physical and sensory disabilities, documentation status, and pre-displacement occupations.

Based on theories of forced migration, return intentions and timing are modelled as functions of pre-flight experiences, host-country conditions, and temporal factors. The framework integrates structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and the capability-aspiration framework (Carling, 2002), operationalised through three dimensions: (1) initial displacement drivers, (2) current conditions (security, drought, host-country policies), and (3) individual vulnerabilities (gender, age, disability, documentation).

To examine determinants of return intentions, a multinomial logit model is estimated, with the outcome variable Y_i (plan_to_return) taking three unordered categories: “No”, “Yes”, and “Undecided.” The log odds of selecting outcome $j \in \{\text{yes, undecided}\}$, relative to the reference outcome “No” are modelled as:

$$\log \left(\frac{P(Y_i = j)}{P(Y_i = 0)} \right) = \alpha_0^{(j)} + \alpha_1^{(j)} \text{Doc}_i + \alpha_2^{(j)} (\text{Doc}_i \times \text{Male}_i) + \sum_{k=3}^{19} \alpha_k^{(j)} V_{ki} + \epsilon_i^{(j)} \quad (1)$$

where Doc_i indicates documentation status, the interaction term $(\text{Doc}_i \times \text{Male}_i)$ tests gender differences, and V_{ki} captures vulnerability indicators including disability, age, and gender-specific risks.

$$\log \left(\frac{P(Y_i = j)}{P(Y_i = 0)} \right) = \beta_0^{(j)} + \beta_1^{(j)} R_i + \beta_2^{(j)} S_i + \beta_3^{(j)} (R_i \times S_i) + \beta_4^{(j)} H_i + X_i' \gamma^{(j)} + \eta_i^{(j)} \quad (2)$$

Here, R_i represents displacement reasons (generalised violence, targeted persecution, etc.), S_i captures current security assessments, the interaction term $(R_i \times S_i)$ tests whether trauma effects persist despite improved conditions, and H_i measures host-country push factors.

To analyse host-country contexts and exile duration:

$$\log \left(\frac{P(Y_i = j)}{P(Y_i = No)} \right) = \gamma_0^{(j)} + \gamma_1^{(j)} C_i + \gamma_2^{(j)} D_i + \gamma_3^{(j)} X_i + \nu_i^{(j)} \quad (3)$$

where C_i comprises host-country dummies (Uganda, Sudan, etc.) with DRC as reference, D_i encodes exile duration categories, and X_i controls for marital status and gender.

For return timing, a parallel specification is estimated:

$$\log \left(\frac{P(T_i = k)}{P(T_i = Undecided)} \right) = \delta_0^{(k)} + \delta_1^{(k)} Doc_i + \sum_{m=2}^{18} \delta_m^{(k)} V_{mi} + \xi_i^{(k)} \quad (4)$$

where $\delta_1^{(k)}$ measures how documentation status affects timing decisions, and V_{mi} captures vulnerability factors.

$$\log \left(\frac{P(T_i = k)}{P(T_i = Undecided)} \right) = \theta_0^{(k)} + \theta_1^{(k)} R_i + \theta_2^{(k)} S_i + \theta_3^{(k)} (R_i \times S_i) + \xi_i^{(k)} \quad (5)$$

Model (5) extends the analysis to timing outcomes, where $\theta_1^{(k)}$ coefficients indicate whether displacement reasons lead to faster or delayed returns, and $\theta_3^{(k)}$ reveals context-dependent effects.

To ensure robustness, models are re-estimated using the UNHCR Regional Intentions Survey of Sudanese and South Sudanese Refugees (2021/2022), validating findings across different time periods and displacement dynamics.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics

The regional distribution of South Sudanese refugees across major host countries reveals significant disparities in asylum contexts. Figure 2 shows that Uganda hosted the largest share of South Sudanese refugees, 1,380,000 in 2019 and 1,010,109 in 2025, followed by Sudan (1,007,000 to 617,698), Ethiopia (485,000 to 437,439), Kenya (140,000 to 199,668), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (120,000 to 56,033). Uganda's dominant position is attributed to its progressive refugee policy framework, which grants refugees access to land for cultivation, freedom of movement, and opportunities for self-reliance (World Bank Group, 2016). The sharp decline in Sudan followed the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, which generated large-scale cross-border movements and return flows of South Sudanese refugees. In Uganda, refugee numbers declined alongside sustained spontaneous return movements to South Sudan following the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement, with UNHCR recording over one million cumulative spontaneous refugee returns by the end of 2023 (UNHCR, 2019, 2025). Ethiopia and Kenya continue to host sizeable refugee populations shaped by geographic proximity and relative stability, while the Democratic

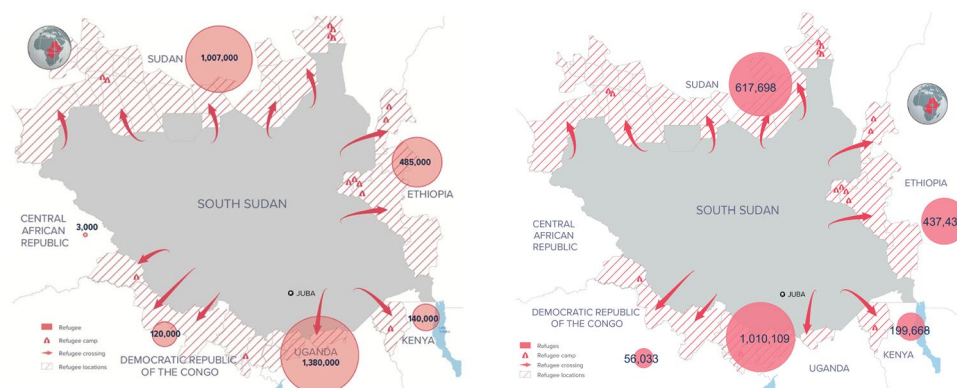


Fig. 2 Regional distribution of South Sudanese refugees in 2019 and 2025. Source: (UNHCR, 2019b); (UNHCR, 2025)

Republic of Congo remains the least preferred destination, underscoring how national policies and security conditions structure regional refugee distribution (Rugaza, 2022; Verwimp & Maystadt, 2015). As shown in Table A12, these countries operate under markedly different asylum regimes: Uganda's progressive self-reliance model, Kenya's restrictive encampment approach, Ethiopia's limited out-of-camp policy, Sudan's mixed urban-encampment system, and the limited formal frameworks in DRC and CAR, which provide the contextual variation for analysing how host-country policies shape return intentions.

Gender differences in return intentions are modest but evident. As shown in Figure A1, female respondents are slightly more likely to express an intention to return (48.0%) compared to males (45.7%), while males are more likely to report no intention to return (47.5% vs. 42.4%). These differences reflect gendered socio-economic roles in displacement contexts, where women's return decisions are often influenced by family responsibilities and social networks, whereas men's decisions are more closely tied to labour market opportunities in host countries (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Zorlu & Kooiman, 2019). Return intentions vary more substantially with the duration of exile. Figure 3 indicates that refugees displaced for shorter periods display relatively balanced intentions between returning and remaining. Among refugees displaced for 0–2 years, 48.5% intend to return, while return intentions peak at 54.7% among those displaced for 4–6 years. In contrast, only 18.1% of refugees who have been displaced for more than 6 years plan to return. This pattern is consistent with evidence that prolonged displacement strengthens socio-economic integration in host countries and reduces the feasibility and attractiveness of return (Ghosn et al., 2021; Macdonald & Porter, 2021; Omata, 2013).

Pre-flight occupation also plays an important role in shaping return intentions and expected timing. As illustrated in Fig. 4 and Fig. A2, individuals previously engaged in agriculture and professional occupations are more likely to plan a return, often within a shorter timeframe. Specifically, 52.7% of agricultural workers and 52.5% of professionals report an intention to return, compared to 45.4% of business owners and 41.7% of those with no formal occupation. This reflects the land-dependent nature of agriculture and the limited transferability of professional qualifications in host countries. Conversely, business owners and individuals without formal occupations exhibit lower return intentions and higher uncertainty, likely due to stronger economic anchoring and

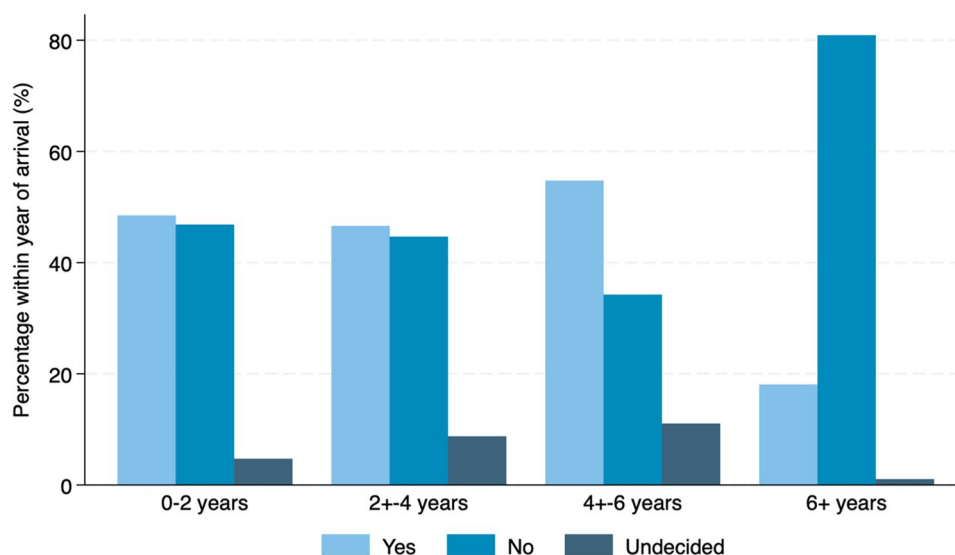


Fig. 3 Return intentions by duration of exile. Source: Own elaboration from UNHCR Regional Intention Survey (2019) data

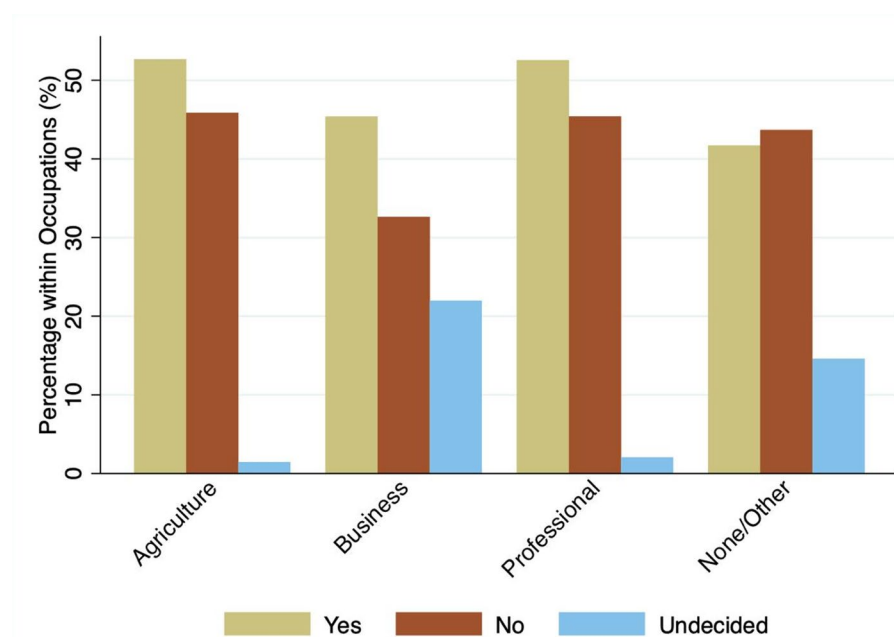


Fig. 4 Return intentions by pre-flight occupations.

more established livelihood opportunities in exile (Betts et al., 2017; Ghosn et al., 2021; Omata, 2013).

Special need status further constrains both return intentions and timing. Figure A3 shows that refugees without special needs are more likely to plan a return within a shorter period, whereas individuals with at least one special need disability, chronic illness, or caregiving responsibilities display lower return intentions and higher uncertainty. Among respondents without special needs, 54.1% intend to return, compared to 37.2% among those with at least one special need. Moreover, 68.8% of individuals

with special needs report either no plans or remain undecided. These vulnerabilities increase perceived risks and practical barriers to return, including access to healthcare, social support, and sustainable livelihoods (Bogic et al., 2015; Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022; Omata, 2013).

Empirical results and discussion

Determinants of return intentions

Multinomial logistic regression estimates reveal significant differences in return intentions based on reasons for fleeing. As shown in Fig. 5 and detailed in Table A2, refugees displaced by generalised violence are 14.4% points more likely to plan a return, while those whose homes were attacked show an even stronger inclination of 15.1% points. Conversely, refugees who experienced individual targeting are 14.8% points less likely to plan a return, highlighting how personal threats create durable barriers to return. Hunger- and drought-induced displacement produce a distinct pattern: individuals are 1.6% points less likely to return and 18.4% points more likely to remain undecided, suggesting environmental shocks foster prolonged uncertainty about repatriation.

The relationship between displacement drivers and return intentions further varies by social and security considerations. Refugees with family members in the asylum country are 13% points less likely to plan a return, underscoring how family networks prolong displacement. Paradoxically, those fleeing persecution show a 30.2% point higher likelihood of intending to return, which may reflect strong ethnic or political ties to the homeland despite risks. Meanwhile, improved security conditions do not signal stronger return intentions, indicating that refugees may await more durable guarantees before repatriating. These findings align with evidence from other post-conflict settings (Macdonald & Porter, 2021; Stefansson, 2006), demonstrating that return decisions are shaped by personal risk, family separation, and trust in stability.

The results further reveal that refugees citing education as a primary flight reason are 12.7% points more likely to plan a return, viewing displacement as temporary for academic purposes. This heterogeneity underscores the limitations of categorising displacement drivers without accounting for how refugees perceive their exile conditions. These

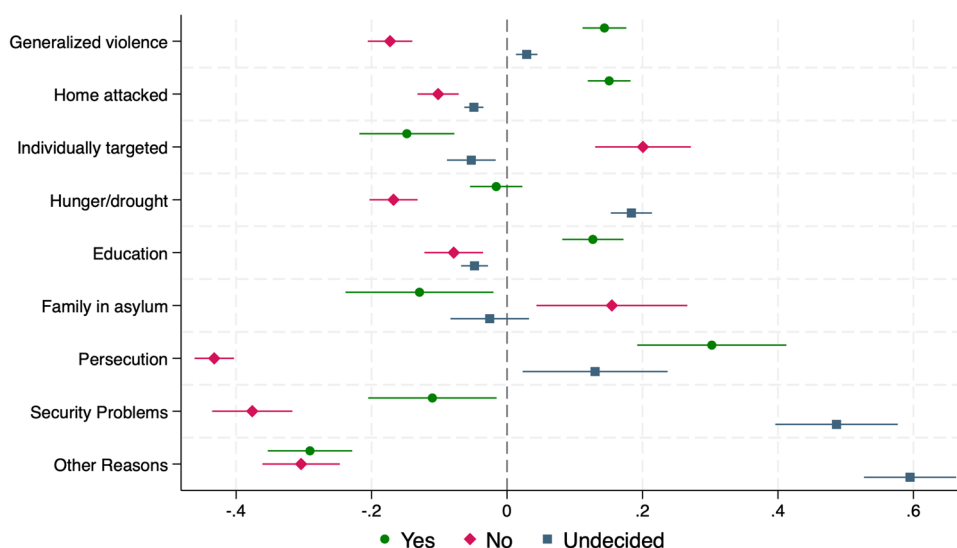


Fig. 5 Marginal effects of flight reasons on return intentions with 95% confidence intervals

patterns align with recent studies demonstrating that refugees' decision-making reflects complex, context-specific calculations beyond simple push-pull frameworks (Alrababah et al., 2023).

As shown in Table 1, return intentions are also determined by pre-flight occupation. Refugees previously employed in education exhibit the highest probability of planning to return (29.9% points higher), reflecting transferable skills and opportunities to contribute to post-conflict reconstruction (Macdonald & Porter, 2021). Those with agricultural backgrounds are 19.1% points more likely to intend to return, driven by seasonally dependent livelihoods and challenges accessing land in host countries (Ghosn et al., 2021; Omata, 2013). Respondents formerly engaged in housekeeping show 24.0% points higher return intentions, reflecting low transferability of informal skills and stronger incentives to rejoin familiar social networks.

Conversely, business owners display a 15.7% point higher likelihood of returning, with lower undecided rates, highlighting challenges in reestablishing enterprises after displacement. Public sector employees exhibit an 11.5% point higher probability of intending to return but face a 7.0% point higher likelihood of remaining undecided, suggesting uncertainty about formal employment reintegration. Respondents with no pre-flight occupation remain moderately likely to return (18.4% points), yet 13.7% points are more likely to be undecided, indicating that social or familial drivers motivate return even without formal skills. These results underscore the need for occupation-sensitive reintegration policies.

Temporal dynamics of return (Return timing)

Beyond whether refugees intend to return, the timing of repatriation reveals important variation in how displacement drivers shape return horizons, distinguishing between short-term (within 12 months), medium/long-term (after 12 months), and undecided plans. As shown in Table 2, temporal planning for repatriation exhibits clear stratification across short-term (within 12 months), medium/long-term (after 12 months), and undecided horizons. Refugees subjected to home-specific violence exhibit urgent short-term return intentions (8% points higher), driven by what Stefansson (2006) terms the asset reclamation imperative, the need to rebuild destroyed property swiftly. Victims of individualised targeting also prioritise short-term return, suggesting personalised harm creates resolvable grievances that accelerate planning (Belloni, 2019). In contrast, those fleeing persecution show no short-term return plans (15.2% points lower), instead remaining undecided, reflecting political temporality where return is suspended pending justice for past atrocities.

Table 1 Estimated marginal effects of pre-flight occupational status on return intentions

Variables	Plan to Return		
	Yes	No	Undecided
Agriculture	0.191*** (0.015)	-0.036** (0.016)	-0.155*** (0.007)
Business	0.157*** (0.025)	-0.061** (0.025)	-0.096*** (0.004)
Education	0.299*** (0.035)	-0.217*** (0.034)	-0.082*** (0.006)
Public Sector	0.115** (0.045)	-0.045 (0.045)	-0.070*** (0.008)
Housekeeping	0.240*** (0.038)	-0.328*** (0.034)	0.088*** (0.018)
Student	0.157*** (0.028)	-0.185*** (0.027)	0.028*** (0.010)
None	0.184*** (0.017)	-0.047*** (0.017)	-0.137*** (0.005)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Marginal effects shown. Full regression results in Table A8

Table 2 Estimated marginal effects of flight reasons on return timing

Variables	Return Time		
	0–12 months	12 months +	No Plans/Undecided
Generalised Violence	-0.009(0.011)	-0.026**(0.011)	0.017(0.015)
Home Attacked	0.080*** (0.012)	-0.010(0.010)	-0.070*** (0.014)
Individually Targeted	-0.060*** (0.021)	-0.055*** (0.010)	0.115*** (0.022)
Hunger/Drought	-0.053*** (0.012)	-0.034*** (0.009)	0.087*** (0.014)
Education	0.135*** (0.020)	-0.004(0.012)	-0.131*** (0.021)
Family Members	-0.012(0.038)	0.026(0.035)	-0.014(0.048)
Persecution	-0.152*** (0.004)	-0.057*** (0.019)	0.209*** (0.019)
Livelihood Security	-0.139*** (0.014)	-0.055*** (0.015)	0.194*** (0.020)
Other	-0.155*** (0.004)	0.057*** (0.011)	0.212*** (0.011)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Marginal effects shown. Full regression results in Table 6

Drought-displaced refugees show lower short-term return intentions (a 5.3%-point decrease), reflecting the structural and prolonged nature of environmental displacement. Unlike conflict-driven displacement, where return may follow the cessation of violence, drought-induced migration is tied to deep ecological deterioration that cannot be rapidly reversed. As Ebi & Otmani Del Barrio (2017) and Lal (2023) argue, the viability of returns for environmentally displaced populations depends on large-scale ecological rehabilitation and long-term climate adaptation.

Mid/long-term planning emerges for refugees accumulating portable capital, yet remains suppressed by systemic violence. Education-motivated refugees deprioritise mid/long-term returns (0.4% points lower), strategically treating displacement as a fixed-duration phase for skill acquisition, a phenomenon Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) call academic deferral. Meanwhile, refugees citing generalised violence have the lowest likelihood (2.6% points) of return after 12 months, as they seek to move home once violence ends. Non-return and indecision are most prevalent when displacement drivers create irreversible thresholds. Drought-displaced refugees are 8.7% points more likely to report indecision, reflecting ecological irreversibility (Myers, 2002). Persecution survivors exhibit a 20.9%-point higher likelihood of indecision, illustrating political irreparability (Buxton, 2023), in which the absence of transformative justice makes return unconscionable. Even among those displaced by generalised violence, there is a 1.7% point increase in indecision, suggesting widespread trauma can erode temporal agency (De C. Williams & Hughes, 2020). These variations demand driver-specific temporalities: drought-affected populations require ecological rehabilitation, persecution survivors need credible justice, and education-motivated refugees benefit from reintegration pathways preserving academic capital.

As Table 3 illustrates, refugees' pre-flight livelihoods significantly influence temporal return planning. Refugees with agricultural occupations demonstrate a striking 16.9%-point higher likelihood of short-term return planning. As Verwimp and Maystadt (2015) establish, this reflects the "agrarian imperative," in which land access and seasonal cycles override security concerns, a pattern validated by Macdonald and Porter's (2021) fieldwork documenting South Sudanese farmers' willingness to risk unsafe returns for harvests. The 24.6%-point lower likelihood of being undecided among agricultural workers further supports Stefansson's (2006) theory of "asset-anchored return," whereby attachment to productive assets and land encourages more definite return planning.

Table 3 Marginal effects of pre-flight occupational status on return timing outcomes

Variables	Return Time		
	0–12 months	12 months +	No Plans/Undecided
Agriculture	0.169*** (0.016)	0.078*** (0.013)	-0.246*** (0.016)
Business	0.164*** (0.030)	0.084*** (0.025)	-0.248*** (0.028)
Education	0.196*** (0.051)	0.153*** (0.047)	-0.350*** (0.043)
Public Sector	0.127** (0.052)	0.067 (0.043)	-0.194*** (0.051)
Housekeeping	-0.085** (0.037)	-0.015 (0.034)	0.100** (0.047)
Student	-0.088*** (0.020)	0.052* (0.027)	0.037 (0.031)
None	0.146*** (0.020)	0.029** (0.014)	-0.175*** (0.019)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Marginal effects shown. Full regression results in Table A8

Refugees without pre-flight occupations have a counterintuitive 14.6% point higher likelihood of a short-term return despite uncertain prospects. Belloni's (2019) Eritrean case studies explain this "return against reason" as economic exclusion, making precarious repatriation seem rational. In contrast, informal sector workers show 10% points higher indecision, exemplifying how informal work's structural vulnerabilities trap refugees in temporal limbo (Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022). Skilled professionals reveal different temporalities, with education workers showing 15.3% points higher medium/long-term return intentions, supporting De Haas' (2021) transnational hedging theory, where portable skills enable returns timed to post-conflict reconstruction. Pre-flight students exhibit 8.8% points lower short-term return intentions but 5.2% points higher medium/long-term preference, aligning with Dahya and Dryden-Peterson's (2017) finding that refugees prioritise academic continuity before repatriating.

Living conditions in host countries also significantly impact return decisions. Refugees reporting problems in host communities show a 6.21 log-odds increase in the likelihood of return, suggesting that dissatisfaction accelerates repatriation plans (Milner, 2009). Family reunification needs raise return intentions by 3.99 log-odds, reaffirming the influence of kinship obligations (Macdonald & Porter, 2021; Omata, 2013). Return decisions are shaped by comparative assessments of perceived safety at home and of difficulties in host countries, rather than by isolated push-pull factors. Perceived security improvements also influence return timing (Table 4). Refugees perceiving enhanced safety exhibit strong inclinations toward both short-term (2.72 log-odds) and long-term (2.23 log-odds) returns. The interaction between improved security and generalised violence displacement does not significantly alter timing, indicating that while security perceptions are paramount, return immediacy may depend on additional contextual factors.

Host-country problems exert differentiated effects on return timing, increasing short-term (1.62 log-odds) and medium/long-term (1.82 log-odds) returns, underscoring how unfavourable environments accelerate repatriation. Family reunification has a stronger influence on short-term plans (0.68 log-odds), emphasising kinship as an immediate motivator for return (Macdonald & Porter, 2021; O'Byrne & Ogeno, 2021).

Intended destination and migration pathways

Where refugees intend to go is as important as whether and when they return. Future destinations include returning to the place of origin, remaining in the place of displacement, moving to a third country, or having no migration plans. This section examines how documentation status, gender, age, and vulnerability shape these destination

Table 4 Multinomial logit estimates of flight reasons and current conditions on return timing

Variables	Return Time to SSD (Base Outcome – No plans/Undecided)			
	0–12 months	12 months +	0–12 months	12 months +
Improved security			2.724*** (0.159)	2.225*** (0.194)
Problems in host country			1.621*** (0.187)	1.823*** (0.214)
Family reunification			0.676*** (0.099)	0.125 (0.137)
Improved security # Generalised violence			-0.281 (0.186)	0.123 (0.230)
Generalised violence	0.035 (0.093)	-0.342** (0.140)	-0.262* (0.153)	-0.902*** (0.196)
Home attacked	0.594*** (0.087)	-0.035 (0.135)	0.185* (0.098)	-0.439*** (0.141)
Individually targeted	-0.660*** (0.247)	-1.387*** (0.426)	-0.270 (0.271)	-1.176*** (0.437)
Hunger/Drought	-0.537*** (0.132)	-0.675*** (0.188)	-0.168 (0.149)	-0.318 (0.199)
Education	0.883*** (0.111)	0.149 (0.180)	0.833*** (0.129)	0.055 (0.192)
Family in host country	-0.062 (0.329)	0.315 (0.391)	0.190 (0.376)	0.544 (0.416)
Persecution	-15.329 (879.9)	-1.670 (1.023)	-15.316 (1255.5)	-1.205 (1.028)
Security issue	-2.706*** (1.007)	-1.518** (0.718)	-1.462 (1.010)	-0.372 (0.724)
Other	-15.576 (427.7)	-1.583*** (0.509)	-14.999 (616.6)	-0.439 (0.517)
_cons	-1.817*** (0.099)	-1.936*** (0.147)	-2.864*** (0.142)	-2.535*** (0.180)
Number of obs.	6,587	6,587	6,587	6,587

Notes. Values in parentheses are robust standard errors. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 5 Predicted probabilities of intended destination by documentation status and gender

Variables	Where to return			
	No return	Elsewhere	Place of Displacement	Place Of Origin
No Document	0.463*** (0.008)	0.018*** (0.002)	0.048*** (0.003)	0.470*** (0.008)
Has Document	0.649*** (0.012)	0.027*** (0.004)	0.023*** (0.004)	0.301*** (0.011)
Female	0.512*** (0.008)	0.018*** (0.002)	0.042*** (0.003)	0.427*** (0.008)
Male	0.526*** (0.011)	0.025*** (0.003)	0.039*** (0.004)	0.410*** (0.011)
No Document##Female	0.450*** (0.010)	0.016*** (0.002)	0.050*** (0.004)	0.484*** (0.010)
No Document##Male	0.486*** (0.014)	0.022*** (0.004)	0.045*** (0.006)	0.447*** (0.014)
Has Document##Female	0.664*** (0.016)	0.023*** (0.005)	0.022*** (0.005)	0.290*** (0.015)
Has Document##Male	0.621*** (0.018)	0.033*** (0.006)	0.025*** (0.006)	0.320*** (0.017)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Predicted probabilities shown. Full regression results in Table A8. "Documentation" refers to refugee identity cards or proof of registration issued by host country authorities, which affect access to services, work authorisation, and freedom of movement

choices. Table 5 reveals a striking divergence in return intentions by legal documentation status, with particularly pronounced effects among women. The predicted probability of planning no return is 64.9 per cent for documented refugees, compared to 46.3 per cent for undocumented refugees. This pattern aligns with research demonstrating that secure legal status facilitates local integration by improving access to work, education, and protection, and by reducing the need for repatriation (Harild et al., 2015; Long, 2013). Gender-disaggregated analysis reveals that documentation effects are more pronounced among women: the predicted probability of planning no return is 21.4% points higher for documented women compared to undocumented women. In comparison, the difference among men is 13.5% points. This suggests legal documents provide women enhanced safety and mobility, particularly important given heightened risks of gender-based violence (Kelly et al., 2021).

Men with documents have a slightly higher predicted probability of planning a return "elsewhere" (3.3% points) than documented women (2.3% points), suggesting a preference for secondary migration (Bloch, 2008). Overall, the evidence supports the "documentation–integration nexus" perspective (Bakewell, 2008), highlighting that

expanding legal documentation may strengthen local integration while reducing short-term repatriation.

The multinomial logit estimates in Table A3 indicate that age significantly influences return intentions. Those aged 60 and above have a log-odds increase of 0.731 in being undecided, suggesting greater uncertainty due to health or reintegration challenges (Komakech & Garimoi Orach, 2022). Young refugees aged 17 or less show strong positive associations with both planning to return (0.768) and being undecided (1.226), reflecting interest in staying in host countries. Special needs statuses have diverse effects. Refugees separated from children show increased log-odds of planning to return (0.796), as do unaccompanied children (0.723). Those with physical disabilities are 0.457 more likely to plan a return. In contrast, women at risk show negative coefficients for both planning to return (-0.279) and undecided (-1.32), indicating lower intentions and heightened protection concerns (Abbas et al., 2018; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Health vulnerabilities also matter: refugees with chronic illnesses show higher log-odds of planning return but lower undecided likelihood, while those with critical medical conditions show negative associations with both planning and undecided intentions.

Host-country constraints and displacement duration

Return intentions are also shaped by broader structural conditions beyond individual characteristics, including perceived security conditions in South Sudan, host-country constraints, and the length of time spent in displacement. Table 6 shows that perceived improvements in security in South Sudan emerge as a powerful driver of return intentions. Refugees who believe security has improved are over 3.7 log-odds more likely to plan return, underscoring the central role of home-country stability (Ghosn et al., 2021). This effect becomes more pronounced when paired with prior generalised violence displacement, adding 1.65 log-odds to the likelihood of returning, suggesting that those directly affected by conflict respond quickly to peace signals (Harild et al., 2015; Omata, 2013).

As shown in Table 7, host-country conditions and displacement duration emerge as key determinants of return planning and timing. Compared to the Democratic Republic

Table 6 Multinomial logit estimates of flight reasons and current conditions on the return plan

Variables	Plan to Return to SSD (Base Outcome – No)			
	Yes	Undecided	Yes	Undecided
Improved security			3.742***(187)	-14.131(1112.3)
Problems in host country			6.210***(1.006)	-12.471(1672.2)
Family reunification			3.999***(0.203)	-0.464(0.550)
Improved security # Generalised violence			1.652***(0.279)	0.151(1300.7)
Generalised violence	0.718***(0.759)	0.960***(0.188)	0.150(0.121)	0.891***(0.191)
Home attacked	0.548***(0.072)	-0.714***(0.192)	-0.060(0.115)	-0.767***(0.197)
Individually targeted	-0.788***(0.165)	-1.765***(0.723)	-0.628***(0.242)	-1.708***(0.723)
Hunger/Drought	0.449***(0.097)	2.318***(0.137)	1.024***(0.126)	2.351***(0.138)
Education	0.437***(0.100)	-0.862***(0.327)	0.082(0.153)	-0.949***(0.331)
Family in host country	-0.648***(0.258)	-0.868(0.749)	-0.575(0.391)	-0.922(0.762)
Persecution	4.080***(1.020)	4.957***(1.077)	4.458***(1.039)	5.345***(1.067)
Security issue	1.661***(0.488)	4.684***(0.472)	2.836***(0.508)	4.688***(0.472)
Other	0.262(0.297)	4.190***(0.251)	1.516***(0.322)	4.204***(0.251)
_cons	-0.693***(0.080)	-3.159***(0.197)	-1.727***(0.124)	-3.091***(0.198)
Number of obs.	6,587	6,587	6,587	6,587

Notes. Values in parentheses are robust standard errors. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

of Congo (reference category), refugees in the Central African Republic are 51.3% points less likely to intend to return and 18.6% points less likely to plan a return within a year. Likewise, refugees in Sudan are 40.1% points less likely to intend to return, and those in Uganda 25.1% points less likely, supporting observations that stable asylum conditions encourage local integration over repatriation (World Bank Group, 2016). In contrast, refugees in Ethiopia demonstrate a 28.7% point higher likelihood of return planning, suggesting restrictive legal frameworks and encampment policies serve as push factors (Harild et al., 2015). Kenya exhibits a modest 5.6% point increase in return planning, reflecting its intermediate policy environment (Omata, 2013).

Displacement duration also critically shapes return timing. Refugees displaced for 2–4 years are 4.7% points more likely to intend to return and 5.4% points more likely to plan a return within 12 months. Beyond six years, the decline becomes pronounced, with a 36.8% point drop in return planning and decreases of 8.9 and 8.4% points in short- and long-term return plans, respectively. These patterns mirror the “protracted displacement effect” (Loescher & Milner, 2013), in which prolonged exile fosters socio-economic integration and erodes confidence in the prospect of improving conditions back home. These results demonstrate that host-country policy environments and the duration of exile profoundly shape return intentions. The substantial variation across host countries emphasises the importance of asylum regimes in facilitating or inhibiting repatriation. Moreover, the temporal dynamics highlight a critical window early in exile during which interventions can most effectively support informed return decisions before prolonged integration reduces the likelihood of repatriation.

Robustness checks

To assess the validity of core findings, robustness checks are implemented using the UNHCR Regional Intentions Survey of Sudanese and South Sudanese Refugees (2021/2022) dataset, incorporating gender interactions. Models are re-estimated using alternative operationalisations of return intentions and displacement duration to evaluate whether primary results hold across these dimensions.

Table 7 Marginal effects of host country characteristics, demographics, and displacement duration on return plans and timing

Variables	Return Plan (Yes)	Planned Return Time		
		0–12 months	12 months+	Undecided/ No plan
CAR (ref: DRC)	-0.513*** (0.021)	-0.186*** (0.018)	-0.202*** (0.017)	0.300*** (0.021)
Ethiopia	0.287*** (0.028)	-0.211*** (0.017)	-0.174*** (0.018)	0.385*** (0.021)
Kenya	0.056** (0.023)	0.005 (0.020)	-0.118*** (0.019)	0.113*** (0.024)
Sudan	-0.401*** (0.033)	-0.194*** (0.019)	-0.130*** (0.023)	0.324*** (0.027)
Uganda	-0.251*** (0.027)	-0.201*** (0.017)	-0.192*** (0.017)	0.392*** (0.021)
Married (ref: Divorced/ Separated/Widowed)	0.007 (0.015)	-0.018 (0.011)	0.011 (0.009)	0.006 (0.013)
Single	-0.076*** (0.022)	-0.040** (0.017)	0.001 (0.012)	0.038** (0.018)
Male (Ref: Female)	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.016*** (0.010)	0.001 (0.007)	0.015 (0.011)
2–4 Years (ref: 0–2 years)	0.047** (0.022)	0.054*** (0.017)	-0.031** (0.013)	-0.024 (0.020)
4–6 Years	-0.031 (0.024)	-0.023 (0.017)	-0.044*** (0.014)	0.067*** (0.020)
6+ Years	-0.368*** (0.026)	-0.089*** (0.018)	-0.084*** (0.015)	0.172*** (0.022)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Marginal effects shown. Full regression results in Table A5. Country dummies reflect differences in asylum regimes, including land access, work authorisation, freedom of movement, and encampment policies. See Table A12 for detailed country profiles

As shown in Fig. 6 and detailed in Table A6, significant heterogeneity in return intentions emerges across displacement drivers. Refugees fleeing generalised violence have a 48.2 per cent probability of returning, with women showing a higher probability (53 per cent) compared to men (37.5 per cent). This 15.5-percentage-point gender gap persists after controlling for family structure, suggesting distinct social and familial considerations influence women's return decisions. In contrast, refugees displaced by persecution have a very low return probability (10 per cent), empirically supporting “political irreparability.” The stability of these patterns across specifications indicates they reflect structural differences in return motivations rather than methodological artefacts.

Occupational background emerges as an exceptionally robust predictor of return intentions. Figure 7 shows that agricultural workers have consistently high return probabilities (42.8 per cent) across robustness checks, confirming the “agrarian imperative” hypothesis (Verwimp & Maystadt, 2015). However, the 2022 data reveal an emerging gender gap, with women at 44.1 per cent and men at 40.7 per cent, suggesting evolving land tenure dynamics may create differential incentives. Students demonstrate persistently low return intentions (26.1 per cent), challenging assumptions about education as a temporary displacement strategy. The business sector shows strong gender disparities (women 35.7 per cent, men 28.6 per cent), highlighting how occupational identity interacts with gender to shape repatriation decisions.

The temporal dimension of return planning reveals equally robust patterns. Figure 8 illustrates the predicted timing of return by pre-flight occupation and gender. Agricultural women achieve returns consistently earlier (32.0 per cent within 12 months) than men (26.1 per cent). Business sector migrants show the opposite pattern, with men planning later returns than women. These findings hold across alternative measures of return timing and when controlling for host-country conditions and family networks, suggesting they reflect fundamental structural relationships.

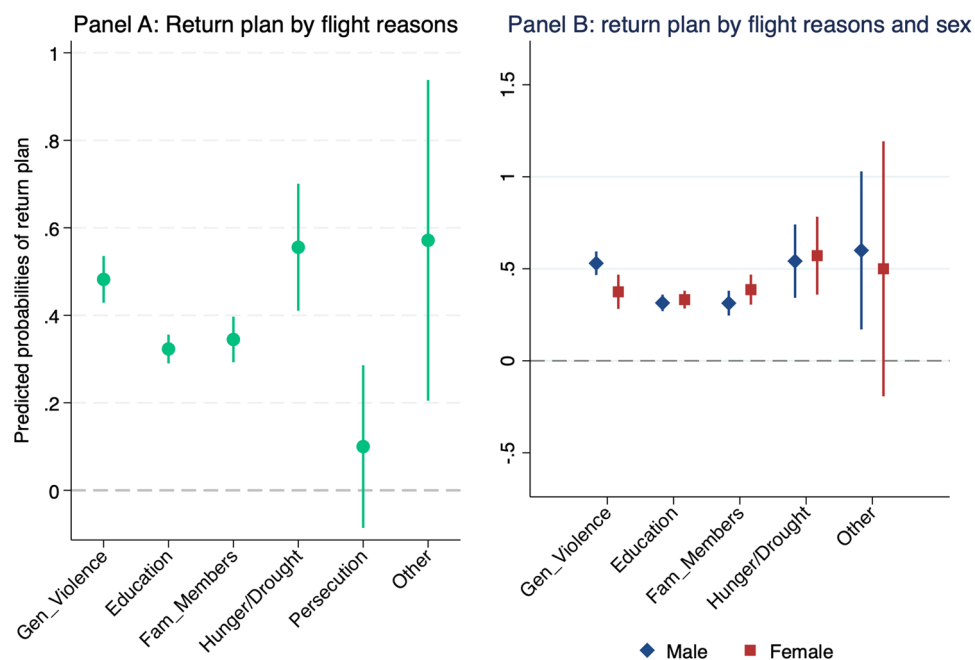


Fig. 6 Predicted probability of return within 12 months by flight reasons and gender

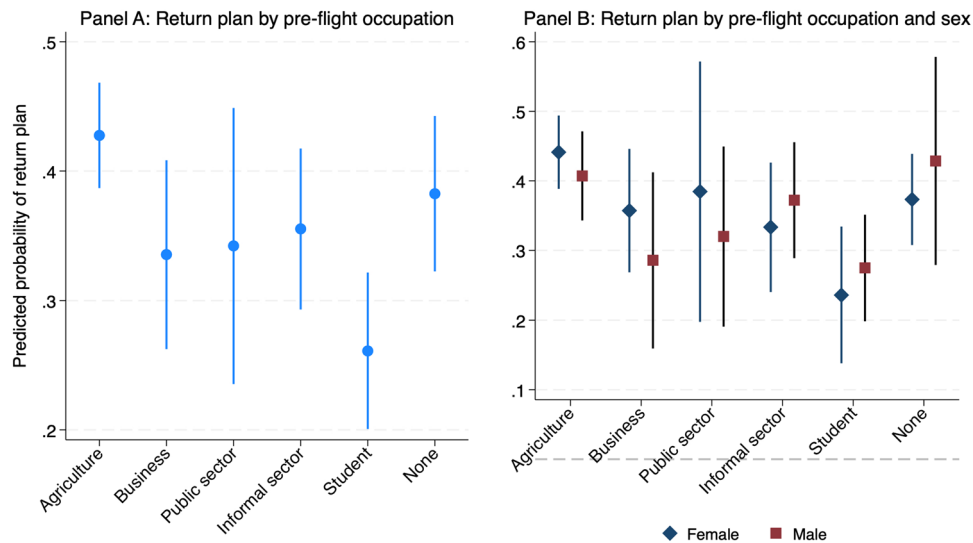


Fig. 7 Predicted probability of return within 12 months by pre-flight occupation and gender

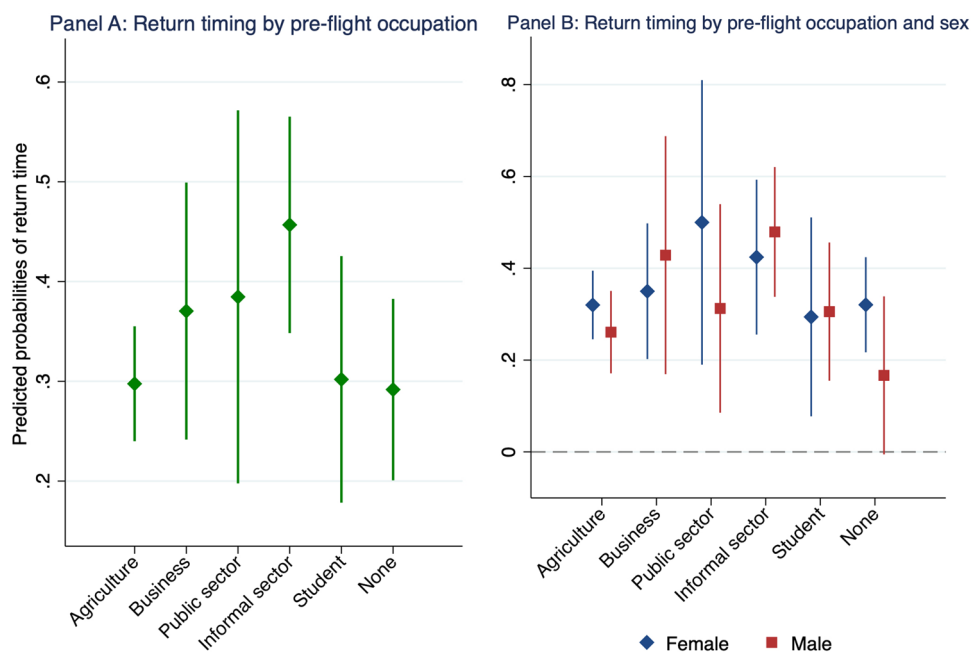


Fig. 8 Predicted probability of return time by pre-flight occupation and gender

Documentation status demonstrates robust yet complex effects on return intentions. Figure 9 shows that documented refugees have lower return probabilities (34.3 per cent) than undocumented refugees (39.9 per cent). The 2022 data reveal a striking gender paradox: documented women are 10.6 percentage points less likely to return than undocumented women, while men's probabilities remain stable regardless of legal status. These findings challenge simplistic narratives about legal empowerment by showing how documentation differentially affects mobility choices by gender. The near-zero return probabilities among persecution survivors (10.0 per cent) remain consistent across robustness checks, providing strong evidence for the irreversibility of political exile in the absence of institutional guarantees.

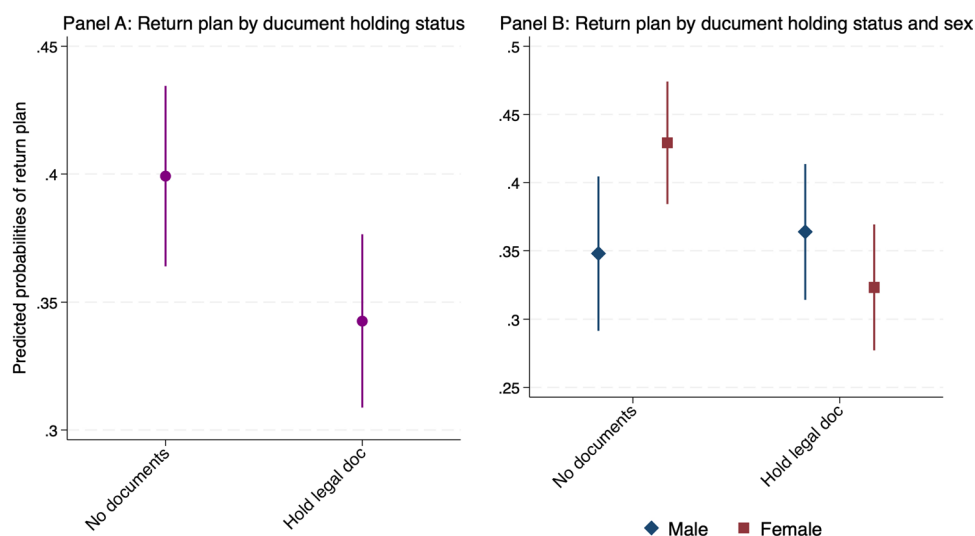


Fig. 9 Predicted probability of return within 12 months by document holding status and gender

As detailed in Table A10, document holding status also affects return timing. Refugees without documents show a 27.1 per cent probability of planning return after 12 months, compared to 39.8 per cent among documented refugees, highlighting the positive association between legal recognition and longer-term return intentions. Undocumented women exhibit a 29.5 per cent probability of planning return after 12 months, higher than their male counterparts (22.1 per cent). Among documented refugees, women and men display probabilities of 40.6 per cent and 38.9 per cent, respectively, suggesting documentation reduces the gender disparity observed among the undocumented. These findings indicate that legal status shapes both the likelihood and timing of return, and that it interacts with gender to influence repatriation planning.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of factors shaping return intentions among South Sudanese refugees, using multi-country survey data to illuminate the interplay between displacement drivers, host-country conditions, and temporal dimensions of exile. Repatriation is not a linear or uniform process; refugees' decisions are influenced by a dynamic combination of security perceptions, livelihood considerations, and evolving identities. Initial displacement reasons, including generalised violence, targeted persecution, and environmental stressors, create durable path dependencies that continue to shape return intentions years after displacement. Concurrently, host-country policies and living conditions play a crucial role: progressive asylum regimes facilitate local integration, whereas restrictive environments function as push factors toward repatriation or onward migration.

Temporal dynamics of exile further modulate return intentions. Short-term return intentions are highest in the early phase of displacement, declining over time as ties to the homeland weaken and social, economic, and human capital accumulate in host countries. Individual characteristics, such as gender, age, disability status, and pre-flight occupation, significantly influence these patterns. Women prioritise safety and access to social services, agricultural workers demonstrate stronger short-term return intentions, and urban professionals' networks anchor them in host countries. Possession of legal

documentation emerges as a pivotal factor, reducing return likelihood while interacting differently with gender and vulnerability.

The analysis underscores the heterogeneity and conditionality of return planning. While perceived security improvements in South Sudan increase short-term intentions, these effects diminish for refugees in prolonged exile or those displaced by environmental shocks, whose return decisions remain contingent on structural, policy, and livelihood conditions rather than immediate improvements. Despite leveraging robust multi-country survey data, unobserved factors such as informal social networks, localised conflict dynamics, and individual risk preferences may also shape actual return behaviour, which could diverge from stated intentions.

Refugee return emerges as a highly contextualised and temporally sensitive process. Effective interventions require policymakers to account for these dynamics, designing strategies attuned to refugees' temporal planning, livelihood priorities, and protection needs. By grounding policies in the lived realities of displaced populations, interventions can achieve greater flexibility and effectiveness in supporting safe, sustainable, and durable repatriation.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-026-00576-x>.

Supplementary Material 1

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Author contributions

Tadele Muche Tefera was responsible for all aspects of this work, including research conceptualisation, data curation and analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation.

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Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study utilised secondary, anonymised data from the UNHCR Regional Intention Survey of South Sudanese Refugees (2019). UNHCR conducted the original data collection in accordance with international ethical standards for research involving human participants, including informed consent protocols, confidentiality protections, and voluntary participation. As this study exclusively uses de-identified, secondary data from a publicly available source, no additional ethical approval was required.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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