Research Article

Visual Stratification: Representations of Immigrant and Refugee Women in UK Media

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Abstract: This article systematically investigates the visual framing of immigrant and refugee women in four major UK media outlets (BBC, Daily Mail, Financial Times, and Metro) over a twenty-month period spanning politically charged events. While existing literature has identified recurrent visual tropes depicting migrant women primarily through binaries of victimhood or empowerment, it frequently overlooks intersectional nuances of nationality, legal status, and racialized hierarchies. Addressing this gap, this study employs a rigorous visual content analysis informed by feminist, postcolonial, and critical media theories, emphasizing how visual frames differentially racialize vulnerability, distribute moral recognition, and code social legibility across groups. The analysis, based on a dataset of 3,647 images, reveals significant disparities: Ukrainian women are often portrayed through normalizing frames that suggest integration and belonging, whereas Afghan, Palestinian, and Rohingya women frequently appear in anonymized or victimized representations, reinforcing symbolic exclusion. Regression modeling indicates that nationality, visual framing choices, and temporal political contexts significantly predict whether migrant women's faces are visible. This article enhances the scholarly understanding of visual stratification by demonstrating how ostensibly humanitarian imagery can reproduce racialized inequalities and political invisibility. Future research is encouraged to explore audience reception of these visual frames to elucidate their societal implications further.

Keywords: Visual Framing, Migrant Women, Refugee Representation, Intersectionality

Jel Codes: J15, Z13, D83

Görsel Tabakalaşma: Birleşik Krallık Medyasında Göçmen ve Mülteci Kadınların Temsilleri

Öz: Bu makale, Birleşik Krallık medyasındaki göçmen ve mülteci kadınların görsel çerçevelenmesini sistematik olarak incelemektedir. Çalışma kapsamında BBC, Daily Mail, Financial Times ve Metro gibi dört önemli medya kuruluşunda yer alan görseller, siyasi olarak hassas dönemlere denk gelen 20 aylık bir süreç boyunca analiz edilmiştir. Literatürde, göçmen kadınların temsiline yönelik çalışmalarda genellikle mağduriyet ya da güçlenme gibi ikili karşıtlıklar öne çıkarılsa da milliyet, hukuki statü ve ırksallaştırılmış hiyerarşiler gibi kesişimsel farklılıklar büyük ölçüde göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu eksikliği gidermek amacıyla, feminist, postkolonyal ve eleştirel medya teorilerinden beslenen titiz bir görsel içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılarak, görsel çerçevelerin farklı gruplar arasında kırılganlığı nasıl ırksallaştırdığı, ahlaki tanınmayı nasıl dağıttığı ve sosyal tanınırlığı nasıl kodladığı incelenmiştir. 3.647 görselden oluşan veri setine dayalı analiz, önemli farklılıklar ortaya koymuştur: Ukraynalı kadınlar, genellikle entegrasyon ve aidiyet çağrıştıran normalleştirici görsel çerçevelerle sunulurken, Afgan, Filistinli ve Rohingyalı kadınlar ise daha çok kimliksizleştirilmiş veya mağduriyet vurgusu içeren temsillerle sembolik dışlanmaya maruz kalmaktadır. Regresyon analizi, milliyet, görsel çerçeve seçimi ve siyasi bağlamın zaman içerisindeki değişiminin, kadınların yüzlerinin görünür olup olmadığını anlamlı biçimde belirlediğini ortaya koymuştur. Bu çalışma, görünürde insancıl olan temsillerin aslında nasıl ırksallaştırılmış eşitsizlikleri ve politik görünmezliği yeniden üretebildiğini göstererek, görsel tabakalaşmaya ilişkin akademik anlayışı zenginleştirmektedir. Gelecek çalışmaların bu görsel çerçevelerin toplumdaki etkilerini daha iyi anlamak amacıyla izleyici alımlamasına odaklanması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Görsel Çerçeveleme, Göçmen Kadınlar, Mülteci Temsilleri, Kesişimsellik

Jel Kodları: J15, Z13, D83

1. Introduction

Scholars have long examined how migration is framed in political and media discourses, specifically through the lens of race, gender, and security (Hall, 1997; Mohanty, 1988; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Crawley, 2022). Within this expanding literature, visual representations of migrant and refugee women have not received the same level of attention, even though they play an important role in shaping public perceptions of legitimacy, empathy, and social threat to the receiving society. Visual images carry affective and symbolic meaning that often works differently from text, within their emotional impact. While many studies focus on discourse and policy, there is still a lack of comparative research that systematically investigates visual portrayals, particularly with varied frames and face visibility as a variable. Existing literature shows that non-Western women are often portrayed in simplified and oppositional ways, either victim, threat or one in a crowd. However, the specific visual patterns that distinguish between representations of "refugee women" and "immigrant women," and the broader implications of these portrayals, remain underexplored.

This study responds to the limited attention given to visual portrayals of migrant and refugee women by focusing on four major UK media outlets: BBC, Daily Mail, Financial Times, and Metro. It analyzes how images of women differ depending on nationality, legal category, and changing political moments. The research builds on feminist, postcolonial, and visual media theory to explore how visual framing contributes to the unequal recognition of migrant women. Specifically, it investigates how some groups are portrayed as vulnerable or threatening, while others are granted familiarity or some kind of acceptance. Instead of offering surface-level description, the study engages with the deeper media structures. This analysis contributes to broader debates on the politics of visibility in migration and media research.

This article examines how visual media contribute to the construction of political and cultural boundaries through the representation of migrant and refugee women. One of the core contributions of this study is its development of a systematic, frame-based typology. The comparison between representations of "refugee" and "immigrant" women shows how media assign different levels of visibility and legitimacy to these groups, often in line with existing power structures. Thus, this study aims to offer a methodological and conceptual model that can support further empirical research on visual stratification in migration narratives. The following sections present the theoretical framework, methodological design, key findings, and broader implications of this article.

2. The Unfinished Frame: Media, Migration, and the Politics of (In)Visibility

In this research, I understand visual framing as a way of organizing meaning through visual elements, which shapes how media shows and constructs migrant and refugee women. Images do not only support the text but have their own logic that comes from how faces are shown, how space is used, and what emotions the image gives. This idea comes from Entman's (1993) work on framing and also visual media studies like Bleiker et al. (2013) and Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017), where images are taken seriously as active parts of meaning-making. Earlier research often talks about visual patterns like victim, threat or mother figure, but less attention is paid to how these images change depending on nationality or legal status. My contribution is to give a classification of thirteen different visual frames, which is based on feminist and postcolonial perspectives. These frames help to show how visibility works differently depending on who is shown and in which media outlet. With this typology, I try to fill an important gap in the literature by focusing on how visual framing changes depending on political moment, legal identity and national background.

2.1. Visibility, Voice, and the Gendered Politics of Representation

Media visibility of migrant women often involves ideological decisions that reduce individuality and reinforce symbolic hierarchies, particularly through tropes of

anonymity and victimhood (Hall, 1997, p. 2559; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017, p. 1169). Rather than reflecting reality, media representations are ideological constructions embedded in editorial and infrastructural systems (Hall, 1997, p. 257). In the digital age, these dynamics are shaped by algorithms that favor emotionally charged and simplified migration narratives. As Greussing & Boomgaarden (2017, p. 1770) argue, such content circulates more widely when it aligns with dominant frames like threat or pity. Banet-Weiser (2018) refers to this as an "economy of visibility," where affectively resonant yet ideologically narrow images dominate. Noble (2018) adds that algorithmic infrastructures embed racial and gendered biases, shaping which lives become visible and under what ideological terms.

Media portrayals of migrant women do not only emphasize victimhood; they also highlight forms of strength and autonomy, particularly in depictions of immigrant women. These representations often align with neoliberal values such as self-sufficiency, productivity, and social integration (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014 p. 422). In contrast, refugee women are frequently absent from such narratives of agency. Their exclusion reinforces symbolic distinctions regarding who is perceived as capable and who remains dependent. As a result, deeper political and economic conditions that shape forced migration are obscured in favor of simplified moral frames.

The contrast between victimhood and empowerment does not fully explain how non-Western women are portrayed in media. As Mohanty (1988) argues, Western feminist discourse often treats "third world women" as a single category, without considering the political and historical differences that shape their lives. These women are usually pictured in temporary or damaged settings, such as borders, tents, or ruins, and are rarely shown as active members of society. Their daily lives after migration, including work or education, are mostly invisible. Even when compared to men from similar backgrounds, they are less frequently represented in public spaces. This lack of representation reflects deeper assumptions about which lives are considered complete or socially valuable.

A review of recent studies reveals persistent representational limits. Women appear predominantly as victims and vulnerable ones. Studies such as Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore (2015) and Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017) have shown the prevalence of crisis-oriented imagery for refugee women. More recent works by Crawley (2022), Loza (2023), Zhou (2024), and Galpin & Rohe (2025) challenge this by examining racialized power, orientalist visual codes, and the shaping of visibility by national memory. However, across this literature, migrant and refugee women's complexity and agency remain unequally distributed.

Media often shows migrant women through roles that reflect common assumptions about gender, emotion, and who deserves to be seen. Whether they are called refugees or immigrants, women are usually pictured as mothers, quiet victims, or distant figures in crisis. These kinds of images do not appear by accident. They come from wider social ideas that see women as vulnerable and emotional, rather than active or political. News coverage tends to stick with what feels familiar, using images that are likely to match what the public already expects or accepts. Over time, this creates a pattern where certain ways of seeing women are repeated again and again, while other possibilities are left out. What stands out is that not all women are given the same chance to appear in stronger or more complex roles. When migrant women are shown as confident, outspoken, or working in public, these cases often feel unusual. It is as if that kind of visibility is something rare, something allowed only under certain conditions. Being seen in this way is not treated as a basic right, but more like something that must be earned. Whether a woman is shown in these ways often depends on whether her story fits with what society is ready to accept at that moment.

2.2. Postcolonial Affects and the Racialization of Migrant Womanhood

Immigrant and refugee women do not receive equal treatment in media portrayals. While gender shapes their depiction, race, culture, and national origin often carry more

weight. A woman from Eastern Europe and one from the Middle East might both be described as vulnerable, yet their visual framing differs significantly. The former tends to be shown as familiar and potentially integrable, the latter as distant, dependent, or even problematic. These contrasts reflect deeper representational hierarchies that extend beyond editorial choices, rooted in enduring colonial assumptions about who belongs and who does not.

Feminist media scholars have long questioned the idea that womanhood can be represented as a single, universal experience. Mohanty (1988) criticizes the tendency within Western discourse to reduce "third world women" to passive, undifferentiated figures, stripped of political and historical context. Such framing persists in media representations, where non-Western migrant and refugee women often appear voiceless or culturally regressive. Their everyday agency, resistance, and collective experience rarely enter dominant visual narratives. Recognition, when it occurs, tends to depend on their conformity to familiar cultural scripts. Otherwise, they remain marginal, reinforcing underlying value systems.

Evidence from multiple media contexts reinforces this pattern. Loza (2023), for example, illustrates how British news coverage reproduces orientalist frameworks that depict non-Western women as persistently vulnerable and lacking agency. Zhou (2024) observes how even alternative media narratives, like those in Disney's Mulan, continue to operate within racialized frameworks. Crawley (2022) highlights how protective narratives often infantilize and discipline refugee women. Earlier studies by Andreassen (2005, pp. 277–279), Kray (1993, p. 352), and Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris (2014, p. 462) point to broader patterns in which media use race and origin to define who is seen as desirable or threatening. These studies collectively demonstrate that racialized portrayals of migrant women are deliberate, structured through complex systems of meaning.

Although recent studies have expanded the conversation, much of the literature still tends to present racialized representations as fixed, often overlooking how they shift across political events or between different migrant groups. This study extends earlier research by examining how images of racialized femininity are created and controlled, particularly during periods of social and political tension.

2.3. Geographical Hierarchies in Inducing Politics of Pity

Emotional responses to images of suffering are shaped not only by physical distance, but also by the sense of closeness or separation that is created through visual and editorial choices. Some lives are presented as emotionally near and understandable, while others remain distant and abstract. This dynamic, described by Chouliaraki as an "analytics of mediation," helps to explain why migrant women are often shown in culturally marked and far-removed contexts. Such portrayals may encourage feelings of pity, but they rarely lead to a sense of shared responsibility or political engagement.

Visual portrayals create a sense of closeness through symbolic elements, making some lives appear emotionally familiar while presenting others as distant (Kyriakidou, 2015; Ibrahim, 2010). Zhe Hu (2023, p. 91) highlights this contrast by comparing the individualized images of Ukrainian refugees with the anonymous representations of Afghan refugees. Similarly, Xu & Zhang (2023, p. 649) show that Chinese state media creates emotional distance through ideological framing, rather than removing empathy altogether. Ibrahim (2010, p. 132) adds that repeated exposure to distant suffering in global media can lead to emotionally neutral and politically empty imagery. These patterns suggest that proximity is shaped less by geography and more by how emotion, culture, and ideology determine who is shown, who deserves empathy, and who remains unseen.

2.4. Framing Theory and the Construction of Visibility

The previous discussion on spatial hierarchies and mediated emotion provides a foundation for examining how these patterns are shaped through framing in media narratives. Framing theory helps explain how audiences come to interpret events, social

actors, and moral implications (Entman, 1993). In the context of migration coverage, visual portrayals of women are shaped not only by gender, but also by legal status, cultural assumptions, and geopolitical context. This section explores how such framing practices structure the way migrant and refugee women are made morally and politically intelligible in the public sphere.

Framing theory explains how media draw attention to certain aspects of reality to shape how events and issues are understood by the public (Entman, 1993). More recent extensions of this theory, such as the agenda-setting model by McCombs et al. (2014, p. 782), differentiate between the importance of issues, the features emphasized, and the associations made between them. These distinctions are useful for analyzing visual framing, where both the content and the way it is presented affect interpretation. Visual elements such as facial expression, setting, and ethnicity work together to influence how images are read. The concept of agenda melding builds on this idea by suggesting that people make sense of the media by combining different cues with their own lived experiences and social environments.

This study does not aim to evaluate how audiences react to media content or speculate about editorial intentions. Instead, it looks at recurring visual patterns across four different news outlets. The concept of network salience (McCombs et al., 2014) helps to explain how these combinations become familiar in the public eye. Rather than predicting audience responses, the study treats media imagery as a shared visual space where different forms of migrant womanhood are either made visible or remain pushed to the out of focus.

These theoretical perspectives offer useful tools for understanding how media shape what becomes visible and what remains out of view. In this study, they are drawn on mainly to explore how representations of migrant women are affected by gendered and racialized structures. Spatial theories that focus on pity and media witnessing are not used to evaluate emotions themselves, but to explore how images produce a sense of closeness or distance. Additionally, framing and agenda-setting theories are included to identify visual patterns that appear across outlets, rather than to make judgments about media intent. The next section outlines the process through which visual frames were developed and applied during the analysis.

3. Research Method

This study examines only the visual content of news articles, leaving aside their written elements. The reason for this focus is that images often shape how people see migrant women, particularly in terms of visibility and emotional or political framing. These visual effects can differ greatly from those produced by written text (Hall, 1997; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; McCombs et al., 2014). Before starting the full data collection, a pilot phase was carried out to identify recurring visual themes and formal features. That initial step, combined with insights from the literature, helped define thirteen categories (see Table 1) of visual framing used in the coding process. This study aims to document and compare how visual patterns appear and shift over time. The analysis is based on material collected within the TÜBİTAK-2219 postdoctoral project "Dehumanization of Women and Children in British Media".

3.1. Case Selection and Sampling

This study focuses on four media outlets: BBC**,** Daily Mail**,** Financial Times**,** and Metro**.** The selection was guided not by a desire to reflect the full political spectrum, but rather to capture editorial diversity and varying levels of public accessibility. Each outlet represents a distinct mode of journalistic production, distribution, and audience engagement, which are critical in examining how news about migrant women is framed across different media environments.

Metro was included in the sample because it is freely available and widely distributed through public transport across the UK. This makes it accessible to a broad

and diverse group of readers. The Financial Times, by comparison, can only be accessed in full by paying subscribers. As a result, its content is more likely to reach a smaller, more specialized audience. BBC and Daily Mail were included both for their political divergence and the public availability of their data. The Daily Mail, a right-leaning newspaper, is the second-most sold newspaper in the UK, making it a key player in shaping popular discourse. Also, the BBC remains the most widely used source of news in the UK, both online and offline. According to the Reuters Institute, it also reaches over 400 million people globally each week and is among the most trusted public service media institutions worldwide. However, it is important to note that its reach is relatively lower among younger audiences and individuals with less formal education (Nielsen et. al., 2023).

The decision to focus on these four outlets creates an opportunity to examine how agenda-setting works across different types of media. Some platforms have broad public access, while others target smaller or elite groups. They also differ in popularity, distribution models (print or digital), and the kind of audience they reach. These differences may influence how migrant women are portrayed in the news. The research question guiding this study is whether and in what ways such structural and editorial features affect the visual representation of migrant women across media outlets.

The data collection spans January 2023 to August 2024, a 20-month period anchored by two critical events:

The disappearance of asylum-seeking children in early 2023, which initially sparked this project by drawing attention to how such incidents are reported in media.

The anti-migrant street protests in August 2024, which marked a peak in the public discourse surrounding immigration. This structure helps the study observe how media framing changes during times of heightened tension.

3.2. Data Collection

Instead of using the web archives of each newspaper, the data were collected through the Nexis Uni database, which was accessed via the University of Sussex. A list of predefined keywords was used to identify and retrieve all relevant articles from the four media outlets. To strengthen the reliability of the dataset, two independent coders worked through the material in multiple rounds and compared results to ensure consistency.

Initially, the data collection did not include a nationality variable. However, during the pilot stage, a clear discursive distinction between nationalities was observed, which led to the inclusion of this category in the final coding scheme. The dataset was thus coded based on the following variables: media outlet, publication month, nationality, presence of a visible face in the image, headline-visual relevance to the article, and whether the subject was identified as a refugee or immigrant.

All retrieved articles were screened to confirm that the keywords genuinely appeared within the article body, ensuring a cleaned and accurate dataset. In total, 3,647 news articles were coded by coders between 1 October 2024 and 10 January 2025. The keyword search focused on "refugee woman/women" and "immigrant woman/women," yielding 1,961 articles. Of these, 1,245 referred to "refugee woman/women," while 716 referred to "immigrant woman/women."

Articles without images were excluded from the analysis. Coders were trained to recognize multiple visual themes within a single image and to prioritize the most dominant one. Inter-coder reliability was assessed in three stages using Krippendorff's alpha, which was calculated at .88, indicating high agreement. All coded data were stored in an Excel spreadsheet and prepared for statistical analysis using Stata.

3.3. Coding Scheme and Analytical Framework

The visual content of the selected news articles was categorized based on a pre-defined coding scheme developed through preliminary analysis and thematic clustering. The coding framework below identifies the visual category, explains the thematic focus, and outlines the visual strategies employed to construct each representation:

Table 1. Visual Category, Themes and Representations

Visual Category	Themes and Descriptions	Visual Strategies and Representations
Crowd (1)	Refugees shown in large groups, focusing on the collective rather than individuals.	Wide shots, blurred individual identities, and unrecognizable figures (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021).
Faceless (2)	Refugees with obscured or hidden faces, emphasizing anonymity and lack of identity.	Shots from behind, shadows obscuring faces, or profiles that don't reveal full identities (Bleiker et al., 2013); Martikainen & Sakki (2021); Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017)
Criminal (3)	Refugees depicted as criminals or threats, associated with danger or fear.	Dark tones, aggressive body language, images showing confrontations with security forces(Martikainen & Sakki (2021); Holmes & Castañeda (2016); Cetin & Gürelli (2024))
Refugees in Transit (4)	Refugees shown traveling or on the move, often in transit.	Groups walking, using transportation (on the road or boats on water), with luggage or travel-related props (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021)
Shelter/Refugee Camps (5)	Refugees depicted living in temporary shelters or camps.	Crowded tents, minimal resources, emphasizing poverty and displacement (Kyriakidou, 2021; Altınoluk & Tunç, 2022; Carpi & Şenoguz, 2019; Friese, 2009; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021)
Parenting (Maternalizing) (6)	Depicting mothers and children in caring and protective relationships.	Mother-child closeness, affectionate gestures, warm colors, and protective stances (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Friese, 2009)
Lonely Child (7)	Children shown alone, vulnerable, and unprotected.	Single child depicted in isolation, sad facial expressions, and small figures in large empty spaces (Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017; Xu & Zhang, 2023; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; 2024)
At Work/School (8)	Refugees depicted in educational or work settings, showing active participation.	Refugees interacting in classrooms or workspaces, children studying or adults working (Martikainen & Sakki, 2024)
Life Goes On (9)	Everyday life normalized, highlighting leisure or social activities.	Children playing, people laughing, or engaging in daily social interactions (Martikainen & Sakki, 2024)
War-torn City (10)	Images of destruction and ruined urban areas affected by war.	Collapsed buildings, bombed streets, and scenes of devastation (Martikainen & Sakki, 2024; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Friese, 2009)
Politician/Spokesman (11)	Politicians or spokespeople addressing refugee-related issues.	Figures speaking from podiums, holding microphones, or showing serious facial expressions (Bleiker et al., 2013; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017)
Contextual Nonhuman Imagery (12)	Depicting the context of refugee crises through nonhuman elements.	Objects, surroundings, and symbolic items such as luggage, tents, or buildings (Bleiker et al., 2013; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017)
Contextual Human Imagery (13)	Human figures shown in contextualized settings related to the refugee experience.	Celebrities, humans engaging in daily tasks, emotional facial expressions, or scenes emphasizing shared experiences (Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017; Xu & Zhang, 2023)

In addition to the main thematic categories, secondary variables were introduced to better understand how editorial decisions may shape visual representations. One of these was the publication month, which made it possible to trace whether portrayals shifted during key moments. Another variable is the relavancy of the image and the headline, focusing on whether the image was clearly connected to the article's title. This made it easier to spot cases where images might have been selected to steer emotional reactions. Such practices raise ethical concerns, particularly when migrants and refugees are involved. Face visibility was also included as a variable, used as an indicator of humanization. When faces were blurred, hidden, or not shown at all, this was taken as a sign of dehumanization.

The results section includes a regression analysis that models the likelihood of face visibility based on variables such as media outlet, frame type, nationality, and time. In order to assess which factors influence the likelihood of a woman's face being visible in media images, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was conducted using Stata. Although the dependent variable is binary (face visible=1, not visible=0), OLS was preferred over logistic regression to allow for more straightforward interpretation and comparability with other media studies employing similar designs.

The final model included 1,962 observations and yielded an R-squared value of 0.676, indicating that approximately 68% of the variation in face visibility can be explained by the included variables. The model incorporated fixed effects for media outlet, frame category, subject nationality, legal classification (refugee vs. immigrant), relevance to the article, and month of publication. An interaction term between media outlet and subject type was also added to examine platform-specific patterns. Multicollinearity diagnostics using VIF values remained below 2 across all variables, indicating no serious collinearity concerns.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Distribution of Visual Frames Across Media Outlets

This section examines how visual framing practices vary across media outlets in their portrayal of immigrant and refugee women. The data show notable differences in frame preference that align not only with editorial orientation and audience segmentation but also with deeper visual economies of (in)visibility and affective proximity.
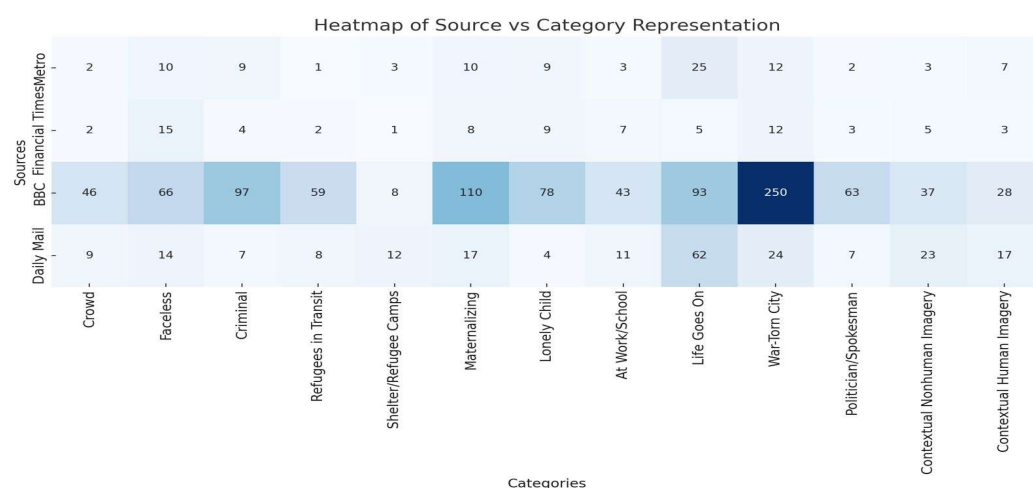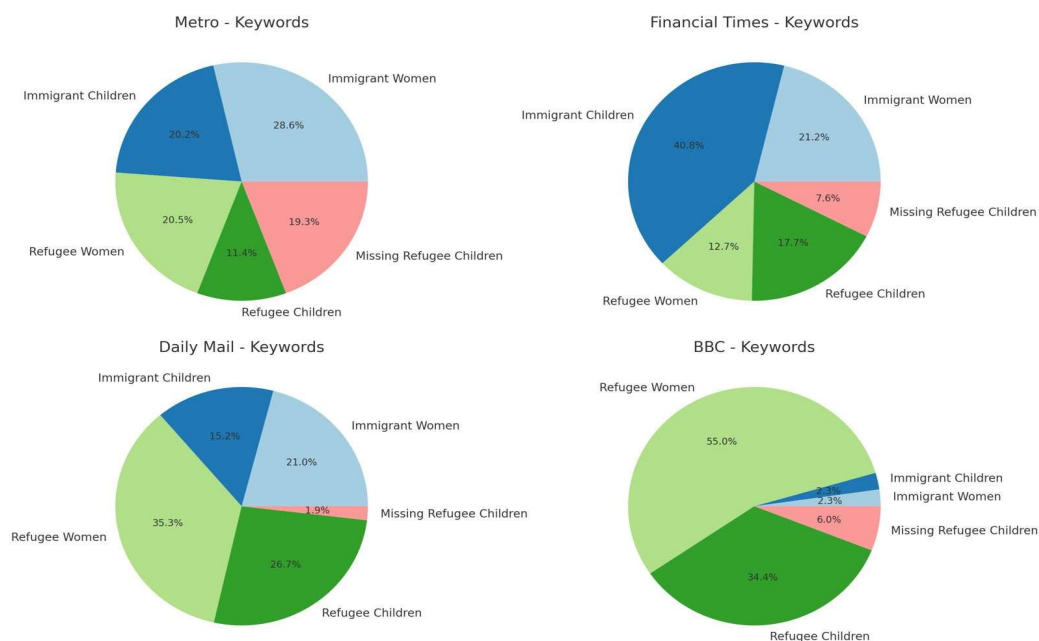

Figure 1. Frames Across Outlets

Figure 1 presents clear differences between outlets in both the number of images and the visual frames applied. The BBC features the most portrayals of women, followed by the Daily Mail. In the BBC's coverage, the most frequent frame is War-torn City (n=250), while the second is Maternalizing (n=110). These patterns suggest two dominant representational modes. The first connects refugee women to scenes of conflict and displacement. The second draws on familiar images of motherhood and caregiving. As Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017) note, such visuals are part of a broader media logic that invites emotional responses but tends to limit political recognition.

Across Metro, Daily Mail, and Financial Times, frames like Life Goes On and Faceless recur frequently. While Life Goes On suggests normalization and post-migration integration, it often lacks context and risks depoliticizing migrant experiences. Faceless, on the other hand, erases individuality and reinforces emotional distance. As Mohanty (1988) reminds, these visual patterns illustrate how normalization can mask structural inequalities, while anonymity sustains symbolic exclusion.

## 4.2. Keyword Associations and Frame Tendencies

Figure 2. Keyword Category Distribution on Pie Chart

Figure 2 shows how different keyword categories are distributed across the four outlets. The patterns indicate some links between the terms used and the types of frames applied. At the BBC, there are many references to both "refugee women" and "refugee children," which seems to correspond with the frequent use of the War-torn City and Maternalizing frames. These choices point to a humanitarian framing approach, where refugee women are often shown in roles connected to suffering or caregiving.

Compared to other outlets, the Daily Mail features more visual content about "refugee women," but this often comes with repeated use of War-torn City and Criminal frames. Together, these choices tend to present women either as victims of distant conflict or as potential threats within the host country. As Zhou (2024) and Loza (2023) suggest, this kind of framing supports racialized and moral distinctions, shaping who is viewed as deserving of empathy and who is treated with suspicion.

The Financial Times shows the least number of visual images featuring refugee women, even though it uses frames like Faceless and War-torn City. This mismatch suggests that the crisis is presented in a distant and abstract way. The women in these images are not connected to a clear story or context. In such cases, the act of showing becomes more like a routine step than a choice with ethical or political meaning. Noble (2018) might describe this as a kind of invisibility built into the system, shaped by how algorithms and editorial routines work.

Among the four outlets, Metro refers to "immigrant women" more often than the others. This is reflected in its frequent use of the Life Goes On frame, which usually shows scenes of daily life, integration, and normal routines. On the surface, this might suggest a more inclusive tone. However, as Gill & Scharff (2013) argue, such portrayals often follow a neoliberal logic, where being seen depends on showing signs of self-reliance, productivity, and fitting into mainstream society.
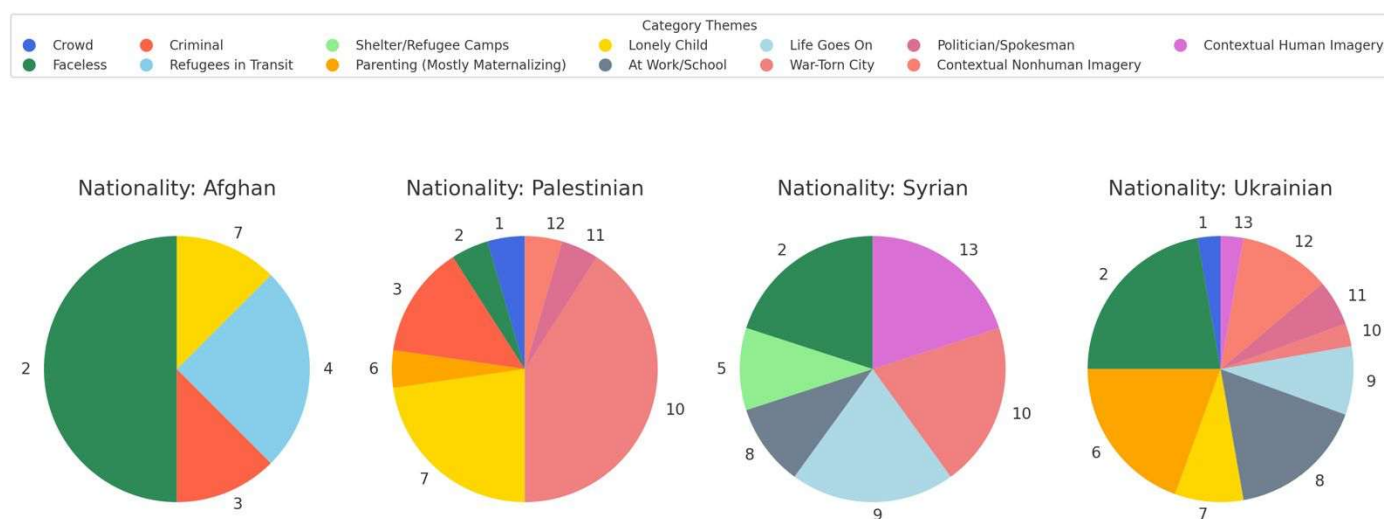
Figure 3. Visual Framing by Nationality in Financial Times

Figure 3 shows clear patterns in how the Financial Times portrays women from different national backgrounds. Although the dataset includes five nationalities and one group with unidentified origin, Rohingya women do not appear at all in the outlet's coverage. This is not simply a random absence. It points to a broader tendency in elite media to leave out certain refugee groups from visual representation. As Mohanty (1988) explains, when some groups are repeatedly missing from public narratives, it reveals which kinds of suffering are seen as worth showing and which are ignored.

Within the dataset, Afghan women are shown using only four main visual frames: Faceless, Lonely Child, Refugees in Transit, and Criminal. None of the other categories appear in their portrayal. This limited range points to a consistent pattern where Afghan women are framed through themes of vulnerability, invisibility, and suspicion. They are rarely shown as individuals with agency but instead appear as displaced and disconnected. This finding supports Loza's (2023) argument that non-Western refugee women are often denied complex representation and are reduced to passive roles within media narratives.

The way Palestinian women are represented shows a similar lack of variation. Most of their images fall under the War-Torn City frame, followed by Lonely Child and Criminal. Other frames, such as Life Goes On, At Work or School, Refugees in Transit, and Refugee Camps, are missing. This suggests a strong focus on scenes of destruction, where Palestinian women are often shown in damaged environments, with little indication of movement or change. These portrayals reflect what Kyriakidou (2015) calls "symbolic distance," where suffering is shown in a way that evokes emotion but not connection or deeper understanding.

In contrast, Syrian women are associated with a wider spectrum of six visual frames, including Faceless, Life Goes On, and Contextual Human Imagery. The presence of both humanizing and dehumanizing frames reflects an ambivalent representational strategy. While some images suggest normalization and integration, others rely on anonymizing or abstract visual tropes. Particularly notable is the prominence of Contextual Human Imagery, which situates Syrian women within everyday scenes or environments. This hybridization may reflect what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls an "economy of visibility," where affectively resonant but ideologically constrained imagery circulates based on narrative convenience and audience expectations.

In the case of Ukrainian women, the most common visual frame is Faceless, followed by Maternalizing. Although anonymous imagery still dominates, the presence of maternal themes fits with broader media narratives that present European refugee women as familiar and deserving of care. This pattern is consistent with Muezelaar's (2025) analysis

of Dutch media, which showed a focus on Ukrainian mothers and children as relatable and in need of support. It is also important to note which frames are missing. Ukrainian women do not appear in Criminal, Refugee Camps, or Refugees in Transit categories. These absences help build a more positive image of arrival and adjustment, reflecting deeper ideas about who is seen as closer and more acceptable within European contexts (Zhou, 2024).

In the Financial Times, visual portrayals reveal a clear hierarchy where nationality influences both how women are represented and how close or distant they are made to feel in moral and political terms. Some groups are shown within the context of crises that need to be managed, while others appear as familiar and less problematic. These editorial patterns are consistent with Butler's concept of differential grievability (2009). This concept refers to the uneven way in which people are seen, mourned, or recognized as fully human. The analysis shows that visibility is not automatically given. It is shaped by overlapping factors such as race, nationality, gender, and the perceived cultural familiarity of the subjects.
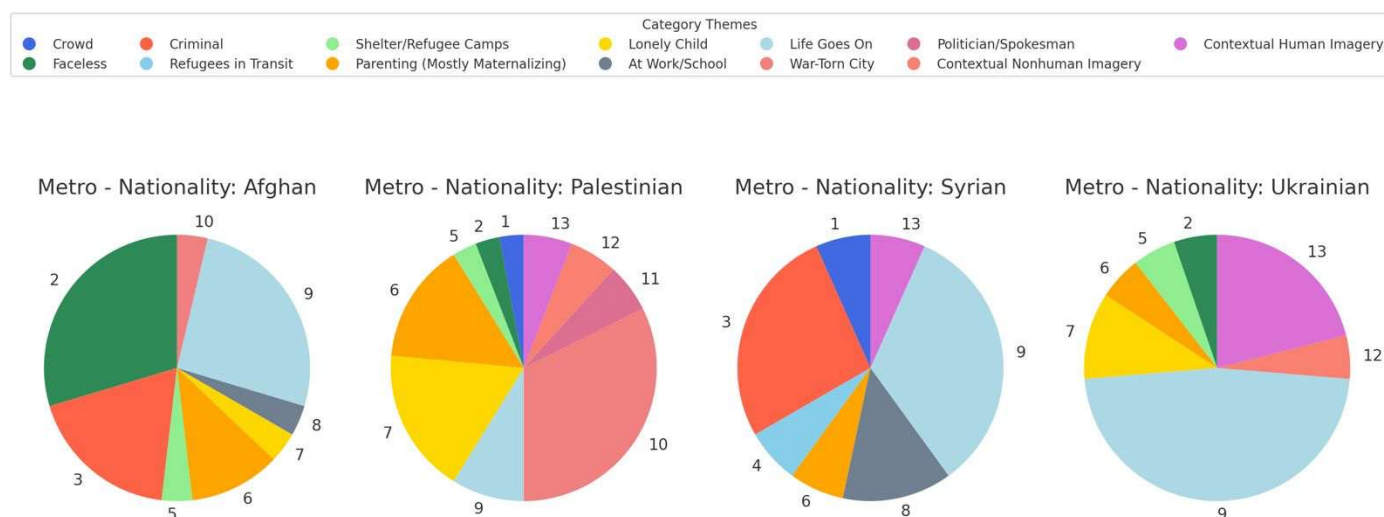

Figure 4. Visual Framing by Nationality in Metro

Compared to the Financial Times, which appeals to a more exclusive readership, Metro is widely available to the public as a free newspaper. However, this broad accessibility does not seem to lead to more inclusive visual coverage. As shown in Figure 4, Metro omits Rohingya women entirely from its dataset, just like the Financial Times. This absence questions the idea that wider public access automatically brings greater representational diversity. As Hall (1997) points out, visibility is shaped not only by whether someone is shown, but also by how their presence is constructed and what roles they are made to occupy.

Although both Metro and the Financial Times exclude Rohingya women, Metro applies a wider range of visual frames to different nationalities. Afghan women, for instance, are most often shown as Faceless, followed by Life Goes On and then Criminal. These choices suggest mixed tendencies. On one side, using the Life Goes On frame points to some degree of normalization, showing Afghan women as part of daily life. On the other side, the frequent use of faceless images continues to portray them as anonymous and without voice. This supports Chouliaraki & Stolic's (2017) argument that such visual practices reduce individuality.

Palestinian women are mostly framed through War-Torn City, with some use of Maternalizing, and only a few instances of Life Goes On. Frames such as Refugees in Transit and Criminal are not present. This pattern suggests that Palestinian women are often shown in settings of destruction or care, without visual reference to movement or post-migration life. Their portrayal focuses on static scenes, reinforcing a sense of ongoing

crisis. This reflects what Ibrahim (2010) describes as repeated images of distant suffering, where political struggle is replaced by emotionally charged but passive imagery.

In Metro, Syrian women are mostly shown through the frames Life Goes On, Criminal, and At Work/School. This combination differs from the patterns seen in other outlets, suggesting more attention to the post-migration experience. Images of women working or studying point to a sense of settlement and participation in daily life. While this can be read as a sign of agency, Zhou (2024) warns that such portrayals may also shift focus away from the structural barriers migrants face. By highlighting individual success, the deeper political and economic factors behind displacement can become less visible.

Ukrainian women in Metro are mostly shown through the Life Goes On frame, with only a few cases of Faceless and Contextual Human Imagery. Nearly half of the images fall under the category of everyday normalization, which is notable considering how recently many have arrived. This result supports also Muezelaar's (2025) finding that Ukrainian women are often portrayed in familiar roles, such as mothers or community members, suggesting that they are seen as culturally close and deserving of support.

Metro's framing does not simply reflect the timing of migration or neutral reporting. Instead, it reveals a pattern in which post-migration visibility is given unequally. The use of the "Life Goes On" frame differs by nationality, suggesting that some groups are more easily shown as integrated into society than others. Ukrainian and Syrian women appear in everyday or normalized roles, while Palestinian and Afghan women are still mostly shown in images linked to war. This difference reflects what Mohanty (1988) describes as the Western feminist tendency to simplify non-Western women. Some are allowed to be seen as complex and forward-looking individuals, while others remain stuck in limited images of suffering or cultural otherness.
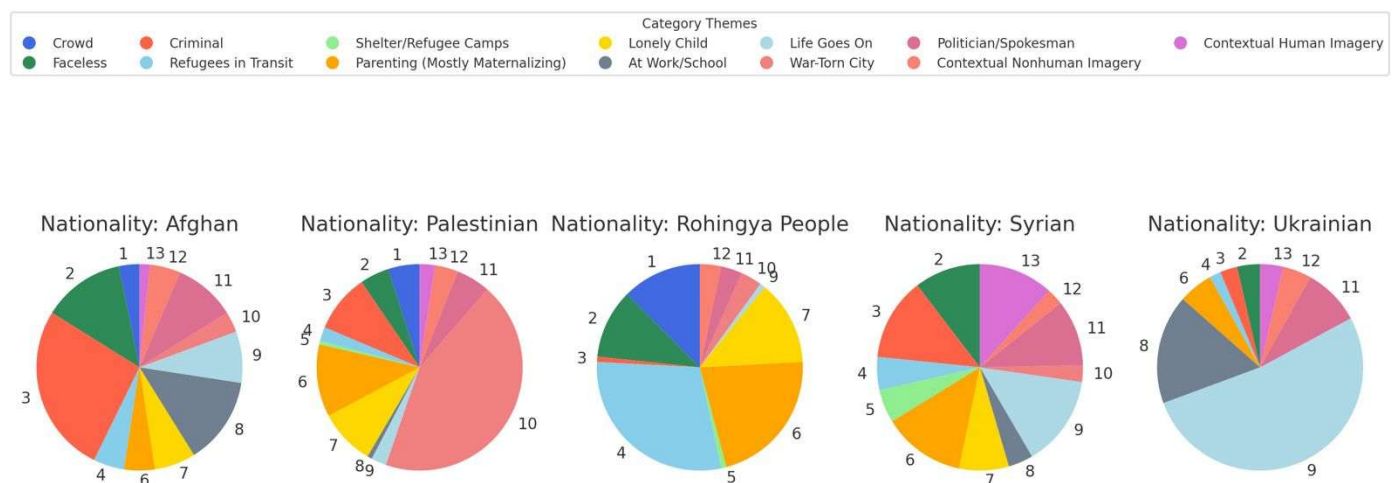

Figure 5. Visual Framing by Nationality in Daily Mail

Among the four outlets in the study, the Daily Mail uses the largest variety of visual frames in its coverage of immigrant and refugee women. However, this broader use of frames does not necessarily mean the coverage is more inclusive. Instead, it reflects a mixture of different representational approaches, combining narratives of security, humanitarian concern, and racialized judgments about morality and worth.

The Daily Mail's portrayal of Afghan women is primarily shaped by the Criminal frame, with Faceless appearing as the second most frequent. These two categories carry dehumanizing effects, aligning with what Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017) describe as the "aesthetics of opacity," where individuals are depicted not as full subjects but as anonymous or threatening figures. While the frames of Life Goes On and At Work/School are occasionally present, they are relatively marginal. This suggests that Afghan women are rarely shown as part of everyday social life or recognized as individuals engaged in work, education, and community.

In the case of Palestinian women, although the War-Torn City frame remains dominant, the Daily Mail presents a broader visual range compared to the Financial Times and Metro. Alongside imagery rooted in crisis, there are instances of Life Goes On, At Work/School, and Maternalizing frames. This broader spread suggests a degree of variation in representation. However, Palestinian women are still primarily depicted through scenes of conflict and caregiving. As Hall (1997) cautions, expanding visual categories does not necessarily prevent the reinforcement of stereotypes, especially when symbolic meanings remain narrowly defined.

Rohingya women are most often shown in transit, especially in boats or on water, reflecting what Ibrahim (2010) describes as "ritualized suffering." While these images can be emotionally striking, they usually lack political context and risk turning the women into moving symbols of displacement. The repeated use of the Refugees in Transit frame, along with Child, Parenting, and Crowd categories, creates the impression that Rohingya women are not seen as individuals but rather as part of a vulnerable, anonymous mass. This reflects Mohanty's (1988) argument that non-Western women are often portrayed in Western humanitarian discourse as helpless victims, with little attention to their agency.

Syrian women, compared to other groups, are represented through a wider variety of frames in the Daily Mail. They are no longer commonly shown in the Crowd category, marking a departure from earlier media patterns. Instead, the most frequent portrayals fall under Life Goes On and Contextual Human Imagery. These categories point to a tendency to normalize their post-migration lives. However, this shift does not entirely remove the influence of othering. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, even seemingly positive representations can support selective narratives of inclusion, especially when they align with the emotional preferences of dominant audiences.

The portrayal of Ukrainian women shares several features with the patterns seen in Metro and the Financial Times, but some differences stand out. More than half of these portrayals fall under the Life Goes On frame, and many are shown in work or educational settings. A smaller number appear in the Politician/Spokesperson category, which suggests that Ukrainian women are more often included in political narratives. In contrast, Middle Eastern and Rohingya women are almost entirely absent from such representations. Notably, frames like Crowd and Refugee Camps do not appear at all in the Ukrainian case. This absence reinforces the idea that Ukrainians are not visually linked to mass displacement.

The Daily Mail's use of visual framing moves between more conservative themes like crime and other portrayals that try to show refugee or immigrant women in softer, sometimes normalized ways. Compared to Financial Times, which tends to be more distant and abstract, or Metro, which often simplifies things, the Daily Mail uses a broader set of visual categories. But still, this range does not remove the deeper inequalities in representation. Instead, it spreads them across different groups based on race or legal identity. For example, Ukrainian women are usually shown as fitting in but without much political voice, Rohingya women appear stuck in ongoing displacement, and Afghan women are often framed as possible risks. These patterns support the main point of this research: who gets seen and how they are seen is shaped by ideology, and that visibility is not shared in a fair way across all groups.
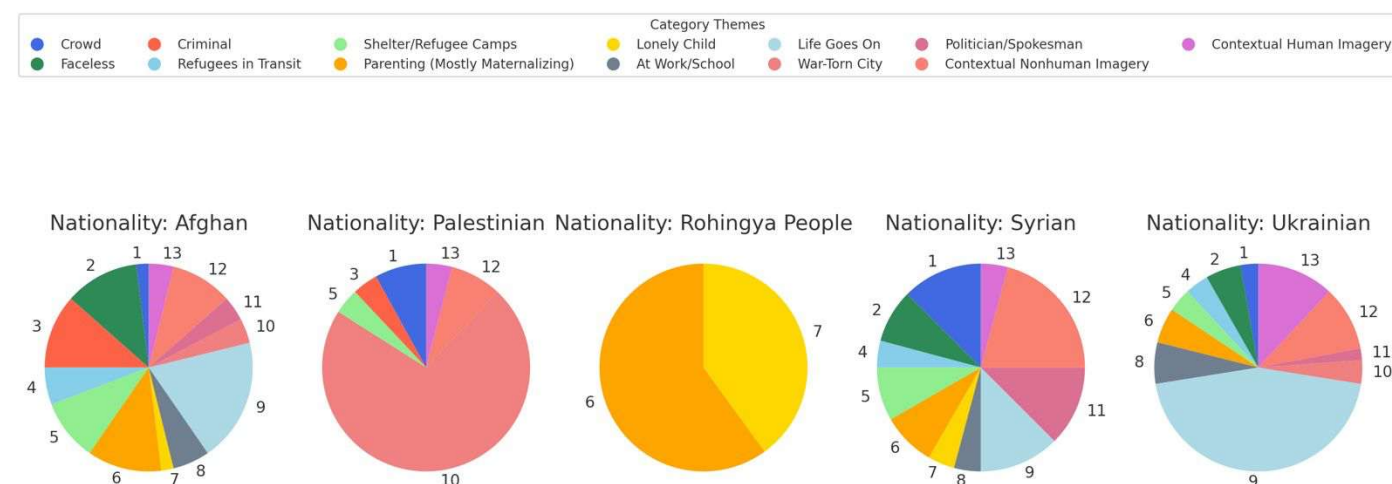
Figure 6. Visual Framing by Nationality in BBC

BBC coverage presents Afghan women through the most diverse range of visual frames among the national groups analyzed. The most frequently used category is Life Goes On, followed by Maternalizing, Criminal, and Faceless. This variation might appear to reflect a more complex representational approach. However, it also reveals a dual movement between normalization and securitization. As Hall (1997) points out, media representations are shaped by broader ideological dynamics and cannot be considered neutral. In this context, Afghan women are shown within conflicting emotional narratives: they are sometimes depicted as integrated members of society, while at other times they are portrayed as potentially threatening figures.

In BBC coverage, the way Palestinian women are shown very limited. Most of their images are placed under the War-Torn City category, and the Crowd frame is also used, though less often. These choices make it look like these women are always stuck in conflict zones, without moving forward in their journey or being shown in their lives after migration. Ibrahim (2010) explains this as "ritualized suffering," where repeated images of war turn serious violence into something that can be watched but not really understood.

Rohingya women are framed even more narrowly. They appear almost exclusively through Parenting and Lonely Child frames. In this context, Rohingya women are visible only as maternal caregivers or as extensions of suffering children, never as workers or autonomous individuals. Their representation is shaped by emotional narratives and limited by underlying ideological structures.

Compared to other groups, Syrian women are represented through a more complex yet uneven visual pattern. The most common frame is Contextual Nonhuman Imagery, followed by Politician/Spokesperson, Crowd, and Life Goes On. The absence of the Criminal frame might suggest reduced securitization, but the dominance of abstract or symbolic visuals points to a different form of marginalization. In these portrayals, Syrian women are visible but not central. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, within the so-called 'economy of visibility,' being seen does not always lead to recognition or agency. Instead, Syrian women often appear as background figures in policy narratives, rather than as individuals with subjectivity.

Ukrainian women, similar to portrayals in other outlets, are most frequently depicted through the Life Goes On frame, followed by Contextual Human Imagery. These visuals emphasize post-migration integration, emotional strength, and a sense of everyday normality. The BBC's use of visual strategies shows a layered way of making some migrant women more visible than others. Even though the BBC is expected to follow principles of neutrality, its imagery still reflects deeper hierarchies of recognition and empathy. As Hall (1997) and Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017) remind us, being shown in the media does not always mean being fully represented. What matters is who not just

appearing, but in what form, with what emotional tone, and under which framing. This also connects to what McCombs et al. (2014) describe as agenda melding, where visual messages blend into wider media environments and shape how the public builds emotional and cognitive understandings of migrant women. When Afghan women are shown as both anonymous and criminal, or when Palestinian and Rohingya women are mainly portrayed through caregiving and victimhood, these are not accidental choices. They form patterns that make some lives more legible and others more distant.

4.3. Statistical Modeling: Predictors of Face Visibility in Visual Representations

Table 2. Logistic Model Predicting Face Visibility

Variable	Effect (Std. Err.)
BBC	-0.054**
	(0.027)
Faceless	-0.120***
	(0.030)
Criminal	0.314***
	(0.045)
Refugees in transit	-0.068*
	(0.036)
Shelter/refugee camps	-0.069*
	(0.039)
Parenting	0.379***
	(0.053)
Lonely child	0.486***
	(0.065)
At work/school	0.827***
	(0.036)
Life goes on	0.842***
	(0.031)
Contextual nonhuman imagery	-0.104***
	(0.030)
Contextual human imagery	0.825***
	(0.036)
Relevant	0.059***
	(0.015)
Syrian	-0.109**
	(0.046)
Afghan	-0.143***
	(0.039)
Rohingya People	-0.194***
	(0.059)
All other nationalities	-0.126***
	(0.030)
Palestinian	-0.211***
	(0.041)
Feb.23	-0.108**
	(0.053)
Jun.23	-0.133**
	(0.050)
Oct.23	-0.123**
	(0.048)
Nov.23	-0.088*
	(0.052)
Apr.24	-0.144**
	(0.046)
Jul.24	-0.145**
	(0.054)
Aug.24	-0.157**
	(0.050)

Significance levels are indicated as follows: p≤0.001 (***), *p≤0.05 (**), p ≤0.10 (*)*. Standard errors are shown in parentheses under each coefficient. This table presents the key results for statistically significant predictors. Full regression outputs, including all variables regardless of significance, are available in the Appendix.

The results first indicate that visual frame plays an important role in whether faces are shown in the images. Frames such as "Life Goes On", "At Work/School", "Parenting", and "Contextual Human Imagery" are significantly associated with face visibility (p<0.001), suggesting that these categories tend to present women in more individualized and humanized ways. In contrast, frames like "Faceless", "Contextual Nonhuman Imagery", and "Criminal" are linked to lower face visibility. These associations point to the role these frames play in supporting more dehumanized portrayals, as also discussed by Banet-Weiser (2018) and Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017).

The findings also show that nationality has a notable influence on face visibility. Women identified as Palestinian, Rohingya, Afghan, or Syrian are significantly less likely to appear with visible faces in news images compared to women from other national backgrounds (p<0.05 in all cases). This supports arguments in the literature that racialized and politically marginalized groups are more often portrayed in ways that limit their visibility (Butler, 2009; Mohanty, 1988). On the other hand, Ukrainian women are more frequently shown with visible faces, especially in frames like "Parenting" or "Life Goes On," which tend to invite empathy. Even when not statistically highlighted in every instance, this pattern is consistent across the dataset.

A third finding relates to differences between media outlets and subject categories. The Financial Times generally included fewer images with visible faces, but when it covered refugee women, the rate of face visibility increased in a statistically significant way (p<0.001). This could suggest an editorial choice to highlight a more humanitarian tone in refugee-related stories, even though the outlet typically favors more abstract visual content. On the other hand, the BBC did not show a similar variation across different categories. Its use of face visibility remained fairly stable, pointing to a more uniform editorial approach.

Finally, the timing of publication also shaped the presence of visible faces. In several months across 2023 and 2024, particularly after periods of intense media attention such as April to August 2024, the likelihood of showing faces decreased. This pattern may reflect signs of compassion fatigue in news coverage, or changing editorial choices as attention moved elsewhere.

These results offer empirical support for the visual hierarchies discussed earlier. The presence of faces, treated here as a marker of humanization, varies significantly across media outlets, framing categories, and national backgrounds. This pattern reinforces the view that visual inclusion is not simply a matter of editorial aesthetics. Rather, it is shaped by political and cultural judgments about who is seen as a recognizable subject and also what society expects to see. The influence of nationality and framing confirms that media visibility follows unequal trajectories. Some migrant women are presented as relatable or familiar, while others are depicted in ways that render them anonymous, marginal and/or threatening.

5. Conclusion

This study uses an intersectional approach to explore how migrant women are visually represented in British media. The results show that certain visual patterns repeat across outlets, but they are not applied equally to all groups. Some women are shown often, while others are barely visible. For example, women from Palestine and Afghanistan are mostly portrayed through images of war, motherhood, or without identifiable faces. These choices frame them as victims and exclude them from political roles. Ukrainian women, on the other hand, are more frequently shown in scenes of daily life, such as school or work. These portrayals make them seem closer to the viewer and more accepted. This contrast supports ideas in feminist and postcolonial media research, which suggest that race, location, and political alliances shape how people are treated in media. Kyriakidou (2015) also describes how images of suffering can create emotional responses without bringing people closer. Some groups are shown in ways that invite pity, but not recognition.

The study also finds that each media outlet frames migrant women in ways that reflect its editorial focus and intended audience. The Financial Times, which targets a more elite readership, often uses abstract visuals that show people without clear identity. Metro, although it reaches a broad public, does not consistently offer more personalized or human-centered portrayals. The Daily Mail uses a wide range of visual categories but often chooses frames related to crime or movement, especially for certain nationalities. The BBC may appear more balanced, yet it often relies on images that are emotionally strong but do not show the political or social complexity behind migration, such as scenes of war or caregiving.

This study makes clear that visibility in media images does not always mean inclusion or recognition. As Hall (1997) argues, representation is shaped by deeper ideological tensions. Visual framing is one of the ways these tensions appear in media, as it helps define who is seen as a victim, who is understood as legitimate, and who is granted a sense of agency. Even when refugee women are shown in what looks like humanitarian imagery, their political presence often remains missing. These portrayals may reduce migrant women to passive figures, especially when their difference is connected to race or distant geographies. Some visual patterns appear repeatedly. For example, blurred faces, scenes of displacement, and criminal associations are common in images of Afghan and Rohingya women. These are not just stylistic choices. Over time, they create links in the audience's mind, making some portrayals feel expected and others less likely to be noticed. In this way, visual framing does not simply reflect media priorities. It shapes what kinds of migrant subjectivities become visible, and which ones remain on the margins.

From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to visual media research through a detailed classification of how migrant women are portrayed. Instead of using broad categories like "victim" or "threat," it introduces a set of visual frames that reflect ideas from feminist and postcolonial theory. The inclusion of regression analysis provides a clearer quantitative basis for interpreting these patterns. Future research could explore how audiences respond to such images, asking whether they accept or question the ways migrant women are represented. As media become more visual and politically divided, it is important to understand which portrayals are repeated and accepted, and which ones are overlooked or pushed aside.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. Full OLS Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	Significance
Financial Times	0.01	0.03	
Daily Mail	0.028	0.019	
BBC	-0.054	0.027	**
Refugee women	-0.02	0.016	
Faceless	-0.12	0.03	***
Criminal	0.314	0.045	***
Refugees in transit	-0.068	0.036	*
Shelter/refugee camps	-0.069	0.039	*
Parenting	0.379	0.053	***
Lonely child	0.486	0.065	***
At work/school	0.827	0.036	***
Life goes on	0.842	0.031	***
War-torn city	-0.033	0.041	
Politician/spokesman	-0.043	0.034	
Contextual nonhuman imagery	-0.104	0.03	***
Contextual human imagery	0.825	0.036	***
Relevant	0.059	0.015	***
Syrian	-0.109	0.046	**
Afghan	-0.143	0.039	***
Rohingya People	-0.194	0.059	***
All other nationalities	-0.126	0.03	***
Palestinian	-0.211	0.041	***
Feb.23	-0.108	0.053	**
Mar.23	-0.069	0.052	
Apr.23	-0.09	0.059	
May.23	-0.061	0.057	
Jun.23	-0.133	0.05	**
Jul.23	-0.067	0.056	
Aug.23	-0.038	0.051	
Sep.23	-0.081	0.05	
Oct.23	-0.123	0.048	**
Nov.23	-0.088	0.052	*
Dec.23	-0.05	0.051	
Jan.24	-0.036	0.054	
Feb.24	-0.042	0.051	
Mar.24	-0.071	0.047	
Apr.24	-0.144	0.046	**
May.24	-0.074	0.049	
Jun.24	-0.058	0.048	
Jul.24	-0.145	0.054	**
Aug.24	-0.157	0.05	**

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.10$