

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Issue: Protecting Displaced and Refugee Children

Name: Annika Aggarwal, Aksharra Maheshwari

Position: Deputy Chair, Deputy Chair

Introduction:

With global crises and unprecedented levels of displacement, the imperative to safeguard the welfare and rights of displaced and refugee children has become more critical than ever. In 2022, children comprised 41% of refugees and internally displaced persons. Children all over the world get displaced due to war, governmental factors, violence, natural disasters, economic instability, discrimination, and marginalization. These are just some of the few reasons why children are removed from houses and remain as refugees in need of protection.

The UNHCR heavily prioritizes the safety and protection of these refugees and displaced children. Still, children struggle with getting protection as refugees and displaced people. They lack physical protection, in which a child is directly harmed, but also lack attention towards the establishment of a refugee or IDP status, and even access to healthcare, education and shelter. They are stripped of their rights through external factors which creates lifelong damage for each displaced child. None of this happens by the choice of the child since many children are born into or forced into this status. As children maintain their refugee and displaced status, they become exposed to many traumatic and threatening situations such as war and conflict. Thus, it is nothing but their imperative right that all member nations in the UNHCR protect their dignity and development.

Definition of Key Terms:

- 1. Refugee:** An individual who has been forced to leave their country or homeland to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.
- 2. Internally Displaced Person(IDP):** Individual(s) who are forced to leave their home, city, state or region but remain within the country's borders. They are

often referred to as refugees however do not fall within the legal definition of a refugee.

3. **Unaccompanied Children:** Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who is responsible for doing so by law or custom.
4. **Separated Children:** Children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal guardian or primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other adult family members.
5. **Asylum seekers:** A person who fled their home country and is seeking protection in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee.
6. **Physical Protection:** In the context of refugees, physical protection is defined as a refugee's right to physical security. It refers to the implementation of measures to ensure the safety, security, and well-being of refugees.
7. **Migrant:** As defined by the International Organization for Migration, a migrant is “an umbrella term, of a person who moves away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.”
8. **Immigrant:** An immigrant is a person who moves to *permanently live in* another country that is not their own.
9. **Human Rights:** As defined by the United Nations “Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status...Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.”

Background Information

Why refugees migrate

Refugees migrate for numerous sorts of reasons. It could be due to forced displacement out of their country because of religious, political or social factors and beliefs. 110 million

individuals are forcibly displaced annually. According to the UNHCR refugee agency, in mid-2023 these individuals were displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order. The marginalization and discrimination can be targeted due to religion, race, ethnicity, or beliefs. Targeting certain groups can lead to conflicts causing tragic events and displacement. From 2014 until 2023 59,037 deaths have been recorded of migrants. However, these are only recorded. Due to refugees' lack of access to documentation, the majority remain unknown. All in all, refugees migrate for many sorts of reasons yet it is never a choice. It is a forced movement.

Why children are involved

Children are forced to migrate when their family or adult figure (such as a parent, guardian or relative) decides to do so. Families normally do this for many reasons, especially if the future of their children is at risk. 43.3 million children were displaced by the end of 2022. A relevant example of this would be World War II. In this war, 15 million children were orphaned and 1.5 children were killed. Children represent more than half of migrants all over the world. The range of reasons differs based on the situation. Children are normally involved due to family decisions of an unstable lifestyle and future.

Why children may lack protection

Children at a young age are normally dependent on an adult figure. They tend to be more vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation, trafficking and detention. With many of them not knowing how to deal with these situations, this can lead to unfortunate circumstances for these children. If the protection of children from an adult figure is stripped, they are left helpless. Lack of protection for the children can lead to significant long-term impacts including mental and physical health. The mental trauma of neglect can influence depression and loneliness. The physicalities of children can commute over years due to the rigorous tension surrounding them. Which can also lead to mental trauma in children.

Current Situation

Problems faced by child refugees and IDPs

There are multitudinous problems that child refugees face including mental trauma, physical exhaustion, survival tactics, isolation stress and being precocious. These problems the children face are normally long-term and impact their future. Having exposure to such conflict and

possibly encountering death can impact their overall development such as their mental and physical composure and health. and Due to forced displacement, children may lose their sense of their cultural identity and roots. Maintaining cultural ties becomes difficult affecting their sense of belonging and identity. This is highlighted especially as children integrate themselves into new refugee or IDP communities.

Stigmatization and discrimination can occur, both within host communities and among other displaced individuals. In many countries, there are laws against refugees entering the country and immigration policies. Some of these countries withholding such laws include Australia, Japan, the United States, Middle Eastern countries and Eastern European countries. With anti-refugee sentiments and laws placed to make entry for refugees harder (near to impossible), refugees struggle for safety (a right they should have). Middle Eastern countries that in fact have hosted a lot of Syrian refugees have witnessed stigmatizing the refugees. They have stated that refugees, particularly those without legal status, may face challenges in accessing services and employment. These negative stereotypes can contribute to social exclusion. Meanwhile in Australia, a land surrounded by sea has taken in 180,073 refugees which is in fact 0.75% of the global total number of refugees. The policies, such as the "Pacific Solution" and mandatory detention, have faced criticism for their impact on the mental health and well-being of refugees. Stigmatization has occurred through the portrayal of refugees as threats to national security.

When stigmatization occurs, the laws enforced make it inflexible for migrants to come to find safety. Therefore comes the factor of legal documentation issues. Child refugees and IDPs may lack proper documentation due to the lack of access they have to resources, making it difficult for them to access basic services and protection. Entering countries becomes very difficult as they are unable to get these resources they have never been given. This can lead to legal challenges that may arise in terms of nationality, asylum, and the right to stay in a host country.

Unaccompanied and separated children

There is a colossal number of more than 153,300 displaced unaccompanied and separated children. 41,000 in Ethiopia, 10,700 in Kenya and 9,000 in Cameroon. Many separated and unaccompanied children have faced abuse and exploitation of sorts leading to being unidentified. During conflict, most children lose their adult figure such as a guardian or parent(s) and this leads them to be vulnerable to the harsh environment around them. With no

guidance of such, these children are forced to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, Not many of them make it.

Education

The early start of 2023 displayed more than 43.3 million children having been displaced, according to UNICEF- many of them having been displaced for the entirety of their childhood. Out of the preposterous number of 43.3 million, more than 14.8 million children do not receive any sort of formal education. This leads to an uncertain future for such individuals. With the possibility of prolonged displacement and limited opportunities for a stable and secure life. The lack of experience and education may hinder the future of these children.

Violence

In conflict zones and areas of displacement, refugee and internally displaced children often face the immediate threats of armed conflict, witnessing or experiencing violence, and enduring the trauma associated with displacement. Children tend to be more vulnerable to such harm due to their age. They require external support and struggle with the understanding of the real world. Due to their lack of experience, they are vulnerable to physical harm, recruitment into armed groups, and various forms of abuse, including sexual violence. The lack of adequate protection mechanisms, limited access to education, and challenging living conditions exacerbate their vulnerability. Humanitarian organisations continually work to address these issues, but the situation is dynamic and subject to change based on the geopolitical landscape and ongoing conflicts.

Child labour

Child refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to confront significant challenges related to child labour. Many children are forced into hazardous and exploitative work, robbing them of their childhood and exposing them to physical and emotional damage. The lack of proper monitoring and regulation in refugee camps or displaced settings exacerbates the risk of child labour, demanding urgent attention to address this violation of children's rights and ensure their well-being.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Syria

The Syrian Crisis is currently the largest displacement crisis in the world, not only due to conflict but also to natural disasters like earthquakes. Syria accounts for more than 6 million refugees that have fled the country, almost half of them being children. In the country, refugees are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance, while many homes and infrastructure have been destroyed. The UNHCR has already implemented a resilience plan called the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) aimed at promoting the reintegration of these refugees, however, there continues to be a small number of returning refugees.

Turkiye

Turkiye hosts the largest number of refugees seeking asylum in the world, as well as a large number of refugees and displaced children. Hosting a population of 3.67 million, these refugees have fled mainly from Syria due to conflict, although many of them have also come from Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Their largest refugee camp holds over 20,000 refugees.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan has the third-largest refugee population, suffering over 4 decades of conflict, along with violence and poverty. Many Afghan refugees are seeking asylum in the communities of Pakistan and Iran, which have accommodated them accordingly. Still, the UNHCR has helped the return of over 5.3 million refugees since the early 2000s and has provided humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, such as cash grants to help them address immediate needs, basic health services, mine risk education, information on school, etcetera.

Sudan

Sudan hosts a large number of refugees, specifically 1.1 million, 48% of them being children. However, it is also the country in which there is a refugee crisis due to a large ongoing conflict. The majority of refugees seeking asylum come from South Sudan, but Sudan is still very much prone to violence, leaving an even larger number of Sudanese people to have fled their home country as well.

South Sudan

South Sudan hosts 310,000 Sudanese refugees but accounts for over 1 million child refugees who have fled the country due to conflict. Efforts have been made to resolve the conflict, however, South Sudan continues to struggle with violence and food insecurity. The UNHCR is continuing to support this host country and provide good-quality asylum.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The UNHCR has already begun to address this issue by partnering with national and international organizations to widen access to education for refugee children and also vouching for family reunification through the implementation of global platforms. In addition, UNHCR and UNICEF collaborated to implement “Blue Dot Hubs” as safe spaces for refugee children and their families in Ukraine.

All related resolutions are linked below:

- [Convention on the rights of the child, 20 Nov 1989, \(RES 44/25\)](#)
 - The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the fact that children deserve privacy, freedom, education, and most importantly, protection. Thus the convention ensures that children, including child refugees, deserve protection and humanitarian assistance by the state. Article 22 of the Convention highlights the rights of refugee children and makes sure that families are reunified with these refugee children. The Convention frames some of the UNHCR’s principles and standards towards child refugees.
- [Assistance to unaccompanied refugee minors, 12 Feb 1997, \(RES 51/73\)](#)
 - Assistance to Unaccompanied Refugee Minors acknowledges that refugee minors are the most prone to violence and abuse of all kinds. The resolution highlights the status of unaccompanied refugee minors, prioritising reunification with their families. Similar to Article 22 of the previous resolution, it pushes the importance of tracing these minors for the identification and reunification of families. This helps spread the idea that reunification of families can protect minors and mental healing.
- [Protection of and assistance to IDPs, 19 Dec 2017, \(RES 72/182\)](#)
 - This resolution establishes that IDPs deserve full equality, freedom, and humanitarian assistance. Most of all, the resolution ensures that IDPs have the right to protection against discrimination and arbitrary displacement, and are sheltered away from war sites. These guidelines are incredibly important, as stated in the resolution, considering IDPs continue to face discrimination and lack of recognition.
- [Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 30 Dec 2022, \(RES 77/198\)](#)

- This report acknowledges the more modern-day problems such as climate change and the Covid-19 epidemic and how that puts a toll on refugees across the globe. The report highlights the importance of protection for these refugees, local integration, and resettlement. Most importantly, it encourages long-lasting solutions for these refugees including access to education and family reunification.

Possible Solutions

- Put in place measures to prevent the separation of refugee or displaced families, enhancing screening methods for children to stay together with their families during relocation. Ensure children are being adequately traced for reunification.
- Analyze the severity of child protection needs, risks, concerns, etc assessments using a predetermined scale. Frequently monitor child protection violations made by specific parties and frequently update this information for assessments.
- Local and host communities can ensure the integration of children in activities that help children overcome psychological distress. They can also provide information to guardians or community volunteers to establish safe spaces for children, better helping them relieve trauma.
- Put in place security measures to respond to harassment, violence, and discrimination against refugee and displaced children while monitoring causations. Ensure that children and guardians have access to information on child protection services within communities.

Bibliography

Useful Links

<https://www.unhcr.org/> - Official UNHCR website

<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/> - Useful tool for country research including data on transnational issues such as the refugee population

https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/advocacy_brief_protection_of_children_on_the_move_in_times_of_crisis.pdf - Advocacy brief on strengthening the protection of child refugees

<https://www.unhcr.org/media/child-protection-practices-unhcr-2014-2022> - UNHCR child protection practices implemented in certain countries

<https://www.unhcr.org/media/framework-protection-children> - Child protection framework by the UNHCR

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- <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/background-guide-challenge-2-protecting-refugee-children.pdf>
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- <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances>