

Protecting refugees, with focus on children and unaccompanied minors



To fully understand the topic, it is first necessary to define the terms 'children' and 'unaccompanied minors'. Children are defined as all individuals under the age of eighteen. This includes those born into refugee families, who still require appropriate support and protection. Unaccompanied minors are children under eighteen, who are traveling without their parents or a legal guardian. Around 40% of the world's displaced people are children. They are unaccompanied for various reasons: they may either be orphans, or their parents may have sent them ahead, often to escape conflict or seek better opportunities, with the hope that the family can reunite later. They can also become separated from their families due to challenging circumstances. Unaccompanied children cannot apply for asylum by themselves because they are minors. As a result, they are forced to manage their own survival and ensure their personal safety. It is a serious problem when children under the age of 18 are in this situation.

This committee guide is separated into different sections, such as the challenges refugee children face and what is currently being done, but also questions to lead the debate. At the end you will also receive links to helpful websites which give further insight into the topic.

1. Challenges faced by refugee children

- Unaccompanied and separated children
- Children born to refugee parents
- Education
- Psychological Trauma
- Legal and Social Exclusion
- Healthcare and nutrition
- Child Labor
- Violence and Exploitation

2. What is currently being done to address this issue?

- Provide equal support to all refugee children, regardless of their country of origin
- Recognize refugee children as children first and foremost – entitled to protection and the right to participation
- Including refugee children and families benefit both them and the community
- Protecting refugee children from discrimination and xenophobia
- End harmful border management practices and child immigration detention
- Empower refugee youth to unleash their talents

3. Current measures and their effectiveness

4. Possible solutions

- Education
- Mental Health and Psychological Support (MHPSS)
- Legal Protection and Rights
- Economic Support for Families
- Health, Nutrition, and Sanitation
- Community Engagement and Social Integration
- Policy and Global Coordination

5. Sources and helpful websites

Challenges faced by refugee children

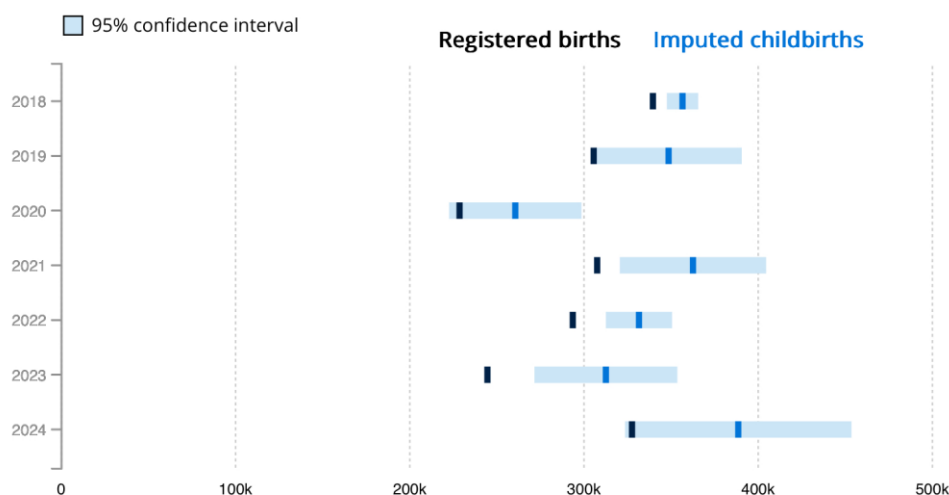
1. Unaccompanied and separated children

Globally, an estimated 153,000 children are living apart from their families. In 2021, 27,000 unaccompanied children filed asylum applications, representing an increase of 6,000 compared to the previous year. These children come from a variety of countries affected by conflict and instability, including Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan. Back in 2019, roughly 85 percent of the unaccompanied minors making their way to the United States came from Central America, especially Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Children may be separated from their caregivers unintentionally, for example when a family is forced to flee danger, or intentionally, when parents entrust them to others in the hope of providing a greater chance of safety. Once on their own, some unaccompanied minors must take on adult duties, like caring for younger siblings. Without parental care, they face a much higher risk of violence and exploitation and urgently require protection and support.

2. Children born to refugee parents

Children do not necessarily have to be refugees themselves; they may also be born into refugee families. Some women may flee while pregnant and give birth during their journey. Often, these children are not officially registered, which poses a significant problem, as it deprives them of a legal identity. As you can see in the diagram below, only a small proportion of the children born to refugees are officially registered. Registration also provides a birth certificate, which ensures that the children receive adequate legal protection, appropriate care, assistance and access to essential services.

Figure 2 | Children born to refugees | 2018-2024



3.Education

Education is a vital part of life, as it provides a stable and safe environment for displaced children and helps communities rebuild by fostering an educated generation capable of contributing to social and economic development. It also enables individuals to pursue productive and meaningful lives.

Forced displacement severely restricts refugees' access to education, with 48% of all refugee children currently out of school, according to the latest UNHCR Education Report.

Education plays a crucial role in protecting refugee children. It provides them with stability and a chance to rebuild their lives.

Through education, they gain knowledge and skills that empower them to lead productive, independent, and fulfilling lives.

However, in many regions, refugee children encounter numerous obstacles to accessing education.

These may include discrimination or restricted access to schools when fleeing conflict or persecution refugee girls are particularly disadvantaged, often unable to attend school due to domestic responsibilities, lack of access to adequate sanitation facilities, which can compromise privacy and hygiene, or concerns for their personal safety while attending school.

The report also highlights that refugee girls slightly lag behind boys in attendance, with 67% of girls versus 68% of boys in primary school and 34% versus 36% in secondary school, demonstrating how these gender-specific challenges directly impact their educational participation. UNHCR's 2022 Education Report also revealed that only 68% of refugee children are enrolled in primary school, compared to over 90% of children globally. Only 37% are enrolled in secondary school, whereas the global average exceeds 80%.

4. Psychological Trauma

Refugee children are often exposed to traumatic experiences such as war, the loss of family members and friends as well as various forms of violence. These events can severely impact their mental health, potentially impairing their well-being and behavior, learning capacity and social integration within new communities. Main cause for especially long term traumas, are the missing institutions for immediate treatment in areas of conflict.

5. Legal and Social Exclusion

Without valid documents or legal status, refugee children may be excluded from essential services like healthcare or education. In addition, they often face discrimination and social exclusion in host countries, which makes integration difficult and can harm their self-esteem and sense of belonging. During periods of high refugee numbers, host countries developed new strategies to improve the situation for refugees, for example offering help with the processes of bureaucracy, trying to cut long waiting times for a integration into the educational systems

6. Healthcare and nutrition

Refugee children often face challenges related to food security. In many cases, they do not have sufficient access to food, which can lead to undernutrition and associated health problems, such as negative consequences for their growth, cognitive development, and overall well-being. A lack of food often occurs because parents face significant difficulties finding employment in the host country. Additionally, refugee children are frequently exposed to physical harm during their journey to safety. They often travel long and dangerous routes, which makes them vulnerable for injuries and diseases. The challenge is that they often cannot access the medical care they require, either due to financial constraints or because the necessary medication or treatment is unavailable in the host country.

7. Child Labor

The parents of refugee children often struggle securing employment in the host country that provides enough income to support the entire family, if they can find work at all. As a result, families often must rely on their children to work, which is not only highly dangerous but also deprives them of their right to education. Child labor, which is illegal in most countries, robs children of their childhood and development opportunities. Children who were separated from their families or are unaccompanied minors are more likely to work, especially if they are not enrolled in any education system. In the context of child labor, children may also be subjected to various forms of violence, including physical abuse, psychological pressure, sexual exploitation, long working hours and inadequate pay. While child labor is more common in African countries, it can also occur in European countries. Two out of three refugee children living in Asia and Africa are affected by child labor, which highlights the severity of the problem.

8. Violence and exploitation

Refugee children are often at heightened risk of child marriage, human trafficking, aggravated smuggling and various forms of violence and exploitation, including child labor. Refugee camps are often overcrowded, which increases the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, especially for children and women. Additionally, some escape routes are more dangerous than others, for example the Balkan route or the route through Central America and Mexico, as they expose refugees to extreme dangers, including exploitation and harsh environmental conditions.

What is currently being done to address this issue?

In the last few years, it has become increasingly clear to everyone, that refugee children require comprehensive support. According to UNICEF there are six key actions necessary to effectively help refugee children:

1. Provide equal support to all refugee children, regardless of their country of origin:

All refugee children should receive equal support, regardless of where they come from. The inclusive response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine demonstrated what is possible when refugees are provided with access to education, healthcare and social services. This same approach must be extended to all refugee children globally, with governments ensuring the right to seek asylum and access to long-term solutions.

2. Recognize refugee children as children first and foremost – entitled to protection and the right to participation

Refugee children must be recognized primarily as children, with full rights to protection and participation. Governments are supposed to integrate them into national child protection systems, empower refugee youth and ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making processes at all levels.

3. Including refugee children and families benefits both them and the community

Including refugee children and their families in health, education and social protection systems benefits both refugees and host communities. It fosters shared growth and development. All refugee children should be integrated into national education systems and have access to free, high-quality services regardless of their migration status.

4. Protect refugee children from discrimination and xenophobia

Refugee children must be protected from discrimination and xenophobia. Everyone, governments, NGOs, communities and the private sector, has a role to play in creating welcoming environments. Policies should promote long-term integration and provide opportunities for youth to contribute to solutions.

5. End harmful border management practices and child immigration detention

Harmful border practices and child immigration detention must end. These measures place children at risk and violate their rights. Instead, states should provide access to asylum and implement child-friendly alternatives to detention.

6. Empower refugee youth to unleash their talents

Refugee youth should be empowered to realize their full potential. Reaching safety is only the first step, refugee children also need opportunities to heal, access education and thrive. Investment is needed in their mental health, resilience, and well-being, so they can overcome trauma and fully participate in their new communities and achieve their goals.

Current measures and their effectiveness

UNICEF is actively working to implement these six measures by taking step-by-step actions. The UN has addressed this topic repeatedly in the past, as its importance continues to grow. With each year there are more refugee children that need help. While many effective solutions already exist, progress requires collaboration. One successful example is the improved access to education, which has helped many refugee children attend school more easily. This keeps them protected from child marriage and child labor. Efforts have been made to provide refugee children with mental health support which improved their overall mental well-being. Additionally, it has been made easier to register birth certifications. The UN has also worked on finding ways to reunite families. Financial support plays a crucial role as well as helping families achieve a more stable living situation, reducing the need for their children to work. For example, in Bangladesh, learning centers were established, where children could learn basic skills such as mathematics and literacy. These centers also provided child-friendly spaces to help children overcome trauma and support their emotional healing.

Possible solutions

1. Education:

- Integrate refugee children into national education system
- Accelerated and catch-up learning programs
- Language support and preparatory classes
- Remote and hybrid learning programs that combine online and in-person learning

2. Mental Health and Psychological Support (MHPSS):

- child-friendly spaces
- School-based trauma support
- Peer-led support groups

3. Legal Protection and Rights:

- Birth registration and documentation initiatives
- Strengthen systems for child asylum and family reunification
- Strengthening measures to prevent child labor and human trafficking

4. Economic Support for Families:

- Cash assistance or vouchers linked to school attendance
- Livelihood programs for parents

5. Health, Nutrition, and Sanitation:

- Vaccination programs and maternal-child healthcare services School-based health and nutrition programs
- Programs supporting menstrual hygiene for adolescent girls

6. Community Engagement and Social Integration:

- Promote cohesion between host communities and refugees
- Youth empowerment and leadership programs
- Engaging parents in children's education and well-being

7. Policy and Global Coordination:

- Implement the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)
- Increase long-term funding for refugee education
- Strengthening partnerships among NGOs, governments and UN Bodies

Sources and helpful websites

- https://www.unicef.org/children-uprooted/six-actions-refugee-children?utm_
- [Unaccompanied Children](#)
- [Latest statistics and graphics on refugee and migrant children | UNICEF](#)
- [Unaccompanied Children](#)
- [Children born into refugee life | UNHCR](#)
- [Six actions for refugee children | UNICEF](#)
- <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/3b84c6c67.pdf>
- [Education | UNHCR](#)
- [Migrant and displaced children | UNICEF](#)
- [Child Displacement and Refugees - UNICEF DATA](#)
- [UNICEF press Centre | Urgent action needed to tackle child Labouré caused by Syrian crisis – Save the Children and UNICEF | UNICEF](#)
- [Uprooted in Central America and Mexico | UNICEF](#)
- <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/2023-03/background-guide-challenge-2-- - protecting-refugee-children 0.pdf>