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Research report

Forum: UNHCR
Issue: Protecting the rights of refugee children
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Introduction

When considering the protection of refugee children, it is important to keep in mind that even though the standards for them to be considered refugees are the same as for adults, their needs are most definitely different.

Refugees must often undertake dangerous travels, simply to live somewhere they feel safe. On these undertakings, lots of people fall victim to diseases or, when travelling overseas as well, strong tides. All this, only to arrive in a country that doesn't have the capacity to house all these people, leaving them with poor living conditions and still not much security.

The Policy on Refugee Children, adopted by the UNHCR, stresses the importance of protecting children from this. Children are vulnerable. They depend on their parents for guidance as well as their well being. They are still growing and developing their brain. Having the need to flee their home, especially at a young age, will change the way they are. The child will never have a normal childhood, and such a long and dangerous voyage can take a heavy emotional toll on them.

Therefore, it is extremely important to provide child refugees with a safe environment. There are many sides as to why this is definitely not an easy task to accomplish, and this research report intends to provide delegates with a concise yet thorough explanation of the issue at hand. This research report will provide some official UNHCR statistics, alongside other sources. Please keep in mind most numbers are from 2022 and can be slightly outdated.

Definitions of key terms

Family reunification

Family reunification occurs when family members living in different countries with different nationalities wish to reunite in one country. This can happen with migrants, but more specifically with refugees. Sometimes it occurs that (at least) one member of the family has been recognised as a refugee or offered a temporary protected status in a different country than the rest of the family. The refugee then can apply to have the family to join them.

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Refugee/displaced person

Both refugees and displaced people are people who have fled their habitual area. The difference is that a refugee does this in fear of persecution, war or violence, and leaves the country. The fear comes, often, from being from a certain race, religion, nationality, etc. A displaced person doesn't necessarily leave its country. They are often referred to as IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). They can be displaced for the same reason as a refugee, without being able to leave their country, but can also be forced to relocate due to climate disasters. Forcibly displaced people can be both.

Asylum seeker

An asylum-seeker is someone who has requested asylum in a different country. This means they want to be offered the status of refugee and eventually be accepted as a member of said country. Usually, there is a process necessary before an asylum seeker can receive either one of these. An asylum seeker is still awaiting this process.

General overview

The problem

At the end of 2022, the UNHCR documented a total of 108.4 million forcibly displaced persons, 43.3 million of which were children. 1.9 million children are born as refugees. Despite the common misconception where high-income countries house most of the refugees, that is actually only the case with 24%. When refugees are fleeing their country and attempt to cross a border into a less stable country, they can potentially be faced with gunfire. There are many horrifying stories where children are faced with gruesome forms of violence.

The top three countries with the most refugees are Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. Most refugees flee to neighboring countries at first, seeking asylum, and end up in camps. Neighboring countries, used to these refugees, more often than not already have systems and camps to take in these refugees. Sadly, in those camps refugees may find poor living conditions and an infinite amount of waiting. This surely takes a toll on anyone, but especially on children, that often have already endured a traumatic journey.

Traditional refugee camps are created after a large humanitarian crisis to take in the large stream of refugees. A lot of these camps have grown into much larger communities, sometimes hosting more than a hundred thousand refugees in one camp. The idea is to temporarily host refugees, but as history shows, residents often stay in camps for multiple years and end up living below the poverty line.

The largest issue is overcrowding. The amount of refugees is too great, which results in shortages of water, private toilets and even safe places to sleep. Additional dangers overcrowded refugee camps form are violence—originating from competition for the best supplies—, fire and diseases spreading easily, making it possible for a small problem to cause catastrophe, and limited medical care. For children, it is especially dangerous to be in such an unstable position. Considering that

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they are already more vulnerable, the lack of medical care can be disastrous and violence can cause not only physical but also psychological scarring. It also creates difficulty for them to follow proper education, later leading to more problems in their lives, varying from issues such as difficulty finding proper jobs to ending up homeless.

Causes

Considering all the results of migration, it is important to remember why people decide to undertake this journey. We will take Ukraine as an example, specifically in the light of recent events. Russia's recent invasion of the country has sparked an increase in refugees in neighboring nations. Ukrainians from all over the country are fleeing out of fear for Russia's violence. They look for a safer haven in neighboring countries, causing a massive influx. Ukraine is the country with the world's second largest amount of refugees.

The world's first is Syria. In March 2011, protests against the government arose which were violently suppressed. This sparked even more protest and it eventually led to a civil war, still going on with a horrible aftermath. Considering the fragile state of the nation, other crises—natural, like the earthquakes February 2023—affect the population much more than in a more stable country. Most of Syria's refugees are situated in neighboring countries, like Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Though only an eight percent or so of Syrian refugees live in refugee camps, more than 70% of Syrians live in poverty with limited access to basic needs, including education and job opportunities. The country has been in this humanitarian crisis for over a decade and 90% of its population lives beneath the poverty line. Over 6.5 million refugees are from Syria.

Of course, violence does not only come in the form of war, but also from discrimination. As an example we could take any country with an ethnic minority that is treated differently. If we look at Myanmar, we can see that Rohingya have been stripped of their citizenship, forcing them to leave the country or remain as a stateless person and face systematic violence and oppression.

History

Looking at history, the first time the word refugee is used is reference to the Huguenots. These are a group of French protestants who feared persecution in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries and fled out of fear for violence. Most of them found shelter in Great Britain, where they were received relatively well.

About a hundred years later, between 1845 and 1852 a disease affected the potato crop in Ireland, causing great shortages and resulting in over a million deaths of hunger. The Irish potato famine led to the rehabilitation of hundreds of thousands of Irish refugees. Most of these went to the United States, but some also chose to relocate in England. Unlike the Huguenots, Irish immigrants were not received well. Often they were poorer than the English, causing a clear distinction between the two.

Rights

During wars and revolutions both civilians and political figures were forced to leave their country. Threats have always persevered, and up until this day large numbers remain. There are many

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global attempts to improve the reception and to make countries more welcoming, especially for children. Sadly, there are still many countries that do not prioritize the rights of child refugees. The consequences are not difficult to imagine, and so is the importance of global cooperation to make sure the rights are, indeed, protected for all children.

Major parties involved

Türkiye

With almost 4 million, Türkiye houses the largest amount of refugees. The country has been taking in refugees for a long time and is one of the most important players in this field. However, refugees have a hard time, due to the expensive living costs, despite Türkiye providing refugees with access to the same rights as civilians. Türkiye plays a pivotal role in the Syrian refugee crisis as well. Considering this, Türkiye is a delegation that could make and break attempts at solving this issue.

Germany

As the only high-income country in the top three countries housing refugees for many years, Germany is an important facet in the refugee crisis. German civilians, on the other hand, would like to see the government take in less refugees. However, this disagreement has not influenced the government's decision to remain a safer haven for many refugees. When thinking of a solution, cooperation with Germany should definitely be kept in mind.

Syria

As Syria is the country with the highest number of refugees, their part in the issue is not to be overlooked. It can be a good solution to solve the root of the issue as well, rather than letting this increase in refugees continue. After all, people don't want to be refugees. They flee out of necessity, and it is a solution to prevent this necessity from occurring at all.

Timeline of Key Events

15 th – 17 th century	Huguenots flee France
1840s - 50s	Irish hunger famine
1880s	Jewish immigration
1900-1950s	Refugees fleeing the World Wars and the tensions that followed afterwards due to conflicts that arose. The numbers of Belgians and Polish was especially large.
1951	Refugee Convention: guidelines about refugees

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1950s-1980s	During the Cold War, refugees arose escaping tensions in Hungary, Vietnam and Uganda
2000s	Türkiye starts refugee camps for Syrian refugees
2016	EU-Türkiye deal

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Eu-Türkiye deal

Many refugees residing in Türkiye fled to the Greece islands. This is, however, a dangerous journey to undertake, and the deal attempted to stop it. Refugees that arrived in Greece would be sent back and for every 'returned' refugee, one would be taken in in Europe. Türkiye would receive additional economic support.

The deal worked partially, but fell flat when Türkiye would not take refugees back during the covid pandemic. These refugees were stuck with legal issues, as they could not receive the same treatment as Greek refugees. Additionally, there were only a couple thousand refugees sent back to Türkiye.

Guidelines

UNICEF, UNHCR and Amnesty International have all released guidelines on how to deal with child refugees specifically; the points usually include the protection of children from xenophobia and discrimination and the provision of health care access along with equal education. Furthermore, they promote the unification of family and the prevention of child detention.

Of course, there are many agreements on refugees in general, but not so many specifically aimed at children. The attempts mainly consist of guidelines or independent action from ordinary civilians.

Possible solutions

Naturally, it all starts with cooperation. It is important to keep in mind that not every country has the means to take care of refugees and refugee children the way they need. With proper cooperation, all refugees can find a place where their human rights are respected and protected.

There are no laws that differentiate adult and child refugees, though children definitely have different needs. A possible solution would involve the creation of such laws to protect children.

Additionally, all issues have a source, and rather than stopping the results, delegates should do their best to prevent children from having to flee at all.

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Further reading

Should delegates find themselves in a position of interest for more information, some examples will be provided in this paragraph.

An example of a source for further reading is the official UNHCR site. It provides many statistics and explanations on a variety of subjects, all relevant to the issue and related to refugees. The same goes for Amnesty International and UNICEF, which both provide information directed more at children.

Of course, looking at your delegation's government's official site explaining their refugee process can be a good first step while doing research as well.

Finally, any of the links in the bibliography will provide further information on any events mentioned in this research report, and the chairs wish you the best of luck!

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