

Standing Committee of the  
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme  
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**NGO Submission**

**Agenda Item 6 (i)  
Refugee Children**

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*Thank you Mr. Chairman,*

The NGOs would like to welcome the AGDM mainstreaming currently being rolled out, especially for the active participation of refugee girls and boys in the identification of protection risks and possible interventions to prevent such risks. The participatory approach has also led to the identification of children with specific protection risks, such as non-registered unaccompanied or separated children, and girls forced into survival sex among other issues, and highlights that we are still facing immense protection issues for refugee girls and boys.

In Shekole camp in Ethiopia, for example women reported an increase in rape of children. They suggested that one reason was the belief that sex with a virgin would cure HIV/AIDS. They also reported a very large increase of forced marriages of under-age girls, which has led to an increase of deaths due to pregnancy in girls not yet large enough to bear children. "What sort of mother am I - I saw my little daughters forced into marriages, and I could do nothing - they would have beaten me up."

As NGOs, we are extremely concerned with the budget crisis UNHCR is currently facing. We know from previous budget shortfalls that budget cuts are often detrimental to the already weak protection systems that are in place for the protection of children. We know from Kakuma camp that the current budget cuts have led to the closure of a newly started secondary school for refugee girls, as well of the Christmas break sports activities for the children and youth, which had successfully managed to cut crime rates to barely anything while implemented. While the cuts of this specific sports activity may save about 15,000 USD, we are most likely to see a renewed rise in crimes over Christmas as a result.

In early May an inter-agency meeting was held to generate input on violence against refugee and displaced children for the UN Study on Violence against Children. The meeting discussed the risk and protective factors relating to violence against refugee and displaced children, and produced a number of findings.

What makes refugee/displaced children more vulnerable to violence than other children?

### *General*

- **During conflict, violence against, and exploitation of, children generally increases**, either as a weapon of war or as a consequence of lack of accountability. New forms of exploitation also appear, such as the recruitment of children as soldiers.
- **After a conflict, the levels of violence remain high (or increase) for a certain period of time.** This is due to factors such as a lack of law and order, reduced coping mechanisms, the absence of employment, etc. There is also evidence that the availability of small arms, including at the household level, may be sustained after conflict - a spill over effect of conflict - which can continue to impact on levels of violence.
- **In the immediate aftermath of an 'emergency', the occurrence of violence against children and gender based violence tends to decrease. However, violence and exploitation then tend to rise, as people settle into their new situations or when situations of displacement become protracted.**

In addition to these general considerations, the following more specific risk factors were identified at different levels:

### *Family related risk factors*

- **Changing family structures** - separation from family members, fragmentation of families, female- and child-headed households, etc. The violent situations from which families have fled and the changes in family structures can weaken the protective capacity of the family.
- **Heightened stress** can make the family environment volatile and children more at risk of violence in the family.
- **Alcohol and substance abuse** - are often used as coping mechanisms and are implicated as a factor in domestic violence.

### *Factors related to displacement*

- **Displacement itself and the reasons for flight.** Proximity to violence can be a reason why families are forced to leave. The displacement itself and the reason for flight can lead to trauma and further exposure to violence.
- **Continuous change/movement**, i.e. from being in a school, to not having access to schooling, to starting a new school in a new community, etc.
- **The culture of violence** in which children are being brought up.
- **Proximity to border areas.** Refugee and other displaced children at border areas are at a higher risk of trafficking, abduction for forced marriage and military recruitment.

### *Social-cultural factors*

- **Difference of culture and social structure** between refugee/displaced families/groups and host communities.
- **Erosion of values, traditions and norms that would otherwise protect children.** Displacement often means a complete loss of the social framework, within which people define themselves and lead and plan their lives. The despair

generated as a result may lead to self-destructive behaviours, alcohol and substance abuse, and a range of psychosocial problems.

- **The change or lack of structure may bring a change in norms and values.** The social control born out of networks of communal relationships in smaller communities, and which often has a protective function for children, needs to be recreated.

#### *Risk factors related to the absence/breakdown of structures and services*

- **Being outside the regular protection systems.** Refugees are outside the borders of their country and often outside the social support services and protection systems existing in the host country. By being outside the regular settings, they are at risk of violence.
- **Disintegration of settings** (family, schools, community), breakdown of structures and lack of support services. Structures that once existed are no longer there.
- **Absence of education.** School is a place where children learn what their rights are, and how they can be protected, how to cope, and essential life long skills, such as literacy, numeracy, etc.
- **Scarcity of resources** can trigger competition between refugee and host communities and increases the risk of violence.
- **Exploitation in the distribution of resources** incl. by humanitarian workers, e.g. in food distribution.
- **Heightened risk of being internally displaced** and without support services from agencies. (There is no specific international convention and international agency for IDPs).

#### *Discrimination and legal status*

- **The lack of legal status** can lead to a higher risk of violence. Being stateless also denies access to services for children and their families.
- **Discrimination/stigmatization because of the status/identity of being a refugee/IDP or returnee child.** A great deal of the violence stems from the social identity of being a refugee/IDP/marginalized group and not necessarily their physical circumstances.
- **Programmes for refugees can lead to violence.** The fact that refugees in camps receive support can create tensions with surrounding communities perceiving preferential treatment to refugees, esp. where local communities are also poor.

#### *Gender related risk factors*

- **The modification of gender roles** in the aftermath of natural disasters and in post-conflict situations. If the role of women, at least as mothers, is not directly threatened, the role of men as providers of food and security is heavily challenged. The absence of employment opportunities, and also the reduced self-esteem of men seems to have an impact on their behaviour.
- **Transactional sex.** Lack of livelihood opportunities and/or inadequate assistance can increase the risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, including 'survival sex' and forced prostitution by girls.

- **Harmful traditional practices.** Girls are also more vulnerable to harmful traditional practices, such as early and forced marriages (which may be seen as a 'solution' to economic deprivation), and female genital mutilation.

#### *Economic factors*

- **Economic stress.** Becoming displaced means, for millions of people, the loss of an independent income and being dependent on aid. For children this adds extra risks of abuse and exploitation (i.e. recruitment, child labour, domestic violence).
- **Lack of opportunities to work and freedom of movement.** If refugees/displaced people do not have opportunities to work and are unable to economically support their families, children are at a higher risk of getting involved in exploitative child labour and violence in the workplace. Alternatives to the camps are also needed, because of (1) funding and (2) often long-term dependency situation of the refugees.

In conclusion, the meeting provided useful input for the UN Study on Violence Against Children. Some of the key points identified during the discussion were:

- A great deal of the violence stems from the social identity of being a refugee/displaced or returnee child.
- During emergencies and in post-conflict situations the levels of stress in a family can increase due to external and internal factors. Parents, who would not use violence against their children in normal circumstances, will turn to violence to discipline their children when they are put under great stress in extreme situations, such as conflict or post-conflict contexts.
- Children are also at risk of violence and abuse because of the tasks that are assigned to them, e.g. supporting the meager family income, covering education needs, collecting fuel and water, or caring for animals.
- Education can be a protection tool - it can learn children about protection strategies and ways to keep them safe. In addition education can teach the children values, respect towards others, essential conflict resolution skills.
- Detention will exacerbate the trauma of flight/displacement and can increase the risk of violence and exploitation - children should not be penalized for the act of seeking asylum.
- If refugees and asylum-seekers have opportunities to work, they will be in a position to economically support their families, and dependency on international agencies will diminish. It will also reduce the risk that children will end up engaged in child labour or 'survival sex' and are at risk of violence and exploitation in the workplace or of contracting HIV/AIDS or getting pregnant.
- The establishment of formal and inclusive child protection systems is an important contribution to prevent and respond to violence.
- Children should be recognized as partners. Children's own views and experiences must inform prevention and other interventions to stop violence against them.