

## Children at Risk in the World's Crises: *Improving Efforts to Protect Children in Humanitarian Emergencies*

### Introduction

*"In the early stages of a crisis, as emergency actions are undertaken to meet the urgent needs of vulnerable people, protection systems can struggle to develop quickly enough. Unfortunately, there are people who will prey on this vulnerability and will exploit children at a time when they most need support and protection... We must do everything we can to protect them now and in the future. They, like all children in the world, deserve a childhood and a chance of life in all its fullness." - Johan Mooij, National Director, World Vision Syria*

Child protection interventions are essential and lifesaving in humanitarian emergency responses and fragile contexts. Natural disasters, severe hunger, poverty, and conflict put children at significant risk of increased violence. The early stages of a humanitarian crisis are crucial to protecting children from violence, abuse, abduction, and exploitation, including grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict. The United Nations has deemed child protection as equal to all other sectors accepted as lifesaving (water, shelter, nutrition, etc.)<sup>1</sup>. The United States, however, has not made that determination. Therefore, child protection interventions are not implemented with priority at the onset of a crisis. The United States must designate child protection as a lifesaving intervention in humanitarian emergencies to ensure that programs are immediately implemented to safeguard vulnerable children. With child protection services currently lagging behind other interventions, risks remain high to abuse, exploitation, and trafficking at the onset of these crises.

Prioritizing child protection interventions in humanitarian responses saves lives and provides a better future for children and for the globe. However, child protection needs remain dreadfully underfunded. An analysis of UN humanitarian funding in 2020 found that only 24% of funding for child protection needs in humanitarian emergencies were received on average, and the number is trending down.<sup>2</sup>

As an international leader, the United States must take steps to emphasize its commitment to child protection in humanitarian emergencies to address the very real risks children face in these contexts. These risks include:

## » **Abduction and recruitment risks**

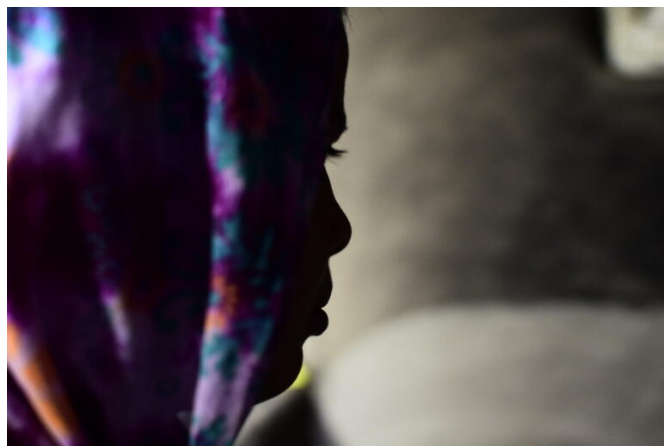
**Trafficking and Abduction:** Families can be separated in the fear and confusion when fleeing violence or natural disasters and other sources of displacement. When unaccompanied, children are at much higher risk of abduction and trafficking for purposes of domestic labor, armed groups, criminal activity, exploitation, and even adoption. Without protection interventions in place from the beginning the response, children can be lost, and the numbers are devastating. According to Europol, when families were fleeing conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya into Europe between 2014 and 2016, an estimated 10,000 children (1 in 9 of the displaced children) went missing.<sup>3</sup>

**Child Soldiers:** Children are coerced to join armed groups through abduction and forceful conscription, but also out of fear due to insecurity; peer, family or community pressure; and lack of alternative opportunities when growing up surrounded by violence.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of a humanitarian emergency, joining an armed group can seem a desirable alternative to suffering from violence, hunger, or family separation. Child recruitment affects both boys and girls, and exposes children to other grave protection risks, including sexual violence.

*“Unaccompanied children are at high risk of various forms of violence and exploitation, such as being trafficked, sexually exploited and forced to work or beg. If they slip through the registration system and are consequently not referred to the host country’s children’s services, they are at risk of losing their identity and nationality. This makes the chances of them being reunited with their families virtually impossible.”<sup>5</sup> - World Vision Child Protection Report*

### INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATION

- › To protect children from these risks, systems for identification, registration, family tracing, and reunification or interim care arrangements must be established from the outset of an emergency.



#### References

<sup>1</sup> <https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/CERF%20Life-Saving%20Criteria%202020.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unprotected-annual-spotlight-child-protection-funding-humanitarian-action-2021>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees#:~:text=At%20least%2010%2C000%20unaccompanied%20child,hands%20of%20organised%20trafficking%20syndicates.>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/WVSS-Child soldier report 2022-update\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/WVSS-Child soldier report 2022-update_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldvisionadvocacy.org/2021/08/03/central-america-development/>

### < ADDRESSING TRAFFICKING IN INDIA

An estimated 40.3 million adults and children are currently living in forced labor, sexual slavery, and forced marriages. One in four modern slaves is a child — a child like Samira in India. With a love of learning, Samira hoped to continue school, but her childhood came to a screeching stop at just age 14. Traffickers abducted Samira from her family and forced her into a brothel in an unfamiliar city. “What I went through, I would not want any other girl or woman to go through,” Samira said. “In the morning, there would be 12-14 men and, in the night, around 15-16 men.” Since being rescued, Samira has found housing in a women’s shelter, joined a World Vision support group for survivors, and started taking classes to learn a professional skill. Temporary housing, mental health support, and help going back to school are a few examples of the resources that World Vision uses to address trafficking in vulnerable communities.

## » Abuse and exploitation

**Physical and Sexual Abuse:** As families face greater stressors, instances of violence against children increase. This correlation was made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. An assessment in Bangladesh revealed that in the first few months of the lock down, domestic abuse against children had increased by 42%, and there was a 40% increase in calls to the child helpline.<sup>6</sup>

**Early Marriage:** In humanitarian crisis, particularly conflicts, natural disasters, or emergencies defined by acute food insecurity, early or forced marriage significantly increases. Young girls are promised in marriage to reduce the number in the household to be fed, and the bride price is used to feed the remaining members of the family.

**Child Labor:** The incidence of child labor in countries affected by armed conflict is 77% higher than the global average, while the incidence of hazardous work is 50% higher in countries affected by armed conflict than in the world as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Schools are often shut down in the midst of a humanitarian emergency, and the International Labor Organization has found a direct correlation between school closure and an increase in reports of child labor and exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

### INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATION

- Government assistance is strained during an emergency, so child protection programs prioritize the identification and strengthening, or establishment of community-based child protection mechanisms to monitor, assess and address child protection issues. These programs also identify high-risk areas and factors driving abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children in the emergency and work with others to strengthen/set up prevention strategies.

### CHILD PROTECTION IN ETHIOPIA

Violence in Tigray has forced schools to close. Assefu, 11, was a third-grade student when her school was closed several years ago. She loves attending school because she believes it will help her realize her dream of becoming a doctor. "The war had a devastating effect on us. We were forced to stay at home due to the frightful sound of loud gunfire. That took months for us to endure. Many of the things I studied in school have already been forgotten. Additionally, our parents have forgotten about it," Assefu declared. Instead of studying, many of the girls were occupied taking care of their parents. Because they believe it is preferable to staying at home, many of Assefu's friends are also getting married young.



#### References

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks FINAL VERSION\\_0.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks FINAL VERSION_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_575499.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575499.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms\\_845129.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_845129.pdf)

## » *Mental health*

**Trauma:** Witnessing or experiencing violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation, particularly when coupled with living through conflict, displacement or a disaster can create psychosocial or mental health challenges, including trauma in children. Cortisol released from this stress risks permanent changes to a child's brain and can lead to long-term health and development ramifications.<sup>9</sup> Toxic stress from experiencing crises can disrupt the development of major organs and lead to lifelong social and emotional impairments.<sup>10</sup> Refugee and displaced children in conflict-affected contexts are at high risk of developing mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety.<sup>11</sup>

In 2021, World Vision partners found that 100% of displaced children in Idlib, Syria showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>12</sup> Based on experiences with other children and families affected by conflict, we expect that over 1.5 million children in Ukraine may develop depression, anxiety, PTSD, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia as a result of their experiences during the war, and we are already seeing increased substance abuse and physical violence used as coping mechanisms among these children.<sup>13</sup>

### INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATION

- In order to live life to their fullest, affected children must receive Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) to help them process the trauma they have experienced. This can include the provision of child-friendly spaces<sup>14</sup> or other community-based interventions, return to school or emergency education, psychosocial first aid, and mental health referrals where expertise exists.



#### References

<sup>9</sup> [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)00579-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)00579-7)

<sup>10</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2876>

<sup>11</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-022-01974-z>

<sup>12</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/destruction-you-cant-see-report-prevalence-post-traumatic-stress>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/newsroom/ukraine/toll-conflict-eastern-ukraine-leading-increased-aggression-anxiety-substance-abuse>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.worldvision.org/child-protection-news-stories/child-friendly-spaces-safe-place-children>

### < MENTAL HEALTH IN SYRIA

Amir was 9 when his family fled the bombing of their village in Syria. A child protection specialist monitoring Amir's school in a refugee camp noticed Amir standing alone, looking frightened. The specialist had Amir assessed and found he suffers from severe emotional distress due to health abnormalities from malnutrition. Amir's parents have been provided with food assistance to help fulfill their children's most essential needs. Amir was included in child psychological support sessions for several months to rebuild his trust in himself and help him overcome the distress and effects caused by the bullying faced at school. His parents also participated in several counselling sessions that taught them how to identify and respond to early signs of emotional distress.



World Vision believes our faith calls us to care for children and for the vulnerable. We strive to see every child live life in all its fullness and work toward that goal in all our responses worldwide. We ask the United States to take action to prioritize child protection in humanitarian emergencies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS



### Pass Strengthening Efforts End Violence Against Children Act

The Strengthening Efforts to End Violence Against Children Act (SEEVAC) mandates the use of evidenced-based strategies to address violence and recognizes child protection interventions as lifesaving in humanitarian and conflict areas. This recognition would ensure that more money is being prioritized for child protection programs in areas where they are desperately needed. This bill also requires a greater level of coordination among U.S. government agencies that address violence against children to ensure effective programs continue and are appropriately implemented.



### Pass the Mental Health in International Development and Humanitarian Settings (MINDS) Act

The Mental Health in International Development and Humanitarian Settings (MINDS) Act is the first US legislation to address mental health and psychosocial support in foreign assistance. The act codifies the position of USAID Coordinator for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS); codifies the USAID MHPSS Working Group to promote inter-bureau and interagency coordination and support the integration of MHPSS in U.S. foreign assistance; requires the Department of State and USAID to integrate MHPSS programming across regional bureaus and missions; and requires the Executive Branch to brief Congress on implementation of the bill, barriers to MHPSS programming, and overall expenditures on MHPSS programming in U.S. foreign assistance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION



### Update policies to include child protection as lifesaving

US policy does not recognize child protection as a lifesaving intervention in humanitarian emergency responses, despite children being among the most vulnerable in any emergency context. USAID and the State Department must update policies to reflect prioritizing child protection in humanitarian responses in line with international standards.



[worldvisionadvocacy.org](http://worldvisionadvocacy.org)

World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. We serve all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

World Vision p300 I Street NE Washington, D.C. 20002

5g\`Ym;c\bgcbz>8!A DD  
Dc`Jm5Xj JgcfZ<i a UbJhUfJUb`  
UbX`9a Yf[YbVt5ZUJfg  
aigwe@worldvision.org  
202.572.6374

BUHY@UbW  
GybJcfDc`Jm5Xj JgcfZ<i a UbJhUfJUb`  
UbX`9a Yf[YbVt5ZUJfg  
nlance4.worldvision.org  
202.572.6442