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# Protection of Refugee Children by UNICEF: A Thematic Focus

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## ABSTRACT

*The article has explored the critical role which UNICEF plays in the protection of refugee children, in particular those who have been recently affected by the Syrian and Ukrainian war crisis. With over 40 million children being displaced, UNICEF has emerged as a leading figure to ensure the safety and well-being of these children. The article has carefully analysed UNICEF's activity in conflict-affected regions and provided the people and children with relief and long-term support to reintegrate into society. The findings of the study have outlined the key progress that the organisation has made towards providing the refugee children with access to clean drinking water, healthcare and education. The efforts of UNICEF to collaborate with local government agencies and NGOs to rebuild schools, train teachers and reduce discrimination against the people who have been displaced have been of significant importance in the research. The study has emphasised the destruction of public infrastructure in both Syria and Ukraine, which negatively affects the education and well-being of the children. In order to address the deteriorating health conditions, UNICEF has launched different initiatives such as mobile medical teams and Blue Dots support hubs that provide high-paced support to the children and help in the reintegration of the displaced children. UNICEF continues to struggle with funding, discrimination and inadequate resources, which limit their efforts, but the organisation continues to safeguard the interests of the children and protect them during periods of crisis.*

## KEYWORDS

*UNICEF, Syria, Ukraine, education, health, mental health, well-being.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The number of people who have been forcibly displaced from their region continues to increase each year. A report from Statista highlights that the number of international refugees in 1951 was recorded to be 2.1 million. In 2023, the numbers have risen to almost 123 million, showing the significance of this global crisis<sup>1</sup>. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was founded in 1950 to provide a home to those displaced due to the Second World War. Since then, the UN has been working to provide humanitarian aid and other crisis management solutions to people who have been suffering from displacement. In 2024, the primary factors that were responsible for the wide-scale increase in the number of refugees were the ongoing problems in Sudan, Syria and Ukraine. Back in the 1990s, nearly 1.5 million people were able to return to their homes after the civil unrest ended; however, in the present day, the number has fallen to around 385,000, showing that the displacement of the people has crossed the possibility of solutions<sup>2</sup>. The UN Refugee Agency, with its headquarters in Geneva, has been responsible for providing the victims of displacement with assistance. The organisation is constantly working with stateless people from 136 countries. Much of the staff are based in Asian and African nations, as they produce the largest number of refugees.

In this context, the refugee children are the most vulnerable population on the planet as they are forced to evacuate their homes due to the ongoing conflict. In refugee camps of foreign nations, they are often separated from their families and, as a result, suffer from persecution and disaster. The children of refugees are also considered refugees under international law (2). The UNHCR has made significant steps to protect these children and ensure they have access to essential services such as education and healthcare. The UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and UNICEF are some of the key organisations of the UN that are working closely with these children and have therefore collectively established a framework to promote inclusion for all refugees. In

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<sup>1</sup> Statista, 'Annual number of refugees under United Nations mandates, internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum seekers, and other persons in need of assistance from 1951 until 2024' <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1309846/refugees-displaced-worldwide/> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>2</sup> United Nation, 'Refugees' <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

2022, when the number of people forcibly displaced from their land increased to 103 million, 40 million of them were recorded to be children<sup>3</sup>. The UN believes all children deserve a fair chance in life, and therefore, their work is centred on protecting these children from any form of physical harm or exploitation. The purpose of the present research is, therefore, to understand the effectiveness of the child protection programs under the UN, with a special focus on Syrian and Ukrainian refugee children.

## **2. UNICEF'S ROLE IN PROTECTING SYRIAN AND UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN**

The primary role of UNICEF is to ensure all refugee children receive equal support, the organisation works towards integrating the children into national educational systems regardless of their refugee or asylum status. UNICEF works with the local government bodies to integrate these children and provide them with protection<sup>4</sup>. The steps taken by UNICEF are generally inclusive and include both the children and their families. UNICEF is also known to work with the government for the long-term integration of these children, prevent them from being discriminated against and provide them with the opportunities to establish themselves. The lifesaving humanitarian supplies that are provided by UNICEF help in creating a safe space where families can reunite and address the specific needs that the displaced children have. The data which is collected on these children is used to prevent the detention of children at the refugee camps<sup>5</sup>. In order to help the refugee children adapt, a safe and productive migration environment needs to be provided to reduce the chances and need for further displacement and build resilience among the children.

The Syrian war has resulted in the largest humanitarian crisis in the modern era. The war, which began at the beginning of 2011, has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and millions being displaced. The war initially started as part of the Arab uprising but soon became a larger refugee crisis as over 6 million people were displaced internally, resulting in the crippling of the social and healthcare infrastructure<sup>6</sup>. The war had destroyed

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 'UNICEF-UNHCR Strategic Collaboration Framework'

<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/unicef-unhcr-strategic-collaboration-framework> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, 'Six actions for refugee children' <https://www.unicef.org/children-uprooted/six-actions-refugee-children> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, 'Migrant and displaced children' <https://www.unicef.org/child-protection/migrant-displaced-children> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>6</sup> Alhaffar, MHD Bahaa Aldin, and Sandor Janos. "Public health consequences after ten years of the Syrian crisis: a literature review." *Globalization and health* 17.1 (2021): 111.

public healthcare systems, leaving the people helpless and seeking opportunities to flee the country. Children during this war have been highly vulnerable, with a report from 2014 suggesting that 12,000 children were killed, however, the true numbers are estimated to be much higher. By the next year, over 5.6 million children needed assistance, and another 3.8 million were displaced internally, while another 2.1 million found refuge in the neighboring countries<sup>7</sup>. Younger children had incomplete vaccination status, with past data being lost during the war. Respiratory diseases, infections, and nutritional deficiency had been observed in many of these children.

Additionally, studies have also shown that the Syrian children who had to relocate multiple times in different countries also had to suffer from panic attacks, mental distress and other issues<sup>8</sup>. Social exclusion, which the children faced in these neighbouring countries, resulted in loneliness and other stress factors. Syrian children observed in Lebanon and Jordan revealed to be suffering from PTSD and were at high risk of emotional dysregulation. During the 2017-2019 period, over 2 million Syrian children were reported to have dropped out of school, and the lack of education significantly impacted their lives. Despite having a positive attitude towards reading and getting enrolled in schools, many of these children possessed low language skills<sup>9</sup>. The role of UNICEF is to raise awareness about these children and their condition. The reports from the organisation demonstrate how these children are the worst affected by this crisis.

The Syrian crisis report from UNICEF shows that the children required humanitarian assistance, with nearly 6 million children in need of urgent protection. Healthcare for these children continues to be a fragile concept despite increased efforts made by the government and international bodies. The displacement of families has resulted in the children being exposed to child labour, child marriages and trafficking. The increasing food insecurity in the nation has also forced out a significant number of people and raised malnutrition<sup>10</sup>. UNICEF has continued to operate on the ground levels to ensure the surviving families in the country and

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<sup>7</sup> Hazer, Livia, and Gustaf Gredebäck. "The effects of war, displacement, and trauma on child development." *Humanities and social sciences communications* 10.1 (2023): 1-19.

<sup>8</sup> Hazer, Livia, and Gustaf Gredebäck. "The effects of war, displacement, and trauma on child development." *Humanities and social sciences communications* 10.1 (2023): 1-19.

<sup>9</sup> Abouzeid, Marian, et al. "A generation at risk: the impacts of Lebanon's escalating humanitarian crisis on children." *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (2021): 704678.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, 'Syrian crisis' <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/syrian-crisis> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

outside can navigate their new paths and transition into a new era without political turmoil.

The report has further revealed that UNICEF has partnered with local authorities in Syria to help the children improve their situation and achieve psychosocial support. Critical humanitarian assistance is provided by the organisation, such as clean drinking water and vaccines for the children to have a healthy life. UNICEF and its other partners have also helped in reopening schools, training the faculty and repairing water and sanitation facilities. In 2024, mobile medical teams were assigned to help vulnerable children and make sure they have access to clean water. The humanitarian focus for UNICEF for Syrian refugee children has continued to be providing them with urgent relief and helping the host communities against any form of violence<sup>11</sup>. The organisation requires US\$ 282.2 million to support the displaced Syrian children who have been living in Egypt, Jordan and Turkey. The programs launched by the organisation have been towards improving the nutritional intake of the children and providing them with education. By providing the children with fresh drinking water and formal education, UNICEF has been trying to provide them with a proper life.

After the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, millions of Ukrainian children both in and outside the country have constantly been living in a state of fear. The war has completely stopped three years of schooling for many children, as numerous schools and health facilities were destroyed by Russia. UNICEF has been present in Ukraine since before the war began and has been directly observing the escalation. Studies have revealed that 250,000 children in Ukraine regularly experience shelling and are exposed to open land mines that remain unexploded on the eastern frontier of the country<sup>12</sup>. The armed conflict has resulted in 7.5 million children being exposed to the hardships of war, the destruction of housing, neglect and deprivation experienced by the children has further exposed the children to diseases. Exposure to such high outbreaks of violence also leads the children to develop diabetic problems, cardiovascular diseases and other chronic problems as they grow up<sup>13</sup>. The teachers have shared the psychological distress experienced by the children and fear that the trauma to have a negative impact on their mental

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<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, 'Syrian Refugees and Other Vulnerable Populations Appeal' <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrian-refugees> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF, 'War in Ukraine: Support for children and families' <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/war-ukraine-pose-immediate-threat-children> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>13</sup> Júnior, Jucier Gonçalves, et al. "The impact of "the war that drags on" in Ukraine for the health of children and adolescents: Old problems in a new conflict?." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 128 (2022): 105602.

health. The economic crisis, which has taken place due to the war, has resulted in families experiencing a loss of income, and poverty is on the rise<sup>14</sup>. UNICEF reports estimate 1.5 million children to be at risk of developing depression, anxiety, and other post-traumatic stress disorders that can have a long-term impact on their health.

UNICEF has played a significant role during this period of crisis in Ukraine; the organisation has continued to work in order to ensure cash assistance is provided for the people. The children are provided with winter clothing to keep them safe. Rehabilitation efforts have been made both in and outside the country to help the children better adjust to the changing circumstances. Children who suffer from mental health problems have been provided with psychosocial support by UNICEF. The people are provided with fresh water for rehabilitation, and increased efforts towards sanitation and hygiene have been made. Furthermore, UNICEF has worked towards improving the healthcare available for the people. As medical supplies are sent to the frontlines, UNICEF has been providing aid to the people to strengthen the collective efforts towards the violence<sup>15</sup>. UNICEF has also extended their support to the vulnerable households, providing them with cash assistance to improve their economic situation. In neighbouring countries where Ukrainian refugee children have been sent, UNICEF has been working closely with local government bodies to ensure they have access to proper education and have access to health services.

### **3. UNICEF'S EFFORTS TO ENSURE EDUCATION AND HEALTH RIGHTS FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN**

Prioritising the education of displaced and refugee children has been one of the central goals of UNICEF. The organisation shares that out of the 30 million children who have been forced to move across borders, nearly half of them face many different legal and practical barriers which prevent them from seeking proper education. Similarly, only half of the 12 million children who are documented are enrolled in primary schools and less than a quarter in secondary schools, with only 1% being able to enter a college<sup>16</sup>. Additionally, the other 16 million children who have

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<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, 'War in Ukraine pushes generation of children to the brink, warns UNICEF' <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/war-ukraine-pushes-generation-children-brink-warns-unicef> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>15</sup> Júnior, Jucier Gonçalves, et al. "The impact of "the war that drags on" in Ukraine for the health of children and adolescents: Old problems in a new conflict?." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 128 (2022): 105602.

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF, 'Education Solutions for Migrant and Displaced Children and their Host Communities' <https://www.unicef.org/documents/education-solutions-migrant-and-displaced-children-and-their-host-communities> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup>

been displaced internally also face multiple barriers which prevent them from accessing education. UNICEF has been working with the educational sectors of the host countries to develop diverse classrooms that can better accommodate children who have been displaced. The educational system lacks the presence of qualified teachers who are capable to teach these children and understand their diverse needs. UNICEF considers education to be a fundamental right for all people; the peacebuilding goals of the organisation have always been to resist violence and help the children reenter society<sup>17</sup>. Helping refugees develop necessary life and job-based skills is necessary to prevent them from falling into crime-related temptations. Due to this, UNICEF works with refugee youths as well as host communities to navigate peaceful coexistence and the reconstruction of a comfortable relationship between the different communities.

UNICEF's efforts towards promoting education are both resilient and cohesive as it encourages the youth to participate by their own free will. Listening to the different voices has helped the children to understand their full potential. The well-being of these refugee children is often determined by their environment and the opportunities that they have. UNICEF shares that these children possess ideas and experiences that should not be ignored but rather utilised as part of their educational journey<sup>18</sup>. The poor health and language barriers lead to fear, which makes children avoid educational institutions in the new region. The organisation therefore works with local communities, religious groups and institutions to ensure the children have a safe environment to grow and understand their surroundings. Turkey is one of the countries which hosts a large population of Syrian children, It has been found that UNICEF works with Syrian Volunteer Education Personnel and other NGOs to increase the enrollment of children in Turkish schools<sup>19</sup>.

Even though 40% of these children are missing out on education, UNICEF has been working towards strengthening the educational system and introducing inclusive measures that can improve the efforts towards education. UNICEF has renovated and refurbished nearly 400 schools and trained 20,000 volunteer teachers to

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<sup>17</sup> Pauluk, Dorota. "Protecting and Educating Children on the Move in UNICEF and UNHCR Documents." *Horyzonty Wychowania* 22.64 (2023): 137-146.

<sup>18</sup> Pauluk, Dorota. "Protecting and Educating Children on the Move in UNICEF and UNHCR Documents." *Horyzonty Wychowania* 22.64 (2023): 137-146.

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF, 'Inclusion of Syrian refugee children into the national education system (Turkey)' <https://www.unicef.org/documents/inclusion-syrian-refugee-children-national-education-system-turkey-2> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025



improve the educational standards for the children<sup>20</sup>. The problems which Syrian children face in Turkey have also been reported in Jordan, as the lack of inclusive educational practices excludes the children and prevents them from accessing proper education<sup>21</sup>. For Ukrainian children who have been displaced, UNICEF and UNHCR have collectively launched Blue Dots, which are safe spaces where the children can access proper healthcare and education. The children can register themselves based on whether they are travelling alone or with others<sup>22</sup>. Blue Dots has been set up in many European countries, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Belarus, and Slovakia. UNICEF partners with the local governments of these countries to help children avoid exploitation and abuse.

Over the years, UNICEF has also made many efforts to strengthen health and child protection systems for the different refugee children. Many of the refugee children do not have access to proper healthcare or nutrition, which is a significant barrier for them. UNICEF believes that detention of children at borders and camps is particularly harmful as it undermines their development, foster care, and independent living arrangements; on the other hand, are many more effective measures which can help in protecting these children<sup>23</sup>. Reports from UNICEF share that the COVID-19 pandemic has further contributed to the poor living conditions of millions of refugee children and their experiencing poverty, low access to healthcare and sanitation. Through collective efforts and collaborations, UNICEF has been able to promote collaborations between the different parties and design proper measures that can promote the well-being of the refugee children and provide them with the care they require for a successful life<sup>24</sup>. The humanitarian response of UNICEF for Syrian children has also prioritised support for the mental health of the children and providing them with nutrition services that can prevent them from getting certain diseases. UNICEF has been

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<sup>20</sup> UNICEF, 'Over 40 per cent of Syrian refugee children in Turkey missing out on education, despite massive increase in enrolment rates' <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/over-40-cent-syrian-refugee-children-turkey-missing-out-education-despite-massive> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>21</sup> AJEE, 'Refugee Children's Right to Education: Education of Syrian Refugee Children in Jordan – Reality and Prospects' <https://ajee-journal.com/refugee-children-s-right-to-education-education-of-syrian-refugee-children-in-jordan-reality-and-prospects> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>22</sup> UNICEF, 'Guidance for protecting displaced and refugee children in and outside of Ukraine' <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/guidance-protecting-displaced-children-ukraine> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>23</sup> UNICEF, 'UNICEF's Agenda for Action for Refugee and Migrant Children' <https://www.unicef.org/eca/emergencies/unicefs-agenda-action-refugee-and-migrant-children> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>24</sup> Hallas, Donna. "A new focus on global health." *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 38.1 (2024): 1-2.

working towards developing facilities where 320,000 children can access the community-based mental health and support initiatives<sup>25</sup>. The deployment of mobile medical teams has also helped with catering towards the health needs of the people and saving vulnerable children living in and outside of Syria<sup>26</sup>. Likewise, UNICEF has also been working with local authorities to restore access to safe water and sanitation sources for the children of Ukraine. Strengthening the healthcare system by providing more resources and home visits has dramatically improved the efforts towards catering towards the needs of these children<sup>27</sup>.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As concluding remarks for the present research, the article highlights the unwavering efforts of UNICEF to remain committed towards protecting refugee children. The findings of the research have essentially focused on the millions of children in Ukraine and Syria who have been displaced due to regional conflicts and wars. The life-saving interventions of Ukraine extend from providing the refugee children with safe refuge in neighbouring countries to allowing them to seek proper education. The efforts of UNICEF are not merely transformative, but they also focus on long-term integration of these children into the systems of the host country and building resilience, which can empower the children to have a better chance at help. UNICEF understands the importance of education and has therefore contributed towards the development of additional efforts in Syria, Ukraine and all the other nations in which the refugee children are living to address the unique challenges they are facing. Programs such as Blue Dots created safe spaces where the refugee children can come and seek protection, and also enroll in education and health services. The child-centred response has been impacting the people positively and addressing the shortages to prevent the hindrance of progress. On the other hand, the study has also revealed the existing problems, as despite the efforts of UNICEF, Syrian refugee children living in Jordan and Turkey continue to struggle to enter the educational system. This suggests that the efforts towards child protection need to be more multifaceted and also showcases the critical need to prioritise the needs of the children through innovation. UNICEF requires continuous international support to

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<sup>25</sup> UNICEF, 'Syrian Refugees and Other Vulnerable Populations Appeal' <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrian-refugees> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>26</sup> UNICEF, 'Syrian crisis' <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/syrian-crisis> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

<sup>27</sup> UNICEF, 'War in Ukraine: Support for children and families' <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/war-ukraine-pose-immediate-threat-children> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2025

continue supporting these vulnerable children and protecting them against harm.

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