

ISSUE FACT SHEET: REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS

Did You Know?

According to UNHCR, The United Nations Refugee Agency, in 2019 there were 68.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world. Of these, 40 million had been forced from their homes but were still in their own countries. 25.4 million were refugees elsewhere and 3.1 million were seeking asylum. According to UNHCR, every 2 seconds, one person becomes displaced. That is 44,500 people each day who are forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution.

Guiding Questions

1. What is a refugee?
2. Why do people become refugees?
3. What are conditions like for refugees in camps?
4. Who is trying to help refugees?

Definitions

- A **refugee** is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.
- An **internally displaced person**, or IDP, is someone who has been forced to flee from home but never crosses an international border. These individuals seek safety anywhere they can find it—in nearby towns, schools, settlements, internal camps, even forests and fields. Unlike refugees, IDPs are not protected by international law or eligible to receive many types of aid because they are legally under the protection of their own government.
- An **asylum seeker** is someone who flees his or her own country and seeks sanctuary (safety) in another country. Asylum is the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. Asylum seekers must demonstrate that their fear of persecution in their home country is well-founded.

- A **refugee camp** is a temporary accommodation for refugees, where they can be protected and sheltered. In a camp, refugees can be provided with food, water, and medical attention as needed.
- A **refugee crisis** occurs when large numbers of people are forced to become refugees.

Overview

Today we are experiencing the worst refugee crisis in history. Tens of thousands of people are forced from their homes every day, usually because of war, violence, or persecution. Children make up a large percentage of these refugees, sometimes without their parents to protect them. Traveling to a new and unknown location presents many challenges. Often, refugees can only travel with what they can carry, including food, water, and very small children. Many have to walk a hundred miles or more to a place of safety, often over difficult terrain.

Even when they arrive in a place of relative safety, life is difficult. In camps, shelter is often primitive, often without running water or electricity. They have no jobs, and therefore little means of livelihood, and they must depend on the host countries and international agencies for basic necessities of life. Most often, these host countries are developing nations themselves. Refugees must often learn a new language and new customs to adapt to their new surroundings. Difficult as life is, refugees often prefer it to the danger of returning to their own countries. In many cases, the “temporary” camp becomes a permanent home, sometimes for several generations.



Related Impacts: Refugee families

One result of a refugee crisis is that families are greatly affected. Parents lose their homes and jobs and cannot support their families in the way they have in their home country. Leaving the only home they have known can be very disorienting, even traumatic, for children. Older and beloved members of the family such as grandparents may have to be left behind because the flight is too arduous for them.

Sometimes families become separated during their journeys and, once they have been separated, reunion becomes very difficult. Even if the family stays intact, some family members may suffer from PTSD caused by the trauma of war, violence, and the stresses of the journey, and they may be unable to cope with their new lives. Anxiety and stress may affect family relationships even after physical safety is achieved.

To a desperate family, an early marriage for a girl can seem the best way to provide for her safety and well-being. But this “child marriage” usually spells the end of her education. According to a nonprofit organization called Girls Not Brides, the rate of child marriages (i.e., marriages when the girl is under 18 years of age) is 45% for Somalia. An article in the magazine *National Geographic* pointed out that “Some estimates now show child marriage rates to be four times higher among Syrian refugees today than among Syrians before the crisis.” Such early marriages often result in early pregnancies, often at an age that is dangerous for the young mother.

Related Impacts: Education

When children go to school regularly, they are safer from forced child labor, sexual exploitation, and early marriage. Education for girls in particular has been shown to result in increased health and prosperity for their own future families. For all refugee children, education is the path to success in their new country of refuge. An education can give a girl greater confidence in herself and more independence. It increases her family’s standard of living and helps her safeguard the health of her own children in the future. An education can also help a girl to resist the pressure to marry at a very young age.

Around the world, about 92% of children go to primary school; among refugee children, that figure is only 61%, according to UNHCR. Only 23% of refugee children can attend secondary school, and only 1% are able to go to college. (The situation is even more dire for girls. For example, in Kenya, where Dadaab is located and where girls make up half the child refugees, there are only 7 refugee girls in primary school for every ten refugee boys; for secondary school, there are only four girls for every ten boys.) Even for students enrolled in school, their education may be interrupted by changes in location, limited by a scarcity of books and supplies, and hampered by overcrowding in classrooms. The United Nations has declared that children have a fundamental right to education, yet the sheer numbers of refugees have precluded that from happening for many children around the world.

Related Impacts: Violence against women

Violence against women has become endemic in some parts of the world. Genocidal attacks by terrorist organizations and armies combating them have included rape as a tactic. Some women face violence from a more personal source, within the family itself because of domestic violence, forced marriages, and even honor killings. Women who choose to flee such violence often find themselves still vulnerable on their journeys; one survey found that half or more of the women along certain migration routes had been victims of sexual assault. Even in the relative safety of refugee camps, women are vulnerable, and incidents of rape, forced early marriage, and forcible prostitution frequently have occurred.

What’s Working

How can we help to reunite families, provide the necessities for daily living, and give refugees the means to establish their new lives in their adopted country? How can we provide schools so that children can grow into successful and safe adults?

There are many agencies working in Kenya and elsewhere to help refugees.

- The **International Rescue Committee** (IRC) was Girl Rising’s NGO partner in the production of the film *Brave Girl Rising*. The IRC has 191 field offices in more

than 30 countries that are in crisis, plus offices in 20 cities in the United States that help recently-arrived refugees adjust to their new homes. The IRC works to provide education, health care, and safety for all refugees.

- The **United Nations Refugee Agency** (UNHCR) and the **United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund** (UNICEF) try to carry out the mandate of the UN to provide food, health care, and education to all children, regardless of status. UNICEF’s Six-Point Program calls on nations and individuals to:
 - Press for action on the causes that uproot children from their homes
 - Help uprooted children to stay in school and stay healthy
 - Keep families together and give children legal status
 - End the detention of refugee and migrant children by creating practical alternatives
 - Combat xenophobia and discrimination
 - Protect uprooted children from exploitation and violence
- Many non-governmental agencies are also involved in helping refugees by providing food, education and services, and by trying to help them to establish themselves in their new homes. Examples are **CARE**, **Concern Worldwide**, **Doctors without Borders**, **Mercy Corps**, **Refugees International**, and **World Vision**.

What can you do as a student? An obvious answer is to contribute to a refugee aid organization through activities like hosting a fundraiser at your school. You can find out if churches or other groups in your community have programs to help refugees get resettled. If there are immigrant children in your own school, whether or not they are refugees, you can help them by making them feel welcome, helping them get involved in school activities, and tutoring them if they have trouble in classes at first.

Online Resources

- International Rescue Committee
<https://www.rescue.org/>
- The Malala Fund for girls’ education
<https://malala.org/>
- Understanding refugee camps
<https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/>
- UNICEF’s work with migrant children
<https://www.unicef.org/children-uprooted>
- The five greatest refugee crises in the world today and how you can help
<https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/worlds-5-biggest-refugee-crises>
- Definitions of terms and information about global crises from CARE
<https://www.care.org/emergencies/global-refugee-crisis>
- Providing medical care for refugees
<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/global-refugee-and-migration-crisis>
- How schools can help refugees
<http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/sites/default/files/documents/resources/Welcoming%20Schools%20PPT.pdf>
- “Her Turn: It’s Time to Make Refugee Girls’ Education a Priority” from UNHCR at
<https://www.unhcr.org/herturn/>
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/3/5a9eb2024/turn-unhcr-report-reveals-critical-gap-education-refugee-girls.html>
- Gender-based violence
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/gender-based-violence-against-women-both-cause-migration-and-risk-along-journey>
- Alexa Keefe, “Divorced at 15: Inside the Lives of Child Brides” in National Geographic
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/01/child-marriage-divorce-syrian-refugees-turkey/>

- A constantly changing collection of short films featuring the residents of Dadaab. (Be sure to preview stories before using in class.)
<http://www.dadaabstories.org/>.
- By The Numbers: The United States of Refugees
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/by-numbers-united-states-refugees-180962487/>
- How Does the U.S Refugee System Work?
<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work>

Further Reading

- *What is the What* by Dave Eggers
- *American Border Culture Dreamer: The Young Immigrant Experience from A to Z* by Wendy Ewald
- *Stormy Seas: Stories of Young Boat Refugees* by Mary Beth Leatherdale and Eleanor Shakespeare
- *Rescue: Refugees and the Political Crisis of Our Time* by David Miliband
- *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* by Viet Thanh Nguyen
- *City of Thorns* by Ben Rawlence
- *How Dare the Sun Rise* by Sandra Uwiringiyimana and Abigail Pesta
- *We Are Displaced* by Malala Yousafzai