

**ADDENDUM**

# Recovering Childhood Report: An Update on Children in Kenya's Refugee Camps

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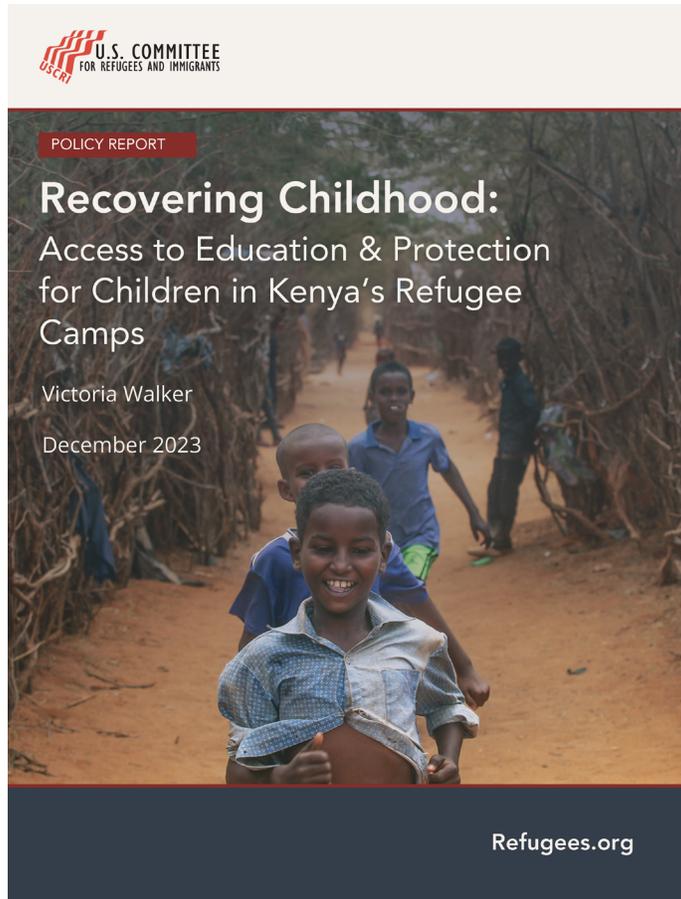


Cover photo by Gabriel Bugoma - UNHCR



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This is an addendum to the December 2023 report  
“Recovering Childhood: Access to Education & Protection  
for Children in Kenya’s Refugee Camps”



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2023, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) published its report, *Recovering Childhood: Access to Education & Protection for Children in Kenya's Refugee Camps*, following field visits to Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps and Kalobeyei Settlement.<sup>1</sup> During the visits, USCRI Policy Analyst Victoria Walker examined the experiences of refugee children in the camps and assessed their access to education and child protection services within the camps. The report presented key findings from the field visits, including the unique challenges faced by refugee girls. Since the report's publication, conditions in the region have worsened, as have conditions in the camps. The refugee populations in both Kakuma and Dadaab have increased, including the number of children living in the camps.

The following report addendum presents updated information on the key areas of children's protection and wellbeing in Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei—access to food, water, shelter, and education, as well as menstrual hygiene products for girls. It underscores the impact on mental health, including suicide and suicide attempts by children, resulting from hopelessness and lack of necessities for survival. The addendum also provides updates on the Keep Girls Dreaming initiative launched by USCRI in October 2023 in response to menstrual health needs identified during the 2023 field visits.



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USCRI Policy Analyst Victoria Walker with children in the Kalobeyei Reception Centre.- Photo: UNHCR

# INTRODUCTION

Displacement around the globe continues to reach record highs with over 117 million people forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2023.<sup>2</sup> This includes children. In 2023, children represented 40 percent of all forcibly displaced people despite only accounting for 30 percent of the world's population.<sup>3</sup> Women and girls constituted 49 percent.<sup>4</sup>

In the East Africa region, children have been forced to migrate as violence, unrest, and climate shocks worsen in countries like Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In December 2023, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) published its report, *Recovering Childhood: Access to Education & Protection for Children in Kenya's Refugee Camps*, following field visits to Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps and Kalobeyei Settlement.<sup>5</sup> During the visits, USCRI Policy Analyst Victoria Walker examined the experiences of refugee children in the camps and assessed their access to education and child protection services within the camps. The report presented key findings from the field visits, including the unique challenges faced by refugee girls. Since the report's publication, conditions in the region have worsened, as have conditions in the camps. The refugee populations in both Kakuma and Dadaab also increased, including the number of children living in the camps.



*Students participate in the Keep Girls Dreaming distribution at a boarding school for girls in Kakuma.- Photo: UNHCR*

The following report addendum presents updated information in the key areas of children's protection and wellbeing in Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei. It also reports on the Keep Girls Dreaming initiative launched by USCRI in October 2023 in response to a significant need identified during the 2023 field visits —menstrual hygiene materials.<sup>6</sup> USCRI returned to Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei in January 2024 to deliver and distribute sanitary pads from the Keep Girls Dreaming initiative. While there, Policy Analyst Victoria Walker received updates from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff and partners caring for children in the camps on current needs and challenges.

# CONDITIONS UPDATE

By January 31, 2024, Kenya hosted 714,137 registered refugees and asylum-seekers: 275,953 (39 percent) resided in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, and 338,224 (47 percent) resided in Dadaab.<sup>7</sup> The remaining 14 percent were in urban areas.<sup>8</sup> In Dadaab, 25,128 individuals were awaiting registration and were not included in the Dadaab population and country totals.<sup>9</sup> In January, 51 percent of the refugee and asylum seeker population in Kenya were children aged 0-17 years.<sup>10</sup> At current writing, records report that, as of July 31, 2024, Kenya hosted 782,468 registered refugees and asylum-seekers: 291,979 (37.3 percent) resided in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, and 385,328 (49.3 percent) resided in Dadaab.<sup>11</sup> At over 380,000 people, Dadaab now hosts “three times more than it was originally built for.”<sup>12</sup> The remaining 13.4 percent of the refugee and asylum-seeking population resided in urban areas.<sup>13</sup> Population increases were due to the resumption of registration in Dadaab and new arrivals from Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan. In July, 53 percent of the population was children aged 0-17.<sup>14</sup>



Refugees at the Kalobeyei Reception Centre. - Photo: USCRI

Deteriorating conditions for children in their home countries persist, forcing them to flee. On June 3, 2024, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres issued his Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, covering the period from January to December 2023, which revealed a 21 percent increase in grave violations against children in armed conflict around the world.<sup>15</sup> The DRC, Somalia, and Sudan were all named as conflicts with the highest levels of killing and maiming of children in 2023, as well as the highest numbers of grave violations against children overall.<sup>16</sup> Although the report showed a decrease in grave violations against children in South Sudan, the Secretary-General noted that he “...remain[s] concerned by grave violations committed against children by all parties to the conflict, including the recruitment and use of children, notably by Government security forces.”<sup>17</sup>

Children in the Horn of Africa region continue to grapple with devastating drought and climate shocks, often forcing them out of school and into migration. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) USA reported that 15 million children are out of school due to the “worst drought in 40 years” and displacement crises in the Horn of Africa.<sup>18</sup> UNICEF USA stated, “Severe shortages of water and pasture have pushed families out of their homes and fomented conflict between communities.”<sup>19</sup> In May 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 10.8 million children under five years old in the Greater Horn of Africa region would face acute malnutrition by June 2024 and that figure is expected to worsen.<sup>20</sup>

As conflict, climate, and other factors continue to fuel displacement in the East Africa region, Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyi are absorbing such influxes. And this is with strained systems, little resources, and waning support from the international community. It remains of the utmost importance that all displaced children in the camps are protected and their rights upheld.

As more children are forced to flee in search of safety, some of the most vulnerable are those who are unaccompanied or separated from their parents or caregivers. When children migrate unaccompanied, they face heightened risks of trafficking, exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), and other abuses. Often their rights to education, health, and protection are undermined and they are left to cope with substantial amounts of trauma. As detailed in the *Recovering Childhood* report, many children arrive in Kenya's refugee camps unaccompanied or separated from their loved ones after fleeing war, becoming orphaned, or being sent ahead by their parents to save their lives.<sup>21</sup>

While in the camps in January, USCRI spoke with UNHCR and partners supporting unaccompanied and separated children. Staff expressed that there continue to be significant challenges in providing care and protection for unaccompanied children in the camps. With rising inflation, high cost of living, and cuts to assistance—such as food rations—refugee families in the community were refusing to foster unaccompanied children as they were already in desperate situations. Staff in Kakuma and Kalobeyi expressed that assistance kits for families fostering unaccompanied children through a recently launched foster system would be welcome support from donors and help provide more stability and protection for unaccompanied children in foster families.



*USCRI President & CEO Eskinder Negash and Policy Analyst Victoria Walker speak with CP staff at Kalobeyi Reception Centre CFS.- Photo: UNHCR*

Typically, there are between 8,000 to 10,000 unaccompanied and separated children in Kakuma and Kalobeyi. By June 2024, over 3,000 unaccompanied and separated children had newly arrived in Kakuma and Kalobeyi at the reception centres this year alone. Over 1,000 were reunified with parents or relatives and the rest were placed in various forms of alternative care arrangements. In Kakuma, this includes child-headed households, where unaccompanied children who are not reunified and are old enough to care for themselves establish their respective households with guidance and support from UNHCR and partners instead of going into a foster situation.

The reception centres in Kakuma and Kalobeyi were filled with children when USCRI visited in January. As noted in the previous report, reception centres are where new arrivals are registered and assessed and where the provision of assistance and resources begins.

They are often the first place where Child Protection (CP) staff can assess newly arrived children and establish if they are unaccompanied or separated along with other protection needs. When USCRI visited in 2023, children were arriving with very little and especially needed clothing and shoes. During the January 2024 visit, this reality worsened. Many younger children were naked or had little clothing and no shoes to protect them from the elements. UNHCR staff emphasized the need for emergency support kits for children upon arrival, including sandals, underwear, and clothes.

While in Kakuma, USCRI met with a group of adult refugees living in the Kakuma reception centre. They shared with USCRI why they were displaced and the difficulties they were facing in the reception centre, particularly for those who had been stuck there for over two years. Reception centres are meant to be temporary while registrations are processed. They do not contain the infrastructure for permanency or livelihoods. Although the government resumed registrations by 2024, a shortage of shelter materials kept cases pending and delayed exits into the community. Some of the individuals who spoke with USCRI became emotional as they described the “very hard” realities they face living in such dire conditions in the centre. Lack of clean water and sanitation, little clothing, going hungry and malnourished, no medical care, no work or education—all leave people languishing in the centres and indefinitely in the camps. USCRI reiterated its stance against ‘refugee warehousing,’ “the practice of keeping refugees in protracted situations of restricted mobility, enforced idleness, and dependency.”<sup>22</sup>

Children in the reception centres, be it alone or with their families, are suffering in limbo. During its January visit, USCRI again went to the Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) in both Kakuma and Kalobeyei reception centres. Here too, the challenge of limited resources persists. CFS are the few safe spaces where displaced children can just be children—play, socialize, and receive care. However, play equipment is run down, materials for activities such as paper and crayons are scarce, and even the CFS structure at Kalobeyei’s reception centre is a temporary tent. On January 25, the day USCRI was there, 210 children arrived at Kalobeyei’s reception centre—three of them were unaccompanied. The population at the reception centre was 7,357 people—62 percent children—whereas the capacity was 5,475. Systems remained forced to operate at overcapacity.

In Dadaab, by June 2024, the number of ‘children at risk,’ including unaccompanied and separated children, was over 2,000. Like Kakuma and Kalobeyei, staff underlined the need for construction and equipment of additional CFS in the camps, particularly in IFO2 and the host communities. Both existing and new CFS need age-appropriate play materials for the children. Staff in Dadaab also emphasized the need for emergency support and cash-based interventions for children at risk to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, education, and medical care.

Other vulnerable children include children with disabilities. Staff in both camps underscored the need for more support for children with disabilities. Children with autism, cerebral palsy, those requiring wheelchairs or other assistive devices, deaf and blind children, and others are largely ignored in the community, stigmatized, and suffer a severe lack of support. Accessible and inclusive tools and materials are needed to provide effective communication and dissemination of information to children with disabilities in the camps. This is especially critical in schools to ensure children with disabilities have access to education. The lack of accessible toilets and hygiene facilities in reception centres and camps also gravely impacts the wellbeing of children with disabilities.

Amidst mounting needs, the primary reason for USCRI’s January visit to Kakuma, Kalobeyei, and Dadaab was to address one of the key needs identified during the 2023 visit—menstrual hygiene management (MHM).

# KEEP GIRLS DREAMING

When the onset of menstruation occurs, women and girls begin to have menstrual hygiene needs monthly. These include soap and clean water, menstrual hygiene products such as sanitary pads, and safe toilet facilities that are secure and provide privacy. MHM is defined by the WHO and UNICEF as,

**“Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials.”<sup>23</sup>**

Although MHM is a global issue, the situation is increasingly dire for women and girls in displacement contexts, where such challenges are acute and exacerbate preexisting vulnerabilities. When conflict, climate, or other extraordinary circumstances force people to flee, their access to resources, essential services, and security cease, however, menstruation does not.<sup>24</sup>

Over 90,000 school-aged girls are living in refugee camps in Kenya. Their safety and wellbeing are at risk when they get their period and do not have access to menstrual hygiene products. This impacts every part of their lives, from their health to their ability to attend school. Poverty, gender inequality, cultural stigmatization, and a lack of basic services all fuel the inability for girls to experience their menstruation cycles with dignity and safety. Adolescent girls bear the burden on their livelihood and wellbeing without menstrual hygiene management, as it relates to their health and education.



*Keep Girls Dreaming distribution at a boarding school for girls in Kakuma. - Photo: UNHCR*

While in the camps in 2023, staff and school-aged girls themselves stressed to USCRI the impact the shortage of menstrual hygiene materials, such as sanitary pads, has on girls' enrollment in school as well as their health. Without pads, girls often resort to reusing unsanitary pieces of cloth, causing infection and other health risks. This trend, ongoing stigma, and discrimination around menstruation force girls to miss weeks of school at a time or to drop out altogether.

USCRI launched the Keep Girls Dreaming initiative in October 2023 and collaborated with Chandaria Industries, a local Kenyan manufacturer of hygiene products made from recyclable materials, to address this need.<sup>25</sup> Due to extreme water shortages in the camps and high levels of stigma surrounding menstruation, sanitary pads made from recyclable materials were procured instead of reusable pads. In just a few months, Keep Girls Dreaming raised enough funds to purchase, deliver, and distribute over half a million sanitary pads to Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyi.

In January 2024, USCRI oversaw the delivery and distribution of the pads. The initiative delivered enough sanitary pads to support an estimated 5,000 girls for one year.

USCRI, alongside Chandaria, oversaw the packing of the sanitary pads in Nairobi at Chandaria's warehouse into trucks operated by humanitarian relief personnel that were then driven to the camps. Once at the camps, USCRI participated in various site visits for the distribution of the pads. These sites included schools, medical clinics, reception centres, women's centres, CFS, and a shelter for survivors of GBV. Pads and other items found in 'Dignity Kits' are especially important for GBV survivors. However, due to recent funding cuts, Dignity Kits (containing soap, pads, underwear, etc.) are rarely available. With rising costs and lessened assistance, women and girls are forced to prioritize the purchase of food and shelter materials before menstrual hygiene products despite the detriment to their health. During the distribution, a feeling of relief was evident. For these young women and girls, at least for some time, menstruation would not pull them out of school, cause increased medical risks, or limit their participation in daily life.

In Dadaab, USCRI spoke to a mother of ten who has four girls in school. She spoke about what the delivery of the pads meant for her family and the community. USCRI also spoke with her daughter, who now was able to stay in school with access to sanitary pads. In Kakuma, USCRI spoke with a teacher at a girls' boarding school about what the delivery meant for her students. She said,

**"While on periods, girls who do not have sanitary towels are always afraid of interacting with others due to the fear that they might soil their clothes. They fear others getting to know they are on their period. But with sanitary items they have confidence, they are more attentive, they do not miss school."**

Menstrual health must be prioritized in displacement settings. Three primary reasons for this are health, education, and participation.<sup>26</sup> In conflict and crises, access to medical care is often already weakened and at times nonexistent. In refugee camps, clinics can be overcapacity and underfunded. When women and girls lose access to medical clinics and care, it is a loss of safe space where they could typically seek information, materials, and care to manage menstruation.



*USCRI President & CEO Eskinder Negash, Policy Analyst Victoria Walker, and Director of International Programs Taylor McNaboe at Chandaria - Photo: USCRI*



*Students participate in Keep Girls Dreaming distribution at a boarding school for girls in Kakuma.- Photo: UNHCR*

As noted in the Recovering Childhood report, menstruation has a serious impact on girls' enrollment in school, particularly at the secondary level. When dealing with the medical implications of period pain or resulting infections from lack of resources, girls may not be able to be present and engaged in their classes. Poor toilet facilities and a lack of menstrual products often force girls in displacement settings to miss weeks of school at a time or to drop out.

Prominent levels of stigma and discrimination within communities around menstruation can hinder women and girls' ability to participate in society and interact with others. This can keep women and girls from experiencing their periods with dignity and confidence. False information about menstruation can thrive in environments of secrecy, which can cause women and girls to experience significant stigmatization. Alongside menstrual hygiene products, it is vital to facilitate community engagement activities for both menstruators and others in the community to learn about menstrual health, its normality and importance, and to combat stigma.

USCRI continues to uplift its Keep Girls Dreaming initiative and is currently examining opportunities for expansion and increased sustainability so women and girls in the camp are continuously provided with this support. This is ever more pressing as conditions grow increasingly difficult in the camps, widening protection gaps and risking leaving vulnerable children and families in desperate situations.

# FLOODS AND FOOD

Following USCRI's visit in January 2024, Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyi experienced catastrophic flooding from March to May, as did Nairobi and other parts of the country. UNHCR reported that more than 23,000 refugees were displaced from their homes in Dadaab and Kakuma due to the above-average rainfall.<sup>27</sup> Flooding destroyed homes and possessions, leaving an already vulnerable population that lacks basic resources in a worse situation. The floods caused the spread of disease, especially cholera. UNICEF reported that, according to the Ministry of Health, the flooding resulted in a fourth wave of a cholera outbreak across the country, with children the most affected.<sup>28</sup> Save the Children reported that the floods "submerged or destroyed at least 62 primary schools in Kenya, leaving more than 15,000 children with nowhere to learn..."<sup>29</sup> For refugee children in the camps, education access was already at risk, and classrooms were congested and overcapacity. Flooding further limited access to education for refugee children. Schools also became emergency shelters for those displaced by flooding in the camps. In Dadaab, seven schools became "necessary safe shelters for many refugees as their own homes [became] submerged."<sup>30</sup>

In the camps, infrastructure is weak, and homes are often temporary shelters that cannot withstand extreme weather impacts. Staff in Kakuma expressed to USCRI that when these emergencies occur, teams struggle to repair and reconstruct households—particularly child-headed households—because of shortages in shelter materials due to budget cuts and competing priorities. Following the 2024 floods, support was needed to reconstruct child-headed households in Kakuma into more stable and permanent structures that could better withstand such impacts.

Coinciding with the floods, news of extreme cuts to food rations by the World Food Programme (WFP) in both Kakuma and Dadaab was announced.<sup>31</sup> USCRI received pleas for help and credible information from refugees in Kakuma detailing "a dreadful reality" following the cuts.<sup>32</sup> Food rations were cut by 60 percent, leaving refugees with 1,000 Kenyan Shillings per month—the equivalent of around seven dollars. Cash assistance was suspended altogether. The New Humanitarian reported on the shock that overcame the refugee community in Dadaab when the cuts were announced, meaning over 600,000 people in Kenya's refugee camps would receive only 40 percent of the recommended minimum calorie intake needed to stay healthy.<sup>33</sup> A Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)/Doctors Without Borders team leader in Dadaab told the outlet that she was concerned that the cuts would cause an increase in malnutrition amongst all age groups, but "especially in children and vulnerable populations."<sup>34</sup> She expressed particular concern for the impacts on new arrivals in Dadaab with already compromised health after fleeing war and drought in Somalia.<sup>35</sup>



*USCRI President & CEO Eskinder Negash sees conditions of the cooking area in Kalobeyi Reception Centre. - Photo: USCRI*

While USCRI was in Kakuma in January, staff reported a rising trend of hopelessness and suicide attempts. There had been nine suicide attempts already in the year, six of them were successful and three of them were children. Following news of the food ration cuts, suicide attempts in the community increased further. It was reported to USCRI that three people died by suicide in Kakuma in April alone. The most recent was a single mother of seven children. USCRI implored WFP to urgently restore food rations and for donor governments and the international community to take immediate action to secure funding and restore WFP Kenya's budget in the camps.<sup>36</sup>

On June 19, WFP announced a donation from the United States Government of \$37 million "to provide critical food and nutrition assistance to refugees in Kenya."<sup>37</sup> The agency stated that the "contribution will enable WFP to increase rations for vulnerable refugees and resume cash transfers in Dadaab and Kakuma until December 2024." The increased rations will stand at 60 percent of the minimum ration.

# FORWARD MOVING

The flooding and food insecurity within Kenya's refugee camps emphasize the need for inclusive policies that allow refugees to be active participants in Kenya's socio-economic development and growth. The Kenyan Government continues to make strides in this regard, particularly through its proposed Shirika Plan. The Shirika Plan will change the status of refugees through special identification cards, a program that would end restriction and warehousing in camps and permit free movement and work eligibility for refugees. The Shirika Plan has been delayed over the course of two years due to funding constraints, but on June 20, 2024, the Shirika Plan National Steering Committee met in Nairobi to discuss the three-phase implementation of the program, expected to begin this November. The Kenyan Government continues to move towards transitioning Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps into integrated settlements and functioning municipalities. This transition aims to achieve a model of integration and socio-economic independence rather than dependency on humanitarian aid.<sup>39</sup>

On February 28, USCRI announced the official opening of its office in Nairobi, Kenya, and the expansion of services to protracted refugee camps in the country.<sup>40</sup> USCRI Kenya will provide social services to improve the health and education of child refugees and advocate for stronger refugee protections and policies.

USCRI's Keep Girls Dreaming initiative remains active in collecting donations to provide menstrual hygiene products to women and girls in Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei. All funds raised go towards the procurement and delivery of the products.



#UNHCR/Gabriel Bugoma

*USCRI Policy Analyst Victoria Walker with children in Kalobeyei Reception Centre.- Photo: UNHCR*

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The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), established in 1911, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization dedicated to addressing the needs and rights of refugees and immigrants.

This report is part of USCRI's ongoing commitment to serving the needs of refugees globally.

USCRI advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants both nationally and globally, helping to drive policies, practices, and law.

## U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants



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