




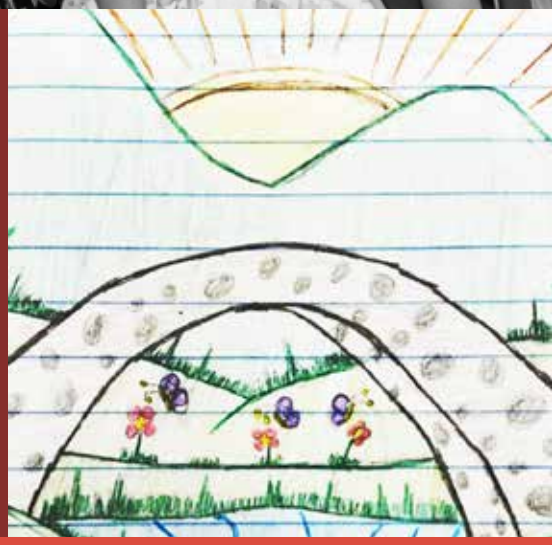

THEIR FUTURE. THEIR VOICE.

Centering Displaced Children in Global Protection and Policy

June 2026

Refugees.org

U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS
USCRI

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the courage, insight, and generosity of the children and young people whose voices, experiences, artwork, poetry, and advocacy bring these pages to life. The U.S. Committee of Refugees and Immigrants is deeply grateful to every child and youth contributor who entrusted us with their stories. May their perspectives remind us that displaced children are not merely subjects of policy discussions; they are leaders, advocates, and experts in their own lives.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the refugee-led organizations, community groups, advocates, educators, and humanitarian partners whose expertise and collaboration made this work possible.

Special thanks to the American Relief Agency for the Horn of Africa (ARAHA) in Sudan, HODARI Foundation in Uganda, the Legal Refugee Center (LRC) in Burundi, child rights advocate Adson Mphepo in Malawi, and the many individuals and organizations whose field-based knowledge informed this report. In addition, we thank our Policy Intern, Lía Butanda, who is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in International Migration and Refugees at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service.

We are also grateful to the dedicated staff of USCRI whose expertise and commitment made this publication possible, including the authors, reviewers, designers, and program teams across regions and departments. Particular thanks to Ryan Mace, USCRI Director of Policy and Communications; Victoria Walker, Policy Analyst and Lead Compiler; and Senna Ahmad, Communications Specialist, for designing the report. Thank you to all colleagues who contributed to the report's development.

We offer our deep appreciation to all contributors whose time, care, and expertise shaped these pages.

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

This year marks two significant milestones: the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention and USCRI's 115th year of service to refugees and immigrants. These anniversaries should be a moment to reflect on the progress made and re-commit ourselves to the unfinished work ahead. Instead, they arrive at a moment when displacement is still at record levels, pathways to safety are shrinking, and commitments to protection are being tested or reversed around the world.

Seventy-five years after the international community pledged to protect those forced to flee, too many governments are turning inward. Policies of exclusion and deterrence have become common, while millions of refugees, asylum seekers, and other displaced people continue to search for safety, stability, and opportunity. Seven out of every ten refugees live in long-term displacement, many in warehoused conditions that USCRI has long worked to end. The promise of protection remains unfinished. Today, it is under threat.

Against this backdrop, USCRI's Policy & Advocacy team began the year with a clear priority: centering children. Displaced children are at the heart of our work in communities across the United States and around the world, and they must also be at the center of our advocacy. That commitment has shaped our research, informed our partnerships, and ultimately inspired this report – the first in a new series that brings together USCRI's policy analysis, field perspectives, and original reporting.

Their Future, Their Voice centers displaced children and youth as rights-holders, leaders, and agents of change. It elevates the experiences and perspectives of children and young people in places like Sudan, Burundi, and the United States through their artwork and poetry accompanied by insights from advocates, practitioners, and child protection experts working in displacement settings worldwide. Their voices make one thing clear: lasting solutions cannot be built without the meaningful participation of children themselves.

Developed in partnership with refugee-led and community-based organizations across multiple regions, this report reflects USCRI's commitment to centering lived experience and elevating the leadership of displaced people, local actors, and community organizations that are often overlooked in research and policymaking. It also highlights USCRI programs such as Keep Girls Dreaming and the Habesha Project while offering practical recommendations to learn from such programs to strengthen protection, participation, and opportunity for displaced children and youth.

You need not read this report cover to cover. We encourage you to explore the stories, perspectives, and recommendations that resonate most with you, then share what you learn with others. Awareness is the first step toward action.

No single report can capture the full reality of child displacement. We offer this publication not as a definitive account, but as a contribution to a larger conversation. It is also an invitation to act. We invite policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and community members to join us in championing the rights of displaced children, investing in their futures, and ensuring they have the support they need to thrive. Sometimes that means advancing policy change. Sometimes it means amplifying children's voices. And sometimes it means something as simple as ensuring a child has a meal, a safe place to learn, or someone who believes in their potential.

To everyone who contributed to this report, thank you, and thank you to all those who take time to engage with these stories and calls to action. We hope they inform, inspire, and challenge you. Most importantly, we hope they strengthen your commitment to ensuring that displaced children are not only protected but heard.

Their future depends on the choices we make today. Their voices must be at the center of every one of them.

Sincerely,

Eskinder Negash

President & CEO

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 5

A Letter to Young People 6

Snapshot of Global Child Displacement 8

Sudan's Children: At The Center of the World's Largest Displacement Crisis 10
By Victoria Walker and Lía Butanda

Sudan is the Land Of Peace: A Poem by a Refugee Student in Sudan 13

Uganda's Displaced Children Cannot be Left Behind 14
By Janvier Hafasha

Futures at Stake: Legal Documentation Barriers to Higher Education for Refugee Youth in Mexico 16
By Carlos García Dorantes

United Voices: Answering the Call of Immigrant Children and Youth 20
Compiled By Victoria Walker with USCRI Voces Unidas Youth Participants

Family Separation as Policy: The Human Cost for Children 24
By Victoria Walker

Education Interrupted: Refugee Children in Burundi Fight for Their Future 28
By Victoria Walker with thanks to Gaspard Atibu and the Legal Refugee Center (LRC) Burundi Team

My School! A Poem by a Refugee Girl in Busuma 30

Forgotten Children: Child Protection Failures in al-Hol, Syria 32
By William Evans

Finding Care Without Support in Dzaleka Refugee Camp 34
By Rachel Ryu and Adson Mphepo

Through My Eyes: Early Reflection on Empowering Adolescent Girls in the Face of Fragility 36
By Sylvia Maru

Dignity in Displacement: Menstrual Health Access for Displaced Afghan Girls in Pakistan 38
By Lía Butanda

Not Invisible: Strengthening Protection for Children with Disabilities in Migration and Displacement 40
By Victoria Walker

About USCRI's Child-focused Work 44

About Supporting Organizations 45

Executive Summary

We are witnessing an unprecedented global displacement crisis, with children bearing a disproportionate share of its consequences. Conflict, persecution, violence, climate disaster, and economic collapse have uprooted millions from their homes. The result has been fractured families, severed educations, and children exposed to violence, exploitation, discrimination, and relentless uncertainty. Yet despite being among those most profoundly affected by displacement, children remain too often excluded from the decisions, policies, and systems that will determine their futures.

Their Future, Their Voice arrives at a critical juncture. Global displacement remains at historic levels while pathways to durable protection are increasingly under strain. Humanitarian funding shortfalls and restrictive immigration policies are narrowing the space for action precisely when it needs to expand.

At the heart of this report is the argument that displaced children and youth must be recognized not only as recipients of protection, but as rights-holders and agents of change. Their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations should shape the policies and programs designed to support them.

Informed by refugee-led organizations, community-based groups, practitioners, and displaced young people themselves, the report spans a wide range of displacement contexts: from conflict in Sudan, the world's largest child displacement crisis, to barriers to education in Mexico and Burundi, family separation in the United States, protection gaps for children from Syria's al-Hol camp, and displacement in Uganda, Malawi, Kenya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Particular attention is given to girls, children with disabilities, and others consistently overlooked in humanitarian response.

Woven throughout are the voices of children and youth themselves. This includes their artwork, poetry, personal reflections, and first-hand accounts. From Habesha Scholars speaking about education and belonging, to refugee children in Sudan and Burundi, to former unaccompanied children in the United States, all carry a clear and consistent message: displaced children are not passive observers of their own futures. They hold knowledge, insight, and vision that must inform the decisions shaping their lives.

Across these diverse contexts, common themes emerge: the primacy of education access; the importance of family unity and child protection safeguards; the barriers that undermine children's rights and limit access to essential services; the disproportionate vulnerabilities of girls and children with disabilities; and the essential role of local and refugee-led organizations working closest to affected communities.

This report is a call to governments, international organizations, civil society, and donors to strengthen protections for displaced children, invest in education and child-focused services, expand meaningful opportunities for youth participation, and resource the local actors doing this work every day. It is also a call to each of us to listen to the voices of displaced children and youth and to act with solidarity and sustained commitment.

Some pieces in this report are published here for the first time, while others were previously released on USCRI's website and may have been updated with the latest available data. Pieces that have appeared previously include their original publication date.

To young people living through displacement

This report is dedicated to you.

Those who have had to leave home behind, to start over in unfamiliar places, or spent years navigating uncertainty. To those carrying memories of places they miss, and those still waiting for a place that feels like home.

Too often, conversations about displacement happen without the meaningful participation of young people living through it. Policies are written. Programs are designed. Decisions are made. Yet, your voices are not always heard with the attention and respect they deserve.

This report begins with a different belief: that your experiences, insights, and aspirations matter.

You are a generation that sees one another. From Sudan to Syria, the United States to Uganda, Ukraine to Palestine, you are hearing each other's voices, witnessing each other's experiences, and building connections across borders in ways previous generations could scarcely imagine. In moments of crisis and uncertainty, you continue to show empathy, bravery, and solidarity. You remind the world that humanity is shared, and that the hopes, fears, and dreams of young people are not divided by geography, language, or circumstance.

Your strength is found in your creativity, your determination, and your ability to build connections across cultures and countries. It is found in your courage to keep moving forward while carrying stories that deserve to be told.

Throughout this report, I hope you see reflections of your own experiences, aspirations, and calls for change. I hope you recognize that your perspectives are not an addition to this conversation; they are essential to it.

You understand realities that policymakers, researchers, and governments cannot fully understand without listening to you. You know what meaningful inclusion feels like. You know where systems fall short. You know what support makes a difference. And you know what kind of future you want to help create.

Your voice is important.

Every child and young person deserves safety, opportunity, belonging, and the ability to pursue their dreams. Not someday, but now.

You have rights. Your aspirations matter. Your education matters. Your well-being matters. Your leadership matters.

Whatever brought you to this report, as you read these pages, I hope you feel seen and heard. I hope you feel respected. I hope you know that your experiences have helped shape the conversations and recommendations held here.

Most importantly, I hope you know that you belong in conversations where decisions about your future are made.

Thank you for your collaboration and for challenging us to do better.

The world has much to learn from you, and much to gain from listening.

With respect, solidarity, and hope,

Victoria Walker

USCRI Policy Analyst, Lead Report Compiler, and Contributing Author

©UNHCR / Gabriel Bugoma

USCRI Policy Analyst Victoria Walker at Kalobeyei Settlement in Kenya.

SNAPSHOT OF GLOBAL CHILD DISPLACEMENT

Children continue to be displaced at unprecedented levels, driven by conflict, violence, persecution, disasters, and climate-related shocks. Behind each statistic is a child whose safety, education, health, and future have been disrupted.

While this report examines some displacement crises in greater detail, this snapshot highlights the scale of global child displacement and draws attention to additional country situations where children face significant and overlooked risks. Together, these figures and country examples underscore the urgent need for protection, durable solutions, and sustained investment in children's futures.

117.8 MILLION

people **forcibly displaced** worldwide at the end of 2025.

39%

of those **forcibly displaced are children** despite accounting for 29% of the world's population.

2.4 MILLION

children born as refugees between 2018 and 2025, about 305,000 children per year.

** This does not include children of refugees born in 32 host countries where these children would have the right to attain the citizenship of that country.*

42%

of **internally displaced people (IDPs)** are children.

Countries with the highest proportion of internationally displaced children included Afghanistan (62%) and Somalia (61%).

46%

of the **stateless population** in 2025 were children.

13 MILLION

were displaced by conflict in 2025—**a record high.**

The Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Palestine, and Sudan were among countries where conflict and violence caused the most displacements of children in 2025.

Figures are from UNHCR's 2025 Global Trends Report

SITUATIONS AT A GLIMPSE

UKRAINE

Four years into war, 2,589,900 Ukrainian children remain displaced—more than a third of the country's children.

In February 2026, over **791,000 children were displaced inside Ukraine, and 1,798,900 children were refugees.**

1 in 3 children are unable to attend in-person schooling full-time, as more than 1,700 schools and education facilities have been damaged or destroyed.

HAITI

In June 2026, displacement in Haiti reached an unprecedented 1.5 million people. **At least 755,000 children** are displaced in Haiti and 2,800,000 children need humanitarian aid.

Children are among the most vulnerable, living in overcrowded displacement sites that often lack clean water, food, shelter, and other necessities.

Children in Haiti have been exposed to high levels of violence, including recruitment and use by armed groups, which increased threefold in 2025.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

About **4 million children are displaced in the DRC** following decades of armed conflict and recent escalations of violence in the east.

Nearly 15 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in the DRC, including 8 million children, making it one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world.

In May 2026, Ebola outbreaks were confirmed in DRC and Uganda. Children, particularly those who are displaced, are among the most vulnerable during Ebola outbreaks, facing increased risks of infection and death, orphanhood, and separation from parents and caregivers.

MYANMAR

Conflict and natural disaster have displaced over 3.7 million people in Myanmar, with children accounting for over one third of those displaced.

In 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar to seek safety in Bangladesh. Today, Cox's Bazar, the largest refugee settlement in the world, hosts over one million refugees, including at least half a million children.

PALESTINE

Children have endured years of suffering in Palestine. In 2026, by the end of March, about **800,000 children were displaced in the Gaza Strip and more than 750 children displaced in the West Bank.**

Water and food shortages, malnutrition, insect and rodent infestations, and disease are worsening in displacement settings and disproportionately affecting children.

Ongoing attacks continue to force children on the move. At least 21,500 children have been killed and 41,200 injured since October 2023. 1.7 million children in Palestine need humanitarian aid.

LEBANON

By early April 2026, armed conflict had **displaced over 390,000 children** in Lebanon, many of whom had already experienced displacement during the previous 18 months.

Over 1 million children in Lebanon need humanitarian aid.

As of June 2026, 247 children had been killed and 992 injured in Lebanon since March 2, 2026. More than 770,000 children were experiencing heightened psychological distress as a result of displacement and repeated exposure to violence.

SUDAN'S CHILDREN:

AT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

On April 15, 2026, Sudan entered its fourth year of war. The following piece has information from USCRI's Children in Sudan snapshot, December 2025 Sudan Situation Update, as well as new reporting as of June 2026.

By: Victoria Walker, USCRI Policy Analyst

Sudan is not only the largest displacement crisis in the world, but also the largest child displacement crisis. Over five million children are displaced, and children in Sudan are bearing some of the war's deepest scars. But Sudan is also a nation shaped by its young people, and its children are a generation deserving of a future beyond war.

A 2025 analysis from Save the Children found that, on average, **one child every ten seconds has been forced to flee their homes** in Sudan since the war began in 2023. Of the nearly nine million internally displaced people (IDPs) in the country, 55 percent are children.

Children have come under relentless attack in the war in Sudan. At least 245 children were killed or injured in the first three months of 2026 alone. Drones are now responsible for almost 80 percent of all reported killing and injuries of children. Over 4,300 children have been killed and injured in Sudan, primarily in the Darfur and Kordofan states. The scourge of conflict-related sexual violence has also become a sickening hallmark of the war, with children's bodies turned into battlegrounds. A shocking report compiled by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and gender-based violence service providers in Sudan revealed that hundreds of children were being raped and sexually assaulted by armed men, including children as young as one year old. These cases represent only a small fraction of actual figures. The true scope of this violence may never be fully known.

As of April 2026, eight million of Sudan's children were out of school. This includes 3.3 million of Darfur's estimated 3.9 million school-aged children. Attacks on schools and surrounding areas by warring parties, the transformation of schools into shelters for IDPs, and children being forcibly displaced have all kept millions of children from accessing education.

The fall of El Fasher, the capital of Sudan's North Darfur State, in late October 2025 made evident what UNICEF called "an epicentre of child suffering." Nearly one in five civilians killed in El Fasher during the month of October 2025 were children. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) repeatedly targeted displacement camps in and around El Fasher, including Zamzam and Abu Shouk camps. The targeting of camps, meant to shelter people who had already fled unimaginable violence, transformed supposed safe zones into sites of renewed terror and displacement. Many of those who could escape El Fasher—primarily women and children—fled to Tawila, a 70km journey filled with horror. On November 27, one month after the fall of El Fasher, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) reported receiving at least 400 children who had fled El Fasher and arrived in Tawila without their parents. Children became separated from their parents while fleeing or after their parents were killed, detained, or went missing.

The crisis for children extends beyond Sudan's borders, as over 4.5 million people have sought safety in neighboring countries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that over 58,000 unaccompanied and separated children were recorded across countries hosting Sudanese refugees, with actual figures likely far higher. The agency found that "children often travel alone along irregular and dangerous routes, facing violence, exploitation, trafficking, and further separation." This underscores how the conflict continues to place children at risk even after they flee initial violence.

Today, over 17 million children in Sudan require lifesaving humanitarian aid. Two out of every five people in Sudan are facing crisis levels of acute food insecurity—nearly 19.5 million people—and the risks are rising for children. An estimated 825,000 children under five years old are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in 2026, the deadliest form of malnutrition for children.

Sara, a student at the ARAHA-run Shagarab Girls Secondary School in Shagarab Refugee Camp, says her drawing is a celebration of the creative spirit's resilience. Read her full poem and view her artwork on the next page

Cuts to humanitarian aid have caused crippling funding lapses that severed the few lifelines that children had left. In June 2026, NRC ranked Sudan as the world's most neglected displacement crisis, noting that "nowhere on earth are more people suffering, and nowhere is the gap between need and action greater…" As of May 2026, only 21 percent of the total funding required for the 2026 Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan was received. Donor governments and other actors must urgently scale up funding for the humanitarian response in and around Sudan, including flexible funding for child protection.

The numbers of those affected are difficult to comprehend. Yet behind every statistic is a child, a parent, or a family in need of support. Meeting these needs requires urgent attention, resources, and a renewed commitment to the people of Sudan.

Across Sudan and in neighboring countries, children continue to seek out opportunities to learn, play, and rebuild a sense of normalcy despite extraordinary adversity. With sustained humanitarian and community-led support, access to education, protection services, and safe spaces, millions of children can recover, heal, and contribute to the future of their communities. The scale of the crisis is daunting, but it is not irreversible. What is happening in Sudan is not unfolding in the shadows—it is happening right now in front of our eyes.

Governments, donors, humanitarian organizations, and local communities, have the ability to help ensure that Sudan's children are not defined by war, displacement, or trauma, but by their strength, advocacy, and capacity to shape a more peaceful and prosperous future for their country and our global community.

Stay informed, amplify children and youth voices, and ensure Sudan is not met with silence.

Sudan is the Land of Peace

Poem and Illustration by Sara

Sudan, land of safety,
In you there is goodness and peace.
All people turn toward you,
Seeking your goodness and peace.
You are like the gardens of paradise,
Filled with comfort and reassurance.
My people, whom I am proud of,
I always say: one day I will visit their homeland.
Let me describe my people to you:
Kind-hearted and hospitable, living in simple mud houses and huts.
They never sold their homeland, nor supported the traitor.
We stand tall like mountains, never bowing our heads in humiliation.
They rush to help those in need, and none of them betray or abandon others.

Sara is a 17-year-old student at the ARAHA-run Shagarab Girls Secondary School. The Shagarab camp has been home to over 51,000 Eritrean refugees since 1983. While the United Nations education policies in refugee settings often focus on primary education, ARAHA expanded these opportunities by establishing the girls' secondary school in 2010 and the boys' secondary school in 2023. These schools provide a vital pathway for students like Sara to continue their education. Sara recently sat for her Sudanese Certificate Examinations and plans to enroll in university next year if she passes the exam.

UGANDA'S DISPLACED CHILDREN CANNOT BE LEFT BEHIND

By: Janvier Hafasha, Team Lead, HODARI Foundation

A Crisis Hidden Behind Uganda's Generosity

Uganda has been recognized as one of Africa's most welcoming nations for refugees for decades. Today, the country is the largest refugee-hosting nation on the African continent, hosting more than two million refugees and asylum seekers. More than half are children under the age of 18, while women and girls make up the majority of the displaced population.

Uganda's progressive open-door refugee policy has earned global praise. Yet behind this reputation lies a deepening humanitarian crisis, not of Uganda's making, that is quietly stealing the future of tens of thousands of displaced children.

Across refugee settlements, thousands of children are facing reduced access to education, healthcare, nutrition, psychosocial support, and child protection services as global humanitarian funding declines. Organizations working on the ground, including refugee-led initiatives such as HODARI Foundation, are being forced to do more with less while the number of vulnerable children continues to rise.

The consequences are devastating. An entire generation of displaced children is growing up surrounded by uncertainty, trauma, hunger, and diminishing hope. The international community must match Uganda's generosity by investing in education, child protection, healthcare, safe spaces, and refugee-led organizations to protect vulnerable children and build more peaceful and resilient societies.

The Human Cost of Funding Cuts

In settlements such as Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, located in Kyegegwa District in western Uganda, the effects of shrinking humanitarian assistance are becoming impossible to ignore. Many refugee families can no longer meet their most basic needs. Children are increasingly dropping out of school because parents cannot afford scholastic materials, sanitary supplies, uniforms, or transportation. At the same time, food insecurity is worsening as humanitarian food rations continue to shrink.

The pressure is exposing children to even greater protection risks. Cases of child labor, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and early marriage are becoming more common. Unaccompanied minors and children fleeing conflict often struggle with trauma, grief, and separation from their families without access to adequate psychosocial support. In nearby Kyegegwa Town Council, the growing number of children living or working on the street reflects the desperation many displaced young people now face. Behind every statistic is a child whose dreams are slowly fading away.

"Self-reliance cannot succeed without first investing in children. A society that prioritizes economic resilience while neglecting children is like a farmer planting seeds while refusing to care for the soil. No meaningful harvest can come from neglect."

Children are Paying the Highest Price

The refugee funding crisis is unfolding at a time when Uganda's refugee response system is under increasing pressure. The recent suspension of the prima facie refugee recognition system means that new asylum seekers must now undergo individual refugee status determination processes before accessing protection and services.

When systems weaken, children suffer the most.

When food aid is reduced, children go hungry.

When schools lose support, children lose opportunities.

When child protection and psychosocial programs are cut, children are left alone to cope with trauma, violence, and displacement.

Without urgent intervention, many displaced children risk becoming a lost generation trapped in cycles of poverty, exclusion, and hopelessness.

Self-Reliance Cannot Replace Child Protection

The global refugee conversation is increasingly focused on self-reliance, innovation, livelihoods, climate resilience, and green economy initiatives. These investments are important and necessary. However, self-reliance cannot succeed without first investing in children. A society that prioritizes economic resilience while neglecting children is like a farmer planting seeds while refusing to care for the soil. No meaningful harvest can come from neglect.

Children need education before employment. They need protection before productivity. They need healing before resilience.

If displaced children are denied these essentials today, the long-term social and economic consequences will extend far beyond refugee settlements and affect entire communities and nations.

A Defining Moment for the International Community

This is a defining moment for donors, governments, philanthropic foundations, international non-governmental organizations, and development partners. **Refugee and displaced children must remain at the center of humanitarian and development funding decisions**. Child-focused services should never be treated as optional expenditures that can be reduced during financial crises or cuts. They are long-term investments in peace, stability, human dignity, and sustainable development.

The international community must match Uganda's generosity with sustained and targeted support. Urgent investments are needed in:

- Education and school retention programs
- Child protection and psychosocial support
- Nutrition and healthcare services
- Safe spaces for children and adolescents
- Support for refugee-led organizations serving vulnerable communities

Protecting children today is the surest way to build peaceful and resilient societies tomorrow.

We Cannot Abandon a Generation

Every displaced child carries a story of survival. Many have fled war, violence, hunger, and unimaginable loss. Yet despite the hardships they endure, they still carry dreams—to learn, to belong, to contribute, and to build a better future. The question is whether the world will stand with them.

The future of displaced children in Uganda should not be determined by shrinking budgets or shifting donor priorities. It should be shaped by our collective humanity, compassion, and commitment to justice. If we fail refugee children today, history will remember not only the crisis they endured, but also the silence of those who had the power to act and chose not to.

No child should grow up believing they were forgotten by the world.

FUTURES AT STAKE:

Legal and Documentation Barriers to Higher Education for Refugee Youth in Mexico

By: Carlos García Dorantes, Strategic Communications, Advocacy, and Mobilization Coordinator at USCRI Latin America and the Caribbean

This piece follows earlier USCRI analysis of documentation barriers in Mexico's asylum system and their broader impact on access to rights and integration, The Struggle for Documentation in Mexico's Asylum System: The Human Impact of Withholding the TVRH.

Education for Displaced Youth in Mexico

"Education restores your right to imagine a future." These are the words of Hazem Sharif, a graduate from the Habesha Project, USCRI's higher education program for refugees in Mexico. For many refugee children and youth, whether displaced from their homes or born into displacement, education becomes one of the few spaces where they can build or rebuild the life and future they envision for themselves.

In Mexico, Article 3 of the Constitution guarantees the right to education to all individuals, regardless of migration status. In recent years, the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) has introduced measures to facilitate refugees' access to education across the national education system. However, a gap persists between this legal guarantee and the experiences of displaced youth, particularly in higher education, where policymakers have devoted comparatively less attention to addressing access barriers for refugee youth.

Multiple factors contribute to refugees' exclusion from university education in Mexico. However, legal documentation requirements for access to higher education play a critical yet often overlooked role in refugees' inability to pursue higher education opportunities.

Without these documents, refugees face significant barriers to accessing higher education in Mexico. While the country has made significant progress in expanding refugee access to primary and secondary education, refugee youth continue to face substantial barriers to entering higher education. Many of these obstacles stem not from legal restrictions but from administrative and documentation requirements, which universities are often ill-equipped to adapt to the disrupted educational trajectories of displaced populations.

This policy brief examines how gaps between law and practice at the university level can impede access and undermine higher education opportunities for refugee youth in Mexico.

Challenges Accessing Higher Education Systems

Refugees often flee under urgent circumstances, without passports or other identity documents. They may be escaping situations where obtaining official records is difficult or dangerous, where government institutions have ceased functioning, or where certain documents were never issued or have been lost or destroyed. Whatever the reason, a lack of documentation can become a persistent challenge in a country of asylum, affecting access to legal status, employment, education, housing, and other essential services.

The existing legal framework allows universities to establish flexible criteria for equivalency and revalidation, particularly regarding the assignment of academic credits. These provisions create important opportunities to facilitate the inclusion of refugee students in higher education, but their potential is often limited by inconsistent implementation across institutions.

Even when current regulations create flexibility for refugee students in meeting prerequisites, academic transcripts, identity documents, apostilles (international document authentication), and proof of prior studies are often required by universities as part of admission, scholarship, or degree validation processes. For many refugees and migrants, obtaining an apostille is not simply a bureaucratic inconvenience; it requires contacting or physically appearing before the authorities of the country they fled, a process that may be impossible, unsafe, or legally prohibited by the very protection status they hold. Although current regulations in Mexico, including Agreement 286 issued by SEP, have eliminated the requirement to present apostilles for academic and identity documents submitted by students who are migrants, a gap between formal regulations and institutional practice exists and can create significant barriers to access.

Limited institutional awareness of refugee protection frameworks, uneven administrative criteria, and the absence of harmonized procedures continue to create barriers for displaced youth seeking to continue their studies. Consequently, refugee students often navigate higher education systems designed around assumptions of uninterrupted educational pathways and readily available documentation, rather than the fragmented realities shaped by forced displacement.

To ensure that Agreement 286 is implemented fully, university staff in admissions, student services, financial aid, and academic leadership should receive training on the flexibility it offers refugee students in meeting academic and institutional requirements. Universities should also support the use of flexible credit recognition and transfer mechanisms for refugee students, including those pursuing graduate degree programs.

The Habesha Project: A Pathway to Higher Education

Exclusion at the higher education level is not always produced through the formal denial of rights, but rather through administrative and institutional systems that remain insufficiently adapted to displaced educational trajectories. In response to these challenges, initiatives have emerged to facilitate access to higher education for refugee youth and to address the gaps left by conventional educational frameworks. One such initiative is the Habesha Project.

The Habesha Project is a program of USCRI that provides refugee youth from around the world, including Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, with a scholarship pathway to higher education in Mexico. From reception through graduation, the program supports students by providing academic assistance and fostering the social integration needed to build a new life in Mexico. The initiative's educational component includes reviewing and validating students' documentation prior to university submission, preparing students for admission assessments, supporting them throughout the enrollment process, and providing ongoing academic follow-up until graduation.

For more than a decade of implementation, during which it has supported more than one hundred students, the Habesha Project has consistently encountered barriers related to documentation requirements and admission processes. In many cases, admissions officers request that refugee students provide apostilles, academic records, and identity documents. Meeting these requirements often imposes a significant financial burden, as students must cover the costs of translation and certification.

In addition, universities often require students to complete an academic admissions assessment. Although performance on this assessment does not affect eligibility for the Habesha scholarship, it remains a prerequisite for admission to the academic program. This requirement places refugee students at a clear disadvantage, as they often have less than a year to prepare for an examination for which Mexican students may have been preparing throughout their education.

Habesha scholars, who were previously recognized as refugees in a first country of asylum and later selected to continue their studies in Mexico, often arrive on a student visa and must initiate their asylum process upon arrival. As a result, they frequently face a race against time, as many universities require proof of refugee recognition or another regularized migration status while their asylum applications remain under review by national authorities, a process that can take more than a year. To ensure

Since its establishment, the Habesha Project has guaranteed access to university studies for 123 refugee youth from more than 11 countries, including Syria, South Sudan, Somalia, Venezuela, Haiti, Colombia, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador.

"Education can restore the right to imagine a future. Realizing this right requires institutions that are both capable of and committed to responding to displaced educational trajectories through flexible and inclusive policies."

that migration regularization does not become a barrier to education, universities should adapt academic calendars and administrative requirements for refugee students whose refugee status determination remains pending.

Beyond administrative obstacles, these processes reveal the unequal conditions under which refugee students are expected to compete, adapt, and integrate into higher education systems. In many cases, displaced youth must simultaneously navigate migration procedures, academic transitions, financial uncertainty, and rapid cultural adaptation within limited timeframes. As a result, access to higher education becomes not only a matter of admission, but also of a student's capacity to manage emotional, bureaucratic, and academic pressures that are rarely experienced under the same circumstances by other applicants.

Bridging Access to Continuity

Higher education pathways for displaced youth remain less developed within refugee integration responses. This is reflected not only in the limited availability of higher education programs and scholarships for refugee youth, but also in the insufficient attention devoted to institutional and administrative barriers affecting continuity beyond secondary education. However, there has been meaningful progress.

Recent years have seen measurable progress in educational access and continuity for refugees and complementary protection holders. Documentation-related barriers to enrollment, which once posed significant obstacles to educational access, have decreased substantially. According to the National Survey of the Refugee Population in Mexico 2024 (ENPORE), economic constraints were identified as the main reason for non-attendance among refugee children at school, whereas in the 2017 edition, the main reason was the lack of academic records and identity documents such as birth certificates, national identity cards (CURP), and passports.

This progress stands in stark contrast to the challenges refugee youth face in continuing their education beyond the primary and secondary levels completed in their country of origin or first country of asylum. While refugee integration efforts in Mexico have increasingly prioritized school enrollment and access to basic education, far less attention has been paid to ensuring that refugee students can successfully transition into and graduate from higher education.

Addressing these barriers requires advancing beyond a sole focus on access to basic education and toward a more comprehensive approach to educational continuity. Globally, universities, government agencies, and refugee-serving organizations all have a role to play in developing flexible admissions procedures, recognizing prior learning, facilitating document verification, and expanding targeted financial and academic support for displaced students.

Education can restore the right to imagine a future. Realizing this right requires institutions that are both capable of and committed to responding to displaced educational trajectories through flexible and inclusive policies. Such measures are not acts of goodwill; they are necessary to ensure that refugee youth can fully exercise their right to education and that no one is left behind.

UNITED VOICES: Answering the Call of Immigrant Children & Youth

Compiled by Victoria Walker with USCRI Voces Unidas Youth Participants
Originally published August 13, 2024

The recommendations presented in this policy brief were written collectively by six youth participants in the USCRI Voces Unidas initiative credited by their initials: MH, DL, JD, HF, MA, and JT. Content from that document will be cited as (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

All images are drawings by Voces Unidas (VU) youth participants in response to the question, "What would your world look like if the solutions proposed by young immigrants were implemented?" (First Cohort of Voces Unidas, 2024)

Illustrated by MH

Without the inclusion of children and youth in our present, there can be no sustainable future or peace. They are the next generation; not only will they inherit the consequences of our decisions, but they already bear the greatest burdens of our inaction. Children and youth are grappling with a lack of safety and stability in their countries and communities, including in the United States. As changemakers, they are championing solutions for the problems that impact them and their local and global communities. They are calling on leaders, policymakers, and communities to create change. It is time we answered.

To ensure a participatory space for former or current unaccompanied children, the USCRI Community Outreach and Education team brought together a group of six former or current unaccompanied children (aged 16-18 years old) to form the first cohort of USCRI's Voces Unidas (United Voices) initiative. The members of Voces Unidas were able to inform decision-making at USCRI Children's Services and develop recommendations for USCRI's Policy and Advocacy team to inform ongoing advocacy efforts for immigrant children and youth in the United States. VU youth identified the following five priority areas of need:

1. Access to mental health
2. Access to health care
3. Safe schools
4. Social and community support
5. Access to local services and resources for newly arrived youth

The following details the five priority areas of need and presents recommendations for change as developed by VU youth members.

Access to Mental Health and Health Care

"Mental health access is very important for everyone. Mental health is about well-being, both with yourself, your person, and your emotional, psychological, social, and economic well-being" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Throughout the five areas of need identified, VU youth emphasized the importance of access to services and support, not just for immigrant children, but for all children and all people. When discussing the need for mental health resources, such as therapy and medical care, youth expressed that in the United States, this remains out of reach for so many despite pressing needs.

In a 2023 report, the American Academy of Pediatrics and Migration Policy Institute highlighted the importance of medical and mental health care for unaccompanied children in the United States. The report noted that all children should have the "gold standard," meaning "a 'medical home,' which includes a primary care provider or team that cares for and coordinates all of their health needs and services," and that this applies to unaccompanied children in the United States as well. However, the report makes clear that "unaccompanied children encounter numerous challenges when seeking medical and mental health services in U.S. communities."

In sharing their experiences, VU youth illustrated the challenges that they and other immigrant children and youth face when accessing medical and mental health care. Although challenges inherent to the United States health care system were factors, VU youth explained how such obstacles are exacerbated for immigrant children and families due to things like the high cost of care, economic instability, and no insurance (1st Cohort VU, 2024). Youth also highlighted that when people do not have legal status, it can result in fear of deportation that causes them to remain silent about health issues that need attention (1st Cohort VU, 2024). Such realities can worsen stress and anxiety, particularly for those who have already experienced high levels of trauma. One youth wrote,

"My experience with access to mental health has been very bad as I have not been able to ask for help when I needed it most, or when there was no one. Some people I know have suffered from depression and have tried to end their lives. This issue is important to me because I have also felt that way and worse" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Another youth noted, "As people who enter this country as immigrants, there are many things that happen to us, so it is necessary to have someone to help you overcome and understand everything" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Youth understood mental and physical health care to be a human right for all and made clear to USCRI's Policy and Advocacy team that this should be central to advocacy efforts on behalf of immigrant children and youth. "This issue is important to me because health is a fundamental right," wrote a VU youth member. "I feel frustrated seeing how many people struggle to access the necessary medical care. Health [care] should be accessible to everyone" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Safe Schools

All children have a right to live and learn free from violence. Yet around the United States, children and youth experience acts of violence in their schools. VU youth expressed that they feel "very unsafe" in school, particularly due to the prevalence of drugs and firearms.

"This issue is important because schools should be safe places where we can learn and grow without fear. A lack of safety at school makes me feel worried and anxious about the students' well-being and the negative impact this situation can have" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Everytown for Gun Safety, the largest gun violence prevention organization in the United States, reported that firearms are the leading cause of death for children and teens in America, and in 2024, there were at least 124 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, resulting in 34 deaths and 71 injuries. One VU youth spoke to guns being easier to access than healthcare in the United States (1st Cohort VU, 2024). VU youth referenced drug use, their peers bringing knives and other weapons to school, fights, and threats of violent acts in school as examples of why they feel unsafe there (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

The group's input reflected that advocating for safe schools for immigrant children and youth meant advocating for safe schools for all children and youth (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Illustrated by JT

Community Support & Access to Local Services for Newly Arrived Youth

"Personally, I still struggle to find a way to move forward in this country, as starting from scratch is very difficult. It's also an especially bad experience not having any friends to talk to" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Unaccompanied children and youth who arrive in the United States have had to leave their communities, friends, and support systems behind. They are adjusting to a new country, new language, and new culture— often with little support. One VU youth member wrote,

"The lack of social support for immigrants can be a bit shocking; many immigrants have to face problems such as accessing health services, housing, work, and education. In addition to dealing with the acceptance of a new life, the drastic change of leaving their home, and their difficult path" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Dialogue with the VU group raised various topics important to building community. From access to housing to the importance of friendship, facilitators found that "young people consistently reiterated the importance of building networks and connections with other young immigrants and the difficulties they sometimes faced in doing so in their schools or local communities" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Having welcoming communities and safe spaces for young people who have newly arrived in the United States is critical in addressing such disconnects and strengthening access to resources. VU youth recommended that support groups facilitated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) serving immigrants, as well as welcome centers in cities where many immigrant children and youth arrive, be funded and implemented. They felt that such spaces would not only create better and safer environments for young immigrants, but for communities at large throughout the United States. One youth wrote,

"...creating support groups and expanding the use of necessary resources for us newly arrived immigrants in the U.S. is crucial. We should take steps towards proper support and a secure start in this country. This solution would not only protect the safety of those who need it most but also strengthen many in our society for a more just future for all" (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

Youth highlighted that welcome centers would be places where immigrant families and young people could receive information and services to aid with legal processes and employment, as well as medical, nutrition, and language support (1st Cohort VU, 2024).

No one leaves home unless they have to. Providing guidance and support for immigrant children, youth, and their families who arrive in the United States strengthens communities and fosters a peaceful environment for all children and young people.

Illustrated by HF

Illustrated by JD

The Children's Call

The following recommendations for change were developed by the six youth participants in the first cohort of VU based on the five areas of need identified. These recommendations are not exhaustive but provide key points of advocacy to better support immigrant children and youth, by immigrant children and youth.

Improve access to mental health for young immigrants by implementing low-cost mental health programs, home visits, and/or virtual appointment options.

Ensure access to medical care for everyone and educate people to live healthy lives and prevent chronic diseases.

Implement comprehensive education on drug use during adolescence and restrict access to and availability of firearms in schools.

Fund NGOs working with immigrants to facilitate support groups for newly arrived youth.

Implement welcome centers in cities where young immigrants and families arrive.

FAMILY SEPARATION AS POLICY:

THE HUMAN COST FOR CHILDREN

By: Victoria Walker, Policy Analyst
Originally published February 6, 2026

A child who is separated from their parent or caregiver does not experience a policy decision; rather, they experience fear, confusion, and a complete collapse of the world they trust.

Globally, family separation—particularly the forced or involuntary separation of parents and children—is a profound human rupture. It is measured in the enduring trauma of sudden absence. For a child, forced separation from their family can shatter the basic promise of safety and belonging.

Family separation occurs in many contexts including armed conflict, displacement, immigration and state care systems. However, its growing use as an accepted policy tool for governments around the world is alarming. All States are required to respect and protect the rights of children and aim to avoid family separation. Yet an increasing number of displaced and migrating children, as well as children in immigrant families, are being separated from their parents through government-enacted laws, enforcement practices, and administrative decisions. What is framed as regulation or control in policy language is, for children, an abrupt and traumatic severing of family bonds, imposed not by circumstance alone but by design.

This policy brief derives from a simple truth: **protecting children requires keeping families together when safely possible.** Recognizing family unity as a fundamental human right is not just a moral imperative; it is a practical one. Evidence consistently shows that family separation undermines child welfare, destabilizes communities, and erodes public confidence in institutions. This brief explores the varied ways U.S. policies are separating children from their parents and caregivers and examines the human and social costs of these separations. The choices made by policymakers today will determine whether systems are designed to manage movement, safeguard dignity, build resilience, and protect the well-being of the next generation.

"The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State."

Article 16 (3), Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Article 23 (1), *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*

Family Unity as a Child Protection Imperative

International child rights standards affirm that the best interests of the child must guide all decisions affecting them. Yet, across migration and displacement settings, children's voices and needs are too often overshadowed by enforcement, deterrence, or administrative convenience. Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines the duty of States Parties to ensure children are not separated from their parents against their will unless it is necessary for the child's best interests. If such separation occurs, States must ensure children have assistance, alternative care arrangements, and provide children with protection and access to family reunification procedures. Customary international law—legal rules that arise from the consistent practice of States carried out with a sense of legal obligation, even in the absence of a written treaty—also upholds respect for family life. Rule 105 of customary International Humanitarian Law (IHL) interprets respect for family life to require "to the degree possible, the maintenance of family unity, contact between family members and the provision of information on the whereabouts of family members." International human rights bodies have consistently affirmed that family separation in migration contexts must be an exceptional measure of last resort, subject to individualized determinations of procedural safeguards, and ongoing review.

Despite the clarity of these obligations, the implementation of child-centered protections in migration governance remains inconsistent. In practice, State policies frequently prioritize border control and immigration enforcement over holistic assessments of children's best interests, resulting in systemic gaps between both international and national legal commitments and lived realities. These failures are most visible where separation is treated as an incidental or strategic outcome of migration management, rather than as a measure of last resort requiring strict safeguards, individualized review, and ongoing support for affected children and families. When in the best interest of the child, the goal should be prompt family reunification.

Unfortunately, family separation has been particularly prevalent in the United States. Administrations have implemented policies that result in family separation, whether through mass deportation, detention, or other measures. The result has been severe emotional and psychological harm to children who lose their primary caregivers, stability, and support systems. The consequences of these policies are often neither accidental nor unavoidable.

A Legacy of State-Sanctioned Family Separation

Today, millions of children are displaced worldwide. Driven from their homes by conflict, persecution, climate shocks and natural disasters, and deepening inequality, children, whether independently or alongside parents and other family members, are increasingly forced to migrate in search of safety. In this global context, the risk of family separation is heightened, and U.S. history offers repeated examples of how such separation becomes embedded into policy design.

The long and harmful history of family separation in the United States is deeply rooted in systemic practices that have caused irreparable harm to individuals and communities. The country has long employed practices that intentionally sought to sever familial bonds, particularly within Black and Brown communities.

This includes the enslavement of African Americans, during which families were torn apart for profit or punishment; the forced removal of Indigenous children to government-run American Indian Boarding Schools, where they were subjected to assimilation tactics and abuse; and the forced separation of immigrant families through detention and deportation. Separation can last days to years, or even be permanent, but all forms can have long-lasting psychological impacts on children.

From 2017 to 2018, the U.S. Government forcibly separated over 4,600 children from their parents at the southern border, often with no plan or measures for reunification. These separations took place under what was officially known as the "Zero-Tolerance Policy." The policy sought to expand and expedite criminal prosecution of individuals who entered the United States without authorization. Reports emerged that the Government was deliberately targeting parents traveling with children, using criminal charges as reason to transfer responsibility for protective care of their children, thus separating them from their children.

Parents were detained and children were classified as unaccompanied and placed under the care of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). But these children were not unaccompanied at all. They were officially separated from their parents or guardians who in turn were not told where their children were being taken. These children, some under the age of five, were held in detention centers and then sent to various ORR care arrangements around the country. Parents were left without a way to track them down. Many parents were deported back to their countries of origin, forced to leave their children behind in the United States.

Forced family separation is a clear violation of IHL, as detailed above. It also violates U.S. constitutional rights, as affirmed in the *Ms. L v ICE* lawsuit, filed in February 2018 by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on behalf of a woman who was forcibly separated from her seven-year-old daughter when seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. The *Ms. L* Settlement included a June 2018 injunction ordering a halt to separations and subsequent orders to locate and reunify separated children with their families. The settlement, approved in December 2023, placed limits on family separation by the U.S. Government through October 2031.

In 2020, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) reported on the psychological effects of family separation on asylum-seeking parents and children who were separated by the U.S. Government in 2018. The investigation found symptoms of "post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder consistent with, and likely linked to, the trauma of family separation."

Parents that PHR spoke with detailed how "immigration authorities forcibly removed children from their parents' arms, removed parents while their children slept, or simply 'disappeared' the children while their parents were in court rooms or receiving medical care." Almost all of the parents said they were not provided explanation as to why the separation was happening, where family members were sent, or how or when reunification would take place.

Building on PHR's 2020 report, a 2021 medical study analyzing mental health impacts of family separation on asylum-seeking children and parents found them to experience "severe psychological trauma even years after reunification." This was especially true when compounded with pre-migration trauma experienced in home countries.

Despite countless studies and academic research on the harms of family separation, the practice continues to persist in the United States today, inflicting lasting harm on children.

An Ongoing Policy Choice

Under the current Administration, family separation in the United States has reemerged in new iterations. Narrowed asylum access, stripping immigrants of lawful status, the restart and expansion of family detention, keeping unaccompanied children in government custody for longer periods of time, rapid deportations without adequate safeguards for parental unity, the weakening of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Detained Parents Directive, and increased enforcement initiatives have all heightened the risk that children will be separated from their parents and guardians, often without warning or meaningful safeguards. This includes the possible separation of U.S. citizen children in immigrant or mixed status families.

In some cases, separation occurs physically through detention and removal; in others, it is imposed functionally, as parents are forced to make impossible decisions, such as detention with their children or leaving them behind in the United States. In December 2025, PHR and the Women's Refugee Commission detailed their conversations with parents who had been deported from the United States to Honduras, dozens of whom were separated from their children. The organizations reported, "of the parents we spoke to, more than half had been deported without being given an opportunity to bring their children with them" and were unable to obtain information about their children's location and well-being.

Across the country, there have been documented cases of children arriving home from school to empty homes, their parents detained while they were gone. Detained and deported parents are in distress, terrified, and unable to locate their children. Families are hiding and making emergency plans for what will happen to their children if their parents are detained and deported. Children have been detained themselves, sent out of state to detention facilities alongside their parents and held in unhealthy and unsafe conditions. Once safe spaces such as schools, churches, and hospitals have become sites of immigration enforcement, often traumatizing children as they witness masked agents take the people who hold their entire worlds.

Stories are emerging in the headlines: five-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos detained from his driveway with his dad, three other children detained from the same Minnesota school district in a single month, and five-year-old Génesis Ester Gutiérrez Castellanos deported alongside her mother to Honduras despite being a U.S. citizen. These and the lived experiences of thousands of immigrant children across the United States reflect a policy environment, and a society, in which enforcement outweighs child protection, and where family unity is treated as expendable rather than fundamental.

On January 23, 2026, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, called on the Administration "to end practices that are tearing apart families" as he decried "the dehumanizing portrayal and harmful treatment of migrants and refugees" in the United States. The Commissioner "highlighted that many arrests, detentions, and expulsions occur without effort to assess and maintain family unity, exposing children in particular to risks of severe and long-term harm." In addition, on January 27, 2026, three UN experts expressed alarm over the United States' treatment of unaccompanied children, including efforts to terminate federal funding for their legal services, the concerning conditions in which they are being held, and efforts to unlawfully deport them. The press release detailed, "Reports indicate children are being held in windowless cells, denied adequate medical care and separated from parents or caregivers for long periods. Between January and August 2025, average custody time rose from about one month to six months, while releases to family caregivers dropped from approximately 95 percent to 45 percent."

As international bodies sound the alarm, the United States continues to permit policies that fracture families and expose children to profound harm, revealing a system that prioritizes enforcement over its most basic obligation to protect children.

> "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."
>
> *- Nelson Mandela*

Family separation in the United States is not a historical relic or an unintended consequence. It is an ongoing policy choice with well-documented consequences for children and families. Across immigration enforcement, detention, and deportation practices, children are experiencing irreparable trauma, while parents are left powerless to protect or reunite with their children. Advocates and international bodies have repeatedly highlighted the harm caused by such policies and called for their immediate cessation, yet enforcement continues to outweigh child protection.

The following are recommendations for all States, the U.S. Government, and you, as members of the public, to stay informed, create change, and support efforts that protect children and keep families together:

All States:

Affirm and uphold the universality of children's rights in all migration policies. All States should ensure that children, regardless of legal status, country of origin, or host country, are guaranteed their full rights, including protection from harm and meaningful participation and inclusion.

Family unity, when in the best interests of the child, must be protected as a fundamental right in all migration policies and procedures, as provided for in domestic and international law. All States responding to migration flows should end policies that treat family separation as a deterrent or acceptable consequence of seeking refuge.

All States should develop child-rights based strategies and guidance for family reunification.

U.S. Government:

Ensure full compliance with the *Flores* Settlement Agreement, the *Ms. L v. ICE* Settlement, The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, and all other related court orders and regulations to prevent family separation and unlawful detention of children.

Restore the protections set forth in the prior Parental Interests Directive and require that all personnel involved in enforcement activities receive training to ensure compliance with those safeguards.

Reinstate the Protected Areas Policy and immediately cease all enforcement actions in or near schools, childcare centers, medical care facilities, courts, and other sensitive locations.

Congress should pass the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act to limit immigration enforcement in sensitive locations.

Ensure that ORR can adhere to its obligations pertaining to the care, placement, and reunification of unaccompanied children with their families independently from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

For You:

Support policies and practices that protect children, keep families together, and ensure schools, hospitals, places of worship, and courts are safe spaces.

Support community-based, child-focused, and legal service organizations, including USCRI, that provide assistance with child protection, family reunification, and access to legal representation.

Engage with local institutions to promote child-centered, trauma-informed practices for migrant children and families.

Raise public awareness. Have conversations with your family and friends about children's rights and protections. Use social media, community newsletters, or local events to share stories, reports, and research about the human impact of family separation.

For More:

Children in Migration Need Protection, Not Barriers, USCRI

How the "Zero Tolerance" Family Separation Policy Harmed Children and Families, USCRI

Unaccompanied Children Resource Center, USCRI

Know Your Rights: Five Things Parents Detained by ICE Should Know, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) & National Immigration Law Center

Detained or Deported: What About My Children? Parental Rights Toolkit, Women's Refugee Commission

Toolkit: Protecting Immigrant Families Facing Deportation, Children Thrive Action Network

Immigrant Children with Traumatic Separation: Information for Professionals, Florida State University College of Medicine, Center for Child Stress and Health

U.S. Senators, State Attorneys General's Offices, healthcare professionals, child advocates, law professors and more file amicus briefs in support of the Flores Settlement, National Center for Youth Law

Child-Family Separation and Immigration Enforcement in the United States, Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues

EDUCATION INTERRUPTED:
Refugee Children in Burundi Fight for Their Future

Originally published May 18, 2026

By: Victoria Walker, USCRI Policy Analyst

With thanks to Gaspard Atibu, Chairman of the Legal Refugee Center (LRC) and to the LRC Burundi Team for informing this reporting.

LRC is a nonprofit humanitarian organization founded in April 2023 in the United States by a former Burundian refugee. Operating in Burundi, Tanzania, South Africa, and Ghana, LRC is dedicated to protecting the rights and well-being of vulnerable refugee populations, including children. Through close collaboration with refugee communities, local authorities, and civil society actors, LRC promotes rights-based protection, dignity, and self-reliance.

Around the world, millions of refugee and displaced children are growing up in crises that receive little global attention, despite facing immense hardship, trauma, and uncertainty.

Burundi is a small country in East Africa bordered by Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The nation has a rich cultural heritage and complex history, but in recent years, Burundi has faced serious displacement and humanitarian crises, both internally and cross-border. Driven by climate shocks, economic hardship, and both political and regional instability, these crises require urgent support.

In places like the Musenyi and Busuma refugee camps in Burundi, children who have fled violence in the DRC are navigating interrupted childhoods marked by displacement, family separation, and limited access to education and essential services. Too often, these communities remain overlooked or willfully ignored by the international community, leaving critical needs underfunded and unheard.

Education Out of Reach

Across the Busuma and Musenyi refugee camps, education represents far more than academic learning for thousands of displaced children: it offers hope, stability, and the possibility of a future beyond life in the camps. Yet, when many refugee children in Busuma and Musenyi awake each day, access to education remains painfully out of reach. Language barriers and shortages of teachers and learning materials, in addition to extreme poverty, trauma, and other lasting effects of displacement continue to deny children in the camps their basic right to education. If these barriers remain unaddressed, countless children will be left without the skills and opportunities needed to rebuild brighter futures for themselves and their communities.

Although over 188,000 refugees from Burundi reside in neighboring countries, Burundi hosts over 113,300 refugees and asylum-seekers itself, predominantly from the DRC. Musenyi was established in 2024 and is located in the southeastern part of Burundi. Busuma was established in 2025 and is in eastern Burundi. Together, they are two of the largest refugee sites in the country. Both camps received large influxes of refugees in 2025 when violence escalated in eastern DRC.

In early 2025, thousands of Congolese refugees sought safety in Burundi in what the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) detailed as the largest influx Burundi had experienced in decades. Many of these new arrivals were children, including unaccompanied and separated children (UASC)— those arriving without their parents or guardians. Many displaced children fled the DRC after witnessing armed conflict, violence, destruction of their communities, and the loss or separation of family members, experiences that have left deep psychological and emotional trauma. After enduring dangerous journeys to reach safety, many children arrived in Burundi already vulnerable and in urgent need of protection, stability, and psychosocial support.

As the refugee population rapidly expanded, already limited resources in both Musenyi and Busuma became increasingly strained or were never available in the first place, particularly in the child protection and education sectors. Today, both Busuma and Musenyi are over capacity. Musenyi, designed to host around 10,000 people, now hosts over 22,000 refugees with children making up over half of the population. In Busuma, children make up 60 percent of the more than 66,700 refugees who live there. This includes over 1,100 UASC. Severe overcrowding and limited resources have left two-thirds of the population in Busuma without shelter. Some shelters consist merely of plastic sheets, leaving refugees, including young children, exposed to rain, heat, and all other elements. Access to clean water, latrines, health and nutrition services, protection services, and education have all become increasingly strained due to overcrowding and decreased funding from the international community. In its April 2026 emergency response update for Burundi, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported a 100 percent funding gap for education. The agency had received no humanitarian funding for education in Burundi in 2026, including carry-over funds, against a required $722,317 education response budget.

These conditions have had especially devastating consequences for refugee children, whose safety, development, and futures depend on consistent access to protection and education services that remain severely under-resourced.

Photos from LRC team in Busuma and Musenyi, June 2026

Learning Amid Trauma and Instability

Refugee children in Burundi are living in both urban and camp settings. All experience barriers to education and serious protection risks. In Busuma and Musenyi refugee camps, the resources available are not enough to keep up with the increasing needs. Children are left without access to quality education due to overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and inadequate infrastructure. That is if there are schools at all. At current writing, in Busuma, there is no access to formal education systems for the children who live there. The Ministry of Education, UN agencies, and civil society organizations are working to bridge the gap and establish an education response in Busuma, but major funding gaps persist.

LRC Chairman, Gaspard Atibu, conveyed the urgency of the education crisis in Busuma and Musenyi, noting that the lack of education opportunities "not only hampers the cognitive and social development of children but also makes them vulnerable to early marriage, child labor, and psychosocial distress."

Even when children can access formal schooling, like in Musenyi, many struggle to stay enrolled. Burundi's primary language, Kirundi, used in public schools can prove to be a significant language barrier for Congolese refugee students. Additionally, certain subjects that students studied in the DRC may not be available in schools in Burundi, so integration can be a challenge.

The situation for many refugee households in Burundi is dire. When families are unable to afford food and other necessities, school fees become a barrier. Access to textbooks and other required school materials is often extremely limited, leaving many children without the tools they need to fully participate in class. For some families, children are forced to miss school altogether to help earn income, care for younger siblings, or support household responsibilities. LRC also noted the increased risks for girls, as they are often kept home while their male siblings are prioritized to receive an education. Girls are under greater threat of early marriage and teenage pregnancy, and menstruation can also have a serious impact on their school enrollment.

Lastly, as reported to LRC, many of the children in Busuma and Musenyi suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related to war or exile. Trauma and mental health struggles have had a significant impact on children's school enrollment, at times leading to depression, severe anxiety, addictive behaviors, and suicidal thoughts.

Education is a Right, Not a Privilege

Being forced to flee already disrupts a child's education. In displacement settings, these intersecting barriers place refugee children at heightened risk of falling behind academically, dropping out of school entirely, and becoming more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, child labor, and early marriage, often with minimal protection services available.

Regardless of who they are, what country they came from, what country they sought safety in, or how they got there, refugee children have the same rights as all children. This includes the right to education, as is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

LRC reports that "education is the most urgent and unmet need in both camps, especially in Busuma..." and the organization is working to immediately fill the gaps. As challenges are compounded by widening humanitarian needs in the country, including 632,989 children in need of humanitarian assistance, the capacity of humanitarian actors to deliver key services is strained. Donations to LRC support their work to provide children with school fees, supplies, and learning support, as well as other child protection initiatives.

"I want people to know about the situation of these children in Burundi," LRC Chairman, Gaspard Atibu, told USCRI. "To know what kind of life they are going through right now and how we can help them to be in a situation where they can feel they are not alone, even in displacement. To see how people can come together and help support them in small or big ways. We need to show our values and support them in school."

The international community must urgently step up to protect refugee children's rights, fully fund humanitarian responses, and invest in long-term solutions that prioritize education and protection.

Refugee children are not defined by the crises they survived. They are students, leaders, and future changemakers whose potential should never be limited by displacement. Ensuring their right to education is not simply an obligation; it is an investment in their futures and in stronger, resilient communities for generations to come.

My School!

My school,
My family, my childhood home.

It is you alone who should teach me the values of life and communication;
For here in Busuma, I live as though I were a stranger.

It is not easy to live under normal conditions;
We cannot live without worries, and the pain is real.
Having a tent as a home,
And enduring hunger day after day cannot be compared to a normal life.

My school! It is you who should extend a helping hand to us.

Hands filled with education and hope for transformation;
A future that our parents are no longer able to provide for us.

My school! You should support us with a smile and look upon us with hope;

A hope built on strong foundations and empowerment.

To educate a girl is to educate a nation.

Written by a refugee adolescent girl living in Busuma Refugee Site, expressing her desire for education, dignity, and a better future.

FORGOTTEN CHILDREN

Child Protection Failures in al-Hol, Syria

By: William Evans, USCRI Policy Analyst

Eva was only nine years old in 2014 when she and her young brother Endri were taken by their father from their home country of Albania. What she thought was a weekend trip was instead a forced abduction to join Islamic State fighters in Syria. After their father was killed in the conflict, Eva and Endri ended up in al-Hol displaced persons camp in northeastern Syria. At the time it was host to thousands of women and children, all with alleged connections to the Islamic State.

In 2020, the Albanian government conducted a repatriation mission that brought Endri back to Albania but was unable to locate Eva. Finally, in February 2026, after 12 years in the camp, Eva was returned to her mother in Albania with the help of her uncle. Eva survived not because of any humanitarian effort or state fulfilling its obligations, but due to the efforts of family members and well-timed help from Albanian authorities.

The same month that Eva reunited with her family in Albania, al-Hol camp closed. It was not a planned handover, but a chaotic evacuation, with people fleeing in fear. Al-Hol's closure ended a chapter of brutal detention for its residents, yet it opened another one fraught with new dangers. Now, thousands of children like Eva have left the camp, but are at serious risk of further harm including trafficking, exploitation, and recruitment by armed groups.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), children like Eva must be recognized and treated primarily as victims of war. Many children affected by armed conflict remain trapped in prolonged or indefinite detention, where they can face violence, deprivation, and lasting trauma.

In what follows, we trace the history of the camp, the conditions children endured inside it, and the risks that have emerged since it closed.

The Rise and Fall of al-Hol

Al-Hol was established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1991 to shelter around 15,000 Iraqi refugees fleeing the Gulf War. In 2003, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it was opened for Palestinians fleeing Baghdad. In 2016 it began its third life, this time as a place for Iraqis, Syrians, and other nationals who had alleged connections with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Islamic State once held a self-proclaimed caliphate that controlled around 10 million people across a territory the size of the United Kingdom.

Al-Hol's population peaked at 73,000 in 2019, far beyond what the camp's intended infrastructure could manage. What made al-Hol a unique humanitarian challenge was that 90 percent of its population were women and children. Males, including husbands and teenage sons of al-Hol's population, were primarily held in detention facilities spread throughout Hasakah Governorate. Approximately 65 percent of its residents were children under the age of 12, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). These children did not choose the caliphate, and they did not choose the camp. They were born into both, delivered to one by the collapse of the other.

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, Syria entered a transitional phase that continues today. This political shift paved the way for an integration agreement that was signed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on March 10, 2025, which mandated the merger of civilian and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the national state administration. During this time, a significant number of families were returned, such that by early 2026 the total population of al-Hol's camp was down to around 24,000, including approximately 14,000 Syrians, 6,200 third-country nationals, and 4,000 Iraqis. The Norwegian Refugee Council estimated that nearly 60 percent of the remaining residents were children.

On January 20, 2026, the SDF withdrew from al-Hol, blaming "international indifference" and "the failure of the international community to assume its responsibilities." In early 2026, U.S. Central Command initiated an operation to transfer 5,700 male detainees (including 157 boys from Syria to Iraq.) During the chaotic transition, an estimated 20,000 individuals departed the camp according to United States and other intelligence assessments. While some may have escaped of their own free will, others—particularly children—may have been smuggled out or coerced by armed actors, traffickers, or family members. Some families who left al-Hol have since said they are not certain whether they have been freed or kidnapped. After Syrian government security forces took over, they facilitated the relocation of families to Aq Burhan camp north of Aleppo. Finally, on February 22, 2026, the Syrian authorities announced al-Hol was fully evacuated and shut down.

Conditions and Child Protection Risks in al-Hol Camp

The inhumane conditions of al-Hol are well documented. Children living there did not have proper access to clean water, food, or other essential services including healthcare and education. As Amnesty International found in 2021, tens of thousands of children from over 60 different countries were left to endure misery, trauma, and death, and governments refused to repatriate them to safe environments. The United Nations warned that the confinement in al-Hol may amount to cruel or inhuman treatment.

In 2025, UN Women released a comprehensive report that challenged common assumptions about al-Hol's residents. Its findings confirm that most individuals in al-Hol were children under 18. More than half of the women they interviewed were married between the ages of 13 and 17, reflecting child marriage as a norm. The researchers also found that up to a quarter of residents did not have direct links to the Islamic State, with some being detained due to bureaucratic errors and misinformation.

Even among residents with no meaningful connection to the Islamic State, its ideology shaped the roles prescribed for girls and boys, creating gendered protection risks. For example, boys and male youth were seen as agents of violence, and as a result were recruited for militant roles in the future. In some instances, boys as young as eight years old were forced to undergo military training. This is a violation of international humanitarian law and the protections afforded to children under the CRC and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. There was also a policy from the SDF of separating boys from their mothers once they reached puberty.

Young girls were at greater risk for sexual and gender-based violence, including forced and early marriages. Incidents of rape are more difficult to identify due to stigma and fear of authorities, however, there are several identified cases involving children. Researchers suspect that many more acts of sexual violence have occurred and gone unreported. All the children in the camp experienced unimaginable challenges, including interrupted education, exposure to violence including sexual and gender-based violence, and, for some, recruitment and use by armed actors.

Post-Closure Risks

The closure of al-Hol was a welcome dismantling of an unsustainable, extrajudicial detention system that held women and children for nearly a decade. However, the protection risks for children have now been dispersed into contexts where protection monitoring and service delivery are severely constrained. For most children who escaped, they are now living in extreme poverty, many without legal status or access to humanitarian assistance. Without civil documentation, children are invisible to formal protection systems, which leaves them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, human trafficking, exploitation, and abuse.

As Save the Children's Syria Country Director, Rasha Muhrez, said, "Every hour without clear protection measures increases the risk of children being harmed, exploited or coerced by armed actors." As of May 2026, there is a profound information vacuum, and the former residents of al-Hol have disappeared from the international policy agenda.

The success of al-Hol's closure should not be measured by the camp's end, but by the safety and well-being of the children who once lived there. To that end, policymakers should urgently address the following questions:

- **Reintegration Mandates:** What comprehensive, civilian-led reintegration plans are in place for Syrian and Iraqi children, and which national or international authorities will fund and implement them?
- **Detained Adolescent Boys:** What is the exact status of the 157 boys transferred to Iraqi custody, and what mechanisms are available to monitor their safety? Has there been a handover protocol developed to ensure detained children's release to child protection actors who will support their reintegration?
- **Third-Country Nationals:** What is the status of repatriation efforts for the thousands of foreign children remaining in Roj camp or scattered across northwestern Syria, and is the U.S. CENTCOM-led Joint Repatriation Cell still operational to facilitate their safe return?
- **Tracking and Verification:** What independent monitoring and verification mechanisms will be established to track the estimated 20,000 escaped individuals, as well as the residual populations relocated to the Aq Burhan camp and other informal settlements?

The story of al-Hol is a tragic chronicle of both institutional failure and an international community willingly turning away. It exposes the deep structural flaws in national security frameworks that systematically, if unintentionally, override international child protections. Although the physical site of al-Hol is now closed, the legal, moral, and humanitarian responsibility to protect, reintegrate and repatriate these children remains unresolved.

The Syrian Transitional Government, along with the United States and other states with nationals inside Syria, have the responsibility to implement reintegration programs, ensure the safe repatriation of third-country national children, and transfer any detained minors from military custody to child protection actors. States should act with urgency, and responses should be grounded in the best interests of the child.

FINDING CARE WITHOUT SUPPORT IN DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP

Originally Published on March 11, 2026

By: Rachel Ryu, Staff Attorney, USCRI Humanitarian Legal Services, and
Adson Mphepo, Advocate for Refugee Children's Rights

Dzaleka Refugee Camp is Malawi's largest refugee camp. Established in 1994, the camp was built on the site of a former prison to accommodate up to 12,000 refugees. At the end of 2025, it housed over 60,000 refugees, mostly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi. The Republic of Malawi requires all refugees to reside in designated refugee camps, and Dzaleka is home to refugees who have suffered protracted displacement, as well as newly arriving refugees. Women and children make up 93 percent of the population. Despite the large child population, there is no dedicated child protection officer on site at Dzaleka or at Karonga Reception Center.

In 2019, a local law student, Adson Mphepo, went to Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi to find and assess the needs of unaccompanied and separated refugee children (UASC). He met and spoke with three young girls who had fled from their village in the DRC due to armed conflict. While fleeing, they were separated from their parents and kin. On the journey, they found another group of refugees, and they followed them to Karonga, Malawi's refugee reception center near the border with Tanzania. After registration, the girls had to find their own way to Dzaleka Refugee Camp, which is over 500 km (approx. 310 miles) away. It takes 10 hours to drive or over five days straight to walk. The three girls became separated from the group, but an older refugee girl led them to Dzaleka. When they arrived, the older girl disappeared. By chance, a refugee woman saw the three children and realized that they were alone. She took them in to live with her and her own children. These informal foster arrangements are common in Dzaleka.

In any discussion about refugee children, it is imperative for advocates and local actors to assess and prioritize the "best interests of the child." Each child has a right to have their best interests centered in every decision made concerning them. Each decision should include an evaluation of a child's best interest, and these interests should be frequently reevaluated as a child grows and as their environment changes. Children in displacement are at risk of different protection gaps and dangers as they develop, and conditions in refugee camps can drastically alter due to climate shocks and aid cuts. All of those factors impact the best interests of each child.

A displaced child's best interest should be evaluated as early as possible upon arrival. Currently, Malawi's Department for Refugees conducts registration of all refugees.* Unaccompanied children are referred to the Red Cross, which is an implementing partner of UNHCR in Dzaleka. In December 2025, the Red Cross shared that they had 67 registered UASC. It is not clear if all UASC have been identified, as there is not enough information on the identification and registration process. The Red Cross mainly uses this information to conduct family tracing. In this context, tracing is difficult because families have been split up in the chaos, and the Red Cross can only cross-reference lists of other refugee camps in the region. Reunification is near impossible if a child's parents did not reach a refugee camp, if there were mistakes in registration, or they moved to another refugee camp.

UASC may be placed into the care of foster families. At Dzaleka Refugee Camp, placement commonly occurs through informal, traditional protection mechanisms without rigorous assessment of the caregiver's suitability. The lack of screening procedures can lead to placements that jeopardize the child's safety and well-being. Although a Malawian childcare law provides a regulatory framework for foster care placement, these provisions are not adhered to in practice in Dzaleka due to the lack of staffing and resources to implement them.

Foster families receive no extra financial or psychosocial support. They register each foster child as part of their household, so that the World Food Programme (WFP) knows to provide the household with a food allowance. The WFP currently provides cash assistance to refugees on a monthly basis. Over the years, assistance has been cut, but food prices keep rising. Households struggle to buy enough food and cover basic needs for half of the month.

Malawi itself is facing a chronic food security crisis due to climate-related shocks. A 2023 analysis shows that 15 percent of the country's population is experiencing high levels of food insecurity. Dzaleka Refugee Camp is located in a region that is under "stressed" food insecurity. While resilient, the country struggles with weak economic growth, stagnant trade, and

currency depreciation. Aid and assistance through the help of UN-affiliated and non-governmental actors are necessary to sustain support and services for refugees.

On February 23, 2026, WFP announced that it would have to stop food assistance for over 60,000 refugees in Dzaleka by June 2026 if it cannot raise funds. These cuts will force refugees to make impossible decisions just to survive. The Deputy Prime Minister of Luxembourg said that food shortages will increase the "risk of people [going] into prostitution just to get food." Cuts to assistance and food rations can also lead to refugee families refusing to foster unaccompanied children. In other refugee contexts, caregivers reported both food insecurity and meeting basic needs as persistent challenges. Emotional and psychosocial strain and feelings of isolation in caregiving were also reported.

After conducting several visits and producing research on this topic, the need is clear: Dzaleka Refugee Camp must have a permanent child protection officer. Further support is critical to ensure that foster families are assessed for suitability, and placements must be monitored.

NGO actors have consistently raised the need for dedicated child welfare workers in refugee camps to address protection gaps. Without formalized care systems, these children do not have their future protected. At minimum, UASC in foster families should be routinely visited by child protection workers to ensure they are safe and receiving adequate care, protection, and access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and psychosocial support. Monitoring UASC placements is not only good for the child's safety, but it also ensures that NGO actors are continually evaluating the child's best interest and inviting child participation in decisions about their lives and future. Being left out of the process and without information also contributes to a child's stress in an already fragile environment.

Foster caregivers are volunteering to take on the responsibilities of feeding, housing, and looking after the development of UASC. Many arrangements are caring and supportive for children. While these arrangements are often informal and can present significant challenges, the dangers can be comprehensively mitigated by the State, child protection experts, and refugee camp administrators who implement and enforce policy. For instance, the woman introduced at the beginning of this article is living with her foster children and her own two children in a small, dilapidated structure that leaks in bad weather. None of the children are able to attend school. Collaboration among stakeholders to address the critical needs of UASC in migration and displacement settings is of the utmost importance. To ensure child protection, foster care systems need to be supported. This includes designated, sustainable funding to support foster families and child protection initiatives.

The Constitution and laws of Malawi stipulate that the rights of children and their well-being should be protected by the State. For UASC, however, the lack of formal procedures for identification, care placements, and evaluation are resulting in protection gaps. Under this system, NGOs are forced to improvise and create systems that are vulnerable to aid cuts and shifting priorities. **The international community must advocate for a stronger system to protect children's futures. Policy change at the local level must go hand-in-hand with international support.** Otherwise, children may be handed an empty promise of protection and inclusivity.

**UNHCR used to conduct registration and administer programs for refugees. Due to international aid cuts, UNHCR is no longer in charge of registration and has significantly cut back presence in Dzaleka as of the time of writing.*

THROUGH MY EYES:

Early Reflection on Empowering Adolescent Girls in the Face of Fragility

Originally Published on March 22, 2025
By: Sylvia Maru, Program Manager, USCRI Kenya

Stepping into Kakuma Refugee Camp for the first time is an experience that stays with you. The heat, the dust, the hustle and bustle, the resilience stamped into every face, and especially the young ones. I have just begun my journey with Keep Girls Dreaming here, but even in the early days, I am already learning how fragile, complex and powerful the lives of adolescent girls and young women truly are.

In Kakuma, I met young women who dropped out of secondary school at 16 or 17, not because they lacked dreams, but because life interrupted them. Many got married early, not out of desire, but out of survival. Some became caregivers long before they had a chance to be children. Their stories stay with me, quiet reminders of how deeply context shapes the future of a girl.

USCRI Kenya Program Manager Sylvia Maru prepares sanitary pads for distribution through the Keep Girls Dreaming program in Kakuma Refugee Camp

In two years, USCRI's Keep Girls Dreaming program has delivered over 1.4 million sanitary pads to refugees in Kenya. Photo taken by UNHCR / Gabriel Bugoma during USCRI visit to a girls' boarding school in Kakuma Refugee Camp.

Where Childhood meets Survival

During a visit to one of the safe spaces for children, what struck me most was not the noise of play or the laughter. It was hunger. The food shortage was visible, tangible. I watched what was to be shared amongst the children, and it was little. I couldn't help imagining how much harder it must be for adolescent girls who are navigating bodily changes, self-awareness, and responsibilities no teenager should carry.

Food, a basic need that many of us take for granted, is a privilege. Hunger changes everything: mood, concentration, school attendance, confidence, and dignity. It chips away at childhood bit by bit.

What Happens When a Girl Starts to Bloom Without Support

As I observed the girls around me, some shy, some bold, some curious—all trying their best to adapt, my mind wondered to their teenage years. When their bodies begin to change.

Will they have someone to explain what is happening?
Will they have menstrual products during their periods?
Will they understand that their bodies are blossoming and not betraying them?
Will they feel shame, or will they embrace it with dignity?

These questions sit heavy in my heart because adolescence is supposed to be a time of discovery and guidance, not confusion and silence.

The Quiet Potential I See Everywhere

Even during struggle, I see potential shining through in a girl who still walks to the safe space every morning, in one who dreams of becoming a nurse, in the way they help each other laugh together and find joy in the smallest things.

These girls carry bigger futures than their circumstances. What they need is support, safety, and a chance for simple dignity to allow them to dream beyond survival.

My Role Begins with Seeing, Truly Seeing

I am still learning, still listening. I don't have years of stories yet, but I already feel the weight and beauty of the work ahead.

Empowerment, I realize begins with presence. Being there, observing, acknowledging vulnerabilities without judgement and imagining what it could be like if a girl is given a small opportunity.

Another thing is clear: I do not want the potential of these girls to be lost to hunger, early marriage, fear, or lack of dignity.

When you empower a girl in a fragile context, you are not just changing her day, you are changing her destiny.

DIGNITY IN DISPLACEMENT:

Menstrual Health Access for Displaced Afghan Girls in Pakistan

By: Lía Butanda, USCRI Policy Intern (2026),
Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service

Every month, millions of displaced adolescent girls globally are forced to manage menstruation without the basic resources needed to do so safely and with dignity. Across conflict-affected areas and displacement settings worldwide, women and girls continue to face limited access to sanitary products, clean water, private sanitation facilities, and menstrual health education. These barriers compromise not only physical health, but also educational continuity, confidence, and the ability to participate fully in daily life.

Sustainably investing in menstrual health support for displaced adolescent girls is not just a matter of menstrual hygiene, it is essential to advancing health, protection, educational continuity, and girls' ability to participate fully and safely in their communities.

For displaced girls in and from Afghanistan, these challenges are particularly relevant against a backdrop of decades of conflict, humanitarian crisis, and worsening oppression of women and girls under Taliban rule. These conditions have deepened instability and forced many to flee to overcrowded urban communities such as Karachi, Pakistan, where support systems are often ill-equipped to meet girls' menstrual health needs.

Barriers to Menstrual Health for Displaced Afghan Girls

Even after escaping the Taliban's gender apartheid regime in Afghanistan, many displaced Afghan girls continue to face gender-based barriers in their daily lives. In Karachi, under-resourced healthcare, sanitation infrastructure, and overcrowded living conditions can make managing menstrual health safely and with dignity especially difficult.

In many of these communities, conversations about menstruation remain taboo, creating additional barriers to menstrual health education alongside the many other challenges girls already face. Globally, the United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization estimate that only two out of five schools provide menstrual health education. Paired with persistent stigma, millions of girls worldwide are left unaware or unprepared for menstruation before their first period. Despite the importance of menstrual health education, there is little evidence that it has been systematically integrated into formal education for displaced Afghan girls in Karachi. Although non-governmental organizations and international organizations have implemented awareness programs and training sessions, significant gaps in accessible and consistent

"Ensuring displaced girls can manage menstruation safely is not only a health concern—it is tied to education, protection, autonomy, and girls' rights to participate fully in their communities and futures."

menstrual health education remain. As a result, many girls grow up with limited or inaccurate information about menstruation, while stigma can contribute to shame and harmful practices such as avoiding bathing or restricting certain foods during periods.

Displaced girls in Karachi may also face limited access to adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities and menstrual hygiene products. Many rely on unsafe alternatives such as old cloths or tent materials, increasing the risk of infection and other health complications. These challenges also contribute to school absenteeism, as displaced girls often lack the resources, privacy, and support needed to manage menstruation safely and with dignity, causing many to miss classes during their menstrual cycles or leave school altogether. In some communities, the onset of menstruation is viewed as a marker of adulthood, which can contribute to forced child marriage and further restrict girls' access to education and autonomy.

In response to these challenges, UN agencies and implementing partners across Pakistan have increasingly sought to expand menstrual health support for displaced Afghan girls through hygiene kit distribution and menstrual health education sessions. While these initiatives can help improve access to information and resources, support often remains limited and inconsistent, particularly for girls living in underserved urban communities.

To help address these gaps, community-based programs such as HER Pakistan, a youth- and women-led community initiative, have also worked to expand menstrual health awareness and improve access to hygiene resources for girls in displacement settings across Pakistan. Through their "Period at School" educational sessions, curation of period-friendly safe spaces for menstruators globally to connect, and advocacy for policy change, HER Pakistan is striving to create more sustainable and inclusive social change. More initiatives like this are needed.

A Global Humanitarian Challenge

The challenges facing displaced Afghan girls in Karachi reflect broader menstrual health barriers experienced by adolescent girls across humanitarian settings worldwide. In Gaza, humanitarian organizations have warned that conflict and displacement have left around 700,000 girls and women with limited access to menstrual hygiene products, clean water, and sanitation. Similar challenges have been documented in South Sudan, where flooding, conflict, and limited infrastructure continue to affect girls' ability to manage menstruation safely and attend school consistently.

Recent humanitarian aid cuts have also intensified menstrual health challenges for displaced girls globally. The collapse of U.S.-funded humanitarian programming in Afghanistan led to the closure of hundreds of health facilities and the disruption of health services, including programs that distributed menstrual supplies and provided menstrual health education.

As displacement continues to affect millions of children worldwide, menstrual health must be treated as a priority within humanitarian response efforts. Ensuring displaced girls can manage menstruation safely is not only a health concern—it is tied to education, protection, autonomy, and girls' rights to participate fully in their communities and futures.

Governments, donors, and humanitarian organizations must increase and sustain funding and capacity for menstrual health programming, ensure consistent access to menstrual hygiene products in displacement settings, expand access to WASH facilities, and support community-based education led by women and girls themselves. Without sustained investment and targeted action, displaced adolescent girls will continue to face preventable barriers that deepen inequality and limit their opportunities, even if displacement ends.

NOT INVISIBLE:

Strengthening Protection for Children with Disabilities in Migration and Displacement

By: Victoria Walker, USCRI Policy Analyst

Originally published on July 16, 2024, and updated in June 2026.

When air raid sirens sound, a deaf child cannot hear them. When a family migrates through the Darién Gap's jungle terrain, a blind child cannot see the way. When war erupts and a family must flee, a child in a wheelchair could be left behind. When a non-verbal child arrives in a refugee camp reception center, they struggle to communicate what they need. Far too often, children with disabilities in conflict, crises, and the resulting displacement are at increased risk of experiencing violence and abuse and a lack of safe and inclusive spaces. They are left behind and left out. Disabilities, both seen and unseen, should never render children invisible. Migrating and displaced children with disabilities must be included in any humanitarian and child protection response.

By the end of 2025, nearly 118 million people were forcibly displaced. Children account for 39 percent of this displaced population. As conflict and crises continue to uproot people around the world, people with disabilities are disproportionately affected. Children with disabilities are especially vulnerable.

The World Health Organization estimates that 1.3 billion people—around 16 percent of the world's population—live with a disability. Around 240 million of them are children, one in ten children globally. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines protections for children with disabilities in Article 7. This includes obligations for States Parties to ensure children with disabilities enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children, that the best interests of the child be a primary consideration, and that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them. The Convention also details under Article 11 that States Parties are "to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters." The most widely ratified human rights treaty, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, outlines the rights of *all* children including those with disabilities and the obligations of States Parties to protect them.

Despite such obligations, the call to ensure equity and freedom from discrimination and abuse for children with disabilities repeatedly goes unanswered.

"Children with disabilities and children on the move represent highly diverse populations living in a broad range of circumstances. But as two of the most marginalized groups of children in the world, there is much they have in common, often-times neglected in data collection, policies and programming." – UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines 'children with disabilities' as "those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an

equal basis with others." Children with disabilities are a diverse and vulnerable population that can face deprivation of their rights and needs in daily life. Migrant and displaced children are already a highly vulnerable group of children as well. They often endure significant levels of trauma in their countries of origin as well as throughout their migration journeys. Many are still at risk once in host countries, as social and protection systems can be non-inclusive, discriminatory, overcapacity, or nonexistent. When these realities intersect and children with disabilities experience migration and displacement, the likelihood that they will receive the care and resources they need decreases. Preexisting disabilities can be exacerbated, or new impairments—such as mental health conditions—can begin.

Migrating or displaced children with disabilities are not a homogenous group and are not inherently vulnerable as individuals. Barriers and threats in their environments, as well as stigma and communal capacity, are factors that can increase threats to their well-being, thus rendering them more vulnerable than other children.

When children with disabilities are in conflict or disaster, it can be more difficult for them to flee or be alerted to what is happening. Without assistive devices or present caregivers, sometimes children cannot hear, see, or comprehend that an attack is happening. Children with disabilities face an elevated risk of abandonment or family separation during attacks when families must make instant decisions to flee with those who can physically run with ease or stay behind with their child who cannot go. After documenting the impact of armed conflict and crises on children with disabilities in seven conflict zones, Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that "children who are unable to flee independently and do not have someone to support them can be left behind."

When in conflict or crisis, it is likely that access to essential services for children with disabilities will be disrupted, causing protection gaps and keeping them from meeting their basic needs. HRW reported a primary gap to be the disruption of education. The organization found that,

"The disruption of education during conflict and crises places a high burden on children with disabilities. Government forces and armed groups may attack, occupy, and destroy schools. Remaining options for schooling may be inaccessible or difficult to flee in case of attack. Children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school and without access to education provided by humanitarian organizations, which may have limited options for inclusive programs and lack trained staff."

When living in an informal displacement settlement or refugee camp, access to education is a lifeline for children and can provide a renewed sense of stability and safety. However, 46 percent of school-aged refugee children were estimated to be out of school at the end of 2024, about 5.7 million refugee children. Schools in these settings are often overcapacity and underfunded, and extreme challenges keep children from attending. For children with disabilities in such contexts, the situation is more complex. Oftentimes these schools are not accessible for children with disabilities, nor are they staffed with teachers who can communicate with visual- or hearing-impaired students or those who require assistive devices or specialized programming.

In August and September 2023, USCRI policy staff conducted a field visit to Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps and Kalobeyei Settlement in Kenya to assess child protection and access to education for children in the camps. In both camps, UNHCR and partners expressed the difficulties in safeguarding and ensuring access to education for children with disabilities. When visiting a school in Hagadera, Dadaab, USCRI met a class of five girls who were all hearing-impaired. They were able to have class together because their teacher was deaf and knew sign language. Staff expressed that this is rare, and even though it is positive that the girls were able to attend school, they were isolated from their peers and impacted by the lack of a fully inclusive system. Staff noted, however, that the situation in the camp was far worse for children with cerebral palsy or severe physical impairments, as adequate facilities, physical barriers, and stigma were major challenges.

"When migration and displacement result in breakdowns in community networks, experiences of discrimination may be exacerbated as families try to meet their basic needs. If children on the move and children with disabilities are seen as different, they are likely to see their rights violated across dimensions."- UNICEF

Migrating and displaced children can experience high levels of stigma and discrimination due to harmful narratives, language and cultural differences, and other factors. When they also live with a disability, levels of stigma can increase, leading to distress, isolation, and abuse. UNICEF noted that "children with disabilities living in refugee or displacement camps report suffering physical or verbal abuse from others in the community, and mothers of children with disabilities report harassment, stigmatization, and ostracization."

In June 2024, USCRI met with the HODARI Foundation, a refugee-led organization supporting unaccompanied children in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement in Uganda. Hodari told USCRI that one of the largest gaps in services and support was for unaccompanied children with disabilities. Staff cited the dire need for safe spaces for children with disabilities, inclusive education, and community engagement to combat stigma from caretakers and the community. The Hodari Foundation cares for over 50 children with albinism and noted that stigma is especially targeted at these children. They lack the medical care and resources required to protect their skin and minimize visual impairment and are further isolated by discrimination and stigmatization.

"The international community must take targeted action to protect and support children with disabilities, including through the development of inclusive policies and programming informed by the meaningful participation of children with disabilities and their caregivers."

Recommendations

Children with disabilities affected by migration and displacement face multiple and intersecting barriers that can limit their access to protection, education, medical care, and meaningful participation. These challenges are often compounded by inadequate data, inaccessible services, and policy frameworks that fail to address their specific needs. Ensuring their rights requires a coordinated and inclusive approach that places children at the center of humanitarian, migration, and development responses.

The following are recommendations to strengthen the protection and care for displaced and migrating children with disabilities worldwide:

- Governments and all relevant stakeholders must uphold their commitments and legal obligations to protect all children, including children with disabilities and children affected by migration and displacement.
- All parties to conflict must uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, including ensuring safe and unhindered humanitarian access to affected populations, particularly children with disabilities and their caregivers.
- Children with disabilities must be systematically included in humanitarian and child protection responses. Humanitarian actors and all relevant stakeholders should consult organizations with this expertise and apply established guidance, such as UNICEF's Guidance on Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.
- The international community must take targeted action to protect and support children with disabilities, including through the development of inclusive policies and programming informed by the meaningful participation of children with disabilities and their caregivers.
- Monitoring, data collection, and reporting on children with disabilities in migration and displacement contexts must be strengthened to address evidence gaps and support more effective, evidence-based policy and programming.

About USCRI's Child-focused Work

USCRI Policy and Advocacy

USCRI's Policy and Advocacy team assesses federal laws and international agreements, develops policy positions, and advocates for humanitarian practices to protect the rights of refugees and immigrants nationally and globally.

Through its Children and Youth portfolio, the team advances evidence-based policies and programs that center the rights, protection, and meaningful participation of displaced children and adolescents, tracks trends in child displacement globally, and conducts field visits to engage directly with affected communities, ensuring children's voices inform policies and sustainable solutions across national and international contexts.

Visit USCRI's ***Get the Latest*** and **sign up** for timely updates, reports, and more from the Policy and Advocacy team.

USCRI Children's Services

Since 2005, USCRI has delivered critical social services to unaccompanied migrating children in the United States. As the nation's largest provider of case management services for unaccompanied children and their families, USCRI has supported more than 65,000 children.

The Children's Services team manages the Unaccompanied Children Resource Center and the Refugee Youth Resource Center, which offer guidance and resources to newcomer youth and their families as they adjust to life in the United States. The Centers also strengthen provider and community capacity to improve outcomes and better meet the needs of migrating children.

USCRI Kenya: Keep Girls Dreaming

Since October 2023, USCRI Kenya's Keep Girls Dreaming initiative has delivered over 1.4 million sanitary pads to refugee girls in Kenya's Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps, keeping them in school and ensuring dignified, safe periods. Keep Girls Dreaming has now expanded through a pilot program offering unaccompanied girls case management, menstrual health education, food support, and school supplies, while training youth mentors and hosting stigma-reduction workshops. A partnership with Girl Power Action Initiative, a refugee-led women's center, also trains refugee women to make reusable pads, turning a health gap into a livelihood opportunity.

Click here to become a "Dream Keeper" monthly donor. All funds raised go towards ensuring girls in Kakuma and their foster families have menstrual hygiene products and continuous support.

USCRI Mexico: Habesha Project

USCRI Mexico's Habesha Project is an initiative aimed at ensuring access to higher education for refugee and forcibly displaced youth. The project implements a comprehensive action model that combines international protection with local integration through academic scholarships. Habesha Project has guaranteed access to university studies for 123 refugee youth from more than 11 countries, including Syria, South Sudan, Somalia, Venezuela, Haiti, Colombia, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador.

USCRI El Salvador: REDII Program

USCRI El Salvador's REDII Program equips Salvadoran youth returnees with the tools to rebuild their lives and contribute to their country's economic development. USCRI provides a three-month stipend covering transportation and meals during vocational training, while also building soft skills and facilitating job placement through a three-month, half-salary incentive for local employers. Graduates have gone on to launch and work in a range of businesses.

About Supporting Organizations

American Relief Agency for the Horn of Africa (ARAHA) founded in 2000, is a nonprofit organization that strives to alleviate suffering and build self-reliant communities in the Horn of Africa.

ARAHA | Humanitarian Relief for Africa and Beyond

HODARI Foundation is a refugee-founded and refugee-led organization based in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement in Southwestern Uganda. The organization promotes resilience and self- reliance among refugee women, children, and youth through regenerative agriculture, Child care, and Social Enterprise programs.

HODARI Foundation

Legal Refugee Center (LRC) is an international non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and vulnerable children through legal assistance, education, child protection, and community empowerment programs across East Africa. LRC works to ensure that displaced and marginalized populations have access to justice, education, and opportunities to rebuild their lives with dignity.

Legal Refugee Center

This report is made possible through the generous support of people like you. The work highlighted in these pages reflects USCRI's commitment to ensuring that displaced people, especially children and young people, are heard, protected, and supported. To help sustain this work, visit refugees.org/donate.

Stay Connected: sign up for our e-mails

This report was designed by Senna Ahmad, USCRI