

UNHCR's 5 Priorities for Girls and Boys of Concern to UNHCR

Refugee children are a policy priority of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Promoting respect for the rights of refugee girls and boys, including adolescents, of diverse backgrounds and abilities is UNHCR's responsibility.

Priority issue #1: Separation from families and caregivers

Separation of children from their families or caregivers should be prevented. For those girls and boys who have been separated, it is important to identify, register and document them in order to provide protection and undertake tracing of parents or primary caregivers. Family reunification should occur if it is in the best interests of the child. Monitoring of all interim care arrangements should be undertaken regularly by UNHCR and partners as temporary care can present other problems for these girls and boys. Durable solutions must be tailored to their needs.

Priority issue #2: Sexual exploitation, abuse and violence

Refugee girls and boys have to be protected from sexual exploitation, abuse and violence as well as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies and harmful traditional practices. This is the responsibility of the host government, the refugee community and humanitarian organizations. Abuse can be prevented through awareness raising, ensuring improved access to assistance and education as well as safe living conditions and school environments. Response mechanisms include health care, psycho-social support, measures to ensure the safety of the victim/survivor and legal redress.

Priority issue #3: Military recruitment

A refugee child may be recruited compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily by armed groups or forces. Both girls and boys participate in fighting as well as take on other duties as porters, cooks, cleaners, and messengers. Girls are at a higher risk of sexual abuse, forced marriage and pregnancy. These risks can be prevented by providing alternatives such as enrolment in schools and training centres. While recognizing that girls and boys may have different needs, they should benefit in an equitable manner from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes.

Priority issue #4: Education

Girls and boys of all ages have a right to equal access to quality education in a safe environment. Education, including literacy and vocational training, serves as an important tool to protect them from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), HIV and AIDS, military recruitment, crime and drugs. It adds to a sense of normality in everyday life and provides them with skills and knowledge for the future.

Priority issue #5: Specific concerns of adolescents

In refugee situations, younger children are often being cared for while their communities and organizations tend to overlook the needs of adolescents, who may also be heading households. Based on participatory processes with adolescent girls and boys, opportunities for formal and non-formal education, skills-training, income-generating activities/employment, participation in decision-making processes, recreational activities and life-skills education should be created.