

# KidsRights Report 2017



## “A Crisis within a Crisis”

Access to Education for Syrian Refugee Children



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## 1. Introduction

“Children are hiding their stories inside” Mohamad Al Jounde, child refugee and winner of the International Children’s Peace Prize 2017 says. Currently, as many as 28 million children have been forcibly displaced worldwide. Each and every one of them has their own story. Mohamad grew up in Syria, where his parents, active in the Syrian revolution, raised him to be politically aware. In 2013, his mother received a death threat from the regime and the family had to flee immediately. They found refuge in Lebanon.

In total, 2.5 million Syrian children have become refugees as a result of the conflict that erupted in 2011. Lebanon is currently home to about 500.000 Syrian refugee children. About half of the children aged 6 to 14 are not going to school and 84% of the children aged 15 to 17 is out of school.

During his first two years in Lebanon, Mohamad could not go to school either. However, he was determined to fight for a brighter future for his peers and himself. Together with his family, he built a school in a refugee camp. Only 12 years old, he started teaching maths, English and, his biggest passion, photography, to his peers. He encouraged them to take pictures of their daily lives and to open up about experiences in order to process their trauma. It took time and trust, but eventually, children started to uncover their hidden stories. The school has been professionally rebuilt and has been staffed with official teachers. Currently, 200 children attend Mohamad’s school. After completing two years of education there, children can be enrolled

in the formal Lebanese education system.

This reports aims to provide a brief overview of the current circumstances of Syrian refugee children, with a focus on access to education.

In order to address the topic of education, it is important to highlight the physical and psychological impact of the conflict on children first, as this profoundly influences children’s development and their education. Once this has been established, the lack of educational opportunities for Syrian (refugee) children and the reasons behind this will be addressed. This will be followed by an examination of the benefits of education, education as a key factor for Syria’s future and education as one of the Rights of the Child (as stated in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child). The report will conclude with a few recommendations and suggestions to ameliorate the facilities available to Syrian (refugee) children – this includes both access to education and to humanitarian aid – as soon as possible.



## 2. The Detrimental Effects of War on the Physical and Mental Health of Syrian Children

The conflict in Syria has been raging for six years now – and it is taking its toll on the physical and mental wellbeing of Syria’s children. Daily anxiety, stress and uncertainty due to the exposure to war leaves many children in a continual state of ‘toxic stress’, “the most dangerous form of stress response”<sup>2</sup>, which, left untreated, can affect children’s mental and physical health for the rest of their lives.<sup>3</sup> This will not only harm so many individual lives, but will have devastating effects on the future of Syria as well. We are now close to reaching a ‘tipping point’, after which the effects of war on children’s development may become so big that the damage could become irreversible.<sup>4</sup>

It is estimated that at least 3 million children live in areas where exposure to weapons is high. They are confronted with violence on a daily basis and often have terrible nightmares due to previous experience with violence.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the shocking results of research Save the Children conducted on this topic:

- Two-third of the children are said to have lost a loved one, had their house bombed or have suffered war-related injuries.
- 84% of adults and almost all children stated that the continuing bombing and shelling is the main cause of stress in children’s lives.
- 80% of the children have become more aggressive and 71% of the interviewees said that children increasingly suffer from involuntary urination. These are both common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and toxic stress.
- 48% of the adults interviewed said that they have seen children who have lost the ability to speak or have developed speech impediments over the course of the war.
- 49% of the children interviewed said to often or always experience feelings of extreme sadness and grief.
- One in four children said that they rarely or never have someone or someplace to turn to or go to when they feel upset or scared.<sup>6</sup>
- All interviewees said that not being able to go to

school has a tremendous psychological impact on the lives of children. 50% of the children who are still going to school said that they never or rarely feel safe there.

Daily exposure to type of traumatic events that Syrian children experience is very likely to lead to long-term mental health disorders such as separation anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder after the end of the war.<sup>7</sup> Many children find it difficult to fall asleep or frequently have nightmares. Long-term sleep deprivation also raises the risk of psychiatric disorders and can lead to health problems such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and even early death.<sup>8</sup>

Children need professional help to be able to process their traumas. However, there is a severe lack of professional psychiatrists and psychologists in Syria. Already before the war, there were only two public psychiatric hospitals. Now, when the people need it most, it is estimated that in some regions that are populated by more than one million people, there is only one professional psychiatrist.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, many children still feel that they have someone or someplace to turn to in times of need or sadness.<sup>10</sup> The majority of the children interviewed still showed a range of emotions, were able to talk to family and friends and were not yet totally desensitised to the violence. This suggests that the effects of the war are not yet irreversible.<sup>11</sup> It is however of paramount importance that they receive professional help very quickly; it will not be long before it will become impossible to significantly improve their (mental) health.

Education can also play a key role in the improvement of children’s mental health. A sense of normalcy, safety and routine are crucial to children’s development. Without schools and other support programs, there is a higher risk that children will suffer from depression, will become withdrawn and will begin feeling hopeless about their future.<sup>12</sup>

Children fleeing Syria take their stories with them. Most Syrian refugees currently live in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. It is important to pay attention to children's psychological needs and to help them, like Mohamad does, to process their war traumas. Also in

this case education can, alongside traditional learning, provide a sense of stability and gives hope for the future. Unfortunately, as will be addressed in the next paragraph, many Syrian refugee children do not have access to education.



### 3. No Access to Education

As stated in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, every child has a right to education. The participating parties agreed that primary education should be compulsory and free for all and the development of secondary education should be encouraged. In addition, it was agreed upon to take measures to reduce the drop-out rates and to encourage regular attendance.<sup>13</sup> It was promised to promote and encourage “international cooperation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.”<sup>14</sup>

In September 2017, the United Nations Refugees Agency (UNCHR) announced that staggering numbers of refugee children do not have access to education. Of the 17.2 million refugees under UNCHR’s mandate, 6.4 million are of school age. In 2016, more than half of them, 3.5 million children, did not go to school.<sup>15</sup> Although progress has been made and a host of initiatives have been implemented, refugee children are still five times more likely to not be enrolled in school than their non-refugee peers.<sup>16</sup> 1.5 Million of those school-aged children are Syrian refugees living in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>17</sup> Although there has been a vast improvement and education is becoming more accessible, at least 530,000 Syrian children living in these countries are still out of school.<sup>18</sup>

This problem is largely due to insufficient funding and to restrictive refugee policies. In 2016, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that globally, less than 2 per cent of donor support was allocated to education in emergencies.<sup>19</sup> On top of that, most of these funds go to primary education, rendering access to secondary education for refugee children even more uncertain than to primary education. In February 2016, international donors (the biggest of which are the European Union, United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Norway and the United States) pledged 1.4 billion dollars to fund education in both Syria and neighbouring countries. In addition, it was agreed upon that all Syrian refugee children living in

refugee-hosting countries would be enrolled in quality education by the end of the 2016–2017 school year.<sup>20</sup>

However, funds often did not reach their destination. For example, the annual education needs in Lebanon were estimated to be \$350 million. However, the UN reported that Lebanon only received \$253 million in 2016. The six donors reported to have given \$223.4 million that year.<sup>21</sup> Also Jordan did not receive enough educational funding and there is no clarity about the amount of money that was actually given or received, as all sources report different amounts.<sup>22</sup> HRW has identified four main problems in regard to educational funding: a lack of consistent and timely reporting by donors, a lack of information about the projects the donors are funding, inconsistent information about schooling and school enrolment and inconsistent targets set by both the donors and the host countries.<sup>23</sup>



In addition to this problem, children often become the victim of restrictive refugee host-policies.<sup>24</sup> In Jordan for example, refugees often encounter difficulties due to registration policies. Without an ID and asylum seeker certificates, children cannot be enrolled in formal education. Moreover, the absence of these documents also prevents families from receiving humanitarian assistance.<sup>25</sup> Lebanon has implemented generous policies that allow refugees to enrol without proof of legal residency, has initiated ‘second shift’ classes and has waived educational fees. Yet there are other contradictory policies that prevent refugees from gaining proof of legal residency or work undermining their educational policies. This often means that parents cannot afford to send their children to school.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, even if children have been able to enrol, there are numerous other factors that keep children out of school. In Lebanon, Syrian parents often find themselves unable to pay for school supplies or for the transport that will take their children to school.<sup>27</sup> As many of them have not been able to register in their host country, it is almost impossible for them to find a well-paying job. As it is therefore usually hard to

make ends meet, children are often expected to work and provide a salary or – in the case of many girls – to do chores at home. Lastly, there are additional reasons to drop out, such as the language barrier (as classes are often taught in foreign languages like English and French), bullying and harassment by other students, corporal punishment and additional enrolment requirements set out by individual schools.<sup>28</sup>



## 4. The Importance of Education in Times of War and the Prevention of a ‘Lost Generation’

Before the eruption of the war, school enrolment rates were quite high in Syria. Around 97 per cent of the Syrian children attended primary school, 67 per cent also went to secondary school.<sup>29</sup> In 2015, UNICEF reported that conflict in countries like Syria has reversed more than two decades of access to education.<sup>30</sup> Today, 6 years after its outbreak, the war has forced many children out of school, up to a point where we should fear ‘a lost generation’ of Syrian youth.<sup>31</sup> This problem calls for international cooperation. Several initiatives have been taken, for example, last year The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was signed by all members of the United Nations. This declaration inter alia emphasized that education should be a critical element of the international emergency response to a refugee crisis. The UNCHR stressed this need again last September:

*“We declare that education must be an integral part of the emergency response to a refugee crisis. It can provide a protective and stable environment for a young person when all around them seems to have descended into chaos. It imparts life-saving skills, promotes resilience and self-reliance, and helps to meet the psychological and social needs of children affected by conflict. Education is not a luxury, it is a basic need.”<sup>32</sup>*

In other words, education helps children in many aspects of their development. Not only does it improve

their chances to find a well-paying job in the future, it provides them with life skills that are valuable in other areas of life as well. As Human Rights Watch puts it, “education promotes stability”. Education for example teaches children how to resolve disputes in a peaceful way. It has even been shown that quality secondary education improves tolerance and can “foster a stronger belief in democracy, and help resist recruitment to violent extremism.”<sup>33</sup> Education brings hope and gives a sense of purpose. It gives children a chance to access protective environments and the skills to rebuild their countries.<sup>34</sup>

However, despite all benefits it brings, education often becomes a casualty<sup>35</sup> when children are forcibly displaced. Despite the widespread support for the abovementioned declaration, one year later, refugees are still in severe danger of missing out on education. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi: “Ensuring that refugees have equitable access to quality education is a shared responsibility. It is time for all of us to put words into action.”<sup>36</sup>

Once peace will be established in Syria, people and knowledge are essential to the rebuilding of the country.<sup>37</sup> If more educational opportunities for children will not soon be created, the proportion of uneducated youth will rise sharply, which will perpetuate the costs of the conflict for the following decades.<sup>38</sup>



## 5. Suggestions and Recommendations

- It is essential that Syrian children who have lived through the war receive professional psychiatric help as soon as possible in order to process their trauma. Being able to go to school can also play an important role in this process.
- Host countries in the region could revisit their registration policies and make it easier for refugees to find work. This would make it more affordable for parents to send their children to school.
- It is imperative that international donors honour their promises and guarantee that host countries actually receive the pledged amount. Moreover, they need to provide more clarity about their donations, their projects and their targets.



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# There's more than meets the eye

Our society faces challenges every day. We would like to make a meaningful difference that goes beyond our day-to-day work. We take responsibility for the effects of our activities from a social, ecological and economical perspective and we are especially engaged when it concerns children and their rights.

That is why we are proud legal partner of KidsRights and help the foundation to advocate the realisation of equal fundamental rights for children according to the UN Convention of the rights of a child.

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This report has been prepared for KidsRights by Ms. Isadora Dullaert.

The KidsRights Report 2017 is sponsored and supported by our legal partner NautaDutilh. KidsRights wishes to thank Silvia Gawronski for her valuable feedback on earlier versions of this report.

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