

# NEGLECT and the PROTECTION of refugee children

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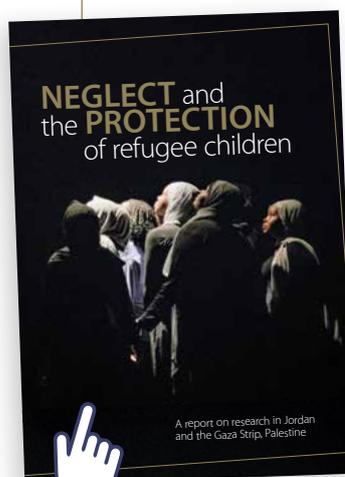
## SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH PROJECT IN JORDAN AND THE GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE

**CHILD PROTECTION** is a prominent area of activity for many humanitarian organisations working in contexts of forced displacement and armed conflict. As a field, it is grounded in a set of minimum standards and international agreements, in particular, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1989 and The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019 CPMS).

### Introduction

In humanitarian contexts, national and international organizations as well as UN agencies have played a central role in efforts to protect children. They do so either in collaboration with or as a substitute for the state. Furthermore, where possible, UN agencies work with relevant ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Social Development) to ensure that national legislation and policies are up to date and consistent with relevant international conventions.

The research report, '[Neglect and the Protection of Refugee Children: A Report on Research in Jordan and the Gaza Strip, Palestine](#)', examines local understandings of child protection. The research team sought to learn how caregivers and children perceived threats to children's safety and wellbeing and the steps that they took to prevent harm. They also looked



into the relationship between individuals, the state and the humanitarian system, including national and international organisations and UN agencies. The research considered the role played by the main actors in this system as they worked to protect refugee communities, and it examined both deficiencies and ways to enhance protection efforts in these settings.

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, the project team worked closely with four organizations focused at the community level - three in Jordan and one in the Gaza Strip in Palestine - at the different stages of the project. This included the design of the activities, training, data collection and analysis, dissemination of findings, and drafting of the recommendations. The partner organisations working directly on research with the target populations were Sawiyan, Seenaryo, and the Collateral Repair Project (CRP) in Jordan, and Tamer Institute for Community Education in the Gaza Strip. In addition,

the research team collaborated with the German-Jordanian University and Proteknôn Foundation for Innovation and Learning.

The project embraced four communities in Jordan – Somali, Sudanese, Iraqi, and Syrian - and Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. The research was undertaken in collaboration with a total of 38 researchers from these communities. Working in pairs, they conducted 170 interviews (140 in Jordan and 30 in Gaza) with caregivers and children. One third of the people interviewed were teenage children under the age of 18. The partner organisations also implemented participatory activities with groups of children and caregivers. Seenaryo organised theatre activities with over 30 children from the Sudanese and Somali communities. Tamer Institute worked with 60 boys and girls to explore their understandings of protection through creative writing and art. This work produced a set of outputs: two plays staged, a documentary about the [theatre project](#), and a picture book.

 YouTube

<https://youtu.be/LBmOsUsdDUk>



## The research process

In preparing the research, the core team based at the University of Bath consulted organisations and individuals working in the field of child protection in humanitarian settings, especially in Palestine and Jordan.

Through these consultations, child neglect was identified as an important theme about which there was little understanding in settings of armed conflict and displacement.



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## Main findings

Across the communities, caregivers understood the protection of children as meeting children's basic needs, preventing harm, ensuring access to education and healthcare, and safeguarding the possibility for a decent life over the long-term. By contrast, child protection efforts undertaken by international organisations and UN agencies tend to focus on issues, such as child labour and child marriage, begging, and domestic and gender-based violence. With the exception of child marriage, all of these issues emerged from the research. However, they were discussed by caregivers more as symptoms of deeper causes, including poverty, social marginalisation and discrimination, rather than as issues in themselves that could be tackled in isolation.

In Jordan, most refugees are denied access to employment in the formal labour market. Stipends received from humanitarian organisations do not cover the costs of meeting children's basic needs. In Gaza, caregivers reported on their struggle to provide for children's basic needs given the widespread and long-term unemployment and poverty there – a situation exacerbated by the Israeli blockade. Understanding these economic conditions, the risks to children

that they create, and the constraints they impose upon caregivers emerged as knowledge that should be fundamental to the child protection efforts of humanitarian organisations and host governments and other actors in the humanitarian system.

Direct harm in school and public spaces was an issue for children from all of the research communities in Jordan. This harm took different forms: bullying, verbal abuse, physical attack, and exploitation. Not all communities experienced all of these forms of violence to the same extent. For example, Somali and Sudanese children were far more likely to be subjected to verbal abuse and physical attack in school and public spaces, and such violence was far more severe and damaging than that generally experienced by children from other communities. This is evidently due to racist and discriminatory attitudes towards people with darker skin. In several cases, these harms led caregivers to take their children out of school for their own protection.

In Gaza, several interviewees spoke of their experience of domestic violence, ascribing it to stress, depression, poverty, and the uncertainty of life under occupation.

Such violence was a problem that caregivers might develop strategies to overcome. However, the largest source of harm to children – frequent military attack on civilians and civilian infrastructure by Israeli forces – was seen by all as beyond their power to prevent. There was common acknowledgement that the most caregivers could hope to achieve was to reduce children’s fear. Protection of children’s bodies was simply impossible.

In Jordan, access to education and health services was also an important protection concern. Many talked about the struggles they faced trying to get adequate healthcare for their children in a timely manner, or securing a place at school and covering the associated costs of transportation, uniforms, books, snacks and, in some cases, admission fees. In Gaza,

UNRWA delivered schooling to all refugee children up until the ninth grade and offered primary health care through its clinics. However, further education and more specialised or advanced healthcare were hard to access.

Far from being passive in the face of severe conditions and constraints, caregivers seek through various way to protect and care for their children. Strategies include reaching out to neighbours, relatives, and friends (especially those of the same nationality), taking on debt, and safeguarding their children by, for example, maintaining a regular presence in the school environment or, if all else fails, taking their children out of school altogether. In some cases, caregivers reported keeping their children at home as much as possible to avoid violence and abuse in the street.

## ANALYSIS: the dynamics of neglect



The issues raised by participants in Jordan and Palestine highlight the structural obstacles that prevent caregivers from protecting their children. However, national and international organisations and UN agencies often attribute blame to caregivers for children’s exposure to harm. In particular, neglect is often attributed to a failure of caregiving. By contrast, research participants consistently spoke about the constraints on caregivers’ capacity to protect. If children experienced neglect, participants connected their situation to the way that the humanitarian system – including donors, host governments and humanitarian agencies – supported or failed to support caregivers to meet their responsibilities for children’s care and protection. With cuts in aid, the exclusion of certain populations from support, denial of lawful employment, lack of access to basic services, and discriminatory treatment within state-run institutions (including schools), caregivers are being handicapped in numerous ways. Therefore, while recognising that there may be caregivers who lack the motivation to protect children in their care, and humanitarian agencies that lack the resources needed to support caregivers and children, this project calls attention to the role of humanitarian agencies and other relevant actors in what may be called **‘THE PRODUCTION OF NEGLECT’**.

“ Across the communities, caregivers understood the protection of children as meeting children’s basic needs, preventing harm, ensuring access to education and healthcare, and safeguarding the possibility for a decent life over the long-term. ”





Photo: rodrickbeiler

## Recommendations

In light of the findings, we make the following recommendations to policymakers and practitioners:

- 1** Conduct a 'neglect audit' in each setting that involves child protection professionals and community members in tracing if and how the humanitarian system contributes to neglect by asking these key questions:
  - Are all populations of displaced and conflict-affected children being served, and being served equitably, by child protection programming, in keeping with the core humanitarian principle of impartiality and the notion of universality that is central to the UNCRC?
  - Do humanitarian organisations fully understand the risks faced by children and the corresponding challenges encountered by caregivers who are addressing those risks? What steps are they taking to develop their understanding of an evolving situation through engagement at the community level?
  - Are measures to address the identified risks appropriate and holistic? For example, when addressing issues such as child labour and child marriage, do humanitarian organisations consider political and economic causes as well as those associated with social and cultural forces?
- 2** Directly address the connections between elements of the humanitarian system in each setting that need change or strengthening to reduce the likelihood of child neglect.



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سويياً SAWIYAN



Collateral  
Repair Project