

Action is required to protect children in refugee camps

Children living in countries at war have come under direct attack, have been used as human shields, killed, maimed or recruited to fight. Rape, forced marriage and abduction have become standard tactics in conflicts from Syria to Yemen, and from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Nigeria, South Sudan and Myanmar.

The above was stated by UNICEF in December 2018 as they concluded that the world has [failed to protect children](#) in conflict.

In 2019, the year we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the situation still remains the same for children affected by war and conflict. Children are always the ones who have the most to lose. Their childhood, their safety, their loved ones, and their lives, are all at stake.

Recently, [civilians in Kurdish controlled areas](#) in Syria are being heavily affected by the Turkish invasion in Syria. These events add to the brutality and suffering children are subjected to when armed conflict and humanitarian crises emerge.

In Greece's Moria refugee camp, which only has capacity for 3000 people, there are currently living 13 500 people. As many as 1000 are unaccompanied minors, the highest figure since early 2016. The conditions are dire and the camp is [described](#) as a "place that can only compound psychological trauma, not soothe it." Children lose all hope.

Al-Hol in the north-eastern part of Syria, holds almost [70 000 refugees](#), 55 % of them are under the age of five. Among them, are the children of ISIS-parents who left their home countries to fight for ISIS. These children are currently detained in refugee camps in Syria and Iraq. Some of them are orphans, others are detained together with their mothers. There is mounting evidence that many of the detained children are sick, malnourished, injured and traumatized. Many of the children are very young placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.

These are just a few examples of the current global situation in which children are affected by war.

We acknowledge that the issue is complex and that many legal, political and national security issues need to be addressed. However, the psychological and developmental harm that is currently being brought upon the children, are unquestionable. As psychologists we are obligated to speak up when fundamental human rights are being violated and when children are at risk. Though we wish to remain politically neutral as part of EFPA, this expert group wishes to acknowledge the likelihood of psycho-developmental harm affecting these vulnerable children should their needs not be fully considered.

Therefore, we urge the leaders of the world to take necessary actions to protect children in refugee camps and to respect and be compliant to the international humanitarian laws meant to protect civilians.

The Standing Committee would like to emphasise from our professional and ethical position as trauma psychologists' that certain actions should be taken to safeguard the children's current and future health and wellbeing.

- 1. All violations against children must end and the CRC and humanitarian international law must be respected in times of war and conflict**
- 2. Action must be taken to protect children currently living in refugee camps**
- 3. The children should be evacuated from the camps to a place of safety together with their primary caregivers. This stance is based on the following:**
 - a. Research dating back to WWII shows that children evacuated from war zones without their parents displayed more long-term reactions than those who stayed with their parents despite being exposed to warfare.
 - b. UNHCR and UNICEF guidelines following the Yugoslavia/Balkan-war recommend that children should be evacuated with their caregivers, and if separation is necessary, they should be reunited as soon as possible.
 - c. Clinical experience from working with children in war and other crisis situations, has shown the importance of maintaining and establishing safe, secure and familiar relationships and attachment bonds.
 - d. Long-term follow up requires children to maintain contact and receive support from their primary caregiver. The caregiver has a pivotal role in a child's adjustment to a new life and capacity to form new attachments, to receive treatment and become rehabilitated.
- 4. Children of ISIS-parents are children.** The case regarding the children of ISIS-parents which have European citizenships is complicated. However, the rights and needs of these children do not differ from those of other children. They need protection and rehabilitation regardless of their parents' actions. We support that the European countries repatriate the children, and stress once again that the evacuation of the children from the camps, needs to be realized together with their primary care giver (in these cases their mothers). If mothers are required to serve time in prison, health professionals and the legal system hold the necessary experience and knowledge to deal with this matter in a way that safeguard the children needs and rights. Any contact between the child and caregiver is possible to maintain in a controlled, gentle and safe manner. The Standing Committee for Crisis, Disaster and Trauma therefore recommend, that should it be decided to evacuate the children of ISIS parents they should be evacuated with their mothers to a place of safety.
- 5. Protection of the Rights of the Child.** The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child stresses that the interest of the child, their needs and wellbeing, should be the main concern in issues regarding children, and that they have a right to life, physical integrity and family life. In the year of its 30th anniversary, we owe it to the children to raise our voices on behalf of all the minors who are currently victimized and at risk due to wars and the collapse of civil society.

EFPA's Standing Committee on Crisis, Disaster and Trauma Psychology.