REPORT

STAND WITH ME

CHILDREN’S RIGHTS, WRONGED

World Vision briefing on child protection issues facing Syrian children

January 2014
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Some names in this report have been changed.

Photograph on cover: Syrian children now living in Jordan struggle to access schools in a system struggling to cope with the burden of so many children. Jon Warren/World Vision.
As the Syrian conflict nears its fourth year, the situation for children affected by the crisis is becoming unbearable. Thousands of children have been killed, and millions more have been displaced. More than 4.3 million of these children remain in Syria, while more than 1.2 million\(^1\) have fled into neighbouring countries, including Lebanon and Jordan.

Often these children are fleeing conflict only to find themselves faced with devastating instability, poverty and desperation. Many live without protection. Many work instead of attending school. Many are left vulnerable to the worst forms of abuse. For many young children, this situation is quickly becoming a new normal, one in breach of all of their most basic rights.

The statistics are shocking, but nothing illustrates the depth of the impact on children more than the stories told by them personally.

Four-year-old Saad doesn’t know that child labour is a breach of his rights. But he knows that he hurts “here and here” when he makes concrete blocks every day. Young Amjaddoesn’t see that the marriage of his 14-year-old sister as an abuse of her rights; he understands it was financial help to his family, “as we had one less child to burden”.

Governments, both within Syria and internationally, have failed to protect Syria’s children. World Vision recently spoke to more than 250 children and parents across Syria, Jordan and Lebanon about their lives and their biggest concerns, years into one of the worst humanitarian crises in history. We share their comments in these pages.

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\(^{1}\) UNICEF. January 2014. http://childrenofsyria.info/
Action to protect Syria’s children is long overdue. The international community – those with an interest in or responsibility for alleviating Syria’s conflict – must respond now before we lose an entire generation of children.

World Vision is calling for:

1. All parties to the conflict to cease hostilities and come together to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict, with support from the international community.

2. All parties to do everything within their power to respect and ensure the protection of children and their rights by immediately ceasing all violence, exploitation and abuse against children.

3. Donors to meet the US$ 1 billion call to fund education and child protection programming for children affected by the crisis, under the No Lost Generation Strategy.2

**ISRAA’S STORY**

“He was in school when the bombs hit,” the 17-year-old says. “The windows were blown out, glass everywhere and some hit my friends in the face and hands. Glass hit my face. I ran out, ran home to be with my family, my father. There were hurt people everywhere on the street. I saw bodies on the streets. I saw a lot of blood.”

2 The No Lost Generation Strategy is a joint initiative of UNICEF, UNHCR, Save the Children, World Vision and other key partners. Through the US$1 billion strategy, the organisations are focusing donor and public support on critical education and protection programmes for children.
FALLING INCOMES, RISING RISKS

As Syrian families desperately search for ways to make money, children’s lives and well-being are in constant danger. Many families’ savings have run out, leaving them struggling to find new sources of income. These include child labour, recruitment into armed groups, and exploitation such as forced marriage and prostitution. Many families told World Vision that these coping mechanisms are not seen as culturally appropriate or acceptable – but they feel that families are driven to them out of sheer desperation.

More than 100,000 children (one in ten) who have fled Syria have had to replace playing and going to school with work, often in jobs which are unregulated and unsafe.

Across Jordan and Lebanon, refugee children are working in restaurants, auto-repair shops, farms, fields or making or stacking concrete bricks. In some areas of Jordan, nearly half of Syrian families depend on a child for their primary source of income. World Vision research in Lebanon suggests that child labour is increasingly common in agriculture and service industries as families struggle with high rent and a lack of jobs for parents.

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Women whose husbands have died or are still in Syria see no choice but to ask their children to work. “My son is 15,” says Yara. “He left school to work. He makes two Jordanian dinar (US$2.80) per day selling sweets. But I have a 12-year-old too, and he will have to work soon also because I don’t have enough money to feed them.”

Children are being asked to work for long hours at very low pay. Families tell World Vision that they ask their children to work because they are less likely to be checked for licences by employers and authorities. They say that children often find it easier to get work than their parents because they can be paid less by their employers.

**OUJELAN’S STORY**

At 13 years old, Oujelan works a 12-hour day. His jeans and sturdy boots are caked in mud, his hands hardened and dirty. They’re the hands of man, yet they clutch a stack of brightly coloured certificates, covered with stars and teenage mutant ninja turtles. Red pen marks exclaim “Excellent!” and “Number one in the class!” They are his certificates from his school in Syria, before the war.

“Every week I look at these and they remind me of my school, of my friends and how I played at school,” he says.

The last one is dated more than two years ago—before his family had to flee Syria and the violence. Oujelan used to dream of becoming an Arabic teacher. Now he has little time for dreams. He falls asleep shortly after coming home from his job picking grapes.

“I’m very tired from working. I’m always on my feet,” he says.
SUBJECTED TO EXPLOITATION

Children are not only having to work to provide financially for their families. Many are being forced into forms of exploitation, ranging from being used to illegally transport goods to being trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation or put on the frontlines of conflict. The reasons behind children falling into these activities vary, but in all of these circumstances, there is little recourse for children as justice institutions do not have the capacity to respond.

Many children have been used to smuggle goods, such as fuel, in and out of refugee camps and across the border to and from Syria.

Children are being exposed to sexual and gender-based exploitation. Early marriage may be increasing among Syrian children in Jordan, with the preliminary results of surveys showing an increase from 15 per cent in 2011 to 18 per cent in 2012. Families in Lebanon suggest that early marriage may be becoming more common because their desire to protect daughters drives them to believe that they will be safer in marriage than in the poor families they came from. As Amjad reflected on his 14-year-old sister’s marriage last year: “That helped our family, as we had one less child to burden.”

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7 UNICEF Early Marriage Study (preliminary findings). 2013.
For particularly vulnerable children, for example those separated from their families or those with vastly depleted family support structures, the forms of exploitation can be devastating. Vulnerable children are at risk of being forced into prostitution or recruitment into armed groups in Syria to fight or work, even from across borders.\(^8\) Such children can be manipulated with a sense of pride to protect their communities, which can lead to exploitation by armed groups.\(^9\)

These kinds of risks are complicated, and each requires a special response if children are to be protected.

**NO EDUCATION, NO PROTECTION**

Education is key to protecting Syrian children and helping them recover. School helps keep children off the streets and away from risky work activities or crime. It combats isolation and encourages a sense of normality. Importantly, it safeguards children’s futures. It is Syria’s children who will be tasked with moving their nation forward, toward peace and stability.

Yet a whole generation of children is missing out on education. In Syria 7.9 million people have fallen into poverty since the onset of the crisis.\(^10\) The economic recession linked to the conflict has triggered massive increases in the prices of food and fuel. Education priorities are pushed further and further down the line of family necessities.

The education crisis for Syrian children has now reached a critical point, with many children having been out of school for nearly three years. The more time children spend out of school, the less likely they are to ever return. This is not about trying to fill short-term gaps. Urgent action is required to ensure that thousands of Syrian children don’t lose out on a future.

Fathers in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria say money is one of the main factors affecting education for their children. In Lebanon, Hani says, “I wasn’t able to send my children [to school]. At first I wasn’t obliged to pay

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\(^{9}\) Ibid.

for the admission, but now I can’t pay that, so they don’t go”. Lamia, a mother in the same area, says, “If you have more than one child, which we all do, then the fees are too much.”

Inside Syria, the alarmingly frequent attacks on teachers and schools further undermine children’s education. Many families are being prevented from accessing sufficient support to protect and educate their children.11 As insecurity grows, the basic physical and human resources needed to educate Syria’s children are rapidly diminishing.

**OBIDA’S STORY**

“They shot my teacher.

“When we were leaving Syria, there was so much bombing all around. My school was bombed. A lot of my friends died.”

No matter what the question, 10-year-old Obida’s answers always seem to come back to conflict and school. He describes the tanks, he talks about the bombs and how his uncle was killed in the conflict – the same uncle who used to help Obida with his school lessons.

“I am not comfortable. I am not happy here,” he says.

It has been more than two years since Obida was in formal school. In Syria his school was destroyed. Currently, he is still not enrolled in public school. His parents can’t pay for the transportation.

So Obida attends a remedial class several times a week. Because he has missed so much time, he sits awkwardly in the same classroom as his little brother, looking clearly much older and bigger than the other children. He struggles to do the basic alphabet and numbers lessons designed for 7- and 8-year-olds.

His family says he was once first in his class. Even having missed so much school, his intelligence is immediately clear when he speaks. His teachers in the remedial school saw that promise and now tutor him five days a week.

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WHAT CHILDREN NEED

Children are the largest and most vulnerable group affected by the Syria crisis. Yet their needs are often unmet – and continue to be hidden among the many competing priorities. A generation of children is at risk of being lost. Lost to displacement, lost to poverty, lost to the worst forms of child labour and lost to other forms of exploitation. Without educated and safe children, it will take much longer and be much harder for Syria to recover.

A lasting end to the conflict

The most effective way to prevent Syria’s children from becoming a Lost Generation is for parties to the conflict, supported by their international allies, to rapidly reach a politically negotiated settlement. All parties need to agree to join the talks in Geneva in good faith to reach a settlement, end hostilities and create a plan towards peace.

World Vision recommends that:

• The UN Secretary-General and the UN/Arab League (LAS) Special Envoy to Syria, with the support of the international community – particularly the United States and Russia – continue to work with all parties to the conflict to convene and attend the Geneva II peace conference.

• All parties to the conflict commit to immediate measures such as negotiated cessation of hostilities to allow humanitarian aid to reach children and their families, including accountability measures where a ceasefire is not upheld.

• The UN Secretary-General and the UN/LAS Special Envoy map out a framework that includes the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements at national, provincial and local levels, as part of a sustained push for peace beyond the Geneva II peace conference.

• The protection of children be raised as an important point during negotiations, as per the recommendations of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. Concessions should be sought from all parties to negotiations in order to protect children.
Protection for children now

More must be done to end the targeting of children. Parties to the conflict bear the primary responsibility for ending policies and practices violating child rights. States and others with influence over parties to the conflict also bear responsibility, and should leverage their influence to ensure that children are protected.

World Vision recommends that:

• All parties to the conflict respect and ensure the protection of children and uphold children’s rights by immediately ceasing all violence, exploitation and abuse against children.

• States with influence over parties to the conflict review and remove support for parties to the conflict that commit violence, exploitation or abuse against children, including the recruitment and use of children in their military campaigns.

Funding for child-focused programming

More than 5.5 million children are in need of immediate assistance in Syria and the region. As the crisis wears on, millions more children in host communities are vulnerable and in need of assistance to ensure that their development is not derailed by the crisis. The future of an entire generation is at risk, and donors need to prioritise funding that targets the needs of children.

World Vision recommends that:

• All donors and international bodies make commitments first and foremost to projects that directly address child protection and promote child-focused humanitarian assistance. In line with the No Lost Generation Strategy, World Vision is calling for US$1 billion in priority funding for education, child protection and psychosocial support for children affected by the crisis.

• All donors and international bodies ensure that the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action are integrated into every project selected for funding.
World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision is dedicated to working with the world’s most vulnerable people. World Vision serves all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.