



from EVIDENCE to ACTION

DISCUSSION BRIEF ON A RESEARCH PROJECT
IN JORDAN AND THE GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE

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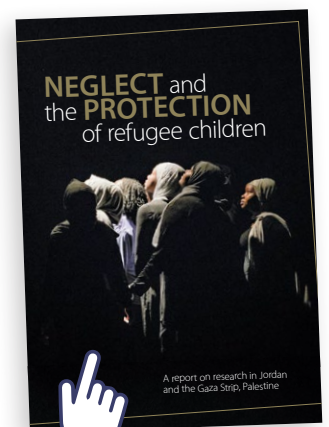
CHILD NEGLECT is widely understood as the failure of families to meet children’s basic needs and protect them from harm. This view blames caregivers while ignoring the wider circumstances in which refugee families find themselves. How can we develop a deeper understanding about neglect that considers the role of the humanitarian system in supporting or undermining caregivers?

Research summary

In settings that are characterised by displacement and armed conflict, child neglect is unfortunately commonplace, but little is known about the dynamics and drivers of child neglect in such contexts. To address this gap, this discussion brief reports on study findings from our June 2022 [report](#), titled ‘*Neglect and the Protection of Refugee Children: A Report on Research in Jordan and the Gaza Strip, Palestine.*’ The brief provides a roadmap for further

discussion with stakeholders on ways in which the humanitarian community can reduce the principal drivers of child neglect and mitigate their effect.

Through consultations with more than 200 refugee children, parents and child protection experts in Jordan and Gaza, we find that child neglect can most accurately be attributed to failures of the humanitarian system, rather than to individual caregiver shortcomings or negligence.



In Gaza, for example, the drivers of neglect included poverty caused by the Israeli blockade as well as the psychological and physical risks associated with military and militia violence.

In Jordan, neglect happened through discriminatory policies: non-Syrian refugee caregivers are excluded from the formal labour market, which drives families into poverty, and many refugees are unable to access social services.

Humanitarian actors play an important role in providing support, but their response is often seen as less effective than it could be. In Jordan, refugees said they do not understand how the humanitarian system works; moreover, it is hard for them to appeal for access to services when they do not know what they are entitled to. Those we spoke with in Gaza said they were mostly satisfied with the health and education services provided by UNRWA, especially when compared to government-run services. But in both settings, participants felt that humanitarian efforts needed to offer more substantive, clear, reliable and holistic forms of support.

Why this research matters

The research offers a unique perspective. Rather than taking humanitarian programming as the central focus, we prioritised the perspectives

and experiences of caregivers and children from different refugee communities, including Palestinian, Iraqi, Sudanese, Somali, and Syrian. The study was conducted by refugee peers within these communities to ensure that the research tools and questions felt safe and relevant to participants. This approach and the key findings challenge us to consider how humanitarian action can better investigate and respond to the causes of child neglect by listening to the voices of those on the ground.

Over the next months, we plan to use this Discussion Brief as a tool for engaging with child protection stakeholders in Gaza and Jordan on how best to apply the study findings and lessons learned to improve the protection of children in each setting.

Methodology

In-person field research took place between August 2021 and March 2022 in two humanitarian settings: in refugee communities in Jordan and the Gaza Strip, Palestine. Data gathering included 170 individual interviews plus focus groups and arts-based workshops. The research team also undertook 20 interviews with humanitarian professionals.

TABLE 1. Research methods and number of participants

Research methods	Jordan	Gaza	Total
Semi-structured interviews with children (age 12-18)	23	10	33
Semi-structured interviews with caregivers	47	20	67
Theatre workshops and focus groups with children (age 12-18)	30		30
Participatory workshops	35		35
Creative writing and arts (age 11-18)		60	60
Key informant interviews: humanitarian professionals (national, global)			20

To understand how neglect happens, the study focused on gaining a better understanding of children's daily lives and lived experiences. This meant seeking to understand their social spaces, including their neighborhoods, health clinics, schools, home environment, the places they went to play and socialise, and even the virtual worlds that some occupied to play games and engage on social media. Using the various research methods, we looked at the opportunities and risks these spaces present and examined the actions taken by caregivers, school staff, community members, and children themselves to provide children with a safe and protected childhood.

The research was carried out in collaboration with four local NGOs.¹ Together, the NGOs in Jordan recruited researchers and workshop facilitators from the refugee populations being studied. In Gaza, the local partner recruited researchers from among the Palestinians registered as refugees. Following training by the core research team, these selected 'peer researchers' conducted research within their own communities. The peer researchers included five children aged 15 to 17 years of age. One-third of the interviewees were young people aged 14-18 years old.

Key Findings

Child neglect can be best understood as the result of systemic institutional failings rather than caregiver shortcomings. We did not encounter caregivers who had the resources to protect children but opted not to. Rather, we found that caregivers faced immense obstacles to providing safety and care that were often insurmountable. For example, parents in Gaza struggled to meet their children's basic needs, including for protection, due to the Israeli blockade, while parents in Jordan struggled to feed and provide for their children because

they were not allowed to work legally. Faced with these challenges, caregivers did not fail to seek support and resources: they frequently sought out support from their local networks and communities, local authorities, or by appealing to humanitarian actors. However, they struggled to understand the process of getting support and resources. Often caregivers said that it is hard to find out where they can get support, what support is available, and how to access it. Often, support was complicated to access or simply unavailable. The support they did get was often piecemeal, minimal and inadequate.



No one cares about the children from the government...the government is supposed to provide psychological support for children, entertainment, open parks, and playing areas, but the government does nothing.

—Palestinian father, Gaza, Palestine

Participants see a 'protected' childhood as one that is safe and stable, with a reasonable standard of living in relation to the communities in which they live. Refugee children and caregivers considered the protection of children to primarily be the responsibility of parents. They also regarded the family as the first line of protection against threats to children's survival and wellbeing. Parents worked to secure the means to address their children's basic needs, such as food, schooling, health and physical safety, supporting leisure activities when possible. They strived to secure a future of stability and a reasonable standard of living. Gaza Strip residents also had to contend with a unique set of political, economic and social conditions. Any efforts these caregivers made to keep children safe was overshadowed by the effects of the ongoing Israeli blockade and recurrent warfare.

¹ The NGOs were Sawiyan, Seenaryo and Collateral Repair Project in Jordan, and Tamer Institute for Community Education in Gaza.

Child neglect takes place along four different axes²:



PHYSICAL NEGLECT is the failure to meet children's basic needs and keep them safe from violence. Caregivers uniformly expressed concern over children's exposure to interpersonal violence. This took several forms, including bullying, discrimination, exclusion, and direct physical violence, including domestic violence. In Gaza, the situation is aggravated by the stress of the blockade, internal political conflict, and frequent Israeli bombardments.



My son's two teeth are half broken by some random kids who threw an object at him. He doesn't know them except one...His back was torn with the metal cover of the tuna can. He has many scars on his back, but he sees none of them. He only sees his half-broken teeth. And the other son can't forget about his eye.

—Somali mother, Amman, Jordan



MEDICAL NEGLECT is the failure to seek care for a serious physical or mental health problem. In Jordan, participants' access to medical services was often hindered by bureaucracy, overcrowding, and refugees' lack of capacity to pay for their own treatment or transport to reach health centres. These difficulties were compounded by a complex set of protocols of different health policies for each refugee group. In Gaza, healthcare has been severely affected by the blockade, whilst infrastructure has been damaged by bombardments. Despite this, participants spoke in positive terms about their experiences getting health care from UNRWA clinics, particularly maternity services, noting that treatment is free. However, interviewees also noted that dental treatment and tertiary care had to be accessed outside the UNRWA system and was often unaffordable.



EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT is the failure to secure a child's education. The lack of access to education was one of participants' primary concerns. There were several reasons for a child's non-participation in school. For many non-Syrian refugees in Jordan, lack of documentation delayed or prevented children's enrolment. For Somali and Sudanese children particularly, school was experienced as a place where bullying and violence went unchecked. For some, the routine physical harm and humiliation led to drop out. Many caregivers couldn't afford the costs associated with schooling, such as registration, schoolbooks, transportation, and uniforms. Caregivers felt that an inadequate education risks their children's future. In Gaza, UNRWA assures primary education (until grade 9). In Jordan access is contingent on documented refugee status and entails significant expenditure, particularly for non-Syrian refugees. In both contexts physical violence and verbal bullying are common.



If your children cannot get education and you left your home country because of war and seek refuge in this country and still you can't get education and development for your children, this is a big problem for their future. I don't think there is a problem bigger than this.

—Somali mother, Amman, Jordan



SUPERVISORY NEGLECT is the failure to provide a safe environment with appropriate adult supervision for children. Many participants felt overwhelmed and unable to provide adequate supervision to their children due to their need to work and a lack of extended family (Jordan). Moreover, children across all participant communities did not enjoy a safe environment. In Gaza, this was most obvious in the military violence and its effects on the physical environment children play in. In Jordan, refugee children live in an environment marked by racism and prejudice against refugees. Physical and verbal abuse were common.

² These areas of neglect are based on The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2018). [Child Neglect in Humanitarian Settings: Literature review and recommendations for strengthening prevention and response](#). Geneva: The Alliance.



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Caregivers try to mitigate these conditions by assuming different survival strategies and ways of coping. Some of these included:

TAKING ON DEBT: When research participants could not obtain help from within their networks, they employed different strategies to get funds. Most families we spoke with said they took on debt. In Jordan, they borrowed from local shopkeepers. In such a situation, delayed rental payments were common, which led to participants frequently moving houses and neighbourhoods, fragmenting solidarity networks. In Gaza, participants relied first on support from their extended families. However, given the Gaza Strip's endemic poverty, most participants reported being heavily indebted.

SHIELDING: Some caregivers reported shielding their children from potential harm and threats of violence. In Jordan, this meant minimising interactions with the host community and encouraging children to build friendships within their own national group. However, these strategies isolated children, limiting their activities. In Gaza, caregivers sought to shield children from military violence by keeping them close to home.



I was staying at home for more than three years. I didn't manage to cover even rental payments. I owe rent on three homes, more than 800 or 900 dinars. Each time the owner evicted us, I found a new house. Now I live in a house where I owe four months' rent. The money that I receive from UNHCR goes to debts.

—Sudanese father, Amman, Jordan

TURNING TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES: It is not common for refugees in Jordan to pursue cases of interpersonal violence through the police and wider justice system. The different refugee communities in Jordan listed several reasons for not seeking redress through national authorities, including previous experience or the general impression that the police and other institutions would always side with Jordanian citizens against refugees. Furthermore, several caregivers explained their fear that involving authorities could put them at risk of greater harm. Whenever possible, local mediation was chosen instead of recourse to the police and the criminal justice system. This might entail direct dialogue between families or through the assistance of others in the community who could defuse a tense situation or help find a settlement that all parties might accept. Such an approach was not only discussed by refugee community members in Jordan but was also a strategy employed by caregivers in Gaza.



I called the police, and they came to arrest the adult who had beaten my son. His family came after me in a car to the jail and asked me to give up on this case and not to report. I didn't agree to give up...because it happened more than once...But this time, it was different as he hit my son in front of me, and I saw everything. He is bigger and older than my son as he is in his twenties...He threatened me that he will hire some people to come after me and beat and kill me...He said that 'I am a Jordanian, and I am the son of this land.' That made me not report the incident.

—Somali mother, Amman, Jordan

SEEKING SUPPORT FROM OTHERS: Across all communities, refugee participants relied on their social networks for immediate support. Extended family played a greater role in Gaza than in Jordan, where nuclear families were the norm and extended family was largely absent in the refugee communities. However, most people only knew others who were in similar social and economic circumstances. They did not have direct ties to people in positions of power who might be able to improve their situation. Participants in both locations reported difficulties in approaching local and international organisations. Though Palestinians in the Gaza Strip offered a largely positive assessment of UNRWA's support, they often felt it was inadequate in helping them meet children's basic needs. Conversely, participants in Jordan were often confused by UNHCR and its relationship with other organisations that were supposed to support refugees.



To be honest, my parents are the ones who help. Thank God for having them. A woman without her parents can't bear life. For example, when I can't provide something, they get it for me. When I can't get diapers for my child, they buy it for me. My husband does provide, of course, but my parents offer great help.

—Palestinian mother, Gaza, Palestine

CHILDREN TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THEIR OWN PROTECTION. In both locations, children reported engaging in self-protection strategies. These primarily entailed seeking the support of peers, whether by banding together for security when moving in unsafe spaces or by facing a playground bully together. Children understood their caregivers' limitations and stress related to being unable to meet their children's needs. Children tried to shield parents from the risks and harms they experienced, seeking out social support from their peers so as to not overburden their families.



I don't go to places I don't know how to get to. I'm afraid of getting kidnapped. Abdali Mall, I know how to get to. There are some older girls with us. One of them is 22 years old. When we go, most of us go with her and we feel confident she can protect us. Even the young girls now go with us, and they see us as older girls.

—16-year-old Somali girl, Amman, Jordan

Next steps - Questions for discussion:

When children in settings of displacement and armed conflict are victims of neglect, it is easy to blame caregivers or their culture. But as this discussion brief makes clear, child neglect should primarily be seen as a product of a humanitarian system as it functions in different geographical settings for different populations. Moreover, we must consider how the humanitarian system may be neglectful when it is undermined in its child protection and wellbeing efforts by underfunding and, in some cases, lack of donor government political will. In this system, humanitarian organisations and caregivers are the two central elements, each needing the other to understand what children face and how to protect and support their well-being.

This perspective connects neglect at the local level to national and global decisions. This wider perspective is vital to preventing neglect.

Viewed in this light, consider the following questions:

1 How can Child Protection actors in humanitarian settings identify the drivers of child neglect in the communities they work with?

Is a 'neglect audit', wherein Child Protection professionals and community in each setting identify the principal drivers of neglect and how the humanitarian system contributes to neglect, a viable option?

KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN THE AUDIT:

- 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 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?
- Do humanitarian organisations fully comprehend the risks faced by children and the challenges encountered by caregivers in addressing those risks? What steps are they taking to develop their understanding of an evolving situation through engagement at community level? How are the risks children face similar or different to established Child Protection programming priorities?
- Are measures to address the risks appropriate and holistic? For example, when addressing issues such as child labour and child marriage, do humanitarian organisations take a holistic, systems strengthening approach that

(1) addresses the issues in relation to their root causes and (2) considers political and economic causes as well as those associated with social and cultural forces?

- What are NGOs and UN agencies doing to identify and address the drivers of neglect?
- Is there another way to capture this information?

2 Considering the drivers of child neglect presented in the findings, which are the ones humanitarian actors (i.e., host governments, donors, humanitarian agencies, national and international non-governmental and community-based organisations) can address? How might this be done?

- Is dividing potential actions in terms of Policy, Advocacy, or Programmes a helpful division? What could we put under each?
- Thinking beyond Child Protection, which other domains/departments/sectors should be involved in addressing the problem? (e.g., Education, Health, Social Protection, Cash, Relief and Social Services, etc.) In what way could these allies support reducing child neglect? And how is the work everyone is doing currently addressing neglect, even if it is not framed in this manner?

3 In the short term, how can humanitarian organisations (in particular UNHCR, UNICEF and UNRWA) modify their current programmes to address some of the systemic issues identified here?

- How could this be done? Could one agency and one particular programme be used as an example? (For example, from a member of the Child Protection Working Group.)



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Collateral
Repair Project