

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Save the Children

**ANYWHERE
BUT SYRIA**

Being forced to flee your home is a life-changing event that often results in negative impacts that persist long after the conflict or disaster that triggered it has ended.

To support progress towards a safe and fulfilling future for displaced children, Save the Children emphasises the importance of ensuring that displaced children experience full physical, material, legal and psychosocial safety, all of which are crucial for a child's survival and development. The aim of this research is to explore in greater detail the elements of a displaced child's experience that contribute to building their mental health and sense of belonging, also known as "psychosocial safety". This lesser-explored element of safety is vital to working towards safe and meaningful participation of children in decision-making, supporting positive mental health and wellbeing, in any attempt to meaningfully reduce the vulnerabilities a child experiences as a result of their displacement.

Between November-December 2020 Save the Children spoke about the experience of displacement to over 1,900 Syrian children aged 13-17 in Syria (in areas controlled by the Government of Syria), Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and the Netherlands; short surveys were also conducted with parents and caregivers of some participating children. Speaking to children of this age group in particular provided an insight into the views and opinions of Syrian children who are in a particularly important stage of development when it comes to psychosocial safety. Older children in their teens are forming their own identities and starting to make choices about their futures.

Through the course of this research, three main topics emerged as contributing to the experience of psychosocial safety for Syrian children growing up in displacement: access to meaningful future opportunities; a sense of connectedness; and agency in decision-making.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

When we asked Syrian children what constitutes safety for them, access to meaningful future opportunities was the most commonly mentioned factor in qualitative interviews. Having hope for a future with ability to study and to secure a job, as well as being able to live in a stable context without fear of losing one's home or facing safety threats, all appeared to have a significant impact on children's overall sense of wellbeing. Based on findings from the survey, having a sense of being able to access opportunities for self-improvement and fulfilling future aspirations correlated with general life satisfaction. At the same time, the data showed that uncertainty about the future was detrimental to their wellbeing, at times

even more so than concerns about current physical safety.

When exploring future opportunities, children expressed the importance of peace inside Syria; securing their choice of durable solution pathway (return, resettlement, integration in the context context); and continuing their education.

Wishing for the conflict and violence in Syria to end was the most commonly held wish for the future across all respondents. In qualitative interviews, children (and particularly girls) often spoke about the importance of ending violence and harassment on the streets, as well as the need for justice and rule of law. In Syria and Lebanon, they spoke about general injustice in society that leads to discrimination and inequality and mentioned the need for stronger legislation to ensure that people are treated equally.

When asked about their preferred place of residence two years into the future, the vast majority of the children saw themselves somewhere other than Syria (79%). Out of the refugee children in the neighbouring countries and the Netherlands, few foresee a return to their country of origin (14%). While the majority of the interviewees in these countries were hoping to integrate where they are (63%), approximately one-in-five refugee children (23%) also reported hoping to live in a third country.

"We cannot go back to Syria, because there is war there and [my siblings] and I are afraid. I am not hopeful. I am afraid because of the war in Syria and because of the blast here in Lebanon." - Girl, 12, Lebanon

Children in Syria were significantly less likely than those in the other countries surveyed to respond that in two years, they would want to be living inside Syria. When asked about whether the children believed they were able to live where they hoped to in the future, those inside Syria were the least confident and those in the Netherlands felt most optimistic. A pessimistic outlook was especially prevalent amongst internally displaced Syrian children, with only 42% confirming that they thought they would be able to realise their wish—significantly less than those in any other country.

Children being able to further their education or return to school was the second most reported wish for the future overall, with almost unanimous agreement that access to quality education, especially higher education, was key for them to be able to secure a life that they wanted. Interviewees also underscored nuanced barriers to education, in

addition to attendance barriers, children identified language barriers in Turkey or parental support and transferability of education in Lebanon as obstacles.

“My future is in the Netherlands; I speak better Dutch than Arabic and economically it’s better.” Boy, 15, the Netherlands

SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS

Across contexts, the need for displaced Syrian children to feel a sense of connection and belonging was clear. While the policies in countries of asylum and often the perceptions of the surrounding communities seemed often to differentiate displaced children from the resident community (also particularly strongly inside Syria) displaced children themselves clearly aspired to build an identity that is distinct from being perceived as a ‘refugee’ or ‘an internally displaced person’, and to develop positive relationships with them.

Generally, feeling close to one’s family, community, and peers had significant correlations with children’s experiences of life satisfaction. While the participants in general spoke positively about integration and assimilation, children also spoke about the challenges of accommodating their two very different cultures into their identities, in particular in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, over half the children surveyed (64%) indicated that they had experienced discrimination, especially at school. In Lebanon, experiencing discrimination in their communities due to difference in socio-economic status was mentioned by several adolescent participants in interviews.

Perhaps surprisingly, the IDPs inside Syria were the group in the study that showed the lowest sense of connection with their communities, and they were significantly more likely to report having experienced discrimination than their peers in Jordan or Lebanon, which could be an indication of torn social fabric inside the country.

AGENCY

“Before the war the country was not perfect. People could not live with each other and there were many divisions among people and groups in Syria. People should adjust better to build a peaceful society. We can advise Syrians how to build peace. Write articles in newspapers about this. Maybe not everyone can adjust or change but many will, and they can make a difference.” Girl, 13, the Netherlands

The Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for children to be recognised and respected as rights holders rather than as passive objects of protection and care, and the treaty sets out the right of children to express their views and to be heard in decision-making processes that affect their lives. All children have a need to take part in decision-making and have a voice when it comes to issues that impact their personal lives, education, their broader environment, including

through political participation and voicing their priorities and concerns around the future of Syria.

Freedom of expression was a key theme that was brought up by children in the interviews. Many children also highlighted the importance of being able to be part of decision making outside their homes and in the broader society. For example, participants in Lebanon stressed the importance of working together to effectively influence decisions. In the Netherlands in particular, many children expressed a desire to help Syrians in Syria, with many highlighting the potential to send money or contribute to peacebuilding inside Syria.

“Some girls wear hijab because they were forced by their parents; but some choose it because it’s beautiful, but when they visit other girls, who wear short sleeves, they might envy them or just feel that they don’t belong. They lose their confidence in themselves.” Girl, 15, the Netherlands

An inability to access opportunities for reasons out of their control had a significantly negative impact on children’s wellbeing, indicating that being able to determine their own path is important for children to progress towards psychosocial safety. In the context of Syria, opportunities to speak out in a protected environment are scarce and little evidence exists to confirm that young people are given opportunities to contribute to community or other decision-making mechanisms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has demonstrated that securing material, physical and legal safety is crucial, but not sufficient to achieving psychosocial wellbeing and supporting children in overcoming the detrimental impacts of displacement on their development.

- Policy makers, humanitarian practitioners and authorities inside Syria and in countries of asylum need to consider it as a unique priority in supporting durable solutions and children’s ability to feel safe. Fostering psychosocial safety is crucial to supporting Syrian children’s ability to plan for their future; develop their identities and become positive agents of change for the societies in which they reside.
- Syrian children whether inside Syria or elsewhere, do not see bright and happy futures inside Syria. Protracted conflict has led to fear and pessimism about children’s ability to build their lives in a country scarred by war and a society that is struggling to heal, with little hope of justice and accountability. Children want the opportunity to fulfil their dreams in safety, with full access to their rights. Given the right tools, children show high levels of willingness to overcome adversity and integrate into environments that allow them to develop and

grow. Their voices need to be heard. Safely engaging children and young people in processes relating to their futures and the future of their country is vital for achieving meaningful long-term outcomes.

- Inside Syria, the needs and priorities voiced by children after ten years are no longer something that traditional humanitarian response alone can deliver. They request access to quality education, jobs and stable income to build the future they want for themselves. If the international community and authorities inside Syria are serious about promoting durable solutions inside Syria, including dignified, informed, voluntary and safe returns, a significant shift in approach will be required, including promoting an urgent end to the conflict, fostering an environment of meaningful positive peace and investing in recovery.
- Currently these conditions are not in place inside Syria. In addition, refugees continue to fear persecution, forced conscription and direct threats to their personal safety if they were to return to Syria¹. Countries hosting Syrian refugees must uphold the principle of non-refoulement, end deportations to Syria and explicitly limit any coercive measures which may encourage or incentivise return. Temporary protection status should be renewed, or asylum granted to individuals who remain at risk.
- Governments and public figures should refrain from characterizing Syria - or parts of the country - as ‘safe’ as such statements are not in line with international standards, do not reflect conditions on the ground, and fail to take risks to individuals into account. For children who have spent significant proportions of their lives in displacement, particularly in Europe, the stress and lack of predictability in life related to them turning 18 and ‘ageing out’ of the protection systems needs to be given due consideration. There is a need for more transition schemes for young people turning 18, which would allow them to access education, traineeships and/or vocational training.²

ENDNOTES

- 1 See for example UNHCR (2019): Fifth Regional Survey on Refugee Return Perceptions and Intentions. March 2019. Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/68443>;
- 2 Save the Children Europe (2020): Protection Beyond Reach: State of play of refugee and migrant children’s rights in Europe. Online: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/protection-beyond-reach-state-play-refugee-and-migrant-childrens-rights-europe>