



# COVID-19 deepens threats for displaced women and children

The pandemic has aggravated many of the factors that put forcibly displaced women and children at greater risk of violence and abuse

UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency

## Displaced women and children under threat

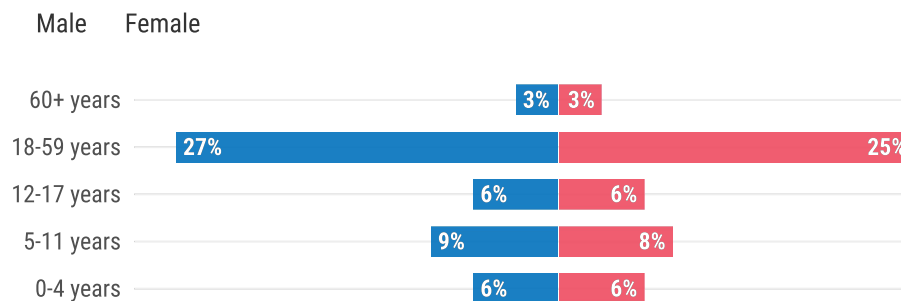
For millions of displaced people the COVID-19 crisis has made life harder in myriad ways from restricting their [access to asylum](#), to [taking away their livelihoods](#) and confining them to cramped rooms or [densely populated camps](#). For displaced women and children, the worsening socio-economic conditions, lockdowns and school closures have brought further threats.



*Displaced people in Yemen receive assistance during COVID-19 pandemic.*

Within months of the outbreak, reports suggested that violence against women and children had intensified. Containment measures were trapping women and children with their abusers and cutting them off from support systems. The heightened risk of violence was even more pronounced among displaced women and children, who make up [70 per cent of all forcibly displaced people worldwide](#).

## Demographics of forcibly displaced people in 2020

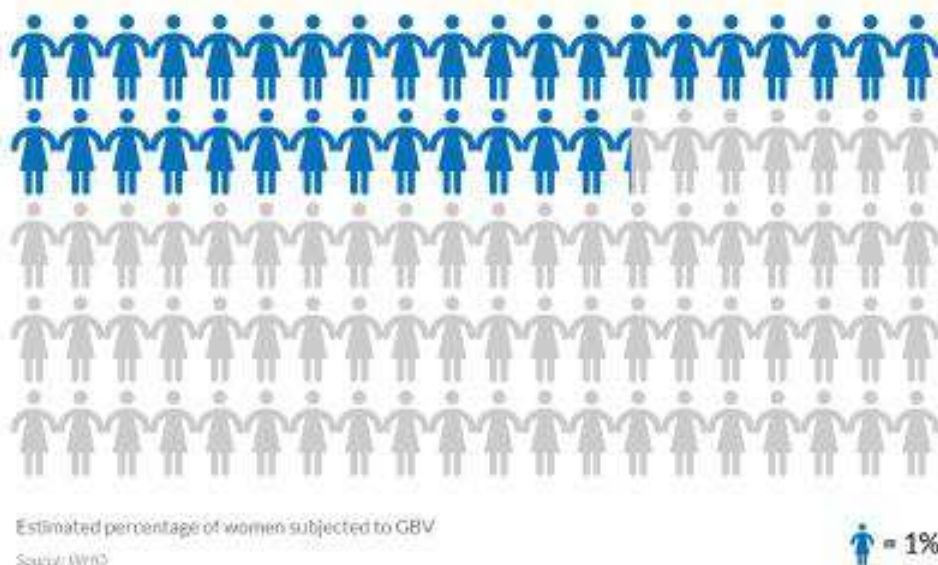


Source: Estimation of IDP demographics (IDMC); Palestine refugees under UNRWA's mandate (UNRWA); Refugees, people in a refugee-like situation, asylum-seekers and Venezuelans displaced abroad are based on the available data (UNHCR) and World Population estimates (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs). • Figures do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

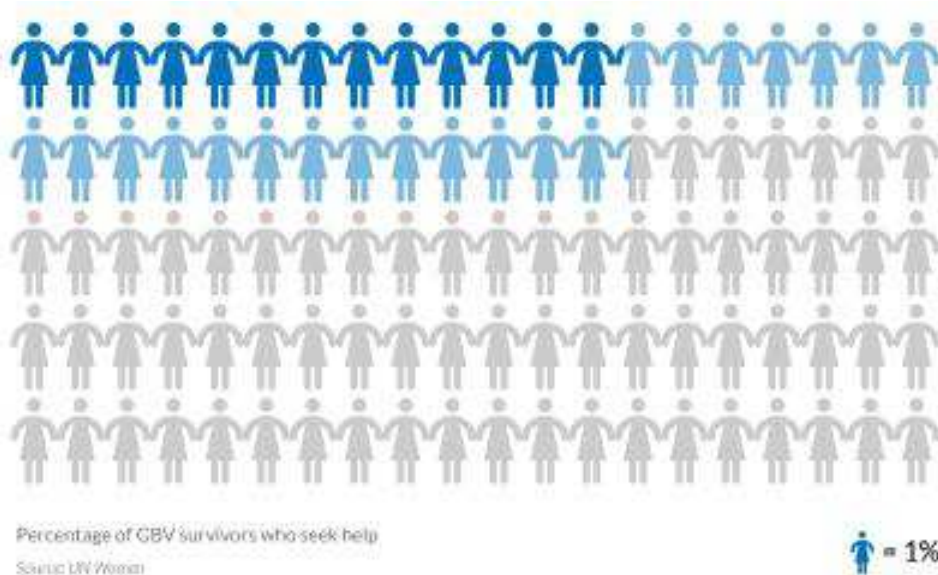
For displaced women specifically, the pandemic has taken away already precarious livelihoods and placed more demands on them at home, worsening gender inequalities.

***“We are seeing grave manifestations of gender inequality for some of the world’s most vulnerable and disadvantaged and a tragic erosion of some important and hard-won gender equality gains achieved over the past few decades” – Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees***

## COVID-19 and gender-based violence

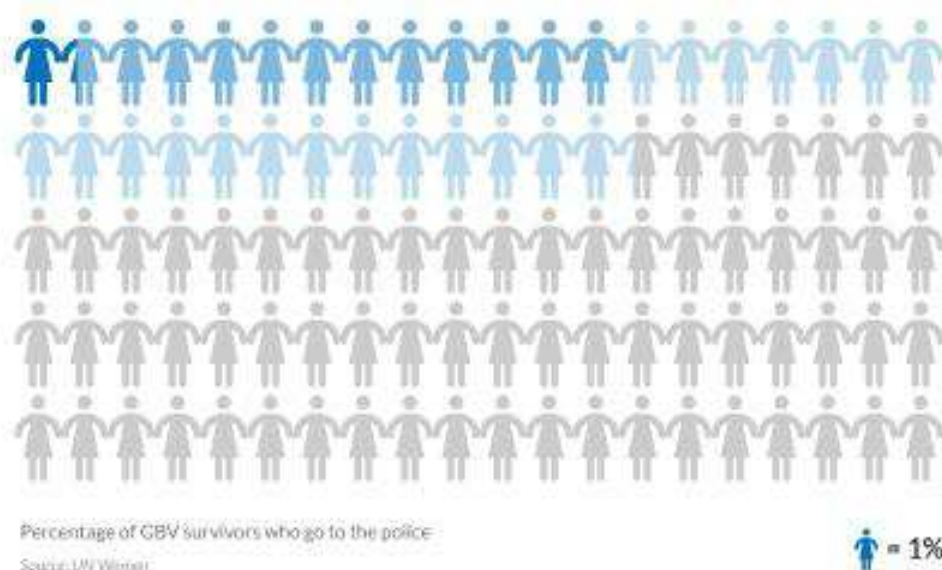


[One in every three women worldwide](#) are subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes.



[Less than 40 per cent](#) of women subjected to violence seek help of any sort, often due to fear of stigma and retaliation.





[Less than 10 per cent](#) of women who do seek help go to the police.

In the early months of the pandemic, experts projected that for every three months of lockdown measures around the world, [an additional 15 million women and girls](#) would be exposed to gender-based violence (GBV) – around three times the population of New Zealand.

Refugee and internally displaced women and girls were at greater risk from GBV even before COVID-19. For example, an estimated [one in five forcibly displaced women in humanitarian crises have been subjected to sexual violence](#) – one of many forms of GBV. The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic have only intensified this risk – heightening tensions in households, while containment measures have created additional barriers to reporting abuse and seeking help.

## Heightened risks for displaced women and girls

[Increased violence against displaced women](#) has been reported in numerous countries throughout the pandemic. For example, [a survey of women in displacement and post-conflict settings](#) across Africa between May and July 2020 found that nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) described an [increase in intimate partner violence](#) in their

communities. In another survey of [refugee women in Jordan](#), 62 per cent reported feeling at risk of physical or psychological violence due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.



*Left: Internally displaced woman and survivor of gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. | Right: A Survivor of sexual violence gets support at the Riohacha safe shelter in Colombia.*

In internal displacement situations, [96 per cent](#) of [humanitarian coordination platforms](#) monitored by UNHCR reported a moderate to extreme risk of GBV at the end of 2020, with [89 per cent describing the risk as severe or extreme](#). Concerns about the high risk of GBV have continued in 2021, with other related – and

aggravating – issues such as trafficking in persons, the exchange or sale of sex as a coping mechanism and child marriage also reported at alarming rates.

## Risks, concerns and adverse coping mechanisms

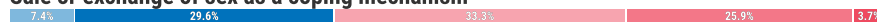
Distribution of operations by reported severity of protection risks | May 2021

1 – NONE / MINOR    2 – STRESSED    3 – MODERATE    4 – SEVERE    5 – EXTREME

### Gender-based violence



### Sale or exchange of sex as a coping mechanism



### Trafficking in persons



### Child marriage



Source: Global Protection Cluster • Figures above are based on 29 coordination platforms reporting to the Global Protection Cluster. One country may have more than one coordination platform and one coordination platform may cover more than one country.

## Girls forced to marry

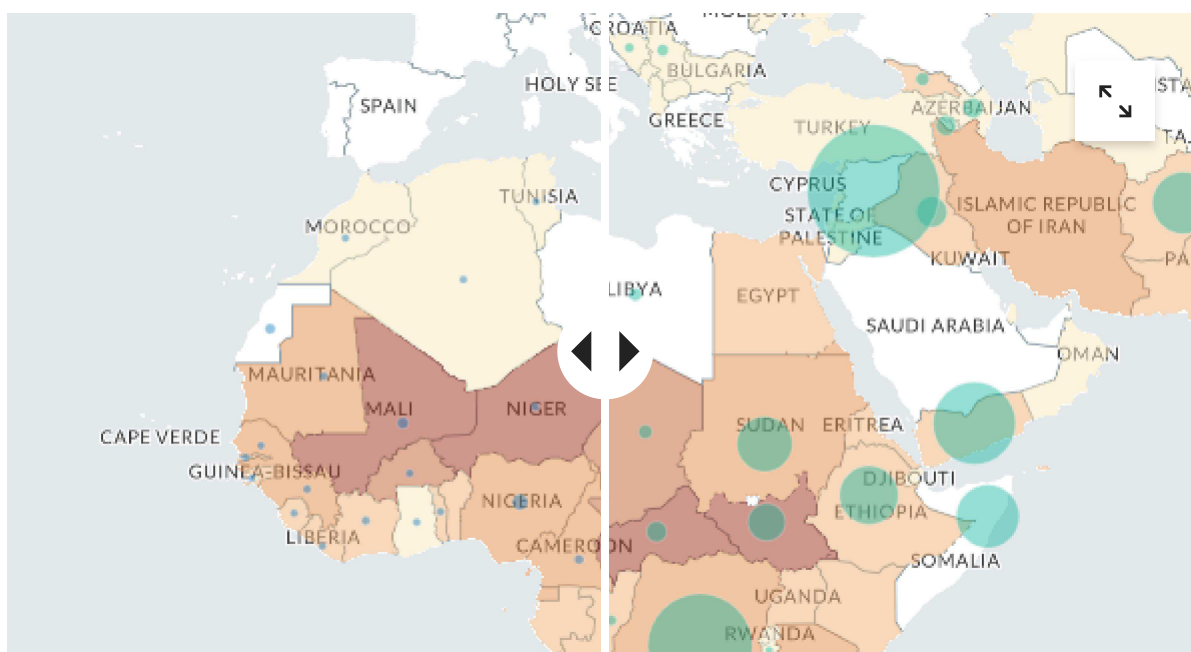
Child marriage was a concern long before the pandemic, including in countries hosting large refugee populations or experiencing high levels of conflict and displacement.

Percentage of girls aged 15-19 years who are currently married or in union

Percentage
0.5-10%
>10-20%
>20-30%
>30-40%
>40-61%

Displaced population by country of origin:

Category
Refugees
IDPs



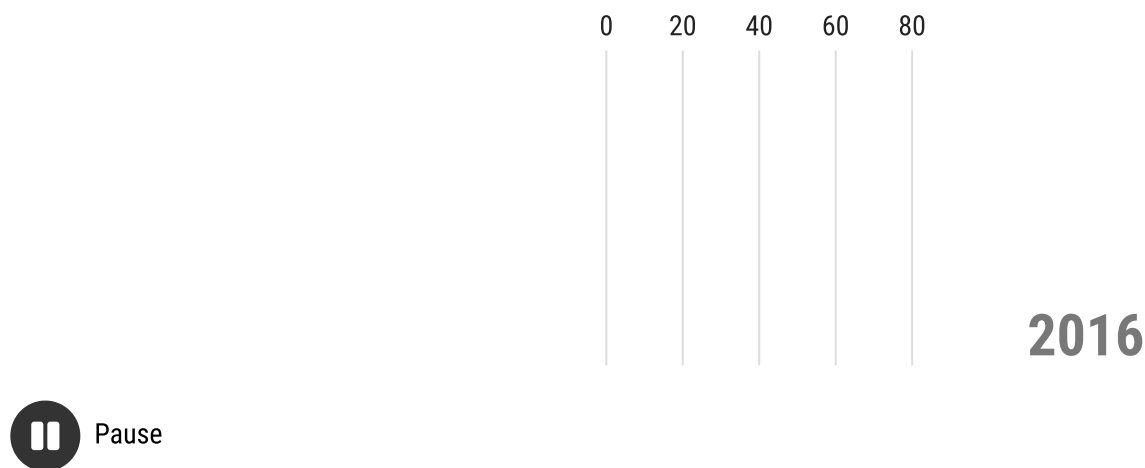
Mapbox

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Source: [UNHCR Refugee Data Finder](#) and [UNICEF Data Warehouse](#)

UNHCR's own reporting points to child marriage being among the most common risks for displaced children identified over the last five years.

### Most common child protection risks reported by UNHCR operations, 2016-2020



Source: UNHCR • Values represent the count of operations reporting each risk per year

Throughout the pandemic, UNHCR has received troubling reports that more internally displaced families, buckling under the weight of socio-economic pressures resulting from COVID-19, are resorting to forcing or pressuring their children, especially girls, into marriage.

[According to UNICEF](#), COVID-19 could put up to 10 million more girls at risk of child marriage over the next decade, severely disrupting efforts to end the practice.

## Disrupted childhoods

The higher risk of child marriage is only one of the ways in which COVID-19 has negatively affected children. While the pandemic response has mainly focused on adults, older persons, and those with pre-existing health conditions, the many [secondary impacts of the COVID-19 crisis](#) are putting children – particularly displaced children – at risk of long-term damage to their future prospects.



## Evolution of number of country reporting school closures caused by COVID-19

Feb-20      May-20      Aug-20      Nov-20      Feb-21      May-21

● Fully open 207

● Academic break COVID-19 1

Source: UNESCO

### School closures

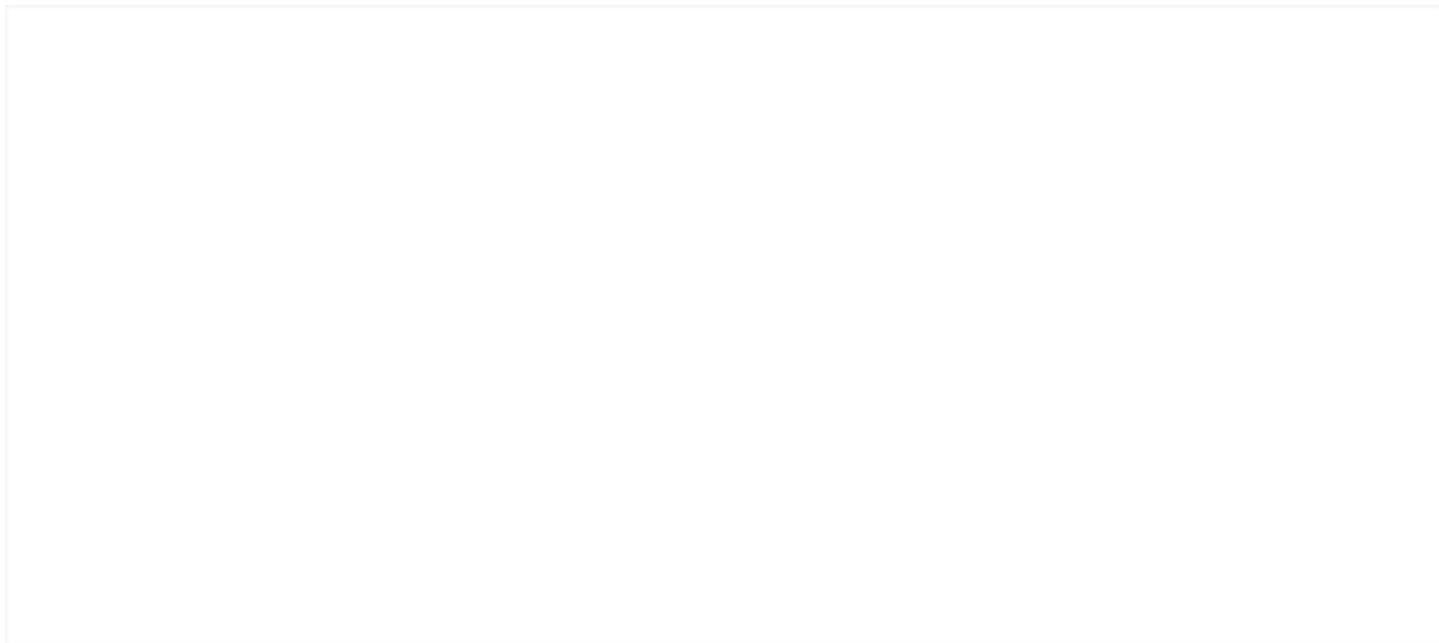
In 2020, [1.58 billion children and youth](#) from pre-primary to higher education were affected by COVID-related school closures. While children everywhere have struggled, forcibly displaced children have been particularly disadvantaged.



For example, before the pandemic, refugee children were already twice as likely to be out of school as non-refugee children, with refugee girls even less likely to be enrolled in secondary education than boys ([27 per cent compared to 36 per cent](#)).

[Data modelling done by the Malala Fund](#) at the beginning of the pandemic suggested that up to 50 per cent of refugee girls in secondary education might not return when classrooms reopen.

*Photo: A 10-year-old Nicaraguan asylum-seeker does her homework online, as schools in Guatemala remain closed.*



## Family separation

Movement restrictions, lockdowns and border closures limited the possibilities for refugee parents and children to reunite with each other in countries of asylum in 2020. Although many countries have since eased restrictions, the risk of separation remains. In fact, separation from parents was identified by UNHCR operations in 2020 as the biggest risk to the protection of children globally.



## Unaccompanied or separated children

In 2020, [some 21,000 unaccompanied or separated children \(UASC\) lodged new asylum applications](#), accounting for 2 per cent of all claims globally. Considering that asylum applications overall dropped by one million in 2020 due to COVID-19, this figure is disproportionately high.

*Photo: Unaccompanied children relocated from Greece to France.*

## Violence against children

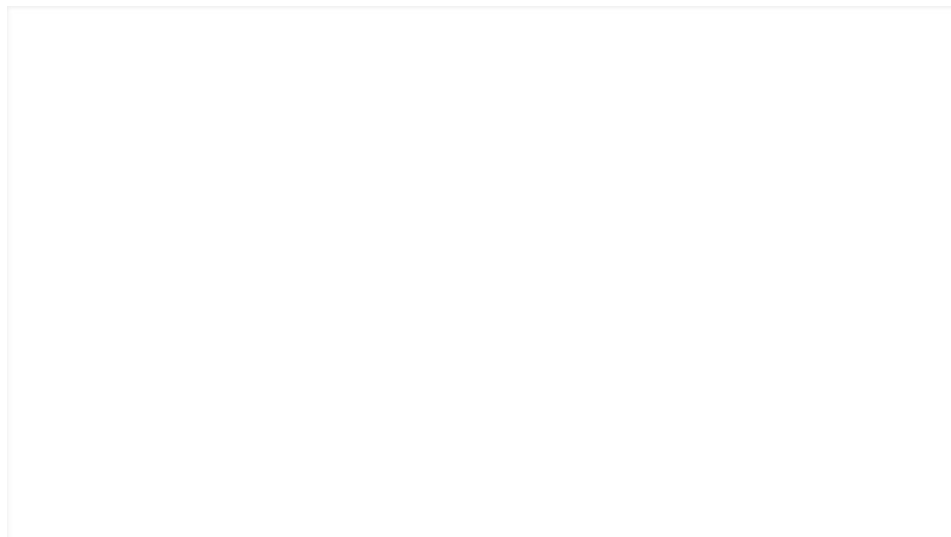
Experience from past disease outbreaks and pandemics tells us that violence against children increases during times of crisis. While difficult to predict, [World Vision International](#) estimates that confinement, increased poverty, and economic hardships related to COVID-19 could increase violence against children by between 20 and 32 per cent.

## PROJECTED NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE DUE TO COVID-19

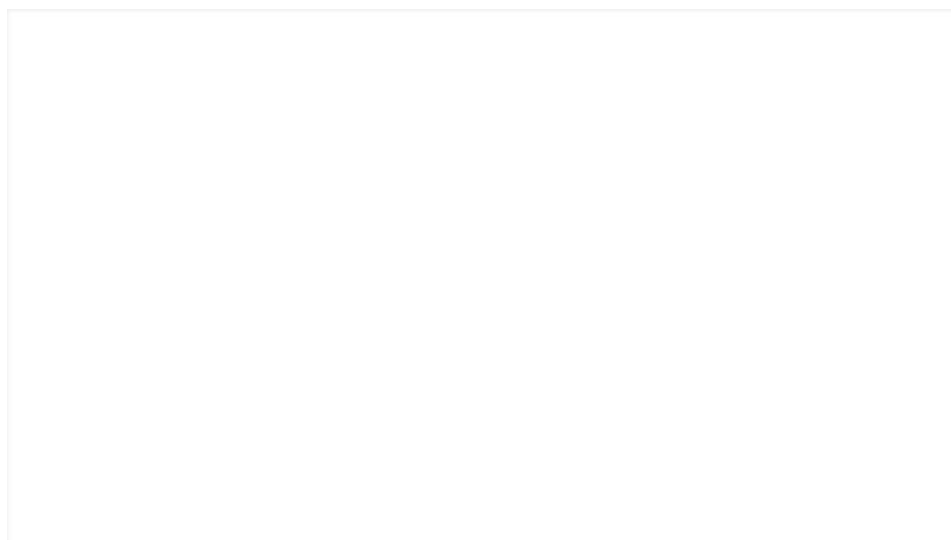


Source: [World Vision International](#)

The number of UNHCR operations reporting the risk of violence, harassment or abuse of displaced children increased by 10 per cent in 2020, compared to the previous year. In particular, the financial and psychological pressures on families caused by the pandemic have driven an increase in violence against displaced children by caregivers.



In internal displacement situations, [89 per cent](#) of [humanitarian coordination platforms](#) monitored by UNHCR reported a moderate to extreme risk of violence against children at the end of 2020. As of May 2021, 83 per cent continued to report high levels of risk, including in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Sudan and Syria.



## Women and children with disabilities

Around [1 out of 5 women and 1 in 10 children](#) have a disability. Several million women and children with disabilities are thought to be displaced but often [remain invisible within communities](#), increasing their vulnerability and risk of exclusion from vital services and programmes.



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls with disabilities were already exposed to higher rates of GBV. In fact, they were subjected to violence from partners and family members [at three times the rate](#) of other women. Meanwhile, children with disabilities [are among the world's most vulnerable](#), marginalized and stigmatized populations, with COVID-19 expected to further expose them to the risk of abuse and violence.



## Protecting children and supporting GBV survivors

[Eighty-five per cent](#) of the world's refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad are hosted in developing countries, many of which also struggle with conflict, disasters and internal displacement, and where donor contributions for programmes to [protect children](#) and support [GBV survivors](#) fall far short of what is needed.



*Left: A refugee family from El Salvador play with toys during a home visit in Guatemala. | Right: GBV training at a settlement for internally displaced people in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique.*

Humanitarian aid is a lifeline for forcibly displaced people, yet the cumulative and multi-faceted impact of COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented protection and funding crisis for refugees, internally displaced people and stateless people.

Despite the challenges associated with the COVID-19 crisis and funding shortfalls, UNHCR has continued to provide life-saving services worldwide. Some services for GBV survivors and children at risk have had to be adapted so assistance can be provided remotely.



UNHCR is strengthening the capacity of the local child protection system to identify cases of family separation during the pandemic, provide the needed response and refer cases that need additiona...



Together with IOM and UNICEF, UNHCR developed child-friendly information materials on COVID-19 and supported recreational activities for children during the lockdown. UNHCR also...



## Ethiopia

UNHCR continued monitoring vulnerable children by maintaining communication with refugee volunteers and increasing their phone credits. Funds were also reallocated for child protection...



## Kenya

In Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, UNHCR's GBV team added a WhatsApp account to their hotline number so survivors or persons at-risk of GBV could message privately with a social worker. They...



## Serbia

UNHCR has trained a group of young refugees and asylum-seekers who arrived in the country as unaccompanied children to teach others in the same situation about how to protect themselves...



## Lebanon

While urgent and high-risk incidents of GBV continued to receive in-person support and access to services, UNHCR also provided emergency cash assistance, remote individual GBV case...



## Jordan

UNHCR and partners in Jordan have strengthened access to remote assistance during the COVID-19 crisis. A project enabling the reception of text, audio messages and calls, made it easier for out...



## Pakistan

In Pakistan, UNHCR has collaborated with female volunteers, community mobilisers and gender support groups to enhance outreach and communication on COVID-19 preventive measures,...



## Bangladesh

In places where displaced women lack mobile phones to call hotlines, such as in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district, refugee volunteers are going door-to-door in Rohingya refugee camps sharing...

## Everyone has a role

Over a year into the COVID-19 crisis, we are only beginning to understand the full extent of its impacts, particularly on the most vulnerable people in our societies. For displaced women and



children, those impacts will stretch well into the future. We need to act now to mitigate them.

Despite the many challenges they face, refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people have stepped up to help with the response to the pandemic. If we all work together, we can help ensure that those forced to flee are not only less vulnerable to the virus itself, but also to its other harmful effects.

#### HELP UNHCR'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

## In case you've missed it...

This story is part of UNHCR's efforts to share information and raise awareness about the impact of COVID-19 on forcibly displaced populations. You can catch up on previous stories and reports here.

- Check out our first story, "[COVID-19 and refugees](#)", to find out more about the impact of coronavirus on refugee issues such as asylum and resettlement.
- Check out our second story "[Space, shelter and scarce resources](#)" to see how access to healthcare, shelter, water and sanitation has affected displaced populations' ability to cope with COVID-19.
- Check out our third story "[Livelihoods, food and futures](#)" to read about the impact of COVID-19 on livelihood opportunities for displaced people, as well as access to education, food and social protection.
- Access [UNHCR's COVID-19 data portal](#) and the UNHCR Dashboard "[COVID-19 Temporary Measures and Impact on Protection](#)".
- Read UNHCR's briefs on "[Protecting forcibly displaced women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)", "[Protecting forcibly](#)



[displaced children during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and "[The Impact of COVID-19 on Stateless Populations: Policy Recommendations and Good Practices](#)".

- See also: [Gender-based violence on the rise during lockdowns](#)

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

**For questions/comments**

[Storymap creation team](#)