

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The rights of children with disabilities during armed conflict

EDITOR—The conflict in Ukraine has sparked massive population displacement. Since February 24th 2022, more than a 2 million children have fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries (<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/two-million-refugee-children-flee-war-ukraine-search-safety-across-borders>), with the number of refugees growing every day. Humanitarian actions are urgently needed to safeguard these children's rights to safety, health, education, psychosocial support, and recreation.

Children with disabilities are more likely than other children to experience violence and this vulnerability is heightened in humanitarian crises.¹ During armed conflict, the lives of children with disabilities are especially affected as health care and social service infrastructure deteriorates, as well as access to education and recreation. Furthermore, armed conflict has a major negative effect on the mental health of children and adolescents, both with and without disabilities.² Overall, war and violence impact children's development, due to restricted access to care, empathy, and attention from adults who love them, as parents and caregivers themselves experience constant preoccupation about their safety.³ Hence, emotional unavailability of depressed or distracted parents leads to significant and frequent disruption in children's attachments.

During armed conflict, parents and caregivers of children with disabilities endure more unfavourable economic conditions, including a rising cost of living and disrupted transport which further reduces access to services. Keeping families together during armed conflict or forced migration protects children with and without disabilities.⁴

Currently, children with disabilities and their mothers in the Ukraine are fleeing the country and becoming refugees, mainly in Poland. They are on the move without appropriate mobility devices, with some parents forced to carry those children with severe physical disabilities. The journey is dangerous as there are no safe corridors for people with disabilities. They are often travelling with only a small bag, no food, no clothes, and no medication. Rehabilitation centers in Poland are collaborating with Ukrainian centers to organize the evacuation of children with disabilities. Although these centers are working non-stop, the lack of organization during the evacuation is draining human and financial resources. At the Ukrainian-Polish border, for example, children with disabilities are sent to the Step by Step Association (www.spdn.pl) in Zamość, where they stay for 2 or 3 days. When

possible, they are then relocated to accessible accommodations in bigger cities in Poland. The Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability (www.psoni.org.pl) has organized a helpline which is answered by volunteers with no special humanitarian relief training. Refugee families with members with disabilities are calling this line continuously asking for assistance. These associations are quickly running out of accommodation, food, human resources, and money to support the steady growing number of families arriving every day. The leaders of these associations stated that they urgently need proper coordination to organize the support and accommodation of refugees with disabilities. Relying on volunteers and associations that already face financial challenges is not a realistic expectation. To avoid these health and social inequalities and discrimination, the global community needs to work on social cohesion before and during global humanitarian crises, in order to leave no one behind.⁵

Therefore, as international researchers in childhood disability, we advocate to protect the human rights of all children in conflict zones, especially access to health care services and education. In a humanitarian context, it is paramount to identify those special needs and barriers faced by children with disabilities. It is especially important to document violations against the rights of such children, including discrimination and denial of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, it is crucial we provide accessible information about the ongoing situation to children with disabilities and their families, and adopt disability-inclusive programming to ensure these children benefit from humanitarian relief. We express our solidarity with international colleagues and children with disabilities and their families, living and working in the Ukrainian conflict zone. We call for global actions to work towards a lasting and inclusive global peace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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