

Protecting the Faith and Well-being of Displaced Children

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Protecting the Faith and Well-being of Displaced Children

In an era marked by increasing global upheaval, the world faces an unprecedented humanitarian challenge: nearly half of the world's 117 million displaced people are children under 18. This stark reality has prompted researchers to examine not just the physical and emotional toll of displacement but also its profound impact on children's spiritual and religious well-being. A groundbreaking study led by Diana Gerson and Dana Humaid Al Marzooqi at the Global Advocacy Hub for Children and Families has unveiled critical gaps in current humanitarian frameworks, particularly regarding protecting displaced children's religious identity and spiritual welfare.

Understanding the Scale of Global Displacement

The magnitude of global displacement has reached levels previously unseen in modern history. By the end of 2023, an estimated 117 million people had been displaced by conflict, violence, and natural disasters. Within this vast number, approximately 36 million were child migrants, each facing not only the immediate challenges of displacement but also significant risks to their cultural and religious identity.

Diana Gerson and Dana Humaid Al Marzooqi at the Global Advocacy Hub for Children and Families collaborated with Dr. Demetrios Argyriades of the City University of New York in a recent literature review. Their work emphasises that the displacement crisis affects children in ways that extend far beyond the obvious physical hardships. Young, displaced individuals face complex challenges that threaten their sense of identity, community belonging, and spiritual well-being. The loss of familiar religious practices and cultural touchstones can have lasting impacts on their development and psychological resilience.

The Evolution of Humanitarian Response

The researchers trace the historical development of humanitarian responses to child displacement, highlighting how organisations like UNICEF (established 1946), the International Organization for Migration (established 1951), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (established 1950) have evolved to meet the growing challenges of global migration and displacement.

It is critical to note that while these organisations have made significant strides in addressing physical needs and basic protections, the spiritual and religious aspects of child welfare have often been overlooked in humanitarian frameworks. This gap in protection becomes particularly concerning when considering the vulnerability of displaced children to various forms of exploitation, including spiritual abuse.

The Complex Nature of Spiritual Vulnerability

The research team's investigation reveals multiple interconnected factors that make displaced children particularly susceptible to spiritual abuse and religious exploitation. The loss of family and community support systems creates a vacuum that can be exploited by those seeking to impose their religious beliefs on vulnerable children. Power imbalances in humanitarian settings further complicate this dynamic, as children and their families often depend entirely on aid workers and local authorities for their basic needs.

Access to familiar religious practices and spaces becomes severely limited during displacement, creating additional challenges for maintaining religious identity. Children may face pressure to conform to new religious environments, either explicitly through forced conversion attempts or implicitly through the subtle erosion of their traditional practices and beliefs, including the risk of radicalisation.

Historical Lessons and Contemporary Challenges

The research draws powerful parallels with historical examples that demonstrate the importance of protecting religious identity and the devastating consequences of failing to do so. The researchers examine the contrasting approaches during World War II, highlighting the work of Père Bruno, who saved 400 Jewish children while actively preserving their religious and cultural identity. This stands in stark contrast to the thousands of Jewish children who were baptised during the same period, leading to a generational disconnection from their religious heritage that many families are still grappling with today.



Gaps in Current Protection Frameworks

The study reveals significant gaps in current humanitarian frameworks regarding spiritual safeguarding. While robust systems exist for protecting children from physical abuse and exploitation, similar protections for religious freedom and spiritual welfare remain largely underdeveloped. The research team found that most humanitarian organisations lack specific protocols for protecting children's religious identity, and there are no standardised tools for measuring or reporting spiritual abuse.

The absence of comprehensive training programmes for humanitarian workers on religious sensitivity and spiritual abuse prevention represents another critical gap. Even when workers recognise the importance of protecting religious freedom, they often lack the tools and guidance necessary to implement effective safeguards.

The Impact of Displacement on Religious Identity

The researchers' analysis reveals how displacement affects children's religious identity through multiple channels. The disruption of regular religious practices and rituals can weaken children's connection to their faith tradition. The loss of religious community and mentors who would typically guide their spiritual development creates additional vulnerabilities. In some cases, children may face discrimination or pressure to abandon their religious practices in order to better integrate into host communities.

Developing Solutions: A Multi-faceted Approach

The research team proposes a comprehensive framework for improving the protection of displaced children's spiritual well-being. This approach encompasses several key areas of focus, including professional development, policy enhancement, and monitoring systems.

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Diana Gerson and her colleagues advocate for developing comprehensive training programmes for humanitarian workers. These programmes would focus on religious sensitivity, cultural competency, and the specific skills needed to prevent and identify spiritual abuse. The goal is to professionalise this aspect of humanitarian work, moving beyond good intentions to establish clear protocols and standards of practice.

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Policy Enhancement and Implementation

The team recommends developing specific policies and procedures that address the unique challenges of protecting religious identity in humanitarian settings. These would include guidelines for ensuring access to appropriate religious practices, supporting cultural and spiritual continuity, culturally inclusive education and preventing forced conversion attempts. The policies would also establish precise reporting mechanisms for cases of spiritual abuse.



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The development of new tools and methodologies is a key requirement for assessing and monitoring spiritual well-being and religious freedom in humanitarian settings. Without proper measurement tools, evaluating the effectiveness of protection measures or identifying areas needing improvement is impossible.

Community Reintegration and Religious Freedom

The study also examines the crucial role of community reintegration in protecting religious identity. Successful reintegration programmes must balance the need for social cohesion with the preservation of religious and cultural identity. This requires careful attention to both displaced children's needs and host communities' dynamics.

The researchers identify several key elements of successful reintegration programmes, including support for maintaining religious practices, connection with religious communities, and education about religious rights and freedoms. They also stress the importance of involving displaced and host communities in developing these programmes.

The research team is developing practical tools and guidelines that humanitarian organisations can implement immediately. This includes creating standardised assessment protocols, designing training modules for humanitarian workers, and establishing best practices for protecting religious freedom.

Finally, the Global Advocacy Hub for Children and Families team and their colleagues are also building partnerships with faith-based organisations and other stakeholders to create a more comprehensive support network for displaced children. These partnerships aim to combine expertise in humanitarian aid with a deep understanding of religious and cultural practices.

MEET THE RESEARCHERS



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Rabbi Diana Gerson serves as Associate Executive Vice President of the New York Board of Rabbis and Senior Advisor for Partnerships and External Relationships for the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities. A co-founder of the Global Advocacy Hub for Children and Families, she is a member of the RFP and UNHCR Multi-Religious Council of Leaders and the Child Dignity Alliance board. Ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, she holds a master's degree and rabbinic ordination. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Essex. She speaks regularly at global forums on building multifaith and multilateral coalitions to safeguard and uplift vulnerable populations in the physical and digital realms.



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Dana Humaid Al Marzooqi is the Director General of International Affairs at the UAE Ministry of Interior and a global leader in child protection and international security cooperation. She co-founded the Global Advocacy Hub for Children and Families, co-chairs AI for Safer Children with UNICRI, and is the Chief Executive of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities. She also oversees the International Security Alliance secretariat. Her work bridges law enforcement, refugee advocacy, and interfaith collaboration, pioneering innovative strategies to combat online child exploitation and strengthen global partnerships for safer, more resilient communities.



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FURTHER READING

D Gerson, DH Al Marzooqi, D Argyriades, [Safeguarding migrant and refugee children: a critical contemporary challenge](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1461653), *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2024, 6, 1461653. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1461653>



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