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## **Role of Social Work in the Integrating Refugee and Immigrant Children into Turkish Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Refugee children who are victims of ongoing wars and conflicts around the world specially in Middle East Region is one of the most vulnerable groups that require international legal protection and professional intervention. Wars and conflicts have forced millions of children to leave their countries and displacements to neighboring countries, accompanied by their families or unaccompanied. However, the problems and trauma experienced by children during a period of asylum, or after is not less than of those experienced in an environment of war and conflict. This stage is one of the critical stages that affect a child's growth. It requires from the host countries meeting the necessary needs of children and developing therapeutic, rehabilitative and preventive programs as well as psychological and social support programs. Problem of education is one of the most important problems facing the vast majority of refugee children, there are millions of refugee children are deprived of the right to education as indicated in the reports prepared on this issue. Therefore, most of the host countries are developing programs that aims to integrate refugee children into schools and to protect their rights to education. Since social work is considered as the most important professions that play an active role in the integration process. This is through the direct practice with refugee and immigrant students and their families and the surrounding environment as well as cooperation with governmental and

nongovernmental institutions in this area. This article will discuss the role of school social work in dealing with refugee childrens' problems in the school and facilitate their integration. In light of this discussion, this research will give suggestions to develop the performance of the school social worker during the integration process.

**Keywords:** Refugee children, school social work, right to education, the integration of refugee children into schools, wars and conflicts.

## Introduction

Children under the age of 18 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) account for approximately 38% of the total population (UNICEF, 2011: 7). This high proportion of the total population suffers from many problems in different countries of the region due to customs, traditions, limited income in some countries and the lack of clarity of social policies aimed at protecting the child. For example the researches and scientific studies conducted on MENA children (Snoubar, 2010., Abdul-Hamid, 2011., UNICEF, 2014., Snoubar & Duman, 2015., Shantayanan, 2016), demonstrate that these children experienced serious problems such as early marriage, child employment, school dropout, witness or exposure to violence, imprisonment and torture. These are serious indicators that threaten the physical, psychological, social and moral development of children.

Recent events and changes in the region resulting from ongoing conflicts have brought with it many serious problems for children's mental and social health. The most prominent of these problems are the direct exposure of children to violence and their exploitation by the parties of conflict and the resulting traumatic experiences. One of the most serious problems facing children in the Middle East and North Africa is the violation of their rights to life and an increase in disability. In addition, the crisis of displacement and resort to neighboring countries added new risks to those living in a war and conflict environment. Millions of children have become refugees or asylum seekers in neighboring countries, this making them vulnerable to many risks such as neglect, exploitation, trafficking, early marriage and loss of education.

This crisis directly affects the violation of the right to education as a result of the direct physical damage of schools in war and conflict countries, as well as pressure on educational institutions in countries of asylum. This situation has deprived millions of children of the right to education. There is an urgent need to prepare new social and educational plans and policies that guarantee the right of education for these children. This situation requires international cooperation and inter-ministerial coordination at the local level. The integration of refugee and immigrant children into a new educational system requires interdisciplinary intervention to facilitate this process.

The profession of social work is one of the most professions that can contribute to facilitate the integration of refugees and immigrant children into the educational system through its holistic approach and its dependence on many approaches in intervention, especially case management approach. Therefore, in this article we try to put forward the perception of the importance of social work in the process of integrating refugee children into the Turkish educational system. This study will also give suggestions on how to take advantage from the profession of social work during the integration process.

The main objective of this article is to identify the main problems experienced by the refugee children in MENA and to make the proposal of future social work practice during integrating them into the Turkish education system. Essentially, this study questions whether ongoing conflicts in MENA have increased the educational problems of children in the region and what social work practice should be applied for integrating these children into educational systems in neighbor countries especially in Turkey.

### **Research Methodology**

To achieve these goals we:

- Reviewed literature on the problems of refugee children
- Reviewed integrating refugee and immigrant children into schools
- Used case management and holistic approach of social work to propose the best future practice for integrating refugee children into Turkish educational system.

We will conclude this discussion by referring to the best practice of social work, programs and regional and international cooperation that must be implemented to alleviate the crisis and protecting the educational right of refugee children in Turkey.

### **MENA Society and Child Concept Perception**

In researching the problems faced by children in the MENA, perceptions and misconceptions about the concept of child and childhood can be observed. It also can be observed that the level of problems experienced by children varies due to gender. Culture, customs, traditions, religious understanding and ethnic also play an important role in violating children's rights or exacerbating problems in the region. In addition, economic conditions, political crises, ongoing conflicts and the lack of clarity or ineffectiveness of the legal framework for the protection of children in many countries in the region play a role in misconception of the concept of children and the weakness and fragility of child protection policies. As a result of this, many serious problems have emerged that threaten the physical, psychological, social and moral development of the MENA children.

The misconception of the child and childhood and inability of international laws to provide protection for children in the region, especially in times of crisis, made children in the first line face to face with the most serious problems. Child marriage, the violation of the right to education, the high rate of disability due to wars and conflicts, child labor, exposure or witness violence, torture, asylum to neighboring countries and problems faced during and after this stage are examples of the most serious problems that can be identified in this context.

The child marriage in the MENA region is considered one of the most important indicators of violations of children's rights for example 18% of girls under the age of 18 are married (Bearat, 2015). This is in spite of the progress made by the MENA compared to other regions in decreasing the percentage of child marriage (UNICEF, 2014., Allison et al, 2015). The problem of the sexual exploitation of children in the MENA under the name of marriage is originally related to many factors such as poverty, the culture of masculine distinction and misconception of religious, wars and conflicts, family, social and political instability (ICMEC, 2013). If the problem of child marriage stems from the misperception of the concept of children in Middle Eastern culture and society, there are other problems that stem mainly from the lack of childhood conception within the laws. For example:

“Across the MENA region, laws relating to children are outdated, and enforcement of children’s rights is too often weak or nonexistent. Many countries lack a comprehensive juvenile justice system that can appropriately respect and handle children’s rights. Shockingly, governments in some countries are simply unable or unwilling to adequately protect children” (DCI, 2015).

All these cultural and religious factors, poverty, wars, conflicts and instability in the region clearly indicate the absence of the concept of childhood. Therefore, it is possible to say that the problems faced by children in the region lie mainly in the misinterpretation of children in the cultural, religious and family context, in addition to the failure to respect international laws in the protection of children during times of crisis.

### **The Problems Experienced by Children during Asylum Process**

The problems experienced by children in the cultural, social and family environment within the MENA community were not the upper limit of traumatic experiences. Conflicts, wars and political instability have brought the greatest problems of all, it is the issue of displacement and resort to neighboring countries. The problem of the displacement of children and their recourse to neighboring countries made them vulnerable to all risks and all forms of neglect and exploitation.

**Unaccompanied and separated children:** One of the most serious problems faced by refugee children is separation from the family and the loss of the basic pillar of social support in times of crisis. Children unaccompanied with their families are most vulnerable to exploitation and other risks at this stage.

Traumatic experiences, exploitation or abuse are the most important problems faced by unaccompanied refugee children in a new environment. The difficult circumstances of these children pose a danger and risk factor for their emotional well-being, which causes significant emotional and behavioral problems (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008). Studies have shown that unaccompanied refugee children are more vulnerable than other vulnerable groups to psychiatric morbidity (Huemer et al, 2009). For example, they have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and sleep disorders (Fazel & Stein, 2002. Fazel et al., 2012). This requires a clinical intervention, which can be said that many countries in the MENA do not provide such kind of interventions. Here, also it should be noted that unaccompanied girls are more likely to be exploited and thus they are more at risk of mental illness and mental health.

**Trafficking and exploitation:** Wars, conflicts and the resulting resort to neighboring countries and displacement have increased opportunities for human trafficking and exploitation. It is recognized that children and women in such circumstances are the most exploited by the perpetrators of these crimes.

Lack of security and legal protection for refugees, family vulnerability and exposure to violence by smugglers are risk factors that increase trafficking in refugees (Wilson, 2011). Policies that limit access to safe labor, insecure housing, inadequate food aid programs and weak personal status laws on child marriage are also important factors in the exploitation and trafficking of children as the case of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon (The Freedom Fund, 2016). The risks and risk factors that make refugee children vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation and trafficking directly affect their mental and physical health. This situation requires interdisciplinary intervention and firmness in the application of international laws criminalizing trafficking in children.

**Risk of detention:** In some cases, refugee or asylum-seeking children are detained while entering the borders of other countries. They are often imprisoned with adults and trafficked persons, making them vulnerable to exploitation and sexual and physical abuse.

The problems faced by children in prison may be exacerbated by several factors due to the special needs of children and their vulnerability. Factors that increase these risks include torture and associated psychological trauma, length of detention, lack of clarity about asylum applications, poor conditions of detainees and lack of access to basic needs and rights (International Detention Coalition, 2012. Save The Children, 2015). "Many children, especially those who are unaccompanied or separated, have fallen between the cracks of asylum systems that are overstretched, slow and uneven. All too often children are held behind bars – in detention facilities or in police custody – because of a lack of space in child protection centres and limited capacity for identifying alternative solutions" (UNICEF, 2016).

**Life in refugee camp and outside:** Refugee camps are not a safe haven for children because of their difficult conditions of overcrowding, poverty and the lack of material resources that help children healthy grow up. These camps can therefore be described as a dangerous and fertile environment for the exploitation and neglect of children (Snoubar, 2016). The environment of these camps is violent and dangerous for unaccompanied children and girls in particular (Arkadas-Thibert, A and Salman, H.F, 2013). However, it can be said that refugee camps are sometimes the most appropriate place for many international organizations to reach children and provide the necessary needs and implement many psychosocial support programs (Alsaud, 2015. Snoubar, 2016). On the other hand, live outside these camps makes children vulnerable to all kinds of risks. At the same time, it is difficult for children to access basic services and are vulnerable to exploitation and neglect.

**Dropout of education:** One of the most dangerous and the most prominent problems faced by refugee children are dropping out of education. Wars and conflicts have led to the closure and destruction of many schools and educational institutions. Millions of children have lost their right to education, and many refugee children have not been able to access the right to education in host countries for many reasons, such as family poverty, inability to cover school expenses, foreign language education and a new system.

Asylum process is the main resource of anxiety in refugee children (Richman, 1998). The traumatic experiences of refugee children are the biggest obstacles to education (McBrien, 2005). However, children who have been fortunate to enroll in host country schools can face short- or long-term problems as a result of the problems they faced during the asylum phase. Perhaps one of the main problems that can be mentioned in the school context, is the problem of concentration, student achievement, and adjustment in the new environment, the problem of isolation and making friends.

**Sexual exploitation under the name of marriage:** Early marriage or child marriage is one of the most serious violations of children's rights because of its negative consequences on physical and mental health of children. Early marriage with the damage to the child's health and development can only be classified as sexual exploitation of children. Regardless of cultural factors, religious beliefs and economic circumstances, child marriage is a crime and the sexual exploitation of children requires multidisciplinary intervention.

Early marriage is more noticeable during crises such as war, conflict and extreme poverty, and between refugees and displaced persons. The prevalence of child marriage among refugees is due to reasons related to the protection of honor (UNICEF, 2001). Child marriage among refugees is also due to the poor economic resources of the family and the desire to protect girls from sexual abuse, for example the marriage of Syrian refugee children within the Middle East. In other words, refugee families consider child marriage as a means of protecting them, as well as reducing pressure on family resources (Save the Children, 2014). Thus, settling family

crisis reduces the marriage of children, which most families are fed into poverty in the first degree. In addition to the severe damage caused by early marriage on children, it is at the same time a barrier to girls' education and isolates them from friends and help programs (Schlecht, 2016).

### **Integrating Refugee and Immigrant Children into Turkish Schools**

Education is a fundamental right of children and it also plays an important role in identifying the problems of refugee children, rehabilitating them and enables children and youth to thrive (UNHCR, 2000, UNHCR, 2016). Therefore, protecting the right of refugee children to education is one of the most important policies and priorities to be applied by host countries. The integration of students into schools requires knowledge of the challenges and obstacles that are related to many things, such as child, environment, educational system and social services.

Conflicts in Syria, are the heaviest humanitarian crisis the world has faced since II. World War. Where millions of Syrians were forced to leave their country and to resort to neighboring countries. Turkey is one of the most host countries for Syrians refugees and displaced where children constitute nearly half of the total these refugees (UNICEF, 2017). In general, the open door policy pursued by the Turkish government in the face of the refugee crisis has made Turkey the most host country for refugees in the world. Since children make up about half of the refugees, plans must be made to guarantee the right of education for these children. Non-governmental organizations in Turkey have played an important role in advising the Ministry of Education on the education of Syrian children and their integration into Turkish schools. However, the short-term solutions provided by these organizations benefited only one in three refugee children and this is evidence of the need for long-term policy development. "Even though there are immense efforts to provide education to the Syrian children in Turkey, only 311,256 are currently being educated in public schools and Temporary Education Centers (GEMs). There are 523,583 Syrian children who are not part of the education system yet" In the integration phase, the low rate of enrollment in secondary schools is observed because of the tendency of male adolescents to work to help their families economically and problems of early marriage faced by adolescent girls. In the context of the educational situation of refugee children, while 90% of children in camps are studying, only 25% of children outside camps receive education. Therefore, one of the most important alternative steps for the education of refugee children is the Temporary Education Centers, which provide education by the Syrian teachers themselves in Arabic and the curricula used by children in the country of origin. Another alternative is the integration of students into Turkish public schools, where the number of students enrolled in Turkish schools is much lower than those enrolled in temporary educational centers. One of the main problems faced by students in the process of integration in Turkish schools is the issue of language, where education in Turkish and the Turkish curriculum. In addition to the language barrier there are problems communicating with teachers and

administrators at school, inability to receive education with children of the same age as well as being excluded by Turkish students. It should also be noted that temporary educational centers are inadequate (Coşkun & Emin, 2016). It is therefore necessary to develop sustainable solutions that promote the integration of refugee children into Turkish schools through coordination among various organizations to ensure the right to education and promotion of refugees (Hos, 2016). Overcoming barriers and obstacles faced by refugee students is a rather complex process that requires positive teaching methods and supports both teachers and the educational institution (McBrien, 2005). Parents' involvement is essential during the integration of children into schools (Bačáková, 2009). In the same time the presence of peer immigrants in the same school is one of the most important factors for the completion of secondary education. This is a positive effect of the presence of immigrant colleagues in the same school (Hermansen & Birkelund, 2015).

The adaptation of refugee children or students lies in overcoming the problems faced by students in an environment of war and during migration. As personal bereavement plays a role in adaptation problems, cultural bereavement is one of the most important factors that play a role in the adaptation of children in the school environment (Eisenbruch, 1988). It is also necessary to focus on the psychological disorders and trauma experienced by refugee children as well as cultural diversity and cultural background (Hodes, 2000). This highlights the role of social work and its effective intervention, which depends on the holistic approach and case management in the situation of integration of refugee students in Turkish schools. Social work deals with the problems experienced by refugees in various stages and problems faced in the school environment in various aspects and also cooperate with all systems surrounding at all levels to reach appropriate solutions to those problems.

### **School- Based Intervention for Refugee Children**

School is one of the best places where a social worker can communicate with children during crisis times. Because it is the most appropriate field to identify the problems of refugee children affected by war and conflict and accordingly identify support, rehabilitation and intervention programs. Social worker identifies the problems and challenges faced by refugee children and cooperates with various systems and develops intervention plans. In order to facilitate the integration of refugee children into schools, the social worker must intervene at the individual, group and community level in cooperation with teachers, administrators and families of refugee children (Duman & Snoubar, 2016). All these steps aim to improve the well-being of refugee children within the school framework to protect their right to education.

“It is no exaggeration to say that refugee children’s well-being depends to a major degree on their school experiences, successes and failures. Because they are unfamiliar with the education system and parents cannot help their children as they would wish to, and children may be left to deal with difficulties alone. School policies are a powerful tool for helping a refugee child feel safe and normal again, and begin



to learn. They can promote the child's confidence and integration, and prevent isolation and frustration. Failure in school can have a disastrous impact on children who are trying to reconstruct their lives and their self-esteem, and develop hope for the future. Educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually dependent." (Richman, 1998a; Hek, 2005).

"In the school environment, social worker uses special knowledge in overcoming learning difficulties and behavior problems of children at school and uses it to help the school staff and parents to mobilize together for examining the causes of these inconvenient and to find solutions to them. The work of a social worker supports the teacher's work which is why usually social workers at school become in close collaboration with teachers. Social worker helps young students in finding solutions to their problems such as teacher-student relations, peer relations and conflicts, student's success at school, aggressive behavior and school absenteeism. Social work practice in schools requires the use of extensive knowledge and skills in the various forms of behavior. He must understand the different norms and behaviors that occur in the physical and emotional development of the child himself. At the same time the latter needs to, have adequate knowledge about issues such as being continuously interacted with the child-teen and colleagues, evaluate the problematic behavior observation, participate in the decision-making process at school, promoting mental health practices that will contribute to early diagnosis and treatment of pathological cases and use social resources according to the needs and problems" (Duman, 2000; Duman & Snoubar 2016).

There are different frameworks of interventions to protect refugee children and integrate them into the educational system. However, in this article we focus on the case management as the most important of these frameworks. This approach in social work practices addresses the problems of refugee children in all their aspects in cooperation with all parties and at all levels.

At the school level, the school is the environment in which refugee children spend the majority of their time, so it is necessary to cooperate between parents and teachers in addressing the problems faced by vulnerable students. In addition, interventions aimed at refugees in the school framework should focus on mental health services and must take into account students' access to these services (Fazel et al, 2009). The existence of these services and develop it in the school framework and facilitate the arrival of refugee students help them overcome many of the problems resulting from depression and increase their sense of belonging to the school (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). It is also important to focus on the role of teachers during the integration process. They are able to build a positive society within the classroom by guiding students on how to live society and respecting diversity while taking into account the cultural, social and political dimension of refugee students (Roxas, 2011).

Refugee and asylum seekers from Syria in Turkey in particular refugee children have a special place and importance. Working with refugee children within the scope of

school social work by minimizing the risks they face during and after the process of asylum will be beneficial for children to cope with the trauma they are experiencing and to make them adapt to normal life in Turkey. The events experienced by the refugee children, both with and without their families in the asylum process are very difficult life events. These can be summarized as follows:

- The war environment they lived in Syria
- Lose parents or other family members in the war,
- The violence they have experienced or witnessed in the war,
- The forced immigration process they experienced,
- The difficulties brought by living in a new country with different language and culture,
- They married at an early age, especially unaccompanied children (child brides),
- Especially unaccompanied children encounter with risky situations such as being victims of an illegal organization and organ trafficking, sex work, child pornography, child trafficking,
- Especially unaccompanied children stayed with their relatives or people they do not recognize the physical, emotional, sexual and economic exposure to the neglect and abuse, and so on.

It is important to solve problems of refugee children, the risks they are exposed to, etc. protecting them from dangerous situations and providing them with grow up in a safe environment with rights like all children. For this, it is necessary to carry out the schooling of the children coming from Syria and the interventions needed within the scope of the school social work. In this context, the tasks that should be done systematically can be listed as follows:

- Refugee children can be provided with a "Child Protection System" from the moment they enter Turkey. For this purpose, the risky situations related to children entering the country (co-existence, trauma, early marriage, exposure to a risky situation, etc.) it must be reported to the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (ASPB), General Directorate of Child Services and ASPB Provincial Social Services Directorates.
- The investigation, intervention and follow-up work for these children who are notified to the ASPB Provincial Social Services Directorates should be done by a case manager social worker who will be assigned by the Provincial Social Service Directorates.
- This case manager is required to protect the refugee child from the risks, to live in a safe environment, to make the necessary arrangements to continue

from the place of education, and to intervene and monitor the trauma experience.

- It is necessary to provide psychological support to the child in this process, supporting them with approaches such as game therapy etc., provision of appropriate services such as language etc. in order to continue education, to adapt to school and life in Turkey.
- It is important for the child to establish a bond with the school, to go to school as a necessity for normal life like his or her peers, and not to leave the school. The survival of the child during the immigration process is a positive contribution to the study and continuance of normal life.
- The ASPB case manager and the Ministry of National Education's school social worker can play an important role in enhancing the child's compliance and school success by coming up with many issues in cooperation.
- There are important roles and duties of the school and school social worker in maintaining the child's educational affiliation, monitoring at school, finding instant solutions to the problems he or she is experiencing, and ensuring language development.
- The school social worker follows the situation of the refugee child in cooperation with the case manager in the ASPB Provincial Social Services Directorate. Thus, can immediately inform the case manager about the difficulties the child has with the school. This cooperation allows quickly intervene in the solution of the problems they are experienced by child.

School social work may be the greatest support to children and their families in solving the psycho-social and economic problems they are experiencing and ensuring their social integration, and their educational rights. The school social worker carries out professional intervention in an eco-system approach and a holistic approach, covering "the child, the family, the school and the community".

When carrying out this intervention they also make teamwork with professional staff in institutions such as School teachers, school staff, school principal; Out of school, hospital affiliated to the Ministry of Health (SB), Community Mental Health Center, ASPB, Ministry of Justice (AB), Governorate. Some examples of work that can be carried out with other institutions are as follows:

Joint work can be carried out with MEB, ASPB and SB for unaccompanied refugee children who need protection.

For a refugee child who has been dragged to crime, it can be worked out with MEB, AB.

Co-operate with the SB Community Mental Health Center for refugee children and their families with trauma.

Working with the SB AMATEM (Alcohol and Drug Addiction Treatment Center) for refugee child with substance abuse.

School Social Worker is based on three levels intervention of social work profession when conducting this task:

- Working with individual and family "micro-level social work intervention"
- Working with groups, "mezzo level social work intervention"
- Working with the community, social work management and organization, "macro level social service intervention"
- The following examples can be given about professional interventions for refugee children in the social work profession:
  - Working with individual and family "micro-level social work intervention":
  - Visiting home of refugee children who do not attend school, check out the psychosocial reasons of them not attending school and writing the assessment report, reporting the child's situation to the ASPB and providing cooperation, etc.
  - Working with groups, "mezzo level social work intervention":

Working with unaccompanied children who are starting school by using group work methods and techniques to carry out supportive activities for coping with the trauma they face during the asylum process, etc.

- Working with the community, social work management and organization, "macro level social service intervention":

Making projects for easy adaptation of the children living in the tent cities where more refugee children live, thereby helping them to overcome language barriers and the trauma they are faced with. When organizing these activities, it is necessary to organize the coming of the educator for the artistic activities from the public education center. The educator should ensure that children receive services from the hospital according to traumatic experiences, cooperate with families, conduct family trainings, carry out awareness-raising activities to school staff on the subject of approaching and dealing with the child and so on.

As a result, all these works require the employment of social workers in MEB affiliated schools and the Guidance and Research Centers (RAM) in Turkey in order to provide these services for refugee children. Since more than a hundred years the "school social work" studies that have been employed at schools and not only for refugee children but also for other children in the school in the world in USA, European Countries and even in the Far Eastern countries, it is of great priority and importance to take the rightful place in the MEB system in Turkey.

## Findings

Wars and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region are the main source of violations of children's rights in every sense of the word. The problems resulting from the stressful environment in which children live in the region threaten their growth and make them a target of danger in the war environment and during and after displacement. Therefore, in order not to lose a generation, it is necessary to develop preventive and curative plans and develop policies to protect children's rights. Protecting the right of education for refugee children is one of the greatest necessities because of its therapeutic and rehabilitative dimensions. Here highlights the importance of integrating children in the schools of host countries and the role of the professions, particularly the social work profession in this process.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

Serious violations of the rights of children at various levels in many countries of the region, the increasing size of refugee and displaced children and the increasing their problems require a review of their basic rights in host countries and the development of preventive and elliptical preventive policies to protect them. The development of plans and policies to integrate refugee children into Turkish schools is one of the most important steps to protect and rehabilitate refugee children. Here in this article we tried to explain the importance and role of social work in integrating refugee children in Turkish schools in order to empower refugee children and help them overcome the most important obstacles. At the same time, this study attempted to show the magnitude of the problem that refugee children suffer as a result of the stages they went through and the traumatic experiences they experienced. This includes focusing on the role of social work and cooperation in the school field at all levels. The role of social work as explained in this article should be taken into consideration in the process of integrating children into schools in various host countries. Here was also an emphasis on the need for policies aimed at integrating children in schools in the host countries to turn the crisis into a bright future and protect them from loss.

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