

Introduction to Refugee Children's Voices

Refugee Children's Voices is a collection of poems written by refugee children from Sudan living in settlements in Uganda in 2004. The poems were compiled by the UN Refugee Agency for FENU, the Forum for Education NGOs in Uganda.

These poems, written in the refugees' own words, highlight the children's strong desire to go to school and the importance of education in empowering these youth and returning a sense of stability to their lives. Some poems contain references to refugees' experiences that younger children may find disturbing, so we recommend that teachers read the poems before sharing them with their students.

As you will see, one refugee reflects in a poem, "My difficult life in school" (p. 11). Some refugees miss many years of school because of their displacement, meaning they may be in their teens and twenties and still be in primary school. This can be very difficult emotionally and has a significant impact on a refugee's life. The UN Refugee Agency takes special care to assist these students because education is a basic human right and an important tool for helping forcibly displaced children overcome trauma and regain a sense of normalcy in their lives.

Unlike many children in your classrooms, refugees face almost impenetrable barriers to education. Girls in particular face challenges related to cultural stigmas, early marriage and childbearing, and the need to care for younger siblings in the absence of a parent. Girls and boys both are often forced to work to help support their households, preventing them from attending school. Children who are out of school face a plethora of dangers, including armed recruitment, child labor, drug abuse, and sexual exploitation. Among other things, these activities greatly increase their risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS.

The UN Refugee Agency also works with refugees to establish schools inside the camps. However, because of limited funding, many of these schools are little more than chalkboards set under the trees. Without a proper building, students are at the mercy of the elements during classes, where rain, sandstorms and extreme temperatures can disrupt their lessons. In areas with harsh winters, classes often cease altogether during the coldest months. With support, the UN Refugee Agency is able to construct proper school buildings, with desks, girls and boys latrines, trained teachers, and books and supplies.

You can learn more about the UN Refugee Agency's work around education at <link>. If your students want to learn more about helping refugees access an education they can visit <link> or join the Darfur Dream Team Sister Schools program <link>. You can also contact us at usawaedu@usaforunhcr.org.

