

STRENGTHENING REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN'S HEALTH STATUS

IN SOUTHERN AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE



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RM Child-Health

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The 24-month 'RM Child-Health' initiative, which began in January 2020, helps to improve the health of children on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia. With European Union funding of €4.3 million, under the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety, the initiative works with UNICEF and its partners on the ground to ensure that all refugee and migrant children and their families have access to quality health care and accurate health information. It does so by:

- **strengthening the capacity of national authorities** to deliver health care to refugee and migrant children
- **improving health literacy among refugee and migrant children** by providing information to help them make decisions about their health, and medical interpreters and cultural mediators to enhance communication between children and families and health care providers
- **strengthening the implementation of health policies** by, for example, increasing the number of health workers equipped with the skills and knowledge to support refugee and migrant children who need health care.

Why is this initiative needed?

The physical and mental health of refugee and migrant children and families in Europe is often precarious. Many have come from countries with broken health systems, travelling for months (even years) with no access to health care and facing the constant risks of violence and exploitation along the way. Many girls and boys arriving in Europe have missed out on life-saving immunization and have experienced serious distress and other mental health problems. They may be carrying the physical and emotional scars of violence, including sexual abuse. The health of infants and mothers who are pregnant or breastfeeding has been put at risk by a lack of pre- and post-natal health services and of support for child nutrition.

Child refugees and migrants also face an increased risk of infections as a result of crowded and unhygienic living conditions during their journeys and at their destinations. Even when they arrive in Europe, refugee and migrant children and families often face continued barriers to their health care, such as cultural issues, bureaucracy, and a lack of information in their own language.

The already severe risks to their physical and mental health have been heightened by the global COVID-19 pandemic, and by lockdowns that have only added to their exclusion and marginalization.

How does the initiative work?

'RM Child-Health' aims to improve the health of refugee and migrant children by increasing their access to life-saving immunizations, mental health and psychosocial support, and gender-based violence prevention and response activities, as well as maternal and newborn health care and nutrition support.

Information materials on health-related risks and services are being shared with refugee and migrant populations. Medical interpreters and cultural mediators are being deployed to enhance communication between children and families and health care providers.

The initiative also supports training programmes to help frontline health care workers better respond to the specific needs of refugee and migrant children and their families. In parallel, national health authorities benefit from technical support to develop, update and improve the implementation of health policies and to tackle the bottlenecks in national health systems that stop refugee and migrant children from accessing services.

Latest facts and figures



Between July and September 2020, **30,543 refugees and migrants (25% children)** arrived in Europe. With the COVID-19 pandemic, all countries, except Italy, reported a decrease in arrivals, compared to the same period in 2019.



On 9 September 2020, a fire at the Moria Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) on the Greek island of Lesbos left **12,000 refugees and migrants, including 4,200 children, homeless.**



1,000 asylum seekers (mostly unaccompanied and separated children) were relocated from Greece to other EU member states in 2020.



COVID-19 continues to have an acute impact on the health and wellbeing of refugees and migrants, who were already suffering from a chronic lack of access to basic services, including healthcare, before the pandemic.

Source: United Nations Children's Fund, 'Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 37, 1 July to 30 September 2020', Geneva, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia.



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About this Newsletter

This Newsletter outlines how the initiative has provided vital support to enhance and safeguard the health of refugee and migrant children and their families since its launch, despite the severe disruption caused by the onslaught of COVID-19.

It features links to stories about the initiative's support for the strengthening of health systems, and to stories from the perspectives of beneficiaries and frontline practitioners across all five countries. It outlines how the initiative has risen to the challenge of COVID-19. And it shares stories from each individual country, showing how the initiative is making a difference on the ground.

Strengthening national capacity

Health systems that work for vulnerable refugee and migrant children are health systems that work for every child. Support from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative aims to strengthen health systems so that they can deliver the high-quality services that every child needs. Activities include research into refugees' experiences of health services in their countries of origin, and how this may shape their uptake of health services in Europe.

[Read more](#)

Improving health literacy

The 'RM Child-Health' initiative supports the development of activities and materials to enhance the health literacy of refugee and migrant children and young people, enabling them to make their own informed decisions about their health. Covering a wide range of health issues, from COVID-19 to sexual and reproductive health, the initiative has generated a large pool of evidence-based materials and approaches to empower young refugees and migrants. [Read more](#)

Strengthening the implementation of health policies

Health policy implementation determines whether a policy succeeds or fails. The frontline workers who deliver health services are, therefore, at the very heart of health policies. The 'RM Child-Health' initiative has supported the training and capacity building of the frontline workers who have regular contact with refugee and migrant children, helping to ensure that they are equipped to meet the needs of these vulnerable children. [Read more](#)

Safeguarding the health of refugee and migrant children during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the physical and mental health of refugees and migrants worldwide, and Europe is no exception. The 'RM Child-Health' initiative has helped to connect children to health services, even during the tightest of lockdowns. Ongoing health initiatives have been adapted to include COVID-19 prevention, showing children how to protect themselves and others, and promoting their right to health care – even during a pandemic. [Read more](#)

Voices from the field



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Bosnia and Herzegovina



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Support from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative helps to connect children with health problems to paediatric support. The paediatric clinic at the Sedra Reception Centre, for example, works with an ever-changing child population. The clinic treats and refers children for a whole range of health issues. Some are complex. But for 10-year old Maisa, the solution is as simple – and as crucial – as a new pair of eyeglasses. [Read more](#)

Bulgaria



© COUNCIL OF REFUGEE WOMEN IN BULGARIA

The story of Zahra and her daughter Lilan shows how health problems often take second place to the urgent need to escape from conflict or earn a living. That's where the work of the Council of Refugee Women of Bulgaria (CRWB) comes in, linking refugee children and families to vital and often life-saving health services and more, even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with support from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative. [Read more](#)

Greece



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Support from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative has helped UNICEF and its partners respond to the urgent health needs of refugees and migrants on the Greek Island of Lesbos. The aim has been to safeguard the health of children uprooted by the destruction of the once notorious Moria camp as they try to rebuild their lives. [Read more](#)

Italy



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A mobile outreach team in Rome has reached refugee and migrant children throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown. Drawing on support from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative, the team uses health information as an entry point to link children and their families to other services. From providing information on COVID-19 prevention to ensuring that children get their basic health checks, the team tackles the barriers to health care for refugee and migrant families. [Read more](#)

Serbia



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For refugee women in Serbia, the Mother and baby corners are places of safety, peace and respite from their daily cares. With support from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative, UNICEF and its partners make good use of the Mother and baby corners to connect with refugee women, providing health information that relates to their lives, as well as childcare that enables them to take part in workshops, with health acting as an entry point for their inclusion in Serbian society. [Read more](#)

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