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THE SILENT VICTIMS: LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN IN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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Abstract

The legal intricacies surrounding child protection are dissected, emphasizing the critical roles of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in sustaining peace and ensuring safety. Additionally, the paper addresses gender-based violence (GBV) and its intersection with child protection, focusing on vulnerable categories of crisis-affected youth. This paper examines the multifaceted challenges faced by children in conflict-affected settings, highlighting the ambiguity in the definition of "children" within legal frameworks. It explores the profound impact of war on various aspects of children's lives, including education, livelihoods, health, and nutrition. By advocating for meaningful participation of children in decision-making processes, the study culminates in recommendations aimed at enhancing protective measures and fostering resilience in the face of ongoing challenges. The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive legal frameworks and practical interventions to safeguard the rights and well-being of children in times of conflict.

Keywords: Children Protection, Child Law, Human Rights, Child Conventions

INTRODUCTION

Young individuals are a significant demographic in the global population, especially in fragile and conflict-affected regions. Their experiences are complex and multifaceted, often leading to increased stress, impeded educational prospects, and a decline in mental health. Childhood trauma and adverse experiences can have long-term effects on physical and mental health, with exposure to war and terrorism causing posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and other psychological sequelae. In humanitarian crises, youth often face responsibilities that surpass their developmental capacities, leading to increased stress, impeded educational prospects, and a decline in mental health. Interventions should focus on promoting resiliency at a community level, identifying at-risk children and families, and mental health treatment for those in distress. A child's relationship with caregivers is crucial for recovery from a traumatic event, and efforts should be made to reunite families after trauma. Organizations like the Y-PEER network play a crucial role in promoting youth participation in decision-making processes, advocating for healthy lifestyles and civic engagement. The agency of youth within humanitarian contexts is essential for cultivating sustainable development and social cohesion. However, there is a pervasive sense of exclusion among young women and men globally, especially during humanitarian disasters. In the aftermath of conflict or disaster, interruptions in educational, health, and developmental trajectories are commonplace, exposing young individuals to risks that can significantly hinder their growth and development. Fostering the agency of youth within humanitarian contexts is not only an ethical imperative but also essential for

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cultivating sustainable development and social cohesion.

AMBIGUITY IN THE DEFINITION OF CHILDREN

The definition of a child, as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),[1] encompasses every individual under the age of 18. However, the delineation of terms such as "adolescents" and "youth" varies significantly across nations, cultures, and institutions. According to the General Assembly's classification (A/36/215, 1981), adolescents are defined as individuals aged 10 to 19 years,[2] while youth encompass those aged 15 to 24 years. In contrast, the Security Council (S/2250, 2015) specifies youth as extending from 18 to 29 years. Further specificity is provided by the Afghanistan National Youth Policy, which categorizes adolescents as aged 12 to 18 years and youth as 18 to 35 years.

Article 1 of the CRC enunciates that ***"the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice."***

These definitions intersect with broader discussions on gender equality, gender-based violence, meaningful youth participation, civic engagement, and global peacebuilding. The United Nations broadly defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 24, with UNICEF and partner organizations like WHO and UNFPA agreeing on this framework while also characterizing adolescents as 10 to 19 years and young people as 10 to 24 years. The overlapping nature of these classifications complicates the collection and reporting of standardized data, further emphasized in the 'Demographics' subsection, which reveals significant variability in statistical representations of young people across regions and data sources. Additionally, the transition from childhood to adulthood is often culturally defined not merely by age but by the attainment of societal statuses, such as marriage or property ownership. Consequently, an unmarried 35-year-old may still be deemed a 'young person', while a child soldier, child laborer, or teenage mother might assume adult roles at a much younger age.

Article 32 'States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.'[3]

In humanitarian contexts, where displacement or conflict delay educational and employment opportunities, the concept of 'waithood' arises, denoting a prolonged suspension between childhood and adulthood. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines utilize the term 'young people' to encompass both adolescents and youth, specifically those aged 10 to 24 years, and further distinguish between younger adolescents (10–14 years) and older adolescents (15–19 years), reflecting the complex layers of age-related definitions in the discourse on youth.

IMPACT OF WAR ON CHILDREN

War has a profound impact on children, as they are dependent on the care, empathy, and attention of adults who love a social life. Children may be marginalized by society and lose the opportunity for marriage long after the war has ended. Attachments are frequently disrupted during times of war, leading to the loss of parents, extreme preoccupation with family survival, and emotional unavailability of depressed or distant parents. A certain proportion of war-affected children lose all

[1] The Convention on the Rights of the Child: The children's version | UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version (last visited Oct 7, 2024).
[2] DEFINITION OF YOUTH available at https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf (visited on 7th October 2024).
[3] Article 32 of CRC available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-84647-3_33 (last visited on 5th October 2024).

adult protection, known as "unaccompanied children."[4]

The impacts in childhood may adversely affect the life trajectory of children far more than adults. For example, children may lose the opportunity for education during war, be forced into refugee or displaced person camps, and have disabilities that may result in loss of limbs, sight, or cognitive capacity. Death is another significant impact, with hundreds of thousands of children dying of direct violence in war each year. Injuries, such as landmine explosions, can also affect children, with thousands suffering each year. Disability is another significant impact, with millions of children disabled by war, many of whom have inadequate access to rehabilitation services. Children may have to wait up to 10 years before having a prosthetic limb fitted, and survivors rarely receive prostheses that can keep up with their limb growth.

Illness is another significant impact, with conditions for maintaining child health deteriorating during war, including nutrition, water safety, sanitation, housing, and access to health services. Refugee children are particularly vulnerable to the deadly combination of malnutrition and infectious illness.[5]

Rape and prostitution for subsistence leave lasting physical impacts in sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, psychological impacts, and changes in life trajectory. [6]Psychological suffering is also experienced by children, as they are exposed to situations of terror and horror, leading to post-traumatic stress disorder. Moral and spiritual impacts include the loss of meaning in children's construction of themselves in their world, which may require them to change their moral structure and engage in activities like lying, stealing, and selling sex. Social and cultural losses occur, as children may lose their community and culture during war, sometimes having it reconstituted in refugee or diaspora situations. Remedial strategies for children affected by war can be divided into two categories: mitigation and healing.

Making war less damaging to children (secondary prevention) involves implementing international humanitarian law regarding the protection of children in war, such as the Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These conventions aim to protect children from food, clothing, medicine, education, and family reunion, as well as from ethnic cleansing and recruitment into armed forces. However, compliance with these instruments is poor, especially when recruiting children to armed forces.

To ensure economic sanctions against a country are never used again, it is crucial to consider the use of economic sanctions as a war crime. Special considerations should be given to children who are inflight from war zones and live in camps for refugees and internally displaced people, particularly those unaccompanied by adults. Measures to reduce sexual exploitation and gender-based violence against women and girls in war include training soldiers, inclusion of relevant interventions in humanitarian responses to population emergencies in war, reporting and support systems for victims of rape in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons, prosecution of rape as a war crime, and making organized rape a crime against humanity.

Parties must also facilitate humanitarian assistance to ensure that the health infrastructure of children's lives is not destroyed. Perpetrators should be prosecuted for actions such as destroying clinics, schools, and hospitals, protected by international law. If access to health services is hindered by violent conflict, humanitarian ceasefires should be implemented to enable access.

[4] Unaccompanied Children | The Administration for Children and Families, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/uc (last visited Oct 7, 2024).
[5] Avinash K. Shetty, *Infectious Diseases among Refugee Children*, 6 CHILDREN (BASEL) 129, 139 (2019).
[6] Angelo A. Alonzo & Nancy R. Reynolds, *Stigma, HIV and AIDS: An Exploration and Elaboration of a Stigma Trajectory*, 41 SOCIAL SCIENCE & MEDICINE 303, 308 (1995).

Rehabilitating children affected by war (tertiary prevention) involves addressing the psychological impacts of war on children, moving toward education in the Culture of Peace, which is an approach to primary prevention of recurrence of war.

The article argues that efforts to make war less damaging for children are important but a feeble response due to the intensity and magnitude of suffering involved. It suggests that focusing solely on making war more tolerable for children is preposterous, as it may not be as effective as addressing other issues like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, or malaria. Poverty, on the other hand, should be treated with the assumption that it will always be with us and a fact of life. The European Union has evolved its conflict management institutions to a point where war is unthinkable between member states. There are clear alternatives to war in dealing with intra- and inter-state conflicts, such as the judicial process, democratic functioning, dialogue, nonviolent struggle, and cultural change from encouragement and support of violence in conflict response to support and knowledge of peace processes. Health professionals should define war as a serious global public health problem and focus on primary prevention, such as removing the vector of illness or making conditions unfavorable for survival. If a peace system can be devised for an entity as large, diverse, and populous as Europe, it can be devised at a global level. There are global networks of health professionals working to eliminate war, such as the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and the Peace and Development Network (TRANSCEND), which includes several physicians.

LEGAL INTRICACIES

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) mandates states to take all feasible measures to prevent children from participating in hostilities. The Optional Protocol, adopted in 2000, entered into force in 2002 and has 167 parties as of 2017. The Protocol aims to remedy some of the CRC's perceived inadequacies by specifying that states must take all feasible measures to ensure that children do not take direct part in hostilities.

The Optional Protocol requires states to deposit a binding declaration upon ratification or accession that sets forth their minimum age of voluntary recruitment as determined under national law. However, approximately three-quarters of states list minimum ages of voluntary recruitment of eighteen or older.

International humanitarian law, such as the Fourth Geneva Convention, grants special protections to children,[7] including barring occupying power from commissioning persons under the age of eighteen to work. Additional Protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977,[8] ensuring that children are the object of special respect and protected against any form of indecent assault.

Additional Protocol I mandate that parties to a conflict take all feasible measures to prevent children from participating in hostilities and restricts the ability of a party to the conflict to evacuate children other than its nationals to a foreign country.

Additional Protocol II, which covers non-international armed conflict, states that children under fifteen years old are not allowed to be recruited in armed forces or groups nor participate in hostilities. This prohibition is stronger than its counterpart for international armed conflict in Additional Protocol I. Article 4(3) of Additional Protocol II requires children to receive the care and aid they require, including education, family reunification, and temporary removal from areas plagued by hostilities.

In both international and non-international armed conflict, the conscription, enlistment, or use of children under fifteen to participate

[7] GENEVA CONVENTION RELATIVE TO THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIAN PERSONS IN TIME OF WAR OF 12 AUGUST 1949 available at https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf (last visited on 7 October 2024).
[8] Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols I and II of 1977, available at https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/geneva-conventions-of-1949-and-additional-protocols-i-and-ii-of-1977 (last visited on 6th October 2024.)

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actively in hostilities is a war crime with individual criminal responsibility attached. The unlawfulness of illicit recruitment expands to include state responsibility and individual penal culpability in the case of children under fifteen. Prosecutions have occurred at the Supreme Court of Justice (SCSL) and the International Criminal Court (ICC). In ***Prosecutor*** v. ***Lubanga,***[9] a rebel leader in the DRC was sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment. Jurisprudence from these institutions has clarified important aspects of this war crime, such as the definition of conscription as implying "compulsion" and enlistment as accepting and enrolling individuals when they voluntary to join an armed force or group. The CRC permits the arrest, detention, or imprisonment of a child but requires these measures to be used only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. The CRC does not favor incarceration, preferring rehabilitation and reintegration. However, it does not bar incarceration.

EDUCATION

In crisis situations, education is crucial for youth development, providing physical, psychosocial, and cognitive safeguarding. It equips young individuals with coping mechanisms, facilitating access to essential services and equipping them with skills for holistic development.

Its Article 28 of CRC guarantees free compulsory primary education for all; progressive free secondary education that should in any case be available and accessible to all; and accessibility to higher education on the basis of capacity.

The early years of 0-3 and the later window from 9-14 are critical periods for youth development. Interventions targeting youth not only benefit individuals but also the broader community, fostering skill development and engagement in employment and voluntary initiatives. However, emergency educational programming often caters to younger children, neglecting the developmental rights of adolescents and young adults. Barriers to access must be dismantled, particularly for young women, disabled individuals, and those in precarious circumstances. Engaging young people as educators and facilitators is essential during periods of displacement.

LIVELIHOODS

Livelihood initiatives are crucial for humanitarian programs involving youth, as they possess adequate human, social, and financial capital. Acquiring essential tools for securing a livelihood, such as life skills, vocational training, job-seeking assistance, and ancillary support mechanisms, enhances employability, self-esteem, confidence, and fosters a sense of agency. Empowering youth mitigates the propensity for harmful behaviors like substance abuse, violence, and premature sexual activity. Young women face disproportionate challenges in accessing resources, exacerbating unemployment and food insecurity. Humanitarian agencies should implement various economic empowerment interventions, including cash or voucher assistance, income-generating activities, infrastructure projects, livestock and agricultural support, financial inclusion initiatives, market access strategies, job creation, and vocational training.

HEALTH

During humanitarian emergencies, young individuals face health challenges such as general health, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health. Contextual factors often lead to mortality, such as diarrheal diseases, respiratory infections, and pregnancy complications. Adolescents in such situations are at high risk of poor mental health outcomes due to complex emergencies. Recent mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions in low- and middle-income countries have not adequately addressed climate change. While MHPSS interventions generally have positive impacts, further research is needed to confirm these effects. Gender and disability status also play a role in

[9] *Prosecutor* v. *Lubanga* ICC-01/04-01/06

shaping coping strategies, with girls often facing sexual violence and boys more at risk of physical violence.

NUTRITION

Malnutrition significantly impacts population health, especially during adolescence, a critical period for growth, maturation, and brain development. It manifests in various forms, including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and obesity, heightening the risk of chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. Gender inequities and sociocultural norms contribute to malnutrition, particularly among girls and boys. In humanitarian crises, addressing malnutrition is crucial, especially in areas with food scarcity.

Article 24 encapsulate that 'States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.'

To mitigate these issues, a comprehensive assessment of nutritional conditions tailored to adolescents' unique demographics is crucial. Social and behaviour change strategies, such as engaging young people in peer-to-peer nutrition education initiatives, are also essential. Community-based platforms can provide opportunities for engagement and learning, while targeted health and nutrition counselling should prioritize households with pregnant and lactating adolescent girls and young parents.

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH)

The involvement of young people in humanitarian water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) initiatives is crucial for fostering sustainable practices and compliance with national and international legal frameworks. However, the lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities in educational institutions can exacerbate gender inequities and undermine the broader objectives of humanitarian response. Empowering young people as WASH promoters enhances project efficacy and ensures lasting impacts within communities. This empowerment must be grounded in participatory rights, allowing young people a voice in the design and implementation of WASH initiatives. Successful strategies within the WASH sector resonate with young people's interests and capacities, such as engaging in campaigns, fostering volunteerism, and developing technical and communication skills. By prioritizing the safety, rights, and active participation of young individuals in WASH initiatives, we can mitigate risks and foster a generation of informed leaders committed to sustainable water resource management.

SUSTAINING PEACE

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250, ratified in 2015, emphasizes the importance of young people in peace and security. It calls for their involvement in political, social, and economic spheres, including education, employment, and socioeconomic development. The study on youth, peace, and security (2018) shows that young individuals are actively engaging in community service, civic engagement, and advocacy for local needs. This engagement transcends humanitarian and developmental responses and aims to address root causes of conflict, human rights violations, and violations of international humanitarian law. Peacebuilding activities can occur before, during, or after conflict, and can lead to more proactive citizens committed to peace.

'Article 6. 1. Articulates that states Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life.'

To effectively engage in peacebuilding, specific conditions must be established, including political participation spaces, access to essential social services, strong connections between youth and communities, and opportunities to enhance confidence and self-esteem.

PROTECTION

Youth in humanitarian contexts face unique protection risks, including high crime rates, harassment by law enforcement, and

exploitation by armed forces. They often live in perilous neighborhoods, often in conflict-affected regions. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, which can lead to sexual abuse.

Article 18 "***States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child.***"

Despite these challenges, young people are increasingly taking on protective roles in humanitarian responses. Community-based and women-led initiatives are engaging young women in identifying protection needs, mapping services, providing psychosocial support, and challenging social norms. However, this participation can provoke backlash from local authorities, necessitating a balance between youth empowerment and potential repercussions.

CHILD PROTECTION (AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY WITHIN PROTECTION)

The Child Protection Area of Responsibility must prioritize the interests of young individuals, as they require specialized protection services and can be trained and mobilized to safeguard their peers. They face various child protection concerns, including gender-based violence, child marriage, and arbitrary detention. The best-interests principle, enshrined in international human rights instruments, must guide humanitarian actions for internally displaced, refugee, returnee, or stateless children, emphasizing the safety, dignity, and holistic development of these young individuals in vulnerable contexts.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY WITHIN PROTECTION)

The increasing risk of violence in humanitarian settings, particularly against young people, is a result of pre-existing gender inequalities. Adolescent girls and young women are particularly vulnerable, especially those with disabilities, who face physical and sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. The prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) is exacerbated by societal prejudices, such as homophobia and transphobia, which hinder LGBTQIA+ individuals' access to support. Humanitarian actors must adopt a proactive stance, considering the occurrence of GBV even without precise data. Sexual assault and rape are common, especially in unsafe areas. Armed groups' involvement in sexual violence violates human rights and intensifies domestic violence. Addressing GBV requires a comprehensive, intersectional approach, including collaboration among allies, partners, and activists, while ensuring funding and resources do not divert funding away from women's organizations.

HOUSING, LAND AND PROPERTY (AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY WITHIN PROTECTION)

Crisis-affected young people face significant challenges, including eviction from housing and homelessness. Legal restrictions and insecure tenure arrangements can exacerbate these issues, leading to financial precarity and exploitation. To address these issues, humanitarian actors must understand the tenure arrangements faced by young people, devising strategies to strengthen tenure security and mitigate risks of exploitation and eviction. A comprehensive approach considering legal frameworks and socio-economic realities is crucial for fostering stability and safeguarding rights in crisis contexts.

SHELTER

Empowering young individuals in shelter-related assessments is crucial for disaster preparedness. It fosters community goodwill and enhances the potential for lasting impacts. Young people should understand risks and contribute to improving living conditions and security of tenure. Involving young women, especially adolescent girls, in shelter initiatives

can prevent harm like overcrowding, domestic violence, sexual assault, and child marriage. Insecure tenure, lack of clear rental agreements, and lack of support mechanisms are also challenges faced by young individuals. Integrating them into decision-making processes ensures their rights and security.

VULNERABLE CATEGORIES OF CRISIS-AFFECTED YOUNG PEOPLE

The vulnerability of crisis-affected young people, including orphans, adolescent girls, undocumented individuals, and those with disabilities, requires targeted interventions. These individuals face intersecting adversities that exacerbate their plight. A nuanced understanding and intersectional approach to humanitarian assistance is needed to address these complexities. UNICEF's Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs) serve as a foundational policy framework, but their efficacy depends on practical implementation. The sectors of Health, Nutrition, WASH, Child Protection, and Education must not operate in silos, as they are interconnected. The challenge lies in ensuring the rights of the most vulnerable young people are actively championed in practice, requiring flexibility, inclusivity, and genuine engagement with affected communities.

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Engaging young people in humanitarian contexts is crucial for their growth, empowerment, and active participation in community resilience. This engagement not only aids in acquiring knowledge and competencies but also helps create age-appropriate strategies that consider the diverse needs of their peers and marginalized groups. However, merely acknowledging young people's potential is insufficient; structural barriers must be dismantled to facilitate their participation.

Article 12 Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously.

The Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health advocate for inclusive partnerships that empower young people to influence policies and programs. However, gender-specific barriers, such as limited mobility and domestic responsibilities, hinder their participation. Programmatic strategies should prioritize identifying and eliminating these barriers, mobilizing community support, and fostering safe dialogue. Addressing mental health and psychosocial support needs of all young people is also essential. The Doha Youth Declaration calls for gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction education, community engagement, and training affected populations as facilitators.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

The integration of adolescents and youth in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) is crucial for developing effective responses. This includes service mapping, referral pathways, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). Young people can provide insights into community dynamics, identify gaps, and contribute to user-friendly and age-appropriate pathways. They can also enhance consistency and quality in GBV responses through youth-led advocacy and training. To integrate young people, existing networks and organizations should be leveraged, such as child protection actors, educational institutions, and youth organizations. The reality faced by young people in humanitarian crises is alarming, with millions affected by violence, armed conflict, and natural disasters. Engaging young people in GBV response is essential for effective humanitarian action, fostering a holistic and inclusive response.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Investing in adolescents and youth is crucial for disrupting intergenerational cycles of poverty, violence, and discrimination. By enhancing their health, well-being, and educational attainment,

governments can improve the well-being of future generations. Early adolescence is a critical developmental window for cognitive and emotional growth, and governments should implement supportive macroeconomic policies and targeted investments in health, education, and skill acquisition while promoting gender equality.

Emergencies disrupt the educational, social, and emotional development of young individuals, leading to health complications, disabilities, and limited access to essential goods and services. Young women and girls face disproportionately severe repercussions, including sexual and reproductive health challenges and gender-based violence (GBV). Migration has also increased the vulnerability of young people, with millions experiencing profound deprivations during their journeys. The Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 19 (2016) asserts that state parties often undermine the potential of adolescents and fail to invest in measures necessary for their rights. International conventions and normative frameworks guide interactions with youth populations, and international humanitarian law and refugee law enshrine access to life-saving services and the right to prevention and response mechanisms for GBV. Gender inequality in societal structures disproportionately affects girls and young women, leading to inequitable outcomes in economic, political, social, and health domains. In times of crisis, girls often bear a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities, reducing their chances of educational enrollment and heightening the risk of early marriage. Despite progress in certain areas, gender-specific barriers persist, preventing access to services and active participation in humanitarian initiatives.

To address these issues, young people can engage in the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) by understanding humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. By involving young people in the HPC, agencies can foster an environment where diverse voices are represented, mitigating the risk of perceived bias. They can also serve as crucial intermediaries, facilitating dialogue between humanitarian actors and communities. Barriers to participation include societal norms, social norms, and engagement with elders. Strategies for engagement include capacity building, creating safe spaces for dialogue, promoting youth-led initiatives, involving young people in policy development, and establishing robust feedback mechanisms. By addressing these barriers, young people can contribute significantly to the efficacy and inclusivity of humanitarian responses, ensuring that gender equality is prioritized in humanitarian responses. Empowering young people through meaningful engagement in humanitarian action is essential for fostering resilient communities and promoting social cohesion. This includes acknowledging and developing their capacities and skills, ensuring youth-focused protection, supporting physical and emotional well-being, facilitating networking and information sharing, promoting young people as connectors and peace builders, generating data and evidence on young people to promote accountability, applying an age-sensitive, youth-centered approach in all phases of emergency response, systematically consulting with young people's organizations, involving young people in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs, and harnessing social media platforms to disseminate information and give young people a voice.

Additional initiatives include ICRC voluntary and internship programs, local NGOs internship and youth employment initiatives, and budget allocation for Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. These recommendations aim to create inclusive, participatory frameworks that address the immediate needs of young individuals while contributing to long-term social cohesion and resilience. Recognizing young people as vital stakeholders in the humanitarian landscape is crucial for fostering effective, equitable, and sustainable responses

to crises. By implementing these recommendations, humanitarian actors can create inclusive, participatory frameworks that address the immediate needs of young individuals while fostering long-term social cohesion and resilience.