

Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities

A resource for Reset to guide and inform Community Sponsorship Groups who support refugee families with children or adults with disabilities.

This Disability Inclusion Resource Guide is tailored to Reset’s processes and the relationship between Community Sponsorship groups and refugee families. It aims to provide information about refugees with disabilities in the context of resettlement in the UK, and how to promote and facilitate meaningful inclusion. This guide has been produced by [Kate McAuliff](#), a multidisciplinary consultant and researcher working at the intersection of disability and displacement. Her work focuses on disability inclusion in humanitarian practice in resettlement and displacement settings.

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Who and where are refugees with disabilities?

Disability is an aspect of our global human diversity which includes [16% of the global population](#), according to the World Health Organization. Disability comprises a multitude of physical, mental, socio-behavioral, sensory, and other physical or neurodiversities. Disability can be either [congenital](#) or [acquired](#).

In displaced populations, there is typically a [higher incidence](#) of disability. This is due both to disability acquired while living amongst disaster, war, conflict, or resource deprivation. AS well as congenital disabilities which have lacked treatment or proper care due to unrest and resource constraints in conflict settings.

[Refugees with disabilities](#) remain internally displaced in their countries of origin, are refugees in nearby countries, and are resettled abroad. Refugees with disabilities are not a homogenous group. They come from every country, and are among every age, gender, race, religion, and background that exists among refugee populations.

A refugee's disability status or the disability of their child or family member may or may not be disclosed with their other information. Furthermore, some disabilities are [invisible](#), and may not be immediately apparent. Best practice is to remain aware of any access barriers a person may be experiencing, and let them lead in describing their needs and experiences.

What is Disability?

Disability stems from the [interaction](#) between a health condition or state of the body or mind and the environmental or personal factors in a person's environment. Disability is sometimes viewed from a medical perspective, with a focus on certain functions of the body or mind.

In different contexts, you may encounter varied perspectives on disability falling broadly into the [medical and social categories](#). The graphic below can help you to identify these perspectives, and consider how the medical model can be harmful and oppressive to disabled refugees and their families.

Medical Model	Social / Sociopolitical / Human Rights Model
<i>Disability is a problem, abnormality, deficiency, disorder, or tragedy.</i>	Disability is a difference and an aspect of human diversity.
<i>Disabled people should be cured and become 'normal'.</i>	Disability is 'normal' and disabled people deserve accommodations and access, but don't need a cure.
<i>Disability stems from a problem within the disabled person.</i>	Disability stems from when society or space conflicts with the function of a person's body or mind.
<i>Professionals are the expert on what disabled people and their families should do.</i>	Disabled people and their families are the experts on their experience, and should be supported and informed by advocates, professionals, and others.

Review the above table once more and consider replacing the word **'disability'** with the word **'displacement'**. Refugees are often faced with the same [dehumanizing](#) and problematizing language.

Refugees with disabilities are met on two fronts with narratives which seek to remove their agency and humanity. Keep awareness of the narratives around disabled refugees and how to support their rights and personhood through a social model perspective.

What are different types of disabilities?

Disability is a social identity and experience; and an aspect of human diversity. Disability is a broad category including [developmental](#), [physical](#), sensory (i.e. [visual impairment](#), [deafness](#)), or [behavioral/emotional or mental health](#) disabilities as well as other [physical](#) or [neurodiversity](#). The list below does not cover all disabilities, but may be a helpful guide to begin understanding or identifying some of the most common disabilities.

- **Neurodiversities and Developmental Disabilities**
 - [Down Syndrome](#): Down Syndrome is a genetic condition of a person's chromosomes. It impacts physical features and intellectual disability.
 - [Autism](#): Autism is the term for a wide spectrum of neurodiversity. It may impact communication, attention, reaction or relation to one's physical or social environment, information processing, or other behaviors. Autism is also called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and may also present with ADHD, dyslexia, or other disabilities. It may also present as what some call Asperger's, which relates to above average intelligence and autism.
 - [Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus](#): Spina Bifida is the underdevelopment of the spine in the womb. Hydrocephalus is a neurobiological disorder in the brain related to the buildup of fluid. Both of these disorders are typically identified at birth and impact the function and longevity of children.
 - Learning Disabilities
 - [ADHD](#): ADHD is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder which related to challenges with restlessness, shortened attention, and forgetfulness.
 - [Dyslexia](#): Dyslexia is a learning disability related to language. Specifically, reading and spelling as well as verbal memory and processing are impacted by dyslexia.
 - [Dyscalculia](#): Dyscalculia is a learning disability specific to math and numbers. In addition to math skills. It may appear as mistakes or challenges in remembering numbers, counting currency, reading clocks, or tracking time.
 - [Dysgraphia](#): Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder related to writing. It can appear as challenges or differences in the physical use of writing implements or the disordering of letters, sounds, or other elements related to writing.
 - [Dyspraxia](#): Dyspraxia is a developmental coordination disorder. It can impact balance, energy, and any mobility, motor, or fine-motor skills.

- Physical Disabilities
 - [Wheelchair or other mobility support users](#): People who use wheelchairs or other mobility supports may have challenges in walking or standing at all times or sometimes. This can be due to various medical or physical needs. Aids for mobility include canes, walkers, scooters, power chairs, wheelchairs, and more.
 - [Amputees](#): Amputation is the loss or removal of a limb due to traumatic injury, surgery, or illness. This may lead to differences or challenges in mobility or other activities.
 - [Spinal cord injury](#): Spinal cord injuries occur when nerves or vertebrae of the spine are injured, torn, or severed. This can lead to various stages of paralysis.
 - [Muscular dystrophy](#): Muscular dystrophy is an umbrella term for several diseases which involve the muscles of the body becoming progressively weaker over time. This is a genetic condition impacting the formation of proteins and can occur at any age. It may lead to the use of mobility aids or other tools for walking or gripping.
 - [Epilepsy](#): Epilepsy is a condition of the electrical activity in the brain which causes seizures. This can lead to partial or total loss of control of the body and lack of consciousness during the recurrent seizures. The seizures may also be a risk factor due to potential injury.
 - [Little Persons](#): Little Persons, persons of short stature, or dwarfism are all terms to describe the condition of genetically being of proportionate or disproportionate short stature due to genetic or medical causes such as Achondroplasia.

- Sensory Disability
 - [Vision Impairment / Blindness / Low Vision](#): People who have less, little, or no vision have a few terms including: vision impairment, blind, low vision, or other more specific disability names such as macular degeneration. Blind people have a variety of tools such as canes, braille, screen readers, and other technologies they may or may not utilize.
 - [Deaf / Hard of Hearing](#): Deaf or hard of hearing people have limited to no hearing and are heterogeneous in their use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and/or sign language. Sign languages are different all over the world (the UK uses British Sign Language) and are full languages. Some deaf or hard of hearing people speak or read lips, others do not.

- [Deafblind](#): Deafblindness is a condition of being both deaf or hard of hearing and having some limited or loss of vision. This can be caused by a variety of conditions which occur over time, or a person can be born with or acquire deafness, blindness, or both. Deafblind people can communicate and navigate but with support and training.
- Mental Health Disabilities or Disorders
 - [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#): Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a condition that is related to a traumatic experience. The person may experience flashbacks, nightmares, and symptoms of depression or anxiety.
 - [Depression](#): Depression is a state of sadness, general unhappiness, hopelessness, or other low feelings. Low mood related to depression may also lead to trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, or suicidal thoughts.
 - [Anxiety](#): Anxiety is a state or disorder of nervousness, worry, dread, restlessness, stress, and other related experiences such as trouble sleeping and concentrating. This can be classified as Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and may also present physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, dizziness, or panic attacks.
- Physical Diversities
 - [Visible Difference or disfigurement](#): Visible differences or disfigurement include congenital or acquired conditions, marks, scars, or other instances which make them look 'different'. These include scars, birthmarks, skin conditions like vitiligo, burns, impacts from cancer treatment such as surgery or radiotherapy, cleft lip or cleft palate or other craniofacial conditions, or conditions, malformations, or losses of the ear or eye. Visual differences also include swelling and lymphatic conditions, hair loss such as from alopecia, or limb differences.

Disability is a cross-cutting element in a multitude of aspects of a person and family's life. This includes: healthcare, education, livelihoods, relationships, familial and community dynamics, and social inclusion. Disability can be factor which leads to marginalization of disabled people when access and inclusion in any of the above aspects of life is not upheld.

What does disability look like for refugees?

Disabled people, including and especially disabled refugees, are at even higher risk for oppression, marginalization, and neglect. This is due to their position in (at least) two minority

communities: displaced people and disabled people, as well any other language or cultural minority they may be in. This means they are likely to ‘fall through the cracks’ of programs which are designed for one group (i.e. refugees) but not the other (i.e. disability) or vice versa.

Disabled people, [refugees](#), and of course disabled refugees are also at an increased risk of violence. In 2012, a large scale meta-analysis was performed by the World Health Organization synthesizing 21 studies globally, including over 21,500 people with disabilities. This resulted in the conclusion that people with disabilities, especially those with mental disabilities are much more vulnerable to violence than those without any disabilities. People with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely, and those with mental disabilities are four times more likely to be victimized by violence ([Hughes et al., 2012](#)).

Due to these risk factors, disabled refugees are more vulnerable to exclusion and related impacts on their wellbeing, health, and livelihoods.

In the case of refugees with disabilities, keep in mind that the disability may have been caused by or arisen related to the conflict which displaced the family. This could be the loss of limbs or destruction of sight or hearing in explosions such as [IEDs or bombings](#). It’s also seen in the traumatic impact of these experiences which may lead to [mental, behavioral, or emotional disability](#) and stress. Proceeding with sensitivity is key.

According to the Women’s Refugee Commission and the International Rescue Committee, leaders in disability inclusion for refugee populations, “Persons with disabilities are among the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups in any crisis-affected community” ([2015, p. 1](#)). Vulnerability is increased in relation to violence, gender based violence, as well as increased health risks due to the lack of education and information sharing which is a typical experience of populations which are socially isolated. This vulnerability is at least partly, if not mostly, due to the perception of refugees, persons with disabilities, and therefore refugees with disabilities.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is a landmark convention for the disability community. Article 11 ensures their protection in humanitarian crisis contexts, and Article 32 notes the importance of inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities which may be facilitated by international cooperation. The CRPD importantly notes that “women and girls with disabilities are often at greater risk, both within and outside the home, of violence, injury or abuse” ([UNCPRD, 2007, p. 2](#)).

Becoming displaced and arriving in the UK as a refugee entails a large amount of stress and effort. A family with a disabled member, and a disabled refugee themselves face even more

barriers to access and support. Furthermore, refugees with disabilities and their families have the additional need of accessing accommodations, support, assistive devices, and medical care they upon arrival in the UK.

Views of Disability

Disability in general or specific disabilities may be viewed differently depending on [cultural context](#), resources, and environments. It's important to be sensitive to how others may define disability, as well as creating [safe spaces](#) without judgement.

People with disabilities often face stigma, discrimination, [ableism](#), or marginalization. This is further exacerbated by being a refugee in a new country. This may lead to a family not disclosing they have a disabled child or adult member, for fear of discrimination. In other cases, there are opportunities for disabled refugees and their families to be [prioritized for resettlement](#) or other services within the asylum system.

Inter-Cultural Perceptions of Disability

Refugee families bring their own cultures and languages with them, this includes their conceptualizations of what disability is in general, and perhaps how they understand the specific disability in their family. Their perception may align or conflict with what is common in the UK, or what is presented in this guide. While it may be difficult to navigate, it is important to keep an open mind.

Perception of disability may include the idea that a child born with a disability is a [punishment for ancestral or parental wrongdoing](#), or as a result of [curses](#) from mystical [sources](#) or enemies. In other cases, people who became disabled as a result of war, such as amputees, may be treated with honor for their sacrifice and reject the 'disability' label.

Cultural perception may also indicate the situation of the disabled refugee before arriving in the UK. This might include isolation within the home or [institutionalization](#) or other contexts which may impact the disabled person's life experience.

Disclosure and identification of disability

With the above cultural perceptions of disability in mind, it's notable that disability is sometimes not disclosed when families or individuals seek asylum and pursue resettlement.

In some cases, disability is in a vulnerable persons category, and may be prioritized. Refugees with mental and physical disabilities are now included in a [‘Priority One’ group along with emergency cases to be referred for resettlement from UNHCR](#) and NGOs. In this case, disability may not only be disclosed but information altered to meet this criterion. An example may be a deaf person who typically does not identify as disabled (many deaf people identify as members of a language minority and not a disability group) but who took on the disability label when completing paperwork. Equally if not more common is the case of a family or individual believing the disability to be a source of shame, or that they will be denied resettlement if they request additional disability-related resources. In this situation, the disability is hidden.

In either case, Community Sponsorship groups may be in the situation of working with families, schools, and other support systems to identify and accommodate disabilities within the refugee family. Consult the links throughout this guide to proceed sensitively, utilize trustworthy resources, and always follow the lead of the disabled refugee and their family.

The rights of refugees with disabilities

The UK has [disability benefits](#) that disabled refugees are entitled to. These include [Personal Independence Payment \(PIP\)](#), a [Disability Living Allowance \(DLA\)](#), and [other sources of support](#).

Due to vital advocacy work by [Refugee Action](#) and other organizations in 2016, refugees are eligible for disability benefits when they are granted sanctuary in the UK, and don’t have to wait to meet the formerly imposed 2-year presence test. This ensures disabled refugees, and their families can access their rights and vital resources and support.

People with disabilities in the UK, including resettled disabled refugees, have the right to seek access arrangements. Access arrangements, reasonable adjustments, or accommodations are organized supports for disabled people such as interpreters, assistive devices, or increased time. Assistive devices and technologies are also within the rights of disabled refugees to use. These include wheelchairs and powerchairs, hearing aids, glasses, or learning and communication aids. Fundraising and other support may be needed to fund the purchase of these items, visit the linked charities at the end of this document for sources of support.

It’s important to remember that disability or refugee status should never take away someone’s rights. Therefore, any disability benefit, law, or program should be inclusive for refugees with disabilities; and any refugee benefit, law, or program should be inclusive of disabled refugees.

Policy and protocol of [UNHCR](#) provides an optimistic outlook and leadership on this in establishing resettlement guidelines and exerting their influence on global refugee admissions which have evolved over time to become more inclusive of refugees with disabilities.

Supporting individuals, parents, & families

While disability is very common in any community, you may be encountering disability for the first time. Fortunately, you don't have to be any kind of expert to support disabled people and their families! There are resources available if you know where to find them.

Supporting the agency and individuality of disabled people

Disability is a diverse category, but the expert on the disability you're encountering is the disabled person themselves! In making any decision, include the disabled person as much as possible.

Parents and family members, especially with disabled children, should also be trusted to make informed decisions. Be sure to work with interpreters and other supports to ensure families and individuals understand their options. Then facilitate them making their own decisions about accommodations, education, and other disability-related resources.

Disability in the family system

Disability in the family can lead to a variety of tasks and roles. For example, some family members may be acting as [carers](#) for their disabled member, which may impact their schedule and involvement in other activities while resettling in the UK.

Disability is cross-cutting, and impacts a multitude of aspects of family and community life. Keep a keen eye to any potential impact on or barriers to the opportunities given to non-disabled family members as well as any family members who aren't in a caretaking role.

Community Support Group Functionalities

As a Community Sponsorship group, you likely have divided responsibilities. If the refugee family you are welcoming has a member with a disability, each person in the group may have to include the disability aspect at some point. You may want to consider appointing one member to collect the disability resources and knowledge for the group.

Working with local authorities, schools, and communities

Don't forget that disability is common and the disabled refugee, their family and your Community Sponsorship group don't need to navigate alone! There are resources and responsibilities which are shared in your community and beyond.

Inclusive Education

In the UK, there are several options for the education of children with disabilities. Every school in the UK should have a [Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator \(SENCO\)](#) who can assist in advising and implementing suitable education for a disabled student. Legally, schools are meant to prioritize seeking accommodation for disabled children to remain in the mainstream classroom, but other specialized classrooms or schools may be an alternative option.

For advice about special education needs and disabilities, you can contact [SENDIAS](#), a free advice line provided by the [Council for Disabled Children](#), available throughout the UK.

Disability Organizations

The UK is home to a multitude of [organizations](#), [charities](#), and [initiatives](#) for and by people with disabilities. While these are not refugee-specific, their experience with disability is a vital resource. Many charities will also be a gateway into a community of people with disabilities which the disabled refugee and their family can connect with.

Below are some examples of disability organizations you might contact for support and links to additional resources:

- Neurodiversities and Developmental Disabilities
 - [Down Syndrome](#)
 - [Autism](#)
 - [Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus](#)
 - Learning Disabilities
 - [ADHD](#)
 - [Dyslexia](#)
 - [Dyscalculia](#)
 - [Dysgraphia](#)

- [Dyspraxia](#)
 - Physical Disabilities
 - [Wheelchair or other mobility support users](#)
 - [Amputees](#)
 - [Spinal cord injury](#)
 - [Muscular dystrophy](#)
 - [Epilepsy](#)
 - [Little Persons](#)
 - Sensory Disability
 - [Vision Impairment / Blindness / Low Vision](#)
 - [Deaf / Hard of Hearing](#)
 - [Deafblind](#)
 - Mental Health Disabilities or Disorders
 - [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#)
 - [Depression](#)
 - [Anxiety](#)
 - Physical Diversities
 - [Visible Difference or disfigurement](#)
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Links to other resources and information

Materials about refugees with disabilities and resettlement

- International Disability Alliance - Recommendation to Include a Stand-Alone Paragraph on Refugees with Disabilities in the Global Compact on Refugees
 - <https://www.unhcr.org/media/international-disability-alliance-recommendation-include-stand-alone-paragraph-refugees>
- UNHCR - Forced displacement and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas: perspectives of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon
 - <https://www.unhcr.org/media/forced-displacement-and-use-explosive-weapons-populated-areas-perspectives-syrian-women>

- UNHCR - UNHCR's approach to forcibly displaced and stateless persons with disabilities – 2022
 - <https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcrs-approach-forcibly-displaced-and-stateless-persons-disabilities-2022>
- UNHCR – Persons at risk – Persons with disabilities
 - <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/persons-risk/persons-disabilities>
- UNHCR - Conclusion on refugees with disabilities and other persons with disabilities protected and assisted by UNHCR No. 110 (LXI) - 2010
 - <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/conclusion-refugees-disabilities-and-other-persons-disabilities-protected-and-assisted>
- UNHCR - Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement
 - <https://www.unhcr.org/media/working-persons-disabilities-forced-displacement>
- Women’s Refugee Commission – In Their Own Words: COVID-19 Update on Displaced Persons with Disabilities
 - <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/in-their-own-words-covid-19-update-on-displaced-persons-with-disabilities/>
- Women’s Refugee Commission - Disability Inclusion, Translating Policy into Practice in Humanitarian Action
 - <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/disability-inclusion-translating-policy-into-practice-in-humanitarian-action/>
- Women’s Refugee Commission – Disability Inclusion in Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Programs
 - <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/disability-inclusion-in-child-protection-and-gender-based-violence-programs/>
- Women’s Refugee Commission - Disability Inclusion in Gender-based Violence Programming
 - <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/disability-inclusion-in-gender-based-violence-programming-english-accessible/>
- Women’s Refugee Commission - GBV Disability Toolkit Overview
 - <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/gbv-disability-toolkit-overview/>
- Women’s Refugee Commission - Sharing and Learning on the Inclusion of Aging and Disability in the Syrian Crisis
 - <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/sharing-and-learning-on-the-inclusion-of-aging-and-disability-in-the-syrian-crisis/>

UK Disability Law & Rights Resources

- Disability Rights UK – Personal Independence Payment (PIP)
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/personal-independence-payment-pip>
- Disability Rights UK - Education and Training Jargon Buster
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/education-and-training-jargon-buster>
- Disability Rights UK – Carer’s Allowance
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/carers-allowance>
- Disability Rights UK – Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/disability-living-allowance-dla>
- Disability Rights UK – the Equality Act and Disabled People
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/equality-act-and-disabled-people>
- Disability Rights UK – Links to organizations giving advice on benefits, care, and debt
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/links-organisations-giving-advice-benefits-care-and-debt>
- Disability Rights UK – What counts as a disability
 - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/what-counts-disability>