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Seulbee Lee (fully funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea), UN Volunteer with UNICEF, during a field monitoring visit on outreach activities in Una Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Contributing to emergency response for children on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina

For Seulbee Lee (Republic of Korea), volunteering with UNICEF in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Child Protection Associate, children's rights have been always her prime interest. Despite COVID-19 changing her working reality and conditions, this has not diminished her professional engagement in response and recovery, nor her motivation to carry on. Seulbee's volunteer assignment is fully funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea, and here, she shares her story.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and declared state of emergency in Bosnia and Herzegovina, vulnerable children, especially unaccompanied and separated children, are at higher risk of experiencing a disruption of basic social services.

“Seulbee’s support to UNICEF’s humanitarian response to children on the move has been significant. She has supported the office in raising much-needed funds, developing human interest stories, collecting and consolidating data to inform the response, and providing recommendations on how to better safeguard and protect children transiting through/stranded in the country. --Antonia Luedeke, Child Protection Specialist with UNICEF

Child protection emergency preparedness and COVID-19 response guidance is crucially important to enable identifying vulnerable children at risk and ensuring the continuity of child protection services. In this context, extra focus is being dedicated to Una-Sana Canton, where approximately 70 per cent of refugees and migrants are located, owing to the proximity with the Croatian border and the European Union.

Now, more than ever, the constant monitoring of operational status and identifying bottlenecks in delivering services are important. This is bolstered by feedback from beneficiaries, support to frontline workers, and building trust relationships with implementing partners on the fields.

“Though all field visits are cancelled or postponed now, field monitoring is still regularly done by implementing partners. Working with the data received, I have recently contributed to drafting a concept note for the child protection response to COVID-19. -- Seulbee Lee, UN Volunteer Child Protection Associate with UNICEF

Continuous support for children on move

Since 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina has struggled with an increasing influx of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants after previously popular migration routes to Western Europe through the Balkans shut down. More than 57,000 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, an estimated 20 per cent of whom are children, arrived between January 2018 and March 2020.

Currently, some 1,100 children are stranded in the country, more than a third of whom are unaccompanied and separated children. Many children and parents are severely traumatized by experiences in their home country, as well as experiences on their journeys – risking their lives while travelling via perilous means of transport, being preyed upon by smugglers and traffickers, and/or being exploited and sometimes sexually abused.

“ I believe that discrimination against refugees and migrants starts falling apart when a positive human relationship is built. I have seen this firsthand here, for example when we organized a soccer game in which unaccompanied children and local children participated, or when we support children from reception centres to attend public school classes together with other local children. Once the personal relationship is built, one realizes that the other person is an equal human being with the same rights that should be protected and respected. --Seulbee Lee

UNICEF has been supporting child protection, health and education response for children on the move. The emergency response includes child-friendly spaces, which provide children with opportunities to develop, play, learn and strengthen their resilience; mental health and psychosocial support; outreach activities to identify unaccompanied and separated children; assignment of legal guardianships; and 24/7 on site child protection support in temporary reception centres.

Seulbee's favourite spot to visit before the COVID-19 outbreak was the child-friendly space, because that is where children can be children, at least for some time, she says.

“ Whenever I visit the child-friendly space, I am heartened to see how children are creative, positive and resilient. I still remember a phrase written by a child that says, ‘Today is bad, but tomorrow will be better!’. It was also a heart-warming experience to receive a Christmas card from a child who participated in the activities. -- Seulbee Lee.



The message inside the Christmas card that Seulbee received. (Seulbee Lee/UNV, 2020)

Seulbee holds a Master's degree in social work as a human rights profession, and a Bachelor's degree in child welfare.

“ I am still in the learning stage, however, I was fortunate to get engaged with the organization whose mandate I share fully: safeguarding the rights of all children. Working with UNICEF has given me an opportunity to reaffirm the value of working for children. After my current mission, I will continue to work for children’s rights. --
Seulbee Lee



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