Listening to Youth Is Not Optional
Why Refugee Mental Health and Protection Systems Must Be Co-Designed With Young People

Systems designed without youth will continue to fail them.

A Youth-Led Advocacy Brief

Harbor Haven

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Executive Summary

Refugee mental health and psychosocial wellbeing are too often addressed at the margins of humanitarian response, despite being central to protection, safety, and dignity. For refugee youth, this neglect is compounded by systematic exclusion from decision-making spaces that shape the very programmes intended to support them.

Harbor Haven, a youth-led foundation, developed this advocacy brief to make a clear and urgent case:

Refugee protection systems that exclude youth voices are failing refugee youth.

Drawing on youth-led consultations and reflections, this brief argues that:

•Mental health is a core protection concern, not a supplementary service.

•Youth engagement in refugee protection remains largely tokenistic, under-resourced, and disconnected from power.

•Excluding youth from programme design and governance actively undermines mental health outcomes.

•When youth are meaningfully engaged, mental health interventions become more trusted, relevant, and effective.

This brief calls on UN agencies, NGOs, donors, and policymakers to move beyond rhetorical commitments to participation and take structural action to embed youth leadership into refugee mental health and protection systems.

1. Refugee Mental Health Is a Protection Issue Act Like It

Forced displacement exposes refugees to cumulative risks that directly impact mental health: trauma, protracted uncertainty, family separation, poverty, legal limbo, and violence. For young refugees, these challenges coincide with formative life stages, leaving deep and lasting effects.

Yet too often:

•Mental health support is underfunded or short-term

•Psychosocial services are siloed from protection casework

•Youth-specific needs are folded into “general programming”

•Participation is treated as symbolic rather than structural

This approach is inadequate.

Poor mental health increases exposure to:

•Exploitation and abuse

•Harmful coping mechanisms

•Social withdrawal

•Educational dropout

•Loss of agency and hope

If protection aims to reduce harm and restore dignity, mental health must be treated as non-negotiable.

2. Youth Are Not the Problem Exclusion Is

As a youth-led foundation, Harbor Haven works with young people who consistently express frustration at being consulted but not trusted.

Across dialogues and youth-led reflections, several realities emerged:

“We are asked to share our stories, but not to shape solutions.”

“Our trauma is data. Our ideas are ignored.”

“We want to protect our communities, but we’re locked out of decision-making.”

Key themes:

•Youth consultations lack decision-making power

•Feedback is rarely shared or acted upon

•Mental health interventions are not youth-friendly

•Youth leadership is welcomed rhetorically, resisted structurally

This is not accidental. It reflects adult-centric humanitarian systems that prioritise control over collaboration.

3. What Is Failing And Why It Matters

Tokenism Masquerading as Participation

Youth panels, surveys, and consultations are often designed to legitimise pre-made decisions rather than influence them. This erodes trust and damages wellbeing.

Mental Health Treated as Secondary

MHPSS remains under-prioritised in protection strategies, despite evidence of its central role in safety and resilience.

Power Without Accountability

Decisions affecting young refugees are routinely made without youth representation in governance, advisory bodies, or budget planning.

Chronic Under-Investment in Youth-Led Work

Youth-led mental health initiatives struggle to access:

•Direct funding

•Long-term support

•Institutional trust

The result is predictable: programmes that fail to meet real needs.

4. Why Youth Leadership Strengthens Mental Health Outcomes

Youth engagement is not charity. It is good protection practice.

Meaningful youth participation:

•Reduces stigma around mental health

•Improves service accessibility and relevance

•Builds peer-to-peer support systems

•Encourages early intervention

•Strengthens community resilience

Youth are not substitutes for professionals but without youth, systems remain blind to lived realities.

5. Advocacy Demands and Recommendations

To UN Agencies and Policymakers

•Recognise youth mental health as a core protection priority in policy and funding frameworks.

•Establish youth decision-making roles linked directly to MHPSS and protection units.

•Compensate youth participation and provide safeguarding support.

•Require evidence of meaningful youth engagement, not symbolic consultation.

To NGOs and Implementing Partners

•Co-design mental health and protection programmes with youth from the start.

•Create safe, youth-owned spaces within MHPSS and protection services.

•Invest in youth peer-support and leadership models with professional supervision.

To Donors and Funders

•Provide direct, multi-year funding to youth-led organisations addressing mental health.

•Remove structural barriers that exclude youth-led groups from funding.

•Make youth leadership a measurable funding criterion, not an optional add-on.

Commitments without resources are not commitment.

6. About Harbor Haven

Harbor Haven is a youth-led foundation committed to advancing refugee mental health and wellbeing through meaningful youth engagement in refugee protection.

We believe:

•Youth are rights-holders, not beneficiaries

•Mental health is foundational to protection

•Participation without power is tokenism

•Sustainable solutions require shared leadership

Our work is grounded in ethical engagement, accountability to affected communities, and a refusal to accept systems that speak about youth while excluding them.

Contact Harbor Haven

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