**Background**

* In 2022, global displacement reached record levels, with over 103 million forcibly displaced people. Among them are 26.7 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, with children making up roughly half of the total population[[1]](#footnote-2).
* There are specific legal and policy instruments that support the right to education for refugees. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol state that refugees should enjoy the same rights as other foreigners in their country of asylum with respect to education. This includes the right to attend public schools on the same basis as citizens of the host country. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) also specifically mentions the rights of refugee children to education and states that primary education should be compulsory and available free to all.
* In addition to these legal frameworks, various policy frameworks support the right to education for refugees. SDG 4 supports education for refugees by recognizing the importance of education for all and prioritizing the needs of marginalized and disadvantaged populations, including refugees, through specific targets that aim to increase access to education and improve the quality of education for these groups.
* The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 2018, reaffirms the commitment of States to the right to education for refugees and includes a pledge to ensure that refugee children have access to quality primary, secondary and tertiary education in national systems in hosting countries. Furthermore, the Global Compact on Refugees reaffirms international cooperation and solidarity toward this commitment to quality education for all refugees and their hosting communities and calls for the "provision of adequate funding to ensure the availability and sustainability of quality education for refugee children and adolescents.".
* The Global Compact on Refugees advocates for children to return to learning within three months of displacement; however, this is rarely the case. Around 35 per cent of persons forced to flee across borders are school-age children[[2]](#footnote-3), and so it is imperative that national governments, humanitarian and development agencies plan adequately to ensure that they have rapid access to public schools and to relevant support services.
* The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is mandated to protect and assist refugees by ensuring they have access to education. UNHCR's approach to education for refugees is based on the recognition that education is a fundamental human right and essential for the protection and well-being of refugee children. This approach is further guided by the principle that education should be provided in a way that is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and flexible, considering refugee children's specific needs and circumstances.
* UNHCR Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion[[3]](#footnote-4) is situated within these global frameworks for the right to education, with a strong emphasis on the inclusion of refugees in national education systems, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees. Inclusion implies that refugee students receive an education on par with the education provided to host country students. Including refugees in national education systems also builds from the global consensus that education for refugees is, even during emergency phases, a medium- to long-term intervention rather than a parallel short-term crisis intervention.
* There has been some progress in increasing access to education for refugee children in the past two decades, with a shift towards a greater emphasis on the right to education for all children, including refugees. This has included initiatives at the international, national, and local levels to provide funding, resources, and support for refugee education. One example of an international initiative is the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), which was held in 2019 and brought together governments, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to discuss ways to improve access to education for refugees. Despite these efforts, there are still millions of refugee children who do not have access to education. Much more work needs to be done to ensure that all refugee children can access and receive a quality education.

**Challenges to accessible, inclusive, and equitable quality education for refugees**

* Historically, refugee education has been addressed through separate or parallel systems as a temporary response to refugee emergencies. However, these parallel systems are inadequate and unsustainable in responding to the increasingly complex and protracted nature of crises seen today.
* Even though it is well recognized that education in the context of displacement is critical and fundamental to protection, the available data indicate that refugee children and youth are falling behind their non-refugee peers. Access to education for refugee children remains low, with nearly half of school-aged children estimated to be out of school in2021[[4]](#footnote-5). At all levels, refugee enrolment is lower than that of non-refugees.
* While the shift towards inclusion of refugee children in national education systems has provided critical opportunities for increased access to education for refugees, ongoing efforts to implement inclusion across hosting countries have faced persistent challenges to access as well as emerging challenges to learning and the use of education in creating sustainable futures.
* Policies in hosting countries place varying degrees of restrictions on refugees' inclusion in national education systems. Barriers to refugee children and youth accessing education in national education systems include legal status, documentation that limits enrolment and completion and freedom of movement in addition to discriminatory practices, lack of flexible options – especially for overage learners who have missed schooling during flight and displacement – and safety and security. These factors can prevent refugees and stateless children and youth from accessing national education systems.
* Legal and policy barriers to refugee education access remain across various host countries. For example, in Bangladesh[[5]](#footnote-6), national policies prevent refugee children from accessing accredited education. Primary school-age children have some access to non-formal education. However, nearly **97 per cent of children aged 15-17 in Bangladesh are not enrolled in formal education or training[[6]](#footnote-7). In Trinidad and Tobago, displaced Venezuelans also do not have access to the national education system, which has led to a parallel education response.**
* Meanwhile, other refugee-hosting countries with no legal and policy barriers may struggle with development, economic and fragility challenges, including providing education to their national population. 74 per cent of refugees and others needing international protection are hosted in low- and middle-income countries[[7]](#footnote-8). Many top refugee-hosting countries are on the OECD's list of fragile countries. In these contexts, schools are often under-resourced, and expanding school services to include displaced children and young people can place a major strain on host communities and governments, particularly in situations where services may already be under pressure to meet the needs of local populations.
* In addition to contextual constraints, refugee children may have specific needs that support their successful integration into formal schooling, such as language learning, support in foundational subjects, and assistance adapting to new curriculum elements. They may also need psychological support to cope with any traumatic events they might have experienced. Unfortunately, these additional needs are often unmet in national education systems that lack sufficient support and capacity.
* Recognition of qualifications and prior learning in countries of asylum and upon return to countries of origin remains an ongoing concern for refugees. Recognition is particularly challenging when learning has occurred outside of formal education.[[8]](#footnote-9)
* Education for refugee girls is a significant challenge, as they often face barriers that prevent them from attending school[[9]](#footnote-10). These barriers can include financial constraints, lack of access to schools, cultural and social norms that discourage girls' education. As a result, refugee girls often have lower rates of school enrolment and higher dropout rates compared to their male counterparts and non-refugee peers.
* The education of refugee children with disabilities is also a major challenge, as they often face additional barriers due to their disabilities. These barriers can include poor infrastructure, inadequate accommodations and support, negative attitudes and stigma. As a result, refugee children with disabilities often report lower rates of school enrolment and higher dropout rates than their peers without disabilities.
* Teachers in refugee settings often face challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, language barriers and the added challenges of working with students who may have experienced traumatic events and displacement. Refugee teachers are often not included in national teacher management and development systems, and they face challenges in finding paid teaching work as well as limitations in obtaining recognition for their credentials.[[10]](#footnote-11)
* Traditionally, funding for refugee education has been similar to other types of humanitarian aid, meaning it is often short-term, fragmented, unpredictable and designated for specific projects outside national education systems. To transition from parallel education services to including refugees into national systems, funding must shift from short-term humanitarian aid to multi-year development financing to the benefit of both refugees and host communities. The GCR calls for financing to be predictable, flexible, multi-year and unearmarked.[[11]](#footnote-12)

**Analysis of refugee children participation at different levels of education**

*Pre-primary and Primary Education*

* Young refugee and other displaced children are often exposed to prolonged adversity, such as violence, insecurity, economic hardship and family separation, and might be lacking age-appropriate stimulation, among other challenges. Large bodies of evidence tell us that severe and prolonged adversity in the early life of children can alter brain development, making children vulnerable to toxic-stress response. This can have a long-term, negative impact on a person’s health, cognitive and social development and learning. For young refugees and other displaced children, the long-term impact of conflict and/or displacement can be devastating.
* Regardless of the importance and the proven benefits of early childhood development and education, the provision of pre-primary education for refugee and other displaced children remains limited. UNHCR’s Annual Education report 2022 “All Inclusive”[[12]](#footnote-13) states that across the reporting countries, the average gross refugee enrolment rate stood at 42 per cent in pre-primary, while the average global pre-primary gross enrolment rate was 61 per cent[[13]](#footnote-14).
* Ensuring that refugee children have access to quality primary education is crucial for their personal and social development, as well as for the long-term stability and prosperity of their communities. However, the status of primary education for refugee children remains a significant concern, as many refugees face barriers that prevent them from accessing this fundamental right. In 2020/2021, the average gross refugee primary enrolment level stood at 68[[14]](#footnote-15) per cent[[15]](#footnote-16), almost unchanged from the previous year, compared with global average of 102 per cent[[16]](#footnote-17).
* Refugee and other displaced children face many barriers to enroll, and remain, in primary education. Some of the factors that limit access to and participation in primary education for refugees and other forcibly displaced children include language barriers, insufficient or limited physical infrastructure and shortages in teaching staff. Also, there might be additional barriers such as requirements to provide a birth certificate or other documentation to access school or register for examinations. Furthermore, poverty, child labor and child marriage as well as gender norms might prevent children from accessing education.

*Secondary Education*

* Secondary education is a critical cognitive, physical and social protective factor in adolescents’ lives. As well as contributing to resilience and self-reliance, secondary education mitigates the risk of adolescent recruitment to armed forces, reduces the likelihood of forced marriage and early pregnancy, promotes health literacy and supports climate adaptation[[17]](#footnote-18). In the long term, secondary education serves as a vital bridge to higher education and sustainable livelihoods[[18]](#footnote-19). Refugee adolescents are over-represented in out-of-school statistics at the secondary level.
* Across 40 refugee-hosting countries surveyed for UNHCR’s 2022 education report[[19]](#footnote-20), just 37[[20]](#footnote-21) per cent[[21]](#footnote-22) of refugee adolescents were enrolled at the secondary education level in reporting countries compared with 84 per cent of adolescents globally[[22]](#footnote-23).
* Globally there has been progressive improvement of policies regarding the right of refugees to access national education systems, yet the greatest barrier remains financial. The costs cannot be covered through humanitarian funding alone, which is often not sufficient and does not allow for long term planning. In many cases, even those governments with an open policy are unwilling (or unable) to include refugee education in their national budget.

*Tertiary education & vocational training*

* As of 2021, only 6 per cent of young refugees had access to higher education, which stands in stark contrast to the global average of 40 per cent of the non-refugee population. Although the global higher education sector is experiencing rapid growth, particularly in the Global South, financial investment remains highly unequal.[[23]](#footnote-24)
* Higher education is much more than an opportunity, it is a lifeline for young people that has systemwide implications for access and inclusion at all levels of education and sustainable livelihoods. The economic returns for tertiary education graduates are the highest in the entire educational system – an estimated 17 per cent increase in earnings as compared with 10 per cent for primary and 7 per cent for secondary education completion.[[24]](#footnote-25) These figures are even greater in sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 21 per cent increase in earning for tertiary education graduates.[[25]](#footnote-26) Most significantly, the economic returns for female graduates of higher education are the greatest. Women with a secondary school education may earn twice as much as those with no formal education and women with a tertiary education may make three times as much.[[26]](#footnote-27) It is the investment in the final years of education that results in the greatest gains.
* The right of refugees to access education, including higher education, is grounded in international and regional instruments which establish the right to education for every person, without discrimination and regardless of their legal or migratory status. Nonetheless, many refugees continue to face barriers in trying to access higher education ranging from lack of academic records, mobility restrictions, discriminatory fee structures, restrictive admissions standards and ineligibility for education finance.

*Connected education*

* Refugee-hosting schools and communities are simply not equipped with the digital resources, skills, and knowledge needed to foster learners who can succeed in an increasingly digital world. Research also shows that the forcibly displaced are still less connected than their host communities, especially in rural areas[[27]](#footnote-28).
* The COVID-19 pandemic and the related school closures made the situation even more difficult and exacerbated pre-existing inequities that refugee learners already faced prior to COVID due to inadequate access to digital infrastructure, devices and connectivity. It is estimated that 57 per cent of refugees or displaced learners who were enrolled in school prior to COVID-19 pandemic were not supported by any digital or home learning programme during school closures[[28]](#footnote-29). Where UNHCR and partners had supported prior investments to bring connected education programmes to communities, these locations were better able to extend national efforts, by utilizing community radio stations, providing external access to school wifi, and even through device loan programmes.
* UNHCR is committed to harnessing connected education to ensure all forcibly displaced learners, and the communities that host them, are meaningfully engaged and benefit from today’s digital landscape - preparing them to fully participate in the world’s social and economic future. These efforts in connected education are embedded within the framework of the Global Compact on Refugees, The Global Compact also mentions ‘online’ education as a specific support required to meet the needs of refugee learners.
* UNHCR is committed to enhancing the digital inclusion of refugees and displaced persons. There is a need to ensure that schools that host refugees, and forcibly displaced students, are prioritized and meaningfully included in global and national digital education and connectivity efforts.

*Data & evidence on refugee education*

* Addressing gaps in access to quality education and building up an effective response requires access to reliable and timely data. Many data gaps remain in all dimensions of refugee education. As a starting point, only a few countries can provide representative data on indicators related to education access (e.g., enrolment).
* Aside from a handful of studies evaluating programmes,[[29]](#footnote-30) virtually no countries can provide data on if and whether refugees are acquiring basic foundational skills (reading and mathematics skills). The acquisition of socio-emotional skills amongst refugee students is even less well understood and documented.[[30]](#footnote-31)
* Data on the environments in which children learn is also a piece of the puzzle that is missing. This third dimension is critical, as the kind of environment in which children study influences whether they are acquiring necessary skills. For example, abundant evidence points to the link between the presence of school-related violence and lower standardized testing scores[[31]](#footnote-32).
1. [UNHCR - Refugee Statistics](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=Dj6sp1) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. [UNHCR - Education](https://www.unhcr.org/education.html#_ga=2.27416508.1411026302.1671005668-1914285681.1669027469) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [denial-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh, HRW](https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/12/03/are-we-not-human/denial-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. UNICEF. 2019. Beyond survival: Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh want to learn. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/brainwaste> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. [2020, UNHCR and Malala Fund: Coming together for refugee education](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CLIAKKA%5CDownloads%5C2020%2C%20UNHCR%20and%20Malala%20Fund%3A%20Coming%20together%20for%20refugee%20education) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. [Teachers of refugees: a review of literature](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED588878.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. United Nations. 2018. Global Compact on Refugees. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/631ef5a84/unhcr-education-report-2022-inclusive-campaign-refugee-education.html [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRE.ENRR> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. 68% boys, 67% girls [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Countries with some of the lowest primary education gross enrolment rates for refugees include Liberia (5%), Senegal (7.3%), Togo (15%), Pakistan (16.6%), DRC (34.2%). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. [UIS Statistics (unesco.org)](http://data.uis.unesco.org/) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Anselme & Hands, 2012; Garbern et. al, 2020; King et. al, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/631ef5a84/unhcr-education-report-2022-inclusive-campaign-refugee-education.html [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. 36 % boys, 34 % girls [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Among countries with lowest gross enrolment rates for refugees at secondary school are Pakistan (1 per cent), Republic of Congo (2.3 per cent), Senegal (2.8 per cent), Cameroon (4 per cent), Liberia (4.6 per cent). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. [UIS Statistics (unesco.org)](http://data.uis.unesco.org/) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220311151815827 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29956/HighCostOfNotEducatingGirls.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. UNHCR “Connecting Refugees: How Internet and Mobile Connectivity can Improve Refugee Well-being and Transform Humanitarian Action” (2016) available at: https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/ uploads/2018/02/20160707-Connecting-Refugees-Web\_ with-signature.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. [UNHCR Connected Education for Refugees: Addressing the digital divide](https://www.unhcr.org/61b743ef4) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. e.g., Piper et al., 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. e.g., Diazgranados et al., 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. for ex., Chavez et al., 2021; Delprato et al., 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)