

**FORCIBLY DISPLACED
WOMEN IN HIGHER
EDUCATION:**


**Investing in an
Inclusive and
Sustainable Future**

INTRODUCTION

Education **significantly transforms the lives of women and girls, their families, and communities**. Yet, 131 million girls have never set foot in a classroom ([ActionAid 2023](#)). This stark contrast is even more pronounced for forcibly displaced people. **Only 68% and 34% of displaced youth attend primary and secondary school respectively**. As a girl moves from childhood into adolescence and early adulthood, her prospects of pursuing a higher **education decline**. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected countries ([UNICEF](#)). Only **68% and 34% of forcibly displaced youth attend primary and secondary school respectively** ([ActionAid 2023](#)).

As a girl moves from adolescence into early adulthood, her prospects of pursuing a higher education decline. For every 10 refugee boys in primary school there are fewer than eight refugee girls; at secondary school there are **fewer than seven refugee girls for every ten refugee boys** ([UNHCR 2023](#)). Attending university remains out of reach for many as only **6% of refugees are enrolled in higher education** compared to 40% of the general population ([UNHCR 2023](#)). For refugee and other forcibly displaced and stateless women this is even lower. **We must act now** to ensure more women fulfil their potential and become effective changemakers and leaders for an inclusive and sustainable future.



 Youth and Community Centre, Azhdar Valley, Bamyan, Afghanistan: Funded by the Japanese government and constructed by UNHCR in 2016, this community center is located approximately 10 kilometers from Bamyan City. It is now autonomously managed by the local community. When new restrictions on girls and women's education were introduced, UNHCR provided support to community teachers and also some computers for classes. The agency also installed solar panels, to ensure 24-hour electricity. The center offers diverse classes, including English, computer literacy, mathematics, and supplementary schooling. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Educating women matters

- ▶ Education is at the heart of UNHCR's protection mandate. Equitable access to quality education helps to protect, include and empower displaced and stateless women.
- ▶ Education for women and girls at all levels breaks cycles of poverty, improves economic inclusion, narrows disparities, challenges harmful norms and reduces gender inequalities.
- ▶ Each additional year a girl spends in school can also boost her earnings as an adult by up to 20 per cent, while the global poverty rate would be more than halved if all adults completed secondary school (UNESCO).
- ▶ Higher level education amplifies the voices of forcibly displaced women and empowers them to meaningfully participate in decisions that affects their lives, families and broader communities.
- ▶ Education enables women to formulate solutions to displacement drivers such as conflict and the climate crisis, and to play a pivotal role in conflict prevention, sustainable peace and development.

The **Global Compact on Refugees** sets out to expand and enhance access of refugee youth to all levels of education. More specifically, it recognizes the importance of “measures to strengthen the agency of women and girls, to promote women's economic

empowerment and to support access by women and girls to education (including secondary and tertiary education).” Similarly, **SDG 5** affirms the international commitment to achieving gender equity, including equal access to education.

UNHCR'S COMMITMENT TO GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Many forcibly displaced girls never graduate from secondary school and are therefore unable to pursue higher education opportunities. Restrictive social and gender norms, discrimination, harmful cultural practices, gender-based violence and economic constraints pose and amplify multiple intersecting barriers to girls' education.

UNHCR's vision for refugee education is to ensure equitable refugee inclusion in and throughout all levels of education.

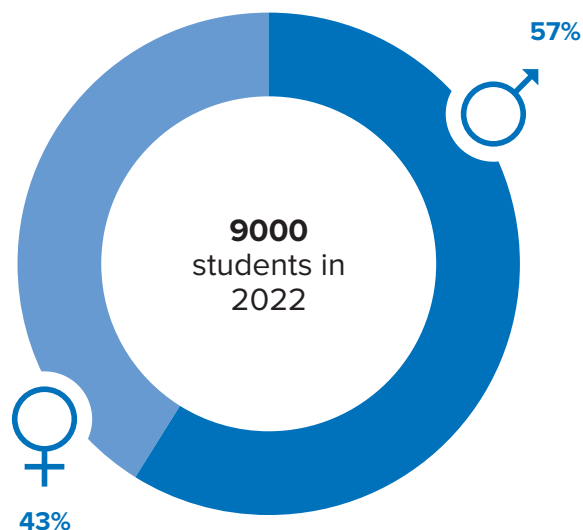
In accordance with UNHCR's [Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity](#), the organization strives to ensure that forcibly displaced women enjoy equal, meaningful, and safe access to education.

The **UNHCR Strategic Directions 2022-2026** reaffirm UNHCR's commitment to strengthening accountability to affected people, particularly women and girls, and calls for additional, accelerated and targeted action to advance gender equality.

UNHCR's **Refugee Education Strategy 2030** aims to **increase the current higher education enrolment rate from 6 to 15 per cent**, while **achieving equal gender representation in tertiary enrolment**. Through the [15by30](#) strategy, UNHCR and partners are committed to achieving enrolment of 15 per cent of young refugees in higher education by the 2030. The roadmap is built around [five higher education pathways](#), to offer strategies for optimizing, coordinating, and expanding opportunities namely:

- [National university enrolment](#)
- [Technical and vocational education and training \(TVET\)](#)
- [Connected higher education](#)
- [UNHCR's tertiary scholarship programme for refugees \(DAFI\)](#)
- [Complementary education pathways for admission to third countries](#)

DAFI Scholars



UNHCR runs three flagship programmes: [Educate a Child \(EAC\)](#), the [Secondary Youth Initiative](#), and the [DAFI Scholarship Programme](#), UNHCR's flagship higher education initiative. The DAFI programme has supported over 22,000 students since it began 31 years ago. Within DAFI, UNHCR is close to achieving gender parity and in general aims to increase the number of forcibly displaced women enrolling for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses.

Importantly UNHCR's digital and connected education solutions are also helping to bridge the digital gender gap by supporting more girls to complete secondary education and preparing them to enter higher education competitively. At higher levels of learning, online and blended approaches to learning have enabled women and girls in displacement settings to access education in contexts where this would otherwise be unlikely.

UNHCR continuously seeks feedback from the girl and boy students it supports to tailor its education programmes, find joint solutions and identify more opportunities.

Education for empowerment



“ I was constantly telling myself: you must do whatever it takes to succeed.”

Raïssa fled the Central African Republic due to generalized violence in 2013, ultimately settling in Chad. Even as a young mother struggling with money, she managed to complete high school. Then she won a scholarship on the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) programme, supported by Germany, Denmark and the Czech Republic, as well as UNHCR and other private donors. Now 24, Raïssa is a recent graduate in Communications and Marketing from Emi Koussi University, in N’Djamena. “My son goes to school, I go to university,” she says. “It is just the two of us and we keep going.” Marketing suits her, she adds. “I want to be creative, to be a leader. I am always keen on learning new things. I am always on the move, doing something.”

Women as leaders in STEM

Hawler Muhammad is a Syrian refugee living in Darashakran Refugee Camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. She was born in Qamishli and fled to Iraq at the age of eight in 2012 with her family due to conflict. Now 18 years old, Hawler is a DAFI scholar pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Physiotherapy at Erbil Polytechnic University and is one of five chairpersons of the DAFI Club Committee for Erbil City. She is in her second year of study. Hawler is devoted to serving her community through volunteering with SWEDO organization as an English teacher for refugee students and is passionate about participating in activities that raise awareness for climate change. Hawler is determined to have a successful career as a physiotherapist and is an avid supporter of other forcibly displaced women accessing and pursuing higher education. She encourages refugee students to dare to dream about a better tomorrow.



“ I decided to study physiotherapy because of my persistence and love for the medical field and to help people recover. I may have chosen physiotherapy because of my friend, who, after partially recovering from her burns, was experiencing great difficulties in movement or did not have the ability to move; but with the help of physiotherapists, she was able to perform all her tasks as before. Her recovery was greatly aided by the physiotherapist.”

WOMEN AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS



“ Alumni play a very important role. They act as role models for young refugee students and can change community perceptions of education. It is also key to mix with national students because national students play a greater role in influencing community perceptions towards refugees and host communities.”

Zura (a DAFI alumna with a bachelor’s degree in business administration from Makerere University in Uganda) was always committed to giving back to her community and to serving as a role model for other young people. This did not change when she became a DAFI scholar. Together with other refugee students, Zura founded the Makerere University DAFI Students Association (MUDASA) to strengthen refugees’ education within the university, to give back to their communities, and to share information on the DAFI programme with refugees at primary and secondary-school levels to encourage them to pursue higher education. MUDASA elevated the profile of refugee students within Makerere University and advocated for refugee students’ rights and fees on a par with those levied on national students. Today, Zura remains engaged with MUDASA as an alumna and is a staunch advocate for engagement with national students as well. She deeply believes in the value of refugee and national students working together as advocates within host and refugee communities, while finding opportunities to bring them together.

CALL TO ACTION

Governments, donors, and other key stakeholders are vital partners in ensuring that more forcibly displaced women can access and thrive in higher education and can play central roles by:

- ▶ Constructing, equipping and upgrading secondary schools in refugee hosting areas so that more host community and refugee girls can attend and complete secondary schools that have adequate and safe water and sanitation facilities.
- ▶ Providing students and their parents access to information about the benefits of educating girls and women.
- ▶ Ensuring that girls complete secondary education, providing vital access to information, creating more scholarship opportunities and removing the obstacles that prevent them from accessing higher and tertiary education.
- ▶ Committing earmarked funding, providing in-kind support for education initiatives that can create enabling environments for women and girls in displaced settings, and creating more scholarships for refugee women through the [Aiming Higher Fundraising Initiative](#), to remove the obstacles that prevent girls from accessing secondary and higher education.
- ▶ Partnering with UNHCR to ensure that forcibly displaced women and girls have access to affordable digital devices, digital literacy and skills, and that they are included in national digital education rollouts through [UNHCR’s Connected Education Challenge](#).
- ▶ Multiplying efforts to implement pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and developing quality joint pledges to address gender equality in higher education for the 2023 GRF.

“ My mother always said that if you educate a man, you educate one person. If you educate a woman, you educate her entire community, city and the whole world.”

Khatira, DAFI alumna and finance officer living in Pakistan

**Contact us**

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Cover photo:

Nadeen, 28-year-old Iraqi refugee. She arrived to Syria in 2005 fleeing the war in Iraq. After finishing the baccalaureate in Syria, Nadeen applied for a DAFI scholarship and received a scholarship to study Political Science. “Our financial situation was not good, especially to cover university fees. It would have been possible for me to pay without receiving a scholarship”, she said. UNHCR Syria supports refugee students to pursue their studies through the DAFI scholarship programme. Nadeen can aspire to change her reality and other women to be more successful in society. Today, she has the skills required to pursue her dream career. © UNHCR/Ola Kabalan