

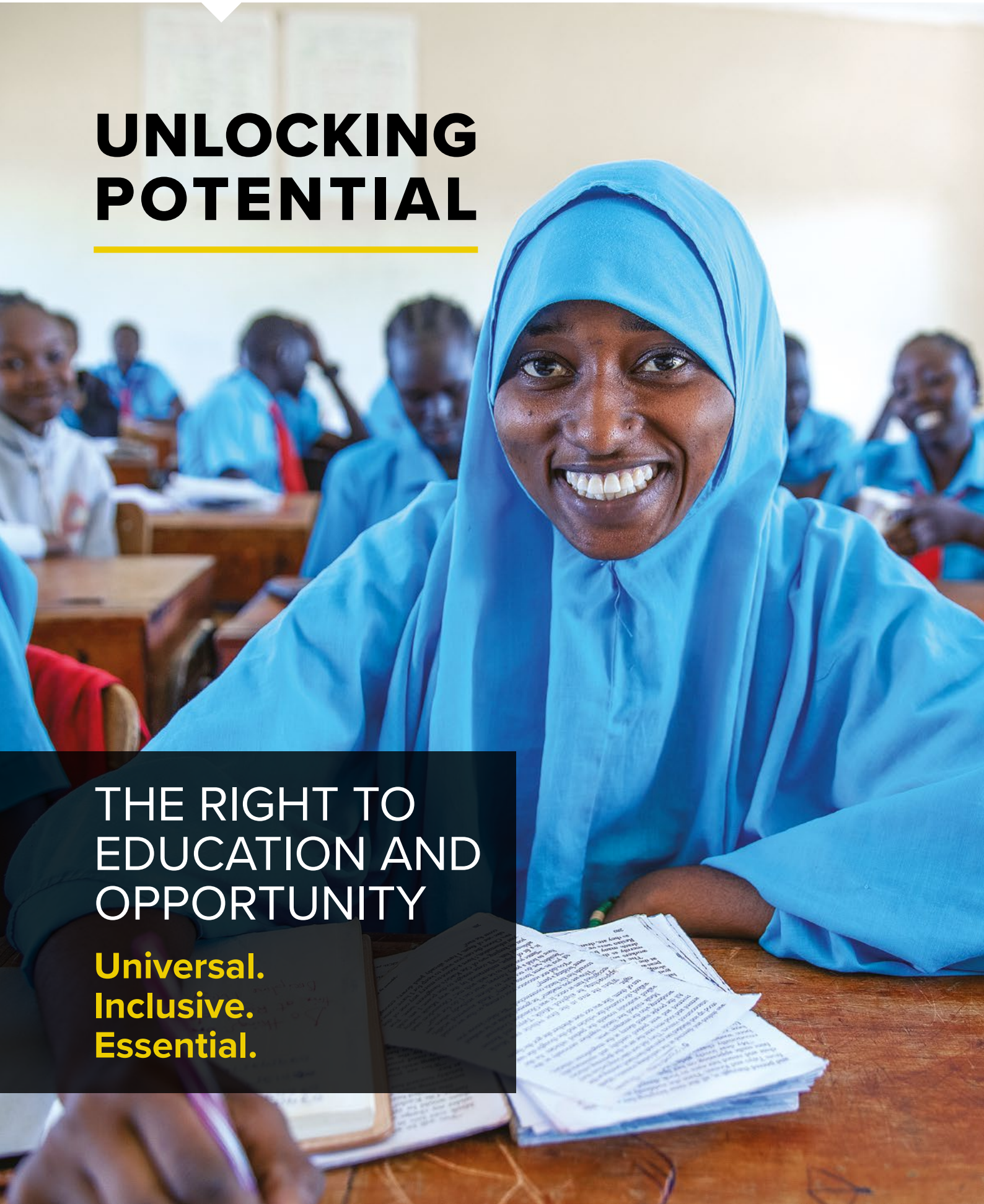


UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

UNLOCKING POTENTIAL

THE RIGHT TO
EDUCATION AND
OPPORTUNITY

**Universal.
Inclusive.
Essential.**



ABOUT THIS REPORT

The 2023 UNHCR Refugee Education Report outlines the challenges faced by the nearly 15 million refugee children of school age¹ under UNHCR's mandate, including school-aged Venezuelans displaced abroad. But it also highlights the achievements and aspirations of refugee youth who, with the right support, have attained the highest of educational goals through perseverance, resilience, determination, and sheer hard work.

Data on refugee enrolments and population numbers is drawn from UNHCR country operations and refers to the 2021-2022 academic year. The report also references the latest available data on enrolment and out-of-school children and youth from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

¹ Calculated for 2022, counting the number of children of pre-primary, primary and secondary age in countries reporting data and applying the ratio to the global population of refugees displaced abroad – for more information on refugee demographics, see UNHCR's annual report *Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2022*.

The increasing complexity of humanitarian emergencies involving forced displacement presents several challenges when it comes to data collection. In addition, essential progress in the incorporation of refugees in national education systems creates additional challenges, such as a lack of data on student enrolment disaggregated by protection status – an issue that is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

Where refugees are incorporated into national systems, it is often difficult to keep track of when and where they are accessing education. In other contexts, where some refugees attend camp schools and others public schools, data reported by country operations is only on camp-based populations (and thus not representative of all school-aged refugees).

Despite these limitations, over 70 countries have provided data, allowing us to build the most complete picture yet of refugee education worldwide, and while progress can be seen, it remains clear that we remain a long way from allowing all refugee learners to exercise their fundamental right to education.



📷 Afghan students attend UNHCR's upgraded Girls school at Khazaana refugee village, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. © UNHCR/Mercury Transformations

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FOREWORD

WITHOUT THE KEY OF EDUCATION, WE WILL NEVER UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL THAT LIES WITHIN REFUGEE CHILDREN

BY FILIPPO GRANDI
UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fully inclusive national education systems offer refugees opportunities to thrive, with benefits for refugees and their hosts

The very first High Commissioner for Refugees, a Norwegian diplomat called Fridtjof Nansen, set a formidable standard for his successors.

As the League of Nations grappled with the tumultuous aftermath of the First World War, Nansen was handed a trio of Herculean tasks: not just to help hundreds of thousands of people who had fled violence and revolution, but also to organize the repatriation of prisoners of war and mobilize famine relief in Russia.

As he tackled this bulging in-tray, Nansen spent almost a decade at the pinnacle of global diplomacy. Well before that, however, he had shot to global attention as a pioneering polar explorer. And he could have gone in so many other directions. After leaving school, he considered engineering, military service, and forestry, before settling on zoology (hoping it wouldn't get in the way of his true passion, skiing).

How did he do it? No doubt, he had innate qualities of courage, determination, leadership, and compassion. Yet without the chance to go to school and university, he would never have ventured into academia. Academia led to field work, which led to exploration, which led to renown, high politics and diplomacy, and eventually the Nobel Peace Prize.

I mention this great humanitarian not only because he was one of my predecessors but also because his multifaceted career highlights a crucial point about opportunity. Nansen would have regarded the education that unleashed his potential as an automatic right. Had he known of the struggles faced today by refugees seeking access to education, he would have been dismayed.

In June, I was in Kenya, which hosts 624,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, including thousands displaced over the past few months alone. An island of stability in a fragile region, Kenya has little choice but to handle the consequences of conflict and climate change. This includes helping refugee children go to school. In this respect, Kenya's commendable willingness to support displaced children must be matched by adequate resources.



“We need fully inclusive education systems that give refugees the same access and rights as host-country learners.”

📍 High Commissioner Grandi meets a recently arrived Somali family at the Dagahaley refugee camp in Dadaab, Kenya © UNHCR/Samuel Otieno

Just over 70 per cent of primary school-age refugees are enrolled in school. Yet, the higher up the educational ladder you go, the steeper the drop-off in numbers, because opportunities to study at secondary and tertiary level are limited. The pattern is the same at the global level, as UNHCR’s latest education report reveals: gross enrolment rates for refugees are 65 per cent for primary-age children, 41 per cent for secondary and 6 per cent at tertiary level; figures that are lower than enrolment levels for non-refugee children, which are markedly higher in all but the lowest-income states.

This matters for several reasons.

First, around 20 per cent of the world’s refugees live in the world’s 46 least developed states, which are somehow expected to shoulder this responsibility even though they collectively account for just 1.3 per cent of global GDP. The result? Of the nearly 15 million school-age refugees, half are not in school. With the displaced population rising every year, there is a significant and increasing proportion of the world’s children who are missing out on their education.

Secondly, ambitions of ensuring that every child has access to a full, quality education will not be fully realized without closing this gap. This year, we are halfway to the 2030 “deadline” for the UN Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4 is on education – specifically, equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels. Refugee children must surely be part of that goal, but unless their access to education is given a major boost they will be left behind. This will not help meet other goals for employment, health, equality, poverty eradication and more.

Comparing refugee education statistics with previous years, it can feel like we are running to stand still. Yet there has been progress – erratic and halting, but progress nonetheless. Millions of refugees have received some level of education, and thousands have made it all the way to the highest levels.

To continue and accelerate this progress, we need fully inclusive education systems that give refugees the same access and rights as host-country learners. That means removing barriers based on factors such as nationality, legal status, and documentation, letting them follow an accredited curriculum in registered schools with qualified teachers, and other policies to ensure they receive an education that is no better and no worse than for everyone else.

Where refugee-hosting countries have implemented such policies, they need predictable, multi-year support from global and regional financial institutions, high-income states, and the private sector – money, technology, expertise, training – creating a broader base of support. We cannot expect overstretched countries with scarce resources to take the task on by themselves.

In this year’s report, we have asked three refugees to tell the story of their path through education, and of their hopes and aspirations for what comes next. They are stories of success, but also of struggles, setbacks, and obstacles that many young non-refugees do not have to think about, let alone face. They are showing what can be achieved, but they also make me think of the children who have been, and are being, left behind.

This is not just about statistics and targets. It’s about development, opportunity, unexpected connections, opening doors, setting off chain reactions. What would we have lost if a young Nansen had not been able to go to school? And what are we losing, collectively, because half of today’s refugee children are not in school? We can let these potential explorers, diplomats, engineers, foresters, and zoologists languish, or we can ensure they fulfil their potential – to their benefit, and to ours.



📷 Ayen Malith from South Sudan attends an English class at Morneau Shepell Girls' School in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp. © UNHCR/Charity Nzomo

DATA ANALYSIS

OVER 50 PER CENT OF REFUGEE CHILDREN NOT IN SCHOOL

A clearer picture is emerging of refugee education

At the end of 2022, the number of forcibly displaced people across the globe had reached 108 million, including 35.3 million refugees.² The school-aged refugee population, which last year was around 10 million, has jumped to 14.8 million.³

Of those children, 51 per cent are estimated to be out of school: that's more than 7 million refugee children missing out on education.

Most accurate picture yet of refugee education

For this report covering the academic year 2021-22, **over 70 countries** hosting refugees are included in our assessment of access to education for refugees – more than ever, giving us the most accurate picture yet.

Data from these countries indicate that average gross enrolment rates for refugees stands at **38 per cent** for pre-primary, **65 per cent** for primary, **41 per cent** for secondary, and **6 per cent** for tertiary.⁴

These figures do not include the situation for refugees from Ukraine (see section 'Hurdles to learning for Ukraine's children' below).

At first glance, this year's figures seem to represent a decrease in pre-primary and primary enrolment, an increase in secondary enrolment, and no change to tertiary enrolment, when compared to the 2022 UNHCR refugee education report. However, because last year's figures are drawn from a smaller number of countries (just over 40 were included) it is impossible to draw direct comparisons.

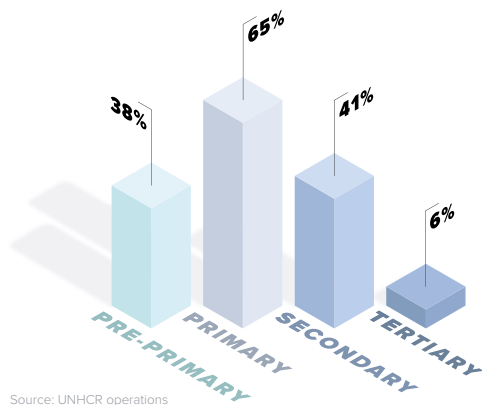
² UNHCR, "Global Trends Report 2022" (Copenhagen: UNHCR, 2022), <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>.

³ UNHCR country operations. All figures specific to refugees are calculations of the author with data from UNHCR country operations.

⁴ UNHCR country operations.

Refugee enrollment rates

Average reporting countries, 2021–22



Source: UNHCR operations

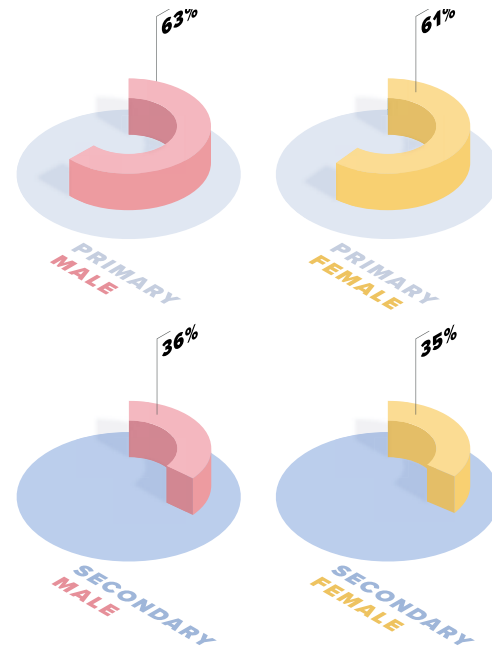
Striving for gender parity

On average, there is gender parity with similar male-female access rates for refugee learners.

Of the countries that provided gender disaggregated data, the average primary enrolment rates for males stood at 63 per cent, while the rate for females was 61 per cent. At secondary level, the corresponding figures were 36 per cent and 35 per cent.⁵

Refugee gross enrollment rates

Average reporting countries, gender

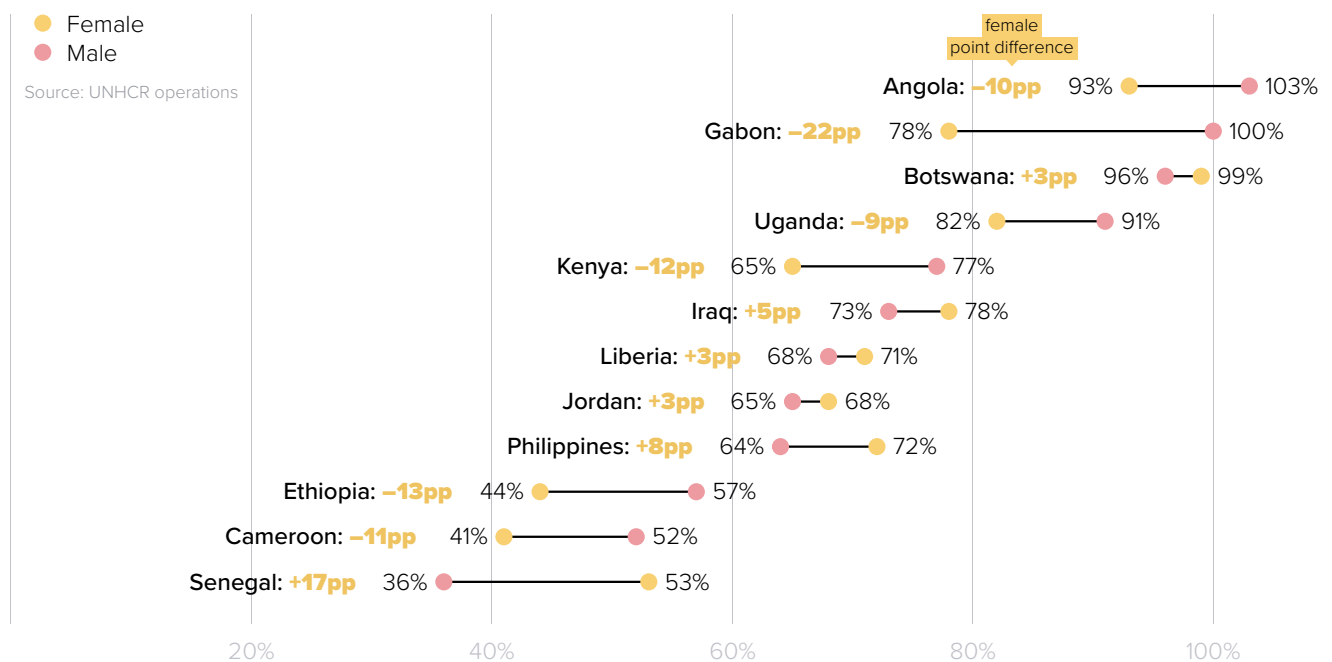


Source: UNHCR operations

However, this does not mean that gender parity has been achieved in every refugee-hosting country. The graphic below illustrates some of the disparities, with longer lines indicating bigger gender gaps. Senegal and Gabon show the greatest disparities: in Senegal, for example, enrolment rates are 53 per cent for females and 36 per cent for males; conversely, in Gabon the situation is reversed, with 100 per cent enrolment for boys and 78 per cent for girls.⁶

Gender disparities in primary education access

Countries with largest gaps, refugee enrollment rates



⁵ UNHCR country operations.

⁶ UNHCR country operations.

Access problems persist

Clear disparities are observed when comparing access rates for refugees versus national averages at the primary and secondary levels. While the global average primary gross enrolment rates for males and females were 103 per cent and 101 per cent,⁷ respectively, they were only 63 per cent and 61 per cent for refugee males and females, respectively.⁸ At the secondary level, these differences are also apparent with the enrolment rate for refugee males and females, which are less than half the global average.

Gross enrollment rates

Global averages and refugee reporting countries, gender



A deeper dive into the situation in the top refugee-hosting countries further highlights the gap in educational access for refugees. As illustrated below, the countries with the largest discrepancies are Peru, Colombia, and Bangladesh, where there is a difference of 80, 80, and 74 percentage points, respectively, between refugee enrolment and the national average.⁹

⁷ UNESCO-UIS, "UIS Statistics," 2023, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>; Enrolment rates can exceed 100% because of over-age learners such as students repeating years, or those catching-up on missed years of schooling.

⁸ UNHCR country operations.

⁹ UNHCR country operations.

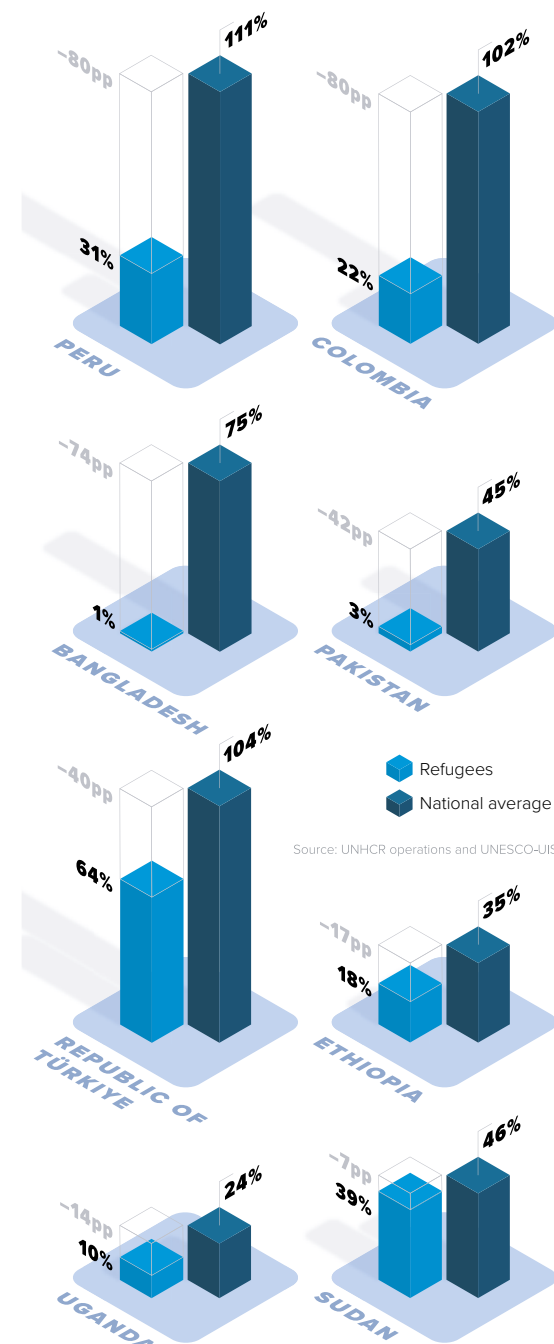
¹⁰ UNESCO-UIS, "UIS Statistics."

The data also shows that upper-middle-income countries with large forcibly displaced populations, such as Türkiye, Colombia and Peru, have national average secondary enrolment rates that exceed 100 per cent,¹⁰ while rates for refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad are dramatically lower. In Colombia, for instance, secondary enrolment rates for displaced Venezuelans are close to one fifth of the rates for the host population.

In other settings, such as Uganda and Ethiopia, while average secondary enrolment rates are low in general, they are still markedly lower for refugees.

Secondary gross enrollment rates

Refugees and national averages, top hosting countries



A changing picture?

The customary, if depressing, picture is for secondary enrolment for refugee children to be markedly lower than for primary – and for the gap at secondary level between refugees and non-refugees to be significant. The latest figure, of 41 per cent, shows a potentially encouraging improvement on last year, when it was 37 per cent, albeit the analysis is not based on the same countries.¹¹

But the picture is very mixed. In Türkiye, in just two years, refugee enrolment rocketed from 27 per cent to over 60 per cent. In Pakistan, by contrast, the figure dipped from 5 per cent to 1 per cent and back up to 3 per cent over the same period.¹² In Colombia, meanwhile, enrolment for displaced Venezuelans fell to 22 per cent, down from 30 per cent the year before.¹³

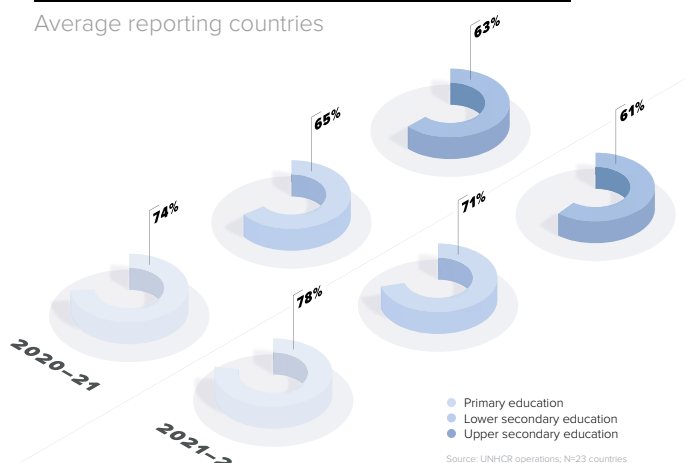
The question of quality

Enrolment is a start, but where refugees are in school, we need to ask if they are receiving *quality* education.

There are indications that refugee learners can excel with the right opportunities. While few refugees sit for national examinations, where they are able to do so, their pass rates at all levels are high, at times exceeding the national average. In our reporting countries, 78 per cent of refugee students who sit primary exams pass them. The figures are 71 per cent and 61 per cent for lower and upper secondary, respectively.¹⁴ At the primary level, pass rates are higher for males than for females, at 83 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively.¹⁵

National examination refugee pass rates

Average reporting countries



¹¹ UNHCR country operations.

¹² UNHCR country operations.

¹³ UNHCR country operations.

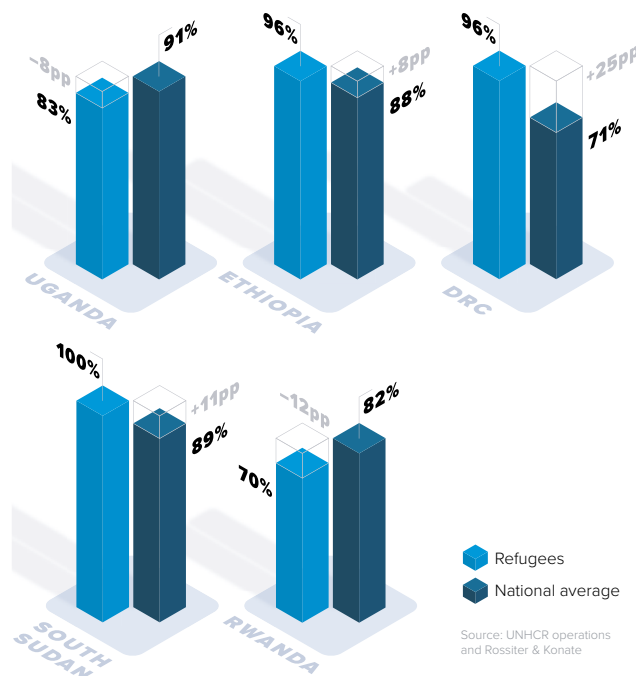
¹⁴ UNHCR country operations.

¹⁵ UNHCR country operations.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an astounding 96 per cent of refugees who take primary national examinations pass, well above the national figure of 71 per cent.¹⁶

Primary national examination pass rates

Top hosting countries, comparison refugees and national averages



Many factors affect learning, but one of the most obvious is the quality of teaching. We lack sufficient data to know the proportion of teachers engaging with refugee learners who have acquired a minimum level of qualifications, but other indicators can serve as useful proxies for quality education, such as pupil-to-teacher ratios.

There is no consensus on the ideal ratio, which in any case varies between age groups. However it is agreed that younger children and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from a lower pupil-to-teacher ratio.¹⁷ While few countries are able to report reliable figures, some appear to have very high ratios – Uganda, for instance, has an average of 73 refugee pupils for each teacher.¹⁸

The differences with national averages are also marked in some cases. For example, while the national average pupil-to-teacher ratio in Burundi is 43,¹⁹ for refugees it is 62.²⁰

¹⁶ UNHCR country operations.

¹⁷ OECD, "Education GPS: Class Size & Student-Teacher Ratio" (Paris: OECD, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3R0Sbvk>.

¹⁸ UNHCR country operations.

¹⁹ World Bank, "World Bank Open Data: Pupil-Teacher Ratio, Primary," World Bank Open Data, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

²⁰ UNHCR country operations.

REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT:

ACCESS IN THE AMERICAS

At the end of 2022, there were more than 700,000 refugees and 5.3 million others in need of protection in the Americas.²¹ Most were Venezuelans displaced abroad: Colombia (2.5 million), Peru (976,400) and Ecuador (555,400) host the largest displaced populations in the region.²²

Refugee enrolment

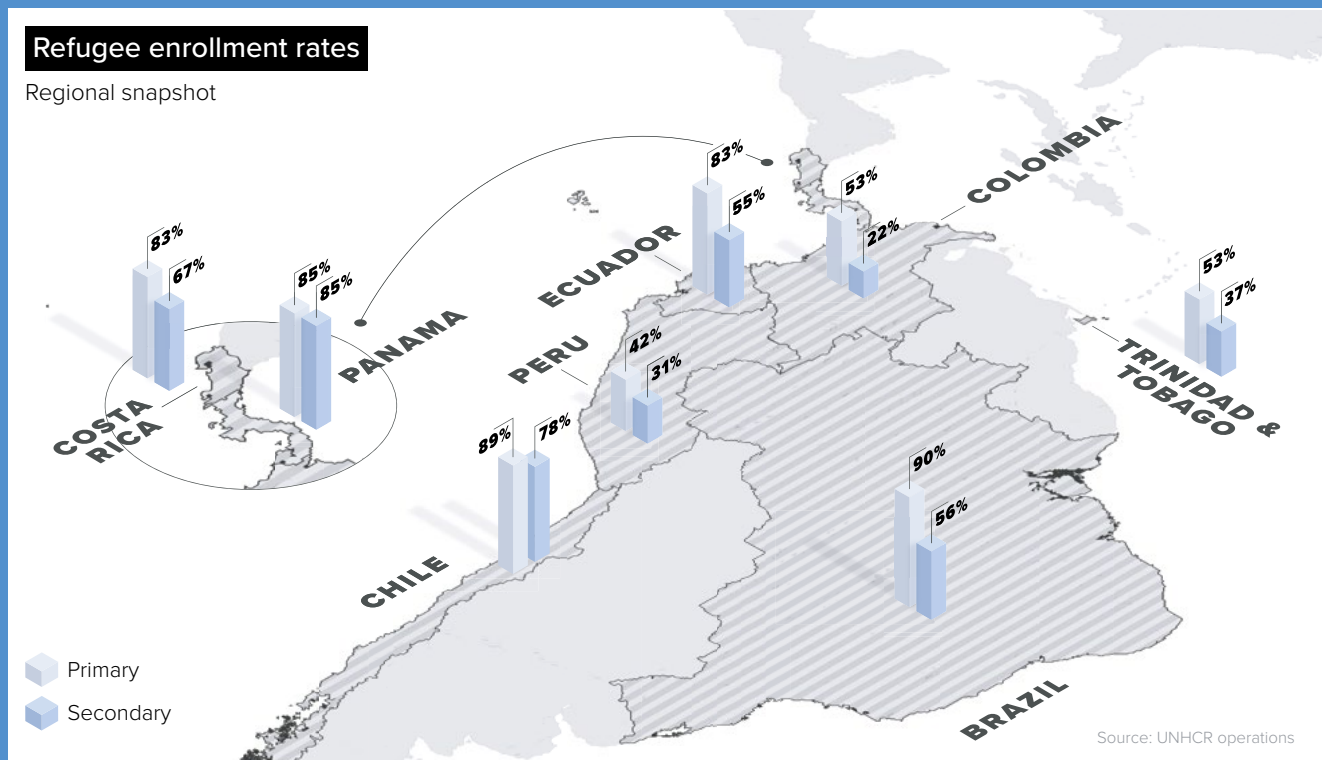
The data indicates that refugee enrolment in the Americas is low. For one thing, enrolment rates drop off in the transition from primary to secondary education in virtually every reporting country. There are also big differences between national averages and refugee enrolment. As the graph below shows, in Peru, for example, the primary enrolment rate for refugees is only 42 per cent,²³ while the corresponding national figure is 121 per cent.²⁴

Assessments / learning

There have been interesting advances in the measurement of learning for forcibly displaced populations in the Americas region.

In Colombia, the Saber 11 exam evaluates competencies at the 11th grade and is a requirement to access higher education. Available disaggregated data for Venezuelans indicates that they are performing similarly on the subjects tested in comparison to Colombian nationals. In results for 2020, Venezuelans scored an average of 46 points in English on Saber 11, while the corresponding score for Colombians was 47. In maths, the average score for Venezuelans was 49, while the score for Colombians was 51.²⁵

Further progress in assessment of learning is anticipated. In 2025, the next edition of a 16-country regional survey that measures 3rd and 6th graders' achievement in maths and reading will include forcibly displaced populations for the first time, generating important new data.



²¹ UNHCR, "Global Trends Report 2022."

²² UNHCR.

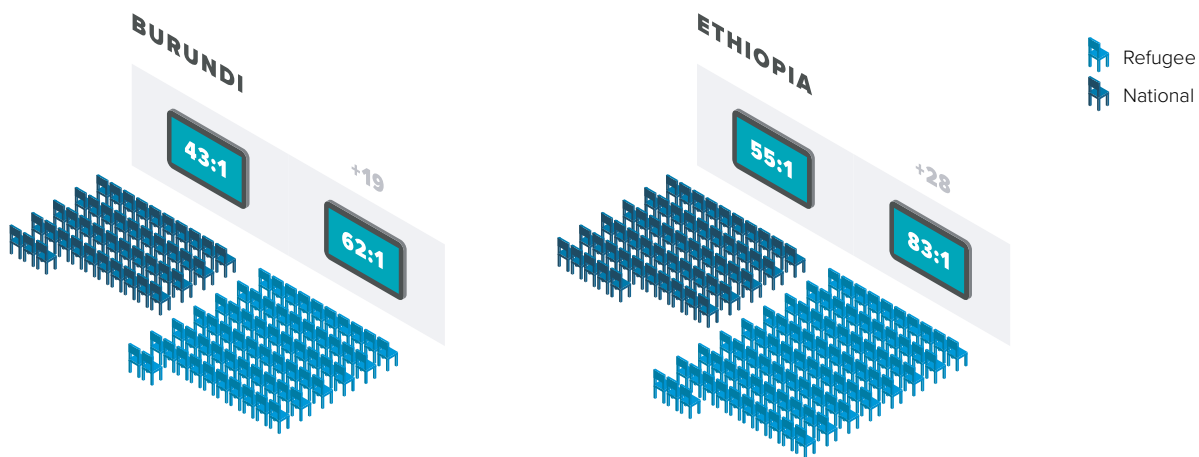
²³ UNHCR country operations.

²⁴ UNESCO-UIS, "UIS Statistics."

²⁵ R4V, "GIFMM Colombia: Análisis de Resultados Del Examen de Estado de La Educación Media, ICFES – Saber 11 (2022) En Población Escolar Refugiada y Migrante de Venezuela," 2022, <https://www.r4v.info/es/document/gifmm-colombia-analisis-de-resultados-del-examen-de-estado-de-la-educacion-media-icfes-0>.

Primary education: pupil to teacher ratios

National and refugee averages



Source: UNHCR COMPASS and World Bank

Hurdles to learning for Ukraine's children

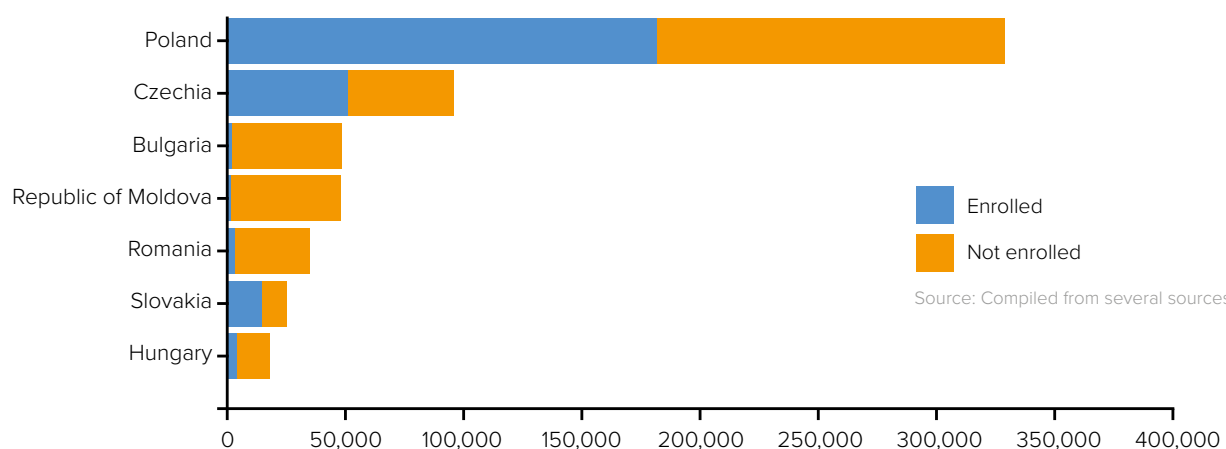
As of June 2023, there were almost 6 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe.²⁶ An estimated **40 per cent**, or nearly 2.5 million, are children.²⁷ Most have fled to neighbouring or nearby countries, including Poland, Germany, Moldova, Romania, and Czechia.

The European Union has taken decisive action to ensure that refugee children from Ukraine are welcome in host countries through the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which grants residency permits to eligible individuals, giving them access to government services, including education.

For a variety of reasons, however, around six in 10 Ukrainian refugee children are not in host country schools. The levels vary: for example, the estimated gross enrolment rate in primary and secondary education across Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia (which collectively hosted just over 2.5 million Ukrainian refugees as of 14 June, 2023) is **43 per cent**, with a wide range in individual countries of between 4 and 59 per cent. Data in other countries varies but is not encouraging.

Number of Ukrainian refugee school aged children

Enrolled by hosting country



Source: Compiled from several sources

²⁶ UNHCR, "Ukraine Situation Flash Update #46," UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/100493>.

²⁷ UNHCR, "Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Ukraine Situation," 2022, <https://bit.ly/3qXvSf5>.



📷 Masha, 12, from Dnipro in Ukraine reads a book in her room at a refugee shelter in Kraków, Poland.
© UNHCR/Anna Liminowicz

Lack of clarity

The lack of take-up of educational opportunities is partly down to different approaches between member states to some rights under TPD, while refugees have also encountered various obstacles such as a lack of information on availability of schools, language barriers, and a lack of relevant documentation such as previous school records.

Compounding the situation, Ukraine’s education ministry has encouraged the use of an e-learning programme devised in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, called the All-Ukraine Online School.²⁸ In the period between February and June 2022, host states took different approaches, from immediate enrolment in local schools where refugees and non-refugees learn alongside each other, to a combination of host country and Ukrainian curricula, to full-time remote learning using Ukraine’s e-learning platform.

Data on how many refugees follow the online Ukrainian curriculum is limited. However, in summer 2022, over

50 per cent were doing so in Moldova, Slovakia and Romania, while less than 30 per cent were following it in Poland. There is a generalized understanding that a non-segregated setting is a better approach since it allows children to interact with their classmates and receive appropriate support.²⁹

Mixed blessings

Online learning has proved a mixed blessing. Some evidence suggests that few children are using it, or that they are following both online courses and the host country curriculum, doubling their workload.³⁰

However, in Moldova, online learning provided by the Ukrainian education ministry is the most widely accessed education service by refugee primary and secondary school-aged children: up to 61 per cent were studying online³¹ not including preschool learners.³² According to one assessment, 82 per cent of parents said they preferred their children to study via Ukrainian online platforms rather than go to primary schools. In Georgia, an estimated 45 per cent study online while in Romania the figure is 71 per cent.³³

Additional barriers

Despite the right policies being in place, there are other barriers to accessing school for Ukrainian refugee children. With many parts of Ukraine are still affected by war, it is difficult for refugee families to plan for a return home,³⁴ which also affects decisions on whether to put children into host-country education systems or stick with the Ukrainian curriculum.

In addition, capacity in host country national education systems – including shortages of teachers and other staff – is a challenge, particularly in towns and cities. Czechia, Poland and Hungary are facing severe teacher shortages,³⁵ while some countries are struggling to find enough professionals to provide mental health and psychosocial support.³⁶

²⁸ Save the Children, “‘This Is My Life, and I Don’t Want to Waste a Year of It’: The Experiences and Wellbeing of Children Fleeing Ukraine,” Save the Children’s Resource Centre, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3EiUvWQ>.

²⁹ European Commission, “Supporting the Inclusion of Displaced Children from Ukraine in Education: Considerations, Key Principles and Practices for the School Year 2022-2023,” 2022.

³⁰ Save the Children, “‘This Is My Life, and I Don’t Want to Waste a Year of It.’”

³¹ REACH and UNICEF, “Moldova: Multi-Sector Needs Assessment,” 2022, <https://bit.ly/45sSNOI>.

³² Inter-Agency Education Working Group, “Moldova Rapid Education Needs Assessment” (UNHCR, 2023).

³³ Inter-Agency Operational Update, “Czech Republic: Inter-Agency Operational Update,” 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96855>.

³⁴ Inter-Agency Education Working Group, “Moldova Rapid Education Needs Assessment.”

³⁵ Akila Quinio et al., “Wanted: Tens of Thousands of Teachers to Staff Europe’s Schools,” Financial Times, September 2, 2022.

³⁶ European Commission, “Supporting the Inclusion of Displaced Children from Ukraine in Education: Considerations, Key Principles and Practices for the School Year 2022-2023.”



📷 Ukrainian refugees build a breakdancing robot at a robotics class run by NGO Next Step Association in Budapest, Hungary. © UNHCR/Erno Simon



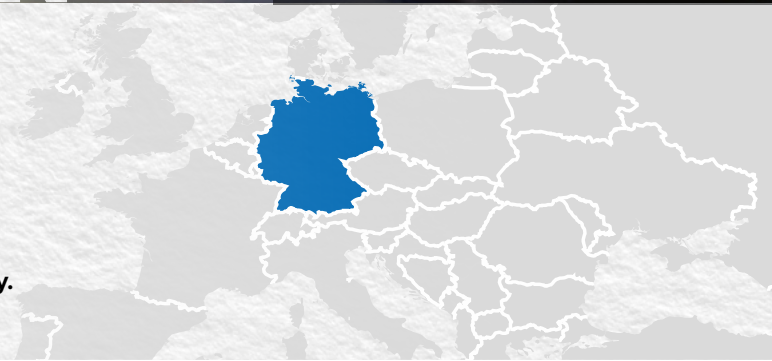
FIRST PERSON

📷 Nilab Akhmad visits a library in Berlin, Germany.
© UNHCR/Gordon Welters

MY JOURNEY:

TRIUMPHING AGAINST ALL ODDS

Dr Nilab Akhmad, 24, originally from Afghanistan, hopes to begin studying for her PhD in dentistry in Germany.



They say that lightning doesn't strike twice. Well, it did for me and my family. First, we had to leave Afghanistan, and then in 2022 we were forced also to leave our new lives in Ukraine.

After some years in Ukraine I was feeling settled, able to pursue my education to the highest levels. We had come to enjoy the warm welcome of the Ukrainians among whom we lived, and who were always very friendly and ready to help. But when the full-scale war began there, hostilities compelled us to move onwards once again, to seek safety in another country, this time Germany. I became a "double refugee".

My journey has been marked by a multitude of challenges: cultural, educational, financial, religious and linguistic. Yet I believe I am living testament to the indomitable spirit of refugees, someone who has overcome the numerous hurdles life puts in our way.

After leaving Afghanistan, with my parents and three brothers, we arrived in Ukraine. With me, I took my dream of becoming a great dentist because I had seen in Afghanistan how women and girls were blocked from seeing male dentists and therefore excluded from dental treatment because of their gender. I wanted to change that by becoming a female dentist, willing and able to treat female patients. Initially, I feared that my background would be a barrier to continuing my education, not to mention the language barrier. Yet in Ukraine I found a community that embraced diversity with open arms, making me feel welcomed and accepted. The people of Ukraine soon dispelled my worries about being a refugee in their country.

Although I had succeeded in continuing my education, I still faced one major hurdle: none of the tertiary educational institutions I wanted to study at provided financial support specifically for refugee students.

Undeterred, I secured admission to the dental faculty at a private university in Odesa and was fortunate that my father was able to find a way to pay my fees. With the unwavering support of my family and a lot of hard studying, I completed the first two years of university and then applied for a DAFI scholarship.³⁷ Thankfully my diligent studies and excellent exam scores meant I was granted a DAFI scholarship, which enabled me to finish the course. I will always remember the day and moment when I heard the happy news about the scholarship!

“ I haven’t forgotten those who were left behind.”

Things were going so well, but then suddenly, my family and I were on the move again. The war in Ukraine made life too risky and dangerous, and we were forced to leave Ukraine, as we had left Afghanistan all those years before. At the time I was in the final semester of my master’s degree and, once again, life was full of unbearable uncertainty, complications and doubts: would Germany be as welcoming as Ukraine? Would I be able to learn another new language and adapt to another new culture? I wanted to start my PhD, but at the same time I was struggling even to find an apartment!

At that moment, I thought back to my idol: Malala Yousufzai, the Pakistani student who suffered so much for her right to receive an education, and who has done so much for female education. Every time I read about her courage, it gave me courage of my own to forge ahead. She made me believe that one day I would stop feeling helpless, would achieve my goals – and then help girls in my own country who need support at this devastating time for Afghanistan.

I haven’t forgotten those who were left behind – like my friend Sarah, who recently finished school and wanted to go to university, until the de facto authorities forbade women from doing so. Kabul fell one day before she and her classmates were due to take their final school exam, and Sarah’s ambitions of becoming a politician have been cut short along with her education.

Or Lina, who has been a teacher for the past 12 years and says that she and her colleagues are continuing their jobs but are always facing financial and other difficulties.



📷 Nilab, who is studying for PhD in therapeutic dentistry, consults reference books at the library.
© UNHCR/Gordon Welters

I want to encourage them and other women and girls to embrace their aspirations, to surmount the challenges in their way, to nurture an unyielding spirit of determination.

I know it is not easy: I have been ignored, people closed doors on me even when I deserved opportunities, but I have stood strong and today I am embarking on a PhD in therapeutic dentistry to achieve the highest level of education and become the best I can be. I know that even though you might be strong and brave, that doesn’t mean you won’t feel hurt by other people’s negative words and attitudes, but you have to ignore them and push on. And I want to be a voice for those who I can’t help directly.

I hope powerful and influential people read my story and my message and are inspired to help women and girls across the world to achieve their potential as I have done.

³⁷ The DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship programme offers qualified refugee and returnee students the possibility to earn an undergraduate degree in their country of asylum or home country.



📷 Monicah Malith sits in a lecture hall at the University of Nairobi, where she is a third-year law student. © UNHCR/Charity Nzomo

FIRST PERSON

MY JOURNEY:

OVERCOMING HARDSHIPS

Monicah Malith, 25, originally from South Sudan, is a law student in Kenya and the first female refugee to be elected President of the University of Nairobi Students Association.

As a young refugee girl, I have faced many challenges in my education journey, but with determination, resilience, and hard work, I have overcome these personal difficulties.

There have been devastating hardships – including the loss of my father during high school exams, the constant struggles to pay school fees, and the continual pressure to consent to forced marriages—as well as hope, and opportunities.

I believe sharing my experiences can empower other refugee girls who face challenges and setbacks like mine, and who can discover that education is the key to transforming your life, breaking free from societal constraints, and charting your own path.

As a child growing up in South Sudan, I knew no life beyond cattle. My father had a large herd of cows and we were always on the move in search of pasture and water. But there was war too and as the fighting became more intense, I was sent to the capital Juba with other young children.

I was only 12 years old, but according to tradition I would soon be married and there were already four men waiting in line. Luckily for me, my aunt was going to Kenya to seek safety from the conflict, and my father let me go with her to help with household chores. At that time, education was not even a dream of mine.

It took three days on a lorry loaded with soda crates to reach Kakuma refugee camp and from there we went to Eldoret. I remember my arrival date vividly: it was a Sunday morning, 10 a.m., on 13 July 2008.

When I enrolled in primary school a year later, I was the oldest in my class, could only speak my mother tongue, did not know how to write my name, and could not even count to 10! But I was determined and worked hard and soon caught up. By the end of the year I was top of my class.

As the crisis in South Sudan worsened, financial constraints made it hard to continue paying school fees, while the social and cultural pressure to marry became unbearable as I grew through my teenage years—I would come home from school to find numerous men having visited my aunt seeking to marry me—but I wished to continue my education.

“*The scholarship... freed me from the idea that someone would demand something in return for my education.*”

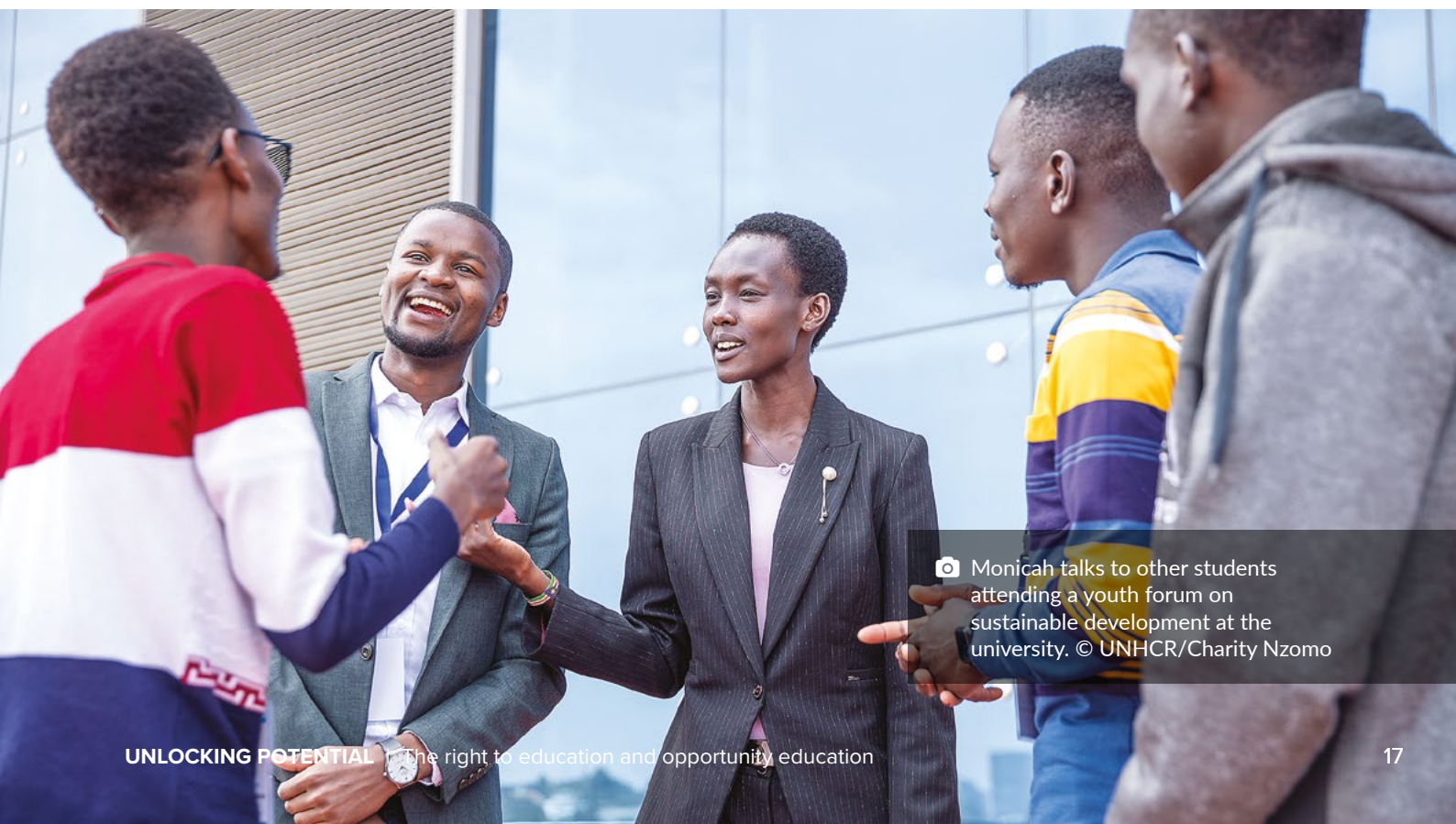
One man volunteered to pay my school fees, and I felt I had found someone who really cared about my studies, but then he told me I would have to marry him in return. I felt betrayed and cheated, and rejected his bargain, although sometimes I felt it would be easier just to be married and have someone provide for me. Through a church group, I was able to find a sponsor and worked hard through high school, but just before national exams my father got sick, his health worsening with each passing day. Losing my father was a devastating blow. I had no one to hold me up. In the midst of my grief, I summoned all of my strength to honour his memory and finish my exams successfully.

As I looked to the future after school and the dream of university, scholarships offered a glimmer of hope in providing financial support and shielding young refugee girls like me from forced marriages, but the COVID-19 pandemic hit and everything was delayed.

I had always wanted to improve the justice system in my country of South Sudan, so I applied to study law at the University of Nairobi. Halfway through my first year, I heard about the DAFI scholarship on social media. I immediately applied and was lucky to be selected. The scholarship has given me peace of mind, knowing my fees will be paid, and it has freed me from the idea that someone would demand something in return for my education.

Last year I was elected President of the University of Nairobi Students Association, becoming the first-ever female refugee to hold the post. In that role, I am advocating for increased financial support for refugee students and for greater kindness, because we refugees have all suffered hostility and trauma in our lives.

My personal journey exemplifies the resilience and determination of refugee girls and shows that by empowering us through education we can break the cycle of hardship and provide a path towards a brighter future. If you seize every opportunity, no one and nothing can hinder you from achieving what you want.



Monicah talks to other students attending a youth forum on sustainable development at the university. © UNHCR/Charity Nzomo

📷 Manar Emad pictured on her graduation day from nursing school in Tangiers, Morocco. © Photo courtesy of Manar Emad



FIRST PERSON

MY JOURNEY:

LEARNING TO ADAPT

Manar Emad, 23, originally from Iraq, recently graduated and works as a nurse in Morocco while also studying law.



Ever since I was a little girl, I dreamed of becoming a nurse. I was inspired by those who cared for me when I was sick, and wanted to make a difference in people's lives, just like they did in mine. I was only five years old when we left Iraq in 2005, during the war, and I remember how much my mother fought to keep me, my two brothers and my sister safe. We settled in Morocco, in Tangiers, a lovely city!

Moroccans welcomed us, but my early schooling was hard because I was the only Iraqi girl and faced a lot of bullying from the other children, but I was strong and defended myself. I worked hard in high school, studying for days without resting so that I was accepted into a nursing programme in 2019. I was excited to start on the path towards treating patients, but it was also very challenging. Nursing school can be very tough—learning all the medical terminology and concepts, and balancing coursework and clinical requirements—there's a lot of

information to learn and a lot of practical skills to master, but with time and practice, it became easier, and my stress levels decreased.

When the pandemic started, I faced difficulties in my studies like many others around the world. I missed the face-to-face interaction with my teachers and classmates, and it was harder to get the support I needed. Like others, I had to deal with the stress and uncertainty that came with the global pandemic, which added to the already challenging workload of the nursing school programme.

Safety protocols and social distancing restrictions meant I suffered a lack of clinical experience and hands-on learning that made it hard to feel confident in my growing abilities as a nurse. However, I was determined to succeed and found ways to adapt to the new learning environment. I made use of online study groups and

virtual tutoring sessions to help me stay on track. I also made sure to take care of my mental and physical health by taking study breaks, staying active, and connecting with friends and family.

In addition to the challenges of online learning, the pandemic also hit clinical rotations, in which students gain valuable real-world experience working with patients and healthcare professionals. Hospitals and clinics had to limit the number of students allowed in their facilities, which meant that my classmates and I had to compete for very few spots, making it harder to get the hands-on experience needed to become a competent nurse. I was persistent and was able to secure a place at a local hospital to complete my clinical rotations. I made sure to keep up to date with all the latest safety protocols and precautions, so that I could show the hospital that I was serious about keeping myself and my patients safe.

“ My dream of becoming a nurse has come true.”

I learned a lot from working in the hospital, but the experience brought challenges too. I was worried about bringing the virus home to my family because, as a healthcare worker, I was at higher risk of exposure to the virus. I was particularly concerned about the potential impact on my loved ones. I took every possible precaution to minimize the risk of transmission,

including wearing personal protective equipment in hospital, washing my hands frequently and practising social distancing.

While getting sick or spreading the virus was a constant worry, I also felt it was important to continue working and doing my part to help patients during this challenging time.

I have to say that the pandemic also had some positive effects. I saw first-hand the impact that nurses can have on patients' lives, which made me even more determined to pursue my dream and make a difference in the world. The pandemic also forced me to be more adaptable and flexible in my approach to learning and problem-solving. I had to find new ways to connect with my classmates and instructors, which has helped me develop new skills and strategies for working in a rapidly changing world. While the pandemic has been difficult, it has also been helpful for me to grow and develop as a person and a future nurse.

I graduated in 2022 and am now a fully qualified nurse, and at the same time, I have also enrolled to study law at university. My dream of becoming a nurse has come true. I love my job, and I want to be the best nurse I can be.


 COVID-19 vaccines in cold storage. © UNHCR/Jose Cendon





CALL TO ACTION

STEPS TOWARDS EDUCATION FOR ALL REFUGEES

 Venezuelan and internally displaced Colombian pupils at the Tierra Bomba School in Cartagena, Colombia. © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo

With the right support from donors, civil society, and other partners, refugee hosting countries can fully integrate refugee children and youth into national education systems, ensuring inclusivity and opportunity for all.

Education is essential to thrive in life, leading to better employment opportunities, higher wages, and improved life outcomes. For girls specifically, higher education is associated with a lower likelihood of early marriage and pregnancy, allowing girls to take charge of their own destinies.

The stories in this report are a testament to the strength of refugee children and youth – and especially of girls and young women – who in the face of adversity few can imagine, have maintained their resolve to stay in school and continue their education.

However, the sober figures presented in this report highlight how much work remains to be done so that achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education and its targets becomes a reality for all learners everywhere, including refugees. In line with the Global Initiative on Education in Situations of Crisis and the Call to Action on Financing Education, agreed at the 2022 Transforming Education Summit, and in anticipation of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, the priority areas of action are laid out below.

Recognizing the efforts that states have already made to increase opportunities for refugees, we call on a variety of actors, including partners, civil society, donors, and others to support states to:

1. Improve access to education and learning outcomes for children and youth affected by crises.

Civil society and partners can support host states by:

- ➔ Advocating for governments to include all young people in their national education plans in ways that respect the diversity of needs, abilities, and capacities, and are free from all forms of discrimination.
- ➔ Supporting states to monitor and ensure that all students in school are acquiring the foundational literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills essential for learning success.
- ➔ Supporting states to ensure education programmes equip young people with essential work and life skills, as well as demand-driven training specifically for refugees.

States can:

- ➔ Remove existing social, economic, and political barriers to primary and secondary education for all children and adolescents, including refugees.
- ➔ Uphold existing commitments and international laws and treaties stipulating that refugees can access education on a par with host country nationals.

2. Build inclusive, crisis-resilient education systems.

Donors and partners can support host states by:

- ➔ Ensuring schools are equipped with information and tools to safeguard health and well-being, provide adequate nutrition, water, and sanitation, and protect learners from violence, sexual exploitation and abuse.
- ➔ Advocating for the alignment of emergency education with both national programmes and the minimum standards for education set out by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE).

3. Scale up and mainstream high-impact and evidence-based interventions into national policies and programming.

Donors and partners can support host states through action in these thematic areas:

- ➔ Teachers –support refugee teachers’ inclusion in national teacher management systems, align their recruitment and deployment with national standards, recognize their prior qualifications, and ensure predictable multi-year financing for their recruitment and professional development.



Ukrainian children show their artwork during a class at the PepsiCo-funded Learning Center in Buchest, Romania. © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell



📷 Ukrainian children and their teacher at a learning centre in Bucharest, Romania, set up by PepsiCo in the first weeks of the Ukrainian refugee emergency. © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

- ➔ Gender equality and inclusion – ensure refugee boys and girls have equal access to national education systems.
- ➔ Early childhood education – ensure refugee children have access to early childhood education where it is available to host country children.
- ➔ Socio-emotional skills and psychosocial support – provide refugee children with adequate support to develop the socio-emotional and foundational skills that will strengthen their learning.
- ➔ Protection from violence – ensure all children are educated in safe spaces and live in communities free of violence.
- ➔ Education technology and innovation - support children and youth with evidence-based, connected education programmes that use tech-enabled teaching and learning practices, contributing to improved digital skills, life skills and learning outcomes.

4. Maintain and increase external financing, ensuring it reaches all learners equitably and aligns with national planning priorities.

Donors can support host states by:

- ➔ Ensuring reliable, multi-year funding to build education systems that are agile, responsive to the onset of crises, and inclusive of refugees.
- ➔ Restating and meeting their commitments to allocate 0.7 per cent of gross national income to overseas aid, and to devote at least 10 per cent of that to education.
- ➔ Supporting UNHCR to innovate and find solutions to both new and longstanding problems – from classroom equipment, infrastructure, connectivity, and online resources to teacher training, apprenticeships, and internships, and encouraging the private sector also to play a role.

States are encouraged to:

Meet commitments to increase overall spending for education, and targeting the increase equitably so that it benefits the most marginalized learners, including refugees.

THE FINAL WORD

Leonardo Garnier,

Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Transforming Education

Let's welcome refugee children to their learning adventure

Learning is discovering, looking for answers to never-ending questions, finding out, reading about something that baffles you, sharing your search with others, learning with and from others. Learning is not just about answering questions, but about imagining and collectively confronting new and more challenging questions, or looking at them from a different perspective.

Education is the key to building a learning society, a society in which we learn to learn, we learn to do, we learn to live together, and we learn to live. Learning does not begin at school. It starts much earlier, and it never ends. It's truly a lifelong adventure. When we deny such an adventure to any person, for whatever reason, we are denying them access to the most important path to a productive, collaborative, meaningful and enjoyable life. That is why we regard education as an essential and enabling human right: a right that opens the door to other rights.

And yet, for many different reasons, millions of children and young people are still denied their right to education, their right to learn. Poverty, long distances to school, lack of teachers and infrastructure, gender inequality, discrimination in rights and in practice, as well as the lack of adequate facilities for persons with disabilities, are some of the reasons why the right to education is denied to millions.

But, as this report attests, all those barriers are compounded in a particularly perverse way by the challenge faced by increasing numbers of forcibly displaced learners – especially refugees. Suddenly and through no fault of their own, they find themselves not just out of school, but out of their homes, their communities, their countries, and their cultures. They are in unfamiliar territory, often lacking a sense of belonging. And they don't always feel welcome. Learning, for them, can become an almost impossible mission.

I still vividly recall my dismay when, years ago, a Minister of Education in my home country of Costa Rica lamented that resources had to be allocated to foreign children who sought refuge in our schools after



📷 Leonardo Garnier. © UN Photo/Jaclyn Licht

fleeing war in other Central American countries. Those children simply wanted to be welcomed, receive their school meals, use the bus to get to school, and sit in a classroom and learn, just like any other student. What the minister failed to comprehend then was that every child, irrespective of their origin, belongs in school. Given the unique challenges forcibly displaced children face, they deserve not only a place in school, but also a warm welcome and dedicated support.

“ *It is imperative that we embrace the educational journey of displaced children* ”

Is there a cost in this effort for host countries? Yes, of course, and it is important that the international community steps up to help countries in their efforts to integrate displaced and refugee children in their schools. But let's not focus only on the cost as a central concern, since there are also huge long-term benefits for host countries. Education is about learning to live together, and sharing the classroom with foreign, displaced classmates serves as a wonderful lesson in love and solidarity for our children – and for us: we become better people.

Let us also remember that many of those children we host today in our schools will be our future fellow contributing citizens. And let us not forget that many of us are descendants of yesterday's displaced children – and here, I think of my grandpa, once a teenaged migrant himself.

It is imperative that we embrace the educational journey of displaced children. Education is their right and our responsibility. By providing them with quality education and offering them the care and support they need, we foster their resilience, nurture their potential, and contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate society. Let us not deny them the transformative power of education but rather open ourselves, our classrooms, and communities to their unique stories, knowledge, and aspirations. Together, we can create a world where no child is left out and where every learning adventure can flourish.



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To contact the education team at UNHCR for more information on our education work or to discuss donations, funding, scholarships, data, partnerships and other forms of collaboration, please email Becky Telford at telfordm@unhcr.org.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organisation dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights, and building a better future for people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We lead international action to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people.

We deliver life-saving assistance, help safeguard fundamental human rights, and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place called home where they can build a better future. We also work to ensure that stateless people are granted a nationality.

We work in over 130 countries, using our expertise to protect and care for millions.

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