

# OVERCOMING BARRIERS: GENDER INEQUALITY AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES FOR REFUGEE GIRLS

## INTRO:

- According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 117.3 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, and 43.4 million of these are refugees (2024, 2).
- **Refugees:** are those forced to flee their homes due to factors outside of their control, such as violence, conflict, and persecution (UNHCR 2025).
- The number of refugees has more than tripled in the last 10 years (UNHCR 2024, 15).
- 49% of refugees are women and girls.
- An estimated 40% are children, however, over half do not attend school (UNHCR 2024, 18; Storen 2024, 1).
- Due to additional barriers, refugee girls do not have equal access to education as refugee boys (Grandi).
- Education is crucial for building self-confidence and allowing refugees to become “agents of their own development” (Wright 2010, 44, 47). Additionally, attending school provides routine and purpose to a child’s life, which is especially important for displaced persons (Grandi).

## METHODS:

I conducted a scoping review to assess the current refugee situation and explore the role of gender in refugees’ access to education. My review included an analysis of five case studies examining barriers to education through interviews with women and girls in refugee camps. These case studies were conducted in Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Kenya. Additionally, I reviewed reports from the UNHCR and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on initiatives aimed at supporting the inclusion of refugee girls in education.

## RESULTS:

- 1951 UN Refugee Convention, Art. 22: all refugees have a right to education (Storen 2024, 2).
- Donors, however, prioritize immediate needs like food, water and healthcare (Wright 2010, 47).
- Although the UNHCR is responsible for supporting refugees’ rights, the provision of education is at the state level (Storen 2024, 4).
- 75% of refugees are hosted in low/middle income countries and 21% are hosted in countries considered least developed, therefore, providing adequate education can be challenging (UNHCR 2024, 3; Storen 2024, 2).

“Refugee girls are one of the most marginalized groups in the world when it comes to school participation (Carvalho 140).”

- Refugee girls are half as likely to attend secondary school as refugee boys (Grandi).
- In refugee contexts, immediate survival needs often must be prioritized over education (Carvalho 2022, 143). The result is that girls are often obligated to take on domestic (gendered) duties, especially as they grow up.
- Barriers to girls’ education include: cost, gender roles, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and discrimination, early marriage, menstruation, and attitudes disregarding the importance of education for girls.
- Even though many of the participants believed in the value of education, the immediate risks involved in accessing it, often outweighed the potential future benefits (Garbern 2020, et al. 10). The result is that marriage is often seen as a more effective measure for securing girls’ future (9-10).

## DISCUSSION:

- Targeting these barriers is essential for ensuring that refugee girls have equal access to education.
- Safe and accessible learning spaces are needed to tackle these barriers, including: proper and discreet mechanisms for reporting SGBV, safe WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) facilities, girls only spaces for studying and socializing, transportation to and from school - including girls only school busses, and hiring more female teachers (UNHCR 28).
- Other ways to increase accessibility for girls include providing cash payments to families and alternative, flexible modes of education, such as e-learning (but wifi and cost barriers) and distance learning.
- Initiatives:
  - The Kenya Equity in Education Project (KEEP): Community engagement and cash payments (UNICEF 2121, 11).
  - The Girls Education Support Program (Aga Khan Foundation): Financial assistance to schools - hiring more female teachers (12).
  - ENEZA Shupavu291: SMS Study Tool through cell phones without internet connection (26).
  - These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading (TIGER Girls): Pre-loaded tablet content (31).

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Works Cited

