



HER FUTURE

Challenges & Recommendations to
Increase Education for Refugee Girls



Refugee girls participate in a JRS run school in Northern Thailand. (Jesuit Refugee Service)

INTRODUCTION

For millions of refugee girls, education is out of reach. Despite substantial increases in access to girls' education around the world over the last two decades, refugee girls remain left behind.

In countries affected by conflict, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.¹ Girls make up half of the 7.4 million school-age refugees, yet face disproportionate challenges in accessing and sustaining their education. Among all refugee children, only 61 percent are enrolled in primary school and 23 percent are enrolled in secondary school. Notably, refugee girls are only half as likely to be enrolled in secondary school as boys.²

Limited access to education further perpetuates the challenges and vulnerabilities that displaced girls face. The isolation of being out of school can harm girls who've experienced trauma during their displacement as they may be more vulnerable to trafficking or early marriage. Without school, refugee girls may find it more difficult to heal, build hope, and find safety.

The benefits of investing in education for all girls – including refugees and those who are forcibly displaced – transcends the individual. If refugee girls have access to an education, their families and communities are more likely to improve their social and economic position. The further girls progress with their schooling, the more they develop leadership skills, become income generators, and build self-reliance.³ These are personal qualities that will help their communities flourish as they strive to adapt to their host countries or as they prepare to return to their home countries.

Refugee girls are only

1/2 as likely to be enrolled in secondary school as boys.

UNHCR



Education improves people's lives. When you educate a girl, you educate a nation.

SARAH, 19 YEARS OLD, JRS SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT & SOUTH SUDANESE REFUGEE LIVING IN ADJUMANI, UGANDA



Many refugee boys and girls that experience a gap in education due to their displacement, find themselves adjusting to a host country with a different language, educational system or curriculum, and struggle to manage the stresses that come with having to rebuild their lives. For refugee girls, these barriers are often more heightened and include bureaucratic and structural limitations as well as social, cultural, and economic challenges.

Operating in over 50 countries, Jesuit Refugee Service has observed these challenges in many of the refugee communities where we provide educational services. This policy brief will explore how we can improve her future, the future for the millions of refugee girls. The brief will highlight the challenges refugee girls face in accessing education, the strategies host countries and their partners are using to provide tangible solutions, and recommendations for policymakers, donors, and practitioners to make a better future for displaced girls often left behind.

JRS'S COMMITMENT TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

While the number of girls and boys enrolled in JRS's education programs is equal in the early primary years, girls drop out at higher rates than boys as students grow older. JRS believes that in order to enhance refugee girls' access to education, particularly as they transition to secondary education, it is necessary to develop a holistic understanding of the barriers that prevent girls from achieving an education.

JRS is committed to providing quality education to refugees and displaced people around the world. This commitment includes a five-year effort, launched in 2015, called the Global Education Initiative (GEI). The GEI is an ambitious international campaign to enable JRS to open the doors of our education programs to 250,000 refugee students by 2020.

The initiative focuses on key areas, including increasing access to secondary education, with a focus on girls. Through the GEI, JRS is supporting girls as they progress through primary school and transition to secondary education. Some of these programs include scholarships targeting girls, facilities to ensure adequate menstrual health management, and tailored programs to support the empowerment of girls and address gender barriers.

CHALLENGES:

GENDER UNDERREPRESENTED IN PLANNING

Gender-specific needs are often under-represented in government education plans, donor priorities, and approaches to educational programming. Though there have been gains in incorporating refugee educational needs into host country government education plans and increased investments by donors in providing support for education in emergencies and protracted crises, gender-specific needs have not been included in all planning efforts.

A series of global, regional, and country-specific plans - including the Global Compact on Refugees, the Djibouti Declaration, and the Uganda Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities - have highlighted the importance of investing in education for all refugee children, with

some highlighting the unique challenges faced by women and girls. Yet, gender-specific needs must consistently be incorporated in similar efforts to advance solutions that reflect these challenges. Gender as a priority must start at the national level and be reflected in any effort to tackle refugee education.



GLOBAL FUNDS PRIORITIZE GENDER

A few global funds have shown leadership in prioritizing gender in refugee education efforts.

In 2016, a new fund for education in emergencies – **Education Cannot Wait (ECW)** – was launched. To date, ECW has mobilized over \$330 million in funding for education programs serving children in crisis in 19 countries. By 2021, ECW aims to reach 8.9 million children and youth living in areas affected by fragility, conflict, and violence – half of whom will be girls. To do this, ECW has committed to investing in strategies that are gender-responsive and increase access to education, promote safe and protective learning environments, and improve learning and skills for teachers.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) supports more than 65 developing countries to ensure that every child receives a quality basic education, prioritizing the poorest, most vulnerable, and those living in countries affected by fragility and conflict. Girls' education and gender equality are also central to GPE's vision of improved learning and equity for all through stronger education systems.

The donor community must also do more to highlight gender-specific needs as a funding priority.

By requiring that partners incorporate gender into all educational programming and ensuring that sufficient funds are provided to support these initiatives, we will make progress towards a more equitable distribution of access to education between refugee girls and boys.

The U.S. government has made significant strides in this area as evidenced by its new Strategy on International Basic Education for Fiscal Years 2019-2023, which was launched in 2018. This ground-breaking strategy prioritizes gender-sensitive education programs, as well as the need for educational programs in conflict and crisis settings.

“There is the greatest need and opportunity to expand access to basic education and to improve learning outcomes, including for marginalized and vulnerable groups, particularly girls and women to help ensure gender parity in basic education, or populations affected by conflict or crisis.”

U.S. GOVERNMENT STRATEGY ON
INTERNATIONAL BASIC EDUCATION



A teacher at a JRS school in Chad helps a student. (Jesuit Refugee Service)

In early 2019, the U.S. also signed into law the **Protecting Girls' Access to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act**, which will help refugees, especially girls, access safe and quality education. The new law will help ensure that the empowerment of every girl through education is a critical element of U.S. foreign assistance efforts as it authorizes the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to prioritize refugee education abroad.

MIREILLE'S STORY

Mireille Twayigira left Rwanda with her family when she was two years old, after her father was killed during the 1994 Rwandan conflict. For the next six years, her family traveled from country to country on foot. Her mother, grandmother, and sister all succumbed to illness during their long journey.

Mireille's grandfather became everything to her. His dream was to enroll her in school and he heard of a refugee camp in Malawi where they had good schools for refugee children. At eight years old, Mireille finally arrived with her grandfather at Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi.

In Dzaleka, Mireille became a student in one of the JRS's education programs. She found stability and self-confidence in Malawi, and dedicated herself to her studies, eventually graduating from secondary school among the top three female students in the country. She won a university scholarship for girls and in 2016, Mireille earned her medical degree from a university in China.

Today, in addition to practicing medicine, Mireille can be found in Dzaleka promoting the power of education to girls through the Naweza project, which includes extracurricular activities, psychosocial support, and material support to help girls remain and thrive in school. She also serves as JRS's Education Advocate, telling her story and supporting refugee education around the world. "I used to look at myself as a girl with a tragic past. But I realized I was more than that, I was a girl with a story to tell."



SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS KEEP GIRLS AT HOME

In some refugee communities, social and cultural beliefs regarding gender roles and education pose challenges to girls' access to education. This is often the case when parents believe that boys have greater future earning potential and, with limited resources, choose to invest in their son's education rather than their daughter's. Some religious or traditional values also discourage girls' education and emphasize a girl's role in the home providing domestic support. These social and cultural pressures contribute to an estimated one in seven girls in developing countries married before the age of 15.⁴

Uganda, Africa's largest refugee-hosting country, is home to over 1 million refugees from South Sudan. JRS operates education programming in northern Uganda where dropout rates among girls in both primary and secondary school are significant. Among UNHCR-supported schools, only 67 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school and 11 percent of girls are enrolled in secondary school.⁵ Reasons for dropping out include families' inability or unwillingness to pay for school fees, domestic duties at home, and early marriage or pregnancy.



Girls walk to school in the Kaya Refugee Camp in Maban County, South Sudan. (Paul Jeffrey / Misesan Cara)



Kindergarten child learning the shapes and colors in the Jbeil educational centre, a JRS school in Lebanon. (Kristóf Hölvényi/Jesuit Refugee Service)

JRS has had success in addressing these challenges in Uganda and elsewhere by engaging with communities and building the capacity of teachers, administrators, parents, and students to allow for greater communication and collaboration. This is accomplished by organizing community sensitization programs. These programs encourage school leaders to visit refugee settlements, recruit students, and talk with families and community leaders about the importance of sending their children to school – both boys and girls.

In addition, JRS encourages schools to identify a senior female teacher who can offer counseling services and check-in frequently with female students. This outreach allows girls to raise any concerns they might have without feeling self-conscious about discussing sensitive issues. It also helps to create an environment that fosters open dialogue and an opportunity for teachers and administrators to help address any challenges girls may be facing in completing their studies.



SILVIA, NYAKOUTH, AND EVALINE'S STORY

Silvia, Nyakouth, and Evaline are classmates in an accelerated learning program hosted at a school in Adjumani, Uganda, where JRS is providing scholarships to some secondary school students. Silvia and Nyakouth are from South Sudan, while Evaline is from Uganda. They have each faced their own challenges in defying their cultures in order to access a secondary education. Now enrolled in school, all three are hopeful that their education can provide a future for them and their families.

Silvia

Silvia, now 19, spent her childhood in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, returning to South Sudan in 2013. Like many South Sudanese refugees, her family experienced multiple displacements, having to flee their home on more than one occasion due to war and conflict. In 2018, Silvia and her family left South Sudan for the second time, arriving in Uganda. Despite the disruptions she faced in her education, she dreams of going to university and becoming a nurse.

“ I want to be educated so that I can get a job and send my children to school.

NYAKOUTH

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Nyakouth

Nyakouth, 24 years old, left South Sudan two years ago with her two young children – ages seven and five years old. She fled South Sudan because of the war and lack of educational opportunities. Her husband died and she is now left alone to care for her children. Yet, she perseveres and relies on a neighbor to watch her children while she goes to school – “I want to be educated so that I can get a job and send my children to school.”

Evaline

Evaline, 23 years old, is from Uganda. It was difficult for her family to pay for her school fees, so she left school at age 15, married and became pregnant. After the unexpected death of her newborn, she separated from her husband and decided to return to school - “I talk to fellow girls in the class, I tell them my story because it was not easy.”

LACK OF APPROPRIATE STRUCTURES & MATERIALS



Basamat Alnoor Jakolo Aldabi teaches school in the Kaya Refugee Camp in Maban County, South Sudan. (Paul Jeffrey / Misesan Cara)

A lack of access to adequate school structures is a challenge across the refugee landscape. In particular, there are a limited number of secondary schools in rural areas where 40 percent of refugees find themselves. Resources to pay for transportation to urban centers, where many secondary schools can be found, is cost-prohibitive for most refugees.⁶

To address long distances required to travel to school, and lack of transportation options, offering dormitories for students, including girls, makes a significant difference in school retention rates. By living on school grounds, the need to balance domestic duties at home and school obligations for girls is minimized. The dormitories also provide a safe and secure place for girls to study and thrive.

In addition, girls often do not have proper accommodations for their particular needs to succeed in school. A lack of adequate, gender-segregated sanitation facilities often poses a challenge for girls, especially as they begin to menstruate. Without access to appropriate facilities, menstruating girls are often left at home or unable to fully participate in school activities. Although little research has been conducted in refugee settings, some studies in developing countries have shown that access to gender-

segregated sanitation facilities increased girls' school attendance by almost four percent.⁷

Lack of access to sanitary supplies also limits girls' participation in school. Where girls don't have access or resources to purchase sanitary materials, they must be made available through school facilities, as JRS does in many of its supported schools through the provision of monthly sanitary kits. In addition, any new infrastructure projects must include building latrines for girls, and ideally incinerators, to properly dispose of sanitary napkins.



Loa Secondary School, Nimule, South Sudan. JRS give out sanitary packs to refugee girls. (Sergi Cámara/Jesuit Refugee Service).



NOUR'S STORY

Nour, a refugee from Syria, is 13 years old and a student at a JRS school in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. When Nour was 11, she missed one whole year of school. She was approached by a Syrian man who offered her a job. She told him that her priority was to attend school, but he promised he would help pay her family's debts and that they would live in a house, rent-free.

None of the promises were fulfilled. Nour, along with her two younger sisters, worked from 4am until 6pm, six days a week, cultivating and picking potatoes. Her family's debt was not payed off.

Eventually, Nour returned to school and met with a JRS social worker who spoke with her family about the importance of keeping Nour in school. Although Nour is working hard to achieve her dream of becoming a lawyer, she continues to fear that her family will take her out of school so that she can work and assist them financially.

“ It was a scary experience, and it made me long for school.

NOUR, 13 YEARS OLD, JRS STUDENT & SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVING IN LEBANON

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UNSAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In crises, targeted attacks on schools as well as the military use of school buildings can impede access for all children and teachers. Girls and women can be uniquely targeted because of their gender, not only as victims of sexual violence, but also when armed groups oppose female education. Girls and women were targets of attacks on education because of their gender in at least 18 of the 28 countries profiled in the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack's 2018 report.⁸

INCREASED VULNERABILITY

Both boys and girls are vulnerable to recruitment, attack, and injury, while girls are at greater risk of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse and exploitation of girls is exacerbated by armed conflict as children are especially vulnerable during times of upheaval. The physical and psychosocial impacts of sexual and gender-based violence have consequences for learning, attendance, retention, and achievement.⁹

Establishing a safe and secure school environment is critical in ensuring that girls are able to stay in school. Creating a female-friendly environment involves training teachers in strategies for providing guidance, mentorship, and targeted extracurricular activities for girls. Refugee girls often endure considerable trauma. Targeted programs, such as clubs, sports teams, and student leadership positions, provide informal psychosocial support and can help increase academic performance. In addition, investing in gender-responsive curricula and teaching practices that include social and emotional learning and life skills help foster a more inclusive learning environment that welcomes dialogue and discussion.

A lack of female teachers can also lead to an unsupportive environment. The presence of female teachers increases the likelihood that families will send their daughters to school and has a positive effect on girls' continued education. Programs that

have invested in "girl-friendly" amenities, including the recruitment of female teachers, increased girls' enrollment by 13 percentage points.¹⁰ Yet, there is often an insufficient supply of female teachers in emergency settings, in part because of a lack of educated females, as well as safety concerns and cultural practices in many refugee settings.¹¹ While JRS programs recruit staff from both the host and refugee population, it can be challenging to identify a sufficient number of qualified female teachers due to low educational attainment among females in both communities.

Providing teacher training and professional development opportunities is critical in recruiting and retaining teachers. In some settings, tailored programs are necessary to address the skills gaps that keep women from becoming teachers, such as JRS's female-only English language courses in Maban, South Sudan. These courses seek to improve the language skills of women so that they can succeed in a formal teacher training program.

In Chad, JRS offers a teacher training program for primary school teachers that includes courses on pedagogy and teacher quality. After the training, the teachers take what they have learned back into refugee primary schools and are monitored for quality. Nadjwa, a 34-year-old mother of seven who fled Sudan 14 years ago, is a graduate of JRS's teacher training program. Before the course, Nadjwa felt powerless to manage her students' emotional problems, and she doubted her competence to make lesson plans. Since completing the training, Nadjwa has noticed a significant difference in her students' attitudes. "When they have a problem at home or school, they come to speak to me about it. Now that they see I can help them solve their problems, they respect me."



GULSOOM'S STORY

Historically, access to education for Afghan girls has been extremely low. In Pakistan alone, the primary school enrollment rate for refugee girls is only 18 percent compared to 39 percent for boys. Among Afghan refugees, sociocultural traditions demand that adolescent girls can only be taught by women, but there are very few female teachers.¹²

Gulsoom beat the odds. In 1998, she was an 11-year-old girl who had recently returned to Herat, Afghanistan after spending seven years in Iran as a refugee with her family. Suddenly, the Taliban took control of the government and started ruling the country. Formal schools were closed to girls, but her parents found a neighbor who was holding classes in her home.

Soon, it became too dangerous to leave home, so Gulsoom began to study at home, without a teacher. She read voraciously and began sharing stories to her little sisters and other children. Gulsoom's experience teaching girls under the Taliban regime made her want to be a teacher. To pursue this dream she knew she had to continue her studies at university level. Even though her father didn't approve, she decided to apply to the University of Herat.

During her time at university, Gulsoom heard that JRS was recruiting English teachers for students who were recently returned refugees. She taught for three years and then received a scholarship from JRS to continue her studies in New Delhi, India. Now she continues to work in Afghanistan serving her country and educating girls – “It is my responsibility to help my people. I want to be self-reliant and to support my family.”





Refugee children participate in a JRS classroom in Jbel, Lebanon. (Kristof Holvenyi / Jesuit Refugee Service)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increasing access to quality education for refugee girls is within our reach. To do this, JRS urges donors, practitioners, and communities affected by crisis and conflict to implement the following recommendations:

1. INCORPORATE GENDER INTO NATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND GLOBAL EDUCATION PLANS.

- Ensure that national plans include the promotion of equality and empowerment through gender-responsive strategies.
- Fully implement refugee education priorities outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees, including the call to “support access by women and girls to education.”
- Carry out the priorities and processes envisioned in the U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education for Fiscal Years 2019-2023.
- Ensure that the U.S. government’s Protecting Girls’ Access to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act is fully implemented and that results are tracked and communicated to stakeholders.
- Encourage donors to provide targeted funding to bridge the gap in access to education for girls. Only when political commitment and sustained investment are present can success be achieved at scale.
- Engage in data collection and monitoring to better understand where there are gaps in access to education for refugee girls and to assess whether interventions are having the intended result.

2. ADDRESS SOCIAL & CULTURAL NORMS THAT PREVENT GIRLS FROM ATTENDING SCHOOL

- Invest in capacity-building efforts within refugee and host communities to promote gender-responsive activities, including counseling services for students.
- Carry out community sensitization programs that encourage family support for girls' education and help foster dialogue and collaboration.
- Establish support networks within school settings to ensure that girls are able to voice concerns and staff are able to help address their needs.

3. PROVIDE APPROPRIATE STRUCTURES & MATERIALS TO ENSURE GIRLS ARE SUCCESSFUL IN SCHOOL

- Provide adequate access to schooling at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, and post-secondary – for all refugees.
- Ensure that sufficient scholastic materials are available to all students.
- Ensure that gender-segregated sanitation facilities are available at schools.
- Provide access to sufficient sanitary supplies for female students, as well as proper disposal mechanisms.

4. PROMOTE SAFE AND PROTECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

- Recruit teachers and administrators from both refugee and host communities to foster social cohesion and build stronger communities.
- Support the hiring and training of female teachers and programs that address the skills gaps that keep women from becoming teachers.
- Invest in gender-responsive curricula and teaching practices, including social and emotional learning and life skills.
- Establish social clubs and mentoring opportunities for girls to share, discuss, and advocate on behalf of their needs.
- Invest in school-based extracurricular activities and sports that engage girls, promote their wellbeing, and build their resilience.



CONCLUSION

Girls participate in a class run by JRS in Afghanistan. (Jesuit Refugee Service).

As the world witnesses the highest levels of forced displacement since World War II, the challenges may seem insurmountable. Yet, harnessing the potential of refugee children and youth by ensuring that they have access to a quality education will change lives and create hope for the future. When political commitment and sustained investment are present, success can be achieved at scale. By building political will, donor support, and community capacity that prioritizes gender-specific interventions in refugee contexts, we can improve the future of displaced girls and women around the world through education.

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Author: Giulia McPherson

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Cover Photo: Recipients of JRS secondary school scholarships in Yambio, South Sudan (Jesuit Refugee Service)

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ACCOMPANY



SERVE



ADVOCATE



The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organization with a mission to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, that they may heal, learn, and determine their own future. JRS programs are found in 51 countries serving more than 750,000 individuals, providing assistance to: refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, asylum seekers in cities, and those held in detention centers.

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