

# Refugee transitions from education to employment: perspectives from Pakistan and Rwanda

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## Introduction

Despite increased efforts to amplify refugee voices within research, refugees continue to struggle to be heard within these conversations (Rabi et al, 2022). First-hand reports of refugee experiences within research are crucial to understanding refugees' realities and the associated challenges; without this knowledge, efforts to help solve refugee issues risk being not fully informed or conversant with contextual needs.

This article provides a first-person account of some key moments in our educational journeys and transitions. Both of us have encountered education and employment challenges related to having refugee status, though we both currently work as Research Assistants for [Jigsaw](#), an education research organisation based in the UK. The aims of the piece are to highlight the difficulties from our personal perspectives, suggest possible lessons and make recommendations regarding refugees' access to education and transitions to employment. Writing this piece has given us a vital opportunity to speak on behalf of the many refugees whose voices lack a platform, but who have experienced similar educational challenges due to forced displacement.

The article comprises three key sections. The first and second are dedicated to our respective personal narratives and analytical reflections of our experiences, supported by references to existing literature. The concluding section contains our recommendations for a variety of actors based on our combined experiences.

## Rozina's journey

I started my education journey in one of the government schools in Peshawar, Pakistan, back in 2001. At that time, my family was not in a good financial situation and my parents could not afford an expensive education, so my siblings and I went to a small public school in our area. The school was receiving funding from the Japanese International Corporation Agency (JICA), and the quality of education and environment of that school was good compared to other government schools in the area, which my cousins tell me often lack even basic facilities such as chairs and tables. My school infrastructure was, however, still poor – we lacked laboratories and IT facilities, which made it very difficult to develop the skills needed to pass exams and pursue further education.

Although the learning environment was fair, there were still many quality issues. Teachers tended to come to class only to complete their attendance and if a student had any queries, teachers were reluctant to offer support. Low salaries amongst the teacher workforce and a lack of proper teacher training<sup>3</sup> constitute some explanatory factors (Hunter 2020). Teacher absenteeism is also an issue, a phenomenon whose effects on academic outcomes have been documented (UNICEF 2022). Work remains to be done to understand how widespread it is in Pakistan, and if this disproportionately affects under-resourced schools, the type of schools that refugees and disadvantaged host country students are typically able to access.

Though some of my teachers were kind and approachable, corporal punishment was a reality. Pakistan is one of 68 countries where corporal punishment is still legal, and it was estimated to affect 44% of sampled students in the country in 2014 (Gershoff, 2017). Corporal punishment is especially directed at male students. The literature finds that boys, along with children with disabilities as well as ethnic minorities, are more likely to experience corporal punishment than their peers (see for ex., Lee, 2015). While not documented in the

<sup>1</sup> The author is a refugee from Afghanistan, born and raised in Pakistan. For more information, see end of article.

<sup>2</sup> The author was born in Rwanda in 1996, just after her family fled from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information, see end of article.

<sup>3</sup> Though most teachers have a Bachelor's degree in their subject specialism, many are not given access to further professional teacher training. Unlike in Rozina's school, teachers in Afghan schools sometimes do not even have a Bachelor's degree.

literature, beatings could be perceived as being more appropriate to the physicality of boys compared to girls. It is telling that in some countries gender discrimination is part of the law – *only boys* can be the subject of corporal punishment.<sup>4</sup>

While corporal punishment was also administered to girls, it tended, in my experience, to be less harsh. Even so, I became so scared of being beaten that I stopped going to school regularly, causing me to miss out on vital learning experiences. The link between experiencing school-related violence in different forms and poor education (Delprato et al., 2017; Trucco & Inostroza, 2017) and well-being outcomes (Farrington et al., 2011; Holt et al., 2015; Topper et al., 2011) have been amply documented. Experiences of school-related violence have been associated with lower performance in standardised testing (Chávez Villegas et al., 2021), increased absenteeism and an increased risk for dropping out of school (Smalley et al., 2016).

I studied at the government school until I was seven years old. After this, my family gained some financial stability. We moved to another location and switched schools, where mastering Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, became very important. Teachers delivered lectures and students conversed in this language, making it possible to master its use. This was very beneficial for my integration as an Afghan student, as if you do not speak Urdu in Pakistan, it is difficult to secure further work and education opportunities later on. English was also used as a language of instruction, though this was problematic as the teachers themselves did not have high spoken proficiency. In addition, we were not encouraged to speak English ourselves, which I think led to feeling very shy about using the language. Not having much experience of producing the language for myself meant that I was always worried about making mistakes. This then impacted my confidence with applying for opportunities that required high levels of spoken English.

In my experience of both primary and secondary schools in Peshawar, refugees and nationals were treated relatively equally in terms of fees (though I knew of some schools that did not admit Afghan refugees). However, the experiences of my younger siblings and cousins have been different; more recently, schools have made the admissions process very difficult for refugees. They do not award either sibling scholarships or merit scholarships to Afghan refugees, though these were both options in the past. Without these scholarships, education is unaffordable for many refugees that I know, as there are no schools that are free for refugees. This results in the interruption of education and a switch to engaging in informal work to support themselves and their families quite early in their lives. While boys usually work as shop assistants, cleaners, or street vendors, girls mostly do indoor work like tailoring, cleaning people's houses, or babysitting.

At the age of 15, I completed school and I wanted to go to one of the government-funded colleges in Peshawar that are known for their quality education, but this was not possible as there were only one or two quota places available for Afghan refugees. Admission was possible through self-funding, though refugees are treated as international students and are therefore charged three times the amount in comparison to Pakistani national students. I had to make the difficult choice to opt out of this college and was admitted to a private college to study Computer Science where, due to my grades, I received a fee reduction.<sup>5</sup> Though this gave me access to this college, the discounted fee would still have been too high for many of my peers. The limited quota places for refugees and discriminatory fee policies make these institutions inaccessible for the majority of refugees.

After college, I gained a place at the Institute of Management Sciences in Peshawar for my undergraduate studies. Fortunately, I won a merit-based scholarship, **without which I would not have been able to continue with my higher studies**. Then, in my second semester, I successfully applied for a DAFI scholarship. To illustrate how competitive these processes are, the DAFI programme granted scholarships to 470 refugees in Pakistan in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020). Given that there were an estimated 220 thousand refugees in the country in the 18 to 24 age group in 2021, this makes the success rate of obtaining a scholarship extremely small!<sup>6</sup> As a result of getting the scholarship, I was able to complete my higher education quite smoothly. There were many other

<sup>4</sup> In Singapore, according to the Education regulation of 1958: "The corporal punishment of boy pupils shall be administered with a light cane on the palms of the hands or on the buttocks over the clothing. No other form of corporal punishment shall be administered to boy pupils."

<sup>5</sup> At that time, this college was offering this discount to every student regardless of their nationality, but now they have changed their policy and are only offering it to Pakistani nationals. While the reason for this change is unclear, it could be because of political pressure to reduce refugee support, or perhaps due to institution funding problems.

<sup>6</sup> 0.2%, though we know that not all individuals in this age group are eligible, particularly if they have not been able to complete a secondary education.

refugees who were not able to continue their education journeys like I did. Allowing enough time to apply for scholarships and to gather the required documentation was crucial to my success, as it can be a lengthy process. I would suggest that students begin their scholarship quest even before finishing high school.

After graduation, I was worried about getting a job and was searching for over a year. There are very few job opportunities available for Afghan refugees in Pakistan; refugees are not guaranteed the right to work under Pakistani law (Ginn et al, 2022). To enter formal employment, potential employees need to be able to provide a Pakistan national ID card, which refugees like me cannot apply for – even if they are born in or have spent decades in the country. Being a part of the DAFI scholarship programme, however, helped me to eventually secure a place on a project led by Jigsaw, Refugee Education UK, and the UNHCR called *Voices of Refugee Youth*. I got a notification in our DAFI scholars group about the Youth Researcher role within this project, and decided to apply, seeing it as a great opportunity to work with an international organisation. Though I had never thought much about working in research before that point, working with Jigsaw enabled me to explore the experiences of fellow refugees in Pakistan and the project opened my mind to the power that research has to make positive change.

I have been working as a Youth Researcher with Jigsaw since 2019, and more recently as one of three Pakistan-based Research Assistants with the same organisation. We work remotely on a variety of tasks such as detailed data review and analysis, conducting data collection, data cleaning and coding, presenting findings and developing research skills. Our work with Jigsaw demonstrates why involving refugees in this kind of research is beneficial for all: we are able to use our experiences to help with project scoping, collect data sensitively and ethically in our communities, and apply our own knowledge and experiences in the interpretation of findings. Not only does this strengthen the quality and validity of research, it also enables us to amplify the voices of refugees and to advocate for our communities. I believe that other organisations can and should follow the example of Jigsaw by creating employment opportunities for refugees. Though remote working has enabled me to take advantage of this opportunity, going abroad for higher education and further employment is still a challenge due to the near impossibility of obtaining the appropriate visas here in Pakistan,<sup>7</sup> limiting my opportunities for professional growth.

## Aimeé's journey

My early education access was hampered by forced displacement and financial issues. My mother fled with my elder sister, my brother and myself, while my father had to stay in the DRC due to security issues. He decided to come after the family because men were more at risk of being killed than women and children. We had only our mother, and she was usually not around to look after us – she would travel to other districts looking for work. From primary school until the end of secondary school, we would come home to an empty house. The challenges were many, from having to prepare our own food to a lack of electricity and a lack of money to buy lamp oil. My secondary school allowed students to use its electricity for two hours during evenings from Monday to Thursday, but students who wanted to perform well needed much more study time than this. Sometimes, my siblings and I used flashlights to review material, especially prior to school and national examinations, though the batteries usually ran out after a couple of hours.

These challenges did not discourage me from studying. I was always motivated to work hard in school so that I could continue my education, which I saw as a pathway to secure employment in the future. My father was an important influence; he used to tell me and my siblings that, as we had left our home country, there would be no inheritance for us, so we would have to study hard to secure a bright future. In addition, I made the most of the limited resources available to me: I had a few English books, including two dictionaries that I was awarded. There was also a library in the camp where I used to go to learn on my own, or sometimes with a friend. I enjoyed reading Math, Chemistry, Biology and English books. I became a brilliant and dedicated student; I engaged in self-learning in the evenings using my notebooks. I was the first female at my school (Amahoro College) to get top marks in the Ordinary Level national examination and received an ADRA (the Adventist Development and Relief Agency) scholarship for advanced secondary school in Maths, Chemistry and Biology. I even received an award from the first lady of Rwanda, Jeannette Kagame. This was one of the

<sup>7</sup> Afghan refugees need to obtain a Pakistani visa in addition to a visa issued by the country to which they are travelling. The Pakistani government has made this process very long, difficult and expensive for refugees.

most encouraging experiences for me, and motivated me to give it my all. It was clear that if I was disciplined and worked hard, I could achieve my goals. I always kept this experience in mind when applying for secondary and higher education scholarships later on.

Unfortunately, my educational progress was also hindered by health issues. I was sensitive to the cold weather in Musanze district. My mother tried to find another school for me but it was not possible due to financial constraints. It required her to travel to different districts, and those journeys required resources that we did not have. A change in circumstances can result in unsurmountable financial challenges that could have meant the end of the education journey for me. My poor health at this time impacted my performance in school, though the continuation of the scholarship enabled me to complete my secondary education.

As my experience shows, merit-based scholarships have been an essential feature of my education journey. I was awarded the ADRA scholarship due to high exam scores, and later I got a full scholarship to do a Bachelor's degree in Healthcare Management with a concentration in Global Perspectives from Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) through the Kepler programme in Kigali. In the face of adversity, I was successful! I applied with more than 100 youth from the camp, and was one of the seven best performers in an admission exam. There are ongoing efforts to understand how learners can thrive in adverse environments – research that can help us to identify the enabling factors that can lead to successful education outcomes (see Singhal, 2013; UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2022). From my perspective, I performed better because I had gained confidence from my past academic achievements. A three-month preparatory programme for women run by Kepler also helped me to develop key skills in Maths and English.

While pursuing my Bachelor's degree, I applied and got selected to do a year-long MIT-certified programme in Computer and Data Science in Amman, Jordan. Alongside other interdisciplinary youth from Africa and Asia, I travelled there to learn computing skills, including computing languages such as Python. This programme gave me vital digital skills and confidence with IT skills that have enabled me to navigate the digital world and helped me to secure employment. I realised that everything is increasingly being done using technology and I wanted to ensure I had the skills to keep up with these developments. I also thought that this would be an opportunity to travel, and increase my knowledge of other cultures.

In addition to the academic skills and knowledge that I acquired during my education journey, I learnt transferable skills that have helped me to apply for jobs and to be successful in the work-place, including CV and cover letter writing, effective communication, team work, time management and problem solving skills. For instance, at university I was required to attend classes five minutes before they started. This routine equipped me with time management skills that continue to help me work effectively to this day. There is consensus from experts that softskills, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and socio-emotional (SEL) skills, such as problem solving, collaboration, and emotional intelligence are just as necessary for thriving in the workplace as foundational skills (WEF, 2016), which is why it is important for these to be incorporated in educational trajectories.

In early 2020, I was selected as a Youth Researcher on the *Voices of Refugee Youth* project, led by Jigsaw in partnership with the UNHCR. Following this project, I started working with Jigsaw as one of three Rwanda-based Research Assistants. In parallel, I enrolled in a fellowship programme with the African Union, where I am working closely with other fellows based in Ethiopia and Ghana to develop a chatbot software that will help people get African trade information. This is valuable because it will help businesses to understand how they can participate in continental trading, which will enhance their prospects. The skills and knowledge gained in the MIT programme proved essential to securing these opportunities, both of which require strong research and computing skills.

## Recommendations

In light of the experiences recounted above, a number of recommendations can be made to the different actors who play a part in the education journeys of refugees across the world. Though we have grouped these according to those who may be best placed to respond to each issue, some may be applicable to multiple actors.

## Recommendations for education institutions

- **Reward high performing refugee students.** Whether one-off prizes or full scholarships, awards are extremely motivating for refugees, and amplifying these successes within refugee communities can constitute a ‘pull factor’, motivating others to perform well in school.
- **Prioritise the development of refugees’ digital skills.** Refugee youth must be exposed to and comfortable with modern digital realities if they are going to stand a chance of securing well-paid jobs in the future.
- **Prioritise the development of refugees’ transferable skills.** These can support in increasing the likelihood of securing work opportunities and in being successful in a professional environment.
- **Create safe environments for skills practice in schools.** Students need to be encouraged to express themselves in class, and not be afraid to make mistakes. This could be encouraged by supporting teachers through professional development.
- **In contexts where refugees are not included in national education systems, increase refugee quotas and reduce fees where possible.** This will help increase opportunities for refugees to access the education opportunities they seek.

## Recommendations for host government ministries

- **Provide basic necessities for refugees.** Access to food, water, shelter and electricity play a vital role in securing successful learning outcomes.
- **Provide good quality resources to public schools.** Doing this will ensure that those who can’t afford private schools, including host country students, can have access to quality education.
- **Create and enforce laws and policies prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in schools.** Children cannot learn effectively if they are afraid. This should include banning corporal punishment, as a great majority of countries have done, and funding teacher professional development to support staff in employing adequate disciplinary measures that respect and are in line with child rights.
- **Create policies that enable refugees to be taught in the language of their host country.** This is crucial for the integration of refugees and for developing the ability to contribute to their host society.
- **Provide English language training as part of teacher professional development.** English language skills are vital for securing further education and employment opportunities. Teachers need to be better equipped to help students to develop these language skills.
- **Make visa processes less costly and easier to navigate.** This is a vital component for increasing refugees’ access to international education opportunities.

## Recommendations for UNHCR and other agencies

- **Increase awareness on educational opportunities available to refugees.** Refugees cannot apply to education opportunities such as the Kepler programme or the MIT programme mentioned above if they do not know about them.
- **Support access to national health services for refugees.** Having access to health support and advice will help to ensure that refugees are able to make the most of their educational opportunities.

## Recommendations for scholarship providers

- **Increase scholarship availability.** Most higher education opportunities are unaffordable for the vast majority of refugees, making it impossible to continue studying without financial support.
- **Offer non-academic scholarships or other financial support.** This will enable refugee students who have strengths in other areas, not just in academic subjects, to develop their knowledge and skills.
- **Offer wrap-around employment support alongside the scholarship itself.** This could include details of upcoming education and employment opportunities, and services that help students to navigate the administrative processes associated with applying for these opportunities.



## About the authors

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### Rozina Zazai

Rozina is a Research Assistant at Jigsaw. She holds a degree in Computer Science from IMSciences, Pakistan, supported by a DAFI scholarship. She also completed the one year online MIT ReACT program from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA. Born and raised in Pakistan, Rozina is an Afghan refugee and has raised the voices of refugee youth during her work with Jigsaw as a Youth Researcher. This work included spending two years conducting surveys and interviews with Afghan refugees and submitting data for analysis. Rozina has also been voluntarily tutoring K-12 students in STEM and other subjects since 2015.

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