

# Forcibly Displaced Women in Higher Education: Investing in an Inclusive and Sustainable Future

Education **significantly transforms the lives of women and girls, their families, and communities.** Yet, 131 million girls have never set foot in a classroom (ActionAid 2023). This stark contrast is even more pronounced for forcibly displaced people. Only 68% and 34% of displaced youth attend primary and secondary school respectively. As a girl moves from childhood into adolescence and early adulthood, her prospects of pursuing a higher **education decline.**

In countries affected by conflict, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys. Young women are nearly 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict (Global Education Monitoring Report). As refugee girls move from adolescence into early adulthood, her prospects of pursuing a higher education **decline.** Attending university remains out of

reach for many with only **6% of refugees are enrolled in higher education** compared to 40% of the general population (UNHCR 2023). **We must act now** to ensure more women fulfil their potential and become effective changemakers and leaders for an inclusive and sustainable future.

## Educating women matters

- Education is at the heart of UNHCR's mandate. Equitable access to quality education helps to protect, include and empower displaced and stateless women.
- Education for women and girls at all levels can help to break cycles of poverty, improve economic inclusion, narrow disparities, challenge harmful norms and reduce gender inequalities in the long term.
- Each additional year a girl spends in school can boost her earnings as an adult by up to 20 per cent.
- Higher level education can prepare women and girls to meaningfully participate in decisions that affects their lives, families and broader communities.
- Education enables women to formulate solutions to displacement drivers such conflict and the climate crisis, and to play a pivotal role in conflict prevention, sustainable peace and development.

The **Global Compact on Refugees** sets out to expand and enhance refugee access to all levels of education. More specifically, it recognizes the importance of “measures to strengthen the agency of women and girls, to promote women’s economic empowerment and to support access by women and girls to education (including secondary and tertiary education).” Similarly, **SDG 5** affirms the international commitment to achieving gender equity, including equal access to education.

## **UNHCR’s commitment to gender equality in education**

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

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

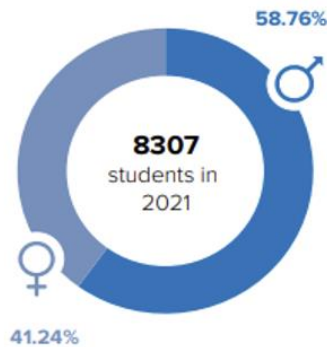
In accordance with UNHCR’s **Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity**, the organization strives to ensure that forcibly displaced women enjoy equal, meaningful, and safe access to education.

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

UNHCR’s **Refugee Education Strategy 2030**, through the **15by30** roadmap, commits UNHCR and partners to achieving enrolment of 15 per cent of young refugees in higher education by the year 2030. The roadmap is built around **five higher education pathways**:

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

## DAFI Scholars



UNHCR's flagship programmes for higher education - the DAFI Tertiary Scholarship Programme is the cornerstones of UNHCR's commitment to expand access to education for all refugee youth. The DAFI programme has supported over 22,000 students since it began 31 years ago. Recognizing the considerable barriers that refugee girls face in accessing and completing school, the DAFI programme is committed to achieving gender parity by 2025. UNHCR's digital and connected education solutions are helping

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

## Education for empowerment

*"I was constantly telling myself: you must do whatever it takes to succeed."*



**Raïssa** fled the Central African Republic in 2013, ultimately settling in Chad. Even as a young mother struggling with money, she managed to complete high school. As exceptional and dedicated student, she was determined to go to university and eventually won a DAFI scholarship. Now 24, Raïssa is a recent graduate in Communications and Marketing from Emi Koussi University, in N'Djamena. "My son goes to school, I go to university," she says. "It is just the two of us and we keep going." Marketing suits her, she adds. "I want to be creative, to be a leader. I am always keen on learning new things. I am always on the move, doing something."



## **Women as leaders in STEM**

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

Hawler Muhammad is a Syrian refugee living in Darashakran Refugee Camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. She was born in Qamishli and fled to Iraq with her family in 2012, at the age of eight. Now 18 years old, Hawler is a DAFI scholar pursuing a bachelor's degree in physiotherapy at Erbil Polytechnic University and one of five chairpersons of the DAFI Club Committee for Erbil City. She is in her second year of study. Hawler is devoted to serving her community and volunteers as an English teacher for refugee students with a local non-governmental organisation. She is passionate about raising awareness about climate change and participates in many advocacy activities as well. Hawler is determined to have a successful career as a physiotherapist and is an avid supporter of other forcibly displaced women accessing and pursuing higher education. She encourages refugee students to dare to dream about a better tomorrow.

## Women as community organizers



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

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

### Call to action

Governments, donors, academic institutions, advocacy networks and other key stakeholders are vital partners in ensuring that more forcibly displaced girls and women can access and thrive in higher education and beyond by:

- Constructing, equipping and upgrading secondary schools in refugee hosting areas so that more host community and refugee girls can attend and complete secondary schools that have adequate and safe water and sanitation facilities.



- Providing students *and their parents* access to information about the benefits of educating girls and women.
- Committing earmarked funding, providing in-kind support for education initiatives that can create enabling environments for women and girls in displaced settings, and creating more scholarships for refugee women through the [Aiming Higher fundraising initiative](#), to remove the obstacles that prevent girls from accessing secondary and higher education.
- Partnering with UNHCR to ensure that forcibly displaced women and girls have access to affordable digital devices, digital literacy and skills, and that they are included in national digital education rollouts through [UNHCR's Connected Education Challenge](#).
- Multiplying efforts to implement pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and developing quality joint pledges to address gender equality in higher education for the 2023 GRF.

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

-Khatira, DAFI alumna and finance officer living in Pakistan

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## Contact us

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