



Education outcomes of refugees and hosts: Comparative analysis in South Sudan

Acknowledgements

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The document benefited from inputs and comments from colleagues from UNHCR HQ (Education team), UNHCR Regional Bureau for Eastern and Southern Africa, and UNHCR South Sudan Operation.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics, the UNHCR South Sudan Operation, the UNHCR Global Survey Team, and the World Bank–UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement to the design and implementation of the Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan 2023.

Mena, M., Nava, A., Sarr, I., & Chavez Villegas, C. (2026). *Education outcomes of refugees and hosts: Comparative analysis in South Sudan*. FDS Thematic Brief Series No. 3. Copenhagen, Denmark: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.



Key Findings

- ▶ Refugees show a higher net attendance rate for primary education (60 per cent) than host communities living in proximity to refugee camps (40 per cent) and the national average (38 per cent). Net attendance rate for secondary education remains critically low for refugees and host communities (2 per cent), below the national rate (5 per cent).
- ▶ Refugees have higher primary and lower-secondary completion rates than hosts living in proximity to camps. Less than 10 per cent across all groups complete upper secondary education.
- ▶ Around 25 per cent of refugee children are out of school, compared to 55 per cent of host children. This rate follows a U-shape, high at early and late ages due to late school entry and early dropout.
- ▶ While enrollment opportunities for boys and girls in South Sudan are broadly comparable, boys continue to have higher completion rates at every level of education among both refugee and host populations. Primary completion rates illustrate this gap: among refugees, 47 per cent of boys complete primary school compared to 35 per cent of girls; among host communities, the corresponding rates are 37 per cent for boys and 17 per cent for girls. This is at least partly due to factors such as marriage/pregnancy. Indeed, refugee girls are significantly more likely to be out of school compared to boys due to distance, high costs, and marriage/pregnancy.
- ▶ The most commonly reported reasons for not attending school include: economic barriers (including hidden costs despite “free education” policies); social barriers (gender norms, marriage, caregiving roles); and infrastructure/access barriers (distance and limited access in rural areas).
- ▶ Among refugee children, the risk of being out of school increase significantly with age, fostering/orphanhood, household shocks, poverty, and living in a male-headed household, while higher education level of the household head and higher household wealth strongly reduce these risks.
- ▶ Governments and partners must urgently adopt multi-sectoral, gender-responsive, and area-based approaches that remove financial barriers, strengthen resilience to crises, and systematically include forcibly displaced children in education data and policies, so that every child in South Sudan can access and complete quality education.

Introduction

Refugee context

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has faced persistent fragility. Despite the ongoing hardship, the country continues to be a gracious host to large numbers of refugees. Furthermore, its refugee population has been consistently increasing due to continuous instability, ever-present conflicts, and severe, recurring climate events across the region. Many refugees hosted in South Sudan live in protracted situations, residing side-by-side with host communities that themselves face structural challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited access to basic services, and scarce economic opportunities. A vast majority of refugees hosted in South Sudan reside in camps. The presence of camps has triggered local changes, including new infrastructure and services, such as schools and health centres, that also benefit surrounding host communities.

As of March 2023 South Sudan hosted 298,362 refugees. The vast majority (93 per cent) originated from Sudan, with the remainder primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and the Central African Republic. After the start of Forced Displacement Survey (FDS) data collection in April 2023, escalating conflict in Sudan led to an additional influx of 135,000 refugees, primarily into Upper Nile State and Doro camp in particular. Ajuong Thok and Pamir camps in the Ruweng Administrative Area also saw significant inflows.

As of the end of March 2025, the number of refugees hosted in South Sudan is 552,333, with the vast majority facing serious protection concerns. The countries of origin of the refugees remains approximately unchanged in comparison to in spring of 2023. Given the ongoing crisis in Sudan, the number of refugees seeking protection in South Sudan is likely to continue rising.



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Objectives

This brief examines education outcomes among refugees and host communities in South Sudan. Using data from UNHCR's Forced Displacement Survey (FDS) conducted in 2023, it provides a snapshot of education access for forcibly displaced children and host populations. Three questions guided the analysis:

- i **Do refugee children have different opportunities for access to education compared to nearby hosts?**
- ii **What characteristics of forcibly displaced and host children and their households are associated with better education outcomes?**
- iii **What role does gender play in school attendance?**

The brief starts by providing an overview of the country context and situates the analysis within the existing literature. It then presents the methods used for analysis of the data, followed by descriptive statistics on key education indicators and regression analysis findings on the determinants of being out of school. It concludes with research and policy recommendations.

Country context and inclusion in the national education system

Access to primary and secondary school in South Sudan remains a challenge. The country has the second highest rate of children out of school (67 per cent) globally, only surpassed by Somalia (NJ MED, 2025). As of 2024, the country had a refugee population of 517,475 and a refugee school aged population of 243,257 children, with the largest share originating from Sudan, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (UNHCR, 2025). Between 2023 and 2024, there was a 42 per cent increase in the refugee school-aged population at all levels (ages 3-24 years) from 222,525 at the end of December 2023 to 314,309, primarily due to the Sudan crisis and natural population growth.

Despite these challenges, South Sudan has in place a robust legal and policy framework for education. The General Education Act 2012 outlines twelve guiding principles, including the provision of free and compulsory primary education for all without discrimination, the promotion of gender equity, support for alternative learning pathways, and the use of education to promote peace, self-reliance, cultural respect, and national unity (GRSS, 2012). This framework remains a cornerstone for efforts to expand equitable and inclusive education across the country, including for displaced populations.

Complementing this, the National Inclusive Education Policy 2020 provides strategic direction for ensuring access to education for all, particularly marginalized groups, and for creating an enabling, inclusive learning environment across all levels of the system (GRSS, 2020).



The broader policy landscape is articulated in national development strategies, notably the South Sudan Development Strategy (2021–2024). Education falls under Cluster 3: Social Development, which aims to “*increase support to the social sector for human capital development and protect the vulnerable population, to leave no one behind*”. Priority interventions include: i) national capacity assessments and surveys; ii) investment in infrastructure and learning materials; and iii) strengthening teacher education and curriculum development.

While the crisis in South Sudan has continued to hinder access to services, the policy environment in the country regarding access to education for refugees is generally favourable. The existing education policy framework allows refugees to access the national education system on equal terms with nationals (*Section 33(g) of the Refugee Act, 2012*) and remains unchanged. Although the Refugee Act does not explicitly address refugees’ access to public secondary education on the same terms, they are generally considered to have equal access.¹ Refugees are also mentioned in the General Education Sector Plan. In all schools, the South Sudanese curriculum is followed, and refugees have the right to sit in the examinations under the same conditions as nationals.

In practice, however, refugees are not included in the national budget for education and the government’s capacity to meet basic education needs, even for nationals, remains limited. Costs for refugee education (with the exclusion of those living in urban settings) are covered by UNHCR and partners in coordination with the National and States Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI). In 2024, this funding supported a total of 35 primary schools and 7 secondary schools in the 12 refugee camps, serving a combined 86,256 learners.

¹ This interpretation is based on Section 33(c) of the Refugee Act, which ensures that recognized refugees and their families enjoy full legal protection, including rights set out in Part Two of the Transitional Constitution of South Sudan specifically the Bill of Rights. This encompasses Article 29, which affirms the right to education for all citizens without discrimination, including secondary and tertiary education—generally understood to apply not only to all citizens, but to all people living in South Sudan, including refugees.

Existing literature on refugees and education

Only a few studies have looked at access to quality education among forcibly displaced people, and fewer still specifically for refugees in South Sudan. Scharlin-Petee et al. (2024) analyze multidimensional poverty using a gender perspective in several displacement settings, including South Sudan. Although education is one part of their analysis, they group Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees together and refugee households are not included in this part of the analysis.

In another paper, several authors explore how gender norms change in the context of forced displacement on several dimensions, including access to education. However analysis is limited to Colombia (Rubiano-Matulevich, 2024; Wirtz et al., 2014) and does not include estimates on the rates of education access. Additional literature on refugees in South Sudan and education centres on the resilience and well-being of teachers and learners (Mendenhall et al., 2024) or on South Sudanese refugee education experiences in camps in hosting countries (Akoi & Pendle, 2020), yielding no estimates on the state of access to education of forcibly displaced populations in the country.

Beyond the academic literature, South Sudan's Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) conducts the Annual Education Census with aim of generating reliable and timely information on key education indicators. According to their census, in 2023, there were 59,344 refugee students in South Sudan in 2023 (GRSS, 2023). However, none of the indicators presented are disaggregated by protection status (GRSS 2023: 14). The report does not indicate what the refugee specific rate of enrolment at different levels of education is, for example.

Building on the existing literature, this brief addresses a key knowledge gap. Drawing on data from UNHCR's Forced Displacement Survey (FDS), the study examines education access and completion rates, and conducts a multivariate analysis of the factors associated with children being out of school, for both refugee and host communities.

Methods and sample

UNHCR's Forced Displacement Survey is the main data source. The FDS collects household and individual level data on the socio-economic and living conditions of forcibly displaced people. The refugee population in South Sudan as of March 2023 was the main target population of the FDS. Host populations in the northern areas of the country were also included in the survey². Results are presented for three comparable population groups:

- i **Refugees in the north:** Refugees in camps and settlements in Pariang (Unity) and Maban (Upper Nile) counties;
- ii **Refugees in the south:** Refugees located in Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, and Jonglei; and
- iii **Host Community North:** Hosts living in proximity to refugee camps and settlements in Pariang (Unity) and Maban (Upper Nile) counties.

At national level, the data are representative of the rural refugee population of South Sudan. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews between April and December 2023 for a sample of 3,078 households, 68 per cent of whom were refugee households.

Descriptive statistics are used to present the main characteristics of the children and their households, as well as key education indicators. Due to its major advantages in terms of interpretability and simplicity, a linear probability regression analysis is used to identify the determinants or associated factors of being out of school. The factors used include characteristics of the child and head of household as well as the characteristics of the household.



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² The Sudanese crisis that started in April 2023 was not included in the survey design and was a significant part of the country context while FDS data was collected.

Characteristics of the school-age population and their households³

Half of the refugee and host community populations are children. Girls make up around 50 per cent of the school age population both among refugee and host community children. Disabilities though are slightly higher among refugee children in the south (6 per cent), compared to their peers living in refugee camps in the north (2 per cent) and in host communities (1 per cent).

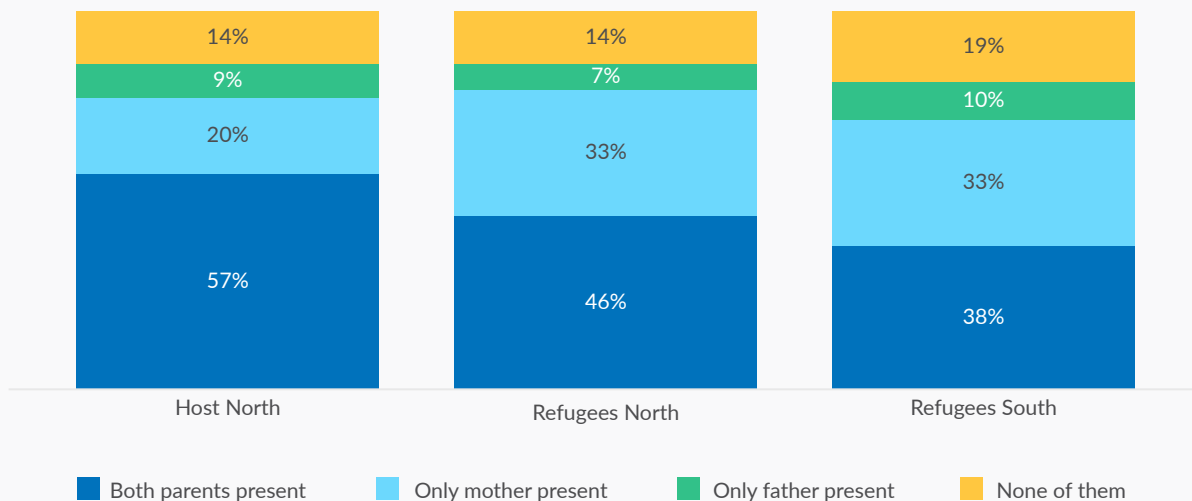
Separated children are usually fostered through kinship, and alternative care is prevalent. Separated refugee children are more prevalent in the South; approximately 2 out of 10 refugee children in this area live without their mother and/or father in their household. Children living in host communities in the North are more likely to live with both their parents (57 per cent) compared to refugee children living in the South (46 per cent).

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³ School age population has been defined as 6 to 17 years old for this section.

FIGURE 1. Presence of children’s parents in the household, by population group

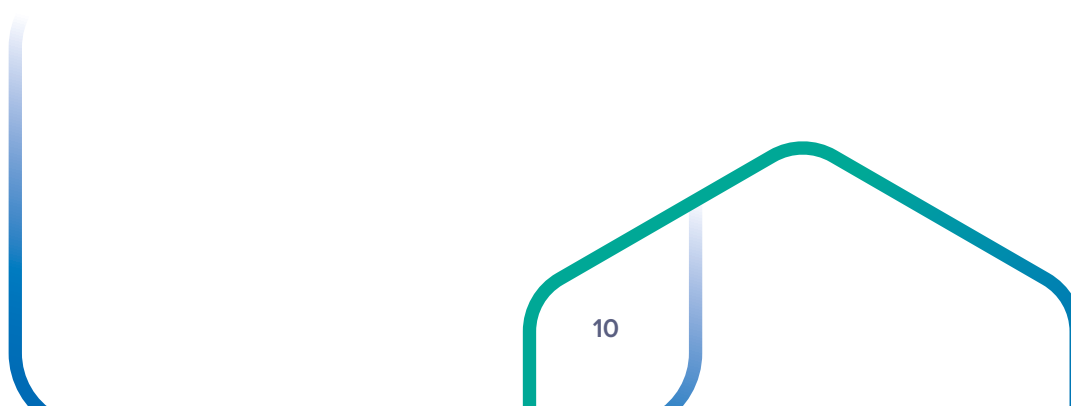


Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

The countries of origin of refugee children differs between the North and the South of the country. Most refugee children living in the North belong to households where the head was born in Sudan, while most household heads of refugee children living in the south come from Democratic Republic of the Congo (38 per cent) and Ethiopia (32 per cent). Additionally, while 37 per cent of host households are headed by women, this proportion rises to 47 per cent among refugees in the North and 54 per cent among those in the South.

Refugee and host households have experienced various shocks over the past two years, with refugee households in the South facing particularly challenging conditions. There up to 6 out of 10 households have had at least one shock in this period, while this proportion drops to 4 out of 10 in the case of refugees in the North and to 5 out of 10 in the case of host communities.

Exposure to shocks is particularly high among refugees in Maban (60 per cent of households), with three quarters of households reporting a flooding shock in the last two years. Flooding also affected a large part of the surrounding host community in the North (44 per cent of households). The most common type of shock for refugees in the South was the death of a household member (30 per cent of households), followed by serious illness or accident of a household member (18 per cent).



Core Education Indicators

Net Attendance Rate

Access to primary education among refugee children is higher than in host communities living near refugee camps, and exceeds the national values.

Six out of ten refugee children of primary school age (6–13) attend school, compared to four out of ten among children in host communities near the camps in the North⁴.

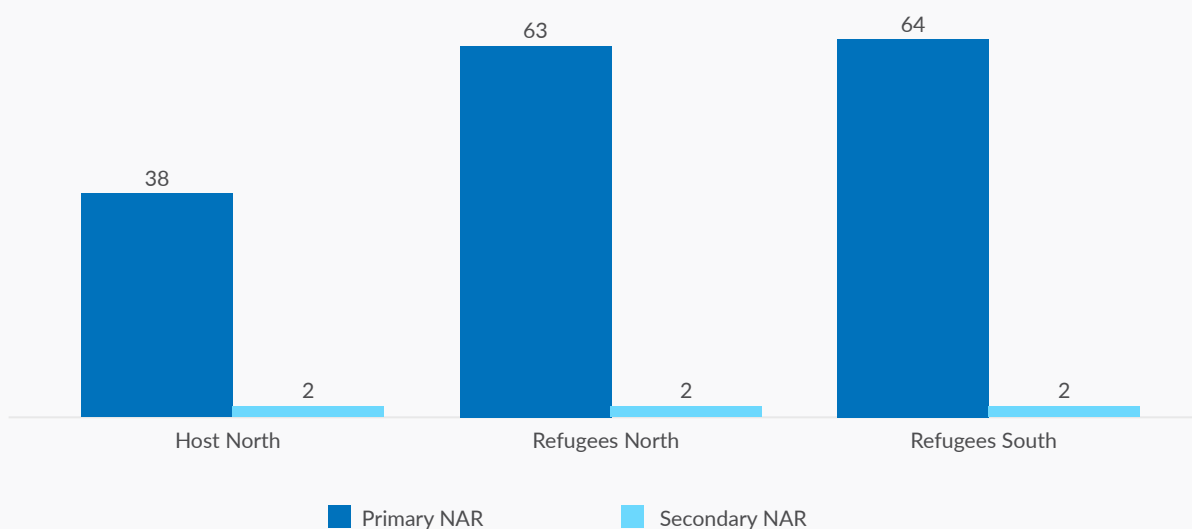
Access to secondary education is critically low for refugee and host populations. Only 2 per cent of secondary school-aged (14-17 years old) children attend secondary education, both among the refugee population and those living in host communities (Figure 2). Further, secondary attendance is slightly lower for refugees and hosts than for nationals at the country level (5 per cent). Barriers to accessing secondary education are more challenging for both the refugee population and host communities living in proximity to refugee camps in the North than in other areas of the country.



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⁴ Please note that the indicators are not strictly comparable. The net enrolment rate measures the percentage of children in official age for attending a certain education level who are enrolled in at this education level. The net attendance rate measures the percentage of children in official age for attending a certain education level who are attending (therefore previously enrolled) in at this education level.

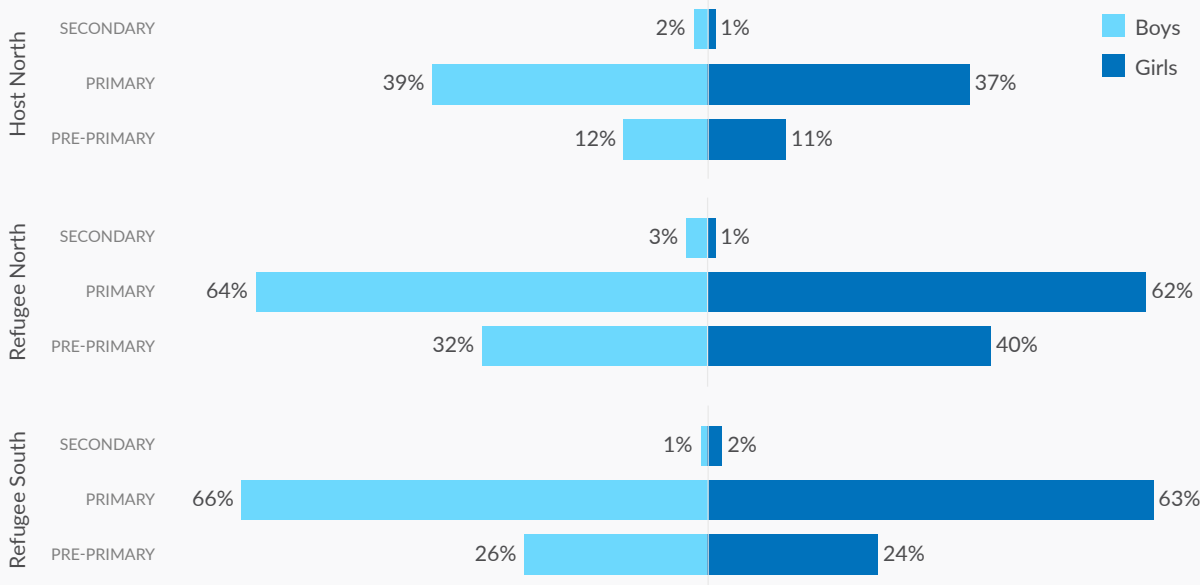
FIGURE 2. Net Attendance Rate (NAR), by level of education and population group (Percentages)



Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

Boys and girls have similar access to primary and secondary education. As the figure below shows, boys and girls present similar net attendance rates for all education levels and population groups (Figure 3). The absence of a gender gap in terms of access to education is a remarkable result. Only a few years ago, in 2015, national statistics for South Sudan revealed important gender gaps in the access to primary education: while boys’ net enrolment rate was 40 per cent, this share dropped to 30 per cent in the case of girls (UNESCO, 2015). These results suggest that gender difference in access can be tackled in refugee contexts, not only for refugee children but also for the host communities living in proximity, which raises hope for closing gender gaps amid challenging conditions of displacement.

FIGURE 3. Net attendance rate, by level of education, population group and sex (Percentages)



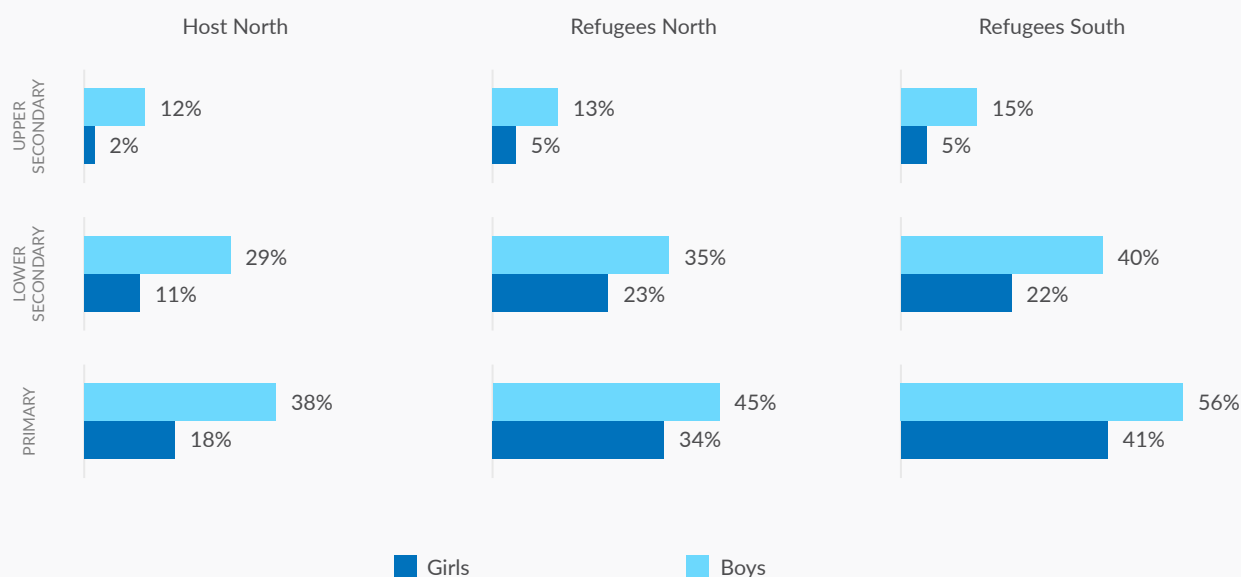
Note: Figures do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding
 Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

Completion Rate

Completion rates of primary and lower secondary education are higher for the refugee than for the host population, while completion rate for upper secondary education is low for both population groups. Whereas 47 per cent of young refugees between 16 and 34 years of age have completed primary education in the South, this percentage drops to 39 per cent in the case of their peers living in refugee camps in the North and to 27 per cent in host communities. The difference among population groups tends to decrease with the level of education. In the case of upper secondary less than 10 per cent of individuals between 20 and 34 years of age have completed this level of education, regardless of their protection status (9 per cent in the case of refugees in the South and North, and 7 per cent in the case of host population).

While boys and girls are equally likely to attend school, boys are more likely than girls to complete each level of education, regardless of whether they are refugees or members of host communities. The magnitude of this gender gap is smaller among refugee populations in the case of primary education, but it is equally large for the refugee and host populations in the case of upper secondary education.

FIGURE 4. Completion rate, by level of education, population group and sex (Percentages)

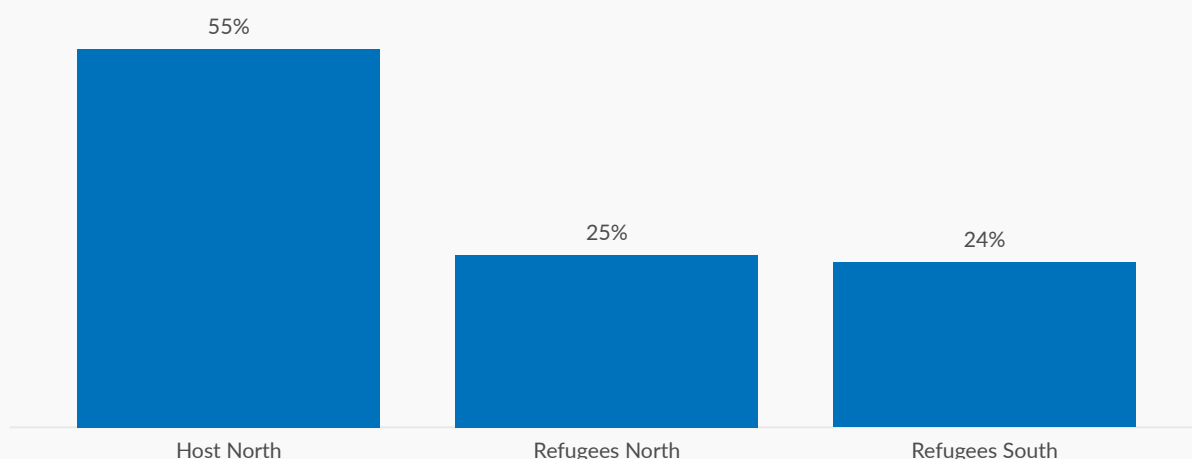


Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

Out-of-School Children

In South Sudan, 2 refugee children out of 10 are out of school compared to nearly 5 in 10 among hosts. The prevalence of out-of-school children (OOSC), including school age population (6-24 years old) who dropped out or never attended, is 24 per cent for refugees in the South and 25 per cent for refugees living in the North (Figure 5). A significantly higher rate of host children in the North are out of school (55 per cent). This highlights a substantial disparity in terms of conflict experience, poverty, exclusion, and reliance on pastoralism between host communities and refugee populations when it comes to access to education and keeping children in school.

FIGURE 5. Children out of school, by population group (percentages)

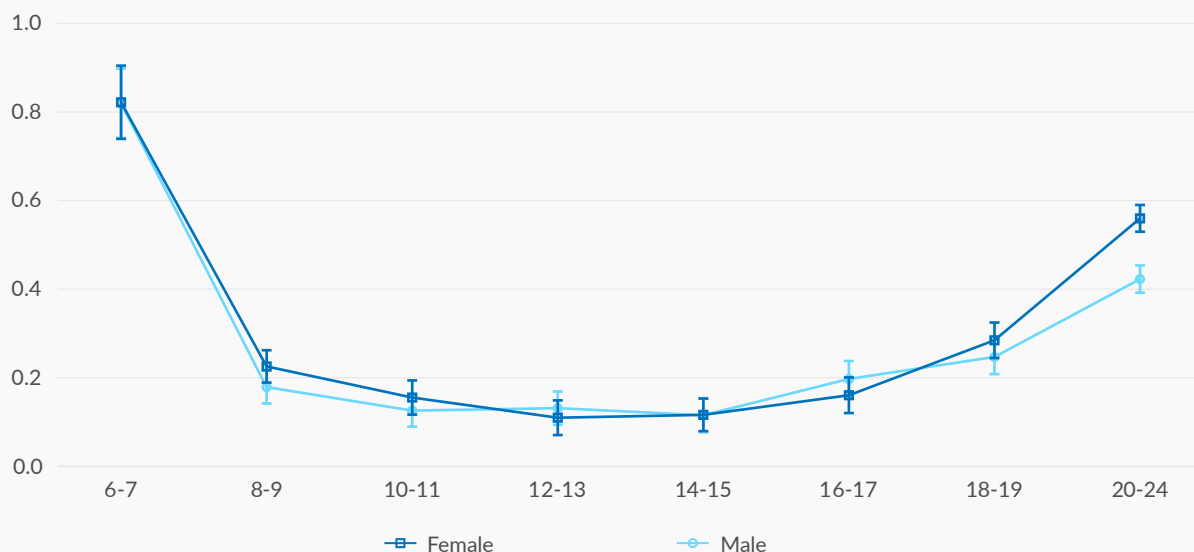


Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

Among refugees, out of school rates exhibit a U-shaped pattern across age groups with notable late entry. The results indicate the likelihood of being out of school is very high in the youngest age group ages (6-7) (Figure 6). Then, a significant drop in OOSC rates in ages 8-13 is observed reaching their lowest point around ages 10-13. OOSC rates gradually increase in adolescence (ages 14-17), with a notable increase between 18 and 24 years old. These results suggest a late entry and early dropout are common factors affecting school attendance.

The gender gap in the OOSC rate among refugee children remains insignificant until age 19 before increasing drastically. The results suggest that OOSC rates for males and females are similar from ages 6 to 18, indicating no significant gender disparity in school attendance during these years. After 19 years old, a significant difference appears, with females experiencing a much higher chance of being out of school compared to males. This suggests a gender-specific barrier to continued education for adolescent girls which could be due to various factors such as cultural norms, marriage, caregiving responsibilities, and economic challenges.

FIGURE 6. Refugee children out of school, by sex and age (Percentages)



Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

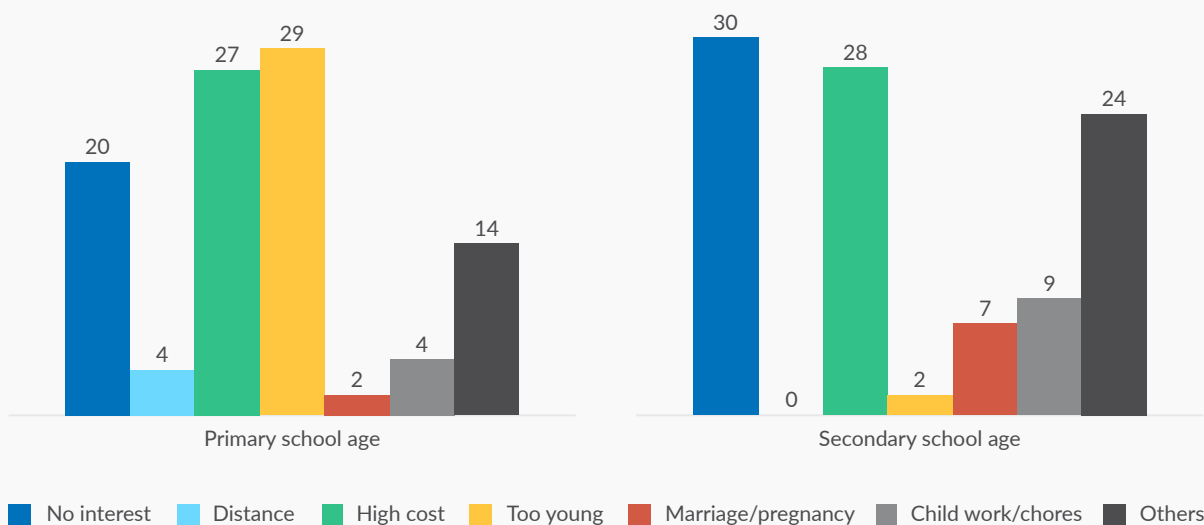
Reasons for not attending school among refugees⁵

Surveyed households mention a range of factors for their children being out of school.

Economic barriers are the most repeated reasons for being out of school. Although the *Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (2011), Article 29(2)*, guarantees education as a right for every citizen and mandates that it be compulsory and free at the primary level, this is often not the case in practice. Many schools impose hidden charges, such as examination fees, school uniforms, and other informal costs, which can make schooling inaccessible for vulnerable families. Cultural and gender barriers are also cited as reasons for being out of school, with marriage/pregnancy becoming significant at higher levels of education, including secondary and tertiary (Figure 7). This highlights the cumulative impact of cultural expectations and gender inequality. A lack of interest in school is quite prevalent, with nearly a third of children at primary and secondary school not attending for this reason. Distance is also cited as a common reason for children being out of school.

⁵ The reason for a child not attending school was provided by the head of household or the most knowledgeable household member (aged 15 or above). The reason then was not provided directly from the children nor teenagers out of school.

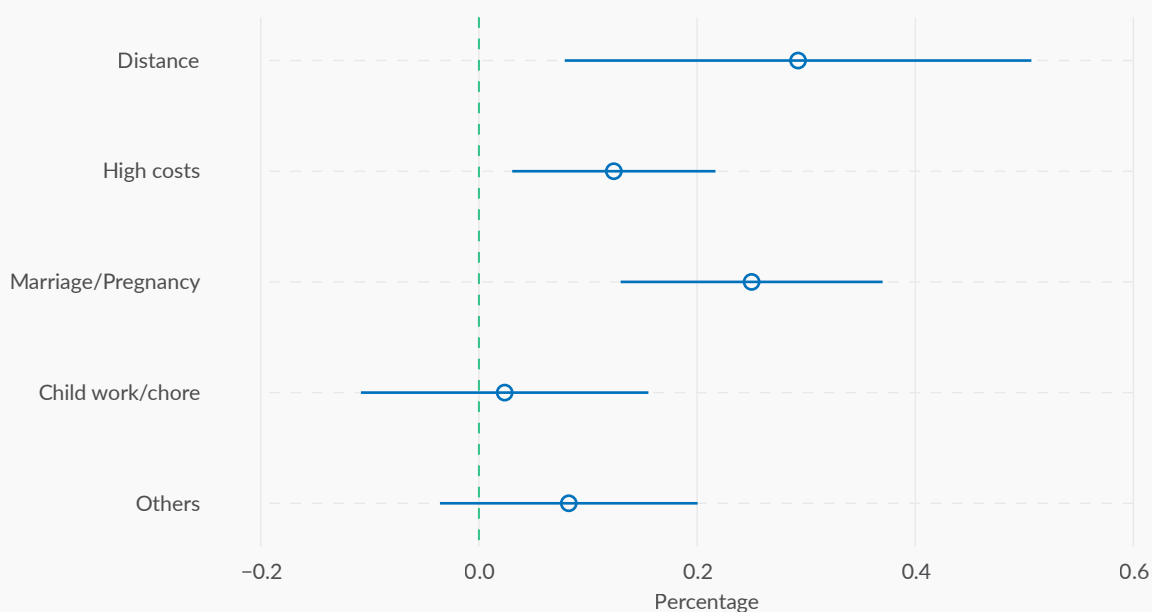
FIGURE 7. Reasons for being out of school, by population and age groups (Percentages)



Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

When disaggregating the reasons for being out of school by sex, refugee girls are significantly more likely to be out of school compared to boys due to distances to school, high costs, and marriage/pregnancy. Girls aged 6-24 are 29 percentage points more likely than boys to be out of school due to distance, and they are 12 percentage points more likely to be out of school because of high costs. Even more significantly, girls in the same age group are 41 percentage points more likely than boys to be out of school due to marriage/pregnancy. (Figure 8)

FIGURE 8. Regression Estimates of Reasons for Being Out of School: Females Compared to Males



Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023

Determinants of Out-of-School Refugee Youth: Regression Analysis

Among refugee children, the risk of being out of school increases significantly with age, foster care/orphanhood, household shocks, low wealth, and male-headed households. In contrast, higher educational attainment of the household head and greater household wealth substantially reduce these risks. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Adeleke & Alabede, 2022; Kumar et al., 2023; Shah et al. 2025).

A linear probability regression model is used to analyse the determinants of out-of-school status among primary and secondary school-age children (ages 6–17). Pre-primary school-age children (age 5 and below) and post-secondary school age children are excluded from the analysis. The dependent variable is binary, equal to 1 if a child is out of school and 0 if the child is enrolled in the current academic year.

The model estimates the average effects of various explanatory variables on the likelihood of being out of school, controlling for other factors. These explanatory variables include geographic location, individual and family characteristics, household head attributes, overall household conditions, and displacement-related information.

The figure below presents the estimation results. While pooled results are generated, we present only here the results for refugees.

Refugee child characteristics are significant drivers of out-of-school status. Female children are more likely to be out of school, indicating a gender advantage in favour of boys in educational inclusion. Moreover, older refugee children are more likely to be out of school, reflecting potential age-related dropouts. Family structure also matters. Children who live with none of their parents are significantly more likely to be out of school, highlighting the vulnerability associated with fostering/orphanhood.



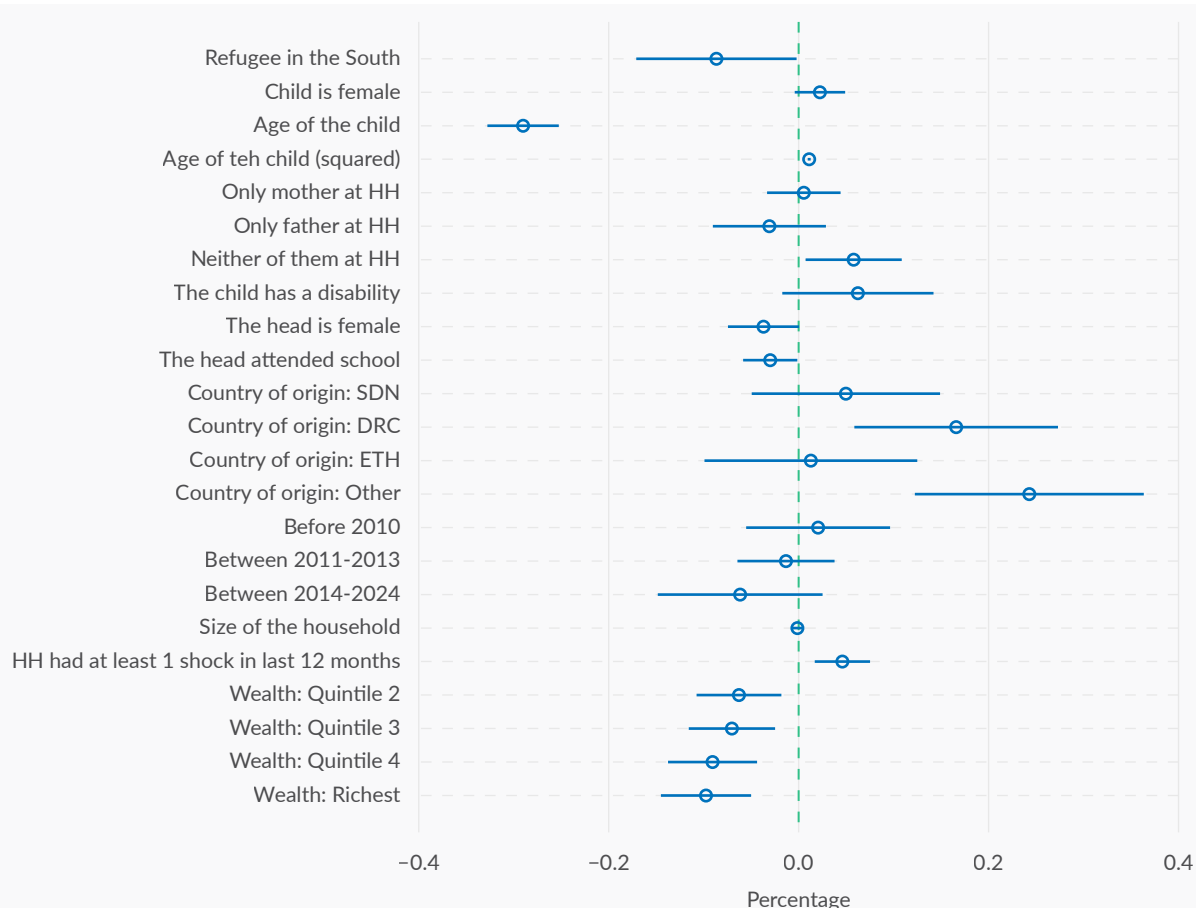
Household head characteristics also influence school participation among refugee children.

Those living in male-headed households face a higher risk of being out of school compared to those in female-headed households. This is in line with several studies in the literature (Asiedu et al., 2024; Saasa, 2018; Chudgar, 2012). Additionally, refugee children residing with a household head who has attended school are significantly less likely to be out of school.

The country of origin also appears to shape schooling outcomes. Refugee children from the Democratic Republic of Congo and from other countries are more likely to be out of school compared to Sudanese refugee children, suggesting that origin-related factors, particularly cultural and language barriers, may influence educational engagement.

Finally, household characteristics play a critical role. Experiencing shocks—such as economic hardship, conflict, or health crises—is associated with a higher probability of children being out of school. These effects are consistently negative and statistically significant. Additionally, wealth plays a central role: children from wealthier households are significantly less likely to be out of school, with the strongest effects observed among the richest quintile.

FIGURE 9. Associated factors for being out of school - Linear Probability Regression results



Source: FDS South Sudan, 2023
 The wealth index used is the one constructed by the JDC data "Deriving an Asset-based Wealth Index from Refugee and Host Community survey data"

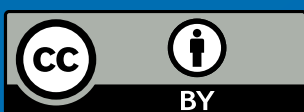
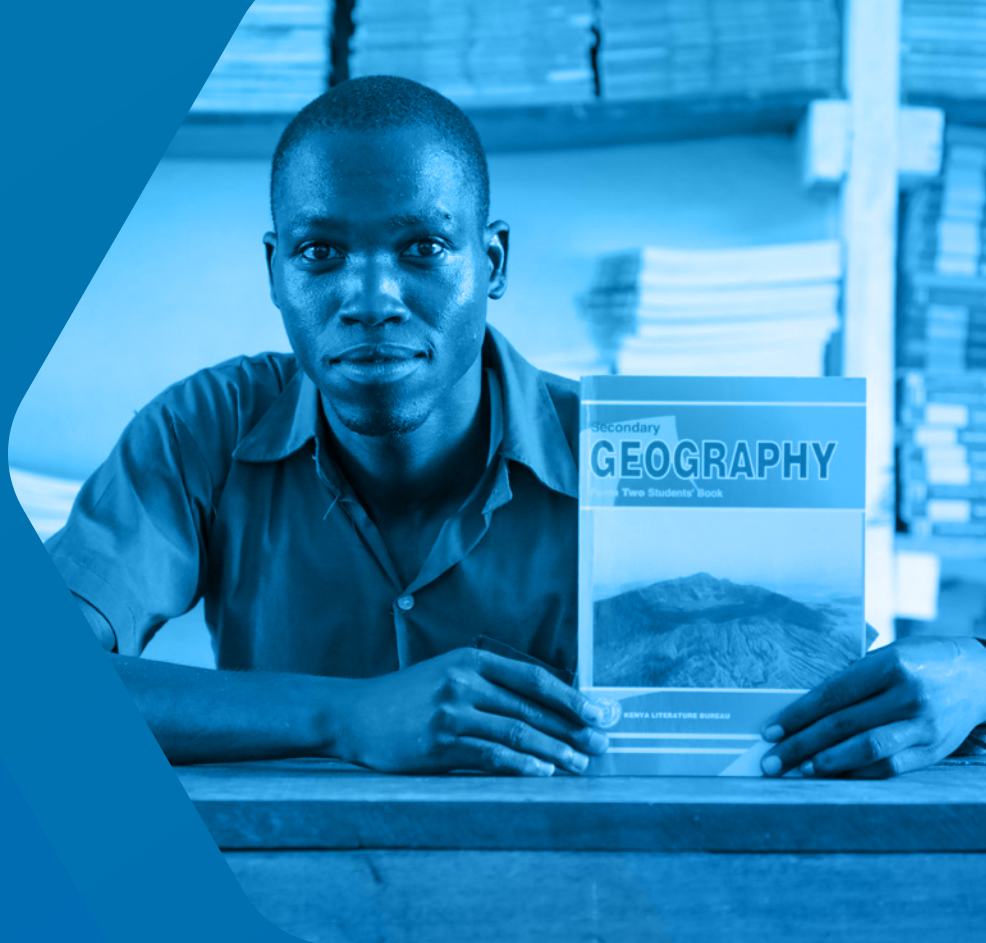
Recommendations

- 1 Promote multi-sectoral interventions. Education outcomes are closely linked to broader socio-economic and protection dynamics.** Integrated programming across education, child protection, livelihoods, and health is needed to address the complex drivers of out-of-school children.
- 2 Reduce costs associated with education.** For children to be able to fulfil their right to basic education, governments and international organizations should combine efforts to reduce direct and indirect costs of education. Cash-transfer programs for families, conditioned on children attending school, offer an alternative to tackle these costs.⁶
- 3 Adopt gender-responsive education policies.** Access to education is affected by gender. Policies should address early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and domestic responsibilities, since they are key barriers to girls' education. For boys, interventions must tackle the economic pull of informal labour, which drives school dropout, especially in adolescence.
- 4 Adopt an area-based approach.** Access to school is remarkably different between refugee children and host communities in proximity to refugee camps. Efforts should continue to extend support to host communities to ensure equitable access, infrastructure improvement, and teacher training across the board.
- 5 Strengthen education system resilience and contingency planning.** Given South Sudan's exposure to conflict and climate shocks, there is a need to strengthen existing alternative education programs, including Pastoralist Education Programme (PEP), field schools and teachers' training, as well as a need to develop supporting policies/regulations to enable education continuity planning during crises.
- 6 Generate and use evidence to drive public-sector programming.** There is a critical need to strengthen education data systems in South Sudan, especially for forcibly displaced populations who are often excluded from national surveys. Initiatives to include refugee children in the Education Census conducted by the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) are a step in the right direction. However, the Education Census should improve reporting to reflect its full potential for forcibly displaced populations. More broadly, there is a need to systematically include forcibly displaced populations in national data systems (including EMIS) and to strengthen official analysis that informs policy and programming.
- 7 Generate and use evidence to inform research and learning.** Quantitative data such as the FDS raise important research questions that can inform efforts to improve education access. In particular, the reported "lack of interest" among adolescent boys warrants further study to understand the individual and social processes behind this response. In addition, qualitative research should capture children's lived experiences and perspectives on education and alternative pathways.

⁶ Previously, there was a cash transfer programme for girls from P5 to secondary under the Girls Education South Sudan (GESS) Project, which ended in 2024.

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Please cite the work as follows: Mena, M., Nava, A., Sarr, I., & Chavez Villegas, C. (2026). *Education outcomes of refugees and hosts: Comparative analysis in South Sudan*. FDS Thematic Brief Series No. 3. Copenhagen, Denmark: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

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