Transition to secondary education[1]

Background

The transition to secondary school is a significant life stage for young people, as well as a period of adaptation that coincides with significant social, emotional and physiological changes in the lives of adolescents (Balvin and Banati 2016; Lee, Hollarek, and Krabbendam 2018). It is also a period when cognitive and analytical skills (Crone and Dahl 2012), autonomy (Fleming, 2005) and a capability to aspire and envision an imagined future (Hart, 2012) are developed. While navigating this critical stage, young refugees, who are simultaneously experiencing the challenges of forced displacement, have very limited opportunities to continue their education. For the academic year 2019/20, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the refugee gross enrolment rate at secondary level in 41 reporting countries stood at 34 per cent. In comparison, the average enrolment rate for host country learners for reporting countries were markedly higher,[2] indicating a significant discrepancy in access when comparing host and refugee learners. Furthermore, disparity in access to secondary education for refugee learners by gender persists, with girls still at a disadvantage. Adolescent girls living in refugee camps or displaced in urban areas are less than half as likely as boys to attend and complete secondary school (UNHCR 2018). This is a missed opportunity, as each additional year of secondary education a girl completes is associated with a lower risk of early marriage and early pregnancy, sometimes by as much as six percentage points (Wodon et al. 2018). Failure to complete the transition to secondary education may therefore significantly reduce the possibility of girls and young women leading empowered and fulfilling lives.

The present study set out to identify, document and promote innovative ways to boost the transition from primary to secondary education among refugee youth, with a strong emphasis on adolescent girls of secondary school age, through case studies conducted in four countries: Egypt, Ethiopia, Malaysia and Uganda.

Key research questions

- What are the key challenges in the transition to secondary education for refugee youth?
- What are the support mechanisms in place to address these challenges?

Literature review

The review of evidence focused on key challenges and support mechanisms in the transition from primary to secondary school for refugee students. It found that most of the research into the transition from primary to secondary has been conducted in Western countries – namely in the United States, Europe and Australia and in large urban areas. A few studies have explored the transition from primary to secondary school in developing countries or rural areas, **but virtually no studies on the transition to secondary school for refugee girls were located.** Some of the challenges that populations in forced displacement and crises contexts face in accessing secondary education were addressed in grey literature.

Egypt

Ethiopia

Malaysia

Uganda

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[1] The present research brief draws on the findings of a research project on the transition to secondary education. The full-length report was authored by Fabiana Maglio. The research brief was compiled by Cirenia Chavez Villegas.

[2] For example, in Burkina Faso, the secondary enrolment ratio was 41 per cent for the host population in 2019/20 (UNESCO-UIS 2021); in comparison, the ratio for refugees was 10 per cent (UNHCR Country Operations Data). In Djibouti, the enrolment rate for the host population for the same period was 53 per cent (UNESCO-UIS, 2021) while for the refugee population the ratio was 28 per cent (UNHCR Country Operations Data).

For example, a recent report aimed at understanding more about the intersection between humanitarian crises, age and education found that the challenges to accessing secondary education for female learners in crises were: the higher prevalence of early marriage and early pregnancy resulting from a heightened risk of sexual violence; increased reliance on adolescent girls to do housework; and menstruation challenges (Plan International 2019). Another report summarizes progress made in improving education and training for girls and women affected by conflict and crisis (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies 2021). The report mentions refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and addresses the transition to secondary education, but neither are the main focus areas of the report. Significantly, the report notes that girls in crisis-affected countries are far less likely to complete lower secondary school than girls in other lower middle-income countries. Similarly, the authors find that, in emergencies, girls are often at greater risk of school dropout than boys because the risk of early marriage, family expectations around domestic labour and caregiving work all increase during crises.

Given the scarcity of literature on the transition to secondary education and the particular challenges faced by refugee girls in low- and middle-income countries,[3] the present study constitutes a valuable contribution to the literature. This is the first in-depth study to look at the transition to secondary education amongst refugee learners in the contexts of Egypt, Ethiopia,[4] Malaysia and Uganda.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, relying on three data collection methods: semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with a range of stakeholders involved in the refugee response (n=101); focus group discussions (n=216); and school observations across all four countries. Key informant interviews were conducted with: selected experts from State authorities and Ministries of Education at district and federal level; UNHCR and related United Nations agency staff; international non-governmental organizations and Civil Society Organizations; researchers in the field of youth education and refugees; donor agencies; and primary and secondary school principals, in the four countries considered. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with parents of primary and secondary refugee students and out-of-school youth, primary school teachers and teachers at refugee and government secondary schools. School observations were also conducted at all schools.

The sampling strategy selected to identify informants for interviews and FGDs **was non-representative and purposive.** Key informants and school locations for data collection were identified and selected in close consultation with UNHCR teams in each country (i.e. through snowball sampling). Every effort was made to ensure a diverse and inclusive sample to avoid the same groups of refugee participants being repeatedly selected. Audio-recordings were made of all individual and group sessions to preserve the accuracy of the data. Field notes were also taken during and immediately after each interview. Recorded sessions were transcribed and coded with the support of qualitative analysis software (AtlasTi). Preliminary patterns were triangulated and aligned with findings from the literature review. Themes were integrated into the report in accordance with their relevance to the key research questions posed.

Though not a limitation of the study itself, it is important to remind readers that, because the sampling of the study participants was purposeful, the conclusions drawn from these findings are not generalizable across the four country contexts. Any conclusions drawn from this research apply to the participants in the study and are indicative of areas that merit further exploration.

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[3] A landscape review on secondary education is forthcoming.
[4] An exception includes World Bank Group (2019), Education for Resilience: Exploring the experiences of refugee students in three communities in Ethiopia. The report focused on refugee education, but not specifically on secondary education.

Ethical considerations

This study was not submitted to an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. At the time of writing, clearly defined ethical clearance processes for collecting data and conducting research in humanitarian settings are still underdeveloped (Maglio and Pherali 2020). However, efforts were made to ensure that the study followed ethical principles, including do no harm, informed consent and confidentiality. Consent forms and an information leaflet were drafted and participants in the study were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; they were informed that their participation in key informant interviews and focus group discussions was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time. The data collected was anonymized through the use of pseudonyms for individual names and sites, and stored in a password-protected computer only accessible by the lead researcher. Recordings were destroyed once transcribed.

Key findings/results

This section summarizes key findings on challenges (Q1) identified from country case studies. The last section lays out recommendations and includes examples of support mechanisms (Q2) and promising practices (Q3). Findings in both sections are organized around four topic areas: 1) education policy, 2) secondary education access, 3) learning and retention, and 4) teachers and other education staff.

Education policy

One important area of challenges identified in the case studies is in education policy and legal frameworks. In some host countries, refugee youth may be excluded from national secondary education. Freedom of movement may also be restricted, especially when residing in camps, limiting access to secondary school for refugee learners.

The four countries included in the study have varied education policies. In Ethiopia and Uganda, refugees are able to access the public system at secondary and tertiary levels, on par with nationals and within available resources, and in both countries, refugee youth are allowed to attend government secondary schools in urban settings. In Egypt, policies are based on the refugees' country of origin–a presidential decree passed in 2012 allowed access to public education for Syrian, Sudanese, South Sudanese and Yemeni refugee children. In Malaysia, current policy does not allow access to state schools.

When policy does not allow access to secondary government schools, refugee youth resort to non-formal learning centres or community schools, which may not provide accredited learning or pathways back into formal education. This is the case in Malaysia, where refugee youth attend non-formal learning centres or community schools set up by partnerships between local NGOs, refugee communities and UNHCR. These are not recognized by the Ministry of Education and do not provide accredited learning, meaning that youth are unable to pursue further formal education in Malaysia.

A related challenge is that refugee parents and unaccompanied youth may face difficulties in completing enrolment procedures, filling in forms and providing the documentation required by education officials in the host countries: government-issued residence permits, birth certificates, etc. Across all case study countries, refugee youth faced transition challenges associated with providing documentation.

Secondary education access

Across all countries, significant disparities in access to secondary education were recorded between refugee adolescents and youth, and the host population (Figure 1). Demographic characteristics including age, gender, income level and the interactions between them, were found to affect the likelihood of accessing secondary school.

Gender, which interacts with socioeconomic characteristics, is important when analysing the key challenges in the transition to secondary education. In both Ethiopia and Uganda, the study found that the gross enrolment ratio at secondary level was higher for males than for females (see Annex).

Refugee girls are often negatively affected by social codes, pressured to leave school early (or not to enroll in secondary education at all), relegated to the domestic sphere and caregiving obligations or engaged in **early marriage.** This is particularly the case in low-income households, where parents prioritize harmful practices for girls which nevertheless ensure community acceptance, which is vital for their social (and economic) survival (Boyden, Pankhurst, and Tafere 2013). In Malaysia the study found that, of refugee female youth attending non-formal

Figure 1. **Gross enrolment ratio 2019-2020: secondary. Refugee and host learners**

*Refugee enrolment is for Kyangwali and Kampala; **Data for host population is for 2017/18 (latest available)
Source: Author using data from UNHCR Country Operations, UNESCO-UIS (2021) & World Bank Group (2019)

secondary education (612 out of 1,300 youth and adolescents), only 5 per cent were Rohingya. Interviews with Rohingya parents in this study revealed that they are reluctant to send their adolescent daughters to schools because they believe that there should be separate seating arrangements for boys and girls, particularly at secondary level, and would prefer female-only classes.[5] In Uganda, the study found that study participants cited early and arranged marriages as an alternative to education, with girls' education perceived as an additional burden to families.

In addition to gender, age may play an important role in constraining access to secondary education. Refugee youth may find asylum across international borders, but may face altered family dynamics (Reed et al. 2012), with adolescents taking on care responsibilities. For example, both male and female refugee adolescents and youth who are unaccompanied or separated may take on the role of caregiver for their younger siblings, making it difficult for them to continue their studies (Plan International 2013). In the aftermath of a disaster, families may also depend on children, especially girls of an adolescent age, to perform chores (2013). According to Kwauk et al. (2019), adolescent girls tend to be the first to be pulled out of school in emergencies, usually to alleviate extra burdens as a result of a given crisis. In Ethiopia, the study found that parents had expectations that adolescent girls should carry out household chores, which disadvantaged them from continuing their education at the secondary level. In Uganda, no evidence for this was specifically identified, but may be present, as 1 out of every 2 refugee households are female led.

In addition, like host community families, refugee families may be unable to afford the direct and indirect costs involved in the transition to secondary education. In Ethiopia, the study found that many students mentioned financial difficulties; notably not being able to buy school uniforms and insufficient food. In Uganda, most secondary schools require students to pay extra fees. These hidden costs were identified as one of main reasons for the failed transition to the secondary level by both refugee youth and their parents in this study. In Egypt, the study found that refugee parents also expressed concern about their inability to cover the costs of secondary education, including costs relating to transportation, school supplies, examination fees and private tutoring.

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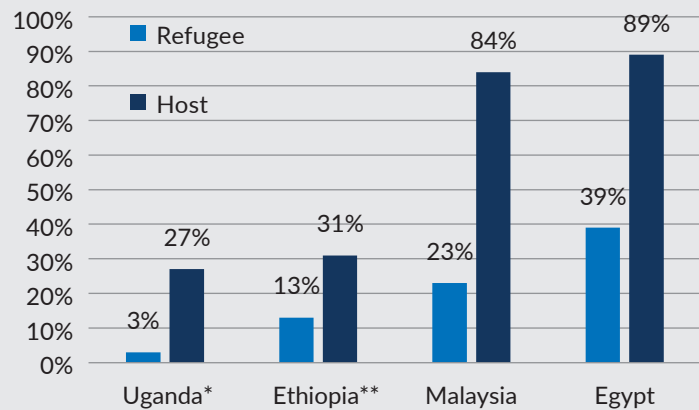
[5] A recent INEE report identified similar findings for Rohingya female adolescents in Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), where, by late adolescence (15-18), only 2 per cent of girls were still receiving an education and girls were six times less likely than their male peers to attend a learning centre (2021).

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Economic constraints can also interact with age and tend to impact upon refugee boys and male youth. Particularly in contexts where traditional notions of masculinity are upheld, they may prioritize paid labour over education in order to support themselves, provide for their family's needs or meet high dowry costs (Plan International, 2019). In Ethiopia, the study found that youth who were heads of households were pressured to earn a living, which made it difficult for them to transition to secondary school. The lack of prospects for their future and inability to meet their own basic needs or those of their families, increases the likelihood of engagement in the worst forms of labour, including participation in illegal activities in or through organized criminal groups (Aguilar 2019). This is particularly acute at the adolescent age, when risk-taking behaviour significantly increases (Romer and Hennessy 2007). In Uganda, the risk of recruitment into militant groups, particularly in refugee settlements that are close to the border with South Sudan, were cited by study participants as one of the most frequently reported reasons for the interruption in schooling.

Learning and retention

Access to quality education to ensure learning outcomes and retention at secondary level also constitutes a key challenge, though it is important to point out that there is little to no systematic evidence regarding the learning outcomes of refugee students.[6] The findings from these case studies elucidate some of the factors that may be driving poor learning outcomes and high dropout rates.

As a starting point, the provision of secondary education is more costly both to the state and to parents than primary education (UNHCR and World Bank 2021), with students often lacking access to the materials they would need to engage in learning activities and ensure positive learning outcomes (see Fredriksen & Brar (2015) on the importance of textbook availability to ensure learning outcomes). In Ethiopia for example, the study found that almost all refugee students expressed concerns about the lack of science laboratories, relevant equipment and information and communications technology (ICT) facilities in their schools. Principals also shared their concerns about the high cost of lab materials and the difficulty of importing them to Ethiopia. At most schools, the ICT facilities were not being used due to a lack of electricity, all of which points to underresourced environments that are not conducive to learning.

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In addition, there are concerns about school-related violence as well as violence around schools, all of which affects the educational experiences and learning outcomes of students, although evidence has not been collected specifically for refugee learners (see for example, Chávez et al., 2021; Delprato et al., 2017; Román & Murillo, 2011). In Ethiopia and Malaysia, the study found that parents and students voiced concerns relating to their children's safety on the way to and from schools and learning centres. Violence in the form of corporal punishment by teachers was also noted in studies on Ethiopia and Uganda and there is abundant evidence to suggest that this practice negatively impacts on education outcomes, including enrolment, retention (Gershoff 2017) and learning (Baker-Henningham et al. 2009; Ogando Portela and Pells 2015; Talwar,

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[6] Exceptions include a study in Kenya (Piper et al. 2019) and in Uganda (Uwezo 2018), as well as a recent ASER assessment of Myanmar refugee children in Bangladesh (Education Cannot Wait 2020), with findings indicating that learning outcomes among refugee students are generally poor.

Carlson, and Lee 2011). There were also reported concerns about the safety of infrastructure in both Ethiopia and Uganda, with strong evidence of the link between infrastructure, safety and learning (Barrett et al. 2019).

A poor learning environment can contribute not only to poor learning but also to increased dropout rates (see Townsend et al., 2008); although, again, the available evidence is not specific to refugee learners and is more limited in lower middle-income contexts. Data from this study reveals that retention at secondary level is also difficult for learners who are overage, as well as for those who lack motivation to continue their studies. In Ethiopia, for example, students described their teachers as not being properly qualified in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. This, combined with unengaging teaching methods based on rote learning, caused them to lose motivation. Many students also have poor educational support capacities within their homes and limited access to opportunities for remedial education, all of which affect learning and retention outcomes.

Teachers and education personnel

A fourth area of challenges relates to teachers and education staff. Quality of teaching is perhaps one of the most relevant school-based determinants of education outcomes, including retention and student performance (World Bank 2019). Unfortunately, national teachers, who are in charge of teaching refugee students in public secondary schools, often face a myriad of issues, including limited training or qualifications, low salaries (or incentive payments in the case of refugee teachers) and constraining environments.

National teachers working with refugee students are often caught unprepared to manage large intercultural classes of varying levels and psychosocial needs and feel overwhelmed by the extra responsibility. In Ethiopia, the study found that only a limited number of national (and almost no refugee) teachers have the formal qualifications required to teach at secondary school level. In Malaysia, the study found that qualifications may vary significantly across learning centres: some teachers may be university graduates while others have only completed high school. Further exacerbating these challenges are the high refugee pupil-teacher ratios identified: in Malaysia this figure exceeded 70:1 while in Ethiopia the figure was above 100:1.

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In addition to varied profiles in qualifications, there are concerns around low or non-existent salaries for teachers engaging with refugee learners. In Malaysia, the study found that many teachers are volunteers and find it challenging to teach refugees, which makes for high staff turnover. In Egypt, key informants of the study mentioned that the low teachers' salaries lead to low levels of self-efficacy and to many teachers working as private tutors to supplement their income.

Recommendations

A series of recommendations for the four thematic areas of the study is provided below:

Policy recommendations

Education policy

- Where appropriate, continue working with government actors to incorporate refugees into education sector plans (ESP), with the aim of ensuring that refugees can access secondary school under the same condition as nationals. Where feasible, accelerate both refugee inclusion in government schools and investments in secondary education.
- Enhance links between primary and secondary schools and with parents, to prepare refugee students for transition to secondary. Primary schools could: share relevant information with the students, parents and receiving school; set up visits; share lists of students ready to enroll; identify vulnerable students and provide support; provide mentorship and opportunities for peer exchange.
- Support refugee parents with guidance, form-filling and literacy classes, to ensure that they understand and can complete the enrolment process. Home visits coordinated by parent and teacher associations (PTAs), to support vulnerable refugee families and assist parents in the transition process, might be one avenue to explore further.

Secondary education access

- Identify context-specific factors that are preventing girls or boys from accessing secondary education. Where traditional views include a negative perception of girls' (or boys') education, introduce behaviour change programming (Petit and Zalk 2019), including the creation of campaigns that focus on changing norms and associated behaviour patterns.
- Where adolescents and youth have care responsibilities (for younger siblings) and this constitutes a barrier to accessing secondary education, provide childcare support.
- Identify/assess the opportunity costs to adolescents and youth of selecting secondary education over labour; provide targeted cash support at household level that compensates for lost earnings.
- Where applicable, advocate for abolishing direct school fees (enrolment costs or examination fees) in public schools with refugee students, or schools catering to refugees, and introduce extra-curricular income-generation activities at schools, to improve cost-effectiveness and increase ownership.

Learning and retention

- Facilitate the administration of a national secondary exam, where appropriate. In addition, conduct research to measure holistic learning outcomes for secondary refugee learners across the four countries covered by this study.
- Through a consultative process with communities, create a checklist with priorities for a holistic school design that is also in line with existing national standards (if feasible, also with INEE standards), including: science lab equipment; segregated dormitories and gender-sensitive WASH facilities; accessibility for youth with disabilities; generators and/or solar panels.
- Ensure that existing national anti-bullying campaigns are also reaching refugee schools or schools at which refugee students are enrolled.
- Carry out evidence-informed advocacy in order to outlaw the use of corporal punishment in schools in contexts where this is still a common practice.
- When developing infrastructure, assess and target areas of critical need and conduct conflict-sensitive risk assessments. Use an 'area approach' to decide where a new school should be constructed to benefit both host and refugee learners (ideally in the proximity of primary schools and safely accessible for both boys and girls) and pilot schools for handover from UNHCR to government management.

Teachers and training

- Train national secondary-levels teachers on: refugees' needs, protection and existing policies; the potential value of their inclusion; and how they can support transitions to secondary school.
- Enhance incentives and working conditions to increase the number of teachers, especially in hardship locations and/or refugee-hosting districts. This should address issues surrounding poor and unsafe accommodation, low salaries and limited opportunities for career advancement or promotion, which lead to dissatisfaction, absenteeism and impaired classroom relationships due to stress, fatigue and burnout.
- Support the translation of refugee teachers' qualifications, as well as their opportunities for exchanges with national teachers, including across countries, to allow for the sharing of ideas and lessons learned.

Research recommendations
- Conduct robust empirical research to further understand the barriers to transition into secondary education for refugee learners in other contexts.
- Conduct thorough desk-based research to collect existing evidence on the association between the use of corporal punishment and poor learning outcomes.
- Conduct systematic data collection to understand the prevalence of different forms of school-related violence, including corporal punishment and bullying. Conduct studies to understand the effects of school environmental factors (bullying, corporal punishment, etc.) on the learning outcomes of refugee students.

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Annex

Secondary refugee gross enrolment ratios 2019-2020, disaggregated by sex

Country	GER Secondary Female	GER Secondary Male
Egypt	N/A	N/A
Ethiopia	7 per cent	17 per cent
Malaysia	27 per cent	19 per cent
Uganda	7 per cent	14 per cent

Source: Author using data from UNHCR (2021).