



Transition experiences of young women and girls living with disabilities, and refugee and internally displaced young women and girls

Youth Employment Evidence and Insights Hub

This brief highlights the need for inclusive education strategies tailored to the complex realities of young women and girls who are internally displaced, refugees, and those living with disabilities. These groups are diverse with intersecting factors like race, gender, and socioeconomic status which require context-specific approaches to activate and support their pathways to sustainable employment ([UN Women, 2018](#)). The brief draws on recent and relevant evidence sourced through systematic and targeted literature searches. The brief builds on existing quantitative data which, while valuable for tracking trends and measuring progress, often overlooks the complexity of gendered barriers that shape the experiences of vulnerable young women and girls. Importantly, the brief centres efforts towards equitable education in Africa which must address the compounded disadvantages arising from structural and systemic barriers and integrate intersectionality into education policy and design.

Intersecting factors and education

- Young women and girls living in poverty and those displaced, are at a greater risk of

marginalization, violence, and discrimination ([Tadesse et al., 2024](#)).

- Economic exclusion, disability and displacement exacerbate the lived experiences of these young women in their educational journeys and workforce entry.
- Ensuring access to inclusive education and facilitating their transition to decent work are crucial for their protection and empowerment.
- Inclusive education initiatives in Africa are increasingly recognizing young women and girls with disabilities and those who are displaced. However, evidence of impact specific to these groups remains scarce, as they are often subsumed within broader participant categories ([Burde et al., 2023](#)).
- Furthermore, the functioning of disabled and refugee girls within an education setting is outweighed by their emotional and behavioural issues. Therefore is need for customized support and strategies to support all-inclusive education for refugee children with disabilities ([Crea et al., 2023](#)).
- In context, in Kakuma refugee camp, putting disabled children in special needs settings with access to individualized services, accessible accommodations, and infrastructure supports was considered a better alternative for addressing their needs ([Crea et al., 2022](#)).
- Elsewhere, vocational education positively influenced livelihood capabilities and was also considered a contributor to self-efficacy and empowerment among refugee adults ([Davis et al., 2019](#)).



- Overall, there is limited data on experiences of intersectionality between disability, refugee status and access to formal education in Sub-Saharan Africa; therefore, there is a need for further research in this given area ([Walton et al., 2020](#)).

Poverty

- For women living in poverty, the struggle to access education and work is shaped by intersecting financial, social, and structural constraints.
- In Botswana, low-income single mothers faced overlapping challenges that limit access to education and work, including early motherhood, caregiving responsibilities, and the pressure to contribute to household income. These constraints, combined with limited institutional support and skills training, force many to prioritize immediate survival over long-term education, reinforcing cycles of low-paid work and economic insecurity ([Malinga and Modie-Moroka, 2023](#)).
- Social and economic factors, including a preference for boys' education, worsen the situation when resources are scarce.
- In low-income refugee households in Zimbabwe's Tongogara Camp, adolescent girls are often withdrawn from school for domestic duties, early marriage, or low-paid work, while boys continue their studies ([Zvavahera et al., 2025](#)).

Rural location

- In many rural communities across Africa, young women face multi-layered barriers to education and livelihood participation.

- Geographic remoteness and rurality limit education access, with disability and displacement worsening the situation. In Somalia, the spread of schools and safety concerns contribute to high dropout rates for girls ([Sambili and Ngeno, 2022](#)).
- Rural women and girls often have lower decision-making power, reduced access to formal schooling and decent work opportunities, in addition to limited exposure to the internet and banking services ([Patel, 2020](#)).
- Much of the work that rural women engage in (domestic work, crop production, livestock management etc.) is often unpaid or viewed as mainly for subsistence ([FAO, 2015](#)).

Disability

- Children with disabilities face greater barriers to education ([Sanhori et al., 2022](#)) and exclusion of persons with disabilities varies by disability type and available support systems.
- In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, girls living with disabilities face gendered stigma over physical access barriers, which decreases their school attendance and retention ([Handicap International, 2021](#)).
- Similarly, blind female students in an Ethiopian university faced challenges which were intensified by inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive devices, and stigma ([Zegeye, 2022](#)).
- Interventions such as peer networks, family support, sign language interpreters, and adapted teaching methods in Uganda and



Rwanda have helped improve participation in education and transition into work opportunities ([ICED et al., 2023a](#); [ICED et al., 2023b](#)).

- A 2021 report on inclusion in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) suggests further strategies such as demonstrating that TVET courses work for women, offering more course choices, providing financial support, (e.g. Kenya's Disability Development Fund), and using successful female graduates as role models. They also recommended making buildings accessible and changing equipment to suite different abilities e.g. use of hands instead of feet ([Essa, 2021](#)).<https://essa-africa.org/node/1341>

Displacement status

- Displacement significantly limits women and girls' access to education and participation in learning.
- In Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Somalia, displaced girls and young women are often vulnerable to sexual violence, early marriage and schooling disruptions ([Idris, 2024](#); [Rwang, 2023](#)).
- In Tongogara Refugee Camp in Zimbabwe, displacement compounds pre-existing gender inequalities that already favour boys' education over girls. Safety concerns, including sexual harassment e.g. when collecting firewood and inadequate camp security, further limit girls' mobility and school attendance. Furthermore, period poverty, cultural taboos, and lack of menstrual hygiene facilities contribute to frequent absences ([Zvavahera et al., 2025](#)).

- Prolonged school absences are more common in insecure environments.

Technology as an enabler

- Technological innovations are key to improving education access for at-risk young women and girls, combining physical (e.g. laptops, tablets, electricity supply, safe spaces, etc.) and digital (e-libraries, mobile apps, video tutorials, etc.) support.
- Tools like radio-based lessons, offline learning kits, and online platforms for psychosocial care and feedback help bridge learning interruptions.
- Context-aware, localized tech solutions like AI-powered micro-courses delivered via mobile phones (such as M-Shule in Kenya) help overcome cultural, language, and infrastructure barriers, making learning more accessible to displaced young women. By translating content and adapting formats for limited connectivity, these tools provide equitable education pathways in refugee settings ([Ashlee et al., 2020](#); [Mastercard Foundation, 2024](#)).
- Interactive tools such as visual apps, games, and personalised learning platforms are helping girls in refugee camps and those isolated by disability to build life skills, improve communication, and gain academic confidence which also expands their access to education and opens up greater opportunities for the future ([Cheng and Lai, 2020](#)).
- Digital gaming helps improve learning outcomes for displaced children, especially with simple, entertaining game designs ([Koval-Saifi and Plass, 2018a](#); [2018b](#)).



- Despite promising change, access to technology remains limited for vulnerable groups like refugees and IDPs ([Burde et al., 2023](#)) e.g. in Tongogara Refugee Camp in Zimbabwe, limited access to digital devices during remote learning disproportionately excludes girls ([Zvavahera et al., 2025](#)).
- Text and messaging interventions in Kenya are enhancing teacher training and mentorship ([Dahya et al., 2019](#); [Mendenhall et al., 2018](#)).
- Adapted technologies strengthen teachers' ability to support learners with disabilities ([Paul et al., 2022](#)).
- In Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, the use of online social networks and mobile technology increased access to higher education opportunities for women ([Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017](#)).
- To facilitate redress, policy is a useful tool for equity and to improve the educational prospects of marginalized young women and girls.
- In Kenya, government instruments such as the [Refugee Act No. 10 of 2021](#) and the [Shirika Plan](#) aim to integrate refugees into society to ensure meaningful participation.
- Evidence from Kenya suggests that inclusive education programs have shifted teacher knowledge and attitudes on educating children living with disabilities ([Carew et al., 2019](#)).
- Ghana, Nigeria and Rwanda have introduced measures such as fee-free education, targeted subsidies, and policies promoting systematic inclusion. However, gender-inclusive interventions to improve education for young women and girls with disabilities remain underexplored.
- In Southern Africa ([de Souza et al., 2024](#)), policy efforts are often too broad or weakly implemented to fully address barriers for marginalized groups. For example, South Africa's disability rights legislation references women and people with disabilities but rarely addresses the intersectional needs of young women with disabilities ([Centre for Disability, 2015](#)).

Systems-level adaptations, policy and education

- Policy changes aimed at dismantling exclusive legal and policy frameworks are critical for reforming education systems.
- Uganda has some inclusive education policies that are critical in reforming their education systems. Some of these include the [Education Response Plan \(ERP\)](#) and the [Universal Primary Education \(UPE\) policy](#) for refugees and those living in poverty, respectively. However, discrimination persists amongst refugees ([Burde et al., 2023](#)).
- In Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, and Mali, free basic education increased entry rates for girls, including those with disabilities. However, completion rates remain low due to barriers such as early marriage and financial hardship. For instance, in Zambia, around 55% of female pupils completed Junior Secondary (Grade 9), but this dropped to just below 28% by Senior Secondary (Grade 12) ([Matambo, 2017](#)). Zambia's [Education Act No. 23 of 2011](#) and [Persons with Disabilities Act No. 6 of 2012](#)

Free basic education policies



require affirmative action admissions and provision of quality education for special needs learners ([Matambo, 2017](#)).

- Zambia's [Re-Entry Policy of 1997](#) allows pregnant girls to return to school ([Matambo, 2017](#) ; [Beales and Gilber, 2021](#)) which enhances retention.
- Similarly, in Kenya, the introduction of [Free Primary Education in 2003](#) led to an overall increase in primary education enrolment. As a result, the Lake region saw a 12.5% increase in primary school enrolments between 2003 and 2009 ([Carew et al., 2020](#)).
- Uganda's [Persons with Disability Act \(2006\)](#) promoted inclusive education and was associated with a 56% increase in school attendance for children with visual hearing, and physical disabilities, compared with Chad and Ghana where such laws were absent ([Bose and Heymann, 2020](#)).

Policy changes

- A study on the [Status of Women's Rights in Refugee and Internal Displacement Settings in Africa](#) has highlighted important frameworks such as the [Beijing Platform for Action \(1995\)](#) and the [Maputo Protocol \(2003\)](#) which provide frameworks for women's rights, addressing displaced women, women with disabilities, and widows ([AU et al., 2020](#)).
- In addition, the [AU Kampala Convention \(2009\)](#) is the first legally binding regional instrument on the rights of IDPs. It recognises the specific vulnerabilities of internally displaced women and obliges states to protect them ([AU et al., 2020](#)).
- Policies targeting school-based violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based

discrimination have been shown to be crucial for retention, especially for displaced girls and those with disabilities ([Mkutumula et al., 2024](#); [EM2030, 2022](#)).

- Bridging programs, mentorship, and psychosocial support for refugees and IDPs further help girls transition to higher education or work ([EM2023, 2022](#)).

Barriers to policy implementation

Despite evidence on policies and system-level adaptations, various barriers to implementation have been identified.

- **Social and cultural factors:** Early marriage, teenage pregnancies, stigma (e.g., disability as a curse), and family hardship often confine girls, especially those with disabilities, to the home ([Matambo, 2017](#); [Beales and Gilber, 2021](#)).
- **Resource limitations:** overcrowding, lack of adapted materials (e.g., braille), untrained teachers, and inaccessible school infrastructure reduce effectiveness of these policies ([Bookings, 2025](#)).
- **Weak political will and contradictory laws** e.g. inconsistencies between the [Refugee Act of 2006](#) and citizenship laws in Uganda, hinder education access ([Agaba, 2024](#)). In Kenya, the latest [Refugee Act of 2021](#) lacks a harmonized national refugee management policy framework, which continues to limit the effective coordination across government institutions, departments, ministries, and development partners. The current law also remains unclear on social integration, such as land and housing acquisition for the refugees. ([Halakhe and Omodi, 2024](#)).



- Funding dependence and sustainability challenge: Many refugee and disability programs rely heavily on external donor support, limiting their sustainability ([AU et al., 2020](#)).
- Poor data: Limited sex-, age-, and disability-disaggregated data makes it difficult to design and monitor targeted interventions ([Beales and Gilber, 2021](#)).
- Dropout beyond primary: Even when enrolment improves, refugee girls and girls with disabilities often fail to transition to secondary or work due to poverty and systemic exclusion ([Agaba, 2024](#) ; [Wieser et al., 2024](#)).
- In some countries (e.g. South Africa), perceived regulatory burden discourages self-employment and the employment of asylum seekers ([Carciotto, 2021](#)).

Social support systems and education

- In African contexts, social networks and peer relationships play a pivotal role in shaping girls' educational access and pathways into work.
- An individual's networks and relationships are linked to their job opportunities ([Bandiera et al., 2023](#)).
- The AGI-K program for young adolescent girls in Kenya and the Girls' Clubs and youth development clubs for adolescent girls in Rwanda showed positive effects on school retention, delayed marriage, and financial literacy ([Amenya et al., 2022](#)).
- Some initiatives like [WOUGNET \(Uganda\)](#), [Girls Connect \(Nigeria\)](#) and [STEM clubs \(Rwanda\)](#) aim to create platforms for learning, communication, mentorship and support.

- Evidence from high-income countries shows that multicomponent interventions have improved school-to-work transitions and labour market participation for youth with disability ([Lindsay et al., 2018](#)).

Vocational training and career development programs

- Investing in lifelong learning is essential for helping young women and girls adapt to changing labour market demands and sustain livelihoods.
- Career advancement interventions are crucial, particularly for internally displaced young women and girls and those with disabilities.
- A multi-country TVET study reveals substantial evidence of successful vocational training programs for refugee, displaced, and host community young women across Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda ([UNHCR et al., 2022](#)).
- Programs reported from this multi-country TVET study achieved employment rates of 61-71% for graduates, with strong gender participation (30-45% female). Key success factors included integrated childcare services, market-based training aligned with local opportunities, entrepreneurship components, and supportive services like stipends and transport.
- In Ethiopia, the government, in partnership with GIZ has reformed national refugee laws and expanded TVET access, allowing refugees and internally displaced women to participate alongside locals. TVET programs offer market-oriented courses, training in and near refugee camps, and promote transition to jobs by linking trainees with



business incubators and employment partners. This is an ongoing program and impact results are yet to be released ([GIZ, 2025](#)).

- In South Africa, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) runs the Arrupe and Loyola Women's Skills Centres in Johannesburg and Pretoria, offering training in hairdressing, beauty, computers, and English language, alongside empowerment workshops on business, health, and counselling. The centres target refugees, asylum seekers, and local women facing xenophobia, unemployment, violence, and legal or language barriers. Some graduates achieve self-reliance and start businesses, creating community opportunities ([JRS, 2019](#)).
- A recently concluded EU-supported project in Northern Uganda skilled over 2,500 people including over 60% refugees and over 50% girls and women, with 1,000 more currently being trained as at when this report was developed. This program operated across multiple districts, targeting youth, women, and girls from both refugee and host communities to develop skills needed for settlement economies or eventual return home ([GCR, 2020](#)).
- Also in Uganda, the Windle International Uganda's vocationalization program, for example, integrated technical skills including catering, hotel management, welding, metal fabrication, motor vehicle mechanics, salon and hairdressing, and tailoring into secondary education curricula. As of 2017, at least 30% of graduates were employed within the vocations they trained in ([GCR, 2017](#)).

- However, challenges that hinder access to these programs persist. These include cultural barriers limiting women's participation, inadequate infrastructure, restricted mobility for refugees, and limited evidence specifically addressing young women with disabilities ([UNHCR et al., 2022](#)).
- Additionally, systemic barriers - such as discrimination, xenophobia, lack of document recognition, gender-based violence, inaccessible facilities, limited course options, poor treatment by teachers and fellow students, discriminating employers, and reliance on survival-oriented informal work etc. - all limit the long-term livelihood outcomes of these women ([Beqiraj and Ferrari 2023](#); [Nyabvudzil and Chinyamurindill 2019](#); [Essa, 2021](#)).

Constraints to digital economy employment opportunities

- The employment prospects of men are marginally better than those of women in digitalized industries ([Charles et al., 2021](#)).
- In North Africa, digital jobs have been cited as a quick fix to economic barriers faced by refugees while some argue that it is not sustainable unless it complemented by efforts to address digital divides, uphold refugees' rights, and ensure more decent working conditions ([Mansour-Ille and Starks, 2023](#); [Easton-Calabria and Hackl, 2023](#)).
- Sustainability constraints like limited access to electricity, technology, and the internet continue to restrict employment entry points for refugees ([Xia and Charles, 2025](#); [UNHCR, 2020](#)).



- In Ghana, digital inequalities are demonstrably linked to demographic and socioeconomic inequalities ([Awuni, 2024](#)).

Climate smart livelihoods and decent work for RDPs

- Climate-smart practices improve food security and livelihoods ([Asefa et al., 2024](#); [Bhattacharjee and Thomas, 2023](#); [Agarwal et al., 2021](#)).
- In the case of farming in Africa, climate-smart practices can create opportunities to close gender gaps in adoption and employment through more gender-sensitive approaches ([Boudalia et al., 2024](#)).
- A report on already implemented climate-smart interventions and those in the pipeline shows an expected impact on the livelihoods of refugees in Uganda ([Price, 2020](#)). Climate resilient farming among other sustainable agricultural projects, has been shown to improve agricultural sustainability and allow for adaptation of refugee farmers in Kakuma refugee camp ([Mwangi, 2024](#)).
- A study done in a refugee camp in Ethiopia identified priority areas for improving water security and suggested recommendations such as identification of water harvesting locations, improvement and protection of existing infrastructures, raising community trust, and climate adaptation practices ([Singh et al., 2024](#)).

In Uganda's Nakivale refugee camp, a study showed that strengthening Community Savings and Credit Groups through able leadership can lead to better livelihoods of refugee women ([Andrew et al., 2024](#)). There is a need to integrate gender into the

anticipatory action to minimize risk and enhance disaster preparedness ([Schnidler et al., 2024](#)).

Access to agricultural extension education and financial literacy improves livelihood adaptation and progression towards self-reliance among refugee women ([Awidi and Quan-Baffour, 2021](#); [Kinyanjui, 2025](#)).

- Due to a lack of credit history, assets, or security to back up the request for loans, women refugees are unlikely to be involved in entrepreneurship; therefore, there is a need to be supported by financial trainings, and provision of documentation by host communities ([Kandolo and Msomi, 2024](#)).
- Common constraints in the uptake of climate-smart agriculture include limited capital, policy requirements and information asymmetries, all which disfavour women.
- Some women refugees in the Kakuma Refugee Camp lamented their lack of formal education and skills as impediments to their sustained practice of climate-smart agriculture ([Mwangi, 2024](#)).
- Lessons from Asia show that green entrepreneurship skills by RDPs, and social protection systems help create sustainable work opportunities ([Fernando, 2024](#)).
- For displaced groups such as refugees, community-driven initiatives can lead to better food security and inclusive employment opportunities for women.

Mindsets of young women

- Resilience and agency as demonstrated by refugee girls help overcome barriers to access to education through strong desires and commitment to the attainment of



education ([Zvavahera et al., 2025](#)). For instance, refugee girls in the Tongogara Camp in Zimbabwe expressed how platforms created for them to share their stories were important for their individual empowerment and understanding of the significance of education.

- As evidenced in programs such as Educate!, young women and other vulnerable groups can benefit from TVET and entrepreneurial training to improve leadership and public speaking skills which can aid educational progress and transition into work ([Baxter et al., 2022](#)).

Key programmatic insights

1. **Adopt intersectional approaches:** Address the compounded effects of poverty, disability, displacement, and isolation in education interventions for young women and girls.
2. **Address gender norms and economic constraints:** Reduce the financial burden of education and challenge social norms that prioritize boys' education over girls.
3. **Expand education access in rural and conflict-affected areas:** Invest in safe school infrastructure, mobile units, and localized education models to overcome geographic and security barriers, as well as barriers relating to disabilities.
4. **Strengthen inclusive education systems:** Focus on teacher training, assistive technologies, and inclusive infrastructure to support learners with disabilities.
5. **Leverage technology:** Use EdTech solutions like radio, digital games, and mobile teacher support to reach marginalized learners, ensuring equitable access to devices and connectivity.
6. **Ensure effective policy implementation:** Align ministries and stakeholders for better implementation of inclusive education policies, supported by adequate budgets.
7. **Promote social support systems:** Enhance peer networks, mentorship, and community structures to improve retention and transitions, particularly in crisis settings.
8. **Invest in lifelong learning and vocational training:** Support school-to-work transitions with career development and skills training, especially for displaced or disabled girls.
9. **Reform employment regulations:** Remove barriers to self-employment and job access for refugee women and girls, such as work permit restrictions.
10. **Link climate adaptation with livelihoods:** Support climate-smart agriculture and green entrepreneurship with enabling policies and skills development for displaced populations.
11. **Fee abolition and economic supports expand access, but retention requires targeted measures for the most vulnerable:** Some examples are re-entry policies for young mothers, menstrual health interventions, safe and private sanitation facilities, and structured psychosocial or mentorship programs.
12. **Legal and policy reforms matter,** but weak implementation such as inconsistent



enforcement, contradictory laws, and limited resources, limit impact – especially for young women and girls living with disabilities and those who are displaced.

13. Intersectional vulnerabilities demand multi-pronged approaches:

Where education is combined with livelihood support, mentorship, gender-responsive teaching, and violence prevention for young girls and women in Africa.

14. Structural and socio-economic barriers undermine the long-term impact of vocational training programs:

Even with training, refugee women face xenophobia, non-recognition of documents, language barriers, and gender-based violence, forcing many into survival-driven informal work. This highlights the need for vocational programs to be paired with systemic reforms (e.g., policy recognition, anti-discrimination measures, language support etc.).

