

## The barriers Yemeni refugee women encounter in accessing education in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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### Abstract

One of the fundamental human rights is education. Since education benefits all citizens, regardless of nationality, it has become an essential subject of discussion on a global scale. International conventions highlight the right to education for refugees. However, refugees faced various barriers to education in their host countries. This study's main objective was to examine the barriers to access to refugee women's education in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The study used a descriptive phenomenological design to achieve its objective. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct interviews with thirteen Yemeni refugee women. Purposive sampling was used to select study participants. Using a descriptive phenomenological analysis, the data was analyzed. The study's findings revealed that language and limited income were the major barriers to access to refugee women's education. Refugee women's children also faced barriers to access to education, such as language barriers, interrupted education, schools' reluctance to admit them, and bullying and discrimination at school. Concerned parties have to take action to get rid of the obstacles that prevent refugee women from accessing education.

*Keywords: Barrier, Education, Yemeni refugee women, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

### Introduction

Throughout human history, people have been migrating (Manning & Trimmer, 2020). By the end of 2022, 108.4 million individuals were persuaded to leave their homes due to intimidation, hostilities, or abuses of human rights, and 35.3 million of them were refugees [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022)]. Seventy-six percent of refugees worldwide were found in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2022). Seventy percent of refugees are in neighboring countries where they are living in exile (UNHCR, 2022). The majority of neighboring countries have unstable political and economic structures, as well as overburdened educational systems (Hathaway, 2016). Ethiopia is Africa's third-largest host country for refugees which hosted more than 900,000 refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2023a). Addis Ababa which is capital of the country is home to 74,353 urban refugees (UNHCR, 2023b). The UNHCR's (2023b) report indicated that over 2400 Yemeni refugees resided in Addis Ababa, and they are the second-largest urban refugee group.

One of the fundamental human rights is education. Since education benefits all citizens, regardless of nationality, it has become an essential subject of discussion on a global scale (Saiti & Chletsos, 2020).. International conventions highlight the right to education for refugees. Signatory states declare in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees that "shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals concerning elementary education... and treatment as favorable as possible... concerning education other than elementary education" [United Nations (UN, 1951), p. 18]. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) relies heavily on education, and SDG 4 in particular states that all nations must guarantee everyone's access to quality education throughout their lifetime [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016)]. SDG4 depends on the basic premise that "education is a fundamental human right and an enabling right" (UNESCO, 2016).

Education has been singled out as a vital worldwide response to the situation of refugees in the September 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (UNHCR, 2018). The United Nations member states' commitment was reiterated in September 2016 by the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which aimed "to provide quality primary and secondary education in safe learning environments for all refugee children" (UN, 2016). Ethiopia signed the regional Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education in 2017 and endorsed the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016 (Carvalho, 2022). One of the pledges that Ethiopia made at the September 2016 Leaders' Summit on Refugees and Migrants in New York was to increase refugees' enrollment in primary, secondary, and tertiary education [Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA, 2018), 2018].

Several studies have been conducted on barriers to access to refugees' education globally (Ibesh et al., 2021; Namak et al., 2022; Tulibaleka, 2022). These studies indicated that refugees faced language barriers, financial

difficulties, discrimination, and a lack of information at different educational levels. For instance, (Hauber-Özer, 2023) conducted a study among Syrian refugees in Turkey and found that refugees faced several obstacles when getting an education, such as prejudice, limited resources, and obstacles related to information. A qualitative study among refugees in the Netherlands revealed that a lack of knowledge, unfamiliarity with the Dutch educational system, a language barrier, exclusionary practices, and challenges using organizational resources were some of the obstacles to refugees' education (van Dijk & Kooiman, 2023). Moreover, a study conducted among refugees in Canada found that financial problems, a lack of knowledge about admission standards and scholarships, a lack of communication with peers in the community, and age restrictions for high school education are just some of the obstacles that prevent refugees from accessing education. (Que, 2020).

There have been some studies revealing barriers to access to refugees' education in Ethiopia (Alebachew, 2016; Getachew, 2020; Redeit, 2015; Yared, 2020; Yonas, 2018). These studies indicated that refugees faced language, cultural, and financial challenges in educational settings. However, the majority of these studies concentrated on refugees from Somalia and Eritrea. These studies only provided an incomplete understanding of the educational barriers that Yemeni refugees encounter in educational institutions in Addis Ababa. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has been conducted on barriers to access to Yemeni refugee women's education in Addis Ababa. According to (Loo et al., 2018), countries that host a significant number of refugees need to respond to the educational needs of refugees by their political and social contexts as well as their educational systems. Therefore, the study examined the barriers to Yemeni refugee women's access to education in Addis Ababa.

## Method

### Study design

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative research design is very helpful for examining individual experiences as well as for exploratory inquiry, which aligns with the objectives of this study. When conducting qualitative research, researchers attempt to pay attention phenomena in their natural environments and try to understand or interpret the meanings that individuals give to the experiences they have in everyday language (Hennink et al., 2011). Because it allows for a focus on both the nature of a phenomenon and the nature of the social process surrounding that phenomenon, qualitative research is suited for this kind of study. (Patton, 2015). In particular, descriptive phenomenology was employed in the study. According to Giorgi (2012), descriptive phenomenology is a suitable study methodology for examining the shared experiences of a life situation.

### Study setting

The study was conducted in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, serves as the diplomatic hub of Africa (Abnet et al., 2017). Addis Ababa is a melting pot of people from different origins because it is located in the middle of the nation (UN-HABITAT, 2008).

### Participants and sampling

Refugee women were participants in the study. To recruit participants, I got in contact with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), a nonprofit organization that assists refugees. I was given the phone numbers of representatives of the Yemeni refugee community by the organization. With the assistance of representatives of the Yemeni refugee community, participants were recruited. The objective of the study was described to participants who met the inclusion criteria and they were invited to take part in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants. There were thirteen participants in the study. The inclusion criteria were: being Yemeni refugee women, living in Addis Ababa at least for one year, being aged 18 years and older, having the willingness to take part in the study, and having the ability to communicate in Arabic.

### Data collection procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was employed to inquire about participants' barriers to education. The interview guide prompted participants to share their narratives. I chose a semi-structured interview because it produces rich data. The participants were interviewed in Arabic, their mother tongue. The interview was done by a bilingual female interviewer had experience conducting qualitative research. I gave training to the interviewer for one day, covering topics such as the study's objectives, how to get to know participants and the study's ethical considerations. All participants were interviewed in their preferred places. The period of data collection was from July 5 to September 1, 2022. The interviewer who conducted the interviews transcribed and translated the data. Everyone who took part in the study had a single interview. The duration of each interview was one to two hours.

### Data analysis

The procedures outlined by Giorgi (2009) served as a roadmap for the data analysis. I initially read the interview transcripts in their entirety to have a complete understanding of the participants' experiences. I then coded for

meaningful units. Next, I converted meaningful units into third-person narratives. Analyzing the transformed meaning units for the constituents present in each participant's experience was the last stage.

### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to the semi-structured interview, participants who could read it were given a written information sheet by the interviewer. For those respondents who were illiterate, the interviewer read aloud the information sheet's contents to them. After being thoroughly informed about the study's objective and the information sheet, all respondents verbally consented to participate in the study. Respondents were informed that they might end the interview process at any time and declined to answer any of the semi-structured interview questions. The participants were informed that there was no risk or danger associated with the research. In addition, participant anonymity was preserved by not using their names. A pseudonym was employed in its place. The semi-structured interviews were effectively captured using an audio recorder. The recorded tapes were stored correctly by data protection regulations. All of the study participants' anonymized data were acquired. There was assurance of confidentiality throughout the data collection process.

## Findings

### **Socio-demographic characteristics of participants**

Thirteen women refugees, ranging in age from thirty to sixty, were chosen. The study participants had lived in Addis Ababa for three and a half to ten years. Four of the study's participants were single, three were married, four had divorced, and two had been widowed. At most four children and at least one child each had among the nine participants. Of the participants who were parents, eight were single mothers. Of the participants, five had completed their tertiary education in their home country, four had completed secondary school, two had not finished secondary school, one was illiterate, and one had completed primary school.

### **Obstacles to education**

Education is an instrument for building a better future. However, participants in the study encountered some barriers to education. The obstacles to education can be classified into two categories: Obstacles that were faced by refugee women and obstacles faced by refugee women's children. Refugee women place a high value on education, especially the early adult refugee women hoped for a better future through education. Refugee women intended to continue their education. However, they faced two major barriers to education. The language barrier was one of the main obstacles to education for refugee women. Some refugee women wanted to take short-term courses to expand their job opportunities. Nevertheless, they faced local language barriers in college. The private college that refugee women were registered at taught students in Amharic, which is the official language of the country. As refugee women were unable to understand Amharic, some of them were forced to stop taking the course. Halima described:

If you don't study, you can't get a job. Just to extend my job opportunities, I tried to study some short-term courses like photography. Then, I went to a private college and got registered. I thought that they would teach us the course in English. However, teachers taught us to use the Amharic language instead of English. Everything was in Amharic. I couldn't understand what the teacher was teaching. Due to this reason, I quit studying the course.

The other major barrier to refugee women's education was limited income. The limited income affected refugee women's education negatively. Hoping for a better future, refugee women were enrolled in private colleges. However, one obstacle they had to overcome was the cost of tuition. Pursuing their education at private colleges was too expensive for refugee women. Refugee women could not afford to cover the educational costs at private colleges. As a result, they dropped out of college. Because of their limited income, refugee women could not develop themselves personally and professionally. This left refugee women with no hope for the future. Refugee women's futures became dim. Halima stated:

Since I'm not studying a course I want, I can't get the chance to grow myself. When I was in Yemen, I took so many short-term courses that, as a result, I worked in various positions. I was working at the bank. I was a customer service officer; after that, I was a supervisor. The final position was training specialist. I developed myself through coursework, training, and experience. Since I came here for the last four years, I've been the same as before. I couldn't upgrade myself through education and taking courses. I can't develop myself through education. I can't say I will be this good in five or three years. I can't say I will have a home, a car, this, and that. I only live for today. I don't know about tomorrow.

Accessing education was a hurdle not only for refugee women but also for their children. Some refugee women with children reported that one of the obstacles to their children's education was the language barrier, especially in the initial period. Refugee children who attended primary school faced language barriers as the medium of

instruction was Amharic. Refugee children struggled with homework, assignments, and preparing for exams. Refugee children were underperforming in their education as a result of the language barrier. In the end, some of them were forced to drop out. For example, in the initial period, Iman sent her children to a government school. However, they dropped out because her children were unable to understand Amharic. As her children learned a few Amharic words, she sent them to the school again, and they were attending their education at the time of the interview:

Since my children couldn't understand Amharic, they couldn't perform well at school and dropped out. As a result, they blame me. They said that I was the one who brought them to this country. I told them that it was a war that drove us out of our homes. After missing one academic calendar, I let them join the school when they were able to understand Amharic.

Refugee children who attended secondary school also faced language barriers. They used to learn Arabic when they were in their homeland. In Addis Ababa, refugee children encountered language barriers due to the English language being used as the medium of instruction. They performed poorly in their schooling as a result. Refugee women could not help their children when they had exams or homework since some of them were unable to understand English. Refugee women also could not hire tutors for their children since they were financially weak.

Another obstacle to refugee children's education was the schools' reluctance to admit them. According to Article 24(1/2) of the new refugee proclamation, refugees may have access to pre-primary and primary education the same as Ethiopian nationals. Refugees may also have access to secondary and higher education and technical and vocational training with the available resources in the country. However, some government schools were not interested in admitting refugee women's children. For instance, even though Emani completed all the requirements, the government schools refused to admit her son to the regular program. After several trials, with the assistance of a teacher working in a school, her child was admitted to the school in the extension program:

The government allowed refugees to study, but schools refused. I wanted to educate my son, but government schools refused to do so. My son's educational certificates were sent to me from Yemen by my friends. Since his educational certificate was in Arabic, I translated it into Amharic. I asked that my son be registered at a number of government schools where I went. But they turned him down. After so many trials, my son was subsequently enrolled in the extension program because of the assistance of one teacher.

However, Abia, who initially enrolled her children in a private school, did not face what Emani and some other refugee women did. The school admitted her children to enroll without a problem. According to refugee women with children, interrupted education had a greater impact on their children's education. Since refugee children's education was interrupted because of the war, they did not acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. As a result, refugee children were forced to enter two grades lower than they were before they came to Addis Ababa. Abia stated:

My children entered school two grades lower than they were. One of my sons was a 6th grader when we came to Ethiopia from Yemen. But when he took the 6th-grade entrance exam to get into a private school, he was unable to pass the exam. So the school admitted him to the 4th grade. This may be because my children went to private schools, but if they had gone to a government school, they would not have been two grades lower.

Prejudice posed another barrier to children's education. Refugee children faced prejudice in school due to language and skin color differences. Refugee children are enrolled with a certain name attached to them. Students and teachers tag the name "Arebu" for refugee boy students and "Arebuwa" for refugee girl students. According to refugee women with children, their children didn't feel good when they were singled out. The name alienated refugee children and made them different from their fellow students. Because of this tag, refugee children quarrel with their fellow students and even teachers, and later on, some refugee children drop out of school. For instance, Nahir's grandson was not called by his name by his friends and teachers while he was attending school. This annoyed him, and eventually, it was one of the factors that led him to give up on his education:

My little grandson attended a government school in Addis Ababa. One of the teachers always called him "Arabu" instead of his name. My grandson told his teacher and classmates to call him by his name. However, they didn't hear him. My little grandson often used to quarrel with students and teachers about the tags and labels in the school. Finally, because of this reason, my grandson decided to stop his studies and later return to Yemen. Living in Addis Ababa as a refugee makes us feel sad. You have a certain name attached to you. People make you feel lonely. You don't feel good when you are singled out.

Refugee children had a different accent and could not communicate with their fellow students using Amharic correctly as it was their second language. About this, refugee children were bullied by students when they spoke the local language. This in turn caused refugee children to clash with their fellow students. For example, when one

of Abia's sons enrolled in a government school, he used to clash with students because they laughed at his Amharic language. Then, Abia let her son enroll in a private school with the help of Yemeni rich men. Abia illustrated:

My son used to fight with his fellow students at school because he couldn't speak the language very well. Then, with the help of Yemeni-rich individuals, I enrolled him in a private school (Yemen Community School) in the Merkato neighborhood. In this school, most of the students can speak Arabic, so he can communicate with them.

## Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrated that language barriers prevented refugee women from accessing education. Refugee women struggled to understand the local language. A significant obstacle to education for Arabic refugees and immigrant women is language barriers (Senthanar et al., 2020). In line with this study, previous studies conducted among refugees indicated that language was a barrier to refugees' education (Avery & Said, 2017; Ibesch et al., 2021; Kek & Huijser, 2011; Streitwieser et al., 2017; Watkins et al., 2012). For instance, Karen refugees in Australia described that the biggest issue harming their well-being is their inability to communicate and speak English fluently (Watkins et al., 2012). Refugees from Sudan who landed in Australia claimed to have significant language challenges while trying to access educational opportunities (Kek & Huijser, 2011). Moreover, a Syrian refugee living in Turkey stated that when interacting with members of the host community, language was considered to be the biggest obstacle to social and educational integration (Ibesch et al., 2021). According to these studies, local languages were used as the medium for instruction in the host countries, which presented challenges for refugees all over the world trying to access education.

The findings of the study also showed that limited income was another obstacle to refugee women's access to education. Similarly, studies carried out in host countries (Buckner et al., 2017; Ibesch et al., 2021) indicated that one of the major obstacles to education for refugees was limited income. Studies conducted in Ethiopia also revealed that economic issues constitute a barrier to the education of refugees (Getachew, 2020; Redeit, 2015; Yared, 2020). Refugees tended to have low incomes since there were few employment opportunities available to them. Refugee women could not attend school due to limited income. Their professional and personal development were thus adversely impacted by this.

Some of the refugee women's children also faced language barriers both at the primary and secondary levels in the initial period of settlement. In a similar vein, an earlier study (Namak et al., 2022) revealed that language barriers were an issue for refugee children attending school. Children who were refugees also suffered from interrupted education as a result of the war. This, in turn, had a detrimental effect on the academic achievement of refugee children. In a similar vein, McWilliams and Bonet's (2016) study found that young refugees' education was adversely impacted by their interrupted educational background. Another obstacle to refugee children's education was the unwillingness of government schools to admit them. Similarly, a prior study (Akesson et al., 2020) revealed a lack of recognition of certification by schools was a barrier to refugee children's education. Refugee children were also the targets of bullying and discrimination at school because of differences in language and skin color. Refugee children were thereafter discouraged from going to school. Likewise, prior studies (Correa-Velez et al., 2017; Shamieh et al., 2022; Tulibaleka, 2022) demonstrated that prejudice was encountered by refugee children in educational settings. Specifically, according to a study in Uganda, schools stigmatized and discriminated against refugee children (Tulibaleka, 2022). Additionally, a survey study among refugees in Jordan found that one of the difficulties faced by refugees in schools was being the target of bullying (Shamieh et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

Refugee women encountered barriers to access to education that adversely impacted their development on both a personal and professional level. The language barrier was one of the obstacles preventing refugee women from accessing education. Thus, governmental and nongovernmental organizations should prioritize teaching refugee women the local language. Limited income was one of the other barriers to access to education for refugee women. Thus, organizations that care about refugees must involve them in income-generating activities that strengthen their financial capabilities. Refugee women's children also faced some obstacles to education, which affected their school performance. In schools, refugee children encountered language barriers. Therefore, it is essential that language training be provided to refugee children by the government and other relevant organizations. Bullying and discrimination in schools, together with government schools' unwillingness to accept them, were additional barriers to education for refugee children. Hence, concerned organizations must raise awareness of the rights of refugees to education and prevent discriminatory practices in educational settings.

### Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in the work

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