



Policy Brief: Disabled refugees - visible and included in education

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Context

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines education as a basic human right and Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Despite this, 244 million children and young people were out of school in 2021, 98 million of whom live in Sub-Saharan Africa ([UNESCO, 2022](#)).

Disabled children are 49% more likely never to have never attended school compared with non-disabled children ([UNICEF, 2021](#))



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Forty-eight percent of refugee children are not in school ([UNHCR, 2022](#)).

Policy Recommendations

- The right to education for all students, including disabled refugees, needs to be unambiguously secured in policy and practice to ensure equitable access, irrespective of the availability of community or family advocacy
- Policy makers concerned to secure educational access for specific marginalised groups (like refugees, disabled people, or girls and women) need to recognise the compounding effect of having multiple marginalised identities
- Policy must be informed by intersectoral dialogue to ensure that disabled refugee students, particularly girls, are not inadvertently excluded from education by falling between group-specific policy provisions
- Pathways through education and into work for disabled refugees need to be secured through policy and practice.

Marginalised groups, like refugees and disabled people, are most likely to be excluded from school. Students who are both refugees and disabled are invisible in policy and service provision, and their right to education is not secure.

About this Research

Researchers at the University of Nottingham have collaborated with teams in South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe to understand the educational inclusion and exclusion of disabled refugee students, with a particular focus on girls.



All three countries have legislation and policies for refugee education and for disability education, but our research shows disabled refugee students face challenges in accessing education and transitioning through and beyond the education system. This is because disability and refugee status are considered different issues, and there are no reliable indicators of the extent of disability among refugee populations in these countries.

Following stringent ethical guidelines, we interviewed disabled refugees and their families, Non-Government Organisations, and education officials in each country. We found that policies do not acknowledge the unique challenges experienced at the intersection of refugee and disabled identities. These challenges are compounded for girl children who often experience gender-based violence.

Disabled refugee students, particularly girls and young women, can be excluded from education for a number of reasons in the different contexts. Specialist disability provision is not always available in schools in refugee camps, and local special schools sometimes put barriers in place to discourage refugee enrolment. Family poverty is linked to both refugee status and the need to look after a disabled child, so school fees, uniforms and transport costs are a barrier to access.

“Multiple characteristics intersect to push people deeper into education disadvantage.” (UNESCO, 2020)

The intervention and support of NGOs and parent advocacy often determines whether or not disabled refugee students can access education. The efficacy of these role-players is, in turn, enabled or constrained by various socio-cultural, economic and historical conditions in each context. These conditions include

- the availability of human and material resources;
- accessible infrastructure and education facilities;
- the availability of pathways through education and into work;
- attitudes and beliefs about disabled people, refugees, and girls and women.

Because policies do not consistently and equitably secure educational access for disabled refugee students, the extent to which they participate in learning opportunities is variable and contingent.

To promote access to quality, inclusive education for all, education policies must acknowledge and make provision for the multiple and intersecting identities of students.

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