

# Education

## Empowers Individuals:

## Transforms Lives and Futures



Mai Nguyen-Doan RSM

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### **Abstract**

Education is a fundamental human right for all, not just a privilege for some people. Education is a person's invisible navigator, especially for refugee and other forcibly displaced children. However, there is an immense and unacceptable number of children worldwide who have no access to education. This unjust social issue has drawn much attention from various local and global organisations, such as the United Nations, governments, non-government organisations and the United Nations organisations. Many more articles have been written about education since the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015. Quality education is SDG 4. This research project explores the importance of education and its benefits and the barriers that prevent children from having access to education, with a specific focus on forcibly displaced children. In order to address these barriers, a collaboration of stakeholders, such as governments, non-government organisations, the United Nations organisations, schools, teachers, parents and students needs to occur. Three selected educational methods are included to be used for children in different circumstances.

## 1. Introduction

Education is a key, a tool and an instrument that empowers and transforms our lives and futures. This research project will explore the importance of education and its benefits on personal, societal and global levels. It will explore the progress of the SDG 4 quality education and the barriers that prevent an immense number of children, especially forcibly displaced children, from accessing quality education. This research project will look at the number of children who have no access to education today and in the next five years when the SDGs reach the 2030 agenda, if we do not do more than what we have been doing. The following sections will particularly focus on forcibly displaced children, especially girls, to have a better understanding of the barriers that prevent them accessing education, so as to find out what difference an extra year of schooling, or two years of schooling or complete secondary school can make for girls and people's lives to bring them out of poverty, especially for people who live in low-income countries. We will look at what each one of us in the Mercy and global world can do - and need to do - to give every child the opportunity to access education "leaving no one behind." Finally, this research project will explore and recommend the best educational methods to be used in different circumstances.

## 2. Background

### *Statistics*

According to the current statistics provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) there are about 123.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. 49 million are children under 18 years old (40 percent). 36.8 million are refugees; out of these numbers, 14.8 million are refugee children (\*); 5.9 million are people in need of international protection (\*\*); 8.4 million are asylum-seekers; and 73.5 million are internally displaced people. 69 percent of refugees and other displaced people come from five countries: Afghanistan, Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine and Sudan. 73 percent of forcibly displaced people are hosted by low and middle-income countries. 67 percent are hosted by neighbouring countries (UNHCR).

(\*) Among the 49 million forcibly displaced children, the majority of them come from Sudan, Myanmar, the Gaza Strip, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan. The estimated number include, 14.8 million refugee children; and an unrecorded number are children in need of international protection; 2.7 million are asylum-seeking children; 29.4 million are internally displaced children and 1.7 million are Palestine children under United

Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (UNICEF: Displacement).

(\*\*) The United Nations recorded the statistics of forcibly displaced people slightly differently: 43.7 million are refugees, out of these numbers, 32 million are refugees under UNHCR's mandate and 6 million are Palestine refugees under the UNRWA's mandate. The Palestine refugees are registered in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the West Bank with the UNRWA which is not under UNHCR's mandate (UNICEF: Displacement); 72.1 million are internally displaced people and 8 million are asylum seekers (UN: refugees and UNICEF: Displacement).

Today in our world, it is estimated 700 million people are living in extreme poverty and about 1.5 billion people have no access to basic needs, such as nutrition and healthcare due to their situation (Global Citizen).

### *Definitions*

**Refugees** are people who have to flee their country of origin as a result of persecution, war, violence or violations of human rights. They need to be recognised as refugees. Most people are unable or fear to return to their home country, as they fear that they would be persecuted because of their “race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular group” (USA for UNHCR and UNICEF: Displacement).

**Asylum seekers** are people who have fled their home to go to another country and applied for protection of another country and await their application to be assessed for refugee status (USA for UNHCR and UNICEF: Displacement).

**Other people in need of international protection (OIP)** are people who live outside of their country of origin by crossing over international borders. They are not classified as asylum-seekers or refugees; however, they need international protection, including protection when they are at risk of being forced to return or need to access basic services either temporarily or long-term (UNICEF: Displacement).

**Internal displaced persons (IDPs)** are peoples who have to flee their home because of armed conflict, violence, violations of human rights and disaster. They stay within their own country without crossing over another country's border. IDPs are not protected by international law or

provided aid assistance because they are still legally protected by their own government (USA for UNHCR and UNICEF: Displacement).

**Returnees** are people who had been refugees or were internally displaced persons but have returned to their home country or their living areas. Once returnees return to their country or place of origin, they no longer hold their refugee status (UNHCR: Returnees).

**Stateless persons** are people who are not citizens of any country, even the country where they were born because of a number of reasons, such as “sovereign, legal, technical or administrative decisions or oversights” (USA for UNHCR).

### 3. Why I chose this topic

I am blessed and grateful for my own educational opportunities. Many of my childhood friends and refugee friends who left the camp during our youth did not have the same education opportunities that I fortunately had. Many of them wished they had a chance to go to school, while others regretted that they did not go to school. Therefore, my heartfelt desire for doing this research project is to deliver a message to young people: **“Please remain in school and make the most of your educational opportunities,”** so they will not regret it later.

I am mindful that there are many children, especially those who are forcibly displaced, who have no access to education. Therefore, I also desire to bring awareness to each one of us, individually and globally about the ongoing injustice that exists due to a huge number of children and young people in our world still having no access to education.

I received almost all my secondary education in refugee camps. My education during those years was broken, but not interrupted. I moved between schools and countries several times, but I always had a chance to go to school, because the Sisters of Mercy from Australia came to our refugee camps and carried with them the mission of education, which was very close to the heart of Catherine McAuley. They built schools, they taught us and gave us support during those challenging but memorable and special years.



*The three Sisters of Mercy with their students (The Writer's refugee camp)*

Before doing MELF, I had thought of doing an informal education research project, out of personal interest and curiosity. After I was accepted in the MELF program, I considered between education and other topics, because I became aware that education is a very big and complex topic! However, after my immersion in Cambodia where I was an eye-witness to the large number of children and young people selling items in the markets, on the streets and paddling a canoe water taxi on rivers of a floating village instead of having the opportunity of going to school. Hearing stories about stateless children and young people who have no access to education because of various reasons, I no longer thought of doing any other topic, but strongly wanted to focus on education.

#### **4. My hopes for this research project**

In developing this research project, I have four hopes as outcomes. The first of these hopes is for children and young people who have no access to education that they can get help to go to school, thus enabling them to participate as fully as possible and thus determining their futures. The second is that children and young people who feel hesitant about accessing education, can gain courage to engage with any education possibilities and be appreciative. The third is for those who are privileged to have access to education that they always fully receive support from their family, community, school and teachers. I hope they choose to remain in school, to make the most of their education opportunity to develop their potential, and that they will be appreciative in the future. The final hope is that for us who are privileged to have access to education and have been empowered by our educational opportunities, that we choose to be informed of the situation for disadvantaged children and young people who do not have access to such opportunities, and be prepared to give a hand to make a difference to enable them to have access to education.

## 5. Aims

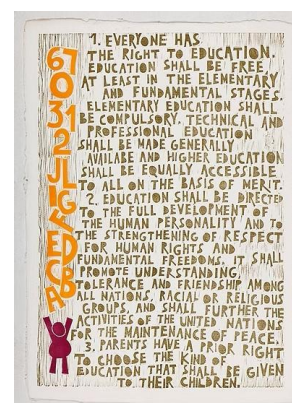
There are three aims that this research project focusses on. The first aim is to raise awareness about the importance of education and highlight the lack of access to education for millions of the poorest children in our world, especially forcibly displaced children. The second aim is to identify the barriers preventing children from having access to education and inviting stakeholders in the Mercy and global world to respond to the needs of these children. The last aim is to research and select the most effective and inclusive methods of education for children, as modelled by Catherine McAuley and the best practitioners today. These methods could be used in various situations, especially for children and young people who live in crisis and conflict zones that either have no access to education or it is not safe for them to go to school.

## 6. Education (Why? What? How? When? For Whom? By Whom?)

### 1) *Why education is so very important?*

#### *At the Personal level*

Education is a fundamental right for everyone, not just a privilege for some people. “Education plays a pivotal role in reducing inequality, fostering economic growth, and empowering individuals to live fulfilling lives” (UN). Education is an opportunity for people to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills, which becomes an instrument for self-empowerment for a better future.



Through education, people can acquire knowledge and obtain qualifications to help them access stable employment and higher salaries, which is a path that leads people out of poverty into a life of dignity (World Vision). In contrast, children who have no access to education will not have the skills they need for employment. “The cycle of poverty continues when they grow up and cannot afford to send their children to school” (Global Citizen). For refugees, “education enables children, young people and adults to use their academic and practical knowledge, adapt to changing circumstances, build decision-making and peacebuilding skills, express their needs and views concerning decisions that affect them both where they live now and in the future” (UNHCR – Refugee Edu 2030).

**“Education protects refugee children and youth from forced recruitment into armed groups, child labour, sexual exploitation and child marriage. Education also strengthens community resilience.”**

*UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency*

**“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”**

*Nelson Mandela.*

**“Education is a fundamental human right, central to the dignity and empowerment of individuals, to driving sustainable development, and to building peace.”**

*– António Guterres, UN Secretary-General*

#### *At the Societal level*

Education helps people to develop essential critical thinking skills for decision making, to form and express their opinions and received opinions in a respectful manner. These create a more stable, peaceful and productive society. Education also contributes to a development of countries' stable economic prosperity because when people are educated, they have more potential for personal economic growth which leads to a national economic growth (World Vision and UNHCR).

#### *At the Global level*

Quality education also helps achieve greater social and gender equity and hence contributes to marginalised people fulfilling their fundamental human rights. Education also “empowers people everywhere to live more healthy and sustainable lives” (World Vision, UNESCO and UN SDG 4). In low-income countries, education helps to increase by 10 percent of income per hour for every extra year of schooling (World Bank and World Vision). This can lead people to a more prosperous and equitable future, enabling them to participate in the economy, improve their lives, and strengthen stable economic growth globally. By 2030, if all girls complete secondary education, the gross domestic product (GDP) of developing countries will increase by 10 percent. Education helps to improve lives and economy, it is also “globally-recognised as the solution to ending the cycle of poverty” (World Bank, World Vision and Global Citizen). Even though education provides “enormous benefits to children, societies and entire countries, education is often the first service suspended and the last to be restored during crisis” (UNICEP).

**“Education is globally-recognised as the solution to ending the cycle of poverty.”**

*Global Citizen*

**“Education is the key that will allow many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved.”**

*The United Nations*

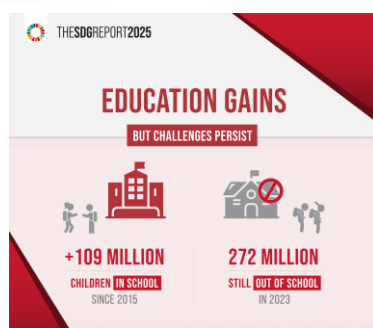


## 2) *Why should we be concerned about education today?*

There is an enormous number of children and young people in our world who have no access to education and we only have five more years to work on **the SDG 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”** (UN).

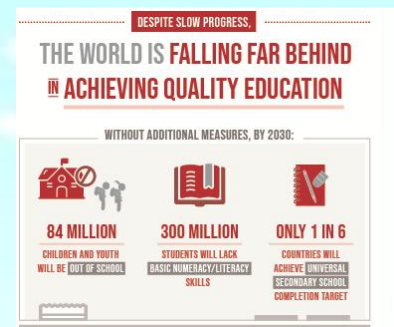
**“With just five years to reach the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to shift into overdrive.”**

*António Guterres, Secretary-General, United Nations*



According to the SDGs Report 2025, as of 2023, it was estimated 272 million children and young people had no access to education worldwide because of social, economic and cultural reasons. Within this number, 98 million are from sub-Saharan Africa and 122 million are girls (World Bank, World Vision, UNESCO, Global Citizen, the UN SDGs Report 2024 and SDGs Report 2025).

By 2030, it is estimated that an additional 84 million children and young people will have no access to education and 300 million young people will lack adequate basic required literacy and numeracy skills if we continue operating in the same way as it has been in the last few years. Only 1 in 6 countries will achieve the universal secondary school completion target (UN SDG 4).



These statistics are devastating! However, also by 2030, it is estimated that 825 million children will lack skills that are vital in the twenty first century for employment, such as digital skills that enable them to use and understand technology; transferable skills or life skills that enable them to deal with and manage personal and social challenges, and job-specific skills or technical and vocational skills that are needed in a workplace (UNICEF: Adolescent Education and Skills). In addition, there are “over 470 million children – more than one in six globally – live in areas affected by conflict.” At the end of 2024, it was estimated 52 million children who live in countries affected by conflict were out of school (UNICEF: Education in Emergencies).

Globally, 6 out of 10 children and young people lack the ability to effectively read, write and use mathematics when they complete primary and secondary education. The total estimated are 617 million, including 387 million primary school aged children from 6 to 11 years old and 230 million lower secondary children aged from 12 to 14 years old. The primary level takes up 56 percent and the lower secondary level takes up 61 percent (UNHCR – Refugee Education 2030 and UNICEF). Other sources indicate that in low and middle-income countries, the same lack of quality education means that children will leave school without the necessary skills to lead lives free from exploitation and face significant difficulty accessing employment when they grow up – education cannot be delayed (World Bank). We are living in a rapidly changing world; without education they will also have limited understanding about their health; the capacity to be critical thinkers, or to make decisions relating to their future and their communities (UNICEF). According to the UN SDGs Report 2024, the progress to reach SDG 4 quality education 2030 agenda has gone more slowly than expected and COVID-19 has added significant impacts on various factors of education as below.

### *Pre-primary education*

Globally, from 2015-2022 which included the COVID-19 years, 7 out of 10 children attended one-year pre-primary education before they started primary school. However, the attendance of children in sub-Saharan Africa and Northern Africa and Western Asia was less than 50 percent. Pre-primary education is recommended to be legally free and compulsory. It is an important program to provide all children equitable opportunities and to prepare them to be ready for school. However, only 25 percent of countries made it compulsory and 50 percent of countries provided it for free. Higher rates of children of wealthier families attended pre-primary school than children of families experiencing financial barriers. The pandemic also affected the growth in pre-primary education and children of most disadvantaged families were affected the most (UN SDGs Report 2024).

### *Primary and secondary education*

There was progress for both primary, lower and upper secondary levels. Some regions grew faster, such as Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, other regions grew more slowly, except Oceania which experienced negative growth. Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southern Asia had the lowest completion of their levels (UN SDGs Report 2024).

In comparison with the global completion from 2015-2023, the primary level has increased from 85 to 88 percent, the lower secondary level has increased from 74 to 78 percent and the upper secondary level has increased from 53 to 60 percent. Nevertheless, in sub-Saharan Africa only 2 out of 3 students completed the primary level (UN SDG Report 2024 and UN SDG Report 2025). The higher education enrolment was 43 percent (UNESCO: Higher Education).

### *Recognising the importance of education*

The recognition of the importance of education has grown over time. Education is article 26/30 in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN: Education for All). Education is article 22 in the 1951 Refugee Convention of Human Right (UNHCR, UN, UNESCO, World Vision). Education is now 4<sup>th</sup> of the 17 goals of 2015-2030 SDGs.

**Goal 4 targets are fully adopted from the UN SDG 4 as below:**

**4.1** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes

**4.2** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education

**4.3** By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

**4.4** By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

**4.5** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

**4.6** By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

**4.7** By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

**4.A** Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

**4.B** By 2030, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries

**4.C** By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states.

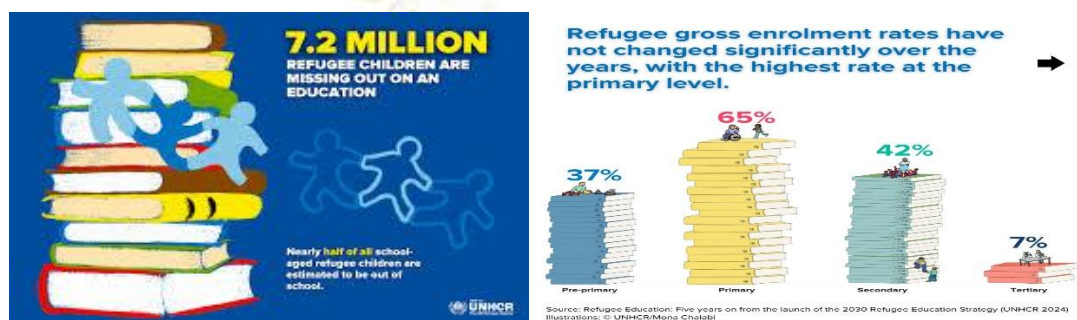
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

### ***3) Why education is especially important for forcibly displaced children?***

**Forcibly displaced children:** the phrase “forcibly displaced children” used in this research project paper includes refugee children, asylum-seeking children, children in need of international protection, internally displaced children, returnee children and stateless children.

Education prepares displaced children with knowledge and skills that can help them in various circumstances, with decision-making, to express their needs, their views and to develop peacebuilding skills in their surroundings. Education helps to acquire knowledge about their legal rights, provides opportunities to obtain work rights and be treated with respect (UNHCR Refugee Education 2030). Through education, refugee children have access to a stable and safe place to learn to reduce the risk of exploitation and child labour and to obtain knowledge so as to transform them in the hope for a better future. It may also help to ease some of the trauma they experienced when fleeing their country, so as to rebuild their communities and have meaningful lives. However, almost half of school-age refugee children have no access to education (UNHCR Education Report 2024, UNHCR and UNHCR Australia). For girls, “education is associated with a lower likelihood of adolescent pregnancy and early marriage, giving girls the possibility of shaping their own destinies.” For boys, “more years in education translates into a lower likelihood of risky behaviour, and hence into less violence and victimisation” (UNHCR Education Report 2024).

According to the UNHCR Education Report 2024 and as mentioned earlier, there were about 14.8 million school-aged refugee children and 49 percent of whom had no access to education. This means about 7.2 million refugee children had no access to education. “An estimated additional 16 million internally displaced children and forcibly displaced children without refugee status, either lack access to education, or face multiple barriers to beginning or continuing their education” (UNHCR Edu Report 2024 and UNICEF Working Paper). Based on the data collected in 2022-2023, the enrolment for pre-primary was 37 percent, the enrolment for primary was 65 percent, the enrolment for secondary was 42 percent and the enrolment for tertiary was 7 percent (UNHCR Edu Report 2024). The global tertiary enrolment rate increased from 1 percent in 2019 to 7 percent in 2023. The goal for 2030 is 15 percent (UNHCR – Refugee Edu 2030 and UNHCR Global Report 2023).



**“I would like refugees to go away with something. And for me education would be key. Because even if they relocated to a different country today, they would go with the knowledge, they would go with a paper, something that would help them in their lives and the years to come.”**

*NGO Staff working with refugee youth*

#### **4) Why is education important for refugee and other forcibly displaced girls?**

Education is a fundamental human right. However, many girls and women still do not have access to education (UN). It is important to ensure that girls and women receive quality education to develop knowledge, leadership skills, to close the gap of gender inequality, to empower girls and women, to access employment, to



eradicate poverty, to prevent the risk of exploitation, child labour, early child marriage and pregnancy (World Bank, World Vision, Global Citizen, UN and UNHCR Australia).

The importance of education is recognised that “a girl’s education is an investment in her future. It is also an investment in the future of our world” (World Vision); another view: “investing in girls’ education transforms communities, countries and the entire world” (UNICEF). The education opportunities that girls and women gain will empower them and lead them in our world to a more prosperous and equitable future. When everyone can participate in the economy, their lives will improve, they will become self-sufficient, contribute to economic growth and enhance global stability (World Bank). Yasmine Sherif, Executive Director of Education Cannot Wait (ECW) stated that “without education as a foundation, you cannot end extreme poverty. If you don’t have education for girls, you’ll never achieve gender equality” (Global Citizen).

Education does not only provide opportunities for girls and women to learn and obtain knowledge, but also to feel safe while they are at school. If they are given the opportunity to complete all levels of education, they will have more employment opportunities and develop socio-emotional and life skills which are essential to navigate life and to make their own life decisions. Education also helps girls and women improve health outcomes; not only for themselves, but also for their families, communities and countries because education helps with better understanding about nutrition and healthcare, which enables them to nurture and raise

healthier children. Education helps girls and women to avoid the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (World Bank and UNHCR Education Report 2024). However, in countries that are affected by fragility, conflict and violence (FCV), girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys, and at the secondary level, girls who have no access to education is up to 90 percent (World Bank).

In primary, there is about 49 percent of gender equality in accessing education. The percentage is lower when the children reach further levels of secondary school. In lower secondary, there is about 43 percent and upper secondary is 24 percent of gender equality in accessing education (UNICEP). According to the UN, 40 percent of countries have not achieved equal gender access for primary education. This implies the lack of access to employment opportunities for girls and women in the future (UN SDG 4).

**“Ensuring that girls receive quality education can lead to a more prosperous equitable future for all. When everyone fully participates in the economy, we improve lives, build self-sufficient communities, drive economic growth, and strengthen global stability.”**

*The World Bank*

### **5) What are some of the barriers?**

There are a number of barriers preventing children from accessing education, including the following:

**Culture, child marriage and disability:** Many parents do not value education and impose labour on their children. Many cultures allow boys to go to school while girls have to stay at home. If girls are allowed to go to school, they have to leave school when they reach puberty or when they are forced into early marriage and/or become pregnant and are expelled from school. They stay home to do household chores, collect firewood, fetch water, cook meals and care for younger siblings or sick family members. Education is considered as undervalued and unnecessary for girls, as they will marry, become a wife and mother (World Vision). Girls and women who marry at an early age have children early and often experience family violence from their partners. These factors prevent them from getting a job, impact on their children's education and health (World Bank).

**Distance and violence:** Some children have to walk to school for 1 to 5 hours. Their parents are concerned about their safety during these long-distance walks. For girls, they may be exposed to violence on their way, be abused at school or be subject to sexual exploitation. For boys, they might be kidnapped and forced to join armed groups. If any of these factors occur, some parents no longer allow them to go to school (World Bank, World Vision and Global Citizen).

**Poverty, cost, hunger and drought:** Poverty is one of the significant factors that prevent children from accessing education and causes dropout of school, especially for girls. Even though some children have access to free primary and some secondary education, their family may not have money to buy the uniform and school books or pay other costs. If parents cannot afford these for all of their children, girls are often the ones who have to stay at home while the boys can go to school. If girls have access to education, they have to get up early in the morning to walk a long distance to collect water for the family before they go to school. By the time they get to school, they are too tired or hungry and cannot focus on their study (World Vision, UNICEP and UN SDG 4).

**Gender, Health and Sanitation:** Many children leave school because of inadequate hygiene and sanitation facilities, which cause significant impact on them at school, especially for girls when they reach the menstruation stage. In situations when girls have a chance to go to school and remain in school, there are a number of areas they are not encouraged to study, such as “science, technology, engineering and mathematics” (World Bank and World Vision). Over 20 percent of primary schools globally lack adequate sanitation facilities for girls. In sub-Saharan African, only 30 per cent of primary and 50 percent of secondary schools have access to electricity thus “hindering the use of technology” (UN SDGs Report 2024). Refugee children experience additional barriers, such as “overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms, curriculum and language barriers, and conflict-driven school closures” (UNHCR Global Report 2024).

**Technology and educational materials:** Schools have inadequate educational resources, such as textbooks, pencils and exercise books for students. Technology provides more educational opportunities for many children, at the same time it may also cause inequalities and leaves many children without having access to education, especially children of low-income families (UN SDGs Report 2024). In particular, families who cannot afford to have internet connection at home causes significant impact on the children’s learning and development (UNICEP).

**Schools, teachers and infrastructure:** Situations where teachers use physical punishment, teacher shortages, unqualified teachers, insufficient teacher training, inadequate teacher salaries and limited or no ongoing professional development for teachers causes significant impact on children's learning. Insufficient funding causes lack of resources which remains the most challenging obstacle for children to access education. In low-socio-economic countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa, less than one-half of schools of the primary and lower secondary levels can provide suitable infrastructure, drinking water, toilets, electricity, electronic devices, internet, up to date educational materials or basic resources. Globally, about 50 percent of primary schools and 62 percent of secondary schools can provide basic infrastructure for children with disabilities; whereas, in Latin America and the Caribbean about 30 percent of primary schools have suitable facilities for disabled children. Technology has created more opportunities in education, but at the same time it also creates more inequality by leaving millions of children having no access to education, especially the marginalised and low-income communities (UN SDG 4, SDGs Report 2024 and UNESCO).

**Other barriers for refugees:** there are a number of factors that impact refugee children, such as different nationalities, legal status, documentation issues, language barriers and different curriculum (UNHCR Global Report 2023 and UNHCR Global Report 2024). In addition, tertiary students experience significant barriers in different aspects, such as smaller numbers of refugees who complete the secondary level, limited places available for refugees in higher education institutions, distance and restricted movements for refugees, expensive fees, limited study options for refugees, insufficient required academic documents, limited technology access, financial obligations to support family and disability. Most refugees are settled in more vulnerable countries (UNHCR Refugee Education 2030).

**War, political conflicts, disability and minorities:** The children grow up as their countries face civil war, political conflicts, tribal conflicts, natural disaster, famine, drought, disability and minority communities (World Bank, World Vision: Girls' Education and UNICEP). The number of children living in these situations has increased, as "more countries are gripped by conflict today than at any time in the past 30 years" (UNICEP). Out of the total number of children who have no access to education, 25 percent are girls who are often more vulnerable (World Vision).

**COVID-19:** COVID-19 is one of the significant factors that affects the global education. The performance in reading and mathematics has declined in many countries (UN SDGs Report 2024). A study of 104 countries found that four out of five children's education performance was affected by the pandemic (UN SDGs Report 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic affected 1.5 billion students around the world (USA for UNHCR). It also caused significant impacts on girls and women's health and well-being, as they were exposed to more violence during the pandemic (World Bank).

#### ***6) What is emerging or has surprised me?***

Basic education with reading skills when leaving school could make significant changes for people living in low-income countries. 171 million people could escape extreme poverty, "if all students in low-income countries had just basic reading skills," nothing else (Global Citizen quoted UNESCO). 60 million people would not have to live in poverty if they had 2 more years of schooling (World Vision quotes UNESCO); 420 million would escape poverty if they completed secondary education. This means that half of the people living in poverty globally would be reduced and two thirds of the people living in poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia would be reduced (World Vision quoted UNESCO and UNESCO). Only 7 % of refugee children achieve a tertiary education (UNHCR Education Report 2024 - Refugee Education).

#### ***7) How can my research help to make this happen?***

We cannot afford to operate our education system the way it has been in the last few years, especially with the impact of the pandemic. Otherwise, we will never achieve the SDG 4 ambition. We need stakeholders, such as governments, non-government organisations, the United Nations organisations, schools, teachers, parents and students to take part in this as follows:

##### ***Governments***

Governments need to provide free pre-primary, primary and secondary education, especially compulsory primary education, for both boys and girls, including for marginalised and disabled children to "ensure that quality education is accessible to all, **leaving no one behind.**" (World Vision and UN). Governments also need to establish policies to welcome and include forcibly displaced children, including girls, and children with disabilities in the national education system (UNHCR Refugee Education 2030). According to the UNHCR report, "refugee

children still do not have the same access to education as non-refugee children” (UNHCR Global Report 2023).

Governments need to focus on quality education at all levels, such as early childhood education, pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary, including vocational training that can be equally accessed for all genders and classes. Today people are living in a fast-changing world and they need ongoing learning opportunities. Therefore, governments need to make a priority investment in education to respond to the needs of their citizens, to provide adequate infrastructure, sanitation, education resources, to invest in teachers’ training and sufficient teacher salaries (World Bank and UNESCO). Through the support of NGOs/UNOrgs, Governments need to award scholarships for disadvantaged children to enable them to remain in school, instead of leaving school to look for work (UNICEP Cambodia).

*Non-government organisations (NGOs) and the United Nations Organisations (UNOrgs)*

NGOs/UNOrgs support local governments to establish their education systems, to improve quality education at all levels to ensure every child worldwide has a chance to access education (World Bank). They also provide funding to award scholarships for disadvantaged children to access early childhood education and enable them to remain in school, especially to promote gender equality in education by supporting girls to go to school to complete pre-primary and primary and secondary education. The purpose is to provide opportunity for girls to access education, and to eradicate the gender discrimination in education and gender inequality. NGOs/UNOrgs also help to build adequate school facilities for both boys and girls to suit their needs and to protect their health; to train teachers from early childhood to secondary levels with different skills, to work with children of ethnic minorities and children with disabilities. They also promote positive discipline training in the classroom for teachers and positive parenting programs for parents so as to avoid the physical punishment of the children. NGOs/UNOrgs also work with schools to promote education to families and communities, and involve them in the school activities. The aim is to help parents and communities to understand the importance of education for both boys and girls (UNICEP and UNICEP Cambodia).

The number of forcibly displaced children has never increased as rapidly today as it has in the last thirty years, therefore NGOs/UNOrgs need to provide emergency education programs to the crisis areas to prevent interrupted education for children, because sometimes children can be displaced for a period of time before they return home or resettle in other countries

(UNICEF: Education in Emergencies). They also need to provide funding for infrastructure development of host schools which brings benefits for both refugees and local children, and support to address challenges that prevent girls and children with disabilities from accessing education. They support and encourage communities to run their own programs, such as community sports, homework support programs, local childcare and early childhood education programs, train classroom teachers and teacher aides (UNHCR Refugee Education 2030). At the same time, they advocate for the children's right to education, protect their safety in the school environment and "forge partnerships at the national and global levels to safeguard learning for every child." They also need to work with governments to apply "Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines to protect schools and universities from being used as military places when conflict occurs" (UNICEF).

### *Schools*

There are a number of components that schools are recommended to achieve for quality education, such as strong leadership and management, safe school environment and adequate infrastructure with sanitation facilities, especially for teenage girls to manage menstruation hygiene, adequate water to avoid children getting sick and facilities for disabled children. These encourage parents to send their children to school and encourage the children to remain at school (UNICEF Cambodia). In regard to curriculum, school does not only provide literacy and numeracy, but also a holistic educational approach that focuses on health, nutrition and socioemotional skills, such as psychosocial support, mental health and well-being. These programs are vital to support forcibly displaced children who have had traumatic experiences of shelling, bombing, violent attacks, displacement, losing their parents and home (UNICEF and Global Citizen).

Schools also need to provide qualified teachers and teachers with special skills and multilingual languages to accommodate children with special needs and children of ethnic minorities (UNICEF Cambodia). They need to provide teachers with sufficient resources, such as computers and electronic devices to meet their teaching needs. In addition, schools need to promote education to families and communities to help parents and children understand the values of education. The children often arrive at school without being fed or with an illness. They are not ready to learn and not being encouraged by parents to learn. Schools are recommended to provide meals to help with increasing the enrolment, maintaining the students in school and for better learning outcomes. Therefore, schools are not only places where

children learn, they are also places where children can rely on food, water, health care, hygiene supplies and feel safe from being abused, exploited and kidnapped into armed groups (UNICEF).

### *Teachers*

Teachers hold significant roles in the children's learning journey. They do not only convey the learning materials to the children, but also prepare them with knowledge, skills and values that they need for their lives, careers and futures. Therefore, they need to help the children to be aware of and understand the importance of literacy and numeracy to help them later in life and throughout the education journey (World Bank). It is necessary for teachers to have regular communication with the children's parents regarding their learning progress, and to help parents understand and be aware of the school's expectation of their children's learning and school work. Teachers need to respect each child's needs and capacity, and to use positive discipline in the classroom instead of physical punishment (UNICEF and UNICEF Cambodia). The way teachers encounter the children who are in their care creates great impact on the children's learning experience. This develops his or her unique potential, to reduce drop out and to achieve SDG 4 quality education. Therefore, pre-primary, primary and secondary teachers need to be well trained, to have ongoing professional development for improvement of knowledge and teaching skills, and be well supported and provided with sufficient technology devices. Teachers need to be adequately paid (World Bank and UNICEP). Their professional development must be holistic and practical so the bodies, minds and spirits of the children they teach are cared for (UNHCR – Refugee Education 2030).

Globally, there are about 15 percent of teachers across all levels of education who do not meet the minimum required qualifications. ***Pre-primary:*** In sub-Saharan Africa, there were about 60 percent of pre-primary teachers who meet the qualification requirement standards whereas in Europe and Northern America it was 90 percent. ***Primary:*** In sub-Saharan Africa, there were about 70 percent of primary teachers who meet the qualification requirement standards, whereas there were 90 percent in other regions (UNICEF, UN SDGs Report 2024 and UNESCO). Teacher shortages and inconsistency of teacher qualification standards are some of the main barriers that affect the progress of SDG 4 (UN The SDGs Report 2024). By 2030, 3.4 million additional primary teachers and 16.7 million additional secondary teachers are needed to meet the SDG 4, as most refugees are hosted by very vulnerable countries themselves. (UNHCR – Refugee Education 2030).

### *Parents*

Parents hold a significant role in the journey of their children's education. Parents are encouraged to provide adequate preparation for their children before they start school (UNICEP and World Bank). Once they start school, parents are encouraged to read with their children at home and talk to their children about their day at school and what they learn at school; all of these will help the progress of their learning. Parents need to support their children to develop their independent learning, set aside time for their children to study at home and to ensure they have what they need for their study. In order to understand their children's learning progress, parents are recommended to talk with their children's teachers about school expectation of their children's work and ask for their children's school reports and to view their children's works (UNICEP).

Parents and communities are encouraged to be involved in school activities, because their involvement helps them gain better understanding about education and its value. *For the children:* this has shown significant positive impact on their learning progress. *For the parents:* they have made more demands about education for their children, both boys and girls; support them to remain in school; and allow them to complete early childhood education and basic education (UNICEP Cambodia). This reminds me of what my mother used to say to us: "I wish each one of you will complete at least a higher education degree." This was a direction and motivation for me to study when I was younger.

### *Students*

Beside the support and involvement of various stakeholders, the students themselves are encouraged to remain in school, stay focussed and hold on to their dream and desire (UNICEP Cambodia). Every "piece" of education is very important and counts. Every small part of education is like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle and every piece is needed to complete the whole picture. Scholarships provided by NGOs/UNOrgs and schools enable children, especially refugee children to access education and to complete higher education. Students who received assistance to complete their study are often very generous in helping and passing on their knowledge to other children later. One of the students stated: "I really want to help others without asking anything in return. My motto is: give, give and never stop giving" (UNHCR Australia).

*I am mindful of different learning environments, where there is limited or no access to electricity or technology devices. However, do not let any of these stop you. I am reminded that I used to study under an electricity light pole, as our long-house in the refugee camps either had no lights or the lights were turned off at curfew time (Writer).*



*The Writer's refugee camp*

## **7. Best Education methods**

There are three educational methods chosen for this research project to be used in different circumstances.

### ***1) Education for a world in crisis***

#### *Emergency education*

This research was instigated because of my personal experience of being a refugee child and the question of why some forcibly displaced children were able to access education and others could not. It is vital to provide learning spaces for children to feel safe, even if they have a class under a tree or in a tent, especially during conflict. Educators or adults who may not be trained teachers in these situations can still be supportive and encouraging mentors and help children to deal with their traumatic experiences and offer hope for their future. Children need emergency education while they live in areas that have experienced conflict, post-conflict and emergency to avoid interrupted education. Forcibly displaced children do not only require education to help with the loss of schooling opportunities, but they also need holistic education to provide with psychological support to deal with their traumatic experiences to be able to concentrate, learn and develop better relationships (UNESCO, Global Citizen and UNHCR Refugee Education 2030). Many forcibly displaced children may live in refugee camps in foreign countries for a substantial period of time before they resettle in other countries or return home. It would be helpful if they are being supplied with educational materials for their learning, especially those whose parents cannot afford to buy these items. Beside the emergency education, there are other programs that have been delivered to refugee children.

### *Early Childhood Development*

Early Childhood Development (ECD) or Early Childhood Education (ECE) is an important long-term investment, as it is a path to lead people out of poverty and to have a prosperous life and strong economic growth. Through ECD programs, children experience “profound impact on brain development – affecting learning, health, behaviour and ultimately, productivity and income.” It helps children with the best start in life and equips them with critical skills later in life. (World Bank). ECD/ECE also helps to improve “children’s survival, health, growth, cognitive and social development.” Early Childhood Education methods give children the experience of what a normal life should be, such as playing, singing and creating (UNESCO, Global Citizen and UNHCR – Refugee Edu 2030).

### **2) Education in an ideal world (Montessori Method)**

The Montessori method is an “holistic, experiential, child-centered system” of education that supports the learning and development of a child (American Montessori Society). It was developed by Dr Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, and it is comprised of the five components:

- i. Trained Montessori Educators
- ii. Multi-age programs
- iii. Montessori Materials
- iv. Guided Learning
- v. Uninterrupted Learning

#### *Trained Montessori Educators*

Montessori educators are required to have a standard teacher qualification, and an additional Montessori education training with theory and practice. Their roles are to observe and support the children with their own interests and developmental needs by linking the children with the learning materials and equipment that have been prepared in the classroom; and to liaise with the children’s parents regarding their children’s learning progress. The Montessori educators are also required to love and respect the children as they are.

#### *Multi-age programs*

The multi-age Montessori programs are divided into 4 stages of development: the first is birth to 6 years and called the ‘absorbent mind’ because children are like sponges, taking in everything around them; the second is from 6 to 12 years and is the reasoning mind stage, as

the children explore and question; the third is titled the humanistic mind stage and is from 12 to 18 years, where the teenagers search for their identity and try to work out their role in the world; and the fourth is from ages 18 to 24, called the specialist mind stage where the young adult continues to explore where they will eventually belong.

### *Montessori materials*

The Montessori materials are carefully designed and set up in the classroom to correspond to the physical and psychological needs of each child's developmental stages and are compatible with the Montessori curriculum.

### *Guided learning*

The children are provided with a spaciouly designed and calm classroom environment for individual and group activities. Children and teenagers are together so they inspire and connect with each other. The purpose is for the children to explore and to foster their curiosity. The educators' role is to guide the children in their individual learning as well as in their interaction with others and to keep their classroom environment in order.

### *Uninterrupted learning*

The children of each stage are given two hours each for uninterrupted learning so they can work independently and at their own pace. The educators' role during this period is to provide individual and group lessons, supervise and support the children's needs.

### **3) Education in an ideal world (Catherine McAuley's Method)**

Education was very important and close to the heart of Catherine McAuley. Catherine believed that education empowers people, and she was particularly focused on education for girls and women because she knew this is what helps to transform and improve society. "She wished to empower poor people to lead happy, mutually sustaining lives; she believed the development of girls' and women's talents is most conducive to the good of society; and she saw religious education as the centrepiece of a truly merciful education" (*in The Life and Legacy of Catherine McAuley 1778 – 1841*). Catherine believed that children do not only learn from what is delivered by their teachers, but they also learn even more from their teachers' example, manner and values. "Catherine always maintained the special obligation of Sisters of Mercy to educate poor children, but she also saw the need to educate other children in tuition-paying schools. She sought to develop in all students, the well-off and the poor alike, a true commitment to the

well-being of all children and of the whole human community” (in *The Life and Legacy of Catherine McAuley 1778 – 1841*).

Catherine transformed her belief into action by following the footsteps of Jesus to serve people in the society that are considered ‘the least.’ In building the House of Mercy she included classrooms to provide free education for girls. Catherine herself went to France to study the education systems there while the house was being built and she also did work experience before she opened schools.



She employed well qualified teachers and teacher aides (Monitresses) who used the Lancastrian method (Lancasterian) for their teaching. The teachers’ role is to deliver the lesson to the children. The teacher aides gather the children into a small group, according to their ability, after they had a lesson with head teachers or did their own study.

The teacher aides’ role was to assist the children with their reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic (mathematics), religion, Bible study and handicrafts. She provided the opportunity for her Sisters to gain training and encouraged them to be prepared to meet the national standards in order to plan for their schools to be affiliated with the national school systems. While Catherine lived in another place, she came to the house almost every day to receive, and to greet the children with a kind word and an outstretched hand.

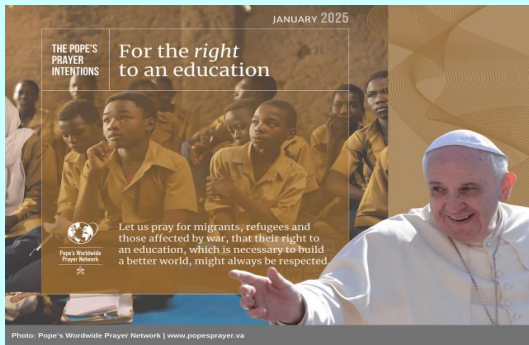
**“No work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women.”**

*Catherine McAuley*

## **8. Pope Francis’ prayer intention for January 2025**

In early 2025, Pope Francis released a video of his January prayer intention and invited us, the Church worldwide, to pray for “the right of an education.” There was an article written about the video that can be found on the Vatican website.

(<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-01/pope-january-prayer-intention-2025-education.html>).



Pope Francis wished to bring awareness about the 250 million children around the world who lack education due to “wars, migration, and poverty.” Pope Francis emphasised the rights of education for all the children regardless of their background and circumstances thus preventing children from being exploited. He knew education prepares them

for a better future for themselves and to contribute to the country they will live in, either a new country or their home country (VaticanNews).

Pope Francis stated: “Let’s never forget that whoever welcomes the foreigner, welcomes Jesus Christ” (VaticanNews). Pope Francis also “urged the faithful to join him in praying for migrants, refugees and those affected by wars, “that their right to an education, which is necessary to build a more human world, might always be respected”” (by Deborah Castellano Lubov in VaticanNews).

## 9. My invitation for action

To follow the examples of Pope Francis, the footsteps of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy, I would like to invite each one of us in the Mercy and global world to respond generously to the need for education for children and young people in our world, especially forcibly displaced children.

In Australia, I have extended my invitation to Mercy Education Limited of Mercy Ministry Companions (MMC) to invite their staff and students to participate in this project by donating one dollar (\$1) per person per year during their Mercy Day celebration. The donated funds will be used to provide ongoing financial support for the education of girls living in poverty in Africa and for trainee teachers. I am hoping to extend this invitation to Mercy schools of Mercy Partners.

We may think that social justice issues, such as education, is a big issue that needs to be addressed by local governments and global organisations, rather than us as individuals or small groups. In fact, each one of us as an individual, as a collective group or as an organisation can give a hand to address this issue to make a difference for the lives of children living in poverty to gain access to education.

## 10. Summary

Education is vital and the ultimate instrument of empowerment for everyone, especially for forcibly displaced children, and especially girls. Through education, children have access to a safe place to learn to prepare for their futures, to help them recover from traumatic experiences and to reduce the risk of exploitation, dangerous child labour and early child marriage. Education is considered as “one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability. It delivers large consistent returns in terms of income, and is the most important factor to ensure equity and inclusion” (World Bank). Education creates opportunities for employment and economic growth which leads people out of poverty. If people could complete secondary education, half of the population living in poverty in our world could be reduced. However, the number of children and young people who have no access to education is not only unjustly and unacceptably high but is actually increasing. In order to address this unjust social issue, stakeholders of different levels, such as governments, NGOs/UNOrgs, schools, teachers, parents, students and each one of us need to take part to ensure every child has access to education **“leaving no one behind.”**

## 11. Acknowledgements

I express my deep gratitude to: the **Sponsor** of the MIA-MGA Emerging Leaders Fellowship (MELF) for your kindness and generosity; **Sister Denise and the staff at Metta Karuna** for your warm welcome and hospitality; **the MIA staff** for your warm welcome and hospitality; the **MGA Team** for your wisdom, dedicated leadership and trust; the **past and current MELF Fellows** for your support and companionship throughout this program and with no doubt through the time to come; the **past and current Community Leaders** and **Institute Leadership Teams** for the recommendation and support; the **Sisters in the Institute** and **other religious friends** for your support, interest and prayers; my **past and current Communities** for your support, encouragement and companionship; my current **colleagues, supervisors and manager** for your support, encouragement and flexibility to help with my work when I go overseas and need to take time off to complete my tasks; my former **co-ordinators and manager** for your ongoing support, companionship, guidance and interest in my life journey; my **family and non-religious friends** for their well wishes; my **long-term companions** for always being there to help, support and give guidance; and finally my **two mentors** Sister Cathy Solano RSM and Sister Anne Ryan RSM for your wisdom, guidance, patience and generous support.

Each one of you has made my MELF journey possible and a unique opportunity to see the world; not its glamour and splendour, but to gain insight and be attuned with our world's development for its people and unjust social issues. What I have learnt and seen had certainly broadened my understanding and awareness, and at times it has been overwhelming to see the broken situations and crises of our world. I am blessed to know that you are always there to pray and support me in different ways, and allow me to learn and develop in my own way. I cannot complete this program as expected without my two dedicated and generous mentors.

People have asked me what MELF is and what you do during your immersions. Besides giving the answers that can also be found on the MIA-MGA website, other answers depend on what an individual fellow has perceived and acquired. I remember when we were in New York, we were privileged to be part of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) at the United Nations. There were hundreds of sessions and side events that we could choose to attend, depending on our preferences and personal interests. After our first gathering in the morning before we went on our way to attend the sessions, either individually or as a small group, I remember we were told that "this is your banquet." Since then, I have realised that not only the CSW69 at the UN was a banquet, but every immersion and part of the MELF has been a banquet itself. This indicates the richness, profundity and significance of MELF for me. My sincere and prayerful gratitude.

## 12. Resources used

Global Citizen

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/categories/defeat-poverty/>

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/why-education-is-critical-for-children-in-conflict/>

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<https://montessori.org.au/>

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<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/education-all>

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<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education>

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UNHCR Australia

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<https://www.unicef.org/education/primary-education>

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VaticanNews

Pope Francis' January prayer intension for "the right to an education."

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-01/pope-january-prayer-intention-2025-education.html>

Venerable Catherine McAuley: Aspects of her Life and Spirituality

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World Vision

<https://www.worldvision.ca/en/stories/why-is-education-important>

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<https://www.wvi.org/article/girls%E2%80%99-education-how-far-have-we-actually-come-and-where-do-we-go-now>

### 13. Images used

1. MGA logo
2. Catherine McAuley rose
3. Young boy
4. Children: iStock-577325078
5. Refugee camp photos
6. Australia photo
7. Cambodia photos
8. Created image with Brad Schneider's words
9. The Right to Education by Charles Bignon 'Hand Up'
10. Nelson Mandela's words
11. UN's images
12. George H. W. Bush's words
13. Everyone Has the Right to Education "© Otávio Roth" [www.otavioroth.com](http://www.otavioroth.com)
14. UN's image
15. UNHCR's images
16. Little girl: iStock-491562578
17. Education Cannot Wait @EduCannotWait
18. Equality Vs Equity: The Leys Primary & Nursery School
19. Government house
20. NGOs/UNOrgs
21. School
22. Clare Agnew's sketches, Mercy International Association (MIA)
23. Family: iStock-1129665004
24. Two little girls: iStock-1153974684
25. Open classroom: iStock-458463317
26. Scholarship Opportunity with permission
27. Teacher and children read: iStock-484794658
28. Teacher and children play: iStock-2184735242
29. Children painting: iStock-505936773
30. Catherine McAuley and student, photo by Ravi
31. Mercy International Centre (MIC)
32. Pope Francis, VaticanNews
33. Background - Pink Flower
34. Mercy Education logo (MMC)

### 35. Further recommended resources

School for Life in Uganda

<https://youtu.be/R6cs9WY9670>

The girls effect

<https://youtu.be/1e8xgF0JtVg>

# EDUCATION AWARENESS

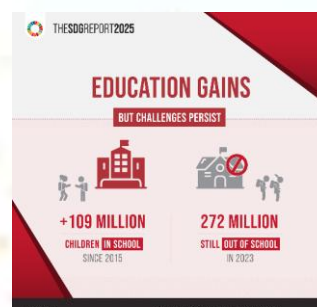
## Education Empowers Individuals: Transforms Lives and Futures

### Why education is so very important?

- it is a fundamental right for all and not just a privilege for some
- a path out of poverty into a life of dignity, opportunity and self-empowerment
- helps achieve gender equity

### Why should we be concerned about education today?

- 272 million children have no access to education worldwide
- 122 million are girls
- 1/2 of the people living in poverty globally would be reduced if they completed secondary school
- 2/3 of the people in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia would be reduced if they completed secondary school



- By 2030, another 84 million children and youth will be out of school
- 300 million will lack adequate basic literacy and numeracy
- ONLY 1 in 6 will achieve the universal secondary school completion target

**171 million**

could escape extreme poverty if they could read

**60 million**

would live above the poverty line with 2 more years of schooling

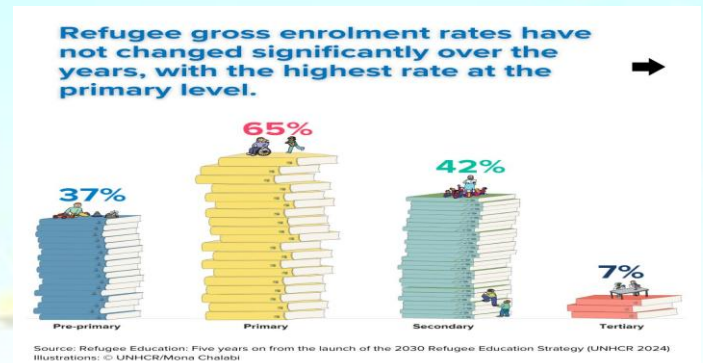
**420 million**

would escape poverty if they completed secondary education

## REFUGEE AND OTHER FORCIBLY DISPLACED CHILDREN

### Why is education important for forcibly displaced children?

- 49 million refugees and other forcibly displaced children are under 18 years old globally
- 49 percent of them have no access to education



### Why is education important for displaced girls?

#### # Education:

- empowers girls and women
- helps to reduce the gap of gender inequality
- helps to access employment, eradicate poverty, prevent exploitation, child labour, child marriage and early pregnancy
- helps to understand their rights and their potentials
- **“a girl’s education is an investment in her future. It’s also an investment in the future of our world”**
- without education as a foundation, extreme poverty cannot be ended and gender equality will never be achieved.



*(World Bank, World Vision, UNICEF, UNESCO, Global Citizen, UNHCR and UN)*