



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy

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SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES

ACCESS TO EDUCATION August 4, 2017

Summary

- One in four schools in Syria has been attacked by the [Syrian government](#) or by opposition groups, and attendance rates have been reported to be as low as [6 percent](#) in some areas, while rates of enrollment for Syrian refugees range from [52–65 percent](#) in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.
- Low overall enrollment rates, a gender gap for education in combat zones that keeps 2.5 times as many girls out of schools, and regressive Islamic State policies on education mean that Syrian girls are at an increased risk of child marriage.
- Despite the dire economic, human rights, and security implications of a “lost generation,” the international community’s commitments to universal enrollment have fallen woefully short of goals in February 2016.

Overall Situation

With over 2.8 million internally displaced children, average rates of enrollment for Syrian children have dropped to an estimated 60 percent as of June 2016. Comparative enrollment rates for boys and girls are not available for Syria, but studies show that in conflict zones girls are [2.5 times](#) more likely than boys to be out of school. Another 4.8 million people have fled the country, four out of five of whom are women and children, yet [fewer than 27 percent](#) of refugee girls receive the critical educational support they need, thus excluding 1.6 million girls in 2015 alone. At the university level, though the Syrian government published figures alleging that more people are [enrolled in higher education](#) in Syria than in prewar years, and half of those enrolled are women, outside sources

place enrollment at a quarter of its previous rate and the male-to-female ratio at nearly 3:1. In the countries hosting the greatest number of Syrian refugees—Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—refugee enrollment in universities ranges from 2–8 percent.

Despite international development programs that aim to educate Syrian children inside the country and in refugee camps, underfunding, such as the \$220 million gap affecting UNICEF programs as of June 2017, threatens these efforts. Lack of investment in education will cost Syria an estimated \$2.18 billion as the generation currently missing out on necessary schooling enters a competitive labor market.

Background

In the three decades leading up to the conflict, Syrian education made dramatic gains, nearly doubling literacy rates between 1981 and 2011. Compulsory education of at least nine years for both male and female students was mandated by Law No. 35 in 1981 and Law No. 32 in 2002, and was accompanied by an allocation of more than five percent of GDP to education. With these measures, primary school enrollment rates before the war ranged from 94–98 percent, with near gender parity. In higher education, enrollment rates stood at 26 percent for both genders from urban backgrounds and at 17 percent and 15 percent for rural men and women, respectively.

With the widespread destruction of schools and their alternate use as shelters and military bases, the quality and accessibility of those remaining varies widely. Even in relatively stable areas controlled by the Syrian government, complaints of overcrowding, inadequate security, and poor infrastructure plague schools, while contested areas are often dangerous, requiring students to pass through areas of active conflict to get to class or exams. The Syrian government reported in 2015 that enrollment in higher education had increased by more than 190,000 students since 2010, yet national education budget cuts, the rising cost of living, and the flight of thousands of teachers has led to harsh criticism of the government's reports on these figures.

Those regions controlled by Islamic State or other extremist groups follow a sharia-based curriculum that actively targets girls, encouraging subservience and early marriage. Persons interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported that while both men and women were deterred from attending school in these areas, the impact on women was compounded by additional clothing and movement restrictions, as well as greater threats to health and safety from rape or kidnap. The Islamic State outlined its vision for women's education in "Women of the Islamic State," a manifesto from the all-female al-Khanssaa Brigade, discouraging women from attending university to "prove that her intelligence is greater than a man's" and advocating for a religious and domestic-based curriculum and marriage by age 16.

For Syrian refugees, enrollment rates vary across host countries but remain low as students face barriers to education. In Lebanon, 48 percent of refugee children and 95 percent of refugee youth ages 15–24 are not enrolled in formal education. In Jordan, 65 percent of students were officially enrolled in 2016, while Turkey reached a refugee enrollment rate of 60 percent in 2017. Across these three countries, financial barriers, lack of legal status or papers, host-school overcrowding, and violent bullying from local children were repeatedly mentioned as obstacles to education. As of 2015, an estimated 90,000 to 100,000 Syrian refugees were eligible for university, yet enrollment has remained low, in large part because of financial concerns and missing academic documents: less than two percent of refugees in Turkey are participating in tertiary education, eight percent in Jordan, and six percent in Lebanon, while numbers of refugees given scholarships to study in Europe or the United States are negligible.

Policy Implications and Challenges

Such concerns have led to an increase in rates of [child marriage](#) within Syria and among refugee communities. Girls married young are unlikely to ever return to school, and child marriage has repeatedly been linked to isolation, mental health issues, and decreased access to sexual and reproductive health resources. In Jordan, rates of child marriage have jumped from [12 percent](#) in 2011 to [32 percent](#) in 2014, while in Lebanon, [41 percent](#) of displaced Syrian women are married before age 18.

As of 2015, only four percent of all humanitarian funding to Syria was dedicated to education. In February 2016, leaders and diplomats from 20 countries pledged [\\$11 billion](#) in response to the Syrian war, setting goals for universal refugee child enrollment by 2017, but [opaque](#) reporting systems make it difficult to track where that money has gone or even how much has been delivered, and refugee enrollment has remained low into 2017. Furthermore, while access to secondary education has been linked to eliminating poverty and narrowing the gender gap, the UNHCR spent three times more on primary education than on secondary education. This [disparity](#) disproportionately affects girls, especially those living in conflict zones, who are 90 percent more likely than girls in peaceful areas to be excluded from secondary education.

Without significant thought and investment in addressing the current Syrian education crisis, the country faces having a “lost generation” that poses an economic and security risk to the future of the nation. Women and girls are particularly at risk, as they face early and often unwanted marriages in the name of their own protection, which bar them from continuing their studies in both the short and long term. Failure to protect education and gender parity as a high priority will hamper reconstruction and reconciliation, which may once again leave Syria’s youth vulnerable to [radicalization](#), perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment and instability.



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy

1140 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 505
Washington, DC 20036
office 202 969 3343
fax 202 480 2178
timep.org

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