



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

PREVENTING A LOST GENERATION: LEBANON

## “Growing Up Without an Education”

Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon

# SUMMARY



**“My children should learn to write  
their names. It’s over for us, should  
it be over for our children as well?”**

RANA, MOUNT LEBANON, NOVEMBER 20, 2015



Syrian children in an informal refugee camp in the Bekaa Valley.

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**“We left our country and our homes and now they don’t even have an education or a future.”**

JAWAHER, NORTH LEBANON, DECEMBER 1, 2015

**In Lebanon—a country of around 4.5 million citizens—almost one in four people today is a refugee. Since the start of the Syria conflict in 2011, 1.1 million Syrians have registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the Lebanese Government puts the total number at 1.5 million.**

Lebanon’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education has taken several positive steps to enroll Syrian children in formal education. But the system has struggled to keep pace. Five years after the start of the conflict, more than 250,000 children—approximately half of the nearly 500,000 school-aged Syrian children registered in Lebanon—are out of school. Some have never stepped inside a classroom. In far too many cases, as one Syrian woman said, “Our children are growing up without an education.”

Older children are particularly affected: of the 82,744 registered Syrian refugees aged 15-18 as of August 2015, less than 3 percent enrolled in public secondary schools during the 2015-2016 school year.

This report finds that it is unlikely that Syrian children will be able to realize their right to an education unless Lebanon undertakes reforms that go beyond the framework of its current education policies and receives increased donor funding targeted at improving access to school.

The high number of refugee children out of school is an immediate crisis. Education is a fundamental right. Under international law, all children in Lebanon—including Syrian refugees—have a legal right to free and compulsory primary education, and access to secondary education without discrimination. Education is also crucial to protecting children in situations of displacement, which can last an entire childhood. The longer children remain out of school, the less likely they are to finish their education.



Syrian refugees in Lebanon are taking extraordinary measures to ensure that their children get an education. Parents have moved closer to schools that might let their children enroll and slid into debt to pay for documents, school materials, and transportation. One refugee who was unable to enroll her children in Lebanon temporarily took them back to Syria to do so. “It was an easy decision,” she said. A 9-year-old girl who was unable to enroll in school after arriving in Lebanon set up a small blackboard under a tree and started teaching the younger children in her refugee camp what she remembered from her first grade class in Syria.

## A System Under Strain

Lost revenue due to the war in Syria and the burden of hosting refugees have cost Lebanon an estimated US\$13.1 billion, and the refugee influx has strained public services and infrastructure, including health, energy, water, waste collection, and education. International donor aid has been insufficient: the \$1.87 billion Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, designed to address the country’s refugee crisis, was only 62.8 percent funded in 2015.

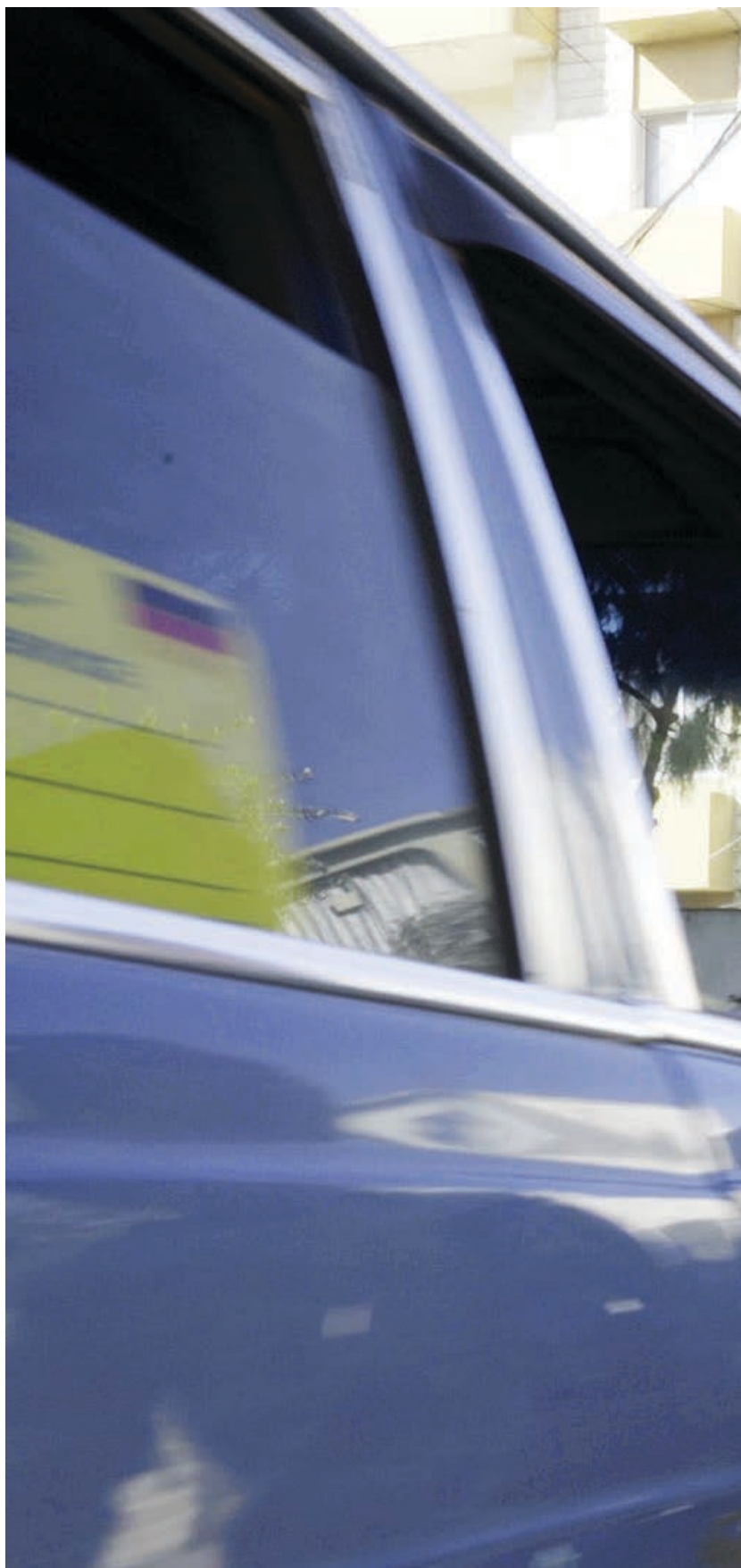
Most refugees rely on Lebanon’s public education system, which was already weak before the Syria crisis. Only 30 percent of Lebanese students went to public schools, which suffered high rates of grade repetition and dropouts. The influx of Syrian refugees has further strained public schools, with the number of school-aged Syrian refugees far exceeding the 249,494 Lebanese children enrolled in public schools in 2015-2016.

Lebanon has taken important steps to include Syrian children in the public education system. Authorities have allowed refugees to enroll in school without providing proof of legal residency, waived school enrollment fees, and opened up afternoon “second shift” classes in 238 public schools to provide Syrians with formal education.

In 2014, Lebanon adopted the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) policy, which has helped Lebanon increase the number of Syrian children enrolled in public schools to 158,321 by the end of the 2015-2016 school year. In 2016, Lebanon adopted a five-year RACE II plan with the goal of enrolling 440,000 Syrian children in formal education by the 2020-2021 school year.

**Nizar, 10, has not gone to school in Lebanon since arriving from the outskirts of Damascus in 2011. He sells gum on the street in Mount Lebanon every day to help support his family.**

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**Bara'a, 10, originally from Ghouta, stands in front of the tree where she set up a blackboard and began teaching younger children in her informal refugee camp in Mount Lebanon what she remembered from her first grade class in Syria.**

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Yet despite these efforts, too many Syrian children are still out of school. Harsh regulations that prevent most refugees from maintaining legal residency or working are undermining Lebanon's generous school enrollment policies. Many families are impoverished and fear arrest if caught working or trying to find work. Often, they cannot afford school-related costs like transportation and school supplies, or they rely on their children to work instead of attending school.

Other factors that deter Syrians from enrolling and lead to dropouts include individual school directors imposing additional enrollment requirements; bullying and harassment by other students; safety concerns; corporal punishment; lack of access to sanitation facilities; and classes taught in unfamiliar languages, such as English and French, with insufficient language support. Girls, older children, and children with disabilities face particular barriers to enrolling.





Although the number of classroom spaces has increased, there are still not enough for Syrian refugees in public schools. There were 200,000 places available for Syrians in public schools for the 2015-2016 school year—less than half needed for the 495,910 school-age Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR at the beginning of the year. Yet not all of those spaces were filled because schools with available spaces are not necessarily located in the areas of need, and the barriers identified above prevent children from attending even where spaces exist.

**Yousef, 11, originally from the outskirts of Damascus, has never gone to school in Lebanon. Instead, he has worked for the past three years cleaning in a pastry shop and selling gum on the street to support his family. Yousef says he has been beaten up and robbed while working.**

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**Ali, 14, originally from Idlib, Syria, shows the knife he uses to harvest tobacco in Akkar. He said that he does not use protective gloves when working: the scar on his finger required 10 stitches and he has experienced rashes, headaches, and trouble breathing.**

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## Preventing a Lost Generation

It is in the interest of Lebanon and the international community to avoid a situation in which more than 250,000 Syrian children are denied an education and left less able to coexist with their Lebanese hosts, contribute to Lebanon's economy, or play a positive role in the eventual reconstruction of Syria.

Lebanon needs much more international financial support to respond to the educational needs of Syrian refugees, including expanding and rehabilitating public schools, investing in quality education, fully including children with disabilities, training and hiring more teachers, and subsidizing school transportation.

But this alone will not necessarily mitigate the obstacles preventing Syrian children from going to school. Lebanon must also change policies that have limited children's access to education, and ensure that refugee children can enroll in primary school, continue through secondary school, and have a realistic option of attending higher education or vocational training and earning a living. It should also ensure that its generous enrollment policy is

**Fahd, 15, originally from Syria, is not in school. Instead, he works in construction in the Bekaa Valley.**

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**Mohammad and his son walk his daughter to school from their informal refugee camp in Mount Lebanon.**

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properly implemented and that there is accountability for corporal punishment. The Education Ministry should support non-formal education, at least as a temporary measure until formal education is accessible to all children in the country, and ensure that it is of a basic quality and that students have a certified pathway to formal education.

The government should allow Syrians to maintain legal status by revising its residency requirements and allowing those whose status has expired to regularize. It should also allow Syrians access to the labor market, including by letting qualified Syrian teachers educate refugee children.

**Syrian children board a bus to school from their informal camp in Mount Lebanon.**

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Wa'el, 13, and Fouad, 7, originally from Idlib, study outside their home in Jounieh. Their mother, Kawthar, 33, struggled to enroll them in school, and eventually withdrew them due to concerns about the quality of education and transportation costs of US\$80 per month.

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Syrian refugee children on their way to school  
in Mount Lebanon.

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## PREVENTING A LOST GENERATION: LEBANON

# “Growing Up Without an Education”

### Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon

In Lebanon, a country of an estimated 4.5 million citizens, some 1.1 million Syrians are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Almost 500,000 are Syrian children aged 3 to 18, of whom more than 250,000 are out of school. Older children are particularly badly affected: less than 3 percent of secondary school-aged children are enrolled in public secondary schools. Some Syrian children have never stepped inside a classroom.

*Growing Up Without an Education* is the second of a three-part series addressing the urgent issue of access to education for Syrian refugee children in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. It documents several barriers keeping Syrian children out of school, despite important steps that Lebanon has taken since the Syria conflict began five years ago to include them in the public education system. This report finds that Lebanon’s generous enrollment policy for Syrian children is both insufficiently enforced and undermined by policies that limit refugees’ freedom of movement, exacerbate poverty, and contribute to child labor. It also finds that students are dropping out of school due to widespread corporal punishment, bullying, and harassment, an inability to pay for transportation, and because they cannot follow classes taught in French and English. Children with disabilities and secondary school-aged children face particular obstacles.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Lebanese government, international donors, and humanitarian organizations to work quickly to mitigate these barriers to prevent a lost generation of Syria’s children.

*(above) Syrian child agricultural workers at an informal refugee camp in the Bekaa Valley during the potato harvest.*

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*(front cover) Bara’a, 10, originally from Ghouta, Syria, leaves for school from her informal refugee camp in Mount Lebanon.*

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