

This essay critically explores the structural, social, and economic barriers that restrict access to consistent, high-quality education for children and young people in Syria and Lebanon. Syria, located in Western Asia (Smadi, 2026), shares borders with Türkiye, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel, and its capital is Damascus (Britannica, 2023). As of January 2023, the country's population was estimated at 22.66 million, including approximately 7.5 million children (Britannica, 2023; Data Report, 2023).

According to ResearchGate, "Education is the transmission of civilisation" (p.436 *as cited in* Naziev, 2017). Similarly, Nelson Mandela suggests, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." (*as cited in* Ellis, 2024). Furthermore, education is an important aspect of any child's lives especially vulnerable refugees; it can provide stability and protection from child labour, premature pregnancies, and gender-based violence, as well as being a basic human right (Albakri and Shibli, 2019; Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020; Monk, 2021; UNESCO, 2015; 2020; United Nations, 2015). Without guaranteed access to consistent, good-quality education, an entire generation may remain uneducated (UNESCO, 2019, *as cited in* Albakri and Shibli, 2019; Culbertson and Constant, 2015; United Nations Country Team, 2013).

The right to education for all young children and people, particularly girls, is widely recognised in many global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The United Nations (2015) set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as part of the Development Agenda 2030 emphasising that primary education plays a pivotal role in reducing poverty (Fennell and Arnot, 2008), deprivation (Hulme, 2007 *as cited in* Ainscow

and Miles, 2008) and enhancing life and career goals later on in life (Albakri and Shibli, 2019; Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020). Most notably, SDG three promotes gender equality (UNICEF, 2007) and SDG four suggests that education should be “inclusive, responsive and resilient” (*as cited in* Albakri and Shibli, 2019) and that no child is left behind, including marginalised and vulnerable individuals (United Nations, n.d; United Kingdom Government, 2017; Albakri and Shibli, 2019; United Nations Country Team, 2013). Furthermore, the Education for All (EFA) framework (2015) stipulates education should be free, equitable, inclusive and of high quality for all children (UNESCO, 2015; 2000; Ainscow and Miles, 2008). Equally important, the millennium year of 2000 introduced the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), comprising of six goals (Unterhalter, 2013), which asserted education as a fundamental right and established a global commitment to achieving universal primary education by 2015. The Dakar Framework (2000) pledged that all children have access to good-quality education with a focus on girls, vulnerable children, and ethnic minorities (UNESCO, 2000). This is also reinforced in the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), particularly Article 28 and 29, which confirms that every child has a fundamental right to education to develop their skills, abilities whilst respecting cultural values and human rights (United Nations, 1989, UNESCO, 2019 *as cited in* Albakri and Shibli, 2019; UNESCO, 2015). This closely aligns with Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2000), a famous philosopher who argues that all individuals should be given the chance to freedom and real-life opportunities to live a life they value with a reason to value. Nussbaum's Capability theory (2000) highlights that education is a key aspect for children and young people to thrive and overcome barriers such as trauma, violence, and economic disadvantage (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Nussbaum, 2000; UNESCO, 2015; 2000; United Nations, 1989).

Before the 2011 conflict, Syria had achieved high enrolment rates at all levels of education, including higher education which produced high literacy levels (World Bank, 2010, *as cited in* Fayek, 2017). Furthermore, the primary level reached ninety seven percent (World Bank, 2010, *as cited in* Fayek, 2017), most of whom were educated in state-funded establishments. Children were primarily taught in Arabic, with French and English taught as a second language (Fayek, 2017; United Nations, 1989; UNESCO, 2015; 2000). Children attended mandatory education from the age of six up to the age of fifteen (Shuayb *et al.*, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2015, *as cited in* Welker *et al.*, 2021). Public, basic, and secondary education were government-funded and free (Roache, 2022). However, private schools were an option for those able to afford the additional costs (Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020; Fayek, 2017; United Nations Country Team, 2013).

The protracted Syrian conflict, which claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Syrians (Monk, 2021), has resulted in sustained educational disruption, with many residents, families and children forced to flee their native homes. By the end of 2013, half of the Syrian population had been displaced to neighbouring countries (Wofford and Tibi, 2018). Lebanon hosts the highest proportion of refugees (Mitri, 2015). Illustrating not only the severity of the conflict but also the breakdown of social, economic, and protective structures necessary for civilian stability (Maslow, 1943, 1948; Mitri, 2015). Poverty became more prominent to those living in war-affected areas, with an alarming fifty-four percent of residents living in extreme poverty and thirty percent abject poverty (UNICEF, 2015; Wofford and Tibi, 2018; Nussbaum, 2000; UNESCO, 2000, United Nations, 1969). The destitute living conditions had a detrimental impact on children's physical and psychosocial well-being and overall development. Many children and families are fighting for survival with a lack of basic living

requirements. Inadequate shelter, water, and food supplies caused children and young people to starve and be undernourished (Friedrich, 2016; UNESCO, 2022, *as cited in* Hammad and Cochrane, 2025; Habib, 2019). Millions of school-aged children required humanitarian assistance due to persistent educational interruption, as many schools were damaged, destroyed or repurposed for military purposes (UNICEF, 2015; 2024a, Wofford and Tibi, 2018; Christophersen, 2015; SC, 2020a; 2020b, *as cited in* Hammad and Cochrane, 2025; Galtung, 1969). It is noteworthy that schools in nongovernment areas were deliberately targeted by the regime during the conflict. Between 2011 and 2015, an estimated 40 percent of schools were targeted, leading to the loss of the lives of numerous teachers and pupils. Consequently, parents and families refrained from sending their children to school due to safety concerns (GCPEA, 2014, 2018, 2022; SC 2015 *as cited in* Hammad and Cochrane, 2025). Moreover, the destruction of infrastructures affiliated with conflict not only disrupted access to education but also removed important supportive learning spaces for children, increasing their exposure to exploitation, child labour, and early marriage (Galtung, 1969; UNICEF, 2015; 2024a). These findings echo what Johan Galtung (1969) terms structural violence, whereby social and political systems indirectly harm populations by denying humans access to their basic needs. Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy (1943; 1948) underscores that without addressing these foundational needs, education remains an unattainable aspiration for many Syrian children (Maslow, 1943, 1948; Galtung, 1969; UNESCO, 2015; 2020; United Nations, 1969; Save the Children, 2020). With less than 40 percent of Syrian children engaged in education, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data underscores the scale of education exclusion among displaced communities (Culbertson and Constant, 2015; Habib, 2019). This suggests that humanitarian provision alone is insufficient to address systemic educational collapse (Mitri, 2015).

Conversely, according to a survey on “Child Labour in Agriculture in the Bekaa Valley,”) approximately 79 percent of respondents were not informed of any humanitarian aid available to Syrian refugees (Habib, 2019).

The high influx of refugees in the Lebanon area caused limited access to education, primarily due to overcrowded classrooms (Shuayb *et al.*, 2014; Tumen, 2021). Approximately 1.1 million of these were enrolled with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, 2016, *as cited in* Buckner *et al.*, 2017). Although an abundance of Syrian refugees was not registered, the total refugee population in Lebanon is estimated at 1.5 million (UNICEF, 2017, *as cited in* Khansa and Bahous, 2021). To address these challenges, government-run schools opened a “second shift” in primary schools to allow more children to attend school. However, refugee children were segregated from Lebanese children and taught in the second shift, which limited equality and inclusion (Fayek, 2017; Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020; Hammad and Cochrane, 2025; Save the Children, 2020; Education for All, 2015; Nussbaum, 2000; United Nations Country Team, 2013). This created financial pressures on the government as they could not afford double teacher salaries and general costs of running the schools (Reliefweb, 2013, *as cited in* Charles and Denman, 2013). Although some children's journeys to school required passing through security checkpoints, without the relevant documentation, children were not permitted access, which restricted their attendance further (Buckner *et al.*, 2017). Many settled in rural areas, restricted access to education as communities lacked basic infrastructure (Ahmadzadeh *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, secondary education was not included within the government's regime, and secondary-aged children were left without any formal education (Shuayb *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, evidence suggests that most Syrian students enrolled in public schools in Lebanon faced routine

physical and verbal mistreatment from educational professionals, alongside bullying by their native peers (Shuayb *et al.*, 2014; Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020). Private schools were the main providers of secondary education (Shuayb *et al.*, 2014). Private and public schooling in Lebanon differ considerably in terms of the quality of learning outcomes. A study on educational equity revealed that out of every thousand public school pupils, only nine complete the baccalaureate on time, out of 1,000 public school students complete the baccalaureate without repeating a year, compared with 255 private school pupils who achieve this academic milestone (Nussbaum, 2000; United Nations Country Team, 2013).

Local economic conditions, laws, and government protocols often limit access to education. The World System Theory (1974) developed by Immanuel Wallerstein helps explain these inequalities displaying that poorer or more prolonged conflict countries are unable to provide good-quality education (1974). Evidently, Syrian children and young people still face difficulties and barriers accessing an equitable education despite international support from global organisations such as UNICEF (2024a), UNESCO (2000) and UNHCR (*as cited in* Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020).

A myriad of refugee inhabitants affected by displacement often endure precarious living conditions, residing in informal tented settlements (UNICEF, 2020), and poor sanitation causes the spread of diseases and additional health issues in daily life (Habib, 2019; Maslow, 1943; 1948). These pressures inevitably drove children into employment to support their families' physiological needs, adversely affecting children's social and economic development. As a result, minors were excluded from consistent, meaningful access to

education (Sharit, 1992; Lavalette, 2000; Kak & Pati, 2012, *as cited in* Habib, 2019; Save the Children, 2020; Maslow, 1943; 1948). Evidence indicates that, on average, children often commenced work from the age of ten, enduring substandard working conditions that were hazardous and inappropriate for their developmental age (Save the Children, 2020; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013, *as cited in* Yaylaci, 2018), which led to a 90 percent decrease in school attendance (Abouzeid *et al.*, 2021). Job roles for boys include agriculture duties, whilst for girls, home economics responsibilities were more prominent. In addition to labour exploitation, vulnerable children were violated and mistreated for insufficient pay (Habib, 2019). Within the preceding decade, approximately 5,700 minors were exploited or used for military purposes, influenced by indoctrination (Hammad and Cochrane, 2025; United Nations Country Team, 2013). While families depend on these earnings to sustain their livelihoods, child labour continues intergenerational poverty and educational exclusion, further limiting young people's future opportunities (Barone, 2022; United Nations Country Team, 2013). Furthermore, girls and young women are particularly exposed to gender-based violence and early marriage, which often lead to reduced educational opportunities and school dropout and further restrict children's capabilities and life trajectories (International Rescue Committee, 2012; World Bank, 2015b *as cited in* Bastagli *et al.*, 2019; Nussbaum, 2000). Notably, these conditions breach Article 15 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC (1989), which outlines every child should be free from exploitation and child labour, particularly if it interferes with their education (African Union, 1990). Conversely, children in Lebanon are regularly forced into child labour, which frequently results in premature school leaving and children becoming

illiterate (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013, *as cited in* Yaylaci, 2018; UNICEF, 2024; United Nations, 1989).

Family connections are paramount for Syrian children affected by premigration and postmigration stress, complex trauma, and violence (Thabet *et al.*, 2009, *as cited in* Yaylaci, 2018). These adversities are highly likely to impact a child's mental health (Montgomery, 2011, *as cited in* Yaylaci, 2018). Parental involvement is an essential role in supporting their child's mental well-being and overall development (Maslow, 1954; Panter-Brick *et al.*, 2014, *as cited in* Yaylaci, 2018). However, a vast number of children and young people had lost family members and parents during the conflict, which can harm their psychopathological performance without the correct interventions in place to overcome Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (African Union, 1990; Education for All, 2015; Maslow, 1954; Nussbaum, 2000; UNICEF, 2024; United Nations, 1989; Yaylaci, 2018). Consequently, education is decreased as families prioritise immediate physiological and safety needs, reflecting Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs (Culbertson and Constant, 2015; Maslow, 1943; UNESCO, 2000). In addition, hospitals were overrun, and official healthcare was scarce (Culbertson and Constant, 2015). Nevertheless, UNICEF (2015) opened "school clubs" in underground shelters to cater for Syrian children, delivering vital psychosocial support to 26,000 children (*as cited in* Hammad and Cochrane, 2025). This intervention aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979), emphasising the importance of supportive microsystems to facilitate child development despite the wider disruptions caused by conflict (*as cited in* Soyer, 2019; UNICEF, 2015; United Nations, 1989).

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) plays an important global catalyst role for children's education in the aftermath of any catastrophic crisis. They consistently collaborate with global governments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and local communities, funding essential supplies, creating temporary learning spaces and training teachers to maintain continuity (Nussbaum, 2000; Albakri and Shibli, 2019; Save the Children, 2020; UNICEF, 2025). UNICEF (2024) advocates that education is not just a privilege but a right that must be protected, even in the most challenging of times. UNICEF is essential for protecting children's futures, rebuilding communities, and breaking the cycles of poverty and violence that often result from emergencies. (Nussbaum, 2000; UNESCO, 2105; 2020; United Nations, 1989; UNICEF, 2007; 2024; 2024a, United Nations Country Team, 2013). Similarly, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the United Nations global emergency funding for education, announced "US \$20 million Multi-Year Resilience Programme grant" donated to young people who were deeply affected by the Syrian war. The funding led by Save the Children (2020) aims to support and develop an inclusive education, such as teacher training, rebuilding learning establishments, and psychological support in a comprehensive approach (Education Cannot Wait, 2024; Save the Children, 2020). Additionally, Save the Children (2020) also strongly advocates for children's protection against violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Children have a right to an education, particularly those who have witnessed violence and war, and it aims to support adolescents to return to school after years of unprecedented times (Save the Children, 2020; Nussbaum, 2000; UNICEF, 2024a). Consequently, although these non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide essential support for vulnerable children and young people of Syria, they are unable to substitute for the years missed on education, trauma inflicted or the root cause of war (Arndt *et al.*, 2009 as cited in Klees, 2024, Mitri, 2015, UNICEF, 2024a).

In conclusion, the interplay of gender inequality, severe destitution conflict, and displacement has exacerbated the barriers faced by children and young people in Syria and Lebanon in accessing consistent, high-quality education, including social inequality and gender-based discrimination. This means Syria is unlikely to meet SDG Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda (Klees, 2024). These challenges highlight the critical importance of a sustainable global education community, which can support inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all, particularly marginalised groups. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Education for All initiative, and the work of NGOs like UNICEF (2025) and Education Cannot Wait (2024) demonstrate that collaborative, coordinated efforts are essential to uphold children's right to education. Drawing on Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2000), it is evident that barriers to education restrict not only school attendance but also children's fundamental freedoms and life opportunities. Furthermore, Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence highlights how systemic political and economic conditions continue to disadvantage marginalised communities. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1979) macrosystems are crucial for helping children in overcoming trauma, violence, and poverty. Sustainable progress, therefore, requires not only coordinated global action but long-term structural reform that addresses impoverishment, gender discrimination, and political instability. Only through such systemic transformation can education become truly equitable and accessible to all children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable.

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