

# The real lives behind the data

## Children with disabilities in education across Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory

Although access to education has steadily improved over the past 20 years, the number of children and young people excluded from education is still a major issue, and progress has slowed down, particularly in low and middle-income countries.<sup>(1)</sup> In 2018, 258 million, or one in six, children and youth were out of school.<sup>(2)</sup> Unfortunately, even when children access school, this does not necessarily mean they have access to quality learning. The impact of COVID-19 and school closures further hinders progress, with 1.6 billion children out of school globally at the peak of the pandemic<sup>(3)</sup>, and widespread learning losses that may never be recovered.<sup>(4)</sup>

Not all children are affected equally. Disability remains the main factor of exclusion, together with socio-economic status and the child's gender.<sup>(5)</sup> In low-and-middle income countries, about 50% of children with disabilities are estimated to be out of school.<sup>(6)</sup>

When multiple factors of discrimination

intersect, the educational exclusion for millions of children with disabilities is amplified. For example, this is the case for many girls with disabilities who are forcibly displaced, whose multiple barriers to education often go unaddressed in both education and social protection policies and programmes.

In countries affected by conflicts, humanitarian disasters, socio economic crises, and political instability, children's lived experiences of exclusion from education are compounded. For example, one in every five children in the Middle Eastern and North African region is not in school (representing a total of 15 million children),<sup>(7)</sup> compared to one in six as the global average.<sup>(8)</sup> An estimated 3 million of the 15 million out-of-school children would have been in school if the multiple crises affecting the region had never happened.<sup>(9)</sup>

Within this context, the limited evidence available shows, for instance, that in Lebanon

1. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019). "Combining Data on Out-of-school Children, Completion and Learning to Offer a More Comprehensive View on SDG 4".

2. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019). "Combining Data on Out-of-school Children, Completion and Learning to Offer a More Comprehensive View on SDG 4".

3. UNESCO (2021). "When schools shut: Gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures".

4. UNESCO (2021). "Learning losses from COVID-19 school closures could impoverish a whole generation".

5. UNICEF (2021). "Combatting the Costs of Exclusion for Children with Disabilities and their Families".

6. UNESCO (2016). "Global Education Monitoring Report".

7. UNICEF (2019). "MENA Generation 2030: Investing in Children and Youth Today to Secure a Prosperous Tomorrow".

8. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019). "Combining Data on Out-of-school Children, Completion and Learning to Offer a More Comprehensive View on SDG 4".

9. UNICEF Middle East and North Africa (n.d.). Education. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/mena/out-school-children>

children with disabilities represent only 0.5% of children who are in school;<sup>(10)</sup> and in Egypt only 43% of persons with disabilities from 15 to 29 years old attended school, versus 89% of persons without disabilities.<sup>(11)</sup> Girls and women with disabilities in rural areas are reported to have the lowest rates of school

attendance, educational attainment and literacy in the Middle Eastern region.<sup>(12)</sup>

But behind these numbers there are real people, with their unique life experiences that give meaning to data and purpose to actions.

## Here are the stories of Nur, Malek, Layla, Sherif, Amir, and Hala.

They are children from Egypt, the occupied Palestinian territory, Jordan, and Lebanon who shared, together with their family members, about the challenges they face, their hopes and projects, and - in some cases- also their positive experience of inclusion in education.

Countries have developed national strategies and policies for education, in addition to ratifying relevant international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (except from Lebanon, which has only signed it). Agenda 2030 on sustainable development also provides a framework for action, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive, equitable quality education. Nevertheless, gaps between policy and implementation persist and no country across

the region has made sufficient efforts to ensure that schools include children with disabilities. The segregation model<sup>(13)</sup> is still widespread, as special schools continue to play a fundamental role in providing education to children with disabilities in these countries.<sup>(14)</sup>

These children's stories demonstrate the urgency to scale up efforts. They come with a call to action for governments, the international donors' community, and civil society organisations to strengthen commitments, mobilize resources, and take concrete steps to transform education systems towards the inclusion of all learners.

This factsheet presents six stories from children with disabilities, collected by Humanity & Inclusion in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and the occupied Palestinian territory. The stories are presented alongside data and facts taken from country-focused factsheets on inclusive education, produced by Humanity & Inclusion's teams in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and the occupied Palestinian territory.

This factsheet also builds on the evidence from the "Gender Equality Study in Education in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip", which was conducted by Humanity & Inclusion in 2021 through 64 surveys and 15 in-depth interviews with parents of children with and without disabilities, as well as through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with informants from the education, protection, and community-based rehabilitation sectors.

10. Humanity & Inclusion (2022). "Factsheet - Disability-Inclusive Education in Lebanon".

11. UNESCO (2018). "Education and Disability: Analysis of Data from 49 Countries".

12. UNESCWA (2018). "Disability in the Arab Region".

13. Children with disabilities are often taught in a segregated learning environment such as a special school or centre. These types of settings can mean a child is isolated from the community, from other children, or from mainstream schools. Alternatively, children with disabilities may be taught in separate classes at a mainstream school for much or all of the time.

14. Khochen-Bagshaw, M. (2020). "Inclusive education development and challenges: Insights into the Middle East and North Africa region".

# Nur – Protection and inclusion: what it takes for a girl to succeed in the West Bank

Nur\* is an 11-year old girl who lives in the West Bank and has Down syndrome. She is a happy and outgoing child who has some difficulties in understanding and being understood. Nur is currently enrolled in a mainstream school, which she transferred to, after completing first and second grade in a different mainstream school.

Nur's mother's decision to transfer her to a different school was due to several challenges that she faced. For example, in the first school there was a very rigid school curriculum that did not take children's different learning abilities into account, and there was limited teachers' awareness and capacity to welcome and fully support Nur in the classroom.

Her mother said: "**I felt that my child was just a number in the class and that the teachers did not believe there was a point in teaching her, because of the misconception that a child with Down syndrome cannot learn, by default**".

Nur and her mother report that in her previous school, physical punishments were quite widespread and combined with other forms of maltreatment: Nur was often yelled at, excluded from activities, or expelled from the classroom without justification. Nur also experienced bullying by her schoolmates. She recalls that once her pocket money was taken by children standing in line at the canteen and that she was repeatedly asked to clean the school playground alone.

Nur adds: "**I did not feel safe while waiting outside the school for my parents to pick me up**".

Nur's experience has drastically improved in her new school which follows an inclusive education model. It has a resource room supporting learners with disabilities with additional small group teaching, where Nur is now included in all education and recreational activities. The resource room's teacher has been tasked with developing an individualized education program for Nur, and



Nur is in school, but not all girls with disabilities are. According to UNICEF (2018), in the occupied Palestinian territory 36.6% of girls with disabilities between the ages of 10 and 15 are out-of-school, compared to 26.3% of boys with disabilities.



Parents interviewed by Humanity & Inclusion in the occupied Palestinian territory highlighted that a girl with disabilities is more exposed to teachers' bias or discrimination than a boy with disabilities.



The study conducted by Humanity & Inclusion in the occupied Palestinian territory found that there is a widely shared perception that children with disabilities are weak, powerless, vulnerable and that they are seen as targets of attacks, insults, and bullying.

\* not her real name

the other teachers are ready to accommodate Nur's needs too, for example by giving her more frequent breaks. The school is adequately resourced with suitable educational and recreational tools and materials, as well as assistive technology to help make learning more accessible and fun.

During COVID-19 lockdowns, Nur's school did not provide remote learning options, initially. Later on, communication with her teacher was possible via WhatsApp, and Nur's teacher was able to send her school work to complete and support her learning. However, there was only one laptop available in her house, which Nur's mother used for her work as a teacher.

Girls and young women usually take responsibility for the majority of household chores, and this was exacerbated during the lockdowns. While Nur's mother does not expect her to perform domestic tasks, Nur has started helping with chores like making the bed or grocery shopping at the nearby local supermarket.

Nur says that she would like to be a teacher just like her mother and her teacher.

In the occupied Palestinian territory, there was a gender gap in accessing distance learning: 64.9% of girls with and without disabilities could not do their school works during school closures compared to 47% of boys.

Although it is not the case for Nur, social norms impact expectations regarding education. A significant 78.1% of parents responding to Humanity & Inclusion's interviews in the occupied Palestinian territory believe that schools should teach girls specific skills that they will need during their life, like sewing, cooking, taking care of children. 37.5% of parents think that this should particularly apply to girls with disabilities.

## Malek – Educational challenges and achievements of a boy in the Gaza Strip

Malek is an 11-year-old boy, living in the Gaza Strip, who can count on the continuous support of his parents. Malek has a physical disability and some difficulties in understanding and communicating. Malek's father shared: "**I think Malek could have a job when he becomes an adult, if he can receive the needed rehabilitation and support to succeed. Nothing is impossible, the future is open for Malek, we shouldn't limit the options for him**". Protection issues are a concern for Malek's parents, in addition to education. His father recalls that in 2014, when the family was living near to the fence, "**due to bombings, I evacuated my home, holding Malek for 5 kilometers until I reached a safe place**". Until 2019, Malek was enrolled in a special



Children at Beach Camp: The third largest of the Gaza Strip's eight refugee camps – and one of the most crowded.

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Portrait of Malek in his house. Malek uses a wheelchair, which was provided by his school. © Humanity & Inclusion

school, where he completed first, second and third grade. This special school used to receive project-based external support. When this support ended, the overall costs for transportation and school fees reached 100 USD per month, an amount that Malek's family could not afford. However, by then he had gained the skills which enabled him to succeed in mainstream school.

Malek is now enrolled in a mainstream school. Malek's experience in his current school is positive overall : "**I love almost everything about my new school. The school provided me with an electric wheelchair that facilitates my mobility. The only thing I don't like is the heavy load of reading and studying**", says Malek. His parents agree that the curriculum, the long school-day schedule, and the rigid exam system are not as adapted to Malek's learning. In addition, there is only one educational counselor in the school, who is responsible for all children in need of specific support.

The school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected Malek's learning and wellbeing. Malek felt isolated and was afraid to be infected. Remote lessons were difficult for him to follow, and the teachers were not able to provide appropriate follow-up. Malek was fortunate that his younger sister stepped in: they read and studied together. To some extent, she played a subsidiary teaching role.

In Humanity & Inclusion's study, it emerges that economic constraints, in particular for parents in the Gaza Strip, affect the decision of keeping a child in school. In the Gaza Strip, specifically and differently from other contexts, boys with disabilities are more likely to be kept out of school to work and support their families.

Parents of children with disabilities interviewed by Humanity & Inclusion in the occupied Palestinian territory indicated that the fact that mainstream schools are not fully prepared to accommodate and support children with disabilities is a key barrier to access and staying in school. There is still some way to go to ensure all mainstream schools are fully adapted to support the needs of all learners with disabilities.

In the Gaza Strip, more than half of the children with and without disabilities surveyed (56.5%) could not follow online classes put in place during the pandemic due to no internet connection and limited school support.

# Sherif - Not supported, despite being in an "inclusive school" in Egypt

Sherif is a 7-year-old boy, living in an urban area in Egypt. He has a range of disabilities, with difficulties in seeing, communicating and moving. Sherif is in second grade in a mainstream public school that is considered to be inclusive, as some accommodations are provided, but with limited results due to lack of resources. He has attended this school since kindergarten, as it is the closest one to his home.

Because of balance difficulties, Sherif usually falls when something gets in his way. However, his physical disability is often underestimated, as his mother explains: "**The school sometimes doesn't consider his physical disability as a disability, just because he is not on a wheelchair, nor uses crutches**". For this reason, Sherif does not receive adequate support to use the restrooms, for example.

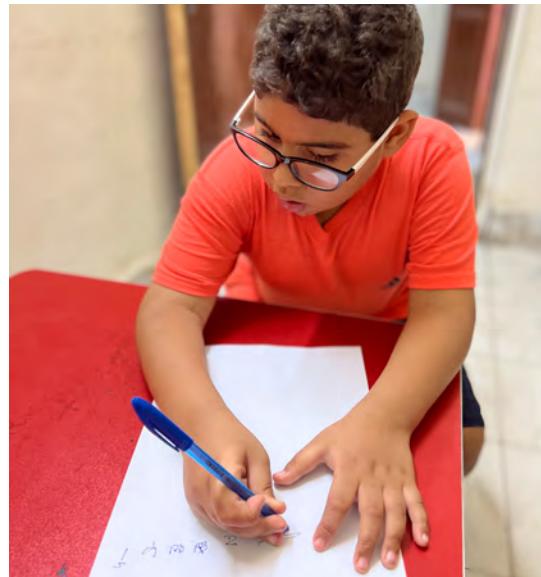
Although Sherif is enrolled in a school that is considered inclusive by the education system, no specific accessibility nor pedagogical measures are sufficiently in place, besides the adaptation of exams for pupils with disabilities.

His schoolmates are often unsupportive or even adopt discriminatory behaviors. While school staff receive training and awareness-raising, stigma towards children with disabilities persists.

Sherif's mother says: "**I know this school is not suitable for Sherif, but this is what I can afford. I would not be able to pay for a good private school**".



Available data are significantly inconsistent. According to the Egypt's Ministry of Education, 7-10% of students enrolled in schools in 2013 had disabilities; but the figure appears to be shockingly low in 2016 (only 0.19% of the overall number of students). In addition, data on out-of-school children with disabilities are scarce.



Sherif practices his writing.  
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The education system currently lacks capacity and resources to welcome and adequately support children with disabilities in mainstream public education and community schools in Egypt.

# Layla – A girl from Sudan living and going to school in Egypt

**“When we came from Sudan, as a refugee single mother with a hard financial situation, I faced a lot of difficulties to enroll my three children in schools in Egypt, our new country,”** says Layla’s\* mother.

Layla (10 years old) flew from Sudan to Egypt three years ago, with her mother and siblings. Layla has a congenital heart defect that led to having her toes amputated, and she also has depression which affects her general participation and social activity. Layla and her sister had their education interrupted for almost one year when they arrived in Egypt. Only her elder brother was enrolled in school then.

Layla then attended a small Sudanese community school for one year, which she eventually left to enroll in a school for refugee children. Her mother points out that **“The community schools in Egypt have low capacity and they usually have a high teacher turnover, which affects the children’s education journey”**.

Layla’s new school provides better-tailored teaching and pedagogical materials, combining the Sudanese syllabus with other resources, as well as a number of extra-curricular activities like basketball and hip-hop. These activities made Layla choose the further school over the closest one, although this requires her to make a long commute every day by public transportation.

Both the schools that Layla has attended bring together children and teachers of Sudanese and Eritrean origins. While this reduces communication and cultural challenges, it slows down the learning of the host-country’s language and the inclusion process in later stages of life.

Due to factors such as poverty or economic instability, parents tend to prioritize the education of children without disabilities over children with disabilities. For children with disabilities, priority goes to the education of boys over girls.



According to UNHCR, 86% of refugee children aged 6-17, in Egypt, were attending school (public, community, or private schools). Information on access to schools for refugee children with disabilities is not currently available but is likely to be much lower.



The Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum Seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq, and Yemen (2020) and the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis (2020-2021) recognise the need for inclusive education for all refugees and asylum seekers living in Egypt, including those with disabilities. However, actions have so far been limited.



\* not her real name

# Hala – Her struggle to enter school, as a child with disabilities in Jordan

Hala is a 7-year-old girl whose parents are from Syria, living in Jordan, with her parents and older brother. Hala loves playing at home. She is a wheelchair user and requires support as she experiences difficulties with moving and self-care. Unfortunately, the family had no choice but to move into a flat on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor without an elevator. This means that her parents must carry her wheelchair when they go out every day, including to take the taxi to reach school.

Hala started her education only in March 2022, in the middle of the second semester. Her parents struggled to enroll her in school, as her mother explains: “**Hala faced many challenges. She was initially rejected because of the late registration, and because she has a disability, she was not welcomed by the schools where I requested to enroll her**”. In many cases, the reason for refusal was the lack of accessible infrastructure.

Now that Hala is in school, she has become more confident and has formed relationships with her peers. Hala’s parents are supportive, as her mother says: “**Just because she has a disability, this does not mean that she has to give up on education**”.



Hala does her homework on her home desk.  
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Amongst Syrian refugees in Jordan, a significant percentage (22.9%) of children aged 2 years and above have disabilities, while <sup>(15)</sup> the worldwide average is 15%.



In Jordan, only 1.9% of the 1.4 million children enrolled in primary education are children with disabilities. 79% of persons with disabilities are excluded from any type of education.<sup>(16)</sup> Syrian refugee children with disabilities are less likely to attend school than their peers without disabilities and than children with disabilities from other nationalities.<sup>(17)</sup>



The 10-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education of the Ministry of Education of Jordan, adopted in 2020, envisions that by 2031, the percentage of school-aged children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools reaches 10% of the total number of school-aged children, while providing all the requirements for inclusive education.



15. HI and iMMAP (2018). "Removing Barriers: The Path towards Inclusive Access: Disability Assessment among Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon (Jordan Report)".

16. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Ministry of Education (2018). "Education Strategic Plan 2018 – 2022".

17. Humanity & Inclusion (2021). "Factsheet – Disability-Inclusive Education in Jordan".



Amir during a speech therapy session, in times of COVID-19. ©Humanity & Inclusion/ Handicap International.

## Amir - The cost of education leaves him behind (Lebanon)

Amir is a 9-year-old boy living in a slum in Beirut, who enjoys going to school. He was born with muscle weakness and severe vision impairment. Amir also experiences unbalanced walking, difficulties to speak, concentrate and memorize. His twin sister has a vision impairment too, and his elder brother also has a disability. The deteriorating economic crisis caused Amir's father to close his coal shop.

Amir's family got into debt in order to register their children at private schools, because public schools in the area do not accept children with disabilities. Continuation of their education is uncertain, as Amir's mother says: "**We have around 20 Million LBP [more than 13,000 USD] in debt due to school fees and we don't know how to repay this amount and what to do for the next school year**".



In Lebanon, children with disabilities comprise less than 0.5% of the total student population,<sup>(18)</sup> and only 1% of children with disabilities learn in mainstream schools.<sup>(19)</sup> Education for children with disabilities is still mostly provided by specialized schools, in separated settings.

18. Humanity & Inclusion (2022). "Factsheet - Disability-Inclusive Education in Lebanon".

19. Various authors (2015). "A common presentation by several PWD Associations, to the High Commissioner of Human Rights on the occasion of the 10th session of the Universal Periodic Review 2015".

Before being enrolled in private school, Amir's education was interrupted for three consecutive years. Due to the expensive school and transportation fees, Amir was taken out of school in order to give the existing resources to his siblings' education and to meet other basic needs, like the provision of medication for both Amir and his brother.

During the school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic response, Amir did not have access to online learning as his family could not afford the necessary devices. In addition, the continued cuts of power and electricity made remote learning even more complicated.

All these factors exacerbated Amir's feeling of being left behind. He asks: "**Why am I not like my sister? She can play, she doesn't feel pain, she always goes to school**". Fortunately, Amir received support from Humanity & Inclusion's rehabilitation specialists, which has facilitated his return to school. "**I like to go to school and I don't want to stay at home any more**", says Amir.

Lebanon is currently experiencing one of the worst crises globally, with inflation as high as 84.3%.<sup>(20)</sup> In 2021, 78% of the population was estimated to live in poverty.<sup>(21)</sup> The de-prioritization of education over basic needs affects in particular girls, children of Syrian origin, and children with disabilities.

At least 1.2 million children across Lebanon had limited or no access to education, during COVID-19 lockdowns.<sup>(22)</sup> Remote learning was often not accessible or responsive to the needs of children with disabilities.

## A call to action

Reflecting on these stories, what should be done to ensure quality and inclusive education for all, including Nur, Malek, Layla, Sherif, Amir, and Hala?

### Act to transform education

1. In compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal 4, governments must accelerate the transformation towards inclusive education systems. This entails, among other things, accessible infrastructure and flexible curricula, well trained and supported teachers, as well as adapted educational materials. Placing learners with disabilities in mainstream school alone does not mean achieving inclusive education.
2. All education, development, and humanitarian stakeholders must systematically collect globally comparable disaggregated data<sup>(23)</sup> (at least by age, disability, and gender) about children and youth enrolled in schools and out-of-school, in order to develop relevant response strategies.

20. The World Bank (2021). "Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction" Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

21. OCHA (2021). "Emergency Response Plan".

22. Save the Children (2021). "Lebanon Education in Crisis: Raising the alarm".

23. Improving data disaggregation is fundamental for the full implementation of the SDG indicator framework to fulfil the ambition of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable of leaving no one behind.

## Mobilize resources for education

- 1.** Governments must mobilise an increased share of domestic resources for quality and inclusive education. National education budgets should represent a minimum of 5% of national Gross Domestic Product and 20% of total budgets.<sup>(24)</sup> Within these budgets, resources must be appropriately allocated to respond to the needs of children and youth at the higher risk of being left behind. As part of these efforts, governments must provide solutions (i.e. school grants, cash transfers, canteens, transport) for reducing the costs of education for the households.
- 2.** Governments and international donors must adopt a twin-track approach to education financing by providing resources to strengthen inclusive education systems in general and, at the same time, dedicating specific funds to people who are at higher risk of being left behind. These targeted allocations should be traceable (for donors, for example, by using the OECD/DAC disability and gender markers) in order to ensure accountability and to better assess progress and gaps.
- 3.** International donors must increase financial commitments both through bilateral development assistance and through multilateral initiatives that pool resources for greater impact on education – such as the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, as well as joint humanitarian response.

## Use a people-centred approach

- 1.** All educational, development and humanitarian stakeholders must use an intersectional approach in the development of education strategies and programmes, in order to understand and address situations of exclusion and discrimination caused by the combination of multiple factors (like gender, disability, nationality, migratory status, and socio-economic background).

- 2.** All educational, development, and humanitarian stakeholders must ensure meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, parents, learners, and education professionals – across genders and backgrounds – as well as their representative organisations, at all stages of the education policy-making.

## Work together

- 1.** Governments must set-up mechanisms for collaboration between the educational sector and other interconnected sectors (health, rehabilitation, social protection, transport and infrastructure) in order to remove the multiple barriers faced by children and youth to access and thrive in education.
- 2.** International donors must support civil society organisations – such as organisations of persons with disabilities, gender-equality organisations, and international NGOs – in their advocacy, sensitisation, and service delivery activities, paying particular attention to initiatives that adopt a holistic approach and address intersectionality.
- 3.** All stakeholders must foster collective action across the humanitarian-development spectrum, to build inclusive and resilient education systems that are prepared for and have the capacity to respond to crises, in order to ensure the right to education for all, under any circumstances. This includes addressing the educational situation of displaced and refugee children and youth.

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24. Target set in 2015, in the "Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action".

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Malek in his home with his siblings. ©Humanity & Inclusion/ Handicap International.

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