

WOMEN LEADERS UNITE TO FUND \$15M IN SCHOLARSHIPS FOR REFUGEE EDUCATION

Investment launches USA for UNHCR global initiative to deliver 1,000 university scholarships to refugee women as the sector faces shrinking aid

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, September 22, 2025 / EINPresswire.com/ -- USA for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is announcing the launch of [Building Better Futures](#), a multi-year campaign dedicated to expanding access to higher education for refugees - with a strong focus on empowering women and girls. The initiative seeks to break down barriers to education, foster gender equality and create lasting pathways to prosperity for displaced communities.



South Sudanese refugee and DAFI Scholar Monicah Malith at the University of Nairobi in Kenya.
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Spearheaded by an advisory task force of six women leaders from across the globe, Building Better Futures is part of USA for UNHCR's broader Women in Philanthropy Initiative. The campaign aims to raise \$15 million by the end of 2028 to support 1,000 female refugee scholars through the DAFI Scholarship Program, the world's largest and longest-running higher education scholarship program for refugees. The campaign has already secured \$3.1M in lead gifts.

"Through education, refugees become agents of change rather than recipients of aid. That's why this campaign is more than a fundraising effort - it's a global movement to stand with and support women," explains Suzanne Ehlers, Executive Director and CEO of USA for UNHCR. "When we invest in the education of refugee girls, we not only empower those women; we help lift entire communities out of poverty and unlock generational potential."

As a child, Monicah Malith fled conflict in South Sudan. In spite of the devastating hardships she faced – the loss of her father, the constant struggles to pay school fees and the continual pressure to consent to forced marriages – she earned a DAFI scholarship to pursue her law degree at the University of Nairobi. "My personal journey exemplifies the resilience and determination of refugee girls and shows that by empowering us through education we can

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break the cycle of hardship and provide a path towards a brighter future. If you seize every opportunity, no one and nothing can hinder you from achieving what you want."

Expanding Impact

The Building Better Futures campaign will build a global community of women supporting refugee education in the face of urgent funding shortages. It aims to do that by supporting the global '15by30' pledge, which is working to get 15% of refugee youth in higher education by 2030. It will also work to amplify personal stories and lived experiences to educate the public and champion gender parity in scholarship access, especially through the DAFI program.

"One of the things that we are trying to achieve through the Building Better Futures campaign is bringing together a network of like-minded women who will all join forces and support each other in supporting female refugee scholars," explains film and theater producer and philanthropist Jessica de Rothschild, who is co-chair of USA for UNHCR's Women's Committee. "Women are very empathetic. They like to give and they also like to have an ongoing involvement in what they support. And over time, women give more than men. The Women's Committee was formed to catalyze this powerful network."

Giving is already underway. de Rothschild donated \$1.1 million dollars through the ERANDA Rothschild Foundation to fund university scholarships for 80 women through four-year university programs, including tuition, housing, and essential support. "Education is a clear path to empowerment," she says. "I think that any woman who desires it should have the opportunity to receive her education. That should be available for all women, to have agency and the ability to create whatever life you want for yourself and your family."

Since its founding, the DAFI program has supported more than 27,200 refugee students in 59 host countries. In 2024, 7,890 students were enrolled, with scholars coming from 54 countries of origin. Thousands of refugee students, many of whom are the first in their families to access post-secondary education, are now coders, advocates, engineers, entrepreneurs, teachers, researchers, nurses and leaders.

From Afghanistan to Zambia, in refugee camps and universities, these students have gone on to build businesses, mentor younger generations, participate in local development, work in companies, shape reconstruction policy, and build more inclusive economies and societies. Each student and each education is indispensable to building a truly sustainable response to humanitarian crises.

The Education Gap for Refugees

Education statistics remain stark: while refugee enrollment in higher education has grown from 1% in 2019 to 9% in 2025, gender disparities persist. For every 10 refugee boys in secondary school, only 7 girls are enrolled, limiting their path to higher education. Among DAFI scholars, women represent just 45% of recipients.

Refugee education is being deeply impacted by critical funding gaps and growing global need. UNHCR's newly released [2024 DAFI Annual Report](#) found that due to shifting international priorities and funding, 2024 was the first year where there was a decline in scholarships offered through the DAFI Scholarship Program, the UNHCR higher education scholarship program established in 1992 that is one of the longest-running and largest refugee scholarship programs in the world.

- The number of DAFI scholars fell to 7,890 in 2024, down from a record 9,312 in 2023.
- This marks the first decline since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Demand remains high: 5,000 applicants competed for just 879 slots in 2024.

About USA for UNHCR

Founded by concerned American citizens, USA for UNHCR is the only U.S.-based nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness and mobilizing resources for the UN Refugee Agency. Over the past five years, it has raised more than \$700 million in cash and in-kind contributions to support the protection and empowerment of refugees worldwide. To learn more and support the campaign, visit: www.UNrefugees.org/Building-Better-Futures. Reporters can access photos and videos in the [USA for UNHCR Media Kit](#).

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