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Elvis Munyoka
University of South Australia, munyokae1@gmail.com

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Investigating the Role of Identity Documents in Refugees' Access to Education in South Africa

Elvis Munyoka

E-mail address: munyokae1@gmail.com,

University of South Australia, Justice & Society, Australia

Abstract

This article examined the role of identity documentation in refugees' access to education in South Africa. Identity documentation has become a necessity in modern societies. Proof of identity is required to demonstrate who one is, and to gain access to various government services such as health care, employment, and financial assistance. However, the role of identity documents in refugees' access to education in South Africa has received less attention. Few studies have demonstrated that without identity documents, refugees confront multiple barriers to accessing primary and secondary education in South Africa. This article reviewed available studies and recent literature on the role of identity documents in accessing education and revealed that refugees struggle to enrol in academic institutions and are denied access to basic education due to a lack of identity documents, which has serious consequences for their access to employment and livelihood opportunities in future. This article suggests that the South African government must expedite the processing of identity documents for refugees and asylum seekers to ensure that humanitarian immigrants have access to services in the country.

1. Introduction

Education is a basic right for all people worldwide. Every child, regardless of circumstance, has the right to quality education. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, education empowers refugees by providing them with the skills they need to live successful and independent lives. Education safeguards refugees from forced recruitment into militant groups, sex trafficking, and early marriage (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2019). Even though education is a basic human right, as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, only 61 per cent of refugee youth are enrolled in primary school, 23 per cent in secondary school, and 3 per cent in tertiary education (Rich 2016). Educating refugees is an investment that will benefit both future generations and communities (Jones et al. 2022). Several refugees in both the Global North and the Global South find it difficult to access education. One main barrier to refugees' access to education is lack of identity documents, which is often overlooked, particularly in the Global South, where the processing of identity documents takes longer, leaving many unable to prove their identity. This article presents findings from a review of relevant published studies on the role of identity documents in refugees' access to education in South Africa, which was and continues to be an appropriate case study due to its status as a refugee hub in Southern Africa.

Apart from receiving a large number of asylum seekers in Southern Africa, South Africa has no encampment policy, so refugees can live alongside South Africans, making it difficult for them to access education in public schools. Furthermore, acts of violence against refugees and migrants have increased in recent decades, owing in part to the economic slump and xenophobia. Given the importance of education to livelihoods, this article hopefully contributes to debates about refugee integration in South Africa, considering the growing mobility of refugees among countries in the Global South.

2. The importance of Education for Refugees

Education is a fundamental human right, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the 1989 and the 1951 Refugee Convention. Education is both empowering and protective, it provides refugees with the knowledge and skills they need to live productive, fulfilling, and independent lives (Dryden-Peterson & Giles 2010). Avery and Said (2017), argue that education offers a pathway to employment and self-sufficiency. Education promotes self-sufficiency and socio-economic development through the development of human capital, which is essential for the future reconstruction and growth of displaced individuals' countries of settlement or origin. Furthermore, education gives a better understanding of society and individual rights and responsibilities, resulting in stronger communities that inevitably protect refugees and their children (Dryden-Peterson 2003). Moreover, education has been identified as an important factor in the acculturation of refugees in host communities. Acculturation refers to the process of learning and incorporating the values, beliefs, language, customs, and mannerisms of the new country immigrants and where there their families are living, including behaviours that affect health such as diet, lifestyle, and substance use (Mody 2007).

Through education, it is believed that refugee women and girls are less vulnerable to sexual abuse, gender-based violence and exploitation, child marriages, and teenage pregnancy (Rizo et al. 2019). Since young people spend so much time in schools, schools can be an excellent place to reach out to them with information about early marriages, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancies, and human trafficking (National Research Council 2013). Another important role of education is to assist refugees in meeting their psychological needs; in other words, it is a psychological treatment for displaced people who might have little optimism about the future. As result of the disruption of refugees' lives caused by war and displacement, there is a great need for organised activities that give a sense of normalcy. Education performs such a role. Through participating in society, refugees' sense of belonging may be restored. Sheikh and Anderson (2018), systematically reviewed nineteen articles on the relationship between acculturation and education. Their study discovered a positive relationship between acculturation, integration, and education.

A growing body of evidence indicates that education can facilitate or impede the process of acculturation (López & Yamashita 2018). Refugees with higher education, for example, can quickly integrate into society by finding work and being economically independent, whereas those without education may face difficulties adapting to the new environment. This, however, is dependent on the context and type of education received. Refugee employment and integration cannot be guaranteed or solely ensured through education. Many factors contribute to refugees' assimilation in new environments. For example, the ability to communicate in the host country's language is a critical factor in one's ability to find employment. While education cannot be the sole determinant of displaced people's success, it remains important for refugees and their livelihoods.

3. The Legal Frameworks for the Right to Education in South Africa

Although the right to education has a long history in international treaties and discussions, it has proven challenging to implement in many nations including South Africa. Every child has a right to an education, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2010). Because of this, everyone should receive an education, in spite of their status, nationality, or level of socioeconomic development. Education is a fundamental right for refugee children and serves as a powerful instrument for helping them recover from the social and psychological traumas that their countries' instability would have otherwise caused (Meda, Sookrajh & Maharaj 2012). South Africa has ratified several international educational treaties, which will be discussed further in this section. South Africa has legislation that recognises the right to education for all, regardless of status or nationality, at both the national and international levels. However, refugees and asylum seekers have faced numerous challenges in gaining access to education in the country. Poor documentation, inefficient implementation of policy, discrimination, and an inefficient refugee and asylum seeker processing system are among the barriers deterring refugees from accessing education.

In terms of legal frameworks for the right to education, South Africa ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 stipulates that everyone has the right to education. It further states that education should be free, at least at the primary and secondary levels. Elementary education will be mandated. Technical and professional education will be made widely available, and higher education will be open to all based on merit. Furthermore, Article 22 of the Convention relating to the status of

refugees, to which South Africa is a signatory, states that refugees have the right to receive an education. In particular, Article 22 states that contracting states must provide refugees with the same treatment as nationals in terms of elementary education. However, the right to education for asylum seekers is not clearly and unambiguously mentioned in Article 22. This complicates the rights of those who are still in the process of obtaining refugee status. Regardless of the lack of a direct provision addressing the rights of asylum seekers to education, South Africa is not empowered to discriminate against asylum seekers because this is prohibited under Article 1 of the Convention against Discrimination in Education.

In addition, South Africa also accepted the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 13 subsection 1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stipulates that member states are required to realise the right to education for all individuals to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic, or religious groups. The international Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights further states that higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, based on capacity, by every appropriate means, and by the progressive introduction of free education. Members of this convention are obligated to provide all persons with primary and elementary education, and the infrastructure required for primary and secondary education. Other international treaties that protect the right to education for refugee children in South Africa include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). All these conventions guarantee the protection of basic human rights (education included) regardless of context or situation, whether in limbo or on the migration journey.

Regionally, South Africa is a signatory to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which was established in Banjul in 1981. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights is a regional special convention that requires all member states to recognise the right to education for all people, including refugees and asylum seekers. The Charter explicitly says that states parties to the Charter shall have the duty to promote and ensure the respect of the rights and freedoms contained in the Charter through teaching, education, and publication, as well as to ensure that these freedoms and rights, and corresponding obligations and duties, are understood (Nanima 2021). Furthermore, the African Charter protects all children from discrimination under the principle of non-discrimination. When it comes to the protection of children in displacement, the principle of non-discrimination is a cornerstone of the African Charter. The African Charter argues that states and governments who are treaty signatories must respect and promote the rights of children, including the right to education, which is a basic human right. The principles enshrined in other international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, are reinforced by the African Charter.

At the national level, the South African Constitution, the country's supreme law, states that everyone has the right to basic education. Section 29 of the South African Constitution enshrines the right to education and outlines the state's positive responsibilities in this regard. The section stipulates that everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education (South African Human Rights Commission 2012). The South African Constitution is regarded as a transformative document because it seeks to change the nation's affairs, including improving the education system after the apartheid regime left an inequitable and unequal education system (McConnachie, Skelton & McConnachie 2017). The ordinary South African citizen had no access to education because the education system was

dysfunctional and only served the needs of white people. Following independence in 1994, the new government recognised that everyone in South Africa needed access to education to address the discrimination and social injustice fostered by apartheid. Aside from the Constitution, another profound piece of law that enables asylum seekers and refugees to study in South Africa is the Refugee Act of 1998, which allows refugees and asylum seekers to access education in South Africa. South Africa has a progressive refugee policy that includes basic refugee protection principles such as free movement, the right to work, and access to basic social services (Ramjathan-Keogh 2017).

In South Africa, the right to education is viewed as an empowering right because it has the potential to enable disadvantaged populations to participate actively in their communities and to improve their economic and social conditions in order to lift themselves out of poverty. The South African government has since been committed in investing in education. However, regardless of the huge investment South Africa has made to ensure equitable education for all, refugees and asylum seekers still experience some barriers to admission in primary and secondary schools. One of the main obstacles is a lack of identity documentation and the politicisation of the application process as a result of the influx of individuals seeking asylum in the country. Lack of financial resources is also linked to a lack of identity documents (Rugunanan & Smit 2011). Families who lack proof of identity find it difficult to find work and thus cannot pay their children's school fees. Even if financial assistance is available in some cases, undocumented immigrants may be unable to receive it.

4. Barriers to Education for Refugees

South Africa has ratified several international treaties protecting refugees' and asylum seekers' right to education. It has also signed a number of regional treaties requiring it to protect humanitarian immigrants such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples rights. Apart from international and regional treaties, South Africa has progressive domestic policies that protect refugees' right to education, such as the Refugee Act and the Constitution. It is clear that the country is obligated to provide basic education to all citizens, regardless of refugee status, identity papers, nationality, or ability to pay school fees. Unfortunately, despite all the legislation, the right to education in South Africa is not fully promoted and protected. Refugees and asylum seekers continue to face barriers to education. Problems with admission to public schools, a lack of school fees, a lack of identity documentation, language barriers, and a failure to release previous school reports are among the barriers (Nanima 2021).

According to the South African Schools Act and Section 39 of the National Education Policy Act, students must be admitted to any public schools of their choice without discrimination of favour. The South African Schools Act goes on to add that parents must be fully informed about the governance of schools including participation in activities such as budgets and school fees. However, many refugees are denied admission to public schools due to lack of required documentation. Refugees, for example, may be unable to provide documents such as birth certificates or immunisation cards. The reasons for this are that they may not have had the opportunity to collect their particulars when fleeing war, or that the type of documentation they have does not meet South African government standards. This makes it difficult for refugee children to gain access to basic education, which is guaranteed by both international and domestic law.

Refugees and asylum seekers frequently have financial difficulties, which may arise as a result of people fleeing war-torn countries and losing all sources of income. It takes time for

refugees to rebuild and adjust in host countries after being displaced. School fees are a major barrier to education for refugees due to financial constraints. School fees are monetary sums that parents agree to pay to the school for their children to receive an education. The money is used to improve the quality of education for students. In South Africa, foreign pupils might have to pay additional fees before being enrolled to the school. Administrative fees, registration fees, and fees for specific subjects such as practicals are examples of these payments (Ramjathan-Keogh 2017). Extra fees may put additional strain on parents who are already dealing with the financial stress of resettlement. As a result, children are denied their right to an education, which is essential for empowering them to achieve financial freedom.

Furthermore, some South African schools reject refugee students who do not have previous school reports. Previous school reports are required to determine a student's level of education or to place students in the appropriate grade (Amit 2012). Learners cannot be turned out of school because they do not have a previous school report, according to the law (Hathaway 2021). According to the South African Constitution and the Refugee Act, for instance, every citizen has the right to an education free of discrimination, so refugee and asylum seekers children should not be segregated due to lack of previous educational records.

Not only are children of refugees and asylum seekers having difficulty accessing education in South Africa. Children of economic migrants, and some South African children, face barriers to education (Mohamed 2020). This is due, in part, to increased social inequality between the rich and the poor, poor infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, poverty, xenophobic violence, and lack of access to sanitation and electricity. The report published by Amnesty International in 2020, highlighted that South Africa has one of the most unequal school systems in the world. According to the report, children in the top 200 schools obtain more distinctions in mathematics than children from the next 6600 schools combined (Mohamed 2020).

The broken education system was left by the apartheid regime, when social inequality was rampant and black children were restricted to schools in remote areas with inadequate infrastructure. While the South African government has made commendable progress since its independence in 1994, the number of children dropping out of schools and those unable to attend school remains high, resulting in lower educational outcomes. A recent international survey, for example, discovered that more than three-quarters of children aged nine years are unable to read for meaning (Mohamed 2020). Many schools in other areas, such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, lack adequate resources for quality education. They lack basic facilities such as toilets, clean water, and laboratories, making the experience of learning a great challenge for low-income families.

5. The Role and Difficulties of getting Documentation in South Africa

In contemporary societies, the need for some form of personal documentation is a requirement of daily life. Depending on the administrative arrangements in place, establishing one's identity may be essential for a variety of activities, like obtaining employment, housing, health care, qualifying for social benefits, enrolling in educational institutions, registering births and deaths, marriage certificates, or the issuing of official documents and permits (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015). Many countries around the world have established systems for providing people with identity documents to uphold public order and civil status. Documentation plays a fundamental role in accessing a wide range of services for nationals and foreign citizens. Under international

law, all citizens, including aliens, have the right to be provided with documentation or permits recognising their existence in a country. Documentation also assists governments in determining the size of the population to which they should provide basic services. A lack of accurate statistics frequently leads to governments and local councils failing to provide basic services to their citizens, such as clean water and health care.

Identity papers are an essential part of life for refugees, and the lack of such documentation could be more than just an inconvenience. Yaron (2009) argued that identity papers empower and impede persons and that their absence can liberate people in the same way that it can be used to categorise and govern them. On the other hand, Brecht highlighted that identity papers have the potential to fetishize people by being their representation but also an object superior to them and capable of erasing them (Urian 2006). In some nations, foreigners without appropriate documentation face detainment and, in some cases, compulsory expulsion. Such measures are especially serious for a refugee, who may face deportation to his country of origin as a result of lacking proper documentation. This makes identity documents extremely important in the lives of displaced people. The lack of documentation causes a variety of problems, ranging from being unable to prove one's identity to being unable to access essential services.

Identity documentation processing is complicated and difficult in South Africa, as it is in any other country that receives huge volumes of refugees and asylum seekers. In Southern Africa, South Africa receives many asylum seekers and refugees from all over the continent. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019), South Africa hosts around 250,250 asylum-seekers and refugees. The main countries of origin of asylum-seekers and refugees comprise Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Somalia. Unlike other southern African countries such as Namibia and Botswana, South Africa has a no-camp policy, which allows refugees and asylum seekers to exist side by side with South Africans. While the South African government is committed to protecting humanitarian entrants, the Department of Home Affairs, which oversees issuing identity documents, is overwhelmed by the large number of applicants they receive daily. The Department of Home Affairs has a massive backlog of applicants who have yet to be cleared due to a lack of adequate resources and efforts to centralise the visa application system (Krensel 2022). The World Bank estimated that there are about 137 million stateless people without identity papers in South Africa (Rulashe 2022). These people are mostly refugees and asylum seekers, who live on the outskirts of society. They struggle to find work, get an education, purchase a house and property, see a doctor, or even marry. The number of undocumented people has more than quadrupled. The population without identification documents stood at 37 million in 2010, with the number expected to double in the next ten years (Rulashe 2022). The backlog of applications makes the process of applying for and getting identity papers in South Africa complicated.

The difficulty of obtaining identity papers in South Africa is exacerbated by xenophobic attitudes against foreigners by South Africans. Since the apartheid regime, xenophobic tendencies and narratives have been perpetuated in South Africa against nationals from other African countries. This propaganda is directed not only at refugees and asylum seekers, but also at economic migrants. The Human Rights Watch (2020) highlighted that South Africa continue to experience instances of xenophobic violence and prejudice against non-citizens, despite the government's National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance being introduced in 2019. Since 2008, when xenophobic violence first appeared, animosity towards African newcomers in South Africa has increased.

The provision of basic services to foreigners, particularly those from African nations, has been impacted by anti-immigrant sentiments, and white immigrants are less marginalised than black migrants (Tella 2016). Xenophobic attitudes have also played a crucial role, even though other administrative problems may have had a negative impact on the processing of identification documents for refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa. Particularly, politicians in South Africa have used the narrative of foreigners versus South Africans to advance their political aspirations by demonising immigrants who are there for humanitarian reasons. The politicisation of refugees and immigrants entering South Africa is the result of a lack of political will to handle the problems the department of home affairs faces, corruption, and the misuse of public funds for personal gain (Solomon & Kosaka 2013). Consequently, refugees have struggled to acquire identification documents, making it difficult for them to access services such as education, employment, and health care.

6. The Role Documentation Plays in Accessing Education in South Africa

South Africa ratified international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and the Dakar Education for All (Meda, Sookrajh, & Maharaj 2012). However, refugees experience stern discrimination in schools and higher learning institutions in the country (Ackermann 2017). One of the significant barriers is the lack of identity papers that hinder matriculation, employment, accommodation, and freedom of movement (Willie & Mfubu 2016). Wedekind, Fakoush and Alla-Mensah (2019), argued that identity documents mean everything to refugees; they are a prerequisite for better livelihoods. The education of non-South African nationals is limited to a few individuals with up-to-date legal papers. Walton *et al.* (2020), indicated that regardless of the sound and well-intentioned policies, exclusion from schools and within schools remains the experience of many children and young people in South Africa.

Education is considered a vital tool in the fight against poverty. In spite of its centrality in poverty alleviation, the South African government does not offer enough support to refugees, which makes it hard for them to attain education although the constitution allows every citizen to have equal access to education (Crush & Tawodzera 2011). The problem is worsened by the lack of identity documents because, without proof of residency, the enrolment of refugees in public schools is complicated (Rutherford 2020). Wedekind *et al.* (2019), argued that education enhances autonomy, socio-economic development, and psychosocial needs. Also, refugees cannot get high-paying jobs, mostly due to a lack of academic qualifications and English language skills (Taylor & Sidhu 2012). However, the lack of identity documents remains the chief obstacle along with financial challenges in paying school fees for refugees (Singal et al. 2018).

On the other hand, refugees continue to be extremely marginalised in South Africa's public education system merely because they do not have legal documents (Tikly 2019). Admission to public schools depends on the presence of identity documents and reports from previous schools for continuing pupils. Meda *et al.* (2012), highlighted that refugees and asylum seekers face problems when enrolling in schools because most schools ask for documentation such as passports and refugee IDs. Failure to present identification documents may result in denial of a school placement. School principals may reject documentation such as asylum permits and Emergency Travel Documents in some cases (Meda et al. 2012). Parents frequently give up, and their children fail to complete basic education in South Africa.

Vigneswaran (2008), revealed that refugee students find it difficult to be admitted to public schools on a regular basis because of a lack of identity documentation and school fees. The requirement that refugees prove their residency, age, and immunisation records before being admitted to schools systematically limits their access to education systems (Buckland 2011; Greenberg, Adams & Michie 2016). When learners manage to enrol, they are mostly accommodated in refugee-designated schools such as Sangoma School of refugees (Meda et al. 2012). South Africa deprives refugees of their fundamental rights protected by law. In certain cases, access to refugee education is subject to decisions and discretion by school principals who may reject applications based solely on nationality (Rutherford 2020). Legal documents are difficult to obtain and can take more than a decade to be released by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) (Ekambaram 2020). Consequently, refugees may not have access to education during the pending period, no matter how long it might take. It is incredibly difficult for refugees to attain education because of a lack of proof of identity and funds (Meda et al. 2012). In the long run, refugees continue to establish their distinct villages within the native population because they are unable to assimilate into the new societies.

Access to education is believed to be essential for ensuring better livelihoods, political participation, health, and gender equality (Santini 2017). Magos and Margaroni (2018) argued that education plays a vital role in social integration, economic progress, building confidence, and improving the chances of earning sustainable incomes that are critical to poverty alleviation. Nicolai, Wales, and Aiazzi (2016), note that refugee children must not be put in separate schools or classes conducted in vernacular languages. Non-South African children are alienated and offered places in schools intended for foreigners, such as the Sangoma refugee school (Meda et al. 2012). When admitted to mixed classes, they are often characterised by low performance, and most of them do not qualify for tertiary studies (Magos & Margaroni 2018). Mohamed (2020) indicated that few than fifteen of the students, who begin school in remote South Africa, will go to university.

Meanwhile, refugees may not have time to carry identity documents such as birth certificates and transfer letters for their children when they are fleeing violence. Most of the refugee departures are unplanned. They tend to forget about their identity documents. Upon arrival in host countries, it is often difficult for them to secure admission to South African schools and start new lives (Willie & Mfubu 2016). The Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town (2019) reported that 40 per cent of undocumented children had no access to education in 2018, with the lack of identity documents being the main reason. Furthermore, many children have dropped out of school because they failed to provide identity documents to school administrators (Howden 2018). Their dreams of becoming prosperous people in the future are deterred by the lack of education. For example, refugee children were forced out of schools across South Africa in 2018, following the Ministry of Education and Home Affairs directive, that children without identity documents could not attend school (Howden 2018). Following this situation, Crush and Dodson (2017) ascribed that uneducated children are trapped in perpetual poverty, unable to liberate themselves from marginalisation, find jobs or employ themselves.

The lack of access to education for refugees living in South Africa renders them more vulnerable to discrimination and xenophobia, which can be deconstructed by learning (Rugunanan & Smit 2011). Educated refugees cannot be seen as a burden on society because they can participate in productive work that can develop their communities. Crush and Skinner (2017) further argue that tertiary education can create economic opportunities through entrepreneurial activities in both the formal and informal sectors. Often times, non-

South African children are denied fundamental freedoms that subject them to exploitation, racism, alcoholism, poverty, and drug abuse. Refugees indulge in risky behaviours because they have few opportunities after dropping out of school (Willie & Mfubu 2016). For instance, in 2018, refugee students from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, who were studying Business and Administration the University of Johannesburg, were sent home for lack of identity documents (Howden 2018). The students emphasised that the decision taken by the Home Office to deny them access to education, the rights given to them under domestic and international law, ruined their dreams (Howden 2018). Lack of education impedes refugees to participate in politics and decision-making processes in so doing reinforcing their exclusion in all walks of life (Rutherford 2020).

Apart from lacking identity documents, refugees do not have enough financial resources to support themselves even when they are admitted to school (Taylor & Sidhu 2012). Most of the refugees struggle to get places. When they do, they often fail to pay school fees, which leads them to be unable to sit for exams or continue with their education (Vandeyar & Vandeyar 2015). Refugees rely on donor funding for survival. When there are no assistance parents cannot afford to pay for the educational costs of their children (Meda et al. 2012). Besides, refugees generally work in the informal economy due to the lack of legal papers where they earn low salaries that cannot sustain their livelihood needs.

Refugees struggle to get enough food and other essential commodities; hence parents end up sacrificing to feed their children, rather than sending them to school (Rutherford 2020). In some cases, exorbitant examination registration fees prevent refugees from sitting for examinations. In some years, students would study the entire term and fail to sit for external examinations in their final year because of the absence of donors to pay for their examination fees. That has resulted in many students dropping out of school or resorting to seeking employment to raise money for their education (Meda et al. 2012). However, disabled youth are among the most vulnerable and discriminated populations in South Africa (Walton et al. 2020). Disabled children have extremely lower attendance and completion rates at school in South Africa (Singal et al. 2018). Lower attendance is caused by lack of support and infrastructure to accommodate students with impairments. The dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation cut across all disabled children irrespective of refugee status.

In addition, disabled refugee children tend to suffer more from poverty due to their legal status and infrastructural difficulties, which promote higher school dropout rates (Wodon, Male, Montenegro, & Nayihouba 2018). The Human Rights Watch (2015) indicated that 500 000 children with disabilities were excluded from school in South Africa in 2015. The exact number of children removed from school is not known. However, this figure suggests a significant gap in access to education for young refugees in South Africa. The lack of reliable data remains a major obstacle in the migration debate in South Africa (Gordon 2016) and the globe alike. The lack of education negatively impacts the livelihoods of refugees through increased discrimination, unemployment, prejudice, violence, and lack of accommodation. Nearly 48 per cent of refugees were rejected as job applicants because they were non-South African citizens in 2008 (Vigneswaran 2008). Some applications were unsuccessful even though they had valid working rights in South Africa.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article argues that without identity documents refugees face several challenges in accessing education in South Africa, including the inability to enrol in schools

and prove their age and identity. This is contrary to the South African Constitution, which allows every citizen to have access to education irrespective of nationality, status, or financial resources. Refugees and asylum seekers who do not have documentation are not allowed to register in schools unless they show proof of identity. Denying refugees and asylum seekers access to basic education is also contrary to the 1998 Refugee Act and other international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The lack of education means that undocumented refugees cannot get high-paying jobs in the formal economy of South Africa. Additional obstacles and barriers that refugees and asylum seekers encounter in South Africa include poor English language skills, lack of school fees, and poor infrastructure thereby making refugees vulnerable to poverty and food security. It is believed that access to education for displaced people plays a crucial role in improving the chances for refugees to earn sustainable incomes that are vital to their livelihoods. Besides, children with special needs suffer more than other children when it comes to learning because of their disabilities and the lack of infrastructure to accommodate them. The South African government has made significant progress in ensuring equal access to education for all children. However, undocumented children have never received adequate support; as a result, many children are dropping out of school and succumbing to vulnerability. This article argues that the South African government should provide adequate assistance to refugees and process their identity documents in a timely manner to ensure that they have access to education and other amenities in the country.

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