Bahati Ernestine is a refugee from Rwanda.

She’s also a UN Volunteer with UNHCR in Kenya and a nurse working on the frontline during COVID19.

Refugee education in times of COVID-19

Bahati Ernestine is a 26-year-old refugee from Rwanda living in Kenya. She is also a UN Volunteer serving with UNHCR in Kenya and a nurse working on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic response. Bahati shares an excerpt of the
keynote speech she gave at a virtual forum convened by UNHCR and Kiron on 19 June 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on refugee education.

My name is Bahati Ernestine. I live in Kenya and have lived here for the past 24 years as a refugee. My parents fled our homeland, Rwanda, when I was just a few weeks old and all I have known as home since then is Kenya. I have had the privilege to get an education through scholarships. I have gone through primary school, secondary school and my university, as well through the DAFI [Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative] scholarship programme. I was able to graduate last year with a degree in nursing.

At time like this last year, I was in Berlin, Germany at a conference representing the 1 per cent of refugee youth who have access to tertiary education. This was a very momentous occasion for me because I had the opportunity to showcase how much education can change a person's future.

I chose a path in the medical field and specifically in nursing. This choice was influenced by my journey – starting from an early life torn apart by civil war.

“As a refugee, I needed a skill that would give me control that would put me in a position to be useful and helpful in case there is need, whether it be another war or a pandemic like we have now.

At a time like this, last year I began my internship at Kenyatta national hospital here in Nairobi, not knowing this pandemic would come along, and that I would be part of the team that would be responding to COVID-19 in our hospitals.

“Fast-forward to today, I feel very honoured to be part of health workers across the world who are taking care of and supporting healthcare systems in this pandemic. It has been a great and humbling learning experience. It has also been a very fulfilling and satisfactory experience.

So far, a lot of refugees like myself have been empowered to contribute to the response on COVID-19. I have seen very many youths involved in bridging the important public information gap about COVID-19, creating awareness on how communities can protect themselves against the virus. These refugee youth help bridge the great language and
literacy barriers in their communities.

We also have a lot of refugee-led organizations that are involved in fundraising in, in amassing resources to provide food, to provide water, to provide soap, to provide masks and sanitizers for refugee families and not only them, but also the vulnerable in the host communities.

This whole pandemic, in my opinion, has put us in a place where we acknowledge each other’s vulnerabilities. We acknowledge that we are in this together.

“I am so happy to see so many refugees and so many of their host communities coming together to fight this pandemic together. We should however not forget the precarious position refugees find themselves in in context of this pandemic.

The fact that we are refugees in a foreign country with very limited access to basic things such as water, soap, sanitizers, masks and food. Additionally, because of their positions of powerlessness and hopelessness, refugees find themselves facing mental health challenges, some falling into depression. A lot of refugee youth cannot go to school anymore, stuck in their homes on one meal a day if any at all.

School-going refugees are growing anxious, lacking access to internet and technologies required for schooling at home.

“This refugee day, I ask all who can to take a moment and think about refugees, and how this pandemic has impacted their access to education, employment and access to even the most basic of their needs.

As we think about this, let us think about how much change education can make, how much empowering one refugee can trickle down to others in their communities.

Having been among the 1 per cent of refugee youth who have accessed tertiary education globally, I am living proof that education, particularly in challenging times like this, can make the whole difference.
Kiron is a German-based online learning platform for refugees and underserved communities worldwide.

UNHCR’s higher education scholarship programme, DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), plays an integral role in enabling refugees worldwide to access higher education.

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 4: Quality education, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals