The education and willpower to build a better future

Shamshidah started school at age 14. She hopes to study computers and give back to those who need it most.

Like many children, Shamshidah was nervous on her first day of school. But unlike most young people, her anxiety came from the fact that she was 14 and had never been to school.

Shamshidah is Rohingya, an ethnic minority of Myanmar denied citizenship and targeted by violence. She and her family fled persecution and eventually found their way to Malaysia. They had no official papers, no money, and no education—other than occasional math lessons from their father.

Half of the refugees in the world are children, and half of those don’t get the chance to attend school. The statistics for Rohingya are even more dire, with nearly three-quarters of all children denied a basic education. Since coming to Malaysia, however, Shamshidah has been able to attend a small school supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

The opportunity to finally begin her education has been a turning point for Shamshidah. Beyond learning to read and write, she feels like she has begun to forge a path for her whole family. Her parents see her schooling as a way to lift up her siblings—and even the Rohingya community at large.

"Wherever I go, I don’t know how to read—I don’t know the way to do anything," Shamshidah’s mother says. "I don’t want [my children] to be like me. That is why I give them an education."

Shamshidah knows that an education is the key to a more promising future—especially for refugees and marginalized people like her family. She is studying English, science and drawing, but it’s mathematics that she loves. It should come as no surprise, then, that she is passionate about technology. “If I study a lot, I can get a job,” she says. “I want to study computers because in the computer you can gain knowledge.”

Having watched her friends drop out of school to work in the market, care for siblings or even enter an early marriage, Shamshidah vows to get an education, no matter how long it takes. “Even if your parents don’t let you study, learn from your friends,” she says. “If you don’t have money, work and use the money to study. Study hard, even until you are grown up. Study!”

Ultimately, Shamshidah wants to give back—not by helping her brothers and sisters learn, but by providing for her community. “If I have money, I want to give it to my parents. And if there are people who cannot eat or drink, I want to give it to them.”