Online Higher Education: Female Refugee Scholars in the Making

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Abstract

Postsecondary education and the use of technology has become an important avenue through which men and women living in protracted refugee situations are empowered to acquire new skills and make important life choices. Education brings a sense of purpose and normalcy for refugees waiting for their next steps. It has allowed refugees to be critical, thoughtful scholars speaking about their educational experiences, on their own terms. BHER is a development project that seeks to build the capacity of untrained refugee teachers in the Dadaab refugee camps by delivering online and face-to-face university-level courses that can build the capacity of future leaders in their communities. Teaching and learning are offered through a blended model: online and face-to-face to accommodate the complex lived experiences of refugees. Security in the camps, mobility, travelling long distances and balancing household responsibilities are all factors that impact men and women's education differently. Dahabo Ibrahim, a Somali refugee living in the Dadaab refugee complex offers an important perspective into refugee participation in education in research as a graduate student at York University.

Keywords: higher education, refugee, Dadaab, Kenya, lived experience, agency, technology

Introduction

The Kenyan refugee camp complex located in Dadaab, Kenya has been operating for

approximately 29 years. Since its establishment in 1991, it has been a space of prolonged displacement

to Somali's fleeing the civil war, and environmental degradation (Abdi 2016; Giles 2018). Composed of 4

camps—Dagahaley, Hagadera, Ifo, Ifo II—it currently holds 217 511 refugees. The majority of the refugee population originates from Somalia (53.7%) as well as South Sudanese (24.7%), Congolese (9%) and Ethiopians (5.8%). Almost half of the refugees (44%) in Kenya are in the Dadaab camps. The almost other half (40%) of refugees are located in the northwestern part of the Turkana County of Kenya in Kakuma (UNHCR, 2020). Insecurity and violence are common characteristics of the region for several reasons:

> retaliation by various militia groups in response to the Kenyan military's incursion across the nearby border with Somalia; the activities of the jihadist fundamentalist group Al Shabaab and other gangs in northeastern Kenya; the mix of foreigners and Kenyans who make up the refugee "industry" in Dadaab; and the extreme poverty not only of the displaced people but of the local and often marginalized Kenyans living in this very desolate part of the country. (Giles, 2018, p.168).

The majority of refugees today have been in exile, restricted to camps or urban areas for decades. They are located in the world's poorest, war-affected regions and face many restrictions on their rights. According to the UNHCR (1997), 'the consequences of having so many human beings in a static state includes wasted lives, squandered resources and increased threats to security' (p.105). A refugee in this kind of situation is restricted to a heavy dependence on external assistance by international humanitarian organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The literature on humanitarianism speaks to this representation of refugees as passive victims of war needing saving from international humanitarian actors (Harrell-Bond, 2002; Hyndman,2000; Hilhorst, 2018). Many of these refugees have been forced to put a pause on their education and put their aspirations on hold due to the precarity of being displaced or exiled from their home countries. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine an important avenue through which men and women are empowered through online higher education. Furthermore, it has allowed them to be critical, thoughtful scholars speaking about

their educational experiences, on their own terms. BHER is a development project that seeks to build the capacity of refugee teachers in the Dadaab refugee camps by delivering online and face-to-face university-level courses that can build the capacity of future leaders and teachers in their communities. Many of the graduates in our programs have ambitions to return to their home countries and give back in a meaningful way such as being university instructors, educators or policymakers. If they do not have the opportunity for return, then many take their newly gained skills and certifications to find jobs within the camp as formally trained teachers.

Education in emergency situations has been used as a humanitarian response by aid organizations and non-governmental organizations since the 1990s (Mackinnon, 2014; Retamal & Aedo-Richmond, 1998). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26, recognizes education as a human right (UN General Assembly, 1948). This right also extended to refugees as recognized by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 1951). Education as a humanitarian response in refugee contexts has thus been conceived as a short-term temporary solution. Due to the protracted and uncertain nature of refugee contexts, host states, donors and humanitarian organizations are reluctant to invest into university programs (Lutheran World Federation, 2015). Education efforts in humanitarian contexts only make up 2% of all humanitarian allocated aid (UNESCO, 2011). According to the Kenyan Ministry of Education only 5% of the teaching staff in Dadaab are deemd qualified. This is because teachers that are recruited to teach in the camps are recruited as 'incentive teachers' who "completed at least secondary school but with very low pass rates and are ineligible for admission to higher education institutions in Kenya" (Abdi, 2016, p.24). With inadequate resources and infrastructure for education, this not only impacts the quality of education that is provided for a population looking to rebuild their lives but also reinforces a generation of untrained, unqualified teachers. Many of the incentive teachers are refugees themselves who have taken up jobs as teachers

without the formal teacher training because of the large gap and need for teachers (Abdi, 2016; Giles, 2018).

The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Project teacher education program seeks to build the capacity of untrained refugee teachers in the Dadaab refugee camps by delivering university-level courses online. The courses are part of a 4-year Educational Studies degree that equips refugee teachers with the formal training so that they become competitive prospective teachers in the local job market in the refugee camp or their home countries, should they return. BHER is a development project comprised of two Canadian (York university and University of British Columbia) and two Kenyan universities (Moi University and Kenyatta University) to provide tuition-free, university-accredited courses towards a Bachelor of Educational Studies and a certificate in teacher's education. This type of educational programming, with the use of technology and social media, is important because it addresses the complex ways in which refugee teacher education takes place in camps. Teaching and learning are offered through a blended model: online and face-to-face (Giles, 2018). The BHER project has been designed to accommodate to the complex lived experiences of refugees. Furthermore, the context with which this project is offered must also be taken to account. Security and mobility within and between the camps are factors that impact men and women differently. However, the flexibility with which courses can be given using technology, bridges many of the potential barriers that female refugees face, including travelling far distances to learning centres and balancing studies with household responsibilities as many of our female students are mothers.

Online higher education has been a critical element in the lives of refugees trying to create a better future for their families and community. Bringing higher education opportunities through online platforms to a population that can be ousted from the host country at any moment, allows them to continue pursuing university courses from wherever they re-locate (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Giles, 2018; Kekwaletswe, 2007). BHER is a model example of a project that has inserted itself in the Kenyan

education system landscape by partnering with two Kenyan universities; Moi and Kenyatta to offer

courses through York University and University of British Columbia. If refugee students in these

programs are asked to relocate by the Kenyan government, students in Dadaab can rely on the Canadian

academic partners to continue their postsecondary education. Since 2013, the BHER project has had

students relocate to Somalia, Canada, United States and Australia, however they have still been able to

stay connected to their studies (Giles, 2018). Education programs in refugee and humanitarian contexts

have been inadequate for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of resources and poor infrastructure,

shortage of trained teachers, overcrowding of classrooms and lack of funding from national

governments and NGOs (Lutheran World Federation, 2015). In the last 10 years there has been an influx

of educational institutions and Northern-based universities partnering with development organizations

to provide online higher education to bridge the gaps in quality education (Kirk, 2006). Researchers have

spoken of the potential of higher education for refugees from the perspective of development

organizations (Avery & Said, 2017; Crea and McFarland 2015; Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Zeus,

2011). However, little has been said from the perspective of refugees themselves about their

educational experiences in their local contexts.

The findings shared in this article are from the direct experiences of Dahabo, one of the co-

authors and what she's observed as a student enrolled in an online university program. It will highlight

the unique experiences of women in Dadaab pursuing tertiary education, through their own lens and

the value of women authoring their own lives, and what is meaningful to them in a patriarchal society

and humanitarian aid industry. The authors' aims are to ultimately examine how female scholarship

shifts the way we think about refugee participation in education and research. Dahabo Ibrahim is a

Somali refugee living in the Dadaab refugee complex. She enrolled in York University's Teacher

Education certificate program in October 2014, as offered by the Borderless Higher Education project.

As of April 2019, she has graduated from the Bachelor of Arts in Educational Studies and is now a

Master's student, currently working on her Major Research Paper. As a young woman, the flexibility of a

blended teaching and learning model allows her to balance her schoolwork, employment commitments

and household duties. Hanan Duri is a third-year Canadian doctoral candidate at York University. She has

been a Course Director and Teaching Assistant with the BHER project since 2018. She has taught face-to-

face courses in Dadaab, Kenya at the BHER Learning Centre and taught online courses.

Socio-Technical Theory and Higher Education

In this paper, the authors draw on socio-technical theory to highlight the empowering potential

of technology on the lives of refugee women, particularly as it relates to their educational pursuits. A

socio-technical perspective illuminates the ways in which 'social practices and norms are informed by

the integration and use of technology (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017, p. 286). The adoption of various

technologies is influenced by cultural values and norms, as well as the social, political and economic

realities of the region (Sawyer & Jarrahi, 2014). Refugees in Dadaab already face restrictive policies that

limit their freedom of movement, preventing them from actively pursuing education beyond secondary

education. According to Horst and Nur (2016), 'mobility is imbued with power relations that enable

some and restrict others from moving' (p. 542). While Kenya's 2010 Constitution prescribes all refugees

with the freedom 'to enter, remain and reside anywhere in the country, national encampment policies

prohibits refugees from leaving the camps. This hinders their ability to access employment opportunities

and higher education. Encampment policies were legally recognized in 2014 and were ruled by the

Higher Court as being constitutional and not violating freedom of movement. The policies are not only

contradictory but they are selective in that only camp residents with movement passes can travel to

other parts of Kenya. Reasons for refugees to receive these passes are for travel required for 'medical

reasons, higher educational requirements or due to protection concerns in camps' (O'Callaghan &

Sturge, 2018, p.6). Access to technology like cellphones is available in the camp markets. Refugees buy

data bundles that gives them airtime to network and keep in touch with friends in the camps and family

members overseas (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Women are doubly restricted in their freedom of

movement due to societal expectations to uphold the household and on-going sexual violence in the

camps (Hyndman & Giles, 2011). Access to technology has filled the gap of the challenges related to

being mobile. Thus, the use of technology in higher education has provided a pathway for women to

participate with more ease and flexibility to overcome such barriers.

Naomi's Klein's (2013) work on technological choice is important here because it highlights the

agency and 'degree of empowerment' that comes with the use of technology. An individual exercises

agency through the resources that are available to them and in relation to other factors such as gender,

ethnicity and age. Klein's choice framework operationalizes Amartya Sen's influential capability's

approach by demonstrating how individuals can exercise their ability to make choices and lead 'the lives

they have reason to value'. A person's ability to live a good life is defined by 'beings and doings' that

they have access to (Sen, 2003). Traditionally used in economics, it's been used to explain human

development and poverty as deprivations in capabilities. Klein's choice framework includes "degrees of

empowerment pertaining to the existence of choices, sense of choice, use of choice and achievement of

choice of an individual or community and development outcomes or achieved functionings within an

ecological system" (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017, p.298). Klein views technology as part of an

ecosystem supporting and also restricting development. Structural elements within society influence

how resources like technology are organized and distributed within the community. For example, local

computer access points and who has access to these services are determined by the way in which social,

economic and political structures within society are established. Agency is exercised within these

structures and in relation to their personal markers of identity such as race, gender and ethnicity.

Agency and the capacity to make choices are significant in women's empowerment. Empowerment is

broadly defined as the ability to make strategic life choices. One's ability for decision-making is

connected to 3 key ingredients as explained by Kabeer (1999); access to social and material resources,

agency, and well-being outcomes. Having the opportunity to pursue online higher education gives

women the decision-making capability to juggle the complexities of camp life as a woman. In Dadaab, it

is the most important element to access education. 'Refugee women are burdened with social

expectations related to domestic labour and childcare, persistent inequalities that become heightened

in the face of armed conflict and forced migration (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson 2017, p.296) Social norms

are increasingly shifting with the availability of internet in refugee camp contexts because women can

obtain a degree and are able to contribute to the family income while maintain their responsibilities .

Social support structures through social media networks were also increasingly important for their

academic success (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Technology and its role in the lives of refugees pursuing education is undoubted (Ally & Samaka,

2013; Dahya, 2016; Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Kleine et al., 2013). The use of technology in aid of

learning for displaced populations seeking opportunities is known (Dahya & Peterson, 2017; Giner &

Dankova, 2011; McFarland & Crea, 2015). Online social networks and mobile phones challenge

inequitable social and economic norms in Dadaab but also open opportunities for women to pursue

higher education within the camps. Kekwaletsewe's (2007) study of the role of online social networks

and mobile phones in South African higher education found that it can 'be that of an enabling

knowledge-sharing space' (p. 105). In the context of a refugee camp where there are no large economic

disparities because everyone is economically poor; access to mobile phones and networks are key

components to filling the gaps of social structures that open pathways to higher education in camps. The

gendered nature of technology use in Dadaab has resulted in cellphones being used as a tool to monitor

and control women's mobility (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Studies have demonstrated that there

is a masculine culture of technology that perceives information communication technology as a domain

for men and as a tool to control women (Iwilade, 2015; Masika & Bailur, 2015; Wajcman, 2004). This

kind of gendered positioning of technology use deprioritizes women's training and technology use

(Dahya, 2016). When mobile phones, tablets and internet connectivity is put directly into the hands of women, their use of these devices is put in their control, giving them more possibilities of access and privacy (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Access to social networks while not inherently productive, provide information, resources and assistance to refugees through their networks that can be helpful in their day-to-day lives such as passing information about family members across Diaspora, information about business, money and goods, (Annan et al., 2015; Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Technology has also been identified as a crucial resource in refugee migration, settlement and survival (Horst, 2002, 2006). Horst (2002) identified the use of radio communication amongst Somali family members in Dadaab, in the urban areas of Nairobi and Garissa and across the borders of Somalia. Refugees have been communicating 'about their personal situation as well as to send and receive assistance' (p.245).

Opportunities for Refugee Women Online Education

Online higher education has given the opportunity for women to participate in programs without the added burden of neglecting their duties in the home with their families and community. Women are able to attend their lectures and tutorials in the comfort of their homes, while juggling their household duties and employment commitments. Distance also plays a factor in women's accessibility in education. Students have to travel long distances to attend their tutorials at the BHER Learning Centre and this can serve as a challenge for many, especially women. Mobility around the camps can be impacted for a variety of reasons such as weather conditions, security concerns, caring for sick family members, transportation costs, lack of prioritization of women's education (Dahya & Dryden Peterson, 2017). Many of Dahabo's peers have been able to continue participating via WhatsApp, tablet or laptop. As students enrolled in the university program, they are given a data bundle for their mobile devices that allows them to connect remotely.

Engaging in online higher education has helped the women in developing their reading comprehension and literacy skills. Every week, students must read articles that they can access online and submit weekly reflections via Moodle. Additionally, their weekly hour long video conferencing connects the students to their professors where they have discussions related to various topics. The female students are encouraged to share their opinions and ideas, gaining the confidence to speak publicly amongst their male peers. The women felt a sense of inclusion and unity being able to share their ideas with a culturally diverse classroom (Sarkar, 2012). The students in the BHER programs reflect the diverse ethnicities, tribes, and religions of the refugee camp population. Our students are from Somali, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Congo, and Sudan. Among other important skills has been the ability to think critically and problem-solve interpersonal and communal issues through cross-cultural communication. As a result, refugees have been 'agents of change through helping others in the community to understand situations, acting on opportunities and working with the available resources to solve issues and develop communities in the camp' (Crea & Sparnon, 2017, p. 11).

Like with most refugees, the hope of getting a university education is that one would gain employment opportunities and improve the economic status of their households, as Dahabo describes:

Women who finished their degree online from BHER fully participated both to the social and economic development of their families and made stable financially like me and others who worked as national staff to our home country and send back to families…they can transform the community perspective on girl-child education. These [achievements] made us to be a role model to our community who has cultural stereotypes on higher education for women (2020).

This quote highlights that the value of higher education goes beyond the idea of a short-term, temporary humanitarian relief model, which is typically how responses to situations of displacement are approached in theory and practice. Rather, the women were able to return home to Somalia and find jobs to help their families. Furthermore, it challenges the victimizing narrative of refugees who are stuck

in precarity, empowering women to see themselves as role models for other women in their

community. The skills gained from the online university program also helped Dahabo and others gain job

opportunities in the camps with NGOs.

Having a university education has also enabled women like the author to envision return to her

home country and make valuable contributions in political affairs:

The knowledge that I got from online higher education and estimation I made my home country

tells me inner voice of my heart that one day I will be a Minister of Education or Minister of

women and family affairs to advocate and look a solution the prolong challenges they have had

and change in form of education in mindset and live sustainable life that prospers the whole

country.

Not only is return to their country of origin desirable but the author feels that she can contribute

politically, in a sphere that is overwhelmingly dominated by men. According to Dryden-Peterson and

Giles (2018), 'post-secondary education has the potential of giving greater voice to displaced

populations. It can create an educated segment of society that can return and rebuild local, regional,

and national institutions' (p. 5). The sense of responsibility refugees feel to give back to their families

and home country has been a common theme among both women and men (Dryden-Peterson & Giles,

2010).

Female Scholars In-the-Making?

In the author's final semester, she participated in York University's first student research

conference in Dadaab, Kenya, where students used a culmination of the skills they have gained in the

program to inquire about an issue or topic that was significant in their communities. They collected their

own data, transcribed interviews, analyzed their data and presented their findings. This experience was

significant for Dahabo and her peers because they were given the agency to inquire about a topic or

issue that was meaningful to them. The outcome of the research conference was even more profound.

The women proposed potential solutions for the problems they see and experience everyday in their camps. It gave them a sense of empowerment that they could go out as student researchers and problem-solve, write about and present research findings. Some of the research topics included: female genital mutilation, school feeding programs, girl education, and shoe-shine boys/unaccompanied minors. Being situated in the context meant that they had the expertise on issues that have affected them and their community whereby they could devise local solutions and transmit the knowledge in a way that was meaningful to them. They were trained to do research: formulate questions, interview community members, transcribe their data, analyze the data and present it to their colleagues. In this way, they are experts of their lived experiences. Their insider lens, gave these women opportunities to become "experts" in the field when they have been very accustomed to benefitting outsiders with their research by playing the role of a research participant or informant. These kinds of opportunities are significant for many reasons. Refugees are traditionally represented and researched by Northern academics, institutions, development organizations as passive victims in need of educational salvation (El Jack, 2010; Kabeer, 1999; Zeus, 2010). They are treated as research 'subjects' and 'informants' of research (Harrel-Bond & Voutira, 2007), and are rarely invited to contribute their own experiences to research record. Meaningful experiences such as the one mentioned above are critical in shifting the way we conceptualize refugees as active change agents in their communities.

There is a politics of dissemination in the scholarship produced by refugees, whereby refugees from the Southern nations are not given the same opportunities to be heard and considered as refugees from their Northern counterpart (Chimni, 1998; Harrel-Bond & Voutira, 2007). Appadurai (2006) takes this further by recognizing a universal 'right to research'. Due to globalization, knowledge is more valuable than ever before. The only way vulnerable populations can make claims to citizenship rights is through the knowledge that one is equipped with. If one has the skills to do research on issues pertaining to one's rights and livelihoods, one can make critical life choices. The right to research is even

more critical in the contexts of refugees stuck in encampment as many of them don't even have claims for citizenships rights, let alone legal status. Research in this context is a means for empowerment, agency and voice. Research gives one 'the capacity to make strategic inquiries and gain strategic knowledge on a continuous basis' (Appadurai, 2016, p. 168). The quality and quantity of information that becomes accessible through higher education expands and enhances women's ability to make choices desirable to them (Kabeer, 1999). Add a sentence about your participants and the ways they were empowered through the online program and the research. Please clarify earlier how research was incorporated in the program**.**

Conclusion

Given the tendency to rely on development organizations like the UNHCR and other aid agencies to give temporary responses to internally displaced people's, online higher education presents a new avenue of support for refugees (Pigozzi, 1999; Sinclair, 2007). It equips them with long-term, on-going skills such as critical thinking. These skills empower refugees with the tools to make sense of their lives in encampment and make strategic plans towards their future aspirations (Crea & MacFarland, 2015; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Giles, 2018). Furthermore, the ability to 'to do research' offers refugees the opportunity to participate and contribute knowledge as people with lived experience in the academy and dismantle existing scholarly discourses which have created barriers to access for those in the South. Only when we invite discourses of female refugee-centered research and lived experience can we truly democratize research cultures.

Giving refugees a space to have "voice" has been something that has been often neglected in theory and in practice. Fraser (2005) questions issues of representation where members of refugee communities are "excluded from membership in any political community…deprived of the possibility of authoring first-order claims, they become non-persons with respect to justice" (p.77). This is the case of the author and many others living in refugee camps who have to rely on the narrative set by the

humanitarian regime and global academia that rely on a narrative that victimizes refugees. Higher education is a vehicle to build the capacity of refugees and make them self-sufficient. We argue that the skills refugees are gaining through postsecondary education are critical in reversing such narratives. They are their own change agents who can rebuild their lives and communities. Our findings demonstrate the significance of technology in higher education, especially its transcendence of space, time and global socio-economic disparities. It's also highlighted the need to amplify lived experiences of refugees in international development and humanitarian research, policy-making and practice. Policies need to consider the lived experiences of refugees, include them in discussions about durable solutions rather than imposing solutions on them. This kind of work also contributes to a very undervalued space in refugee studies that sees refugee women as active and independent agents of change. The way forward is perfectly captured through famous slogan *"nothing about us, without us".*

Author's Note

Hanan Duri is a third-year doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. She is also affiliated with the Centre for Refugees at York University. Hanan's research interests include women in higher education, refugee participation, gender relations in refugee contexts and the refugee lived experiences.

Dahabo Ibrahim is second-year graduate of Master in the Faculty of Education at York University. She worked as teacher more than six years at Dagahaley Camp. Dahabo's research interests include; role of education in protecting environmental degradation and women rights in Dagahaley camp-Dadaab, Kenya.

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