

Book Review: *Borderless Higher Education for Refugees: Lessons from the Dadaab Refugee Camps* edited by Wenona Giles and Lorrie Miller

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BOOK REVIEW

***BORDERLESS HIGHER EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES:
LESSONS FROM THE DADAAB REFUGEE CAMPS***
EDITED BY WENONA GILES AND LORRIE MILLER
BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING, 2021. 248 PAGES
\$34.95 (PAPER), \$100.00 (HARDCOVER), \$31.45 (E-BOOK)
ISBN 978-1-350-15124-6

Borderless Higher Education for Refugees: Lessons from the Dadaab Refugee Camps, Wenona Giles and Lorrie Miller's edited book, takes readers on a journey that reveals the possibility for hope and achievement amid the "chaos" and complexities of life in a refugee camp. On this journey, we are introduced to Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER), a project that provides free accredited higher education programs to refugees in two of the world's largest refugee camps, Dadaab and Kakuma, which are located in the northeastern and northwestern regions of Kenya, respectively. The contributors to the book recognize from the beginning that higher education for refugees is often perceived as a luxury, a complex (and often unattainable) dream. However, as these authors reveal, achieving this dream can sometimes become a reality for refugee learners, who use the opportunity to secure new skills, employment, and the possibility of giving back to their communities. Instead of dismissing or downplaying the seriousness of the social, material, and political constraints operating in these spaces, the authors engage directly with these factors and show that it is not only possible but necessary to provide higher education for refugees so that they will be able to navigate ongoing systems of inequality and overcome some of the social, political, and economic barriers they face.

This book demonstrates that, despite its complicity in (re)enforcing Eurocentric ideals that reflect ongoing experiences of colonialism, higher education has the potential to transform the lives and experiences of these refugees, and that it is "only through education" (3) that such unequal structures and systems of oppression can be challenged and resisted. For example, although the refugees feel that designating English as the language of instruction deprives them of their right to speak their mother tongue, they simultaneously recognize that it gives them the potential to gain "marketable" skills. The contributing authors also counter the misrepresentation of refugees' lived experiences in national and international narratives and policies with stories of potential and possibility. This is apparent in chapter 4, in which the authors explain that the community health education

degree program offered in the camps was developed collaboratively with the local populations. As a result, its content is meaningful and relevant to local realities and it equips graduates with skills and credentials they can use to improve health services for both the refugees in the camps and the host communities in Dadaab.

Some of the other ways BHER equipped learners with skills and knowledge that enhanced their understanding of their abilities and their overall position in society include giving them opportunities to be critical (chap. 6), allowing educators and staff members to be flexible (chap. 7) and collegial (chap. 3), and providing a curriculum that could be adapted to students' needs (chap. 8)—all of this despite the ongoing constraints of life in the camps. This was eloquently articulated in chapter 9 through Dahabo's and Seraphin's accounts of learning as children in the refugee camps. The idea of giving back to the community is present throughout the chapters of *Borderless Higher Education for Refugees*. BHER clearly recognized the potential of higher education to redress global inequalities and promote peace and development, thus it focused on teaching learners so that they “may improve living conditions in the camps” but also “catalyse sustainable recovery in their home societies” (127).

The transformative potential of education is also recognized in BHER's approach to the refugee camps as “places of possibilities” and “new beginnings” (chap. 1). Even though they “contain” and “restrict” the refugees, the camps provide refugees with protection, access to essential social supports, and opportunities for resettlement. They inevitably create additional hardships, including gendered constraints (chap. 2) and hostility and threats from the host communities over resources (chap. 1), but instead of letting these challenges get in the way, BHER providers have found creative ways to minimize their impact. For example, including the host communities in BHER programs has helped some local residents overcome their feelings of disconnect with the refugees and their worries about the limited availability of resources, all of which has promoted a culture of understanding and connectedness (chap. 6). Likewise, offering female-only WhatsApp discussion groups (chap. 7) also helped to expand the physical and symbolic confinement of the camps and provided spaces where female students could participate without worrying about compromising their social beliefs and culture.

Finally, what makes this book more invigorating to read than some other texts on refugee learners is its conviction that refugees do in fact have agency and, consequently, the potential to transform their lives and the systems of inequality around them, including gender inequalities, and the ability to address the needs of the camps and to contribute to the development of their home countries.

This approach not only challenges common depictions of refugees as passive and lacking voice or power, it also presents higher education as a powerful tool that empowers refugees (chap. 10) and enables them to act on their agency (chap. 5). The contributing authors emphasize the importance of including refugees in meaningful decisionmaking and of putting this into practice by recognizing learners as educators and educators as learners (chap. 8). The authors of chapter 9 describe how they used storytelling to give refugee students the opportunity to share their own experiences of learning in the camps. Through these accounts, we learn of the refugees' resilience (e.g., Dahabo's mother's insistence that Dahabo continue to go to school despite facing social and cultural barriers), and their ongoing struggles (e.g., Seraphin's account of learning English in the camps as a "new form of colonialism and weapon to intimidate"; 154). While these personal accounts of refugee students provide deep insights into their lived experiences, a possible shortcoming of this book is that it does not share the experiences of other BHER students who are living in Canada or describe how the program affected their understandings, perceptions, and experiences of learning alongside students who are located in precarious and necessitous environments. Ultimately, this book teaches a familiar yet indispensable lesson about persevering and succeeding, despite the odds and obstacles. The BHER project reveals and enables this possibility. This book will appeal to those who recognize the transformative potential of higher education broadly, and to those working more specifically for the empowerment of refugees.

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The views expressed here are the author's.

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