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Book Review: *Unsettled Families: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Kinship* by Sophia Balakian

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (July 2026), pp. 247-249

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/75803>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/ba9f-r6pj>

## REFERENCES:

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Oliveira, Gabrielle. 2026. "Book Review: *Unsettled Families: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Kinship* by Sophia Balakian." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 11 (1): 247-49. <https://doi.org/10.33682/ba9f-r6pj>.

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# BOOK REVIEW

## ***UNSETTLED FAMILIES: REFUGEES, HUMANITARIANISM, AND THE POLITICS OF KINSHIP***

**BY SOPHIA BALAKIAN**

**STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025. IV + 244 PAGES**

**\$28.00 (PAPER), \$110.00 (HARDCOVER)**

**ISBN 978-1-5036-3965-2**

In the current period of unprecedented global displacement, *Unsettled Families: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Kinship* offers a critical examination of how the Global North and the international refugee regime determine which families merit resettlement and why most are denied this possibility. Sophia Balakian, a sociocultural anthropologist and scholar of forced migration, reveals that categories often treated as objective or technical, such as “fraud” or even “family,” are in fact deeply political and unstable. Drawing from multisited ethnographic research conducted within Nairobi’s humanitarian bureaucracy and the resettlement world of Columbus, Ohio, Balakian follows Somali and Congolese refugees as they navigate overlapping systems of aid, security, and immigration while in pursuit of safety and permanence. Her work highlights not only the complexity of these processes but also the human costs embedded in the bureaucratic logics that govern refugees’ lives. The author’s work is foundational to the field of education in emergencies, which focuses on protecting, sustaining, and rebuilding education during crises such as conflict, displacement, and natural disasters, with an emphasis on access, equity, and psychosocial wellbeing.

In the introduction, Balakian challenges the usual view of resettlement, asking what it looks like when we focus not on the bureaucratic timeline—from UNHCR recognition to arrival in the United States—but on the long-term experiences of those who remain refugees for years or generations (p. 11). Her fieldwork involved moving alongside families—Somali and Congolese—through both official and informal spaces, where she was witness to conversations shaped by waiting, uncertainty, and the overwhelming influence of systems that hold the power to grant or withhold a chance at life. Early in the book, readers come to see how profoundly hegemonic, exclusionary, and discriminatory resettlement systems can be, even as bureaucrats and humanitarian intermediaries in both Nairobi and Columbus justify strict policies as being necessary and rational.

In chapter one, “The Figure of the Fraudulent Refugee,” Balakian introduces the stereotypes and racialized assumptions that underpin national security-driven decisionmaking. Somali and Congolese refugees in Nairobi are often treated as inherently unreliable narrators of their own experiences and are compelled to continually demonstrate suffering, trauma, and legitimacy. Balakian shows how these dynamics position refugees in a perpetual cycle of proving and re-proving their worthiness within a system predisposed to doubt them from the outset.

Across these interconnected narratives, Balakian demonstrates how institutional understandings of “fraud” and “family” unravel when viewed from refugees’ own perspectives. Behaviors interpreted by officials as deceptive are, for refugees, often moral acts—efforts to sustain relationships, honor obligations, or maintain kinship ties that extend far beyond narrow Western definitions of the nuclear family. As these categories blur and even collapse, Balakian reveals how refugees both navigate and contest the very terms used to regulate their movement. By foregrounding kinship within broader debates on humanitarian governance, she illustrates how ideas about “the family” become central to reinforcing, negotiating, and resisting the boundaries of nation-states and the security logics that increasingly shape humanitarian practice.

Although Balakian emphasizes that her ethnography is fundamentally about a legal process rather than a specific group, the book ultimately becomes a richly human account. The stories in chapters two and three demonstrate how people’s stories can deepen our understanding of resettlement. Through Yvette’s experiences, for example, we see how gender, abuse, and vulnerability shape ideas about who counts as a “desirable” refugee. Meanwhile, the story of Mohamed—born in 1991, the year civil war erupted in Somalia—reveals how kinship networks facilitate access to resettlement and sponsorship programs. As Balakian notes, culturally grounded notions of kinship evoke both “the morality of family obligation and the ills of inequality in a world of growing disparity” (p. 115). In this way, her ethnography exceeds its initial framing: it is about legal processes *and* about the everyday lives shaped by them.

In chapter four, Balakian turns to the impact of DNA testing, showing how it can cause a resettlement case to collapse. “In addition to separating families physically, DNA exposed relations that were not as they had appeared” (p. 134). For Somali refugees, kinship terms publicly signal belonging, history, and relational roles, yet these same categories clash with the UNHCR’s narrow definitions of family. Balakian argues that DNA testing reinforces an idealized nuclear-family model, treating it as natural, universal, and morally correct (p. 146), even when it contradicts the kinship structures that sustain people in displacement.

In chapter five, Balakian brings the narrative to the United States, highlighting the continued scrutiny refugee families face even after resettlement. She shows how families remain vulnerable to accusations of fraud and are forced to prove their relationships and reassert their legitimacy. Practices that once ensured survival—forming extended or flexible kin networks, constructing “makeshift” families, or maintaining ties across borders—are now frequently interpreted as suspicious. Through Dahir’s story, Balakian illustrates how delays in family reunification and prolonged separation can inflict profound emotional harm, even after resettlement. She also traces how post-9/11 security policies sharply reduced the likelihood that Somali refugees would gain entry to the United States, as geopolitical fears became embedded in everyday bureaucratic decisions.

In the conclusion, Balakian reflects on the category of “family” as both an analytic concept and a political object. “Legislating issues surrounding marriage and reproduction and what constitutes a family or household is central to contemporary politics” (p. 180), she writes. Balakian’s *Unsettled Families* shows how care, kinship, and belonging are shaped by conflict, displacement, and the regulatory frameworks that determine who is allowed to move and who must remain behind. Balakian interweaves stories of people at different points in their refugee journeys, connecting them to broader theories of kinship and to the restrictive US immigration and refugee policies designed to destabilize networks of care. Balakian invites readers to invest deeply in the families at the center of each chapter. She delivers a pointed critique of the humanitarian apparatus by revealing how systems of aid can inflict violence through prolonged waiting, continuous questioning, and institutionalized doubt. Since Balakian focuses primarily on adults, future research could explore the experiences of children and youth, both in their new homes and schools and in contexts of protracted conflict. Young people often experience separation, displacement, and mobility in different ways than their parents, which highlights an important area for further study.

Readers may find it difficult to sustain hope by the end of Balakian’s book, especially if they expect a conventional resettlement narrative with a reassuring conclusion. But offering a happy ending is not the goal of this work. Balakian instead centers her book on the everyday realities of individuals who are navigating bureaucratic demands—completing forms, attending interviews, undergoing DNA tests, earning and saving money to survive, supporting loved ones across borders, and telling their stories repeatedly until someone in power decides to believe them. Uncovering these quiet, persistent forms of labor is the central contribution of this book. Rather than asking merely whether they “make it out of Nairobi,” Balakian prompts us to consider a more urgent question: How are displaced people supported, heard, and cared for while they are forced to wait?

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