

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF SOMALI FEMALE STUDENTS ACCESSING
HIGHER EDUCATION IN DADAAB, KENYA

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of five Somali refugee women living and participating in higher education programs in Dadaab, Kenya with a particular focus on centering their narratives. Through exploring the different factors impacting the recruitment and retention of women in higher education in a refugee higher education context, this paper seeks to present participants' autonomy and ownership of their lived experiences and stories. Drawing from the perspectives of these five women who were interviewed, this paper argues that the access and participation of Somali refugee women in higher education are influenced by several key factors that cannot be limited to culture, religion and being a refugee. The presented narratives will counter conventional discourse from the global north through showcasing their lived experiences and perceptions - thus this is a qualitative study and their shared narratives need to be understood as their own and not representative of all Somali female refugees living in Dadaab.

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1. Introduction

Following the eruption of the civil war in 1991, Somalia had an outpouring of refugees entering Kenya looking for protection, humanitarian support and stability. To accommodate the arrival of the large number of Somali refugees as well as others from East and Central Africa, refugee camps were established in Dadaab, Kenya, a desert border town of Garissa County in the North-Eastern Province of Kenya. Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera became home to the world's largest refugee camp complex globally and home to the largest population of Somalis living outside of Somalia (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Hammond et al. 2011). Many of the residents in this refugee camp have spent the last 25 years in this space, with very few educational opportunities available to them. In an effort to address the gap of higher education opportunities, the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) project was established as a platform to help universities deliver post-secondary education to refugees in Dadaab. The BHER consortium is made up of the following partners: York University, Kenyatta University, Moi University, University of British Columbia and Windle Trust Kenya (WTK), an organization that focuses on secondary education in Dadaab refugee camps and training for refugees in Kenya. They are also supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The BHER project is committed to improving the quality and accessibility of higher education for refugees in Dadaab. This project seeks to implement affirmative action in its program structure to help with the recruitment and retention of women, people with disabilities, and people who identify/belong to ethnic/religious minorities (Dippo et al., 2012, p.23). As part of their mission to attract students from outlying refugee camps in this area as well as to address gender equity issues, BHER aims to actively recruit and retain women as students.

This can be difficult at times because some women in Dadaab did not attend secondary schools and therefore often do not qualify for the higher education programs offered through BHER.

With the growing attention to prolonged exiles due to conflicts, many refugees are spending their entire school-age years displaced. This has changed how the UNHCR and its donors view all levels of refugee education and there is a growing shift in thinking and policy that includes the services of education, moving away from the view on the development side of the transition from relief to development (Dryden-Peterson, 2010, p.12). The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), which is an open global network of educators and policymakers who work to guarantee all persons with the right to quality education and a safe learning environment in emergencies, refer to “education in emergencies” as:

the quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocational, higher and adult education. Education in emergencies provides physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection that can sustain and save lives. Common situations of crisis in which education in emergencies is essential include conflicts, situations of violence, forced displacement, disasters, and public health emergencies. Education in emergencies is a wider concept than ‘emergency education response’ which is an essential part of it (INEE, 2012, p.2).

Gladwell et al. (2016) argues that access to higher education provides three significant benefits. First, it is able to serve as a strong incentive for students to continue their studies at the primary and secondary levels. Secondly, higher education programs can provide protection in conflict settings - especially for older youth who complain of idleness and are at risk of being drawn into violent groups. Lastly, higher education can play a vital role in developing the human and social capital that is needed for the future reconstruction and economic growth in the countries from which students fled.

1.1 Participant Overview

This paper will explore different factors impacting the recruitment and retention of women in higher education, through examining the experiences of five Somali refugee female students who are enrolled in a higher education program within the BHER Project and reside in the encampments of Dadaab, Kenya. The experiences and narratives of Fowsia, Rahma, Maryam, Safia, and Habon¹ will be shared in an effort to highlight their experiences accessing higher education and the quality of their experience. In April 2016, I was given the opportunity to work as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for the BHER project. My time in Dadaab allowed me to reflect and explore the experiences of Somali female refugee students accessing higher education in a humanitarian context. In my five weeks working and building relationships with students in Dadaab, I was able to see firsthand how vital higher education is in a protracted refugee situation like Dadaab, specifically for female students. After leaving Dadaab in May 2016, I found myself in daily contact with BHER students and fuelled with a desire to learn and share the experiences of the Somali female students studying in higher education. I returned to Dadaab twice over the next 11 months (December 2016 and April 2017) to continue my work as a TA and conduct my study with five active students.

Fowsia is 24 years old and works fulltime for a local agency as she is completing her studies. She has been contemplating applying for a degree program, while she is working on a diploma. Her main supporter and motivator for continuing her studies past the secondary level has been her father, who raised her in Dadaab. She was born in the camps and her mother passed away while giving birth to her. She is the youngest in her family, with four older brothers and 3 older sisters, and the only one that has participated in a high education program. **Rahma** is 23

¹ In order to protect participant's anonymity, all participants have been given pseudonyms.

years old and was my only married participant with children. She wants to be able to provide a better future for her children and works hard to balance her family duties and her studies. **Safia** was my youngest participant, 21 years old and working fulltime for an agency in the camp. She has six sisters, some of whom are still in secondary school and wants them to work towards receiving a higher education as well. **Maryam** is 25 and has always looked for higher education opportunities online and within the camps. She attempted to apply for the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) Student Refugee Program, which provides scholarships to over 130 refugee students per year through active partnerships with over 80 Canadian campuses, but did not get accepted. When the opportunity to study through BHER arrived, she eagerly jumped on board. **Habon** is 24 and is hoping to return to Somalia after completing her higher education. She has high expectations and ambitions for her future, with an undergraduate degree in hand. Fowsia, Safia and Habon live the furthest from the Learning Centre campus, around 15 kilometers. They always take a bus or a taxi to campus and when it rains, they are unable to make it to classes or tutorials because of the lack of transportation due to flooding and difficulties on the road. Maryam and Rahma live closer to the Learning Centre and shared that they sometimes walk for 5 kilometers to use the computer labs to complete assignments. All of these women have different experiences and academic interests, but all believe that receiving a higher education will transform their futures.

The conversations and relationships I built with BHER female students, and my participants in particular, provided me with the opportunity to explore the intersectionalities that I embody as a young Somali Muslim female pursuing higher education in Canada, which can be likened in some regards to the stories of the female participants included in this study. While my connections with Somali refugees is personal, as many of my family members fled the civil war

in Somalia, I acknowledge that I have not directly experienced the civil war, or have been displaced in a refugee camp. This has made me cognisant of my privilege as a Somali Muslim woman living in Canada. Many of the Somali female refugee students in Dadaab continue to fight oppressive structures on several fronts—xenophobia, sexism and Islamophobia. While I am not spared of these issues, their protracted living situation coupled with their status as refugees have not has provided them with a platform to share their voices and lived experiences. I wondered how Somali female women living in Dadaab and accessing higher education view their lives evolving in the future, knowing that their ability to study, work or travel legally is limited. I believe their narratives expand and nuance the current literature on the accessibility of higher education for females in the Global South. Literature in this area often includes a combination of xenophobic, Islamophobic and sexist stereotypes that are riddled with misconceptions on the experiences of Muslim women. My aim with this paper is to provide space for them to define and give meaning to their own academic journeys in higher education, in a manner that recognizes their agency and personal accounts.

1.2. Research Objectives

The Dadaab refugee complex has been extensively researched, written about, photographed and documented by academics and journalists from the global north and south. For instance, Horst's (2006) research focuses on how Somali refugees adapt their nomadic heritage in order to cope with life in the camps and Dryden-Peterson's (2011) research explores different educational models for portable and online/onsite higher education for refugees in Dadaab. Current research conducted on Dadaab focuses on the instability of Somalia and terrorism to the exclusion of a nuanced conversation about the gendered social conditions in the camps. My research aims to heed what Pulido (2013, p. 13) advises as actions that are informed by lived

experiences of marginalization, oppression and resistance, and driven by a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to working for social change—this was a consistent reminder for me that my framework and approach to research and work in Dadaab must always be embedded in my desire to listen, understand and commit to learning more about the Somali female refugee experience in accessing a higher education in Dadaab. This research paper seeks to present my participants’ thoughts and desires, which demonstrates their autonomy and ownership of their lived experiences and stories (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Through sharing the experiences and narratives of Fowsia, Rahma, Maryam, Safia and Habon, I aim to:

1. *Explain the nature and importance of higher education in emergencies: specifically in Dadaab and its relation to the lives of women.*
2. *Highlight inequalities that are connected to the low participation rate of Somali female students in higher education.*
3. *Center the lived experiences of the Somali female students and explore the complexities of their personal participation and quality of learning.*

Throughout this study, I explore how ethnicity, gender and geography are strong determinants of access to higher education for Somali women living in Dadaab. Intersectionality refers to how different intersecting oppressions, such as the intersections of race and gender can demonstrate how oppressions work together and cannot be reduced to one fundamental type (Collins, 2002, p.18). Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991), the scholar who proposed Intersectional Theory states:

...the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women’s race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately (p.1244).

This research paper will argue that there are multiple complex factors beyond the unidimensional narrative of negative cultural and religious practices that impede the participation and representation of Somali refugee women in higher education in Dadaab. These narratives are often created and owned by researchers from the global north, rather than the Somali women. It is important to note that each individual female student has a different level of power and agency. Thus their stories, lived experiences and perceptions need to be understood as their own and not representative of all Somali female refugees living in Dadaab. I will begin by setting the context of why higher education is vital in a protracted refugee situation like Dadaab. The subsequent chapters will be divided into learning about the students' participation and perspectives in accessing higher education. I will include themes such as accessibility, barriers, inclusion that will weigh heavily on their experience as students and will end with their aspirations for their future.

2. Gendering Exile and Higher Education



**Figure 2: Photo of students working on science experiment outdoors.
Photography by Hawa Sabriye in April 2016.**

2.1. Refugee Rights in Prolonged Exile

The UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five or more years in a given asylum country (UNHCR, 2016, p. 20). Dadaab is now 25 years old and for many residents, it is the only place they call home. However, the term “home” is usually affiliated with something that is everlasting, welcoming and safe. There has been a plethora of research that showcases how refugees living in Dadaab are “dismayed by their dependency on inadequate aid and express the loss of a sense of self-worth due to their inability to better their situation or to escape from the dire conditions of camp life” (Abdi, 2008, p. 18). Although Kenya has graciously provided land and resources for the past 25 years to host refugee camps in this region, this does not diminish the fact that people living in Dadaab are still denied the right to work and have no opportunities to integrate outside of refugee camps. Through discussions with BHER students, I learned that many question and fear for their future. Without educational opportunities, like those offered through BHER, their hopes and dreams would remain precarious. The topic of uncertainty and living in limbo was a point made emphatically clear in Maryam’s interview when asked about her life outside of the BHER project. Maryam shared her growing frustration with the Kenyan government and what she views as resentment against Somali refugees in Dadaab:

Life in Dadaab is becoming more difficult these days. Before many refugees, mostly from Somalia, were able to come into Dadaab, but now the Kenyan government does not allow any more people to come in. This has created less jobs because we all work for the refugee agencies who are leaving. There are people who are working and people who are not working, the people who are not working are larger in number. The situation is not very bad, but it’s not good. Some people are leaving Dadaab because they cannot afford it anymore, but the longer you are in Dadaab the easier it can become. (Sabriye, personal communication, March 28, 2017).

Maryam distinctly believes that Kenya’s announcement in May 2016 regarding the voluntary

repatriation of Somali refugees living in Kenya effectively demonstrates discrimination against Somalis. The treatment of Somali refugees reminds me of how Black Muslims fall under Fanon's (2008) suggestion of Black people suffering from a "double jeopardy," because as Black Muslims they must confront specific interlocking conditions of Islamophobia and racial stratification. In the case of Dadaab, double jeopardy inherently impact Black Muslim women greatly. Media (mis)representations of Muslim women have allowed for the *hijab* to become a symbol for political examinations on assimilation and radicalization. All of the Somali female students in the BHER project wear the *hijab*. Kenya's security tactics and police officers utilized this new discourse on counter-terrorism to justify their maltreatment against the overwhelmingly Muslim Somali refugees, not only in the camps but also in Nairobi and Mombasa (Kagwanja & Juma, 2008, p. 224). The Kenyan government's implementation of anti-terrorist laws and practices that are not equally prioritizing combating terrorism and the need to protect the ethics of democracy and human rights are making the lives of Somali refugees more difficult through illegal harassment, arrests and imprisonment on suspect grounds, which violates the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. The UNHCR, Kenya and Somalia signed a tripartite agreement on voluntary returns in November 2013, disregarding the fact that Somalia was still unsafe. This agreement contradicts the UN's own mandate for the minimum acceptable conditions for repatriation and essentially allowed the Kenyan government to announce and develop arbitrary timelines for the closure of Dadaab (Rawlence, 2016). During Safia's interview, she made a comment regarding the repatriation process that echoed Rawlence's belief of illegal practices:

Our life in Dadaab is good and humble, although now we are more worried that the government of Kenya said they will close the camps. We are told not to [worry] because the President said there is no force, the people must choose to go on their own but there is still repatriation, people are being cut off from food and told they must leave (Sabriye, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

The shift from theory to practice regarding these conventions are only made more difficult in protracted refugee situations. This is because tensions surrounding refugee protection and state security grow as refugees become perceived as a greater threat than the violence they fled from (Hyndman & Giles, 2016, p. 30). This is made evident in the case of Dadaab because the Kenyan government has stated that the Somali militant group, Al-Shabaab, has been infiltrating and recruiting from within Kenya's Somali refugee community (Burns, 2010, p. 6). Through suggesting that Dadaab is a base for Al-Shabaab militants as a determining factor to the closing of the camps, Kenya is willing to disregard international law and discriminate, while spreading suspicion against the Somali refugee population. This is not to say that Kenya does not have the right to take the threat that Al-Shabaab poses seriously. The strongest evidence of systematic recruitment for the militant group is in Somalia, where the United Nations (UN) reported that Al-Shabaab abducted 2,000 children and youth for military training in 2010 and recruited another 948 in 2011, mostly from schools (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2014, p. 20). Human Rights Watch also reported cases of Al-Shabaab abducting girls from schools for forced marriage to fighters. This is important information that should not be taken lightly just because Dadaab is not in Somalia. However it is imperative to distinguish Dadaab from Somalia—if not, this will only feed the fears that the Kenyan Government uses to portray Dadaab as a base for militants. Since the border closure, the Kenyan authorities have deported hundreds, possibly thousands, of Somali refugees and asylum seekers, thereby violating the most fundamental part of refugee law, the right not to be refouled—forcible return to a place where a person faces a threat to life or freedom on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Heightened securitization will only add to the fear

and disdain of asylum seekers, which will force government's like Kenya to implement further, possibly even illegal, measures to exclude them.

While there are some faults in the system, Dadaab provides refugees with access to health, shelter and more specifically with education that can assist in combating the radicalization of youth. Youth who are able to gain an education will be able to equip themselves with knowledge that can provide them with practical skills and hope for the future. There is also a need for understanding between Kenyans and Somalis—there is a growing anti-Somali sentiment within Kenya and young refugees who face discrimination can have their anger exploited by radical groups (McSweeney, 2012, p. 53). In an article discussing the driving factors that attract youth to Al-Shabaab, there were arguments that identified the effects of poverty, idleness and low self-esteem that were able to drive youth to join the radicalized group. This article also included focus group discussions with 15 former Al-Shabaab members between the ages of 19 and 27 living in Northern Kenya, some of whom mentioned lack of education as one of the pull factors:

When asked to clarify, they stated that this entailed a lack of education in general and not religious education. According to them, they were not able to pursue different avenues in life and they did not see a bright future ahead. As a result, it was easier to join al-Shabaab rather than languish in poverty with no chance to 'pursue something greater' (Hassan, 2012, p. 19).

Having access to higher forms of education will enable young adults to make the types of choices that will not only improve their personal livelihoods, but also reverse the harmful effects of militarized violence and motivate community reconstruction from within the camps and the larger host community (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2011, p. 5). Projects like BHER help address and deliver the fundamental right to education and play a critical role in stabilizing the environment for students by providing a safer learning space.

2.2. Schooling for Somali Women in Dadaab

The complexity of a refugee experience in prolonged exile has always included negative implications for gender relations, specifically for women. In the protracted cases in Kenya, there have been recorded reports of significant increases in levels of domestic and sexual violence (Loescher & Milner, 2008, p. 31). Women's experience in exile is influenced by different factors that include their class, ethnicity or race, age, ability and their sexual orientation (Freedman, 2015, p. 13). In the case of Dadaab, the factors can include religion and culture. Somali traditional culture is largely patriarchal and mixes pastoral traditions and norms with Islamic teaching, and the development of culture is impacted by the interaction between these two factors (Carson, 2002, p. 5). This is evident in Dadaab where Somali culture continues to play a large role in the lives of refugees as it defines your identity and affinity for both men and women. In addition, this tribal system not only provides collective and individual identity to members but also serves as the collective memory (Carson, 2002, p. 5). Sometimes this tribal system determines your social, personal and professional development in life. During my time in Dadaab, I was interested in exploring the question of low representation and enrolment of Somali females. Is this related to the popular belief of negative Somali cultural influences on female students or does it have to do with the unique context of the refugee camp? In this section, I contend that Somali refugee women have been limited by restrictive gender norms that are rooted partly in traditional culture but also reinforced by the unique conditions of life as a refugee in Dadaab. As such, Somali women have been circumscribed by these gendered norms, which are key to understanding the phenomenon of low enrolment and underachievement of women refugees in higher education in Dadaab.

Wright and Plasterer's qualitative study on understanding higher education opportunities in Kenyan refugee camps shared that "in Dadaab, girls' educational attainment steadily decreases with age, such that by secondary school only 67 of the 394 students were girls" (2012, p. 45). Furthermore, throughout their interviews, it was shared that the two leading issues that impacted their participants' support for education from community and parents were culture and gender. In addition to this study, Buck and Silver (2012) share that traditionalism, displayed in generalized attitudes regarding women's education in Dadaab was expressed as the dominant perspective in the Somali community (p. 112). However, the majority of research regarding the lower representation of female students and teachers in schools in Dadaab is consistently narrowed down to what Abdi states as traditional limits on what women can and cannot do such as housework and marriage at an early age (2016, p. 25). Due to the nature of Dadaab, insecurity and protection needs to also be considered as factors as to why female students may not be attending schools or working in schools. Despite various humanitarian attempts to challenge and decrease gender based violence, there are narratives by women that testify and reveal that violence in the form of rape is still very widespread in Dadaab camps (Abdi, 2006, p. 232). As a result, being in protracted refugeehood and a confined and largely unpoliced camp space heightens women's sense of vulnerability and security.

The lack of permanent status, the inability to work and move, and the risk of sexual violence intersect with Somali women's education desires and choices at all levels in Dadaab. Crenshaw (1991) states how undocumented women are vulnerable to spousal and domestic violence because many of them depend on their husbands or families' information regarding their legal status (p. 1249). Similarly in Dadaab, domestic abuse has been widespread and can be intensified by the frustration and disempowerment men feel under camp administration and in

the camp environment (Abdi, 2006, p. 247). In Awa Mohamed Abdi's study (2006) on gender based violence in Dadaab, it was shared that "in Somalia, one of the participants said, two men could never share a woman, but in this environment of rape and insecurity, men are 'tamed' to accept living with this reality and 'humiliation,' accounting for one more blow to the male refugee ego" (p. 241). Women who travel longer distances to collect firewood for cooking are more susceptible to sexual violence due to the lawless nature of the refugee camps and its environs (Keefe & Hage, 2009, p. 5). Moreover, refugee women in Dadaab who are able to afford firewood in the market express exactly the same fear of being sexually assaulted as those who have to travel to collect firewood, demonstrating the ubiquitous impact of camp insecurity on refugee women regardless of social status (Abdi, 2006, p.241). These examples illustrate how patterns of subordination and lack of permanent status intersect in women's experience of protracted refugeehood and violence. Crenshaw (1991) points out how intersectional subordination does not need not be intentionally produced; rather "it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (p. 1249). As such, the popular belief of Somali traditional culture as being the key obstacle to women's education needs to be explored and challenged. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes are often reinforced in protracted settings. Insecurity, prolonged exile and the lack of reliable law enforcement in Dadaab has reproduced and intensified cultural barriers that have negative implications for Somali women accessing education in Dadaab.

As Somalis are predominantly Muslim, there is a tendency to locate the status of Somali refugee women within Islam, often without considering the historical and local contexts which shape women's experiences (UNICEF, 2002, p. 8). Abu-Lughod (2013) explores the resonances

of contemporary discourse on equality, freedom, and rights with earlier colonial and missionary rhetoric on Muslim women. She argues that there needs to be a clear and serious appreciation of differences among women in the world—“as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 783). Abu-Lughod presents stories of Muslim women who share their desires, dreams, anger and disappointments, in their own words—in order to lay particular stereotypes of oppression to rest. Among Somali refugees, the underachievement of girls and women in Dadaab contrasts sharply with the experience of female students in Somalia and the Diaspora, pointing out the explanatory inadequacy of religion or traditional culture. Abdi (2016) shares (as cited in Omar 2009; Abdi, F. 2012,) a crucial point that “both research and anecdotal evidence outside Dadaab camps show that female Somali students have higher achievement rates than Somali males” (2016, p. 25).

This is not to argue that female students in higher education do not face widespread traditional practices (i.e., restricting women and girls activities to chores, early or forced marriage) do not serve as barriers to women’s empowerment. However, in the specific context of Dadaab, we need to consider the fulsome of women’s experiences that do not favour female education. In addition to the lack of security, we need to look at the general state of education in Dadaab, such as congestion in schools, rundown under-resourced facilities, and a lack of trained teachers, which compounds women’s disadvantages (Wright & Plasterer, 2012, p. 47). The BHER Project continuously works towards breaking down cultural stereotypes through the teamwork between global and regional institutions. They have been able to build an educational project that includes gender responsive policies and services that have the capacity to address

gender inequality. These policies and services are brought back into the camps, and this was highlighted in an interview when Habon shared:

Being in BHER has changed a lot of things. Previous I was not having the intention to teach in schools because in here in Dadaab refugee camps female teachers are less because of culture issues. Female teachers were not respected; they would say, “even if you know, we don’t care.” When BHER came to Dadaab we were able to get a lot of trained teachers after they completed the diploma. Unlike before we never had many women who are teachers in the camps. Now after this program we have many women who are professional teachers (Sabriye, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

By training more women teachers, the BHER Project has been able to strengthen the role of women in education and provide academic role models for younger girls in the primary and secondary schools who will view them as proof that higher education is attainable.

3. Accessibility, Barriers and Participation



Figure 3: Photo of students huddled on a bench at the BHER Learning Centre. Photography by Hawa Sabriye in December 2016.

3.1 Attraction to Higher Education

There are many social and economic benefits of schooling for women. Especially in developing countries, these effects can be intergenerational as educated women serve as strong

role models to young girls in their families and communities (Patrinós, 2008, p. 58). A commonality between all of my participants in this study was their desire and attraction to higher education being related to their aspirations outside of the refugee camps. In particular, for the women in Dadaab, schooling offered them a chance to gain more knowledge past the secondary level. This was important since many other opportunities were closed to them prior to this because of their performance in secondary school and/or conflicting commitments related to work and family life. Maryam reflected on her experiences and initial impressions of the BHER project:

When I decided to apply I consulted with my mother because my father passed away. I told her I wanted to study while I work and she agreed. The secondary grades I had did not allow me to get into any university or an online program but the BHER program accepted me when no other program would. It is difficult to find a program that allows you to study and work while also giving you food [stipend]. As a woman this program will benefit my future, my family and my children. When you are given the chance to learn without paying, you will accept right away (Sabriye, personal communication, March 28, 2017).

In Dadaab, Somali women and girls are more likely to not participate or drop out of education programs to support domestic responsibilities or to work for income and as result, they are more likely to have lower English proficiency because of their limited access to secondary education (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 19). The BHER Project has implemented many techniques to counteract the challenges by promoting a gender-sensitive selection process, which proactively encourages female applicants to apply, like Maryam, and accepts them into a program with a lower grade entrance requirements. By doing so, the BHER project gives more consideration to the woman's "life or work experience" (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 19). Dryden-Peterson & Giles (2011) affirm that "post-secondary education has the potential of giving greater voice to displaced populations", while also building an environment that is able to "create an educated segment of society that can return and rebuild local, regional, and national institutions should

refugees have the chance to repatriate” (p. 5). Having witnessed the implications of the BHER project over a two year span, I truly believe that the attraction of projects like BHER stem from their ability to deliver quality education that is meaningful. BHER’s education continues to work towards higher quality in order for refugees, particularly women, to become actively engaged civically and politically and economic producers.

There are a number of education related challenges for females affected by prolonged exile and conflict. In Dadaab, projects such as BHER are able to foster new opportunities for females in these refugee camps to allow them with opportunities to overcome these challenges in their pursuit of a higher education. Safia was eager to join BHER when it first developed, but was hesitant that she would not be accepted in this program as a teacher because she did not possess the necessary credentials:

This program was advertised through papers and through Windle Trust in all the camps and even Dadaab town. I applied through Windle Trust office in Dagahaley secondary school where I completed my secondary studies. At the time I was working for an International Organization as a counsellor and when I was in the office I saw this. But at first many people told me that if I was not a teacher I was restricted from applying. So I went to Dagahaley secondary school and asked others for consultation and they told me not only female teachers but also if at all you are willing to apply, the door is open. Females were highly encouraged and that’s why I applied (Sabriye, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Not only are female students encouraged to apply, but as stated earlier BHER provides a stipend to support their transport and food expenses. These allowances allow the participants to focus on their education, while also serving as a form of retention and a way to combat withdrawal from this program. In additions, students at BHER also have access to remedial courses and have the opportunity to redo courses if they fail. This benefits a number of our female students, as many of them are mothers. BHER allows nursing mothers within the learning compound to nurse their babies and return to class (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 26). It is these accommodations that continue

to attract and retain mothers enrolled in the BHER project, providing them with flexibility in their schooling that is coordinated around their individual needs.

Furthermore the BHER program also makes use of technology as a tool to improve access to education in Dadaab (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017, p. 10). The BHER project's blended teaching and learning approaches provides students with flexibility through mediums such as technology at the Learning Centre where they have access to a computer lab. For many female students, like Fowsia, it was the first time they had worked on a computer:

In the camps we do not have computers or even know how to use it, and for many of us the first time we ever touched a computer was in this program, like me. The program made me want to have my own computer (Sabriye, personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Distance education learning and technology can serve a role within blended learning approaches.

However, online learning can be difficult to navigate for many students due to their lack of familiarity with this form of instruction and access to onsite support staff in their regions.

Students may also experience multiple issues through distance education, that are related to security, the sustainability of computers and tablets, availability of electricity, and the reliability and quality of internet connectivity onsite and in the camps (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 3). This was evident when also Fowsia shared her difficult experiences of accessing coursework in the evening:

The program is fruitful but when you are in study there are challenges especially when you are in a refugee camp. For example there can be no electricity and pervious we were giving lamps to study in the evening. The world is changing, now we have electricity and power in the camps but sometimes during the day some of us don't have [electricity], during the night some of us have [electricity] from 7pm – 10pm. I am not able to study or complete my work in the evenings when the electricity does not work (Sabriye, personal communication, April 4, 2017).

The refugee student population in Dadaab offered a wide range of perspectives related to the ability and effectiveness of learning with technology. This range of perspectives was influenced by the wide range of different contexts in which technology were utilized, such as desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 37). One of the benefits of technology in the BHER program, is that it allowed for new transnational and interregional online social networks over mobile phones, specifically those related to higher education for refugee women living in camps (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017, p. 2). For example, after my first visit to Dadaab, my fellow TA and I established a female only WhatsApp messenger group. We used the group to discuss coursework, writing support, but also shared our personal struggles and were able to learn first hand how the use mobile and networked communication can change the structure of how we were able to deliver support as TAs in the camps. Habon indicated her appreciation of the distance support she was able to receive:

The instructors and teaching assistant are very good people, anyone who needs help, they assist us. If you ask them questions online or in person they will assist you even through phone message [WhatsApp]. If there is a point that you do not understand, they will make sure you understand. Before I did not know how to use the computer and it was very difficult to use. But being in the BHER program has taught me how to type assignments and email them, use skype and even do readings online (Sabriye, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

In a study done by Dahya & Dryden-Peterson (2017) on the role of online social networks in higher education for refugees, particularly for Somali women in Dadaab, 69 % of female participants who lived in Dadaab shared that they rely heavily on student peers for virtual academic support, in comparison to the 56% of men who shared they depend more heavily on teachers for virtual academic support (p. 19). I believe that social networks and communication through distance learning techniques like Skype and WhatsApp groups can impact and improve access to higher education for women in Dadaab. Online social networks offer both interject

“inequitable social and economic norms in the physical and geopolitical world of Dadaab, and also create opportunities for some women to pursue higher education within refugee camps”

(Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017, p. 22). Safia described how technology and online support she received enhanced her distance learning experience:

The most satisfying thing about this program is, first I get new knowledge and skills and on the other hand I got a tablet that I am able to use at home for my studies. The online program lets me work from the camps and submit work from there. The tablets are better, because I cannot come to the learning centre everyday from so far. With the tablets I am able to study from my home, with my tablet it is enough. I can send work night or day. We even are asking each other questions online since we come from different camps in Dadaab. We made Whatsapp groups for each course so we can communicate and support each other. We are all active and helpful, both men and women (Sabriye, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Currently, distance education is the most accessible option for students living in a refugee camp but there are concerns related to the quality of this form of educational medium and its impacts on student engagement and learning outcomes in the classroom, and how sustainable and scalable it can be (Lim & Wang, 2016). BHER’s unique development and delivery of education programs has attracted many Somali female refugees to access higher education through new innovative online learning that interconnects their love of mobile social networks. This allows BHER Somali refugee women to not only learn new knowledge that transcends local boundaries but it also promotes their ability to challenge larger social and cultural norms and values that exist and impact their access to higher education in Dadaab.

3.2 Inclusion and Quality of Schooling Experience

Education can be used as a tool in conflict and protracted crises for healing trauma, conveying new skills and knowledge for conflict resolution and future peace-building. However, the majority of responses to emergencies and protracted crises using education have often been focused on primary and secondary schooling. In order to increase women’s agency and

autonomy, there needs to be quality higher education programs that integrate gender equity tools and gender transformative approaches in the delivery of education. Maryam disclosed how she believes her inclusion into BHER was able to breakdown what she views as a growing cycle of women being married instead having the opportunity to gain a higher education:

First, what I like is that it [BHER] is good for the society, but especially for women. As Somali women, we do not get our proper rights when living in a refugee camp. We have less economic opportunities here in the camps. Our mothers and fathers are running looking for money and work, and as females we will be asked to stay home to cook and clean. This is because they believe that they are protecting us females and when we get older we will marry a man and whatever working ability we gain now will belong to [her] new family. The program is good for students who finished school but did not get good grades to go overseas and study with WUSC, because it helps them to become hopeful individuals again. Especially women who are married because this programs allows them to continue their studies. This is a new opportunity that also encourages students to improve their skills and studies like WUSC does. BHER encourage me to encourage other women to continue their studies and we are lucky because most of our instructors are female. The women who started at the very beginning with BHER and dropped out, are regretting it now—I have seen many women who are regretting it now. They say, “why did we leave, do not drop out, we do not have anything” (Sabriye, personal communication, March 28, 2017).

The quality of school and experience matters more for marginalized girls and women, because they are less likely to complete primary school or attend secondary school, let alone reach higher education (Lockheed, 2008, p. 118). The quality of education can be difficult to determine and should not only be measured through grades, but should also implement a comprehensive examination of external factors related to family, community (specific camp), and the social, cultural and religious aspects of the student’s environment. The BHER project takes into consideration the differences between refugee camps in Dadaab, by acknowledging the “politics of inclusion/exclusion among national, ethnic, tribal, language, religious and other groups” and that this can lead to resentment and feelings of superiority between members from the camps and local host community (Giles & Dippro, 2017, p. 4). By providing an environment

that is gender responsive and conducive to learning, BHER also addresses barriers related to envy and misconceptions. Rahma recounted how BHER's diverse makeup of individuals coming from different camps and the neighbouring areas, allowed for a better understanding of who they have been living with:

BHER also has brought us together. When we were younger, education was a competition and not all of us could afford books. If those students who could not afford books asked those who had the books, people who had the books were worried that if they shared the other students would become more knowledgeable. But in BHER there is no envy, we are all given the same supplies. There is also diversity, people I did not know before or speak to are in my class. I have found people who are willing to help me and also pray for me when I am ill. We are all African, although we have different ethnicities and religion, we still come together. There are other students who have different faiths - like some students do not come to class on Saturdays because they worship that day. We all understand and are still able to study and work together. We do not say we do not want to work with them because I know now that when you come together and study together, you learn from different perspectives and get a more open mind. Students who are not Somali or not even Muslim, sometimes have different knowledge that they share with us. I do not care about what religion, race or ethnicity the other students are, I look at what I am able to learn from them (Sabriye, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

This diversity of staff and students is extended into BHER's commitment to support and retain women while also developing a curriculum that is culturally relevant and responsive. The development of gender-awareness and inclusion needs to be a key component in the curriculum and delivery, because this would allow for teachers to encourage female students to take a lead in classroom activities and all students would be engaging with content that is gender sensitive and challenging discrimination and marginalization (Stephens, 2003, p. 17). During my first assignment in Dadaab I was able to witness how gender sensitive curricula was able to introduce gender mainstreaming into the classroom. Gender mainstreaming is the process of determining the implications for women and men of any planned action and this strategy can be used to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women (Derbyshire, 2002, p. 11). The

instructor for the Health and Physical Education course I was a TA for, developed a curriculum and instructional materials that were sensitive to class diversity and gender make up. The instructor provided opportunities for separate lecture times for females to allow for them to feel comfortable and safe when addressing and learning about issues related to sex education and self-defense. The relevance and appropriateness of curricula is vital because it can be common for curricula to not to reflect the specific experiences of females and not to explicitly challenge gender stereotypes or to promote gender equality, especially in a crisis-affected setting (Kirk, 2008, p. 158). By providing relevant and appropriate curriculum, the rights of women and girls can be discussed and challenged in an environment that reinforces traditional notions or beliefs regarding females. Exposure to different and unique knowledge is also helpful with demolishing stereotypes and learning about different communities, as Maryam shares:

I wanted to get as far as could in my education. I have seen that when you stay in the same area and don't learn new things, you do not understand many things but when you got to school and learn new things like online courses, you see more things and learn more. For example, through my Anthropology course I learned about different people, countries, languages and how they live their life. This exposed me to cultures and ways of life that I would never see in Dadaab. But through this program, BHER, there is diversity of culture and people of different tribes and nationalities interact and study together. BHER transformed people. Now people regardless of where they come from, come to study together in one class, one family (Sabriye, personal communication, March 28, 2017).

Through my experience on the ground, I have witnessed how critical quality education is, as it provides the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive support that can sustain and save lives (INEE, 2012, p. 2). However, BHER does have its challenges in regards to the quality of the safety and security it provides, as many projects working in the dimensions of a protracted post-crisis context do. There is a gendered social geography that specifically impacts women living in prolonged exile and is related to social reproduction, including caring for children and elderly people, which is work largely done by women (Hyndman & Giles, 2016, p. 91). Rahma shared

her challenges in finding a balance with her duties at home and school:

Another difficulty is writing essays while I am at home. As a woman my workload at home is high—I have children to look after and a home to take care of. I sometimes cannot complete or send work from home in the camps. But when I am at the BHER Learning Centre I can send and complete work. Sometimes we need to bring our young children to the centre because there is no one to take care of at home. There is no child care available but we are able to work at the centre and there is usually other children that they are able to play with. Even though there are these difficulties we are continuing to learn for our futures and our children (Sabriye, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Furthermore, there is sometimes pressure to choose between their studies and work that will presently support their family, and this was contemplated by Safia:

Although there is nothing that has disappointed me in the program there is still challenges for us as women. As we are refugee people who have finished our secondary studies, we normally begin working so we can have a salary. Most of us females in the BHER program are not teachers, I myself am not a teacher. I use to work for an agency, so it is a daily job, we work everyday except Sundays. So whenever I want to come to the Learning Centre for the BHER program to learn, it is very far for me and I need to request my work office and I inform them about the program. They said they would not allow because the agency policy does not allow someone to work and learn at the same time. Better learn or better work, I must decide. So in order for me to keep my job and continue my studies, when there would be a class or instructor coming I would take unpaid leave from work. That month I would lose money and that is very challenging for me (Sabriye, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Lastly, while there was an overall appreciation from my participants regarding the delivery of the education BHER is providing, Habon commented on a challenge related to the type safety that is provided at different circumstances throughout their studies:

We worry about the security sometimes, because we notice that the police are only here when you [all] come. When there is no international instructors there is no police or security. That makes us feel that the police are only there to protect the people from outside of Dadaab, not us because we are not as important. The guard who checks our student ID is very strict when you are here, but when you are not here no one checks. The only person who is here for security is the watchman when you are not here (Sabriye, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

The benefits of increasing security for women not only includes reducing violence-based injury

and death, but also giving women the independence and confidence to pursue economic and social activities (World Health Organization, 2005, p. 23).

4. Impact and Future



Figure 4: Photo of students learning how to use a parachute in their Physical Education course. Photography by Hawa Sabriye in April 2016.

4.1. Aspirations Beyond the Camps

All five of my participants' aspirations for the future were related to returning to Somalia for a better future, through the support of being able to find work and economic independence with their diplomas and hopefully their degrees. Their clear and concise views for their future confirmed how higher education is able to provide students with a sense of self-dignity, pride, and confidence that allows their hope for their future to grow—one that is filled with endless possibilities if they are able to complete a higher education degree. Fowsia shared that:

If I go back to Somalia I will have a degree outside Kenya even outside of Africa, which will make me an international educated if I go back to Somalia. There was a time I applied to a job in Somalia with this certificate and I got the job but unfortunately my dad told me just finish the degree because there is no hurry. That is why I opted to stay and finish the degree. When I finish, I am planning to go

back to Somalia (Sabriye, personal communication, April 4, 2017).

The desire of returning to Somalia proves how important their inclusion and access to high education is. For Somalia to become a more secure, stable and prosperous country their new skills and knowledge must be utilized and it is indisputable how the access to quality education can be linked to the empowerment of girls and women. This is because the investments in higher education will meet the requests of individual refugees for education and assist in the development of human and social capital that is needed for the future re-establishment in the home countries of the students (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2011, p. 15). This was echoed by all of my participants, all of who only spoke about Somalia as their future destination. In addition to this, accessing and receiving a higher education is a means for them to be able to contribution to the development of females continuing their schooling - through teaching more effectively and sharing the knowledge they have gained. Habon views her time in Dadaab as temporary and higher education as a tool to gain in order to be prepared when it is time to move:

Although we are refugees we are here to learn and to get new opportunities so we can be prepared when we are able to go back home to Somalia. I encouraged myself because I will not get another chance like this so I want to continue for my future (Sabriye, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

It is important that females are not seen as simply vulnerable but as protagonists in rebuilding countries like Somalia. When provided the opportunity to gain an education, females can become catalysts for positive social reconstruction; this is evident in Maryam's response to a question related to her future:

BHER has transformed us really to be better people and to have better futures. We got higher diplomas and now are doing degrees. I hope that after 5 years or 10 years I hope to be able to work in a high position. For example, I can be a high officer for the Somali government. I believe the certificate and degree I receive

from BHER will help me get out of Dadaab and have a new life with a good job, God willing. In ten years to come we will be respected people, big people (Sabriye, personal communication, March 28, 2017).

Through listening to the narratives and perspectives of learners currently participating in higher educational projects working in prolonged and fragile settings, we are better able to understand their situation and take into account their desired futures. Their voices will help address existing barriers and develop a strong provision of a safe learning environment for all learners, especially females.

4.2. Personal Reflection: Positionality and Intersectionality

Prior to conducting my personal interviews, I had many questions and assumptions concerning ethnicity, racism and Islamophobia. This was because of Kenya's decision to repatriate only Somali refugees, which made me wonder how the BHER students were feeling, particularly the Somali students. Would they feel it was their ethnicity, their faith or the unfortunate collective blame that has been placed on them for attacks at the Westgate Mall and Garissa University by the government, media and citizens of Kenya? I believed that through our shared discussions and reflections on their experience with higher education in Dadaab, their narratives would include how being Somali, Muslim and Women would have impacted their access and participation. However, it was through my conversations and later reflection that I realized I had implemented intersectionality as a tool because of my personal biases and assumptions related to being Somali, Muslim and Women. Through this research process I learned that the literature I was reading did not center or include the voices of refugees accessing higher education, rather that the majority of findings and reasons for lack of opportunities attributed to negative cultural and religious practices—all of which are real issues and challenges; however, without the voices of the refugee women, there is an imbalanced portrayal of

what is actually happening. I wanted to utilize intersectionality as a tool to counter the literature that I found, however and my intended outcome was completely different. My participants did not want to discuss or see the need to discuss how being Somali, Muslim and Women impacted their experiences in gaining a higher education within Dadaab. When I inquired about how ethnicity and race has impacted their experience in the BHER project, Rahma shared:

I work with Gambala, Sudanese, Ethiopians - people I never thought I would work or become friends with before and now we all study together and learn together (Sabriye, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

There was no animosity in any responses that I received and it became clear that this decision by the Kenyan government did not impact the relationships and knowledge they had built within the classroom. It was the voices of my participants that changed my conceptual framework on intersectionality to a different level and I learned through my interviews to not reject the theory because it was not working out as I had planned but to understand intersectionality in a different way. Due to my personal experiences with anti-Somali sentiment and Islamophobia in higher education, I unknowingly projected the same challenges to the Somali refugee women in Dadaab. Intersectionality assisted me in learning that anti-Somali sentiment and Islamophobia were not the main issues for women in Dadaab and that even as a Somali woman, I had to deconstruct my assumptions about their experiences with higher education in the camps and be cognisant of the population and context of my participants. This experience has indelibly shaped my pedagogical practices, understanding of schooling in a protracted refugee environment and how theories, like intersectionality are able to provide us with different understandings than what we may begin with. I have developed a deeper interest in understanding the role of education in the development sector and how students studying in protracted crises conceive their access and participation in higher education.

Conclusion

Throughout my past two years at York University, my most valuable accomplishment to date would be my work as a TA for York University courses offered through the BHER Project. Early on, I recognized the complexity that my identity presented in researching in Dadaab. Being a female of Somali origin, and working with a largely Somali population within the BHER learning center gave me a unique perspective in which to approach my position as a TA and researcher. However, my ability to come and go from Dadaab, at a time when the Somali refugee movement is extremely constricted by the Kenyan and international governments, left me with some discomfort and worry about how I would be viewed by BHER students. When I first arrived and began interactions with BHER students, I found myself often reiterating that I have never been to Somalia and that my Somali-language skills were not the best, in order to make sure my students did not assume I knew what they had experienced. Even though we had many differences, there were also commonalities between my participants. I reflected on the commonality of being a “second-generation” Somali refugee. My participants were either born in Dadaab or arrived as children and this made me think about what it means to be a second-generation Somali student in higher education studying Somali female refugees in higher education. I believe that my role as TA allowed explore these questions, while also develop strong relationships through having the opportunity to work alongside Somali refugee women in Dadaab who are working to change their access to higher education. Through listening and learning from their agendas for change I have been able to get a better understanding on the barriers and needs of Somali refugee women accessing higher education. Higher education projects and initiatives for fragile contexts must listen to the experiences and needs of the women they are working with. Centring their voices and narratives force us to challenge our own

assumptions and better understand what their desires, strategies and imagined futures are and have a greater interest in working alongside them. My role in BHER has reaffirmed my belief that women's autonomy in education can play an integral role in contributing to sustainable education and development. I viewed my female students as colleagues and as vital contributors to the classroom. The relationships I managed to develop and maintain with my students inevitably informed my research goal of learning about their access and experience in higher education and have strengthened my belief in dreams of assisting in the building of a better and safer Somalia.

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