

# **Living in Hope: Education in Refugee Camps Readers' Theatre**

**by Phyllis Webster**

The following dramatic presentation is intended to raise awareness of the barriers refugees face in accessing education in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. It is not a GRAN document but is the creative copyrighted work of Victoria, BC GRAN Phyllis Webster. All questions and enquiries should be directed to Phyllis Webster at [nudgeccm@yahoo.ca](mailto:nudgeccm@yahoo.ca) .

With many thanks to Phyllis for this submission.

## **Author's Notes:**

### **Education in Refugee Camps in Kenya, Africa**

People in refugee camps have many problems. Kakuma and Dadaab in Kenya are representative of many other refugee camps in Africa. A reporter has the ability to interview many people and so, in this Readers' Theatre, the reporter is able to give a great deal of information and then ask the interviewee to tell his or her story. Peter Atum, the headmaster, is a real person and his story borrows heavily from a news story from Their World. Faraja represents a refugee who has managed to overcome many difficulties and is now a Canadian. She wishes to remain anonymous. I thank all the interviewees, both real and imagined, for telling their stories.

The play was read on Zoom in January 2021 during a joint meeting of the GRAN Education Working Group and the Victoria GRANS. Thank you to them for their important suggestions for additional information.

If you plan to use the play, please contact me at [nudgeccm@yahoo.ca](mailto:nudgeccm@yahoo.ca) with your questions. I do not mind if you add stories or leave out sections. It is designed to be used in a way that suits your audience. The Education Working Group's document, [Education for Refugees Backgrounder](#), will add useful information for the presentation.

When you have had your "performance", I would be happy to have a small report to tell me how many people were in the audience and how the discussion evolved. Asante (Thank you).

Phyllis Webster

*"Living in Hope" is dedicated to the teachers, learners and all who live and work in refugee camps.*

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**by Phyllis Webster**

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## **Reporter:**

Good Morning. My name is..... and I am a reporter for the Grandmothers Advocacy Network, reporting on the work of a group of volunteers from across Canada working together to promote and protect the human rights of grandmothers, children and youth in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, I am reporting on two refugee camps in Kenya, Kakuma and Dadaab, where the residents must overcome many problems in order to get an education. These are only two of the many camps in Africa, but all the difficulties are very similar. I will let the interviewees tell their stories in their own words. I thank them for sharing them particularly because some are very painful.

## **First reader:**

My name is Jonathan, I am 22 years old and I am a resident of Kakuma which was established in 1992, 29 years ago. It is 807 kilometers North-East of Nairobi. I live here with my mother and three sisters. We have been here for almost 20 years after fleeing our country. Kakuma which means “nowhere” in Swahili has a population of 196,800 registered refugees and asylum seekers (July 2020). This area has many problems such as dust storms, poisonous snakes, spiders and scorpions. And an average daily temperature of 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) and 40 degrees (104 degrees F) during the hot months of January, February and March. We have many problems in getting enough water. Electricity is supplied by diesel engines and increasingly by solar panels. We often have periods with no electricity. During the wet season, we also have floods.

Because of the crowded conditions, there are outbreaks of cholera and malaria. Of course in 2020, the camps must also deal with COVID. The camp is administered by the High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) and falls under the jurisdiction of the Kenyan Government.

I would like you to imagine standing beside me and looking across the camp which is a sea of small houses as far as the eye can see. These homes are getting old and sometimes the doors and windows do not fit well which makes it difficult when the wind blows the sand.

You will hear about other problems from others who live here. New people who come to the camp must live in tents and shacks made of available materials until new houses can be built.

I would love to leave the camp and travel to your country, get an education and a good job, but I know that it is exceedingly difficult to be accepted when you are uneducated and without a skill. I also cannot leave my widowed mother and three sisters unprotected and without the small wage I make by repairing shoes and other things.

**Reporter:**

My next interview is with Headmaster Peter Atum of the Friends Family school which was established in 1993 in Dadaab in Eastern Kenya. He tells us his story.

**Second Reader:**

Thank you. My name is Peter Atum and here is my experience as a principal in Dadaab; it will reflect the work of my colleagues who head schools. Dadaab has almost 250,000 people. I am a headmaster of a school called Friends Family School. Most of our students come from Somalia, but others come from Ethiopia, South Sudan and Rwanda- all are fleeing from desperate situations in their home countries and come with their own culture and different norms which can cause some challenges in the classroom. We teach in two languages- English and Kiswahili. Children who do not speak those languages, especially Kiswahili, are able to get extra help from teachers from their language group.

We have many children at this school. Formerly there were 2000, but some have moved to the Kakuma camp and so now there are only 700 students. There are many challenges because of the 19 teachers only three including me are trained. So the trained teachers spend a great deal of time on the weekend preparing lessons to help the other teachers. Another problem is that the curriculum is often different from other schools in Kenya so there are some differences when students face the common Kenyan exams. This is gradually being solved as the school gets the proper textbooks.

You may not know this, but the weather is extremely hot and so outdoor Physical Education is sometimes difficult. Still, we do quite well in some athletic competitions. The girls have some trophies. We would certainly appreciate more play materials which would help the children to participate and nurture their talents.

Another problem for us in Dadaab is that life here has affected us psychologically. The surrounding community is not friendly, and a few years ago the Kenyan government threatened to relocate us to our original countries. To add to the problems, we had floods which affected more than 60,000 people. Many lost their belongings and had to move into the school until other accommodation could be found. To relocate these people who have lived in the camp for many years would be heart breaking.

My message to the UNHCR, other organizations, private donors and governments is to please work together to put the education for the refugee learners at the heart of the camp to make a bright future for them by buying learning materials and training teachers.

[Created from “*Life in Dadaab: a head teacher in Kenya’s massive refugee camp*” published by Their World in 2017.]

**Reporter:**

My next interview is with a teacher in Dadaab which is 475 Kms from Nairobi. Before I give you her story, you should know that teachers in schools that host refugees often walk into the toughest

classrooms in the world, day after day. A single classroom could contain many learners who have seen their homes destroyed, and their relatives injured or killed. Some may have disabilities, either from birth or because of the violence in their home countries. They could be former child soldiers, survivors of sexual abuse, or children whose siblings were not lucky enough to escape to a safe place as they have done. Their education may have been interrupted by months or even years. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that on average, some children miss out on three to four years of learning, and this, as you can imagine, creates many challenges for the teachers.

Even though the environment is not optimal, the teachers remain the most likely catalysts for transformation for the children, and they continue to do their best for all their learners.

Some of the teachers may themselves be refugees and have often experienced the same type of trauma as their students. Unfortunately, there are very few trained therapists who can help with the massive amount of trauma in the camps.

[Information taken from *“Helping teachers to help refugees”* in the UNESCO Courier.]

### **Third Reader:**

My name is Chaltu! I was a brand-new teacher and was so excited to begin. I was accepted as a first-grade teacher in the Kakuma Camp. I knew the children would be between ages of five and ten years old. When I entered the class room, I was mesmerized-I did not know where to turn because there were 250 children sitting in rows on the floor. What was I to do? I was to teach in Kiswahili and not all the children spoke the language.

My first job was to discover who spoke which language and to try to find a way to begin their learning. Fortunately, the children love to sing and to dance so I began with a simple song which made everyone sway and dance. Then we began to learn colours, and shapes and moved to numbers and letters. The children were so eager to learn and so happy when they were able to answer the questions by chanting. I used simple things I found in their environment to increase their vocabulary. Sometimes, I asked some of the students in older classes to take little groups into the school courtyard to practise some of the words they knew. And slowly, slowly, the children gained confidence and began to enjoy their lessons.

We were lucky that there was a school lunch program, and because there was not a great deal of food at home, the attendance was particularly good because it also meant a warm lunch.

### **Reporter:**

Of course, your story of that large class was pre-COVID-19. I have asked a worker with an NGO to talk to you about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees.

### **Fourth Reader:**

I would prefer not to tell you my name. I have lived in a refugee camp for 15 years and now work with an NGO which is trying extremely hard to help the women in my camp. COVID has made all of our lives more difficult. First, we have very little water so the problems of washing our hands and keeping

our houses clean is very difficult. We also have up to 10 people living in a one-room house which means we cannot easily socially distance and when one person in the family becomes ill, there is absolutely no way to isolate that person. Access to medical help is always a difficulty and that has become worse. In addition to Covid-19 and the worries about when we, in Africa, will get a vaccine, we are also concerned that the campaigns against childhood diseases such as measles have been suspended; therefore, the risk of the spread of this childhood killer has increased in our crowded conditions.

Another problem is that domestic abuse is increasing. Men who are no longer able to work are stressed because of their inability to provide for their families, and turn to drinking which is one of the factors leading to more domestic violence. Women have nowhere to escape so must remain in the home which is sometimes dangerous. Another problem which creates problems for women and girls is that not every home has a private toilet so people are required to use a communal toilet where women can be attacked especially at night.

I can also tell you that there is an increase of cutting in Kenya and the same is true here in the camp. You call it Female Genital Mutilation, but some cultures believe that a girl who is not cut will be promiscuous and no man will marry her unless she is cut.

Food insecurity also affects many people in the camp. Many depend on food aid and may go hungry much of the time. Now that the schools are shut, the children are missing the lunch program which adds to the problem of providing enough food for the family. As you can see, there are many problems which face refugees.

[*Under Siege: Impact of Covid-19 on Girls in Africa*. June 2020 by African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) and Plan International. There is an extensive bibliography.]

**Reporter:**

I would like to introduce you one other person who lives in a camp and who is unable to go to school because all schools have been closed because of COVID-19.

**Fifth Reader:**

How I love to go to school because it is a place where I learn so many exciting things about the world. I am sixteen and am in the second last year of my school or Form 3. I hope one day to become a teacher because I want other children to know that they are worthy and can do something with their lives. My school is now closed because of COVID and so I am at home. I try to study using the books the teachers gave me, and sometimes, I have access to a radio so that I can follow lessons put on by the United Nations Refugee Agency.

But I know that my family is now trying to find me a husband and are urging me to give up my education. We are extremely poor and the dowry which my husband will bring will be helpful to my parents as they raise my five brothers and sisters. Some of my friends are also in the same situation and I am afraid one of them is contemplating ... suicide. We, as young women, are also often asked to do what you call “transactional sex” meaning that older men promise us money for sleeping with them.

I cannot do that and do not want to marry. You can see that so many of us are trapped between the dreams we have for our future and the expectations of our families and culture.

One of my mentors at an NGO has told me that 10 million girls in Africa will never go back to school even when the schools open, and I am so fearful that my friends and I will be part of that terrible number. Surely, people in the richer countries understand that this would be a terrible waste for African society.

**Reporter:**

Now I would like to introduce a person with a remarkable story that has a happy ending. She had to leave her country to flee violence and became a displaced person. Here is her story and some suggestions about what GRAN and our Canadian government can do to help refugees and displaced people.

**Sixth Reader:**

Good morning everyone. My name is Faraja. The following is my story about being a refugee, my long journey to getting an education and eventual journey to Canada.

I was born in Burundi and lived with my parents and four siblings. I had just started my first year at school. We were happy and safe. However, when I was six and a half, the war broke out. One terrible day, when our father had not come home, our mother was told that he had been killed while at work. Knowing that we were unsafe, our mother packed a few things for each of us and we joined others in a lorry driven by a friend of our father for a terrible journey to Nairobi, Kenya. We were stopped many times at barricades. We did not know whether the men were militia or people dressed like soldiers. I understood later that the terrible screaming we often heard meant that women and girls were being raped in front of their fathers and brothers. It was a terrible journey because we had no food or water for three days and nights. I am sorry I cannot say more about this terrible time.

**Reporter:**

I understand. What happened to you and the family when you reached safety in Nairobi?

**Faraja:** In Nairobi, we went to a Catholic Church where we were assigned to a wonderful woman who took us in for a few days. She had recently been widowed and had three children so it was a real gift to our family. You can imagine that there was a great deal of pain, fear and crying. We registered with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) and were able to finally register for school and were given monthly funding for food and school registration. In those days, we had to pay school fees for primary school; I am glad to say that primary education is now free in Kenya.

My next great sorrow was that our mother became terribly ill and died when I was 12. My older sister had left so I was the oldest child. The wonderful lady who first rescued us took me and my 3 younger siblings in so that we could help with household chores and preparing food. At age 13, I learned to cook! We all walked about 40 minutes to school and 40 minutes back.

I was a good student, worked hard and with the help of several scholarships, I was able to graduate from secondary school. You can imagine how long the days were when I had many chores to complete, walking many kilometres to school and studying hard.

After high school, I was encouraged to apply for a scholarship with the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). It was a fierce competition because there were only five spots for Nairobi students and ten for the Kakuma Camp.

While I waited for the results of the scholarship application, I was sent to Kakuma where I worked as a teacher's aide. I was given a small allowance for my work because I was a volunteer even though in the end, I taught Swahili, Math and Business studies to five different classes of grade 10 and 11. Can you imagine that I had just graduated from secondary school...form four...grade 12 in Canada, and here I was teaching about 100 students in each class! Some of them sat on the 15 benches and others sat on the floor or stood at the back. It was better than nothing, of course, but the quality was poor because there was no equipment or supplies and far too many students in the room.

During my time in the camp, there were very few girls at school and even the few who were enrolled (about 5 to 6 girls for 100 boys) were not able to get to school regularly because they had so much to do at home caring for siblings, some of whom were in the camp without parents. They often did not get to school during their periods because they did not have hygiene products. Also, girls were intimidated because the boys and some older adult students undermined their contributions in class.

**Reporter:**

And how did you finally get to Canada?

**Faraja:**

After 15 months, I was given a WUSC scholarship and made the long journey from Nairobi to a university in Western Canada where I enrolled in an undergraduate degree in economics. You can imagine that it was difficult because I had few resources. My accent at first made it difficult to communicate confidently. Lots of predetermined ideas about my culture also made it difficult for me to be accepted by some of the students and I was sometimes avoided when there were group projects. However, I did make friends and found the WUSC student group especially welcoming.

Culture shock is quite common when a person moves to a new country! I had to adjust to a new diet and at first missed ugali and chapati. I was shocked to find that the price on goods was not the actual price because in Kenya taxes on goods are included in the stated price. My first shopping adventure for clothing ended in my leaving the jacket and pants at the cashier because I did not have the correct amount of money. How embarrassing! In addition, my first winter was a nightmare as I had not understood how much layering was necessary for the cold.

My journey continued to Eastern Canada where I became a graduate student, married, had our two sons, and now work as an analyst in the federal government! I have also sponsored one of my sisters to Canada.

**Reporter:**

Faraja, what would you say to others who are refugees?

**Faraja:**

I would say that even though we have lost so much, our lives cannot be determined by our past experiences. We need to remain optimistic, determined, hardworking and open to correction. The last is to suggest that we can only learn if we are willing to climb mountains and open our minds to challenge ourselves and accept lessons since life is an interesting journey full of them! I continue to volunteer/work for organizations for refugees because I want them to know that there is hope at the end of the tunnel. Also, even though life may be raining misery at some point in time, it does not mean that there is no sun behind the dark clouds; the sun will eventually come out.

**Reporter:**

What would you tell NGOs, Advocacy groups and governments about the best way to help refugees and displaced persons?

**Faraja:**

Many refugees in developing countries live in isolated places or camps under extreme weather conditions, mostly desert-like conditions that make life difficult. I have a lot to say here but to be precise:

- While education is an essential need for all, the accompanying resources and equipment are also essential to students' success. Therefore, efforts should also be directed towards improving the quality of education for girls as well as boys in the camps.
- Resettlement is appreciated as one of the best durable solutions that allows refugees to start rebuilding their lives by getting access to the same level of quality of services, rights and responsibilities. It also awakens a sense of purpose and drive to succeed!
- When extending a scholarship or resettlement opportunity to a student, it would be great if the sponsorship could consider including some type of help for the student's immediate family. This could help release the pressure off students who are often the primary care givers or who are the primary source of labor and/or financial support for their families.

*[This interview was with a woman who would like to remain anonymous. I would like to thank her for the courage it took to tell her story.]*

**Reporter:** Thank you Faraja for your story, which illuminates so clearly that if refugees are given support to get to school, they can not only fulfill their own dreams, but also give others the hope that they, too, can succeed. Thank you, also, to the other interviewees who have answered many questions for your invaluable information.



I am going to end with some of the words of Karina Gould, the present Minister of International Development for the Canadian government. She is a strong advocate for girls, including those in refugee camps and in crisis situations.

Here she speaks to another reporter for Education Cannot Wait.

**Seventh Reader: “Karina Gould”**

Girls and adolescent girls face a unique and additional set of challenges that limits their chances of accessing and completing an education. These challenges include poverty, unequal gendered roles in the household and at school, gender-based violence, and school environments and curricula that perpetuate inequalities. In crisis contexts, these barriers to girls’ education can be even further entrenched, with girls being 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.

Through the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), Canada recognizes that gender equality is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Access to education is a pathway to achieving this goal. It can significantly reduce poverty, provide for better economic opportunities, and can improve health outcomes such as maternal and child health, protecting women and girls from child, early and forced marriage and providing essential sexual and reproductive health services that can enable women to engage in improved family planning.

Yet access is only part of the solution. We also need to make sure that once the children are in school, that they are learning. Quality teaching and learning, and ensuring that schools are safe places for children, particularly girls, are equally important and require additional efforts and resources, especially during a crisis. Ensuring that teachers are well-trained and equipped to instruct children who have or are living through a crisis; that curricula and learning materials reflect relevant cultural realities and do not perpetuate negative gender norms; and that girls and boys have access to adequate hygiene and WASH facilities are all required in order to keep children engaged and for families to continue to see the value in sending their children, particularly their girls, to school. This is why Canada, as President of the G7 in 2018, championed the *Charlevoix Declaration on Quality Education for girls, adolescent girls and women in developing countries* to further address these challenges in order to ensure that girls – especially those affected by crisis and conflict – have access to quality education.

I personally believe that it is essential for girls, including refugee and displaced girls, as well as adolescent girls, to have access to education in crisis contexts.

**Reporter:**

Thank you to all who have participated in this report from Dadaab and Kakuma. If you would like to know more, please go to the GRAN website where you will find documents about the need for education for all children and why we are asking the Canadian government for a generous increase in funding to support the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).