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Do not forget families and households when addressing urban refugee education

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Introduction

There are currently more than 25.4 million refugees globally, representing the largest number of refugees in recorded history (UNHCR 2018). More than one in three refugees who fall under the auspices of United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) protection are of school age

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(UNHCR 2019a). Dryden-Peterson (2015, 2016) points out that much of what is known about refugee education stems from research conducted in high-income countries of resettlement, ignoring the reality that the majority of refugees live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) neighboring their countries of origin. Additionally, 60% of refugees globally reside in cities (UNHCR 2019c), where UNHCR coordinates with host countries to integrate students with refugee backgrounds into the national education system (Dryden-Peterson 2016). We attempt to contribute to this literature while highlighting the importance of family and household factors in urban refugee education.

In addition to being considered a basic right by the international humanitarian community, education has been shown to protect against early marriage, sexual exploitation and recruitment into armed groups while also strengthening community resilience (UNHCR 2019a). Yet the reality of refugee education has often been in sharp contrast with this promise. Despite improvements in recent decades, refugees face several obstacles that prevent them from enrolling in and attending schools (Karanja 2010; Mendenhall, Garnett Russel, and Buckner 2017). For those who are able to access educational opportunities, education is often of low or uneven quality, characterized by high student–teacher ratios, lack of teachers trained to work with students who have experienced trauma (including those with refugee backgrounds), and discrimination against refugee students (Dryden-Peterson 2015; Kronick 2013).

Given the importance of education in the lives of refugees, it is necessary to examine the nested layers of context that influence access to schools and educational programming in urban settings. Due to the variance in caregivers for refugee youth, lack of necessary resources, and the precarious nature of familial stability, we argue that the family and household should not be overlooked in research and programming addressing urban refugee education.

This brief report draws on three authors' (DN, JS, JT) continuing work with refugee populations in Kenya and, more specifically, upon two unique datasets. The first is data collected by two authors (JS, JAT) at different intervals in 2012 and 2014 as part of an urban refugee education assessment coordinated by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) and UNHCR Kenya to understand urban refugees' barriers and facilitators to education in Nairobi. Data were collected

with refugee learners attending primary and secondary schools, head teachers, school administrators and nongovernmental organization staff. The second dataset is from the third author's (JAT) ethnographic research with urban-displaced refugee families and households in Nairobi from 2013–2014. This research sought to understand the lived experiences of urban refugees more generally. Education was not a central focus of this study; however, children's access to education and experiences in school emerged as key areas of concern among refugee caregivers. As such, this work is used to provide additional context to household and family factors that affect the educational access and outcomes of urban-displaced refugees. Ethical approval was obtained from educational institutions (JAT) and the Kenyan National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI).

Kenya is an important case study for urban refugee education. The country remains a major refugee-hosting nation, with more than 473,000 refugees living in camps and cities (UNHCR 2019b). Although the Government of Kenya enforces encampment, 13% of the country's refugee population reside in cities (mainly Nairobi) (UNHCR 2019b). This report focuses on Nairobi; however, we believe the presented research has broader application for policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

Family structure and household composition

Forced migration fragments families and disrupts traditional caregiving structures (Walsh 2007). Urban-displaced refugee children and youth faced educational challenges related to family and household composition, particularly when cared for by fictive kin – non-biological relatives who have become parental or caregiving figures. Unofficial guardians, especially those who themselves are undocumented urban refugees, discussed barriers to enrolling children in schools without necessary documentation (e.g. birth certificates, refugee identification, proof of prior educational documentation). In refugee contexts, these documents are challenging to maintain or secure (Dryden-Peterson 2010). Requesting these documents only becomes more complex and taxing when fictive kin, or non-biological caregivers, attempt to obtain them.

Refugee participants, who were unable to work in Kenya's formal economy, were forced to make difficult decisions regarding the distribution of scarce resources within the household; biological children were often prioritized with regard to education. Several caregivers of school-aged children in Nairobi stated that while educational assistance from NGOs helped biological children access school, these benefits did not extend to non-biological children under their care. In addition to the prioritization of biological children, gender was also seen as playing a role in the decision-making process regarding distribution of resources for educational purposes, with male children at times receiving preferential treatment; participants noted that additional barriers for females to attend schooling included lack of access to sanitary products, environmental safety concerns, and increased maltreatment from peers. This topic requires additional scrutiny from practitioners and researchers given the growing gender gap at all levels of education.

Family and household resources

Participants representing NGOs and educational institutions noted that many refugee families did not have the means to afford school. Uniforms, textbooks and learning materials placed a financial burden on caregivers. Teachers reported that refugee parents were at times unable to provide basic needs such as food, books and uniforms; some teachers claimed that education was not the main priority of refugee families dealing with co-occurring financial problems in the household. School-aged children and youth reported similar concerns: one young male participant discussed his struggles completing homework and studying without a desk or lamp in his home. Some single caregivers reported occasionally keeping children out of school to help support the household through chores in the home (more frequently females) or paid labor in the informal sector (more frequently males).

Even when free primary education opportunities were available to refugee children, barriers remained. Caregivers discussed lack of knowledge regarding school enrolment processes, inability to access documentation (e.g. birth certificates, previous diplomas), and limited school transportation for children. Several NGO practitioners stated

that scholarships provided to refugee students were not a sustainable practice, and that agencies were powerless in advocating for broader policy reform.

International migrants, including refugees, are highly transient within postmigration cities (Madhavan and Landau 2011). During interviews in 2013 and 2014, refugee caregivers who reported moving one or more times in the past year *within* Nairobi did so because of more affordable housing or the presence of social supports in a different part of the city. Frequent moves within Nairobi were reported by caregivers as affecting students' enrolment in different schools, school attendance and educational performance.

Family stress and caregiving: Maintaining stability in insecure times

Exposure to war-related violence in tandem with everyday post-migration stressors has been shown to disrupt family functioning and decrease the general wellbeing of household members (Miller and Rasmussen 2010; Weine 2008). Targeted police raids against refugees in Nairobi resulted in unpredictable living situations, such as family separation and caregiving changes for school-aged children. Caregivers and children expressed fear of being separated from family, and caregivers reported occasionally keeping children home from school in anticipation of police raids. Individuals in undocumented and mixed-status households were particularly vulnerable during the period of police raids. For example, a young Congolese girl who had excelled academically told interviewers that her grades were falling as she was too anxious about being separated from her family to concentrate in class.

Expectations of education

Familial expectations of the relevance of education for young refugees was also a factor in children's access to and experiences of schooling. A Somali first grader told interviewers: 'My parents said that we are waiting for peace in Somalia. Once there is peace, I will go home

for a proper education.' Other children, caregivers and head teachers echoed this, noting that expectations of children's education were not always congruent with the Kenyan system. Teachers at a public secondary school noted particularly high truancy and dropout amongst Somali girls and South Sudanese students, describing 'cultural reasons' such as early marriage and familial roles as caregivers, respectively. Some communities and families addressed sociocultural expectations of education by enrolling children in non-formal schools that emphasized instruction that would be suited to a return to countries of origin. For example, students at a community-run school in Nairobi for refugees and immigrants from the African Great Lakes received instruction in French. Burundian and Congolese caregivers, in particular, stated this was an important foundation for children whom they believed would eventually return to their countries of origin. In instances such as these, inclusion of refugees in national education systems as promoted by UNHCR (2015) was not desired by caregivers. Importantly, this highlights the need to work with parents, caregivers and families to work toward educational solutions that integrate sociocultural expectations into educational mainstreaming.

Moving forward

The influence of the family and household on urban refugees' educational access needs to be more than a post-hoc consideration. Understanding school-age refugees' home environments is key to addressing access issues amongst urban-displaced groups. Parent and caregiver input into education, including local curricula, has the potential to increase a sense of belonging among refugee families and communities while equipping students with the necessary tools to contend with what Dryden-Peterson (2017) termed an 'unknowable future'. Without proper attention to contextual family and household factors, programs designed to improve refugees' educational outcomes risk failure. Conversely, educators and school administrators are uniquely positioned to advocate for refugee families and households. Teachers bear witness to the effects of household factors on children's school access and educational achievement; their voices may be effective in advocacy around family reunification, enhanced access to vital documentation

(e.g. birth certificates, diplomas), and so forth. The nexus among refugee families and households, education, and social welfare presents is an important area for further consideration by practitioners, policymakers and researchers.

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