Education Can't Wait for LGBTIQ Refugees? Exploring Inclusion and Access to Higher Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp

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Introduction

Higher education in refugee contexts has, in recent years, emerged as a key humanitarian response and development imperative within the international forced migration management space (ECRE 2016). Humanitarian organizations and authorities active in the global forced migration management system have, to varying degrees, instituted and facilitated access to higher education opportunities for many refugees within the confines of refugee camps or the close proximity of host communities (Ferede 2018). Under the broad, sometimes vague, guidance of global development initiatives such as the sustainable development goals (Sawadogo 2016), the raison d'etre of higher education has been positioned as an

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enabling tool for the economic, social and emotional empowerment of refugees (Brugha and Hollow 2017).

Enabling access to, and reaping the benefits of, higher education in refugee camps, while not an easy task for any refugee, is, for the most part, out of reach for the most vulnerable ones who experience multiple and often intersecting layers of discrimination (Walton et al. 2020). The lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) "community"[1] in Kakuma refugee camp is the case in point. LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers have a long experience of discrimination in Kakuma refugee camp (Zomorodi 2016; NGLHRC 2016), where the authors have been running higher education courses for the last five years. Even though Kenya is the only country in the region to permit asylum seekers to be recognized as refugees on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity, LGBTIQ refugees in Kakuma suffer multiple layers of prejudices from fellow refugees, the host community, national police, and international organizations (Pincock 2020; NGLHRC 2016). In a context where homosexual acts are criminalized (Kenya Penal Code, Section 162 (a) and (c), Section 163, Section 165) and given the severe lack of learning infrastructure (such as adequate learning technology and safe learning spaces) and limited resources, these refugees have very limited access to the few higher education opportunities that other refugees might have.

While higher education has enabled and facilitated various refugee-led community initiatives in Kakuma,[2] because of difficulties in facilitating access and lack of inclusive approaches, these opportunities are still absent for the LGBTIQ "community." In this article, we explore the realities of access and inclusion in higher education for LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers in Kakuma refugee camp and chart a way forward so that higher

[1] We put the word "community" in quotes as in Kakuma, as elsewhere, lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex, and queer people are generally categorised as a homogenous group or "community". While we understand that this is a contested notion, we use this term as the LGBTIQ people that we spoke to for this article in Kakuma identify as such. To quote one of them: "We are a community and do what we can for each other. Outside of the community, everyone sees us as the same. Lesbian, gay, transgender, we are all bad to them. They don't care, they hate us."

[2] Various initiatives have been put in place by our former students in Kakuma—for example, creation of the community-based organization (CBO), African Initiative for Human Development, which focuses on access to digital education for refugees, or the youth club, Vijana Twaweza, that brings together young people from many different communities to raise fish and vegetables and teach others about the importance of nutrition, sustainability, respect and cooperation.

education can empower the "community," within the confines of their legal and social existence, to build on and from their resources. Through consultation and discussion with LGBTIQ people immersed in the forced migration management system, we relay our assessment of the situation in Kakuma and offer recommendations on how to move forward.

Higher Education in the Camp

Located in remote, arid northwestern Turkana state, Kakuma refugee camp is home to over 197,341 refugees of around 20 different nationalities (UNHCR 2020). Education opportunities in Kakuma are few, with primary and secondary schools oversubscribed and under-resourced (Mendenhall et al. 2017). Tertiary education opportunities are limited to a handful of places on vocational courses offered by international organizations operating in the camp. University-level courses are even rarer. They are offered by a few local and international universities who operate exclusively or mainly online, and the University of Geneva's InZone program, which offers blended learning courses at its Kakuma campus.

InZone is an interfaculty programme at the University of Geneva that has offered accredited university courses in Kakuma for the last five years. During this time, InZone has delivered courses in human rights law, ethics, medicine, global health, engineering, economics, and history for over 200 students in the camp. Using a connected, collaborative blended learning ecosystem, students access online courses and participate in face-to-face lessons at a learning facility (the learning hub), which is managed by a team of refugees (O'Keeffe 2020). This "refugee-led model" is central to InZone's collaborative learning ecosystem (CLE) which enables lecturers and tutors based at the University of Geneva to connect with refugee students both online and face-to-face. The refugee-led management approach also helps refugee students to congregate in the learning hub where they can access the necessary technology to connect with their teachers and participate in peer-to-peer learning with classmates. Using responsible, responsive, and transformative pedagogical approaches, the CLE model has been empirically developed and scientifically validated (O'Keeffe 2020; Carron 2019a, b) to help ensure that refugee students experience optimal student-centred learning conditions even in the restricted nature of higher education in refugee camps.

During our time in Kakuma, we have forged alliances with the various humanitarian and refugee-led organizations and communities present in

the camp and attempted to reinforce local refugee capacity—both technical and human—in our efforts to enable accessible, inclusive higher education. Our management team in Kakuma has the capacity to manage courses for 100+ students per semester at the learning hub. Unfortunately, access to the hub is not possible for all people within the camp. Certain vulnerable communities, such as those with disabilities, or those who face persecution within the camp itself, cannot safely travel to and from the hub, which is located up to 12 kilometers (8 miles) from the barracks where some people live. Furthermore, security and physical safety for some groups cannot be guaranteed at the hub. This is particularly the case for LGBTIQ people, who routinely face persecution in the camp from authorities, the host community, and fellow refugees. Furthermore, within the infrastructure of education provision in the camp, little or no training has been given to students, teachers, facilitators, and administrators about LGBTIQ rights or sensitivities relating to this 'community'. Finally, in our experience, curriculum developers have given little or no consideration to the consequences of non-LGBTIQ-friendly learning materials.

LGBTIQ Community in Kakuma

Over the course of 2018–2020, we have connected with prominent LGBTIQ rights advocates and leaders in Kenya through our academic and advocacy pursuits. Our work in Kakuma refugee camp and our interactions with these leaders and advocates have afforded the opportunity to gain insights into the dynamics of the "community" in Kakuma, the issues that affect their lives and hopes for the future (particularly in the domain of higher education). Refugee Flag Kakuma, a LGBTIQ rights group active in Kakuma, informed us that there are at least 200 self-identified "out" LGBTIQ refugees living in different parts of the camp (May 2018)—mainly coming from Uganda but also the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Burundi, Ethiopia and so forth. While some members of the community live in a protected zone in the camp, the majority are dispersed around the sprawling camp.

Fluctuating numbers and frequent violence against LGBTIQ people have often resulted in community leaders demonstrating outside the headquarters of UNHCR in Kakuma (at considerable risk to their personal safety) to plead for UN protection. This has, at times, resulted in UNHCR temporarily removing identified LGBTIQ people from the camp to less immediately dangerous conditions in Nairobi (Bhalla 2019). The 200

LGBTIQ people who self-identify in Kakuma hardly represent the true number.[3] Although some LGBTIQ people are "out" in Kakuma (in particular, activists who have fought hard in their home countries for their rights), the majority are not. While relocation to Nairobi or the goal of being resettled to a Western country may convince some to identify as LGBTIQ, the fear of "coming-out" in Kakuma where being identified as a member of the "community" is a real and present danger prevents many from doing so. This was emphatically expressed to us when we discussed with members of the "community" an inaugural Pride Parade that Refugee Flag Kakuma organized in Kakuma in 2019.[4] We were told that "afterwards attacks increased as the other refugees now knew who was LGBTIQ. We have no recreation, no events, we can't go and be ourselves in public."

Currently (during the Covid-19 pandemic), movement in, around and out of the Kakuma camp has been extremely restricted (Carron and O'Keeffe 2020),[5] removing any safety-valve measures, such as relocation to Nairobi, in case more attacks flare up against the "community." The fear of being identified as LGBTIQ by their fellow refugees in Kakuma has, according to a prominent member of the community, resulted in a "hidden community who cannot be visible." Being "hidden" comes with the fear of being exposed as LGBTIQ and as such heightens vulnerability for LGBTIQ people in Kakuma, where, according to another member of the community, "There are no safe spaces." Participating, openly or not, in pursuits like higher education, while it would "give me something to do and allow me to sometimes forget where I am and some skills if I ever

[3] A recent report from the Voice of America on violence against the LGBTIQ community in Kakuma puts the number at 300. UNHCR agrees on the number of people concerned. April Zhu, "Kenya's LGBTQ Refugees Face Threats, Attacks at Kakuma Camp," *Voice of America*, August 13, 2020, www.voanews.com/africa/kenyas-lgbtq-refugees-face-threats--attacks-kakuma-camp; UNHCR, "UNHCR urges dialogue and peaceful coexistence among refugees in Kakuma refugee camp," *UNHCR Kenya*, July 10, 2020, www.unhcr.org/ke/18473-unhcr-urges-dialogue-and-peaceful-coexistence-among-refugees-in-kakuma--refugee-camp.html.

[4] For refugees coming from Uganda, the situation is more complicated as there is no instability in their country of origin. It means that being from Uganda in Kakuma means being affiliated with the LGBTIQ "community" and therefore not getting a chance to find a job, avail of medical services properly or serve in a shop.

[5] The Kenyan government announced various measures to prevent the further spread of coronavirus in 2020. See: www.unhcr.org/ke/coronavirus-covid-19-update.

leave this place," may risk being "outed" in the camp, such as happened after the Pride Parade.

As a programme of the University of Geneva, InZone operates under an expectation and duty of being an inclusive, accessible program.[6] A tenet of the programme's operations is to create safe education spaces for all students regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, where they can discuss their concerns and develop tools and knowledge to analyse and shape their environment. This goal has not yet been accomplished, given the reality of being LGBTIQ in Kakuma. Speaking to a prominent member of the LGBITQ "community" during a planning session for improving inclusion and access to our program, we were told that LGBTIQ people "have to keep a low profile—pretend we are not gay. If it is revealed, we could be killed." Another member of the community told us that "there is a protection problem" in Kakuma. "We are harassed constantly. The host community started stoning us two weeks ago. The police say they cannot help LGBTIQ people because of the laws of Kenya. They tell us to not wear what we wear, even. I am transgender, so I am forced to wear men's clothes and pretend to be someone I am not. I can't express myself. When things got bad in Nairobi, I had to come here and suppress myself even more. You can see what I'm wearing (men's jeans and a t-shirt)—this is not me, this is not who I am."

What Can We Do?

Any attempt to ensure that LGBTIQ people have the opportunity to safely participate in higher education in Kakuma must start from a deep understanding of the situation in the camp and from the "community" itself (Freire 1970; Adams and Bell 2016). To avoid a neocolonialist approach of what should be done (Freire 1970,) and of identity *per se* (Lee 2018; Murray 2014), the first thing we must do is to talk and listen to the people concerned. This can only be done by making sure they feel safe to share with us what would help them to be comfortable enough to attend our courses if they wish to do so. This is a long process, as mistrust has undermined many relations in the camp (Grayson 2016); further, LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers, like many others, have a long history of

[6] See, for instance: www.unige.ch/actualites/files/2015/2655/9717/Charte_de_la_Diversite-signe-EN.pdf.

participating in surveys and interviews in the forced migration system without seeing concrete improvements in their situation.

According to our first insights from talking to the LGBTIQ community in Kakuma, three main pathways could be available to make higher education spaces there more welcoming and inclusive for LGBTIQ students. One approach is to develop course offerings only for LGBTIQ people in Kakuma by building a physical space in the protected zone where some members of the LGBTIQ community live. To do so would come with many constraints such as getting access to power and reliable Internet (a major concern in Kakuma). Furthermore, such an approach, if following InZone's refugee-led CLE model, would require the creation of a management team capable of running a higher education program and responding to the needs of the higher education organization. Once such a team is established, the education provider would have to adjust their offer to make sure it fits with the needs and wishes of the members of the community.

A second approach, which might not require building a separate physical space, would be to provide community members access to computers and connectivity from their homes. This could be done through technology such as the BeeKee box—a device developed at the University of Geneva that provides access to courses without requiring access to the Internet. This approach, while negating the role of face-to-face and peer-to-peer interaction in learning, would permit LGBTIQ refugees to access courses without having to travel and be in a classroom with fellow students.

These two first "separate education models" have important flaws. First, they do not prevent LGBTIQ refugees from being attacked while learning at home or in their hub. It could even be that some refugees will not understand why the education provider mobilizes specific funding for LGBTIQ people and not for other refugees, who also need access to higher education. This could increase tensions and put LGBTIQ students at further risk. Second, in the long run, this will not improve the situation of LGBTIQ refugees in Kakuma. Refugees can spend more than decades in the camp with little chance to be integrated into Kenyan society, repatriated or resettled in third countries. Moreover, repatriation is the last thing many LGBTIQ refugees want. It is therefore essential to try to build physical and virtual spaces where they can feel that they belong to the broader community, and where mentalities can change.

A third and final approach we would like to put forward is to improve higher education providers' offerings in Kakuma, so that seeking higher

education is safe and relevant for LGBTIQ students. This would require a more considered, holistic approach. It would mean ensuring safe travel to and from learning hubs, protection from harassment in class and online, complaint mechanisms, visible support of anti-discrimination policies in all premises and awareness trainings for education programme management teams on-site and online and for all the people involved in the learning ecosystem. For instance, lecturers and tutors should be aware that there might be LGBTIQ people among their students who require specific, sensitive pedagogical approaches—for example, being aware of how to deal with questions about the morality of homosexuality or trans identity in an ethics class, or with the question of the legality of homosexuality or trans identity in a human rights class, while not being culturally invasive (Freire 1970, 1998). The main flaw of this approach? It requires more resources and, when starting, does not ensure the physical and mental safety of LGBTIQ students in learning hubs. It is nevertheless the only option for programs like ours if we are to respect our own rules when operating abroad, and the only option for LGBTIQ people in Kakuma to study while participating in and changing their own society.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out our experience of working in Kakuma and attempted to amplify the voices of the LGBTIQ refugees who have put their trust in us as researchers and pedagogues. Echoing those with whom we have spoken, we remain optimistic that higher education can help improve their lives and accelerate progress for refugees worldwide. While no single one of our suggested approaches is a quick fix, we hope that they at least open possibilities to educators to start thinking about solutions.

Regardless of which approach is followed, higher education providers need to take a step farther than opening their doors to LGBTIQ students. To paraphrase Paolo Freire, education is not neutral and can be used either for conformity or freedom (Freire 1970). If we are serious about having LGBTIQ students studying in places like Kakuma, and determined that they feel safe "in" or "out of the closet", we need to rethink our pedagogy and learning ecosystems. In other words, queer it (Shlasko 2005), while respecting the "now" and "here" of the students and letting them lead the way (Freire 1970). Such an undertaking could draw inspiration from queer theories and pedagogies, especially those developed on the African continent and taking into account other forms of oppression. For instance, lecturers and other people who teach and administer courses could make

sure that queer experiences, in all their diversity, are put at the centre—when, for instance, explaining in class a story with a concrete case (Brooks and Parkes 2004; Petersen 1994). Those teachers and administrators must also take into consideration, analyze, and finally make unwelcome in classes, discriminatory behaviours and speeches against LGBTIQ people (Brooks and Parkes 2004; Petersen 1994; Adams and Bell 2016).

Finally, on a different level, an academic institution that would like to take an inclusive approach to higher education for LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers in a place like Kakuma should also be ready to advocate for wider institutional changes. This could mean engaging in discussions with actors on-site, like the UNHCR and its implementing partners, but also the police and local courts, to remind them of their obligations regarding this population. This is a risky approach, as some of those institutions have the power to expel academic institutions from the camp. Nevertheless, one basic principle of queer pedagogy is to embrace activism when necessary, and to take our own risks when people we want to work and learn with are risking their own lives (Hung 2017; Brooks and Parkes 2004).

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