



Dr Rachel Silver

Associate Professor

Faculty of Education

York University

Borderless Higher Education for Refugees

(BHER)

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Dr. Rachel Silver from York University spoke at the October 26, 2021 meeting about Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, a project of the Faculty of Education which has been in existence since 2013 and her personal research interests in girls' education especially in refugee situations.

While an undergraduate student at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine in the early 2000s, Rachel became a supporter and advocate for the Somali refugees who had resettled in Lewiston due to the civil war in Somalia. The refugees encountered racism from the mayor and some of the locals, while a larger group, including Rachel, supported their resettlement. This activism led

to work with Dr. Patricia Buck and the publication of “Educated for Change? Muslim Refugee Women in the West”.

After completing her PhD in Educational Policy Studies and Anthropology from the University of Wisconsin, Rachel joined York University and the BHER project. This project is a consortium of Canadian and Kenyan universities and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) that aim to make educational programs available where refugees need them.

The BHER project offers free post-secondary degrees in Education at the undergraduate and graduate levels to refugee students in the Dadaab, Kenya refugee camps. The project has been funded by Global Affairs Canada, Open Society Foundations, and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Classes have been held exclusively online since the COVID pandemic but are normally offered online and face-to-face with on-site instruction from York faculty and graduate student assistants in August, December and April of each year. The students are primarily Somali who have been resident in Dadaab since the civil war of the early 1990s. The project also admits local Kenyan students to ensure that good relations exist between the local townspeople and the camp residents.

The Dadaab camps are run by the UNHCR and are currently home to over 200,000 refugees. Rachel spoke about and presented images in her presentation of the difficult life in the camps including substandard housing and food insecurity. Residents’ movements are restricted and opportunities for work and education are limited. Surprisingly, Somali women in the camps have more extensive educational opportunities than they had or currently exist in Somalia.

The UNHCR runs primary and secondary schools in the camps with 47% of girls attending at the primary level. This dwindles to 7% of girls at the secondary level. Pupil/teacher ratios are high and sixty per cent of the schools’ teachers are untrained. The BHER program focusses on training of unqualified teachers in the camp schools and increasing the quality of instruction for all camp school students.

Over 400 students have graduated from BHER programs with certificates, diplomas and degrees in Education. There is an extremely high retention rate for women students in the degree programs which surpasses that of the male students with a 100% retention rate for female students at the graduate level.

A recent initiative of the project to promote discussion and recreational reading for the women students is the Dadaab Book Club. It was launched by the BHER Academic Programs Officer in Dadaab. She consults with the women's book club members and they select a title. Donations to the BHER project through York University are used to purchase e-book vouchers which are then distributed to the book club members.

In addition to online donations made to the e-book fund, donations in support of BHER can be sent to York University, Division of Advancement, West Office Building, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON. M3J 1P3. **The enclosure should note that the funds are to support Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Faculty of Education, account 500-560366.**

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Summary written by Donna Smith for the CFUW A/N Program Committee