

A Better Home?

The world's largest refugee camp is also a giant social experiment. Take hundreds of thousands of Somalis fleeing a war. Shelter them for 24 years in a camp in Kenya run by the United Nations. And offer different opportunities than they might have had if they'd stayed in Somalia.

The Kenyan government wants the experiment to end, soon. It's pushing the refugees to return to their home in Somalia, though the camp called Dadaab is the only home many have known.

Habiba Abdurahman fled the war in Somalia when she was six, with her mother and sisters. She had lived in a village where girls rarely went to school. Suddenly she was in a camp where international organizations offered free tutoring for girls to catch up academically. In her village, female genital mutilation was common. In the camp FGM was not only illegal but there were constant messages against it.

At 27 Abdurahman was elected a camp chairwoman, under election rules designed to promote gender equality. Last year she went back to Somalia on a U.N.-sponsored "look and see" trip to the liberated city of Kismayo. The trip was meant to assure refugees that parts of Somalia were finally safe enough to return to. But what she saw shocked her.

"In fact we have seen differences. A lot of differences," she says. "The roads were very bad. The schools were not even well-built."

Crumbling roads and schools she could have predicted because of the war. The Somali school curriculum spoke to a deeper dysfunction. One lesson would be in Arabic. The next lesson in English. It was all mixed up, she says, and it unsettled her. What kind of person would she be if she'd grown up there instead of here in the camp?

"Probably the most interesting and misunderstood thing about Dadaab is that the refugee camp has had a kind of liberalizing influence," says Ban Rawlence. Rawlence has spent the last three years writing a book about Dadaab, especially about the earliest arrivals, who've lived most of their lives in the camp. "They are a ready-made middle class," Rawlence says. "Educated Somalis who are ready and waiting to move into Somalia to rebuild the country."

Abshira Mursal would seem to be the perfect example of that educated class. Kenyan law forbids refugees from working. But in the meantime the 26-year-old has pursued almost every certificate course and job training a refugee can. "Like leadership training, conflict prevention, community development, electronic records management," she says. The list goes on. "There are a lot I cannot recall that I have done," she adds.

But her 24 years in the camp have come at a cost. Her family has lost any claim on land they once owned in a country she's never known. Her unlikely fantasy is that one day the camp gates will open, and she'll be granted a Kenyan passport. "That's nice, if we are considered as Kenyan citizens," she says.

A phrase you always hear in the camp is that the refugees will return to Somalia when it's peaceful. But that can mean different things. For Abdurahman, it means she'd go back if there's a decent school for her kids. Mursal would return if there's a chance to move from job training to an actual job. For Hussein Farah, a former science teacher who won the last election for camp chairman, it's when Somalia is safe enough to hold an actual representative vote.

"Yeah I was elected by one man, one vote, in the camp," he says. I ask: "So you basically want Somalia to look more like Dadaab?" "Yes! Yes of course," Farah says. He's willing to apply the skills he's learned in the camp to rebuild his country. As soon as his country looks a lot more like his camp.

