

BOOK REVIEW

Derese G. Kassa. *Refugee Spaces and Urban Citizenship in Nairobi: Africa's Sanctuary City*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018. 93 pp. \$90.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9-781498-570992.

A significant number of refugees in Africa choose to live outside of designated camps; they locate in urban areas instead for a variety of reasons, including seeking better access to economic opportunities and social services such as schools or health facilities. While the amount of research on urban refugees in Africa has grown in recent years, it remains much more limited compared to the research conducted on refugees living inside traditional refugee camps.

Refugee Spaces and Urban Citizenship in Nairobi: Africa's Sanctuary City by Derese G. Kassa represents a welcome endeavor that seeks to narrow this gap. Drawing upon urban theories, the author examines multiple aspects of the quotidian lives of Ethiopian refugees living in Nairobi, Kenya. Nairobi is seen as a “melting pot” of refugees from various neighboring African countries; nevertheless, most of the published scholarly works have focused either on Somali refugees or to a lesser extent on Congolese refugees, the two largest refugee populations in the Kenyan capital. From an empirical perspective, a study on Ethiopian refugees thus provides an important contribution to the existing forced migration literature.

The book consists of five chapters. Chapter One, “Setting the Scene,” sets out the key arguments, drawing upon urban citizenship literature, in particular Henry Lefebvre’s concept of “The Right to the City,” as a main theoretical framework for the book. Chapter Two, “Africa’s Sanctuary City,” provides the research context, including a brief history of Nairobi and of refugee influxes to Kenya. It also includes an overview of the research methods; the author employed interviewing as a key data collection tool and conducted a total of fifty interviews during the research period.

The subsequent two chapters present the empirical findings. Chapter Three, “The Making of Urban Refugees,” gives a detailed profile of Ethiopian refugees in Nairobi and explores the ways in which they navigate the range of challenges as well as opportunities available to them in the city. This chapter also discusses their livelihood strategies, including some businesses established by refugees, such as restaurants and beauty salons. It also highlights

the various types of religious, civil, and cultural organizations which were founded by refugees themselves, highlighting the roles that these organizations play in the refugees' day-to-day lives in Nairobi.

Chapter Four, “‘Governing’ Refugees,” discusses the relationship between urban refugees and the Kenyan state, with particular focus on refugees' access to political rights. After outlining a summary of international and national legal and governance frameworks related to refugees, this chapter reviews the history of legal protection for refugees in Nairobi's context. In particular, it sheds light on the widespread practices of harassment and bribe-seeking by the Kenyan police against refugees. Relatedly, the author highlights the ways in which the Kenyan government approaches refugees from a “securitization” perspective and how such a viewpoint manifests as real constraints on the lives of refugees in the capital city.

The final chapter, “Refugee Spaces,” synthesizes the author's findings and provides an analysis with reference to Lefebvre's concept of “The Right to the City.” This chapter points to the diversity among Ethiopian refugees in Nairobi, for instance, in terms of their reasons for flight and their diverse economic strategies. Kassa notes that these refugees have produced “social, economic, and political practices difficult to qualify in such conventional terms like ‘refugees’, ‘immigrants’ or a ‘citizen’” (84). This finding leads to a broader observation about the situation of urban refugees in Nairobi, in which there is “a liminal state of existences between being a refugee, an immigrant, or an urban citizen. Hence I dubbed it as being ‘stranded stranger’ in the city” (84). This chapter concludes by evaluating refugee lives in Nairobi vis-à-vis Lefebvre's concept. According to Kassa, the empirical reality of urban Ethiopian refugees meets two of the main criteria of urban citizenship: namely, inhabitation of the city and the production of social spaces. Yet, it fails to meet the third criterion—having the political right to participate in the democratic governance of the city.

Overall, the book provides interesting insights into the lives of self-settled Ethiopian refugees. However, one limitation is that it contains relatively little information about data sources and methods. For instance, having more detailed information about research participants would be helpful for readers to contextualize Kassa's findings. Also, while this study is almost entirely qualitative, some explanation of the selection of interviewees is still important in order for readers to assess the representativeness of the author's findings.

Nonetheless, *Refugee Spaces and Urban Citizenship in Nairobi* represents an important contribution to the field of forced migration theoretically and empirically, especially given the scarcity of existing knowledge. It also offers useful implications for practitioners, particularly in light of the increasing trend toward urbanization in forced displacement situations.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Balakian, Sophia. 2020. "Navigating Patchwork Governance: Somalis in Kenya, National Security, and Refugee Resettlement." *African Studies Review* 63 (1): 43–64. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.53](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.53).
- Whitaker, Beth Elise. 2020. "Refugees, Foreign Nationals, and Wageni: Comparing African Responses to Somali Migration." *African Studies Review* 63 (1): 18–42. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.52](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.52).