

BOOK REVIEW

Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, *African Refugees*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023. 634 pp. Index. Maps. \$50.00. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0253064417.

In this large tome Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the context, courses, conditions, and consequences of refugee lives, issues, policies, and solutions for African refugees “everywhere they may be found” (xxi). Their “decolonial project” (xxv–vi) proposes to challenge the “Eurocentric foundations” of “Refugee Studies,” and is thus part of the significant uptick in scholarship and activism–development literature about refugees and refuge in Africa and African studies, and from the Global South. It is a welcome addition with some caveats.


Divided into four major parts of over a hundred pages each, and a conclusion, *African Refugees* discusses “Context,” “Making Refugees,” “Displaced Lives,” and “Protection and Solutions.” The eighteen chapters cover, in order, refugeehood in Africa; refugee studies; African refugee studies; human rights instruments on African refugees; states and policy frameworks; colonialism and the making of refugees in Africa; postcolonial politics, wars and African refugee problems; internal displacement; refugee camps and settlements; urban refugees; refugee women: gendering policy and protection; African refugee youth; hope in displacement; refugees and cultures of creativity; refugee protection and management; durable solutions and the crisis of development; home, return and postrelocation; citizenship, rights and development; and, ending Africa’s refugee crisis.

Ostensibly, Falola and Yacob-Haliso seek to bridge the divide between refugee studies and African studies—both interdisciplinary fields with complex historical relationships with international and area studies (and others)—and the agenda-setting intervention recentering Africans in African refugee studies is welcome and needed. At the end of the day, however, when I pick up a monograph, I want to be able to understand how debates are to be advanced and then see that advancement sustained in well-supported and evidenced argument. Gaim Kibreab, most active in refugee studies in the 1980s, and Liisa Maalki’s foundational work (36), now three decades old, are no longer points of departure for refugee studies in Africa. While it is indisputable that African refugees have long been pathologized by scholars and activists, several decades of complex, diverse, and critical scholarship has worked to rectify misrepresentation, passivity, and marginalization (e.g., Iris Berger et al., 2015; and a forum in the *African*

Studies Review, 63.3, September 2020). Here, abundant empirical evidence is disgorged, abuses denounced, and numerous well-conceived policies are advocated. But with the important qualification that more Africans and African refugees ought to be authoring and at the center of African refugee studies, it remains unclear how scholarly debates between refugee studies and African studies have been advanced here. Too often engagement with the vast literature on refugee studies is insufficient and occasionally perfunctory. Dismissing the subfield of urban refugee studies in one sentence (275), for example, is quite unsettling.

As admirable as a “comprehensive overview” as a goal may be, however, it is not and cannot ever be such. The fields of African studies and Refugee Studies are dynamic and multivalent. The research subjects and sites are unstable and mobile. Indeed, the subject matter is characterized by mobility. Successful scholarly engagement is predicated on accessibility. In this vein, missing from the index are significant subject matter and analytical terms, including but not limited to: asylum, migration, migrant, statelessness, citizenship, particular social group, resettlement, refoulement, refugee status determination, and even the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, the 1967 Protocol which extended the Refugee Convention to the African continent, or the 1969 OAU Convention. By contrast, both the New York Declaration and the Global Compact (which have some heuristic value but no international legal heft) *are* indexed. This inattentiveness is doubly frustrating as some of these omitted terms are explored in various ways in differing depth in specific chapters (e.g., “particular social group,” 41; “asylum,” 283–96; “citizenship,” 493–515). For a volume that promises so much, a rigorous indexer (and zealous proofreader) ought to have been engaged to fully realize its potential.

Notwithstanding my criticisms, I recommend this book to anyone interested in African refugee studies specifically, or contemporary development issues more broadly. It will offer novelty and insight to many readers, and is replete with useful data and commentary. Ultimately, however, I somewhat gingerly suggest this is more accurately a volume of “Reflections on the Contemporary Refugee Experience in Africa.” My reason for this comment is that the millions of Africans who have and continue to flee abroad and claim asylum within non-African nation states that have ratified the Convention are rarely mentioned, with some exceptions, such as a brief discussion of Donald Trump’s administration (48–50), and two paragraphs on the US border (72). Subjects as diverse as informal migration, documentary precarity, *de facto* statelessness, credibility determinations, the technologies of suspicion Africans encounter in Europe and the Americas, African ordeals navigating asylum application procedures, and realigning African narratives within the confines of the five protected categories, remain undisturbed. In some respect, this work underscores both how vast the field of African refugee studies is today but how authoring a comprehensive treatment may possibly be a fool’s errand.

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