Gentille Meda Dusenge

A CONGOLESE REFUGEE'S QUEST FOR A PURPOSE AND BETTER LIFE

More to Life than a Refugee Camp

Gender Studies

Collection Editors

JAN ETIENNE

&

REHAM ELMORALLY





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Abstract

This book shares my lived experience as a Congolese refugee in Rwanda, revealing how gender challenges, displacement, poverty, and structural injustices intersected and affected my personal expression and professional growth. My path shows how education, speaking out, and personal choice can help break patterns of poverty and exclusion. It is a story of possibility and persistence, but also one of insights and recommendations for the untold number of refugees and the people who support their journeys in this turbulent world.

Key words

Refugees, displaced people, asylum seekers, resettlement, host countries, UNHCR, forced migration

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Learning objectives

- Learning objective one: to develop an understanding of how being identified as a refugee affects the way a person can seize opportunities to rise above forced migration and poverty. Structural violence, as Paul Farmer described it in 2004, refers to the way social structures, like poverty, racism, sexism, and political exclusion, systematically harm or disadvantage people. By reading this book, readers will gain insights into the structuring of the African refugee experience, where having a refugee status limits opportunities available for displaced African youth. The end purpose is to inspire readers to apply insights from Gentille's story to their own communities, fostering advocacy, policy reform, and grassroots initiatives aimed at empowering refugees and displaced people.
- Learning objective two: to use intersectional feminist theory, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 paper, to show how Gentille's gender, refugee status, race, class, and nationality are not isolated challenges, but they interact and add to act against her in a system that doesn't account for her compounded vulnerability. By seeing it through Gentille's eyes, the reader can discover how her heightened challenges around education, marriage, motherhood, and her path to asylum are overlooked by women's empowerment perspectives and refugee policies that fail to effectively address that intersectionality.
- Learning objective three: to critically evaluate the systemic effectiveness of global organizations and host governments

X

in addressing intersecting barriers of race, gender, and displacement. Recognizing that individual refugee needs may become invisible in the broader refugee discourse, where policies and strategies are centred on universal experiences. By examining Gentille's personal narrative, readers will understand how solutions that mute the individuality of refugee voices marginalize African women refugees in unique and compounding ways. Readers can develop a lived experience perspective of what it takes for women refugees and asylum seekers to move beyond the barriers that deter them, and ultimately live a life of fulfilment and hope.

Learning objective four: to explore how changes in the way people are being educated may serve as an effective future solution for people like Gentille. In this story, readers will learn how Kepler University's innovative approach to using massive open online courses eventually gave Gentille the opportunity she needed to get her degree. Consider how elearning platforms and digital classrooms are transformative educational tools for displaced students, provided they have access to the technology that supports such learning methods. Readers will also consider the accessibility gaps inherent in digital education, reflecting on how systemic inequities—such as lack of internet access—may exacerbate educational inequalities for displaced students.

Introduction

This book shares my lived experience as a Congolese refugee in Rwanda, revealing how forced migration and a refugee status affected my personal expression and professional growth, and how I forged my future through advocacy and education. Being born female in Africa has many cultural and social challenges, and these obstacles are magnified when you are born into a displaced community, and you must grow into womanhood through the frame of a refugee's life. For academic students, my journey offers a window to intersectional feminist theory, which looks at how different forms of oppression—like race, gender, and socioeconomic status—make life harder for people who are already on the outside of accepted society. It also reveals why we should be critical of the unfair societal conditions that make it difficult for refugees, especially women and girls, to live their lives, drawing on the idea of structural violence. Despite these obstacles, my resilience is strengthened in a refugee environment that is not just visibly harsh and violent, but where I must also endure the slow, invisible suffering caused by unequal access to resources, rights, and opportunities.

The chapters reveal how I keep seeking my life's purpose while navigating the challenges of being raised as a refugee, never giving up on my dream that life could be better. I talk candidly 2

about my experiences, from the hardship of refugee camp life to the demands of being different in my public boarding school, and from struggling to find myself as a young adult, a wife, a student, always bearing the societal label of refugee. This is my story of being a little refugee girl who had desires and dreams, who turned her wishes into ideas and experiences, and who overcame a resistant environment to find her place of hope and purpose—as a student turned teacher, a wife, a mother, and a career woman.

I believe this is a story of possibility and persistence, but also one of insights and recommendations for the untold number of refugees and people who support their journeys in this turbulent world. While deeply personal, this narrative also reflects broader patterns of displacement, resilience, and marginalization that resonate across refugee communities globally. It bridges the individual and the collective, urging readers to consider how structural forces shape personal struggles and achievements. It challenges mainstream narratives about refugees, encouraging a transition from tokenistic depictions to genuine involvement with the needs, ambitions, and agency of displaced populations. It is vital for scholars, policymakers, and advocates to draw on lived experiences as an important source of knowledge.

1 A seat at the refugee table in Geneva

The first Global Refugee Forum took place in December 2019 in Geneva, Switzerland. Its purpose: to bring the international community together in a show of unity with the world's refugees and the countries and communities that host them. The Forum was set to include around 3,000 participants, including four Heads of State or Government, more than 90 Government Ministers, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, over 50 international organizations, representatives of more than 130 companies and foundations, as well as 250 civil society organizations, and some 70 refugees. I was one of those refugees. My name is Gentille Dusenge, and this is my refugee story.

Perhaps I should start by painting a picture of why such a Global Refugee Forum has become necessary. You see, there is an invisible country without real borders, one in which people have become removed from the places they once called home. Instead, they have been forced to walk hundreds of miles on foreign roads, carrying their meager possessions. They have been banded together in tented camps and temporary housing. The

dispossessed citizens of this unseen country, which is scattered across territories belonging to other people, have little claim to their cultural identity other than the languages they speak and the rituals they cling to as reminders of their long-lost homes. It's a hidden nation created by forced displacement. Men, women, and children who can no longer belong or live safely due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or events seriously disturbing public order.

My displacement story is rooted in the Democratic Republic of Congo—known by many names, but today, called the DRC. It is an African nation whose turbulent history was shaped by colonialists like King Leopold II of Belgium, who brutally exploited the country as his personal colony during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Under Leopold's rule, the Congolese people endured forced labor, violence, and widespread suffering, as the nation's vast natural wealth—rubber, ivory, and minerals—was extracted to enrich foreign powers. This legacy of exploitation left deep scars on the people and set the stage for generations of poverty and political instability.

As the world entered the 21st century, conflict in the DRC escalated. Faced with rising violence and the immediate threat to their lives, my parents had been forced to make the harrowing choice to leave the only home they had ever known in the DRC. With little time and all our lives at stake, they only packed the belongings they could carry on their backs, and we set out on foot, bound for neighboring Rwanda, where we didn't know if we would be safe. I was too small to understand that my parents were sacrificing everything for survival and safety. Not only were they leaving the country that had once given them an identity,

but they were also leaving behind a life they had built, a community, and hopes and dreams for the future. At that time, the most important thing was to keep the family alive.

The world we all live in is well acquainted with war. Around the globe, there are similar stories of refugee crises, symptoms of humanity's deeper systemic issues, including global inequality, racialized geopolitics, and the enduring impact of imperialism. The 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed unprecedented levels of forced displacement due to colonial legacies, conflict, and climate change. It seems that centuries ago, wars and conflicts would cause the world to fall apart, then order would somehow be restored. But by the end of 2019, it was clear that the situation of forced displacement was no longer a temporary disorder; it had become a widespread and ongoing global phenomenon. At that time, more than 26 million people were classified as refugees worldwide. Additionally, there were 45.7 million internally displaced people and 4.2 million asylum-seekers. If you put them all together, these displaced people made up 22% of the US population!

When I heard of the Global Refugee Forum in 2019, my heart soared in anticipation. I was someone who lived in this border-less country of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people, where we lacked one voice, one platform, one recognized identity. There were so few invited places available for refugees to attend the Forum, and yet I hoped that through my organization, Kepler University, there would be an opportunity for me to go to Switzerland. I was part of an education association for refugees—the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium—and when the Global Refugee Forum selection was done, I had the

best news. My CLCC teammates had elected me to attend the event. I wish you could understand my feelings. From elation and excitement and huge anticipation to some anxiety that people would change their minds about sending me, and even a small fear of the unknown. I had never been on a plane before, and here I was going to be traveling across continents and oceans. I could hardly sleep in the weeks before the trip, wondering if it would happen.

Most travelers can apply for visas with relative ease. I was a refugee, and there are strict guidelines about how, where, and when we may move about if we are to retain our refugee status in the host country. In my case, I was living in the Kiziba refugee camp in Rwanda. The Kiziba camp is the oldest refugee settlement in Rwanda, located in the country's remote mountainous Karongi District. There are about 17,000 refugees living here in an area the size of about forty football fields. The fact that I would be representing these fellow refugees at a global event made it easier to deal with the red tape to procure my travel visa, and to do the 160-mile journey from Kiziba to the government offices in Kigali and back again twice.

I eagerly filled in the Swiss visa application forms and started going through the application process, and a new feeling of hope stirred in me. I had this fervent belief that as someone with a voice and a seat at the Global Refugee Forum table, my life could change once and for all. I imagined all the important people I would meet, and how I would make new personal connections and build out a stronger professional network, and that it would all lead to a game-changing opportunity for my life and the impact I could have around me. I think that's just the optimism in me, something of the hope I have felt even in difficult times.

My ten-day visa for Switzerland finally arrived, and I must have boarded the plane with that same energy and excitement coursing through my veins because I found it hard to sit still, so much so that the older lady seated next to me reached across and quieted me, saying that my nervous motion was making her uncomfortable. When she heard this was my first flight ever, we got to talk about her life and work in Africa, and her family back in Europe. Soon our plane landed in Brussels, and she explained how our transit between flights would work and taught me how to read a boarding pass. She even held my hand until we got separated by security, where she boarded ahead of me, and we did not see each other again. I found my seat more easily on the second flight and settled, quickly aware that these people around me were less engaging. Nobody talked to each other, and everybody pretended to be in their own space right up to when we landed in Switzerland.

Geneva, what a city. Imagine I was a mere toddler when my parents found their way from the conflict in the DRC to the Rwandan refugee camp. Now, here I was in the Ibis hotel with its big fluffy white bed and clean towels, far away from Kiziba's clay huts and dark alleys, the dirt tracks, and muddy ravines. The first thing I noticed: there were no mosquitoes, no flies—and I could drink the running water without boiling it. Oh, and I was hungry! We had been given a daily stipend, and on that first afternoon, I used mine to buy something to eat while I waited eagerly for the rest of the invited refugees from other countries to gather. When evening arrived, we were introduced to more of our hosts,

and we took time to connect with the other invited refugees. We chatted a lot, and I realized we all had one other thing in common—we had plans for how we would make the most of our time at the Global Refugee Forum, and we were glad to be there as representatives to tell the refugee story.

Dinner time came, and we entered the food hall. It was a small shock. There was no buffet. Dinner had been pre-ordered, and one had to eat what was served. It was all Western food, nothing familiar to our palates. Sam, my refugee colleague from Burundi, had declared before dinner that he was starving, and yet now he did not even touch the food, confiding that even the aroma of the meal made his stomach churn. I picked at the foreign food, while Sam went to bed hungry that night. I slept wonderfully well; I even dared to put my feet on the white sheets like I had seen them do in movies because my shoes were without a speck of dust. As for food, our hotel breakfast in the morning brought little relief. Sam helped himself to the only thing that looked familiar and edible—red apples!

In some ways, the big refugee event was an isolating experience. I had expected more talking and more connecting. Instead, there was lots of walking, sitting, and listening. The venues for the forum were huge, and we were expected to find our way around. We met up in a preparation room, and I asked one of the hosts if they could please just tell us where to find bottles of water. As we navigated the Global Refugee Forum program, we ended up at the *Palais de Nations'* building, where again we truly hoped for a good buffet meal with more choices. Instead, participants were offered cold sandwiches and burgers. Sam took one look and was disappointed. He was so hungry and hardly strong enough

to participate in anything. To help him, I sought out the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s team lead, Leonne, whose workload, just helping to manage and coordinate our logistics, was really busy. But she did not know where we could find a restaurant serving African food and said so in a friendly way.

There was an unexpected highlight for me while in Geneva. When planning the trip, I had hoped to see Laetitia, a friend of mine who lived in Germany. We had met when she volunteered in Rwanda. But my stay in Europe was too short, my visa was for attending the forum, and I could not travel freely as she could. I was thrilled when she opted to come to Switzerland instead. When we met up one evening, I told her about the forum food situation, and we found a Cameroonian restaurant in Geneva. Sam was so happy with the take-out meal I brought him, it felt like we had at least one success, even if the meal was a big chunk of my stipend. It cost about 65 *Franc Suisse*, which seemed very expensive for a refugee African on a UNHCR budget. The truth was that most of the refugees had already used a big part of their stipend money for personal and family reasons before even traveling to Geneva.

The fact that food choices at such a global refugee event didn't take ethnic diversity into account somehow began to shape my perspective on how far apart these policy discussions were from real life. The forum was about a universal refugee problem, a top-down approach. I could not help wondering if this mistake is typical of many well-meaning refugee programs. Being a refugee becomes a cultural identity, one that overshadows our different origin stories. We are all bundled in one big group under

the banner of refugee problems; our real voices and individual messages are muted in the search for solutions.

Of all the activities going on at the Global Refugee Forum, I was most excited to be part of a panel about refugee education. That was the real business for me because I had been asked to share my personal experience as a refugee student and talk about the importance of funding refugee education. My life was a testimony about the impact of education, and I was inspired to tell others about being a mother to a two-year-old boy, about being a teacher myself, and about my commitment to being an outstanding student. I valued that I had been elected by my fellow refugee students at the Kepler campus as their Student Government President. I was grateful for the recognition from my refugee community, to be seen as an advocate and community leader.

My life lessons had already taught me that connecting with people was a key tool for finding growth opportunities and being given a chance to make a difference. That's why I wanted to use the time at the forum to share my story and to grow my network in support of my refugee community. As the forum hosts prepared us for the panel and put us through rehearsal processes, I listened to their guidance. The panel messaging was planned—some wanted me to say this, others stressed the importance of saying that. Yet, in that moment, on the stage in front of all the people, I simply spoke what came to my mind. And I was observant enough to see that my outspokenness did not sit well with the panel chairperson. I thought it may be why he later ignored my requests for email introductions to my fellow panelists, which was disappointing. You see, there were all these pledges at the

Forum, with stakeholders promising to support an "out of camp" approach for refugees who wanted more education, more jobs, and more opportunities.

Nevertheless, I wanted to make the most of meeting key people in person at the Global Refugee Forum, and before we even left Geneva, I excitedly reached out to the few panelists who had shared business cards with me. These were people who cared about the interests of refugees, about their livelihoods. It was good to see the forum attendees talking of better infrastructure, not just sanitation, but also digital connectivity. I was also pleased to hear ideas for job creation and empowering women refugees. I collected information about organizations that were participating and looked for anything that would be helpful for our community and the refugee camp. My heart was full of hope for what could be in the future, especially around improving the quality of education. Sadly, all that reaching out was in vain because after the event, none of the people I had spoken to, messaged, or emailed bothered to reply or respond.

Only one person reached out to me as part of my presence at the event. Ms Julie Kasper, from Childhood Education International, a global organization whose mission is to use education as a tool for global development and to help create sustainable futures for everyone. Ms Kasper was the Director of Teacher Learning and Leadership at the Centre for Professional Learning. I recall how, after the panel session, she came and warmly shook my hand, and was really kind, saying she wanted us to connect. And we did, once I was back in Rwanda, we got in touch, and she even offered me an internship, and she has always been happy

to see my professional growth. We still stay in touch today, and it is my most valued connection from the Global Refugee Forum.

Soon, the Geneva event was ending, and to be honest, by then I had seen so many shiny-haired people in fancy clothes that I was somehow longing for the simplicity of my family. I had missed my little boy's second birthday for this trip, and I was very happy to be going home to my husband and son in the morning. So happy in fact that I could not sleep and got up very early, showered, and started to pack while it was still dark. All the while, imagining my joy of hugging my son, being back in my own simple bed, and thinking how I would share stories of Switzerland with my refugee colleagues. Making sure my suitcase was packed and closed, I headed to the bathroom. Suddenly, there was a commotion outside my hotel door. It was a woman in charge of organizing the refugee delegates, and she was banging on the door and shouting my name. I rushed to open it, and when I saw her relief, I realized she thought I might have escaped or disappeared. She said it was almost time to leave and that she was there to make sure I was going to catch the plane. Her attitude shifted when she glanced past me and saw my packed suitcases. I told her that, as she could see, I was ready to go. It made me even more eager to return to Rwanda.

Events like the Global Refugee Forum reflect broader power relations, in which host countries and international agencies frequently decide policies without fully appreciating or addressing the lived reality of displacement. For people like Sam and me, the event was simply an architected experience that was built for an audience of refugee observers. It felt like yet another example of useless inclusion that was not truly able to change the

underlying unfairness that keeps the world's refugees in limbo, while being left out. The forum interactions taught me that while international events can raise awareness, the real change comes from on-the-ground efforts that prioritize refugees' voices and leadership.

The lack of action or follow-through I experienced is an example of a problem that keeps coming up: refugees being included in global platforms for no reason other than to be a token presence. Platforms like the Global Refugee Forum bring attention to refugees, but they don't always give them real chances to change policy or influence funding. Because of this gap, we need to rethink how refugees are represented so that their views take the lead in global discussions about displacement, not just add to them. Although the forum's promises largely remained unfulfilled, the experience reinforced my commitment to education as a tool for empowerment. It inspired me to seize each opportunity that came my way to grow professionally and to work for the benefit of the displaced community.

One year later, my earlier trip to the Global Refugee Forum in 2019 yielded a second surprise opportunity when I was invited to attend another refugee event in Kigali, this time with the Deputy High Commissioner of the UNHCR, Ms Kelly Clements, in attendance. There was just one problem. The meeting we were to have with her was scheduled for the same day as my university graduation ceremony. Still, I wanted to represent my refugee community and use this moment with someone so high up in the UNHCR to talk about the hopes and vision that had been inspired by the Geneva promises—a dream that life for refugees could be better yet. Again, the meeting organizers had a

preparatory session and gave us the gratitude script. We were told what to say and what we should not dare mention. Say your name, say where you live, and say what you do for the UNHCR. Be sure to say that the Geneva Global Refugee Forum had created a positive experience, and that it was through our UNHCR's Kiziba refugee camp representative that I had been able to obtain an opportunity at UNHCR headquarters in Kigali.

What I wanted to say was yes, I was a refugee who attended the Global Refugee Forum, and that I had worked hard and studied hard, that I had put all my effort into writing my exams and doing well. And when I had seen the job description that the UNHCR representative shared, I knew with certainty that I was qualified for the role and that I deserved the opportunity through merit. My commitment to my education mattered. Not the goodness of others, or because I had attended the Global Refugee Event, and it had somehow benefited me. That day, I left my graduation to attend the UNHCR meeting with Ms Clements, and then deeply regretted missing the ceremony. The whole UNHCR program was rushed, and we were cut short when we tried to talk with Ms Clements. Is this what it was meant to be, these PR centered events that looked promising, but which ended up being unproductive for the refugees themselves?

When I somehow got invited to attend the Global Refugee Forum again in 2023, I declined the trip. There were a few reasons. My family was growing; I had a small baby. And I believed it would be a good experience for some of my other refugee colleagues to travel and attend a global event and see if they could somehow be more than part of the promotional footage. Personally, I was grateful for once having had a seat at the Global Refugee Forum

table. Glad for the chance we refugees were given to see messages served up at a global level where goodwill was an integral part of the politics of that invisible country which stamped our papers, giving us status as dispossessed, displaced people.

But the fact that meaningless inclusion keeps happening shows that the system needs to be changed so that it can meet not only the immediate needs of refugees but also the inherent unfairness that keeps them separated and leads to them being left out. Platforms like the Global Refugee Forum ought to stop only showcasing refugees and start genuinely integrating them as decision-makers and policy-making participants. It's easy to find grassroots refugee-led groups—organizations, associations, coalitions, networks, faith-based groups, or initiatives—that are linked closely to displaced communities. They are the activists and advocates whose understanding of the humanitarian, cultural, and developmental needs of refugee communities, and whose real refugee voices, would surely help guarantee that practical solutions are informed by the lived reality of displacement.

One thing I would always remember about my time in Geneva would be fellow refugee Sam from Burundi, starving at the Global Refugee Forum, but for his apples from the breakfast buffet. People can eat as many apples as they want in Switzerland—it's amazing! You see, apples are one of the most expensive fruits in Rwanda. Not everyone in Rwanda gets to eat apples. They are for high-class people. But we can buy bananas—we would even get five or six bananas for the price of one apple. I somehow think it is a good metaphor for life as a refugee. When you are invited to sit at a table where there is seemingly plenty to eat, but it's not food you know, and so you are happy to discover the apples,

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but you become aware that, at its best, your life is mostly going to be about the bananas. In the end, you reflect with gratitude because you work with what you are given, and you make the most of what you have.

The Global Refugee Event may be a highlight on a calendar for funding, policy, and political purposes. Yet for us refugees, we value most the men and women who make a tangible difference in our everyday lives. Like the ones who played great roles in creating education opportunities for refugees in Rwanda and in the Kiziba refugee camp, where I could attend and graduate from university. We are the ones who know the journeys we must take to be seen and heard in this world. When I reflect, I want to tell the story of my refugee life and the wonderful people who played a real part in helping me achieve my goals and in making my education possible. How I got married, became a mother, and found a career, because people in refugee organizations on the ground, with us and among us, worked alongside us to overcome challenges. That is why I am writing my book, to share what life is like when you are dispossessed, living as a refugee who has hopes and dreams for making a better future for yourself and for your displaced people.

Unclassified in Kiziba, without parents or refugee papers

When you flee from war and violence, you lose the protection of the country in which you were born, the country your parents once called their home, and you lose a part of your national identity. If you are a refugee child, you cease to exist as a citizen of any country. You are only a few lines of print on a refugee document that is given to your parents to affirm their displaced status. This bureaucratic reduction of identity makes people less human and shows how displacement can easily succumb to systemic violence. Even though refugee registration systems are necessary, they can be abused, mismanaged, and biased, making things worse for the people they are supposed to protect. These actions hurt children more than adults, taking away their power and making cycles of exclusion even stronger. In Rwanda, more than a third of the refugee population is made up of school-going children. My siblings and I were among those children whose lives were reduced to some lines of text. The UNHCR and all the supporting refugee organizations reminded everyone of the

importance of being registered properly—it was the best way to make sure we could, as a family, have access to the services being provided to refugees. Those refugee status documents were vital. My parents had spent the many hours needed to get their own documentation sorted. So let me tell you what happened, and how we children ended up unclassified, without parents or refugee papers.

In the Kiziba refugee camp, most of the thousands of people there had fled Rwanda's neighbor, the DRC. The children were born either on the way to fleeing, or in the refugee camp. I was the first child in my family, followed by my brother Gedeon, and we were just two small children when my parents came to Rwanda. I can only imagine what it must have been like for my mother and father when they first arrived at Kiziba and were met with the grim reality of life in exile. The camp was severely overcrowded, with makeshift shelters crammed together in a maze of patched tarpaulins and mud walls. Access to clean water was a daily struggle, often requiring hours of queuing at communal taps, and sanitation facilities were rudimentary at best, posing constant health risks. The lack of privacy and the overwhelming sense of confinement must have made the camp feel less like a place of refuge and more like an open-air prison, where survival overshadowed the faintest hope of rebuilding a life.

Despite the circumstances, or perhaps because of them, our family grew fast while we were in the camp; my mom had five more kids, and even though we are all adults now, I am forever the oldest child, responsible in some measure for my siblings. Kiziba refugee camp was a big mountainous place, green hills up and down, all covered with tents. Those were our homes,