

THE PLIGHT OF FEMALE URBAN REFUGEES IN UGANDA



THE HUMANITARIAN
PLATFORM FOR LOCAL
AND NATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS IN UGANDA



Majority of refugees in the region are from the DRC, Burundi, South Sudan and the Central Africa Republic. They are also mostly hosted in Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia among other countries in the East and Horn of Africa

While most refugees are settled in camps, a growing number is dispersed in urban areas. In demarcated hosting districts, more refugees are dispersing to urban and peri-urban areas in quest for better services and employment. The growing trend of urban refugees in Uganda

comes with underlying challenges especially for the most vulnerable populations among refugees. In the absence of financial assistance, urban refugees, particularly young girls and women often struggle to find gainful employment and report frequent cases of discrimination, sexual abuse and exploitation. The right to move freely without fear and to work are often unmet for urban refugees. It is also noted that majority of the refugee response interventions target refugees in settlements thus leaving a significant number of urban dispersed refugees underserved.



26%

Total number of refugees globally who are hosted in Sub-Saharan Africa



8%

Of all refugees in Uganda are dispersed within Kampala, the country's capital



1.4m

Total number of refugees currently hosted by Uganda. Majority are from South Sudan, DRC and Burundi

Responding to the needs of urban refugees requires a concerted effort towards strengthening partnerships with key factors such as the private sector and efforts for coordination of humanitarian and development agencies, sensitization of refugees and host populations as well as delivering comprehensive socioeconomic services. The Humanitarian Platform for local and national organizations in Uganda under the auspices of the Uganda National NGO Forum organization a special session to discuss the plight of female urban refugees at the Annual National Youth Festival. The session provided a platform for female urban refugees to engage with key actors including representatives of humanitarian, development and women rights agencies. It was led by a four-member panel comprising one refugee female youth living in Kampala and three representatives from Inter-Aid Uganda, Refuge Law Project and ISIS WICCE – agencies working on issues affecting refugees and women in fragile settings.



Noella is a refugee from DRC who has lived in Uganda for over 10 years. She is trained as a counsellor and community extension worker by Inter-AID Uganda. She had a dream of being a lawyer but this gradually crumbled due to her refugee status and inability to further her studies. Nonetheless she is an instrumental member of her community and a co-founder of a Refugee Entrepreneurship Club in Kampala that aims at maximizing the potential of young female refugees to strengthen their skills for self-reliance.

“We are deliberately discriminated against by some members of the host community especially here in Kampala due to limited sensitization on how best we can co-exist. It is also important for response actors to appreciate that young female urban refugees do not need handouts to survive. Instead, they need more opportunities to explore their potential and unlock their skills for them to equally participate and contribute to the economy”

Noella Kabale, female urban refugee

Summary of Issues Affecting Female Refugees in Urban Areas

Sexual and reproductive health risks: segments of this population, particularly adolescents and youth find it difficult to access sexual and reproductive health information and services hence its low uptake and predisposal to early pregnancies, survival sex work and are caught in survival sex.

Social exclusion: there is a gap in strengthening awareness and highlighting ways in which the host community can be supportive to refugees. Current messaging entails the notion of refugees exerting pressure on socioeconomic amenities within host communities. This if not coupled with an indication of how well refugees can be integrated or their responsibilities results in negative attitudes which hinder coping and adaptability for most of the young women.

Language barrier: Language remains a critical challenge as most urban refugees try to seek employment or access any services. language is central to the wellbeing of young female urban refugees as it enables their ability to advocate for their needs, it opens doors of commerce for them and enhances their increased uptake of health information.

Legal obstructions :While there is a supportive policy and legal framework for refugee response in Uganda, there is still a gap with implementation and enforcement.

Partners' non adherence to the CRRF: Implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is hindered by some partners not adher-

Obtaining bail for refugees is still a challenge, this requires the person seeking bail to have a fixed place of aboard and sureties; yet most often they are struggling with integration and establishing a network of support.

Panelist, Refugee Law Project

ing to the 70:30 implementation criteria for interventions to benefit the host communities. This is the largest cause of hostilities between the two populations.

Political manipulation: especially in urban centers like Kampala, refugees are seen engaging in the politics of Uganda including claiming the right to vote while others are being used by political parties, contrary to the Ugandan laws.

What Works to Strengthen Outcomes For Female Urban Refugees

Safe spaces: these can be centers for access and uptake of a range of services and skills. Including reproductive health services, skills development and information on legal and education needs. For example, the Refugee Entrepreneurship Club founded by Noella. Considering the wide gap of access and uptake for reproductive health needs among young urban refugees, safe spaces serve to address stigma and break barriers for adolescents.

Linking to government programs: there are several programs ongoing for youth in Uganda such as the Youth Livelihoods Program that can be beneficial for female urban refugees. There is a general gap regarding access to financial services including credit for refugees who benefit from skills development interventions.

Advocacy and awareness sessions remain key to rallying masses towards responding to the needs of refugees in Uganda and drivers within conflict torn countries in the region. Through the Access to Justice Program, Refugee Law Project invests in English language sessions for urban refugees aged 15 and above to strengthen their ability to engage on issues that affect sustainable peace within their home countries and service delivery in the host country.

Psychosocial support: urban refugees bear deep rooted trauma. However, there are not adequate services to provide response. Organizations like Inter-Aid Uganda provide psychosocial support services to urban refugees through training them as extension counselors to reach out to fellow refugees. Partners like TPO Uganda must be brought on board to explore opportunities for support and capacity strengthening.

Inclusivity: this requires concerted efforts from various actors. The private sector for instance is not engaged enough to support the refugee integration process. Some refugees possess rich skills that can be tapped to grow the country's economy. This however needs to be viewed in context of the wider youth unemployment issue in Uganda in order to strike a balance.



“We feel left out. The government and key actors must grant us a sit at the table for us to articulate our issues. Even to our host communities. We need them to appreciate that anyone can find themselves in our position – as a refugee. Therefore, the first point of identification is to appreciate and recognize that we too are human beings with equal rights. That way, we can start to say we can make meaningful contribution to especially the host country.”

Noella Kabale, urban refugee

Response to conflict drivers in neighboring countries is the strongest solution. The Chairperson of the Humanitarian Platform urged the youth to appreciate their central role in addressing conflict drivers back home. This requires various factors especially religious leaders to intervene and position young people to champion the cause for peace in countries like South Sudan, DRC and Burundi.