



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



REPORT

Towards Inclusive Protection: Understanding Refugee Experiences and Gender Dynamics in Uganda

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The **Norwegian Refugee Council** (www.nrc.no) is an independent humanitarian organisation helping people forced to flee. We work in crises across 40 countries, providing life-saving and long-term assistance to millions of people every year.

Cover photo: An NRC staff at one of the Refugee communities in Uganda. © Dixon Odur / NRC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Uganda ranks among the leading refugee-hosting nations in Africa and globally, providing refuge to almost 1.6 million refugees and 46,000 asylum seekers. Despite the country's commendable open-door policy, ongoing conflicts in neighbouring countries, continual influxes of new arrivals, and significant underfunding have strained the effectiveness and sustainability of Uganda's refugee policy, leading to persistent protection risks.

This brief, informed by the voices of displaced communities, offers insights into the challenges faced by refugees, asylum seekers, and host communities in Uganda. Drawing upon qualitative data collected in late 2023 across Kampala, Southwest, and West Nile regions and supplemented by case studies compiled in early 2024, it aims to document the protection landscape and inform NRC's programming in Uganda, with a specific focus on gender dynamics.

The findings reveal enduring protection risks across critical areas including legal and justice challenges, limited access to housing, land and property rights, and struggles to secure livelihood opportunities and essential services. Gender dynamics, age, and disability introduce additional layers of complexity. While families and individuals identify coping mechanisms, these can often further exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Key Findings

The ongoing conflicts in their home countries have forced many refugees and asylum seekers into extended displacement, sometimes lasting for decades. This situation continues to push new arrivals to seek refuge in Uganda, where they confront uncertain futures. However, despite their desire to remain in Uganda, bureaucratic hurdles and delays in service provision and attaining a dignified livelihood persist, leaving many vulnerable. This vulnerability is especially pronounced for women, who continue to face sexual abuse while attempting to sustain not only their lives but also those of families.¹ In many cases, they may resort to adopting troubling coping mechanisms as a result.

While Uganda's settlement approach has been praised for fostering self-reliance and integration, refugees and asylum seekers still confront challenges. Tenure insecurity and rising rental costs in urban areas impede refugees from achieving stability. Additionally, gender biases often favour men in property decisions, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and marginalisation. Additionally, common housing issues like overcrowding and poor construction materials further impact health and overall wellbeing.

Refugees commonly encounter obstacles while striving to access livelihood opportunities and achieve self-reliance, with administrative hurdles, such as delays in acquiring work permits, frequently impeding their progress. Additionally, refugees residing in urban areas struggle to secure employment opportunities and face limited access to essential humanitarian assistance. Gender norms perpetuate traditional roles, further hindering women's economic empowerment. Coping mechanisms may force children into work, while adolescent girls and women may be pushed into early marriages or resort to prostitution for survival.

Uganda's policy grants refugees' access to essential services, but persistent barriers disproportionately affect refugees with disabilities and the elderly, exacerbating poverty and vulnerability. Access to healthcare, mental health support, and education can vary and is further complicated by cultural norms and gender disparities. Additionally, recent reductions in humanitarian aid, in particular food distribution, have raised concerns about food security, particularly for at-risk groups.

¹See Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) - Monthly Dashboard December 2023

Bureaucratic challenges and resource constraints persistently impede refugees' access to legal and justice services. Female refugees often perceive traditional justice systems as biased towards men, leading them to turn to humanitarian organisations for support. Safety concerns remain prevalent, especially for women and girls in rural areas, where they face heightened risks of gender-based violence during routine tasks and social gatherings. Relations with host communities vary, often strained by tensions heightened in urban areas due to economic hardships and resource scarcity. Refugees rely on community leaders and NGOs for support and conflict resolution, emphasising the importance of positive neighbourly relations for addressing social challenges and security issues.

Conclusions

This brief emphasises the importance for NRC to uphold the multi-sectoral strategy and community-based approach to address the persistent and intersecting protection risks encountered by refugees in Uganda, particularly for at-risk groups. It underscores the need to continue empowering and involving the community in protection processes, sustaining a focus on gender-responsive strategies, and integrating gender analysis into programme reviews. Recommendations underscore the significance of these actions as crucial steps toward fostering a more inclusive and resilient environment for displaced communities.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction and context

Uganda stands as the leading host of refugees in Africa and the sixth globally, accommodating almost 1.6 million refugees and 46,000 asylum seekers.² The majority, nearly 60 per cent, hail from South Sudan, while over 30 per cent originate from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The country continues to receive new arrivals, with more than 29,000 individuals registered since the onset of 2024.³ Despite Uganda's lauded open-door policy, granting prima facie recognition to refugees and providing significant protection and socio-economic rights, challenges loom large. The enduring crises in neighbouring countries and continuous influxes of new arrivals, coupled with severe underfunding—only 15 per cent of Uganda's 2024 refugee response is funded⁴ - have significantly strained the effectiveness and sustainability of Uganda's progressive refugee policy, highlighting the precariousness of the situation and the persistent protection risks to refugees and asylum seekers.

This protection brief, grounded in realities of displacement affected communities expressed during focus groups, aims to provide critical insights into the challenges faced by refugees, asylum seekers, and the host community in Uganda, incorporating a gender lens for a more compressive understanding. By amplifying their voices and shedding light on the protection risks and challenges, this brief aims to offer contextually relevant perspectives that can directly inform and support NRC's programming founded on a multi-sectoral strategy and community-based approach across major refugee hosting districts, including urban areas.

2. Methodology

This protection brief relies on qualitative data collected during four data collection activities conducted in late 2023 in locations in Kampala and Southwest and the West Nile, where NRC has an operational presence. NRC staff conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) as part of two different assessments: Community-Based Protection Assessments and Gender Analyses. These assessments aimed to explore and understand community-based protection risks, capacities, learnings and gaps from communities and gender dynamics among refugees – both new and protracted caseloads, asylum seekers, and host communities in both urban, rural and settlement contexts.

The majority of refugee and asylum seeker participants in the assessments were from South Sudan, reflecting the current population of displaced individuals in Uganda.⁵ In Kampala and Southwest, FGDs also included participants from Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. In the West Nile, participants also included individuals from Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A total of 50 FGDs and 24 KIIs were conducted across the research locations. There were an average of twelve participants in each FGD; all were stratified by gender and age groups. The brief includes four case studies, providing an exploration of individuals' stories that illustrate the refugee experience and the intersection of protection risks and their consequences.⁶

¹Figure as of 29 February 2024, UNHCR Uganda- Population Dashboard," Accessed 7 March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107064>

²Ibid.

³Figure as of 31 January 2024, UNHCR, "Uganda- funding Update," Accessed 7 March 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/uganda-funding-update>

⁴Supra note 1.

⁵All names mentioned in the case studies have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

Kampala and Southwest

Community-Based Protection Assessment: FGDs took place in Kampala and the Southwest region, with refugee and asylum seekers residing across four divisions of Kampala (Kawempe, Makindye, Central Kampala, Nakawa), as well as the surrounding cities of Wakiso and Mukono. Additionally, FGDs took place in refugee settlements in Isingiro (Nakivale/Oruchinga) and Kikube (Kyangwali).

Gender Analysis: FGDs were conducted with refugees in Kampala and settlements in Isingiro (Nakivale/Oruchinga) and Kikube (Kyangwali).

West Nile

Community-Based Protection Assessment: FGDs took place in the West Nile region with refugees and members of the host community residing in Adjumani, Obongi, and Lamwo, as well as refugee settlements in Yumbe (Bidibidi) and Terego/Madi-okollo (Rhino and Imvepi).

Gender Analysis Report: FGDs engaged refugees and host community members in Arua, Adjumani, and Lamwo as well as refugee settlements in Yumbe (Bidibidi) and Madi-Okollo (Rhino). Additionally, KIIs were conducted with host community stakeholders, along with one KII with a male refugee.

3. Key findings

Key findings from the assessments conducted in Kampala and Southwest and West Nile highlight critical challenges and protection risks faced by refugees and asylum seekers, both those who have been in Uganda for an extended period and those who are newly arrived. These assessments reveal persistent issues, including protection risks and insecurity, justice and legal challenges, such as barriers in registration processes, limited access to housing, land, and property (HLP) as well as challenges in accessing livelihood opportunities, basic needs and essential services. Gender dynamics and disparities are highlighted, and vulnerabilities for children and youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities are made clear. Negative coping mechanisms are documented, underscoring the complex nature of protection issues faced by displaced communities in these regions of Uganda.



3.1. Protracted displacement and registration

The ongoing conflict in their home countries has forced many refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda to endure prolonged displacement, often spanning decades. This ongoing turmoil drives new arrivals to seek refuge in Uganda, where they face uncertain futures.

Intent to stay

In FGDs, refugees and asylum seekers express their intent to stay in Uganda, citing ongoing security concerns in their country of origin and a lack of viable alternatives. In the West Nile, participants from South Sudan describe engaging in pendular movements across the border for economic reasons. However, they emphasise persistent security challenges and inadequate services as significant obstacles to a permanent return.

Refugee registration

Across the board, asylum seekers express a desire for official refugee registration; however, recent changes in eligibility for World Food Program (WFP) food rations have led to shifts in perceptions as asylum seekers re-evaluate the necessity and value of official registration. In addition, some refugees are reluctant to register due to the perceived complexity of the process and fears of family separation during reunion cases. Instances of rejected family reunion applications further contribute to this hesitation, as illustrated by accounts from men from South Sudan who joined their families but chose to skip registration upon arrival in Uganda to avoid potential separation. For those who have attempted registration, insights from FGDs, particularly in Rhino (Madi-Okollo) and Bidibidi (Yumbe) settlements, revealed complaints about lengthy and financially demanding procedures and bureaucratic processes.

“Refugees find themselves navigating from one office to another, and in some cases, being sent back to reception centres, which can lead to discouragement and a sense of hopelessness.”

- FGD participant, West Nile

In FGDs held in Kampala and Southwest, asylum seekers from various countries voiced concerns about the extensive delays in determining refugee status, expressing uncertainties about their legal standing, difficulties in obtaining official documentation, and their heightened vulnerability to arbitrary detentions, deportations, and challenges at border crossings. These challenges are believed to contribute to declining mental health among refugees. Additionally, challenges and delays in obtaining civil documents like birth certificates were reported in both areas. Host community participants expressed frustration over the exclusion of refugees who marry Ugandan residents from official documentation by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM); this omission affects the type of assistance a family can access.

At-risk populations and coping mechanisms

Asylum seekers have recounted experiences of facing demands for bribes and instances of sexual harassment, particularly affecting female participants. One respondent highlights a troubling coping mechanism, revealing that engaging in romantic relationships with authority figures is considered a preferable alternative to facing detention; as these relationships often evade punishment.

⁹Figure as of 29 February 2024, UNHCR Uganda- Population Dashboard, Accessed 7 March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>

⁹ibid.

¹⁰UNHCR Refugee Influx Dashboard - Uganda Refugee Response, Accessed 7 March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/es/dataviz/68>

¹¹VNG International, 2023, Self-Settled Refugees and the Impact on Service Delivery in Koboko Municipal Council., Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.vng-international.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FINAL-Nexus-brochure_small.pdf. This information was also confirmed during the KIIC2 and KIIC4.

¹²Office of the Town Clerk, 2023, Adjumani Town Council Report Refugee Statistics - 7 December 2023.

3.2. Access to housing, land and property

Although Uganda's settlement approach, including the practice of assigning land plots to refugees in 'village-style' settlements, has been acknowledged for promoting self-reliance and integration, participants in FGDs consistently highlighted challenges in accessing secure and sustainable housing, land, and property (HLP), along with barriers to obtaining sufficient and appropriate information related to HLP, regardless of gender.

Security of tenure

In both urban and rural settings, property owners' reluctance to formalise agreements, driven by fears of disputes and property loss, exacerbates challenges related to land tenure security and leads to concerns about potential eviction among refugees. This interplay between land access, income generation, and housing stability is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where refugees and host communities primarily engage in farming and pastoralism, directly relying on the land for livelihoods. During FGDs, participants expressed concerns about the significant obstacles refugees encounter in acquiring farming land, emphasising the inadequacy of plots allocated to refugee families by the OPM, which are integral to Uganda's settlement approach aimed at fostering self-reliance.⁷ To compensate, in settlements like Bidibidi and Imvepi in West Nile, refugees increasingly rely on renting land from the host community. However, this reliance is not without its challenges. Insights gathered from FGDs revealed escalating rental costs and exploitative practices by property owners, such as renting the same plot to multiple families. Additionally, refugees reported being prevented from fully utilising the land, specifically at harvest time.

"The host community here has some bad elements who chase us away from the land when the crops we have grown are almost due for harvest. The landlords have even increased the price of land for rent 1 acre from UGX 150,000 to UGX 160,000"⁸ - FGD participant, West Nile



⁷The Refugees Act 2006 set out the institutional framework for refugee management and gave the Office of the Prime Minister responsibility for all administrative matters concerning refugees in Uganda, including the coordination of inter-ministerial and non-governmental activities and programmes relating to refugees.

⁸The equivalent of USD 38 to USD 41 based on exchange rates in March 2023.

Housing conditions

In FGDs across all areas, participants highlighted significant housing challenges, including overcrowding, inadequate construction materials, and environmental issues, all of which pose protection risks and affect the overall health of these communities. Specifically, in West Nile, housing suffers from low-quality construction materials, termite infestations, and limited roofing resources. In Kampala and Southwest, participants also report facing suboptimal shelter conditions, impacting hygiene, privacy, and health. These challenges are further compounded by environmental factors like deforestation, soil degradation, and water scarcity, all exacerbated by climate change.

Gender dynamics and access to HLP

In refugee communities, entrenched gender dynamics persist regarding access to HLP, where cultural biases, customary norms, and traditions favour men who hold the reins in household decision-making. As a result, women are disproportionately affected, facing heightened vulnerabilities and often have a lower likelihood of securing HLP rights and face additional hurdles in navigating the complexities of HLP access and control. Interestingly, female respondents in Kampala and Southwest demonstrated a keen interest in acquiring knowledge about inheritance laws.

CASE STUDY: A Mother's Journey: Grace's story

In September 2016, Grace, a 40-year-old mother of three, fled the conflict in South Sudan to safety in Uganda. Initially, she settled in the Pagirinya refugee settlement in the Adjumani district with her husband and children. A few months later, the family moved to Arua City where they rented a house. The move to an urban environment provided them with more opportunities to rebuild their lives, earn income - supplementing the humanitarian aid they received and ensure their children's education.

Despite her efforts to establish stability, Grace faced a significant setback in mid-2023 when her husband abandoned her and their children, returning to South Sudan with another wife. She found herself unable to afford the rent and accumulated a debt of UGX 1,400,000 (USD 360). Her children also dropped out of school. Grace lost contact with her husband and received no support from him. After eight months of unpaid rent, Grace and her family faced eviction from their home by the landlady. However, with a determination to provide a better life for her children in urban Arua, Grace refused to give up. "I wanted to live with my children in this city for better employment options and access to schools and healthcare," she shared.

Seeking support from the NRC's ICLA team, Grace received legal counselling. The team's paralegal facilitated mediation with the landlady, who agreed to provide one month's eviction notice and waived the rent arrears. This support, coupled with cash assistance, granted Grace the necessary time to find alternative accommodation and stabilise her family's situation. Grace was able to pay three months' upfront rent and start a small food business and her children have now returned to school - marking a significant improvement in their circumstances.

3.3. Livelihood and self-reliance

Accessing livelihood opportunities and achieving self-reliance present significant challenges for refugees in Uganda. While the country has progressive legal and policy frameworks on paper, bureaucratic hurdles frequently impede the timely acquisition of work permits. Additionally, refugees residing outside of settlements encounter limited access to essential humanitarian assistance, employment opportunities, and work.⁹

In FGDs, respondents reported that extended asylum status exacerbates the limitations on job opportunities and access to essential travel documents linked to employment.¹⁰ Refugees frequently express a lack of information regarding employment laws for both employees and employers, compounding the challenges of navigating the employment landscape. As a result, refugees often find themselves restricted to informal sector jobs or self-employment initiatives.

"Finding casual employment was much simpler back in South Sudan compared to here in Uganda, where securing any form of formal or informal employment is exceedingly challenging."
- FGD participant, West Nile

In rural areas, where farming is predominant, refugees face obstacles in accessing land for productive activities (See Section 2 for more details). Some refugees who secure employment also reported that non-payment from private contractors in settlements exacerbated their economic challenges. Meanwhile, in urban centres like Kampala and Arua, unemployment continually undermines self-sufficiency, with those attempting hawking businesses reportedly facing risks of arrest and prolonged detention.

Entrepreneurship and small business

The pursuit of entrepreneurship and small business establishment poses significant challenges for refugees across all settings, as underscored in FGDs, mainly due to limited access to capital and construction materials. Some households in West Nile have received start-up capital, empowering women to initiate various home-based businesses aimed at supporting household self-reliance. Moreover, many refugees lack information on the requirements and procedures for registering these businesses.

Gender dynamics and livelihoods

Entrenched gender norms and cultural practices exacerbate the challenges refugees face in accessing livelihood opportunities. In many communities, women primarily handle domestic duties and childcare, while men assume the role of main breadwinners, resulting in tensions within households, particularly amid widespread unemployment. While urban areas, particularly noted in Kampala and Southwest, have witnessed some deviation from traditional gender roles due to economic pressures, concerns persist over the unequal distribution of labour, with women still bearing the bulk of caregiving responsibilities. Conversely, in settlements, cultural norms continue to dictate labour division, with women predominantly engaged in unpaid care work while men pursue income-generating activities within households. Additionally, cultural norms often confine girls to roles supporting their households, a situation particularly pronounced in traditionally more conservative communities such as South Sudanese and Congolese.

During focus group discussions in Kampala and Southwest Uganda, participants acknowledged the

⁹Alex Betts, *Refugee Economies in Uganda: What Difference Does the Self-Reliance Model Make?*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2019, Accessed 5 June 2023 <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/refugee-economies-in-uganda-what-difference-does-the-self-reliance-model-make>
¹⁰Refugees in Uganda have the right to work; however, unlike Ugandans, they require a Convention Travel Document to obtain a work permit, which can be challenging to obtain. NRC, *Legal Protection Needs of Refugees Self-Settled in Secondary Cities in Uganda* March 2024, Forthcoming <https://www.nrc.no/countries/africa/uganda/>

pivotal role played by humanitarian organisations in fostering the self-reliance of refugees. Still, they raised concerns about the effectiveness of programmes tailored for women. These programmes were perceived as often failing to enhance women's skills and market competitiveness, thereby perpetuating their confinement to traditional roles. Conversely, participants noted that similar programmes targeting men facilitated their integration into Ugandan markets, propelling them towards the private sphere.

Protection risks and coping mechanisms

During FGDs, participants in Kampala, Southwest and West Nile shared insights into their coping mechanisms in response to limited economic opportunities, which pose particular protection risks, especially for at-risk groups. At the household level, refugees resort to budget cuts, borrowing, reduced food intake, and reliance on humanitarian aid. However, despite these efforts, children under 18 are often compelled to work, leading to family separation, either temporarily or permanently. Young boys, lacking productive engagement, may turn to activities like theft and drug use, while women and adolescent girls face the risk of resorting to prostitution.

CASE STUDY: Navigating vulnerability: Alice's story

Alice, a 17-year-old from South Sudan, was thrust into displacement and uncertainty when she, along with her mother and three younger siblings, fled their home and sought refuge in Uganda in late 2022. Upon arrival, they were granted refugee status and resettled in the Bidibidi settlement, where they received a plot of land from the OPM.

Despite her mother's diligent work as a fishmonger, spending long hours harvesting and selling fish at the local market to support the family, they struggled to make ends meet. In her mother's absence, Alice, aware of the financial strain on her family, resorted to 'sex for something', resulting in an early and unwanted pregnancy. This unfortunate reality, engaging in transactional sex, is prevalent among young girls in her village and often leads to exploitation and further vulnerability.

Feeling pressured to continue her studies and burdened by her circumstances, Alice followed misguided advice from friends and made the risky decision to seek an abortion from a traditional herbalist, endangering her life and health. When she was reported to the authorities for attempting to procure an illegal abortion, Alice found herself detained and alone, in desperate need of support and protection.

Recognising the urgency of Alice's situation, the police sought intervention from NRC to assist. Through the Protection from Violence (PfV) programme, Alice was provided with accommodation at a safe house and received psychosocial support, financial assistance, and medical care to address her immediate needs. With the guidance and support of the PfV team, Alice began to deal with the layers of trauma and vulnerability that had led her to this point.

Currently, Alice remains at the protection house, and support sessions are underway with her family as part of the restoration process. Reflecting on her journey, Alice acknowledged the positive impact of the assistance she received. She recently shared, "I am okay now and waiting to have my baby and go back to school."

3.4. Access to basic needs and essential services

Ugandan policy affords refugees access to crucial services such as healthcare and education, ensuring equality with Ugandan citizens. However, during focus group discussions, participants shared their dependence on humanitarian aid and private arrangements alongside government initiatives to fulfil their needs and access essential services. Some participants in Kampala and Southwest expressed feeling neglected and overlooked by humanitarian actors, particularly due to expectations and delays in assistance, which meant their immediate needs were unmet – and sometimes linking this to their geographical distance from base camps. These feelings may stem from a limitation within Uganda’s policy framework, which assumes self-sufficiency among refugees outside of settlements, denying them official access to humanitarian assistance.¹¹ Additionally, FGD participants in both areas commented on how the inconsistent implementation of regulatory frameworks disproportionately affects marginalised groups, hindering their access to essential services, as well as government services and humanitarian aid. Individuals with disabilities and the elderly were thought to face additional challenges in accessing tailored resources, perpetuating poverty, and hindering self-reliance for these at-risk groups.

Food security and nutrition

In all locations, but particularly in West Nile, access to food and nutrition is a concern, related to a recent reduction in distribution due to funding shortfalls. Current food rations disproportionately affect women based on family size, with elderly and disabled individuals thought not to receive sufficient food support from the World Food Programme.



¹¹Supra Note 6.

CASE STUDY: Resilience in Displacement: John's Story

John, a 60-year-old from DR Congo, has endured a tumultuous journey marked by multiple displacements and uncertainty. In 1997, he fled his homeland with his wife and first child to Uganda. They settled in the Kyangwali refugee settlement in the Kikube district.

In Kyangwali, John and his wife welcomed two more children. In 2001, believing their home region had stabilised, they made the difficult decision to return to DR Congo, where they had another child. However, their hopes for stability were shattered when war erupted again in 2006, prompting the family to flee once more back to Uganda. Repeating the familiar journey, they settled this time in the Nakivale refugee settlement in Isingiro.

During their time in Uganda, John and his family managed to integrate and live harmoniously with the communities where they resided. John learned to speak the local languages and could find casual labour. Three of his children attended basic primary and lower secondary education.

In Nakivale, John's family received sufficient land for farming, supplementing food assistance. "There was never a day that they went to bed hungry," he recalled. However, as refugee numbers increased, land became scarce and humanitarian assistance decreased. John's originally allocated land was subdivided twice to create more space for new refugees. These challenges forced him to take drastic measures, including arranging early marriages for his daughters to reduce mouths to feed. Unfortunately, this worsened their situation as violence within these marriages compelled his daughters to return home with their children.

Recent changes, which have further decreased food assistance, have compounded the difficulties for John and his family. "There's nothing to eat at home," he shared, describing how some of his grandchildren have resorted to begging due to the food shortages. Adding to their hardships, John's health has declined, leaving him impaired and unable to work. His children's earnings now primarily go towards his medical expenses, leaving the family in a cycle of poverty.

With each new influx of refugees, John's hope of returning to DR Congo diminishes.

Access to utilities

Access to government utilities and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services varies across settlement areas. In the West Nile, certain communities encounter challenges accessing essential utilities such as electricity and water due to affordability issues and inadequate supply. Likewise, some areas in Kampala and Southwest experience limited access to these services, affecting residents' well-being hygiene, sanitation, and overall quality of life. Participants in West Nile also noted limited access to reliable and affordable communication networks, including mobile phone coverage and internet connectivity.

In FGDs, participants cited that access to water poses a significant challenge, particularly in areas near the Nile belt, where boreholes often fail to yield water due to a high water table. Consequently, women and girls are compelled to undertake long journeys to fetch water, adding to their burden and potentially exposing them to risks.

The construction of stable toilet facilities in West Nile remains challenging, leading to overcrowding and compromised privacy and dignity, as approximately 15 individuals share one bathroom and toilet facility. Refugees report encountering verbal abuse while using shared sanitation facilities. In Kampala and Southwest, refugees also face concerns regarding overcrowding and lack of access to detergents, which compromise residents' ability to maintain hygiene and sanitation. During FGDs in West Nile, specific concerns were raised about increased risks for women and adolescent girls accessing sanitation facilities and hygiene support, linked to a reduction in funding, leading to insufficient support for their hygiene needs.

Access to healthcare

Accessing consistent healthcare services, including the availability of medicine at health centres, presents challenges for FGD participants across the whole country, particularly in remote areas where a reliance on humanitarian assistance is common. Participants in the Bidibidi settlement noted that health referrals made outside the settlement exacerbate access issues. The absence of female staff providing services in healthcare facilities, and perceived risks during travel to centres exacerbates difficulties for women and girls seeking services.

*"Access to health facilities and obtaining necessary medicines can be a challenge as they often request us to purchase them, which poses a financial burden for us."
- FGD participant, West Nile*



Mental health concerns persist among refugees due to prolonged displacement, uncertainty, and exposure to violence, with the stigma surrounding mental health acting as a significant barrier to seeking support from the limited number of mental health services.

Access to education

Refugee children demonstrate a strong desire to learn, yet they encounter persistent obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and financial constraints. Additionally, challenges in accessing vocational training, particularly in settlements, further compound these difficulties and underscore limited pathways to sustainable livelihoods. Children with disabilities face hurdles due to a lack of specialised teacher support. Similarly, unaccompanied minors and orphans in the Bidibidi settlement were reported to struggle with access to education.

"Regarding education, a significant number of youth in our community are being left behind, lacking opportunities for scholastic materials. There is a pressing need for additional vocational training centres within the settlement." - FGD participant, West Nile

During FGDs in both areas, participants highlighted persistent gender disparities stemming from cultural norms that confine girls to domestic roles. Additionally, there was a prevalent





perception that travelling to school was unsafe for girls, further exacerbating the challenges they faced in accessing education. This leads to many girls missing schooling, high dropout rates among teenage mothers and potentially perpetuates early and forced marriages, particularly evident in conservative cultures like those from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Access to social protection

Limited access to information about social protection schemes exacerbates vulnerabilities among the population, with participants in FGDs expressing concern that accessing National Social Security Fund (NSSF) benefits could jeopardise their refugee status. On the contrary, refugees can access the fund and withdraw their savings upon providing evidence of a return to their country of origin or resettlement in a third country, without compromising their status.

3.5. Justice and legal processes

During FGDs, refugees in both areas emphasised the importance of legal assistance, particularly concerning incarcerated individuals and encounters with potentially corrupt police officers. Access to comprehensive legal information regarding rights is crucial. Yet, only a limited portion of the community reported possessing such knowledge, with many expressing unawareness of available legal and paralegal services within their communities.

Access to Legal Services

Refugees in both areas face numerous barriers to accessing essential legal and justice services. Bureaucratic procedures frequently impede their ability to address legal issues effectively, compounded by a lack of resources, unfamiliarity with service locations, and difficulties with

interpretation services. Additionally, instances of delays in follow-up, misconduct, discrimination, and corruption within law enforcement agencies aggravate these challenges, eroding trust among refugees. In both urban and rural settings, female refugees and asylum seekers are vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual harassment by law enforcement officials, which can impede their access to justice and undermine their ability to seek legal recourse or protection.

In Kampala FGDs, refugees reported feeling disempowered during legal proceedings, exacerbated by the dominance of Ugandan citizens in justice system branches. In West Nile, refugees raised concerns around cases of child protection issues, citing many go unreported as witnesses often fail to follow up on cases, influenced by cultural practices such as early marriage.

Perceptions of traditional justice structures

Women in both rural and urban settings across Kampala and Southwest voiced their perception that local or traditional justice structures favour men, influenced by patriarchal norms embedded in customary law. They expressed dissatisfaction with the formal justice system, citing corruption and financial barriers as obstacles to accessing justice. As a result, they often turn to humanitarian organisations specialising in women's rights and gender-based violence response for recourse. Conversely, men generally have confidence in local structures but express discontent with Ugandan laws protecting women's rights, feeling that their status is diminished consequently.

3.6. Wellbeing, safety and security

Refugees, particularly women and girls, face safety risks in both urban and settlement areas. In urban Kampala, a significant number of beneficiaries express insecurity about their well-being, largely due to instances of verbal abuse and harassment from members of the host



community. Conversely, in urban Arua in West Nile, the community generally feels safe and enjoys a sense of freedom. Despite security concerns in the Nakivaale settlement, participants expressed a preference for staying in the Basecamp due to its perceived safety.

Security threats and safety risks

During the FGDs in Kampala and Southwest, participants raised concerns about various threats, including kidnappings, human trafficking, and robberies. Theft emerged as a significant issue in these areas and West Nile, with its occurrence further amplified by a reduction in food rations. Additionally, refugees who had previously served as soldiers for either the government or opposing rebels expressed fears of being pursued and harmed if they resisted further involvement in the conflict. Consequently, some are seeking relocation to other settlements or expressing a desire to be resettled in different countries.

Gender-based violence and vulnerability

In rural areas, women and adolescent girls are at increased risk of gender-based violence, physical assault, and sexual violence during activities like firewood and water collection and grass gathering. In FGDs, participants highlighted social gatherings like discos, video halls, and funerals as occasions that attract many young people in the community where negative behaviours among youth, including inappropriate sexual activities and drug abuse, were observed. This was linked to placing adolescent girls at an increased risk of sexual violence when they are on their way home and potentially exposes young men to contact with the police or law enforcement officials. Furthermore, economic pressures often compel families to send



their children to work, leading to temporary or permanent separation from their families and posing a risk to their physical and psychological safety. Of note, men participating in the West Nile FGDs have raised complaints about the allocation of safe spaces and centres, mentioning the lack of equivalent facilities for men compared to those available for women.

Relations with host communities

The dynamics of relations with the host community exhibit variability, with both communities sharing essential public resources like schools, hospitals, firewood, water points, and farmlands. Insights from focus group discussions unveil heightened tensions and conflicts within refugee communities, particularly evident in urban areas, further exacerbated by economic hardships and resource scarcity. Refugees report challenges in resource sharing, exemplified by increased prices for land rental and difficulties accessing sanitation facilities, which jeopardise their safety and dignity, often resulting in verbal abuse. In Arua city, refugees provide examples of discrimination; perceive overcharging for essential goods and services, and face threats and theft from the host community, worsening existing tensions. Refugees in Kampala and Southwest report utilising community leaders and NGOs for support during conflict, and cite that promptly informing local council representatives and maintaining positive relations with neighbouring counterparts plays a role in addressing social challenges and security issues.





CASE STUDY: Rebuilding Hope: Peter's story

Peter, a 43-year-old from the DR Congo, sought refuge in urban Kampala, Uganda, with his family in 2013, fleeing conflict in their homeland. However, their aspirations for stability were soon undermined by a series of challenges.

Initially, Peter and his wife sustained their family by selling jewellery. However, their hopes for stability were shattered when Peter became the target of violent attacks due to his leadership aspirations in the community. These attacks culminated in a devastating fire that destroyed their home and livelihood, leaving Peter and his family emotionally overwhelmed and without any financial resources.

In the aftermath, Peter and his family found support from their community. Through community protection monitoring, their situation was identified, prompting intervention from NRC and local authorities.

NRC, in collaboration with community members and church leaders, provided vital assistance to Peter and his family. This included finding temporary shelter, financial support, and coordinating with authorities to address their immediate needs and ensure their safety. Recognising the importance of restoring their livelihood, NRC also helped Peter reinvest in their jewellery-selling business, enabling them to regain their income and strengthen their resilience against further risks. Today, Peter and his wife have restarted their business and are generating income to support their family's wellbeing and the education of their children.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This brief underscores the multifaceted and intersecting nature of protection challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda, spanning those residing in settlements and urban environments, regardless of their length of stay. These challenges encompass protection risks, legal and justice issues, limited access to HLP rights, and struggles to secure livelihood opportunities and

essential services. Moreover, it highlights gender dynamics and disparities, vulnerabilities among children and youth, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities, as well as negative coping mechanisms, further emphasizing the intricacy and intersection of protection issues for these populations.

For NRC Uganda, it is crucial to uphold and enhance the current multi-sectoral programme, primarily focusing on community-based protection to safeguard the safety, well-being, and rights of at-risk individuals within local communities. Empowering and involving the community in protection processes is essential, ensuring their participation across all stages of programming, from assessment to evaluation. Additionally, sustaining a focus on gender-responsive strategies within the Uganda country programme is imperative, ensuring inclusivity and addressing key gender issues. Integrating gender analysis into programme reviews will help identify constraints while providing recommendations for enhanced gender integration across all initiatives.

The following recommendations respond to the key themes identified in the brief and provide direction for actors to respond to the protection challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda. They aim to support and contribute to ongoing progress towards durable solutions and achieving self-reliance for displacement-affected communities. Central to this approach is the strengthening of local and national capacities to respond to the impacts of displacement and engage with affected communities within the confines of a constrained funding environment.

1. Enhance engagement with refugee communities, host populations, civil society organisations/local partners, and local authorities to improve communication on registration procedures, rights, and obligations. Prioritise outreach to new arrivals.
2. Strengthen collaboration between shelter, livelihood, and engagement programming to provide refugees with information on key HLP issues including land rights, tenure security, and rental agreements. Integrate gender-sensitive approaches into information campaigns and improve conflict resolution mechanisms.
3. Integrate research on climate change and environmental concerns into programming to address implications for shelter, health, livelihoods, and sustainability of refugees and host communities.
4. Enhance livelihood support for refugees and host community employers by providing information and legal counselling on employment laws and entrepreneurship opportunities. Develop tailored livelihood strategies for at-risk groups.
5. Strengthen outreach efforts to ensure refugees can access available services, including healthcare, education, and social protection schemes. Advocate for consistent policy implementation to remove barriers to accessing essential services.
6. Collaborate with legal aid organisations and community leaders to enhance access to legal services, including collaborative dispute resolutions, mediation and negotiation. Facilitate constructive engagement between refugees and host communities, strengthen conflict resolution and promote social cohesion, ensuring the voices of at-risk groups are heard in decision-making processes.
7. Invest in local partners/community-based organisations to offer support services for survivors of gender-based violence and at-risk individuals. Strengthen referral systems for medical, legal, and psychosocial support and conduct awareness campaigns to address the root causes of gender-based violence in refugee and host communities.





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