

Understanding Protection Risks and Needs Among Refugee Communities in Western Uganda and Greater Kampala

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The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent humanitarian organisation helping people forced to flee. We work in crises across 38 countries, providing emergency and long-term assistance to millions of people every year. We stand up for people forced to flee, advocating for their rights.

This report was written by Claire Birungi Agaba, Laura Cunial and Jackson Mugazi. The Norwegian Refugee Council extends gratitude to all the stakeholders, refugees and members of host communities who generously shared their personal stories, insights, and expertise. Without their contribution, this research and analysis would not have been possible.

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Cover photo: Derrick Sserwanga/ Plan International and Gloria Mrindoko/NRC

Amina caring for her poultry and livestock at her home in Kyaka II Settlement.

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List of Acronyms

CFM	Community Feedback Mechanism
CP	Child Protection
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
ICLA	Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PFV	Protection from Violence
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
RWC	Refugee Welfare Council
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1 Executive Summary

Uganda remains one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world, hosting more than two million refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Sudan. While Uganda continues to maintain a progressive refugee policy framework, refugees and host communities are facing increasing pressure from declining humanitarian funding, reductions in food assistance, rising living costs, and limited livelihood opportunities. These pressures are contributing to a deteriorating protection environment and increasing reliance on negative coping mechanisms.

This report brings together findings from three complementary analyses conducted by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) between April and June 2026: a Community-Based Protection Analysis, a Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM) Health Check, and an analysis of refugee arrivals and movement trends. The assessment covered five refugee settlements (Rwamwanja, Kyaka II, Nakivale, Oruchinga and Kyangwali), four transit centres (Nyakabande, Matanda, Sebagoro and Bubukwanga), and Greater Kampala. Data collection included 83 focus group discussions involving more than 1,000 participants, 114 key informant interviews, community protection mapping, referral pathway analysis and a survey of community feedback mechanisms.

Key Findings

The assessment found that protection risks are deeply interconnected and largely driven by growing socio-economic vulnerability. Poverty, food insecurity and limited access to livelihoods emerged as the most significant underlying factors contributing to a wide range of protection concerns, including gender-based violence (GBV), child protection risks, housing insecurity and exploitation. Refugees consistently linked declining assistance and limited economic opportunities to increasing stress, family conflict, harmful coping strategies and reduced resilience.

Food insecurity was identified as a major protection concern across almost all locations. Reduced humanitarian assistance and limited income-generating opportunities have made it increasingly difficult for refugee households to meet basic needs. Participants reported that food insecurity was contributing to family tensions, psychological distress and negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, early marriage and transactional sex.

Livelihood insecurity and unemployment were reported as among the most significant challenges facing refugee communities. Refugees described widespread barriers to accessing employment and sustainable sources of income, alongside discrimination, underpayment and limited access to mechanisms for redress. Economic vulnerability was particularly severe among female-headed households, single mothers, persons with disabilities, older persons and newly arrived refugees.

Sexual and gender-based violence remains a significant protection concern across both settlement and urban contexts. Domestic violence was the most frequently reported form of GBV, while participants also highlighted sexual exploitation, harassment, rape and abuse linked to poverty, food insecurity and unequal power dynamics. Women and girls were found to face heightened protection risks when seeking livelihoods, collecting firewood, accessing services or attempting to meet basic household needs.

Children face multiple and interconnected protection risks. School dropout, child labour, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, neglect and exploitation were consistently reported across locations. Participants linked these risks to poverty, food insecurity and the inability of caregivers to meet the costs associated with education and other basic needs. Child-headed households, unaccompanied and separated children and children with disabilities were identified as particularly vulnerable.

Housing, land and property (HLP) concerns were another prominent theme. Refugees reported land disputes, insecure tenure, inadequate shelter conditions and overcrowding in settlement settings. In Kampala, unaffordable rent and the risk of eviction emerged as major protection concerns, creating increased vulnerability to exploitation, displacement and homelessness.

The assessment also highlighted growing challenges related to legal status and civil documentation. The transition from prima facie refugee recognition to individual refugee status determination for asylum seekers from DRC, Sudan and South Sudan has reportedly contributed to delays in registration and documentation. Refugees also reported difficulties obtaining birth certificates due to administrative barriers and distance to registration services. The lack of these documents can reduce access to rights, services, livelihoods and protection mechanisms.

Despite these challenges, community-based protection structures remain an important source of support. Refugee Welfare Committees, community leaders, religious networks and informal support systems are often the first point of contact for people facing protection concerns. However, concerns regarding accessibility, confidentiality, delays in response and fear of retaliation continue to undermine trust in reporting and referral mechanisms. While most respondents were aware of feedback channels, many expressed limited understanding of what happens after making a complaint and reported insufficient follow-up.

Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations

The assessment shows that protection risks across refugee settlements, transit centres and Greater Kampala are increasingly driven by poverty, food insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities and barriers to accessing documentation and services. These factors reinforce one another, increasing exposure to GBV, child protection risks, exploitation, housing insecurity and other negative coping mechanisms. While community-based protection structures remain important, gaps in access, accountability and follow-up continue to limit their effectiveness. The following recommendations are proposed for consideration:

Government of Uganda: Strengthen refugee protection, documentation and service delivery systems by reducing delays in refugee registration and civil documentation, improving access to justice and essential services, and reinforcing accessible and accountable protection mechanisms through stronger coordination with humanitarian actors.

Humanitarian Organisations, including NRC and Partners: Invest in integrated programming that combines protection, legal assistance, livelihoods, cash and food assistance, shelter, child protection and GBV services, while strengthening community-based protection, referral pathways and accountability mechanisms, with particular attention to vulnerable groups.

Refugee-Led and Community-Based Organisations: Strengthen community structures to identify risks, support referrals, promote social cohesion, and ensure meaningful participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups in community decision-making and feedback mechanisms.

Donors: Provide flexible, multi-year funding that supports both immediate protection needs and longer-term self-reliance, including investments in legal assistance, protection systems and essential services, while strengthening national and local institutions responsible for protection and service delivery.

2 Introduction and Background

Context

Uganda remains one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries and the largest in Africa, reflecting its long-standing commitment to refugee protection and its progressive refugee policy framework. As of 31 August 2026, the country hosted approximately 2.041.000 million refugees and asylum seekers, including 1.962.000 million refugees and more than 79,000 asylum seekers, living across refugee settlements, transit centres and urban areas.

The refugee population continues to be shaped by protracted conflict, new arrivals and insecurity in neighbouring countries, particularly the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Sudan, alongside smaller populations from Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Uganda's refugee response is operating in an increasingly constrained humanitarian environment: declining international funding, reductions in food assistance, rising living costs and limited livelihood opportunities are placing growing pressure on services provided to the refugees and their host communities.

These pressures have contributed to a deterioration in the protection environment. Limited access to documentation, livelihoods, shelter and essential services heightens exposure to protection risks, including gender-based violence, child protection concerns, exploitation, housing, land and property (HLP) insecurity and social tensions. Newly arrived refugees face additional challenges, including loss of assets and livelihoods, separation from family and support networks, limited knowledge of available services and delays in accessing documentation and assistance. These challenges disproportionately affect individuals with specific needs, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, older persons, child-headed households, unaccompanied and separated children and survivors of violence.

Recognising the evolving protection context, NRC undertook a series of complementary assessments to better understand protection risks, needs and coping mechanisms across its operations in the Western regions and Greater Kampala. The findings presented in this report combine evidence from two assessments: the Community-Based Protection Analysis and the Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM) Health Check and are integrated with arrival and border movement analysis. Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive overview of the current protection environment and the factors influencing protection outcomes for refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable host communities.

The analysis covers NRC's operational areas across five refugee settlements: Rwamwanja, Kyaka II, Nakivale, Oruchinga and Kyangwali, four transit centres: Sebagolo, Nyakabande, Matanda and Bubukwanga and Greater Kampala as indicated in the table below. The Community-Based Protection Analysis and the CFM Health Check were undertaken between April and June 2026 while the arrival/movement analysis cover the January and May 2026 period.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this report is to synthesise findings from the three complementary sources into a single protection analysis to support evidence-based programming, operational decision-making, coordination and advocacy. This report sets out to answer three questions: what protection risks refugees, asylum seekers and host communities face in Uganda's priority intervention areas; who bears the greatest burden of those risks; and what mechanisms exist to prevent or respond to them. By bringing together community perspectives, displacement trends and accountability data, the report identifies the principal protection risks affecting refugees and asylum seekers, examines the underlying drivers of vulnerability, and highlights gaps in access to protection, service delivery and community feedback mechanisms.

The report is intended to inform NRC and partner operations and support humanitarian coordination and advocacy. The findings reflect trends and operational priorities across the assessed locations and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all refugee populations in Uganda.

3 Methodology

Assessment Methodology and Sampling Strategy

The assessment employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating primary and secondary data collection techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the protection situation in the ten locations. To capture diverse perspectives, the assessment used a range of qualitative data collection methods, including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), community protection and referral pathway mappings and the survey for the Community Feedback Mechanisms Health Check – as illustrated in the table below:

Community-Based Protection		
 60 Key Informant Interviews	Semi-structured interviews to explore protection risks and issues	UNHCR, OPM, (I)NGOs, and other partners
 83 Focus Group Discussions	Semi-structured interviews to explore protection risks and issues	Refugees, asylum seekers, host communities (men, women, youth, elderly, PWDs)
 Desk Review	Review of existing protection data, incident reports, assessments and legal reports	Secondary data sources
 Community Protection Mapping	Participatory mapping of protection risks, safe spaces and referral pathways	Refugee community members and community-based protection networks
Referral Pathway Mapping		
 54 KIIs	Semi-structured interviews with focal points of service providers	Focal points of Government authorities and partners responsible for service provision
 Desk Review	Review of existing referral pathways	OPM, UNHCR
CFM Health Check		
 Survey	Semi-structured interviews targeting community members and CFM focal persons	Randomly sampled refugees, host communities and NRC CFM focal persons

Figure 1: Assessment Methodology

For the protections assessment, a purposive sampling approach was adopted for the 83 FGDs, covering 837 participants, to ensure representation across different age groups (children aged 15–17, youth aged 18–35, adults aged 36–50, and older persons aged 50+), sex, nationality and disability status, with particular attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups. Across the assessment sites, 33 female-only, 24 male-only and 26 mixed adolescent FGDs were conducted. Nine nationalities were

represented: Ugandan, Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Congolese, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Rwandese and Burundian.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, 43 KIIs out of the targeted 60 were conducted across all locations with key stakeholders, including OPM, UNHCR, implementing partners, Refugee Welfare Committees (RWCs), and host-community leaders. An additional 40 KIIs were conducted for the CFM health check with the CFM focal persons and community leaders directly involved in feedback and referral mechanisms. The CFM health check used a cluster sampling approach, with each settlement divided into zones and villages.

Still under the CFM health check, five villages were sampled per zone, with approximately 10 community members randomly selected per village. In total, 412 community members participated in the CFM health check survey. The assessment also included community members, CFM focal persons, and community leaders actively engaged in the CFM process, drawing on their direct experience with feedback and referral mechanisms.

			Community-based protection		CFM health check	
#	Site	Site type	FDG participants	KII	CFM survey participants	KII
1	Rwamwanja	Refugee settlement	135	4	82	5
2	Kyaka II	Refugee settlement	110	4	69	4
3	Nakivale	Refugee settlement	208	9	70	6
4	Oruchinga	Refugee settlement	97	5	43	3
5	Kyangwali	Refugee settlement	116	5	1	6
6	Sebagoro	Transit center	0	4	0	2
7	Nyakabande	Transit center	0	2	1	3
8	Matanda	Transit center	0	5	10	2
9	Bubukwanga	Transit center	0	1	0	1
10	Greater Kampala	Urban area	171	4	136	8
			837	43	412	40

Table 1: Summary of methodology and sampling by locations

Data Collection, Quality Assurance, Ethics and Limitations

Data were collected by trained field staff under MEL supervision, following training on assessment objectives, sampling, qualitative methods, data quality and ethical considerations. Tools were field tested before implementation. Qualitative data from FGDs, KIIs and observations were analysed thematically and triangulated with secondary data and, where available, NRC case management data. The assessment followed protection-sensitive principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw and a “do no harm” approach, with dedicated trauma-informed protocols for children and GBV survivors. Data were securely stored and shared on a need-to-know basis.

Findings should be interpreted with the following limitations: purposive qualitative sampling provides indicative findings rather than statistically representative prevalence estimates; small samples in some locations may produce significant percentage variations; sensitive issues such as GBV and child protection are likely to be under-reported in group settings; and referral pathway mapping and the CFM health check were still being validated at the time of drafting.

4 Key Findings

4.1 Participants Profile and Displacement Dynamics

Respondent profile and demographics

For the community-based protection assessment, a total of 83 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted across five refugee settlements, one urban refugee setting. The FGDs were purposively organized to capture the perspectives of diverse population groups, including adult women and men, adolescents, older persons, and persons with disabilities (PWD).

Overall, 837 individuals participated in the 83 FGDs as per the breakdown above. Adults constituted the majority of participants, with 589 individuals (70 per cent), comprising 280 men and 309 women. Their participation provided a broad range of perspectives on community needs, protection concerns and access to essential services.

Adolescents accounted for 224 participants which is (27 per cent), including 103 boys and 121 girls. Their inclusion was particularly important for understanding issues affecting young people, including access to education, child protection risks, livelihood opportunities, and safety concerns. Persons with disabilities accounted for 60 participants (7 per cent), comprising 34 women and 26 men. Older persons constituted 24 participants which is (3 per cent), with equal participation of 12 women and 12 men. Their involvement provided valuable insights into age-related vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms and challenges in accessing support and services. PWD participation was concentrated in Nakivale, Kyangwali and Oruchinga, helping to capture disability-specific protection concerns, barriers to accessing essential services and challenges related to inclusion.

New Arrivals and Spontaneous Movements

Analysis of OPM/UNHCR registration and border monitoring data for the first half of 2026 indicates that displacement dynamics in south-western Uganda are being shaped by both continued arrivals and limited spontaneous movement, reflecting growing pressures on refugee and host communities. In May the Uganda Government stopped the admission of asylum-seekers to contain the outbreak of

Ebola. At present, no asylum-seekers are allowed to cross the border and access transit or reception centres.¹

In the January-June period, over 10,000 individuals representing around 6,600 households were registered across the four transit centres of Nyakabande, Matanda, Sebagoro and Bubukwanga. The arrival population is predominantly young, with children under 17 representing 40 per cent of arrivals, creating heightened needs for child protection, education and psychosocial support. New arrivals are highly concentrated at Nyakabande Transit Centre, placing significant pressure on this reception capacity and service delivery. Across the assessed locations, new arrivals were identified as particularly vulnerable due to limited documentation and information, restricted access to services and increased exposure to exploitation and scams. At the same time during the May-June period, OPM/UNHCR registered over 2,500 declared movement to DRC. Most movements were driven not by improved conditions in areas of origin, but by deteriorating conditions in Uganda, with 70 per cent citing livelihood challenges and reduced access to essential services.

Over the January – June period, over 18,000 individuals have been received and screened as new asylum seekers in Kampala.²

4.2 Protection Needs

This section presents the main protection risks identified across the ten assessment locations. While risks vary across locations and population groups, women, children, persons with disabilities, new arrivals and other vulnerable, the findings show that protection concerns are closely interconnected, with poverty, food insecurity and limited livelihoods.

Food insecurity and coping

“When there is something to eat, we feel safe. When there is no food, we have to find ways to survive.” - Refugee woman in Kyaka II

Food insecurity was consistently reported as a major protection concern, driven by reduced humanitarian assistance, poverty and limited livelihood opportunities. Refugees in Kyaka II and Nakivale described increasing difficulties meeting basic food needs, particularly for children, while Kyangwali and Nyakabande transit

¹ UNHCR Operational Data Portal – Refugee Arrival Monitoring Dashboard available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/68?sv=0&geo=220> and UNHCR Ebola Outbreak: Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda, June 2026, available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/122802>

² UNHCR Operational Data Portal – Refugee Arrival Monitoring Dashboard available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/68?sv=0&geo=220>

centers participants raised concerns about the quantity, quality and limited diversity of food assistance.

Prolonged food insecurity is contributing to stress, family tensions, and negative coping mechanisms. In Kyaka II, reduced assistance was linked to family conflict and household breakdown, while in Nakivale men described pressure and distress linked to their inability to provide for their families. Vulnerable groups, particularly children and people with chronic illnesses, were seen as facing heightened risks.

Across locations, refugees highlighted the interaction between food insecurity and limited livelihoods, with households increasingly struggling to meet basic needs as assistance declines. In Rwamwanja, participants also linked economic stress and food insecurity to increased alcohol use and the diversion of household resources. Overall, the findings highlight how declining assistance and limited livelihood opportunities are weakening household resilience and increasing reliance on negative coping strategies.

Poverty and limited access to livelihood

Poverty and unemployment emerged as key underlying drivers of many protection concerns across the assessed locations. Limited livelihood opportunities and inadequate income leave households unable to meet basic needs, especially food, healthcare, education and housing.

In the settlements, limited livelihood opportunities were linked to school dropout, child labour, family conflict and exploitation. Refugee women in Nakivale noted that “the lack of work is the main source of all the problems” within the settlement. Across the settlements and in Kampala refugees also reported discrimination in accessing employment and instances of non-payment or underpayment, reflecting their limited access to justice and complaint mechanisms. In Oruchinga and Kampala, refugees reported receiving lower wages than Ugandan workers for similar work – even for casual labour.

*“Livelihood insecurity is not just about income; it affects every aspect of our lives.” -
Refugee man in Kyangwali*

Economic vulnerability is also driving harmful coping strategies. In Rwamwanja and Kampala, women and adolescent girls reportedly resort to transactional or commercial sex to meet basic needs, while participants linked poverty more broadly to family breakdown and psychological distress. Single mothers were identified as particularly vulnerable.

Community safety and insecurity

Safety perceptions and experiences of risk vary significantly between women, girls, men and boys across refugee settlements and urban settings. While nighttime and water collection points emerged as common high-risk environments, the nature of

the threats is distinctly gendered. Women and girls disproportionately reported fears of sexual violence and harassment in isolated areas, while men and boys more often faced risks related to theft, land disputes and exploitation in public or work-related settings. Moving around settlements at night was widely perceived as unsafe for both males and females, with men and boys also reporting heightened risks of theft and physical attacks.

Participants across the assessed locations reported medium to high levels of theft, insecurity and violence. In Nakivale, refugees described frequent theft by community gangs and burglaries at night. Women, persons with disabilities and people living alone were identified as particularly vulnerable to theft and exploitation. In Rwamwanja, participants reported threats, killings and other incidents of insecurity involving both settlement residents and members of the host community. Child-headed households and single mothers were considered particularly exposed to theft and exploitation.

In Greater Kampala, participants highlighted a range of urban safety concerns, including theft, physical attacks, phone snatching, and road-related violence involving “boda bodas”. These concerns were rarely reported in the rural settlements, where they were mentioned only once in Nakivale and Rwamwanja. In contrast, they emerged as a primary safety concern in Kampala, where participants reported attacks by gangs and “thieves with “pangas””.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

“Poverty is making women and girls more vulnerable to different forms of violence.”- Refugee women in Rwamwanja

Sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation emerged as significant protection concerns across both settlement and urban settings, particularly affecting women and adolescent girls. Domestic violence was the most consistently reported concern, mentioned in 86 per cent of FGDs in Kyaka and 78 per cent in Oruchinga. Sexual harassment and defilement/rape were also frequently raised, particularly in Kyaka, where 71 per cent of FGDs mentioned each, and in Kyangwali, Nakivale and Oruchinga as illustrated in the table below:³

³ These figures represent the proportion of FGDs in each location that mentioned the issue and should not be interpreted as prevalence rates.

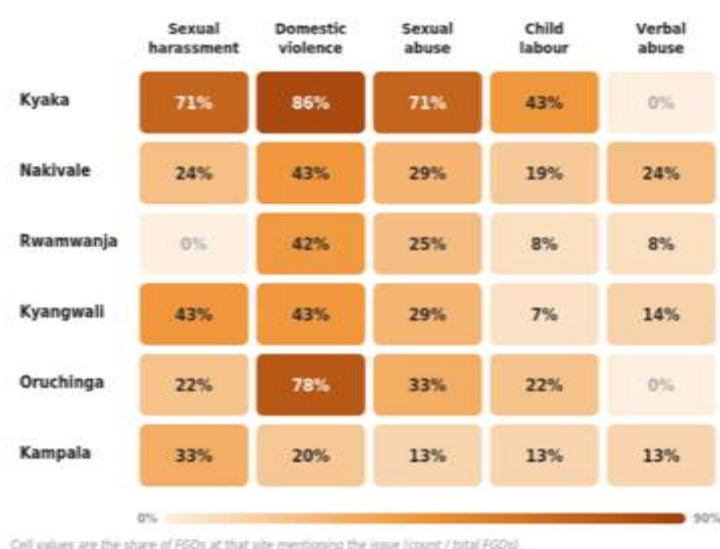


Figure 2: Reported sexual and gender-based violence incidents

Participants described risks of sexual violence and exploitation linked to movement outside settlements, economic vulnerability and unsafe environments. In Nakivale and Rwamwanja, women and girls reported risks of rape while collecting firewood, seeking food or work, and travelling to and from school. In Kyangwali, poorly lit areas and communal facilities such as latrines and bathing areas were identified as particular safety concerns, while young girls were reportedly vulnerable to exploitation by older men. In Greater Kampala, women and girls reported sexual exploitation and assault while selling goods or moving around in the evening. Domestic violence was repeatedly reported, with women describing physical and emotional abuse within households and links between economic stress, food insecurity and family conflict.

Economic vulnerability also increased exposure to exploitation and abuse of power. In Kyaka II, Nakivale, Rwamwanja and Oruchinga, participants reported that poverty had pushed some women into survival sex or relationships in exchange for basic needs. Women and girls with disabilities in Nakivale were identified as particularly vulnerable to harassment and GBV. Participants also reported demands for sexual favours in exchange for work, payment or access to services, including by individuals in positions of authority.

Child protection

Children across the assessment locations face multiple, interconnected protection risks, with poverty, food insecurity, reduced humanitarian assistance, limited access to education and weakened household coping capacity emerging as key underlying drivers. School dropout, child labour, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse and exploitation, and child neglect were consistently reported, although their nature and severity varied across locations.

“When families do not have enough food or income, children are the ones who suffer most.” - Refugee woman in Kampala

School dropout and child labour were closely interconnected and emerged as significant concerns across all assessment locations. Poverty, inability to pay school related expenditures, food insecurity and lack of scholastic materials were consistently identified as reasons children leave school, while financial pressures also pushed children into work to support their families. In Kyaka II, children were frequently withdrawn from school to farm, while in Nakivale children reportedly engaged in domestic work, agricultural labour and casual jobs, particularly following reductions in humanitarian assistance. In Rwamwanja, children as young as six were reported to work in neighbouring host communities in exchange for food or small amounts of money. In Kyangwali, child labour was particularly associated with boys leaving school for casual work, while in Oruchinga children were reported to undertake hazardous activities such as stone quarrying to earn money for food and school fees. In Kampala, children were observed undertaking roadside vending, construction, digging and other physically demanding work, while adolescents reportedly accepted underpaid casual work due to financial hardship. Additional barriers to education included long distances to schools and discrimination against children with disabilities in Nakivale and Kampala, language barriers and discrimination in Oruchinga and Kampala. In Rwamwanja, some participants also linked school dropout to subsequent involvement in theft.

Boys faced additional risks linked to school dropout and economic hardship.

FGD respondents reported boys engaging in hazardous labour and, in some locations, stealing or using alcohol and drugs to cope. In Kampala, boys were also identified as being at risk of forced labour, police detention and gang recruitment, while in Kyangwali boys reportedly engaged in dangerous work such as sand mining and unloading trucks.

Early marriage and teenage pregnancy were significant protection concerns, particularly for adolescent girls. Across Kyaka II, Nakivale, Rwamwanja, Kyangwali, Oruchinga and Kampala, participants linked these risks to poverty, food insecurity and school dropout. Early marriage was sometimes described as a coping mechanism to reduce household financial pressures or secure bride price. In Nakivale, girls were reportedly forced into marriage to escape poverty or hunger, while teenage pregnancy was also reported among girls with disabilities and those exploited by older men. In Kyangwali, participants described cases involving girls as young as 14, while similar concerns were raised in Greater Kampala.

“As a single mother, it is difficult to provide food for my children. Often, I have to leave them alone to look for work.” - Refugee woman in Oruchinga

Child neglect was also linked closely to poverty and livelihood pressures. In Kyaka II and Nakivale, parents reportedly struggled to provide adequate care and supervision because of economic hardship. In Rwamwanja, children were sometimes left alone while parents travelled to host communities in search of work and food. Similar concerns were reported in Oruchinga and Kampala, where family separation and caregiver absence left children exposed to abuse, exploitation and other protection risks. Orphans and unaccompanied children were considered especially vulnerable

in Nakivale, Oruchinga, Kampala and Nyakabande due to the absence of caregivers, extreme poverty and social isolation.

Housing, land, property and shelter insecurity

Housing, Land and Property (HLP) and shelter insecurity emerged as a significant protection concern across the assessed locations. In a few of the refugee-hosting settlements such as Oruchinga and Rwamwanja, refugees reported making payments for access to land. This issue warrants further assessment to better understand the nature and terms of such arrangements. While refugees are allocated residential plots free of charge under the settlement framework, some may incur costs when accessing additional land for agricultural production through informal or private leasing arrangements. A clearer understanding of these practices would support efforts to strengthen policy implementation, ensure consistency with existing land allocation frameworks, and safeguard refugees' access to livelihoods.

Land disputes and insecure tenure were particularly concerning in Kyangwali, Oruchinga and Rwamwanja, where refugees reported limited access to land and a lack of formal documentation confirming their rights to occupy or use land. In some locations, households feared that allocated land could be reclaimed or reassigned "from one day to the next", while competing claims contributed to disputes and displacement risks.

Overcrowding and poor shelter conditions were also widely reported, including inadequate space, leaking or poorly constructed shelters, flooding and limited access to sanitation. These conditions undermined privacy, safety, health and dignity, particularly for larger households and women and girls.

Challenges related to eviction and unaffordable rent were the most frequently reported concerns in Kampala. Participants linked these challenges to limited livelihood opportunities, reduced financial support and increasing household costs. In Kampala, refugees also reported rent increases, demands for several months' rent in advance and evictions with limited notice. Housing insecurity also created heightened protection risks for women and girls, including sexual exploitation. Participants reported cases where landlords or others demanded sexual favours in exchange for rent or continued access to shelter, particularly when women were unable to meet rental payments. Overall, the findings highlight how limited livelihoods, insecure tenure, unaffordable housing and inadequate shelter conditions reinforce one another, increasing the risks of eviction, displacement and exploitation.

4.3 Cross-Cutting Findings

Lack of status and civil documentation

A further challenge relates to securing refugee status and documentation. Until February 2026, Uganda granted *prima facie* refugee recognition to people fleeing conflict in South Sudan, Sudan and the DRC, enabling rapid registration, documentation and access to services without individual refugee status determination (RSD). In February 2026, the Government suspended this approach

and required individual RSD for new arrivals from these three countries, creating significant registration and processing backlogs. As asylum-seeker numbers increased sharply, many individuals remained undocumented and faced prolonged legal uncertainty, limiting access to rights, services, employment and other opportunities available to recognized refugees. Recognizing the strain on the asylum system and the protection risks created by the policy change, the Government reinstated prima facie recognition in August 2026, allowing affected asylum seekers to be recognized as refugees and restoring a key mechanism that supports timely protection and access to rights in Uganda.

Access to civil documentation, including birth and death certificates, remained a challenge across the assessed locations. Participants reported delays, errors in registration records and procedural difficulties, particularly when registering newborns or correcting personal information. In Kyaka II and Nakivale, delays in obtaining birth certificates were reported to sometimes affect the timely updating of family documentation and, in some cases, children's access to assistance. Errors in names and dates of birth were also reported, while registering children born at home was described as particularly difficult.

Distance and associated transport costs to reach the nearest National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) were significant barriers, particularly for refugees living far from NIRA offices. Participants in Kyaka II, Rwamwanja, Nakivale, Kyangwali and Oruchinga reported having to travel long distances, sometimes making repeated journeys when documents could not be processed on the same day. Older persons and persons with disabilities were particularly disadvantaged by these mobility and access constraints.

Participants also identified financial and administrative barriers, including official processing costs and, in some cases, reports of additional payments. These costs were particularly difficult for households with limited income. As one refugee in Kyaka II explained, *"Getting civil documents is difficult when the registration office is far away and the process takes time and money."*



Figure 3: Challenges related to legal status and identity documentation

Vulnerable groups

Across the assessment locations, additional vulnerable groups including persons with disabilities, older persons, single mothers and female-headed households were identified as particularly vulnerable due to poverty, limited access to services and livelihoods, social exclusion and reduced family or community support.

Persons with disabilities faced heightened risks due to mobility limitations, restricted livelihood opportunities and barriers to essential services. In Kyaka II and Rwamwanja, many were unable to undertake physically demanding work and were increasingly dependent on others, particularly following reductions in food assistance. Transport costs, long distances, inaccessible infrastructure and long queues without prioritisation further limited access to health care, food and other services. Shortages of assistive devices and specialised support, as well as stigma and discrimination, increased risks of exclusion and exploitation. Limited access to information, including due to illiteracy and communication barriers, further compounded these challenges.

Older persons were vulnerable due to declining physical capacity, limited livelihoods and social isolation. In Kyaka II, Nakivale and Oruchinga, many were unable to undertake livelihood activities or collect water and firewood. In Rwamwanja and Kyangwali, abandonment, isolation and inadequate shelter were additional concerns. Long distances, transport costs and difficulties accessing services, including long queues and lack of prioritisation, further affected older persons, while some reported being excluded from assistance because of age-based eligibility criteria. Limited access to information and lack of specialised health and other support further increased their vulnerability.

Single mothers and female-headed households faced particular challenges due to sole caregiving responsibilities, limited livelihoods and lack of partner support. Participants reported social exclusion and long journeys in search of work, with some women reportedly resorting to survival sex to meet basic needs. In Kampala, women also faced landlord exploitation, physical violence and psychological distress.

Discrimination, Social Cohesion and Tensions

Discrimination and tensions based on nationality, ethnicity and tribal affiliation were reported across both refugee settlements and urban settings, affecting social cohesion, access to services and perceptions of safety. Participants described segregation, stereotyping, harassment and favouritism, including perceived preferential treatment of some nationalities in registration, service delivery and resettlement, while others faced documentation barriers and exclusion. Language differences further compounded these challenges, limiting communication, access to services and livelihood opportunities and sometimes reinforcing mistrust between refugee and host communities and among different refugee groups. Tribal tensions were also reported within refugee communities, including disputes over settlement and perceived favouritism by community structures. Relations between refugees and host communities were similarly strained in some locations especially in Kampala, often driven by competition over jobs and services, rumours and perceptions of unequal assistance, although participants also noted improvements in some areas over time.

5 Community-based Protection

Community-Based Protection and Access to Support Mechanisms

Community-based structures were the primary source of support when people experienced protection concerns, with Refugee Welfare Committees (RWCs), local leaders, family and neighbours, religious institutions, women's and youth groups, and community security structures commonly approached for advice, mediation, referrals and practical support. These mechanisms were valued for their proximity and accessibility, although their availability and effectiveness varied across locations. Some participants reported that protection committees were not fully operational, while others described local leaders as slow to respond or unable to follow up cases effectively.

The police were the main formal mechanism for serious protection incidents and criminal cases, often following initial engagement with community leaders. Community watch groups and security committees also played an important role in maintaining safety and referring cases. However, confidence in formal mechanisms was mixed, with concerns about delayed responses, limited follow-up and inaccessible police posts.

Women's and youth groups, savings groups, child-friendly spaces and religious institutions provided additional sources of psychosocial support, information and social connection. Family members, neighbours and other informal networks were also frequently the first point of support.

Response Outcomes and Perceptions of Safety After Reporting Incidents

Across locations, perceptions of safety after reporting were strongly linked to the quality and timeliness of the response. Limited follow-up, delayed responses and unresolved cases reduced confidence in reporting and protection mechanisms. Participants in several settlements reported receiving little or no information after submitting complaints, while concerns about confidentiality and fear of retaliation, threats or further violence discouraged some survivors from reporting. Allegations of corruption and perceptions that cases were not acted upon further undermined trust.

However, participants also reported positive experiences where cases were followed up, confidentiality was maintained and appropriate action was taken, leading to increased feelings of safety and confidence in service providers.

Barriers to Reporting and Accessing Support

*“Perpetrators always get away with the crimes without serving any punishment.” -
Refugee woman in Nakivale*

Despite these mechanisms, under-reporting remained a significant concern. Fear, lack of trust in response systems, previous experiences of poor follow-up and the cost of accessing services discouraged some people from reporting protection incidents. Because of this, some refugees reported that instead of reporting they remained silent, indicating continued barriers to accessing effective protection and justice and the persistent underreporting of protection incidents.

Refugees reported in the FGD many barriers including fear of retaliation, shame and stigma and lack of trust in police and community leaders. Corruption and language barriers were particularly prominent in Nakivale and Kyangwali, while limited awareness of reporting mechanisms was less frequently reported. These barriers were reinforced by concerns about confidentiality, negative community reactions and previous experiences of poor follow-up.

Community Feedback Mechanism Health Check Findings

The CFM Health Check across ten locations found that feedback mechanisms are generally established and visible, with 77 per cent of respondents aware of at least one available channel. Community-based and face-to-face mechanisms were most recognised, particularly village meetings and direct access to NRC or partner offices, while suggestion boxes and toll-free lines were less familiar.

Overall, women and girls were perceived to have relatively good access to CFM channels (74 per cent), but disability inclusion remains a significant gap, with around 41 per cent of respondents identifying some level of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities. Communication was generally considered appropriate, although language, literacy and information-access barriers remain for some groups, particularly newly arrived refugees, minority language speakers and persons with disabilities.

Trust and understanding of the feedback process remain key weaknesses. While 59 per cent of respondents trusted CFM mechanisms and did not fear retaliation, around 40 per cent expressed some level of distrust or fear of retaliation. FGDs similarly highlighted concerns about threats, harassment, confidentiality breaches and further violence following reporting. In addition, 65 per cent of respondents did not fully understand what happens after submitting feedback, indicating a significant gap in communication about case management, response timelines and follow-up.

Awareness of pathways for reporting sensitive cases, including PSEA and safeguarding concerns, was generally present, although use of these channels remained limited.

Overall, the findings suggest that while CFM structures are largely in place and well known, greater emphasis is needed on inclusive access, confidentiality and protection from retaliation, communication on the feedback cycle, and timely follow-up and response to strengthen trust and accountability.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Evidence from ten sites across seven districts shows that protection risks are interconnected, driven by socio-economic vulnerabilities, and vary by location and population group. These findings have direct implications for how sectorial responses are designed and prioritised. Protection risks should not be addressed as isolated sectoral issues. Poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, GBV, child protection concerns and housing insecurity reinforce one another and can increase reliance on harmful coping strategies, including child labour, early marriage and survival sex. Sustainable protection therefore requires integrated approaches combining protection, shelter, livelihoods, cash and food assistance, CP and GBV services across all locations.

Legal status and legal identity documentation is also a critical determinant of protection and inclusion. Delays in obtaining refugee status documentation, birth certificates and other legal identity documents can restrict access to assistance, services and livelihoods and increase protection risks. Legal assistance should therefore be treated as preventive protection interventions.

Vulnerability is cumulative, with persons with disabilities, new arrivals, older people, single caregivers and marginalised groups facing compounded barriers. Although community-based protection structures and feedback mechanisms exist, concerns about confidentiality, retaliation, accessibility, limited responsiveness and lack of follow-up continue to undermine trust. Strengthening community-based protection requires accessible, accountable and responsive services, alongside effective referral and feedback mechanisms. Across all locations, communities identified interconnected priorities for improving safety and wellbeing. These reflect a strong desire to move towards greater self-reliance while maintaining targeted protection support for those facing heightened risks as outlined in the recommendations below:

Priority Recommendations for Government:

- Strengthen protection, registration and documentation systems: ensure timely registration and issuance of refugee and civil documentation, particularly for new arrivals, and strengthen coordination and capacity across government institutions responsible for registration, documentation and protection. Improve access to legal information and assistance to reduce protection risks linked to undocumented status.
- Enhance community-based protection and accountability: continue to ensure accessible, safe and responsive mechanisms for reporting protection

concerns, including protection desks, referral pathways and complaints mechanisms. Strengthen confidentiality, timely follow-up and accountability, with particular attention to women, children, persons with disabilities and other groups facing heightened risks.

- Promote coordinated and inclusive service delivery: strengthen coordination between government, humanitarian partners and service providers to address interconnected protection risks through integrated services. Prioritise underserved locations and people facing multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities, including new arrivals and vulnerable households.

Priority Recommendations for Humanitarian Organisations, including NRC and Partners:

- Invest in integrated and inclusive protection: support programmes combining protection, cash and food assistance, livelihoods, shelter, education, CP and GBV services, with targeted support for new arrivals, persons with disabilities, older people, single caregivers, women and children, particularly in locations where risks converge.
- Strengthen community-based protection as core protection interventions, while investing in accessible referral systems, community feedback mechanisms, safe reporting channels and timely case follow-up.
- Expand access to legal protection services: ensure timely and accessible legal information, counselling and assistance, particularly on civil documentation, HLP rights and access to justice, with targeted support for groups facing heightened barriers.

Priority Recommendations for Refugee-Led and Community-Based Organisations and Leaders:

- Strengthen community structures to identify emerging protection risks, support safe referrals and follow up on concerns, with particular attention to women, children, persons with disabilities, older people and newly arrived households. Ensure confidentiality and safe reporting to reduce risks of retaliation.
- Enhance inclusive community engagement and accountability: ensure women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups are meaningfully represented in community structures and decision-making.
- Work with humanitarian and government actors to improve community information-sharing, feedback and complaints mechanisms.

Priority Recommendations for Donors:

- Fund integrated protection and self-reliance: prioritise flexible, multi-year funding that combines protection, cash and food assistance, livelihoods, shelter, education, CP and GBV services to address interconnected risks and reduce reliance on harmful coping strategies.

- Prioritise vulnerable groups and protection systems: ensure funding reaches people facing intersecting vulnerabilities, while strengthening protection, legal assistance, referral pathways, community feedback mechanisms and safe reporting channels.
- Support context-specific, sustainable responses: provide flexible funding that allows organisations to adapt programming to different contexts and supports a gradual shift from short-term assistance towards livelihoods, self-reliance and resilience.
- Maintain funding for essential services: continued investment in health, water, education and safe shelter remains critical to preventing basic needs from translating into heightened protection risks.