A GENDER ASSESSMENT OF UGANDA'S REFUGEE RESPONSE

Impacts of the Phase 3 Food Prioritization Approach in Uganda

UN WOMEN

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ACRONYMS

ERP	Education Response Plan
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PSEA	Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Uganda hosts

1,786,293

Refugees

are women and children.[1]

Despite the country's progressive refugee policy, women and children remain highly vulnerable to humanitarian challenges. Since 2022, funding shortfalls have led to the phased prioritization of food and cash-based assistance, leaving vulnerable households, especially female-headed ones (64 per cent of refugee households), in receipt of only 60 per cent of rations. This rapid gender assessment evaluates the impact of phase 3 food prioritization on refugee households across eight districts, based on surveys and interviews conducted with 2,265 households and 44 key informants.

Objectives and scope

The primary objective of this gender assessment was to analyse the impact of reduced food rations on women, men, boys and girls, generating gender-specific data to inform refugee response plans and policies. The assessment focused on identifying the specific needs, access to services, gender roles and coping mechanisms of refugee populations, as well as understanding the capacities and resources available amid reductions in food supply. The results aim to support efforts in addressing challenges across sectors such as livelihoods, protection, health and education. The assessment covered the refugee settlements Imvepi, Bidibidi, Rhino Camp and Kyaka II, and settlements in other key areas, representing Uganda's largest refugee-hosting regions, to ensure a diverse sample that included northern and south-western regions and urban refugees in Kampala. The data provide critical insights into the gender-specific impacts of reduced food assistance across various sectors.

1. Demographics

Most households in the refugee settlements – 64 per cent – are female-headed, with most heads being between 18 and 59 years of age. The high prevalence of female-headed households is attributed to men migrating for work, engaging in conflict or being lost to conflict, leaving women to manage the households alone. This demographic shift places a significant burden on women to fulfil roles traditionally shared with men, including managing the family's economic well-being, health and education.

2. Specific needs of women, men, boys and girls in the context of reduced food rations

The assessment aimed to identify the essential needs of respondents and their households, prioritizing them in order of importance. The results were disaggregated by the three categories of needs-based food assistance prioritization and the gender of the household head.

1 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Refugee Population Dashboard." https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga.

First priority need

Food emerged as the most critical need for the majority of households.

Among female-headed households,

54%

ranked food as their top priority, while

55%

of male-headed households did the same.

This trend was consistent across the three categories of food assistance prioritization, with 49 per cent in category 1, 46 per cent in category 2, and 45 per cent in category 3 identifying food as their first priority.

Second priority need

The second priority for many households was livelihood opportunities. More than 20 per cent of households in all categories, regardless of whether they were headed by women or men, listed these three needs as their second priority. This indicates the growing importance of not just immediate sustenance, but also longer-term investments in education and livelihoods.

Third priority need

Health care and education were equally ranked as the third most important needs. This was consistent across both female- and male-headed households, and across all prioritization categories, highlighting the continued importance of access to health services and education for household welfare.

3. Impacts on gender roles, relations, participation and decision-making for women, men, boys and girls as a result of reduced food rations

In refugee communities, traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched. Women bear the bulk of household responsibilities, with

85%

of women responsible for childcare and

73%

per cent for cooking.

In contrast, men are primarily involved in farming (52 per cent). Despite interventions aimed at equipping women, girls and boys with vocational skills – such as tailoring, poultry farming and soap production – these groups remain disproportionately engaged in unpaid domestic work. This gendered division of labour, where women and children are relegated to household chores, limits their participation in income-generating activities and leadership opportunities, hindering their path to self-reliance.

A total of 7 out of 10 refugee women and men reported participating in community decision-making meetings. Among them, 83 per cent of women and 69 per cent of men attended as community members. However, barriers to participation remain significant, particularly for women.

A significant 64 per cent of refugee households are headed by women. Many of these households are highly vulnerable due to limited access to economic opportunities and social support systems. This report notes that women in these households bear the brunt of the food ration cuts because they are primarily responsible for ensuring that their families are fed.

Women in these households often face additional economic pressures to secure food for their children and other dependents. With limited rations, women are forced to engage in informal, often unstable, income-generating activities such as casual labour or small-scale trading, which rarely provide adequate income. This economic strain is worsened by their limited access to formal employment, exacerbating food insecurity.

The reduction in food rations has further heightened the vulnerability of female-headed households. Without adequate food support, women are more likely to resort to negative coping mechanisms. This report highlights the alarming use of strategies such as transactional sex, child marriage and borrowing money, which often deepen the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

14%

of adolescent girls drop out of school due to financial stress

The report also reveals that girls are at particular risk of dropping out of school due to the financial stress caused by reduced food rations . In many households, parents face the difficult decision of choosing between feeding their children and sending them to school. The report indicates that 14 per cent of adolescent girls are more likely to drop out of school at the primary level than at any other level, as the economic burden forces families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational opportunities.

In many cases, families view child marriage as a viable coping strategy to alleviate economic pressures. Marrying off daughters allows families to reduce the number of mouths they must feed and offers some economic relief, typically in the form of bride price. This practice not only perpetuates gender inequality but also severely compromises the rights and futures of girls.

Women and girls reported experiencing heightened emotional and psychological stress as they cope with the food crisis. The fear of abuse and exploitation (e.g. sexual violence, forced marriages), as well as the daily burden of securing food and managing their household, intensify their mental health needs. This report emphasizes the urgent need for gender-sensitive psychosocial support programmes that address the unique challenges women and girls face in these situations.

Intersectionality with disability

Women and girls with disabilities reported experiencing heightened levels of vulnerability as a result of the food prioritization exercise. One woman from the Nyumanzi settlement expressed, “We were receiving money from [the] UNHCR [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], which helped us survive. But with the recent changes, things have become difficult, and prices are high. I can’t do heavy work because of my disability, so I do small farming, but it’s hard to find work.” These challenges are intensified for those not classified as extremely vulnerable individuals who receive reduced food assistance. Children cared for by individuals with disabilities are at a higher risk of missing school or dropping out, particularly if their caregivers are not recognized as extremely vulnerable individuals.

4. Access to services for women, men, boys and girls across sectors as a result of phase 3 food prioritization

Food assistance

There has been a significant decline in the proportion of households relying on various forms of food aid, coupled with an increase in those using personal food sources (see Figure 25). Specifically, the percentage of households that considered World Food Programme (WFP) assistance their primary food source decreased from 52 per cent before needs-based prioritization to 34 per cent afterward. The proportions of households receiving food rations from other non-governmental organizations also decreased slightly, from 5 to 4 per cent. Conversely, the proportion of households relying on purchases made with cash grants rose dramatically, from 5 to 14 per cent. In addition, households depending on their own income for food increased from 28 to 33 per cent, while those using crop production as their main food source rose from 8 to 14 per cent.

of households reported experiencing food shortages in the seven days before data collection (see Figure 26).

Among these, 59 per cent were in category 2 of needs-based prioritization, 27 per cent in category 3 and 14 per cent in category 1. Of the 23 per cent (516 households) that reported no food shortages, 43 per cent and 33 per cent were in categories 2 and 3, respectively, while 24 per cent of category 1 households indicated that they had not faced food shortages.

Notably, 80 per cent of female-headed households and 72 per cent of male-headed households experienced food shortages in the week before they were surveyed. The finding that 77 per cent of households were experiencing food shortages represent a substantial increase from the 52 per cent of households reporting unacceptable food consumption in the 2023 Food Security and Nutrition Assessment. The rising food insecurity, exacerbated by humanitarian funding shortfalls and reduced assistance, suggests that more households may adopt negative coping strategies, particularly affecting women, girls and boys.

Livelihoods

Before the needs-based prioritization of food assistance, 32 per cent of refugee women and 30 per cent of refugee men relied on peasant crop farming as their main livelihood. Women also engaged in small trade (22 per cent), while men more frequently undertook casual labour (23 per cent). However, a notable proportion of refugees – 17 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men – relied solely on WFP food rations, highlighting their vulnerability.

After the introduction of food prioritization, 57 per cent of female-headed and 56 per cent of male-headed households reported that their main source of livelihood remained unchanged, with small-scale farming still dominant. This limited change raises concerns about the ability of refugees to transition towards self-reliance, as small-scale farming is insufficient to cover the food shortage created by reduced rations.

In terms of earning and saving, 89 per cent of women and 88 per cent of men worked no more than 40 hours per week, primarily in low-paying jobs. Refugees reported an average monthly income of less than U Sh 50,000 (US$14), with 39 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men unable to save more than U Sh 10,000 (US$3) monthly. The financial strain caused by reduced food assistance has also led to defaults in savings groups, as debts and food insecurity rise.

Health

In terms of access to services, the findings indicate that food prioritization has affected access to health services for women, men, boys and girls. However, 21 per cent of women reported not being able to access maternal health services, 28 per cent could not access family planning services, 50 per cent could not access HIV/AIDs services and 49 per cent could not access menstrual hygiene management services. Forty-three per cent of respondents cited lack of enough money to pay for the services, 25 per cent cited long distances (over 5 km) as the main barrier to accessing health services, particularly in the Imvepi, Pagirinya, Rhino Camp and Rwamwanja/Nakivale refugee settlements.

Education

Access to education has not been affected by food ration cuts at the primary level, where both girls and boys in 81 per cent and 77 per cent of households headed by women and men, respectively, were attending school. However, 87 per cent of the 121 households in which both boys and girls were not attending school said that there was no money to pay their school fees. The issue of school fees affected access to education at the secondary level, where 9 per cent mentioned that children stay

at home to engage in paid labour while 8 per cent need children to stay at home to help with household chores. Other reasons for children staying at home included the family being faced with hunger and hesitant to send hungry children to school, lack of money to buy school uniform, children refusing to go to school and the children being under school age (below 3 years).

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and energy sources

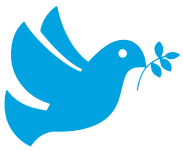
Water collection is a burden mainly for women and girls, who face security risks while travelling long distances to fetch water. Only 50 per cent of households have safe access to latrines, and inadequate sanitation (e.g. 24 per cent of latrines are without door locks) increases gender-based violence (GBV) risks.

Notably, 85 per cent of women are responsible for childcare, and 73 per cent mentioned being primarily responsible for cooking. The majority of men (52 per cent) are involved in farming. Only 6 per cent of men mentioned engaging in firewood collection. This points to the fact that energy poverty is still largely affecting women and girls in refugee settlements.

Protection and gender-based violence

Thirty-two per cent of female-headed households and 20 per cent of male-headed households reported concerns about violence within their homes. Among women, 25 per cent cited sexual violence and 19 per cent mentioned sexual exploitation as key issues. In addition, 20 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women expressed fears of physical attacks, both inside and outside their living areas, while 12 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women raised concerns about insecure housing, such as dwelling units without door locks. Other concerns highlighted during focus group discussions included forced marriages, trafficking risks and a general lack of community safety. The reduction in food rations has increased the risks of GBV, particularly for women and girls who are forced to engage in unsafe or exploitative activities to secure food. This includes walking long distances to fetch water or firewood, which exposes them to physical and sexual violence. The report underscores the need for enhanced protection services, including safe spaces and access to GBV referral pathways.

Peaceful coexistence



Overall, the relationship between refugees and host communities across the districts assessed remains cordial, despite some tensions. Both groups share access to public services such as hospitals, schools, markets and water points. Refugees increasingly turn to their host community to hire land or to work in exchange for food and cash, especially after reductions in food and cash support from the WFP. This has led to greater interaction, with many refugees viewing the host community as a critical source of trade and labour opportunities.

In the Imvepi settlement, members of the host community spoke positively about their relationship with refugees, noting that some remain friends despite changes in food assistance. However, some hosts expect refugees to share their harvest in exchange for land use, causing occasional friction. Refugees in the Nyumanzi settlement expressed gratitude that they were able to expand their farming by hiring land, though they noted rising costs as demand for land increased due to food assistance cuts.

Despite overall cooperation, both communities raised concerns tied to the introduction of needs-based food prioritization. The host community reported an increase in theft and dishonesty among refugees, which they attributed to refugees' struggles to cope with food shortages. Conversely, refugees criticized the hosts for raising land prices, withholding harvests and mistreating refugee children who commit crimes. Both groups agree that these tensions have escalated due to the reduced food support, making refugees more vulnerable.

In the Kyaka II settlement, refugees admitted that food prioritization has worsened relations, as theft by refugees has strained their ties with the host community. One refugee remarked, "Nationals used to offer us loans, but now they don't because they fear we can't pay them back."

5. Mechanisms for coping with reduced food rations

To cope with food shortages, 56 per cent of women and 48 per cent of men reported reducing their daily meals (see Table 17). In addition, 36 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men engage in casual labour, while 24 per cent of women and 21 per cent of men acquire credit or debt. Furthermore, 18 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men resort to begging for food, and 16 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men eat wild or famine foods. The statistics reveal that women generally adopt negative coping mechanisms at higher rates than men. However, strategies such as casual labour and remittances could help facilitate a transition from food dependency to self-sufficiency.

Similar to women and men, a majority of girls (53 per cent) and boys (52 per cent) in refugee households cope with food shortages by reducing their daily meals. In addition, 18 per cent of girls and 16 per cent of boys reported resorting to begging, while 15 per cent of girls and 16 per cent of boys have dropped out of school.

In focus group discussions with parents, school dropout was frequently attributed to insufficient resources for food and school fees. Parents expressed concern that sending children to school on an empty stomach impedes their concentration, ultimately leading to dropout. One parent from the Bidibidi settlement noted, "Schoolgoing children walk long distances, which puts them at risk of fainting from hunger. Many girls tend to marry early to seek a better life, especially after the recent food prioritization changes."

The coping behaviours observed among refugee children reveal a concerning trend where girls are particularly affected by negative strategies such as early marriage and school dropout, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted interventions to address food insecurity and its impact on their futures.

6. Existing capacities and resources among women, men, boys and girls under current food ration reductions

Women

Capacities: Women, especially in female-headed households, are increasingly taking on leadership roles. About 71 per cent of women are part of savings groups, and 68 per cent hold leadership positions in community structures. Women are also involved in small-scale agricultural activities and local businesses, particularly as food reduction pushes them to find alternative income sources.

Resources: Women's participation in savings groups and informal work enables them to support their households, but the reduction in food rations has increased their vulnerability, leading many to resort to casual labour or take on debt (24 per cent).

Men

Capacities: Men continue to dominate paid labour opportunities outside the home, with 52 per cent engaged in farming. They also contribute to household decision-making and often take joint responsibility for managing food and income sources.

Resources: Men have more access to paid work and informal labour markets, but, like women, some are forced to reduce their meals and take on debt (21 per cent) to cope with food shortages.

Boys

Capacities: Boys are often involved in informal labour and contribute to the household by working in farming or other small jobs. However, 16 per cent of boys have dropped out of school due to economic pressures.

Resources: Boys are more likely to engage in off-farm work (16 per cent) to support their families, but this disrupts their education, limiting their future opportunities.

Girls

Capacities: Girls often contribute to household responsibilities such as childcare and fetching water, while some engage in small-scale business activities. However, 15 per cent of girls have dropped out of school, and 6 per cent are at risk of early marriage due to food insecurity.

Resources: Girls are particularly vulnerable, with limited access to resources outside their household duties. Their involvement in savings groups or economic activities is limited compared with boys, making them more susceptible to negative coping mechanisms

Conclusions

The rapid gender assessment highlights the profound and multidimensional gendered impacts of food prioritization on refugee women, men, boys and girls in Uganda's refugee settlements. While Uganda's progressive refugee policy has provided a solid foundation for peaceful coexistence and access to basic rights, the reduced funding and subsequent resource prioritization have disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, particularly female-headed households. Despite these challenges, the findings also underscore the resilience and agency of refugee women, as evidenced by their active participation in decision-making and leadership roles.

The recommendations provided aim to address critical gaps, enhance protection measures and promote gender-responsive programming to ensure that refugees, particularly women and girls, are better supported to overcome systemic barriers and achieve sustainable empowerment. These insights offer actionable pathways for all stakeholders to strengthen the humanitarian response and advance gender equality in alignment with Uganda's broader humanitarian, development and peace continuum and goals.

Key recommendations

Livelihood

- Promote alternative livelihoods, including vocational training, provide start-up support, focus on climate-resilient livelihoods and enhance market linkages and value chains to reduce dependency on food assistance.
- Expand social protection mechanisms such as cash-for-work opportunities and community savings groups to households to meet their basic needs and reduce their risk of resorting to harmful coping strategies such as child labour or transactional sex.

Education

- Improve access to education and child protection, strengthen school feeding programmes and provide incentives for families to keep children in school, such as scholarships or supplies.
- Enhance second chance education for women, young mothers and fathers to enable them to learn English and vocational skills, including in non-traditional sectors such as plumbing, bricklaying and carpentry, informed by needs and market assessments.

Communication with communities and accountability to affected communities

- The WFP and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees should conduct biquarterly vulnerability assessments to identify households that have fallen back into vulnerability and ensure they are reincluded in food assistance programmes.
- There is a need to provide enhanced feedback to refugees in all categories on the selection criteria, and for increased efficiency in the handling of complaints regarding food support.

Protection and gender-based violence

- Protection working groups should update and promote GBV referral pathways and train aid workers on Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines to improve service delivery and trust.
- The protection working groups should enhance access to holistic support for GBV survivors, including mental health and psychosocial support and legal and medical assistance; promote the implementation of evidence-based behaviour change methodologies targeting women, men, boys and girls; and encourage religious, cultural and community leaders to promote positive social norm change.

Food security

- There is a need for proper and continual assessment to identify the most vulnerable groups of women to inform categorization of refugees and track changes in measures of vulnerability.
- Collective feedback and referral mechanisms need to be enhanced at the community level, including regular group feedback sessions on selection processes and food prioritization, to ensure community voices are heard and recommendations are integrated into the food prioritization process.
- Introducing kitchen gardens and supporting households to engage in backyard gardening can supplement reduced rations with fresh produce, focusing on nutrition-rich crops.

Water, sanitation and hygiene; and energy

- Water, sanitation and hygiene partners should focus on conducting preventive maintenance of water sources, liaise with local councils to ensure security and establish gender-sensitive water user committees.
- The energy sector should enhance access to reusable energy in refugee settlements to reduce fuel poverty.

Peaceful coexistence with host communities

- Refugee response partners should organize regular dialogues between host and refugee communities, ensuring that both groups benefit from interventions, with a particular focus on women and girls.
- Host communities must be included among the beneficiaries of every intervention conducted in the refugee communities.

Women's participation in leadership and decision-making

- All sectors should prioritize partnerships with local women's organizations, to provide institutional capacity-building and financial support for participation in humanitarian action and monitor the quality of services, resources and goods for women in humanitarian development settings.
- Those involved in delivering community-based services should provide training and mentorship to women and girls to build their knowledge base, skills, confidence and leadership capacity, including their ability to speak out and influence decision-making.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Uganda hosts the largest refugee population in Africa and the fifth largest in the world, providing protection to 1,786,293 refugees,[2] with 81 per cent being women and children. Given its geographic proximity to countries experiencing conflict and political instability, such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, coupled with its long-standing open door refugee policy,[3] Uganda will continue to receive more refugees.

The increased and long-term presence of refugees has far-reaching implications. The 2023 Global Refugee Forum[4] reiterated the need to address the specific inclusion and protection challenges faced by refugee women, men, boys and girls, respectively, as one of the far-reaching implications of hosting refugees. The stance of the Global Refugee Forum comes at a time when refugee response partners in Uganda face the challenge of a lack of funding for their interventions.[5] Underfunding is already having an impact on the sustainability of the cash and food aid available to refugee households, although refugees in Uganda receive the lowest level of food assistance in the region.[6]

The reduction in refugee response funding further threatens to undermine or reverse modest gains made towards the transitioning of refugees from aid dependence to self-reliance.[7] Moreover, the 2023 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) publication[8] on the impact of underfunding for refugee response in Uganda also established that the underfunding of refugee response partner interventions means that there will be minimal resources available to respond to growing protection needs and efforts to foster gender equality and the empowerment of women.

It is against this background, therefore, that the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), in partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP); United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA); UNHCR; Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development; and the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), sought to conduct a gender assessment in Uganda's refugee settlements of Imvepi, Bidibidi, Rhino Camp, Maaji II, Pagirinya and Palabek in the northern region; Kyaka II, Rwamwanja, Nakivale and Oruchinga in Western Uganda; and Kampala in the Central region. These settlements are situated in 8[9] of the country's 13 refugee-hosting districts to establish the impact of reduced refugee funding for humanitarian responses and to generate gender equality data and indicators to inform the refugee response plan, policies, strategies and programmes.

2 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "Refugee Population Dashboard." https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga.

3 Government of Uganda, 2006

4 UNHCR. "Global Refugee Forum 2023." https://www.unhcr.org/global-refugee-forum-2023.

5 World Bank, 2024

6 WFP, 2023

7 Ibid.

8 UNHCR. 2023. *Uganda Impact of Underfunding on the Refugee Response: Executive Summary*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/104366.

9 The eight refugee-hosting districts visited were Yumbe, Terego, Adjumani, Kyegegwa, Kamwenge, Isingiro, Lamwo and Kampala.

2.0 OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

2.1 Overall objective of the gender assessment exercise

The overall objective of this gender assessment was to establish the impact of reduced food rations in the context of reduced funding on women, men, boys and girls to generate gender equality data and to inform the refugee response plan, policies, strategies and programmes, including the food prioritization exercise and support needed across sectors.

2.2 Specific objectives

1. Identify needs specific to women, men, boys and girls in the context of reduced food rations
2. Establish existing levels of access to services for women, men, boys and girls across sectors (including socioeconomic support, health services, education, energy, gender-based violence (GBV) protection services, peaceful coexistence, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)) as a result of phase 3 food prioritization
3. Identify the impacts on gender-based roles, relations, participation and decision-making for women, men, boys and girls as a result of reduced food rations
4. Identify common coping mechanisms as a result of reduced food rations
5. Identify existing capacities and resources among women, men, boys and girls under reduced food rations
6. Understand and capture key recommendations to meet identified needs and mitigate challenges across the livelihood, protection, food security, health, education and WASH sectors.

2.3 Scope of the assessment

The gender assessment exercise was conducted in the refugee settlements of Imvepi, Bidibidi, Rhino Camp, Kyaka II, Rwamwanja, Nakivale, Oruchinga, Palabek, Pagirinya, Maaji II and Kampala. Interviews were conducted with refugees and members of the host communities as well as refugee response partners at regional and national offices. The scope of the assignment was informed by a representation of regions and districts with the highest population of refugees. Ninety-four per cent of Uganda's refugee population is hosted in districts within the northern and the south-western regions, while urban refugees are mostly hosted in the capital, Kampala.[10]

Overall, the assessment covered 8 out of the 13 refugee settlements in Uganda. The locations were selected based on availability of partners to support the assessment, but also ensured that all regions and refugee population groups are represented in the sample.

10 UNHCR. 2022. *Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan: 2022–2025*. https://reporting.unhcr.org/uganda-2022-2025-refugee-response-plan.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed for data collection and analysis. The qualitative approaches entailed key informant interviews and focus group discussions while the quantitative approaches involved household face-to-face interviews. Literature review was conducted throughout the exercise to contextualize the implementation of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance as well as the gender roles and relations in refugee-hosting communities.

Quality adherence

The data-collection exercise involved a series of activities starting with a rigorous sample selection and distribution process, the development of qualitative and quantitative data-collection tools, recruitment and training of the data-collection team, and the data collection itself, followed by data cleaning, transcribing, analysis and report writing.

3.1 Sample selection and distribution

Sampling strategy

A two-stage cluster stratified random sampling design was employed, with the household as the primary sampling unit. Respondents were interviewed within their households in the respective refugee communities selected using simple random sampling. In each of the refugee communities, the samples were assigned using the probability proportional to size approach.

The sample of respondents in each study district across the different techniques was generated as follows:

Sample determination

The sample for the quantitative phase was scientifically determined using Yamane's formula to ensure precision and representativeness. The sample of the households was distributed in accordance with refugee populations data tracked using the PROGRES dashboard.

Sample size calculation and distribution

The size of the sample for the household survey was obtained using the refugee populations of the study districts as the sampling frame. The sample size computational formula is given as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} * \frac{1}{r}$$

where,

n = sample size

N = refugee population size of study districts, obtained from the OPM/UNHCR Refugee Response Portal (Progress system)

e = desired error margin (0.03)

r = response rate, estimated at 95 per cent

The household sample for the refugee communities was distributed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of household sample for refugee communities

District	Settlement	Total households	Sample (*n*)
Kampala	Kampala	**71,864**	522
Terego and Madi Okollo	Rhino	27,510	305
	Imvepi	15,294	
	Total	**42,804**	
Yumbe	Bidibidi	**36,632**	262
Kyegegwa	Kyaka II	**33,396**	243
Adjumani	Maaji II	2,578	227
	Pagirinya	5,989	
	Total	**8,567**	
Lamwo	Palabek	**16,950**	135
Isingiro	Nakivale	54,894	395
	Oruchinga	1,771	
	Total	**56,665**	
Kamwenge	Rwamwanja	**22,084**	176
All districts	**Total**	**288,962**	**2,265**

Source: Refugee household populations were obtained from the OPM/UNHCR ProGres system on 30 September 2023

Overall, a quantitative sample of 2,265 refugee households were visited in the study districts of Kampala, Yumbe, Adjumani, Kyegewa, Terego and Madi Okollo, Kamwenge, Isingiro and Lamwo.

The sample was further distributed proportionate to the needs-based prioritization of food assistance categories. Given that refugees in Kampala, regarded as urban refugees, are considered to be self-reliant,[11] its entire sample belonged to category 3. Samples of the upcountry districts were spread across the three food prioritization categories.

Respondent selection

Within households, the enumeration team interviewed the women and men who were their heads. A woman was purposively interviewed in two of every three households visited (Table 2). In households where the head was absent, the second highest decision maker in the household was interviewed. The sample was further distributed according to prioritization categories. Category 2 had the highest share of respondent households.

11 International Refugee Rights Initiative. 2021. "Understanding Self-reliance in Contemporary Refugee Protection in Uganda." Rights in Exile Policy Paper Series. http://refugee-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Understanding-Self-Reliance_Final-30082021.pdf.

Table 2: Total respondents for refugee household interviews, by gender and prioritization category

Gender	K'la	Terego	Yumbe	Kyegegwa	Adjumani	Lamwo	Isingiro	Kamwenge
Female (68%)	339	210	197	166	155	92	267	108
Male (32%)	183	95	65	77	72	43	130	68
Total	**522**	**305**	**262**	**243**	**227**	**135**	**397**	**176**
Prioritization category	K'la	Terego	Yumbe	Kyegegwa	Adjumani	Lamwo	Isingiro	Kamwenge
Category 1	–	43	41	36	33	18	87	35
Category 2	–	252	202	195	182	111	179	124
Category 3	522	10	19	12	12	6	131	17
Total	**522**	**305**	**262**	**243**	**227**	**135**	**397**	**176**

3.2 Qualitative data collection

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted with separate groups of women, men, boys and girls. Specifically, discussions were held with young women aged 18–29, young men aged 18–29, adult women aged 30+, adult men aged 30+ and a group of adults with disabilities. In each of the study districts a total of six focus group discussions involving the host and refugee communities were conducted.

Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews were held with people who influence policy, particularly on the management and administration of refugee community settings, at the national and subnational levels. In Kampala, interviews were conducted with officials in the OPM to gather information on refugee response coordination and management. In the rest of the refugee-hosting districts, interviews were conducted with gender focal points, community development officers and production officers. Interviews were also conducted with settlement commandants, refugee welfare committee members, gender and protection officers working with operating and implementing partners within the settlements, and cultural and religious leaders. Overall, 44 key informant interviews were conducted.

Literature review

Literature on related studies, evaluations, reports and publications was extensively reviewed. Literature reviewed included:

- The Sustainable Development Goals
- The Global Compact on Refugees
- Uganda Vision 2040
- The Refugee Act 2016
- The inter-agency rapid gender analysis and GBV assessment reports
- The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
- The Food Security and Nutrition Assessment reports in refugee settlements
- The WASH Knowledge, Attitudes and Perceptions survey reports
- Sector response plans of ministries, departments and agencies
- Publications on the impact of underfunding of refugee response in Uganda, among others.

3.3 Data management, analysis and report writing

Data management

Mobile data-collection tools, employing the KoboCollect software, were used to collect data from refugee households. Data were thus captured and uploaded to the server in real time and submissions from each enumeration team were monitored on a daily basis. Qualitative data were captured through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using specialized data-recording devices compatible with other electronic devices such as personal computers and external storage devices where information was transferred for further management.

Data analysis and report writing

The quantitative data collected were uploaded to a server only accessible by authorized persons. The data were downloaded and converted into STATA readable format, cleaned, processed and analysed. The qualitative data were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software. They were transcribed from the recorders and thematized according to the objectives of the assignment. Each transcript was then coded to obtain quotes under each theme and a list of quotes matching the themes generated. Analysis outcomes for the quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated with results from literature review into the body of findings in this report.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The following ethical considerations adhered to during data collection fostered an environment of trust and transparency, which in turn enhanced participants' willingness to engage in the research process. This contributed to the response rate being high, at 68 per cent female and 32 per cent male.

Assurances of confidentiality

Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their views prior to the interactions. An introductory statement affirming this was included as the very first part of all the data-collection instruments.

Voluntary participation

Participation in the data-collection exercise as a respondent was voluntary and consistent with the Human Rights-Based Approach to Data. Respondents were informed that they were free to withdraw from the exercise at any point.

Respect for all persons

All respondents in the data-collection exercise were treated with utmost respect at all times. The data-collection team addressed them in a respectful manner and captured all opinions they provided without altering their intended message.

Do No Harm principle

Emphasis was placed on ensuring that no harm was inflicted on any of the participants as a result of their participation in the exercise. Precautions were taken to avoid any transfer or spread of disease or any form of damage or injury, whether psychological or physical, during interaction with the respondents.

3.5 Study limitations

The sampling did not cover all 13 refugee settlements in Uganda due to funding constraints. However, the sampled locations represent the different regions hosting refugees and the sample population is representative of the different refugee populations in Uganda.

The assessment was conducted after completion of the individual profiling exercise of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance in the settlements by WFP and UNHCR. This could have impacted the responses some refugee women and men provided at household level. However, the analysis took this into consideration, highlighting such outliers and putting them into context with supporting literature.

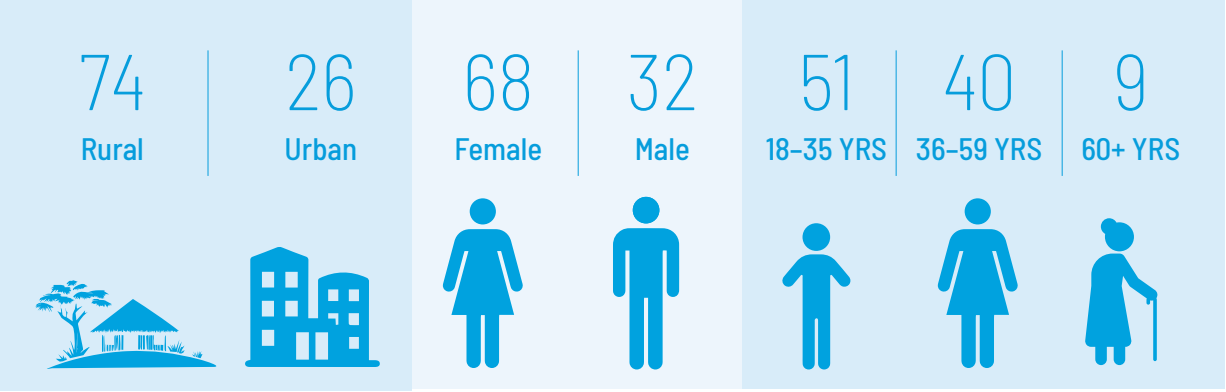
4.0 FINDINGS

This section presents results generated from engagements held with women, men, boys and girls in the refugee and host communities. It elucidates gender roles, relations, needs, capacities, opportunities, barriers and coping mechanisms with respect to the impact of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance on the refugee and host communities.

4.1 Respondent demographics

A total of 2,265 responses were included in the analysis, of which 68 per cent were female and 32 per cent were male (Figure 1). Fifty-one per cent of the respondents were aged 18–35 years; 40 per cent, 36–59 years; and 9 per cent, 60 years and above. Seventy-four per cent of the respondents reside in refugee settlements while 26 per cent live in urban centres, particularly in Kampala Capital City.

Figure 1: Household respondents demographics (n = 2,265) (%)



4.1.1 Refugee household demographics

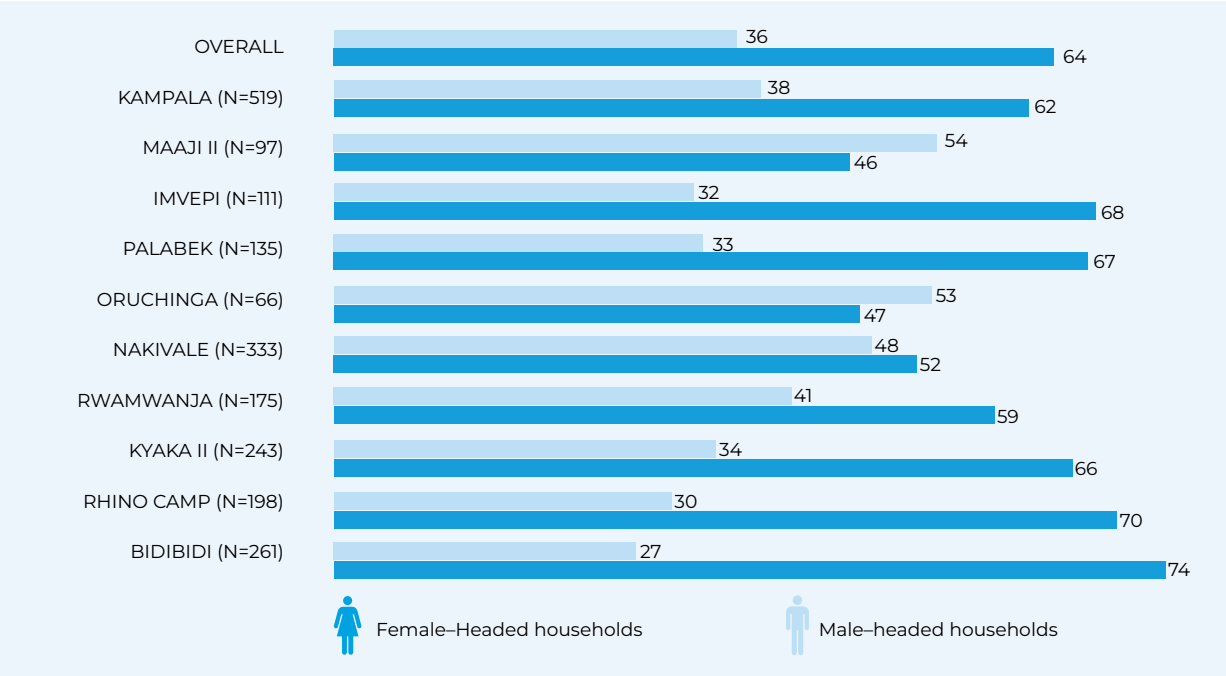
Sixty-four per cent of households surveyed across the 10 refugee settlements were female-headed; only the Oruchinga and Maaji II settlements had greater proportions of male-headed households, which represented 53 per cent and 54 per cent of their respective totals (Figure 2).

The 2019 Rapid Gender Analysis report by CARE International[12] argues there is a high number of female-headed households in refugee settlements because the men leave their families in search of work in other parts of Uganda or abroad. On the other hand, a refugee household survey report by the World Bank (2019),[13] where one in two refugee households was female-headed, postulates that the presence of a higher number of female household heads is a factor of older male members often staying in the country of origin or because they were victims of conflict. However, the World Bank report adds that female-headed households become fewer as the refugees stay for a longer period (about five years) because the male members join their families later on. This further signifies that efforts to support refugees to make the transition from food dependency to self-sufficiency should ensure inclusiveness of the vast number of female-headed households.

12 https://care.at/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CARE-Rapid-Gender-Analysis-Gulu_Arua-2019.pdf.

13 https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/571081569598919068/pdf/Informing-the-Refugee-Policy-Response-in-Uganda-Results-from-the-Uganda-Refugee-and-Host-Communities-2018-Household-Survey.pdf.

Figure 2: Gender of household head, by settlement (%)



Age of household head

Regarding the ages of household heads, 93 per cent across all the settlements were aged between 18 and 59 years (Table 3). Six per cent of the households were headed by an elderly person (60+ years) while 1 per cent were headed by a child. A 2020 report by WFP also found a higher proportion of households headed by persons aged between 18 and 59 years. The report revealed that the elderly and child-headed households were more dependent on relief aid and had limited household membership to mobilize for household productivity (WFP, 2020). The report adds that the adult-headed households are characteristically agile and, as a result, the majority realize a quick transition from assistance to self-reliance.

Table 3: Age of household head, by settlement (%)

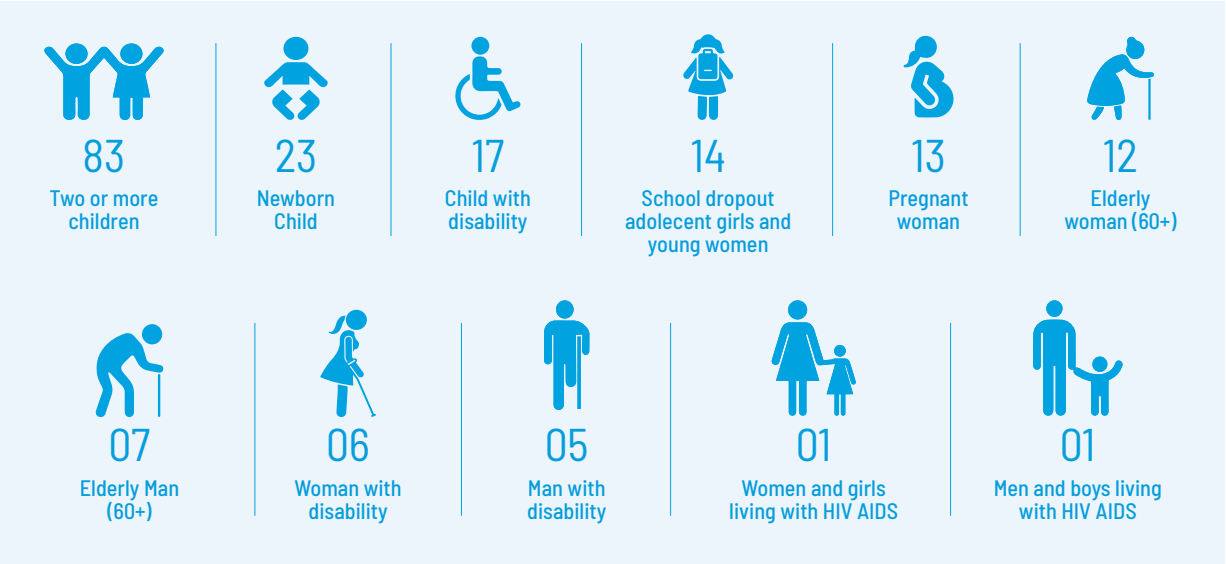
Settlement	Age of household head		
	Adult-headed (18–60 yrs)	**Elderly-headed** (60+ yrs)	**Child-headed** (<18 yrs)
Bidibidi (***n*** = 261)	92	8	0
Rhino Camp (***n*** = 198)	98	1	1
Kyaka II (***n*** = 243)	92	7	1
Rwamwanja (***n*** = 175)	92	6	2
Nakivale (***n*** = 333)	88	10	2
Oruchinga (***n*** = 6)	88	9	3
Palabek (***n*** = 135)	91	9	0
Imvepi (***n*** = 111)	96	4	0
Maaji II (***n*** = 97)	97	1	2
Kampala (***n*** = 519)	95	3	2
Overall (***n*** = 2,078)	93	6	1

4.1.2 Categories of persons living in the household

The UNHCR Protection Induction Programme Handbook[14] provides a guide on the various categories of people and emphasizes the need to ensure protection of their right of access to specialized services. This assessment established that 83 per cent of the households contained two or more children (Figure 3), 14 per cent had school-dropout adolescent girls and young women, 13 per cent had pregnant women and 12 per cent had a woman aged 60 years or above. One per cent of the households contained adolescent women, men, boys and girls living with HIV or AIDs.

In the 2022 Teenage Mothers' Survey report by Windle International, it was highlighted that the number of out-of-school adolescent girls and young women is on the rise within refugee settlements. The report also found that girls dropping out of school is an underlying factor for rising cases of teenage pregnancy in these settlements.[15] Therefore, the presence of school-dropout girls, pregnant and elderly women, as well as women, men, boys and girls with chronic illnesses such as HIV and AIDs in refugee households exacerbates their vulnerability by further exposing them to the risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Figure 3: Categories of persons living in respondent households (n = 2,265) (%)



4.1.3 Number of members living in the household

The number of members living in a refugee household provides a benchmark for the planning and delivery of services.[16] Moreover, refugees are still entitled to have all their needs, aspirations and human rights protected and respected regardless of their gender, race, colour or status. Results from the assessment show that the average household size in the refugee settlements is eight members. The average size of the refugee household is thus greater than the national average of 4.7 members (UBOS, 2021). However, results also established that there were households that had 11 to 15 household members (12 per cent female-headed and 9 per cent male-headed) (Figure 4). The higher the number of household members, the bigger the burden on the household head to ensure sustainable provision for basic needs such as food, shelter, education and medical care.[17]

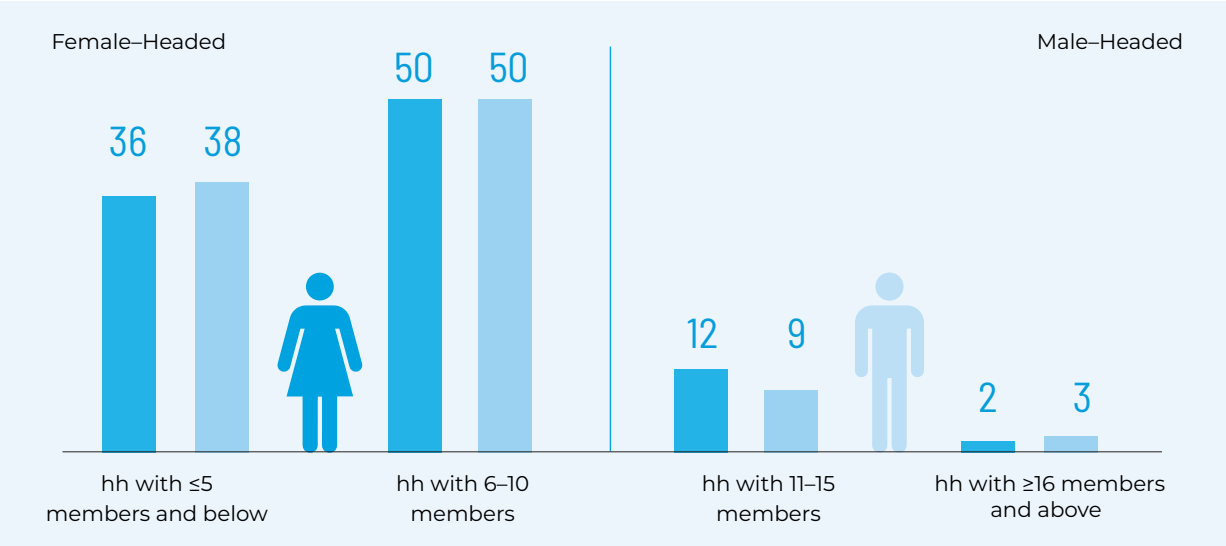
14 UNHCR. 2006. "Persons of concern to UNHCR." In *UNHCR & International Protection: A Protection Induction Programme*. Geneva: UNHCR, pp. 17–31. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/44b5005c2.pdf.

15 Windle International Uganda, 2022

16 UNHCR. "Emergency Handbook." https://emergency.unhcr.org.

17 WFP and UNHCR, 2024

Figure 4: Number of refugee household members, by gender of household head (%)

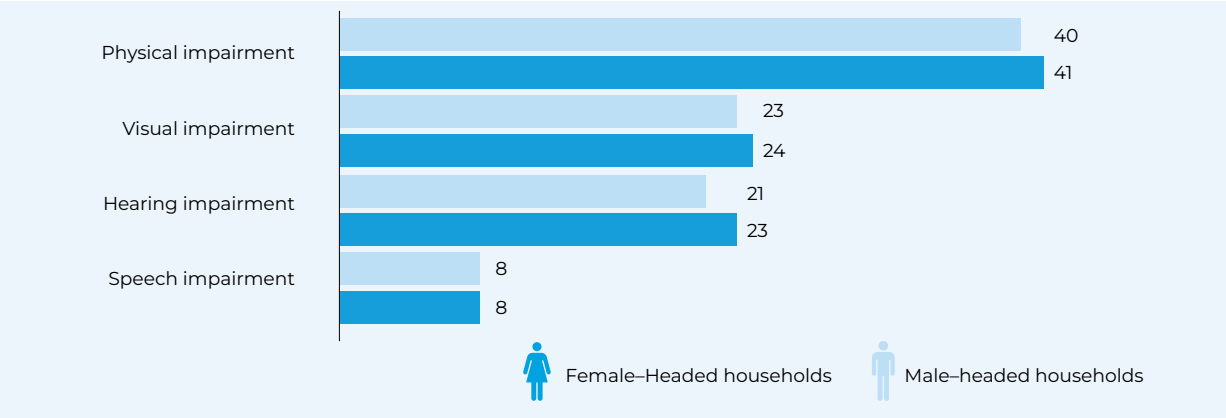


4.1.4 Disability status of household members

The Uganda Persons with Disabilities Act (2019) defines disability as a substantial functional limitation of a person's daily activities caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment and environment barriers, resulting in limited participation in society on an equal basis with others. In the humanitarian setting, households typically incur additional costs related to the disabilities of their members which are not taken into account when assessing the level of food assistance that they require.[18]

The assessment reveals there was no significant difference between the female and male-headed households having persons with a form of disability (Figure 5). Forty-one per cent and 40 per cent of households headed by women and men, respectively, had members with a physical impairment. Around a quarter of both types of households had members with visual impairments (female-headed, 24 per cent; male-headed, 23 per cent), as well as members with hearing impairments (female-headed, 23 per cent; male-headed, 21 per cent). Overall, 8 per cent of households had members with a speech impairment.

Figure 5: Disability status of household members, by gender of household head (%)

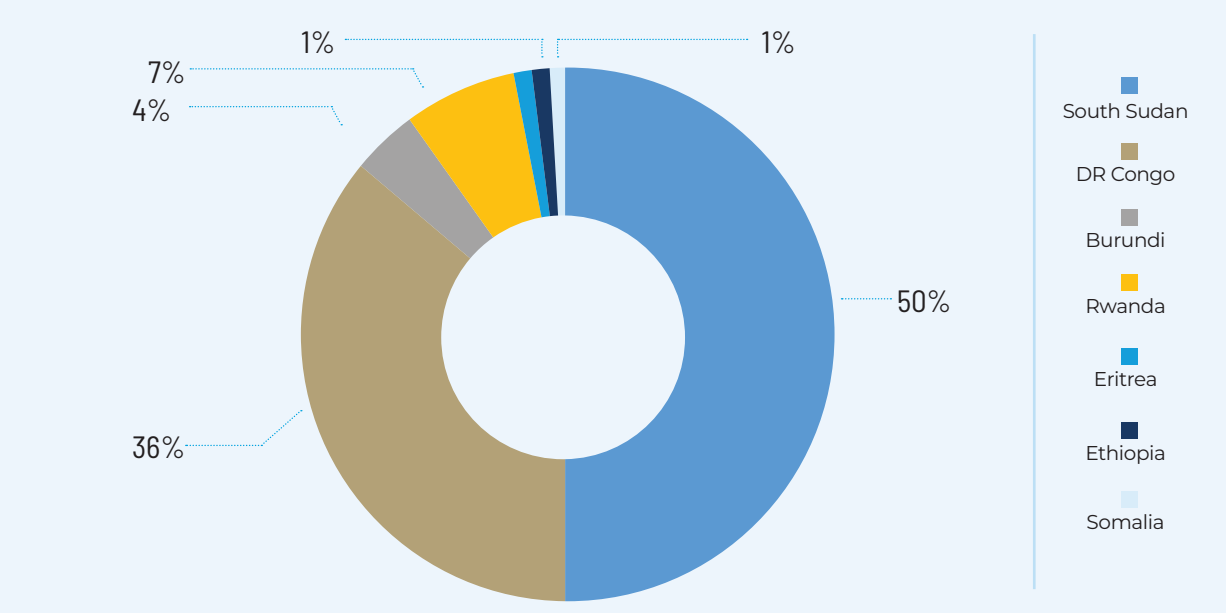


18 WFP, 2020

4.1.1.5 Refugees' country of origin

According to a 2022 situation analysis report by UNHCR,[19] 34.6 million people have fled their home countries due to conflict, violence, persecution or human rights violations. Interviews with the refugees indicated that South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo are politically insecure and continue to prompt many of their nationals to seek refuge in Uganda due to its proximity and open door refugee policy.[20] Results show that 50 per cent of the refugees sampled were from South Sudan, 36 per cent from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the remainder from Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia (Figure 6). The refugees from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo were mostly women and children who had been found to be disproportionately prompted to flee the increased risk of SGBV in their home countries.[21]

Figure 6: Refugees' countries of origin (n = 2,265)



4.1.6 Length of stay

Uganda's open door refugee policy allows shared access for refugees to social services and livelihood opportunities within the host community. The length of a refugee's stay is therefore a critical factor in the process of transitioning refugee households from aid dependence to self-reliance.[22] A refugee's length of stay also has the power to redefine gender roles and relations, increasing the prospect of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Assessment results show that 84 per cent of the sampled refugees had lived in the settlements for at least four years, 13 per cent had stayed for one to three years and 3 per cent had stayed for less than one year. Results in Annex 1 also show that 67 per cent of households that had stayed in the settlements for less than a year were placed in the self-reliant category of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance. The majority (64 per cent) of households headed by women had stayed in the settlement

19 https://www.unhcr.org/neu/104815-10-facts-about-refugees-2.html#:~:text=While%2034.6%20million%20people%20have,countries%2C%206.8%20million%20in%20each..

20 UNHCR. 2010. "Uganda: The Refugees Regulations, 2010." S.I. 2010 No. 9. https://www.refworld.org/legal/decreees/natlegbod/2010/en/102127.

21 Tewabe et al., 2024

22 https://wfp-unhcr-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/UGA_Learning_UNHCR-WFP-Joint-Prioritization-Phase-I-II_FINAL.pdf.

longer (at least four years) than those headed by men (Figure 7). As highlighted in the refugee response plan, the women's long stays in refugee communities underscore the need for refugee response interventions, primarily to ensure their empowerment and sustenance (UNHCR, 2023c).

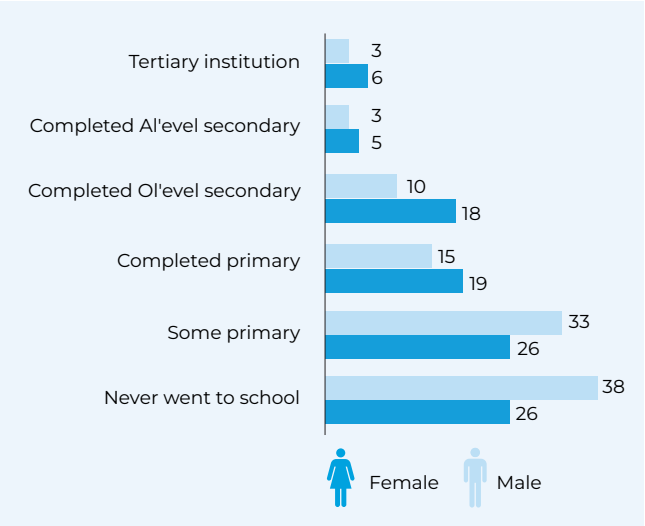
Figure 7: Length of stay, by gender of household head (%)

	Female	Male
Less than one year	53	47
One to three years	62	38
Four years and longer	64	36

4.1.7 Respondents' levels of education

Results from the assessment indicated that 26 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men interviewed within the refugee communities had never attended any level of education (Figure 8). A higher proportion of men (68 per cent) than women (48 per cent) indicated they could read or write in at least one language. During the focus group discussions, refugees noted that they missed the opportunity to attend school due to protracted instabilities in their home countries, which meant that they passed school age and assumed parental obligations. Nevertheless, some of the refugees had enrolled for adult education or attended different forms of training provided by refugee response partners within the settlements, enabling them to gain some literacy and numeracy skills.

Figure 8: Highest level of education, by gender (%)



4.2 Access to essential services

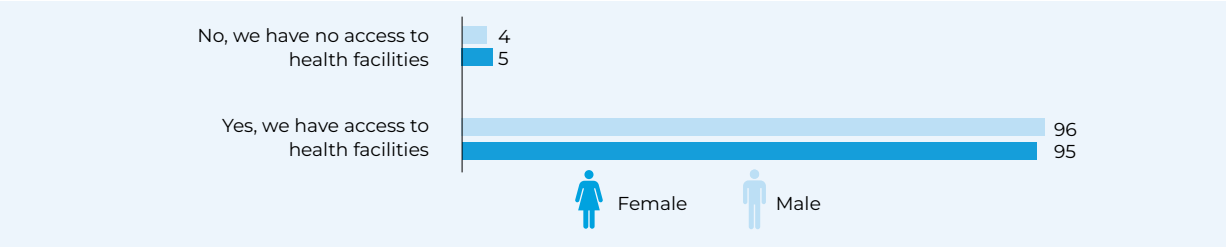
The assessment sought to establish the extent to which refugee women and men can access basic services such as health, education and housing, and to understand their households' WASH situation.

4.2.1 Access to health services

Ninety-five per cent of the women and men across all the settlements visited indicated they had access to health facilities (Figure 9). In terms of prioritization categories, access to health services means that all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship (WHO, 2023). According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics,[23] a household is considered to have access to a health facility if it is within a distance of 5 km or less.

One woman in the Imvepi refugee settlement attested to this, saying, "We have access to the health centre. it is not so far away from our village centre. They attend to us when we go there. The times I have gone there, I have not complained."

Figure 9: Access to health facilities, by gender (%)



It is important to note that even though the majority of the sampled respondents have access to health facilities, there is still a percentage of men and women who reported lacking access, highlighting potential areas for improvement in healthcare accessibility and equity.

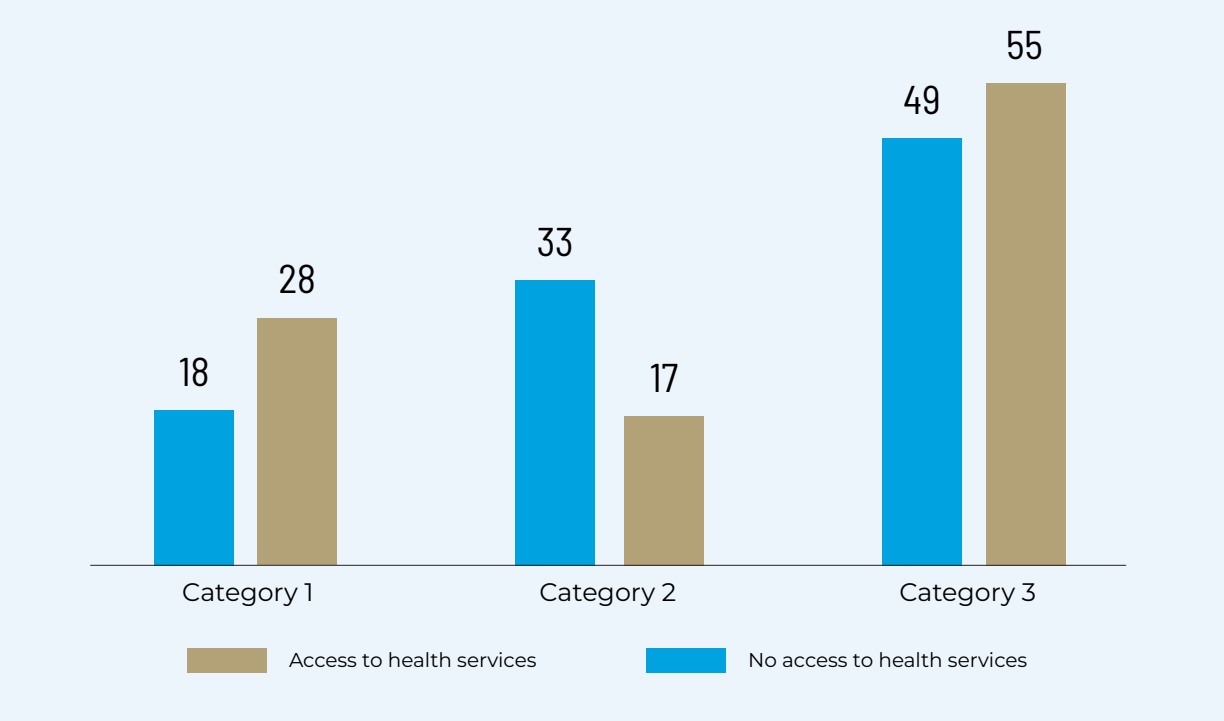
Twenty-five per cent of refugee women and men who reported lacking access attributed this to having to travel a long distance (farther than 5 km). A breakdown of this 25 per cent by refugee settlements indicated that notable mentions were made by refugees in the Imvepi (75 per cent), Pagiringya (60 per cent), Rhino Camp (59 per cent) and Rwamwanja and Nakivale settlements (each 50 per cent). Sixteen per cent of the refugees cited language barrier as a hindrance to accessing health services and it was mentioned by refugees in Imvepi (25 per cent), Rwamwanja (25 per cent) and Pagrinya (20 per cent). Twelve per cent of the refugees – particularly in Oruchinga, Rhino Camp and Rwamwanja – cited the absence of functioning health facilities.

Access to health facilities by prioritization category

Of the refugees who indicated having access to health facilities, 49 per cent were among those in the self-reliant category (category 3) (Figure 10). Refugees who had access to health facilities were fewest (18 per cent) among those in the highly food-dependent category (category 1). Concerningly however, 55 per cent of refugees who had no access to health facilities were also from the self-reliant category. This therefore implies that efforts to ensure access to health services ought to be indiscriminately extended to all refugee households.

23 https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03_2018Compendium__Vol._III.pdf.

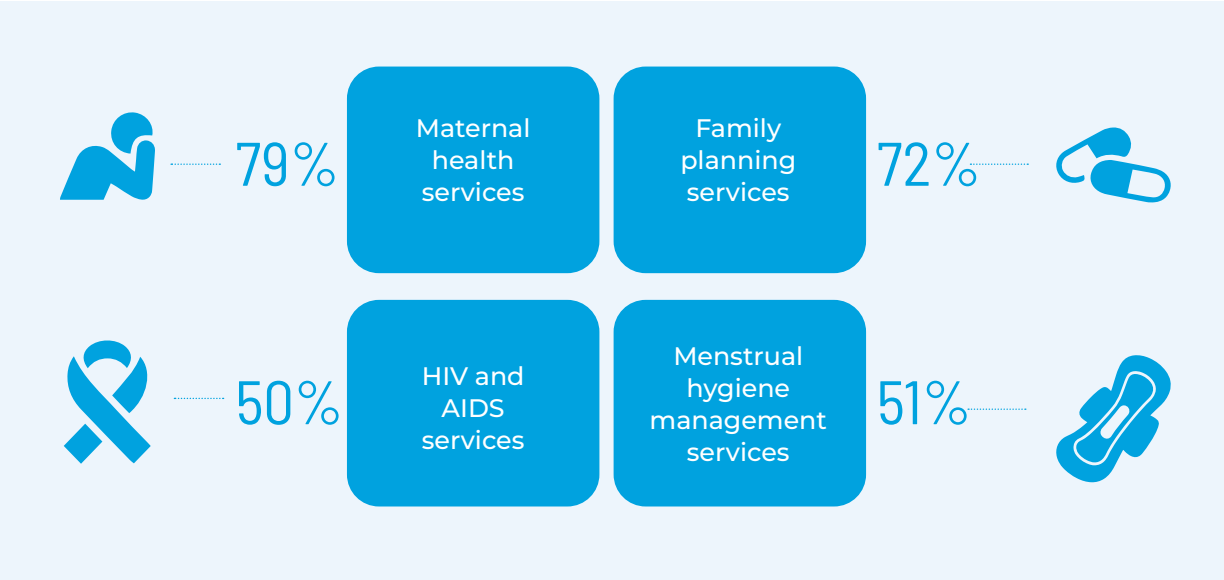
Figure 10: Refugees' Access to health services, by prioritization category (%)



Access to maternal, family planning, HIV and AIDs, and menstrual hygiene services

Assessment of access to essential services, notably maternal, family planning, HIV and AIDs, and menstrual hygiene management services by women and girls, generated distinct results in the different refugee settlements (Figure 11, Annex 2). Overall, the majority of the refugee women surveyed stated they were accessing maternal health (79 per cent), family planning (72 per cent), HIV and AIDs (50 per cent), and menstrual health and hygiene management services (51 per cent).

Figure 11: Access to essential health services for refugee women and girls



The reasons for being unable to access these services included lack of money to pay for the service (43 per cent), a long distance to the given health facility (31 per cent), language barrier (17 per cent) and lack of medicines in the facility (5 per cent).

Other reasons given were the facility not being accessible on weekends, impaired mobility restricting travel, the use of traditional or alternative remedies, long queues at the facility, non-functional delivery beds, inadequate health staff and services being limited to the treatment of malaria.

Barriers to accessing maternal services were further underscored by a married man who had this to say:

My wife has given birth to three children, all through caesarean. But when we go to hospital, they always tell me to make full payment; they do not allow half pay, yet my wife is due and in pain. This process is always long and stressful yet this is a government hospital.

Results from this assessment are consistent with UNHCR's 2023 Access to Services Situation Analysis Report[24] which also indicated that 95 per cent of members of refugee households who were sick had access to treatment in a health facility. The report also cites cost, availability of medication, distance to health facility and long waiting time as key barriers to access to health services. It is crucial that these specific issues be addressed as their persistence threatens efforts towards equitable access to health services, the absence of which mostly disadvantages women and girls.

4.2.2 Access to education services

Eighty-six per cent of households headed by women and 79 per cent of those headed by men had primary and secondary-schoolgoing children between 6 and 17 years of age (Figure 12). Both girls and boys in 81 per cent and 77 per cent of households headed by women and men, respectively, were attending school. This implies an average gross enrolment rate of 79 per cent, which is lower than the rate of 88.5 per cent for the base year 2020/21 for the Second Education Response Plan (ERP II).[25] In terms of the prioritization categories, refugee households whose children were attending school were mostly (49 per cent) among those in the self-reliant category (Annex 2). Children from refugee households in the highly-food-dependant category (category 1) only accounted for 14 per cent of children attending school.

Seven per cent and 10 per cent of households headed by women and men, respectively, had only boys or only girls attending school. As stipulated in the ERP, access to education, particularly primary school education, within the settlements is free and is attended by both boys and girls from the refugee and host communities. As places available in the few public primary schools offering free education are not commensurate with increasing pupil enrolments, these schools have a high pupil population, which causes classroom congestion and a high pupil to teacher ratio.[26] With the anticipatory measures to reduce funding of refugee response interventions, the challenge of congestion in schools can only escalate and consequently impede the delivery of quality and equitable education.

Access to education for boys and girls in refugee and host communities is equitably enshrined in the ERP 2021/22–2024/25, which is aligned with the Uganda Refugee Response Plan 2022–25. Notably, education has been found to be an effective mechanism for reducing the vulnerability of children, particularly girls, helping to address the issue of child marriage if girls complete their education cycle.[27] According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific

24 UNHCR. *Access to Services: Situational Analysis*.

25 See Uganda, Ministry of Education and Sports. *Second Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities in Uganda: 2021/22–2024/25*. Kampala: Ministry of Education and Sports.

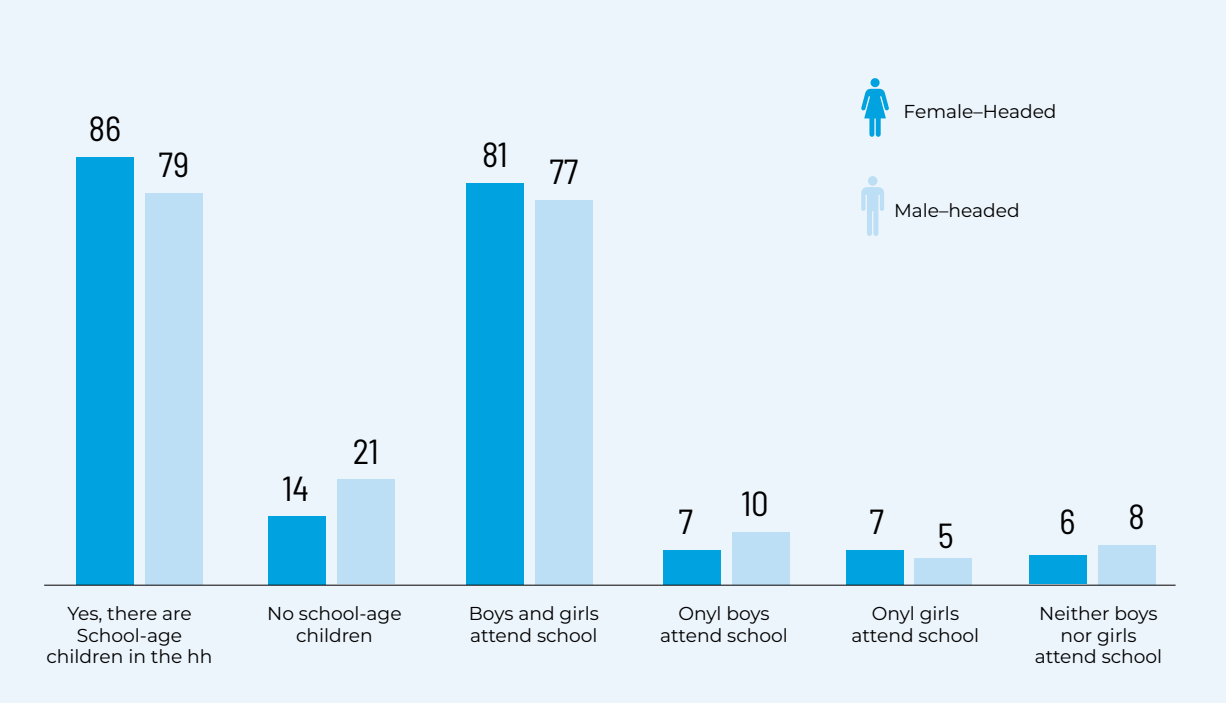
26 Ministry of Education and Sports of Uganda, 2021

27 UNESCO and Education Development Trust, 2023

and Cultural Organization,[28] if all girls completed primary school, child marriage would fall by 14 per cent; if they all finished secondary school, it would drop dramatically by 64 per cent.

Through the ERP, the Ministry of Education and Sports of Uganda (currently implementing ERP II), with the collaborative efforts of partners such as United Nations Children's Fund, AVSI, Save the Children, Plan International and Right to Play commits to improving learning outcomes for the increasing numbers of refugee and host-community children and adolescents across the country.[29]

Figure 12: School-age children and school attendance, by gender of household head (%)



The government's free education policy notwithstanding, parents of children in refugee communities indicated during focus group discussions that there are certain requirements that necessitate that they make some financial contribution, which some say is affordable, and others say has deterred them from sending their children to school. Eighty-seven per cent of the 121 households where both boys and girls were not attending school said there is no money to pay their school fees. Nine per cent mentioned that children stay at home to engage in paid labour while 8 per cent needed children to stay at home to help with household chores. Other reasons stated included the family being faced with hunger and hesitant to send hungry children to school, lack of money to buy the school uniform, children refusing to go to school and the children being underage (under 3 years).

A woman in the Nyumanzi settlement said:

Some of us cannot access education because there is a fee to pay which we cannot afford. Every year there are school dropouts because of fees. We pay around U Sh 15,000 and this is not inclusive of the school requirements. And failure to pay fees and the requirements, the child is not allowed.

28 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2014. *Global Education Monitoring Report*.

29 Ministry of Education and Sports of Uganda, 2021

The 2021 Education Report by UNHCR[30] also establishes that the number of refugee children attending school plummets following the transition from primary to secondary education, on account of pressure to drop out and support their families, which can see both girls and boys subjected to child labour. The report argues that the growing challenge presented by underfunding will further decrease the numbers making the transition from primary to secondary education, which currently stands at 34 per cent and risks falling to below 10 per cent, with significantly worse consequences for young girls.

4.2.3 Housing conditions

Safe, secure and affordable housing plays a critical role in determining a person's overall health and well-being; it provides a base from which resettled refugees can seek employment, re-establish family relationships and make connections with the wider community.[31] While it is mainly the mandate of UNHCR to receive refugees, whether refugees live in a settlement or among the host population is at the discretion of local policymakers or the refugee's choice.[32]

For women, their choice of dwelling is premised upon their safety, while men would prefer a dwelling close to a livelihood opportunity.[33] During this assessment, housing conditions were assessed for the urban refugees considered to be self-reliant. It sought to establish the ownership, type and size of the dwelling units (Table 4).

Nearly all urban refugee households headed by women (96 per cent) and men (93 per cent) were living in rented dwelling units. Fifty-six per cent of households headed by women and 49 per cent of those headed by men reported living in a tenement known locally as a muzigo.[34]

The dwelling units of urban refugees were characterized as follows:

- Most dwelling units for households headed by both women (77 per cent) and men (73 per cent) had between one and three rooms.
- Twenty-two per cent of households headed by women and 26 per cent headed by men had between four and six rooms.
- Forty-four per cent of households headed by women and 46 per cent headed by men had no more than five members.
- Forty-three per cent of households headed by women and 42 per cent headed by men had between 6 and 10 members.
- Sixty-six per cent of households headed by women and 64 per cent headed by men were in dwelling units with separate space or bedding for boys and girls to sleep in privacy.

Results show that housing conditions for urban refugees are moderately favourable to those in refugee settlements, with more living space for household members. Nonetheless, feedback from focus group discussions revealed that most urban refugees experience challenges when it comes to paying rent for their dwelling units. A 2019 REACH study[35] found that most urban refugees are at risk of eviction in the next six months, lack formal housing agreements and documentation, and live in increasing fear of asset confiscation by their landlords.

The study goes on to state that urban refugees consider the free housing provided in refugee settlements to offer better living conditions and, as a result, are more likely to relocate to these settlements than stay in urban areas. The desire of urban refugees to return to refugee settlements goes against efforts by refugee response partners to help refugees transition from dependence to self-reliance, which, among other things, assumes that they have full charge of their households' living arrangements.[36]

30 UNHCR. Staying the Course: The Challenges Facing Refugee Education. Geneva: UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/be/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/2021/09/UNHCR-Education-Report-2021.pdf.

31 UNHCR, 2023

32 World Bank Blogs, 2021

33 REACH and NRC, 2019

34 A *muzigo* is a popular Luganda term used to refer to single- or double-roomed tenements that comprise multiple subdivisions of a single housing structure.

35 REACH. 2019. *Refugee Access to Livelihoods and Housing, Land, and Property in Uganda*. Uganda.

36 UNHCR, 2023

Table 4: Refugee housing characteristics, by gender of household head

Housing characteristic	Description	Female-headed household (%)	Male-headed household (%)
Renting or owning the dwelling unit (*n* = 521)	Renting	96	93
	Owning	3	4
	Neither renting nor owning	1	3
Type of dwelling (*n* = 520)	Detached house	5	10
	Semi-detached house	7	8
	Flat in a block of flats	2	4
	Room(s) in main house	25	18
	Servant quarters	5	7
	Tenement (*muzigo*)	56	49
	Garage	0	2
	Store	1	2
Number of rooms (*n* = 2,265)	1–3	77	73
	4–6	22	26
	7 or more	1	1
Is there more than one family living in your house/shelter? (*n* = 2,265)	Yes	31	24
	No	69	76
Number of people residing in dwelling unit (*n* = 2,265)	5 members or fewer	44	46
	6–10 members	43	42
	11 members or more	13	12
Separate space or bedding for boys and girls to sleep in privacy? (*n* = 2,265)	Yes	66	64
	No	34	36

4.2.4 Water, sanitation and hygiene conditions

Access to water and sanitation

Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals emphasizes the need to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. As part of the operationalization of its refugee policy, Uganda established the integrated Water and Environment Sector Refugee Response Plan to govern the long-term supply of water and sanitation services to refugee settlements and host communities.[37] Figure 13 shows that the water sources most commonly used by the refugee households across the settlements are public taps, public boreholes, unprotected wells or springs, and piped water supplies within dwellings. Ninety-four per cent of refugee households in Rhino Camp and 92 per cent of those in the Imvepi settlement use public taps as their main source of water.

Public boreholes were the most used source in the Rwamwanja (66 per cent), Maaji II (66 per cent) and Palabek (57 per cent) settlements. Fewer households reported using unprotected wells or springs and piped water within dwelling units. Sixteen per cent and 14 per cent of households in Kampala and Kyaka II reported using an unprotected well or spring, respectively.

Challenges of access to water were widely decried by women, and during the interactions, one of them said:

37 MoWE, 2019

I have a problem with water access. In our village we have two boreholes, but to get water there is a fee one has to pay per month, U Sh 1,000. Failure to pay this money, no water. If one tries to get water without pay, they are chased away.

A local leader from the host community said:

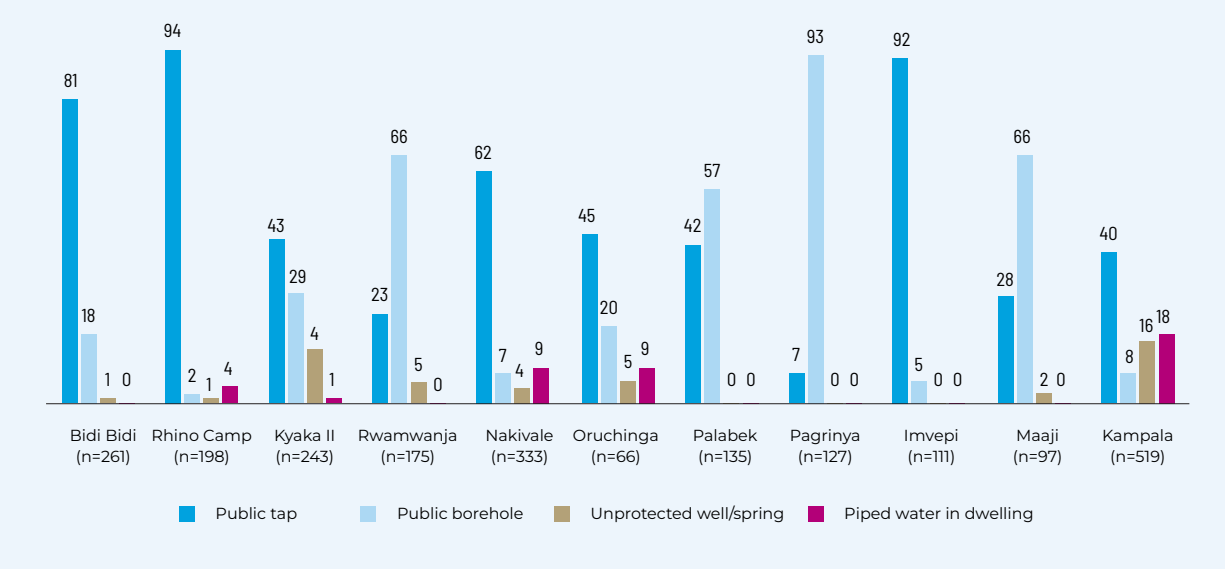
We have some refugees who come all the way to our borehole to get water. When our women go to get water, the line is always long, so you prepare to spend over 3–4 hours.

Results from the assessment and related studies show that water sources accessed in the refugee communities are mostly public. Since access is for the general public, there is a high likelihood of abuse, not only of the water source but of vulnerable populations, notably women, girls, boys and persons with disabilities.

Women from the Oruchinga settlement expressed fear of rape at water points, saying: "We have a challenge of collecting water from swamps when scarcity has occurred and even get cases of cattle-grazing men raping us."

The prominence of public water sources in the refugee communities also implies water stress within refugee households, as collection of public water involves long queues. Moreover, the financial constraints encountered by the refugee response partners mean that the public water sources may not be boosted to function more efficiently.[38]

Figure 13: Proportion of refugee households using most common water sources, by settlement (%)

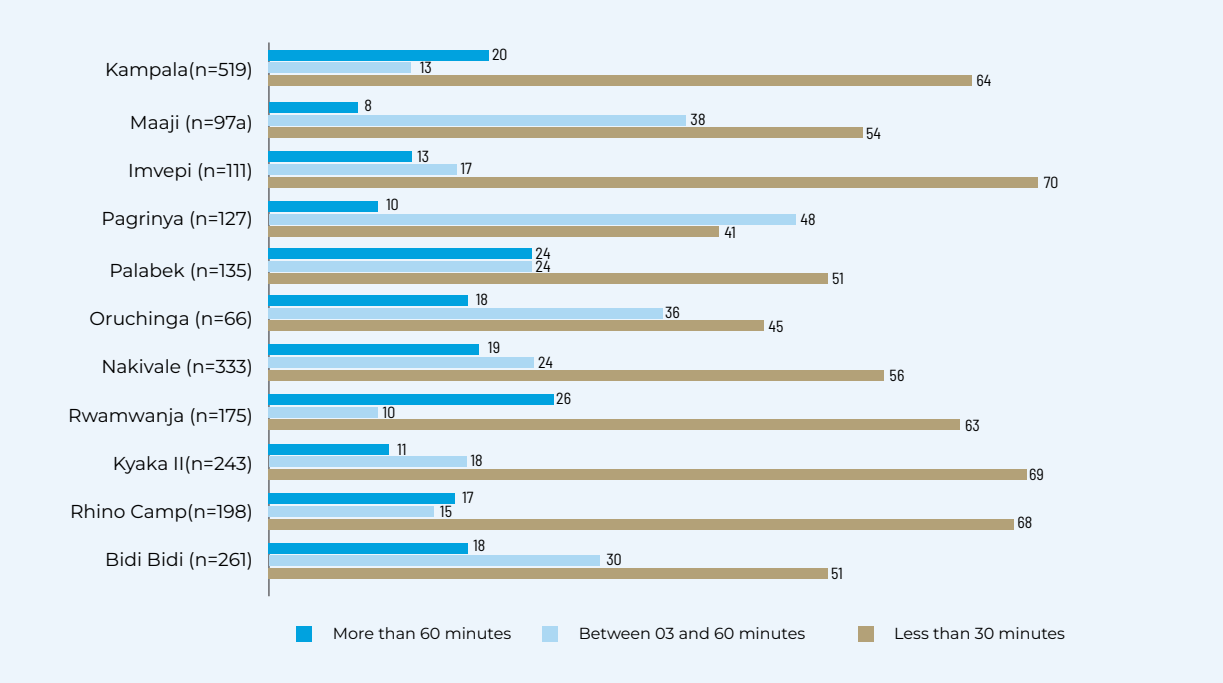


Time taken to collect water

On average, members in 50 per cent of refugee households spend less than 30 minutes collecting water from the household's main water source (Figure 14). A considerable proportion of households in Rwamwanja (26 per cent), Palabek (24 per cent) and Kampala (20 per cent) have members that spend more than 60 minutes collecting water. The round-trip time accounts for collection of sufficient water for household use as well as hygienic water storage and use (Mugumya et al., 2020). Mugumya et al. argue that a round-trip time exceeding one hour for water collection was negatively associated with adequate and safe water storage and use.

38 World Bank, 2023

Figure 14: Time taken to collect water, by settlement (%)



Abuse during water collection

Refugee response reports indicate that women, girls and boys are the household members most likely to collect water, yet they are also the most vulnerable to abuse and violence at water points, which can proceed from the stress and frustration caused by delays.[39]

Refugee households interviewed were asked if their members had experienced a form of sexual harassment during the process of collecting water. Sexual harassment includes inappropriate jokes, suggestive comments, unwelcome touching, intrusive comments about appearance, unwanted sexually explicit comments and indecent exposure.[40] Sixteen per cent of the women and girls from Oruchinga and 6 per cent of men and boys from Pagirinya reported experiencing sexual harassment at the water collection points (Table 5).

Physical abuse at the water point included getting forcefully blocked from accessing the water point, and getting beaten, punched, kicked or stoned (UBOS, 2019). For this case, there were higher proportions of refugee households reporting physical abuse across the settlements. Oruchinga had the highest proportion of women and girl victims, at 31 per cent, while the rest of the settlements had an average of 23 per cent of women and girl victims.

The other incident assessed was psychological abuse at the water point. In this context, psychological abuse comprises threats of harm, embarrassment in front of family and friends, and name-calling (UBOS, 2019). Eighteen per cent of psychological abuse cases with women and girl victims were in Palabek, while other settlements had an average of 14 per cent of psychological cases with women and girl victims. Most male victims were from Rhino Camp (22 per cent), with similar proportions of their counterparts in the Oruchinga (19 per cent), Pagirinya (19 per cent) and Imvepi (17 per cent) settlements.

Related studies indicate that acts of SGBV committed at water points mostly go unreported (CARE International, 2018; UN Women, 2022a; Logie et al., 2024). Some reasons cited for not reporting water point abuse include the victim's

39 CARE International, 2019; New Vision, 2020; VOA, 2020; UNHCR, 2021

40 UBOS, 2019

fear of being rejected by their community, caregivers conniving with the perpetrators to conceal the case and failure of the justice system to communicate with the victim, as most refugees do not have telephones. This confirms that the occurrence of SGBV at water points continues to endanger refugees, most notably women and girls across all refugee settlements.

Table 5: Experiences of refugee household members at water points, by settlement and gender (%)

Settlement (number of respondents)	Experiences at water points					
	Sexual harassment		Physical violence		Psychological abuse	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bidi Bidi (*n* = 261)	0	0	5	11	12	8
Rhino Camp (*n* = 198)	3	5	23	22	17	22
Kyaka II (*n* = 243)	1	1	17	10	15	9
Rwamwanja (*n* = 175)	2	0	13	10	12	6
Nakivale (*n* = 333)	5	5	14	23	9	10
Oruchinga (*n* = 66)	16	5	31	24	13	19
Palabek (*n* = 135)	2	2	28	26	18	14
Pagrinya (*n* = 127)	5	6	21	13	14	19
Imvepi (*n* = 111)	0	0	5	17	12	17
Maaji II (*n* = 97)	2	2	23	17	14	7
Kampala (*n* = 519)	3	3	2	3	3	6

When the victims of water point abuse were asked about preventative measures, 58 per cent of the women said they would do nothing about the abuses, 21 per cent said they would opt for a safer water point, 13 per cent would go to the water point in groups with other women and men, and 9 per cent would go with groups of only women. Like the women, 72 per cent of the men said they would do nothing, 18 per cent would opt for a safer water point and 9 per cent would travel in a group with other men and women.

It is suggested that water point abuse could be avoided by instituting water collection schedules such that, akin to the water distribution strategy, families are assigned to one of three rounds of water collection (UN Women, 2020a; UNHCR, 2021; Water Mission Uganda, 2022). Water collection ought to be done before dark to ensure the safety of women, girls and boys from the refugee and host communities.[41]

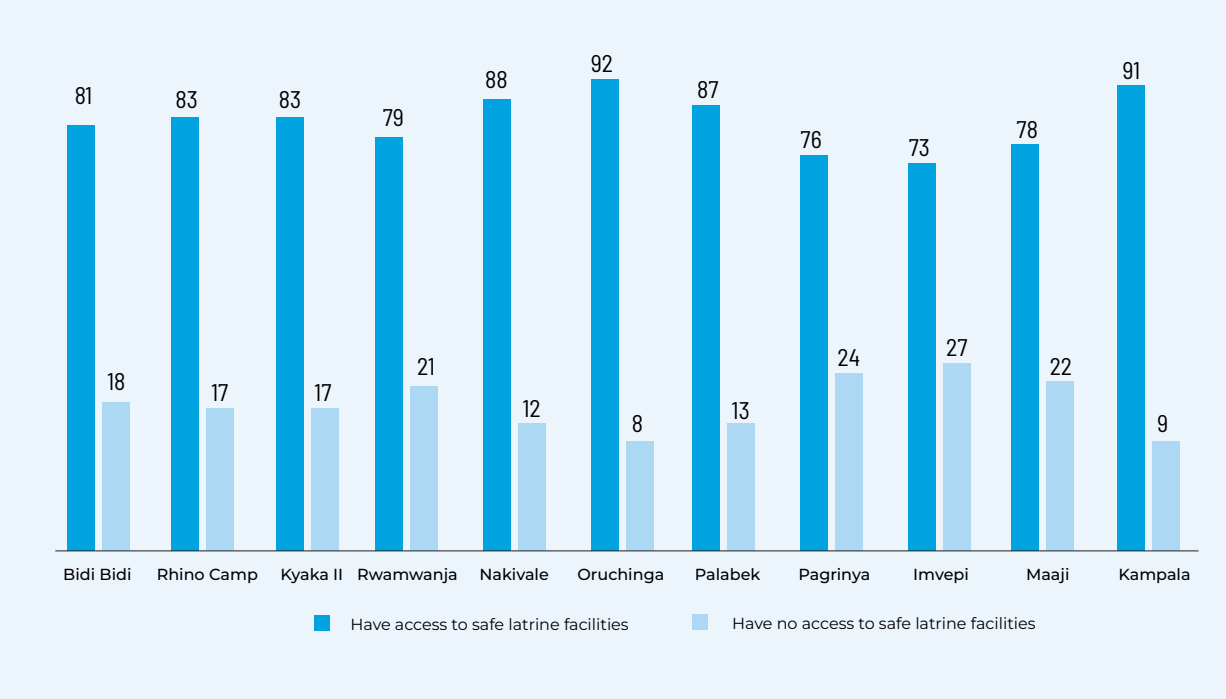
Access to latrines

Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals underscores the need to eradicate open defecation globally by 2030 (UN, 2015). During this assessment, refugees were asked about the availability and usability of safe latrines for their household. On average, 85 per cent of refugee households in all settlements visited stated they have access to safe latrine facilities (Figure 15). On the other hand, significantly high proportions of households in Imvepi (27 per cent), Pagrinya (24 per cent), Maaji II (22 per cent), Rwamwanja (21 per cent) and Kyaka II (17 per cent) had with no access to safe latrine facilities. These results are in keeping with those of the 2022 Individual Profiling Exercise by UNHCR,[42] where households in Imvepi, Pagrinya, Rwamwanja and Kyaka II were highlighted among settlements with latrines that were unusable.

41 UN Women, 2022a

42 UNHCR. *Access to Services: Situational Analysis*.

Figure 15: Access to safe latrine facilities, by settlement (%)



For households who stated that they did not have access to safe latrine facilities, 35 per cent indicated that there were no latrine facilities at all in their area. Twenty-five per cent of the households reported there are no separate toilets for men and women, 24 per cent said the latrines have no locks on the doors and 16 per cent stated that the latrine is in an insecure place. Fifteen per cent of the households indicated that the location of the latrine is not secure at night.

Safe bathing places and complete handwashing facilities

Women in 75 per cent of households had a safe bathing place. However, this figure was lower in Rwamwanja, where 50 per cent of households headed by women had no access to a safe bathing place. In households where men reported having access to a safe bathing place, the proportion averaged 75 per cent across the settlements. However, there were noticeable differences among settlements, with some having significantly lower proportions of men with access to safe bathing places. For instance, in Rwamwanja (49 per cent), Pagrinya (63 per cent), and Oruchinga (67 per cent), the number of households with men reporting access to a safe bathing place was lower compared with other settlements.

Results also indicated that women generally have lower levels of access to complete handwashing facilities than men. The proportion of women with access ranges from 16 per cent in Rhino Camp to 67 per cent in Kampala, while for men, it ranges from 20 per cent in Rhino Camp to 70 per cent in Kampala (Table 6). Handwashing practices have been linked with saving lives and reducing illness by helping prevent the spread of infectious diseases.[43] The need to emphasize the importance of handwashing among refugees cannot be overstated.

43 UNICEF, 2022

Table 6: Access to a safe bathing and handwashing facility, by settlement and gender (%)

Settlement	Access to a safe bathing place and complete handwashing facility			
	Safe bathing place		Complete handwashing facility	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Bidi Bidi	90	92	28	34
Rhino Camp	87	90	16	20
Kyaka II	77	87	46	47
Rwamwanja	50	49	21	31
Nakivale	79	77	55	65
Oruchinga	80	67	60	57
Palabek	90	88	27	30
Pagrinya	83	63	51	63
Imvepi	83	97	37	57
Maaji II	77	93	40	46
Kampala	90	94	67	70

Notably, research[44] has suggested that SGBV can increase due to poor public services, particularly a lack of privacy and security in latrine and bathing facilities. In her study titled 'Gender in Refuge: Women's lives, spaces and everyday experiences in Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda', Kisić (2019) postulates that going to the shared toilet and a bathing place is one of the most dangerous things a woman or girl can do in a refugee or internally displaced persons camp, due to the risk of sexual violence. She goes on to note that the risk of sexual violence in these spaces is particularly high at night-time.

Menstrual health and hygiene management

Menstrual health and hygiene management within the refugee households was gauged by asking women and girls about the menstrual health and hygiene materials they use (Table 7). Overall, the results revealed a diversity of menstrual health and hygiene materials used by women and girls. Fifty-nine per cent of the women and girls reported to mostly use disposable pads. A considerable proportion of women and girls were also using reusable cloths (52 per cent) and reusable pads (41 per cent). In hindsight, the use of reusable options for menstrual hygiene has been found to be the more sustainable and cost-effective approach to menstrual hygiene management in humanitarian settings.[45]

59%

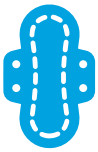
of the women and girls use disposable pads.

52%

of the women and girls use reusable cloths.

41%

of the women and girls use reusable pads



44 https://www.elrha.org/project/research-gbv-lighting-around-wash-facilities/.

45 UNFPA ESARO, 2021

Table 7: Menstrual health and hygiene materials used by women and girls

Respondent category	Menstrual hygiene materials	Percentage of users (%)
Women	Disposable pads	59
	Reusable cloths	53
	Washing and disposable facilities	18
	Reusable pads	40
Girls	Disposable pads	60
	Reusable cloths	51
	Washing and disposable facilities	18
	Reusable pads	42

Meeting hygiene needs of women and girls

Sixty-nine per cent of women acknowledged that their hygiene needs were met either by themselves or the caregiver in the household (Figure 16).

Across refugee settlements,

Rwamwanja had the highest proportion

Imvepi had the lowest proportion

87% 26%

of households where women and girls had their hygiene needs met by themselves or the caregiver

Reasons cited for the hygiene needs of women and girls not being met included: having a high number of women and girls in the household; financial constraints preventing the purchase of hygiene aids such as soap, sanitary pads and undergarments; lack of bathroom and latrine facilities; and inadequate relief aid for sanitation and hygiene.

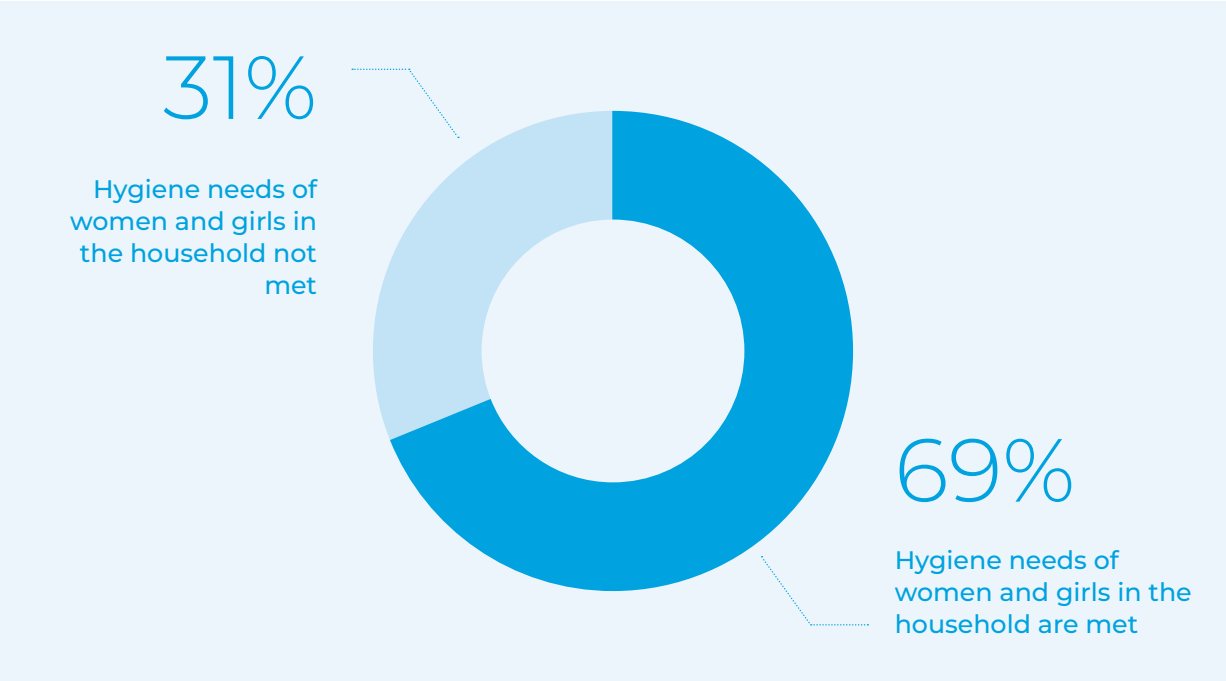
During a focus group discussion with women in the Nyumanzi settlement, a woman noted:

We make pads so sometimes these help. But sometimes we have the issue of money in that when one does not have money to buy these materials, they suffer. About sanitary towels, we have spent a very long time without seeing or using these. In case there is an organization that is giving out these sanitary towels, they only target the young girls in school, us we are always left out yet we need them.

Supporting literature shows that women and girls in the refugee communities are stigmatized by men for sharing information regarding menstrual hygiene, and therefore resort to using unhygienic methods such as blanket off-cuts, soil, cloths or even plain water.[46] The area of menstrual hygiene management requires continuous involvement of refugee response partners to dispel the myths and stigma that come with women and girls' desire to have their hygiene needs fully met. Currently, partners across the refugee settlements are supporting women and girls with dignity kits that contain a reusable pad among other things. This initiative may however be hampered if the underfunding of humanitarian assistance persists.

46 UNFPA ESARO, 2021; Reproductive Health Uganda, 2022; Uganda Red Cross Society, 2023

Figure 16: Meeting hygiene needs of women and girls



4.3 Access to protection, safety, complaint and feedback mechanisms in refugee communities

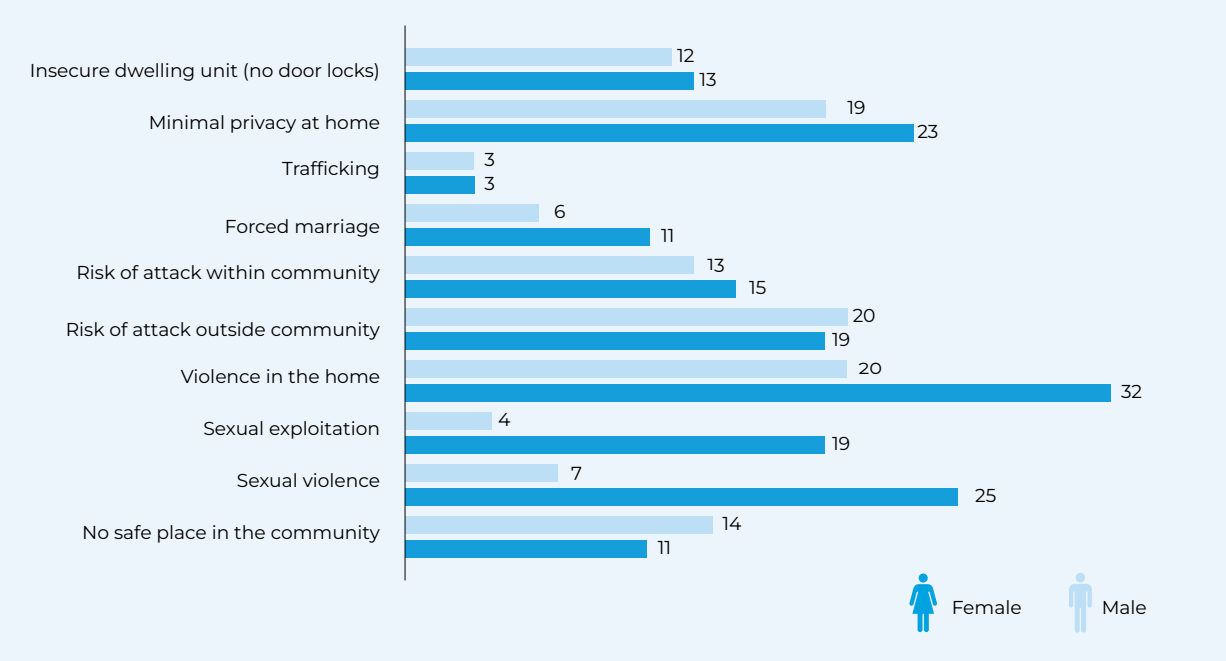
4.3.1 Protection and safety concerns in refugee communities

Thirty-two per cent of households headed by women and 20 per cent of those headed by men cited the concern of violence in their homes (Figure 17). Twenty-five per cent of women mentioned concerns of sexual violence and 19 per cent concerns of sexual exploitation. Twenty per cent of the men and 19 per cent of the women expressed fear of attacks, voicing concerns about their safety while walking inside and outside their blocks. Twelve per cent of men and 13 per cent of women raised concerns about living in insecure dwelling units without door locks. Other concerns raised during focus group discussions included a lack of safety in the community, forced marriage and potential trafficking attempts.

During a focus group discussion with women and girls in a Kampala refugee community, one respondent noted: "We have to be vigilant when moving on the road and return home early. In this area some places are dark and it's not safe."

The UNHCR report on the impact of underfunding in 2023 reiterates the safety concerns raised by the refugees and attributes them mainly to staffing gaps in case management services and alternative care services. The report signals that with limited funding, some 1,500 GBV survivors will not receive the much-needed access to life-saving services and those with existing cases opened by GBV case workers will face delays in service provision.

Figure 17: Safety concerns of male and female refugees



4.3.2 Complaints and feedback mechanisms in the community

Following decreased funding for refugee response interventions in 2020, WFP and UNHCR[47] undertook efforts to create an elaborate feedback, referral and resolution mechanism through which refugees, and in particular highly vulnerable groups such as women, girls, boys, illiterate people, persons with disabilities and older persons, could provide feedback about their safety and vulnerability as well as obtain information about their eligibility for assistance. In light of this initiative, the gender assessment sought the opinions of refugee women, men, boys and girls about access to and use of the complaint and feedback mechanisms in their communities.

In the Bidibidi settlement, more than half (55 per cent) of the refugee households indicated that they know of a complaints desk set up by the OPM (Table 8). A few of the households mentioned the police (13 per cent), family and friends (13 per cent), community elders (11 per cent) and community leaders (8 per cent). In Rhino Camp, 29 per cent of the households mentioned the complaints desk and community elders (27 per cent). Eighteen per cent of the households knew of the police as a complaint-handling mechanism, 14 per cent mentioned the community leaders and 13 per cent spoke of family and friends. Greater proportions of households in the Kampala (56 per cent), Oruchinga (48 per cent) and Nakivale (45 per cent) settlements, knew of the police as a complaint-handling mechanism. More households in the Imvepi (50 per cent), Palabek (48 per cent), Kyaka II (36 per cent) and Rwamwanja (34 per cent) settlements mentioned the complaints desk.

47 UNHCR and WFP. 2023. *Support to UNHCR and WFP Country Operations in Uganda*. https://wfp-unhcr-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Uganda-Hub-support-brief_20230510_clean.pdf.

Table 8: Complaint-handling mechanisms by refugee settlement (%)

Settlement	Which complaint-handling mechanisms exist in your community?				
	Police	Community leaders	Complaints desk	Community elders	Family and friends
Bidi Bidi (*n* = 261)	13	8	55	11	13
Rhino Camp (*n* = 198)	18	14	29	27	13
Kyaka II (*n* = 243)	7	2	36	36	19
Rwamwanja (*n* = 175)	29	18	34	13	6
Nakivale (*n* = 333)	45	21	5	23	6
Oruchinga (*n* = 66)	48	14	0	32	6
Palabek (*n* = 135)	11	3	48	30	8
Pagrinya (*n* = 127)	21	9	19	24	27
Imvepi (*n* = 111)	13	5	50	26	7
Maaji II (*n* = 97)	31	12	12	20	25
Kampala (*n* = 519)	56	9	5	26	4

4.3.3 Usage of the complaints and feedback mechanisms

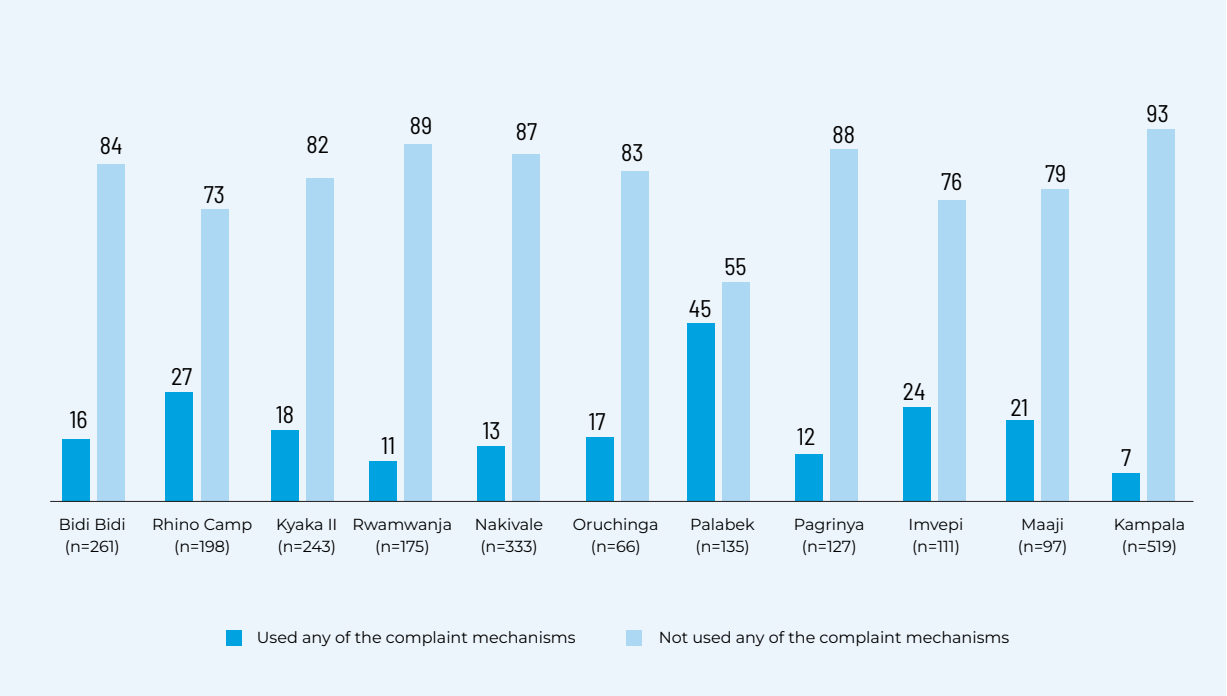
On average, 80 per cent of households across all settlements reported not to have used any of the complaint and feedback mechanisms within their communities in the past three months (Figure 18). Sixty-three per cent of households that reported not to have used any of the complaint and feedback mechanisms were headed by women. Twenty-nine per cent of respondents reporting not to have used any of the complaints and feedback mechanisms were persons with disabilities.

In Kampala, almost all (93 per cent) households reported not to have used any of their community's complaint-handling mechanisms. Palabek stood out among the settlements, as 45 per cent of its households indicated having used the complaint mechanisms. Around a quarter of households in Rhino Camp (27 per cent), Imvepi (24 per cent) and Maaji II (21 per cent), reported having used the complaint mechanisms there.

During a focus group discussion with persons with disabilities in the Nyumanzi settlement, one participant gave this view to explain why he did not use complaint and feedback mechanisms in his community:

Some of us have complaints but because of being disabled, they ignore us or take forever to give us feedback. So for me I gave up on reporting to the mechanisms here. I therefore share my issues with close friends and maybe some elders

Figure 18: Usage of complaint-handling mechanisms, by refugee settlement (%)



In coherence with the results from this assessment, the 2022 Participatory Assessment report by UNHCR also established that the majority of refugees reach out to their community structures that include community leaders, community elders, family and friends to register complaints and seek assistance.[48]

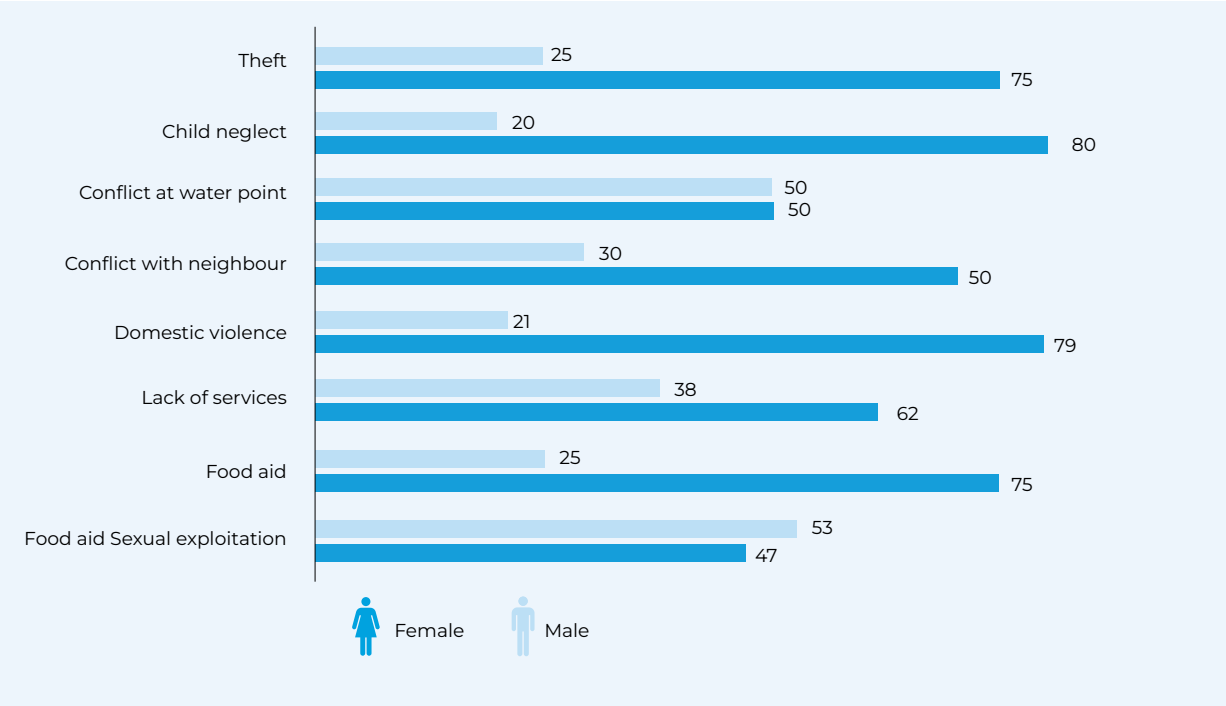
This implies that the preferred mechanisms for giving and receiving feedback among refugee communities regarding concerns about vulnerable groups of women, girls, boys, illiterate people, persons with disabilities and older persons, are the community structures.

4.3.4 Nature of complaints raised

In general, complaints were predominantly voiced by women (Figure 19). Child neglect was the primary concern among women, who raised 80 per cent of complaints, with only 20 per cent raised by men. This was followed by domestic violence, with 79 per cent of reports coming from women, compared with 21 per cent from men. Seventy-five per cent of concerns about food aid and theft were raised by women and over 25 per cent by men. However, men were more likely than women to report complaints regarding sexual exploitation, with 53 per cent of such complaints lodged by men compared with 47 per cent by women. Concerns about conflicts at water points were equally expressed by both women and men.

48 UNHCR, 2023

Figure 19: Nature of complaints raised, by gender of respondent (%)



4.3.5 Access to services to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse

Ensuring the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) is a critical aspect of safeguarding the well-being and dignity of individuals, particularly in vulnerable communities such as refugee settlements. Indeed, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is a key principle in UNHCR's Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response,[49] it emphasizes that PSEA must be systematically integrated into emergency preparedness and throughout all stages of the response. According to the Uganda Refugee Response Plan 2022–2025,[50] all newly arriving refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda ought to have access to territory and protection, including strengthened refugee status determination processes, biometric registration and documentation. The plan underscores that PSEA must be ensured, and there should be zero tolerance in the refugee response towards this.

Results show that access to PSEA information is generally limited among refugees. Throughout the settlements visited, 50 per cent of households reported both women and men having access to the information (Table 9). However, during interviews, the most common sources of PSEA information mentioned by the respondents included community meetings, community radio, banners, posters and community leaders. Across the settlements, individuals primarily accessed PSEA information through community leaders, with fewer utilizing community radio.

In the Bidibidi settlement, women (43 per cent) and men (38 per cent) reported mainly accessing information through their community leaders. In Rhino Camp, the most prominent source of PSEA information for women (32 per cent) and men (43 per cent) was community meetings.

49 file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/UNHCR%20Policy%20on%20Emergency%20Preparedness%20and%20Response.pdf.

50 UNHCR. 2022. *Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan 2022–2025*. https://reporting.unhcr.org/uganda-2022-2025-refugee-response-plan.

Community leaders were the preferred source of information for 42 percent of women and 47 per cent of men In Kyaka II, and 44 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men in Rwamwanja. In Nakivale, community meetings were the primary source for both women (45 per cent) and men (45 per cent). The same trend is observed in Oruchinga (for 40 per cent of women and 33 per cent of men) and Palabek (51 per cent of women and 56 per cent of men). In Pagirinya, women primarily accessed PSEA information through community leaders (47 per cent), while men predominantly used the community radio (44 per cent). In Imvepi, community leaders remain the preferred source for women (41 per cent), while men prefer the community radio (42 per cent).

These results further underscore the significance of community structures as the preferred source of information for all refugee concerns including the acquisition of PSEA information. In light of the underfunding of refugee response, promoting the use of community demand-driven approaches, such as the soliciting of information through strengthened community structures, will offer more sustainable and impactful solutions.

Table 9: Access to PSEA information, by settlement and gender (%)

Settlement	Where do members of this community access information on PSEA?							
	Community meetings		Community radio		Banners and posters		Community leaders	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Bidi Bidi (*n* = 261)	26	28	14	17	17	17	43	38
Rhino Camp (*n* = 198)	32	43	12	27	30	12	26	18
Kyaka II (*n* = 243)	22	16	13	12	23	26	42	47
Rwamwanja (*n* = 175)	25	16	24	34	7	6	44	44
Nakivale (*n* = 333)	45	45	9	21	18	6	27	27
Oruchinga (*n* = 66)	40	33	11	29	18	5	31	33
Palabek (*n* = 135)	51	56	2	0	20	19	27	26
Pagrinya (*n* = 127)	20	25	31	44	3	13	47	19
Imvepi (*n* = 111)	12	29	42	23	5	3	41	46
Maaji II (*n* = 97)	28	9	21	33	9	2	42	56
Kampala (*n* = 519)	27	17	30	44	16	9	27	30

Reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse cases

UNHCR provides guidelines to prevent, mitigate the risks of and respond to sexual misconduct, and to prioritize the protection, rights and dignity of victims through its victim-centred approach policy[51] within the United Nations workforce, as well as in refugee settlements. During this gender assessment, women and men from most refugee households indicated they report sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) cases to community elders (Table 10). In the Bidibidi settlement, women accounted for the highest proportion of those who reported SEA cases to community elders, at 33 per cent. In Rhino Camp, men (48 per cent) and women (54 per cent) from most households also report SEA cases to community elders. In stark contrast, men from 12 per cent of the households in Rhino Camp said they do not report to anyone. Kyaka II had the highest proportions of men (56 per cent) and women (60 per cent) who stated they report SEA cases to community leaders. In Rwamwanja, 44 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women reported to community leaders and community elders respectively.

51 See UNHCR. 2020. *Policy on a Victim-centred Approach in UNHCR's response to Sexual Misconduct*. UNHCR/HCP/2020/04. https://www.unhcr.org/media/policy-victim-centred-approach-unhcrs-response-sexual-misconduct.

In Nakivale, 40 per cent of women and 52 per cent of men report cases of sexual exploitation and abuse to the police. This trend is also observed in the Oruchinga settlement, where 40 per cent of the women and 43 per cent of the men predominantly choose the police as their reporting avenue. In the Palabek, Imvepi, Maaji II, and Pagrinya settlements, women (38, 46, 40 and 43 per cent, respectively) and men (49, 49, 44 and 31 per cent, respectively) typically opt to report to community elders. In Kampala, 54 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men from the sampled refugee households reported cases of SEA to community leaders.

Table 10: Reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse cases, by settlement and gender (%)

Settlement	Where do you report cases of sexual exploitation and abuse?									
	Police		Community leaders		Community elders		Complaints Desk		None	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Bidi Bidi (*n* = 261)	26	28	30	35	33	28	10	9	1	0
Rhino Camp (*n* = 198)	9	12	12	15	54	48	21	13	4	12
Kyaka II (*n* = 243)	8	12	60	56	28	27	2	4	2	1
Rwamwanja (*n* = 175)	26	29	33	44	38	22	3	4	0	0
Nakivale (*n* = 333)	40	52	32	28	16	13	11	7	1	0
Oruchinga (*n* = 66)	40	43	42	38	18	14	0	5	0	0
Palabek (*n* = 135)	19	12	33	37	38	49	10	0	0	2
Pagrinya (*n* = 127)	23	31	31	38	43	31	3	0	0	0
Imvepi (*n* = 111)	25	17	17	26	46	49	12	9	0	0
Maaji II (*n* = 97)	23	26	33	28	40	44	5	2	0	0
Kampala (*n* = 519)	29	36	54	44	10	10	4	8	3	3

4.3.6 Satisfaction with complaint and feedback mechanisms

Thirty-nine per cent of the refugees interviewed said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the complaint and feedback mechanisms, 23 per cent were neutral and 37 per cent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Table 11). Some of the reasons given for the unsatisfactory ratings included being given less attention (59 per cent), the complaints handling team abandoning the complaints midway (49 per cent), being treated rudely (10 per cent), lack of female personnel to talk to (2 per cent) and the complaints handling team conniving with the perpetrator of the case (2 per cent). Other reasons unique to individuals included being given endless referrals, absence of staff to handle the complaint, failure to trace the lost item, receiving negative feedback and delays in providing a response.

The low levels of satisfaction with the complaint-handling mechanisms are also mirrored in the report on the evaluation of the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in Uganda. In the report, refugees, particularly women and girls, acknowledged the presence of complaint-handling systems but decried the limited follow-up on the issues they raise, a factor strongly linked to their overall low satisfaction

levels. When humanitarian groups are facing funding shortfalls, innovation is crucial to ensure that the systems that seek to address refugees' concerns can do so to their satisfaction.

Table 11: Satisfaction with handling of complaints and feedback, by settlement and gender (%)

Settlement	How satisfied were you with the complaint and feedback mechanism?									
	Very satisfied		Satisfied		Neutral		Dissatisfied		Very dissatisfied	
Overall	**13%**		**26%**		**23%**		**26%**		**11%**	
	Women	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**
Bidi Bidi	0	10	19	30	16	0	50	40	16	20
Rhino Camp	14	28	19	56	14	0	39	11	14	6
Kyaka II	7	14	23	29	33	14	30	36	7	7
Rwamwanja	8	0	23	17	8	33	31	33	31	17
Nakivale	20	38	23	54	13	0	33	8	10	0
Oruchinga	17	20	50	0	17	20	0	60	17	0
Palabek	2	0	27	29	55	41	11	24	5	6
Pagrinya	0	0	8	100	38	0	39	0	15	0
Imvepi	13	17	13	25	13	17	33	17	27	25
Maaji II	0	9	44	36	56	27	0	27	0	0
Kampala	21	53	21	18	26	18	16	6	16	6

4.4 Gender roles and relations in refugee communities

According to UN Women,[52] gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women; this is in addition to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female, and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys. Gender also refers to the relations among women and those among men. UN Women also advises that in most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, and decision-making opportunities. This gender assessment sought to establish the gender roles and relations in the refugee communities.

4.4.1 Ownership and access to property by women and men

While Uganda's open door refugee policy[53] permits equitable access to public social services as well as ownership of assets by both men and women, it leaves the work of ensuring the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources to advocacy efforts by refugee response actors, as well as cultural and patriarchal dynamics (CARE International, 2019). Moreover, women's ownership of and access to property provides them with direct and indirect benefits, both individually and at a household level, including ensuring that they have a secure place to live, a means of livelihood, protection during emergencies, and collateral for credit that can be used for investment or consumption (World Bank Blogs, 2021b). As such, this assessment sought to ascertain the ownership and access statuses of women and

52 See UN Women. 2022. *Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming for Gender Equality Results*.

53 UNHCR. 2010. "Uganda: The Refugees Regulations, 2010." S.I. 2010 No. 9. https://www.refworld.org/legal/decreees/natlegbod/2010/en/102127.

men in refugee households for assets such as mobile phones, radios, televisions, bicycles, motorcycles, the dwelling units themselves and land.

Results in Table 12 show that 57 per cent of women interviewed owned mobile phones and 27 per cent had full ownership of the dwelling unit in which their households live, which is eight percentage points greater than the proportion of men (19 per cent). These results show progress in gender equality and women's empowerment efforts given that the gender disparities are narrowing with growing proportions of women having increased access to strategic assets such as land. Such progress made may however be frustrated by the consequent reductions in investments in community sensitization and women's empowerment campaigns due to the ongoing wave of underfunding of refugee response interventions (UNHCR, 2023b).

Table 12: Ownership of property in refugee households, by gender

Property	Ownership	Women (%)	Men (%)
Dwelling unit	Own property alone	27	19
	Own jointly with spouse or other relative	33	44
	Do not own	41	37
Any other housing (other than dwelling unit)	Own alone	10	7
	Own jointly with spouse or other relative	18	23
	Do not own	72	70
Radio, television	Own alone	11	16
	Own jointly with spouse or other relative	12	17
	Do not own	77	67
Bicycle, motorcycle	Own alone	4	12
	Own jointly with spouse or other relative	6	8
	Do not own	90	80
Mobile phone	Own alone	57	66
	Own jointly with spouse or other relative	7	11
	Do not own	36	23

4.4.2 Financial literacy in refugee communities

A refugee's financial literacy journey comprises a spectrum, ranging from the management of their limited personal finances, through engaging with informal financial products and services to improve their personal situations, to starting and maintaining successful income-generating opportunities and eventually to fully engaging with commercial financial service providers on both a personal and professional basis.[54]

The Uganda Cash Working Group ensures that the refugees' willingness and ability to engage with financial services and manage their financial life is "influenced by their home country experience, the attitude of the financial institutions towards them and the range of obstacles they face". During this assessment, the financial literacy of men and women in interviewed refugee households was gauged by ascertaining whether they had a bank account and a mobile money account. For those who indicated that they did not have any account, the assessment sought to understand how they manage their savings.

Ownership of a bank account or mobile money account

Generally, women still lag behind men with regard to ownership of a bank account and mobile money account. Seventy-four per

54 Uganda Cash Working Group, 2021

cent of men own a mobile money account compared with 65 per cent of women. A similar trend is observed in bank account ownership, where 18 per cent of men owned a bank account compared with 12 per cent of women (Figure 20). With the alternative digital delivery mechanism of mobile money to assist vulnerable beneficiaries piloted in Kiryandongo and Kyangwali by WFP,[55] it is encouraging to note that the numbers of persons owning mobile money accounts is high.

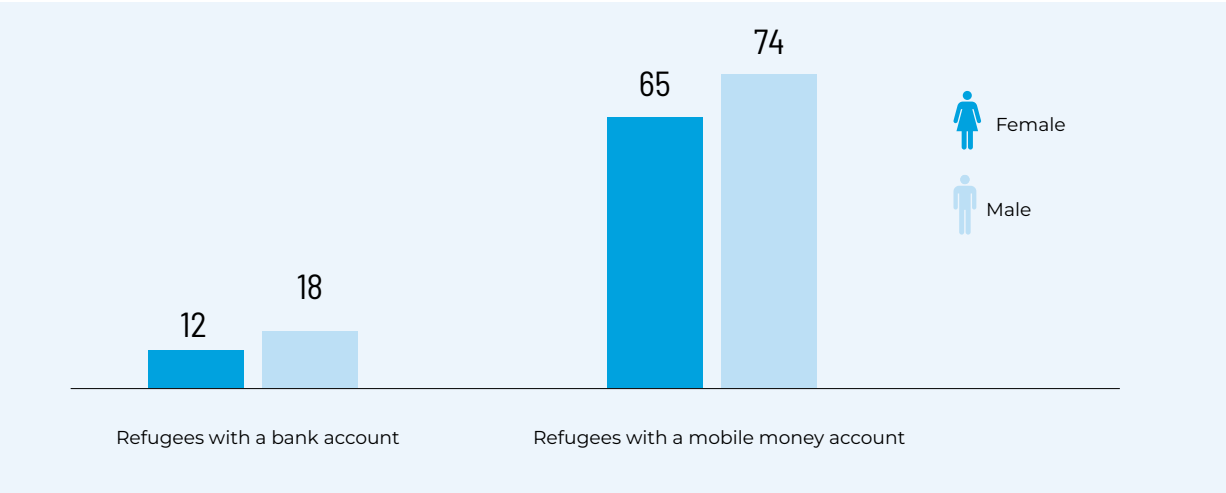
Of the women and men who said they did not have a mobile money account, 66 per cent indicated they did not have any savings, 16 per cent kept their savings at home, 12 per cent kept them in their savings groups and 3 per cent reported keeping their savings on their person at all times.

Of the women and men who said they did not have a bank account, 45 per cent said they did not have any savings, 20 per cent kept their savings on their mobile money account, 14 per cent kept their savings at home and 9 per cent said they save with their savings groups.

Of those who keep their savings at home rather than the bank or in a mobile money account, 75 per cent were women. Of those who said they did not have any savings, 60 per cent were women.

It is notable through this assessment and related studies that refugees, and women in particular, require more financial literacy training to facilitate cash aid transfers as well as their journey to self-reliance.[56] The goal of ensuring equitable uptake of financial services, which is a prerequisite for financial literacy, may however take a long time to achieve, as financial literacy training has been halted due to financial constraints faced by refugee response partners.[57]

Figure 20: Ownership of a bank account or mobile money account, by gender (n = 2,265) (%)



4.4.3 Division of labour in refugee households

In order to facilitate refugees' transitions from dependence to self-reliance, it is essential that the men, women, boys and girls in refugee households are equitably engaged in productive work.[58] Studies emphasize that refugee men and women ought to equitably share responsibilities for both paid and unpaid work if they are to be financially resilient and gradually move away from general food assistance.[59] During the assessment, respondents shared their day-to-

55 UNHCR. 2023. "Food Security Dashboard: Uganda Refugee Response Plan (RRP) 2022–2023." Quarter 3.
56 Opportunity International UK, 2023; UNHCR, 2023b; Financial Sector Deepening Uganda, 2024
57 UNHCR. *Uganda Refugee Response Plan (RRP) 2022–2023*.
58 UNHCR, 2023
59 CARE International, 2019; Uganda Cash Working Group, 2021; UNHCR, 2023c

day household activities, and the members allocated to perform the different roles in these activities. The household activities explored included cleaning, cooking, childcare, collecting firewood, collecting water and farming. Results in Table 13 show that a higher proportion of women reported taking part in each of the household activities.

Notably, 85 per cent of the women were responsible for childcare while 73 per cent were responsible for cooking. Men were mostly (52 per cent) involved in farming. The patriarchal status quo of having women, girls and boys mostly engaged in unpaid household work, as observed in other studies, persists in the refugee communities despite numerous interventions to equip them with skills such as tailoring, hairdressing, fashion and design, poultry farming, bricklaying and soap production.[60] The relegation of women, girls and boys to household activities is a deterrent to their engagement in income-generating activities as well as social engagements and leadership opportunities that would facilitate their transition to self-reliance.

Table 13: Involvement of household members in household activities

Activity	Household members	Proportion (%)
Cleaning	Men	4
	Women	58
	Girls	33
	Boys	5
Cooking	Men	4
	Women	73
	Girls	21
	Boys	2
Childcare	Men	7
	Women	85
	Girls	7
	Boys	1
Collecting firewood	Men	6
	Women	43
	Girls	22
	Boys	30
Collecting water	Men	7
	Women	47
	Girls	28
	Boys	18
Farming	Men	52
	Women	44
	Girls	2
	Boys	2

60 CARE International, 2019; International Labour Organization, 2022

4.4.4 Participation in community decision-making

Whereas previous studies[61] revealed limited participation of women and girls in opportunities for leadership and decision-making in their homes, communities and beyond due to sociocultural, economic and political barriers, refugee response efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment are reversing this trend. Refugee women and men interviewed shared experiences from their community decision-making engagements.

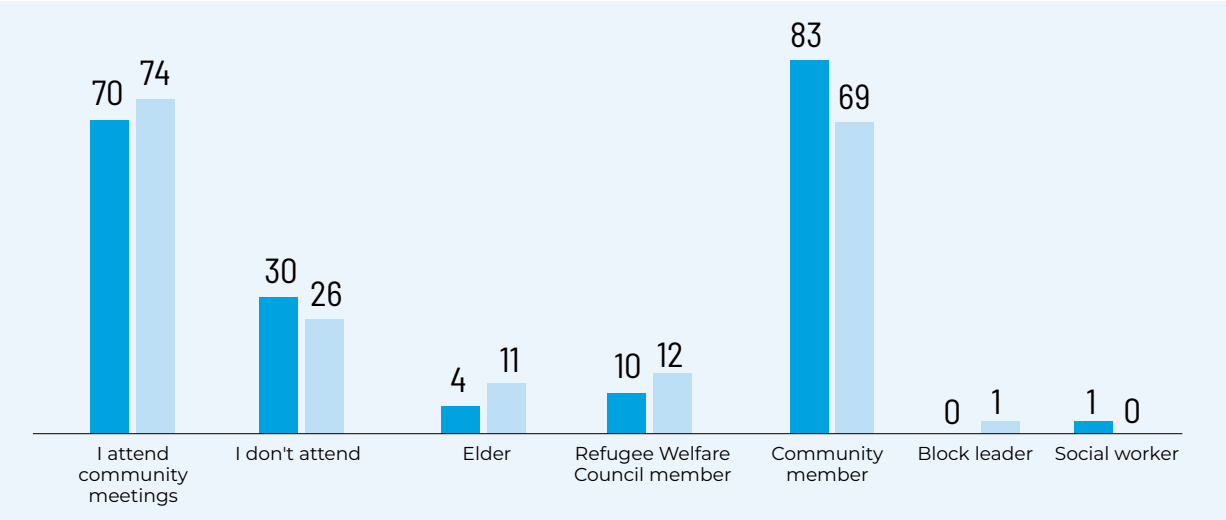
Attendance at community decision-making meetings by men and women

Figure 21 shows the participation of the refugee women and men in the community decision-making meetings as well as the capacities in which they participate. When asked whether they participate in the community decision-making meetings, 7 in 10 of the refugee women and men affirmed that they participate in the meetings. Eighty-three per cent of women and 69 per cent of men reported participation in community meetings as community members.

Women and men who could not attend the community meetings gave a number of reasons. Four per cent of them, the majority of whom were women (79 per cent), said it was because their partners or other relatives did not allow them; 36 per cent, with 67 per cent being women, indicated they did not have time; 11 per cent, 68 per cent of them women, did not have money to travel to the meeting venues. Other reasons included the language barrier, not being informed about the timings of the meetings, lack of a democratic process for electing members, the inability to read and write, having one of the family members attend on their behalf, and physical and visual impairment including old age. Some refugees also expressed fears that their views would be undermined, citing stigma as a disincentive to attending the community meetings.

Deterrents mentioned during this assessment have been highlighted in other studies which also decry the top-down approach that characterizes refugee management, noting that there is little or no meaningful participation of refugees in the decision-making process that affects their futures (Cin et al., 2023; Humanitarian Practice Network, 2023; Oxfam International, 2023). The drive to ensure the self-reliance of refugees will require the increased participation of refugee women, girls, boys and men in dialogues and meetings where decisions that affect their lives are made. Participation ought to be inclusive of persons with disabilities, the elderly and all special interest groups.

Figure 21: Participation and roles in community decision-making meetings, by gender (%)



61 Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation (CECI) Uganda. 2023. *Report of the Refugee Women Conference on Women Participation and Leadership in Koboko, Uganda – December 2023*. Koboko, Uganda: CECI Uganda.

Involvement of women in community decision-making

In its publication on inclusive humanitarian action, UN Women postulates that whereas women and girls disproportionately bear the impact when crises occur, their low participation in humanitarian response planning and decision-making restricts their voices and prevents their needs being fully met.[62] In such times of shortfalls in humanitarian funding, women's low participation in decision-making would jeopardize refugee response initiatives intended to empower refugee women and girls to be self-reliant rather than depend on food assistance.

To gain deeper insights into the unique challenges women face regarding community involvement, women visited during the assessment were asked about their level of participation in community decision-making activities, and the enablers for and hindrances to their participation. Results show that 65 per cent of the women are actively involved in their communities' decision-making meetings (Figure 22). Twenty-four per cent of them stated they are only consulted during the decision-making meetings, while 11 per cent said they do not participate in the community meetings in any way.

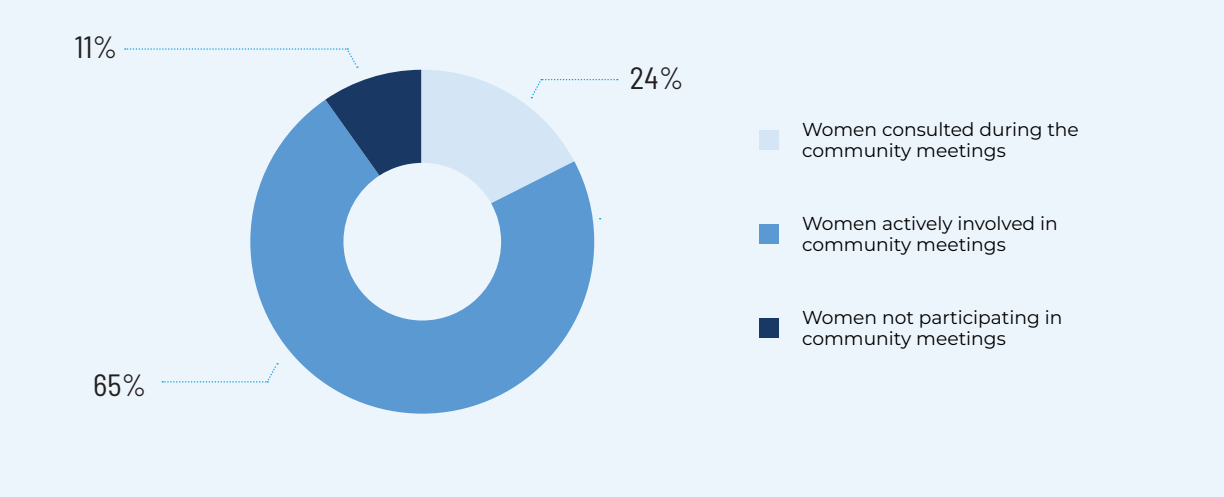
Further discussions revealed that women and girls who participate in community decision-making meetings hold leadership roles within the settlements and are pivotal to their administration and management.

The men in the Nyumanzi settlement commended the leadership potential of the women in their communities, saying:

Women are block leaders and they are even clan leaders. Women are the ones heading the financial part of the families. Some women form groups and they are saving some money and giving us loans.

The reversal of the trend in women's low participation in community leadership roles is partly attributed, by women, engaged through focus group discussions across the settlements, to training led by refugee response partners over the years. For example, since 2018, UN Women[63] has been providing training for women and young people of Adjumani and Yumbe districts, which host 30.1 per cent of Uganda's total refugee population. The training has equipped women and girls with skills in literacy, numeracy, women's rights, leadership and life skills development, public speaking, debating and radio presentation. Through this training, women and girls have become confident, assertive and bold, thereby laying the foundation for innovation, productivity and self-reliance.

Figure 22: Women's involvement in community decision-making meetings (%)



62 UN Women, 2022b

63 https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2022/08/in-uganda-refugee-womens-leadership-drives-inclusive-humanitarian-action.

Reasons not to attend community decision-making meetings

The assessment sought to establish the reasons for which women do not attend community meetings. Thirty-nine per cent of the women indicated they have never expressed interest in taking up roles on decision making committees; 36 per cent said they did not know why they are not involved in the community meetings; 22 per cent stated they do not have time for community meetings; and 11 per cent said their partners do not allow them to attend.

Other individual-specific reasons included the patriarchal belief that leadership is the preserve of men, absence of academic qualifications, busy schedules, financial constraints preventing travel to meeting venues, lack of awareness regarding meeting schedules, and feeling that their opinions are devalued because they are women.

A woman in a focus group discussion conducted in the Bidibidi settlement noted:

We are suffering and ignored but because of UN Women came, they had to involve us. Even in OPM, they should involve women in the offices here in the camps, e.g. sometimes when the boss is away, instead of delegating to the vice who is a woman; they look for a man to take over. This hurts me the most; us women are just given titles only.

Patriarchal concerns and lack of academic qualifications arising as inhibiting factors for women's participation in community decision-making were also highlighted by Care International in a gender analysis carried out in refugee and host communities in Yumbe and Terego districts.[64] The analysis also found that women who want to pursue a leadership position face increased physical and verbal abuse, indicating that as women gain visibility in leadership roles they must be protected by a do-no-harm and GBV mitigation plan.

Membership of associations, groups or clubs

Membership of an association, group or club is pivotal to the rehabilitation and welfare of refugees. As emphasized in the Global Compact on Refugees,[65] membership to social groups among refugees fosters social and economic integration, strengthening their relationships and contributing to a harmonious living environment.

Results generated by the gender assessment show that women and men who were members of an association, group or club were almost equal in proportion. Sixty per cent of refugee women and 59 per cent of refugee men reported membership of an association, group or club (Figure 23). Seventy-one per cent of the women were members of savings groups, while 68 per cent were members of religious groups. Membership of savings groups has been found to be a popular form of association among refugees, with women and girls using them as avenues not only to improve their livelihoods but to raise their voices against GBV.[66] Men continue to occupy settlement leadership roles as platforms to gather, network and influence change.[67]

A UNHCR official interviewed during the assessment underscored the importance of associations, saying:

There is some bit of resilience among refugees. More refugees have joined savings groups [or] farming groups where they produce and sell the harvest afterwards. Refugees are now looking out for each other and sharing with those in great need.

Savings groups and other social platforms can therefore be essential tools to encourage mindset shifts and socioeconomic transformation in refugee communities and would do much to ensure that communities remain resilient in an era of funding shortfalls.

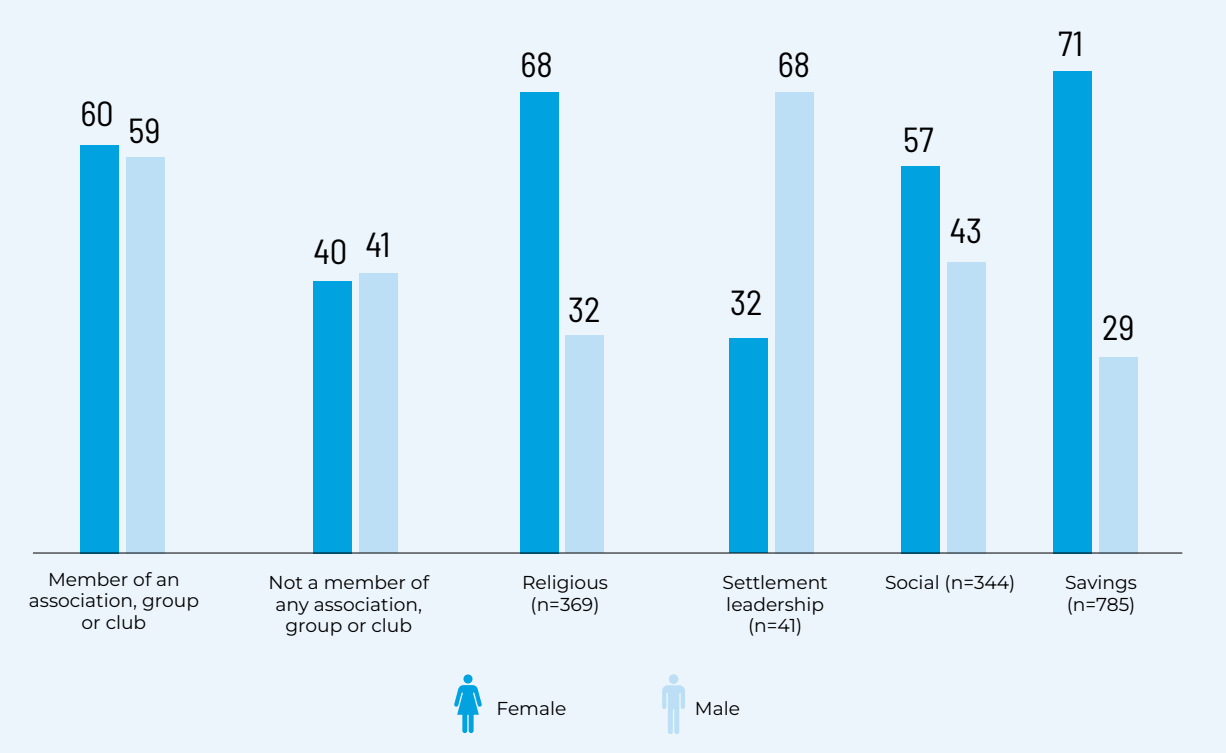
64 CARE International, 2022

65 https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/inclusion-and-peace-among-refugees-and-host-communities.

66 CARE International, 2022; International Rescue Committee, 2024

67 Cin et al., 2023

Figure 23: Refugee membership of associations, groups and clubs, by gender (%)



Non-membership to associations, groups and clubs

Following humanitarian funding shortfalls, refugee women and men who do not participate in social networking groups risk lagging behind and continuing to lead a life of high vulnerability.[68] This is because interventions that seek to support the refugees mostly operate through social groups and associations. It is also through the associations that women, girls and boys are identified, empowered and protected from abuse (CARE International, 2019). Among refugees who said they were not members of any association during the assessment, 44 per cent said they were not interested (68 per cent women, 32 per cent men), 30 per cent said they were not aware of any association or group to join (68 per cent women, 32 per cent men), and 5 per cent said they were new to the settlement (51 per cent women, 49 per cent). Other reasons included being busy or away from the community most of the time, old age, having conflict with members of the association, lack of money required to join and leaders not effectively communicating about the activities of the association.

4.4.5 Role of religious and cultural institutions in condoning or mitigating gender inequality

Cultural and religious institutions have been extensively credited as important sources of spiritual support to refugee women, men, boys and girls, offering safe spaces that can contribute to building and sustaining a sense of identity and belonging.[69] Cultural and religious leaders offer sanctuary to refugees, supporting communities to find solutions that empower refugee women,

68 UNHCR, 2023

69 Medical Teams International, 2022

men, boys and girls to take charge of their lives. At the 2023 Global Refugee Forum,[70] religious leaders reaffirmed this commitment, pledging their collective support to refugees to improve their lives regardless of nationality, race, religion, class or political opinions.

Given the diversity of cultural beliefs and norms among refugees from various nationalities, individuals hold different perspectives on socioeconomic matters within households and communities (Ogwang, 2021). In a publication by the Lutheran World Federation on the role of local faith leaders and institutions in refugee and host communities,[71] it was highlighted that religious and cultural institutions are highly respected by the refugee men and women who subscribe to them. The publication proposes that religious and cultural institutions are the ultimate avenue to fight stigma and social injustice, which are major obstacles to self-reliance and actualization.

Discussions held throughout this gender assessment with refugee women and men, including religious and cultural leaders, further confirmed findings by the Lutheran World Federation and other studies. For instance, on account of their cultural belief in having as many children as possible and viewing contraception as dangerous and forbidden,[72] South Sudanese refugee women are hesitant to embrace family planning advocacy programs run by refugee response partners. The South Sudanese cultural leaders shared, during in-depth interviews, that this is their cultural norm and may not easily be expunged from the minds and practices of their people. These cultural leaders thus confessedly guide opinion on family planning among the women who are expected to respect their culture and, by extension, their cultural leaders.

On this point, one woman taking part in a focus group discussion in the Imvepi settlement had this to say:

it was really hard to know about family planning even in South Sudan it is not allowed, we used to produce a lot, but now some people have tried to understand. South Sudan discourages it so much and enforced by our leaders here. At the health centre they call a husband and the wife whenever they are teaching about family planning. Most of the men don't like family planning because it is in their mind set that the women should produce any time.

Like the South Sudanese, refugee women and men from the Democratic Republic of Congo also uphold the norm of marrying off girls as young as 15 (Catholic Relief Services, 2023). This cultural practice disregards a girl's right to education and a life of dignity and fulfilment. It therefore threatens the ambition of the Global Compact on Refugees[73] to equitably transition refugees from food assistance to self-sufficiency.

Manifestations of these cultural practices were alluded to by an OPM official interviewed in the Kyaka II settlement, who said:

In their cultures (Sudan and Congo), the girl should accept to go with any man that shows interest in her and most particularly now that they are vulnerable and would like to have someone relieve them of the burden of looking after some household members.

Unlike culture, religion is more universal, with greater flexibility regarding the stance on gendered rights, roles and relations.[74] Within refugee communities, religion unifies women, men, boys and girls of all nationalities and cultures. The constitution of Uganda[75] grants freedom of belief, the right to practise and promote any religion, and the right to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. Refugees are thus free to practise any religion in conformity with the

70 See UNHCR. "Religious Leaders Statement from the GRF 2023." https://www.unhcr.org/media/religious-leaders-statement-grf-2023.

71 https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/local-faith-leaders-supporting-refugees-and-host-communities-uganda.

72 Hawkey et al., 2018

73 UNHCR. 2023. *2023 Global Compact on Refugees: Indicator Report*. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023-gcr-indicator-report.pdf.

74 Scheer, 2022

75 Uganda, Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995). https://media.ulii.org/media/legislation/18226/source_file/3b9b-999477caf611/1995-constitution.pdf.

constitution. Conversations with the religious leaders attest that religion has served as an arbiter in conflict situations between refugees and the host community. One of the pastors in the Rwamwanja settlement said:

As they commune to worship the Lord, we also educate them about their responsibilities in the communities, preach against sexual and gender-based violence and even settle family wrangles.

Religion and culture are therefore crucial tools for promoting resilience and harmony among refugees. It is however important that they are acquainted with sociocultural values that seek to ensure the dignity, self-sufficiency and productivity of refugee women men, boys and girls. Platforms such as the Global Refugee Forum should convene both cultural and religious leaders to form a shared appreciation of what is most important for the people who respect and follow their word. The study however noted that the 2023 Global Refugee Forum had only invited religious leaders to participate.

4.5 Gendered impact of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance

While humanitarian needs remain high, the refugee response plan in Uganda is underfunded, and resource shortfalls have intensified the need for household-level prioritization (UNHCR, 2023). From 2020 onwards, decreases in funding for food assistance resulted in food rations being progressively reduced for all refugees. The reductions were first to 70 per cent of existing assistance in April 2020, then to 60 per cent in February 2021, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable refugee households.[76] As of 1st July 2023, WFP, UNHCR and the OPM are implementing a prioritization approach for food and cash assistance for refugees in all 13 settlements across the country.[77] Refugee women, men, boys and girls interviewed shared the ramifications of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance on their gendered roles, relations, capacities and coping strategies.

4.5.1 Level of decision-making before and after the needs-based prioritization

There was a notable shift in the level of decision-making by refugee women and men after the introduction of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance (Table 14). Increasingly, women are becoming key decision-makers in their households, and men are more often making joint decisions with their spouses.

In an average of 45 per cent of all refugee households visited, women are fully responsible for all food needs of the household. They also wield more power to decide whether to start up a business or any other income-generating activity for the sake of their household's livelihood.

One refugee man had this to say during a focus group discussion in the Oruchinga settlement:

Women have started engaging in small businesses as a way of coping with the impact of food prioritizations. Women are engaged in salon, tailoring and small businesses selling food stuffs. In my community alone of Kisura C about 30 women have started small businesses.

The shift in household decision-making power towards women has also been found by other studies within the refugee domain. A 2023 study by Care International[78] found that refugee women now have more say over household decisions and greater involvement in leadership and livelihood activities outside their households. The study attributed this transition to interventions such as Care's Women Lead Programme where women's groups are supported to co-create actions aimed at

76 WFP, 2023

77 WFP-UNHCR, 2023

78 CARE International. 2023. *Women and Girls' Economic Empowerment: Lessons from Care International in Uganda*. https://care.at/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Knowledge-Model-Paper_WGEE_FINAL.pdf.

breaking down barriers and increasing women's meaningful participation in humanitarian decision-making.

In their publication on refugee women's leadership driving inclusive humanitarian action,[79] UN Women also acknowledges the shift in women's decision-making power and, in relation to Care International, attributes advances to the numerous leadership training programmes the agency has been providing to women and girls, initially in Adjumani and Yumbe but with plans to extend to Terego and Kyegegwa by 2025.

With the ensuing funding shortfalls, the continuation of programmes such as those of Care International and UN Women is greatly threatened and may reverse the efforts of empowering women to be at the forefront of critical decision-making. Moreover, the repercussions of underfunding require that vulnerable populations including women transition from food dependence to self-reliance primarily by integrating into their host communities.

Table 14: Level of decision-making in refugee households before and after food prioritization, by gender

Decision	Involvement	Before prioritization (%)		After prioritization (%)	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Working to earn money	Key decision-maker	48	42	50	39
	Joint decision	29	38	33	44
	Consulted	15	12	12	11
	Not involved	8	8	5	6
Buying or selling assets	Key decision-maker	44	33	46	31
	Joint decision	33	45	36	52
	Consulted	15	15	12	12
	Not involved	8	6	6	5
Buying household items and food	Key decision-maker	46	31	48	30
	Joint decision	35	46	38	53
	Consulted	13	14	10	12
	Not involved	6	8	4	5
Accessing healthcare for oneself	Key decision-maker	55	42	56	40
	Joint decision	31	40	33	46
	Consulted	10	12	8	10
	Not involved	4	6	3	4
Having another child	Key decision-maker	48	30	50	32
	Joint decision	31	45	33	49
	Consulted	11	12	8	9
	Not involved	10	13	9	10
Sending children to school	Key decision-maker	45	31	47	33
	Joint decision	39	51	41	54
	Consulted	10	10	7	8
	Not involved	6	8	5	6

79 UN Women. 2022. "Refugee women's leadership drives inclusive humanitarian action." 19 August. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2022/08/in-uganda-refugee-womens-leadership-drives-inclusive-humanitarian-action.

4.5.2 Household livelihoods in refugee communities

In order to promote resilience and self-reliance among refugees and host communities, a strategy for the livelihood and resilience sector was included in the Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan 2022–2025.[80] The strategy seeks to, among other things, promote agricultural production for food and income generation, wage employment and enterprise development in line with pillars 2 and 3 of the Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan,[81] which in turn is aligned to the Third National Development Plan (2020/21–2025/26).[82] The refugee households interviewed shared how their main source of livelihood has evolved since the introduction of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance. They also provided insights into their earning patterns as well as their saving propensities.

4.5.2.1 Main source of livelihood

When asked about their main source of livelihood a year prior to the needs-based prioritization of food assistance, there were distinct results for refugee women and men (Table 15). Thirty-two per cent of refugee women and 30 per cent of refugee men mentioned peasant crop farming. For the women, this was followed by small trade (22 per cent) while the men mentioned casual labour (23 per cent). A considerable proportion of either sex also indicated they depended on no source apart from WFP rations (women, 17 per cent; men, 16 per cent).

In relation to this, UNHCR's 2022 Socioeconomic Situation Update found that refugees are extensively involved in agriculture, mostly in small-scale crop farming as well as serving the host community wage labourers to supplement the reduced food rations.[83] Much as it lays a promising foundation for innovativeness and productivity, small-scale farming and wage labour may not be a sustainable way to help refugees progress to self-reliance. The Global Compact on Refugees' goal of ensuring that refugees can endure humanitarian funding shortfalls by becoming self-reliant may be a distant aspiration if their main source of livelihood is small-scale crop farming.

Table 15: Refugees' main sources of livelihood a year before prioritization, by gender (%)

Main source of livelihood	What was your main source of livelihood a year ago?	
	Women	Men
Casual labour	19	23
Carpentry	0	2
Peasant crop farming	32	30
Peasant livestock farming	2	3
Small trade	22	12
Local artisanry and crafts	1	1
Fisherman	0	1
Building and construction	0	3
Remittances, pension, gratuity, donations	1	3
Informal salaried job	5	5
Formal job	1	1
No source apart from refugee rations	17	16

80 OPM-UNHCR, 2022

81 Uganda, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. 2021. *Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan for Refugees and Host communities in Uganda 2020–2025*.

82 Uganda, National Planning Authority, *Third National Development Plan (NDP III) 2020/21–2024/25*, (2020).

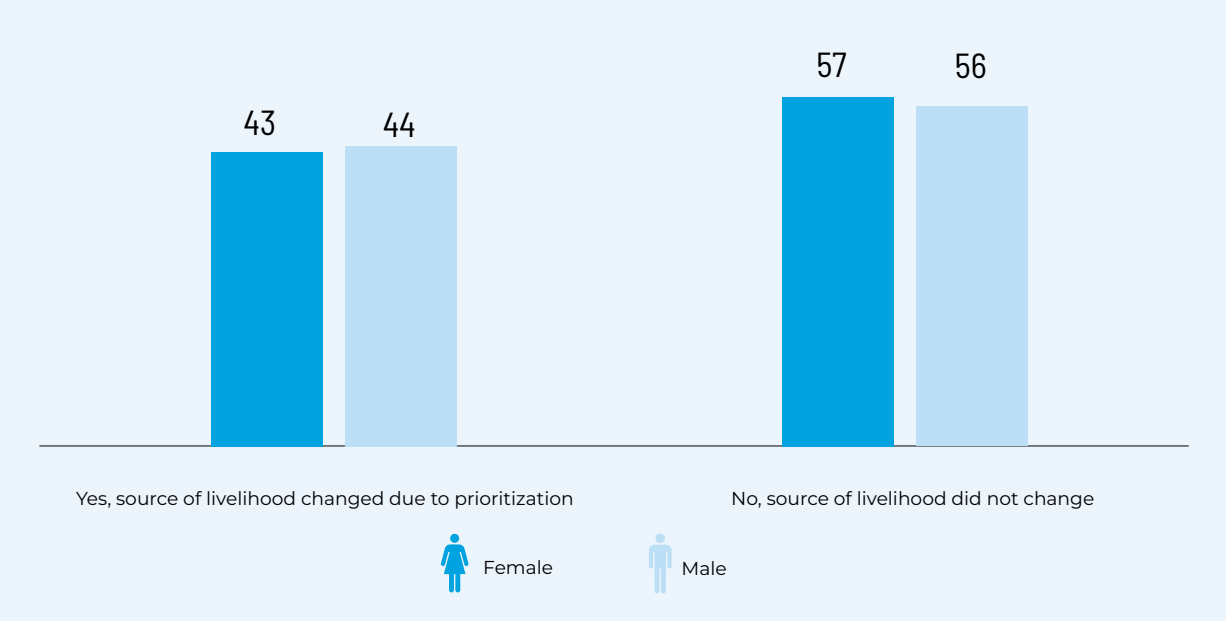
83 UNHCR, 2022

4.5.2.2 Change in main source of livelihood

As the different humanitarian sectors reduce their interventions due to funding shortfalls, refugee households are expected to gradually transition from food assistance to more self-sufficient sources of livelihood.[84] When asked whether their main source of livelihood changed following the introduction of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance, 57 per cent of the households headed by women and 56 per cent of those headed by men said their source of livelihood remained the same (Figure 24).

With the main source of livelihood remaining the same for about half (57 per cent) of the refugee households interviewed, there is a higher likelihood of vulnerability for most refugees given that needs-based prioritization inevitably means a reduction in the amount of food and cash relief. This concern is premised on the finding that the main source of livelihood prior to the needs-based prioritization of food assistance was small-scale crop farming and that it has remained the same even after the prioritization period.

Figure 24: Change in main source of livelihood, by gender (%)



4.5.2.3 Earning and saving behaviour of refugees

Research by the Food and Agricultural Organization established that neither cash nor food transfers are effective in improving households' capacity to gain income from agricultural activities and market participation.[85] It postulates that alternative functional markets are fundamental for the development of other economic activities to improve household livelihoods. This alludes to the significance of ascertaining the ingenuity of refugee women and men to engage in income-generating activities that can enable them to earn as well as make a saving. This also comes against a backdrop of financial literacy training provided by refugee response partners such as Financial Sector Deepening Uganda,[86] UN Women,[87]

84 WFP and UNHCR, 2023

85 FAO, 2022

86 https://fsduganda.or.ug/tag/refugees/.

87 https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2022/08/in-uganda-refugee-womens-leadership-drives-inclusive-humanitarian-action.

Vision Fund,[88] Finnish Refugee Council[89] and the Lutheran World Federation.[90]

The earning and saving behaviour of refugees was assessed using the parameters of hours of paid work per week, frequency of earning from one's source of livelihood, their average monthly income, monthly savings and whether they share their earnings with their spouses. Results show that nearly the same proportions of women and men are engaging in some form of productivity, although they are unable to save a reasonable amount from their earnings (Table 16).

In terms of hours of paid work per week, the majority of the women (89 per cent) and men (88 per cent) reported to mostly work for 40 hours or less. Similarly, women and men across the three prioritization categories also reported to mostly have paid work of no more than 40 hours per week. The regulation on working time by the International Labour Organization (instrument 116)[91] set the general standard of a 40-hour work week as a duration conducive to high productivity while safeguarding workers' physical and mental health. According to the 2006 Employment Act and Labour Laws in Uganda,[92] the standard working hours of an employee may be a maximum of 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week.

A considerable proportion of the women and men also indicated they were earning on a daily basis, with 55 per cent of them coming under category 3 of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance. Most households reported an average monthly income below U Sh 50,000 (14 US dollars). This was mentioned by almost 49 per cent of the women, 34 per cent of men and 57 per cent of all refugees in category 2. The average monthly income corresponds with assertions made in the focus group discussions that most refugees thrive on meagre resources that make it hard to sustainably cater for the basic household needs of health and food. It is also underscored in UNHCR's 2022 Socioeconomic Situation Update that refugees are engaged in unskilled jobs that offer low wages.

Further attestation to this is the proportions of women and men unable to save. On a monthly basis, 39 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men involved in paid work are not able to save USh 10,000 (US$3). While refugee response partners attribute the poor earning and saving behaviours of refugee women and men to low-paying jobs, the women and men interviewed attributed their earning and saving troubles to the needs-based prioritization of food assistance exercise.

One of the men had this to say during the focus group discussion conducted in the host community of the Rwamwanja settlement:

some of the refugees' money has been cut now days they don't have money to rent any land since they don't have money, it causes fights. Refugees are defaulting in their saving groups, they never used to default but after the food cut they have a lot of debts.

Despite numerous interventions by the refugee response partners to empower refugee women and men to be resilient, self-reliant and self-sufficient, results of this assessment and related studies show a need for continuous investment in these interventions.

88 VisionFund. "Delivering Refugee Microfinance in Uganda." https://www.visionfund.org/our-focus/fragile/refugee-lending#:~:text=VisionFund%20Uganda%20is%20partnering%20with,them%20pay%20back%20their%20loan.

89 https://mojaafrica.net/en/magazine/finnish-refugee-council-frc.

90 The Lutheran World Federation. 2024. "Accelerating gender equality through economic empowerment." 16 April. https://uganda.lutheranworld.org/content/accelerating-gender-equality-through-economic-empowerment-106.

91 International Labour Organization. Reduction of Hours of Work Recommendation, 1962 (No. 116). https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R116.

92 See Multiplier. "Understanding Employment Laws in Uganda: A Detailed Guide." https://www.usemultiplier.com/uganda/employment-laws#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20employment%20act%202006%20and%20labor%20laws%20in,can%20be%20nine%20hours%20daily.

Table 16: Earning and saving behaviours of refugees, by gender and prioritization category

Earning and saving behaviour	Description	Women (%)	Men (%)	Category 1 (%)	Category 2 (%)	Category 3 (%)
Hours of paid work per week	40 hours and below	89	88	82	90	90
	41–60 hours	8	8	15	7	7
	61–90 hours	2	3	3	2	2
	91 hours and above	1	1	0	1	1
How often do you earn from your source of livelihood?	Daily	33	31	27	22	55
	Weekly	12	10	9	13	10
	Monthly	6	6	7	7	6
	Seasonally	15	17	16	20	9
	Don't earn	34	34	42	38	20
Average monthly income	50,000 and below	49	34	45	57	26
	50,001–100,000	21	22	25	24	16
	100,001–200,000	17	22	22	13	26
	200,001–500,000	12	18	6	5	30
	Above 500,000	0	2	1	0	2
Monthly savings	Less than 10,000	39	31	38	44	25
	10,001–30,000	27	26	26	27	26
	30,001–50,000	12	13	10	9	18
	50,001–70,000	2	6	2	3	5
	70,001–90,000	1	3	3	1	2
	90,001 and above	3	7	3	4	5
	Don't know	16	14	17	12	20
Do you share your income with your spouse?	Yes, I give all income to my spouse	7	17	11	10	10
	I share only part and keep the rest	58	63	64	64	52
	No, I don't share any part of my income	35	20	25	26	38

4.5.3 Refugee households' capacities and coping strategies for food reductions

A 2023 UK Aid assessment of livelihood barriers and enablers for refugees and host communities in urban and settlement locations showed that refugee households have poor or borderline food consumption scores, which inevitably prompt them to use negative coping strategies.[93] In addition, a publication on building durable solutions for refugees and host communities by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations found that the reductions in food rations were reportedly placing the most vulnerable refugees, especially women and girls, at risk of engaging in negative coping strategies due to lack of food and income.[94] During this assessment, capacities and coping strategies by refugee women, men, boys and girls to ensure food availability and endure food scarcity were assessed.

93 UK Aid, 2023

94 FAO, 2023

4.5.3.1 Accessing food for the household

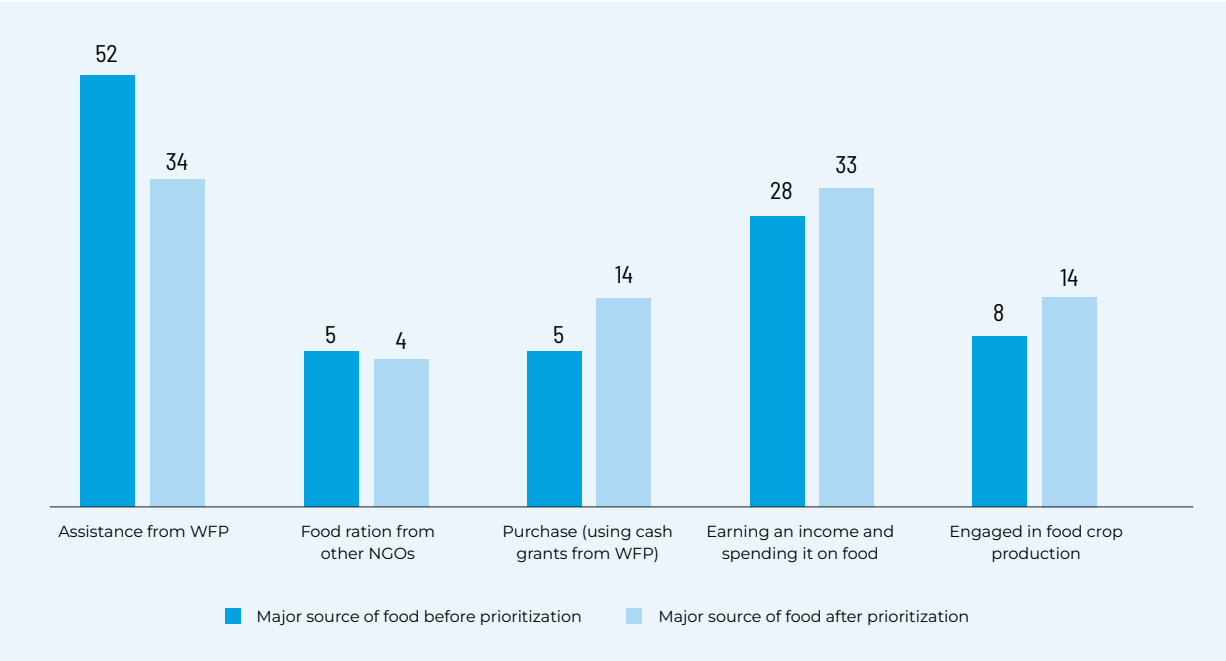
Food access concerns a household's ability to acquire adequate amounts of food, through one or a combination of private production and stocks, purchases, barter, gifts, borrowing and food aid.[95] The most critical component of refugee response is to ensure that refugee households are food resilient.[96] While the drive by the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (detailed planning 2024–2025)[97] to cope with funding shortfalls is to ensure that as many refugee households as possible are weaned off food assistance, the demand for food assistance is still as widespread as it is urgent.

Generally, there were notable drops in proportions of households relying on different forms of food aid and an increase in households using their own sources of food (Figure 25). For example, the proportion of households that had assistance from WFP as their main source of food dropped from 52 per cent before needs-based prioritization to 34 per cent after. Those receiving food rations from other non-governmental organizations also decreased from 5 to 4 per cent. On the other hand, the proportion of households whose main food source is purchased using cash grants increased more than two-fold from 5 per cent before needs-based prioritization to 14 per cent after its introduction. Households that depend on their own income as the main source of food rose from 28 per cent before prioritization to 33 per cent after. A similar scenario was observed among households that engage in crop production as the main source of food. These went up from 8 per cent before prioritization to 14 per cent after its introduction.

An OPM official involved in settlement management from Kyaka II was interviewed and shared that he was not yet confident about the food independence of his people, commenting:

the ongoing categorization has greatly affected the refugees, an assessment was done last year, but still the information which WFP is basing on to categorize was unrealistic and unfair, some of us had some reservation and we got some protection concerns; how will the vulnerable survive, what is given is not sustainable and yet WFP still went ahead and made changes.

Figure 25: Refugee households' main sources of food before and after prioritization (n = 2,260) (%)



95 WFP and UNHCR, 2024

96 WFP, 2020

97 UNHCR. 2024. *Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan: Detailed Planning 2024–2025*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106734.

4.5.3.2 Food shortage in refugee households

Seventy-seven per cent of the households revealed they had experienced food shortage in the previous seven days (Figure 26). Of these, 59 per cent belonged to category 2 of needs-based prioritization, 27 per cent were in category 3 and a 14 per cent were in category 1. Of the 23 per cent (516) who reported not having food shortage, 43 per cent and 33 per cent were in categories 2 and 3, respectively. In category 1, 24 per cent of the households stated not to have experienced food shortage. In terms of gender of household head, 80 per cent of households headed by women and 72 per cent of those headed by men reported experiencing food shortage in the past seven days.

The 77 per cent of refugee households reporting food shortage in this assessment is a significant increase from the 52 per cent of households with unacceptable food consumption scores in the past seven days according to the 2023 Food Security and Nutrition Assessment.[98] The food insecurity situation resulting from an increasing trend in humanitarian funding shortfalls and subsequent reductions in food assistance implies that more households will be prompted to engage in negative coping strategies that make women, girls and boys most vulnerable.

Figure 26: Food shortage in refugee households, by prioritization category (%)

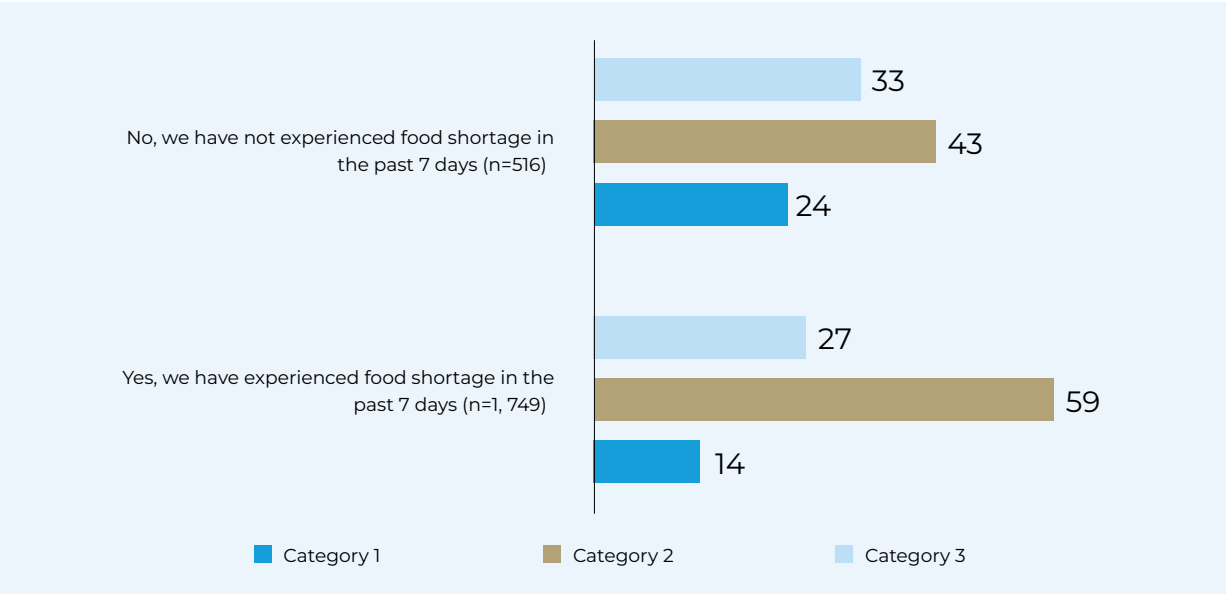


Figure 27: Food shortage in refugee households, by gender of household head (%)

Yes, we have experienced food shortage in the past 7 days	80	72
No, we have not experienced food shortage in the past 7 days	20	28

98 See WFP and UNHCR. 2024. *Report on Food Security and Nutrition in Refugee Settlements, Hosting Districts, and Kampala, 2023.*

4.5.3.3 Coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms for women and men

As a way of coping with a lack of food in their households, 56 per cent of women and 48 per cent of men reduce the meals that they eat in a day (Table 17). Thirty-six per cent of women and 38 per cent of men engage in casual labour, 24 per cent of women as well as 21 per cent of men acquire credit or debts, while 18 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men beg for food. Sixteen per cent of women and 13 per cent of men eat wild and famine foods. As is observed throughout the statistics, there are generally higher proportions of women than men adopting negative coping mechanisms. Nevertheless, mechanisms such as casual labour and remittances could sustainably facilitate the transition of men and women from food-dependence to self-sufficiency.

Related studies show that the negative coping mechanisms also exacerbate incidences of GBV, with women and girls being most vulnerable within the refugee settings. A UN Women publication of an Inter-Agency Rapid Gender Analysis report indicated that women and girls were prompted to engage in survival sex, child marriages and the sale of alcohol.[99] These damaging coping mechanisms disadvantaging women and girls are echoed in a November 2023 interview with the Uganda Refugee Youth Representative for UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council,[100] where she argues that the needs-based prioritization has led to some refugees not receiving rations to feed their families any more. She reiterates that women have become objects of forced marriages and sexual exploitation while the men resort to drug abuse.

A refugee welfare council member in the Kyaka II settlement confirmed the concerns of the youth representative, saying:

women keep changing husbands for better livelihood. Most of the women are no longer in their families since there is a problem of food. There is a lot of prostitution going on here.

A publication by The New Humanitarian on 18th March 2024[101] cited an incident where a refugee in the Bidibidi settlement committed suicide having experienced food shortage. The publication, as well as case records on UNHCR's suicide dashboard,[102] indicate that recourse to such extreme negative coping strategies is likely to increase in the months and years ahead.

99 UN Women, 2020b

100 See interview with Emmanuella Luanda Musafiri, Uganda Refugee Youth Representative for the UNHCR's Global Youth Advisory Council, available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387349.

101 Simonsen, M. et al. 2024. "Why Refugee Ration Cuts in Uganda Risk Long-term Social Damage." 18 March. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/03/18/why-refugee-ration-cuts-uganda-risk-long-term-social-damage.

102 See UNHCR. 2024. *Uganda Refugee Response: Suicide Dashboard April 2024*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/108600.

Table 17: Women's and men's coping mechanisms for lack of food (%)

In the past 30 days, have men and women in your household engaged in any of the following behaviours to cope with lack of food?		
Coping mechanism	**Women**	**Men**
Positive coping mechanisms		
Casual work	36	38
Remittances	8	7
Negative coping mechanisms		
Selling assets	12	15
Transactional sex and clandestine relationships	3	1
Reducing meals eaten in a day	56	48
Eating wild and famine foods	16	13
Arranged marriage	1	1
Begging	18	13
Credits and debts	24	21
Older people go hungry so that young people can eat	8	8
Sending children to relatives and friends	3	2
Removing child from school	5	6

Coping mechanisms for boys and girls

Like the women and men, most girls (53 per cent) and boys (52 per cent) in refugee households reduce the meals that they eat in a day as a means of coping with a lack of food (Table 18). A significant proportion of the girls (18 per cent) and boys (16 per cent) also reported that they resort to begging, while others drop out of school (girls, 15 per cent; boys, 16 per cent). Other negative coping mechanisms extensively cited in related studies and publications include child marriage, return to armed groups, school discontinuation and transactional sex.[103]

In the focus group discussions held with the parents, coping mechanisms such as school discontinuation were attributed to lack of resources to cater for the food needs of the household as well as pay school fees. Other parents argued that insufficient food in the household means that a child goes to school on an empty stomach and loses concentration in the process, a factor that eventually forces their decision to drop out of school. Parents also attributed other negative coping mechanisms, such as forced marriage, to insufficient food.

One parent in the Bidi Bidi settlement had this to say:

School-going children move a long distance to school that means they are at risk of fainting on the road since they have not eaten enough food or are hungry... most of the girls tend to get married early to be in a better life especially during this time after the food groups were introduced.

103 ACT Alliance, 2023; UNHCR, 2023

Table 18: Boys' and girls' coping mechanisms for lack of food (%)

In the past 30 days, have boys and girls in your household engaged in any of the following behaviours to cope with lack of food?		
Coping mechanism	**Girls**	**Boys**
Positive coping mechanisms		
Remittances	8	0
Negative coping mechanisms		
Dropping out of school	15	16
Child marriage	6	1
Transactional sex and clandestine relationships	2	1
Reducing meals eaten in a day	53	52
Eating wild and famine foods	13	0
Participating in child labour or trafficking	2	3
Begging	18	16
Going hungry so that older people can eat	1	1
Travelling to other locations	0	8
Engaging in off-farm work	0	16

The impact of needs-based prioritization on persons with disabilities

Article 11 of the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls on Member States and other relevant humanitarian actors to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in all situations of risk, including armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters.[104] Therefore, in the Uganda Refugee Policy, it is emphasized that any form of assistance provided to refugees should ensure that special attention is given to, among others, persons with disabilities.[105]

Persons with disabilities within the refugee households were mainly engaged through focus group discussions to gain in-depth understanding of issues concerning their livelihoods and how the needs-based prioritization could have impacted them. Like other refugees, it was noted that persons with disabilities have over the years acquired lifelong skills with support from refugee response partners such as Humanity and Inclusion, the Finn Church Aid, UN Women, Financial Sector Deepening Uganda and the Norwegian Refugee Council. The skills acquired include financial literacy, tailoring, hairdressing, art and craft, as well as poultry and animal husbandry. However, refugee women and men with disabilities opined that the reduction in cash and food rations has led to them disproportionately receiving inadequate support to reap the benefits of these skills.

According to a World Bank study on GBV and violence against prevention and response services, women and girls with disabilities are more exposed to GBV, including intimate partner violence.[106] The World Bank study also shows evidence of how the physical and economic dependence of women and girls with disabilities hampers their ability to end violent relationships. Interviews with women and girls with disabilities during this assessment echoed the World Bank findings but, notably, were linked to the needs-based prioritization scheme.

104 UN, 2006

105 UNHCR. 2010. "Uganda: The Refugees Regulations, 2010." S.I. 2010 No. 9. https://www.refworld.org/legal/decreees/natlegbod/2010/en/102127.

106 World Bank, 2020

One woman with disabilities from the Nyumanzi settlement shared:

We were receiving money from UNHCR, which was helping enable us survive. But with the recent new changes, things have become difficult and yet prices are high... I cannot do heavy work because of my disability. Getting smaller jobs is difficult, so I dig but not over dig; I hire land and do some small farming.

Refugee analysis studies by WFP note that households typically incur additional costs related to the disability that are not taken into account when assessing the level of food assistance that they require. In addition, WFP's vulnerability analysis notes that the odds of being food insecure are 3.2 times greater for a household with a member with profound disabilities than for a household without a member with disabilities.[107] The report adds that many older people reporting a form of disability, particularly women, arrive in the settlements with young grandchildren whose parents are missing or deceased (27 per cent of older people live in skipped-generation households).

The challenges are particularly severe for those who have not been classified as extremely vulnerable individuals and are receiving reduced food assistance. Children cared for by people with disabilities or chronic illness are more at risk of missing school or dropping out, especially if the carers are not recognized as extremely vulnerable individuals and the household is, therefore, receiving a reduced ration or no assistance. Indeed, poverty and hunger play a crucial role in limiting a child's capacity to learn or even attend school on a regular basis.

A person with disabilities interviewed in the Kyaka II settlement voiced this concern:

Ever since they cut the food we are very hungry and I'm not having what to eat. Of course our children can't even concentrate in class on empty stomachs. I even can't get a chance to steal because I'm disabled... we have an incident where a certain boy was caught stealing, they cut his leg, he was even rushed to hospital. He got treated and is better but the boy is still stealing.

4.6 Priority needs in refugee households

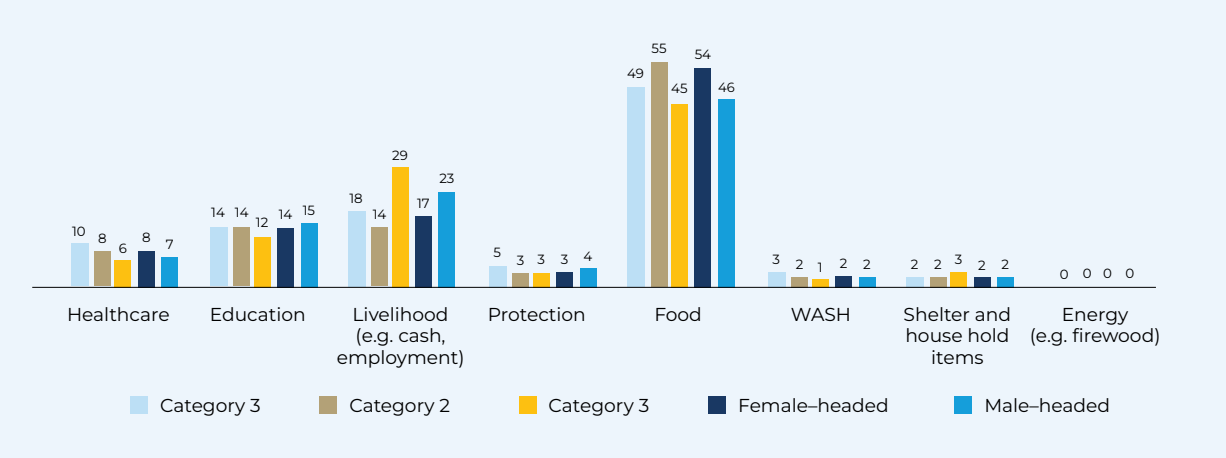
The assessment sought to establish what was considered essential for the welfare of the respondents and the households in which they lived. The priority needs were thus arranged in order of importance from the first to third. These are also disaggregated by the three categories of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance and gender of household head.

4.6.1 First priority household need

Food was the first priority need for most households headed by women (54 per cent) and men (55 per cent) as well as most households in category 1 (49 per cent), category 2 (46 per cent) and category 3 (45 per cent) (Figure 28).

107 WFP, 2020

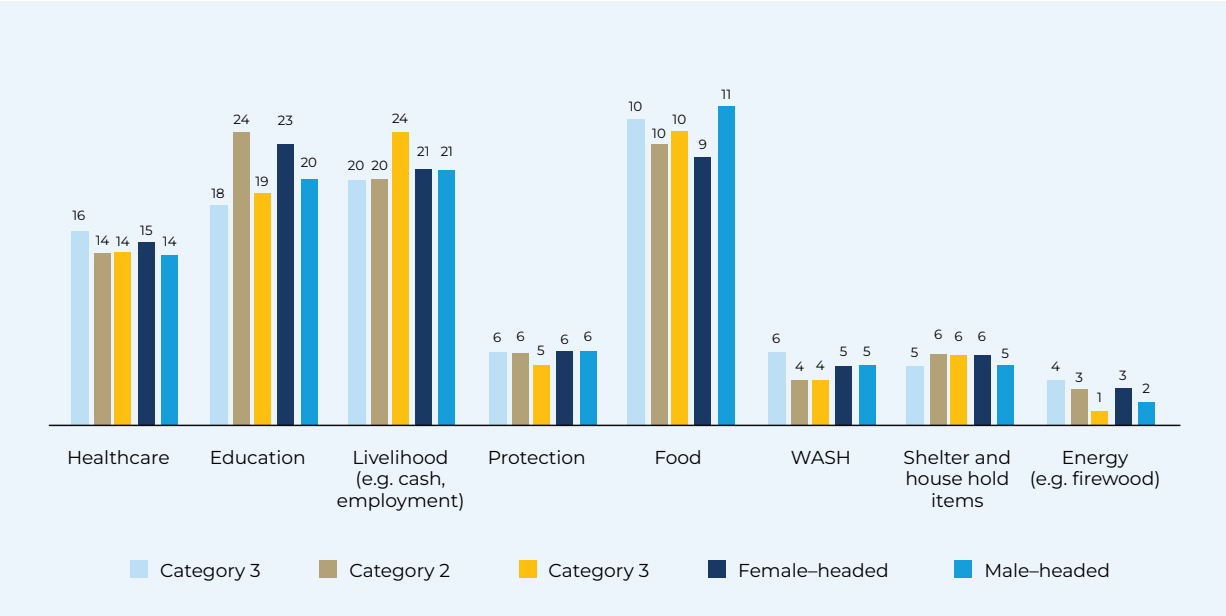
Figure 28: First priority household need (%)



4.6.2 Second priority household need

Food, education and livelihood were ranked as second priority needs by over 20 per cent of households headed by women and men, as well as households across the three prioritization categories (Figure 29).

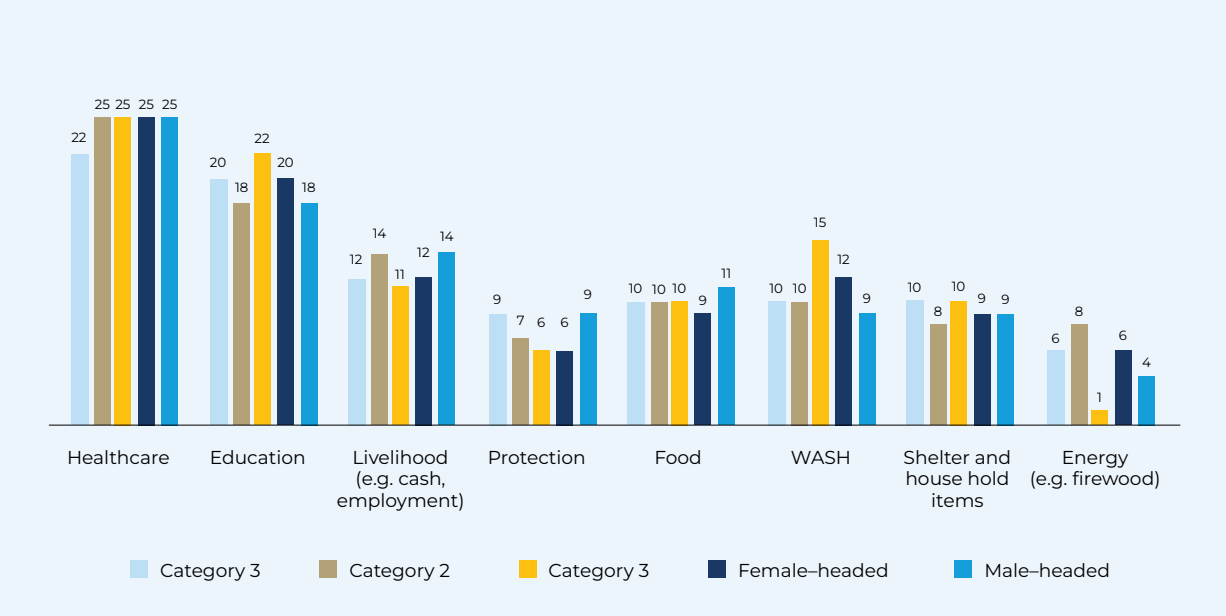
Figure 29: Second priority household need (%)



4.6.3 Third priority household need

Healthcare and education were ranked as third priority by the highest proportion of households headed by women and men, as well as households across the three prioritization categories (Figure 30).

Figure 30: Third priority household need (%)



The ranking of priority needs by households visited during the assessment was dissimilar to those highlighted in the 2024–2025 detailed planning of the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan.[108] According to the plan, capital for business start-ups was identified as the top priority need for most refugee households; this points to the resolve of refugee households to take full charge of their food and livelihood needs, which are key pillars for the resilience and self-sufficiency of refugees.

4.7 Coexistence between refugees and host communities

Uganda is implementing a comprehensive refugee response framework that seeks to ensure that refugees are integrated within the host communities in all aspects of their lives, including resilience and livelihood strengthening activities.[109] The comprehensive refugee response framework is being implemented against a backdrop of persistent and growing funding shortfalls that have necessitated systematic reductions in food assistance rations.[110]

Reductions in food assistance rations have increased the call by humanitarian groups to foster coexistence between the refugee and host communities to diversify their livelihoods beyond food assistance. This is premised on the fact that the relationship is influenced by both groups' efforts to utilize the more expansive land in the host community for food sustenance.

In general, the relationship across the refugee-hosting districts involved in the assessment was cordial, albeit with some areas of discord between the two communities. The refugee and host communities access the same social services and public amenities such as hospitals, schools, markets, roads and water points. The host community is also a popular resource for refugees seeking to hire land or provide labour in exchange for food and cash payment. Refugees interviewed indicated that there is increasing demand for land to hire from the host community following the reductions in the cash and food support afforded them by WFP. This has resulted in increased interactions

108 UNHCR. 2024. *Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan: Detailed Planning 2024–2025*.
109 UNHCR, 2023c
110 WFP, 2023

between the refugees and host community, as refugees view the host community as the default alternative for trade and labour exchange.

Members of the host community in the Imvepi settlement discussed their relationship with the refugees, saying:

Some refugees and hosts have remained friends regardless of the food changes, while some have become hostile towards each other, like, some nationals might offer the refugees land for farming but will be expecting them to share equally during the harvest.

Much like the host community, refugee women and men in the Nyumanzi settlement expressed gratitude that they have been able to expand their farming activities by hiring land, albeit accompanied by concerns that the land was getting more expensive. They said:

The land we were getting was way lesser than it is now. When the reduction happened, people started cultivating and asking the host community to hire their land, it was cheaper but now they have increased because we have less food.

Whereas the two communities praised their coexistence, issues were raised that they say were sparked by the introduction of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance. The host community states that refugees have turned to theft, animosity and dishonesty. As highlighted in the food security and nutrition assessments, these behaviours have for the most part been regarded as coping strategies for the lack of food for their households.[111]

On the other hand, the refugee community accuses the host community of raising the price of hiring land, withholding their harvest, behaving indifferently towards them and being high-handed with refugee children who commit a crime. Both communities argue that these issues have arisen as a result of the needs-based prioritization of food assistance, which has made the refugees more vulnerable and desperate in their efforts to survive.

These concerns were alluded to by refugee women and men in Kyaka II settlement:

After the prioritization process, refugees started stealing from nationals and this spoilt the relationship badly... those days the nationals would give us debts but not anymore because they fear we may not be in position to pay back.

The influx of refugees amid funding shortfalls coupled with the reported refugee–host conflicts is not only of concern to the refugee response partners but also Uganda's legislators. In an article published by the Independent Magazine on 17th February 2024,[112] the Committee on Equal Opportunities in the Ugandan Parliament recommended that the government revises its refugee policy to forestall a probable long-term conflict resulting from the overflow of refugees and underfunding resulting from cuts in budgetary support from donors. However, legislators representing refugee-hosting districts also acknowledged that their areas were seeing progressive development due to the presence of refugees. The woman representative from Terego District said on this point, "we should treat refugees with dignity, the few challenges they are having with host communities, we should address them".

111 WFP-UNHCR, 2024

112 See The Independent Magazine, "Parliament rejects report on refugees' status", 17 February 2024. Available at https://www.independent.co.ug/mps-reject-report-on-refugees/.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Humanitarian funding shortfalls have the potential to gravely impact the resilience and livelihood-strengthening activities initiated in refugee communities by refugee response partners. This threatens to reverse ongoing empowerment efforts geared towards helping refugee women, men, boys and girls to be self-reliant. The reduced food rations are increasing the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual exploitation and abuse as they turn to different coping mechanisms to deal with food shortage in the household, and this situation is further aggravated by growing numbers of adolescent girls dropping out of school.

5.2 Recommendations

Immediate

Improve safety response mechanisms for GBV

The gender assessment showed that domestic violence constituted the biggest threat to urban refugees. Most public spaces lack lights, alerts, guards or neighbourhood vigilantes. The existing complaint desk at the OPM and community elders are underutilized due to mistrust. It is therefore recommended that collaboration between protection and community partners:

- establish a comprehensive approach that enhances transparency, accountability, inclusivity and user confidence, in particular by diversifying feedback channels;
- strengthen protection mechanisms by promoting clear GBV referral systems linking survivors to protection, health, and social services, creating safe reporting channels to provide confidential and accessible mechanisms for reporting GBV incidents;
- increase security patrols and install adequate lighting in high-risk areas, such as water points, distribution sites and communal spaces, as well as providing holistic support for GBV survivors, covering psychosocial support, legal aid and medical assistance;
- and propose UN Women-led training for humanitarian actors on the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Gender in Humanitarian Action guidelines to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure gender-responsive, inclusive and effective humanitarian programming.

Improve coping mechanisms for reduced food rations

The gender assessment showed that women and girls are more likely to adopt negative coping mechanisms compared with men when facing reduced food rations. To counter this, it is recommended that:

- WFP and UNHCR should conduct periodic vulnerability assessments, with female-headed households that have fallen back into vulnerability being reconsidered and prioritized for re-inclusion into food assistance.
- Africa Adaptation Programme partners, including WFP and UNHCR, should strengthen communication and transparency by providing clear and timely information, and regularly communicate the reasons for food ration reductions, anticipated impacts and mitigation measures using accessible channels such as protection desks, community meetings, radio broadcasts and social media.
- Refugee leaders and groups from representative committees, including women, youth and marginalized groups, should be

consulted on changes in food distribution policies and explore local solutions.

- Social protection mechanisms such as cash-for-work programmes and women's savings associations should be expanded to help households meet basic needs and reduce the risk of resorting to harmful coping strategies such as child labour or transactional sex.
- Food and nutrition partners should promote food security and nutrition by introducing kitchen gardens and supporting households in backyard gardening to supplement reduced rations with fresh produce, focusing on nutrient-rich crops.

Intermediate

Strengthen access to education and skills development opportunities

The gender assessment showed that 52 per cent of females compared with 32 per cent of males could not read and write; 81 per cent of children from female-headed households are more likely to go to school than 77 per cent of children in male-headed households; 14 per cent of households had adolescent girls who had dropped out of school, a number which is likely to increase. It is therefore recommended that education and development partners:

- Prevent child labour by strengthening school feeding programs and providing incentives for families to keep children in school, such as scholarships or supplies;
- Engage women, youth and other vulnerable groups in skills development through targeted vocational training and apprenticeships to reduce high-risk behaviours, with emphasis on nontraditional skills and sectors such as plumbing, mechanics, computing, fabrication, carpentry and joinery, and bricklaying to enhance access to jobs and steady incomes;
- Establish upskilling centres that will serve as hubs for vocational training, providing practical and marketable skills, and offering alternative learning pathways to those who are unable to attend formal education.

Promote gender-responsive livelihood opportunities

The gender assessment indicated that, following food prioritization, 57 per cent of female-headed and 56 per cent of male-headed households raised concerns about their inability to transition to self-reliance, as small-scale farming is insufficient to cover the food shortfall created by reduced rations. It is therefore recommended that livelihoods partners, together with protection partners:

- **Support women-led enterprises** by developing programmes that empower refugee women to establish and scale businesses through access to capital, market linkages and mentorship;
- **Diversify livelihood options by** offering tailored training in nontraditional fields (e.g. renewable energy, digital services) to reduce dependency on limited income sources such as small-scale agriculture and informal trade;
- **Introduce flexible livelihood programmes** that accommodate unpaid care work, providing childcare facilities, flexible schedules or remote opportunities for women;
- Promote financial inclusion by establishing community savings groups, providing financial literacy training and increasing access to microfinance or grants tailored to women and marginalized groups;
- Build resilience through climate-smart practices such as agroforestry, drought-resistant crops and water-saving technologies, and invest in green livelihoods to encourage active engagement in renewable energy projects and environmental restoration activities among women and youth;
- Address barriers to participation in livelihood activities through campaigns to challenge harmful norms that limit women's economic participation and improve access to land and resources by working with local authorities to ensure refugees, and in particular women, can access productive resources such as land, tools and raw materials for livelihood activities.

Encourage a more progressive attitude towards gender roles

The gender assessment reported that women remain for the most part solo unpaid household workers managing childcare, cooking, and collecting water and firewood in all the refugee settlements. The men are largely engaged in paid work outside of the home. It is therefore recommended that refugee response partners engaged in the protection working group introduce evidence-based behaviour change methodologies targeting women, men, girls, and boys, and religious, cultural and community leaders to foster equitable division of labour.

Ensure safety and maintenance of WASH facilities

Under WASH, the gender assessment showed that women and girls are largely responsible for collecting water for the households from public taps, wells and boreholes. In times of water scarcity, swamps become an alternative water source. Owing to long distances and queues, an average of three to four hours is spent at the water source, exposing women and girls to physical, psychological and sexual abuses such as rape, as reported by women and girls in Oruchinga settlement. Latrine conditions were also found to expose women and girls to sexual violence and robbery or indignity, as 25 per cent of households do not have separate toilets for males and females, 24 per cent have latrines with no locks on the doors, and 16 per cent have latrines located in insecure places. It is therefore recommended that refugee response partners engaged in the WASH working group advocate for preventive repair of water sources such as boreholes, wells and pumps to prevent future malfunctions. WASH partners should liaise with refugee welfare councils, local councils, security groups and neighbourhood vigilantes to provide security to water point users. WASH partners ought to set up gender-sensitive water user committees to manage water sources and ensure timely handling of WASH-related concerns.

Enhance women's representation and leadership

A positive discovery made by the gender assessment was that more women are now engaged in leadership positions – 71 per cent of the refugee women belong to a savings group, 68 per cent to religious associations and 68 per cent hold leadership positions in refugee welfare councils within the settlement. Moreover, women are increasingly empowered to make critical household decisions. To further enhance women's representation and leadership, refugee response partners should:

- Empower local women's organizations by building their capacity to address the negative impacts of reduced food rations and advocate for sustainable solutions;
- Create platforms for women's voices, fostering partnerships between women's organizations, humanitarian actors and government agencies to integrate women's perspectives into refugee response plans;
- Offer technical and financial support to women-led organizations to design and implement programmes addressing the unique needs of women and girls, including GBV risk mitigation, reproductive health and equitable food access.

Foster positive coexistence between refugees and host communities

The assessment found that the reduced food and cash rations threaten the harmonious coexistence between refugees and the host community, prompting acts of crime and sexual abuse. It is recommended that:

- OPM and refugee response partners should collaborate with local government units such as cultural, religious and community leaders to promote joint initiatives between refugees and host communities to improve access to shared resources and reduce tensions.
- Refugee response partners should collaborate with local government units to facilitate special dialogue sessions for women and girls to discuss and tailor solutions to issues that affect them, while also ensuring that the host community is considered among the beneficiaries of every intervention made in the refugee communities.

Facilitate access to health services

The assessment showed that 16 per cent of the refugees cited language barrier as a hindrance to accessing health services, with those in

Imvepi (25 per cent), Rwamwanja (25 per cent) and Pagrinya (20 per cent) settlements being most affected. As health facilities use English as a lingua franca, the English for Adults programme, which has been a great success in Bidibidi, could drive significant progress. It is therefore recommended that a phased approach, with technical support from UN Women, OPM and UNHCR, be taken to implement literacy and numeracy skills initiatives that enable refugees to learn spoken and written English for easy communication at service points.

Address the gendered impact of food prioritization

The assessment revealed both positive and negative impacts of food prioritization, highlighting the increased decision-making power of women, but also recourse to arranged marriage to alleviate economic pressures; return to armed conflict; adolescent girls being denied an education, as parents and caregivers are forced to choose between buying food and paying school fees; and child labour. In response to these findings, it is recommended that:

- OPM and UNHCR ensure regular leadership training for refugee welfare councils and incorporate decision-making sessions into training for all sectors;
- Education partners coordinate with protection partners to identify children missing from school and link them with specialized support;
- Partners engage in efforts to encourage refugees not to return to war but instead make use of the available livelihood opportunities to be productive;
- OPM and UNHCR encourage education working groups to enrol youths dropping out of school to community vocational training institutes where they can benefit from group support within the institution and start-up kits upon completion of their training course.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: Prioritization category of refugee households, by length of stay (%)

Prioritization category	Length of stay		
	Less than 1 year	1–3 years	4 years and above
Category 1	20	21	18
Category 2	13	29	34
Category 3	67	50	48

Annex 2: Prioritization category of refugee households, by school attendance (%)

Prioritization category	Attending school	Not attending school
Category 1	14	26
Category 2	37	24
Category 3	49	50

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