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Challenges and opportunities for refugee women-led organizations in Uganda

Research Report

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ACRONYM TABLE

Acronym	Meaning
RLO	Refugee-Led Organisation
W-RLO	Women Refugee Led Organisation
RDP	Refugee and Displaced Person
CBO	Community Based Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organization
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UN	United Nations
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
GBV	Gender Based Violence
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
RWC	Refugee Welfare Council
FDG	Focus Group Discussions
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
RDP	Refugee and Displaced Person
KRLON	Kyaka II Refugee Led Organisations Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of assessment

This study was conducted across five locations in Uganda: Kyaka II, Kyangwali, Rwamwanja, Nakivale Refugee Settlements, as well as Kampala. It focused specifically on refugee women-led organizations (W-RLOs), examining the challenges they face in serving female Refugee and Displaced Persons (RDPs), and identifying how W-RLO can be strengthened to enhance their visibility, inclusion, and sustainability. The research explored structural, financial, and systemic barriers to growth, representation, and participation, with the goal of generating evidence-based recommendations for W-RLOs, humanitarian actors, donors, and policymakers.

Background

Women Refugee-Led Organizations (W-RLOs) in Uganda are grassroots initiatives founded by refugee women to meet the specific needs of their communities, including GBV prevention, reproductive health, child protection, and economic empowerment. Despite their vital role, W-RLOs often face underrepresentation in humanitarian coordination, limited visibility, and underfunding, as most support structures favor larger, often male-led organizations. This research was conducted to highlight the contributions of W-RLOs and to identify the structural and systemic barriers that hinder their growth, inclusion, and long-term sustainability.

Methodology

The research combined a review of existing documents from INGOs, women-led RLOs, and RLO networks with primary data collection through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and an online survey. KIIs were conducted with W-RLO leaders, RWC representatives, INGOs, and RLO networks; FGDs engaged women leading or participating in W-RLOs, while the survey was completed by W-RLO leaders from various RDP communities. This triangulation ensured diverse perspectives and minimized bias. Data was collected from Kyaka II, Kyangwali, Rwamwanja, Nakivale refugee settlements, and Kampala between February 10th and March 30th, 2025. In total, 60 W-RLO representatives, 2 RWC leaders, 30 community members, and 9 implementing partners participated.

Limitations included language barriers, varied definitions of W-RLOs, time constraints, difficult weather, not enough literature to review, and challenges in mobilization across remote areas.

Key Challenges Identified

1. **Technology and Infrastructure Gaps:** Only 8 out of 42 W-RLOs had access to computers; few had office space or internet due to a lack of funding.
2. **Limited Access to Funding and Partnerships:** 36 out od 42 reported funding gaps; few received support beyond minor project expenses like refreshments.
3. **Lack of Formal Recognition:** 18 out of 42 W-RLOs were unregistered, largely due to language barriers and complex procedures.

4. **Capacity and Skills Limitations:** 41 out of 42 lacked formal training in finance, proposal writing, and organizational management.
5. **Personal Barriers:** 38 out of 42 cited family duties and restrictive norms that limit mobility and leadership visibility.
6. **Exclusion from Decision-Making Spaces:** Many feel silenced or overlooked in formal spaces, lacking support to voice their ideas.
7. **Access to Markets:** Products from income-generating projects struggle to find stable and sustainable buyers.
8. **Tribalism and Discrimination:** Ethnic tensions reduce collaboration; some W-RLOs are wrongly seen as serving one group only.
9. **Language Barriers:** Limited English skills hinder access to funding, reporting, and professional engagement.
10. **Limited Access to Information:** Poor digital skills, data costs, and underrepresentation from networks keep many W-RLOs uninformed.

Support Needed to Strengthen W-RLOs

I. **Flexible and Accessible Funding**: W-RLOs need simplified, translated application processes and unrestricted grants. Current funding models are too rigid and exclude grassroots organizations.

II. **Capacity Building**: Leaders require training in finance, reporting, digital literacy, GBV, and trauma response. Many lack basic computer skills needed for reporting and communication.

III. **Mentorship and Partnerships**: W-RLOs seek mentorship from INGOs and experienced peers. Peer learning would boost confidence, build networks, and improve access to opportunities.

IV. **Visibility and Networking**: W-RLOs want support in storytelling, digital visibility, and inclusion in national forums. They feel known locally but overlooked by decision-makers.

Recommendations

To Donors, Partners, Governments and Key Stakeholders

* Formalize and emphasize W-RLO representation in cluster meetings, district dialogues, and humanitarian planning as equal partners.
* Take time to discover emerging W-RLOs in the community and extend support to ensure more inclusive growth and visibility for all.
* Provide funding and mentorship to W-RLOs to strengthen operations and impact.
* Innovate around creation of easier funding models and processes that take the grassroots organisations realities into account.
* Deliver tailored training in grant writing, digital tools, project management, and reporting.

* Pair W-RLOs with INGOs or experienced women-led organizations for ongoing coaching and technical support.
* Provide training that strengthens women leaders' self-belief and confidence, especially in leading mixed-gender teams and navigating male-dominated spaces.
* Create awards that recognize and celebrate the contributions of women, encouraging continued leadership and inspiring others to step forward.
* Create platforms to showcase the work of W-RLOs (e.g., newsletters, social media campaigns, learning exchanges).
* Establish platforms or spaces where women-led businesses can showcase and sell their products, boosting income and visibility within the community.

To W-RLOs Themselves:

* Push for national and international frameworks that recognize and prioritize W-RLOs in refugee response strategies.
* Continue leading with confidence and consistency, knowing that their communities trust them. Encourage and uplift each other to keep going, even when challenges arise.
* Develop income-generating projects or social enterprises to diversify revenue.
* Come together as women refugee-led organization leaders to form a unified network for shared learning, visibility, and stronger advocacy.
* W-RLOs should proactively seek out information on legal and policy frameworks affecting their work, including registration, compliance, and protections under the law.

INTRODUCTION

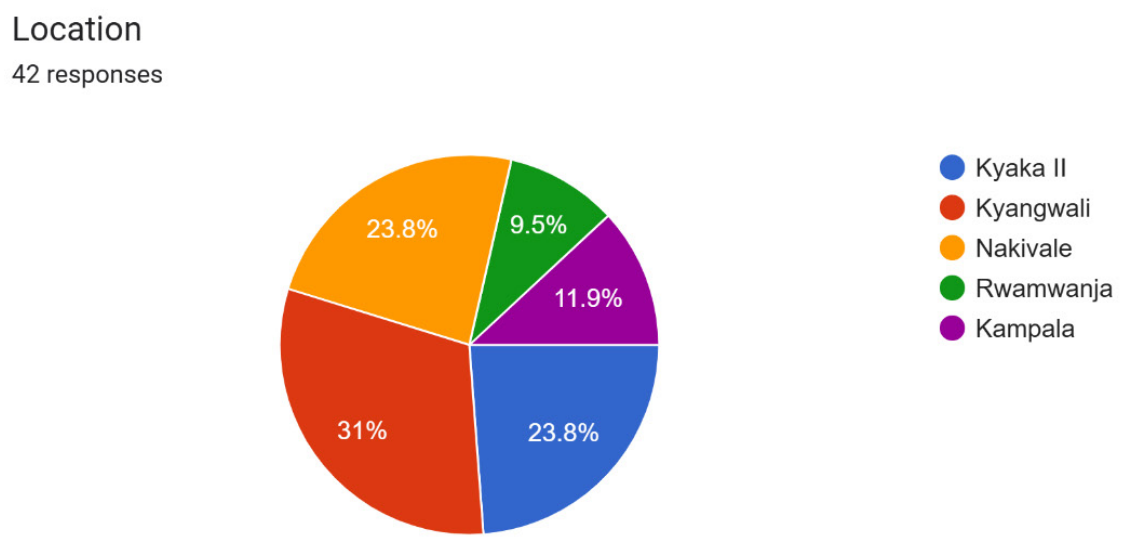
The Scope

This report presents the findings of a research study aimed at evaluating the challenges facing refugee women-led organizations (W-RLOs) when it comes to advocating and serving female RDPs, and how to leverage the women-led RLO Networks to address these challenges. This assessment took place in Kyaka II, Kyangwali, Rwamwanja, and Nakivale refugee settlements and Kampala with a focus on women refugee-led initiatives.

The objectives of this assessment were:

1. Identify the unique challenges faced by refugee women-led organizations in Uganda.
2. Identify challenges that limit participation of women leaders and women led organisations.
3. Develop tailored programs to address the specific needs of women-led RLOs, aiming to enhance their visibility and capacity.

The findings in this report are structured around these 3 objectives and one primary question of *"What are the main challenges facing refugee women-led organizations in achieving growth, sustainability, and scaling their impact in serving their communities?"*. The findings are on primary data collected during one on one interviews and focus group discussions held in the four different refugee settlements and Kampala, in addition to the secondary data derived from an in-depth literature review. Our primary data was derived from a total of 101 consultations that include W-RLO leaders, RLO leaders, INGOs implementing in settlements and Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).



The Context

Refugee women's leadership often remains confined to the grassroots level, with little evidence that their voices influence decision-making processes that affect their lives. Few refugee women and girls currently have access to decision-making spaces[1], which means a large portion of the refugee population is underrepresented in critical decisions. This reduces the likelihood that these decisions truly reflect refugee women's needs and interests.

Women-led refugee organizations (W-RLOs) often lack recognition, in part due to their unique leadership style that is typically less competitive and more collaborative. Many also face challenges in communicating impact, seizing opportunities, and accessing platforms that would elevate their work. For example, on Reframe—a reputable platform that hosts over 500 refugee-led organizations (RLOs) across Africa—only 21 are women-led. This underrepresentation results from barriers such as limited access to technology, lack of confidence, language limitations, and systemic structures[2] that make it hard for refugee women leaders to be visible, heard, or supported.

As shared by a senior leader at Cohere in a conversation: *"In 2021, we did a call for proposals for partnerships across Kenya and Uganda, which we haven't done since, and out of the 150 organisations that applied, only two were women-led. For a couple of years after that, when people asked me where the women-led organisations were in Kenya and Uganda, I would say that there aren't really many because we only had two applicants out of 150. There was so much wrong with that. One of the problems was that we generally put the adverts in English, we requested that the leaders fill in a form in English, which had to be accessed online—and already, right there, you have so many barriers. Women who may not have had the same privileges as male leaders, depending on which country they come from, in many cases didn't even know that we had a call for applications out."* This example illustrates how seemingly inclusive processes can unintentionally exclude the most marginalized. Applications for funding and opportunities are often long, dense, and written in English—rarely the first language of many grassroots women leaders. Even when translated, such forms demand a high level of literacy and writing ability, creating a steep barrier for many dedicated but under-resourced women leaders. While these barriers affect most refugee women, it is important to note that not all face them equally—those with higher education, language skills, or better access to networks may navigate them more easily than others.

Moreover, many refugee women prioritize being physically present in their communities—caring for families, supporting neighbors, and delivering services—over public-facing work such as pitching to donors or filling out lengthy forms. This deeply rooted commitment to community often keeps them from attending conferences, networking events, or training sessions—especially when these are held far from their operating locations. As a result, their voices remain underepresented from key conversations where solutions are designed.

1 Spaces—formal or informal—where decisions on policies, programs, or resources are made, such as coordination meetings, cluster forums, or community dialogues.

2 Examples include funding applications in English only, limited digital access (internet, devices), complex NGO registration processes, male-dominated coordination platforms, and donor requirements like audited reports, which many grassroots W-RLOs cannot meet.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews and key informant conversations to explore the experiences, barriers, and opportunities for W-RLOs. The approach was chosen to allow for in-depth understanding of the lived realities of refugee women leaders and to capture nuanced insights often missed in quantitative data. Given the limited opportunities refugee women leaders have had to share their perspectives, the study intentionally prioritized using its limited resources to amplify these voices as fully as possible. While a mixed-methods approach could have provided additional breadth, the richness of the qualitative data gathered lays a foundation for future follow-up research, including the use of quantitative methods for broader validation and triangulation.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience leading or working within W-RLOs. A total of **101** participants were interviewed, including leaders of W-RLOs, representatives from intermediary organizations, and key stakeholders such as **OPM**. Participants were selected based on their knowledge of or experience with refugee women's leadership and organizational development.The sample aimed for analytical representativeness, ensuring diversity across leader profiles, geographic locations and operational contexts.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through **semi-structured interviews**, conducted either in person or via phone/Zoom depending on participants' availability and access to technology. Interviews were guided by a flexible interview guide that explored topics such as leadership participation, access to opportunities, systemic barriers, visibility, and recognition.

As part of the field data collection process, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized with diverse groups of women leaders. These sessions facilitated conversations on leadership dynamics, community needs, and the impact of existing support mechanisms. The FGDs enabled the research team to capture collective narratives and contextual nuances that may not have surfaced through individual surveys.

An online survey was also used to reach respondents who could not be interviewed in person. It was shared widely across refugee networks and platforms and included key questions about leadership, challenges, funding, and visibility. This allowed for broader participation, especially from W-RLO leaders in hard-to-reach locations. In addition to primary data collection, we reviewed existing reports, documents, and studies from INGOs, W-RLO networks, and humanitarian actors to provide context and support the findings.

Where necessary, interpreters were used to ensure participants could express themselves freely in their preferred language.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and their identities have been anonymized in this report unless they gave explicit permission to be quoted. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data Analysis

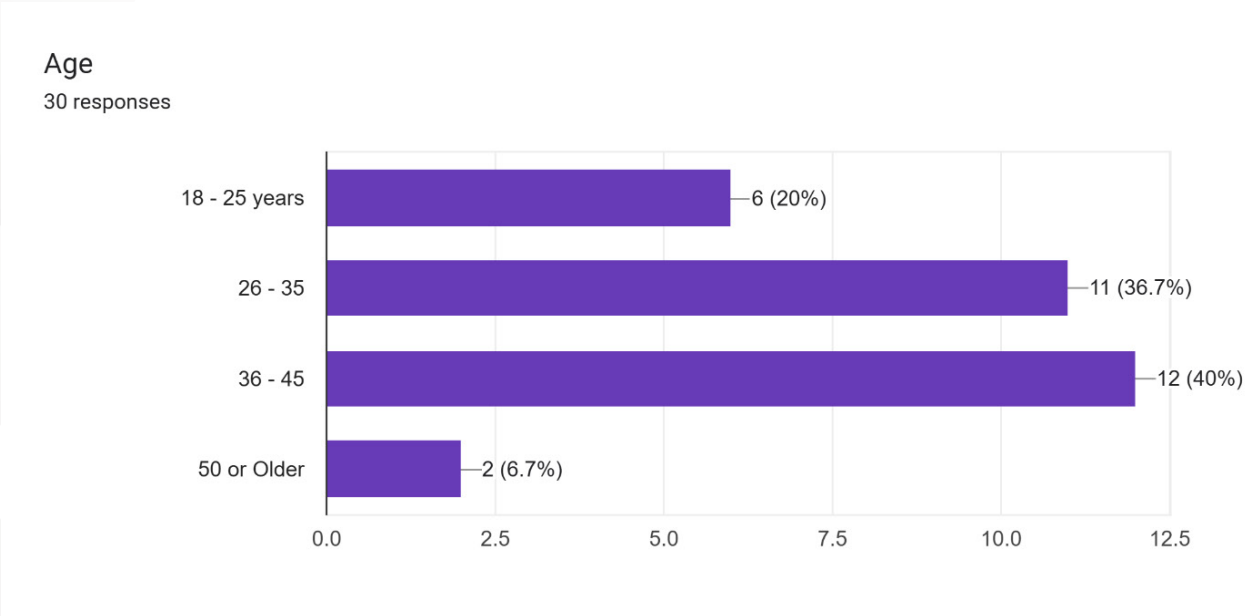
We transcribed interview responses and identified common themes and patterns in what people shared, such as challenges with being recognized, being excluded from decision-making, or limited access to technology. Using a deductive approach, we started with key themes based on our research questions but also allowed new themes to emerge from the data. To ensure the findings were accurate and fair, we compared responses from different individuals and groups to identify where their views aligned, supported, or diverged from one another.

Baseline Snapshots

At the time of this assessment, Women Refugee-Led Organizations (W-RLOs) in Uganda were primarily operating in some of the most remote and hard-to-reach refugee settlements. Out of the 60 W-RLOs interviewed, only 24 were formally registered with official authority, highlighting a significant gap in legal recognition and access to formal support systems.

Most of these organizations were being led by passionate individuals working on a voluntary basis, often without any form of payment or external support. As a result, many leaders had to take on additional jobs to support their families, while still dedicating time and effort to serve their communities.

The average age of the leaders was 35 years. The profile of most leaders showed two common trends: younger women under the age of 35, and older women over 40, often single mothers managing family responsibilities alongside community work.



Basic infrastructure was lacking for most of the organizations. Many did not have access to office space, computers, or reliable communication tools. Some leaders required interpretation support during interviews, indicating the presence of language barriers. In some cases, leaders were interviewed while actively engaged in work such as tailoring or childcare. One of the leaders disclosed ongoing mental health challenges, further underlining the personal strain many of these women face in balancing leadership roles with personal hardships.

This snapshot shows a vibrant but under-resourced sector that is rich in potential but in urgent need of structured support.

KEY FINDINGS

Challenges to Growth, Sustainability, and Impact (Primary Question)

We asked the question, *"What are the main challenges facing refugee women-led organizations in achieving growth, sustainability, and scaling their impact in serving their communities?"* Here is what we found:

While many of the challenges identified in this study—such as limited funding, lack of recognition, and capacity constraints—are common among all Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs), evidence from this research indicates that Women Refugee-Led Organizations (W-RLOs) face these barriers more acutely. These challenges are compounded by gendered barriers, caregiving responsibilities, cultural norms, and lower visibility within formal humanitarian structures. Therefore, the findings in this section emphasize how these broader issues uniquely or disproportionately affect W-RLOs.

Technology and Infrastructure Gaps

Out of the 42 direct interviewees, only **8** W-RLOs reported having access to a computer. However, even among those with computers, many expressed low confidence in using them effectively to support their work.

Additionally, just **17** W-RLOs had access to dedicated office space, and only **2** had access to stable internet. This was largely due to limited or inconsistent access to funding, which makes it difficult to secure basic operational infrastructure.

Limited Access to Funding and meaningful partnership

36 of the W-RLOs interviewed reported facing challenges related to limited access to funding and a lack of meaningful partnerships. Only a small number of women-led RLOs receive funding, and even fewer—**3** out of the **42**—reported being funded beyond basic items such as refreshments or airtime.

For example, a W-RLO based in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement, shared that they received a grant of UGX 2 million (approximately USD 600) to run a project on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and protection. They were expected to implement and report within three months. The funding, however, did not cover compensation for the team members who went to the field. It only supported minor costs such as drinks and snacks for meetings.

This "partnership" left the organisation in the same position they were in before the project began—without any real capacity growth or sustainability—while the partner organization was able to produce a polished report for the donor, based on the limited activities implemented.

The same W-RLOs informed us, *"Since we are the only registered W-RLO in Kyangwali, we are overwhelmed by partners wanting to engage us in smaller projects that take up our time, making it hard to create or find time to pursue partnerships and funding that would enable us to grow."*

In addition to the limited nature of funding, the structure of funding opportunities often excludes W-RLOs from the start. Many of these organizations are not online, due to

poor access to technology, and therefore miss out on seeing or applying for open calls. Their inability to document and share their work online also weakens their perceived credibility and visibility to potential donors.

This results in a vicious cycle: they don't receive funding due to a lack of visible evidence of their work, and they cannot produce evidence because they lack the funding needed to do so.

Lack of Formal Recognition

Half of the W-RLOs we visited had already registered in some form. Some had registered with the local government or the district authorities, which qualified them for recognition as Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). Two of the W-RLOs had registered with the NGO Bureau, granting them status as regional or national organizations. However, 18 of the W-RLOs were not registered at all, despite having been in operation for more than a year.

This lack of formal recognition is primarily due to challenges such as language barriers, limited access to accurate information, and a lack of knowledge on how to navigate the registration process. For many W-RLO leaders, the systems and procedures remain confusing or inaccessible without external support or guidance.

One leader shared, "Registration was very hard and it took one year. The registration process had many requirements. Also, opening a bank account was very hard—I had to involve a lawyer to do it. During registration, we were even asked to have nationals in our organisation."

Capacity and Skills Limitations

For many W-RLOs, the establishment of an organization is not necessarily driven by formal training in organizational management or structured leadership. Instead, it stems from a heartfelt desire to respond to urgent needs within their communities. These women recognize the challenges affecting those around them and take initiative to provide grassroots, community-based solutions.

A case in point is a leader who shared: "As a single mother, I faced many hardships. One of the biggest challenges was that some men tried to take advantage of me because I didn't have a husband to protect me. I decided to go into the community to find other single mothers who were also being mistreated. Since I am HIV positive, I also started visiting hospitals to encourage other patients to take their medication on time so they can stay healthy and save their lives."

This example illustrates a common reality: most W-RLOs emerge in direct response to personal and community adversity, rather than through structured planning or organizational expertise. While this needs-driven formation ensures that these organizations remain deeply connected to their communities, it also means that they often start with limited technical, managerial, and operational skills.

As these organizations grow and their responsibilities expand, the initial lack of formal skills presents ongoing challenges. This was reflected in the data collected, where over **41 out of 42 of the W-RLOs interviewed reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled personnel, establishing compliant financial systems, developing**

competitive proposals, and effectively managing day-to-day organizational operations. These capacity gaps hinder their ability to scale interventions, secure sustainable funding, and meet the accountability expectations of partners and donors.

In essence, while W-RLOs are driven by passion and lived experience, there is a critical need for targeted capacity strengthening initiatives to enhance their organizational management, leadership skills, and operational systems — enabling them to sustain and amplify their impact in the long term.

Personal Barriers

Family obligations were mentioned by 90% of the W-RLO leaders we engaged with as a major barrier to their full participation and growth as leaders. Many are single parents—often due to separation caused by war or displacement—who must navigate parenthood with minimal resources. Without reliable childcare or the means to send their children to boarding school, these women struggle to maintain a consistent presence in their organizations or dedicate uninterrupted time to growth and planning.

Others are young women who face cultural and domestic expectations within their households. They described waking up early to do housework before starting their organizational duties, while also contributing financially by helping their parents pay school fees for younger siblings. Additional restrictions include being expected to return home by a certain time, avoid overnight travel, or seek permission to attend events far from home—conditions that limit their mobility, exposure, and leadership development. These gendered expectations and social norms create a double burden for women trying to run organizations while fulfilling family roles.

One respondent shared, "I can't go to Kampala looking for markets for my products without my husband's permission."

Exclusion from Decision-Making Spaces

W-RLO leaders shared that even when they are present in spaces with other actors and decision-makers, they often feel unable to fully participate. Many expressed fear or hesitation when it comes to voicing their ideas, sharing responses, or asserting their perspectives in discussions. This lack of confidence is often rooted in unequal power dynamics, limited exposure to formal engagement spaces, and the absence of consistent support or mentorship to help them navigate such environments.

One of the respondents mentioned "many times when we are applying for on opportunity for implementation in the community a male led group has higher chances of being given the opportunity that for a women led group".

Access to Markets

A significant challenge identified through the survey is the limited market access for products made by (W-RLOs). Many of these organizations engage in income-generating activities such as tailoring, agriculture, mushroom growing, and handicrafts like doormat making. However, they consistently struggle to find reliable and sustainable markets for their products — yet these sales are often their primary source of funding to support community initiatives.

The issue is further compounded by market saturation in certain sectors. For example, several agricultural groups reported harvesting their produce at the same time, leading to an oversupply and difficulty securing buyers. Similarly, tailoring groups and mushroom growers cited limited local demand, making it challenging to sell their products consistently and at fair prices. This restricts the ability of these organizations to grow, reinvest in their activities, and sustain the community services they provide.

Tribalism and Discrimination

Tribal conflicts continue to hinder the effective implementation of programs by W-RLOs. For instance, a group of Sudanese women reported challenges in mobilizing fellow Sudanese women from other ethnic groups, who are reluctant to engage with them due to ongoing tribal tensions carried over from their countries of origin. These divisions significantly limit women's ability to collaborate and participate in community-led initiatives.

Another example comes from a W-RLO running a school in Kampala, which faced resistance from the local community. Many believed the school was intended only for Congolese children, despite its goal of serving the broader community. This misconception limited enrollment and community support. However, the organization has made progress by hiring members of the host community to help sensitize parents and raise awareness that the school is open and beneficial to all.

Language Barrier

Language barrier was also a significant challenge faced by many W-RLOs. While most of these leaders are deeply passionate about serving their communities, many have limited formal education and do not speak or read English — the primary language used in official communication, funding applications, reporting systems, and management tools.

A *leader of one of the groups from Sudan mentioned that: The main language in Sudan is Arabic, which makes it hard for them to express themselves to get even minimal support, it becomes challenging for them to express their needs and secure even basic support when opportunities are communicated in English.*

As a result, W-RLO leaders often find themselves unable to effectively respond to calls for proposals, access capacity-building opportunities, or maintain accurate records. In cases where groups cannot afford to hire skilled personnel to support administrative tasks, record-keeping is frequently inaccurate, and crucial deadlines or opportunities are missed due to language limitations.

Furthermore, this language barrier affects their participation in networking events, workshops, and forums where potential investors, donors, and collaborators are present. The inability to confidently communicate in English limits their visibility and access to valuable partnerships and resources, ultimately hindering the growth and sustainability of their organizations.

Language barrier (the main language in Sudan is Arabic) making it hard for us to express ourselves to even get the most minimal support (unable to get jobs) and women end up starting small businesses.

Limited access to information

Limited access to information remains a significant barrier for many W-RLOs. Several women-led groups shared that they often miss out on opportunities simply because they are not aware of them. One key reason is that many leaders lack the digital skills needed to navigate online platforms where funding calls, training announcements, or partnership opportunities are shared.

In addition, many cannot afford the cost of staying online consistently—data bundles are expensive, and some W-RLOs lack smartphones, computers, or internet access altogether. As a result, they are cut off from channels of communication where others stay informed.

Another major issue raised was **gatekeeping**. Some respondents expressed that information about opportunities is sometimes withheld by individuals or organizations who prefer to keep those chances for themselves or their networks. This practice creates an unfair playing field, especially for grassroots organizations that already face many other limitations.

Furthermore, women are often the last to be contacted or considered when leadership or capacity-building opportunities arise. Many shared that their leadership is not taken seriously or is routinely overlooked by community members and even peers.

Some W-RLOs also lack awareness of which online platforms or networks they should join to access new opportunities. For those opportunities that rely on referrals or existing networks, many women-led organizations are not referred—simply because no one knows they exist. This invisibility creates a cycle of exclusion that makes it difficult for them to grow or gain recognition.

W-RLOs Contribution to Enhancing Female RDP Voices

Economic Empowerment

W-RLOs play a role in enhancing the decision-making power of female RDPs by facilitating income-generating activities such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), small businesses, and agricultural projects. These initiatives boost women's financial independence, which often translates into increased influence within their households and greater participation in the community.

A good example of this is **Tumaini for Refugee Women**, a refugee women-led organization based in Nakivale settlement. Tumaini has been actively empowering displaced women and more than 1000 women have received entrepreneurship and business skills which enabled them to gain economic stability and become active and valuable contributors to both social and economic development within their communities.

Safe Spaces for Expression and support

W-RLOs support their communities by creating safe spaces where refugee women can gather, share experiences, and support one another. These spaces often take the form of women's groups and community centers that encourage open expression and collective decision-making.

A good example of such spaces is **The Sudanese Women for Peace and Development Association** (SWPDA), a W-RLO in Kampala that provides spaces for Sudanese refugee women, particularly recent arrivals, to learn English and integrate into the local community. Beyond English lessons, they also offer business skills training and small startup grants to help the refugee women support their families. Furthermore, the Sudanese community faces challenges associated with Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), including difficulty accessing the right healthcare specialists to support them during childbirth. This W-RLO supports these women by referring them to appropriate healthcare centers and providing aftercare services and psychosocial support, in addition to sensitizing the community to stop FGM.

Spaces like these, empower women and make it possible for them to raise their voices on matterst hat affect them without fear of judgement or exploitation.

Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response

W-RLOs play a crucial role in addressing gender-based violence within refugee communities by conducting community outreach, raising awareness, and providing support services for survivors. These organizations empower women to speak out, seek assistance, and advocate for their rights and safety.

Often, these RLOs work through referral systems, linking survivors to relevant stakeholders and service providers equipped to handle GBV cases. As a woman leader in Kyangwali refugee settlement explained, they frequently refer cases they cannot directly resolve to responsible authorities and organizations like Alight and Uganda police. Additionally, they utilize safe spaces established by partner organizations as venues where women can access counseling, protection services, and resolve issues affecting them within the community.

Leadership Development

W-RLO leaders take on leadership roles often out of necessity, however the experience of running a community group equips them with leadership skills while on the job. They learn people management, conflict resolution and acquire the confidence they need to represent other female RPDs in their communities.

This furthermore inspires other women to take up leadership roles, hence scaling their impact and involvement in the shaping of solutions to problems that affect them.

Tailored, Gender-Sensitive Services

Being deeply embedded in the community, W-RLOs are well-positioned as first responders to address the specific needs of female RDPs — including reproductive health, education for girls, and psychosocial support.

As the leader of **Wake Alpha Elimu** *explained, "There were many early pregnancies in the area, and this was forcing many girls out of school. In response, we conducted door-to-door visits to educate families about the consequences of early pregnancies. Through these engagements, we made numerous referrals for family planning services to help address the issue and support girls to stay in school."*

Such outreaches shift power to young refugee women by equipping them with knowledge about their rights and strengthening their ability to stand up for themselves.

Advocacy and Policy Influence

W-RLOs engage with local authorities, NGOs, and humanitarian actors to advocate for the inclusion and recognition of refugee women's voices in decision-making processes. Through locally established platforms like KRLON (Kyaka II Refugee-Led Organisations Network), W-RLOs amplify the voices of female RDPs and offer perspectives that help shape policies to be more inclusive of refugee women.

A case in point is the involvement of the Wezesha Women Initiative from Kyangwali refugee settlement, in the Localisation Consultation Meetings held in July 2024 across various refugee-hosting districts in South Western Uganda. According to them, participating in such a forum enabled them to highlight the specific challenges faced by refugee women and W-RLOs, as well as the kind of support needed for their meaningful integration into the localisation agenda.

Such engagements have been rare and they have been increased by the presence of dedicated refugee leaders among other factors.

Inclusive Internal Practices

More than half of the W-RLOs interviewed had at least 50% of their teams composed of female RDPs. This reflects a strong commitment to inclusive leadership, ensuring that decisions are shaped by those with lived experiences, as each leadership team member brings a unique perspective from her community.

Additionally, 97.6% of the W-RLOs interviewed were founded with the purpose of supporting refugee women who had been excluded in one way or another. A representative from **Save and Rescue Abandoned Woman,** a W-RLO in Nakivale, explained, "I was motivated by my past history, by seeing women who were abandoned with no support, and it gave me an idea to start an organisation to *support such women—hence the organisation name, Save and Rescue Abandoned Woman."*

This underscores that W-RLOs are inherently designed to promote the inclusion of female RDPs and elevate their voices.

Innovative Approaches to Inclusion Through Culture and Arts

Some W-RLOs use creative and culturally rooted approaches—such as music, storytelling, and drama—to be more inclusive of female RDPs. These methods help communicate gender messages in ways that are engaging, accessible, and resonate with the community. For example, the Anti-Violence group in Rwamwanja is a performing group that uses music and drama to raise awareness and spark conversations on issues like violence in all its forms.

Support Needed to Strengthen W-RLOs

Flexible and Accessible Funding

There was a clear consensus that the **current funding structures are not designed for grassroots realities**. Many W-RLOs operate without core funding, and most of the financial support they receive is limited to in-kind donations or small, one-time contributions. Many also lack the digital access to find or apply for funding. There's

a strong call for simplified application processes, translated calls for proposals, and small unrestricted grants that allow women leaders to focus on their work instead of only logistics—**including reducing paperwork burdens such as not requiring audited financial statements.**

Capacity Building

Many W-RLO leaders emphasized the need for continuous training to strengthen their organizational skills. These include **administrative management, financial reporting, proposal writing, digital literacy***, and storytelling. Several respondents mentioned lacking the ability to write reports or use computers confidently. One leader shared, "I have no computer skills and it makes it hard to do reporting and communicate our activities."*

Some leaders also expressed a need for **more context-specific training** *in GBV prevention, mental health, peacebuilding, and entrepreneurship. A participant from Mama Nzango Foundation added, "We need more training—on GBV, mental health, trauma, and conflict resolution."*

Mentorship and Partnerships

Several W-RLO leaders mentioned working in isolation, with limited access to **peer learning or guidance** from more established organizations. Many expressed a desire to be paired with **INGOs, diaspora-led networks, or experienced refugee leaders** for mentorship and collaboration. This would not only help them gain confidence and build networks but also improve their access to resources and advocacy platforms.

One respondent from Potenzia, a W-RLO in Kyaka II refugee settlement said, "We would like to learn from other women-led organizations who have already been recognized or funded—how did they get there?"

Visibility and Networking

Most W-RLOs reported that their work is **not visible to decision-makers or the public**, even though their impact is evident within their communities. They expressed the need for more opportunities to be **included in coordination meetings, district-level planning, media, and national platforms**.

Leaders emphasized that they are doing the work but lack the space to share it. "We are known here in the community, but not outside. We're not invited to big events," one said. Others recommended support in creating online profiles, documentation, and storytelling tools to amplify their presence and credibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Governments and Refugee Coordination Structures (e.g. OPM, RWC)

Create inclusion Mechanisms: Formalize and emphasize W-RLO representation in cluster meetings, district dialogues, and humanitarian planning as equal partners. W-RLOs need to be thoroughly sought out for and invited in settlement level meetings and country level meetings, so as to capture their unique experiences and leverage their community trust to meaningfully reach other female RDPs.

"There should be a representative for women that can listen to women's challenges"- A refugee leader in Kyangwali Refugee settlement

Identify and Support Emerging Groups: There are many emerging refugee women-led initiatives, some registered and others not. It is important to map these organizations and maintain a database to allow for easier identification and mobilization, ensuring that when opportunities arise, these groups are also reached—instead of the same organizations benefiting repeatedly. This process can be carried out in partnership with key stakeholders such as INGO partners, NGO partners, and RLO networks.

To Donors/Partners and Key stakeholders

Build Trust-Based Relationships with W-RLOs: Donors, partners, and stakeholders should prioritize building long-term, trust-based relationships with W-RLOs. This includes consistent engagement, transparency, and recognizing them as equal partners—ensuring that collaboration goes beyond transactions to genuine partnership. To achieve this, partners need an on-ground presence, which can be facilitated through collaborations with more established RLOs, RLO coalitions, or RLO intermediary organizations that already have trusted relationships within the communities.

"I think the most inclusive way to build partnerships is to just have a real presence on the ground and know who those innovators are" – A senior leader at Cohere

Provide Financial Support and Strategic Partnerships: Many W-RLOs have greatly impacted their communities with limited resources and some have made significant strides in their journey to growth and sustainability through receiving small grants. Financial support is essential as it enables W-RLOs to hire skilled teams, enhance program quality, and scale their impact.
Furthermore, it is important for W-RLO partners to treat them as equal partners and provide mentorship or apprenticeship support where needed, enabling them to effectively deliver their programs and remain accountable to both funders and their communities.

"Financial support can help us support women in their livelihood activities, which can in the future become income generating activities for the organization" – A W-RLO leader in Kampala

"Trainings are important, but we need funding to practice what we have been trained and prove that we can manage funded projects"- Refugee Mental Health Network

Flexible Funding Models: Many W-RLOs have the passion to serve their communities but are limited by rigid and complex funding requirements, such as audited reports or track records for the as long as three years. Simplified application processes, mentorship in proposal writing, or results-based grant opportunities would ensure that passionate, capable organizations are not left behind due to structural limitations. Furthermore, unrestricted funds or trust-based funding models are needed to allow W-RLOs to design programs based on the priorities of their communities and organizations. Unlike restricted funding, which tends to limit an organization's ability to pivot or respond to emergencies, flexible funding would enable W-RLOs to strengthen their management and scale their impact when given trust and opportunity.

Provide continuous organisation development training: It is without a doubt that many W-RLOs require capacity strengthening programs. However, it is important to ensure that these programs are tailored to the specific needs and leadership styles of the W-RLOs that partners intend to support. Furthermore, such programs should assess the existing management and leadership structures of W-RLOs, determine whether they are indeed underperforming, and apply a customized approach that supports their growth within their unique leadership models. This kind of programming requires innovative thinking.

Mentorship Programs: Mentorship plays a critical role in shaping the growth and sustainability of organizations that are eager to serve their communities. It is evident that many of the women-led groups have already made significant contributions within their communities, often working voluntarily and without financial support, driven purely by passion and commitment. By pairing these grassroots groups with well-established W-RLOs, INGOs, or NGOs, their capacity, reach, and overall impact could be significantly enhanced. Through such partnerships, these organizations would benefit from strengthened administrative structures, improved operational systems, and valuable leadership guidance — ultimately increasing their effectiveness and influence within the community.

Encourage and Sustain Women's Leadership: Leadership is not solely about presence or availability; it requires practical skills, confidence, and the resilience to advocate for one's organization, especially in challenging environments. It is therefore essential to offer training programs that build women leaders' self-belief, leadership abilities, and confidence — particularly in managing mixed-gender teams and navigating male-dominated decision-making spaces.

Women leaders within these communities have not received formal leadership training, yet possess the determination to run successful organizations. Providing targeted leadership training would not only strengthen their capacity to manage and build resilient, effective teams but also enhance their ability to sustain their organizations in the long term.

"We would appreciate the support in leadership training and managerial skills". - a W-RLO leader in Nakivale

Establish Community Recognition for Women Leaders: There is a need to create intentional platforms that publicly recognize and celebrate the impact of W-RLOs in their communities. Highlighting and rewarding outstanding initiatives not only

validates the work of these women-led organizations but also sets a powerful example for others to follow. Such recognition can build credibility, boost morale, and increase visibility, attracting both local and international support. Recognition models — such as community awards, public showcases, and storytelling events — can act as a source of inspiration and encouragement for emerging W-RLOs. *"Create more awards in the community to support women,"* the Anti-Violence Group in Kyangwali said.

Enhance W-RLO Visibility: Creating platforms to showcase the work of Women-led Refugee-Led Organizations (W-RLOs) is essential for amplifying their voices, building credibility, and attracting support. Visibility not only increases public awareness of their impact but also opens doors to new partnerships, funding opportunities, and collaborations. This can be achieved through various channels such as newsletters that feature success stories, social media campaigns highlighting community initiatives, learning exchanges where W-RLOs share best practices, and documentation of their work through blogs, videos, and photo essays.

By consistently promoting their work, W-RLOs are better positioned to influence local and global conversations around refugee leadership and gender equity. Visibility also helps in challenging stereotypes and shifting narratives around refugee women from passive beneficiaries to active changemakers.

Create Market Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs: Establishing or investing in platforms or dedicated spaces where refugee women-led businesses can showcase and sell their products is key to promoting economic empowerment and sustainability. These opportunities can include sponsoring them to attend local and regional trade fairs, pop-up markets, community events, online marketplaces, or create partnerships with retail outlets locally or internationally.

Market access will help women build business networks, and develop financial independence, which further strengthens their role as community leaders.

Establish Inclusive and Accessible Information Channels: Due to the remoteness of many refugee settlements, many women leaders lack access to smartphones, stable internet, or electricity. As a result, they often miss out on important calls for applications and opportunities, despite being well-positioned to implement valuable initiatives within their communities. To address this, there is a need to create diverse and accessible communication channels that reach all leaders, regardless of location or resources. This could include the use of community radios, WhatsApp groups for those with smartphones, and accepting written applications for those without digital access. Additionally, ensuring that opportunities are communicated in multiple local languages will make information accessible to every leader in a way that aligns with their capacity and context.

To W-RLOs Themselves

Influencing Systems Change: A push for policies and coordination systems that formally recognize, prioritize, and allocate resources to W-RLOs as essential partners in humanitarian and development interventions, is important. By doing

so, W-RLOs will have greater opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, influence program designs, and address the unique needs of displaced women and girls more effectively.

"I encourage refugee women leaders to be more confident to avoid becoming like poster children, whose lives never change"- A leader at Ademaria

Financial Sustainability Planning: Some RLOs have begun to develop income-generating projects as part of their financial sustainability strategies. A notable example is YIDA Financial Services, a program that generates profits to support **YIDA (Youth Initiative for Development in Africa)**—an RLO based in Kyaka II refugee settlement. The income earned from this initiative helps fund YIDA's operations, reduces dependency on donor funding, and provides financial stability during periods when external funding is unavailable.

This serves as a strong example of a practical model that W-RLOs can adopt to diversify their income streams, build resilience, and enhance long-term sustainability.

Build Peer-to-Peer Collaborative Networks: There is great value in the power of peer mentorship, especially when it emerges organically through networks formed among organizations and their leaders. W-RLOs that are still developing can benefit significantly from the experiences and insights of more established peers. These peer-to-peer networks create spaces for mutual learning, problem-solving, and knowledge exchange, fostering collective growth and solidarity. By supporting one another, W-RLOs can build stronger, more resilient organizations rooted in shared experience and community-driven leadership.

Strengthen W-RLO Knowledge of Legal and Policy Frameworks: W-RLOs should proactively seek out knowledge on policies and legal requirements affecting their operations. Taking initiative to engage local government offices and regulatory bodies can help them better understand registration procedures, compliance expectations, and protections under the law. For instance, Uganda's **National Gender Policy (2007)** promotes the advancement of women and gender equity across development sectors. Understanding such policies can enable W-RLOs to align their work with national priorities and leverage available support systems. To benefit from these frameworks, W-RLOs must first be aware of them.

Leveraging Uganda's Enabling Legal Framework for Refugee-Led Growth: Uganda provides an enabling environment for refugees under the Refugees Act, 2006, and its progressive refugee policies. These laws grant refugees the right to work, move freely, own property, and open bank accounts. Refugee women leaders in Uganda, can leverage this enabling environment to formally register their organizations, move to look for markets, and scale their impact. This way, W-RLOs in Uganda can strengthen their legitimacy, attract partnerships, and participate more meaningfully in economic and civic spaces.

Define and Seek Tailored Capacity Strengthening: W-RLOs should take initiative in identifying and articulating their specific capacity-building needs. By proactively investing in their growth and defining what support they require, it becomes easier for partners and stakeholders to offer relevant and effective assistance.

In partnership with