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Exploring Stakeholders' Interventions in Addressing Gender Roles and Norms that Obstruct Refugee Women's Access to Higher Education: A Case of Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Northern Uganda

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Gender roles and norms are known to affect women more than their male counterparts disproportionately. In effect, it discourages women and denies them the opportunity to fulfil their potential in various sectors/fields. Specifically, this study focuses on stakeholders' interventions in addressing gender roles and norms obstructing refugee women in Uganda from accessing higher education. The study was carried out in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Northern Uganda. The study used the qualitative research approach anchored in the advocacy worldview using intersectionality with a liberal feminist perspective as a philosophical lens. Using purposive and snowball sampling, 49 participants took part in the study. Using one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions, the study found that some stakeholders' initiatives have facilitated refugee women's access to higher education. Initiatives such as awareness raising, career guidance and mentorship, and legal and policy frameworks, among others, have been put in place to promote refugee women's access to higher education. Nevertheless, the study found that these initiatives have not adequately addressed the cultural, gender, socio-economic, and structural barriers that are still hindering refugee women's access to higher education. Thus, the study recommends that stakeholders should undertake more rigorous and intensive sensitization and advocacy to raise community awareness on aspects of gender roles and norms to break the gender-role stereotyping that is largely hindering refugee women's access to higher education. Also, the study recommends that livelihood and skilling programmes should target women refugees to curb the risk of being forced into desperate survival situations. These should be continuously monitored and evaluated, and refugee women are also encouraged to seek family planning services to relieve them from the childcare role so as to enable access and participation in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The surge in refugee numbers, escalating from 27.1 million in 2021 to 35.3 million (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2022a), and its protracted nature emphasize the critical need not only in addressing the basic necessities but also extending access to education at all levels (Gurer, 2019). The significance of access to education is attributed to its enormous benefits, especially in higher education (United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2018). The 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (A/RES/71/1, para. 82) stated that "higher education serves as a powerful driver for change, shelters and protects a critical group of young men and women, by maintaining their hopes for the future, fosters inclusion and non-discrimination and acts as a catalyst for the recovery and rebuilding of post-conflict countries".

Even when it has been reported that data on refugees' access to higher education is limited and incomplete (Grisanti, 2019), scholars have noted that women refugees are disadvantaged and, therefore, few have higher education access (Naylor et al., 2019). Refugee women have been reported to have several barriers to accessing higher education, gender roles and norms, financial constraints, and sexual violence that are skewed more against women because of their gender (Baker et al., 2019; Giles, 2018). Less is known about the interventions in place to address these barriers.

This paper contributes evidence to the gap by exploring the stakeholder's interventions in

addressing gender roles and norms obstructing Bidibidi refugee women's access to higher education in Uganda. It is important to create a body of knowledge on stakeholders' interventions in addressing gender roles and norms obstructing refugee women's access to higher education. This paper fills the gap in knowledge by exploring available interventions addressing gender roles and norms to refugee women's access in a protracted refugee situation as was in Bidibidi but exposes gaps and limitations in interventions required to enable refugee women access to higher education. Additionally, using the evaluative design, this study exposed the achievements as well as the gaps in the stakeholder interventions towards addressing gender roles and norms that stand on the women refugees' pathways into higher education institutions and suggesting possible theoretical and empirical lenses that can widen and deepen the research in this field. Therefore, this paper will provide policy makers and practitioners with evidence for informed decision-making. It will also give insights into areas for further study in the field of broader refugee women's higher education policy.

Research Context

It is reported that 85 percent of the refugees are within the borders of Africa (Morrice, 2021). Uganda hosts Africa's largest population of refugees and the third largest worldwide (Betts et al., 2019). UNHCR (2022b) reports that results from the verification exercise as of 31 December 2022 were estimated at 1,495,688 individuals, of which 97% were refugees and 3% were asylum seekers, disaggregated by sex as 49% males and 51% females. It also states that the refugee population comprises 57% South Sudanese, 32%

Congolese, 4% Somalis, and 7% other nationalities residing in Kampala and other urban communities. Most (92%) of the refugees and asylum seekers live in settlements in Uganda's Southwest and West Nile regions. The UNHCR report claims that women and Children comprise 81% of the population. Yet women refugees' participation in universal sustainable development is likely hampered by low access to higher education. The UNHCR is working on its target of 15% by 2030 (UNHCR, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature indicates that within this broader landscape of refugee education, gender roles and norms disadvantage refugee women from accessing higher education (Krafft et al., 2021; Platzer, 2018). Most studies show that women are the most disadvantaged when it comes to higher education (Lambrechts, 2020). Naylor et al. (2019) note that female refugees experience 'vertical inequalities' associated with their gender roles and cultural expectations. This situation is even exacerbated in situations of refugeehood (Naylor et al., 2019; Maringe et al., 2017; Finchaman, 2020). In effect, refugee women have been noted to be overrepresented among the unqualified, showing their absence from higher education and their underrepresentation in employment (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018).

Scholars (Freedman, 2016; Grisanti, 2019; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2015) point out socio-economic issues (gender roles and norms, sexual violence and financial constraints) obstructing refugee women's access to higher education. Scholars (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Giles, 2018; Grisanti, 2019; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017) have called for gender-specific studies on refugee experiences in higher education access. While there is rising evidence of gender roles and norms as higher education access barriers facing women refugees, there is more limited evidence on interventions addressing them. Some studies have found that refugee women's exclusion from higher education access results in higher unmet needs that have continuously seen refugee women under-

representation in higher education access (Harris et al., 2015; Jack et al., 2019) and participation in development (Liebig & Trodstand, 2018).

Other studies report refugees receiving inferior quality education just because providers may feel that they are not entitled to further education and thus only emphasize short-skill courses (Hakami, 2017). Studies (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Harris et al., 2015; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010) on women's access to higher education have noted childcare and cultural practices as factors; however, less attention has been accorded to interventions addressing gender roles and norms. Moreover, education support is mainly focused on children at lower levels. Moreover, while the support needs of refugee women aspiring or accessing higher education in protracted contexts may appear the same, they vary because of the varied intersecting vectors of identities such as age, gender, tribe/ ethnicity, type of household, marital status, and religion. It is against this background that through the evaluative case study design, this study sought to investigate the stakeholder's interventions on gender roles and norms that obstruct Bidibidi refugee women from accessing higher education. Bidibidi refugee settlement was selected because it hosts about 270,000 refugees, the biggest in Africa. The results of this study may be useful to education policy and practitioners and may provide insights into the available nature of interventions that will increase refugee women's access to higher education.

Theoretical Perspective

Using the advocacy worldview, the paper was rooted in the liberal feminism perspective through intersectionality. With Liberal feminism as my overarching perspective, the focus was on intersectionality. Liberal feminism seeks to free women from the oppressive gender roles used as justification for giving women a lesser position in society (Tong, 2018). Particularly in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-1858), they advocated for women's individual rights, equality, rationality, and freedom to be

respected (Tong, 2018). This perspective was guided by the philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006), who advocated for equality in access to education opportunities and rights. For instance, Friedan (2010) argued that women's lives could be more fulfilling if their roles as housewives and mothers could be combined with remunerated employment, specifically with professional occupation.

To address the homogenizing critique of liberal feminism, the intersectionality concept was used. Intersectionality is traced back to the racialized experiences of minority women in the United States coined by Crenshaw Kimberle, a civil rights activist (Crenshaw, 1989). The addition of intersectionality to feminism makes the movement truly inclusive, allowing women of all races, economic standings, religions, identities, and orientations to have their voices heard (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). The major tenets from the theoretical perspective were equality (equal opportunity), equity, freedoms, and intersectionality.

METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on stakeholders' views on available interventions addressing gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women access to higher education, using Bididbidi settlement as a case. I employed the qualitative research method, particularly an evaluative case study design. My study sample consisted of 49 participants categorized as stakeholders and were divided into four groups. First, the refugee women were chosen using snowball sampling and whose data I acquired through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Second, four purposefully chosen government officials from the Ministry of Education and Sports, Office of the Prime Minister and the Yumbe District Local Government actively took part in interviews for data collection. Furthermore, I engaged in interviews with four purposefully selected humanitarian actors, each from the UNHCR, FCA, WIU, and WUSC. Lastly, 23 community leaders were purposefully sampled, and their data

obtained through interviews (5) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (2 groups with 9 participants in each), disaggregated by sex. Besides interviews, I also used observation and desk review methods to obtain data. Interviews and FGDs were held in safe spaces for privacy and confidentiality, audio recordings and note-taking were undertaken, and the audio recordings were later transcribed and typed. The data collection phase took place between August 2022 and February 2023.

Research ethics were adhered to, involving participant consent with a focus on confidentiality. Anonymity and privacy were upheld by assigning pseudonyms, later converted into codes. Codes were assigned as follows: Refugee Women Accessing Higher Education (RWAHE); Refugee Women Not Accessing Higher Education (RWNAHE); Women Community Leaders (CLW); Men Community Leaders (CLM); Men Community Leaders Focus Group Discussion (CLMFGD); Women Community Leaders Focus Group Discussion (CLWFGD); Humanitarian Actor (HA) this applied to all the four humanitarian actors that included the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Finn Church Aid (FCA), Windle International Uganda (WIU) and World University Services Canada (WUSC) thus the codes- HAUNHCR, HAFCA, HAWIU, HAWUSC respectively. Participants who belonged to government officials had codes linked to their ministries, that is, Government for Local Government (GLG), Government Ministry of Education and Sports (GMOES), and Government Office of the Prime Minister (GOPM). Sex-specific focus group groups were undertaken to prioritize the safety and well-being of participants. Data was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically with Nvivo's initial support.

FINDINGS

The stakeholders' interventions in addressing gender roles and norms obstructing refugee women's access to higher education.

The study found several interventions in place to address gender roles and norms, namely, the legal and policy frameworks on gender roles and norms; awareness-raising interventions on gender roles and norms; incentives to overcome gender roles and norms; career guidance mentorship and coaching; family support; men involvement and; aspiration, resilience, and resourcefulness.

The Legal and Policy Frameworks on Gender Roles and Norms

The findings revealed strong examples of policies and laws developed globally, regionally, and nationally to eliminate barriers (in this case, gender roles and norms) to access to higher education. International and regional instruments have informed Uganda's legal and policy frameworks to address gender roles and norms. Article 26 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (UDHR, 1948)

Article 12 (2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention states:

Rights previously acquired by a refugee and dependent on personal status, more particularly rights attaching to marriage, shall be respected by a Contracting State, subject to compliance, if this be necessary, with the formalities required by the law of that State, provided that the right in question is one which the law of that State would have recognized had he [she] not become a refugee (UNGA, 1951)

The African Charter for Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) 1981 guarantees the right to socio-economic rights. Article 17(1) of ACHPR 1981 states: "Every individual shall have the right to education". Article 19 states: "All people should be equal; they shall enjoy the same respect and shall have the same rights. Nothing shall justify the domination of the people by another".

Though limited by gender-neutral language, Article 17 (1) of the ACHPR under the name title People's Rights generally provides for access to education. Article 19 stipulates equality, respect, and the same rights that protect from gender roles and norms that obstruct women refugees' access to higher education.

Article 5 of the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) stipulates:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, to achieve the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women; (b) To ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function and the recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children, it being understood that the interest of the children is the primordial consideration in all cases (UNGA, 1979).

At the national level, the 1995 Constitution (Articles 32 & 33), the Education Act 2008, and the Refugee Act 2006 protect female refugees from gender roles and norms. Specifically, Article 33 (a) provides: "Women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men". Paragraph (d) provides that "women shall have the right to equal treatment with men, and this right shall include equal opportunities in political, economic, and social activities". In the case of cultural norms such as forced marriages, which also prohibit women from obtaining higher education, Article 31(1) of the Constitution specifies the age 18 below which one is considered a child, hence incapable of giving informed consent to marriage. Any marriage involving a person under the age of 18 is regarded as a defilement, and any party involved commits a criminal offence punishable by 14 years in jail. Articles 33 and 31 of the Constitution are operationalized through statutory instruments such as the Penal Code Article 129 (1), which

states: "Any person who performs a sexual act with another person who is below the age of eighteen years commits a felony known as defilement and is on conviction liable to life imprisonment". However, due to poverty and the notion that girls/women are a source of income, refugees often cross borders, sneaking back to their nation of origin, outside the jurisdiction of Ugandan laws, to marry off underage girls by inflating their ages (GMoE1).

Article 33 (2) of the Refugee Act 2006 provides that:

A woman refugee is entitled to equal enjoyment and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in economic, social, cultural, civil or any other fields as provided for in the Constitution and other relevant laws in force in Uganda and international and regional instruments to which Uganda is a party, and in particular the following— (a) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979; and (b) the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, 1981.

The Gender in Education Sector Policy 2016 stands on the principle of "Gender equality and non-discrimination". It provides that "Education is a human right and all individuals, male and female, have equal right to education resources and opportunity" (p. 10). This aligns with Articles 30, 33, 34 and 35, which protect the rights of women, children, and persons with disability.

The Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRF), launched in 2017, is a multi-stakeholder approach to address the challenges of refugees in Uganda and support their self-reliance and inclusion. As part of this comprehensive approach, sector-specific Refugee Response Frameworks were developed to address various areas of concern, including education. The Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2017/18-2019/20 is a sector-specific framework that operationalizes the CRF's objectives in the education sector. The ESSP outlines strategic objectives and interventions to improve access to quality education for both refugees and host communities in Uganda. Specifically, the

strategic objective of equitable education, Intervention XII on provision of education to refugees and host communities seeks to "develop and implement response programs for the provision of quality education to refugees and the host communities" (ESSP, p. 20).

Despite these accomplishments, the adverse gender roles and norms were reported to be persistent by all participants, and there remain significant gender disparities in access and participation that disadvantage girls and women. GoES1 states: "Refugees have their own way of doing things, and the government does not greatly interfere in some cultural practices. Some even go across the borders if it is a marriage thing; they go and do it when they know that the laws here may catch up with them".

Relatedly, the study participants (GMoE1, GMoE2, GLG, HAWUSC, HAUNHCR, HAWIU) views, as well as document review, indicated that though the Government of Uganda is working in partnership with development/humanitarian partners to address gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women from accessing higher education, change in the refugee community attitude and practice is gradual.

Access to higher education, including tertiary education, is a crucial aspect of the comprehensive support for refugees and may contribute significantly to their self-reliance, empowerment, and integration into host communities. The government was found to be working in collaboration with civil society organizations, donors, and higher education institutions to contribute to refugee women's access to higher education. Important to note is that government officials expressed the inadequacy of support for refugee women's higher education. GMoES1 stated: "Most of the partners in education are focusing on lower levels; if they [partners] can shift focus to higher education, it could help. You can visit a primary school [in the refugee settlement] and find different pit latrine colours from various partners".

Whereas all humanitarian actors (HAUNHCR, HAFCA, HAWIU and WUSC) revealed that they work within Uganda's laws, rules and regulations, the male community leaders (CLMFGD) appeared to be against Article 31 (1) of the 1995 Ugandan legal stipulation that, "Men and women of the age of eighteen years and above have the right to marry and to found a family and are entitled to equal rights in marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution" (p. 42). The male community leaders argue that this stipulation promotes marriage over enrolling girls in schools and sometimes makes parents seem 'criminals' in their role. They talked about times when their own daughters, after turning 18, which is the legally acceptable age for marriage, opted out of school for marriage. To the male community leaders, these girls are independent of their decisions because the Ugandan law stipulates that young girls who have reached the age of 18 or older are eligible for marriage.

From participant observations, there was a misconception of the law defining the ages of childhood and maturity. To put this misconception about childhood and adulthood in context, the findings revealed that while Ugandans at the age of 18 are expected to be attending university, South Sudanese refugees at the same age are still in primary school due to civil wars that have lasted for more than 40 years and disrupted social services, including education. CLMFGD stated, "I believe the challenge here is that by the time a child reaches 18 in the formal education system of Uganda, he or she is entering college. The challenge for South Sudanese is that the adolescent [who is now an adult] is still performing at lower levels". This observation highlights the issue of an age disparity between students in the education systems of Uganda and South Sudan, which is primarily attributable to the war. Learners who fall behind their age group need much support and resources (in teaching and learning) to catch up, lest they drop out of school, compounding the low rate of women refugees' progression to higher education.

Awareness Raising Interventions on Gender Roles and Norms

Various categories of stakeholders indicated knowledge of interventions that have been put in place to address gender roles and norms. Moreover, all stakeholders interviewed, including the refugee women, tended to believe they participated in awareness-creation on the dangers of norms and roles. The officials' category under the selected humanitarian organizations (UNHCR, FCA, WIU and WUSC) alluded to creating awareness about challenging gender roles. HAFCA, for instance, observes:

We engage communities in awareness sessions to ensure that parents and guardians embrace the importance of education. So, we do these awareness creations in the form of meetings; we have also always carried out Go-Back-to-School Campaigns on a termly basis; we ensure a drive is made at all the various locations of Bidibidi because we have 5 zones here from Zone 1 up to Zone 5. We [FCA education officers] ensure that we meet parents at different villages and the creation is made on the importance of education.

In a bid to address these prevalent gender roles and norms, WIU broadens the age range to include those who are already married and have children. Furthermore, WIU organizes outreach programmes for victims of gender norms and roles in society to motivate them to return to school. HAWIU stated:

Apart from awareness creation and sensitization, we have noted in most cases that South Sudanese girls are married off at the early age of 18, 20, 21 to 28. The scholarship targets those between 18 to 28 years of age. So, within that age bracket, most of the female candidates already have families.

Similarly, the government category participants (GMOE1, GLG, GOPM) shared similar sentiments about their actions. GLG reported that one of the local government's responsibilities is mainstreaming gender issues in the work plans. He maintained that in Yumbe District, all sectors

have been able to mainstream gender and are monitored through the central government. Practically, Yumbe local government, after realizing the low participation of girls in education, has embarked on the creation of awareness about the education of girls, disseminating guidelines on the prevention and management of teenage pregnancy in school settings. The Yumbe District Local Government registered disappointment during the COVID-19 pandemic, where teenage pregnancy statistics went up to 3,973 girls between 15-19 for both refugees and hosts as of 1 September 2021 (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] Report, 2021).

Most of the refugee women interviewed (RWAHE1, RWAHE2, RWAHE4, RWAHE5, RWAHE6, RWAHE7, RWNAHE1, RWNAHE2, RWNAHE4, RWNAHE6) indicated having contributed to addressing adverse gender roles and norms through participating in peer support, community sensitization programmes through various means/opportunities. This was seen from their involvement in community activities through various organizations. They volunteered with humanitarian organizations, some participating in drama groups and art piece exhibitions (murals) meant to communicate messages against negative cultures and norms. For example, one RWNAHE2 stated:

As we [a team of youth involved in gender transformational activities] are fine artists also [apart from being drama actors], we draw murals showing somebody going to school or having that interest in school and show how that who has gone to school (the formally educated) would look like in the future. We are supported by an Organisation called Artolution that gave us that calendar to draw stories of what is occurring in the settlement and how life can be improved.

Other stakeholders (HAUNHCR, HAFCA, GMoE1, GLG, CLWFGD, CLMFGD) further agreed that because of the South Sudan customs and traditional culture, sometimes it was a frustrating venture to create awareness on

prevention of gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women from accessing higher education amongst refugee community. HAUNHCR observed:

The issue of gender roles and norms, I think, is something far beyond our reach. The little we do we cannot say has made change could be the sensitization. We [UNHCR] have sensitizations advocacy meetings and use our key leaders within the community, like the religious leaders [and] the cultural leaders, to create awareness on the importance of sending girls and women to school.

The community leaders (CLWFGD, CLMFGD, CLW1, CLW2, CLM1, CLM2) who seemed familiar with the existing gender roles and norms in the settlement, both female and male FGDs, reported providing awareness raising on gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women access to higher education through their docket as leaders. For instance, the women leaders, also composed of women secretaries for education and welfare in the Bidibidi settlement Refugee Welfare Council (RWC), expressed being involved in talking and guiding communities on the benefits of women's education. CLWFGD stated:

As a leader as a village chairperson, we normally gather girls together to teach them about the dangers of early marriage and about the education experience. I tell them that you will continue to work for someone else when you are not educated, may be in someone's field or to be a house-girl, those works are useless. It would be better for the girls to be educated so that they will be the ones to employ some people to work for them.

Generally, the participants felt that government (OPM and local government), humanitarian actors targeted for this study (UNHCR, FCA, WIU, WUSC) and non-targeted ones like IRC, Plan, Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO), the United Nations entity (UN Women) for gender equality and empowerment of women, among others, were also undertaking awareness raising

directed at addressing gender roles and norms that obstruct the Bidibidi refugee women from accessing higher education. Awareness creation was done through radio talk shows, dialogue meetings with communities to guide and counsel young refugees, and training and awareness campaigns to cast a vote of dissatisfaction with the prevailing gender roles and norms.

While the various categories of participants appreciated the awareness-raising experiences targeted to address gender roles and norms, most eventually conceded that more awareness-creation is required, particularly for parents or guardians, husbands, and girls and women. The CLMFGD, for instance, stated:

Our girls need awareness [on the benefits of education] so that those who are still in school should continue with their studies. They need to be helped. Girls that are now 12 to 18 need to be availed of sanitary pads so that if they go to school, they will not worry about their menstrual period. This help should also come from parents. In the evening hours if you sit down with your wife and talk to children about this [benefits of education and dangers of early marriages] because if they are not sensitized, they will not know.

One humanitarian representative reported that partners have done awareness creation, but more attention is required in the area of economic and cultural issues. HAFCA stated: "We [FCA] have done much as education partners to ensure awareness creation is done. So, I would not think the attitude is negative, but the limitation could be around the economic elements and then the cultural issues that affect access to higher education institutions".

In the same vein, awareness creation was alluded to by participants in both the category of refugee women accessing higher education and those who were not (RWAHE6, RWAHE 7, RWAHE8, RWAHE10, RWNAHE1, RWNAHE2, RWNAHE3, RWNAHE4, RWNAHE5, RWNAHE6, RWNAHE7, RWNAHE8). RWAHE6, for instance, observed:

I would also recommend that the sensitization and the awareness go on it should be more frequent. We should also have mentorship; for example, we need, if possible, to visit schools and talk to refugee girls. We have a very small number of girls in the A-level, so I think we [stakeholders] can get mentors for them so that there is checking on them directly and encouraging them to continue with education and all that. I was not really encouraged and talked to about education directly by my family but by those I interacted with during my short contract work [Research assistant].

Incentives to Overcome Gender Roles and Norms

Some refugee participants (RWAHE7, RWAHE8, RWAHE9, RWAHE10, CLWFGD, RWAHE6, and CLM FGD) considered that the settlement provided women with incentives to pursue tertiary education. The incentives for young women were dignity packages (sanitary towels, underwear, and soap) and school bags. Dignity kits are important resources that aim to provide essential items and support to individuals, particularly in humanitarian and crisis situations. Those already accessing higher education reported being supported to study and supported in gender roles that could bar their access, such as childcare. A refugee woman who happened to conceive while still schooling was given some support, as CLWFGD observed:

World Vision supports refugee girls and women [who conceive while still schooling] with sandals; even clothing is at times with soap; at times, they give them this smearing oil. There was a time they were even supporting [us] with money around UGX 500,000 or 400,000. World Vision normally gives its support from Child-Friendly Space (CFS) where normal children come and play, they share their ideas, they share their stories, and experiences. When you have issues, you bring them to the matron or a person concerned.

Similarly, one participant in the Women FGD category added, "IRC also does the same. We do

not know the amount specifically, but we know that they normally get some support from the "Complaints Desk or Women Centres" (CLWFGD).

In addressing gender roles, specifically reproductive roles that involve child rearing and care, some actors under the DAFI programme supported mothers to access higher education. One participant from UCU Mukono testified to being supported to study while a mother with her one-year-old baby: "I am given 1.4 million for accommodation and feeding while one million is given for upkeep". When asked if the support given to her was enough, RWAHE6 responded:

Actually, when you get such a chance, you usually take what is offered. Also there are chances where what is offered was not supposed to be offered, so I just take that because, good enough, the child's father supports the child, so mostly what I am given is mainly for myself.

Community leaders encourage young refugee women to pursue training to equip them for various income-generating activities while prohibiting them from engaging in some gender norms that discourage productivity and access to higher education. The community has also decided to refer refugee women with children to child protection organizations to care for their children to break free from being held hostage at home and pursue higher education. The male community leaders of CLMFGD stated:

We need to educate the ladies and raise them from the state where they are to continue their further education because when they stay at home, they are given too much domestic work. At least when they go to the women's spaces, they can share experiences since women and girls feel more comfortable reporting to or confiding to fellow women in case of any abuse of rights.

However, regarding incentives, findings from the FGDs and refugee women category indicated that women had gone approximately three months

without receiving dignity supplies. In support of this, RWAHE7 stated:

Before, in the camp, they used to serve pads and panties, but recently, all those things stopped, and they no longer gave us the pads. Now here you [a refugee woman] have to use your own money to buy the pads, and this [purchasing of pads] is monthly.

The above voice revealed that in some cases, the frequency and timing for distribution of dignity kits may vary depending on the specific circumstances, organizations involved, and available resources. Sometimes, logistical challenges or funding constraints may affect the regularity and predictability of distribution.

Career Guidance Mentorship and Coaching

Almost every category of stakeholders (Refugee women, Community leaders, and Humanitarian actors) participated in some form of mentorship. This was accomplished in various ways, including onsite and online (e-mentorship). Still, the ultimate goal was to equip mentees with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate higher education. For instance, women refugees accessing higher education with the assistance of FCA have recently returned to their settlements to reflect, share their experiences, and best practices, which can assist other women and girls in pursuing higher education and offer advice.

WUSC was mentoring these refugees by connecting them with former student-sponsored female students from different nations, such as Canada, who could speak to them about the value of education and encourage them to pursue their dreams despite gender-related barriers in their communities. HAWUSC stated:

We also do a bit of career guidance under our mentorship and coaching. In the mentorship component, we work to inspire the girls to know that beyond their current situation, they can still try. In the WUSC context, we undertake local mentorship where we identify local role models and have the e-mentorship component. The e-mentorship component is

where, again, we link the girl within the refugee settlement to the girls we sponsored under the Student Refugee Programme and settled in Canada. We know these can easily relate to the girls in the settlement, and they relate to these e-mentors.

Similarly, WIU equally utilizes female graduates to reach fellow women regarding accessing higher education. HAWIU observed:

We organize outreach programmes to speak to the girls as models who share their experiences with those in school so that they can see and know the importance of higher education and the change it can bring to one's life. This is done with those in high school, like senior 5 and senior 6.. Really expect them to see the importance of higher education and how it can change their life and enable them to contribute to their well-being and self-sustaining.

Despite the efforts of various higher education stakeholders to challenge gender roles and norms, other organizations not included in the study that are also involved in mentoring girls and women, like IRC, were reported. For instance, one of the refugee women who did not have access to higher education RWNAHE7 stated, "We have NGOs like IRC that are doing mentorship on these gender roles, telling them [the refugee community] that men and women are equal and have the same capabilities and roles. They possess the same intelligence as males to attain a higher education". This indicates that there may be a broader movement or recognition of the importance of mentorship for women across various organizations and sectors. It is encouraging that these organizations have seen the need to enable women to realize their potential and are taking steps to support and empower them through mentorship.

Family Support Addressing Adverse Gender Norms and Roles

The norm of preferencing education for men over women was overcome in some families who, amidst scarce resources, still ensured that women

were accessing higher education. For example, the refugee women (RWAHE1, RWAHE2, RWAHE7) in the category that were accessing higher education who self-sponsor without a humanitarian funder hailed family/relatives' support. The challenge for participant RWAHE1 came when the available scholarship could not support her dream course, a Bachelor of Human Medicine, which she had qualified for and had been admitted to at Makerere University. None of the options available could work, and her mother, a widow, and grandmother embarked on business to pay her tuition. RWAHE1 narrated:

But my mum was like you know what, I do not want you to do something out of circumstances, so you go to Kampala. I am going to look for a way to make sure that you can do what you want to do because you have the brains for it but the problem is just the finances. And I do not want you to regret later that I would have been this, but now I have been forced to become what I do not want. So, she was okay. So, I do not know how she did it, but there is also my grandmother, she had retired she was staying just at home, but she was like I cannot leave you to just be there on your own. So as old as she was, she decided to go back to South Sudan, and she is now doing a fish business, she does fish and she sells, and somehow, they were able to put in money together to pay my tuition.

Generally, very few relatives could afford to pay tuition in higher education institutions privately for female refugees. The students were always uncertain whether they would sit end-of-semester exams or not. The expression also suggests a positive aspect in that some refugee families have recognized the value for educating girls and have managed to break societal norms that prioritize boys' education. These families are trying to meet the education costs to ensure their daughters have access to higher education and are willing to struggle to make it possible.

Men's Involvement in Supporting Women's Access to Higher Education

While South Sudanese cultures are known for being patriarchal, the findings suggested that some men are involved in addressing adverse gender norms and roles. A case in point is a year-one female student pursuing a Bachelor of Accounting and Finance from UCU whose husband takes care of the requirements of their one-year-old baby. She (RWAHE7, 27) states, "In case of any demands for the child and all that I call the father". Similarly, according to WIU policy, when the sponsored student is a woman and married, there is a commitment form that the husband has to sign as a pledge to support the wife in pursuing and completing her studies. The participant HAWIU stated:

When refugee women are selected for the program, especially those with children are given additional support for the children. We provide additional support, but they can hire nannies and may be able to meet their basic needs, so that they are able to concentrate on their studies. And also, for those who are married, we involve their partners when they are offered a scholarship. The partners sign the commitment to the family as the women are pursuing higher education.

While some women blamed men for the majority of ills stemming from adverse gender roles and norms, others believed that not all men are the perpetrators of these vices. Other consequences of displacement, such as economic hardships, widowhood, and the nature of the camp setting, also influenced gender roles. One participant in a focus group for women community leaders (CLWFGD) stated, "I do not believe that men are all redundant because women are not sleeping under the trees, but they [men] are the ones building the houses, and some can even pay their children's school and medical fees; we appreciate their work".

The excerpts above indicate that while some aspects of traditional gender roles may contribute to inequality and harmful practices, some men actively support gender equality and work

towards challenging these norms. Acknowledging the efforts of supportive men is crucial for fostering positive change and achieving equitable societies.

Resilience, Aspiration and Resourcefulness of Refugee Women

The refugee women (RWNAHE4, RWAHE5, RWAHE7, RWHE8, RWAHE4, RWAHE2) who were accessing and those not accessing higher education reported their determination to withstand the difficult situations of displacement and stay focused, seizing any available to overturn the lost opportunity. This ability kept them focused amidst gender roles and norms that obstruct women refugees from accessing higher education. This strong desire to progress to higher levels of education and use their imaginative abilities enabled refugee women to stay focused towards higher education. This is evident from the various experiences that refugee women shared. One participant, a 28-year Kakwa mother of 3 from Yei, who fled South Sudan in 2018 but settled in Bidibidi, separated from her husband from the time of flight, believed that a turnaround in her conditions could only happen by pursuing higher education. She was hopeful and kept applying for mature-age entry to Islamic University In Uganda (IUIU) and UCU. Though successful in securing admission to university, had no sponsor due to age limitations, and was still optimistic especially after seeing the age adjustment by DAFI to 35. RWNAHE4 stated:

In most cases, if you are going to Canada [The Refugee Students Programme], there are lots of limitations. You should be single [and] ... be age 25 below. Those are the limitations. But for this DAFI, which has come, it has favoured people with disabilities, and women are highly encouraged. That is the reason why I am interested in applying for it [DAFI Scholarship]. I just got the advert yesterday... through friends.

Similarly, a 21-year-old, single, self-sponsored, first-year Kakwa participant, hailing from Yei and pursuing a Bachelor of Accounting and Finance from Kyambogo University, was hard hit by

economic hardships (high fees and accommodation) and sometimes contemplated the idea of dropping out but was still very hopeful and continued to search for scholarships. She shared her experience applying with the Refugee Student Programme of WUSC and was unsuccessful a month before the interview. She applied to DAFI and was optimistic while awaiting feedback (RWAHE8).

Refugee women were noted to possess continuous aspirations until breakthroughs happened. A case in point is that of a 30-year-old third-year Kuku female student hailing from Central Equatorial pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration from UCU. Just like the others, she kept on applying for scholarships and only succeeded in 2020 when the age limit was raised to 35. RWAHE2 states:

When my family came to Bidibidi on 18 July 2016, a lot of things happened. I became hopeless because I never thought of another chance to live again and continue my education. I was so disturbed because I had sat my Senior 6 since 2010, but due to financial problems, I could not afford to return to school. I lost my brothers; my sisters and parents became hopeless, and life was so hard, but because of the engagement by the education stakeholders, they did not leave us alone; at least we got back to school.

The expressions of the participants regarding interventions addressing gender roles and norms reveal multiple actions and/or efforts put in place by all stakeholders within their means. For example, the government provided the legal and policy framework; refugee women themselves, apart from being resilient, aspiring and resourceful, together with humanitarian actors, provided awareness raising, career guidance and mentorship (those that were accessing), advocacy, and resourcefulness; humanitarian actors embraced advocacy and incentives and family support; community leaders ensured response in instances where girls and women became victims of negative social, cultural practices. The combination of these efforts was to support

refugee women in overcoming barriers to their access to higher education. However, most participants recommended more awareness-raising efforts to influence the beliefs to lead to behaviour change.

DISCUSSION

The discussion establishes a conversation between the existing theoretical literature and the study's primary findings to advance new knowledge and insight on the topic. I used the liberal feminists' perspective, whose central concern is equality and equity, specifically the tenets of equality, equity, justice, and inclusion (Tong, 2018). Recognizing concerns and criticisms that fault it for being monolithic, I supplemented the approach with the theory of intersectionality by Crenshaw Kimberle (1989) for a better understanding of overlapping and interdependent systems of inequality, discrimination or disadvantage that obstruct refugee women's access to higher education. The effective implementation of interventions that address gender roles and norms that obstruct access higher education will increase refugee women's access and participation in higher education. This could contribute to the targeted 15% increase in refugee participation by 2030 (UNHCR, 2021).

Removal of barriers to equitable access to higher education in itself is a solution (Lambrechts, 2020). Gender roles have been identified as a barrier to women refugees pursuing higher education, which is worsened by the gendered nature of forced migration (Harris et al., 2015). Sudanese women's educational experiences in Australia, for example, show diverse gendered and cultural impediments to academic performance. In that context, gender intersects in complicated ways with concerns of class, race, language, trauma, and educational backgrounds (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Similarly, Naylor et al. (2019), who studied refugees from Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Burma in Australia, contend that refugee involvement in higher education was skewed more toward males since females suffered greater vertical disparities

(related to their obligations) than males. Similarly, Harris et al. (2015) argue that structuring Western education favours men and their associated roles over women. Several academics (e.g., Naylor et al., 2019; Habib, 2018; Harris et al., 2015) contend that gender roles prevent female refugees from pursuing higher education. According to the findings of this study, gender norms and tasks performed by refugee women in the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement obstruct their access to higher education.

Gender roles, according to some researchers (e.g., Ashbourne et al., 2020; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010), are not static because they are social constructs. My study found that gender roles are dynamic in the sense that men and women share roles. For example, women were found fending for their families, a role traditionally ascribed to men, while some men were engaged in domestic tasks. The practices of gender role sharing in Bidibidi resulted from the efforts of various stakeholders, including but not limited to the government, humanitarian actors, community leaders, and women refugees. Through Office of the Prime Minister and local government, the government created awareness of gender equality and the value of education for girls and women. UNHCR, FCA, and WUSC participated in sensitizations through dialogue, training and back-to-school campaigns. WUSC, FCA, and WIU provided career guidance and mentorship to female refugees. All efforts on awareness raising were geared towards attitude and behaviour change towards challenging gender norms and roles that obstruct women's access to higher education. This transformation in the practice of gender roles saw family support, specifically male involvement, which was evident in the policy, which required males to commit to family responsibilities and support the wife who qualified for a scholarship to pursue higher education.

In contrast, scholars have noted that refugee women (in developed countries) themselves intervened at the household level by negotiating with husbands to take care of domestic requirements so that they might attend higher

education (Hatoss, 2010; Harris et al., 2015). In some circumstances (for example, in Germany), men were willing to handle some domestic duties, and some refugee women demonstrated great endurance as they increased their roles in families and communities (Habib, 2018). While refugee women in Germany could speak for themselves, this study discovered that in the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, the negotiation was done on behalf of the women who qualified for the scholarship by the scholarship-providing agency, which indicates the role of household power relations on the position and conditions of women in Bidibidi.

Therefore, although gender roles and norms were being overcome in Bidibidi, evident through family support to self-sponsor their daughter's access to higher education, the policy on securing men's commitment to support their wives enrol and complete and other tertiary education was based on circumstance and may not have directly resulted from attitude and behaviour change on traditional gender roles and norms. This indicates different dynamics between married women refugees and those who were not.

Although the EU has been critiqued for the international regime of migrant and refugee protection, it should rather be based on humanitarianism than a logic of human rights that imposes binding legal obligations (Boucher & Gørdemann, 2021), Uganda, as a signatory to several international instruments. These instruments include the ICSCER 1966, CEDAW 1987, and the 1951 Refugee Convention, which have legal and policy frameworks in place to address gender roles and norms that adversely affect refugee women's access to higher education. These provisions have been domesticated, as shown, for example, in the Republic of Uganda's 1995 Constitution. Article 33 (a) states, "Women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men". Paragraph (d) declares that "women shall have the right to equal treatment with men, which right shall include equal opportunities in political, economic, and social activities". Furthermore, as specified by the Constitution, the government formed a full

ministry as a state apparatus in 2010 to ensure gender concerns are mainstreamed in all planned acts, guided by the gender policy in 2007. More recently, an Act of Parliament established the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) to protect equality, as Article 32(3) of the Constitution mandated. In addition to policy and legislative regulations, an institutional framework that runs from national to local government levels has been established.

In the case of refugees, the legal framework of the host country applies. Moreover, the government embraced an integration policy extending refugee opportunities to Ugandans (Bohnet & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2019). The global compact on refugees emphasized safe, orderly, and regular migrations (Carrera et al., 2018) as one of its commitments. The global compact has been operationalized through the comprehensive response commitment which is evident in the Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework that trickles down to the specific sectors.

Unlike many other countries that host refugees, Uganda is commended globally for its progressive policies (Betts et al., 2019). Refugees in Uganda are allowed to work, establish and own businesses, access public services such as education, move freely, and access a plot of land (Refugee Act, 2006; Krause, 2016). As asserted by Dryden-Peterson (2016), the situation of refugees and education is "caught between the global promise of universal human rights, the definition of citizen rights within nations-states and the realization of these sets of rights in everyday practices" (Dryden-Peterson, 2016, p. 473). This indicates a lack of explicit, legally recognized higher education policy for refugees. Even when laws of the hosting country apply to refugees, rights are granted to refugees practically at the discretion of the host state. The reason for policy inefficiency could be related to contextual and implementation challenges. For instance, the integration and self-reliance strategies are meant to ensure that refugees are woven into the host country by allocating land to refugees and granting them access to government health and

education services which seem inadequate (Hovil, 2018).

Self-reliance and socio-economic integration of the individual (that includes access to social services like higher education) are complementary (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Self-reliance is meant to empower refugees to be able to address their needs in a safe, sustainable, and dignified way (Omata, 2022). The weakness in meeting the objective of self-reliance for refugee women exposes women, especially those whose role of providing food table seems constant, to compromise on their opportunities to access higher education. Similarly, Ashbourne et al., (2020) observes that women are usually busy with domestic responsibilities and may most often take caring responsibilities for their children, creating a disadvantage for women regarding access to higher education.

Even when awareness-raising activities (agreed upon by all stakeholders) and policy frameworks are in place to address adverse gender roles and norms, the prevalence of such vices often leaves refugee women in Bidibidi vulnerable to engage in dangerous practices such as prostitution and sexual exploitation while seeking services for survival, compounding the problem of access to higher education. Several scholars have recognized this vulnerability and have highlighted that refugee women sometimes engage in desperate activities for survival, as was noted in South Africa with refugee women from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2019). In a way, vulnerability continues to establish interlocking layers of obstacles for women refugees' access to higher education.

Ultimately, the findings suggested that due to difficulties in attaining self-reliance because of entrenched poverty, cultural norms such as forced and early marriage for women and girls thrive as families perceive such practices as another method of economic enrichment through bride price, adding an additional layer of limitations to

refugee women access to higher education. According to participant GMoES1, refugee communities often perpetrate negative cultural norms such as early marriages even when existing laws, such as those setting the marital age at 18 require full compliance from them. He adds that "[s]ome are forced into marriage to care for their siblings because they fled alone and separated or lost parents". Such instances of legal violation suggest that no matter how well-intended, efforts to protect women from being hampered in their access to higher education may not always be beneficial due to the intersecting disadvantages that refugee women face, including but not limited to gender roles and norms, patriarchal culture, and child-headed households. If not addressed, these various layers of barriers will invariably compound liberal feminists' concepts of equality and intersectionality that seek equity.

In addition, awareness is raised about the benefit of women's access to higher education using varied approaches by various stakeholders was ongoing. The awareness raising was two-fold: first, on the problems associated with gender roles and norms and second, in response to those already caught up in teenage pregnancies and forced and early marriages, with the message encouraging them not to give up on education but to go back to school. The government and humanitarian stakeholders undertook the go back to school campaign. The commitment to see women and girls attain higher education is also evident in the recently introduced guidelines on teenage pregnancy that encourage education institutions to accommodate pregnant girls/women as opposed to the previous practice that cut the education 'pipeline' of girls and women who happened to conceive while still at school. This commitment resonates with the Liberal feminists' thinking and, specifically, Betty Friedan's argument that a woman can still be a wife or a mother but continue to pursue her education. Similarly, several studies (James-Hawkins et al., 2017; García-Holgado & García-Peñalvo, 2022) have demonstrated that awareness raising on gender roles and norms is key but fraught with many challenges, including patriarchy, role of women as custodians of values

and norms, childcare and domestic labour which was not different from Bidibidi refugee settlement experience.

To overcome gender norms, Dahya and Dryden-Peterson (2017) advocate for virtual pathways to higher education for refugee women, just like in Dadaab, programmes that are specialized, such as online and blended higher education programmes, are offered. However, online and blended higher education programmes are not supported in Bidibidi Refugee Settlements. Moreover, the unavailability of power and internet services and gadgets could not support online higher education focus, which the HAUNHCR described as a very expensive venture for Bidibidi.

CONCLUSION

Stakeholders' interventions in addressing gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women's access to higher education in Uganda cannot be underestimated. Deliberate efforts such as legal and policy framework, awareness raising, incentives, career guidance and mentorship, family support, men involvement, resilience, aspiration, and resourcefulness have helped to raise awareness among the refugee women of their rights and obligations, which somehow have tried to promote their access to higher education. However, these efforts have not comprehensively addressed the gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women's access to higher education. Vices such as restrictive freedom and movement of women, forced marriages, sexual violence against women experiences as well as gender disparities in access to higher education have remained apparent within the refugee community, particularly in the Bidibidi refugee settlement. Thus, it can be concluded that stakeholders' interventions are not as effective in addressing gender roles and norms that obstruct refugee women's access to higher education, since most of them are a work in progress. Therefore, more purposeful concerted efforts are required in addressing the socio-economic injustice that refugees women suffer as a community of people in regards to higher education access.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, several key recommendations emerge. These recommendations are context-specific but may also provide helpful learning for other contexts, including:

- The government of Uganda (through the Ministry of Education and Sports), humanitarian and development partners and other mandated stakeholders' networks should undertake more sensitization and advocacy to raise community awareness on various aspects of discriminative gender roles and norms and their negative effects on women, men, families, and the community at large and specifically on their impact on refugee women access to higher education. This could be done through regular open dialogues and creating working groups/committees that could champion the campaign to reduce harmful traditional practices and behaviors.
- Government, humanitarian, and development partners should ensure that livelihood and skilling programmes target refugee women such that risks of being forced into desperate situations (such as forced marriage, prostitution) for survival are avoided and should be continuously monitored and evaluated.
- The pertinent Information education and Communication (IEC) materials including laws and policies addressing barriers to access to higher education (gender roles and norms and sexual violence) be simplified and translated into local languages that can be read and understood by refugees.
- Knowledge of contraceptives for purposes of family planning need to be underscored for refugee women so as to enable them embrace child spacing to relieve so as to be able to conveniently access and participate in higher education.

Limitations

By employing the qualitative research approach, its principles, such as the limitation of generalizability, become evident. In this context, findings may not be broadly applicable but can be extrapolated to situations with similar settings.

The utilization of non-probability sampling techniques, particularly the snowball method, may have resulted in the omission of certain individual experiences. The referral approach could have led to the inclusion of refugee women participants who were acquainted due to shared or similar experiences, potentially restricting the diversity of perspectives within the study.

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