Growing up as a young refugee; the complexities of mental health among refugee youth in Uganda
By Geneviève Forget and Paul Nkata

As we celebrate the International Mental Health Day in Uganda this year under the theme ‘Young People and Mental Health in a Changing World’, Refugee Law Project (RLP) joins the rest of Ugandans in amplifying the voices of young refugees. We declare our solidarity with young people seeking to survive and prosper while dealing not only with a world in rapid flux, but also with the destabilising experiences that pushed them and their families into exile.

What are the challenges that young refugees face that can compromise their mental wellbeing? A refugee is defined as someone who is forced to flee his or her country due to a “well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group” (1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). The majority of refugees in Uganda come from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, with a large proportion of the refugee population in Uganda falling under 18 years of age, at 61% (UNHCR, 2018).

Young people undergo many changes in the transition from adolescence to adulthood; changes in levels of responsibility, roles, and independence. There are changes in life trajectories, interests, time management, relationships, and in how external factors affect their lives. Many youth, as they transition into adulthood, will experience changes related to the physical and psychological growth, how they spend their time at school and work, romantic relationships develop, and as they gain independence from their families.

The changes that occur in adolescence can have varied affects on youth. For some, the transition can be a time of excitement, new opportunity, and of gained independence. For others, the changes occurring during adolescence can be highly stressful and anxiety inducing. It is important to acknowledge that although the process of growing up into adulthood can be a stressful period for most young people, the histories and the protracted refugee situation many young refugees find themselves in create unique vulnerabilities and challenges that demand our attention. Many refugee youth have experienced multiple and severe traumas in their young lives. Some of these happened in their country of origin, others during their flight, and some are ongoing in their country of asylum, Uganda.

Refugee Law project offers different services to the refugee youth including counselling, legal aid, capacity building, and services responding to sexual and gender based violence. In addition, RLP works with the youth through their support group to further enhance their
ability to cope with life as they develop meaningful peer relationships. This article has been written in conjunction with “Rendezvous”, a unique refugee youth support group mentored by Refugee Law Project. Several challenges unique to their experiences as refugee youth were identified by the group and included in this article.

Members noted how for refugee youth the changes associated with adolescence may be exacerbated by their premature requirement to fulfill responsibility for their families, such as paying for rent and school fees for siblings, and assisting parents who have a lessened capacity to work sometimes due to injuries sustained during conflict. Changes in time may be more related to not having enough time to plan for the future, not being able to pursue personal interests any longer, and giving up sleep in order to both earn money for the family and complete necessary school work.

The youth discussed how their roles in families have changed drastically from being children, wherein they are now becoming responsible for their own financial needs, and in many instances, the economic wellbeing of their whole family. For instance, some youth may need to take on jobs they previously despised, in order to make rent payments. Finances can affect the development of romantic relationships as well, which in turn can affect the ways youth dream and plan for their futures. The stress that accompanies having unclear futures since leaving their countries of origin, coupled with not having enough funds to continue further learning and prepare for their futures due to poverty, can have enormous impact on their mental wellbeing and influence the decisions they make.

Stress that arises from such changes is further compounded by the need to learn new languages, hopelessness as a result of drastically changing circumstances, strains arising from poverty and lack of employment opportunities, limited opportunities for the youth to exercise their talents and energies productively, and struggles arising from a sense of inferiority due to refugee status. Depression can result, for example, from sudden change of social status for youth who prior to flight enjoyed a favourable social standing. All of the challenges, changes, and stressors that the youth mentioned, they identified as having possible links with poor mental health.

As a result; young people face increased temptation from peers to choose use of drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism; young women and men may be forced into survival sex as a way to earn a living. One youth discussed the pressure women can feel to become partnered with a man for financial survival, while others mentioned the additional stresses of living in a city where theft, crime rates, and general insecurity can be quite high in the neighbourhoods where they live.

However, amidst all these challenges, young people still demonstrate strength, resilience, adaptability, willingness and optimism to face life and succeed. Some youth talked about the opportunities they are experiencing, and how they are trying new activities and engaging in capacity building trainings, such as video trainings offered by RLP and other vocational
trainings offered by other refugee agencies. They also discussed the exciting opportunities they are experiencing in the further development of their support group, and the satisfaction of using their talents in the greater refugee and urban community.

**Call to action**

It is important not only to recognize the vulnerabilities of refugee youth but to act proactively to address the challenges they are facing in their communities.

Government, non-governmental organisations should make targeted efforts to develop programmes that facilitate the young refugees to use their talents, learn new skills and enable them to speak for their rights and needs.

Development partners should increase funding that specifically target families, households and the youth to strengthen the social support system that young people need to launch and sustain their transition to adulthood.

Support for the refugee youth community should occur through advocacy, in order to promote their psychosocial wellbeing, and through psycho-education, to broaden youths understanding of the affects of trauma and mental health concerns. Further, counselling support should be made available to refugee youth and their families, and workshops should be carried out to enable further understanding of mental health issues and how mental health challenges can be overcome. Additional workshops on how to be successful in a host country would be of benefit.

Implementing appropriate mental health and psychosocial supports can place youth in a much stronger position for success; we should not forget that the success of both refugee and host youth contributes to the greater success of a country. The young are not only the future of the country but also the present...

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