



Bridging the Justice Gap:

Opportunities for Improving Access to Justice for Refugees and their Host Communities in Uganda

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A Situational Analysis in the refugee settlements of Kiryandongo, Adjumani, Lamwo including the urban host location of Kampala, August 2025

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Map



Map of Uganda showing areas of research

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Executive Summary

Refugees in Uganda, particularly in settlements like Adjumani, Kiryandongo, Lamwo, and Kampala, face significant challenges in accessing justice due to the complexities of their situations, including poverty, marginalization, and vulnerability to exploitation. These challenges hinder their ability to navigate the justice system, seek redress for grievances, access essential services, and exercise their rights. The situational analysis reveals a complex landscape of challenges, including language barriers, limited access to legal representation, and cultural differences, which can prevent refugees from accessing justice.

The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive and integrated response to address these challenges, prioritizing mental health support, livelihood opportunities, education, justice, and social cohesion. Specifically, the key challenges include language barriers that hinder communication with justice officials, limited access to legal representation that exacerbates vulnerability to human rights abuses, cultural differences that conflict with Uganda's legal system, and delays in justice administration that hinder refugees' access to justice.

To create a more supportive and enabling environment for refugees, it is essential to address these challenges and promote inclusive and participatory approaches that acknowledge the agency and resilience of refugees themselves. By doing so, we can work towards creating a more just and equitable society where refugees can rebuild their lives and achieve their full potential. Ultimately, a comprehensive response that prioritizes the needs of refugees can help ensure that they receive the support and protection they deserve.

Opportunities and recommendations:

1. Leverage Community-Based Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

Work with community leaders, traditional leaders, and Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs) to promote Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms.

Foster collaboration between refugees and local authorities to resolve disputes and promote peaceful coexistence.

2. Increase Specialized Legal Representation for Refugees Dealing with Trauma

Provide training for lawyers to handle trauma, cultural differences, and complexities of refugee experiences.

Implement trauma-informed care and cultural sensitivity in legal representation.

Increase resources and capacity of legal aid organizations in refugee settings.

3. Scale Up Language Training Programs

Expand English for Adults (EFA) programs to support refugees in accessing justice and advocating for themselves.

Tailor language training programs to specific needs of refugees, including cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Integrate language training into existing justice programming and involve refugees in design and implementation.

4. Support Refugee Children and Professionals through Targeted Interventions

Provide English language training for refugee children to bridge the gap to formal education.

Offer specialized English training for refugee professionals to support their integration into Ugandan society.

Provide practical skills training, business support, and mentorship opportunities tailored to specific professions.

1. Background

The global refugee crisis has reached unprecedented levels, with millions of people displaced due to conflict, persecution, and violence. Uganda, a country in the East African region, has been a major host to refugees, particularly from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burundi. Despite its open-door policy towards refugees, Uganda faces significant challenges in providing essential services to this population. Uganda is currently hosting approximately 1.8 million refugees, making it the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. The majority of these refugees come from South Sudan (54%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (32%), and Sudan.

Uganda's open-door policy has been a cornerstone of its response to the refugee crisis, providing a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of individuals fleeing conflict and persecution in neighboring countries. This policy allows refugees to access land, public services, and basic rights, promoting their dignity and well-being. However, the influx of refugees poses significant challenges to the country's resources and infrastructure, straining public services and local economies. With 1.8 million refugees currently residing in Uganda, including over 60,000 new arrivals between January and mid-June 2025, mostly women and children, the country is facing an enormous burden. The refugee population is diverse, with over 1 million refugees from South Sudan, 226,200 from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and smaller but significant populations from Burundi (38,200) and Somalia (25,000), underscoring the enormity of the challenge facing Uganda.

The country's position as one of the top refugee-hosting countries worldwide highlights the need for sustained international support to ensure the viability of its open-door policy. Despite these challenges, Uganda's approach has been widely praised for its generosity and commitment to protecting the rights of refugees. The open-door policy has enabled refugees to integrate into Ugandan society, access education and healthcare, and engage in economic activities. This integration has not only promoted the dignity and well-being of refugees but also enabled them to contribute to the local economy.

The success of Uganda's open-door policy depends on the ability of the Ugandan government and international partners to provide adequate support and resources to refugees and host communities alike. As the refugee crisis continues to evolve, it is essential to recognize the contributions of refugees to Ugandan society and to work towards sustainable solutions that promote their dignity, well-being, and economic self-sufficiency. By doing so, Uganda can continue to provide a safe haven for those fleeing conflict and persecution while also ensuring the long-term viability of its open-door policy.

1.1 The Need for Situational Analysis

Given the current context, there is a pressing need to conduct a situational analysis to understand the challenges faced by refugees in Uganda and identify potential solutions. This analysis will help inform access to justice programming both internally at Refugee Law Project (RLP) and outwardly to inform interventions more generally, and provide policy decisions, ensuring that the needs of refugees are met and their well-being and resilience are supported. By examining the complexities of the refugee crisis in Uganda's refugee host districts of Kampala, Kiryandongo, Adjumani and Lamwo, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue and inform effective responses.

This research aims to situate the plight of refugees in Uganda within the broader context of academic and policy literature, highlighting the complex issues they face in accessing mental health services, livelihood opportunities, education, and justice.

1.2 Research Aims

This research was conducted to investigate the challenges refugees in Uganda face in accessing justice, identifying key barriers such as language limitations, limited legal representation, and cultural differences, while also analyzing the dynamics of refugee-host relationships and their impact on social cohesion, with the ultimate goal of developing recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to promote refugees' overall well-being and access to essential services, including justice.

Significance of the Research

This research is significant because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges refugees face in accessing justice, shedding light on the complexities of refugee-host relationships and their impact on justice access. By informing inclusive justice policies, this study contributes to the development of more effective policies and programs that enhance refugees' access to justice, promoting their well-being and resilience. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of promoting refugee participation and empowerment in justice program design and implementation, ensuring their voices are heard and needs are addressed. Ultimately, this research supports efforts to strengthen the justice system, promoting fairness, equality, and human rights for refugees.

1.3 Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore the challenges faced by refugees in Uganda, utilizing a multifaceted methodology to gather rich and nuanced data. The study combined Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), context analysis, observation, and literature review to provide a comprehensive understanding of the refugee experience. FGDs were conducted with refugee groups, including men, women, and youth, to gather information on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges, while KIIs were held with stakeholders, including refugee leaders, community leaders, humanitarian workers, and government officials, to provide in-depth insights into the challenges faced by refugees and existing support policies and programs.

The research design was informed by a context analysis, which examined the broader political, economic, and social factors shaping refugee lives in Uganda. Observation was also used to gather information on living conditions and daily experiences, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by refugees. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, with FGD and KII data transcribed and coded to identify key themes and patterns. The use of NVIVO software aided in generating themes, which were then analyzed into findings. The triangulation of data from multiple sources ensured the reliability and validity of the findings, providing a robust understanding of the refugee experience in Uganda. Overall, the research methodology was carefully designed to capture the complexities of refugee life, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by refugees in Uganda.

Sampling Process

The sampling process for this research employed a purposive approach, deliberately selecting specific locations and populations based on their relevance to the research objectives. This study focuses on four refugee-hosting districts in Uganda: Kampala, Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and Lamwo (Palabek settlement). Kampala, the capital city, is home to 78,516 refugees from countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, with 78% being women and children. In contrast, Adjumani district is heavily populated with 230,675 refugees, mostly from South Sudan, where women and children account for 82% of the population, and new arrivals and births strain limited resources. Kiryandongo settlement hosts over 179,000 refugees, with 76% being women and children, and faces challenges in accessing basic services like water, healthcare, and education. Palabek settlement in Lamwo district has 91,409 refugees, with 83% being women and children, and struggles with limited livelihood opportunities and strained services due to underfunding, highlighting the need for sustained support and resources to ensure the well-being and protection of refugees in these districts.

The research was also guided by current funding from the Netherlands Embassy in Uganda, which focused on these specific areas under the Supporting Refugee Host Relations III Project. Practical considerations, such as ease of access and limited funding, further informed the selection of locations, prioritizing areas where RLP was already working and had existing relationships. While this approach allowed for in-depth exploration of the research questions in specific contexts, it may also introduce limitations, such as potential biases and limited generalizability to broader refugee populations in Uganda. Nevertheless, the sampling process was carefully designed to meet the research objectives, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by refugees in the selected locations.

1.4 Ethics

The research was conducted with utmost regard for ethical principles, ensuring that participants' rights and dignity were protected throughout the process. The researchers obtained informed consent from participants, who were fully aware of the research purpose, potential benefits, and risks involved. Confidentiality and anonymity were also prioritized, with participant data and identities protected and kept confidential. This commitment to ethical research practices demonstrates a respect for participants' autonomy and well-being.

The research underwent a rigorous ethics process, receiving clearance from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), specifically the Commissioner for Refugees, which oversees refugee interventions in Uganda. This approval underscores adherence to national regulations and guidelines. Additionally, RLP's affiliation with the School of Law at Makerere University, a reputable academic institution, lends credibility to the research and highlights the organization's commitment to quality, academically sound knowledge.

By adhering to established ethical guidelines and obtaining necessary clearances, the research demonstrates a strong commitment to responsible and respectful research practices. The researchers' prioritization of participants' well-being, safety, and dignity is evident throughout the research process, ensuring that the findings are not only reliable but also ethically sound. This approach is essential in building trust with participants and stakeholders, ultimately contributing to more effective and impactful research outcomes.

1.5 Limitations of the Research

The research acknowledges several limitations that impact its generalizability and validity. One key limitation is the purposive sampling approach, which, while allowing for in-depth exploration of specific contexts, may introduce bias and limit the findings' applicability to broader refugee populations in Uganda. The selection of specific locations, such as Kiryandongo, Kampala, Lamwo, and Adjumani, may not be representative of refugee experiences in other parts of the country, like Western Uganda. However, the study's findings can still inform programming and policy decisions in similar contexts, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by refugees.

The research also recognizes the potential for bias in the sampling strategy and data collection methods, particularly given RLP's involvement in the selected areas. Nevertheless, efforts were made to mitigate these biases, including the involvement of multiple actors and limited involvement of RLP researchers in data collection. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the importance of context-specific research and nuanced understanding of refugee experiences, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of refugee issues in Uganda and beyond.

By acknowledging and addressing these limitations, the research provides a foundation for further investigation and analysis, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies and programs to support refugee well-being and resilience. The study's findings can inform decision-making in similar contexts, and its limitations serve as a starting point for future research endeavors.

2. Introduction

The United Nations defines access to justice as “a process which enables people to claim and obtain justice remedies through formal or informal institutions of justice in conformity with human rights standards.” However, refugees fleeing their homes and seeking refuge in foreign countries become highly vulnerable to poverty and marginalization. This vulnerability limits their enjoyment of human rights, with the right to access justice being particularly affected. In Uganda, the settlements of Lamwo, Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and urban areas host thousands of refugees who often navigate a complex ecosystem where accessing justice can be elusive.

As Conrad Kimbugwe, Legal Officer at RLP, notes:

For refugees, getting justice is about more than just going to court - it's about being able to survive and live safely. However, the system that's supposed to help them can be really tough to navigate. They might not speak the language, struggle to find work, and face constant threats to their safety, making it hard for them to feel secure¹.

This perspective emphasizes the profound connection between vulnerability, justice, and survival in the lives of refugees. In contexts where safety, dignity, and basic rights are already tenuous, the quest for justice becomes intricately tied to everyday survival. Navigating systems that are often alien can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness and marginalization. This highlights the need for approaches that are sensitive to the multifaceted challenges refugees face, blending legal protection with practical support to foster an environment where dignity and rights can be more fully realized.

Based on information from FGDs and KIIs, the chapter highlights the complexities refugees face in accessing justice in the four settlements of Kiryandongo, Adjumani, Lamwo and Kampala. In these environments, refugees encounter numerous challenges that hinder their ability to navigate the justice system, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and injustice. While government institutions like the police and OPM, Refugee Welfare Committees, the judiciary, NGOs, and community-based structures have made commendable efforts to facilitate access to justice for refugees through formal courts, traditional dispute resolution, and legal aid services, our situational analysis reveals that these initiatives, although noteworthy, are insufficient to address the scale and complexity of the challenges refugees face. Despite these efforts, refugees in Uganda continue to encounter significant barriers to justice, underscoring the need for sustained and enhanced support to ensure their access to justice is adequately addressed.

This report will proceed by examining the multifaceted factors influencing refugees' experiences of justice, followed by an analysis of current initiatives, challenges, and opportunities. This structure is crucial as understanding the complex dynamics of refugee justice informs the development of effective policies and practices. By exploring these aspects, we aim to enhance our comprehension of the justice needs of refugees and provide actionable recommendations to improve their access to justice, ultimately promoting their well-being and dignity.



RLP researchers undertaking a focus group discussion with elders, cultural and religious leaders in Kiryandongo on 7th May 2025: Photo Credit: Asiki Alex

2.1 An Overview of the Environment that Shape Refugees' Experiences of Justice

The study found that the four refugee settlements of Lamwo, Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and Kampala have been characterized by complex and dynamic environments that can sometimes foster vulnerability and have far-reaching consequences, which in turn shapes the experiences of justice among refugees and their hosts.

2.1.1 Precarious Livelihoods and Access to Justice

Our analysis reveals that the interplay of unstable income, limited resource access, social challenges and vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity has created precarious livelihoods for refugees and their host

¹ Interview with Conrad Kimbugwe, Legal Officer, Refugee Law Project, Kampala, 27th May 2025

communities in the settlements. This economic fragility not only exacerbates daily struggles but also has a profound impact on refugees' ability to access justice. Financial instability can hinder their capacity to navigate complex legal systems, seek legal aid, or pursue justice for rights violations.

Land Disputes and Conflicts and Vulnerability of Refugee Women

During FGD in Adjumani, one of the elders mentioned, 'We depend on small-scale farming but the land is limited...'². These circumstances often lead to conflicts between refugees and their hosts, or sometimes among refugees. According to the Magistrate Adjumani and Pakele,

*"...most conflicts between refugees and host communities are not criminal in nature—they often stem from land disputes. The most common scenario is when a refugee hires land from a host community member, typically for cultivation or other purposes, and misunderstandings arise due to informal agreements or unmet expectations."*³

These land disputes, often fueled by informal agreements and unmet expectations, highlight how precarious



A photo showing a South Sudanese child playing outside his family land on the little piece of land allocated to his family by OPM in Adjumani: Photo Credit: RLP

livelihoods can lead to vulnerabilities that impede access to justice, as refugees may lack the resources or legal support to navigate complex land ownership issues.

The struggle for land and access to land as a source of livelihood is particularly pronounced among refugee women, who are often denied land ownership rights and relegated to precarious and insecure tenure arrangements, further exacerbating their vulnerability and limiting their access to justice. In Kiryandongo, one refugee woman mentioned, "I do whatever I can find—digging, selling vegetables—but it's not enough for my family", while another, in Kampala said, 'when you don't have land or space to call your own it is terrible... you become so needy...It's even more painful when you're made to feel like a burden just for needing care'⁴. In Lamwo, a female Paralegal mentioned that,

*"The host community lives in constant fear that their crops will be stolen especially cassava, which is a staple here. Even livestock aren't safe. Some people have started keeping their goats inside their homes at night just to protect them,"*⁵.

These quotes underscore the precarious livelihoods of refugee women, who face significant challenges in accessing land, a crucial resource for their survival. The patriarchal nature of both refugee and host communities often exacerbates their vulnerability, as women are frequently denied land ownership rights,

2 FGD with elders and religious leaders, Adjumani Maaji refugee settlement, 25th May 2025.

3 Interview with Magistrate Grade One Michael Okot, Adjumani and Pakele, 26th May 2025.

4 Interview with a 35-year old refugee woman, Munga Vicky, Kampala, 28th May 2025

5 Key Informant Interview with Brenda Amal, Zone 8 Paralegal, Lamwo, 21st May 2025

relegating them to precarious and insecure tenure arrangements. This not only affects their economic stability but also limits their access to justice when disputes arise, as women's claims to land are often subordinated to those of men. The intersection of poverty, displacement, and patriarchal power structures can lead to particularly harsh outcomes for female refugees, who may face compounded barriers in asserting their rights to land and accessing justice. Addressing these inequities requires a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play and targeted efforts to support women's land rights and access to justice.

Impact on Social Relationships

Given these vulnerabilities, it is not surprising that economic instability was also found to permeate other aspects of refugees' lives, including their social relationships. For instance, marriages between refugees and host communities can be strained by financial disparities, as illustrated in the following quote: The economic instability faced by refugees often seeps into their social relationships, including marriages with host communities, where financial disparities can create tension and conflict. This is illustrated in the following quote:

To me personally, what I'm saying is going to create a bomb around the issue of marriage... This will create problems, because mostly, if refugees marry the host community, they will demand everything you have to pay. But if a host community marries a refugee's lady, whenever you go, you will go there and not even pay a single coin⁶.

The above highlights a critical issue of unequal power dynamics and perceived injustices in intermarriages between refugees and host communities, which can be linked to the precarious livelihoods experienced by refugees. The speaker's concerns about marriage practices reveal how economic instability and disparities can create tensions and conflicts between the two groups. The expectation of payment in one direction but not the other can lead to resentment and mistrust, potentially widening the gap in relationships between refugees and hosts. Furthermore, the anticipated problems, such as disputes over children and abandonment, suggest that these unequal dynamics can result in a lack of justice for refugees, particularly women, who may face difficulties in asserting their rights within these relationships. This analysis underscores the need to address the economic vulnerabilities of refugees to foster more equitable relationships and ensure access to justice for all parties involved.

Consequences of Precarious Livelihoods

This study underscored the need to address the economic vulnerabilities of refugees to foster more equitable relationships and ensure access to justice for all parties involved. Moreover, the struggle to access basic needs and livelihood opportunities further exacerbates the challenge of accessing justice. As noted by the LC 1 Kawempe division in Kampala, "In our area, refugees face challenges accessing livelihood opportunities due to competition and limited support, often leading to conflict and tensions that put them into conflict with the law"⁷. A RWC II leader in Lamwo echoed this sentiment, saying, "Refugees here are vulnerable. They need more support to improve their livelihoods, or else they may end up committing crime."⁸ Another host community leader mentioned that "when people are always thinking about what to eat, they will turn on you."⁹ A female refugee highlighted the desperation that comes with poverty and food insecurity, stating,

People in the community are not happy, hunger is torturing them, especially with the arrival of new refugees. They think constantly about what to eat, but without land to cultivate, the problems just keep growing. The young people can turn to stealing and violence.¹⁰

These conditions exacerbate difficulties in navigating justice systems, and stress and anxiety from struggling to make ends meet may also affect refugees' ability to effectively seek justice or engage with legal processes. To improve access to justice for refugees, it is essential to address the underlying issues of poverty, food insecurity, and livelihood challenges by providing support for livelihood opportunities, improving access to

6 FGD with elders and religious leaders, Adjumani Maaji refugee settlement, 25th May 2025.

7 Interview with LC 1 Chairperson, Kawempe Division, Kampala, 21st May 2025.

8 Interview with RWC II Zone 5, Black 5A, Palabek Settlement, Lamwo, 22nd May 2025.

9 Interview with LC 1, Kiryandongo Settlement, May 12th 2025.

10 Interview with 56 year old Female South Sudanese refugee Florence Acayo Okwir, Kiryandongo Settlement, May 13th 2025.

basic services, and promoting stability and security in refugee settlements. By addressing these root causes, we can help ensure that refugees have the stability and support they need to access justice and rebuild their lives.

Resource Strain and Property Crime

The precarious livelihoods in refugee settlements are leading to increased property crime among refugees and their host communities. This strain is exacerbated by reduced aid and rising commodity prices, which affects not only refugees but also host communities, increasing pressure on local resources. In Kiryandongo, disputes over land use and water access have become a major source of conflict between refugees and host communities. A host farmer expressed concerns about refugees farming on their land without proper agreements, stating, “Refugees farming on our land without proper agreements causes problems.”¹¹ A particularly egregious example of this tension is the reported practice of some host community members renting land to refugees, only to steal the crops planted by refugees during harvest periods, often under the cover of night. This exploitation not only undermines the trust between refugees and host communities but also highlights the dire circumstances that force refugees into vulnerable positions, making them easy targets for exploitation and further marginalization. The lack of clear agreements and unclear demarcation or documentation of plots continues to fuel disputes over land boundaries and tensions between the refugees and their hosts. As competition for limited resources intensifies, many resort to desperate measures to survive including petty theft, as they struggle to make ends meet with limited livelihood opportunities.

All in all, to improve access to justice for refugees, it is essential to address the underlying issues of poverty, food insecurity, and livelihood challenges by providing support for livelihood opportunities, improving access to basic services, and promoting stability and security in refugee settlements. By addressing these root causes, we can help ensure that refugees have the stability and support they need to access justice and rebuild their lives.

2.1.2 Policy of prioritization of new arrivals

The policy of prioritizing new arrivals over long-standing refugees in the allocation of food, land, and basic needs has led to significant tensions between these groups. This policy has created vulnerability and tension among long-standing refugees, who may feel overlooked in the distribution of



*A UNHCR truck handing over South Sudanese new arrivals to the OPM office in Adjumani:
Photo Credit: RLP*

essential resources. The World Food Programme’s (WFP) categorization of refugees for food distribution, aimed at prioritizing vulnerable groups such as the disabled, breastfeeding mothers, and child-headed families, has led to dissatisfaction among some families. These families felt misclassified due to potentially inadequate

11 Interview with host farmer, Kiryandongo, May 13th 2025.

investigation by those who conducted the categorization, as noted by a Chief Magistrate in Kiryandongo¹².

This situation underscores the complexities of managing resource distribution in refugee settings, where decisions on prioritization can impact social dynamics, increase tensions, and potentially drive survival strategies that include property crime. Specifically, the relationship between new arrivals of Sudanese origin and their South Sudanese counterparts in Kiryandongo has been marked by severe tensions, culminating in violence in July that led to the death of a Sudanese individual over resource struggles. The impacts of this prioritization policy on refugees' lives include increased tensions, dissatisfaction with resource distribution, and competition over limited resources like land, food, and water, sparking disputes between different ethnic groups in the settlement.

Quotes from interviews highlight the anger and lack of consideration felt by some refugees and host community members. Juliana, a long-time resident, laments the shrinking food rations since 2023 due to the influx of Sudanese newcomers, stating, "The land we farm is too small now." The Chairperson of Local Council III in Bweyale reflects the local community's grievance regarding refugees acquiring prime properties, stating, "Refugees get land, while locals get nothing." Efforts to mitigate these tensions have been undertaken by the RLP through funding from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, reducing violent incidents



*A Police Truck handing over a survivor of domestic violence to the hospital in Lamwo:
Photo Credit: RLP*

via radio shows and intergenerational dialogues reaching a significant number of refugees and their host communities.

2.1.3 Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

The convergence of economic hardships, resource struggles, and stress in the refugee settlements sometimes creates a volatile environment that exacerbates domestic violence and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) among both refugee and host families. The attributions of IPV to poverty and male disempowerment by refugees in these areas underscore the significance of economic stressors in precipitating violence. For instance, in one statement a leader in Adjumani noted that "Unemployment among men leads to increased tensions in the

12 Interview with Chief Magistrate Kiryandongo, May 12th 2025.

household”¹³. In another statement, a 54 year old female refugee in Kampala stated, “stress from poverty and living conditions in the city which sometimes is unbearable”¹⁴ highlight the pervasive impact of economic strain on household dynamics. The primary perpetration of physical IPV by men against women due to disagreements over resource distribution further emphasizes the linkage between economic challenges and violence. This synthesis suggests that addressing IPV in these refugee settings necessitates consideration of the interplay between economic stress, displacement-related challenges, and gender dynamics.

The relationship between displacement in refugee-hosting the areas of Adjumani, Lamwo and Kiryandongo shows that IPV is linked to poverty, male disempowerment, and stress from challenging living conditions (also see Horn, 2010). Survivors of IPV struggle to rebuild their lives amid fears of stigma, retaliation, or further violence – a factor that is also linked to the incomprehensive statistics on IPV and GBV. According to Dr. Kitembo, Medical Superintendent of Kiryandongo hospital, obtaining accurate statistics on IPV, gender-based violence (GBV), and rape is challenging due to underreporting stemming from stigma¹⁵. Underreporting due to stigma means that many cases of GBV may not be documented or addressed through formal justice mechanisms, leading to a lack of accountability for perpetrators and limited access to justice, support, and protection for survivors. This underreporting can also hinder efforts to design effective interventions and allocate resources to address GBV, ultimately perpetuating cycles of violence and limiting survivors’ access to justice and safety.

2.1.4 Addressing serious crimes like defilement and rape

Defilement and pre-marital pregnancies continue to remain serious concerns in all the refugee settlements. Defilement, defined as a sexual act with someone under 18 years of age, is considered “rampant” in these settlements. It is a capital offense that requires reporting to the police. According to police records in Adjumani, defilement cases were common among refugees in the first and second quarters of 2025. The Officer-in-Charge (OC) predicts that these cases may increase as the year ends, citing typically higher crime rates reported during and around festivities towards the end of the year.

Cultural sensitivities play a significant role in complicating the handling of defilement and rape cases in refugee settings like Kiryandongo. This highlights the complexities law enforcement faces in addressing such cases amidst cultural nuances. In these contexts, community dynamics and issues like land rights can intertwine with defilement cases, further complicating handling and reporting. Victims may face difficulties reporting sexual abuse or rape due to fear of community reaction. For example, it was reported by leaders during FGD with cultural and religious leaders in Lamwo that in some of the South Sudanese communities, relationships between families or groups tend to influence how a defilement case is handled or reported due to factors like social standing, family ties, or community pressure¹⁶. This connection can make it more complicated for: Law enforcement to handle defilement cases, victims or families to report defilement cases and communities to respond to or address defilement cases.

Respondents linked vulnerability to sexual exploitation to poverty, limited access to protection services, and power dynamics in relationships. Host community leaders in Lamwo expressed worries about safety and protection of children amidst refugee settlements. “We worry about safety with so many people around...”¹⁷, noted an elder in Lamwo. Addressing defilement and protecting vulnerable populations in these settings require an understanding of the differing cultural norms, power dynamics, and shift of attention to the addressing the question of access to protection services.

2.1.5 Security, safety and protection of refugees in the settlements

Allegations from local refugee leaders suggest that refugees from Sudan, South Sudan, and Congo with military backgrounds or those who are ex-militias continue to face threats of violence and revenge from agents within their home country’s military or ex-servicemen while in exile in Uganda. These threats often go

13 Interview with Office in Charge (OC) Police, Adjumani Police Station, May 26th 2025.

14 FGD with female refugees in Old Kampala, RLP Office, 21st May 2025.

15 Interview with Dr. Kitembo, Medical Superintendent of Kiryandongo, May 13th 2025.

16 FGD with elders and religious leaders, Palabek Settlement, Lamwo, May 21st 2025.

17 Interview with Odong Paulino, 67 year old elder, Lamwo, 22nd May 2025

unreported due to fear and divisions among refugees¹⁸. The lack of access to justice for refugees experiencing violent crimes exacerbates their vulnerability and perpetuates cycles of insecurity. This situation underscores the challenges faced by refugees in accessing safety and justice in host communities, where interactions with security agencies and past military backgrounds can impact their security and well-being.

RWCs, refugee-led organizations, and NGOs in Kampala have raised concerns about potential for violence stemming from the connections some refugees may have with groups in their home countries like Sudanese rebels or government forces. “Some violent groups within the refugee camp are being supported by certain leaders,”¹⁹ noted participants during the youth FGD in Kiryandongo. Although these concerns were not confirmed by the leaders at OPM in the Settlements, the alleged connections could potentially heighten fear among some refugees about their security. Literature by Jacobsen (2002) highlights the need for broader responses considering local, national, and regional dynamics for refugee security. This means humanitarian responses and policies should be tailored to account for these dynamics to better ensure refugee. “Effective responses to refugee security need to consider the interplay of local, national, and regional factors” (Jacobsen, 2002). Scholars like Harrell-Bond (2008) stress protection and access to justice for refugees to mitigate violence impacts. “Protection of refugees requires attention to their access to justice and safety in host countries” (Harrell-Bond, 2008). This implies that efforts to protect refugees must include mechanisms for accessing justice and ensuring safety to mitigate impacts of violence.

2.2 Initiatives and services towards Access to Justice provisions in Ugandan Refugee Settlements

The study in the four locations came across some of the initiatives and services that have been put in place to enhance access to justice for refugees in the four settlements, as is highlighted below:

2.2.1 Collaboration and Coordination

In the four refugee settlements studied - Kiryandongo, Lamwo, Adjumani, and Kampala we found that collaboration and multi-stakeholder engagement play a vital role in enhancing access to justice for refugees. The management of these settlements involves a coordinated effort among diverse actors, including state



RLP researchers interviewing camp assistant commandant Mr. Mugabe Wilson in Palabek, 14th May 2025.

and non-state entities like the government, NGOs, civil society organizations, and community structures.

18 Interviews with leaders of Refugee-led Organisations in Kampala, RLP Office, June 1st 2025.

19 FGD with youths in Kiryandongo Settlement, May 12th 2025.

This collaboration among Lustice, Law, and Order Sector (JLOS) actors contributes significantly to enhanced service delivery in these settlements, ultimately aiming to support refugees in navigating the justice system and protecting their rights.

Overall, the OPM is instrumental in overseeing refugee affairs in Uganda. The OPM works closely with UNHCR to ensure that refugees receive the necessary support enabling them to coordinate the different sectors. All the agencies we spoke to understood the importance of collaboration and coordination to improve access to justice, especially given the limitations of resources. This coordination helps avoid duplication of efforts and ensures efficient use of available resources. Collaborations among partners in access to justice were found to be strong during the research. As noted by an NGO leader in Palabek, Lamwo, “our coordination meeting is almost to be scheduled with UNHCR, OPM and all implementing partners.” This highlights the commitment to multi-stakeholder engagement in addressing refugee needs. Multi-stakeholder meetings are a key component of this collaborative approach, bringing together refugees, host communities, and various



A photo showing a South Sudanese in Maaji Refugee settlement in Adjumani: Photo Credit: RLP

organizations to discuss issues and find collective solutions.

In the locations of Adjumani, Lamwo, Kiryandongo, and Kampala, collaboration among NGOs, UNHCR, OPM, and other implementing partners facilitated coordinated responses to refugee needs. For example, in Lamwo, an NGO leader mentioned planning coordination meetings with UNHCR, OPM, and partners, indicating active collaboration. Such partnerships likely benefited NGO actors by enabling them to leverage resources and expertise from UNHCR and OPM, enhancing their ability to address refugee needs and improve access to justice. For people in these refugee-hosting areas, collaboration contributed to more effective addressing of challenges like cultural sensitivities and community dynamics in access to justice. In turn, this collaborative approach likely improved outcomes for refugees by fostering collective solutions to common issues.

Additionally, organizations like RLP work alongside others such as Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Justice Centres, and the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) to provide comprehensive services to refugees. This collaboration among the organizations with varying expertise allows for a more holistic approach to addressing refugee needs, including legal aid, protection, and other essential services. By working together, these organizations have been able to leverage their respective strengths to better support refugees in the

settlements of Adjumani, Lamwo, Kiryandongo, and the urban area of Kampala.

Our discussions with partners in Adjumani, Lamwo, and Kiryandongo revealed significant coordination challenges that impact the effective management of refugee settlements. Stakeholders' tendency to protect their work or scope of operations can limit information sharing, making it difficult for partners to access reliable data. As noted by the child protection officer in Adjumani, "Coordination is key, but sometimes getting all the needed information from partners is like pulling teeth."²⁰ This highlights the need for improved collaboration and information sharing to optimize access to justice for refugees, underscoring that addressing these coordination challenges is essential for enhancing the overall effectiveness of refugee settlement management.

2.2.2 The Police and Adjudication of Justice

In the refugee settlements of Kiryandongo, Lamwo, Adjumani, and Kampala, evidence from the ground indicates that the police are unequivocally relied on by all refugees as a valid point of contact for security concerns and accessing justice. As a reflection of this reliance, Husnah Ahmed, a female refugee paralegal encapsulated the role of the police in the following statement, "The police are often the first point of call for refugees needing help with security issues or legal matters. She goes on to say, "We go to the police when we need help with safety or justice or when we want help with problems like violence or theft."²¹ This reliance underscores the importance of police engagement in refugee settings for addressing security and justice needs.

Respondents in Kiryandongo highlighted the vital role police play in addressing serious incidents. The police in these locations serve both refugees and host communities, often referring cases to different channels depending on the gravity of the incident. By serving both communities, the police are positioned as a central actor in maintaining law and order and ensuring that justice is pursued in serious matters.

However, refugees and host communities highlight significant challenges that undermine the effectiveness of police work. Corruption is a recurring concern, with reports of requests for bribes. Additionally, there's a palpable perception of bias towards refugees compared to the host community. During the women's FGD, a 48-year-old female respondent observed that refugees often feel they are not regarded as favorably as members of the host community²². These challenges potentially erode trust in the police and impact the fairness and effectiveness of justice delivery in these settlements.

More generally, while there are issues with police operations that need addressing, the institution of the police is fundamentally viewed as a key recourse for justice in serious matters in these communities.

2.2.3 The Role of Refugee Welfare Committees

The study found that RWCs play vital roles in administering refugee settlements. RWCs are a three-tier system of decentralized governance with structures at block (RWC1), zone (RWC2), and settlement (RWC3) levels. They serve as intermediaries between the "government," NGOs, and refugees. An RWC3 Chairman in Kiryandongo notes, "My work entails being a bridge between government, which is OPM, and the refugees... I advocate for the rights of the refugees to make sure that their welfare services are respected."²³

RWCs liaise with police, though not explicitly mandated by Ugandan law, becoming a first point of contact for refugees with police authorities. RWCs and the Clan System help resolve disputes and promote reconciliation within refugee communities. However, there's a risk RWCs might sidestep handling serious crimes like defilement to protect individuals involved; such cases are capital offences requiring referral to police which are then cascaded to the courts.

20 FGD with institutions providing services to refugees and host communities in Adjumani, 25th May 2025.

21 Interview with a Sudanese Refugee Paralegal, Kiryandongo, 13th May 2025.

22 Interview with a Sudanese Refugee in Kiryandongo, 13th May 2025.

23 Interview with RWC 2, Block 25A, Akim Joseph Yanga, Lamwo, 22nd May 2025

In practice, RWCs collaborate with Local Councils (LCs) and elders to support refugees and host populations through alternative dispute resolution. According to RWC II – Maaji 2, Adjumani, “We handle the minor conflicts among the refugees... We work hand in hand with the LC 1s...” Paralegals meanwhile resolve minor disputes at community level and refer serious cases to authorities. As RWC II – Maaji 2 explains, “The paralegal and the social workers forward either to police or recommend to the lawyer.” RWCs also participate



A South Sudanese Refugee attending English For Adults class in Kiryandongo as part of the Access to Justice intervention of RLP. Photo Credit: RLP

in mediating disputes and resolving conflicts at the community level, as well as provide support and guidance to refugees in accessing justice and resolving disputes.

2.2.4 The role played by NGOs and other stakeholders

A range of stakeholders, including NGOs and community-based structures, contribute to the provision of access to justice services. Organizations like the RLP, LDC Legal Aid Clinic, and Uganda Law Society Legal Aid Project provide critical support to refugees, including mediations, legal drafting, and court representations. The provision of these essential services to refugees is a critical aspect of ensuring their access to justice and protection of their rights.

In the four settlements studied, the judiciary and development partners collaborate to provide legal services, support, and resources to refugees. It was found that NGOs like the RLP has been actively engaged in



Refugees attending English For Adults classes in Kiryandongo as part of the Access to Justice intervention of RLP. Photo Credit: RLP

supporting mobile courts across the four settlements. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and RLP play have played significant roles in providing legal aid, training and other forms of empowerment to refugees and host communities to help them access justice and resolve disputes, making a tangible difference in their lives. RLP also provides legal aid and representation to refugees facing legal challenges, facilitates mediation and alternative dispute resolution, and organizes community dialogues to promote peace in locations like Lamwo. In Kampala, RLP provides assistance with protection orders.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) provides critical legal services to refugees, including counseling, advice, transport refunds, and interpretation support for court proceedings. Specifically, in Kiryandongo, LWF handles cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and offers psychosocial support. A key aspect of their service is language support, which facilitates communication between refugees and court staff. As highlighted by Apio Stella Hope, a Lawyer with LWF in Kiryandongo, “We have a pool of interpreters who always support court to bridge that gap...”²⁴ This sentiment is echoed by Milly Tiabayo, a Legal Assistant with LWF in Adjumani, who notes that “LWF has been hiring an interpreter to be in court and help the refugees with the interpretations.”²⁵ By providing these essential services, LWF plays a vital role in ensuring that refugees have access to justice.

RLP has made significant strides in providing language support to refugees across the four settlements, empowering them to access justice. Through its language training programs, RLP has enabled refugees to communicate effectively with justice officials and advocate for themselves. As one refugee in Adjumani shared, “Before I started English classes, I felt lost and helpless. But now, I can communicate effectively with justice officials and advocate for myself. It’s like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.”²⁶ A female refugee leader in Kiryandongo also mentioned that language training has given her the confidence to report cases of exploitation and abuse, knowing her rights and how to access justice²⁷. RLP staff members emphasize that language training is not just about language acquisition, but about empowerment, enabling refugees to take control of their lives and access justice. As one staff member noted, “Language training is a critical component of our programming. It enables refugees to access justice and respond to the challenges in their settings.”²⁸ By providing this essential support, RLP is bridging the gap between refugees and the justice system.

2.2.5 The role of Cultural and Community Leadership in Dispute Resolution

Research indicates that cultural leadership is pivotal in resolving disputes and promoting peace within the refugee and host communities. According to FGD elders and religious leaders in Lamwo,

*when the tension happens between two tribes, say one is from Uganda, like Acholi here, and then the other is from a tribe across [South Sudan], like Nuer or Dinka, the elders all sit together.*²⁹

This highlights the role of traditional mechanisms in resolving inter-tribal tensions. However, in the context of access to justice for refugees in the settings of Lamwo, Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and Kampala, formal justice systems and collaborations with NGOs also play a critical role in ensuring fair and effective dispute resolution, complementing traditional approaches. Balancing these approaches can enhance access to justice for all parties involved.

Cultural leaders handle cases, provide mediation services, and navigate complexities of customary law from South Sudan within Ugandan refugee settlements. A leader from the Dinka community in Palabek stated,

*We cultural leaders struggle to align our traditional practices from South Sudan with the legal framework here in Uganda. The people we lead often expect us to follow South Sudanese customs, but Uganda’s laws are what govern here.*³⁰

24 Interview with Apio Stella, Legal Officer, Lutheran World Federation Kiryandongo, 12th May, 2025.

25 Interview with Milly Tiabayo, Legal Assistant, LWF, Adjumani, 24th May 2025.

26 Interview with a refugee client of RLP, Kiryandongo, 14th May 2025.

27 Interview with a refugee client of RLP, Kiryandongo, 14th May 2025.

28 Interview with Conrad Kambugwe, Legal Officer, Refugee Law Project, Kampala, 27th May 2025.

29 FGD with elders and religious leaders, Palabek Settlement, Lamwo, May 21st 2025.

30 FGD with elders and religious leaders, Palabek Settlement, Adjumani, May 19th 2025.

This underscores the conflict between implementing customary laws from South Sudan and complying with Ugandan laws, affecting how justice is accessed and crimes are handled in these refugee settlements.

Scholars like Sally Engle Merry highlight that “the coexistence of multiple legal systems” – what she terms “legal pluralism” – leads to complexities in delivering justice (Merry, 1988). In refugee settlements in Uganda, this pluralism involves an interplay between the formal Ugandan legal system, customary laws from countries like South Sudan, and informal justice mechanisms led by cultural leaders. As Merry’s work suggests, navigating these frameworks can impact access to justice for refugees. Cultural leaders in these settings face challenges applying their customs within Uganda’s legal context, which can lead to difficulties in resolving disputes, addressing crimes, and protecting rights. Alexander Betts notes that refugees often navigate “hybrid systems of justice” that blend formal and informal elements (Betts, 2013). In Uganda’s refugee settlements, cultural leaders must balance the expectations of their communities with the legal requirements of Uganda, often



A legal officer representing a refugee in one of the court sessions in Lamwo under the RLP program of Access to Justice. Photo Credit: RLP

operating somewhat separately from formal structures like RWCs. Among refugee communities like those from South Sudan, customary law is frequently managed by respected elders chosen by the parties in dispute, underscoring the adaptive nature of cultural leadership.

2.3 Key Challenges to Providing Access to Justice in Refugee Settlements

Our research in the four refugee settlements revealed several key challenges to providing access to justice for refugees, which included:

2.3.1 Ensuring Access to Justice for Vulnerable Refugees: Challenges in Legal Representation

Refugees face significant challenges in accessing legal representation, exacerbating their vulnerability to human rights abuses and limiting their access to justice. A refugee in Adjumani aptly described the situation, stating, “Navigating the justice system here is very hard for us.” The lack of legal representation can have severe consequences, particularly for women and girls facing gender-based violence and exploitation. Addressing sensitive issues like sexual and gender-based violence requires specialized, trauma-informed legal

representation. This is critical considering that UNHCR (2016) notes 50% of refugees worldwide are victims of sexual and gender-based violence. Experiences of torture can lead to fear or distrust of authorities like police or the army, causing underreporting of criminal cases. In the Settlement studied, we found that the mix of different laws and ways of handling justice – for example, Ugandan law and the traditional customs of refugees from places like South Sudan can profoundly make it hard for refugees to get the help they need, especially when dealing with tough issues like sexual violence or violence against women. Effective legal representation is very important for refugees dealing with these sensitive issues. But refugees often struggle to get legal help, making them more vulnerable to bad things happening to them and limiting their access to justice.

2.3.2 Challenges of Shifting gender expectations

In the refugee settlements, shifting gender expectations and norms have also created significant access to justice challenges for women. The expectation for refugees to become economically “self-reliant” through work and land access is complicated by limited resources. Lacking sufficient cultivable land and income-generating activities impacts women and men differently due to pre-existing gender roles and societal norms. The interactions with the women show that they often face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, exploitation, and limited access to resources like land, credit, or education. Additionally, women typically bear more caregiving responsibilities for children and families, limiting their ability to engage in income-generating activities or seek legal help.

I wake up before dawn to prepare some food for the day. I worry about my children's safety walking to school in the dawn through the crowded settlement of Kawempe to catch school. I want them to have a better life, but every day is a struggle to provide for them. I can't go far to look for work because I need to be here for them. Sometimes I feel like I'm trapped in this cycle of hardship, but I push on for my kids³¹.

The above quotation highlights the daily rough routines women in refugee or vulnerable settings like Kampala face while being mindful of their children's well-being. It underscores the challenges of balancing caregiving responsibilities with limited resources and the desire for a better life for their children.

Cultural and social norms may also restrict women's decision-making power within households or communities, affecting their ability to access justice or report rights violations. This dynamic affects women's access to justice in several ways: Women's enhanced authority from controlling aid access may empower them in some aspects but navigating justice systems in a new context with limited resources remains challenging. These changing family dynamics not only affect refugees but also host communities, as both groups grapple with the challenges of adapting to new settlement realities. The erosion of traditional roles and power structures can lead to increased tensions and conflicts within families. As a male paralegal in Adjumani described, “You, the husband, you are... you remain just a useless man...”³² Similarly, a female RWC in Adjumani observed, “Nowadays, women are up, and men are down...”³³ This shift in gender roles can have far-reaching consequences, complicating women's pathways to accessing justice, particularly in cases of gender-based violence or exploitation. Ultimately, both refugee and host community women may face similar barriers in seeking justice, underscoring the need for targeted support and interventions to address these challenges.

2.3.3 The Language of Justice: A Barrier to Access

Language barriers pose a significant challenge to refugees' access to justice, creating a web of misunderstandings and miscommunication. In the four refugee settlements, we understood that language barriers can hinder effective communication between refugees and justice officials, leading to denied justice and unfair outcomes. This problem is persistent among the Arabic speaking Sudanese new arrivals and South Sudanese who do not understand English in the Kiryandongo Settlement and Kampala.

As a refugee in Kiryandongo stated, 35-year-old female Amina Mir Sudanese, stated “I don't speak the local

31 Interview with a female refugee leader of Sudanese origin, Old Kampala, RLP Office, 29th May 2025.

32 Interview with paralegal national, Adjumani, 19th May 2025.

33 Interview with RWC 1, Adjumani, 19th May 2025.

language, so I have to rely on an interpreter. But what if the interpreter doesn't understand me correctly? What if they don't explain my situation accurately?"³⁴ This challenge demonstrates the fact that relying on interpreters can be a necessity, but it introduces potential risks like miscommunication or misinterpretation of critical information. The accuracy of interpretation is crucial in sensitive matters like legal proceedings or reporting violence. Misunderstandings due to language barriers or interpreter biases can lead to inadequate representation or loss of access to justice. Refugees are often in vulnerable positions. Relying on interpreters can amplify this vulnerability if there are gaps in understanding or if interpreters wield undue influence over the refugee's interactions with authorities or service providers.

The same concern has been echoed by a female agency staff who highlighted the need for more language support services to facilitate effective communication.

*We've seen cases where refugees have been denied justice due to language barriers. It's crucial that we provide adequate language support to ensure that refugees can access justice.*³⁵

During the FGDs, elders also emphasized the importance of language support, highlighting the need to ensure that refugees can communicate effectively with justice officials.

The language barrier in the justice system is further complicated by the increasing use of technology like the Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS). In this case, refugees who aren't skilled in using computers and technology may face additional barriers to accessing justice. This issue affects both refugees and Ugandan citizens with limited English proficiency when interacting with technology in the justice system. Studies emphasize providing language support and training practitioners on procedural rights and language support entitlements in the justice system (Hunter et al., 2022). Effective language support should also consider cultural adaptability, going beyond mere translation to convey nuanced cultural meanings. As the Chairperson LC 1 in Kawempe division astutely observed, "Translation of both language and cultural meanings can be addressed through refugee community leadership."³⁶ This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive communication in bridging the gap between refugees and local leaders, ultimately facilitating more effective interaction and access to justice.

2.3.4 Cultural Conundrum

Cultural differences pose a significant challenge to refugees' access to justice, as they may come from backgrounds where justice is dispensed differently. A local NGO staff member in Adjumani noted, "We are all Africans [the host and refugees alike]. We come from backgrounds where justice emphasizes reconciliation over punishment and it is good to consider that"³⁷. This comment presupposes that it's essential to develop approaches that connect these cultural differences and deliver justice in a manner that resonates with local practices. This highlights the need for cultural sensitivity in justice programming, considering refugees' unique cultural backgrounds and experiences.

The cultural conundrum in access to justice for refugee women is starkly highlighted by challenges in discussing sensitive issues like rape or domestic violence. In many of the cultures of Sudanese and South Sudanese, topics like gender-based violence are taboo or not openly discussed, creating significant barriers for refugee women in reporting or seeking help for such violence. An incident in Palabek and Lamwo, underscores the cultural challenges refugee survivors of gender-based violence face. 27-year-old Sharon - Secretary of RLO in Palabek reported to the research team that one of her close friends was raped by a group of boys along the road leading to OPM. Despite encouragement to speak to leaders about the incident, the survivor chose not to report the case or seek medical attention, largely due to feelings of shame³⁸. This incident illustrates the harsh realities of cultural barriers in refugee settings, where shame and cultural norms can silence survivors and hinder access to justice and support.

34 Interview with 35-year-old Female Sudanese Amina Mir, 14th May 2025.

35 Interview with 37 year old Mao Juliet from Finchurch Aid, Kampala, 28th May 2025.

36 Interview with security officer and chairperson LC 1, Nyombi Ivan, Kawempe division, Kampala, May 29th 2025.

37 Interview with Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Coordinator, Tutapona, Adjumani, 25th May 2025.

38 Interview with 27-year-old Secretary of RLO in Palabek, May 23rd 2025.

Scholars like Harpviken and Suhrke (2016) emphasize the complexities of cultural norms and gender-based violence in refugee contexts. Research indicates that cultural taboos around discussing violence can exacerbate vulnerabilities of refugee women, limiting their access to justice and support services. Studies on refugee populations in Uganda, like those in Kiryandongo and Palabek, highlight the need for culturally sensitive approaches to addressing gender-based violence. Effective interventions often involve community engagement and awareness-raising to navigate cultural barriers while promoting access to justice and support for survivors (RLP, 2018).

Refugees face a cultural conundrum complicated by unfamiliarity with Uganda's national legal system. Despite efforts by organizations like the RLP and Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to introduce refugees to this system, more is needed to ensure they understand their rights and obligations. The cultural challenges they face is partly due to differing cultural understandings of justice and laws. For example, refugees may come from cultures with different approaches to dispensing justice or recognizing certain crimes.

2.3.5 Limited financial means to access justice

Many refugees lack the financial means to access legal representation, or to pursue justice through the formal court system. As a refugee in Kampala stated, "I know my rights, but I don't have the money to enforce them. I'm stuck in a situation where I'm vulnerable to exploitation."³⁹ A court official in Kiryandongo noted, "We need more resources to provide legal aid and support services to refugees. Without these resources, it's difficult for refugees to access justice."⁴⁰ Agency staffs have also highlighted the need for more resources to support justice programming, including funding for legal aid, psychosocial support, and community-based initiatives.

The female refugee in Kampala, the court official, and agency staff all point to the lack of resources as a major obstacle for refugees seeking justice. They stress that limited funding for legal aid, support services, and community initiatives hampers refugees' ability to enforce their rights and access justice. This highlights the harsh reality that resource constraints severely limit refugees' access to justice. Without adequate resources, refugees are more vulnerable to exploitation and face significant barriers in accessing justice. Crucially, legal aid, psychosocial support, and community-based initiatives are needed to address these challenges. There's a clear need for enhanced support through more resources for justice programming, including funding for legal aid and support services to help refugees enforce their rights and address vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the lack of resources can trap refugees in vulnerable situations, unable to access justice or protect their rights effectively.

2.3.6 Delay in the administration of Justice

Compounding the challenges of accessing justice for refugees is the issue of delay in the administration of justice, a problem experienced across the four settlements studied—Adjumani, Kiryandongo, Palabek, and Kampala. For instance, a court clerk in Adjumani mentioned that the average time to get a case resolved can take significantly longer for refugees, estimating an average of 6-12 months for a case to be dislodged compared to quicker processing for other cases, largely due to barriers such as language. According to Michael Okot, Magistrate Grade One in charge of Adjumani and Pakele,

Within the last two months alone, we have more than 30 to 40 refugees who are either sent to prison; some of them are on bail now, but their cases are still pending in this court. Actually, the cases continue to be on the rise....

Such delays exacerbate the difficulties refugees face in accessing justice, potentially leading to prolonged vulnerability and decreased likelihood of achieving justice. Follow-on efforts to address these delays could involve streamlining court processes for refugee cases, increasing legal aid resources, or enhancing community-based dispute resolution mechanisms to complement formal justice systems.

The Magistrate at Adjumani highlighted a pressing concern regarding pre-trial detention, noting that some inmates on remand have been awaiting trial for more than 5 years. "Delays in the judicial process could be

39 Interview with a female refugee of Sudanese origin, Old Kampala, RLP Office 29th May 2025.

40 Interview with the Magistrate Kiryandongo, 15th May 2025.

significantly reduced if priorities are drawn towards allocating resources that speed up trials,” the Magistrate emphasized. Such delays contravene the principle of expeditious trial enshrined in international human rights law, including Article 14(3)(c) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to be tried without undue delay. Prolonged pre-trial detention can amount to a violation of the right to liberty and security of person. The Magistrate’s observation underscores the need for strategic allocation of resources to enhance the efficiency of the judicial process, ensuring that refugees and other vulnerable groups are not unduly prejudiced by delays in accessing justice.

2.3.7 Remoteness – and distance to access courts

The remoteness and distance of the refugee settlements of Kiryandongo, Adjumani, and Lamwo from towns with Ugandan courts and key installations like police posts pose a critical challenge to accessing justice for refugees. The sparsely populated settlements make it difficult for refugees to access justice due to the long distances they must travel, often on foot or at great expense, to attend to matters pending before the courts. As noted by participants in a FGD with elders in the Kiryandongo and Adjumani, limited access to justice is partly due to the “long distances that some of the clients have to move between the court and their settlements.”⁴¹ The remoteness of these settlements also makes it harder for refugees to report crimes, seek legal aid, or attend court proceedings. This can lead to delays, decreased access to justice, and increased vulnerability to exploitation or violence. A refugee in Lamwo said,

*It’s hard to get to the police or court because they’re so far away. Sometimes you look at your case and you look at the cost of movement, and weigh the two, and just decide to leave the case. Moreover, you have to travel not just once, but multiple times to ensure the case comes to a conclusion.*⁴²

Similarly, a court official from Lamwo mentioned that “The distance of these settlements from the courts means cases from refugees often take longer to process, and sometimes we struggle to ensure they get the justice they need.”⁴³

The slow pace of case resolution in the judicial system further complicates this situation. Staff from the RLP highlight that despite funding support for Mobile Courts in these areas, the courts “are so expensive and not as regular as they have to be.” This underscores challenges related to sustainability, regularity, and cost in ensuring access to justice for refugees in these settlements. The reliance on civil society organizations like RLP to run Mobile Courts indicates a broader issue of lack of government funding in this area.

2.3.8 Inadequate funding from government

A significant challenge facing the provision of legal aid services is the lack of government funding. Currently, civil society organizations, rather than the government of Uganda, are primarily responsible for providing legal aid. This highlights the need for reforms in existing laws to address deficiencies in access to justice. The pending Legal Aid Bill, which would obligate the government to provide for legal aid, is a step in the right direction. If passed, this bill could extend legal aid services and advocate for access to free legal aid services funded by the government, thereby improving access to justice for those in need.

The situation has been further complicated by the closure of several Legal Aid Partners, including IRC, UGANET, and FIDA (U), in Palabek Refugee Settlement in March 2025. This closure has created a significant gap in access to justice, exacerbated by the impact of funding struggles faced by NGOs.

2.4 Opportunities and Recommendations

This section outlines the opportunities and recommendations that emerged from our research, offering a roadmap for enhancing access to justice for refugees in Uganda.

41 FGD with elders and religious, Kiryandongo Settlement, May 13th 2025.

42 Interview with a male refugee elder, Lamwo Settlement, May 25th 2025.

43 Interview with OC Police, Palabek Police Station, 22nd May 2025.

2.4.1 Leverage the role of community leaders in providing Alternative Dispute Resolution

Our field observations offered valuable insights into the effectiveness of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms in resolving disputes and promoting peace within the refugee community. Community leaders, traditional leaders, and RWCs play a vital role in promoting and supporting these mechanisms. They serve as a bridge between the refugee community and the formal justice system, facilitating communication and resolving issues before they escalate into conflicts. As the Sudanese Refugee Leader noted, “We try to solve issues within the community before escalating them to other authorities.”⁴⁴ This approach not only reduces the burden on the formal justice system but also promotes peaceful resolution of disputes. This finding is consistent with research that highlights the importance of community-based initiatives in promoting access to justice for marginalized communities (Tyler, 2003).

Our research also found that local leaders are essential in designing effective justice programs that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of refugee communities. According to an elder in the refugee community in Adjumani, “In our culture, we have traditional justice mechanisms that are effective in resolving disputes.”⁴⁵ This highlights the importance of incorporating traditional justice mechanisms into formal justice programs to promote a more inclusive and effective justice system. Local leaders serve as a vital bridge between the refugee community and local authorities, facilitating communication and resolving issues before they escalate into conflicts.

Local leaders serve as a vital bridge between the refugee community and local authorities, facilitating communication and resolving issues before they escalate into conflicts. According to the LC 1 of Kawempe, “We work closely with the refugees to understand their issues and refer them to the relevant authorities.”⁴⁶ This close relationship enables local leaders to facilitate communication between refugees and the police, helping to resolve issues and prevent misunderstandings. For instance, the OC of Palabek noted that “When refugees are arrested, we often call the refugee welfare council or local leaders to intervene and facilitate communication, allowing for a more effective resolution of the issue.”⁴⁷

The research also found that local leaders can empower refugees to assert their rights and avoid conflicts by conducting awareness-raising activities and providing guidance on the law. By facilitating collaboration between refugees and local authorities, local leaders can promote peaceful resolution of disputes and enhance access to justice for refugees. As the LC 1 of Kawempe emphasized, “Local leaders are key in promoting peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities.” The OC of Palabek noted, “Local leaders are the backbone of our justice system, and we rely on them to help us reach the refugees and promote justice.” By leveraging the strengths of local leaders and providing them with necessary training and support, we can create a more inclusive and effective justice system for refugees.

2.4.2 Increase the Focus on Specialized Legal Representation for Refugees Dealing with Trauma

To ensure effective access to justice for refugees dealing with trauma, particularly in cases involving sexual and gender-based violence, the following recommendations were made. Lawyers working with refugees should receive training to handle the unique challenges posed by trauma, cultural differences, and the complexities of refugee experiences.

Trauma-informed care: Implementing key aspects of specialized legal representation requires trauma-informed care where lawyers understand the impact of trauma on refugees and adapt their approach to minimize re-traumatization. Cultural sensitivity is also essential, where understanding the cultural background and customs of refugees leads to effective legal representation. Lawyers must be aware of the specific challenges faced by women and girls in refugee settings, including gender-based violence and exploitation. Providing legal representation can empower refugees, giving them confidence to seek justice and access their rights.

44 FGD with Sudanese refugee leaders in Kawempe, Kampala, 28th May 2025.

45 FGD with elders and religious leaders, Adjumani Maaji refugee settlement, 25th May 2025.

46 Interview with security officer and chairperson LC 1, Nyombi Ivan, Kawempe division, Kampala, May 29th 2025.

47 Interview with OC Police, Palabek Police Station, 22nd May 2025.

Cultural sensitivity: This involves increasing resources and capacity of legal aid organizations in refugee settings. Efforts should be made to overcome barriers to accessing justice, such as language barriers, lack of documentation, or fear of authorities. Cultural and social norms that may hinder women and vulnerable groups from seeking legal help need to be addressed. According to UNHCR guidelines, providing legal aid to refugees is critical for ensuring access to justice and protecting their rights. Organizations like the RLP play a vital role in providing legal aid and promoting access to justice for refugees in settlements like those in Adjumani, Lamwo, Kiryandongo, and Kampala.

2.4.3 Scale Up the Language Training Programs

Our research recommends scaling up language training programs, such as English for Adults (EFA), and tailoring them to the specific needs of refugees, including their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By integrating these programs into existing justice programming and involving refugees in the design and implementation process, we can empower refugees to access justice, advocate for themselves, and live lives of dignity and well-being.

2.4.4 Support Refugee Children access English Training for Orientation to Formal Education

For refugee children, EFA classes can provide a critical bridge to formal education, enabling them to transition into primary schools and eventually pursue higher education. According to a RLP staff member, “We’ve repeatedly come across children who are eager to learn, but are unable to access formal education due to language barriers.”⁴⁸ By expanding EFA classes to support children, RLP can unlock their potential and create a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

By expanding the English for Adults course to support children, RLP could provide a critical bridge to formal education and enabling them to transition into primary schools and eventually pursue higher education. This could also create a pipeline of talented and motivated individuals who could access university education and go on to become leaders in their communities. By investing in their education, we can unlock their potential and create a brighter future for themselves and their communities.”

This expansion would not only address the gap in support for refugee children but also provide an opportunity for RLP to make a meaningful impact on the lives of young refugees, empowering them to access education, build their futures, and contribute to their communities.

2.4.5 Empowering Refugee Professionals through Specialized English For Adults Training

For refugees with professional backgrounds, the existing EFA program falls short in providing the specialized support they need to overcome specific challenges. A refugee professional notes, “I have a degree in law from Sudan, but I’m struggling to find a job in Uganda because of the language barrier. I need specialized English training that can help me navigate the Ugandan legal system.”⁴⁹ A Sudanese refugee doctor notes,

*I’ve been practicing medicine for years, but I’m finding it difficult to communicate with patients in English. I need training that’s tailored to medical professionals, so I can effectively communicate with my patients and provide quality care.*⁵⁰

Another refugee professional, a teacher, adds,

*I’m struggling to find a job in education because my qualifications aren’t recognized in Uganda. I need support to get my qualifications recognized and to learn how to navigate the Ugandan education system.*⁵¹

Julian Namusisi, the EFA Instructor at RLP, acknowledges the limitations of the current program, stating, “We try to bring in things to do with social relations in our communities... but we realize that our current program may not be enough to support refugees with professional backgrounds.”⁵² By providing practical skills training,

48 Interview with Julian Namusisi, the EFA Instructor at Refugee Law Project, Kampala Office, 28th May 2025.

49 FGD with Sudanese refugee leaders in Kawempe, Kampala, 28th May 2025.

50 Interview with Sudanese with professional background of a doctor, Old Kampala, RLP Office, 1st June 2025.

51 Interview with Sudanese with professional background of teaching, Kawempe, 1st June 2025.

52 Interview with Julian Namusisi, the EFA Instructor at Refugee Law Project, Kampala Office, 28th May 2025.

business support, and mentorship opportunities tailored to specific professions, RLP can empower refugee professionals to unlock their potential, become self-reliant, and contribute to the economic growth and development of Uganda.

By expanding EFA classes to support both children and professionals, RLP can make a meaningful difference in the lives of refugees, enabling them to access education, employment, and justice. As Julian emphasizes,

We need to invest in our programs and staff to provide more specialized support to refugees with professional backgrounds. This will enable us to better address the specific challenges they face and help them to rebuild their lives.⁵³

By acknowledging the limitations of the current program and working to address the gap in services, RLP can unlock the potential of refugees and create a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

53 Interview with Julian Namusisi, the EFA Instructor at Refugee Law Project, Kampala Office, 28th May 2025.

3. Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted significant challenges to accessing justice for refugees in Uganda, particularly in settlements like Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and Lamwo, as well as in urban settings like Kampala. Shifting gender expectations and norms in refugee settlements create access to justice challenges for women, compounded by limited resources and evolving family dynamics. Effective legal representation is critical for vulnerable groups like refugees, especially in addressing sensitive issues such as sexual violence and gender-based violence. However, refugees face challenges accessing legal representation, exacerbating vulnerability to human rights abuses. Delays in the administration of justice, with some inmates in remand awaiting trial for over 5 years, contravene principles of expeditious trial under international human rights law.

Looking forward, strategic allocation of resources to speed up trials and enhance access to legal aid, psychosocial support, and community-based initiatives is essential to ensure refugees can access justice without undue prejudice. Addressing these challenges requires gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches to legal representation, taking into account the vulnerability of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Enhancing access to justice for refugees in Uganda necessitates increased resources for justice programming and support services. By prioritizing these needs, it is possible to improve pathways to justice for refugees and reduce vulnerabilities to exploitation and human rights abuses.

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