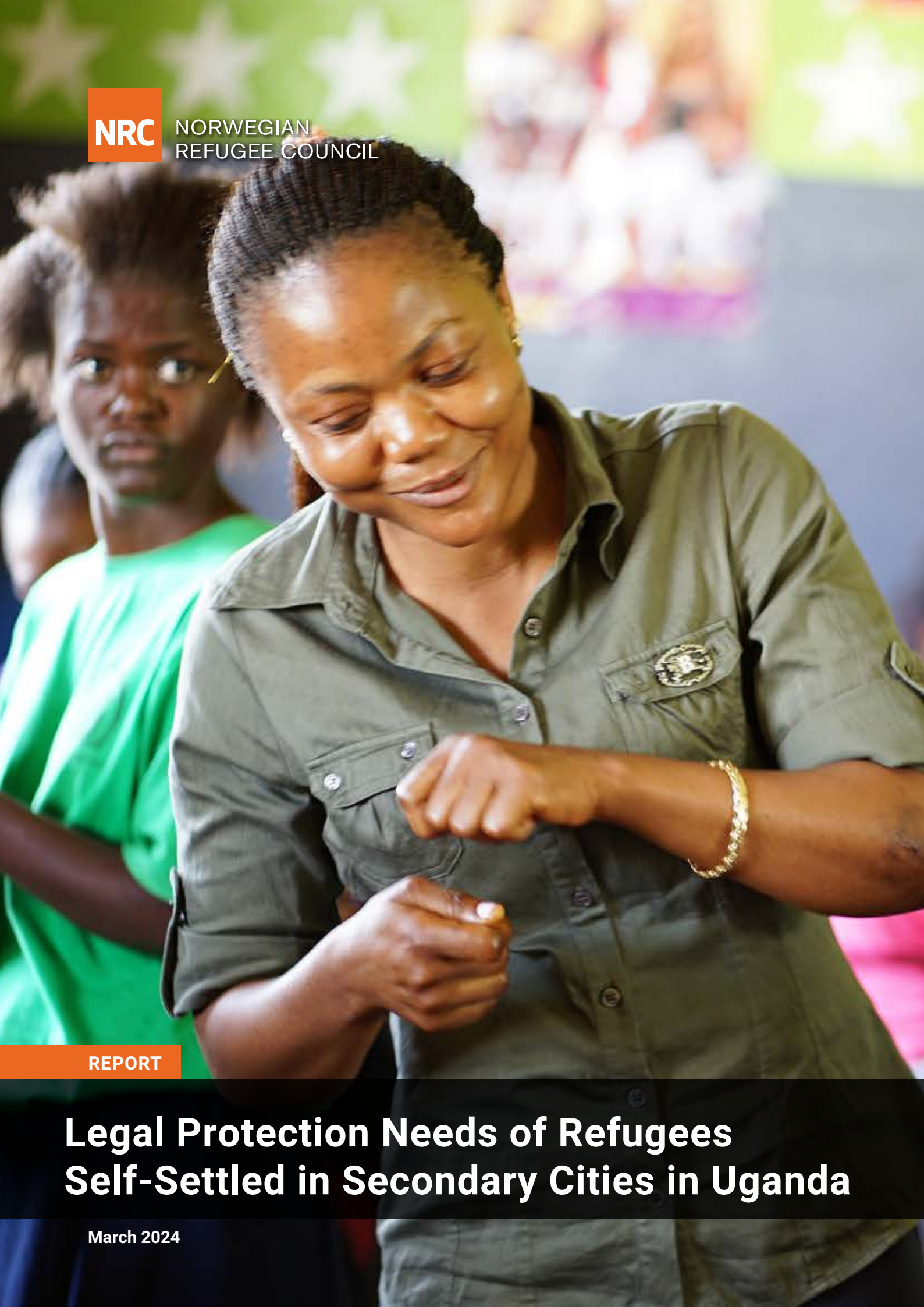


NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

REPORT

Legal Protection Needs of Refugees Self-Settled in Secondary Cities in Uganda

March 2024

NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was researched and written by Laura Cunial with additional research support provided by Claire Birungi Agaba and James Otim. Data collection was led by Bashir Muhumuza, Emmily Komujuni and Dragan Atujune, with support from Pamela Abimo, Bonny Otoo, Brian Isabirye, Mathew Okot, Stephen Mubiru, Ivan Tekwo and Anek Anjella.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) extends gratitude to all the refugees and members of host communities who generously shared their personal stories, insights, and expertise. Without their contribution, this research and analysis would not have been impossible.

We are grateful to our donors, including the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Union, for their valuable funding support. However, it should be noted that the views expressed and information presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the position of NRC's donors.

Co-funded by the European Union

NORWEGIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The **Norwegian Refugee Council** (www.nrc.no) is an independent humanitarian organisation helping people forced to flee. We work in crises across 40 countries, providing life-saving and long-term assistance to millions of people every year.

Cover photo: A woman who has received training in hair dressing at NRC lifeskill in Uganda. © Dixon Odur / NRC

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, there has been a notable trend among asylum seekers and refugees in Uganda, as they increasingly relocate and self-settle in urban areas. This shift towards urbanisation, particularly in Uganda's secondary cities, has prompted a closer examination of the legal protection challenges faced by these displaced populations.

This report focuses on four such secondary cities: Mbarara, Hoima, Koboko and Adjumani, each identified for their significant refugee population and strategic geographic location. Through a comprehensive analysis, the report provides a deeper understanding of the profile and mobility patterns of this relatively new urban population. It outlines challenges related to obtaining legal stay and identity documentation, securing housing, land and property, gaining employment and the consequences of being unable to enjoy these rights. Drawing on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, including a household level survey involving over 1,520 households (targeting 380 households per location), 20 focus group discussions, and interviews with over 20 key stakeholders, the report provides valuable insights into the urban refugee experience and identifies trends and protection risks.

By addressing critical knowledge gaps and highlighting acute needs, challenges and concrete actionable opportunities, this research aims to inform stakeholders and policymakers about the urgent need to enhance the enjoyment of rights and self-reliance among urban refugees. Continued and broadened support tailored to these challenges is essential to enhance the protection environment, facilitate access to durable solutions and support municipalities and authorities in adequately planning for the needs of all residents.

Urban refugee profile and mobility

The profile of the refugees surveyed in the four municipalities mirrors that of Uganda's refugee population in terms of nationalities and protracted displacement. The movement to secondary cities is a relatively recent development. Almost 43 per cent of refugees self-settled in Adjumani, Koboko, Hoima and Mbarara between 2016 and 2020, with an additional 18 per cent arriving in 2021 and over 20 per cent in the past two years. Despite the growing presence of refugees in urban areas, reliable data on the refugee population is limited, as refugees are generally not accounted for by the local authorities. Estimates suggest that Koboko hosts approximately 25,000 refugees, Adjumani hosts 12,500 and Hoima and Mbarara each host an estimated 6,000 refugees.

The evidence underscores the dynamic and complex nature of refugees' choice to relocate from settlements to urban areas. Primary factors influencing their decisions include proximity to services such as health and education (33.2 per cent), access to work and livelihood opportunities (20.2 per cent) and improved security (20.9 per cent). Secondary factors contributing to this movement include reductions in humanitarian assistance in settlements (10.2 per cent), better housing conditions (6.7 per cent) and proximity to family (6.3 per cent). This settlement-urban movement reflects mobility and demonstrates a degree of agency as refugees proactively and independently settle in new locations.

Over half of the urban self-settled population surveyed (58 per cent) relocated to a secondary city with their entire family. Among those with separated families, almost half (46 per cent) had family members who remained in settlements, often to ensure continued access to humanitarian assistance. Another third (35.5 per cent) had family members in the country of origin, while others had members in other urban areas (9.8 per cent) and in third countries (6.9 per cent).

[1]Data shared by the municipalities during data collection in November and December 2023.

Legal stay including refugee status determination

The research reveals that the overwhelming majority of respondents are refugees (96 per cent), with 2 per cent identifying as stateless, 1.1 per cent as migrants and 0.9 per cent as asylum seekers. Most refugees reported holding a Refugee Identity Card or being recorded in the Refugee Family Attestation (91.2 per cent), while 8.8 per cent lacked such documentation.

None of the four municipalities selected for the research are 'refugee gazetted areas' meaning the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) does not provide registration services in these locations. Asylum seekers and refugees must therefore seek official registration in a settlement and then move to an urban location. They must, however, return to the settlement to complete any legal stay procedures in Uganda, such as updating family information in the Refugee Family Attestation or participating in verification exercises. The evidence also suggests that some refugees settle directly in urban areas to reunite with their families without registering with the OPM.

Identity and civil documentation

Accessing identification documents poses significant challenges for refugees across the four urban areas, particularly for women. Half of the refugees surveyed reported that identification documents are inaccessible with limited information available on documentation procedures and requirements. Consequently, many refugees remain undocumented, meaning they lack official evidence to prove vital events or are under-documented indicating they have not followed the prescribed procedure for complete registration. For instance, a child may only possess a birth notification, not a birth certificate representing a partial step in the registration process.

Refugees encounter obstacles in obtaining vital documents such as birth, marriage and death certificates. Only one third of households have birth registration for all dependents, while the majority lack death documentation for deceased relatives. Of the respondents who had lost a relative, the majority (61.2 per cent) lack any documentation. Marriage registration is also problematic. About half of the respondents (56.6 per cent) were married, with the majority obtaining marriage certificates from a religious institution (41.6 per cent from churches and 14.1 per cent from mosques). A small portion followed the customary process (11 percent). Notably, just over one in ten couples (11%) followed an official governmental process, while the remaining 21 per cent lacked any documentation to prove their marital status.

The lack of civil documentation has serious protection implications for surveyed refugees including limited access to services such as healthcare and education (30 per cent), difficulties in obtaining assistance (28.1 per cent) and a heightened risk of arrest and harassment (15.5 per cent). Moreover, it hinders obtaining other documents (15.3 per cent) and impedes efforts to secure employment (10.3 per cent). Marriage and death certificates hold particular importance, as they are essential for asserting inheritance rights and establishing family composition and lineage, which disproportionately affects refugee widows. The full impact and consequences of being under or undocumented may only become apparent when individuals attempt to pursue higher education, seek legal employment, or travel to their country of origin or a third country, which could be years into the future.

Housing, land and property

Regions with a substantial refugee population in Koboko, Adjumani, Mbarara and Hoima typically comprise a blend of residential and commercial zones. Among the refugees surveyed,

[2]This area requires further research as there can be misconceptions and confusion between being undocumented and stateless. The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines statelessness as "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law." Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons_ENG.pdf

[3]As per Art. 44 of the 2006 Refugee Act. The OPM provides refugee registration in Kampala and within the 13 refugee gazetted settlements that are integrated within local communities across 11 Local Government Districts. Accessed 18 March 2024, http://urrms.opm.go.ug/settlement.html

half reported living in permanent structures, while the other half resided in temporary structures. Notably, temporary shelters are more commonly occupied by female-headed households, indicating a higher level of vulnerability among them. Overall, dwellings generally fail to meet minimum humanitarian standards, with poor sanitation and severe overcrowding, often resulting in entire families residing in a single room.

Regarding tenure arrangements, over three quarters of refugees rent either a house (64.4 per cent) or a room (11 per cent), with a minority claiming ownership of their accommodation. A limited number stay with family or friends. Weak security of tenure is evident across all urban locations, as only 40 per cent of refugees possess a written tenancy agreement, while the rest rely on short-term verbal arrangements. This lack of formal agreements leaves many uncertain about their housing situation, as less than half of respondents (40 per cent) are confident they could stay in their current accommodation for the next three months. Female heads of household reported the challenge of negotiating and arranging housing for their families, a responsibility they had not previously undertaken. This is compounded by dealing with predominately male Ugandan landlords, creating an unequal power balance that places female refugees at risk of exploitation.

Around one quarter of refugees are living in their accommodation without paying rent. Among those who do pay, the monthly rates vary, with just under a third (30.7 per cent) paying less than UGX 113,000, a further quarter (27.4 per cent) paying between UGX 113,000 and UGX 226,000 and the remaining 17 per cent pay up to UGX 451,000. Arbitrary rent increases are common due to the absence of written agreements and disputes with landlords frequently arise over non-payment of rent and utility bills leading to precarious situations for displaced households with insufficient and irregular income. Many resort to accumulating unpaid rental fees until eviction. Forced evictions disrupt community ties and support systems, often resulting in downgraded living conditions, loss of access to livelihoods, school dropouts and adverse mental health effects due to stress and trauma.

Employment

Despite the favourable policy environment, which grants refugees the right to work, only half of the refugees surveyed reported working, with a roughly equal split between self-employment and working for someone else. Refugees often find themselves in entry-level positions, sometimes below their skill level, to avoid unemployment.

Informal employment dominates Uganda's economy and labour market, providing significant employment and income generation prospects for displaced populations. Nevertheless, it poses challenges, as only a quarter of working refugees have any form of written contract. Refugees face systemic discrimination throughout the employment cycle from hiring and firing practices to unequal or non-payment of salaries and benefits and limited access to job assignments, promotions and training. Gender disparities are evident across all forms of employment, with women experiencing higher levels of informal employment and lower levels of knowledge regarding labour rights compared to men.

Qualitative data suggests that refugees in all four locations have managed to establish and run small businesses. However, many lack information on procedures and requirements for establishing a business, accessing financial capital and complying with tax regulations. Working without formal authorisation or running an unregistered business as a refugee introduces additional uncertainty. Regarding job security, only 17 per of refugees expressed confidence in retaining their current job for the next three months. The impact of

[4]This area requires further research.
[5]The equivalent of USD 29 based on exchange rates in March 2024.
[6]The equivalent of USD 29 - USD 58 based on exchange rates in March 2024.
[7]The equivalent of USD 114 based on exchange rates in March 2024.

discrimination in the employment sector extends beyond the economic and social realms, leaving lasting psychological effects on refugees.

Consequences and coping mechanisms

Only half of the urban self-settled population is working, and there is a clear reliance on family support and/or other forms of assistance as the primary income source. One in six surveyed refugees (16 per cent) lack any form of income to sustain themselves, and surveyed refugees across all locations have depleted their savings. Of particular concern is the overwhelming dependence of female refugees on familial support, with many reporting either no income source or an unreliable one.

Unable to work and with no savings to sustain themselves, some refugees and asylum seekers have reduced their meals to one per day and/or reduced their portion sizes to make their food last longer. Others had to borrow money from shop owners, friends or relatives to feed their families. Local officials across the areas noted a rise in child protection issues, particularly school dropouts, neglect and child labour. With households becoming increasingly desperate, displaced children are working primarily for their survival and that of their families. Exposure to unsafe and harmful working conditions can harm the health and wellbeing of children. The most at-risk groups across the four locations include children with disabilities, street-involved children and children working in irregular work that is likely to be accompanied by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. One of the more tragic reported coping mechanisms families have adopted is arranging early marriages for their female children.

Conclusions

Despite the comprehensive rights afforded by Uganda's asylum and refugee regime, the increasing trend of refugees self-settling in urban areas poses multifaceted challenges for these populations. Unlike the well-documented needs of refugees in settlements, those of urban refugees, especially in Uganda's secondary cities, remain relatively understudied. As highlighted in the report, urban self-settled refugees encounter specific challenges that impact their daily lives, but many of these challenges can be overcome.

As ongoing urbanisation transforms secondary cities in Uganda, sustained support is crucial to ensure the well-being and integration of all residents, including refugees. By leveraging the agency and resilience of refugees and collaborating with stakeholders, opportunities arise for fostering inclusive urban environments that benefit both displaced populations and host communities alike.

INTRODUCTION

As of the end of February 2024, Uganda hosts over 1.6 million refugees and 46,000 asylum seekers. The majority, just over 930,000 are from South Sudan, constituting almost 60 per cent of the total refugee population.[8] Additionally, there are just over 512,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) (31 per cent), and almost 52,000 from Somalia (3 per cent), along with individuals from other nationalities including Burundi, Eritrea, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Sudan.[9] Throughout the year 2023, Uganda received almost 100,000 new arrivals.[10] Over 140,000 refugees live in Kampala.

In recent years, refugees and asylum seekers have increasingly relocated and self-settled in urban areas often referred to as 'secondary cities' or 'transition cities'. This settlement-urban mobility is evident in the four urban locations identified for this study due to their significant refugee populations: Koboko, which hosts approximately 25,000 refugees,[11] Adjumani, with a reported 12,397 refugees,[12] Mbarara with around 6,000 refugees and Hoima with another 6,000 refugees. These populations consist of refugees who have relocated from settlements or are newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers who settled directly in these urban locations.

The objective of this report is to provide insights into the perspectives and lived realities of refugees in these secondary cities, aiming to highlight and deepen understanding of their legal protection needs. It intends to offer valuable information for humanitarian and development actors working with refugees in Uganda, shaping discussions on urban strategies to support these populations.

The report begins by providing an overview of the mobility and profile of the urban self-settled population in these four locations. Subsequently, it describes the challenges related to residency status, access to identity documentation, Housing, land and property (HLP) and employment. It highlights the consequences of being unable to enjoy these rights and presents evidence suggesting acute needs and challenges across all four locations. Additionally, it identifies clear opportunities for stakeholders to take steps to enhance urban refugees' enjoyment of rights and increase their self-reliance. To conclude, the report summarises the main findings and emphasises the importance of continued and broadened support to address these key challenges, improving the protection environment and ensuring access to durable solutions.

METHODOLOGY AND VALIDITY

This mixed-methods research project collected quantitative and qualitative data, complemented by a desk review of existing literature and insights from NRC Information, counselling and legal assistance (ICLA) programmes. The report focuses on four urban municipalities: Mbarara, Hoima, Adjumani and Koboko. While the exact number of refugees residing in these locations is unknown, the Koboko Town Clerk estimated that the municipality hosts around 25,000 refugees and asylum seekers. This estimate served as a basis for computing the sample sizes for the other three areas. In total, 1,520 households were sampled, with 380 households targeted in each location. Households were randomly selected to participate in the study with a 95 per cent confidence level and a five per cent margin of error. Additional fieldwork included 20 focus group discussions (FGDs) with male and female refugee community members and 20 key stakeholder interviews (KIIs) with government agencies, municipal officials and other stakeholders. The data collection occurred in November and December 2023 and was conducted by a team of research enumerators and NRC staff.

[8]Figure as of 29 February 2024, UNHCR Uganda- Population Dashboard," Accessed 7 March 2024, https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga
[9]Ibid.
[10]UNHCR Refugee Influx Dashboard - Uganda Refugee Response, Accessed 7 March 2024, https://data.unhcr.org/es/dataviz/68
[11]VNG International, 2023, Self-Settled Refugees and the Impact on Service Delivery in Koboko Municipal Council., Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.vng-international.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FINAL-Nexus-brochure_small.pdf. This information was also confirmed during the KIIK2 and KIIK4.
[12]Office of the Town Clerk, 2023, Adjumani Town Council Report Refugee Statistics - 7 December 2023.

The research team employed triangulation, comparing findings across multiple data sources. This involved comparing quantitative findings with qualitative data and crosschecking the data with previous assessments and research conducted by other organisations.

Box 1: Demographic Profile of Quantitative Survey Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents included in the household survey provides essential context for the research findings. The vast majority of respondents were refugees (96 per cent), while two per cent identified as stateless,[13] 1.1 per cent as migrants and 0.9 per cent as asylum seekers. Regarding gender, two thirds were female (67 per cent) and one third (33 per cent) were male. Half of the respondents were aged between 19 and 35 years old, highlighting the significant youth refugee population. This was followed by respondents aged between 36 and 59 years old (35.7 per cent), those over 60 years old (7.8 per cent) and minors (around 5 per cent).

In terms of marital status, just over half (56.3 per cent) reported being married, 23.5 per cent were single, 7 per cent were separated and 2.9 per cent were divorced. Notably, almost 10 per cent of the respondents were widows whilst widowers accounted for less than 1 per cent of the population surveyed. This distribution underscores the profound impact of conflicts and violence in their country of origin on the demographic makeup of the population. One in two households reported having a lactating or pregnant woman at the time of the data collection. Overall, most of the respondents reported being the head of the household, with 52.1 per cent female and 45.2 per cent male.

NRC included the Washington Group Questions[14] in the survey to identify and report disability data. The questions focus on difficulties in seeing, hearing, mobility, communication, cognition and self-care, allowing for self-reporting of functioning at the individual level. The evidence indicates varying degrees of disabilities across all seven functions. Specifically, 82 per cent of respondents reported no difficulties, while around 14 per cent reported some difficulties, 3.3 per cent reported experiencing a lot of difficulties and 0.4 per cent reported not being able to perform these functions at all.[15]

KEY RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Refugees' profile and mobility

This section provides an overview of the refugees' profiles and outlines the trends and factors influencing self-settlement in urban areas.

The displaced population in the four secondary cities reflects the broader refugee population in the country. The majority of refugees interviewed come from South Sudan (47.8 per cent), followed by DR Congo (36.3 per cent), Somalia (7.3 per cent), Burundi (4.4 per cent), Sudan (0.9 per cent), Eritrea (0.1 per cent), Ethiopia (0.1 per cent) and other nationalities (0.1 per cent). Most respondents reported arriving in Uganda between 2015 and 2020 (35.7 per cent), between 2011 and 2015 (23.6 per cent) and before 2010 (29 per cent). However, there has been a constant significant influx of new refugees, with 3.6 per cent arriving in 2021, 1.5 per cent in 2022 and 1.3 per cent last year.

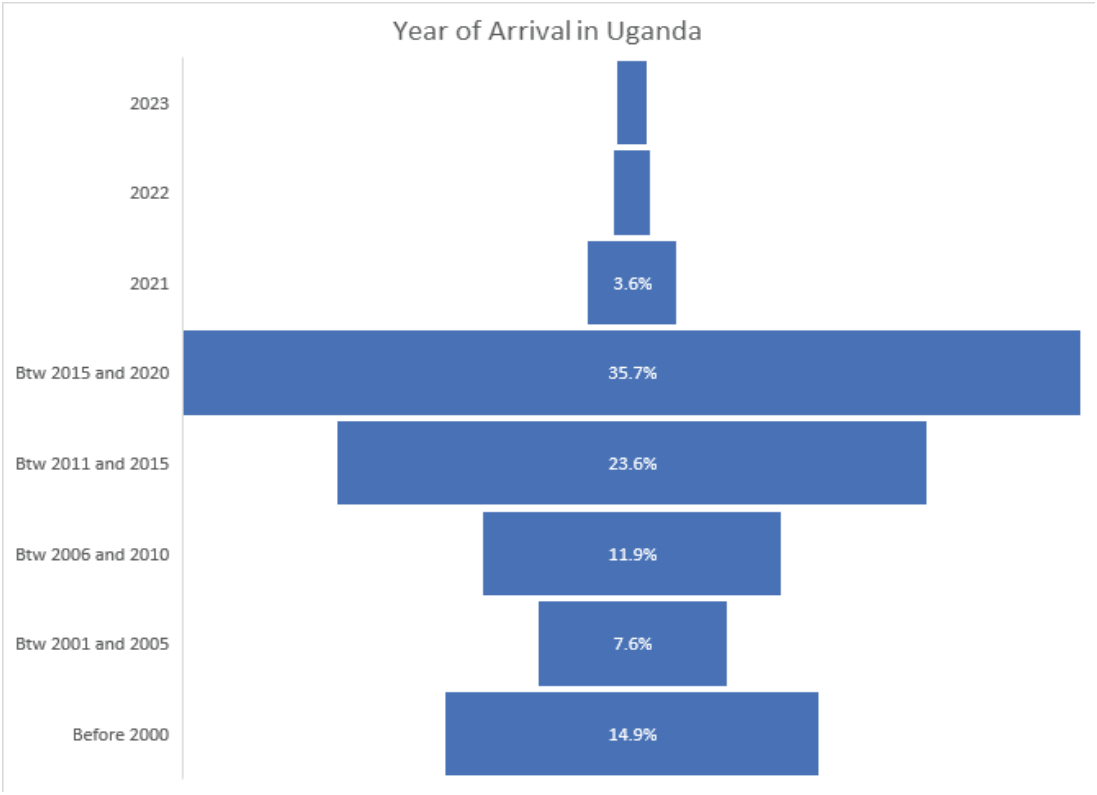
Regarding urban-settlement mobility, this trend is relatively recent, as illustrated in the figure below. Between 2016 and 2020, 40.3 per cent of refugees self-settled in Adjumani, Koboko, Hoima and Mbarara, with just over 19 per cent in 2021 with a steady 11 per cent flow during the last two years. This secondary movement to urban areas signifies mobility and demonstrates a decree of agency as refugees proactively choose to settle in new locations.

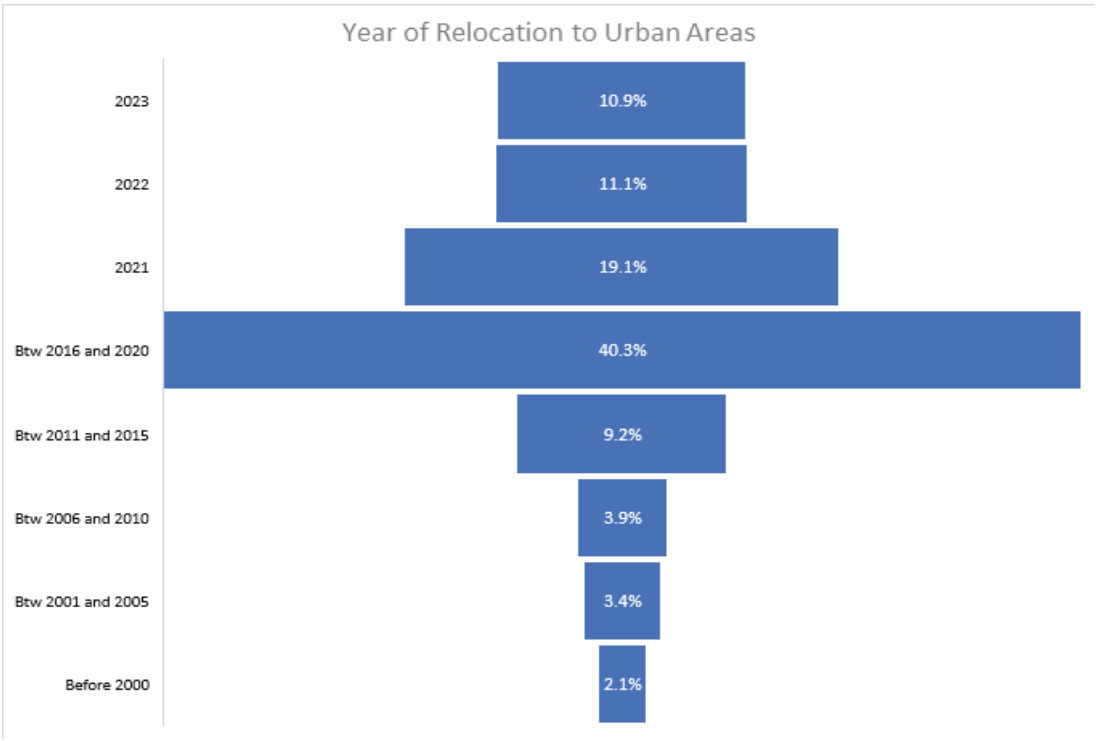
[13]The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines statelessness as "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law." Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons_ENG.pdf

[14]Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability, Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/

[15]The response options were: 1. No difficulties; 2. Some difficulties; 3. A lot of difficulties; and 4. Cannot do it at all.

Figure 1: Year of arrival in Uganda and Figure 2: Year of relocation to urban areas





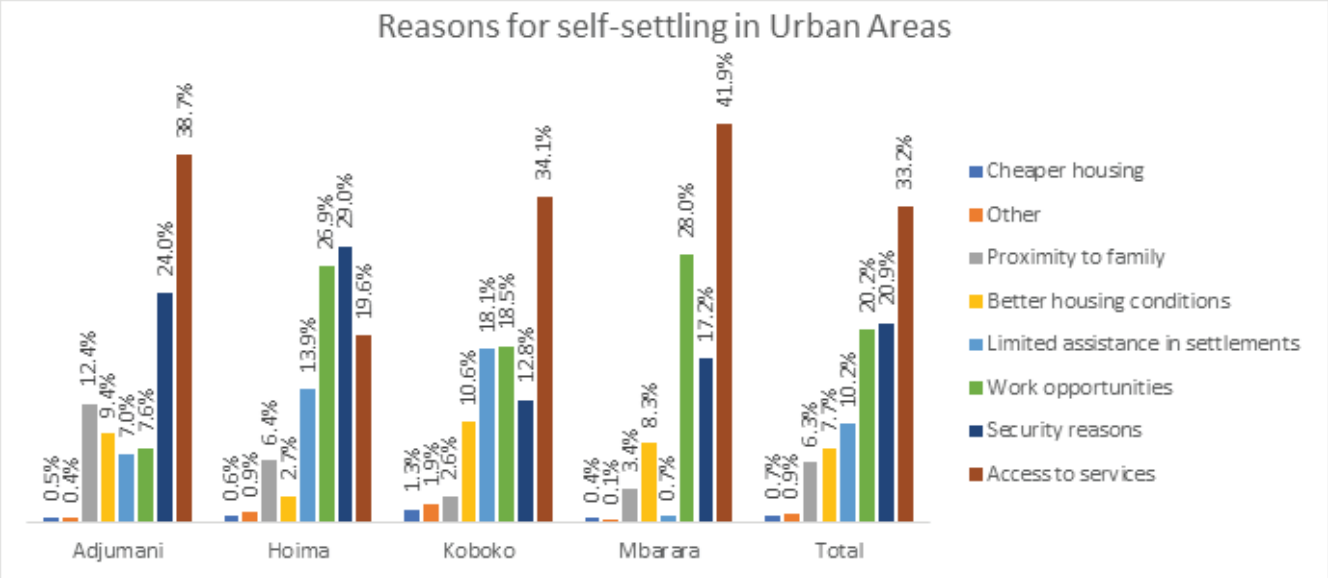
"Moving to Koboko was the first step to move out of the cycle of aid dependency"
– Male Refugee in Koboko

© Dixon Odur / NRC

"Moving to Koboko was the first step to move out of the cycle of aid dependency"
– Male Refugee in Koboko

The evidence highlights the dynamic and complicated nature of refugees' decision to self-settle in urban areas. Primary factors influencing their decisions include proximity to services such as health and education (33.2 per cent), access to work and livelihood opportunities (20.2 per cent) and improved security (20.9 per cent). Secondary factors include reductions in humanitarian assistance in settlements (10.2 per cent), better housing conditions (6.7 per cent) and proximity to family (6.3 per cent). Variations between the four urban settings are illustrated in the figure below.

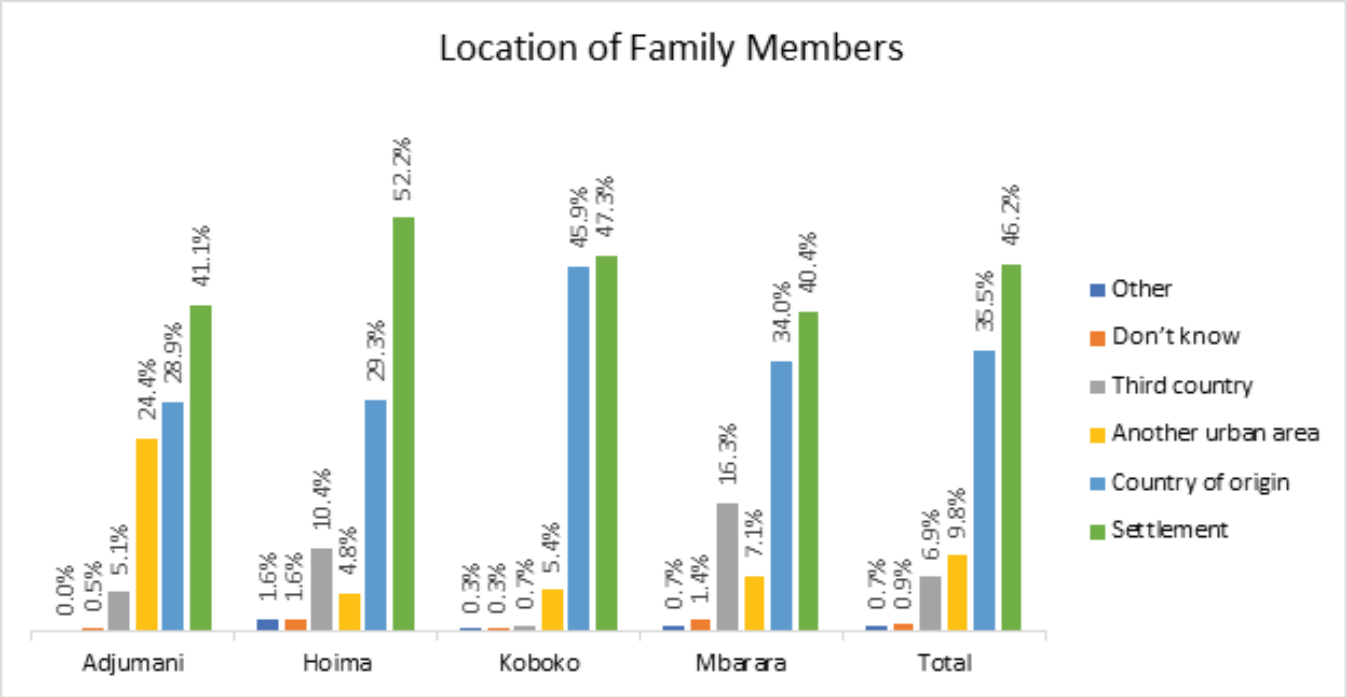
Figure 3: Reasons for relocating and self-settling to urban areas



Opting to relocate from a settlement to these secondary cities can imply forfeiting access to humanitarian assistance, particularly for refugees who do not have family ties in the settlement they are leaving. More than half of the respondents (58 per cent) reported relocating with their entire family to one of the four urban locations, while the remaining respondents had their families separated across various locations. Among this group, 46.2 per cent had family members in a settlement, often to ensure continued access to assistance.[16] Additionally, some had family members back in their country of origin (35.5 per cent), in another urban area (9.8 per cent) and/or in a third country (6.9 per cent).

[16] FGDK1, KIIA2, KIIA4, FGDA1, FGDK6, FGDH2.

Figure 4: Location of urban self-settled refugees' family members



The settlement pattern of refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas, dispersed across various neighbourhoods and intermixed with the host populations, presents a significant challenge in both identifying and maintaining contact with them, making them a hard-to-reach population. Local authorities in the four municipalities voiced concerns regarding the lack of clear data on the refugee population. In addition to having to register with OPM to obtain refugee status,[17] refugees should register with the local councils in urban areas, however many are not aware of this requirement.[18] Local officials have emphasised that information on the resident refugee population is needed for security reasons, for planning purposes and for enhancing the government's capacity to deliver more inclusive services.[19]

Legal stay and refugee status determination

In this section, the report examines legal stay and refugee status determination, emphasising the registration challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in Uganda's urban areas.

The evidence indicates that the overwhelming majority of respondents were refugees (96 per cent), although two per cent identified as stateless (N=31),[20] 1.1 per cent as migrants (N=18) and 0.9 per cent as asylum seekers (N=13). Most refugees reported holding Refugee Identity Cards or being recorded in the Refugee Family Attestation (91.2 per cent), while 8.8 per cent reported not having such documents. There were no significant variations between genders. Regarding asylum seekers, 13 were residents in Koboko, Hoima and Mbarara with no reported asylum seekers in Adjumani. Although the sample is small, two thirds possessed an Asylum Seeker Certificate (N=9), while the remaining third claimed that they did not have such registration (N=4).

"The Uganda Refugee Policy creates its own contradictions: refugees have freedom of movement and are allowed to self-settle outside of the settlements, including in secondary cities, but those who do so are either still registered in a settlement or not registered at all." – Male refugee in Hoima

None of the four urban locations selected for the research are 'refugee gazetted areas',[21] meaning the OPM does not provide refugee registration services in these secondary cities. Consequently,

[17]The OPM provides refugee registration in Kampala and within the 13 refugee gazetted settlements that are integrated within local communities across 11 Local Government Districts. Accessed 7 March 2024, http://urrms.opm.go.ug/settlement.html
[18]KIIA3, KIIA4, KIIH1, KIIA1, Adjumani Town Council, Report on Refugees Statistics, 7 December 2023.
[19]KIIK2, KIIA1, KIIH5, KIIA3, KIIA4, KIIA5, KIIK5, KIIH2.
[20]See the definition of statelessness above. This area requires further research as there can be misconceptions and confusion between being undocumented and stateless.
[21]As per Art. 44 of the 2006 Refugee Act.

asylum seekers and refugees must register in a settlement before moving to an urban location. However, they are required to return to the settlement for any procedures related to their legal stay in Uganda, such as adding or removing family members from the Refugee Family Attestation or participating in verification exercises.[22] The evidence also suggests that some refugees opt to settle directly in urban areas to reunite with family members without registering with the OPM.[23]

Legal identity documentation including civil registration

This section offers an overview of the current level of access to civil documentation, encompassing birth, marriage and death registration and the consequences of being unable to acquire these vital documents.

Access to civil documentation and other legal identity documentation is not only a basic human but also a prerequisite for the enjoyment and realisation of other rights, such as nationality, education, family life and freedom of movement.[24]

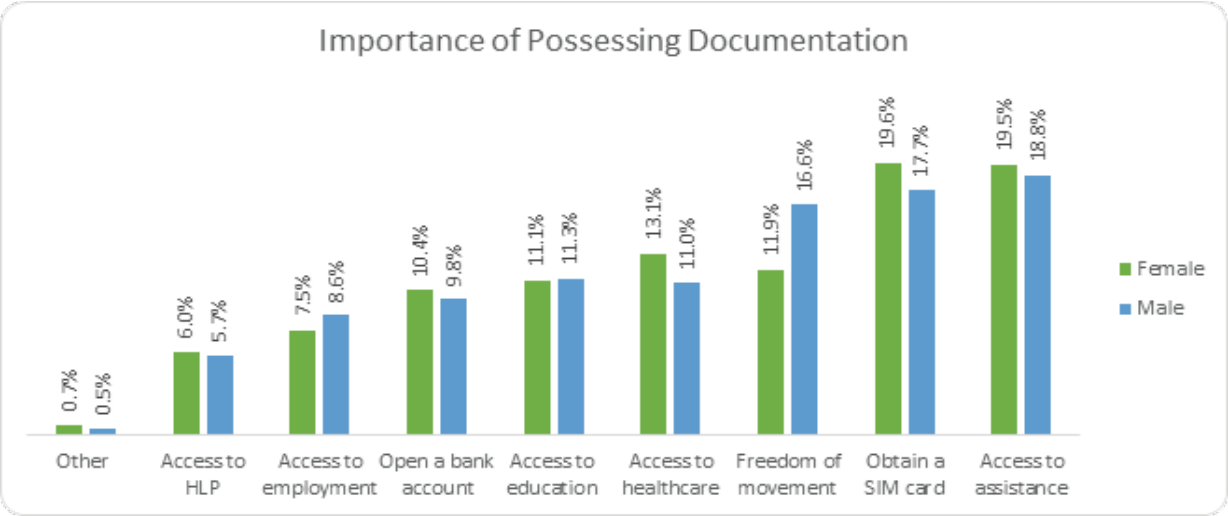
> *"There is an information gap and refugees and Ugandans do not obtain the documents that they need."* – Local authority in Koboko

Half of the refugees interviewed in the four locations (53 per cent) reported that identification documents are inaccessible, while a third (33 per cent) stated that documents were accessible, and the remaining 14 per cent were uncertain. This lack of accessibility is exacerbated by limited awareness of application procedures and requirements.[25] Notably, women refugees disproportionately lack information on birth, marriage and death registration compared to men. Since arriving in Uganda, many women have had to assume new roles and responsibilities, including seeking and obtaining the required identification documents for themselves and their families. Language barriers compound the problem, as information is often not available from service providers in the refugee's native language.[26]

The evidence indicates, that according to the refugees surveyed, possessing these documents is crucial for several reasons, including accessing assistance (19.3 per cent), obtaining a SIM card (19 per cent), moving within the country (13.5 per cent), accessing healthcare (12.4 per cent), registering children in school (11 per cent), opening a bank account (10 per cent), securing employment (7.9 per cent) and obtaining access to HLP (6 per cent). Particularly in urban areas, where refugees interact with different authorities more frequently than in settlements, these documents hold increased value and are used in everyday life.[27]

[22]KIIK1, KIIK2, KIIK3, KIIA2, KIIA4, KIIH5, KIIA5, KIIH1, KIIH2, FGDK5, FGDK6 KIIK2, FGDK1, FGDK3, FGDK4, FGDA1, FGDK5, FGDK6, FGDK7, FGDH1, FGKM1, FDGM2, FGDH2.
[23]KIIK4, KIIA3, KIIA4, KIIH5, FGDK3, FGDK4, FGDH1, FGDM1, KIIH2.
[24]United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014, Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3. See also UN Human Rights Council (HRC), 2017, Birth registration and the right of everyone to recognition everywhere as a person before the law: resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/RES/34/15; HRC, 2016, The right to a nationality: women's equal nationality rights in law and in practice: resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/RES/32/7; ¶ HRC, 2016, Strengthening policies and programmes for universal birth registration and vital statistics development, A/HRC/33/22.
[25]FGDK3, FGDA1, FDGK5, FGDK7, FGDH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, KIIH2, KIIG1.
[26]KIIA4, KIIH4, KIIH5, KIIK1, KIIK5, FGDK5, FGDH1, KIIH1, FGDM2.
[27]KIIH4, KIIH5, FGDK1, FGDK2, KIIA1, KIIA3, FGDK3.

Figure 5: Importance of possessing documentation by gender



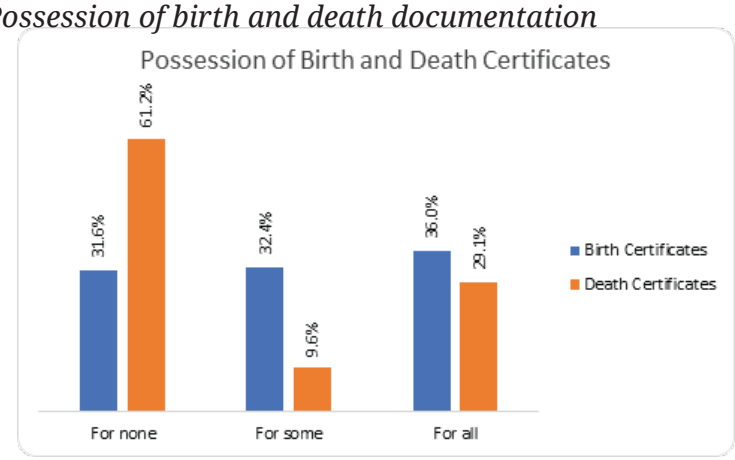
Birth, marriage and death registration

The evidence collected highlights a concerning lack of access to birth, marriage and death certificates among refugees. Regarding birth registration, the majority of refugees surveyed reported having children and other minor dependents living within their households (61 per cent). However, there was significant variation in the possession of birth certificates. Only one third of households reported having birth registration for all dependents, another third had registration for some and the remaining third had no documentation at all. Many who are without birth certificates cited reasons such as the documents being difficult to obtain, lack of information about the procedures, or the high cost involved.

> *"Death documentation is almost non-existent for Ugandans and refugees in the country"*
> – Local Authority in Hoima

Compared to birth registration, the process of completing death registration among refugees is even more limited. Of refugees surveyed, around 38 per cent reported having lost a family member while displaced in Uganda (N=498). However, more than half (61.2 per cent) lack any death documentation, a small percentage had documentation for some (9.6 per cent) and close to a third (29.1 per cent) had the documentation for all deceased family members. Death documents are key civil documents for establishing the death of an individual and for survivors to enjoy their legal rights, including the right to remarry, inherit property or obtain other benefits. [28]

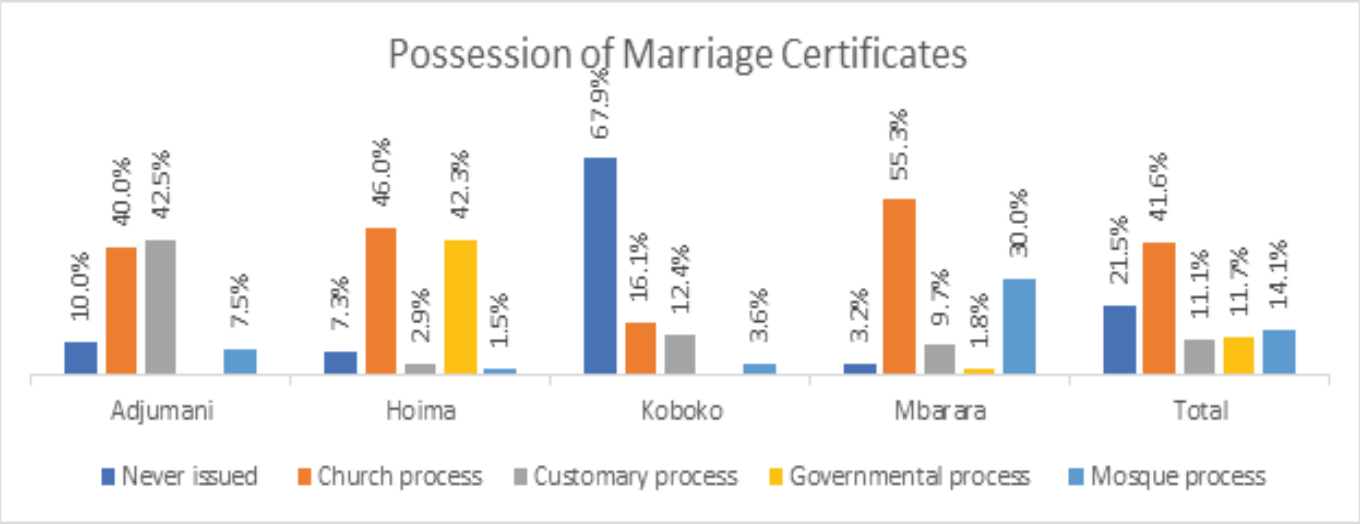
Figure 6: Possession of birth and death documentation



[28]KIIK1, KIIA2, FGDK2, KIIH5, FDGK5, KIIK5, FGDH1, KIIH1, KIIH2

Regarding marriage registration, just over half of the respondents (56 per cent) were married. Among these, the majority possessed a certificate issued by a church (41.6 per cent) or a mosque (14.1 per cent), whilst a small percentage followed the official (11 per cent) or customary (11 per cent) registration process. The remaining 21.5 per cent did not possess any documentation.[29] Marriage registration is a crucial process and can have serious implications for all family members. Without it, parents may struggle to enjoy their inheritance rights and could encounter difficulties in proving family composition and lineage. This issue is particularly significant for displaced widows, disproportionately affecting refugee women in Uganda given the high number of male conflict-related casualties in the country of origin.[30]

Figure 7: Possession of marriage documentation



Consequences of lacking documentation

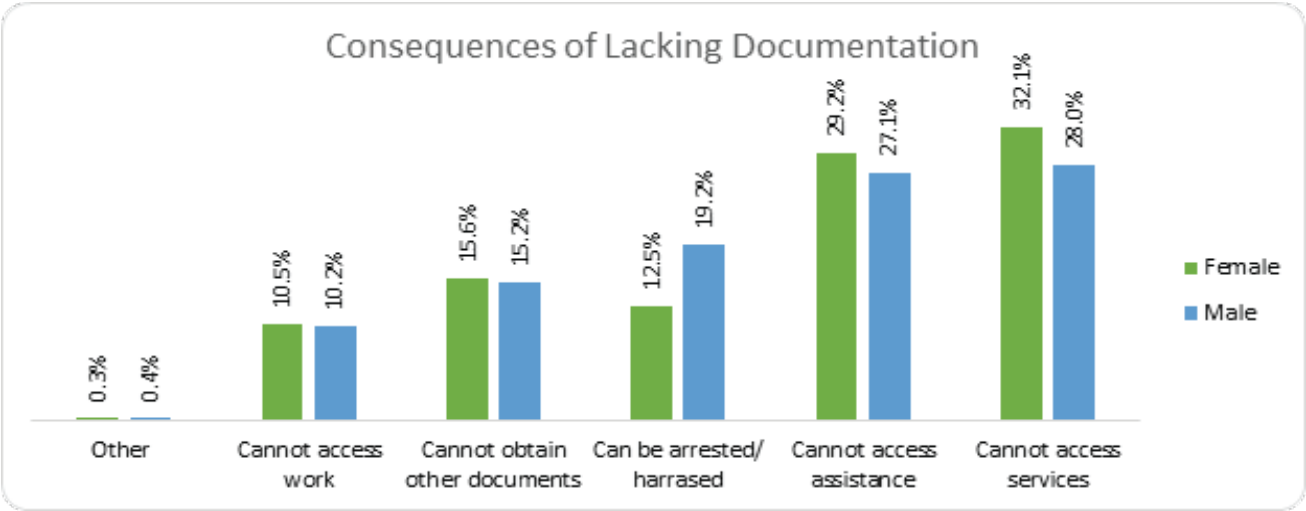
"Without documents, life is not possible for refugees"
- Female refugee in Mbarara

Legal identity and civil documentation are interconnected, and the inability to obtain birth registration often arises from the cumulative effect of multiple barriers, creating an ultimately insurmountable obstacle. Consequently, some refugees remain undocumented, lacking official evidence to prove vital events, or under-documented, with incomplete registration - such as when a child only has a birth notification from a medical facility and no birth certificate from the mandated government organisation The National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) required for complete birth registration.[31] In these scenarios, children face heightened protection risks, potentially leading to statelessness if they are unable to prove lineage and the nationality of their (alleged) parents.[32]

Refugees reported the absence of documentation gives rise to challenges, including accessing essential services such as healthcare and education (30 per cent), accessing humanitarian assistance (28.1 per cent), being exposed to arrest and/or harassment (15.5 per cent), complications in obtaining other documents (15.3 per cent) and facing barriers to employment (10.3 per cent). These tangible consequences negatively impact daily life during displacement. For many displaced individuals, particularly children, the full impact and consequences of being undocumented may only become apparent years into the future when pursuing higher education, seeking legal employment or attempting to travel to their country of origin or a third country.

[29]KIIH1, KIIH2, FGDH1, FGDH2, FGDK4, KIIK1.
[30]KIIK2, KIIA2, KIIA3, KIIH5, FGDK3, FGDK4, FDGK5, FGDA3, FGDH1, FGDM1.
[31]KIIA5, KIIH4, FGDK7, FGDA3, KIIH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDH1, FGDH2, FGDK2, FGDK4, FGDK5, FGDM3.
[32]UNHCR, 2017, Good Practices Paper - Action 7: Ensuring birth registration for the prevention of statelessness", p. 3

Figure 8: Consequences of lacking documentation by gender



Housing, land and property

This section provides an overview of key challenges related to HLP faced by refugees self-settled in Koboko, Adjumani, Mbarara and Hoima. In these four locations, areas heavily populated by refugees typically feature a combination of residential and commercial zones. According to surveyed refugees, half reported living in permanentstructures (51 per cent), while the remaining half reside in temporary structures (49 per cent). The evidence indicates that a higher proportion of female-headed households live in temporary accommodation, suggesting a higher level of vulnerability among this demographic.[33] Overall, housing fails to meet minimum humanitarian standards, exhibits poor sanitation and suffers from severe overcrowding, with entire families often living in a single room.[34] Households with a family member who has a disability face unmet acute needs.[35]

Box 2: HLP rights

In humanitarian responses, HLP rights are commonly understood as having a home free from the fear of forced eviction and a place that offers shelter, safety and the ability to secure a livelihood. The concept of HLP includes the full spectrum of rights, held according to statutory or customary law or informally, to both public and private housing, land and property assets.[36] HLP rights are referenced and defined in several international and regional human rights instruments, and national legal frameworks.[37]

Land tenure refers to the relationship of individuals and groups to land and housing, which can be defined legally, through custom or informally. Tenure can take many forms, including ownership, lease, occupation, cooperative housing, emergency housing and informal settlements. In Uganda, land tenure is multifaceted, bringing into play social, cultural, economic, institutional and political dimensions, which are often key considerations in secondary cities. Tenure security involves protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats to residents and users, irrespective of the type of tenure.

Tenure vulnerability

In terms of tenure arrangements, two thirds of refugees are renting a house (64.4 per cent), while a minority opt to rent a room (11 per cent). Some refugees claim ownership of their

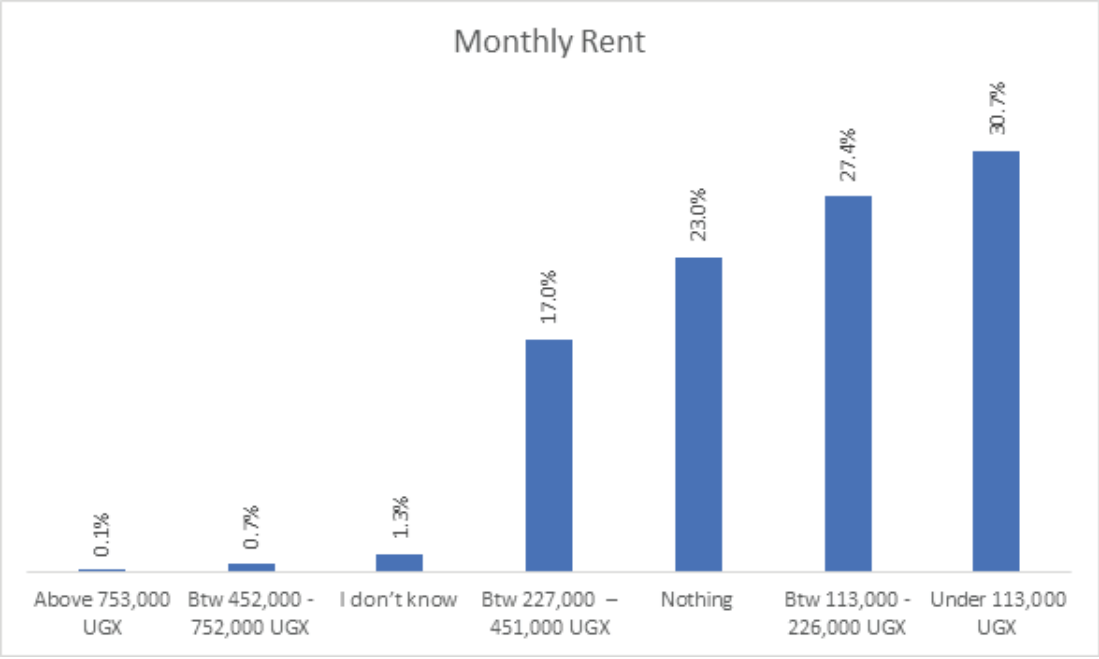
[33]See: NRC, (Forthcoming) Protection Brief on Kampala South West and West Nile Regions for a more detailed analysis of protection and gender issues in urban and settlement contexts
[34]KIIK2, KIIA1, KIIA2, KIIH5, KIIA3, FGDA1, FGDK6, FGDH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDM3, KIIH2.
[35]FGDK1, KIIH5, FGDK4.
[37]This is the definition of HLP commonly used by NRC in reports and studies and by the Global Protection Cluster, Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/AoR/HLP Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), for example, recognises "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing". More information on the scope of HLP can be sourced from the Global Protection Cluster https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/AoR/HLP and NRC's 2011 HLP training manual available online https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/tools-and-guidance/essential-protection-guidance-and-tools/hlp-essential-guidance-and-tools/
[38]The equivalent of USD 29 based on exchange rates in March 2024.
[39]The equivalent of USD 29 - USD 58 based on exchange rates in March 2024.
[40]The equivalent of USD 58 - USD 114 based on exchange rates in March 2024.

accommodation (18 per cent), which requires further investigation. A small percentage report staying with family (3 per cent) or friends (3 per cent).

The data highlights a concerning lack of security of tenure across all four secondary cities. Only 40 per cent of the refugees interviewed reported having a written tenancy agreement for their accommodation. Among those lacking a written tenancy agreement, 80 per cent have a verbal arrangement with the landowner, typically for a short duration. These short-term arrangements and the absence of written agreements result in limited tenure security: only 40 per cent of respondents were confident that they could remain in their accommodation for the next three months, while 27 per cent lacked confidence about the arrangement and 22 per cent felt they had to leave in the near future. Female heads of households face challenges negotiating and arranging housing for their families, particularly outside settlements where the Government manages land allocation. Negotiating with Ugandan landowners creates an uneven power dynamic, placing refugees, especially women, who for the most part are assuming this responsibility for the first time, at risk of exploitation. Additionally, female refugees often lack awareness about the benefits of written agreements or how to request them from their landlords.

In terms of rental arrangements, almost a quarter of refugees renting in the four areas are staying "for free". Others pay varying monthly rent amounts: 30.7 per cent pay under UGX 113,000,[38] 27.4 per cent pay between UGX 113,000 and UGX 226,000[39] and 17 per cent pay between UGX 227,000 and UGX 451,000.[40] Reports from FGDs and KIIs reveal widespread exploitation of refugees who rent accommodation and the use of negative coping strategies. In Koboko and Adjumani, refugees believe believe that property owners charge them higher rents compared to Ugandans and are more inclined to exploit them. Arbitrary rent increases were common due to the absence of written agreements.

Figure 9: Monthly rent fees

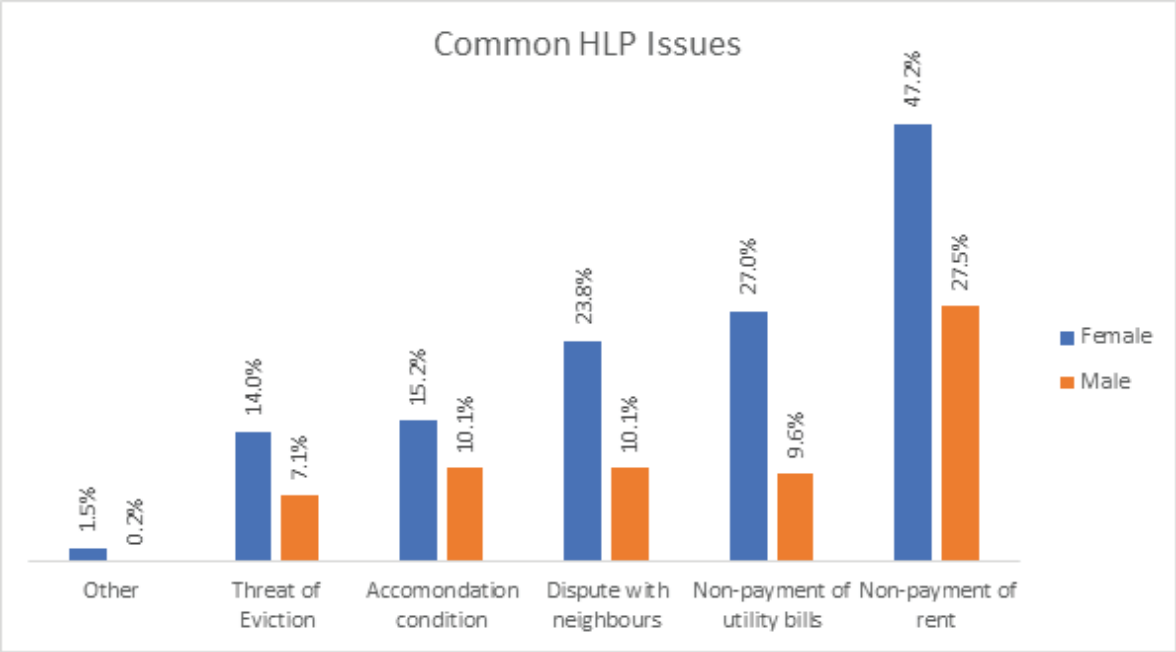


Common HLP Issues

> *"Disputes are not really resolved; refugees are evicted and have to find another accommodation."* – Female refugee in Mbarara

Refugees frequently cite rent payments as the primary source of disputes with landlords (37 per cent),[42] followed by utility bills (18 per cent), disputes with the neighbours (17 per cent), accommodation conditions (12.5 per cent) and the threat of eviction (10.5 per cent). Insights from FGDs identified the key burden rental payments impose on refugee households. Due to insufficient and irregular income, refugees often struggle to keep up with rent, leading to the accumulation of unpaid rental fees until eviction becomes inevitable.[43] Many refugees describe the constant fear of forced eviction as an *'invisible threat'*.[44] Forced evictions not only uproot refugee households from their communities and support networks but often also force them into even more inadequate living conditions or homelessness. Such evictions disrupt access to livelihoods, result in children being withdrawn from schools and have negative mental health consequences due to the stress and trauma they induce.[45]

Figure 10: Common HLP issues by gender



Inheritance disputes often arise in international marriages, particularly when one spouse is Ugandan and the other a refugee. Upon the death of the Ugandan spouse, their family may contest the inheritance, as they do not want the property to end up in the hands of the refugee spouse. In these scenarios, the lack of official marriage registration makes it impossible for the surviving refugee spouse to secure the inheritance.[46]

Data suggests that, in the case of HLP disputes, the preferred method of resolution is for the parties to settle the dispute between themselves without involving an outside party (33 per cent). Several actors, including local leaders (28 per cent), municipal officials (4.7 per cent), OPM representatives (2.7 per cent) and/or customary committees (1.3 per cent) can help facilitate agreement.[47] Their involvement often strengthens the commitment of disputants to voluntarily reach agreements and increases their willingness to implement the agreed settlement. Police intervention (10 per cent) becomes necessary particularly when disputes escalate into violence.[48] Litigation, viewed as costly and time-consuming, is only considered a viable option by a minority of refugees (3 per cent).[49]

[41]KIIK2, KIIA2, KIIA4, FGDA1, FDGK5, FGDM2, KIIH1.
[42]FDGK1, FDGK2, FGDA3, FGDH2, KIIH2.
[43]KIIK2, KIIA1, KIIK4, FGDK1, FGDA1, KIIK5, FGDK6, FGDH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDM3, KIIH1.
[44]KIIK3.
[45]KIIK3, KIIH5, KIIA3, KIIA6, FGDK1, FGDK4, FGDA1, FDGK5, FGDK6, FGDH1, FGDM1, KIIK5, FGDA3, FGDH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDH2.
[46]KIIK3, FGDK3, KIIK5, FGDK5, FGDK6, KIIH1.
[47]KIIH1, FGDM3, KIIH2.
[48]KIIK3, KIIH5, KIIA3, FDGK5, KIIK5, FGDM3.
[49]KIIH5, KIIA3, FGDK4, FGDA1, KIIH1, FGDK2, FGDK3, FGDA1, FGDK5, KIIH5, FGDA3, FGDM1, FGDM2, KIIH2

Business and Employment

This section details the challenges refugees face in accessing employment and business opportunities and provides insights into discrimination and disputes.

Under-employment and informal employment

Despite a favourable policy environment granting refugees the right to work, only one in two refugees reported working, with minimal variation between female and male respondents. Among working refugees, an equal proportion are self-employed or employed by others. A larger proportion of women (37 per cent) reported working independently compared to men (15 per cent).

Qualitative data suggests that many refugees find work in agriculture, often in paid positions, with the construction sector emerging as a growing area of employment in urban areas. Other common semi-skilled occupations include working in restaurants and shops.[50] Self-employment in Uganda tends to involve lower-skill activities and lower pay.[51] Refugees often are more likely than Ugandan nationals to take entry-level positions to avoid unemployment, even if their skills exceed the job requirements. Local authorities and refugees highlighted structural disadvantages in the labour market such as the non-recognition or partial recognition of refugees' qualifications from their country of origin.[52] Additionally, there is a general lack of awareness of employment rights and regulations among both displaced and host populations, leading to uncertainty for many potential Ugandan employers regarding the employment of refugees.[53]

The Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control (DCIC) only issues work permits on refugee Convention Travel Documents (CTDs), which few refugees possess, thereby limiting access to formal employment for most.[54] Only a quarter of employed refugees reported having some form of contract in writing. Informal employment plays a significant role in Uganda's economy and labour market, providing employment opportunities and income generation for displaced populations.[55] However, working without formal authorisation or running an unregistered business adds another layer of precariousness to the existing challenges faced by refugees.[56]

When asked about their confidence in their current work, only 17 per cent of refugees interviewed felt confident about keeping the same job for the next three months. The majority expressed uncertainty about their future employment situation (53 per cent) or concern about needing to seek new employment in the near future (30 per cent).

Discrimination and disputes at the place of employment

> *"Refugee who are exploited at work don't report their employer because they are afraid of being sent back to the settlements."* – Female refugee in Adjumani

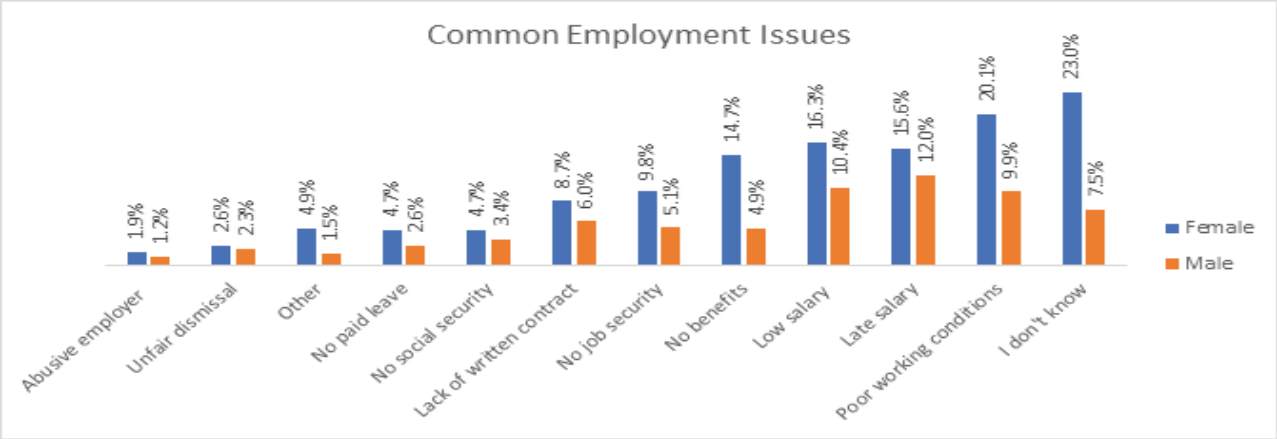
Discrimination is pervasive in many aspects of refugees' employment, including hiring and firing practices, payment of salaries and benefits, job assignments, promotions, training opportunities and other terms and conditions of employment. The evidence highlights several key employment-related issues, such as poor working conditions (15.3 per cent), late payment of salaries (13.8 per cent), low wages (13.3 per cent), no benefits (9.8 per cent), lack of job security (7.4 per cent), lack of social security (4 per cent) and/or paid leave (3.2 per cent).

Gender disparities are evident across all forms of employment, with women experiencing higher rates of informal employment and reporting lower awareness levels of labour rights than men. This places women refugees at a heightened risk of exploitation. Issues related to abusive employers were reported by 1.5 per cent of respondents, predominately by female refugees in FGDs.[58] Communication barriers arising from language differences further compound these employment-related challenges.[59]

---

[50]KIIH5, FGDA1, FGDK4, FGDK5, FGDA3, FGDH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDM3, KIIH1, FGDH2, KIIH2.
[51]UNHCR, 2021, Uganda Employment Policy Brief, July 2021, p.3, Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/unhcr-policy-brief-uganda-employment
[52]KIIH5, KIIK1, FGDH2.
[53]KIIA6, KIIH5, FGDK4, KIIK5, FDGA2, KIIH1, FGDM2.
[54]KIIA6, KIIH5, FGDK4, KIIK5, FDGA2, KIIH1, FGDM2; UNHCR, 2021, Uganda Employment Policy Brief, July 2021, p.3, Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/unhcr-policy-brief-uganda-employment
[55]FGDA1, FGDK4, FGDK5, FGDA3, FGDH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDM3.
[56]KIIH5, FGDA2, FGDK4, FGDK5, FGDA3, FGDH1, FGDM2, FGDM3, KIIH1, FGDH2, KIIH1; NRC, 2023, A critical turning point: the path to durable solutions for refugees in Uganda, p.10 Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/a-critical-turning-point-the-path-to-durable-solutions-for-refugees-in-uganda/a-critical-turning-point_full-report.pdf
[57]KIIK2, KIIA2, KIIH5, FGDK2, FGDK4, FGDA1, FDGA2, FGDA3, FGDH1, KIIH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDM3.
[58]KIIH2, FGDH1, KIIH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDH2.
[59]FGDH1, KIIH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDH2, KIIH2.

Figure 11: Common employment issues by gender



Discrimination and inequality of treatment persist when refugees seek justice for employment violations or abuses. As a result, the majority of refugees opt to resolve disputes directly with their employers (26.7 per cent) or with the intervention of local leaders (22.7 per cent). Other involved parties can include the police (12 per cent), municipal officials (6.7 per cent) and OPM representatives (3 per cent). Less than two per cent of refugees interviewed reported resorting to court to access justice indicating a reluctance to engage in formal legal processes. Refugees noted that this reluctance stems from the unfair treatment, they encounter, including prejudice and explicit discrimination. The experience of discrimination not only has adverse economic and social impacts but also leaves psychological scars,[60] including turning refugees into *'discouraged job seekers'*.[61]

Limited business registration

The qualitative data suggests that some refugees managed to start and run small businesses across all four locations. However, many lack information on procedures and requirements for establishing a business, accessing financial capital and complying with tax regulations. Only a handful reported being fully licensed and paying taxes following the law.[62] Municipal authorities also reported that refugees often register incorrectly – for instance, they might register as a community-based organisation, which is typically a non-profit entity, despite engaging in profit-making businesses like running a restaurant or shop.[63]

Box 3: Relationship between host and refugee communities

Displaced populations generally enjoy peaceful and productive relations with the host population of the assessed localities. Most refugees reported positive (50 per cent) or very positive (32 per cent) relationships, demonstrating how they live alongside the host population, especially where they have attained a growing degree of self-reliance and improved their economic circumstances. This also builds on the significant correlation between refugee-host interaction and how these host communities perceive refugees. In the four locations, displaced and nationals regularly engage with each other in various settings including schools, churches, mosques, markets, social gatherings and community-based organisations.[64] In Koboko, the ethnolinguistic proximity between refugee and host populations is associated with more positive attitudes.[65]

However, when disputes occur, these are primarily linked to different cultures, ways of living and language barriers. The evidence shows that disputes and tensions at the community level can also be entrenched in access to HLP and employment.[66] Moreover, a decrease in humanitarian aid is leading to tensions with the host communities – especially concerning land. Host communities and local authorities are concerned that these changes may render refugees less able to pay rent, which could lead to eviction and increased violence.[67]

[60]KIIH2, FGDH1, KIIH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDH2.
[61]FGDH1, KIIH1, FGDM1, FGDM2, FGDH2, KIIH2.
[62] FGDK6, FGDH1, KIIH1, KIIH2.
[63]FGDH1.
[64]KIIH5, FGDK3, KIIK5, FGDH2.
[65]KIIM2, KIIK3.
[66]FGDK4, FGDA1, FGDK6, FGDA2, KIIH2.
[67]FGDK3, FGDA1, KIIH4, FGDK6, FGDA2, KIIH2.

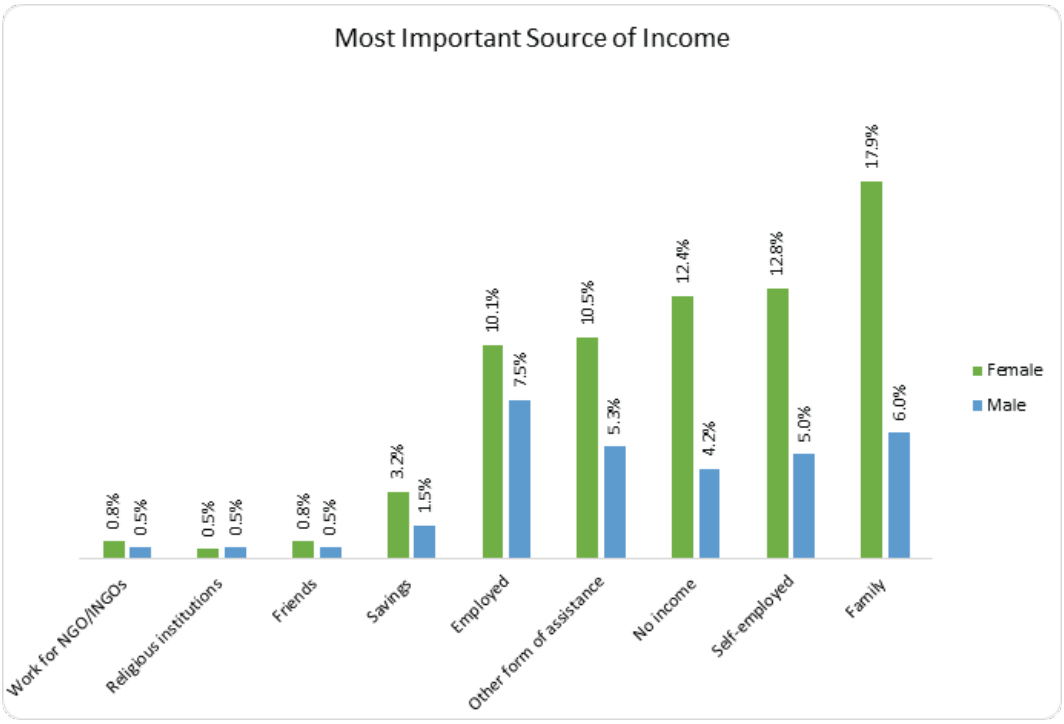
Consequences and coping mechanisms

This section sheds light on the consequences of the legal protection challenges faced by urban self-settled refugees and documents the strategies they are adopting to manage these issues.

> *"It is hard for everyone, but it is harder for refugees."*
> – Local authority in Adjumani

Given that only half of the urban self-settled population work, refugees reported a clear necessity for alternative means to support their families. The evidence shows they primarily rely on family support (23.8 per cent), with additional support coming from other sources of assistance (15 per cent). Over 16 per cent of refugees do not have any form of income to sustain them. Across all locations, refugees have exhausted their savings with a minority (4.7 per cent) considering it as the most important source of income, as illustrated below. Poverty prevails among the displaced population, with the pressing need for money to cover essential items including food, rent and healthcare as strongly echoed by refugees across all locations.

Figure 12: Most important source of income by gender



Female refugees are nearly three times more likely than male refugees to rely on family support (17.9 per cent compared to 6 per cent), reporting either no source of income or an unreliable one. In Hoima and Mbarara, some female refugees have resorted to prostitution to pay their rent.[68] Unstable employment and loss of earnings create financial strain, often leading to household stress and relationship discord or breakdown. While family support helps buffer the impact of unemployment, many women expressed the desire to work, become independent and provide for their families.[69]

Unable to work, and lacking savings, some refugees and asylum seekers have reduced their meals to one per day and decreased portion sizes to make their food last longer.[70] Others have resorted to borrowing money from shop owners, friends or relatives to feed their families. In Hoima, some moneylenders have taken refugees' documents until the loan is repaid, exacerbating vulnerabilities for refugees who are unable to prove their identity.[71]

[68]FGDH1, FGDM1.
[69]FGDH1, FGDM1, KIIH1, FGDH2, KIIH2.
[70]KIIK2, KIIA1, FGDK3, FGDA3, KIIH5, FGDK1, FGDK2, FGDA1, FGDA3, KIIH1, FGDM1, KIIH1, FGDH2, KIIH2.
[71]KIIH1.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, local officials noted an increase in harmful coping mechanisms, particularly regarding education for children. Many schools closed during this period and some children never returned to learning once they reopened. The inability to pay school fees further compounded the problem for refugee families with multiple children and dependents.[72] Local officials across the four areas observed a recent rise in child protection issues, particularly neglect and child labour. Desperate situations have compelled families to resort to having children work for their survival and to contribute to their families' financial support. This often exposes them to unsafe and harmful conditions, which can adversely affect their health and wellbeing.[73] In Koboko, municipal officials reported a number of child-headed households as parents return to South Sudan to follow up on their property and secure a livelihood at their place of origin.[74] In Hoima, local authorities mentioned thatsome refugee children were recently involved in theft and are detained pending trial.[75] The most at-risk groups are similar across the four locations: children with disabilities, street-involved children and children engaged in irregular work that is likely to be accompanied by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Reports from refugees in Koboko indicate instances of children being smuggled across the border.[76] Reflecting distressing coping mechanisms, families in these areas are also reported to be arranging early marriages for their female children.[77] In Koboko and Hoima, municipal authorities observed an increasing rate of child pregnancy.[78]

CONCLUSIONS

Uganda's asylum and refugee regime deserves commendation for the extensive rights afforded to refugees, including the right to work, access to public services and freedom of movement throughout the country. This has led to an increasing number of refugees, like other population groups, relocating to urban areas. While the needs and situation of refugees in settlements are widely studied and well documented, those of urban refugees, particularly in Uganda's secondary cities are less understood. The evidence presented in the report fills an important

[72]KIIH5, FGDA1, FGDK4, FGDK5, KIIK5, FGDH1, FGDM1, KIIH2.
[73]KIIK2, KIIK3, KIIA4, KIIA6, KIIH5, FGDK3, FGDA1, FDGA2, FGDH1, FGDM3.K5.
[75]KIIH2.
[76]FGDK6.
[77]KIIK2, KIIH5, FGDK3, FGDK5, KIIK4.
[78]KIIK3, FGDK6, KIIH2.

knowledge gap on settlement-urban mobility and urban self-settled refugees in Adjumani, Koboko, Hoima and Mbarara, describing identified trends and outlining needs. The report highlights acute challenges, with many asylum seekers and refugees facing challenges securing/renewing their legal status, obtaining necessary identity documentation, securing housing, land and property and gaining employment.

The lack of documentation, both for proving legal stay and identity, can have long lasting and far-reaching implications. In these urban locations, this increases protection risks with, for example, refugee children lacking birth registration facing limited access to education. Death and marriage registration are also of critical importance, as they directly affect inheritance, guardianship, parentage, and nationality of children. Refugee women who informally marry nationals face particular challenges in claiming inheritance.

The lack of documentation also hampers refugees' access to HLP rights and income-generating opportunities. In these urban areas, refugees often live in temporary accommodations that fail to meet minimum humanitarian standards and offer limited security of tenure. Evidence suggests that a higher proportion of female-headed households live in temporary dwellings, suggesting that these households may experience higher levels of vulnerability. Although refugees have the right to work under favourable policies, only half report working, typically in entry-level positions that do not fully utilise their skills. Many continue to rely on family and other forms of assistance, with poverty prevailing. Disputes with landlords over rent and utility bills are common. Some refugees and asylum seekers have resorted to limiting their meals to one per day, reducing portion sizes to stretch their food supplies, while others borrow money from shop owners, friends or relatives to feed their families. Officials across the four areas noted a rise in child protection issues, including school dropout, neglect and child labour.

Given these challenges, the report identifies tangible opportunities for the Ugandan Government, humanitarian and development partners to uphold the rights of urban refugees and promote their increased self-reliance. Local authorities recognise refugees as integral to their area's social, cultural, and economic fabric: they co-exist with the host communities and interact daily with duty bearers.

The high population growth in secondary cities, coupled with a significant refugee population and ongoing urbanisation trend, creates a heightened demand for essential administrative services, housing, land and property and employment opportunities that cater to the needs of all urban residents. Access to employment rights and decent working conditions is fundamental for everyday life, enabling individuals to afford rent, and is key to self-reliance and durable solutions. The movement of refugees from settlements to urban areas reflects a sign of mobility and agency, with many refugees interviewed in this research, viewing self-settling in these urban locations as the first step towards reducing their dependency on aid and becoming self-reliant. It is critical to build on this sense of agency.

Municipal officials interviewed for the report expressed their eagerness to enhance services for the displaced population, in terms of both documentation and access to HLP, employment and livelihood opportunities to foster self-reliance and increase community contributions. Authorities requested technical and financial assistance to strengthen and support displaced and host women's meaningful inclusion in these urban environments, promoting gender equality and facilitating access to the labour market.[79] Additionally, they requested support for structured dialogue between host communities and refugees to nurture positive relationships and build a shared sense of community. While Uganda has been hosting refugees for decades, their presence in secondary cities is relatively new, requiring efforts to strengthen social cohesion and peaceful co-existence.[80] Continued and broadened support is essential to effectively address these challenges, improve the protection environment, facilitate access to durable solutions and assist municipalities and authorities in adequately planning for the needs of all residents.

[79]KIIA3, KIIA4, KIIH5, KIIK1, KIIK2, KIIK5, FGDK5.
[80]FDGA2, KIIK2, FGDK3, FGDG5, FGDA3, FGDH1, KIIH2, KIIG2.

NRC

NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL