



Refugee Law Project

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Sustainable tomorrow without a guaranteed today? A call for renewed commitments towards gender equality in a time of existential threats

It's 8 March 2022, and it's International Women's Day. First commemorated by Uganda in 1984, IWD garners support for women's rights and re-affirms the country's commitments to ensuring that all women and girls within its borders lead dignified lives.

Uganda's commendable milestones in advancing women's rights politically, socially, and economically, include Uganda's Parish Development Model, which ringfenced 30 per cent of resources towards women's enterprises. But as we commemorate IWD 2022, it is important to recognise several dynamics that must be addressed to achieve the much desired sustainable tomorrow.

Key overarching issues

The 2022 International Women's Day theme, "*Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow*" comes at a time when the world is relentlessly struggling existential threats;

Firstly, **planet earth is battling environmental and climate change-related existential threats**. Due to global temperature rise and resultant floods, droughts, earthquakes, wildfires and species loss, humanity is already experiencing disasters on a greater scale than previously thought possible. With women and girls at the epicentre of daily struggles for subsistence and fuelwood, they are also heavily impacted by all these dynamics.

Secondly, **the world is recovering from COVID-19 induced lockdowns**, during which the family as a core institution was tested to breaking point as households wrestled with associated physical, psychological, and economic stress. Early pregnancies create obstacles to returning to school and reduced involvement of young women in debates about a sustainable tomorrow.

Thirdly, **increasing tensions and clashes between refugees and their hosts over scarce natural resources**. Refugees and hosts alike depend on natural resources for fuelwood, shelter, agriculture, and income. The increase refugee numbers in Uganda increases competition over land, water, wetlands, vegetation and forest products, and aggravates cases of physical and Sexual Gender-Based Violence.

Fourthly, this year's commemoration coincides with **a world struggling to pull back from the brink of a third world war, but already confronted with a mass exodus of civilian women and girls on the one hand, and mass arming of untrained men and boys on the other**.

What IWD theme means for refugee women and girls in Uganda in 2022

This year's theme aligns with the 66th Commission on the Status of Women, which is keen on "*Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes*". Besides adopting the international theme, Uganda emphasises engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in climate change, environmental, and disaster risk management.

Realising Gender Equality today for a sustainable tomorrow requires that people, government stakeholders, civil society, private sector, development and humanitarian actors, as well as the international community, wrestle with critical questions and priority areas such as;

Land: IWD 2022 should push us to retable decades-old conversations and struggles on access to land and other productive resources for women and girls, and to add in the hard reality that the 30x30m of land offered to refugees in rural settlements cannot sustain food crop production, let alone support climate change mitigation and disaster risk management. While adding land for refugee women might be part of the solution, such measures must also address issues of power and control between men and women when it comes to this primary factor of production and the harvests produced on it.

Livelihoods: Settling refugees in environmentally marginal locations with few available services, and at the same time reducing distributions of food and non-food items – particularly in a time of pandemic lockdown - has inevitably pushed refugee women with limited options to scouting nature for survival. Unless incomes are diversified or alternative sources of livelihood and fuelwood availed, rural-based vulnerable refugee women have limited options besides clearing above the ground bio-mass. It is important that they be introduced to livelihood practices that harness resources sustainably.

Male involvement: The 2022 theme emphasises 'engaging' men and boys in proactive climate change mitigation, adaptation, and responses adds to the conventional male engagement pillars of; ending violence against women and girls, HIV/Aids prevention and response, Sexual Reproductive Health Rights, unpaid care work, children's upbringing. **It is important that this is one in ways that address** questions such as: does engaging men undermine the agency of women and girls, reinforce patriarchal powers of men over women, reduce already meagre resources for women's empowerment, and further frustrate hard-earned gains in women's empowerment?

Legislative and Policy reforms: Uganda's Constitution grants equal access to essential resources for all people within its borders. However, besides registered and titled land, most land in refugee hosting areas is customarily owned, with men as primary custodians and most women and girls still access land through their husbands and sons. IWD 2022 reminds us to amplify advocacy, awareness, education, and engagements, especially with cultural leaders, to realise transformative changes women's and girls' enjoyment of their constitutionally granted rights.

Climate Change is Science, NOT Politics! Where are women and girls in this debate? Uganda's pursuit of a middle-income economy recognises the importance of education and in particular, science and technology. In 2022 we must ask whether Uganda's women and girls are equipped with the science needed for environmental discourse. According to UNICEF and UNFPA's 2022 report titled "*Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda: The Cost of Inaction*", 18% of annual births in Uganda result from teenage

pregnancy. Inactivity on teenage pregnancy could see 64% of teenage mothers unable to complete primary education. This report adds to Uganda's 2016 Demographic and Health Survey, which revealed that 1 in 4 adolescent girls between 15 and 19 are already mothers or pregnant with their first child.

How should we guarantee a sustainable future if children become mothers and drop out of school, and if national policy reinforces these dynamics? In 2022, Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports issued guidelines demanding that school-girls undergo mandatory periodic pregnancy tests and, when found pregnant, be granted mandatory maternity leave at three months. The guidelines allow pregnant girls to sit for final examinations, but not to attend classes.

Health. To what extent are refugee women able, ready, and willing to engage? Livelihood and self-sustenance are pillars of key policies, including the Refugees and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). Intended to empower and skill refugees including refugee women to supplement humanitarian handouts, these laudable programmes, however, exclude many vulnerable women and girls whose profound physical, psychological, psychosexual, psychosocial, and political harms suffered before, during, and after flight are not attended to. These war-related injuries require timely and professional care if women and girls are to be able to contribute fully.

Refugee Law Project's Intervention

As a Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants, Refugee Law Project (RLP) recognises the impact of changing climate on women and girls irrespective of their legal status, and their contribution in environmental protection.

One of the project's objectives is to enhance durable refugee-host relations through engaging host communities in mitigating impacts of sudden overpopulation and resultant environmental degradation through income generation and reforestation activities. With funding support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, RLP has embraced mitigation and adaptation strategies, including tree growing in Adjumani, Lamwo, and Kiryandongo districts. 205 acres of land have been 'greened' with a variety of trees with nutritional and climate change values. We have promoted community dialogues, engaged younger generations through school debates, facilitated learning and exchange visits for university students and tree growers, conducted training of relevant stakeholders, and supported institutions to run nurseries raising over 400,000 seedlings.

Call to Action

For people heading to Yumbe district, where the national event will be held, let's be reminded that IWD 2022 calls us all to transition from rhetorical proclamations to actionable commitments. Realising Gender Equality today for a sustainable tomorrow cannot be achieved from a one-day event, but requires continuous rigorous actions by all.

Our actions and inaction are equally loud! We implore community members, government stakeholders, civil society, private sector, donor community, diplomatic missions, and the international community to;

- **Expedite the National School Health Policy to address the issues of teenage pregnancies** and allow girls, who are also victims of institutional failure to protect the younger generations, to return and stay in schools
- Engage schools and communities in understanding **the 2020 revised guidelines for prevention and management of pregnancy in school settings** in the context of refugee and forced displacement alongside measures aimed at changing attitudes towards pregnant girls
- Encourage realization of the **parliamentary resolutions to end teenage pregnancies**
- **Fast track implementation of the 2015 National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancies in Uganda** to save vulnerable girls from child marriage and teenage pregnancies
- **Invest in community women's groups and organisations engaging women and girls in environmental protection projects** through direct funding, capacity building, partnerships, and exchange learning visits
- **Invest in physical and mental health for vulnerable refugee and host women** who have experienced unspeakable and inhumane acts of sexual violence before, during, and after conflicts.
- **Support initiatives such as the Koboko Action Plan to promote commercial agriculture for refugees and host women.**
- **Ensure refugee and host women's participation in Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIA)** for environmental management and site planning.
- **Support refugee women's participation in district environment protection committees**
- **Translate relevant laws and policy documents into refugee-friendly languages**, including the Climate Change Act and the 2019 water and environment sector response plan for refugees and host communities in Uganda.
- **Review and re-align policies and legislative frameworks** designed before COVID-19 to match current realities. For instance, Refugee Integrated Response Plan developers did not envisage pandemics such as COVID-19.

From rhetorical proclamations to actionable commitments

Happy International Women's Day, 2022!

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