



## **Scattered Dreams, Broken Promises:**

### Refugee Adolescent Girls in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, Uganda

A Study Conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission

March 2013

#### *REPORT FOR COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTORS*

#### **WHO ARE WE?**

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) is a research and advocacy organization based in New York, United States. Our goal is to improve the lives and protect the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and young people. We advocate for changes in laws, policies and programs that affect people displaced by war, persecution or natural disaster.

#### **WHY DID WE COME TO UGANDA?**

The WRC traveled to the Kyaka II Refugee Settlement in Kyegegwa District in southwestern Uganda to speak to refugee adolescent girls ages 10-16. We talked with girls about their problems and what could be done to improve their lives. The goal was to make sure that agencies working with refugees understand the unique situation of adolescent girls. We will use the findings from our study to encourage agencies working with refugees to develop programs that help keep adolescent girls safe.

#### **WHAT DID WE DO DURING OUR VISIT?**

The WRC met with 93 refugee adolescent girls. Most of them were from the Democratic Republic of Congo; a few were from Rwanda and Burundi. We also met with dozens of adolescent boys and 20 mothers and 25 fathers of adolescent girls. Finally, we met with more than 25 staff from agencies working at Kyaka II. We talked to all these people in focus group discussions and individual interviews. We asked them how they see the problems of adolescent girls and how the community could help address them.



Adolescent girls in a group discussion in Bukere Zone, Kyaka II

## THE CONTEXT

Uganda is signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and has signed its 1967 Protocol. The Government of Uganda allows refugees to move and find employment in or outside the settlement. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with various NGOs, the Government of Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC), provides essential programs in health, education, livelihoods and protection services. But life for a refugee, *especially a refugee girl*, is still very difficult. Why?

1. Poverty is the main reason for exploitation, abuse and neglect of children, especially girls. Girls are sometimes taken out of school and forced to marry. They are overworked in part because of family financial pressures and because of limited options for livelihoods. Many girls do not use available services in the settlement. When girls experience sexual exploitation and abuse, they rarely report them to the authorities. Instead, family negotiations occur first, in which girls have little or no power to say anything about decisions that impact the rest of their lives.
2. Although primary education is free and girls' school enrollment has increased in recent years, girls remain in school much less than boys in all settlement schools (primary and secondary). Because families cannot afford to buy basic school materials, girls often have to drop out of school. Sometimes girls get pregnant or get married off too early, and leave school. This has a negative impact on their future and the life they will lead as an adult.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

1. Girls are affected by physical insecurity inside and outside the settlement. Along paths to school, near water sources, in schools and outside on roads, girls experience physical abuse and fear beatings by peers, teachers, parents, men and boys.

2. School dropout rates for girls are high because of poverty and lack of money to pay for basic materials, such as school supplies, books and uniforms. Girls are also at risk of dropping out of school because they experience sexual abuse and exploitation, and early pregnancy.
3. Primary education is taught partly in the local Ugandan language Kitoro. As a result, many children cannot read the signs about how to report sexual and gender-based violence that are posted throughout the settlement in Kiswahili and English. This increases girls' risks.
4. Sexual exploitation and abuse are an enormous part of girls' lives. Girls are often the most exploited, but also the least heard. Effective programs to prevent and respond to violence and abuse are few, and girls do not have many chances to be involved in these programs when they do exist.
5. Girls worry about many health issues, including early pregnancy, but health services are not adolescent- or girl-friendly. Girls fear seeking services, particularly reproductive health services, because of social stigma.
6. There are not many skills training opportunities, and those that exist are too expensive for girls. Girls also miss chances to develop life skills because they are often too busy carrying out household chores or are out earning money.
7. Girls have limited access to friends and role models that they can rely on during times of need. Because of lack of peer and mentor support, they are not able to take advantage of opportunities for improving their lives.

## **WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND?**

### **UNHCR should:**

- Improve physical security in the settlement. They should install lights to and from wells and clear bushes around the boreholes. They should explore placing security personnel on roads, in and near markets, schools, water points and firewood collection areas.
- Advocate with the Ugandan government and implementing agencies for English to be used in primary education at all levels. Ensure that teachers are qualified and equipped to teach in English. Strengthen training for teachers to maintain standards and provide incentives to retain good teachers.
- Explore ways to increase scholarships for secondary education so girls can continue their education beyond primary school.
- Talk with adolescent girls and their parents or caretakers about the needs, risks and proposed solutions for protecting and empowering girls. Make sure their voices are included in program designs.

**Service providers and refugee community-based organizations should:**

- Increase support for girls to report GBV in and outside school. Create an accountability structure in schools so that teachers and students have clear boundaries. Define roles and responsibilities clearly.
- Offer girls flexible access to training in life skills, decision-making, critical thinking, communication and negotiation skills. Design programs with input from diverse groups of girls (out-of-school girls, married girls and girls from other marginalized groups). Help staff find ways to make it easier for girls to participate.
- Invest in girls' social networks. Let them have space and time to build friendships and find mutual support from peers and adults in their communities.
- Support skills training programs for older adolescent girls; include activities that are alternatives to farming. Encourage older girls to pursue trades that are not traditional for women, as these tend to pay more than traditional female trades.
- Review the current sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) referral pathways and make sure that program services are more adolescent-friendly. Work closely with relevant sectors (e.g., health, protection, security) to identify cases of GBV experienced by adolescent girls and ensure adequate follow-up. Conduct evaluations on the referral pathway's effectiveness to ensure that adolescents use them.
- Reach out to parents and guardians so they understand the disadvantages of early marriage and labor exploitation and the benefits of education.
- When non-food items are distributed, give priority to items that affect girls' protection. These include soap, basins, sanitary pads, clothing, including underwear and uniforms, school materials and shelter materials to improve housing.



Signs posted at a primary school in Bujubuli, Kyaka II

## WHAT WILL WE DO NOW?

The Women's Refugee Commission will share these findings and recommendations to improve the situation for refugee girls in Uganda. We plan to run a small pilot project through a local partner at Kyaka II Refugee Settlement to test out a program centering on enhancing girls' safety.

You can read our full report and recommendations in *Scattered Dreams, Broken Promises: Refugee Adolescent Girls in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, Uganda* at <http://wrc.ms/Wles5V>. Please let us know if this report was helpful to you at [info@wrcommission.org](mailto:info@wrcommission.org).

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