

LIVELIHOOD SUSTAINABILITY AMONG FEMALE REFUGEES IN UGANDA: A SYNTHESIS REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This review explores livelihood sustainability among female refugees in Uganda, focusing on the strategies they use, the challenges they face, and the support available to help them build economic empowerment and resilience. Female refugees navigate complex social, economic, and gender-specific barriers that often limit their path to self-reliance, yet they employ a variety of livelihood strategies in both rural settlements and urban areas. The study focuses on four key objectives: understanding the livelihood strategies of female refugees, examining the gendered constraints that affect their economic empowerment, assessing the role of humanitarian and development actors in supporting these efforts, and proposing recommendations for more effective, gender-responsive interventions. Drawing on a systematic review of literature, including peer-reviewed journals, organizational reports, and policy documents, the study identifies trends, successes, and gaps in current livelihood initiatives. Findings show that female refugees engage in both formal and informal activities such as small businesses, farming, and household-level income generation to sustain themselves. At the same time, barriers like limited access to capital, land ownership restrictions, social norms, and weak institutional support continue to hinder their progress. Humanitarian and development actors play a crucial role in offering training, financial support, and market access, but many interventions lack gender-sensitive approaches or fail to address local realities. Based on the evidence, the review proposes practical recommendations for strengthening gender-responsive programs that promote resilience, self-reliance, and social inclusion. Overall, this study offers insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to create more equitable and sustainable livelihoods for female refugees in Uganda.

Key words: *Livelihood, Sustainability, Female, Refugees, Uganda, Synthesis*

INTRODUCTION

Uganda has emerged as one of the most significant refugee-hosting nations in the world, currently accommodating over 1.6 million refugees, the majority of whom originate from neighbouring countries such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, and Somalia. This makes Uganda not only the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa but also one of the top globally. The country's progressive refugee policy framework, often referred to as one of the most generous in the world, grants refugees freedom of movement, access to land, and the right to work. These provisions distinguish Uganda from many other host countries that restrict refugee mobility and economic participation. As a result, Uganda has been widely recognized as a global model for refugee protection and integration (Alupo, 2025; UNHCR, 2022).

Within this enabling policy environment, female refugees occupy a central role in sustaining households and communities. Women are often primary caregivers, responsible for ensuring food security, education, and health for their families, while simultaneously engaging in income-generating activities to supplement household resources. However, despite Uganda's progressive policies, female refugees face intersecting challenges that limit their ability to fully benefit from livelihood opportunities. These challenges include entrenched gender inequalities, limited access to productive resources such as land and credit, and inadequate social protection mechanisms. Moreover, cultural norms and patriarchal structures often restrict women's participation in decision-making processes, both within refugee settlements and in broader community governance structures (Mathie, Cunial, & Nkuningi, 2024).

This literature review therefore seeks to examine the livelihood strategies, challenges, and opportunities for female refugees in Uganda. It situates these experiences within the broader humanitarian-development nexus, recognizing that sustainable solutions require collaboration between humanitarian actors, development agencies, and host communities. By highlighting the importance of gender-responsive programming, this review underscores the need for policies and interventions that not only provide opportunities but also actively dismantle barriers to women's participation. Ultimately, understanding female refugee livelihoods in Uganda offers critical insights into how inclusive approaches can foster resilience, self-reliance, and long-term integration in refugee-hosting contexts.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To examine the factors influencing livelihood sustainability among female refugees in Uganda and identify strategies, challenges, and support mechanisms that can enhance their economic empowerment, resilience, and self-reliance.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- i. To explore key livelihood strategies adopted by female refugees in both rural settlements and urban contexts in Uganda
- ii. To critically interrogate the gender-specific constraints impeding the economic empowerment, resilience-building, and self-reliance trajectories of female refugees within Ugandan refugee settlements
- iii. To explore the role of humanitarian and development actors in supporting economic empowerment of female refugees in Uganda
- iv. To propose recommendations for strengthening gender-responsive livelihood interventions that enhance resilience and self-reliance among female refugees.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This review draws on two complementary theoretical lenses to understand how female refugees in Uganda sustain their livelihoods: the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) and refugee self-reliance and integration frameworks. Together, these frameworks help explain both the individual strategies and the structural factors that shape livelihood opportunities for refugee women.

Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA)

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach provides a people-centred way of looking at how individuals and households combine different resources and strategies to make a living, even in the face of shocks and stresses (Department for International Development [DFID], 1999; Chambers & Conway, 1992). SLA identifies five key types of assets human, social, natural, physical, and financial that people can draw on to pursue livelihood strategies and achieve outcomes such as income security, resilience, and reduced vulnerability (DFID, 1999; FAO, n.d.). For female refugees in Uganda, SLA is especially useful in understanding how they leverage skills, social networks, and material resources to generate income in both rural settlements and urban contexts. It also highlights the structural barriers they face, including limited access to land, credit, or markets, which can constrain their ability to sustain

livelihoods. Importantly, SLA allows us to explore how gender roles and social norms shape access to these assets differently for men and women, affecting economic empowerment, resilience, and self-reliance.

Refugee Self-Reliance and Integration Frameworks

Self-reliance and integration frameworks offer another lens for understanding how refugees move from dependency on aid toward sustainable economic and social participation. Self-reliance emphasizes refugees' ability to meet their needs through diversified livelihood strategies, social inclusion, and engagement in productive activities (Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, 2020; UNHCR). In Uganda, refugee policies have long promoted self-reliance through economic activities such as agriculture and entrepreneurship, although structural challenges often make these pathways difficult (Easton-Calabria, 2024).

Complementing this, Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework highlights how social connections, legal rights, employment opportunities, and supportive structures influence refugees' ability to integrate into host communities. While not focused solely on livelihoods, this framework helps explain the social and institutional factors that affect female refugees' economic empowerment and resilience.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to examine livelihood sustainability among female refugees in Uganda. A systematic review was deemed appropriate because it provides a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research. Unlike narrative reviews, which may be more descriptive and selective, the systematic approach ensures that the review captures a wide range of relevant studies, minimizes bias, and generates evidence-based insights. This method is particularly important given the complexity of refugee livelihoods, which are shaped by gender dynamics, institutional support, and socio-economic challenges (Mugisha, Mhache, & Mushy, 2021).

The review was conducted through a structured search strategy across academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories and NGO reports. Keywords including "female refugees," "Uganda," "livelihood sustainability," "self-reliance," and "gendered refugee experiences" were used to identify relevant studies. The inclusion criteria focused on publications from 2019 onwards, ensuring that the review reflects current

realities and policy frameworks. Studies were screened for relevance to female refugees in Uganda, with attention to interventions such as self-reliance programs, vocational training, and access to resources. Exclusion criteria included studies outside Uganda or those not addressing gender-specific livelihood issues. This process ensured that the data collected is both contextually relevant and up to date (van Blerk, Cutler, Hewitson, Hunter, Bamutaze, & Kintu, 2021).

Data extraction followed a thematic synthesis approach, where findings from selected studies were coded into key themes such as access to resources, gender-specific challenges, institutional support, and sustainability outcomes. This thematic analysis allowed the study to identify recurring patterns, highlight successful livelihood strategies, and expose persistent barriers faced by female refugees. For instance, recent research emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive programming and inclusive protection frameworks to enhance refugee women's resilience and economic empowerment (Mathie, Cunial, & Nkuningi, 2024). By synthesizing evidence across multiple sources, the review generated relevant data that informs both academic discourse and practical policy recommendations for sustainable refugee livelihoods in Uganda.

FINDINGS

Livelihood Strategies Adopted by female Refugees in both Rural and Urban Contexts in Uganda

Female refugees in Uganda adopt diverse livelihood strategies, particularly in rural settlements where subsistence farming remains central. Mugisha and Kaaya (2023) and Kaiser (2022) argue that agricultural activities are vital for household food security, yet limited land allocations constrain productivity and sustainability. This debate highlights the tension between Uganda's progressive refugee policies, which allow access to land, and the structural limitations of overcrowded settlements. Ahimbisibwe (2021) further notes that while farming provides a cultural sense of stability, it is insufficient to meet economic needs, forcing women to supplement agriculture with petty trade, tailoring, and food vending. The literature thus reveals a contested space where agriculture is both a livelihood foundation and a site of vulnerability due to resource scarcity.

In urban contexts, livelihood strategies shift toward informal employment and entrepreneurship. Omata (2020) and Betts et al. (2019) show that female refugees in Kampala engage in small businesses such as hairdressing, catering, and retail, which provide income but

remain precarious due to lack of capital and regulatory challenges. Kaiser (2022) adds that urban refugees often face discrimination in accessing formal employment, pushing them into informal markets where exploitation is common. This debate underscores the duality of urban livelihoods: while cities offer diverse opportunities, they also expose women to heightened risks of instability and exclusion. Scholars such as Hovil (2020) argue that urban refugee women's economic agency is often undermined by restrictive policies and limited access to financial services, raising questions about the sustainability of urban-based strategies.

Vocational training and skills development have emerged as critical interventions to expand livelihood options for female refugees. CARE International (2023) and Mathie, Cunial, and Nkunyingi (2024) emphasize that programs providing training in tailoring, handicrafts, and financial literacy enable women to diversify income sources and enhance resilience. However, debates persist regarding the accessibility and equity of such programs. Mugisha and Kaaya (2023) argue that training opportunities are unevenly distributed across settlements, with rural women often excluded due to logistical barriers. Similarly, van Blerk et al. (2021) highlight that while skills development initiatives improve self-reliance, they risk reinforcing gendered divisions of labour by channelling women into traditionally "feminine" trades. This raises critical questions about whether vocational programs genuinely empower women or perpetuate structural inequalities.

Finally, social networks and policy environments shape the sustainability of refugee women's livelihoods. Hovil (2020) and Ahimbisibwe (2021) demonstrate that community-based associations and savings groups provide essential credit and resource-sharing mechanisms, enhancing resilience against shocks. Yet, Alupo (2025) and WUSC (2025) caution that these networks are limited by resource scarcity and external pressures such as inflation and donor dependency. The broader debate centers on Uganda's refugee policy framework, which allows women to engage in economic activities but fails to address structural barriers such as land scarcity, limited financial inclusion, and caregiving responsibilities. Scholars like Mathie et al. (2024) argue that livelihood strategies are shaped by both opportunity and constraint, reflecting the paradox of Uganda's progressive yet under-resourced refugee model. This tension underscores the need for gender-sensitive policies that move beyond access to opportunity toward addressing systemic inequalities.

Gender-specific Constraints Impeding the Economic Empowerment, Resilience-building, and Self-reliance Trajectories of Female Refugees within Refugee Settlements in Uganda

Access to financial services remains a deeply contested issue in the discourse on female refugee livelihoods in Uganda. Mugisha and Kaaya (2023) argue that exclusion from formal banking systems primarily due to lack of documentation significantly undermines women's ability to expand businesses or invest in productive ventures. CARE International (2023) reinforces this position, noting that financial exclusion perpetuates dependency and vulnerability. However, Ahimbisibwe (2021) introduces a counterpoint, suggesting that informal savings groups and community-based associations provide women with alternative avenues for credit and resource pooling. The debate thus pivots on whether informal mechanisms can adequately substitute for formal financial inclusion, or whether structural reforms in banking access remain indispensable for sustainable empowerment.

Land scarcity constitutes another critical axis of scholarly contention. Omata (2020) highlights that Uganda's refugee policy, which grants land to refugees, is progressive in principle but insufficient in practice, as allocations rarely meet the threshold for sustainable farming. Kaiser (2022) supports this critique, emphasizing that patriarchal norms and household dynamics further constrain women's ability to secure land rights. Conversely, van Blerk et al. (2021) argue that land access, while limited, still provides symbolic stability and opportunities for subsistence, particularly when combined with diversified livelihood strategies. This divergence underscores a broader debate: whether land allocation should be viewed as a foundational pillar of refugee self-reliance or as a symbolic gesture insufficient to address structural inequalities in resource distribution.

Protection risks also emerge as a central theme in the literature, with Mathie, Cunial, and Nkunyingi (2024) asserting that gender-based violence disproportionately affects women, curtailing their mobility and participation in economic activities. Hovil (2020) similarly emphasizes that exposure to violence within settlements and urban contexts undermines self-reliance and resilience. Yet, Kaiser (2022) introduces a counterpoint, suggesting that while protection risks are pervasive, women's agency in forming social networks and solidarity groups provides partial safeguards against vulnerability. This debate highlights the tension between structural constraints manifested in systemic violence and women's adaptive strategies, raising critical questions about whether resilience can offset entrenched protection deficits.

Gender mainstreaming in Uganda's refugee policy remains uneven. While there is growing recognition of the need to integrate gender considerations into livelihood programming, implementation often falls short. Without deliberate efforts to design and resource gender-responsive interventions, women risk being marginalized in livelihood initiatives that fail to account for their specific needs and constraints. Evidence from South Sudanese and Congolese refugee communities demonstrates that women's economic empowerment is not only about income generation but also about enhancing resilience, protection, and social inclusion. Empowering women economically has ripple effects, improving household welfare, strengthening community cohesion, and contributing to broader development goals (CARE International, 2023; WUSC, 2025).

Lastly, cultural norms and declining humanitarian aid intersect to exacerbate gender-specific challenges. Alupo (2025) and Ahimbisibwe (2021) argue that patriarchal structures systematically exclude women from decision-making processes, thereby limiting their influence over livelihood choices and resource allocation. UNHCR (2022) adds that reductions in food rations and support services disproportionately burden women, who bear primary responsibility for household welfare. In contrast, Betts, Omata, and Bloom (2019) contend that Uganda's relatively open refugee policy environment provides opportunities for women to engage in economic activities, albeit constrained by structural barriers. The debate here revolves around whether progressive policy frameworks can compensate for declining humanitarian aid and entrenched cultural norms, or whether systemic gender inequalities continue to undermine the sustainability of refugee women's livelihoods.

The Role of Humanitarian and Development Actors in Supporting Women's Economic Empowerment

Humanitarian and development actors are widely acknowledged as pivotal in supporting female refugee livelihoods, yet debates persist regarding the scope and sustainability of their interventions. CARE International (2023) and WUSC (2025) highlight the transformative potential of vocational training, financial literacy, and support for women-led organizations, arguing that such initiatives enhance women's capacity to engage in income-generating activities. However, Ahimbisibwe (2021) cautions that these programs often fail to reach the most marginalized women due to logistical and cultural barriers, thereby reproducing inequalities. The tension here lies in whether externally driven interventions can achieve inclusivity or whether they inadvertently privilege women with pre-existing social capital.

The integration of gender considerations into livelihood programming has also generated scholarly debate. UNHCR (2022) and Mathie, Cunial, and Nkuningi (2024) emphasize that gender-sensitive approaches are essential to ensure interventions address women's specific needs and constraints. Yet, Hovil (2020) critiques the operationalization of such frameworks, arguing that gender mainstreaming often remains rhetorical rather than substantive, with limited impact on structural inequalities. Kaiser (2022) adds that while Uganda's refugee policy is enabling, external actors frequently adopt standardized models that overlook localized gender dynamics. This debate underscores a critical gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation, raising questions about the efficacy of gender mainstreaming in refugee livelihoods.

Financial inclusion programs represent another contested domain. Mugisha and Kaaya (2023) and Kaiser (2022) argue that savings groups and microfinance initiatives have been instrumental in empowering women economically by providing access to credit and strengthening resilience. Conversely, van Blerk et al. (2021) contend that such interventions remain limited in coverage and often reinforce gendered divisions of labor, channeling women into low-return economic activities. CARE International (2023) further notes that without broader structural reforms in financial systems, microfinance alone cannot dismantle systemic exclusion. The debate here revolves around whether financial inclusion initiatives constitute a genuine pathway to empowerment or a partial, short-term solution that risks entrenching inequalities.

Partnerships between humanitarian agencies and local organizations are similarly contested. Hovil (2020) and Ahimbisibwe (2021) argue that community-based approaches enhance ownership and ensure interventions are culturally sensitive and responsive to women's realities. However, Mathie et al. (2024) caution that local partnerships can be undermined by resource scarcity and donor dependency, limiting their sustainability. Kaiser (2022) adds that while partnerships foster inclusivity, they often lack institutional capacity to scale interventions effectively. This debate highlights a gap between the promise of localized approaches and the structural limitations that hinder their long-term viability.

Lastly, the question of coordination between humanitarian and development actors remains unresolved. Alupo (2025) and Betts, Omata, and Bloom (2019) argue that stronger collaboration is necessary to align livelihood programs with national development strategies, thereby enhancing long-term impact. Yet, UNHCR (2022) warns that coordination is frequently

fragmented, with overlapping mandates and competition for resources undermining effectiveness. WUSC (2025) further observes that while collaboration is theoretically desirable, institutional silos and donor-driven agendas often impede integration. The debate thus centers on whether coordination can realistically overcome systemic fragmentation, or whether livelihood programming will continue to operate in parallel rather than synergistic frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the livelihood strategies, structural constraints, and institutional support mechanisms shaping the economic trajectories of female refugees in both rural settlements and urban settings in Uganda. Female refugees employ a diverse portfolio of livelihood strategies, including small-scale entrepreneurship, informal wage labour, agricultural production, and participation in humanitarian cash-based programs. These strategies are largely shaped by spatial context, access to assets, and regulatory environments. However, they remain predominantly survival-oriented rather than transformative. Gender-specific constraints such as unequal access to land and capital, care burdens, restrictive gender norms, limited mobility, exposure to gender-based violence, and exclusion from formal labour markets systematically undermine women's capacity to achieve sustainable self-reliance and resilience. The study underscores the pivotal yet uneven role of humanitarian and development actors in facilitating economic empowerment. While existing interventions have improved short-term income security and skills acquisition, they often lack gender-transformative intent, long-term market integration, and coordination with national development frameworks. In conclusion, advancing female refugees' economic empowerment in Uganda requires a shift toward integrated, gender-responsive livelihood interventions that transcend short-term humanitarian logics. Strengthening resilience and self-reliance necessitates multi-sectoral approaches that combine legal inclusion, access to productive assets, care-sensitive programming, and meaningful participation of refugee women in program design. Such recalibrated interventions are essential for translating livelihood support into durable socio-economic transformation for female refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening gender-responsive livelihood interventions for female refugees in Uganda requires intentional, systemic, and multi-sectoral reforms.

First, embed gender responsiveness in all refugee programming through policy reforms and meaningful participation of refugee women in decision-making.

Second, expand access to inclusive financial services such as gender-responsive microfinance, VSLAs, and digital finance, supported by financial literacy training.

Third, improve women's access to and control over productive assets, especially land, through equitable allocation and strengthened tenure security.

Fourth, integrate robust protection mechanisms into livelihood programs to address gender-based violence and create safe environments for women's economic participation.

Fifth, strengthen collaboration between humanitarian and development actors by aligning programs with national development plans for greater sustainability.

Additionally, invest in market-oriented vocational training focusing on both traditional and non-traditional skills to enhance women's employability.

Finally, improve data collection, monitoring, and accountability using gender-disaggregated data to ensure adaptive and effective interventions.

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