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Shifting Roles in Refugee Livelihoods

During displacement, families are jolted into new realities. From navigating new foods and new educational opportunities to negotiating a maze of new customs, displaced households struggle to master their unfamiliar surroundings. Opportunities to earn a living also greatly differed from what refugees and migrants had available to them in their countries of origin. Refugees often found these new realities also shifted roles within the family.

Unlike their counterparts who settled in camps, urban refugees did not receive direct food or material aid but were able to attend vocational trainings. While valued by refugees, these trainings were difficult to put to good use. Most of the businesses that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and churches suggested in trainings required start-up capital. For example, training in tailoring assumed that the refugee students would have the funds to purchase sewing machines. Training in computer skills assumed that refugee students would have the funds to purchase computers. Even training in hair styling required at the very least a good pair of expensive scissors. However, new arrivals did not always have the funds to make these purchases. Their first instinct was to survive, not to amass funds for a new enterprise.

In contrast to camp settings where physical aid is distributed without charge, in urban settings very few resources are offered for free. Everything must be bought and paid for and new livelihoods must be devised quickly, leaving little time for refugees to explore a range of ways to earn a living. Some were granted a grace period, afforded by hand-outs from churches and NGOs. But for many, the clock started ticking the moment they arrived. When forced to start afresh, a refugee's gender, age, or parenthood status limited his or her choices for earning a living, as did language skills, education levels, and previous work experience.

A study carried out in Europe showed that a common coping strategy for women was to take care of their children through indoor activities, while men were able to pursue work outside the home or in a common childcare facility. Women's inability to work not only reduced incomes, but also added to feelings of despair and trauma. Women felt pressure to take care of their children by finding work but were constrained by

what kind of work was actually available to them.¹ Our own study in Kampala, *Finance Integration in Displacement*, revealed similar findings. With the help of interpreters representing four different nationalities, we interviewed 30 refugees in a period of two weeks in August 2019.

In Kampala, even with limited livelihoods choices, women still seemed to fare better than men in adjusting to new surroundings. Men felt pressure to be the breadwinners for their entire family, as they had been in their home countries. They struggled during long stretches of time without income as they searched for work. Women, on the other hand, though constrained by the demands of childcare, appeared more adaptable in the face of limited options. Through grit and flexibility, they took on jobs that their husbands might not have taken. For example, Elena, a female respondent from Congo, was able to find work. At first, she worked as a casual laborer for other tailors. Through these jobs, she built strong relationships, resulting in increasingly better offers, which eventually allowed her to save money and start her own tailoring business. Her husband, Simon, also wanted to start a business. He was interested in selling jewelry but could not find a way to amass the funds to start it. Elena did not have the capital to fund both her own start-up and her husband's. When we spoke with them, Simon expressed disappointment that he would need to wait a considerable amount of time before being able to contribute to his family's income.

Another refugee we spoke with, Eric, also experienced frustration trying to find work. In his home country, Eric had worked as a broker at the border between Congo and Rwanda, helping to clear and forward goods across the border. In Kampala, however, there was no opportunity to pursue this line of work. His only option was to take on low-paying work as a day laborer. Eric's experience is reflective of many refugees who had been skilled professionals in their home countries but felt forced to take on menial work in Uganda. Still others felt their only option was to volunteer until even menial work could be found.

Women as providers

In Kampala, these differences in work opportunities meant refugees had to shift their traditional gender roles in order to make ends meet. For example, we interviewed Somali women who in Somalia typically stayed home to care for their children while their husbands worked. When Amina, a female respondent in her 30's, arrived in Kampala, she was first directed to Nakivaale Camp, about four hours from Kampala. She stayed in Nakivaale for one year, then decided to return to the city after life in the camp had become difficult, as there were no work opportunities. She could not prepare the foods she was accustomed to – the grains were unfamiliar and there were no vegetable or spices. With few opportunities to earn the money she needed to supplement her camp diet, Amina decided to return to Kampala and found a job as a waitress. While she appreciated the income of UGX 15,000 (USD 4.00), Amina felt overwhelmed in her new role as waitress and breadwinner. Back in Somalia, her husband had been the provider for their family. Further, contrary to the norms in her country, she had to talk to customers, both male and female, in order to perform her duties at work. She shared with us that she wished that things were different.

The narratives of our respondents painted a picture of split families. Many in Kampala had close relatives scattered throughout the various camps, which put a strain on familial relationships. In South Sudan, for example, families had maintained close ties, even if members lived in different towns. When the conflict arose, whole neighborhoods fled at once, leaving families no time to coordinate their departure. Those who could travel together still often found themselves separated during their journeys, some going to Kampala, while others went to the camps.

Respondents spoke about expectations within families split between Kampala and the camps. Those in the city were expected to send money to relatives in the camps, but they barely had enough to pay their own expenses. Women, if working, carried the cost of childcare and if they did not work, sacrificed their own incomes to care for their children at home. In the city, everyone paid some form of rent, whether contributing food to their hosts or money to their land-

¹ Mihaela Robila, *Refugees and Social Integration in Europe* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Division for Social Policy and Development, 2018).

lords. Rents ranged from USD 30 a month to USD 150, an amount that precluded frequent remittances to the camps.

Elena's experience reflects a story of perpetual separation. In the DRC, Elena and her husband, Simon, lived in different parts of the country. Simon worked as a contractor, while Elena worked as a tailor in their hometown. Five of their children had been visiting Simon when the war broke out, forcing Elena to flee with only one of her children. Together with other refugees, Elena crossed the border with Uganda and took a bus to Kampala. A few months after, Simon and their other five children were also forced to flee. When they reached the border, they were taken to a police camp, then later to Kyaka II, a refugee camp. With people frequently moving back and forth from Kampala to the camp and sharing information, Elena eventually learned that her family was in Kyaka II. They were reunited and registered as one family.

Today, Elena is a tailor in Kampala, where she lives with her six children. Three of her children attend school and three have dropped out to help her with the family tailoring business. The small house where they live is also where the business is located. The front room has been partitioned with curtains. On one side are three sewing machines and on the other, a living area. Simon agreed she should continue working in the city so that their children could live with her. He would stay in the camp to see what aid distributions might help the family. But their reality did not emerge according to plan; in fact, just the opposite. Elena said, "my husband lives in the camp, while I live here with the children. He does not have any work. Sometimes I send him foodstuff to supplement what he is given."

Through her income from the tailoring business, Elena pays school fees for her three children — 150,000 shillings (USD 40) per term, per child. She pays rent of 100,000 shillings (USD 27) each month and sees to it that that they all have food and clothing.

This new role, a marked shift, is not easy for Elena. In the DRC, she was a tailor, but only as a supplement to her husband's income. Simon was the parent buying food and paying school fees for the children. It also pains Elena to see that her older children cannot continue with their schooling, but she simply does not earn enough to cover the various tuition expenses.

She is hopeful that her husband will soon find a job and support the family. Until then, Elena is doing all that she can to provide.

Women left behind in their home country face the same burden of taking care of the children. Silas, a South Sudanese man in Kampala, recalled how difficult it was to support his wife and children back home. Since he came to Kampala in 2016, he has not sent money to his wife, Grace. He earns only enough to sustain himself. When the war started in their hometown, Silas sent his wife and child to live with her aunt in a different area that was safer. He did not know that he would eventually have to leave South Sudan and his wife. Unlike many refugees who were unable to reach family members, Silas was in contact with his wife and could sense her struggle. She was able to maintain her work as a hairdresser but had no financial cushion. Silas painfully recalls one instance when their child fell ill. Grace took the child to a mission hospital, but the necessary medicine was more expensive than what she could afford. She informed Silas about the situation, but he was not able to help. Luckily, Grace's aunt had some money to pay for the medication.

Three years after separating from her husband, Grace used her savings and some money from her aunt to travel to Uganda to live with him. Silas has now resumed his role as the breadwinner. He works as a waiter in a hotel, earning 10,000 shillings (USD 2.60) a day. A friend referred him to the hotel, which is owned by a South Sudanese man. But even with his income, Silas and Grace are in a bind: Silas lacks the necessary documents he needs to get a better job. Without documentation, Grace cannot start a business. It's now up to Silas to provide for the family and although he received a raise of 5,000 shillings, the rent of 100,000 shillings (USD 26.00) per month leaves little left to pay for household expenses. Silas would like to start a business but does not see how, unless he can borrow money. He is hopeful that UGAFODE, a microfinance institution based in Kampala, will issue him a loan. Unfortunately, UGAFODE also insists on proper documentation. Until Simon can get the papers he needs, he does not see his situation changing.

Children as providers

Respondents also told us of refugee children they knew who, while too young to legally work, often did.

If these children had lost their parents or their parents were sick, they had little choice but to work. If their parents were alive but asked them to work, they also had little choice. Many households relied on the help of their children.

Ramani's story illustrates such a case. We met Ramani, a 20-year-old man from Congo, in a church center that offered refugees English classes. Though Ramani had been in Kampala for six years at the time of our interview, he was just beginning to learn English. The cost of the lessons was not the reason for his late arrival to the English language — the lessons were free. Instead, Ramani was unable to attend English classes because for years, he had been the sole breadwinner in his family of eight.

In 2013, in DRC, Ramani's family was targeted by a militia, which seized upon his family's home, attacking his family members, and raping his sister. Traumatized, they headed for Uganda. When they reached Uganda, a man they met in Kampala took them to a church where they lived for two years. In 2014, with a gift of 50,000 Ugandan shillings (USD 13.00) from a church member, Ramani began to hawk jewelry. He was sixteen at the time.

Ramani, at the time we met, had been hawking jewelry for three years. Frequently, he had to divert working capital intended for the business toward meeting household expenses. Ramani's friends would often lend him money to add to his jewelry stock and he would pay them back in increments. During his three years, Ramani had to hide his business from the Kampala City Commercial Authority (KCCA), given it was an informal business. The KCCA was vigilant about refugees doing business without permits, but the permits were almost impossible to get. At one point, Ramani was caught hawking by the KCCA and was forced to make amends with a USD 8 bribe, a far cheaper settlement than the USD 26 official fine.

As Ramani's sister-in-law started to recover from her trauma, she enrolled in free vocational classes offered to refugees. In class, she learned to master beadwork. She started earning money beading and soon was able to provide for the family, allowing Ramani to take English classes. "I wanted to go back to school or

get some training, but that was not possible because I was the one providing for my family. Hawking jewelry is a difficult job. I could not get time to go for any training ... until now when my sister-in-law started earning enough money from her beadwork."

Young men approaching their eighteenth birthday often felt forced to step in to help their families, especially if they were the eldest. Some were saving money to go back to school but tuition for older children is more expensive than for younger ones. Saving up for tuition would take a long time, a reality that effectively put their education on hold. All those who we interviewed were aware that a lack of education meant little opportunity to improve their livelihoods.

After interviewing minors and observing their thirst for a good education and the opportunity to learn English, our research team concluded that humanitarian organizations should do one or all of the following:

- Help capitalize on the businesses of refugee minors and adults so they can start earning an income quickly.
- Help expedite KCCA business registration paperwork and pay the associated permit fees so that minors and adults do not suffer the consequences of hiding their activities or paying costly bribes and fines.
- Provide a year's worth of tuition for older children to continue their education.

We believe that taken together, these simple services will allow both adults and minors to more easily provide for their households, while enjoying the opportunities that a good education provides.

References

Robila, Mihaela. *Refugees and Social Integration in Europe*. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Division for Social Policy and Development, 2018.

The author would like to thank the MetLife Foundation for supporting this research. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.