

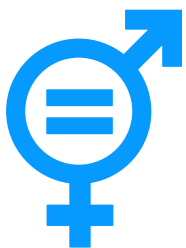


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REPORT OF THE

REFUGEE WOMEN CONFERENCE ON WOMEN PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

IN KOBOKO, UGANDA - DECEMBER 2023



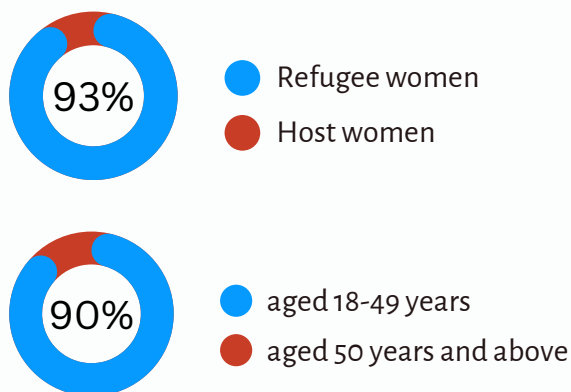
Background and Purpose

Women and girls from refugee and rural communities in Uganda face limited spaces and opportunities for leadership and decision-making in their homes, communities, and beyond due to sociocultural, economic, and political barriers. Uganda hosts over 1.5 million refugees, over 900,000 of whom live in the West Nile Region. Also, teenage pregnancies spiked by 17% due to extended school closures caused by COVID-19, further challenging women and girls. Despite 42% living below the international poverty line and women holding just 34.9% of seats in parliament, these women and girls continue to actively contribute significantly to society, including through care work, home management, community work, and group management.

In response to this critical need and with the vision to *enable people to live in more equal, peaceful, and gender-just societies based on inclusive democracies, human rights, and accountable institutions*, Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation (CECI Uganda) hosted a transformative one-day conference at the Blue Dove Hotel in Koboko Municipal Council. Held on December 5th, 2023, in partnership with OXFAM in Uganda and with funding from DANIDA, and facilitated in local languages commonly spoken by participants, this gathering was centered around *facilitating the participation of women at all levels in events and spaces at local, national, regional, and global levels* to contribute toward the creation of just societies where everyone can thrive.

Themed "**WOMEN! Be Counted, Our Time for Participation in Decision Making and Leadership is Now,**" the conference brought together **30** women aged 18 and 50 from 11 villages in Bidibidi and Imvepi Refugee Settlements and their migrant-host communities. These women, coming from various local groups and organizations, used the conference as a platform to voice their concerns and share learnings and experiences about their participation in decision-making processes and leadership roles. They discussed how gender roles, stereotypes, and male dominance over resources and leadership positions affected their participation and leadership and shared practical approaches for overcoming these barriers. They also identified opportunities for enhancing their participation and collectively drew up resolutions for advancing the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in their communities.

Participants



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The discussions were very informative and insightful, and the speakers provided valuable perspectives on various topics related to women's empowerment. Ropani Sauda, Executive Director of Partners in Community Transformation (PICOT), said, "This conference was a space for women to learn from one another and share their experiences on participation and leadership." She praised it as an inspiring event that helped attendees grow and develop. Akandru Grace, a journalist, longtime Women Rights Activist, and communications expert at ACAV, added that "it provided a safe space where we could engage as women in meaningful discussions about how to actively lead and participate in decision-making in humanitarian action and peacebuilding in our communities. Spaces like this help us challenge harmful social norms and promote gender equality and justice."



Gender-Responsive Parenting

Mary, a participant from the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, shared an important reflection at the conference that highlights the value of providing equal love, care, opportunities, and support to both girls and boys right from the very beginning: "I learned that it is us, parents, who should groom our children in a gender-sensitive way," she said. This reflection emphasizes the need for a cultural shift toward gender equality, beginning from the grassroots level within the family unit. According to her, it is the responsibility of all parents to groom children - boys and girls - in a gender-sensitive way in order to create a new generation that values and supports gender equality. It's not only important for women to hold leadership positions but also for us to change the way we think about gender roles and how we raise our children. This represents a significant step towards challenging and gradually changing the existing traditional beliefs that have long limited opportunities for women and girls in favor of their male counterparts. It marks the start of a journey to shift norms and open up more equitable spaces and opportunities for leadership and participation for both women and men.

Parents, groom children in a gender-sensitive way.

"Provide equal love, care, opportunities, and support to both girls and boys right from the very beginning"

Mary's insights show the personal growth and realizations experienced by the attendees, showcasing how the conference helped them begin to change perspectives and practices in their daily lives and communities. Mary and other participants believe that raising their children in a gender-sensitive way can help create a community where all people are treated equitably regardless of their gender. This reflects an awareness of the long-term impact of their actions, both as parents and as members of their communities, in creating a more just and inclusive community.



Women Economic Empowerment

Also, promoting economic empowerment for women was at the heart of all discussions at the conference as it was seen as key for challenging barriers to leadership and participation, such as poverty, low self-esteem, cultural norms, male dominance, and educational disparities that women face. As Esther aptly said, "To have a voice, we need economic empowerment."

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Illustrating this point, Esther, a South Sudanese refugee woman and tailor, shared her entrepreneurial journey. Starting with a modest investment of just \$200 that was given to her by a friend, she established a tailoring business. This initial step led to significant growth, enabling her to expand her business to include 26 sewing machines and 12 embroidery machines. Now valued at over \$8,000 and employing 15 people, her business makes more than \$550 every month. Esther's experience shows how empowering women economically can make them self-reliant and transform their lives. **"When you give us [women] the resources we need to support ourselves financially, you're enabling us to do great things. We can take control of our lives and make meaningful contributions to our families and communities,"** she said.



Click to watch video:

https://youtu.be/L_ROIQ6umbs

Like Esther's, the stories shared at the conference underscored the intersection between financial independence and societal influence. These stories brought to light how small-scale economic initiatives can pave the way for substantial growth, enabling refugee and host community women to take on leadership roles and actively participate in their communities. The conference illuminated the immense potential that economic empowerment holds for the participation of refugee and host community women in leadership and development.



Strategies for Increasing Women Participation

These women at the conference were not just about identifying problems but about finding lasting solutions and fostering a supportive community. Their proposed solutions for increasing the participation of refugee and host community women in leadership and decision-making included:

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- Investing in adult literacy and skills training for women and girls to empower them to learn and lead;
- Engaging men as allies in the promotion of women's leadership and participation;
- Utilizing current women's spaces and creating new ones;
- Engaging governments, businesses, donors and organizations to invest in women's livelihoods and initiatives;
- Developing business and financial literacy skills of refugee and host community women;
- Enhancing access to capital for refugee and host community women to start, scale, and grow their businesses;
- Promoting gender-responsive parenting in refugee and rural households and communities to break the cycle of discrimination;
- Investing in women leadership development programs that encourage them to aspire to leadership and support them as they prepare for leadership roles;
- Convening annual conferences for women to meet to discuss progress, assess barriers, and reevaluate and reinforce strategies for increasing their participation in leadership and decision-making in their households and communities.

“This conference was more than a gathering. It was the birth of a local movement for gender justice, women's participation, and leadership,” says Rose, the chairperson of the South Sudan Active Women Association (SSAWA). This movement will continually inspire more women and girls from refugee and host communities to actively demand their rights, step into their power, lead confidently, and drive meaningful change in their households and communities. The conference served as a catalyst, igniting a strong desire and collective drive for the participation of women at all levels.

Josephine, a 27-year-old woman from Village 10 in Zone 3 Bidibidi, said, "I used to think that only people with formal education could become leaders. But after attending this conference, I realized that leadership is not just about having a degree. It's about having the courage to lead, believing in yourself, and being willing to take responsibility. I saw women from different camps, some even with less formal education than me, step up and make a difference in our community. This experience gave me hope and confidence that I, too, can be a leader. It's all about self-confidence and taking the initiative. I'm now ready to lead and make a positive impact in my community." Her story shows how the conference helped women see things in a different way and encouraged them to aspire to become leaders in their own communities.

This conference showed that women are strong and resilient and can achieve great things when given the right opportunities and resources. Both men and women need to be part of decision-making processes and positions in their communities, as it brings diverse perspectives and talents to the table. This, in turn, reduces conflicts, increases creativity and innovation, and ultimately leads to better decision-making. The conference also showed that achieving gender equality is an ongoing process that requires sustained effort from everyone, including individuals, communities, organizations, and governments. We must continue to support initiatives that empower refugee women and girls to get an education, access economic opportunities, and become leaders. All of us - individuals, communities, organizations, businesses, donors, and governments - need to work together to create a community where every woman and girl can reach their full potential now and in the future.

“ Achieving gender equality is an ongoing process that requires sustained effort from everyone ”



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This conference was organized as part of a four-year project by the Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation (CECI Uganda) called the **Humanitarian, Development, and Peace Initiative for Crisis-Affected Population in Uganda**. The project is being implemented in eight villages in Zone 3 of Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Yumbe District. It is being carried out in partnership with OXFAM in Uganda and is funded by DANIDA. The project aligns with the broader DANIDA Strategic Partnership (SP) II project objectives of (1) creating just societies, (2) leaving no one behind, and (3) promoting climate justice to see that **“Uganda is a peaceful, gender and climate just society which upholds all human rights.”**

ABOUT US

Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation (CECI Uganda) is a refugee-led community-based organization founded in May 2017 to address ethnic cleavages, conflict tensions, and other challenges refugees face, such as poverty, unemployment, and cultural intolerance. We prevent, reduce, and transform violent conflicts in refugee communities through locally-led innovations in peacebuilding, education, livelihood, and environment driven by local needs. Founded by a group of young refugees, including students, teachers, evangelists, and social activists, we empower youth, women, and girls with the necessary tools to build resilience, prevent conflicts, rebuild livelihoods, and participate actively in their own development. All our work is led by youth and driven by our core values of professionalism, teamwork, honesty, commitment, personal development, accountability and transparency.

CONTACT US

Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation - CECI Uganda
Central Cell, Appa ward, South Division
P. O. Box 158, Koboko, Uganda
Email: info@ceciuganda.org
ceciuganda@gmail.com
Tel. +256 392 986444
www.ceciuganda.org



@CECIuganda