Re-awakening Awareness of Empowerment of Refugee Women and Girls in Uganda

As we commemorate International Women’s Day once again, and show solidarity with women and girls around the world in celebrating socio-economic, cultural and political achievements of women and girls worldwide, this year’s national theme “Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: Opportunities and Challenges” reawakens us to our national and international commitment to ensuring gender justice for all. However, as a country, there is a lot to be concerned about;

Firstly, Uganda’s media is increasingly inundated with terrifying news of kidnap and murders of mainly women and girls, from both rural and urban settings. While we continue to advocate and lobby for robust approaches to tackling these murders, these heinous and yet increasing cases of kidnap and murder continue to send jitters down our spines, and remind the nation of the need for concerted efforts to collaborate with security operatives and other stakeholders to apprehend perpetrators to face the law.

Secondly, Uganda’s progressive refugee management frameworks are currently being tested to breaking point. Uganda has recently witnessed one of the biggest migration crisis in East Africa since the Rwandan genocide (Amamukirori 2017), and the approximately 1.4 million refugees currently constitute 1 in 25 of the population. This comes in the wake of Uganda being lauded for having one of the most generous refugee management policies in the world, and being referred to by many as the ‘Germany of Africa’ and the ‘role model country’ among others (Betts et al. 2014). However, this glorious image is increasingly under scrutiny due to the current corruption scandals that continue to flood the national and international media.

Thirdly, Uganda is experiencing a tough economic moment, with youth grappling with unemployment. The National Housing and Population Census 2014 shows that 58 percent of Ugandans are not working for reasons other than pursuing studies (UBOS 2016). The Assessment report on Uganda’s progressive refugee policy shows that 37 percent of refugee women have no education compared to 15 percent of refugee men, and only 25 percent of refugee women have secondary education compared to 43 percent of refugee men. With the majority coming from non-Anglophone countries, the few educated refugee women struggle with language challenges – one of the key factors hindering recruitment of refugee women. Recent statistics shows that 23 percent of refugee women and 19 percent of refugee men have difficulty attaining employment because of language challenges (OPM et al. 2016).

As Uganda steadily progresses towards becoming a middle-income economy by 2020 (NPA 2015), we cannot afford to ignore the contribution of refugee women and girls, as well as the sacrifices of women activists. However, while Uganda embraces initiatives in the fields of agriculture, industry and business, refugee women and girls struggle to benefit from these. Despite their significant contributions to the formal and informal sector, their full potential is
far from realised, with the majority lacking the necessary capital and denied access to business finance.

The above challenges are further aggravated by the unprecedented rise of anti-refugee legislations and programmes – including erecting physical barriers to deter entry of ‘unwanted migrants’. The United States of America, once known as the ‘hub’ and hope for refugees and asylum seekers, has regressed and retreated from its long-standing leadership position on refugee protection, particularly under the current administration. This compounds the protracted nature of most refugee situations, and further reduces already limited opportunities for sustainable duration solutions. The resettlement quota is likely to further drastically decline due to the rising populist nationalism in Europe and elsewhere.

Against this increasingly gloomy international landscape, Uganda’s numerous and distinctively positive legislative and policy frameworks governing refugees stand out clearly. These include the Refugees Act (2006), Refugee Regulations (2010), The Self-Reliance Strategy (1998), The Settlement Transformative Agenda, The Refugee and Host Community Empowerment Strategy (ReHoPE), and The Koboko Partnership. These frameworks have considerable potential for ensuring the protection of rights and freedom of refugees and asylum seekers.

However, the application and practice of laws and policies in Uganda remains a lot to be desired. The Refugees Act (The Uganda Gazette 2006) and its regulations allow properly qualified refugees to practice their professions – but when employers insist on recognized academic documents, only a few refugee women benefit as the majority have crossed borders in flight from mass violations and almost empty-handed. Secondly, whilst refugees have access to rights to access to employment, the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration insists that refugees need to acquire Convention Travel Documents to obtain work permits which are issued free of charge. Thirdly, the ‘Freedom of Movement’ provided for in the Refugees Act, is highly qualified as many are subjected to restrictions on security grounds and public order, with refugees in gazetted settlements required to obtain movement permits with the aim of restricting stealthy return to home countries.

Whilst Uganda’s refugee policies diverge positively from those of its neighbouring countries including Kenya, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, Uganda has yet to address policy and legislative lacuna regarding refugee women and girls’ economic empowerment and development initiatives. Empowerment of refugee women and girls can hardly be attained if their participation in economic pursuits remains minimal. Refugee women’s participation in formal sector is only 9 percent compared to 35 percent for Ugandan women (OPM et al. 2016)

The future of Uganda’s generous refugee approach, ‘open door’, and ‘receptive climate’ is at a cross-roads – it could be further strengthened through collective approaches, or, alternatively, the historical ‘generosity’ of refugee management could end up frustrated. Given that globally refugees are likely to live in limbo for between 18-20 years, we cannot afford to be apathetic about the glaring challenges facing refugee women and girls.
As the refugee management regime in Uganda tries to ‘clean its house’, protection of refugee women and girls cannot wait, and requires holistic approaches and strategic partnerships. As we take stock of achievements thus far, Uganda refugee management regime as well as other national and international actors need to step-up on empowerment of refugee women and girls – not only to live up to international obligations, but to strengthen security and prosperity for all.

The experience of one or several episodes of conflict-related sexual violence has left many refugee women and girls in unspeakable pain and trauma. In a recently concluded study of South Sudanese refugees 22 percent of women and 4 percent of men disclosed experiences of rape (Dolan 2017). Disclosure of such violence is only a first step; the legacies of such violence include bearing and upbringing children born out of rape, contraction of HIV, family separation and divorce, as well as witnessing loved ones raped, humiliated and killed. For survivors of such violence this international day not mean a lot unless physical, psychosexual, psychosocial, and psychological rehabilitation support are provided to facilitate recovery.

Indeed, empowerment of rural and urban refugee women and girls presents both challenges and opportunities. While relative milestones have been achieved especially in conversational and attitudinal shifts about gender equality, huge hurdles still lie ahead towards achieving gender parity. Nonetheless, there are windows of opportunities for Uganda to step-up protection of refugee women and girls. As we commemorate this important day, we call upon all people to think, act, and be gender inclusive. More than ever, we specifically urge government, donors, civil society, academic institutions/individuals, media, women’s network, private sector, corporations, and international community to:

- Support women-led community initiatives on empowerment and protection of women and girls since many of such initiatives including those of refugee women groups go seldom noticed and or supported
- Strengthen the capacities women activists who continue to put their own lives as well as those of their loves ones at risk as they work to help women and girls achieve gender justice
- Support strategic litigations targeting protection and promotion of women’s rights and empowerment
- Put refugee protection in the centre of the current investigation into allegations of fraud
- Liaise with communities and stakeholders for speedy investigations into the unprecedented kidnaps and murders of women and girls
- Expand social protection mechanisms of and empowerment for most disadvantaged refugee women and girls including those living with disabilities and the elderly
- Support younger generations working towards achieving gender justice
- Support and promote evidence-based research on refugee women protection and empowerment
- Embrace working with men and boys as allies for addressing gender disparity, and promoting women’s empowerment at all levels
- Strengthen multi-sectoral approaches to empowering refugee women and girls for holistic and comprehensive protection of women and girls.

References


