

AID EFFECTIVENESS AND LESSONS LEARNT AMONG TEENAGE MOTHERS IN BIDIBIDI REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the trigger factors for displacements, the South Sudanese conflict caused a number of people to leave their indigenous homes to seek asylum elsewhere. Many of these found an open door in the Yumbe district of northern Uganda and camped in the government-established Bidibidi refugee settlement, which opened in August 2016 in northwestern Uganda in the West Nile sub-region. Due to the high influx of people, the camp was closed in December of the same year. "With an estimated population of 285,000 refugees, Bidibidi was, at the time, described as the largest refugee settlement site in the world" (Boswell, 2018, p. 8). This entire population presented a need for an emergency response from the government of Uganda and the international donor community. Through negotiations between the local officials and the Office of the Prime Minister, Boswell (2018) states that 250 square kilometers of communal land were gazetted for the refugees by the host community. In Uganda, however, these are called settlements and not camps due to the fact that they are given freedom of movement in and out as citizens. Due to the persistent unrest in many sub-Saharan African countries, a report of Network (2017) asserts that many refugees and humanitarian organizations project a potential long-term refugee presence in Uganda, which has opened room for a number of actors. Among these were stakeholders like the UNHCR, WFP, the host communities, NGOs, INGOs, OPM, and civil society organizations (Onencan, 2021, p. 30) providing either similar or differentiated services within the settlement. That withstanding, Casswell (2017, p. 4) notes that the scale of refugee flows into Uganda is stretching the country to its limit, placing excessive pressure on state and host community resources.

Consequently, fights for the resources including firewood, water, wives and husbands have sparked off between the two groups and issues to do with rape, suicides, theft have become part of the everyday life. The effects of this have marked a society victimized with early marriages, early pregnancies, school dropouts, and gender-based violence in the settlement. Understanding the fact that refugee communities are among the most vulnerable groups, an occurrence of an outbreak can easily lead to a multiplication of the usual societal loopholes. Pandemics such as the Covid-19 perpetuated the prevalence of the above-mentioned issues especially among the young girls introducing them to teenage motherhood which brings about double suffering with in the settlement. Despite the vast literature produced about refugee mothers and humanitarian aid, for example Leerlooijer et al. (2013); Ngum Chi Watts et al. (2014) little scholarly attention has been drawn to the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian aid among the teenage refugee mothers. I believe this is one of the key issues that often portray refugee settlements and camps as places of deprived or highly vulnerable groups. I suggest that if we draw attention to the young girls and young mothers in the settlements, an understanding of their problems would ease the work of humanitarian actors and as well as streamlining peace building initiatives.

AN OVERVIEW OF PANDEMICS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Often times pandemics claim economic and social effects on the communities and the situation worsens depending on the county's level of preparedness. The world has faced a number of these, both on a national and global scale for instance; the Ebola pandemic that has recurrently destabilized parts of Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, the Spanish flue of 1918, whose initial origin is not very clear though Potter (2001, p. 91) states that "the first outbreaks occurred at the same time in North America in March 1918" and also costed peoples' lives and economic stagnation. The world then witnessed the outbreak of yet a new epidemic in the evening days of 2019 which came in the name of Covid-19. While discussing its impact on the world scale, Bukuluki et al. (2020) argues that "the 70.8 million refugees, displaced people and asylum seekers must not be forgotten".

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND WELLBEING OF TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

"I am very happy with covid-19, because all my family sit with me in the same room all the time and they have more time for me."¹ Despite appreciation from the aforementioned statement, the pandemic of Covid-19 generated measures that worsened the social and economic wellbeing among teenage refugee mothers. Małachowska et al. (2020) noted that, other measures, related to maintaining social distance and increasing hygiene, are more challenging to apply, more especially with

the teenage mothers who enjoy the utmost level of socialization. Another key cross-cutting impact of the covid-19 pandemic has been on adolescents who were enrolled in education during the outbreak (Małachowska et al., 2020, p. 5). Additionally, the nature of the topography in Bidibidi refugee settlement does not allow proper access to water and so teenage mothers have to move distances in order to fetch water, which became hard during the lockdown and other Covid-19 measures. Kumar et al. (2022) states that due to a lack of pure drinking water, hygiene, and sanitation, there is also a considerable risk of developing a twin pandemic of other infectious diseases, which may as well put pressure on their lives and overall wellbeing within the settlements or camps. Diseases among others may include; diarrhea, tuberculosis, or dengue fever with Covid-19 among refugee camp occupant. The author adds that; “access to aid and social safety nets has declined, while unemployment and xenophobia have increase” (p. 181) still among the teenage mothers.

HUMANITARIAN AID AND COVID-19 AMONG TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

Humanitarian aid flows through different channels to reach out to the communities and manifest in three ways including; donor-to-government aid (traditional aid), donor-to-NGO aid (bypass aid), and domestic-government-to-NGO aid (outsourcing). Even when some governments fail to concede that most of the projects are donor funded, circumstances can tell depending on the traditional norms of the donor or basing on the strings attached to the aid. MacLean and Brass (2015, p. 61) note that scholarship began to highlight the importance of collaborative governance or partnerships among these actors, which yielded credible results in some areas and as well as negative results in other areas. Despite this good collaboration, certain governments’ policies do pose challenges to the smooth flow of aid. For example, Ansar and Md. Khaled (2021, p. 10) assert that “the official policy of the Bangladeshi government is to restrict refugees within camps”, which makes humanitarian organizations’ efforts limited to only emergency relief and yet refugees would need more than that. This has compromised the idea of aid effectiveness among the refugees. In fact, international aid needs to be redirected from care and maintenance toward multilateral and bilateral support that encourage refugee self-sufficiency (Eisenberg, 2013, p. 15).

GENDER DYNAMICS AND COVID-19 AMONG TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

While carrying out his study, Banati et al. (2020) argued that among rural respondents and those out of school, adolescents tended to have poorer awareness about Covid-19 and mitigation measures, and even when they were aware, the guidance was often not practical to their context. This is because, some of them fail to strike a balance between the guidelines and the traditional norms even when they are provided with reproductive health. Generally, healthcare is expensive and inaccessible for disadvantaged households who lack health insurance (Banati et al., 2020), yet almost none of the teenage refugee mothers has obtained health insurance and hence having no better health provision for themselves and their kids during Covid-19. Given this background, teenage refugee mothers face a lot of challenges originating from gender norms which all multiplied during the pandemic as men had much time to stay at home with the women, perpetuating gender based violence in the settlement.

Previously, the UNHCR adopted guidelines on the protection of refugee women in 1991 to front avenues for gender equality and empowerment of women refugees. Furley et al. (2002) add that the established guidelines were aimed at drawing closer to the needs of refugee women and raising their issues at all tables of programing, which has proven difficult to achieve in practice. These guidelines were set for both women and girls including but not limited to reproductive health, gender-based violence and any other issues related to actions of empowering females. When talking about African women, two key issues often take front seats “theirs is a struggle against both poverty and subordination, for survival and respect” (Mulumba, 2005, p. 20). Despite all several endeavors, the gender gap among the refugees seems widening with an increasing pressure on the females alongside forces of patriarchy. Men often have respective roles in their communities but usually intentionally or unintentionally divert from them in the new refugee settings. Atkinson (1999) argues that the most time-consuming work of all is food preparation and beer production, which were often done by women and men respectively, but saw a change during the pandemic as almost everything was left to the girl child and the women. As well, there are other roles taken as female roles that women and girls carry on even in the refugee camps “including collection of firewood, this takes up 50 per cent of the annual hours worked” (Mulumba, 2005, p. 238) which were however a source of problems like rape and many other issues to the girls during Covid-19 pandemic.

REASONS FOR AID INEFFECTIVENESS

Even though it may not be part of the issues that take the front desks, Auerhahn and Laub (1998) notes that the personnel who distribute commodities within the camps might take physical, emotional, and sexual advantage of teenagers which partly accounts for aid ineffectiveness. This may sometimes make it easy for some teenage refugees to receive aid but as well increase their risks towards obtaining unwanted pregnancies. There is also a depiction of declining chances for those

that have either conceived or already became mothers to receive aid, partly because they might have exceeded the attractive stage. These in the short run become single mothers which often comes with social risks like poverty, material deprivation and challenging work-life balance (Mokake, 2021) and thus need psychosocial and material support. In doing so, many actors have often come in from government to non-government to provide humanitarian assistance. For instance, Mishra et al. (2009) mentioned that the government of Uganda established the National Adolescent Health Policy, which came together with the Uganda Adolescent Health Policy and Service Standards.

The National Adolescent Health Policy states that adolescents should be provided with adequate information about Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) services (Bekesiima, 2022, p. 7). This was done by the government to improve on reproductive health among the adolescents and surely achievements have been registered. It is thus surprising that reproductive issues are neglected within conflicts and refugee settings (Roxberg, 2007). Furthermore, Kiden (2018) states that the various studies conducted in refugee settlements of northern Uganda have shown that male refugees were vehemently opposed to the use of family planning, and many women used methods clandestinely. This becomes worse on the side of males and the “men who used condoms only used them occasionally when they had sexual contact with women other than their primary partners” (Mulumba, 2010).

FACTORS FOR FAILED AID SUSTAINABILITY AMONG REFUGEES

Despite the fact that refugees are recipients to a lot of aid, they are the same community that faces hunger, deprivation and suicides due to lack of resources. One of the factors to account for this is the fact that the refugee influx is dealt with as a short-term crisis Leeson et al. (2020), a factor that only perpetuates ineffectiveness and unsustainability of the provided aid. Luxemburger et al. (1998) further noted that the international community, mainly through the UNHCR, is responsible for protecting refugees and providing basic needs. To this day, the organization has tried its level best but with critics such as Barnett and Calhoun argue that aid is not a charitable gift but the continuation of politics by other means (Calhoun, 2008). The influx of refugees brings about pressure on the resources of the host communities and yet the host countries often do not have sufficient sources or the capability to deal with the this influx (Fajth et al., 2019). This is one of the factors that compromises with the sustainability aspect even when the former occupants had established measures for taking care of the future generation. Another critical attribute to aid is the fact that the immediate actions taken by the international community in the response phase and, to some extent, in the post-emergency phase have often lacked the sustainability vision that guarantees a better future for these vulnerable populations (Pomponi et al., 2019).

While discussing the benefits of integration of refugees and the host communities, Goitom (2016) notes that this is supposed to have three interconnected features, according to the Refugee Consortium of Kenya including; ensuring refugees' rights, promote self-sufficiency and promoting the capacity of refugees to adapt and live with the nationals of the host country. Which all seem hard as the aftermath depicts a situation of conflicts between the two as a result of scarce resources. Another school of thoughts from Visconti and Gal (2018) asserts that the tensions between host communities and refugees increase due to the reduction in salaries because of the competition for work, which produced alarming labor abuses, especially for children and adolescents.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Studying the experiences of teenage refugee mothers especially during the pandemic and the post pandemic era is important as it can enable policy makers and humanitarian actors to thoroughly understand the reasons for the failed effectiveness of aid. The study therefore employed a purely qualitative research design, taking an exploratory research path because of the study's intent to advance understandings of why and how teenage refugee mothers' experience is an issue of great concern. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to obtain data from respondents. Snowball sampling assisted in identifying potential respondents with similar characteristics to increase the number of participants. Data was obtained from 10 teenage mothers in Bidibidi, one key informant from UNHCR and one key informant from the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda. Teenage mothers between 13-19 years were asked questions to explore the social, economic and psychological impacts experiences during Covid-19 and the events after. The UNHCR and OPM key informants were also interviewed in order to understand their role in shaping the lives of teenage mothers. Given the nature of the big population of teenage mothers, I would ideally have conducted interviews until saturation of ideas received. However, due to the time constraint I interviewed 10 respondents.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There were no strong measures established to protect the privacy of teenage refugee mothers in Bidibidi settlement even though their daily experience as young mothers' demands privacy attributes emanating from their gender. As a researcher, in respect to the principle of 'do good and do no harm' I sought the consent of the respondents before carrying out the whole process of data collection. Furthermore, given that some respondents had not reached 18 years to decide for themselves, a woman and girls councilor took consent for them before commencement of the interviews.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Language barrier is one of the limitations I faced due to the fact that the teenage mothers speak South Sudan Juba Arabic which I do not understand. That noted, I sought an interpreter to assist me while conducting the interviews. In fact, it was this very interpreter who enabled me to access the teenage refugee mothers as she was the one heading the Rabita group that shelters a number of groups for mothers with a goal of recovering the lost property from the war. The distance to the refugee camp was also long from the researcher and in one way or the other posed some limitations. Distance as well retards the movement of the refugees themselves even though the government gave the right to free movement to the refugees in Uganda (this accounts for the reasons as to why the refugee confinements in Uganda are called settlements).

FINDINGS

The outbreak of Covid-19 came with an establishment of a national lockdown that was announce on 21st March 2020 in Uganda. Several reasons directly related to the lockdown exposed the teenage refugee mothers in Bidibidi settlement to extreme economic challenges and opportunities. The main reasons included; business/government closed due to Covid-19 legal restriction, taking care of children since they are not going to school, movement restrictions, and being ill or quarantined (Atamanov et al., 2021) among others.

TRANSPORT DISRUPTION

Transport is a very important aspect while discussing economic progress and the respondents in Bidibidi mentioned it first while exploring their lived experiences of Covid-19. During the lockdown, there was no motorcycle or vehicle that was allowed to transport the teenage mothers to the host communities where most of them had to do lejja-lejja². This was a big challenge to the teenage refugee mothers and it is upon this same background that one the respondents termed Covid-19 as "big ibiris"³ that came to only quicken their journey to God. Additionally, the research done by the Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) in Uganda depicts that 76 percent of surveyed businesses had reduced the size of the workforce due to Covid-19 by May 2020 (Lakuma et al., 2020) and partly related to immobility. Despite the report being a general one on the national scale, similar situation happened within the businesses owned by the teenage refugee mothers in Bidibidi but also in the host communities where the young mothers would often find work in the businesses with in Yumbe town.

Respondents further stated that even the vehicles which used to bring aid faced great challenges in accessing the settlement until the government provided permission to the non-government organizations to move under the lockdown. This increased the rate of deprivation that made many of the teenage mothers either committee suicide or become thieves to steal the resources of the host communities for survival.

THEFT AND COVID-19 AMONG IN BIDIBIDI REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

There were cases of theft in the settlement even before the pandemic but respondents argued that this became rampant during the lockdown. The teenage mothers attributed the surpassing theft cases to the vast aid that entered the settlement from various humanitarian organizations, where these would not at a particular time satisfy the whole community and so had to give to a limited number with hopes of serving others in the future. There always happened to be groups of those individuals who would attack houses that had received aid. Virtanen (2020) argues that one of the persistent theft acts is stealing food in the settlement which then brings about death if the owner resists giving it out at ease. Another cause of theft was the much time that the people in the settlement had especially during the lockdown where they were restricted from movements and so they used the would-be working hours to raid people's property and food.

Despite the fact that many organizations visited the settlement during the pandemic, there was an aspect of insufficient aid provided as some of the organizations had limited capacity including the Organization for Rural Young Mothers' Empowerment that I work for. For instance, we went there with my organization in the last days of the lockdown but we did not have even resources to aid 50 teenage mothers and our main aim was to bench mark and know exactly what happens in the settlement so that we go back and prepare how best we can put a smile on the faces of the teenage mothers. This kind of

limited aid provision is yet another aspect that perpetuated theft and hence impinging the progress of teenage refugee mothers.

Teenage refugee mothers lost a lot of property during Covid-19 that ranged from houses, after being chased by the husbands who could no longer provide for them. Others lost items that they understood as sources of income through theft that increased during the event of Covid-19. In fact, the very person that helped me in interpretation while carrying out interviews said that:

.....I had started a shop of women garments but it was broken by thieves during the Lockdown and at the moment I am just trying to see how I can re-establish but the issue is that I do not have enough capital. The eyes of the thieves became wide during the pandemic and up to now some people fear to open up businesses here in the settlement. Those you see with business either hire some people to provide security or they sleep in the shops themselves.⁴

These in addition lost hoes and pangas which they used on a regular basis to go and dig for the host communities and got some income, others lost their sewing machines that would as well be stolen by thieves and many other items. Kurt et al. (2021) asserts that these different types of resources such as personal, social, and material which are fundamental for wellbeing and optimal human functioning. Removal of these from the teenage mothers in the settlement meant destabilization of their lives and to many of them, suicide has got to become the solution.

LOSS OF LIVES AMONG TEENAGE MOTHERS IN BIDIBIDI DURING COVID-19

Respondents mentioned that the outbreak of Covid-19 led to death of their beloved ones as some of them were already weakened by other illnesses and when these got Covid-19, death became neither an option nor a choice but an obvious case. None of the respondents mentioned about the death of a teenage mother as a result of Covid-19, but they all mentioned the death of either their husbands or their fathers and mothers plus the elderly groups within the community.

The effects of the pandemic sparked death in the post covid-19 period as there are many people dying both of hunger as a result of limited resources and suicide. It is also important to note that during the time of interviews there was woman aged 22 who was found having closed her three children inside the tukul⁵ house with paraffin in order to burn herself with them as they had taken days without food and still with no hope for the future.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated income insecurity, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and anxiety (Kumar et al., 2022) among teenage mothers in Bidibidi settlement. The fact that in the lockdown many of them survived by the provided aid from various organizations developed a dependency syndrome amongst teenage mothers. Their mindset gradually changed from working to earn a living to the idea of depending on aid. One of them at a certain point in the interview said that;

..... How could I go back to the host communities for digging 50 meters for 10,000/= (3 USD) yet I am able to receive the soap, mama kits and even food from these organizations?⁶

Dependency on aid further made teenage mothers lazy even in other income generating activities including stone quarrying and their option was to see more organizations continuing to come with aid. Furthermore, in circumstances where they had nothing received in form of aid, they argued that visits to boys was the option and hence obtaining unwanted pregnancies. Important to note is that through these experiences got from the visits to boys including rape and unwanted pregnancies, many of the respondents changed their understanding of men from husbands or boyfriends to rapists and drunkards and majority of them did not even wish to dream about marriage any more. Two main issues among others accounted for this where, the first one was about the fact that men would no longer be able to provide for the wives or their families and yet they expected the women to play their roles as women at their best. Secondly, there was no rape case that had been ignited by a woman and all cases were performed by men. One respondent stated that;

.....I rather find ten lions than finding a man of Bidibidi while fetching firewood or water.⁷

The teenage mother above was fed-up of men as even herself was raped at the age of 13 yet nothing much was done to the culprit. In an interview with her, she mentioned that almost all the marriages and pregnancies in the settlements are a result of rape only that girls keep it as a secret and if it happens, you only have to tell the parents

and families will meet to settle the matter. The same respondent had not mentioned the issues of rape at first and it was until I spoke to the interpreter who told me that she was afraid to mention certain things as they may not be allowed to be unveiled in the meetings of their community. I therefore sought another in-depth interview with her and this is how I was deeply explained the prevalence of rape and the magnitude at which it happens. Secondly, there is a security or judicial weakness that perpetuates crimes of this kind in a way that if one reported a case, it is the responsibility of the complainant to feed the criminal for some time until he/she is transferred to the courts of law in Yumbe town out of the refugee settlement.

SOCIAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE WELL-BEING OF TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

Freedom of movement to the settlement for refugees fleeing the war in South Sudan was restricted during the early days of the pandemic. [Sebba \(2020\)](#) asserts that on 25 March, the government of Uganda issued a statement closing the country to new asylum seekers in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, which highly compromised with the socialization of teenage refugee mothers. Majority of them stated that after announcing the closure of entrance to refugees from South Sudan, their hopes for survival only remained in the hands of humanitarian organizations. There was tendency of teenage mothers to receive support from their beloved ones in South Sudan especially from the relatives who had decided to remain in the country of origin for business pursuits irrespective of the instability.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AMONG REFUGEES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Before the events that marked the outbreak of Covid-19, the refugees and the host communities used to have gatherings through which they would discuss matters that affect their well-being. With the usual policy of aid distribution that gives 30% of every good or service to the host communities, 70% to the refugees, teenage refugee mothers as well used to invite a reasonable number of teenage mothers from the host communities in these gatherings. During the time of data collection, I had an opportunity to attend one Rabita⁸ group activity through which the host community and the refugee teenage mothers meet to support at least one member every week. This is one of the activities that socially brought both of them together and whose momentum was very high before the pandemic but saw a decline with the establishment of the lockdown as a result of the Covid-19.

During Rabita ceremonies, teenage mothers and other groups within the settlement used to solicit from each other and gather property for a particular person with an intention of recovering the property lost during the wars. Among these were source pans, mattress covers, blankets and others utensils that were contributed from each member of the association to be given to one Madam Suzan on the right who was the beneficial of the day. This is the trend that happens every Sunday among teenage mothers and many lives have really been improved through the contributions from each other. Even though we found it colorful and joyful, the respondents argued that it has not yet gone back to the joy that they used to have before Covid-19. Furthermore, teenage mothers mentioned an issue to do with inadequate resources at the moment which makes it hard for any celebrating member to achieve much as before, and hence leading to slow transformation. One association leader was quoted saying in verbatim that;

..... In Covid-19 we could not meet and therefore some members did not come back to the association even up to now as they do not have anything to offer when we come here. This is not an issue that would make one not to come but they feel out of space to come without something and yet majority had been recipients to the benefits of this association before.⁹

There is therefore a big role that is still required in order to bring back the good social set up of Bidibidi settlement after the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, the promotion of keeping social distance is another practice that further distorted the social attributes as people were not allowed to either visit each other or meet for any association work or meeting where ideas and problems would be discussed. Rabita has changed many of teenage mothers lives and even made them to stop thinking of marriage as an opportunity of recovery from the problems of war. This is because, through the activity, members are provided with properties that were lost during the war, which among others include, mattresses, chairs, utensils, shoes, clothes and so many more which at least improve their living standards.

EDUCATION AND COVID-19 AMONG TEENAGE MOTHERS IN BIDIBIDI

Save the Children is one of the organizations that have for long supported the refugees with education support in Bidibidi refugee settlement. Having the main objective of helping children around the world found in the middle of armed conflicts and wars, Save the Children was mentioned as one of the organizations that do help the refugees and have special programs for the children. Within Bidibidi refugee settlement, Save the Children constructed 63 classrooms in 13 schools, 105

latrines, and 16 teachers' houses in Bidibidi settlement and handed them to the office of the prime minister in May 2021¹⁰, which was indeed a period of the lockdown. The additional classrooms reduced the pupil-classroom ratio from 156:1 to 83:1, hence creating a suitable learning environment for the pupils. The organization distributed 1,026 desks for the schools as well and this further enabled the schools to improve on their resource availability.

Respondents acknowledged reception of sanitary pads, clothes, and many other items from the organization as well. These great contributions were seen meaningless during the pandemic as schools got closed and even after the lockdown, many of the girls had dropped out of school due to factors that ranged from inadequate funds for school dues, early pregnancies, forced marriages among others. Furthermore, there are still those that produced kids but with low hopes of going back to school at the moment even though they have the desire to either go back with their kids or at least have a helping hand for their kids' education. One respondent aged 16 who was a victim of rape above stated that;

..... you people (researchers) and the government with those other organizations that always come here should provide us with school fees as we do not have work here or business and yet some of us have the desire to continue with school. Now I am in Senior 4 but struggling, in fact if madamis not paying for me, I do not know how I would be going to school. But still I need support to reach my dream of becoming an accountant which I do not know whether I will have money for further studies.¹¹

EFFECTIVENESS OF AID AMONG TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

Despite appreciation from many of the respondents about the Aid that was provided by all the organizations, many of the respondents still conceded to the fact that there are still areas of improvement that need to be undertaken for this Aid to be effective. The vocational trainings for instance that were provided to the refugees by Care Uganda did not aid them to acquire the respective skills of tailoring even though they were awarded certificates at the end of the training. Some respondents noted that because refugees are people on the move and only take settlements as temporary residents, some do not complete the trainings even if the organization wished as some times they have to return to their homes when situation has stabilized. In regard to the items for essential use like the jerry cans, mattresses, food among others they are given less and in fact it has become hard to find an organization that can serve such to all members of the settlement. In actual sense, this is of the issues that have perpetuated theft cases. One respondent was quoted saying in verbatim that;

..... You give me a mattress today, my neighbor does not get, you take 2 years to come back and because you have records you will not give me and so you have to give my neighbor yet mine also got old now, what do you expect a part from me stealing the neighbor's new mattress the following day you leave the settlement.¹²

The respondents therefore claimed that the aid that is provided is inadequate and should be increased or the organizations should try and increase the initiatives for the economic empowerment among the teenage mothers within the settlement but as well as other members in the community. The other factor is attributed to the half-baked training that is given to the teenage mothers to which they did not have an answer as to why it happens like that. They argued that they were trained in hair dressing but only taught 3 to 4 styles of hair dressing which would not enable them go and work in the saloons of the host communities and yet that is where money is. Whether the organizations have less resources it is not known to the refugees and therefore they would not ably benefit from the training because of the little time provided for learning and the limited styles taught.

AID SUSTAINABILITY AMONG TEENAGE MOTHERS IN BIDIBIDI REFUGEE SETTLEMENT.

Whether or not the organizations are given set periods for project delivery, it is not known to the teenage refugees but their dismay was on the multiplicity of organizations that came to the area during Covid-19 and got lost as the pandemic ended. The respondents argued that this has seemed to be a behavior of organizations even before Covid-19 for them to come up with food distribution and training projects which however do happen for a short time and never to come back or take long to happen again. The respondents mentioned UNHCR as their daily organization that would at least never disappear despite the reduction of the aid the organization provides to them at the moment. One respondent asserted in verbatim that;

..... We loved UNHCR but now it is not acting good, long ago they used to give us 8 kilograms of posho but know they give us 3 kilograms and yet this has come with issues to do with categories among us where many of us are falling under category 3 which should not be given food.

From respondents, it was realized that nothing is given to category 3 of the refugees and according to the respondents, category 3 was that of people who seem healthy and strong enough to have income generating activities even though majority had no business venture at the time of interviews.

The provision of food aid, to only two categories within the settlement has increased tension and theft as those who do not get aid either steal from those that get or commit suicide. In fact, even during the time of interviews, there is a man who was reported dead as a result of committing suicide over a debt of 500,000/= (130 USD) that he could not pay to a friend on the set deadline. According to the respondents, category one is characterized by people who have health problems and they are given 7.6 kilograms of maize, 1.8 kilograms of beans, 0.5 kilograms of vegetable oil and 0.1 kilograms of salt. The respondents stated that category two is that of individuals with illnesses but not severe, elderly and child headed households and these receive 3.78 kilograms of maize, 0.9 kilograms of beans, 0.27 kilograms of vegetable oil, and 0.1 kilograms of salt, which are all given out per month respectively. Category three is taken to be of those that have stayed in the settlement for so long and those that are looking health which the distribution team term as self-reliant category. However, respondents are still not satisfied with the criteria that is used to categories recipients as sometimes there are even those that are looking health but without any thing that brings income to them. Furthermore, teenage mothers suggest for increase in the food quantities that are given out per month and as well as enabling all the people in the settlement to receive aid as there is no assurance for one away from his / her home country to be self-reliant more so in a refugee settlement. Another woman was found in the settlement to have killed her daughter and planned to cook her flesh to be used for food, and the issue went to police after the other siblings coming back and finding that their mother had already killed their sister¹³. The respondents showed a need and readiness to practice agriculture but still mentioned the issue of small 30 ft. plots that are provided to them where they cannot grow much to save them.

COVID-19 AND GENDER DYNAMICS AMONG TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

A number of respondents urged policy makers to find solutions to the cultural norms that give a lot of power and influence to the men. In the settlement, men were not blamed for spending a full day at the drinking place but meetings would be called if one woman was found having spent a full day at the drinking place. This made women indirectly empowered to work but on the other hand presented men as a lazy group of the community. It was during Covid-19 when the women jobs of Lejja-Lejja¹⁴ were stopped as the lockdown did not enable them to move from place to place looking for customers, that men realized how important it was for both men and women to be working. This is one other key issue that increased the level of poverty among the teenage refugee mothers who were as well the bread winners before Covid-19. There was an assumption among the respondents that the respect and power community gives to the man is one of the issues that has perpetuated rape cases. This is because even if you take the culprit to the police post, they will ask if you are able to feed the prisoner for the days he/she has to be there until he/she is transferred to Yumbe town. Due to the level of poverty within the settlement, many of the criminals of rape instead used to be called for family negotiations and after that, one disappears from the community, hence no justice is given to the victims.

CONCLUSION

There is quite a considerable role worthy appreciation for the work of various organizations/actors in the well-being of teenage mothers in Bidibidi refugee settlement. These have in many cases contributed to support refugees and developed hope among them to regain better lives as they had before the conflicts in their countries of origin. However, there are issues that have brought about failed effectiveness of aid among teenage mothers in Bidibidi which range from inadequate resources, insufficient funds coupled with many others that make humanitarian organizations to either provide less for the refugees or provide them with limited skill sets. The failed effectiveness later compromises with the organizations' global goal of achieving certain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including; goal 1 (No poverty), goal 2 (Zero hunger), goal 3 (Good health and well-being) goal 4 (quality education) among others. All that withstanding, there were less areas off aid provision or projects that targets teenage mothers and, in many cases, they would only be mentioned under projects that target women and children or women in general. Therefore, there is a keen interest and desire to address issues of teenage mothers in a context-based manner different from the ever-known category of women and children. This shall aid in understanding the specific challenges faced by this sensitive group of the refugees and where need be, improvements shall be undertaken that will later bring about effectiveness and sustainability of the aid among the teenage mothers. Furthermore, it is believed that if aid effectiveness is achieved, achievement of sustainability will have higher chances among teenage refugee mothers in Bidibidi refugee settlement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations were established in line with respective stakeholders and actors in the study of teenage refugee mothers. Several recommendations were established for the government of Uganda, others to the organizations providing aid while, there were as well recommendations to the teenage refugee mothers themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF UGANDA

The government of Uganda especially the Office of the Prime Minister should improve on the evaluation and monitoring mechanisms as that is how best they will understand the performance of every organization and project among teenage mothers in Bidibidi. It was realized that many things do happen within the settlement without the knowledge of the OPM and yet if informed, perhaps they would not have happened to such extents. Issues among others was rape that the refugees noted as an order of the day that requires them now to move in groups while carrying out daily activities. Scholarships and bursaries are yet another issue that the teenage mothers urged government to provide to them so that they can have equal chances to attend classes. These appreciated the Office of the Prime Minister and Save the Children for the schools established but requested that the authorities should as well provide them with free education for both lower and upper levels of education.

There were a number of those teenage mothers that had kids already but still with the desire to continue with education and their only problem was financial assistance. It would therefore be a privilege if government and other stakeholders come in to further provide additional support in form of scholarship and bursaries to the teenage mothers which shall aid them but as well as their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE NGOS

There is need for cooperation from all the organizations that provide aid to the teenage refugee mothers to avoid duplication of services and overlapping projects. This is because the respondents would not even manage mentioning the aid provided to them according to the particular organizations due to the fact that many organizations provided them with similar items or undertook similar projects. The respondents as well urged organizations to always first consult them in order to know what exactly they need at a particular point in time. Respondents further urged NGOs to improve on the monitoring and evaluation of all the projects that they undertake and in circumstances where they find that a given project failed to meet intended goals, reforms should be done to avoid similar mistakes. For the aspect of providing half-baked trainings and later offer them certificates, the organizations should ensure that they increase on the time that is taken to train the teenage mothers as well as advancement in the skills they impart in them to prepare them for credible employment elsewhere. Additionally, they (teenage mothers) requested organizations to bring them trainers from the capital city of Kampala, for the have a lot of trust in them to give them the necessary skills and knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE TEENAGE REFUGEE MOTHERS

The teenage mothers should increase their participation in various NGO programs as these will inform them about their rights through sensitization and trainings. It was observed that many of the respondents did not know anything about the rights of refugees or even the organizations that would provide them with reproductive health programs as teenage mothers. Efforts to know the role and rights of refugees plus understanding the work or services each organization offers within the settlement would aid them in achieving better lives. Just as the common saying goes that “educating a girl child means educating a nation”, similar school of thought should be extended towards planning for the girl child in the refugee setting as this shall solve many of the cases and crimes with in the refugee settlements and camps.

REFERENCES

- [1] A Jordanian boy with a physical disability whose statement is found on page 3 of Małachowska, A., Al Abbadi, T., Al Amaireh, W., Banioweda, K., Al Heiwidi, S., & Jones, N. (2020). Exploring the impacts of covid-19 on adolescents in Jordan’s refugee camps and host communities. *Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence [Internet]*.
- [2] Lejja-lejja meant the activity of moving with various commodities often including clothes, vegetables among others and looking for customers from one place to another.
- [3] Ibiris is a juba Arabic word used to mean satan or the devil.
- [4] 2/November/2023: data obtained from the interpreter in one of the focus group discussions held at Ebenezer resting place
- [5] Tukul is the name given to the grass thatched houses established with in the refugee settlement

- [6] 2/November/2023: Statement from one of the respondents in a focus group discussion
- [7] 1/November/2023: Response from one of the teenage mothers who had been raped for two times, the first time she did not conceive but the next time she conceived unfortunately the baby died after making just 1 year.
- [8] 2/November/2023: Rabita association leader while presenting her point in a focus group discussion
- [9] <https://uganda.savethechildren.net/news/save-children-hands-over-63-newly-constructed-classrooms-office-prime-minister>
- [10] 3/November/2023: The respondent mentioned these insights after an in-depth interview with her realizing that she had given me wrong information at first due to fear. On the last day of the interviews after the Madam (Names are withheld) she lived with explained to her how important and confidential this study was it is then that she decided to open up and disclose all that she had in terms of lived experience.
- [11] 2/November/2023: One of the teenage mothers had that to say in one of the Focus Group Discussions that were held in the settlement.
- [12] Accessed from: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/yumbe-mother-remanded-for-killing-boiling-4-month-old-son-4315044>
- [13] Lejja-lejja meant the activity of moving with various commodities often including clothes, vegetables among others and looking for customers from one place to another.
- [14] Lejja-lejja meant the activity of moving with various commodities often including clothes, vegetables among others and looking for customers from one place to another.