

How training has helped refugee women to speak up



Some of the refugees living in Uganda who have been trained to become community leaders. PHOTO/TREVOR LUTALO

Uganda is home to hundreds of thousands of refugees from Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many of the women who arrive have already experienced early marriage, rape but have learnt how to speak up.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

Inside a small, bright room tucked behind a busy Kampala street, Sarah, a softly spoken Somali woman, adjusts the edge of her hijab with the calmness of someone who has trained herself not to tremble.

She smiles gently when greeted, but it is the kind of smile that floats on top of years of pain she no longer runs away from.

At just 17 years old, before she had learned to fully understand her own body or make decisions about her life, Sarah was forced into marriage back home in Somalia. What followed was a cycle of emotional and physical abuse that she carried like a second skin.

"I was a child," she says quietly. "And I did not survive that marriage without scars."

Today, Sarah sits in this room not as a victim but as a safeguarding officer within the Somali community, one of the refugee women taking the lead in identifying and responding to cases of gender-based violence in Kampala.

She is part of a growing network of women refugees supported by Oxfam, working through the Refugee Women Network (REWON), to build community leaders who can detect, report, and follow up cases of SGBV.

It is a role she embraces with a sense of purpose: she knows how dangerous silence can be, because she once lived inside it.

Her experience is one among many in a much larger, hidden crisis, one that refugee women say continues long after they cross the border into Uganda.

Violence that follows them across
Uganda is home to hundreds of thousands of refugees from Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many of the women who arrive have already experienced early marriage, sexual assault, rape, domestic violence or female genital mutilation (FGM) in their home countries.

But what is less visible is that these same forms of abuse often continue in Uganda, carried along by cultural norms, economic pressures, and the limitations of systems that do not fully understand the specific vulnerabilities of displaced women.

For Salma, also Somali, the pain began even earlier than Sarah's. She was eight years old when she underwent FGM, a practice so

deeply embedded in her community that no one questioned it.

She carries the trauma quietly, but says the Oxfam-supported training - made possible with funding from Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and conducted through REWON introduced her to knowledge she had never been allowed to possess.

"I didn't realise how normalised FGM is," she says. "It is hidden, but it is everywhere. Talking about it was forbidden."

Her voice, once muted by fear and cultural taboo, has become part of a growing chorus of refugee women calling out harm long accepted as normal.

Trapped by a culture of silence

One thread runs through the testimony of every woman interviewed: silence. It is a silence enforced by families, religious leaders, and entire communities who believe acknowledging abuse is more dangerous than the abuse itself.

Aida Musa, a Sudanese community leader now known for her outspoken work against FGM and early marriage, explains that many families prefer to hide cases of rape or domestic abuse rather than seek justice. "In our communities, a girl's future can be destroyed if people know she was raped," she says. "Families say, 'Hide it, don't report, the shame will follow us.' They protect the image of the family, not the girl."

This culture of secrecy is often the first barrier survivor's encounter. When a girl is raped, the instinctive reaction among many elders is to convene the family and settle the matter privately. Survivors may be pressed to forgive their attackers, sometimes within hours. They may be withdrawn from reporting processes and discouraged from seeking medical treatment.

In some cases, entire communities take on the responsibility of burying the case, determined that outsiders should not learn of it.

The burden of shame is almost always placed on the survivor.

Aida describes the kinds of interrogations girls face, including why they were outside, who they spoke to, and whether they were properly dressed.

"They never ask why the man abused her," she says. "It is always the girl who is blamed."

When justice looks away

Even when survivors overcome these community barriers and attempt to seek formal justice, they often collide with a system unprepared to handle the realities of refugee life.

Francine Ziruka Mwozi, a Congolese advocate working in Uganda, has handled some of the most distressing cases. One that still weighs on her involved a young schoolgirl who was sexually harassed. Instead of reporting the crime, the school administration hid the perpetrator to protect their image.

"They wanted the family to drop it," she says sharply. "They were afraid of being known as a school where rape happened."

She pursued the case through

official channels despite intimidation from those seeking to silence it. Her determination stems from recognising how easily refugee women are dismissed. Many do not speak English, understand police procedures, or feel confident navigating unfamiliar justice systems. Some fear that reporting will affect their documentation or their ability to remain in Uganda.

Shukri Ali, the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at Somali Women's Union, an organisation under the REWON umbrella, says the justice system often contributes to the failure. "At some point, even the police are part of the perpetrators," she says. "They keep sending these women back to the abusers. They tell them to solve things at home because they think it is just a family matter."

This pattern is echoed across communities. Once women report abuse, they often begin to feel as if the system itself is pushing them back into silence.

When men weaponise power

The stories reveal another layer to the crisis: the role of poverty. Many refugee men who once held status and income in their home countries arrive in Uganda with neither. The loss of identity and economic

power often turns inward.

"When men reach here, the frustration is too much," Shukri explains. "They feel the pressure of being providers, and some of them take that frustration out on the women and the children."

Economic dependency traps many women in abusive relationships. Some fear homelessness if they leave. Others fear deportation. The vulnerability opened by poverty also exposes women to exploitation by non-refugee men, who may promise help with rent, food or documentation in exchange for sexual favours.

Early marriage remains widespread among refugee communities. Many girls are married off at 17, 15, or even younger. Sarah's marriage at 17 is tragically common. Once married, girls are groomed to obey and endure. Violence becomes normalised, and they are discouraged from seeking outside help. If a girl tries to leave an abusive husband, she is often returned to him with stern lectures about respect and duty. Girlhood ends long before it begins.

FGM: a wound carried in silence

FGM remains a deeply rooted practice among Sudanese and Somali refugees. Though it has gone underground because of legal restrictions, it persists.

Shukri stresses that communities often misunderstand its origins.

"When you come to FGM, it is cultural; it is not even religious," she says. "Our culture has become a religion that we don't appreciate. Some things people think are religion are just culture."

In the training, some women learned for the first time that FGM was harmful. Many had believed it was a necessary rite of passage.

The women refused to remain silent. Yet, amidst the pain and systemic failures, a quiet revolution is unfolding. The refugee women have begun to reclaim their voices and reshape their communities from within.

Shukri has witnessed a remarkable transformation.

"Sometimes I sit back and listen to how a woman speaks after our sessions, and I feel proud," she says. "We are teaching them to speak, especially the girls. I tell them, sit behind and speak so you have that confidence, so you can also fight."

Her work with survivors is deeply personal.

"When one woman succeeds or breaks free, it makes me feel I should continue," she says.

Sarah, once silent, now responds to cases of violence among Somali households. Salma, once unable to speak publicly about FGM, now educates others. Mwozi continues to pursue justice even when institutions resist. And Aida challenges norms that have muted women for generations.

The network strengthens community-led solutions, bringing women, men, religious leaders, local authorities, and service providers together.



We grew up thinking that a man's word ends a conversation. But when women started speaking about the violence they face, I realised silence is also a form of violence. We men must unlearn what harms our families and stand with women asking for justice."

REWON's programme coordinator, Ibrahim Mohammed

A SYSTEM BEGINNING TO SHIFT, SLOWLY

So far, REWON has trained more than 60 refugee community leaders in SGBV reporting, survivor rights, referral pathways, legal literacy, and community dialogues. These sessions begin by listening to women's lived experiences and mapping out how violence happens, who is involved, and how communities traditionally respond. Leaders then hold broader dialogues involving men, religious leaders, local government,

police and health workers to address root causes. The change is slow, but it is real. Women who once whispered now speak openly. Survivors who were once isolated now find support groups and trusted leaders. Discussions about rape, early marriage and FGM are emerging where silence once reigned. Still, barriers remain: cultural expectations, institutional reluctance, poverty, and deeply rooted beliefs about gender. But the shift is fragile, determined, and growing is a significant departure from the past.