



Breaking Barriers: Enhancing Access to Secondary Education for Refugee Girls in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement Camp

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Introduction

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in northwestern Uganda hosts over 65,000 refugees, mainly women and children from South Sudan, displaced by ongoing conflict.

While Uganda's refugee policy promotes inclusion, South Sudanese girls in Kiryandongo remain largely excluded from secondary education, due to persistent barriers despite access to primary education.

Objective

The study identifies and examines the sociocultural, financial, and institutional barriers that prevent South Sudanese girls from continuing their education in Kiryandongo.

Why this Matters?

This study offers insights and strategies to improve refugee girls' education, informing global dialogues and policymakers on creating inclusive systems (SDG 4 & 5)

Methodology

Methodology: Qualitative approach.

Study Area & Participants:

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, Uganda – girls (students), teachers, and education stakeholders.

Sampling: Mixed – simple random (girls) & purposive (teachers/stakeholders).

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews, informal observation, and document review.

Key Findings

Sociocultural Barriers: Early marriage, gender roles, parental attitudes, peer influence and community stigma

Financial Challenges: Fees, uniforms, hidden costs, food insecurity, parental unemployment, inconsistent support mechanisms.

Institutional Barriers: Limited teachers, overcrowding, lack of support structures, insecurity and silent harassment, sanitation and safety concerns

Discussions

Discussion Sociocultural Factors

- Domestic duties and caregiving severely limit girls' study time and increase fatigue. Confirmed by both students and stakeholders
- Early marriage remains culturally embedded and legitimised as a form of security or economic relief.

Financial Challenges

- Inability to afford school fees and educational materials drives absenteeism. Students take informal jobs or are sent home.
- Food insecurity and lack of cash transfers undermine educational continuity. Hunger and dropout are tightly linked.

Institutional Barriers

- Overcrowded classrooms and under-resourced schools limit engagement and learning. Up to 140 pupils per class reported
- Lack of female teachers and poor menstrual hygiene support lead to absenteeism and withdrawal. Girls lack mentors and safe spaces

Analysis

- Method: Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019)
- Process:
- Transcribed interviews → Identified codes → Grouped into themes
- Triangulated data from students, teachers, and stakeholders
- Validated findings through member checking and supervisor consultations
- Outcome: Generated key themes on sociocultural, financial, and institutional barriers

Conclusion

- Sociocultural expectations, financial hardship, and institutional deficits combine to limit refugee girls' access to secondary education in Kiryandongo.
- Deeply rooted norms such as early marriage and domestic labor continue to prioritise boys' education while girls are sidelined.
- Overcrowded classrooms, weak infrastructure, lack of female mentors, and erratic aid weaken school access and retention.
- Despite marginalization, refugee girls demonstrate strength and agency in navigating broken systems that often fail to protect their rights.
- Achieving educational equity requires coordinated, gender-sensitive reforms—not just improved access, but structural justice and meaningful participation.

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