



# Women Lead in Emergencies in Uganda

## Results from a pilot project in Omugo settlement, 2019-2020

January 2021

*More than 880,000 South Sudanese refugees arrived in Uganda between July 2016 and 2020, the vast majority (82%) of whom were women and children. With funding from Global Affairs Canada, CARE has been responding to the crisis in Omugo settlement in the West Nile region since 2016 through a multi-sectoral programme that includes support for shelter, protection and reducing gender-based violence (GBV), and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This programme began piloting CARE's [Women Lead in Emergencies](#) approach in January 2019.*

### What is Women Lead in Emergencies?

In many humanitarian contexts, women are not supported to engage in decision-making and leadership or empowered to participate in humanitarian action. This leads to humanitarian responses that do not consider the specific priorities and needs of women and girls, do not benefit from women's and girls' unique perspectives, and do not contribute to addressing unequal gender relations. Conversely, humanitarian action that is inclusive of different groups of the affected population is more likely to save lives, reduce harm and promote dignity and wellbeing.

CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies approach supports women directly affected by crisis and displacement to participate in humanitarian action. Women Lead supports the formation of grassroots women's groups in these communities and helps to develop their collective strength, participation and leadership within emergency response and recovery. The approach contributes to women's empowerment *by asking them* how they want to participate, what the systemic barriers are, and what support CARE and partners can provide to overcome those barriers.

CARE Uganda used the Women Lead in Emergencies approach to support the participating women's groups to: (1) **reflect** on gender, power and participation in their community, (2) **analyse** the barriers to and opportunities for women's participation in community and humanitarian decision-making and response structures, (3) **co-create** action plans to increase their meaningful participation in humanitarian response, (4) **take action** to improve their lives and communities, and (5) **learn** together about what is working well and make changes where needed.

### How are women's groups participating in humanitarian response?

In Omugo, the project began supporting four women's groups: Ngongi Kuyupet Women's Group (formerly Loketa Group); South Sudanese Refugee Women's Association; South Sudanese Women's Faith Group; and Yoleta 'Think about it!' Group. All four groups are voluntary and are composed of South Sudanese women refugees as leaders and members.

These women's groups collectively decided on and carried out actions to increase their participation in the community and engagement with humanitarian actors, including:

#### **ORGANISING WOMEN'S CONFERENCES TO BUILD NETWORKS AND SOLIDARITY ACROSS DIFFERENCE**

CARE worked with the South Sudanese Refugee Women's Association to organise a Women's Conference on South Sudanese Leadership, Peace and Reconciliation among Tribes in October 2019. The conference brought together the women's groups from Bari, Dinka, Kakwa and Nuer tribes to discuss women's leadership in emergencies, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights, child protection, legal rights and services, psychosocial support and tribal reconciliation, as well as to ask questions and raise concerns with humanitarian partners during a plenary session.

At a second Women's Conference in March 2020, participants networked, shared learning from group achievements and identified further ways to meet women's aspirations for voice and leadership in community life and humanitarian action.

### **SUCCESSFULLY HOLDING HUMANITARIAN ACTORS TO ACCOUNT FOR ACCESSIBLE FOOD DISTRIBUTION**

Women in Village 4 of Omugo settlement were trekking nearly 10 km to the nearest food distribution point, taking hours from their day and exposing them to abuse and attacks along the way. At the first Women's Conference, the Yoleta Group tasked humanitarian agencies with reducing the distance to the food distribution point. When no action was taken, the Yoleta Group collaborated with the Refugee Welfare Council leaders and **Role Model Men** in the community to organise a peaceful sit-down strike. This led humanitarian agencies to engage in direct dialogue with the community and, as a result, to start distributing food directly in Village 4 in February 2020.

### **RAISING AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

Through the four women's groups, CARE organised a Women's Forum during '16 Days of Activism' (December 2019) to fight against gender-based violence in the community, involving the district police focal person. UNHCR and the Office of the Prime Minister asked the women's groups to participate in a panel of refugee women during the International Women's Day celebrations in March 2020, themed 'I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights'.

### **PEACEBUILDING AND INTER-TRIBAL RECONCILIATION**

Following the first Women's Conference, the South Sudanese Women's Faith Group began taking action to encourage dialogue and reconciliation between the Dinka and Nuer tribes in Omugo. They called for a meeting with their Nuer cultural leaders and elected representatives to present their idea for reconciliation with the Dinka tribe. Their leaders applauded the idea and have begun exploring options to take forward, with support from the Office of the Prime Minister.

### **PREPARING TO STAND FOR ELECTION TO THE REFUGEE WELFARE COUNCIL**

Members of the women's groups aspire to stand for the Refugee Welfare Council, including for Chair/Vice-Chair positions that gender norms dictate are commonly reserved for men. Women have been formulating their candidacies and practising campaigning publicly, in readiness for the next election for the first tier of the Refugee Welfare Council (RWC 1) in 2021.

## **How have the women's groups addressed barriers to participation?**

Building on a Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation, the Women Lead team facilitated women's groups to examine and reflect on barriers to and opportunities for their meaningful participation in Omugo. Through this, the women's groups prioritised the following support and action:

- **Women's Forums and Conferences** to bring women's groups together, within and between villages in Omugo settlement, to share experiences, build solidarity and identify common priorities.
- **Training in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) and in business skills**, as lack of livelihood opportunities and limited control of decisions about household finances are significant barriers to women's participation in community activities and decision-making outside the home.
- **Providing Functional Adult Literacy classes**, because the ability to read and write basic English is important to women's confidence and ability to participate in community meetings and other public forums.

- **Extending CARE’s Role Model Men activities** in Omugo. The support of male relatives and leaders enables women’s participation by breaking down patriarchal barriers and reduces the risk of gender-based violence as a backlash to women engaging in activities outside the home.

The Women Lead approach increases women’s confidence and collective action. At the end of the pilot, 91% of women – more than double the percentage at the baseline – said they were confident in their own negotiation and communication skills. 92% of women – more than three times as many – said they could work with other women to solve problems.

**“We have to realize that we can do greater things if we’re united as a group. [...] We need a change and to speak for our rights, because it is mostly women that are suffering.” Halatu Benjamin, Yoleta Group, Village 4**

## How has Women Lead adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic?

CARE Uganda was better able to pivot humanitarian activities towards COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery because the Women Lead in Emergencies project was already underway and had contributed to the increased strength and prominence of women’s groups in Omugo. While COVID-19 restrictions created new challenges for the implementation of planned Women Lead activities, the project and women’s groups adapted to respond to the crisis.

One of the women’s groups changed their business venture to manufacture face masks, which were purchased by CARE and distributed to enable women to safely access GBV and SRHR services. Members of the Yoleta Group trained the South Sudanese Refugee Women’s Association and Ngongi Kuyupet Women’s Group in manufacturing liquid soap for their communities. Yoleta Group members were also involved in translating COVID-19 messages into the local language to sensitise their communities during the lockdown period. CARE also worked with the women’s groups to roll out new technologies, providing a tablet for each group so that they could continue to safely interact with each other and the CARE team. Functional Adult Literacy and VSLA activities were adapted to allow for social distancing, including through the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and reduced meeting sizes.

Home confinement and economic stress related to the pandemic has caused an increase in GBV worldwide. While many service providers were temporarily prevented from accessing the refugee settlements, Women Lead participants living in the communities continued to support victims of GBV, partnering with Role Model Men to mentor victims’ families and mediate conflict. In response to soaring rates of adolescent pregnancy in the settlements due to COVID-19, CARE has also started working with a new girls’ group in Omugo as part of the Women Lead project.

## Resources and information

Women Lead in Emergencies on [CARE Insights](#) (public) and [CARE Shares](#) (CARE staff)

For more information on Women Lead in Emergencies, email:

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For more information on Women Lead in Emergencies in Omugo, read [Learning Brief 2 \(January 2021\)](#).

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