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Women Lead in Emergencies in Uganda

Achievements and results from a pilot project in Omugo settlement, 2019-2020

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.

Why do we need 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 to participate in humanitarian action.** It contributes to women's own empowerment *by asking them* how they want to participate, what the barriers are, and what support CARE and partners can provide to overcome them. Women Lead works with women's groups. Wherever possible, CARE seeks out and supports existing women's groups in the community – usually informal voluntary groups such as solidarity groups, savings and other self-help groups, school clubs or faith-based groups – to increase the sustainability of the benefits to the group and the likelihood of their continuing actions after the intervention ends. CARE's Women Lead approach is also being piloted with girls' groups.

How does Women Lead in Emergencies work?

Women Lead in Emergencies works with grassroots women’s groups, using an approach with five distinct but iterative components designed to support women directly affected by crisis to collectively act on the issues that affect their lives.

Women Lead in Emergencies Model

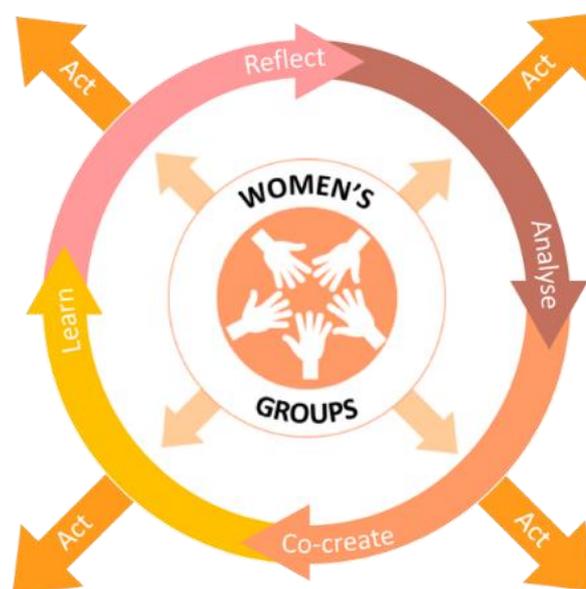
Analyse: CARE and partners conduct a Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation (RGA-P) which is used as a basis for further discussion, reflection and planning with women’s groups.

Reflect: CARE staff, partners and women’s groups explore social norms and individual beliefs about gender, participation and leadership, as well as exploring what changes in community and humanitarian structures would be required to enable women’s participation and leadership in their context.

Co-Create: The women’s group members work together to identify their goals for participation and leadership. They then decide on collective actions to address barriers and to build opportunities for women to influence the humanitarian response.

Act: Each women’s group acts on the issues which affect them and their communities. This can include strengthening the building blocks for women’s collective action, such as rights awareness, solidarity, peer learning, literacy, safety, healing from trauma or increasing men’s support for women’s participation. It also includes women taking action to participate in more meaningful ways in community and humanitarian decision-making forums, such as speaking up in community meetings, mentoring other women, organising to claim rights from government or humanitarian agencies, and facilitating peace and reconciliation in their communities.

Learn: Each women’s group considers what has and has not been working well and what adaptations may be needed to reach their collective goals.



Which women’s groups are leading in Omugo?

In Omugo, Women Lead began working directly with five women’s groups – all volunteer-led and composed of South Sudanese women refugees – in three villages in the refugee settlement:

Yoleta ‘Think about it’ Group: This group of women formed after the dissolution of the Tomore Group in Village 4. The Tomore group had initially been participating in Women Lead, but not all members were coming to meetings. When the group broke down, the active women formed a new group. Yoleta means ‘think about it’ in Bari, the women’s language.

South Sudanese Refugee Women’s Association (SSRWA): SSRWA were a pre-existing women’s solidarity and self-help group in Village 5. During the project, SSRWA decided to formally register as a Community-Based Organisation (CBO). CARE supported this process and SSRWA have now become the first recognised women’s CBO in the Omugo settlement.

South Sudanese Women’s Faith Group: This group brings together Nuer women from different churches and faith denominations in Village 6 of Omugo settlement. The group was formed during the inception of the Women Lead project.

Ngongi Kuyupet Women's Group: This self-formed group in Village 5 was formerly called the Loketa Group. The group has four male members, but most members and all its leaders are women.

Milling Group: This mixed livelihood group of men and women was formed by CEFORD. During the Women Lead start-up, CARE worked with the 15 women from the milling group. However, the group dissolved due to mistrust between the group members.

The membership of the groups has been fluid over time, but at least 20 women regularly attend each of the groups' meetings. In 2020, Women Lead began working with three additional groups: a group of adolescent South Sudanese girls in Village 6 of Omugo settlement, and two women's groups in Ariaze and Simbili villages of Siripi settlement, whose members are refugees from DRC and South Sudan and Ugandan women from the host community.

What are the barriers to participation for women refugees in Omugo?

CARE, together with the women's groups, undertook a participatory and iterative approach to **identifying barriers to women's meaningful participation and leadership**. Three Rapid Gender Analyses on Power and Participation (RGA-P) have been conducted during the project. Women's groups then discuss and validate findings from the RGA-Ps during reflection and co-creation sessions. The identified barriers to the participation of South Sudanese refugee women in community and public decision-making have included the following:

- **Restrictive gender norms and unequal power relations:** Restrictive social norms endure following displacement and are the primary cause of unequal participation and decision-making between women and men.
- **Men place restrictions on women's movement and participation:** The RGA-P found that men are concerned that women might neglect domestic duties, engage in extra-marital affairs or be negatively influenced by other women if they are more free to engage in activities outside the home.
- **Triple burden and lack of time:** Women have no or limited time to engage in community life and decision-making because of the heavy burden of their reproductive/domestic and productive roles. Women's domestic burden is exacerbated by poverty and limited basic services like access to water, firewood, healthcare and education.
- **Limited information:** Women expressed limited awareness of their rights, formal governance structures and opportunities to participate. Women's high illiteracy levels and language barriers limit their access to information. Women usually access information through secondary sources, often distorted by male interlocutors, translators' bias or even tribal affiliations.
- **Lack of confidence in public speaking:** Women often have very limited self-confidence and fear speaking out in public. This is linked to a fear that women who are active in public life may be subjected to violence for transgressing gender norms. There is also a perception that women with limited financial means and/or who do not speak English well will not be respected as leaders by their community.
- **Gender bias in leadership position:** Leadership structures and positions favour men, with significantly more men at every level and especially the positions with most power. Where they do engage in leadership structures, women are often restricted to positions with less power, such as secretary in refugee leadership structures. Specific prohibitions also prevent unmarried or pregnant women from taking some positions (e.g. in church leadership).

- **Intersection of age and gender:** Adolescent girls face additional barriers to participation and leadership. Girls who become pregnant usually drop out of school. Girls also stated that their voices are not heard at community gatherings, requiring an older woman to talk for them.
- **Lack of provision for menstrual hygiene:** Inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products often prevents girls from attending school and women from attending meetings.

What are the opportunities for women refugees in Omugo to participate in public decision-making and humanitarian action?

The Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation (RGA-P) also enabled women's groups to discuss whether and how crisis and displacement had created **new opportunities to participate in decision-making**, inside and outside the home. New opportunities identified included:

- Some women have **more say over household decisions and their movement outside the home** now than they did in South Sudan, especially women now living in female-headed households.
- South Sudanese women in Omugo are **more likely to attend community meetings** since displacement and there are **new opportunities to attend meetings organised by humanitarian agencies**.
- Women have a **right to participate in the formal community and elected leadership structure** of block leadership and Refugee Welfare Councils in Omugo settlement – including a 30% quota for women in the Refugee Welfare Councils.
- Some refugee **women are organising already**, taking up positions as community volunteers and aspiring other leadership positions, **to work for their community and hold humanitarian agencies and government to account** for service provision.
- CARE Uganda already has a Role Model Men project in the West Nile to **engage men and boys in promoting gender equality**.

What actions did the women's groups take to address barriers to participation?

After discussing barriers to women's participation, CARE's Women Lead team supported women's groups to co-create actions that aimed to break down the barriers and increase women's meaningful participation in humanitarian decision-making. The women's groups identified and drove the following actions to take down these barriers:

Organising Women's Conferences to build networks and solidarity

Women Lead participants voiced a desire for more collaborative platforms to enable women to network, share experiences and identify common concerns. As a result, **two Women's Conferences were organised** in Omugo, creating opportunities for women to network with each other, engage with government representatives and humanitarian agencies in attendance, and raise their collective voices.

The **first Women's Conference** in October 2019 was **themed 'South Sudanese Leadership, Peace and Reconciliation among Tribes'**. The Conference was proposed by the South Sudanese Refugee Women's Association and brought together 97 (93 female and 4 male) refugees from the women's groups from Bari, Dinka, Kakwa and Nuer tribes. Topics discussed included women's leadership in emergencies, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights, child protection, tribal reconciliation, legal rights and services, and psychosocial support. A plenary session gave opportunities for the women to ask questions and raise concerns with humanitarian partners.

The **second Women's Conference** in March 2020, **themed #WomeninLead**, was attended by 148 people (101 female and 47 male) including the women's groups, selected Role Model Men and Refugee Welfare Council representatives. Participants networked, shared learnings from group achievements, and identified further ways to meet women's aspirations for voice and leadership in community life and humanitarian action. The project team observed that the **women participants had gained confidence between the first and second conferences**: they participated more actively and were much more confident in speaking before an audience and the community.

Tackling economic barriers to women's participation

During Co-Create sessions, women's groups stressed that their lack of livelihood opportunities and limited control of decisions about household finances were a significant barrier to their participation in community activities and in decision-making, both inside and outside the home. In response, CARE provided women's group members with **training on Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) and business skills**. The training boosted the participants' confidence in decision-making, created awareness of the business environment, market systems and the simplified value chain, as well as their life skills. As a result, **participants are better able to manage profits for personal, family and community use and can plan for unforeseen circumstances**. Following these interventions, each of the four women's groups started saving together and planning various collective business start-ups, including peanut making, restaurant management, shortcake baking and bedsheet sewing.

Building confidence and networks through Functional Adult Literacy

Women continuously identified the need to educate themselves in basic literacy and numeracy skills and English. This is important because their lack of formal education reduced women's confidence to participate in community affairs and engage with humanitarian agencies. In response, Women Lead hired a Functional Adult Literacy consultant who **trained 11 local facilitators** (including a member of the South Sudanese Women's Faith Group) **to teach Women Lead participants through adult learning sessions**. Following their enrolment in literacy classes, several women who had struggled to count, write their names or express themselves in English were able to **confidently stand up in front of a large audience** at the second Women's Conference. They demonstrated what they had learned, including writing their names on flipcharts for all to see.

An unexpected result of the popularity of the literacy classes is that many refugee women not participating in Women Lead also joined the classes, providing a **new space for women to come together and exchange experiences**. The women also requested that literacy classes be opened to men to limit their opposition or backlash. By the end of the project period up to April 2020, 147 direct beneficiaries (103 women and 44 men) were enrolled in the classes through Women Lead.

Creating champions for women's participation through Role Model Men and Boys

Women's groups also consistently identified the support and engagement of male relatives and leaders as being crucial to their leadership aspirations and to mitigate backlash and gender-based violence from their participation in Women Lead. In response, CARE Uganda rolled out the **Role Model Men and Boys (RMMB) approach** in Omugo settlement with a new targeting approach: women's groups participating in Women Lead themselves selected the 112 Role Model Men and Boys (109 men and 3 boys).

CARE's Male Engage Officer trained the Role Model Men and Boys on gender roles, division of labour, gender socialisation and reflections on masculinity. Further trainings and monthly couples' reflection seminars helped to track the progress of positive masculinities as the men were encouraged to examine and change gender power imbalances in their family and community. These changes started from the household and expanded into the community, with **RMMBs encouraging other men to change their negative perceptions and behaviours**. Women testified that there is a **reduction in gender-based violence** in their own families because of these activities.

The Role Model Men have also contributed to Women Lead successes by **supporting women's community and advocacy activities**. This has included engaging in inter-tribal reconciliation meetings, working with women's groups to draft a memo to humanitarian agencies about community food distribution, speaking out in favour of women's leadership during public forums, cheering for women candidates during mock election campaigns, and working with Women Lead participants to provide counselling to families experiencing domestic violence.

How did Women Lead change women's participation in humanitarian response?

Alongside these actions to address barriers to their participation, the women's groups also collectively decided on and undertook actions that directly increased their participation in community life and decision-making, and their engagement with humanitarian actors on issues important to them and their community. Their achievements include:

Lobbying for accessible food distribution

Gender norms dictate that food collection is primarily the responsibility of women in the South Sudanese refugee community. For women in Village 4 in Omugo settlement this meant trekking nearly 10 km to the nearest food distribution point, with many women reporting abuse and attacks along the way. The Yoleta Group decided that they wanted to change this – and **tasked humanitarian actors to take action to reduce the distance to the food distribution point** during the first Women's Conference.

By December 2019, no meaningful action had been taken. The Yoleta Group therefore decided to collaborate with Role Model Men and Boys, community members, and Refugee Welfare Council leaders to **organise a peaceful sit-down strike** at the next regular food distribution. This action was effective and supported by the community. Humanitarian agencies moved quickly to engage in direct dialogue with the community and began distributing food directly to Village 4. This success has **increased respect for the Yoleta Group within their community**: they are now seen as a go-to organisation to help solve problems.

Women's forums and community engagements

As Women Lead in Emergencies has gained recognition and momentum in the community, the women's groups have been sought after to participate in community engagements. During '16 Days of Activism' in December 2019, the women's groups and CARE **organised a Women's Forum to forge a way forward to fight against GBV in the community**. The district police focal person facilitated a discussion to create awareness on the effects of GBV, Ugandan laws and reporting channels.

During the International Women's Day celebrations in March 2020, UNHCR and OPM sought the engagement of the four women's groups. The pre-event Women's Forum, themed 'I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights', discussed women's inclusion, voice and meaningful participation, feedback, decision-making and accountability through a panel of refugee women. The forum also provided a platform to **share and learn positive cultural values across South Sudanese tribes to promote peaceful coexistence and create an enabling environment for leadership**. Dinka, Kakwa, Nuba, Nuer, Shiluk and host community women celebrated their ethnic identity through food preparation, dance, clothing and tribal practices. On Women's Day itself, the Women Lead and Role Model Men participants led the settlement celebration, breaking through barriers isolating women in their tribes and giving participants hope and confidence.

Peacebuilding and inter-tribal reconciliation

During the first Women's Conference in October 2019, **women came together from the different tribes** of Bari, Dinka, Kakwa, Kuku and Nuer. They networked, learned, laughed, cried and co-existed peacefully with no outbursts of anger from one tribe to another. Women from tribes of opposing sides in the South Sudanese civil war expressed their awareness that they had many common experiences and needs.

The conference led the Nuer women from the South Sudanese Women's Faith Group in Village 6 to consider reconciliation with the Dinka tribe. In August 2018 a clash between Dinka and Nuer refugees had led to the relocation of the Nuer refugees from Tika to Omugo Village 6. **Women now began to embrace the use of dialogue as a means of resolving conflict**, creating mutual coexistence across the settlement and building peace.

The South Sudanese Women's Faith Group called for a meeting with their cultural and Refugee Welfare Council leaders in Village 6 to champion the attempt to extend an olive branch to the Dinka tribe as well as get their leaders' buy-in. The leaders applauded the women's initiative and their role in conflict resolution. With support from the Office of the Prime Minister representative in the settlement, the Refugee Welfare Council chairperson of Tika (a Dinka leader) attended the meeting to discuss this initiative and made a promise to share this initiative with his community.

This reconciliation process needs to proceed carefully if it is to bring Dinka and Nuer refugees and their leaders together. When the first phase of Women Lead in Emergencies came to an end, the South Sudanese Women's Faith Group and the Women Lead project team were awaiting feedback from Dinka leaders to enable a way forward. Due to the COVID-19 related restrictions, this activity was temporarily halted.

Public speaking and mock elections

The continuous learning through Women Lead co-creation meetings, skills trainings, exchange group visits, conference networking and Functional Adult Literacy classes have all been incremental contributory factors towards building women's voice and confidence to speak and campaign publicly.

The next **community leadership elections for the Refugee Welfare Councils (RWC)** have been postponed from November/December 2020 to 2021 due to COVID-19. While there is a 30% quota for women in leadership positions, women are often limited in practice to designated positions like the women's representative or secretary for women's affairs, rather than the more powerful positions of vice/chairperson. In response, **Women Lead has supported women to formulate their candidacies and to practise campaigning publicly**. For example, women aspiring for leadership positions have held 'mock campaigns' to provide them with a platform to talk about their candidacy with potential voters ahead of the election.

'If you elect me, I will ensure that the organisations responsible for health, water and schools bring these services closer to our people. I will open up the tribal barriers cocooning us from interacting with our fellow South Sudanese and sharing knowledge and ideas. I will make sure the cultural leaders involve, listen and take into considerations the decisions of women and, above all, I will make sure all the women are educated enough to know how to read and write.' **Tereza Nyakume, Welfare Refugee Council candidate**

Women's participation in the COVID-19 response

The presence of the Women Lead in Emergencies project, and the resulting increased strength and prominence of women's groups in Omugo, made it more possible for CARE Uganda to pivot humanitarian activities towards COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery. 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 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. Women's groups were able to step into this gap in services for GBV survivors because of their embedded access to the community and the capacity and credibility they had gained during the project.

In response to soaring rates of adolescent pregnancy in the settlements, attributed to the closure of schools, suspension of support measures and negative coping mechanisms because of COVID-19, CARE has also started **working with a new girls' group** in Omugo. Part of the Women Lead project, this work aims to strengthen their collective voice and leadership and enable humanitarian actors to better respond to their specific needs.

What's next for Women Lead in Emergencies in Uganda?

In 2020 CARE received funding from Global Affairs Canada (GAC) to continue implementing the Women Lead in Emergencies project in the West Nile region of Uganda into 2021. As part of this extension, the women's groups in Omugo settlement continue to be supported and **the project has expanded to two new groups** in Ariaze and Simbili villages, hosting both South Sudanese and Congolese refugees. During this new project period, many Women Lead participants are planning to stand in the local elections that have been postponed to 2021.

CARE Uganda is also **expanding Women Lead programming to a girls' group**, in response to the evolving COVID-19 context. Findings from the third Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation indicated that girls face additional barriers to participation and struggle to have their voices heard in humanitarian settings. The four established **Women Lead groups are playing a key role in mentoring the new groups** and are also starting to support and mentor more informal women's groups within their communities, not connected to the CARE project. Capacities are therefore being cascaded beyond the original women's groups, contributing to a **sustainable, locally led embedding of women's empowerment actions**.

As the first full pilot of CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies model, the GAC-funded project in Uganda has contributed significantly to testing and refining the Women Lead modality and approach – for example, the **need for flexibility to form new groups** when there are no existing women's group in a location, **revision of the timeframes for and approaches to co-creation** of action plans, and **increased prioritisation of networking** between women's groups.

CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies community of practitioners is growing rapidly. **CARE is now piloting Women Lead in Emergencies in nine emergency responses in five countries** (Colombia, Mali, Niger, the Philippines and Uganda), including an ECHO-funded Women Lead project in Kyangwali (Uganda) as part of the DRC refugee response. At least two more pilots are planned for 2021, as well as a multi-country evaluation.

Key resources

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

Rapid Gender Analysis on Power in Omugo, February 2020

Learning from piloting the Women Lead Model in Omugo Settlement, 2019-2020. Women Lead in Emergencies Learning Report 1, January 2021

Want more information?

For more information on Women Lead in Emergencies in Uganda, email:

- **Caroline Aol**, Women Lead in Emergencies Specialist, CARE Uganda, Caroline.Aol@care.org
- **Tessa Bolton**, Humanitarian Program Officer, CARE Canada, tessa.bolton@care.ca

CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies Programme is a joint initiative of CARE's global Gender in Emergencies and Inclusive Governance teams and has pilots in five countries. For more information, email the CARE Women Lead Global Coordinators:

- **Tam O'Neil**, Senior Gender Advisor, CARE UK, oneil@careinternational.org
- **Isadora Quay**, Gender in Emergencies Coordinator, CARE International, quay@careinternational.org

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