

LIS professionals supporting women living in conflict situations
<https://www.ifla.org/node/11319>

Information needs and information seeking behaviour of women refugees in Uganda; Public Libraries' Role

Winnie Nekesa Akullo

Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority, Kampala, Uganda
nekesawinny@gmail.com

Patrick Odong

Uganda Christian University, Bishop Barham University College, Kabale, Uganda
patodong@gmail.com



Copyright © 2017 by **Winnie Nekesa Akullo, Patrick Odong**. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract:

Information is an important resource for individual growth and survival. Libraries support Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by closing gaps in access to information and helping government, civil society and business to understand local information needs better. With the war in South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somali and other countries, a number of refugees have sought shelter in Uganda. This paper examines the information needs and the information seeking behaviour of the women refugees and the role of public libraries. The objectives of the research were to; examine the information needs and information seeking behaviour of the women refugees; the challenges they face in accessing information; the role of public libraries in providing information to refugees; propose measures on improving access of information by refugees. Twenty women refugee and two public librarians were purposively sampled. A semi-structured questionnaire and interview schedule were administer to solicit for responses. Ms. Excel was used for data analysis and simple tables used for presentation. The research found out that 75% of women refugees were in the age group (31-40) and 45% of them were from South Sudan. The most needed information is on health services (95%) and the majority of the women refugees relied on local authorities for information because they are not aware of availability of information in public libraries. The major challenge they face is lack of money to acquire gadgets to access information. The recommendation therefore was that public libraries should be able to provide information in their locations as well as sensitise them on their services.

Keywords: Information needs, information seeking behaviour, refugees, women refugees

Introduction

Uganda is experiencing the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world, hosting over 1.2 million refugees, and confronting immense pressures as a result. Millions of refugees fleeing conflict and famine in South Sudan, Burundi, Somali and Democratic Republic of Congo have found sanctuary in Uganda because of its open door refugee policy (New Vision, 2017). According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) more than 85 percent of the refugees currently arriving in Uganda are women and children under the age of 18 (Warom & Iceta, 2017). Currently, twelve districts are hosting refugees from South Sudan (898,864), DR. Congo (227,413), Burundi (45,993), Somalia (42,826), Rwanda (17,147) and others (20,227) (UNHCR, 2017).

Refugees are allowed freedom of residence, in rural settlements or in urban centres. The Government enacted a refugee legal and policy framework which allows refugees to stay in urban centres if they so wish. However, most of the refugees reside in rural settlements alongside Ugandan Citizens and use available public health services, have access to universal primary and lower secondary education, and engage in economic activity; and nearly 100,000 live as urban refugees in towns and cities (Office of the Prime Minister, 2017).

Access to information has been recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a target under Goal 16: promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and Target 16.10 to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. Culture (target 11.4) and ICT (targets 5b, 9c, 17.8) have also been included in the SDGs. Half of the world's population lacks access to information online. In the knowledge society, libraries provide access and opportunity for all (IFLA, 2016).

Therefore, the role of public libraries and professional librarians is no longer passive keepers and preservers of books; rather, they have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions. Modern libraries are unfolding the community's learning potential by providing information on community issues, such as health, employment, continuing education and local history. This equitable access to information is essential to enable educated and informed citizens to participate in a democratic global community, in addition to helping to bridge the information gap by providing free access to information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet. They are inclusive in that they build bridges between individuals at the local level and the global level of knowledge. In industrialized countries, access to modern information technology is currently one of the most attractive library services (Krolak, 2005).

However, it should be noted that during these crises women are often the first responders in a crisis, and whether en route or in camps, in home countries or destination countries, they play a crucial role in caring for, sustaining and rebuilding their communities. Yet, refugee and migrant women's needs, priorities and voices are often missing from policies designed to protect and assist them (UN Women, 2016).

More recently UNHCR has again underlined that the most vulnerable groups requiring a prompt, coordinated, and effective protection response (UNHCR, UNFPA and WRC, 2016) are constituted by: all women, persons with disabilities, and elderly men. Single adult refugee women constitute one of the most vulnerable groups of the whole refugee population because of the common lack of financial means, professional qualification, and family support (Chung, Hong, & Newbold, 2013).

According to the National Development Plan (2015) library and information facilities that provide and promote relevant information, knowledge and services to communities for individual and national development are few in Uganda and are mainly urban based. There are only 34 out of the required 112 public libraries and 72 out of the required 365 community libraries.

Objectives of the research

The objectives of this research were to:

- examine the information needs and information seeking behaviour of the women refugees;
- the challenges they face in accessing information;
- the role of public libraries in providing information to refugees;
- Propose measures on improving access of information by refugees.

Justification

Refugees in acute crisis leave their homelands suddenly with little prior planning and with no choice about their destination. Information is very important to every aspect of society, and to understand the information needs of immigrants is indeed essential for librarians or service providers in order to provide better services to them (Kilei, 2013). Fisher [et al.] (2004) have specifically recognized the fact that immigrants are generally perceived to be information poor, meaning they face major challenges with finding and using greatly needed everyday information. In fact, immigrants need information constantly of all types like every other individual for the development of a person. Women refugees have unique information needs such as health issues because they are more exposed to disease and other woman-related complications. They are also more prone to deprivation of rights and exploitation than their male counterparts. As for healthcare assistance, asylum seeking and refugee women find it difficult to access the necessary information and have to face cultural barriers when accessing health care services (Sansonetti, 2016).

Literature Review

Information needs of women refugees

Syrian refugees residing in both camp and non-camps reported that the situation inside Syria was the most important topic, when it comes to information needs, followed by issues related to their current displacement such as services for their children, shelter, aid in general and rights and obligations related to their refugee status. As for refugees in camp settings, their second priority needs, after information needs about the situation in Syria, are issues related to shelter and health (International Media Support, 2014).

For the urban refugees on the other hand, issues connected to children are a priority which could include lack of access to education facilities due to mainly language barriers - whereas there are schools set up in the camp with teachers who speaks Kurdish Kurmanji, including information on the rights and obligations as a refugee (International Media Support, 2014).

Many asylum seeking women arrive in Ireland very late in pregnancy. Thus, they often do not have the opportunity to avail of antenatal care. Other women report not accessing antenatal care because of difficulties in accessing such services through lack of childcare; language barriers; tiredness; distance. While some of these are issues which are experienced by the general population, others are not. Women reported not attending (Patricia & Jo Murphy, 2000).

According to Obodoruku (2014) refugees, especially women, need information for protection in camps, this is emphasized by a research that found out that a preponderance of refugees engage in information seeking while in Nyarugusu camps of Tanzania, refugees reported having been raped in camp and gotten pregnant and having kept the child but a majority of them did not find the information to be useful because it does not meet their needs.

Key areas of information that have been requested by women in the research are information on sexual health, welfare benefits, domestic violence, health, gender related persecution, asylum claims, education and employment. There is a growing awareness that women are affected in specific ways by these issues and the specialist advice and expertise they need is not readily available (Refugee Council, , 2005). As the UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres recently had this to say about refugees” I have met so many who have lost so much, but never lose their dreams for their children or their desire to better our world. They ask for little in return-only our support in their time of greatest need” (Daily Monitor, 2017).

Information seeking behaviour of women refugees

For women refugees in Tanzania, they frequently access information displayed on noticeboard/signboard at the front of the Nyarugusu Dispensary, Tanzania. In addition to the marketplace which was one of the most Frequently Visited Areas to seek information (Obodoruku 2013).

According to UNHCR (2012) Syrian women refugees kept in touch with relatives or friends still in Syria – where the civil war rages on – with mobile phones. Taking note of this preference and realizing it meant refugees are likely to check their phones regularly UNHCR began disseminating information via SMS in 2012. These messages were mainly brief updates about camp news, such as security issues following a riot, or information on when a broken service will be repaired (UNHCR, 2016).

Challenges the women refugees face in accessing information

According to the UN Women Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, a number of UN agencies and non-governmental organizations have done a lot under tremendous pressure to respond to the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of World War II, but the women and girl refugees travelling along the Western Balkans route have specific needs, priorities and rights to protection of their dignity that are not being addressed in full. Specific challenges in transit include family separation, psychosocial stress and trauma, health complications,

physical harm and injury, and risks of exploitation and gender-based violence (UN Women, 2016).

Language barriers and cultural factors, combined with the intention of asylum-seekers to move through transit countries as quickly as possible, make it more challenging for humanitarian actors to provide essential services, as well as to identify and support particularly vulnerable groups. One of the refugees interviewed indicated that they also lack information on the routes they are taking and available services (UN Women, 2016).

Despite the gender-sensitive good practices, response-planning, services, protection capacity and information are not yet sufficient to meet women's and girls' needs and address their distinct vulnerabilities. Specifically, expansion or establishment of targeted services for women and girls, including increased protection monitoring, gender-based violence prevention and response services, psychosocial support and trauma counselling, women-only spaces, local registration capacity at transit centres and points of entry so that detailed sex and age disaggregated data can be collected, and full-time sexual and reproductive services on-site in transit and reception centres (UN Women, 2016).

Refugee women can have complex health needs, arising from trauma and deprivation in their countries of origin, which is then compounded by trauma and deprivation in the UK. High quality and appropriate health services, including psychological support, are essential if women are to be empowered to recover from the devastating impacts that violence, including sexual violence, have on their physical and psychological health (Refugee Council, 2002).

Humanitarian appeals are chronically and severely underfunded, further compounding vulnerabilities of refugees. Refugees and host communities are susceptible to underlying poverty and vulnerabilities exacerbated by limited basic social services, inadequate infrastructure, and limited market opportunities (UNHCR; Lucy Beck, 2013).

Role of public libraries in providing information to refugees

Libraries throughout the world have a strong history of responding to natural disasters and humanitarian crises providing a welcoming environment, a place of refuge for body and soul, and a source of information (Richards, 2015).

In Europe, public libraries have a proud tradition of welcoming everyone, regardless of ethnic origin. Libraries welcome refugees arriving into European countries with plenty of activities for both children and adults, as well as access to information and education (EBLIDA, 2015).

The Danish Library Association, for example, announced in its recent press Release: "*We cannot promise that there will be enough books in the languages of the refugees in all libraries, but librarians will do their best to ensure that refugees feel welcome*". Danish libraries have for many years - with great success - worked hard on integrating resident refugees; immigrants and their descendants are today diligent visitors at Danish libraries (EBLIDA, 2015).

Proposals to improve access of information by refugees

In a newly opened health information Centre in one of Zambia's refugee settlements, refugees receive advice related to SGBV and HIV/AIDS, and can be accompanied to service providers

to report cases and receive assistance. Information about the referral pathways was translated into different languages and displayed on bill boards (UNHCR, 2013).

In India, refugee women requested for an expansion of services at the Women's Protection Clinic in west Delhi, and two new outreach centres were opened in south and north Delhi. This has increased the availability and accessibility of much needed services to these areas where many refugees live. UNHCR protection staff members are available several days a week (UNHCR, 2013).

Libraries should also make sure they are known by other agencies in the various communities that are serving refugees. In addition to providing information to refugees, take a lead role in providing information about Refugees to your community. Foster conversations about the realities of refugees' lives and help them to understand why they have become refugees (Ontario Library Association, 2015).

Translation services are extremely helpful when there are language barriers, though most Libraries will not have a person on staff who speaks every language needed. There is a need to find community volunteers or check with your local settlement agency to find out what is available and have this information ready (Ontario Library Association, 2015).

UN Women plays to help establish a regional network of local NGOs including women's organizations from the refugee and migrant countries of origin, transit and destination to share information, operations and advocacy (UN Women, 2016).

On-going efforts should be made to disseminate information to refugee women. This information should be available, written or orally, in a variety of languages, and available on-line. Translated information should also be put up in waiting rooms, toilets and all accommodation. Organisations should consider having a dedicated women's section on their websites, providing information on women's issues with appropriate links to other information leaflets and websites (Refugee Council, , 2005).

Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of data presented was based on information provided by the 20 urban refugee respondents. Semi - structured questionnaires were administered to 25 women refugees and 20 questionnaires were received giving a response rate of 80%. The analysis is therefore based on the 20 questionnaires received. On the other hand, two public librarians from the National Library of Uganda and Kampala City Council Authority Public Library were interviewed.

Analysis of Demographic Data

The distribution of the respondents by their personal data is shown in this section. Data were analysed using simple percentage. The data in Table 1 is used to show the distribution of respondents by their age.

Table 1: Distribution of the Respondents by Age

<i>Age (Years)</i>	<i>Total Frequencies</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
11-20	2	10
21-30	5	25
31-40	10	50
41-50	3	15
50 and above	-	-
Total	20	100

Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents were in the age group 31-40. This may be attributed to the fact that females in that age group are looking for better opportunities for themselves and children. As some of the respondents indicated that they fled the war and conflicts with their children because there was no water, food, medicines and schools and they don't find any time to dig because of the sound of the guns.

Table 2: Highest Level of Education

<i>Highest Level of Education</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Lower than high school	13	65
High School	5	25
College/University	2	10
Master's Degree	-	-
Total	20	100

Table 2 shows that 65% of the respondent's highest level of education is lower than high school. While 25% of the respondents have attained a high school qualification while none of the respondents had attained a Master's degree. This could be attributed to the wars and conflicts which hinder them from accessing education.

Table 3: Respondents marital status

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Single	14	70
Married	5	25
Separated	1	5
Divorced	-	-
Total	20	100

Table 3 shows that majority 70% of the respondents were single, 25% were married and only 5% were separated and none of the respondents was divorced. This may explain the reason for easy movement of these women during conflict and wars because they don't have much attachment.

Table 4: Country of Origin

<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Sudan	6	30
South Sudan	9	45
DR Congo	4	20
Burundi	1	5
Total	20	100

Table 4 shows that majority of the respondents were from South Sudan (45%) followed by Sudan (30%), DR Congo (20%) and Burundi (5%). The high number of refugees from South Sudan may be as a result of the on-going crisis in the country and also accessibility to Uganda and the open refugee policy which permits the refugees to settle in, go to school, get jobs and receive basic services ((Karungi, 2017).

Information needs of women refugees

A question was posed to find out the information needs of women refugees. Below are their responses;

Thirty five percent (35%) of the respondents indicated that they need information on jobs and where they can access them to enable them to gain an earning and improve their well-being, one indicated “As you can see we are sharing this one room with 3 different families because we can’t afford different rooms for each family, however, if we get jobs it will help us to afford single rooms per family”. Another said, “We have to depend on small handouts from some refugee organizations, local leaders, our boyfriends and husbands to provide for us”. This concurs with the finding of the Women’s refugees Commission, which noted that the urban refugee community of Kampala is divided into two wealth groups: “*vulnerable households*” (who cannot meet their basic needs) and “*struggling households*” (who can meet their basic needs but cannot face emergency or unpredicted expenses).

Fifty six percent (56%) of the respondents indicated that there are a number of schools in the city but they are not aware of any schools with a refugee population. Therefore, the need information on education in the city and where to find schools for their children to study. Schools which have other refugees in order to avoid stigmatization.

Ninety five percent (95%) of the respondents indicated that they needed information on health services, some of the women refugees have children and wanted to find out where to get information regarding free health services for their children and for themselves and other family members, especially when they fall sick. One of the refugees indicated that “*I had a miscarriage because I couldn’t access free antenatal services and feared to disclose my refugee status*”. Only 5% of the respondents indicated that they didn’t need information on health services because they are healthy and haven’t fallen sick.

Forty percent (40%) of the respondents mentioned the need for security information in the city and back home. These women refugees reside in slum areas in the city which are prone to crime and violence and therefore, always in fear that they may be attacked or violated by the citizens. Therefore, it’s very important for them to always have access to security information in the country and back home.

Five percent (5%) of the respondents indicated that information about housing in the city is very much needed when they arrive from their countries because they don’t want to stay in camps.

Information seeking behaviour of women refugees

A question was asked on how the women refugees access information in their locality. Below are responses.

- The respondents indicated that they access information from the local authorities who visit them once in a while.

- Others rely on the information shared with their colleagues who are able to move around the city.
- Other sources of information were radio and television although they indicated that the information may not be specific for them, and is mostly in Luganda and English which some may not understand.
- They also get information from organizations working with refugees in the country.

Challenges the women refugees face in accessing information

Since the majority of the respondents do not have jobs, they indicated that lack of finances is one of the greatest challenges because they cannot buy gadgets like mobile phones, radios and TV sets to access information which may be beneficial to them.

When asked about knowledge of public libraries in the city, they mentioned that they have never accessed public libraries and therefore do not know where they are situated.

The respondents also indicated that the nationals are not happy to have them around because they think that we are encroaching on their services and therefore hostile to them, this makes them to avoid some places to avoid being abused. This is contrary to the 2006 Refugee Act, which allows those entering the country to work and move freely in Uganda. The refugees are able to buy land and access healthcare and education without a great deal of bureaucratic procedure getting in the way (Zuurah, 2017).

Role of public libraries in providing information to women refugees

One of the Librarians indicated that as a public library they had not interfaced with refugees directly; however, he mentioned that maybe indirectly they may have accessed the library. The reason why the refugees may not disclose their refugee status is for fear of being stigmatized and compromised, hence being denied library services and interrogation questions. However, he mentioned that when he visited InterAID, the organization which provides support to refugees, he observed that they were so open because they identified themselves with their fellow refugees - and probably think that libraries may not be able to listen to them and provide them with the kind of information they need.

Another librarian also shared the same sentiments about the fear of refugees accessing the public libraries. The respondent indicated that although the National Library of Uganda and the Public Libraries Board have a responsibility of laying down national policies in regard to public libraries giving advice, issuing standards, norms, guidelines and work manuals, providing technical and professional advisory services and coordinating and carrying out advocacy for these libraries at local and international levels, they are constrained by funding and therefore, they do not meet all needs of the different people. This finding concurs with the National Development Plan (2015) which indicated that library and information facilities that provide and promote relevant information, knowledge and services to communities for individual and national development are few in the country and are mainly urban based. There are only 34 out of the required 112 public libraries and 72 out of the required 365 community libraries (National Planning Authority, 2015).

Strategies/Recommendations

The respondents proposed a number of recommendations which include;

The local community authorities should establish libraries in communities where the refugees are situated to provide them with information to enable them to keep up to date on what is happening.

These libraries should reach out to the refugees and inform them of the various services they offer since the majority do not work and may not have the money to travel long distances to access the information they need.

The information should also be translated into their languages for those who do not understand English, because its tedious to always rely on an interpreter.

On the other hand, the public librarians proposed that public libraries need to interest the organizations working with the refugees as well as community leaders on the role that public libraries can play in providing information to the refugees.

Since the government accepted to host refugees, the government therefore needs to work with the Ministry in charge of the public libraries to lobby the donor community to establish information corners or libraries in schools and camps in order for the refugees to access information especially in the 12 districts which are hosting the refugees.

Summary and Conclusion

Basing on the findings, health information is the major information needed by the women refugees. Their major source of information is from the local authorities who usually interface with them. However, these local authorities may not be in position to provide all the kind of information they need. The role of public libraries in providing information is very important, the research found out that the public libraries have not reached out to the refugees Therefore, they need to partner with refugee NGOs in order to provide them with the information they need, and information is a basic need as well. The government with acceptance to host the refugees should provide funding for the National Library of Uganda to empower it to provide information to the refugees to keep them updated.

References

- Daily Monitor. (2017, June 20). Let's do more to end refugee crisis. *Daily Monitor*, p. 16.
- EBLIDA. (2015). Press Release: Public Libraries in Europe Welcome Refugees. Retrieved February 2017, from <http://www.eblida.org/news/press-release-public-libraries-in-europe-welcome-refugees.html>
- IFLA. (2016). *Access and Opportunity for All How Libraries contribute to the UN 2030 Agenda*.
- International Media Support. (2014). *Humanitarian information needs of Syrian refugees*. Retrieved March 2017, from <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/humanitarianinformation-syriarefugees-ims2014.pdf>
- Karungi, Z. (2017, June 20). Can Uganda sustain its open refugee policy? *Daily Monitor*, p. 35.

- Krolak, L. (2005). The role of libraries in the creation of literate environments. Retrieved February 2017, from <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/literacy-and-reading/publications/role-of-libraries-in-creation-of-literate-environments.pdf>
- Kyomuhendo, G. (2000). *The Present Position of Public Libraries in Uganda*. United Kingdom: INASP.
- National Planning Authority. (2015). *National Development Plan 2016/16-2019/2020*. Kampala: NPA.
- New Vision. (2017, June 21). Uganda stands with refugees, needs support. *New Vision*, p. 34.
- Obodoruku, B. (2013). *Refugees' information seeking in Nyarugusu camp*. New York.
- Ontario Library Association. (2015). How Public Libraries Can Welcome Syrian Refugees. Retrieved May 2017, from <https://www.accessola.org/web/Documents/OLA/Divisions/OPLA/Syrian-Refugees-eBlast.pdf>
- Patricia, K., & Jo Murphy, L. (2000). *Maternity care needs of refugee and asylum-seeking women: a summary of research*.
- Refugee Council. (2002). *he experiences of refugee women in the UK*.
- Refugee Council, . (2005). *Making women visible; Strategies for a more woman-centred asylum and refugee support system*.
- Richards, J. (2015). Responding - Public Libraries and Refugees. Retrieved May 2017, from <https://www.ifla.org/node/9925>
- UN Women. (2016). *Women Migrants and Refugees in Serbia and Macedonia*. Retrieved May 2017, from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/1/women-migrants-and-refugees-in-serbia-and-fyr-macedonia#sthash.SJmBPwy8.dpuf>
- UN Women. (2016). *Women refugees and migrants*. Retrieved May 2017, from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-refugees-and-migrants#notes>
- UNHCR. (2013). UNHCR's Dialogues with Refugee Women. Retrieved May 2017, from <http://www.unhcr.org/511d160d9.pdf>
- UNHCR. (2016). *Leveraging social media and SMS technology to communicate with refugees in Za'atari camp*. Retrieved May 2017, from http://www.unhcr.org/innovation/labs_post/social-media-and-sms-outreach/
- Warom, O., & Iceta, S. (2017, June 20). West Nile struggling to cope. *Daily Monitor*, p. 36.
- Zuurah. (2017). Can Uganda sustain its open refugee policy. *Daily Monitor*, p. 35.