

Regional News

Skills training transforms lives of women in West Nile

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BY ROBERT ELEMA

In the busy training hall at Omugo Refugee Settlement in Terego District, the sound of sewing machines cannot be ignored, as women carefully stitch pieces of colourful fabric.

Among them is a 35-year-old, Betty Poni, a refugee who fled conflict in South Sudan, 10 years ago with nothing, but her children and hope for a safer life.

Today, Poni clasps a measuring tape around her neck and confidently guides fabric under the needle, a skill she never imagined learning before joining a vocational training programme.

"I used to depend entirely on food aid," Poni says, as she admires the dress she is making. "Now I can make school uniforms and earn money to support my children. I feel proud of myself."

As the afternoon sun descends over the refugee settlement, Poni finishes stitching her latest dress. For her, the training represents more than just learning a skill, but it is a path toward independence and dignity.

"I want to open my own tailoring shop one day," she says.

Poni is one of dozens of refugee women and girls and members of the host community, benefiting from skills training in tailoring, hairdressing, catering, driving/riding and entrepreneurship.

According to trainers working with UN Women, the initiative equips participants with practical skills, builds confidence and promotes financial independence. The programme targets women and girls who face limited education opportunities, unemployment and poverty in the settlement.

Many participants form small savings groups and start micro-businesses after completing training. For Sarah Ladu, 19, learning hairdressing has opened doors she once thought were



The UN Women Deputy Country Representative, Ms Ndieli Adekemi, and the Bidibidi settlement commandant, Mr Timothy Kitaka (centre), display the tools given to beneficiaries. PHOTO BY ROBERT ELEMA.

closed. Having dropped out of school due to financial hardships, Ladu was worried about her future. Today, she styles hair for customers within the settlement and contributes to her family's needs.

"I am no longer idle. I can work, save money and plan for my future," she explained.

For Esther Norah, 30, a mother of two children, who lives in Bidibidi refugee settlement, in Yumbe District, life has been hard.

Norah arrived in Uganda in 2016 and wanted to continue with her education, but as soon as her father died, she dropped out of school in Primary Six. "I have faced many challenges after my father's death. This compelled me

to drop out of school and I decided to get married," she said. In 2023, she got an opportunity to train as a mechanic under the refugee law project with support from UN Women.

"I have been working in someone's garage because I lacked a tool box. During the second training, I acquired my own tool box with assorted tools," she said.

By training refugees and local residents together, organisers say the initiative promotes unity and reduces tension between communities competing for limited resources.

Mr Andrew Sessanga, the programme finance officer at UN Women-Uganda, said they have trained 500 women and girls in the districts of Terego, Yumbe and Adjumani and provided them with assorted start-up kits.

He said the Shs300million programme is a follow-up spotlight project, funded by the European Union and Netherlands Government.

Mr Sessanga said under this initiative, some beneficiaries received the assets in organised groups rather than as individuals, especially beneficiaries who received tailoring machines and tricycles. The approach according to him is deliberate.

"When we give start-up kits in groups, we are supporting livelihoods, building a culture of

saving and accountability and we have opened centres for these women to operate their businesses," he said.

He said the collective saving helps in maintaining and repairing the start-up kits and enables members to access small loans for personal or business needs. He added that overtime, this builds financial resilience, expansion of businesses and reduces dependency on external aid.

Ms Justine Gonza, the assistant community services officer in the Office of the Prime Minister, said the skilling programme is empowering women and restoring their dignity.

"Skills training is giving women confidence. When women earn, families eat better, children stay in school and the whole community benefits," she said.

"Count yourself blessed for this opportunity and do not misuse it. It is not good for a woman to be waiting for someone else. Every day you wake up begging for things as cheap as Shs1,000. This is not a life a woman should aspire for," she said.

The UN Women Deputy Country Representative, Ms Ndieli Adekemi, said in this era of humanitarian recess, prioritisation, challenges with food and cash-based support, things have changed drastically. "These items that we have given to you should help you cross dependence syndrome to resilience. It is to strengthen you and give you dignity, opportunity in order to be able to make money to sustain yourself and families," she said.

She added that with the current crisis, refugee women are facing serious challenges and they have resorted to doing dubious things in the settlement.

"I visited Kyaka II refugee settlement three months ago and the challenges listed by the OPM in that settlement broke my heart because people are selling all sorts of things including their bodies to make ends meet," she said.

"We don't want that kind of thing to happen to you (the women). That's not dignity and you should be able to make decisions yourself on how you want your life to be and not to be forced into a particular direction," she added.

The assistant RDC for Terego District, Mr Emmanuel Munduni, said: "We many university graduates who are jobless and the courses they have done have failed to put food on the table. Let's embrace vocational training that can help to solve the problem of unemployment," he said.

The start-up kits distribution marks a significant step toward improving livelihoods among women and girls in the settlement, offering hope for greater independence and economic stability in the future.

WOMEN TRAINED

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