



Celebrate Women Everyday

International Women's Day 2021

We at the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) [#ChoosetoChallenge](#) a world where displaced women continue to bear the brunt of conflict, mal-governance and exclusion. Displaced women and girls are most at risk for sexual and gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and are disproportionately affected by the corollaries of poverty and scarcity, even in the places where they seek refuge.

Women navigate these challenges in many different ways. Some are resilient, and overcome the day to day challenges of being primary caregivers to their families, however they define those to be. Some suffer mental health and psychosocial difficulties, and some fall into neglect and substance abuse. We celebrate everyday, the courage with which all these women face the struggles that life has placed before them.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to greater inequalities, and women who are often excluded in society, have been more impacted by the disease, but also by the stringent measures taken to stem the spread. Particularly for urban refugee women who survived on small businesses, the lockdown measures curtailed their income and their ability to access basic necessities like food. During IRRI's rapid needs assessment on the impact of COVID for urban refugees, we received reports *inter alia* of women who were jailed after being caught selling their products during the lockdown, and of displaced women who were thrown out of their houses after being unable to meet their rent needs due to the reduction in income. Additionally, access to essential services such as health care, including sexual and reproductive health services were disrupted. The closure of schools has also seen many girls forced into early marriages and the numbers of teenage pregnancies rise significantly. For many refugees, the WHO health and safety measures like social distancing, wearing a mask and regular hand washing, are unavailable to them due to resource constraints. More so for the women who end up looking after people who fall sick while they lack the necessary personal protective equipment.

Despite the global shift towards promoting self-reliance in the refugee regime, there are significant consequences and effects in practice, that are not adequately addressed in the refugee response policy frameworks. As we have stated previously, current self-reliance models focus solely on empowerment, and transfer the responsibility for realising self-reliance to refugees. Particularly for women, these are inadequate due to the systemic and structural issues that are also part of the problem. In order to ensure that refugees can build resilience, the self-reliance rubric, beyond employability and economic opportunities, must also include other essential aspects of life such as education, health, housing, legal access and community support structures. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the gaps in refugee protection and policies, and reverberates the need for legislators, humanitarian actors and other

stakeholders, to enhance refugee initiatives to more adequately respond to the needs of the most vulnerable displaced people, including woman and girls.

“Women, particularly those whose vulnerability intersects with other inequalities, need proper and better protection,” said Achieng Akena, the Executive Director of IRRI. She added that, “it is imperative, for the sustainability of interventions, that the agency of displaced women not be limited and that instead, they be recognised as drivers of change, and they be empowered to take action to improve their lives.”

As we celebrate women on this International Women’s Day, IRRI reaffirms our continued commitment to the protection of rights in situations of conflict and displacement, and to a peaceful world where every person enjoys rights, security and dignity. We seek to ensure that voices of displaced and conflict-affected communities are not only heard, but also heeded, at the national, regional and international level through our evidence-based advocacy that is built on solid field-based research and analysis. IRRI is currently implementing the SPACE project that responds to the protection, justice and peace needs of women and young people in 3 refugee settlements in Northern Uganda, in partnership with BRAC Uganda and HANDLE Uganda, kindly supported by the European Union. The project seeks to reduce the gaps in access, delivery, and uptake of justice for refugees and host communities in Palabek, Palorinya and Rhino settlements. The lack of access to justice has resulted in increased social injustice and conflict within the host and refugee communities in Northern Uganda. In mitigating this situation, the SPACE Project will increase access to justice and peaceful co-existence among refugees and host communities, which will contribute primarily, to the safety, protection, and wellbeing of women and young people.

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