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Building Self-Reliance through Social Networks

An analysis of South Sudanese refugee women's self-reliance strategies in rural and urban Uganda

Master's thesis in Globalisation and Sustainable Development

Supervisor: Hilde Refstie

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Abstract

The Ugandan self-reliance strategy is globally recognised for providing refugees with relative protection, freedom of movement, and access to work and services on par with Ugandan nationals. However, the focus remains on creating livelihoods, neglecting social aspects of self-reliance. Additionally, little is known about how different refugee groups fare under self-reliance schemes and the role that social networks play in supporting and providing self-reliance. This study examines the role of social networks in refugee self-reliance strategies in Kampala and BidiBidi refugee settlement with particular attention to gendered effects. The research, conducted from August to October 2022, included 27 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. The findings suggest that social networks are crucial for refugee women in both urban areas and rural settlements to pursue their economic activities while balancing domestic responsibilities, such as childcare and household duties. Social networks also play an important role in promoting the well-being of refugee women by reducing their vulnerability and dependence, while also facilitating social contact and fostering meaningful relationships. Lastly, the study found that social networks and the resources within them were distributed unevenly among refugee women, and that they are neither inexhaustible nor stable sources of support. Disruption of support were related to worsening conditions and long-term lack of essential needs. A conclusion of the thesis is therefore that the Ugandan self-reliance model has differentiated effects and outcomes that need to be assessed in intersectional and contextual ways. Moreover, more attention needs to be paid to social dimensions of self-reliance in humanitarian literature and practice.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Hilde Refstie for dedicated support and guidance throughout my research. Your extensive knowledge and deep interest in the field has been an immense source of inspiration and has kept me motivated all the way.

To all my research participants, none of this could have happened without you. You let me into your lives and shared your stories with me, for this I am forever grateful.

Furthermore, I am deeply grateful for the willingness, collaboration and valuable contribution from my research assistants Judith, Mark, Flora, Edgar, and Betty.

Many thanks to the AidAccount project for including me in your important work, and especially to the Uganda team: Hilde, Emmanuel and Eria. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work so closely with you and receive your guidance. Eria, thank you for your incredible help in shaping my research and making me feel at home during my stay in Uganda.

My sincere appreciation also goes out to the researchers at Makerere University for providing me with valuable insights and feedback.

I am truly grateful to the CoSTClim project for having been awarded funding to conduct my field work in Uganda.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their love and encouragement, and especially my mom for coming to visit me in Uganda. I will forever treasure the memorable experiences we had.

And lastly, thank you Birger for supporting me during this whole process, and being there for me through all my ups and downs. This accomplishment would not have been possible without you.

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List of Abbreviations

AidAccount	Holding Aid Accountable: Relational Humanitarianism in Protracted Crisis
CARA	Control of Alien Refugees Act
CoSTClim	Collaborative Action for Strengthening Training Capacities in Climate Risk and Natural Resource
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GoU	Government of Uganda
ILO	International Labour Organization
KCCA	Kampala Capital City Authority
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSD	The Norwegian Centre for Research Data
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PRIO	Peace Research Institute of Oslo
ReHoPE	Refugee and Host Population Empowerment
SRS	Self-Reliance Strategy
UHRC	Uganda Human Rights Commission

UN United Nations

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1.0 Introduction

Forced migration remains a pressing issue on the global development agenda, with the number of refugees worldwide reaching an unprecedented high of more than 100 million individuals (UNHCR, 2022b). Uganda has become the largest receiving state on the African continent, hosting more than 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, with the majority coming from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2023). In recent years, the country has received international recognition for its self-reliance strategy, providing refugees with relative protection, freedom of movement, and access to work and services on par with Ugandan nationals. This strategy has become widely accepted in the forced migration policy field as an effective way to promote empowerment and integration that benefits both host and refugee communities (Omata, 2022).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines self-reliance as the “social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet its essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity” (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1). While this definition is multifaceted, the predominant discourse on self-reliance focuses on individual and economic aspects, neglecting social aspects. This is problematic because self-reliance is rarely achieved at the individual level, but rather at the household or communal level (Easton-Calabria et al., 2017), where both the social and economic dimensions are intertwined. Additionally, the role of social networks in self-reliance achievement is not sufficiently recognised and understood. To fully understand the role of social networks in achieving refugee self-reliance, it is important to consider the complex interplay between individual backgrounds and the social structures that shape their experiences.

The Ugandan self-reliance model is implemented with an emphasis on humanitarian assistance as a short-term solution. The expectation is that refugees over time are supposed to become self-reliant rather than dependent on aid. However, this idea presents a problematic oversimplification as it creates a binary understanding of self-reliance and dependency and assumes that dependency will inevitably evolve into self-reliance (Easton-Calabria, 2022). As will be demonstrated in this thesis, self-reliance is difficult to achieve and requires time, resources, and investments. The limited and decreasing humanitarian assistance in both rural settlements and urban areas of Uganda do not make refugees more self-reliant, but rather more dependent on support accessed through their social networks. Access to self-reliance

opportunities is in this regard highly gendered, as the ability to build networks and resources is influenced by intersectional differences and power imbalances.

There is a significant lack of knowledge and understanding of the differential impact of self-reliance schemes on different groups of refugees, including their gendered effects and outcomes. While the predominant self-reliance discourse focuses on the economic aspects, the non-economic contributions to a self-reliant household, for which women are often primarily responsible, are neglected. The Ugandan self-reliance strategy has significant implications for refugee women under these schemes, and against this backdrop, the thesis aims to explore the following research questions:

Q1: How do South Sudanese refugee women build and leverage their social networks as part of their self-reliance strategies in protracted displacement?

Q2: Are there any differences in these strategies between South Sudanese refugee women residing in rural settlements and urban areas, and if so, in what ways?

Q3: What are the policy implications of recognising social networks as an important component in refugee self-reliance strategies?

To examine these questions, the thesis analyses 27 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions. The work of the thesis is connected to a larger project, AidAccount, led by the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO), and the initial field work was conducted with the team responsible for the Uganda case in the project. The empirical data of this thesis is mainly based on my individual data collection, but also draws on parts of the joint collection. The main purpose of the interviews has been to examine the participants' experiences of living under self-reliance schemes in Uganda, and how they access and use their social networks for support.

The thesis found that social networks are a crucial component in refugee women's self-reliance strategies. Participants in both rural settlements and urban areas faced challenges at the intersection of social and economic aspects of their lives, such as balancing domestic work with wage-labour. Those with access to social support were better able to combine these responsibilities. While livelihoods activities differed in the two settings, the study found many similarities in the role social networks played in refugee women's self-reliance strategies. However, those who had relocated from rural to urban areas emphasised that social networks in the urban areas could provide more support than in the rural settlements.

The study also found that social networks, and the resources within them, were not distributed evenly among the refugees but varied according to intersectional factors such as socioeconomic status, location, age, and temporal needs. Additionally, social networks were deemed unreliable as a source of support due to previous experiences of disruptions, caused by external factors such as unforeseen circumstances at provider's end or that the networks got exhausted if too much was asked for over longer time periods. These findings suggest that self-reliance achievement takes time and consistent access to resources. The limited and decreasing humanitarian assistance in Uganda does not make refugees more self-reliant, rather more dependent on their social networks for support. The fact that these social networks are unevenly distributed and represent an exhaustible resource, points to a serious flaw in the refugee self-reliance model in Uganda that needs to be addressed.

1.1 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1.0 introduces the topic of research and defines the study's research questions. Chapter 2.0 presents relevant background information on the field of forced migration and the gendered aspects, and provides a brief overview on the status of refugees in Uganda. Chapter 3.0 describes the theoretical framework and main concepts that are employed in the thesis. It first introduces the concept of refugee self-reliance, and the economic and social dimensions of the term. Then it presents theories of social networks and social capital, and their role in providing and supporting self-reliance. Chapter 4.0 provides a rationale for and explains the methodological framework of the thesis.

Chapters 5.0, 6.0, and 7.0 present the empirical data of the study and form the analysis of the thesis. The findings are discussed against the theoretical framework and main concepts, as well as the background chapter. Chapter 5.0 addresses the study's first research question, describing the role of social networks in South Sudanese refugee women's self-reliance strategies, focusing on the participants residing in Uganda's capital, Kampala. Chapter 6.0 addresses the second research question, presenting the similarities and differences in the self-reliance strategies between South Sudanese refugee women residing in rural settlements and urban areas. Chapter 7.0 addresses the third research question and presents the implications of recognising social networks as an important component in refugee self-reliance strategies.

Chapter 8.0 builds on the findings presented in the previous three chapters and directly address the thesis' three research questions by collecting the threads. Lastly, chapter 9.0 provides a brief summary and conclusion of the thesis.

2.0 Background

2.1 Gender and Forced Migration

Forced migration often leads to family separation, loss or disruption of assets and livelihoods, emerging language barriers, and discrimination. These impacts vary between men and women, and gender-related barriers and constraints are often amplified during displacement (Klugman, 2022). Upon seeking refuge, women frequently encounter compounded socioeconomic disadvantages, impeding their progress. Displaced women experience disadvantage of around 24 percent compared to women in host countries, in terms of reduced financial inclusion, economic empowerment, and freedom of movement (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021). Additionally, forced migration can lead to loss of social networks, documentation, and income sources, which in turn can make it challenging to access job opportunities, information, public services, social engagement, and education (UNCHR, 2022a; WRC, 2011). Gender has also been identified as a significant predictor of chronic deprivation due to accumulated disadvantage over time and perpetuating poverty, as per a study conducted by the World Bank Group on the intersection of gender, multidimensional poverty, and forced migration (Admasu, Alkire & Scharlin-Pettee, 2021). Unfortunately, many development policies and programs tend to overlook gendered differences, failing to acknowledge the varying effects and outcomes for men and women (Klugman, 2022).

On the other hand, displacement has the potential to create positive gender empowerment and change due to the disruption of traditional social systems which can lead to a reconfiguration of divisions of labour between men and women (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). The most common narrative of women in the Global South in contexts of crises has been one that poses disproportionate vulnerability and responsible caregiving (Clissold, Westoby & McNamara, 2020). This vulnerabilisation obscures women's situated knowledge, resilience, and agency (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Women are critical agents of change as they often mobilise their own responses to disasters and acquire necessary skills to ensure survival and well-being of their families (Yonder, Akçar & Gopalan, 2009; Kusumasari, 2015). Disasters might result in women taking on roles and tasks that are normally held by men (Drolet et al., 2015), which can cause a change in gender roles and norms (Elmhirst, 2015). Rao et al. (2019) explain that these opportunities emerge as household survival becomes the priority and as the cultural restrictions on women loosen. This may result in transformative changes in status and power

relations within the household, and foster women's empowerment (Ganapati, 2012; Kusumasari, 2015). Meanwhile, detailed case studies on women's strategies, skills and capacities are lacking. It is problematic that women's diverse experiences, skills and knowledges in this area are not fully recognised and largely undocumented (Clissold et al., 2020). Clissold et al. (2020) argue that such analyses are needed in order to bridge globally developed guidelines and tools with local scenarios and realities.

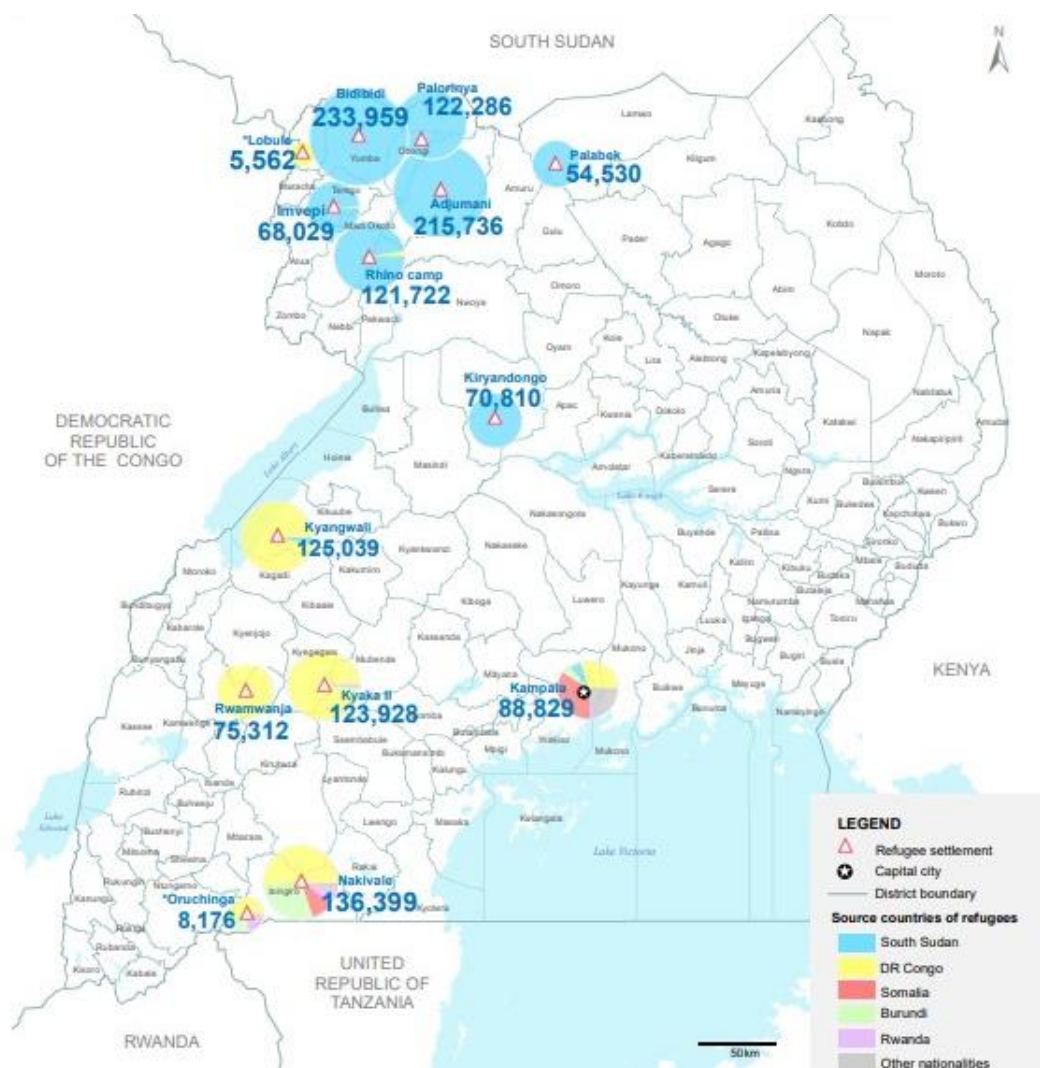
While many refugee women aspire to achieve a sustainable livelihood, they are frequently faced with additional responsibilities such as childcare and domestic work, which often leave them at a disadvantage (Idris, 2020). Zetter & Ruaudel (2016) found in their study of 20 refugee-hosting countries that violence against refugee women, gender-based social discrimination, negative gender stereotypes, and disadvantageous working conditions are limiting refugee women's access to work. Additionally, they found that social networks are important when accessing the labour markets, and that a lack of relations can increase their vulnerability. However, it is important to recognise that refugee women are not a homogenous group. They acquire different intersectionalities and are affected by complex challenges and power dynamics (Clissold et al., 2020). Considering gender in isolation is inadequate in understanding the complex and varied experiences of refugees who are navigating several layers of social stratification while they are holding different social positions (Anthias, 2013). In recent years, intersectionality has increasingly been deployed in migration research to address this issue (Anthias, 2012; Bastia & Piper, 2019; Romero & Valdez, 2016).

Intersectionality recognises the interconnected systems of oppression and difference to explain lived and embodied experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Sultana, 2020). It allows for the examination of multiple experiences and identities that are context and time dependent, and acknowledges that these identities intersect with each other and contribute to the creation of disadvantages, inequalities, and privileges for different people (Taha, 2019). While class and gender remain the dominant axes of intersectionality in most societies, other dimensions such as ethnicity, race, and caste play significant roles in others (Sultana, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to note that individuals may experience oppression in one area while experiencing privilege in another (Vervliet et al., 2013), and also that not all individuals experience oppression or privilege to the same extent or in similar ways (Joseph, 2015). Moreover, intersectionality does not only emphasise the existence of various forms of oppression but also contests the idea of homogeneous and essentialised social identities, labels, or categories (Anthias, 2012). Within much research on forced

migration, the strengths and resilience of marginalised groups are often overlooked (Taha, 2019). Intersectionality is valuable in addressing this critique as one of the main objectives is to lift the voices of oppressed and invisible individuals (Vervliet et al., 2013). Research on refugee women must take intersectional differences into account in order to understand the contextualities of access to support through social networks, and to avoid making overly generalised statements that might not apply to other women in similar contexts.

2.2 Refugees in Uganda

Uganda has a long history of generating and hosting displaced people, and over the last years the country has faced an unprecedented influx of refugees (Hovil, 2018). In 2013, around 250,000 refugees were residing in Uganda, and the country was ranked as the sixth largest receiving state in Africa. Today more than 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers have settled in Uganda, and they are ranked as the largest receiving country on the continent. The majority of refugees come from neighbouring countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Burundi, and South Sudan, and due to ongoing political uncertainty and instability across the Great Lakes region, refugees continue to arrive (UNHCR, 2023). Most of the refugees in Uganda live in rural settlements managed by the UNHCR together with the Ugandan Office of Prime Minister (OPM) (Omata, 2022). Map 1 shows the hosting districts in Uganda, indicating the current status.



Map 1: Refugee Hosting Districts in Uganda (UNHCR, 2021b).

In 2006, Uganda approved the Refugee Act which was eventually implemented in 2008. This act grants refugees with freedom to move and the rights to work and services on par with Ugandan nationals (Hovil, 2018). While this act represents a positive step in Uganda's approach to handle large influxes of refugees, it contrasts with the country's history of significantly restricting movement and access to work and services, and confining refugees to government-defined camps. Major repatriation processes of Rwandan and Sudanese refugees have also been implemented in the past (IRRI & RLP, 2010; Long, 2012). In 2000, there were more than 200 000 registered refugees in Uganda (UNOCHA, 2001), and by 2009 the number had been reduced to less than 140 000 due to the Government of Uganda's (GoU) extensive efforts of forcing repatriations (UNHCR, 2009). Additionally, while Uganda has some of the most progressive and welcoming policies towards refugees today, the GoU is reluctant to provide for local integration of large numbers of refugees due to concerns about security

problems and resource burdens. Instead of naturalisation of refugees¹, assistance is thus concentrated on aid (Serwajja & Refstie, in print).

Out of the 1.5 million refugees currently residing in Uganda, around 60 percent come from South Sudan. Persistent unrest and conflict in the neighbouring country, over the last ten years, have resulted in large numbers of displacement (Statista, 2022). Sudanese refugees first arrived in Uganda in 1955 during Sudan's independence wars, and from 1983 to 2005 due to the conflicts over self-determination of southern Sudan (Kaiser, 2009). From 2013 until today, surges in the civil war in South Sudan have led to a considerable number of South Sudanese refugees arriving in Uganda. In 2016, the number reached an unprecedented high which resulted in the opening of nine new refugee settlements (UNHCR, 2018b). Since then, Uganda has become the largest host for refugees from South Sudan (Statista, 2022), with the majority being women and children (UNHCR, n.d.b).

The growing number of refugees has critical consequences for Uganda's reception capacity. With a 60 percent funding gap in the country's response to the South Sudanese situation, humanitarian actors are not able to meet the critical needs of refugees (Ahaibwe & Ntale, 2018). While refugees represent a considerable economic force (Betts et al., 2014), they will continue to put pressure on the limited resources in hosting regions, which according to Ahaibwe & Ntale (2018) will lead to increased poverty and vulnerability. Following the high funding gap refugees have to rely more on themselves, each other and on a mixture of refugee-led organisations and associations.

Many South Sudanese refugees prefer Uganda as their destination due to relatively open borders, proximity, and shared history between tribes (Viga & Refstie, forthcoming; Kaiser, 2009). As restrictions on refugee mobility has softened up, many refugees also go to urban areas. According to official figures from OPM, Uganda's capital Kampala is currently hosting 98.415 refugees, with 5.808 coming from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2023). However, as these are numbers generated through official registration processes, they may not represent the actual number of refugees in Kampala. While many refugees opt to live in the urban areas for improved livelihood opportunities, poor living conditions and a lack of food remains a concern for many urban residents (UNHCR, 2018a; Bernstein & Okello, 2007). Urban refugees are facing additional barriers to employment, such as discrimination, language barriers, and a lack of recognition of their academic qualifications (RLP, 2005). In Uganda,

¹ Refugees in Uganda are not granted citizenship, nor their children or grandchildren (Walker, 2008).

there is a substantial income gap between hosts and refugees, and the dependency ratios for refugees are higher than hosts which increases the risks for well-being (World Bank Group, 2019).

Furthermore, Omata (2022) shows that an increasing number of refugees residing in Uganda intensifies the competition for meaningful job opportunities between hosts and refugees. This competition and the scarcity of productive livelihood opportunities have led both refugees and hosts to perceive the viability of the self-reliance model with scepticism. Limited access to assistance and emphasis on becoming self-reliant often leave refugees dependent on their social networks and personal skills for survival. As will be explored in this thesis, social networks therefore become important components in refugee women's self-reliance strategies.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Refugee Self-Reliance

The UNHCR defines self-reliance as the “social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet its essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity”. As a programme approach self-reliance is referring to “developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance” (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1). The self-reliance of refugees is not a new concept, it is a policy objective that has existed for as long as the international refugee regime itself. However, in recent years the concept has received new interest, and the achievement of self-reliance has become the main discourse in thinking of refugee response, protracted displacement, and durable solutions (Serwajja & Refstie, in print; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Organisations like the UNHCR, the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and other humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development agencies and donor governments, have promoted the concept as a preferable goal for both host communities and individual refugees (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). At a programme level these organisations have devoted substantial budgetary funds to the actualisation of self-reliance. From the financial perspective of the donors, self-reliance (supposedly) saves increasingly scarce and valuable funding. Others also claim that it is a path to refugee independence, dignity, and a preparation for a return to origin countries (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Self-reliance models are usually presented as a win-win solution where the economic agency of refugees is supported and where the financial burden of hosting communities and countries are reduced. Historically, self-reliance has been considered as a way to achieve durable solutions to displacement, but in recent years it seems to be increasingly perceived as a goal in itself and as a more ‘sustainable’ or ‘realistic’ solution than for instance local integration (Serwajja et al., forthcoming). However, despite the increasing attention towards refugee self-reliance, there is a lack of understanding on how different groups of refugees fare under such schemes, and in what ways they are gendered.

3.1.1 Economic Dimensions of Self-Reliance

Despite the UNHCR’s comprehensive definition of self-reliance that encompasses multiple components, the current discourse primarily emphasises economic aspects (Seff, Lesson &

Stark, 2021; Betts et al., 2018). This focus has resulted in an equation of self-reliance with employment, leading to a perception that portrays wage-labour as the primary means of achieving self-reliance and individual jobs as an end goal (Field, Tiwari & Mookherjee, 2017). As a result, humanitarian assistance is operationalised through livelihood trainings, such as tailoring, arts-and crafts, and vocational training. These programmes have received criticism for investing in livelihoods that do not recognise refugees' former skills and occupations and instead treat them in a generalised manner (Betts et al., 2018). Furthermore, the emphasis on refugees as individual entrepreneurs is problematic because it places the responsibility for self-reliance and economic mobility entirely on them, overlooking structural factors that refugees face in host countries and communities (Easton-Calabria, 2022). Self-reliance is not attained in a vacuum, it is context-dependent (Ward, 2014). The provision of self-reliance assistance through livelihood trainings must be accompanied by enabling environments that support economic autonomy to make any sense (Easton-Calabria, 2022). In a constrained environment refugees are dependent on access to social networks and resources in order to achieve self-reliance.

Livelihood training programmes are under-funded, and rarely achieve their intention of creating successful livelihoods for refugees. Without offering any material support, the international community are leaving refugees dependent on the market rather than the humanitarian system for assistance (Field et al., 2017). Thus, presenting these livelihood programmes as a measure towards self-reliance achievement may justify humanitarian actors' reduced long-term assistance to refugees, without having the essential policies, economic structures, or protection systems in place (Easton-Calabria, 2022).

The sole focus on the economic aspects of self-reliance at policy level neglects the personal circumstances of refugees and various ways they can live without humanitarian aid. Furthermore, policymakers tend to prioritise technical economic outcomes over social ones, which undermine the support for non-economic aspects of refugee self-reliance (Field et al., 2017). Adopting an economic approach to refugee self-reliance is problematic and fails to capture the concept's complexity. In theory, self-reliance schemes aim to enhance both the economic and social conditions for refugees. However, the concept has become increasingly narrow at a declaratory policy level in the 21st century compared to previous definitions, with greater emphasis placed on economic dimension at the expense of the social one (Easton-Calabria, 2022). Understandings of self-reliance must go beyond the economic perspective and acknowledge the importance of social aspects.

3.1.2 *Social Dimensions of Self-Reliance*

Despite the multifaceted nature of self-reliance, the current approach primarily focuses on self-reliance achievement through economic means, neglecting the social dimension. This is problematic for several reasons: One is that self-reliance is rarely achieved at the individual level (Easton-Calabria et al., 2017). Betts et al. (2018, p. 62) emphasise that “the ‘self’ in self-reliance is a social self” and refers to a person that is embedded in a wider social network. The individual perspective in self-reliance policies is based on the individual self as an ‘ultimate autonomous unit’ (Bourdieu, 2005). This stems to a large degree from modern liberal and Western ideologies and might be less applicable in many societies in the Global South where the importance of the extended family and communitarian approaches are very pronounced (Betts et al., 2018). Ferguson (2013, p. 226) demonstrates through his anthropologist research in southern Africa that people in social systems were understood as “nodes in systems of relationships”, rather than as “monadic individuals”. Interconnected individuals within a community contribute to a self-reliant collective over time. Unpaid household responsibilities and childcare are foundational components of this collective, in which women are often responsible. However, their contributions are not recognised as productive within policy frameworks (Field et al., 2017). The scant recognition of the critical role of domestic work in building self-reliance results in women often having to combine domestic work with wage-earning activities. The current approach to self-reliance thus perpetuates the traditional dichotomy of private and public labour and places additional responsibilities on women to demonstrate self-sufficiency (Field et al., 2017). It is essential to acknowledge domestic work as equally valuable contributions towards self-reliance since self-reliant families and communities do not solely depend on wage-earning individuals.

Lastly, the UNHCR’s definition of self-reliance is restrictive as it only considers the ability to access essential needs, where essential refers to “a basic thing you cannot live without” (“Essential”, n.d.). Self-reliance as a concept thus focuses on the present without considering needs that go beyond the essentials. The same critique has been raised towards the humanitarian system in general: that humanitarian actors are paying more attention to what is referred to as *biological life* of the beneficiaries, rather than their *biographical life* (Fassin, 2012; Brun, 2016). Aid is given to support vulnerable groups’ biological lives, which Agamben (1998) explains is the dimension of life that only considers the necessary activities to make life repetitive. Meanwhile, the dimension of life that considers the way lives are actually lived, namely the biographical life, with all its variations, desires, and wants, is

neglected in the humanitarian system (Fassin, 2012; Brun, 2016). Agamben (1998) is known for the term *bare life* which refers to this conception where priority is given to the sheer biological fact of life, rather than to how a life is lived, including all its potentialities and possibilities.

If we take the terms biological and biographical lives with us into the context of refugee self-reliance, we can see that the concept of bare life is prominent here as well. Self-reliance achievement only involves the access to, and attainment of, essential needs and does not consider needs beyond those. The reality of self-reliance schemes is therefore one that considers aspects of the biological lives of the refugees, rather than their biographical lives. Brun (2016) argues that when a crisis becomes protracted, we need to think beyond biology. Well-being is one term that captures more than ensuring basic needs, it encompasses positive emotions, and the ability to thrive in different areas of life (Diener, Scollon & Lucas, 2009). Field et al. (2017) contend that the current approach to self-reliance overlooks individual histories, networks, skills, and aspirations, and because self-reliance is treated as a universal goal to be achieved through standardised means, it fails to provide refugees with the assistance they need to create fulfilling lives that priorities their well-being. They therefore argue that well-being should be integrated into the self-reliance definition. This is crucial in order for humanitarian organisations to support refugees more effectively in creating meaningful lives in displacement. Self-reliance is often perceived as an end goal in today's refugee response, however, many refugees are seeking to create meaning in exile beyond the ability to meet basic needs. As will be highlighted later in this thesis, social networks are an important aspect of refugee well-being. The social dimension of self-reliance is thus not just a means to achieve self-reliance, but also an end in itself. In their study of refugees in the Kakuma camp in Kenya, for example, Betts et al. (2018) found that when offered to relocate to the new Kalobeyei settlement, where opportunities for self-reliance were ostensibly better, very few were willing to do so. The authors argue that most were reluctant to move due to disruption of existing social networks, and that more attention needs to be paid to the social dimension of self-reliance.

3.2 Social Networks and Social Capital

Social networks represent the interpersonal ties of communities, friendship, kinship, or organisational memberships that connect individuals to their destination and their place of origin (Massey et al., 1993; Boyd, 1989). A network thus consists of various social relations, which is a foundational concept in the field of sociology. The study of social relations has a rich research history and continues to evolve, with subsystems becoming increasingly specialised and differentiated (Vonneilich, 2022). Research on social relations stretches from Durkheim's seminal work on suicide in 1897 (Durkheim, 1897), through Parsons' functionalist society analysis (Parsons, 1937), which examines the underlying norms and values of social interactions, to Bourdieu's capital theories and his exploration of social differentiation (Bourdieu, 1986). The analysis of a person's social network focuses on relationships between individuals, taking into account the relationships' characteristics rather than only considering those of the individuals themselves. By studying social networks, it is possible to identify an individual's position within the network and uncover key structural features, such as power dynamics, opportunities for contact, and influence (Vonneilich, 2022.).

Social networks are an essential precondition for accessing and exchanging social support and resources, and the nature and outcome of them are determined by complex and diverse interactions between individuals (Brun & Horst, in print). They are often distinguished according to certain characteristics, such as formal or informal and according to aspects such as size, frequency, and intensity. However, while these characterisations can say something about the networks themselves, they do not consider the quality of the network or the social relations within them. An increasing number of social connections does not necessarily increase a person's access to valuable support, as not every individual within a social structure can contribute with that (Vonneilich, 2022). According to Lin (1999), the structure or size of a network can give insight into the channels in which resources move, but not provide information of the quality of those resources. The quality of the resources and of a person's network can rather be understood through looking at the social capital built within the relationships.

Social capital is a multidimensional concept and widely discussed and studied across various disciplines, including political science, psychology, sociology, and economics. In broad terms, it can be understood as resources that are not produced by individuals themselves, but

through their social interaction with other people (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014; Berkman & Krishna, 2014). While there have been many attempts to define social capital, this thesis gravitates towards Naughton's (2014, p. 13) conceptualisation, which focuses on the "relations, processes, practices and subjectivities that affect, and are affected by, the contexts and spaces in which they [actors] operate". Naughton (2014, p. 5) emphasises the contextuality of social capital production and argues for a focus on the individuals' "multiple rationalities that are embodied, performed, emotional, and subject to change". Social capital should thus connect agency, social relations, space, and power without having predetermined outcomes. People form social relations, over space and time, for different reasons and with different outcomes.

While social networks are acknowledged to be of importance for displaced people, there is a need for more understanding on how diverse groups of refugees' access different social networks, how social capital is developed, and the impact of intersectional differences on these processes. To fully understand the potential benefits of social networks for refugees, it is important to consider the complex interplay between individual backgrounds and the social structures that shape their experiences. It is also important to recognise that social networks are linked to social hierarchy. While certain connections can benefit one group, they can mean marginalisation for another. This implies that social networks are not only enhancing coping strategies but can also potentially exacerbate exclusion and vulnerabilities (Stites, Humphrey & Krystalli, 2021). Refugee communities are not necessarily fair, democratic, and equal. Their social networks should therefore not be romanticised, and existing power relations need to be understood in order to see the patterns of exclusion and dominance (Lyytinen & Kullenberg, 2013).

3.2.1 The Role of Social Networks in Building Self-Reliance

A problem with the overemphasis on the individual and economic aspects of self-reliance is the underestimation of the role social networks play in providing or supporting self-reliance. Social networks are widely recognised to be of critical importance to refugees in various areas, including survival (Stites et al., 2021), migration paths (Anyanzu & De Wet-Billings, 2022), settlement processes (Anthias, 2007), information sharing (Stites et al., 2021), and livelihood creation (Barbelet & Wake, 2014; Betts et al., 2018; Bushcer, 2012; Jacobsen, 2006; Campbell, 2005). As non-citizens in their host countries, refugees are facing particular

vulnerabilities and often depend on their social relations to achieve socioeconomic improvements while in exile (Omata, 2017; Palmgren, 2014; Grabska, 2005; De Vriese, 2006). Jacobsen (2006) explains that the significance of social networks for refugees has increased along with the socioeconomic challenges they face due to the lack of sufficient humanitarian support. The impact of informal networks on the lives and protection of refugees can thus often outweigh formal assistance (Landau & Duponchel, 2011). Field et al. (2017) explain that refugees often access various forms of support from a wide range of formal and informal institutions, individuals, and transnational networks. This study acknowledges the vast body of literature on transnational networks and diasporas, but its main focus lies on examining the “closer” networks that are more intricately involved in the refugees’ everyday lives and routines.

Stites et al. (2021) explain that refugees’ relationships are constructed and reinforced through the allocation of both material and non-material assistance, and that refugee women often access non-material support through their relationships, such as advice and emotional assistance. These non-material forms of assistance are often neglected in policy due to the difficulties of quantifying them (Merry, 2016), and because they are not directly linked to involvement in a formal workplace (Weeks, 2007). However, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, non-material assistance is crucial in refugee women’s ability to achieve self-reliance, and for their well-being. As emphasised in chapter 2.1, female refugees are facing other challenges than men in displacement, which makes them more dependent on various kinds of assistance through their social networks. Previous research on crises-affected women have demonstrated that they contribute to resilience and recovery in multiple ways through their social networks, such as providing psychological support (Soares & Mullings, 2009; de Branco, 2009; Ganapati, 2012), including marginalised groups by creating inclusive approaches to recovery (Enarson, 2012; Yonder et al., 2009), supporting income generation to supplement household incomes (de Branco, 2009), distribute informal humanitarian assistance (Drolet et al., 2015), and reducing the impacts of gender-based violence (Fisher, 2009; Enarson, 1999). Recognising both the material and non-material forms of assistance within the social networks of refugee women is crucial, as they are both of significant importance in fostering self-reliance and promoting well-being.

3.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has described the theoretical framework and the main concepts employed in this thesis. In the chapter I have argued that the current understandings of and implementation of refugee self-reliance, neglect the social dimensions of self-reliance. This is problematic for several reasons. One is that self-reliance is rarely achieved at the individual level (Easton-Calabria et al., 2017). Another is that the role of social networks in achieving self-reliance is not sufficiently recognised and understood, especially in terms of how social networks are conditioned in intersectional ways. To fully understand the potential benefits of social networks for refugees, it is important to consider the complex interplay between individual backgrounds and attributes, and the social structures that shape their experiences. Lastly, refugee well-being should be considered in self-reliance models to move beyond a focus on refugee's *bare life* towards fulfilling refugees' biographical lives (Agamben, 1998). In this thesis I focus on the role of social networks in supporting and providing self-reliance achievement, with a focus on both the social and economic dimensions of the concept, and especially their interconnection. Additionally, the social dimension is examined as both a means to achieve self-reliance, and as an end in itself.

4.0 Methodology

The following chapter provides a rationale for and explains the methodological framework of the thesis. It starts with a description of the selection of topic, research design and methods, followed by a discussion on the choices made when collecting and analysing the study's empirical findings. Furthermore, ethical considerations, including my positionality as a researcher will be discussed. To conclude, the chapter will consider the limitations and trustworthiness of the particular methods used.

4.1 Selection of Topic

When researching topics for my master's thesis I found an ongoing project led by the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO), called Holding Aid Accountable: Relational Humanitarianism in Protracted Crisis (AidAccount). This project aims to “map, document, and analyse the moral and social dimensions of accountability as understood and practiced by civic and professional humanitarian aid providers in protracted crises in Uganda, Somalia and Sri Lanka” (PRIO, n.d.). My supervisor Hilde Refstie is one of the researchers in AidAccount and connected me to the project. I then began to participate in the project's monthly workshops.

In my original master's thesis proposal, submitted in the beginning of 2021, I intended to focus on urban refugee women in Kampala and their network of aid providers, with an emphasis on issues concerning power asymmetries and gender. During the fall semester of 2021, I conducted an online internship at Makerere University in Kampala, where I wrote a literature review on urban refugee women and their livelihood strategies in spaces where refugee self-reliance is promoted as a policy goal. I also participated in hybrid digital interviews (five in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion) and transcribed recordings of interviews conducted in the AidAccount project. This work inspired me to redesign my study to look more at how refugee women use their social networks as a self-reliance strategy. I was also interested in how this potentially worked in rural settlements and urban areas.

4.2 Research Methods

A qualitative approach was taken in the research of this thesis, as it was regarded the most appropriate option. It allowed me to understand the refugee women's own perceptions and experiences of the role of social networks in their contexts, where self-reliance is promoted as a policy goal. While there is no standardised methodology for conducting research in the field of forced migration, scholars have frequently emphasised the importance of adapting research methods to the particular context being studied (Clark-Kazak, 2021; Brun & Lund, 2014). Primary data for this thesis was collected through 27 semi-structured interviews. Three focus group discussions were also held. Additionally, secondary data and grey literature were gathered and analysed to complement the results from the interviews.

4.3 Data Collection

Parts of the empirical data were collected together with the team working on PRIO's AidAccount project responsible for the Uganda case (Hilde Refstie, Emmanuel Viga and Eria Serwajja). Building on PhD candidate Emmanuel Viga's extensive network amongst refugees in the BidiBidi refugee settlement² and in Kampala, that he had created during his fieldwork in 2021, the team conducted five focus group discussions in the BidiBidi refugee settlement, and three in-depth interviews and four focus group discussion in Kampala, in a time span of ten days.

After the ten days of joint fieldwork, I began my individual data collection, which I will describe in more detail in the following sections. The thesis is building on data from both the joint and the individual data collection. However, I have only included the interviews from the joint collection that I found relevant for this study. Therefore, only some of these interviews are represented in Table 1.

² BidiBidi refugee settlement is located in northern Uganda and hosts more than 230.000 refugees, with the majority coming from South Sudan (Logie et al., 2021)

Participant ³	Gender	Female-headed household (FHH) or not	Age range (18-25, 25-35, 35-50, 50-65)	Occupation	Current location	Length of displacement
1 - Mary	F	FHH	25-35	Secretary, chairperson, research assistant, domestic work	BidiBidi refugee settlement	7 years
2 - Joyce	F	FHH	25-35	Chairperson of the village, teacher, domestic work	BidiBidi refugee settlement	7 years
3 - Zaina	F	FHH	25-35	General leader at zone 1, research assistant, domestic work	BidiBidi refugee settlement	7 years
4 - Amira	F	FHH	25-35	Selling bedsheets, domestic work	Nsambya	-
5 - Nada	F	FHH	25-35	Selling bedsheets, domestic work	Nsambya	-
6 - Ayuel	F	FHH	25-35	Selling charcoal, G-nut paste and bedsheets, domestic work	Nsambya	10 years
7 - Bakhita	F	FHH	35-50	Domestic work	Nsambya	3 years

Table 1: Overview of participants from joint data collection

4.3.1 Selection of Participants

In my individual data collection, I was able to build further on Viga's network of interviewees. I gained access to South Sudanese refugee women through three community gatekeepers, whom I connected with during the joint fieldwork. They connected me with

³ All participants in this thesis are referred to by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Participants 1, 2 and 3 were a part of focus group discussion 1.

potential participants, which resulted in “snowball” sampling, meaning that some people of interest identify other people involved in similar cases (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016). The three gatekeepers ended up working as research assistants through the data collection process where they provided access to participants, worked as translators in the cases where the interviewee did not speak or was not comfortable with speaking English, and as discussants of topics brought up in the interviews. The influence of a community gatekeeper, who recommends certain individuals to the researcher, can exert a considerable impact, and potentially lead to a bias (Groger, Mayberry & Straker, 1999). As a mitigation measure, the study incorporated multiple gatekeepers and interviewed different participants from various communities, aiming to have a more varied participant group who were not necessarily all connected through social networks. In addition to the community gatekeepers, I got to know two Makerere students with access to other South Sudanese refugees, and they put me in contact with participants possessing other intersectionalities, such as a younger age, and a higher socioeconomic status.

Given that this was my first time doing field work independently, I was cognisant that it would require some time for me to build confidence in the interview setting, and that the initial interviews would not exhibit the same level of proficiency as those conducted subsequently. In order to ensure that I gathered sufficient information within the three months I spent in Uganda, I initially aimed for around 20 interviews together with observations. While the emphasis in qualitative research is rather upon the analysis of meanings in particular contexts (Robinson, 1998), the sample was not meant to be representative but rather make room for “bad interviews”. As Patton (2002) stresses, the information richness and the validity are normally determined by the researcher’s competencies, rather than the sample size. In addition, reaching ‘informant saturation’ was a goal, to get to a stage where much of the information was confirmed by subsequent interviews (Saunders et al., 2018).

In total, I interviewed 26 South Sudanese refugees in my individual data collection. Most were individual interviews, but two focus group discussions were also held. Out of 26 participants, five were male and 21 were female. Given the focus of the study, the majority of interviewees were women. Particular attention was also paid to involving a diversity of refugee women in terms of economic status, areas of residence, length of stay and so on. The duration of the interviews varied between 30 minutes and 2 hours each. Most were conducted in English, and some in local languages in which the gatekeeper worked as a translator. Issues concerning the presence of a translator will be discussed in chapter 4.5. The sample included

participants from seven different neighbourhoods in Kampala, selected to capture the diversity of perspectives and experience within three of the capital's five political divisions.

As a white Norwegian researcher being introduced into the lives of these refugee women, several women asked what they would get in return for providing me with their information. This was often the case in the initial interviews, especially at the end when I asked if they had any questions for me. I made sure to communicate my situation clearly (that I am only a student with limited resources, and do not work for any organisation) from early on, before starting the interview, in order to try to mitigate the expectation towards me as a researcher. At the same time, I was concerned about the interviewees' time and potential loss of income due to their participation in the study. To compensate for this, I decided to offer both participants and gatekeepers a small payment for their time. The size of this payment was in line with what was recommended to me by the Makerere researcher I was connected to through AidAccount. While these sorts of payments can influence the answers given by the research participants, it was considered more important to compensate the participants for the potential loss of income during the time spent on the interview. However, in an attempt to mitigate the potential influence of the payment on the answers given, it was normally provided to the participants at the end of the interviews.

An overview of the participants in my individual data collection is provided in Table 2 below.

Participant	Gender	Female headed household (FHH) or not	Age range (18-25, 25-35, 35-50, 50-65)	Occupation	Current location	Previously stayed in refugee settlement	Length of displacement
8 – Thok	M	Not	35-50	Community leader, porter of construction materials	Nsambya	No	10 years
9 – Abuk	F	FHH	25-35	Selling G-nuts, domestic work	Nsambya	No	9 years
10 – Malang	F	FHH	25-35	Selling	Nsambya	No	10 years

				bananas, domestic work			
11 – Nakenyi	F	FHH	25-35	Selling bananas, domestic work	Nsambya	No	10 years
12 – Efon	F	FHH	25-35	Selling G-nut paste and bed sheets, domestic work	Kabalagala	Yes	9 years
13 – Diko	F	FHH	25-35	Selling G-nut paste and cookies, domestic work	Kabalagala	No	3 years
14 – Anai	F	FHH	25-35	Washing clothes, domestic work	Kabalagala	Yes	7 years
15 – Guwo	F	FHH	25-35	Selling crafts on social media, domestic work	Luwafu	Yes	7 years
16 – Isika	F	FHH	35-50	Selling pastries, domestic work	Luwafu	Yes	10 years
17 – Kade	F	FHH	50-65	Making jewellery bids, domestic work	Acholi Quarters	No	Around 60 years
18 – Liyo	F	FHH	50-65	Making jewellery	Acholi Quarters	No	Around 30 years

				bids, domestic work			
19 – Maneno	F	FHH	50-65	Selling alcohol and tomatoes, domestic work	Acholi Quarters	Yes	54 years
20 – Meer	F	Not	18-25	Domestic work	Luwafu	Yes	8 years
21 – Keji	F	FHH	18-25	Not working	Luwafu	No	5 years
22 – Jabe	F	FHH	18-25	Not working	Luwafu	No	9 years
23 – Napita	F	FHH	25-35	Domestic work	Luwafu	No	3 years
24 – Kiden	F	FHH	35-50	Making and selling G-nut paste, domestic work	Nsambya	Yes	12 years
25 - Guor	M	Not	18-25	Student	Nsambya	No	-
26 – Kafuki	F	FHH	35-50	Making and selling charcoal, bed sheets and G-nut paste, domestic work	Nsambya	Yes	10 years
27 – Abiel	M	Not	18-25	Student	Munyonyo	No	-
28 – Garwec	M	Not	18-25	Student	Munyonyo	No	-
29 – Sebit	M	Not	18-25	Student	Munyonyo	No	-
30 – Nyamal	F	FHH	23	Student	Makerere Kikoni	No	Whole life
31 – Mandara	F	FHH	22	Student	Makerere Kikoni	No	Whole life
32 – Luba	F	FHH	18-25	Student and working for an insurance	Makerere Kikoni	Yes	Whole life

				company			
33 – Konga	F	FHH	18-25	Student	Makerere Kikoni	Yes	6 years

Table 2: Overview of participants from individual data collection⁴

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Permission to collect personal data was granted by NSD in April 2022. To prepare for the data collection, an interview guide (see Appendix 1) was developed beforehand. Following the experiences from the initial interviews, where I used many of the exact formulations, the guide was mainly utilised to maintain focus on the topics and themes relevant to the research. This approach allowed for a more natural flow in the conversations in line with a narrative approach, where the interviewees were able to tell their unique stories. It also provided flexibility to tailor questions to fit each interview.

A narrative approach emphasises that telling stories, or narratives, is an important way in which individuals express and construct meaning (Mishler, 1991). Gee (1985) argues that people make sense of their experiences through story-telling, and personal narratives are considered “the most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present, and anticipated future” by Cohler (1982, p. 207). The semi-structured and open-ended interviews allowed participants to share stories from their everyday lives on how specific social interactions and relations were valuable to them, or not, and in which ways. By allowing people to tell their stories, researchers gain a deeper understanding of their circumstances and situatedness, enabling them to make sense of complex experiences in everyday life (Mishler, 1991; Riessman, 2008). By asking questions that made them elaborate on their migration journeys, how they ended up in certain areas, who helped them along the way, how they ended up doing what they do for living, and how people in their network are involved in meeting their most prominent challenges, the approach allowed me to connect social networks and social capital to individual actions and experiences. Thus, the primary data for this thesis was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, with inspiration from a narrative approach.

⁴ In addition to individual interviews, participants 10, 14 and 26 were a part of focus group discussion 2, and participants 27, 28, and 29 were a part of focus group discussion 3.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, while a few were held at Makerere University (30, 31, 32, and 33), and a restaurant in their neighbourhood (27, 28 and 29). In the cases of participants 14, 24, and 25, the interviews took place in the home of their friend, who was also interviewed. The interview setting was carefully chosen in order to ensure the participants felt comfortable and at ease. Even though it was not an observational study, conducting the interviews in the participants' homes provided the opportunity to gain valuable insight into their everyday interactions and activities, such as observing how they are making certain products, and their interactions with family and neighbours.

During my field work, I recognised the importance of establishing rapport with the participants. This was essential to enable valuable data collection. As trust and mutual understanding develop between the researcher and participant through strong rapport, conversations often became more open and candid (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). I observed that building a positive relation with the participants often begins prior to the interview itself. The preliminary small talk served to establish a sense of comfort and balance for both the participant and myself. Interviews where such connection was not properly established - either due to my initial lack of awareness of its importance, or because of the language barriers I faced when a research assistant was present and spoke in local language with the participant – resulted in a greater scepticism and conversations of lower quality. In some instances, rapport was built over the course of the interview, while in others, the lack of it had a pervasive impact on the whole interaction.

Being in control over the first meeting with the research participants was crucial to me, not only to establish positive rapport but also to ensure that they were fully informed about the aim of the research and their participation. In situations where a research assistant was present during the first interaction, I sometimes encountered difficulties when they were informing the participant of the thesis' aims in their local language before turning to me saying “ok, you can begin”. In some of these cases, I realised that participants would to a larger degree than when I explained the aims myself, tell me what they believed I wanted to hear, such as expressing their hardships in hopes of receiving help and financial assistance. It also did not build the same kind of rapport that I experienced when doing these introductions myself (in the cases where participants spoke English). Consequently, I recognised the need to work with word-by-word translation by the research assistants in the interviews, with the task of describing the aim of the research being left to me. This also helped me in being able to

capture more of the nuances in the conversation and oriented the conversation to be more between me and the refugees, but with the aid of a translator.

Prior consent was obtained before every interview, and a voice recorder device was used in all, except one, as that person was not comfortable being recorded. Additionally, notes were taken to formulate follow-up questions, keep track of the conversation and document any valuable observations made throughout the interview. I also kept a field diary in which I reflected upon the interviews and experiences of that particular day.

4.4 Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed manually in Word after conducting the interviews, and the files were then uploaded to NVivo for coding. To start the process, I began developing descriptive codes, which according to Cope (2016, p. 378) “reflect themes or patterns that are obvious on the surface or are stated directly by research subjects”. These codes can include categories such as demography, sites, and occupation. Some of my descriptive codes were gender and intersectionality, place of residence, occupation, education, and number of children. These codes provided me with important background information about the participants that helped explain the motives and needs for using certain social networks. In addition to descriptive codes, analytical codes - defined as codes that reflect themes and topics of interest to the researcher (Cope, 2016, p. 379) - were created to gain insights into processes and contexts relevant for this study, such as social network access, social network outcomes, social capital building, self-reliance strategies, and well-being. As new and interesting information came to my attention through the process of analysing, additional codes were developed, either replacing or adding to the existing list. The structuring of codes also varied as I was repeatedly going through the transcriptions.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research delves into the intricacies of social interactions and recognises the impact that societal norms, expectations, power dynamics, and structures can have (Dowling, 2016). The relationship between the researcher and participants is affected by all these aspects, and interviewing as a research method therefore poses several ethical concerns, which will be addressed here. Particularly, I will discuss participants’ privacy, my positionality, power

asymmetries, the use of gatekeepers and translators, and gender dynamics that could have an effect on the research process.

Ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of interviewees' personal information was a priority throughout the whole research process. Before starting each interview, they were provided with an explanation of the study's scope and purpose, what their participation involved, and how the data would be handled afterwards. Furthermore, I obtained their consent before starting the recorder. Throughout the interview, I was mindful of the participants' reactions and avoided delving into topics they found distressing or potentially traumatic. If some expressed any kind of hesitation, I reassured them that they were under no obligation to continue and redirected the conversation as necessary. However, in some cases, speaking about difficult experiences could provide some relief, and I made sure to listen carefully while letting them control the direction of the interview for a while, sharing what they felt comfortable sharing. To preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, I refer to them by pseudonyms, and I have not associated any personal information with descriptive stories or accurate quotes.

Acknowledging the existing power relations between the researcher and the participant is of great importance. When conducting the interviews for this study, I tried to become aware of potential power asymmetries, and whether there were any actions I could take to reduce the imbalance. The setting of the interview was something carefully thought through, and whenever possible we conducted the interview in the participant's home. Considering my position as the researcher, with greater power in the sense that I am the one to interpret the participants' actions and words for others to read, it was important for me to avoid presenting myself as someone with more knowledge than them. I do not have any first-hand experience of forced migration, and I was there to learn more about *their* lives and situations, and they were the ones providing *me* with this knowledge through sharing stories from their lives. This was important in order to avoid reproducing stereotypical representations (Dowling, 2016). Another important aspect of power asymmetries is the presence of a gatekeeper and translator. Some of these individuals were representing community leadership, a refugee association, and/or holding a higher social position, which could potentially influence how and what the participant responded during the interview. To mitigate this impact, I conducted the interviews alone with the participants whenever possible. When language was a barrier, family members or friends sometimes helped with translation, and other times the gatekeeper

served as a translator. However, I remained mindful of the potential power asymmetries and considered the gatekeeper's relationship with the participant when asking certain questions.

During my conversations with the research participants, I encountered some challenges related to gender dynamics. For instance, when interviewing male participants around the same age as me, I noticed a more sceptic behaviour and a reluctance to answer some of the questions. This may have been due to a lack of information about the study in advance, as the gatekeeper sometimes provided information about the study's aim without my involvement. Another reason could be the gender dynamics, as I did not encounter the same challenges when the same happened in interviews with female participants. According to Dowling (2016), we often ascribe certain characteristics to individuals based on their gender, and our personal interactions tend to vary between male and female participants. It is also possible, without being aware of it in the moment, that I acted differently in the interviews with males and females, and that this behaviour evoked a different reaction from the male participants. Furthermore, I found it easier to improve the situation after the initial phase of the interview, if it started off with scepticism, with the female participants.

The best ways to deal with challenges of gender, power asymmetries and positionality is to practice critical reflexivity. Reflexivity, according to England (1994), involves continuous self-awareness and examination of one's role as a researcher and the research process. This means that being critical reflexive requires analysing yourself and your actions as if they were subject of study (Dowling, 2016). Throughout the field work, I continuously paid attention to the nature of my involvement and how it influenced the social relations and interactions. I noted down reflections in my field diary after each interview which included concerns around my position as a privileged white female student from Norway, how formulations of certain questions could reflect some of my prejudices, and my ability to build rapport with the participants. Even though some of these characteristics could not be changed, identifying them helped me notice how the interviewees' responses could be affected by them and how I could aim to reduce potential power asymmetries rather than reinforcing them. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise research fatigue as an ethical consideration, particularly in settings where international NGOs operate and researchers from various institutions come and go. To address this challenge, the team and I attempted to mitigate the burden on participants by conducting joint interviews and avoiding multiple interviews with the same individuals. Additionally, we aimed to include more understudied populations in our research and interviewed participants in the most convenient spaces for them, such as their homes and

workplaces. These efforts were made to minimise the potential negative impact of research on the participants.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Study

In qualitative research, ensuring rigour involves establishing trustworthiness of our work through conducting research in a transparent, thorough, and systematic way (Bailey, White & Pain, 1999). Rigour is particularly important when doing qualitative research because of the context-dependent and subjective nature of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout the fieldwork and analysis process, I employed various strategies to ensure rigour in my research. To begin, I conducted interviews with participants from various neighbourhoods in Kampala, ensuring a diversity of intersectional backgrounds, and employed several gatekeepers to enhance the study's credibility. Additionally, I sought feedback from my supervisor, colleagues, and research assistants during the fieldwork to ensure the appropriateness of the methods and validity of my interpretations. This feedback was valuable in identifying missing information, adjusting the types of questions I asked, assessing the impact of the research assistant's presence, and reflecting on the influence of gender dynamics in the interview setting. Furthermore, I also shared my initial findings with some of the participants towards the end of the fieldwork in order to ensure accuracy of my interpretations. As previously discussed, I practiced critical reflexivity throughout the whole process to mitigate and identify potential sources of bias.

In this chapter, I have provided a description of every stage of the research process and acknowledged my role and positionality as a researcher to ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the study. However, it is important to recognise the limitations of this research. One limitation is related to the sampling strategy employed, which relied much on one researcher's existing network. This method may have resulted in certain individuals and communities being over-represented, as "snowball" sampling works through social networks. This could potentially skew the sample towards communities and individuals who are more easily accessible due to their inclusion in certain networks. If I had more time to conduct fieldwork and connect with additional gatekeepers, I could have included a broader range of participants. Additionally, the time limitation may also have hindered the development of deeper levels of trust between the interviewees and myself, which could have led to more open information-sharing from even more of the participants, had I been able to meet them

more than once. Despite these limitations, this research provides important insights into the perspectives and experiences of a group whose voices are often underrepresented in policy decisions and academia. Hopefully, this study can serve as a contribution to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities in refugee women's use of social networks as part of their self-reliance strategies.

5.0 Social Networks and Self-Reliance Strategies among South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda

The following three chapters present the analysis of the study's empirical findings. In this first chapter I start by presenting the Ugandan self-reliance strategy and the policies that underpin it. I then proceed to address the thesis' first research question: *How do South Sudanese refugee women build and leverage their social networks as part of their self-reliance strategies in protracted displacement?* I do this by examining how the South Sudanese refugee women in the study create and utilise their social networks to achieve self-reliance with a focus on both the economic and social dimension, and especially their interrelation. Additionally, I examine the role of social networks both as a means to achieve self-reliance (in 5.2), and as an end in promoting well-being (in 5.3). The empirical data in this chapter is based on the interviews conducted with the refugee women residing in Kampala.

5.1 Refugee Self-Reliance in Uganda

While many refugee-hosting countries in Africa have implemented restrictive policies concerning refugees' rights, movement, and activities (Omata, 2022), Uganda has become known for their open-door policy and more recent progressive legislation. In 1999, the Self-Reliance Strategy was introduced, and since then Uganda's agenda on refugee self-reliance has been strengthened by additional legislation and policy tools (Hovil, 2018). In 2006, Uganda incorporated a regulatory framework for the rights of refugees into the 2006 Refugee Act, which has become known as the Ugandan self-reliance model. This provides refugees with relative protection, freedom of movement and access to work and services on par with Ugandan nationals (Betts, 2021). In addition, the GoU inaugurated the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment Strategy (ReHoPE) in 2015 and became committed to the global Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in 2017 (Hovil, 2018). Both ReHoPE and CRRF are calling for greater support to refugees and hosting countries and emphasise the need to include refugees in host communities from the very beginning (UNHCR, n.d.a). Furthermore, the GoU has recently announced its plans to incorporate the protection of refugees into the National Development Plan 2020-2030, which is aiming to assist communities hosting refugees through initiatives that support livelihood creation, environmental conservation, and peaceful coexistence (UNHCR, 2021a).

While Uganda is practicing solidarity with refugees from neighbouring countries, Hovil (2018) emphasises that their progressive refugee policies have been adopted and shaped as part of a bigger strategy focusing on engagement with the international community. The self-reliance agenda seeks to boost the country's reputation and guarantee their access to much needed humanitarian and development aid. It has also enabled successive presidents to attract resources and international legitimacy and played a key role in enabling them to assert authority over refugee-hosting hinterlands that are strategically important (Betts, 2021).

5.1.1 Refugee Self-Reliance in Uganda's Rural Settlements

Ever since its establishment, agriculture has been the cornerstone of Uganda's self-reliance strategy (Omata, 2022). When refugees choose to reside in a rural settlement when they first arrive in Uganda, they are, in theory, allocated a plot of land, where they can reside, and engage in farming activities, both for survival and commercial sale (Krause, 2016). However, the decreasing land fertility is creating significant challenges for refugees' livelihoods, and not all refugees are given access. Adding to this pressure, the refugee population in Uganda has increased by nearly 70 percent since 2012, straining the country's self-reliance strategy which is based on the allocation of land. Furthermore, the availability of a small plot of land is not enough to ensure food security, particularly if other essential agricultural inputs like farming equipment, fertiliser, and improved seed varieties are lacking. Agriculture is also significantly affected by erratic and unpredictable weather patterns, which can further compromise food security of refugee groups who lack the necessary coping and adaption abilities (Serwajja & Refstie, in print). Additionally, there are discrepancies in agricultural skills among refugees, meaning that agricultural self-reliance is dependent on factors such as access to resources, networks, and skill sets, that might vary within and between groups (Kaiser, 2000).

As Uganda's population grows, land will become increasingly limited, posing a challenge to initiatives such as land allocation to refugees. In some areas, the size of land allocated to refugee households has been reduced to make room for new arrivals, and the land remains under the ownership of Ugandan nationals rather than refugees (Ahaibwe & Ntale, 2018). Additionally, food insecurity is a persistent problem, with refugees having to wait in long queues at distribution points that may be located far from their settlements (UHRC, 2019). Although some refugees can change their food rations for cash payments, the Uganda Human

Rights Commission (UHRC) asserts that the amount provided is insufficient to cover essential needs (UHRC, 2019.). The UNHCR advocates for refugees' integration into local communities from the outset, discouraging the use of settlements or camps, even though they are the most common form to protect and house refugees (Omata, 2022).

5.1.2. Refugee Self-Reliance in Kampala

Since the 1950s, the UNHCR has mainly focused on programming in refugee camps and settlements, but today only one-third of the world's refugees reside in camps or settlements, and around 60 percent are living in urban areas (Muggah & Abdenur, 2018). The 2006 Refugee Act permits refugees in Uganda the freedom to choose where to reside, including places outside the designated settlements. As a result, many opt to live in Kampala in search for improved livelihood opportunities, including better access to healthcare and education services (Hovil, 2018). However, by moving to the city refugees relinquish the material assistance they received in the settlements and are supposed to become completely self-reliant (Monteith & Lwasa, 2017). This is not always the case, and some refugees are keeping their registration in the settlement and return for the food distribution (UHCR, 2019). While refugees in Kampala have the right to work, accessing formal employment remains a challenge due to the complicated process of obtaining work permits from the GoU. Consequently, most refugees are forced to make a living from work in the informal sector, which can potentially be exploitative and dangerous, especially for refugee women (WRC & RLP, 2015; Malama et al., 2023). Additionally, since displacement can have a devastating effect on livelihoods, leaving refugees with little resources and preparation, many urban refugees have to adopt new economic strategies to ensure income and food security (WRC, 2011). Despite working long hours in an attempt to create a sustainable livelihood, many refugees continue to struggle with inadequate income levels which make it difficult to secure a decent standard of living (Betts et al., 2018; RLP, 2005).

The lives of urban refugees in Kampala are precarious despite being considered self-reliant by the global community. Research reveals that even after participating in livelihood trainings, refugees struggle to make enough to cover their essential needs. Self-reliance assistance in Kampala takes form through entrepreneurship, however, practical steps to enter local markets and compete successfully are lacking (Easton-Calabria, 2022). Urban refugees receive livelihood trainings instead of material assistance, but a law created by the Kampala Capital

City Authority (KCCA) in 2011 prohibits both refugees and nationals to sell goods in public areas without a license. This hinders the creation of sustainable livelihoods through small businesses in the informal market, and limits the protection space for particularly female refugees, as hawking fruit, clothes, and jewellery are common livelihoods among them (Easton-Calabria, 2016; Vemuru et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is no guarantee for refugees to find a job after participating in a livelihood training, and no market assessment of Kampala has been undertaken by neither the UNHCR, nor the GoU, despite livelihoods programming being a priority in the self-reliance model. Additionally, the majority of the participants in livelihoods trainings are observed to be female refugees (Easton-Calabria, 2022), meaning that these women receive trainings that do not effectively facilitate for the establishment of a sustainable source of income.

5.2 Social Networks in Self-Reliance Strategies

All the refugee women interviewed in this study were either living in, or acting as the head of, a female-headed household. While their migration journeys varied, most had fled South Sudan without their husbands. Others had initially migrated with their spouses but later separated or been abandoned due to worsening conditions and the difficulty of sustaining a decent livelihood in Kampala. As a result, many of these refugee women bore the full responsibility of providing for their families, which included paying for food, rent, and tuition. Several of them did not have a job in South Sudan and had to find ways to generate an income upon arrival in Uganda. This demonstrates what Drolet et al. (2015) explain, that women take on roles and tasks that are normally held by men in crises settings, such as providing for their family with taking on additional economic responsibilities.

Accessing the labour market was challenging to many of the refugee women who had to find a source of income, due to a lack of certain skills necessary to build a livelihood, and/or their limited access to assets such as capital, information about the labour market, and knowledge of potential customers. Even those who were employed in South Sudan struggled to access work opportunities in Uganda, because their skills and experiences were not always transferable to the local context. This was the case for Anai who worked as a legal advisor in the government in South Sudan, and now runs an informal laundry service in Kampala. Obtaining work permits from the GoU to access formal employment also remains a significant challenge due to the lengthy and complicated process (Easton-Calabria, 2022;

Omata 2022), and many of the refugee women were not aware of their right to access formal work, highlighting the lack of knowledge of their rights in Uganda. Consequently, the participants who had a source of income worked in the informal market, known to be particularly exploitative and dangerous for women (WRC & RLP, 2015; Malama et al., 2023). Findings from this study recognise the importance of social networks in accessing livelihood opportunities and employment. However, the main emphasis is put on the role of social networks in providing and supporting assistance to both the economic and social dimensions of self-reliance, and especially their interconnection.

5.2.1 *The Role of New Networks*

Social networks played a pivotal role to many of the refugee women interviewed in facilitating the integration of their economic activities with domestic responsibilities. As Idris (2020) highlights, refugee women often face the added burden of household duties and childcare responsibilities, placing them at a disadvantage. The participants underscored the challenges related to fulfilling their children's needs and ensuring their protection. Pursuing wage-labour meant that they had to balance childcare responsibilities with their economic activities, highlighting the necessity for support from their social networks, as Anai emphasised:

The biggest struggle is problems with the kids, the men they don't care, they can have children here and there and there, but the person sitting with them is the mother.

That's why we need to have a social network, go to a sister, share problems with them, and it's good for the women to have social networks. They help each other, especially single mothers (Participant 14 – Anai – focus group discussion 2).

Many of the refugee women coming without a pre-existing network in Kampala often resided in the informal settlements of the city. Several of these women stressed the significance of their neighbours in helping them balance their economic activities with household responsibilities and childcare. Due to their close proximity, living in the same compound, the neighbours became acutely aware of the participants' most pressing challenges. This could result in them assisting in the form of childcare when the refugee women had to pursue work outside their homes or run for errands, providing some small extra food during times of significant scarcity, offering advice and emotional support, and sharing valuable information. The challenges faced by the refugee women and the assistance provided by their neighbours

illustrate the interdependencies of the economic and social dimensions of self-reliance achievement. The refugee women's most pressing challenges varied, and the assistance from their neighbours were thus vital for self-reliance achievement in both economic and social terms. However, accessing support from neighbours in Kampala were more common among the refugee women residing in informal settlements as their neighbours were more involved in their everyday routines and practices due to their close proximity. Thus, location emerged as a crucial factor influencing the refugee women's ability to access new social networks that could potentially offer them valuable support.

In addition to better access to their neighbours, it was evident that the refugee women residing in informal settlements had a greater awareness of the presence and initiatives of international, local, and refugee-led organisations in comparison to those living in the more affluent areas of the city. They had more often participated in livelihood trainings and saving groups, and received humanitarian aid such as clothes and food rations when that was occasionally provided by the NGOs. Thok, the community leader in Nsambya⁵, explained that employees of various NGOs were aware of the many refugees in the informal settlements and therefore came to sometimes provide information about certain trainings and material support. In contrast, those living in comparatively better areas often lacked awareness of available resources and therefore had limited access to such occasional support.

Furthermore, many of the refugee women residing in the informal settlements of Kampala were working in the informal market, and their source of income was often based on hawking in the streets. Due to the hostile laws imposed by the KCCA many participants feared getting arrested while pursuing their work. This concern was often amplified by the fear of leaving children alone at home, especially if they had not established social capital in their relationship with their neighbours and did not trust them. Some participants engaged in negative coping strategies, such as hawking at night to avoid arrestation by the KCCA. Although this was not explicitly described as dangerous work by the refugee women, it was considered undesirable, and lack of safety was implied. In order to avoid hawking at night and leaving their children alone at home unattended, some of the participants had established connections with members in their church community beyond only serving as a prayer group to become a rather secure clientele. By bringing their products to church prayers, they built contacts with potential customers who would eventually visit their homes to buy their

⁵ Nsambya is a neighbourhood in Kampala where both middle-class residents and less privileged urban dwellers live (Viga & Refstie, forthcoming).

products. These new connections provided them with more flexibility to take care of their children and reduced the risk of getting arrested by the KCCA. As another strategy to avoid hawking in public spaces and leave their children unattended, some participants in Kampala had established a WhatsApp group chat in their community to exchange pictures of their products for others to buy. When people were interested, they would then meet up with them, instead of trying to sell their goods in public spaces. These refugee women connected with many new people beyond their closest community, as people were often added by others to the group. Leveraging neighbours, church community members, and connections through social media were thus essential for many of the refugee women to avoid engaging in negative coping strategies, such as hawking at night and leaving children unattended.

When asked about how the refugee women had established the connections with the people whom they received support from, some participants described the importance of non-material support. Providing emotional support, giving advice, and sharing information could be important for the establishment of new valuable connections. Some participants also reflected upon the impact of personal attributes in building social capital with new connections. In a focus group discussion, Anai emphasised that:

It depends on the way you present yourself, the way you contact people are where you also get problem. You go with respect, people respect you. The way you behave, also you find someone that behaves like you (Participant 14 – Anai – Focus group discussion 2).

Furthermore, the non-material assistance could in some cases ultimately lead to the provision of material support. Although many of the refugee women had limited access to material means, they emphasised that if and when they had something, they would share with their close acquaintances. This support was thus often directed towards those whom they had built social capital with through non-material means. It is thus important to recognise non-material assistance as a crucial form of support, as it is essential in the establishment of new valuable connections, and because it could eventually lead to material support being provided.

While many of the participants in the examples above were able to leverage their new connections for valuable material and non-material support, it is important to note that most of these refugee women struggled significantly with covering their households' basic needs. The costs of rent, sufficient food, and tuition fees were posing significant challenges to these women, and they could often not cover all of them. Some were also forced to prioritise some

needs over others. Malang, for instance, resorted to negative coping strategies, such as reducing food consumption, to pay for her children's tuition fees:

I'm a single mother, and it's difficult because I have a kid in p7, two in p5, and two in baby class. And now finding money to take care of them is difficult, that's why we are now eating once, we don't eat supper (Participant 10 – Malang).

While access to support from neighbours were emphasised as crucial by many, some also explained how there is a limit to how much you can ask your neighbours for. Abuk explained that if she needed salt or sugar she could ask her neighbours, but if the problem was larger, she had to consider other options, including approaching humanitarian organisations and hope for the best.

Additionally, while humanitarian organisations were more aware of the presence of refugee women residing in informal settlements, this awareness did not translate into a significant increase in resources allocated to them. The assistance was both rare and limited. Despite having participated in livelihood trainings and saving groups more often than the participants in the comparatively better areas, the positive impact of such programs was limited. Saving groups had disbanded due to insufficient capital from participants, and the livelihood trainings often failed to yield success because the refugee women lacked the necessary resources to enter the labour market afterwards.

5.2.2 *The Role of Pre-existing Networks*

The refugee women residing in the relatively more affluent areas of the city often ended up in those places as a result of interactions with their pre-existing networks in Kampala. Having a pre-existing network was often advantageous in terms of receiving valuable information on places to settle, connections to new people, and support in accessing livelihood opportunities before migrating and in the settlement process. Some of the refugee women with a pre-existing network were able to move in with their friend or relative who were already living in Kampala, and in some cases, they were introduced to their new neighbours and the local community, whose trust towards their connection sometimes transferred onto them. This could result in more rapid access to both material and non-material support, as social capital was built more quickly in these new networks compared to in other situations. In that regard, their pre-existing networks were essential in also forming new valuable connections.

Guwo was able to leverage her pre-existing network in Kampala to establish create a livelihood. She reconnected with her childhood connections in Kampala, as she had resided in the city as a refugee during her childhood as well. Her Ugandan friend let her borrow a sewing machine so she could acquire skills in tailoring and make clothing to sell. However, travelling around the city to sell her products became a challenge, as she was unable to leave her children at home for longer periods. While Guwo was relatively self-reliant in economic terms, she still faced challenges because she did not have anyone to care for her children while she was pursuing her work. She lived in a relatively good neighbourhood in Kampala, but her residence in a closed-off compound, in a community with mostly Ugandan nationals, limited her ability to establish positive connections with her neighbours. Consequently, Guwo turned to her social media channels to connect with relatives and friends living abroad, which eventually led to the expansion of her customer base to the South Sudanese and Ugandan diaspora. The communication with her friends and relatives over social media was initially just a way for them to keep in touch, however, it eventually evolved into an online business. Her connections abroad started purchasing her products online and she only had to go to the post office a few times a week to send the items. This development left her with more flexibility and allowed her to spend more time taking care of her children and domestic responsibilities. She thus leveraged her pre-existing network both in Kampala and abroad as a means to become more self-reliant in both social and economic terms.

Despite the access to valuable support through pre-existing networks, simply having a network did not always guarantee benefits in all areas. Many of the participants with a pre-existing network did not experience a transfer of trust, and establishing good connections with their neighbours and local community was perceived as challenging. As a result, they often ended up depending solely on their relative or friend for support. This dependence on a single source of assistance was a source of worry to many of these participants, as they became particularly vulnerable to the potential interruptions of this support. Additionally, many of the refugee women residing in the relatively more affluent areas had less contact with their neighbours. Since they often resided in physically more enclosed compounds and communities, the neighbours were not so involved in their daily lives compared to the participants residing in the informal settlements. Consequently, material and non-material support in the forms of childcare, provision of additional food, and emotional assistance and advice from neighbours was less frequent. Despite cases like the one of Guwo, many of the refugee women with a pre-existing network in Kampala often fared better in the settlement

process, compared to those coming without an existing network. In several cases the assistance from pre-existing networks were limited to the initial phase of displacement, highlighting the important temporal dimension of support through social networks.

Similar for both the refugee women with an existing network in Kampala and those without were their challenges concerning a language barrier. Many participants had frequently experienced discrimination when purchasing goods at the markets, paying for *boda boda* (moped taxi) and taxi rides. Malang emphasised how language was an issue when purchasing goods:

We face challenges when it comes to language because, like in town at Owino market⁶, if you have your little money, you want to go and buy something and you speak English, they will not tell you the real price of the thing. When you speak at their language you will get it at an affordable price. It is a challenge now for us because we only know English, our language, and maybe little Arabic (Participant 10 – Malang).

The refugee women who faced challenges regarding the language barrier explained that if they were speaking Luganda at the market, even if it was broken, it could result in lower prices matching those of Ugandan nationals. The inability to speak Luganda also presented a challenge for some participants when selling their products to Ugandan nationals in public places, as some of the locals were hesitant to purchase products from refugees who did not speak the local language. While these language barriers presented challenges for all the participants who did not speak Luganda upon their arrival in Uganda, some had found ways to overcome these challenges by utilising their social networks. Malang, for instance, dedicated much of her time to learning Luganda from her children, who had been taught the language in school. This enabled her to buy products at the same price as Ugandan nationals at the market. Another participant, Isika, overcame the challenges presented by the language barrier by allowing the children in the household who spoke Luganda to sell the pastries she made, and also by successfully connecting with her local neighbour who owned his own shop. By letting him take a share of the price he would sell Isika's pastries in his shop. This was advantageous because she could therefore overcome the language barrier and the potential hostile attitudes from the host community. Isika's example highlights how access to support from both pre-

⁶ Owino market is the largest market in Uganda, located in the centre of Kampala in Kisenyi, which is one of the most populous slums in the capital (Kimuli et al., 2022).

existing networks (in this case children in her household), and new networks were an important part of her household's ability to become relatively self-reliant.

5.3 The Importance of Social Networks for Refugee Well-Being

As discussed in chapter 3.1.2, refugee's biographical lives are often neglected within the predominant discourse on self-reliance. However, when a crisis becomes protracted, authors like Brun (2016) argue that we must think beyond biology. While it is crucial to address basic needs, the current conceptualisation of self-reliance only considers the access to, and attainment of, these. Refugee's well-being and their ability to create a meaningful life, is thus neglected. Well-being should be considered in self-reliance models, and findings from the interviews demonstrate that some of the participants both built and leveraged their social networks with the aim of enhancing their children's and their own well-being. This section demonstrates the importance of moving beyond only ensuring basic needs, by first demonstrating the restrictive nature of self-reliance. Then it illustrates how some of the participants were able to build and leverage their social networks to enhance their well-being. While chapter 5.2 mainly considered the role of social networks as a means towards self-reliance, this chapter considers the role of social networks as an end, for refugee well-being.

The refugee women who could be considered more self-reliant compared to other participants, due to their access and attainment of basic needs, were not necessarily more satisfied with their situation. As explained in chapter 5.2, Guwo had significantly improved her situation by connecting with her transnational network through social media and selling her items to people abroad. This made her able to combine her economic and domestic responsibilities. However, when asked if her ability to become relatively self-reliant had improved her well-being she responded:

Can I call this really better, it is just something to survive. We are surviving. Because what we are getting, we don't earn anything for the future. The things we get is very little, and the expenses are too much. You earn little but you find the expenses very hard. It's not enough. And it increases, everything (Participant 15 – Guwo).

Several of the participants would have been considered self-reliant by policymakers because they were able to ensure their families' most essential needs. However, their struggle to cover

these needs often came at the expense of the refugee women's own non-essential needs, which were important for their overall well-being, as Anai explained:

I know it is hard, but you don't have a choice, because your husband is not there. You have to take the double responsibilities as a mother, as a woman, as a man. So, that to bring good children tomorrow to the country. I know it's hard but we have to sacrifice. Also, myself I have needs, I need to have a friend, at least someone to talk to me. But this thing not happen, I have to sacrifice and let it go. One day I will go back and I will find my husband. But now I am here, at least I am saving the children, prepare for them a good future, even if I lose whatever I need in mine (Participant 14 – Anai).

Stites et al. (2021) assert that some groups of refugees may find solace in commiserating with other people who have undergone similar experiences of hardships and trauma. This was emphasised by Kafuki, who explained that:

Being in communication can help your mind and your heart even. Because sometimes you can think that I'm the last one in this condition, mine is worse. But when you meet other people, you understand you are not alone, and some can even be in worse condition. And with that you can console yourself (Participant 26 – Kafuki – Focus group discussion 2).

Several of the participants underscored the importance of connecting with other people and establish friendships to improve their well-being. However, their ability to access and prioritise these interactions varied among them. Some did not have the time or resources to connect with others as they were struggling to cover their children's and their own basic needs and spent most of their time working on this. Others who lived in more enclosed compounds and communities described that they did not have the opportunity to connect with other people as they did not know anyone.

The refugee women who were better-off in economic terms and resided in more enclosed neighbourhoods, did not perceive their relationships with neighbours as equally important as the ones in the informal settlements. Compared to the participants residing in the informal settlements, their neighbours were not so involved in their daily lives and because they lived in a gated compound, the fear of leaving their children alone at home was not as big. However, their well-being was significantly affected by the lack of access to a broader support network. These participants were often relatively self-reliant as they normally

received financial assistance from a relative in South Sudan, and could cover the rent of a decent house, the tuition fees for (some of) the family members, and the household's food consumption. However, the dependency on a single source of assistance significantly affected their well-being, as they were vulnerable to sudden interruptions in the support. Additionally, the financial assistance was only enough to cover the household's basic needs, leaving them unable to prioritise their aspirations for the future. The younger female refugee students who had spent their whole lives in Kampala, Nyamal and Mandara, described how both the lack of resources to cover more than their essential needs, and their feeling of being unwelcome and unwanted in Uganda made them determined to resettle in South Sudan. They envisaged a better future and a more meaningful life in their "home country". The life they had in Uganda was described as limited and the focus was to acquire an education, after which they planned to "start living" in South Sudan. All the narratives above demonstrate the restrictive nature of the concept of refugee self-reliance. Having to focus only on the access and attainment of basic needs left many of the refugees unable to prioritise their biographical lives. While social networks are important as a means towards self-reliance achievement, they are also important for refugee well-being. Although many participants described the inability to prioritise their well-being, some of the refugee women were, and they described how they built and leveraged their social networks in this regard.

Attending church prayers regularly was common among the participants, and a place where friendships could be built. While some participants were able to build a rather secure clientele in church, others were also able to establish friendships with some of the members. However, as it could require both time and resources it was not an option available for everyone. Meer described that because they did not have the money for transport to attend the prayers in the church with other South Sudanese people, they had to attend a church with the local Ugandan community, in which they struggled with the language barrier. They explained that they were able to follow the basic steps of the prayers, but that building any meaningful connections with the other members was too difficult. Diko found the language barrier challenging as well, in the Catholic church with mainly Ugandan nationals. However, she had the opportunity to attend another church as well, with mainly South Sudanese refugees. She thus attended two different churches to cover both her religious and social needs. In the church with other South Sudanese, she had established close friendships with some of the members, and they had started to meet regularly. Together they discussed their challenges and provided emotional support and advice. She described the friendships she had established with other

South Sudanese church members as an important aspect of her own well-being. Additionally, she explained that these connections were valuable because if someone were struggling with access to material needs, others could sometimes help in the form of providing some small money or food. This example adds to what was described above, that non-material support is crucial as it can occasionally lead to material support. While Diko initially built these friendships with the aim of enhancing her well-being, they have also become important in the sense that they can help with the provision of basic needs.

Another young participant, Luba, explained that ever since she started her education in Kampala, she was determined to build positive relationships with Ugandan nationals at her school and university. Having been active in several student organisations, she explained that she had built friendships with other Ugandan students over time and that she felt included among this group and integrated in the local community. In contrast to the other South Sudanese students, Nyamal and Mandara, who felt that their life in Uganda was limited and envisaged a better future in South Sudan, Luba had no significant wish to resettle in her home country. While the reasons for wanting, or not wanting, to return to South Sudan were multifaceted, the pursuit of overall well-being through social connections seemed to be of significant importance. Both among those who sought to return and among those who wished to remain in Uganda.

Feeling welcome and included among the local community was also of great importance to Kafuki. She described that she was determined to establish a positive relationship with her Ugandan neighbours for several reasons. The biggest reason was related to her concern about her children's safety when running for errands:

For me it was dangerous to leave the kids at home because they don't have keys, and if the power breaks, and if it burns, they are stuck there. And because of fear of the neighbours, I left them there (Participant 26 – Kafuki).

Kafuki reported that hostility from host communities was a common experience, and that several South Sudanese refugee women even relocated due to this challenge. While not having the option to resettle, Kafuki persisted in building a positive relationship with her neighbours. She recounted her attempts to initiate interaction with her Ugandan neighbours for several weeks and months, which yielded little response. The lack of recognition had a negative impact on her mental health and well-being, as she neither felt welcome nor safe for the sake of her children. Nevertheless, she explained that she continued to make efforts, and

after a prolonged period her neighbours began showing interest in Kafuki and her family's well-being. Kafuki believed that this was because she had started spending more time indoors as she was feeling depressed, which her neighbours had noticed and eventually wanted to help. Despite tedious efforts of trying to establish a positive relationship with her Ugandan neighbours, Kafuki described how her well-being had significantly improved as a result of it. Additionally, Kafuki was left with more flexibility to pursue her errands and work outside the house, while knowing her children were safe.

For many of the refugee women who needed to leave their children at home while pursuing economic activities outside, establishing positive relationships with their neighbours was a priority. As demonstrated in chapter 5.2, many of the refugee women's neighbours were crucial sources of both material and non-material support. However, positive relationships with neighbours were seen as essential not only in achieving basic needs but also for their household's well-being. While neighbours did not necessarily have to provide any form of support, simply having trustworthy and dependable neighbours were important to many of these refugee women. These examples highlight the importance of social networks both as a means towards self-reliance and an end for refugee well-being, and also their important interrelation.

6.0 Self-Reliance Strategies in Rural Settlements and Urban Areas

While the analysis in the previous chapter focused on the South Sudanese refugee women residing in Kampala and their self-reliance strategies, this chapter includes findings from the interviews conducted in BidiBidi refugee settlement, and addresses the second research question of the thesis: *Are there any differences in these strategies between South Sudanese refugee women residing in rural settlements and urban areas, and if so, in what ways?* The first section considers the experienced differences among those of the participants who had resided in both a rural settlement and in Kampala. The second section presents the self-reliance strategies of the refugee women residing in BidiBidi refugee settlement, with the aim of comparing the role of social networks against what was found among the urban refugees.

6.1 Experienced Differences from Rural to Urban Areas

As presented in chapter 5.1.1, agriculture has been the cornerstone of Uganda's self-reliance strategy ever since its establishment (Omata, 2022). However, with an increasing refugee population straining the land allocation-based strategy, and decreasing humanitarian assistance, a large number of refugees chooses to resettle in Kampala in search for better opportunities. Many of the refugee women who had previously resided in a rural settlement highlighted a fundamental weakness in Uganda's self-reliance strategy, which is also discussed in chapter 5.1.1: While the strategy prioritises land allocation, it falls short in equipping refugees with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to enhance their agricultural productivity. As a result, many participants were left without the tools they needed to succeed and became unable to sustain themselves in the settlements. This motivated their decision to relocate to Kampala. In addition, the reduction in humanitarian assistance provided in the settlements made their living unbearable and often became the primary reason for many of the participants' decision to relocate. Anai emphasised the issues related to the food rations provided:

The rations they give to the refugees is not enough. Especially if you have a lot of kids, it is not enough. They used to also give us good food, posho and beans, maize, oil, but little by little they start reducing the amount and it become little and cannot be enough for the kids to eat (Participant 14 – Anai).

Several of the refugee women and members in their networks had decided to switch from food rations to cash funding while residing in a settlement. However, the increasing cost of food proved to be a significant challenge as the cash transfers did not keep pace with the rising prices, and once they had opted for cash funding, they were not allowed to switch back to food rations again. Moreover, in some cases, both food rations and cash transfers were reduced, exacerbating the difficulties faced by the refugee women, as highlighted by Meer:

The system which they have has changed now, like giving food after two months. And that food is not, it cannot take you for two months, maybe last for half a month, and it is over, you have to struggle to get something for the children. So, that one is really difficult for us, and during those times, those who managed to change the system from receiving food to fund by that time, each person was getting like 32 thousand, but now they have reduced to 19 thousand each person (Participant 13 – Meer).

Anai underscored the concerns regarding the insufficient financial support provided to refugees, pointing out that the sum of 19 thousand Ugandan shillings (approximately 5 US dollars) was inadequate for a family of six to meet their monthly expenses. She emphasised that while she lived in the refugee settlement, the limited purchasing power left her with only enough cash to purchase soap for her family. In an attempt to supplement her income, Anai rented a piece of land from a Ugandan landlord outside the settlement as the allocated land was not enough to cultivate on. However, she encountered difficulties during the harvest time when the landlord disputed ownership of the crops. These challenges prompted her to explore alternative options in Kampala. Anai began travelling back and forth to her sister-in-law's residence in the city to establish a customer base, and with her relative's assistance, she connected with neighbours in the community and started offering laundry services. Once she felt she had established a strong and secure clientele for her informal laundry service, she relocated to Kampala with her children and moved in with her sister-in-law.

Several of the refugee women who had relocated to the capital described the greater ease of starting a business in Kampala compared to in the settlements. Guwo attempted to generate enough income to support herself and her family in the Kiryandongo settlement⁷ by running a restaurant. Upon arrival, she was concerned about the suitability of the acquired land for her newborn child. Fortunately, she connected with an older tribe mate who allowed them to reside in her area, which was more convenient for the baby. The woman also included Guwo

⁷ Kiryandongo refugee settlement is located in Bweyale town in the Kiryandongo district in western Uganda. The settlement hosts more than 76 000 refugees, with the majority coming from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2022c).

in her plan to establish a small restaurant. They began trading their food rations from the UN for the utensils they required for the restaurant. However, Guwo explained that earning an income in the settlement was challenging. Customers only came to eat because of severe hunger, and they could not afford to pay much for the food they were served. Some days, they had no customers, and had to discard the excess food due to the lack of means to preserve it. When asked about the most significant differences between living in the Kiryandongo settlement and Kampala, she explained that it was possible to run a business in Kampala since more people had the resources to purchase her products. Several of the refugee women who had relocated to the city explained that the urban context offered greater access to diverse economic opportunities, markets, and most importantly support from their social networks, which allowed them to enhance their situations.

Many of the refugee women who had relocated from a rural settlement to the capital explained that their social networks were more instrumental in building a livelihood and generating an income in Kampala compared to in the rural settlements. While Guwo was able to receive assistance from her tribemate in establishing a business, they did not generate enough income to cover their most essential needs. The precarious situation of the residents in the settlements was emphasised as a main reason as to why support from other people was insufficient. They could not provide any support to others because they struggled to meet their own families' basic needs. In addition to these challenges, Isika highlighted another obstacle to livelihood development in the settlements: the difficulty of selling products made from commonly cultivated crops. However, after resettling in Kampala, she found it easier to market her products to people in the neighbourhood who did not have access to land for cultivation. As explained in chapter 5.2, Isika formed a partnership with her Ugandan neighbour who agreed to sell her maize-based pastries in his shop for a share of the profits. The majority of the participants who had relocated emphasised the insufficient support from social networks in establishing livelihood opportunities in rural settlements as the main difference in their self-reliance strategies in the rural and urban areas. They described that it was not possible to sell their goods or services in the settlement as people were not able to purchase them.

6.2 Self-Reliance Strategies in BidiBidi Refugee Settlement

The decision to relocate to Kampala was often driven by the limited humanitarian assistance and a lack of sufficient support accessed through social networks in rural settlements, which hindered the refugee women's ability to provide for their families. This lack of sufficient support was often attributed to the precarious situation in these settlements, where refugees were unable to provide any assistance due to their own lack of resources. However, these experiences contrast with those of the refugee women who resided in BidiBidi refugee settlement (BidiBidi from now on), whose social networks played a crucial role in their self-reliance strategies.

Zaina, Joyce, and Mary held voluntary leadership positions at various political levels in BidiBidi, worked as research assistants and teachers, and were single mothers providing for their households. They all described their schedules as very hectic and balancing their leadership and work duties with childcare and household responsibilities was a significant challenge. Similar to the experiences of many of the participants in the informal settlements of Kampala, Zaina explained that her neighbours in the settlement were essential in taking care of the youngest children in her household while she was away from home. Although the neighbours would often help for free, Zaina explained that she would offer payment in the form of cash or sugar when she had something extra. In addition to non-material support, neighbours also occasionally provided material support. For instance, Zaina frequently borrowed food items from her neighbours, however, as soon as she obtained it herself, she would return it. In cases where she had to borrow from other sources, Zaina explained that she could rely on her friends for assistance:

I can't go and borrow money from village 9 because they don't know my behaviour, but I can go through Mary and she talks to someone else who can help me. And I will be borrowed in the names of Mary, and I will return it to Mary and she takes it back to the owner. Social network and trust has helped us because when I borrow today and return tomorrow there will be trust and that's how us women support ourselves
(Participant 1 – Zaina – focus group discussion 1).

Establishing trust was identified as a crucial element in developing positive relationships, and thus social capital. Zaina and Mary both highlighted the significance of trust when borrowing items and explained that when they needed to borrow something, they could only borrow

from people who trusted them because they would then be sure that the items would be returned. Mary added that while building trust takes time, it is of crucial importance:

Since we know each other since we came here and we have that relationship, their child is my child as well. So, if today you don't have food in your house, and I have it, I will give you food (Participant 1 – Mary – focus group discussion 1).

The refugee women in BidiBidi were voluntarily holding leadership positions in the settlement and did not receive any income from those demanding roles. This led them to take on additional jobs as research assistants and teachers for humanitarian organisations in the settlement. For this work they received some small payment which made them able to provide for their children and pay back their neighbours and friends for what they had previously borrowed. Their wages also made them able to form and participate in saving groups where they set aside certain amounts of money every month. These groups worked in various ways, and some according to traditional practices. However, the main purpose was to collectively save money so that the participants could take up loans, and to provide every member with their material needs and wishes in turn. The saving groups served as a safety net as the refugee women could access capital in times of emergency. However, participation also required some resources, as you had to contribute with some money. Humanitarian assistance in terms of food rations and cash transfers were not enough to cover the needs of everyone in their households, and the wages from their work with humanitarian organisations were not always enough. Therefore, being a part of a saving group was advantageous because they could take up loans and receive material assets, as parts of the savings were regularly distributed to each member's needs and wants.

In addition to providing material support, these saving groups also offered valuable non-material support to the refugee women being a part of them. Participants described their connections with the other refugee women as highly valuable, as they provided and received emotional support, and found a sense of belonging through building these relationships. Zaina described how organising evening rituals where they danced to traditional music helped relieve the trauma that some of the refugee women in the settlement experienced. Dancing together until they were tired allowed them to go home and sleep peacefully, instead of overthinking alone at night, which in the worst cases, had led to suicide among some refugee women in the settlement. These groups, therefore, played a crucial role in providing emotional support, promoting well-being, and preventing mental health issues, in addition to serving as a safety net through providing access to material resources.

The refugee women in BidiBidi described their social networks as crucial components in their self-reliance strategies. Although they had a source of income from their roles as research assistants and teachers, this was not enough to cover the household's basic needs, and they relied on both material and non-material support from their social networks. The limited and decreasing humanitarian assistance in rural settlements makes refugees dependent on support from their social networks. While the refugee women in BidiBidi had access to that, the refugee women who had previously resided in a settlement did not, and said they were forced to relocate. Depending on social networks for support poses some serious policy implications that needs to be addressed.

7.0 Policy Implications

The findings presented in chapter 5.0 and 6.0 have demonstrated the importance of social networks for self-reliance achievement, both in economic and social terms. However, depending on social networks for support has significant policy implications. Among other aspects, these implications are linked to issues related to the exhaustible and unreliable nature of the support, and the fact that social networks and support accessed through them are conditioned in intersectional, spatial, and temporal ways. This chapter will explore these issues in greater depth, and thus address the thesis' third research question: *What are the policy implications of recognising social networks as an important component in refugee self-reliance strategies?*

7.1 The Insufficient and Unreliable Support through Social Networks

In Uganda, where humanitarian assistance is scarce, refugees often rely on their social networks for support. Findings presented in chapter 5.0 and 6.0 have demonstrated the various ways the refugee women built and leveraged their social networks as part of their self-reliance strategies, both in rural settlements and urban areas. However, while many participants recounted examples of how their neighbours, relatives, friends, and church community had assisted them, most of the refugee women did not consider them as a reliable source of support.

When refugees relocate from a settlement to Kampala, they are expected to become fully self-reliant and are in theory relinquishing the humanitarian assistance provided in the settlements (Monteith & Lwasa, 2017). However, as noted in chapter 5.1.2, some refugees keep their registration in the settlement and return to collect their food rations every month, or every other month (UHCR, 2019). This was also the case among several of the participants in this study who had relocated from a rural settlement to Kampala. Compared to in the rural settlements, their access to support through their social networks was more prominent in Kampala. However, the assistance from their social networks in the urban areas were not always sufficient to cover all their needs. This often led them to keep their material assistance from the settlement as part of their self-reliance strategies. This example highlights the ambiguity in Uganda's self-reliance strategy. Although, refugees are expected to become self-reliant in urban areas, many continue to rely on the material aid from the settlements due to the lack of sufficient support from social networks.

While many of the participants who had relocated from a settlement to Kampala kept their registration to maintain the humanitarian assistance, some also re-registered from Kampala to a settlement, without physically moving there, in order to access the provided support. Nyamal and Mandara's cases exemplify this. Ever since arrival in Uganda, their families have resided in Kampala without being registered as refugees. However, due to interruption in the crucial material support they normally received from relatives in South Sudan, their families' circumstances deteriorated, and they decided to register as refugees in the city to access potential assistance from local NGOs. However, they were rather advised to register in a settlement to receive the monthly or bi-monthly food rations or cash fundings. Thus, while still residing in Kampala they registered in a settlement and went to pick up the assistance regularly.

The lack of sufficient assistance from social networks in Kampala led several participants to register, and keep their registration, in a settlement to access needed humanitarian assistance. This was a crucial aspect of why these refugee women did not perceive their social networks as a sufficient or reliable source of support. Another reason to why many of the participants did not consider their social networks as a stable source of support could be related to their past experiences of social capital being disrupted by external factors.

Despite having access to social networks and resources provided through them, the support was demonstrated by several participants to neither be exhaustible nor stable. The social capital that had been established between the refugee women and certain people in their network could be disrupted, often by external factors. Several participants described how a lack of essential needs over an extended period of time could exhaust their relationships with neighbours, friends, and relatives. For instance, Malang emphasised that the scarcity of basic needs could lead to difficulties in maintaining social capital in the relationships with her neighbours:

Sometimes things are difficult, you don't have money to go and buy food, take kids to school, rent, and sometimes even eating is difficult. Then the kids start to go to the neighbours for begging food and neighbours sometimes starts quarrelling because the kids come to their houses to look for anything to eat (Participant 10 – Malang).

Friends, relatives, and neighbours often played a vital role in providing material and non-material support during times of need. However, if the situation remained very precarious and too much was asked for over longer periods of time, it could tear on these relationships and

previously established social capital could be disrupted. This issue was also exemplified by Anai, who explained that the continuous lack of essential needs among her family members and herself led to her sister-in-law disconnecting herself:

She start just to disconnect herself because every time you call there is a problem. You call “I’m sick”, you call, it will be too much even for her. So, she decided to disconnect herself from us (Participant 14 – Anai).

Anai’s situation highlights the risks of relying on a single person for support, as it could suddenly be interrupted. She believed that her sister-in-law’s responsibilities for providing for their family members in the Kiryandongo settlement were straining their relationship, as several family members were depending on her. The burden was thus felt on both sides of a relationship, as this situation ultimately led to the sister-in-law severing ties with the entire family by resettling abroad and disrupting the communication. The examples of Anai and Malang illustrate the precariousness of support accessed through social networks.

Furthermore, the refugee women residing in the BidiBidi refugee settlement described trust as an essential component of social capital. Building trust with the people in their social networks were perceived as essential in order for them to be able to borrow material assets like money or food. However, this trust could end if people would not return what they had borrowed. If some refugee women could not access the things they had to return, they would maybe not be able to access more support through these social networks later on as the trust might be broken. This adds to what was described in the examples above, that external factors could potentially disrupt social capital.

Moreover, several participants in the study were not only affected by the actual disruption of support from their networks, but also by the fear of such disruptions, which negatively affected their well-being. Meer, for instance relied on her uncle in South Sudan for financial support to cover rent, food, and tuition fees for herself and her family. Although the financial support enabled them to live in a decent house and meet most of their essential needs, the sporadic and inconsistent nature of the assistance left her with a feeling of hopelessness and uncertainty about the future. Even the refugee women who were relatively self-reliant in economic terms were vulnerable to disruption of support, as they were often dependent on single sources of assistance. This illustrates that while these refugee women were better-off compared to the refugee women representing a lower socioeconomic status, they could still be

vulnerable in other areas, highlighting the importance of considering refugees' intersectional differences.

7.2 Intersectional, Spatial and Temporal Variations

As described in chapter 2.1, women often face multiple disadvantages in the context of displacement, stemming from intersecting identities such as gender, migrant status, socioeconomic status, and age, among many others. These intersecting identities had varying effects on the refugee women in this study, and together with spatial and temporal variations, they played a critical role in determining their ability to achieve self-reliance through support from social networks.

The larger part of the participants in this study were female refugees acting as heads of households as they migrated without their husbands or were abandoned when they arrived in Uganda due to worsening living conditions. This left most of the participants in disadvantageous positions. As single mothers they bore the full responsibilities of taking care of the children, managing household duties, and securing an income to cover the household's basic needs. The added responsibilities of economic duties left many of the participants dependent on support from their social networks in terms of balancing the responsibilities outside and inside the home, so that they could attempt to fulfil the needs of their families and thus achieve self-reliance. However, these challenges were not as prominent among the refugee women who were better-off in economic terms as they often had access to financial support from relatives in South Sudan, leaving them able to reside in decent houses, pay for most of the household's tuition fees, and cover their food consumption. The financial assistance received also left these women with the possibilities of spending more time at home taking care of their children as they were not forced to acquire a source of income.

On the other hand, the refugee women who were better-off economically were negatively affected by having a limited social network. As noted in the previous chapter, 7.1, they were very vulnerable to sudden interruptions in the material assistance provided by their relatives, as they often depended on a single source of assistance. Additionally, their location of residence in more enclosed compounds and communities left them more disconnected from their neighbours, and they were unrecognised by international and local NGOs, who were often not aware of their presence. The consequences of living in more closed-off areas in

better conditions made them vulnerable in social terms, as their access to both material and non-material support from other people and humanitarian actors was limited. While many of these refugee women would be considered self-reliant by policymakers, they were still vulnerable because of the unstable relational assistance and the lack of a larger support network. This illustrates what Vervliet et al. (2013) emphasise, that individuals may experience privilege in one area while experiencing disadvantage in another.

In addition to differences in socioeconomic status and location, age was another important factor that impacted the refugee women's ability to achieve self-reliance differently. The students Nyamal and Mandara were in their early 20s and depended on their fathers in South Sudan to cover their tuition fees. When the support was suddenly disrupted due to hardship on their fathers' ends, they had to abandon their studies, while their siblings who were closer to graduating were able to continue with their families' limited resources. The cousins Keji and Jabe were also in similar situations as Nyamal and Mandara, both in their 20s and forced to drop out of school due to the interrupted financial assistance from their relatives in South Sudan. All four students emphasised their lack of control in these situations. They were forced to drop out, they did not have a job themselves, and their opportunities for self-reliance achievement were described as significantly limited. The refugee students explained that they just had to wait for the financial assistance to return, so that they could attend school again.

Furthermore, the examples of Nyamal and Mandara highlight the important power dimension inherent in relational assistance. The fact that their siblings, who were closer to graduation, were able to continue their studies demonstrated that resources were being allocated according to a hierarchy of needs and priorities within their families. Power imbalance and dependency inherent in relational assistance makes it more available to certain people, and in the families of Nyamal and Mandara it was more available to their siblings. The power imbalance between hosts and refugees also affects refugees' ability to become self-reliant. This was illustrated by the case of Anai, who rented a piece of land from a male Ugandan landlord in an attempt to supplement the humanitarian assistance while she was residing in a rural settlement. However, during harvest time the landlord disputed ownership of her crops, and she could not access them.

Moreover, it is important to understand that the achievement of self-reliance is not a one-time event, but a dynamic process that reflects temporal and contextual changes. As Omata (2022) argues, the Ugandan self-reliance strategy falls short in recognising refugees' changing

familial and personal circumstances. The access to resources may remain static or can be reduced or disrupted, while the household's needs may shift or increase over time. As illustrated in chapter 7.1, self-reliance may be achieved at one point in time, but it can be 'lost' when the circumstances changes or when the support is disrupted. Additionally, self-reliance needs are reflected by the temporal dimension of displacement. During the initial phases of displacement many of the refugee women focused on finding a place to settle and securing an income to cover their most essential needs. As time passed and their circumstances changed, their needs, wants, and priorities also did. The use of social networks served different purposes at different times. For some, pre-existing networks were essential in the settlement process, and new connections were crucial in meeting emerging needs. It is therefore important to consider refugees' access to support through their social networks at different stages of displacement. The refugee women's social networks were sometimes limited to meeting their needs at certain times and not in others.

These intersectional, spatial, and temporal variations illustrate the fact that self-reliance achievement is complex. Different people have different needs, and their access to social networks, and support provided within them, varies. Thus, the refugee women in this study were facing different challenges living under self-reliance schemes in Uganda. When leaving refugees dependent on their social networks for support, as humanitarian assistance is limited and decreasing, it is important to consider the ways in which such support is accessed and distributed.

8.0 Discussion

In chapter 5.0, 6.0 and 7.0 an analysis of the empirical data was provided, and the findings were discussed against the thesis' theoretical framework and background chapters. The following sections will build on these findings and directly address the study's research questions: 1) *How do South Sudanese refugee women build and leverage their social networks as part of their self-reliance strategies in protracted displacement?* 2) *Are there any differences in these strategies between South Sudanese refugee women residing in rural settlements and urban areas, and if so, in what ways?* and 3) *What are the policy implications of recognising social networks as an important component in refugee self-reliance strategies?*

8.1 Building and Leveraging Social Networks in Self-Reliance Strategies

In the literature and policy frameworks on self-reliance, there has been a lack of recognition and attention towards the social dimension of self-reliance, and economic aspects have often been focused upon at the expense of social aspects. This thesis has examined the role of social networks within South Sudanese refugee women's self-reliance strategies and demonstrated the interrelations of both the economic and social dimensions when it comes to becoming 'truly' self-reliant. Additionally, the analysis illustrated the important role social networks play for refugee well-being.

Many of the refugee women in this study were left with the added responsibility of wage-labour and domestic work when they became the head of the household in Uganda. Being able to balance economic activities with childcare was a prominent challenge faced by several participants. Social networks were therefore built and leveraged by many of the refugee women, in various ways, in order to manage combining these responsibilities. The refugee women who resided in the informal settlements of Kampala often emphasised the support from neighbours as crucial in their ability to combine economic and domestic activities. Living in close proximity made the neighbours acutely aware of the participants challenges, which could result in them assisting with childcare when the women had to pursue work outside their homes, providing some small extra food during times of significant scarcity, and sharing relevant advice and information. Other participants leveraged their social media connections to balance economic and domestic activities. Guwo, for instance, established an online business for her transnational network to purchase from. Pursuing income-generating

activities outside the home was not only a challenge because children were left unattended, but also due to the significant fear of arrestation by the KCCA. As a way to handle these challenges, some participants extended their connections with the church community from only serving as a prayer group to becoming a rather secure clientele coming home to the refugee women to purchase their products.

The fact that several of the participants leveraged their social networks to be able to balance their economic work with domestic work demonstrate the interdependencies of the economic and social dimension of self-reliance. Their challenges did not concern either economic aspects or social aspects, but rather both. Several of the refugee women feared leaving their children unattended when pursuing their economic activities, as well as the potential arrestation by the KCCA. Their social networks, including neighbours, church community, and social media contacts supported them in their ability to become self-reliant but also in promoting their well-being. Knowing that their children were safe with trusted neighbours, and/or that they could avoid the KCCA by selling their products in other places than public areas, reduced their worries and fears, and enhanced their well-being. These examples demonstrate that the social dimension is not just a means to achieve self-reliance but also an end in itself, and that they are interrelated.

However, while the social networks were crucial in many of the refugee women's ability to balance economic and domestic work, there was a significant difference in the participants' access to such valuable assistance. Neighbours were important sources of support to the refugee women in the informal settlements, but not so much to the participants residing in the more affluent areas. Living in more enclosed compounds and communities meant that their neighbours were not so involved in their everyday lives and practices, and thus not so aware of their most prominent challenges. Many of their neighbours were also Ugandan nationals which meant that they sometimes faced challenges when trying to interact, due to hostile attitudes. Additionally, these women were more 'invisible' among humanitarian actors as they were living in better areas, and their access to occasional support was thus limited. All these aspects are important to consider when trying to understand how refugee women build and leverage their social networks as part of their self-reliance strategies. Social structures and contextual differences shape refugees' access to new connections, and these need to be assessed.

On the other hand, while these participants often had a more limited support network, many received, and depended on, financial assistance from relatives in South Sudan. This assistance covered their most essential needs and were thus crucial in their self-reliance strategies. It also left many of these refugee women able to spend more time on childcare as they were not *forced* to acquire a job. However, while this financial assistance was vital, and made them relatively self-reliant compared to many others, their sole dependence on a single source of assistance made them vulnerable to disruptions, and negatively affected their well-being.

As emphasised in chapter 5.3, social networks played an important role in promoting refugee well-being. The narratives presented by the participants who were able to build and leverage their social networks with the aim of enhancing their well-being are important because they demonstrate the interrelation between the means and ends perspective within the social dimension of self-reliance. Diko attended two different churches to consider both her religious and social needs, Kafuki was persistent in her efforts to establish a good relationship with her Ugandan neighbours, both in order to ensure her children's well-being and safety, and for her own well-being, and Luba had built valuable friendships with a group of Ugandan nationals which made her feel included and hopeful for the future. While these examples were brought up because they demonstrated how these participants leveraged and built social networks with consideration to their well-being, they also demonstrated that the relationships could evolve into something more. The refugee women formed social networks for different reasons, some with regards to their well-being and some seeking to access basic needs. However, both reasons are important because they interrelate. As argued by Brun & Horst (in print), the nature and outcomes of social connections are determined by complex and diverse interactions. The examples above illustrate ways in which meaningful bonds were created, but also that the outcomes of these relations could potentially reduce vulnerability and dependence, as material and non-material support could eventually be provided.

The findings presented in chapter 5.0 illustrated the crucial role of social networks in the refugee women's self-reliance strategies, highlighting the fact that self-reliance could not be achieved at the individual level through only economic means. The narratives presented by the refugee women interviewed demonstrate the complexity of self-reliance, and that the participants built and leveraged their different networks in various ways, as their challenges related to self-reliance achievement were multifaceted.

8.2 Self-Reliance Strategies among Rural and Urban Refugee Women

When comparing the self-reliance strategies and the role social networks played within them, there were many similarities between the refugee women in BidiBidi and those residing in Kampala. The limited assistance in the settlement, and the income generated from their livelihood activities, did not cover their household's basic needs and accessing support from their networks were thus essential. While their livelihood activities differed in the two settings, the women in BidiBidi faced similar challenges to those encountered by refugee women in Kampala. They also struggled to balance domestic work with economic activities and responsibilities outside the house. Neighbours, saving groups, and friends were crucial in this regard and assisted with material and non-material support when needed. This could take the form through childcare and borrowing food items. Additionally, forming and participating in saving groups were described as important, both because it served as a safety net, and because it significantly promoted refugee well-being.

While the importance of social networks in self-reliance strategies were similar for both the refugee women residing in BidiBidi and those in Kampala, the forms in which social networks were leveraged varied in certain aspects. For instance, that the refugee women in BidiBidi participated in organised saving groups and events to access both material and non-material support. In Kampala, the participants did not take part in such groups, but some of the refugee women in the informal settlements mentioned that they had joined saving groups in the past. However, these groups were disbanded due to mistrust caused by some members who were unable to repay their loans, due to the lack of resources. While the ways in which social networks were leveraged to access support varied in certain ways, between the refugee women in BidiBidi and those residing in urban areas, the importance they played for both the economic and social dimensions of self-reliance were significant both places.

On the other hand, the participants who had relocated from a rural settlement to Kampala highlighted significant differences in their self-reliance strategies, especially concerning the lack of sufficient assistance from social networks in the settlements. The need to establish a source of income was crucial as the humanitarian support in terms of food rations or cash fundings were not nearly enough to cover the household's needs for one or two months. However, the ability to establish a business in the settlements was described by these participants as a significant challenge. The access to a differentiated population was described as very limited in the settlements, making it harder to develop a business as people were not

able to purchase their goods and services. This was explained to be both due to the scarcity of resources among the residents, and due to the difficulties of selling what many people already had, as they were often cultivating the same crops. When the refugee women resettled in Kampala, they found it easier accessing customers with more purchasing power and market their products. The main differences experienced by these participants were thus related to the lack of sufficient support from other refugees in the settlements.

When considering the self-reliance strategies from the refugee women residing in BidiBidi, there were significant similarities with those of whom resided in Kampala, when it came to the important role played by social networks. Although their livelihood strategies varied, they still faced many of the same challenges and built and leveraged social networks to handle these. Additionally, social networks played an important role for their well-being, and they emphasised the value of fostering meaningful friendships. However, the participants who had relocated to Kampala from a rural settlement did not have similar experiences and highlighted the lack of sufficient support from social networks in the settlements as a main difference between the locations.

8.3 Policy Implications of Recognising Social Networks as an Important Component in Self-Reliance Strategies

The Ugandan self-reliance model provides refugees with relative protection, freedom of movement and access to work and services on par with Ugandan nationals (Hovil, 2018). This legislation represents a considerable improvement compared to the country's history of restrictive refugee response. Additionally, the model and the country's approach to hosting large numbers of displaced people is commendable compared to other refugee receiving countries across the world who are devising various means to prevent refugees from entering their territories, and substantially restrict their freedom of movement and access to work and services. However, while it is important to recognise Uganda's self-reliance model, it is not without flaws and these needs to be addressed.

In the Ugandan model, there is an emphasis on humanitarian assistance as a short-term solution. The expectation is that refugees are supposed to become self-reliant rather than dependent on aid. However, this idea presents a problematic oversimplification as it creates a binary understanding of self-reliance and dependency, and assumes that dependency will

inevitably evolve into self-reliance (Easton-Calabria, 2022). As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, self-reliance is difficult to achieve, and it takes both time, resources, and investments. The limited and decreasing humanitarian assistance both in rural settlements and urban areas in Uganda does not make refugees more self-reliant, but rather more dependent on resources accessed through their social networks.

While the current discourse on self-reliance mainly considers self-reliance achievement at the individual level through economic means, the findings in this thesis have highlighted the equally important social dimension and the ways in which they are interconnected. The refugee women in this study were not able to become ‘truly’ self-reliant on their own, but depended on assistance from their social networks, both in terms of material and non-material support. The fact that refugees are dependent on their social networks for support to achieve self-reliance is problematic for several reasons. One is that self-reliance takes time and resources, and the support accessed through social networks is insufficient, unreliable, exhaustible, and fragile. The lack of sufficient support from social networks in Kampala led several participants to not relinquish the material assistance they had received in a rural settlement after relocating. Rather than having become self-reliant in Kampala they were still dependent on food rations or cash fundings from the settlement. Some participants in Kampala had also registered in a settlement without physically relocating, but to receive the assistance. This was due to sudden interruptions in the financial assistance from a relative in South Sudan, and the lack of any additional support from other people in the city. As illustrated in chapter 7.2, social capital in networks is precarious, and the persistent lack of basic needs in the long run could potentially disrupt the support that had previously been provided from neighbours, friends, and relatives. Additionally, unforeseen circumstances at provider’s end could result in sudden interruptions in the support, leaving the refugee women who depended on this single source of assistance very vulnerable to such changes.

The fact that social capital built in networks is neither inexhaustible nor stable is to a large extent invisible to self-reliance policies. Humanitarian assistance such as food rations and cash funds are decreasing, making refugees dependent on support accessed through their social networks, both in rural settlements and Kampala. However, while the refugee women could have access to essential assistance from their social relationships for a long time, it could suddenly be disrupted, which meant that the effects of the decreasing humanitarian assistance were felt a long time after they had been cut. The actual level of self-reliance among refugees is thus often overestimated. It is therefore not only the social networks, and

the support within them, that are being distributed unevenly, but also the effects of the cuts in humanitarian assistance.

Another problem with refugees having to depend on their social networks for support is that the access to social networks is conditioned in intersectional ways, with spatial and temporal variations. While the self-reliance strategy is to a large degree about equal opportunities, it is weaker on the aspect of equal outcomes. Refugees are in possession of different assets, which was visible both within informal settlements, and with the establishment of South Sudanese households in better-off areas. However, this does not mean that the South Sudanese refugee women in higher income households did not face challenges. As illustrated in chapter 5.1 and 5.2, they had a higher dependency on single sources of assistance, interacted less with their neighbours, built fewer skills, and had little influence in building their own futures. Moreover, the refugee women's place of residence had a significant impact on their access to potential support from various channels. In addition to support from neighbours, the refugee women in the informal settlements could occasionally receive assistance from international and refugee-led organisations. Since these organisations are concentrating their support and presence in the worse-off areas, refugees residing in better areas are often 'invisible' for such support even though they are also facing challenges.

It is a problem that refugees are having to depend on support through their social networks because relational assistance is situated in networks of power, which makes it more available to certain groups of people. Social networks and the resources accessed through them are distributed unevenly, which means that the Ugandan model is contributing to current inequalities as it favours refugees along existing axes of privileges. Additionally, some social networks can also potentially reduce opportunities for self-reliance achievement, which was the case for Anai who faced problems when harvesting her crops as her male Ugandan landlord disputed ownership of them. The power imbalances within social networks can thus sometimes undermine refugees' opportunities to achieve self-reliance, and these dynamics are often shaped by various identity markers, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and age. Recognising these complex power dynamics that underlie the provision of support within social networks are important to understand, in order to see how this distribution can potentially reinforce existing inequalities, both between groups of refugees, between hosts and refugees, and within families. Within the Ugandan model there is a lack of consideration and understanding of the many implications of recognising social networks as an important component in refugee self-reliance strategies.

9.0 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to examine South Sudanese refugee women's self-reliance strategies in rural and urban Uganda, and the role social networks play in supporting and providing self-reliance. Policymakers have extensively promoted self-reliance as a strategy to empower and include refugees in situations of protracted displacement, and the Ugandan model has been applauded by the international community (Hovil, 2018). However, there are critical implications of this model when it comes to refugee protection, and the ways in which it is used to replace *de jure* local integration as a durable solution (Serwajja & Refstie, in print). Current understandings and implementations of refugee self-reliance tend to focus on self-reliance achievement at the individual level through economic means, overlooking the equally important social dimension. However, this study found that the interdependencies of the economic and social dimensions of self-reliance cannot be ignored.

Refugee women in both rural settlements and urban areas faced challenges at the intersection of social and economic aspects of their lives, such as balancing domestic work with economic work. Those who had access to social support were better able to combine wage-labour with childcare responsibilities. In addition to their importance for self-reliance achievement, social networks also played a crucial role in promoting the well-being of refugee women by reducing their vulnerability and dependence, as well as facilitating social contact and fostering meaningful relationships. However, participants' ability to consider aspects beyond basic needs attainment was limited, as many described their struggles as too severe to allow for such considerations.

When considering self-reliance strategies among refugee women in rural settlements and urban areas, social networks were found to be crucial components in both settings. However, participants who had relocated from a settlement to Kampala reported a lack of sufficient support from social networks in rural areas as significant, and a key reason for their resettlement. In addition to these differences between settlements in the rural areas and the city, a finding in the study was also that social networks, and the resources within them, were not distributed evenly among the refugees, but varied according to intersectional factors such as socioeconomic status, location, age, and temporal needs, which made it more available to some participants than others. Additionally, social networks were deemed unreliable as a source of support due to previous experiences of disruptions, caused by external factors such as unforeseen circumstances at the provider's end or that the networks got exhausted if too

much were asked for over longer time periods. This is particularly important as refugees may appear relatively self-reliant for a long time, and then lose access to essential support at a later point, leading to an overestimation of their level of self-reliance.

The findings of the thesis highlight the importance of understanding that achieving refugee self-reliance takes time and requires consistent access to resources. It also points to how self-reliance assistance is more available to some groups than others with intersectional, spatial, and temporal variations. Social networks play an important role in this, and if the complex power dynamics and disparities that underlie access to social networks are not sufficiently considered, they will continue to reinforce existing inequalities. Within self-reliance models, humanitarian assistance is seen as a short-term solution, and dependency is assumed to inevitably evolve into self-reliance (Easton-Calabria, 2022). However, limited and decreasing assistance does not make refugees more self-reliant, but rather more dependent on their social networks for support. This is problematic because social networks have been demonstrated to not just be unevenly distributed, but also an unreliable, insufficient, exhaustible, and unstable source of support.

The Ugandan self-reliance strategy and the country's approach to hosting large numbers of displaced people is commendable and particularly noteworthy compared to other refugee receiving countries who are significantly restricting refugees' movement and access to work and services. Also, unlike Europe and the US, which are devising various means to prevent refugees from entering their territories, Uganda's open-border strategy is a source of pride. However, there has been a tendency to idealise it due to the lack of successful cases in the field of global displacement (Hovil, 2018). One consideration that has been demonstrated in this thesis is the need to better understand the social aspects of self-reliance and the role of social networks in achieving self-reliance in different contexts.

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Appendices

1: Interview Guide

Gender:

Age:

Length of displacement:

Occupation:

Introductory questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
 - The migration journey?
 - How and when did you get here?
 - Did anyone help you on the way?
 - Did anyone help you when you arrived?
 - Where do you live now? And do you live with someone?
 - What does an ordinary day look like for you? What do you do after getting up in the morning till you go to bed at night?

Questions on social networks and intersectionality

- Are you facing any (specific) difficulties/struggles in your (everyday) life today?
 - If so, can you explain how you handle them?
 - Are you receiving any kind of assistance/help to tackle them?
 - Can you rely on this assistance? If yes, then how, and if no, why?
 - Are you receiving any kind of assistance because of your status?
 - If so, what kind and from whom?
 - Do you have any sources of income?
- Could you talk a bit about the people you surround yourself with?
 - Who are they? Relatives? Friends? Others?
 - How do you know them?

- Have you received and/or do you receive any kind of assistance/help from these people?
 - If so, what kind?
- Do you consider yourself self-reliant?
 - What does it mean, in your opinion to be self-reliant?
 - Is it important to be self-reliant (Why? Why not?)
 - How does one become self-reliant?
 - Can everyone become self-reliant?
 - Is it easier for some than for others? If so, whom?
- Are you assisting or have you assisted anyone since you got here?
 - If so, what type of relationship do you have with him/her/them and what kind of assistance have you provided?
 - Do you get anything in return for that assistance?
 - Will they assist you in the future if the roles were to be reversed?
- What are the biggest differences in terms of challenges men and women are facing here?
- Do men and women need different kinds of assistance?
 - Do men and women receive assistance from different people?
- Do you feel like your gender affects you in any particular ways?
 - Opportunities: work, studies, assistance received, assistance given?

Concluding questions

- Is there anything you would like to add that you think I/we should know about the topics we have talked about?
- Do you have any questions to ask me/us before we end our conversation?



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