

Profiles in Locally Led Approaches to Thinking and Working Politically

Case Study 4: How Refugee Women Use Political Know-How to Make Everyone Safer: The Case of the Yoleta Group

Yoleta Women's Group, Women Lead in Emergencies Staff and CARE Uganda.

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This is the fourth in a series of case studies aimed at documenting the Thinking and Working Politically-aligned practices of country and regionally based organisations and activists. The case study series is sponsored by the DC Working Group of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice and is meant to elevate the adaptive and politically-aware methods of diverse development actors operating across a range of contexts. This specific case study examines the mobilisation of the "Yoleta Group" – an informal civic group representing a South Sudanese refugee community in Uganda – focused on improved services for their community. It was developed through a collaboration between [Yoleta Women's Group](#), [Women Lead in Emergencies staff](#), and [CARE Uganda](#). The global TWP CoP is delighted to support the publication of this and other case studies in the series as they make an important contribution to the body of evidence on politically aware and adaptive development efforts from the perspective of those at the frontline of such initiatives.

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Background- Omugo Settlement, Uganda

More than 880,000 South Sudanese refugees arrived in Uganda between July 2016 and 2020, the vast majority (82%) of whom were women and children. By December 2018, the Uganda refugee response received only 57% of their earmarked contributions (UNHCR RRP Uganda 2019-2020). That resulted in major gaps in refugee response interventions.

Women experienced especially difficult circumstances and they had few resources to cope with those challenges. Cases of gender-based violence (GBV) remained high in most settlements despite humanitarian investments. Men consciously and unconsciously impeded women's and girls' access to basic services.

Part of the reason for the challenges women faced was that women refugees had very little access to decision-making in any part of the humanitarian system—from how camps were set up to how services were delivered. As resources were increasingly stretched, women—especially refugee women themselves—had almost no influence on how and where those resources were prioritised. The practices of humanitarian systems, agencies and funders continue to be informed by power structures that undermine women's meaningful participation and incentivise the status quo.

This is the context where the Yoleta (*Think about it!*) Group became one of five women's groups that started planning ways to influence the response in the Omugo settlement to get services that worked better for them. In January 2019, they started working with the [Women Lead in Emergencies](#) project¹ with support from CARE and Global Affairs Canada. All groups were volunteer-led and made up of South Sudanese women refugees.

Problem Addressed

Women in the Yoleta group were facing two major challenges:

- 1. The traditional belief that women were not leaders and should not be involved in problem-solving.*

As they unpacked their own ideas about women's leadership, women highlighted that before their displacement to Uganda women from rural locations in South Sudan were not able to attend or speak at community meetings. Refugee women in Omugo had more freedom of movement within the settlement than they had in South Sudan. They were more likely to attend community meetings and take on informal leadership roles (e.g. as community-based facilitators) in Uganda, and the settlement offered new, but often unrealised opportunities for refugee women to hold formal leadership positions. For example, Refugee Welfare Councils (RWC) include a 30% quota for women. Not only was the quota not met, but women also primarily held secretary positions (positions that have limited impact on the community leadership decision-making, and the women in the positions could not confidently speak in a male-dominated space). Women identified two barriers in particular: lack of confidence in public speaking and leadership because of illiteracy, and men's resistance to women's participation in both the Women Lead project and in community leadership more generally.

¹ More detail about Women Lead in Emergencies and the process it follows so women's groups can take leadership in their own contexts—as well as the resources it makes available to women is available at the end of this case study.

2. Services that were not only failing to meet women's needs, but that were also putting women at risk.

During reflection sessions to prioritise actions, one of the other emerging issues from the Yoleta group included the decision to tackle the long distance to the food distribution point, which served five different villages and was more than 10km from their village. The women had to wake up very early in the morning to travel to the distribution point.

"You would see pregnant women walking a long distance... Some mothers had to walk with children on their backs."

On the long journey, women were at risk of gender-based violence (GBV). Once they arrived, sometimes they would wait the whole day and not get any food. The next day it would start all over again. The Yoleta group highlighted that their RWC leaders had raised this issue with a representative of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) for Omugo settlement, but no action had been taken.

Description of Programmatic Approach

While they were designing solutions to address the fundamental challenge of services that were not meeting their needs, women took care to address the political and social barriers that were preventing their leadership and that put them at risk of violence and backlash. In every step of their planning, women found ways to build buy-in from men and other power holders in their own lives and to mitigate political risks they faced. These strategies included the following:

- **Making community-led non-formal education available in Omugo:** The women understood both the political economy and social norms that were preventing them from stepping into leadership positions. Despite new opportunities that the refugee situation had opened for them, the women knew that pro forma quotas were not enough for them to be taken seriously. The women's groups were adamant that learning basic reading and writing skills was critical for them to be respected as leaders and for women to access positions with real decision-making power. The women's first steps were to build their own skills and find ways to reinforce their confidence and leadership qualities. They also insisted on building those skills in ways that supported other people in their own communities. Rather than getting education and training through an external provider, women asked to have local refugees who were teachers be their teachers, with some support and training.
- **Addressing men's resistance to women's participation in civic and leadership activities:** Women identified involving men from the community in the project as an important step for their own active and safe participation. If male relatives didn't understand project meetings, it may make them suspicious and try to prevent women from attending. Women were also concerned that men's fear of women organising with other women or taking on new leadership roles could result in violence. Each of the women's groups chose to have 'orientation' sessions with men from their household to introduce them to the project and for male relatives and influential men from the community to be included in the women's literacy classes. The women's groups also supported an extension of CARE's [Role Model Men and Boys](#) programming to Omugo and the women nominated which men were invited to participate in the project – rather than men leading the selection process. Including men in the literacy classes

turned out to be a savvy way to generate support from male relatives for women's Women Lead activities more generally and a way to prevent potential backlash and gender-based violence.

- **Taking action to hold government and humanitarian agencies to account:** As the women grew in confidence, skills, and leadership positions, they felt more able to tackle the challenge of the food distribution point that was not meeting their needs. The South Sudanese Women's Refugee Association asked CARE to work with them to organise a Women's Conference to provide an opportunity for women in the settlement to network, share experiences, identify common concerns and lobby for support from OPM and the humanitarian actors who would be in attendance. The conference was a women's own space, where they could meet with other actors directly, to help them build the networks and support for broader social change. In October 2019, the conference brought together 93 members of women's groups from Bari, Dinka, Kakwa and Nuer tribes. A plenary session gave opportunities for the women to ask questions and raise concerns with humanitarian partners, and the Yoleta group spoke about the challenges and risks refugees from Village 4 faced in walking 10k to the current distribution point.

Following the conference, the OPM liaised with the WFP. However, the community were not satisfied with WFP's solution, which was to provide tricycles for vulnerable people so that they did not have to walk the 10k to the food distribution point. In January 2020, the group therefore changed tactics: the Yoleta group proposed that they hold a sit-down strike and not collect their food at the next scheduled distribution. Enough was enough, they would go on hunger strike if necessary!

"As women, we are fighting for our rights, we have been talking about these things but there has been no change."

The Yoleta group leveraged its *strong community support* to move forward. If the Yoleta group only staged a sit-in, they knew it was unlikely to be effective! They understood the political context and actors—and how those actors were likely to respond. They built strategies to solve those political hurdles. With support from male leaders in the community, Yoleta wrote a letter to the OPM to tell them what the community planned and why. For the OPM, it was a problem for food allocated for refugees to not be collected and accounted for, and the letter triggered a request for Yoleta group leadership to meet with the camp commandant and focal person from the OPM. After several dialogues, Yoleta representatives agreed to give the OPM and WFP time to organise a new food distribution in Village 4. The strike was called off and the community leaders held the OPM accountable to the agreed decision. The group leadership and the RWC supported them by identifying an appropriate space within the village for this to happen. *Within two months, food was being distributed directly to village 4*, benefitting the whole community.

Success had the effect of *increasing respect for the Yoleta group* within their community and they are now seen as a go-to organisation to help solve problems. The visibility of their success has legitimised women's participation. The leader of the group and other members have since taken on roles within the camp's Refugee Welfare Council, further highlighting how collective actions can both create change but also be a pathway to the normalisation of women's participation.

Preparing for and standing in the RWC elections was a priority for all of the women's groups, including women in the Yoleta group. As part of achieving this priority, the women's groups started practising *public speaking and running mock elections* in anticipation of the elections that were originally scheduled for 2020. These were then delayed because of the COVID pandemic. When they were eventually held, 33 women from Yoleta and the other 4 women's groups in the Omugu settlement ran for office, and 17 of them *were successful*.

Selwa Alice, one of the Yoleta group members, describes the changes this way:

"I have seen that as women we are left behind, and for that, things are not well for us women. ... I used to have like that fear or that shyness whereby I cannot be able to come up with something like I am doing today. But...they are building everything in me to become as who I am today standing for this position. My fellow women will see that this is a lady and she is standing with us. I see myself like Rebecca Kadaga, the speaker of the parliament."

The women are not the only ones who have changed. Male champions remain a critical part of the equation. Bidali Abraham, one of the male champions who worked with the women's groups in Omugu, says, "Even in my campaign, you can see women.... I wanted 50-50 leadership [of the RWC] this time—50% women and 50% men."

Key Challenges and Lessons

The Yoleta group and those involved in their activities identify multiple key challenges and lessons from their experience:

- **Reflecting on power dynamics matters.** The Yoleta group started with a session thinking about power dynamics, and how that was shaping their own challenges, actions, and the barriers they faced. It is likely that a process focusing more on rolling out activities that were already built into a project plan with pre-determined goals and checkpoints would have been less successful. Certainly, such a process would not have led to locally-led solutions that addressed women's concerns through local political action. The CARE staff would not have proposed a sit-down strike to shift behaviour from a UN actor, and it would probably not have been successful if that had happened.
- **Women need a range of support to change the narrative.** Women were very aware of the political environment in which they were operating—an environment filled with expectations that women can't and shouldn't lead, with services that don't meet their needs, and with outright violence when women step out of expected roles and patterns. Women built steps to strengthen their skills, their networks, and their credibility so they could lead the changes they wanted to see. That took a range of activities—like literacy classes, mock debates, and connections to male leaders—that required resources and connections women could not leverage alone. Small amounts of funding that women themselves controlled were crucial to organising this change.
- **Networks and solidarity are critical.** All of the actions women took were rooted in building collective action in addition to individual skills. Letters to leaders, literacy skills, and even sit-down strikes (or the threat thereof) were more powerful when women came together as groups and networks of groups. Finding the resources and support to pay for the activities that build networks—like the Women's Conference—are extremely difficult to find in normal circumstances, and in a humanitarian crisis where

funding is dropping, they are even more scarce. Arguably, those are the circumstances in which they are most critical.

- **Male champions are key.** The Yoleta group—and the other groups in Omugu settlement—took pains to ensure the men in their lives were on board with every step of the process. They knew that moving forward without informing and engaging men would be less effective at best, and actively dangerous at worst. That kind of political awareness about the risks women run, and the act of creating space for women to reflect on those risks and how to mitigate them, is crucial for programming that lives up to the standards of Do No Harm.

Recommendations for Development Actors

The Yoleta experience and the above-listed lessons point toward multiple recommendations for those responsible for designing, implementing, and assessing development programs:

- **Moving from a project ‘cycle’ to a ‘spiral’ to enable greater regularisation of women’s leadership:** Many development projects, including Women Lead, use a ‘cycle’ model that focuses on repeating steps over again. But in fact, as groups mature from cycle to cycle there is the potential to expand their scope. Developing tools, guidance and learning for maturing Women Lead groups could help to ensure we are taking opportunities to build on women’s successes.
- **Convincing institutional donors to fund adaptive and gender transformative approaches in humanitarian contexts is difficult but possible:** Humanitarians working in unstable and fast-changing environments are used to being attuned to the politics of maintaining humanitarian neutrality and access, and to adapting their strategies and assistance as crises unfold. It is still the exception, however, for humanitarian programmes to be purposefully designed to be owned by local communities, informed by gender and power analysis, and to build adaptive approaches in program management, budgets and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning activities. While donors made commitments to gender, localisation, and women’s participation in humanitarian action, in practice, the mindset that women’s participation and leadership (and gender transformative approaches more broadly) are not ‘lifesaving’ and, therefore, not a legitimate use of humanitarian aid, continues to dominate. CARE’s strategy with institutional donors was to begin small and to include WLiE as a small component of a larger programme, with the approach often not explicit in proposals and results frameworks. We have found that, as donors see the result of WLiE, they are willing to provide ongoing funding.
- **Developing a more sophisticated understanding of humanitarian stakeholders and how to influence them:** The evaluation recommended that CARE and partners needed to now be more proactive in using the learning and results from WLiE to engage with the international humanitarian agencies to address resistance to targeted interventions for both women’s participation and gender equality more generally within the sector. The Women Lead team is undertaking a Political Economy Analysis to better understand the roles, interests and incentives of different humanitarian actors and the underlying barriers and opportunities in relation to the implementation of donor commitments to women’s voice and leadership in humanitarian action. This will enable CARE to develop targeted, politically feasible influencing strategies to address implementation gaps.



Photo Caption: Women in the Yoleta Group

Sources

[WLiE global evaluation](#)

[WLiE Omugo learning brief – achievements and results](#)

[WLiE Omugo learning brief – lessons from piloting](#)

World Refugee Day 2021 blog: Halatu Benjamin's story (Yoleta's Group and Chairperson, Women's Centre Management Committee) story:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/65d5155b36814a4492501f54f9ff0d91>

World Refugee Day 2023 blog and video: 'Now I'm a leader, I can Raise my Voice':

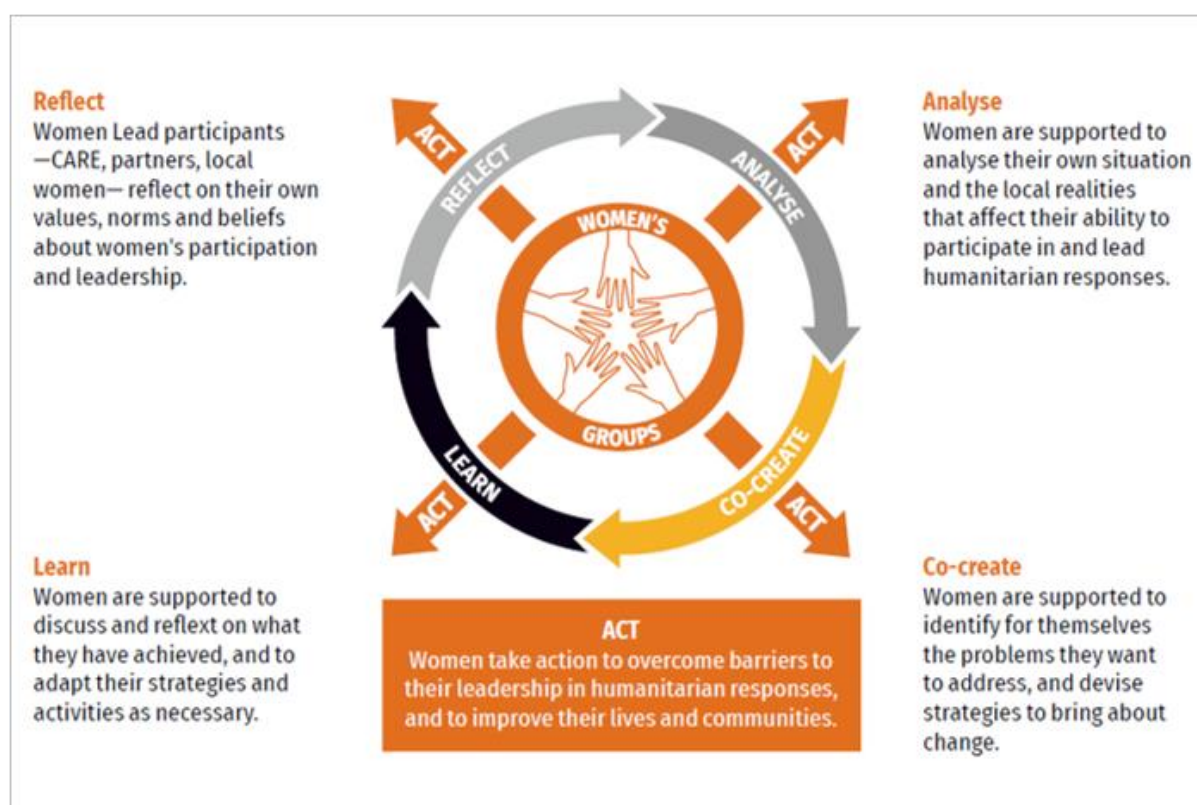
<https://www.careinternational.org.uk/news-stories/world-refugee-day-now-that-i-am-a-leader-i-can-raise-my-voice/>

ANNEX: Women Lead in Emergencies Overview

The practices of humanitarian systems, agencies and funders continue to be informed by power structures that undermine women’s meaningful participation and incentivise the status quo. The humanitarian sector has few tools and approaches designed to support women’s participation, voice and leadership within humanitarian crises.

Since 2018, CARE has been working to address this gap using the [Women Lead in Emergencies \(Women Lead\) approach](#): a set of adaptable programmatic components and tools to support the participation and leadership of women’s community-based groups and associations in crisis and improve the accountability, inclusivity, and ultimately the effectiveness of humanitarian response. Women Lead puts knowledge and resources in the hands of women and enables women’s groups to meaningfully participate in public discussion and decisions in their community, but also beyond within local government and international humanitarian structures and decision-making processes.

With funding from Global Affairs Canada, CARE International in Uganda has been responding to the crisis in Omugo settlement in the West Nile region since 2016. From the outset, Women Lead in Emergencies was designed to be a flexible and adaptive approach that could be used by frontline humanitarians and communities in any humanitarian context. The resulting Women Lead in Emergencies model was piloted with community-based women’s groups in 15 sites across 5 countries between 2018-2021. The graphic shows the five components of the WLiE approach.



Using gender and governance analysis to facilitate women's own reflections on their rights, social and political conditions, and priorities: A [Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation \(RGA-P\)](#) is one of the first activities in a Women Lead project. It uses both [rapid gender analysis](#) and governance analysis to assess the impact of crisis on women's leadership and equal participation in community and humanitarian decision-making and action. The initial RGA-P research is conducted by CARE and other implementation partners (e.g. registered women's rights organisations). This RGA-P serves as a jumping off point for conversations with local women's groups about the problems they see and the ways they wish to address them.

Women Lead is effective: The evaluation of the WLiE component of the GAC programme in Omugo settlement found that the approach had increased women's confidence and collective action. At the end of the pilot, 91% of women – more than double the percentage at the baseline – said they are confident in their own negotiation and communication skills. 92% of women – more than three times as many at baseline – said they can work with other women to solve problems. A [2022 independent evaluation of WLiE](#) in 15 sites in 5 countries (Colombia, Niger, Mali, Philippines, Uganda) found the results in the Omugo pilot to be replicated in other sites, with Women Lead contributing to outcomes across the three dimensions of the CARE Gender Equality Framework (agency, relations and structures).