Unexpected Visitors and Good Hosts: Social accountability, policy, and realities of sexual and reproductive health of young people in Kyaka II refugee settlement in Uganda

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Abstract

This thesis explored the lived experiences of refugee youth with sexual and reproductive health (SRH) service delivery in Kyaka II refugee settlement and examined how social accountability processes shape access to and governance of these services. Through an ethnographic approach, the study moved beyond institutional and policy-level analyses to examine how refugee youth themselves understand, experience, negotiate, and respond to the governance arrangements that shape their everyday lives. In doing so, it sought to contribute to broader debates on refugee governance, youth participation, social accountability, and SRH in humanitarian settings.

The findings demonstrate that SRH service delivery cannot be understood simply as a technical matter of providing health facilities, commodities, information, or programmes. Rather, access to SRH services is embedded within broader governance processes shaped by power relations, social norms, institutional arrangements, and accountability practices. The study reveals that despite Uganda's internationally celebrated refugee policy framework, significant gaps remain between policy intentions and lived realities, particularly for refugee youth seeking to access services and participate in decision-making processes.

A central contribution of this thesis lies in its critical examination of the dominant narrative of Uganda as a "good host" for refugees. While Uganda's refugee policies undoubtedly provide important protections and opportunities, the experiences of refugee youth reveal that legal inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive inclusion. Refugee youth continue to encounter challenges associated with poverty, declining humanitarian assistance, limited livelihoods, resource scarcity, and constrained opportunities for participation. Their experiences suggest that refugee governance should be evaluated not only in terms of policy frameworks and institutional achievements but also through the everyday realities of those who live within these systems.

The study further demonstrates that refugee youth are neither passive victims nor simply resilient survivors. Rather, they are active social actors who continuously negotiate opportunities and constraints within complex humanitarian environments. Through roles such as peer educators, youth leaders, mobilisers, community volunteers, and advocates, refugee youth contribute to service delivery, information sharing, and community mobilisation. At the same time, their agency remains shaped by broader structures of power, inequality, and dependency. These findings challenge simplistic representations of refugee youth and call for greater recognition of their contributions to humanitarian governance.

Another important finding concerns the diverse ways in which refugee youth make their voices heard. The study revealed that youth employ multiple strategies to influence SRH governance, including formal participation structures, youth leadership positions, peer education networks, collective action, digital platforms, informal social networks, and creative forms of

communication such as music, dance, and drama. These findings challenge assumptions that refugee youth are voiceless and instead demonstrate that they actively seek opportunities to influence the systems affecting their lives. However, the research also highlights that voice does not automatically translate into influence. Opportunities for expression often coexist with limited responsiveness, raising important questions about the effectiveness of existing participation and accountability mechanisms.

Perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution of this thesis is suggesting a reconceptualisation of social accountability within humanitarian settings through the notion of relational accountability. The findings reveal that accountability in refugee settlements is not simply a matter of formal feedback mechanisms or institutional procedures. Rather, it emerges through relationships characterised by trust, reciprocity, dependence, negotiation, obligation, and unequal power. Refugee youth often depend on the same institutions they are expected to hold accountable, creating circumstances in which criticism and complaint can be perceived as risky. Consequently, accountability is experienced as a socially negotiated process rather than a straightforward institutional arrangement.

The thesis also highlights the central role of gendered and generational power relations in shaping experiences of governance of SRH service delivery. The findings demonstrate that silence among refugee youth is actively produced through social norms, institutional practices, and unequal power structures, rather than resulting from a lack of interest or awareness. Female youth, in particular, face multiple and intersecting barriers that constrain participation, mobility, access to information, and reproductive autonomy. Meanwhile, youthhood itself functions as a category of exclusion, with refugee youth frequently represented in governance processes without being granted meaningful influence.

Taken together, the findings suggest that improving SRH outcomes for refugee youth is fundamentally a governance challenge. While investments in healthcare infrastructure, commodities, staffing, and programming remain important, these alone are insufficient to address the structural barriers identified in this study. Equally important is the transformation of the power relations that shape participation, accountability, and access to services. Without addressing these underlying dynamics, efforts to improve service delivery risk treating symptoms rather than causes.

Ultimately, this thesis argues for a shift in how humanitarian governance understands refugee youth. Refugee youth should not be viewed merely as beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance, nor solely as targets of protection and intervention. Rather, they should be recognised as rights holders, knowledge producers, community actors, and legitimate participants in governance processes. Their experiences provide critical insights into the functioning of humanitarian systems and highlight opportunities for creating more inclusive, responsive, and accountable approaches to SRH service delivery.