

Policy brief

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# Water and land conflicts and their gendered effects in refugee settings: key considerations

Resty Naiga

## Executive summary

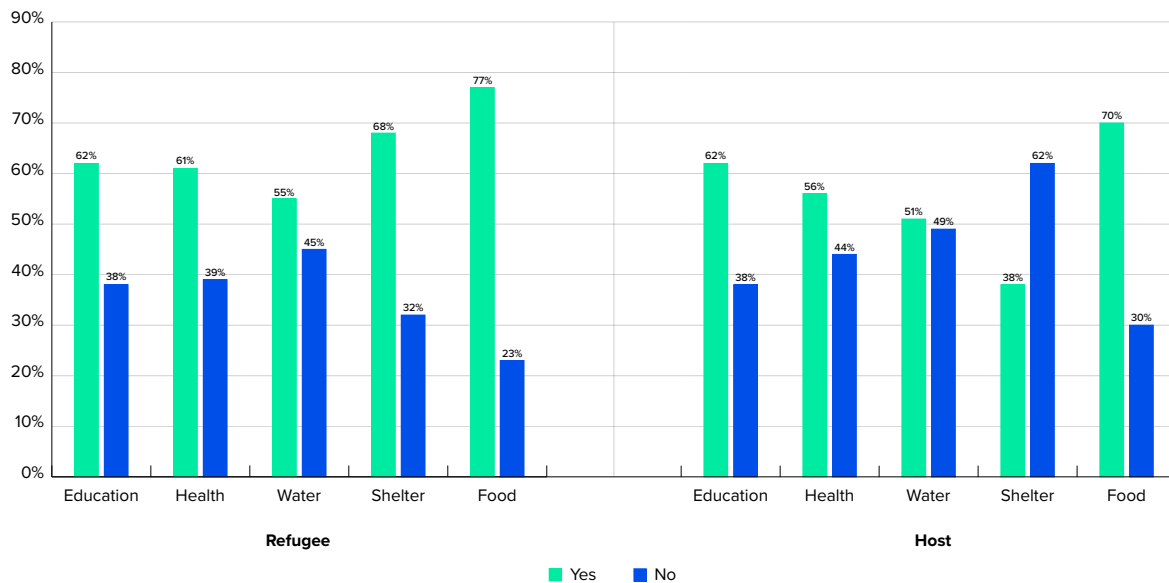
This policy brief provides an overview of water and land conflicts in refugee settings in Uganda and presents policy considerations to mitigate their effects. These recommendations are relevant to humanitarian actors relevant to national governments and international humanitarian actors due to their potential to enhance refugee self-reliance in humanitarian response. It builds on research conducted in 2024 and 2025 to establish the determinants of land and water conflicts and their effects on women and girls in Nakivale and Oruchinga refugee settlements in Southwestern Uganda. The research draws on data collected through mixed methods comprising household surveys, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory meetings at the national and community levels.

## Background and context: self-reliance model

Uganda hosts the largest refugee population on the continent, with over 1.7 million refugees - mostly women - from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Sudan,

and Eritrea as of December 2024. Uganda is widely cited as a 'model country' for the hospitality and integration of refugees, given its open-door policy and refugee self-reliance approaches for over two decades. Refugees are allocated land for shelter and for subsistence farming to grow their own food for home consumption and to sell for a basic income. Refugees also have equal access to public services such as health care, education, water, and land alongside Ugandan citizens.

While this generous land allocation model secured the country's international reputation as a progressive and development-oriented refugee host, increasing land and water conflicts between hosts and refugees are straining this approach. Tensions are partly driven by insufficient water infrastructure and land availability; where, for instance, a refugee family of 16 or more is allocated a small plot - around 900 square metres - for shelter and farming. Water service provision in refugee settlements is fragmented, unstable, and inefficient; over 200 households are expected to use one water source which does not flow consistently. Additional challenges have been raised in regard to soil and water quality and broader environmental challenges. This research is particularly important because the continued land and water conflicts and



**Figure 1. Effects of land and water conflicts on access to services for women and girls in Nakivale and Oruchinga**

their gendered effects risk weakening the overall host-refugee social cohesion and undermining the ongoing efforts to promote self-reliance approaches in refugee settings.

70% of respondents depend on communally used water sources, and over 50% depend on agriculture as their main economic activity. The results further indicate that refugees experience conflicts more than hosts at 66% and 34% respectively.

## Methodology

This research employed a transdisciplinary, cross-sectional participatory design and process method. Data was collected using a mixed methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods that included: 876 household survey interviews (selected through purposive sampling), 15 key informant interviews, 12 focus group discussions, and five stakeholder participatory workshops. Data was then analysed using multiple quantitative methods, including binary regression, chi-square test, and multivariate logistic regression models to assess the determinants of land and water conflicts. Qualitative data was analysed using content and thematic analysis.

## Key findings

The research produced several key findings:

### High frequency of resource-related conflict, especially among refugees

- Conflict over resources is high, with 78% of the land and water users experiencing conflicts at least once a week. Despite this frequency, over

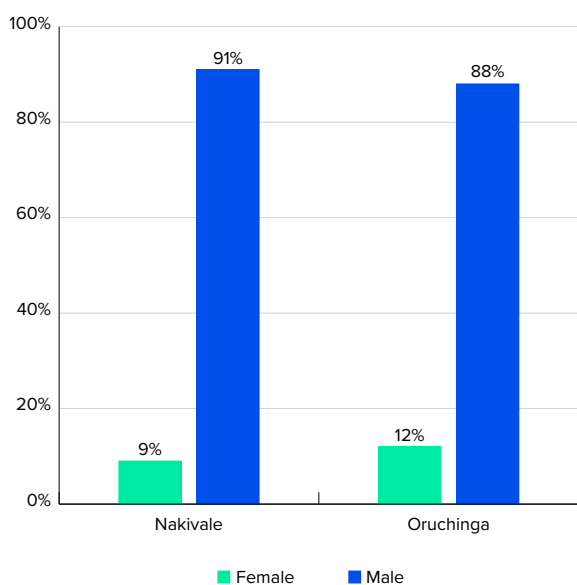
### Gendered drivers and impact of land and water conflict

- The results indicate the key gendered factors likely to increase land conflict; these are land sufficiency, practicing agriculture, food security (measured by the number of meals and food sourced from agriculture), and the duration of stay in the community. Land sufficiency and the involvement in agriculture are stronger predictors of land conflict for both men and women.
- The results indicate key gendered factors that increase water conflicts; these are dependency on safe water sources, limited access to safe water, food security, water quality, quantity, practicing agriculture, and water management.
- Overall, land and water conflicts affect access to services such as health, education, water, shelter, and food among refugee and host women and girls (see Figure 1).

### Protective factors

- The results of this study do indicate some protective factors that are likely to reduce conflict. These are engagement in income-generating

activity, access to alternative sources of food and alternative sources of water, education level, and food security (measured by the number of meals per day).

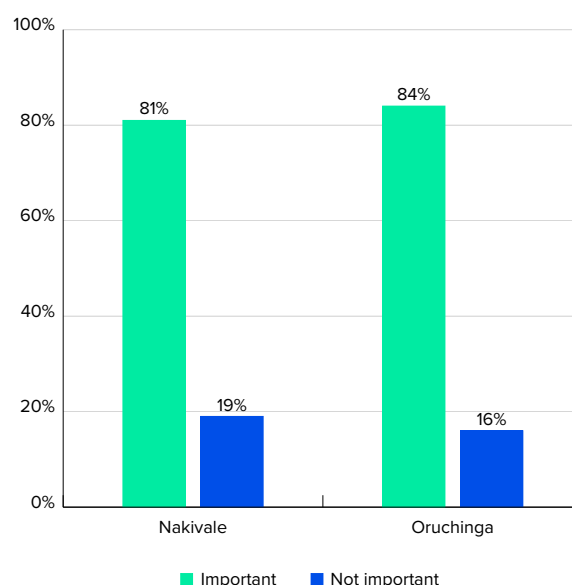


**Figure 2. Composition of refugee welfare committee by gender**

Figure 1 indicates the effects of water and land conflicts on women and girls’ access to services. Interviewees expounded on this, stating that women are affected most because they were primarily involved in cooking and caregiving responsibilities within households, and so suffer heavily from the burdens of water and land poverty, including health, education, energy, productive use of time, and shelter among others. Despite these specific effects on women and girls, women’s participation in water and land decision making is low and, at best, tokenistic. Additional findings indicate that the participation of women is largely hindered by institutional and socio-cultural factors. This includes the lack of explicit and intentional policies to support women’s participation, such as a quota system outlining the number of women and men in leadership structures; it also includes a lack of monitoring mechanisms, capacity building, awareness and sensitisation campaigns to mitigate gender discrimination. Socio-cultural factors include socially ascribed roles and gender stereotypes that limit women’s participation in public affairs and erode their confidence. This is attested in Figure 2, which shows female participation in the Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC) in Nakivale and Oruchinga refugee settlements at 9% and 12% respectively.

## Policy recommendations

Despite bearing the brunt of such conflict, and with their marginal participation in land and water management, women’s participation was still regarded as important among respondents, as revealed in interview data represented in Figure 3. According to the interviews, women are considered responsible for managing resources (such as water, fuel and food) in their communities; these roles make them key stakeholders possessing valuable traditional knowledge, who also play a vital role in community-level environmental conservation efforts, making their inclusion essential for sustainable and equitable land and water management practices. Their greater representation in the decision-making process also helps to reveal the gendered dynamics of water and land decision-making within households and community, which in turn can influence more inclusive water and land-related policies.



**Figure 3. Consideration of women’s participation in land and water management**

In response to the findings, community and national level participatory meetings were held to validate results and co-develop the following recommendations to inform policy and practice:

- National policy actors and humanitarian organisations providing support to refugees in Uganda should implement robust monitoring mechanisms for land management to mitigate conflicts, with a specific focus on land user rights and women’s participation.

- The Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda should designate land specifically for livestock farming, ensuring clear boundaries between land for cultivation and livestock to mitigate animal trespass, which is a significant source of land conflict.
- The Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda and UNHCR should adopt a multi-sectoral strategy, taking a collaborative approach in order to address the interlinkages between land, water and food security by going beyond land as the sole source of livelihood, expanding avenues to achieve self-reliance in ways that strengthen refugees' and host communities' ability to meet essential needs equitably and sustainably. Long-term solutions to resource management should be scaled up to ensure cohesion among communities, especially for long-term refugees (10+ years).
- The Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda should review the Refugee Welfare Committee guidelines to address gender imbalances in decision making and ensure effective participation and inclusion of women. An explicit approach to ensuring women take part in decision making should be implemented, such as the use of quota systems and empowerment programmes; their inclusion should be mandatory rather than optional. Leveraging women's participation in leadership positions can give female refugees more skills and experience, and enable them to support themselves and their communities while also improving service delivery. Tailor-made training and awareness campaigns among refugee and host communities should be implemented to address the individual and socio-cultural challenges to women's participation
- UNHCR and the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda should improve communication between refugee and host communities through multiple channels and in local languages to increase cohesion and accountability. This would help address information asymmetry and create awareness regarding illegal land transactions. Both men and women refugees should take part in land allocation decisions during their settlement to mitigate illegal land transactions among refugees.
- Strengthen education and awareness of land and water rights. Increasing sensitization and awareness campaigns among refugee and host communities in areas regarding rights and usage of natural resources, water and land user rights, and the value of women's participation in resource governance would help to promote social cohesion and the mitigation of conflicts.
- Ensure effective implementation of the '70/30' Principle. UNHCR and the Office of the Prime Minister should monitor and ensure effective implementation of this principle, whereby 30 per cent of all assistance for refugees should also benefit host communities. This would help manage expectations, reduce tensions, and promote social cohesion among refugee and host communities.
- UNHCR should increase the number of water points to reduce overcrowding, long waiting times, and the distances needed to travel to the nearest water point. Alongside this, they should also improve access and the rationing of water so that the refugees and host communities are able to access water throughout the day. This would not only reduce competition and water-related conflicts, but also enable users to commit time to productive activities and the ability to improve their livelihoods.

## About the author

**Resty Naiga** is a Lecturer in the Department of Development Studies at Makerere University, Uganda. She has a PhD in water governance from University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) in Vienna, Austria; a Masters in Development Studies from University College Dublin, Ireland, and a Bachelor of Social Sciences from Makerere University. She teaches Research Methods and Gender and Development at Makerere University. Her research focuses on natural resources governance, gender, collective-action, conflict, peacebuilding, child-focused research, participatory methodologies, and transdisciplinary research design and mixed-methods approaches. She has published widely in the area of water governance, conflict and peacebuilding, gender and collective-action.

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