

THE VOICES AND EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG REFUGEES IN UGANDA

This article explores the needs and vulnerabilities of young refugees, who through sharing their experience have revealed an overwhelming interest in continuing their education, a desire to work, and willingness to learn new skills.

ARISE REPORTER



Maria Nyabieu Taker

I am a South Sudanese and a Nuer. I came to Uganda in 2007 and live with my step-mother. When the war broke out in 2013, I was already in Uganda but still it affected me. For example, the source of income for my parents whom I left in South Sudan was disrupted. So, sometimes I would lack school fees and miss out on classes. I would also lack money to cater for my daily needs.

Uganda is a peaceful country and the climate is favourable and the education is good and so are the people, though not all of them. You will find really polite and loving people but not everyone is like that. Some people on the streets call us South Sudanese, fighters, names like that. Some rob and beat up our boys on streets.

I think it is the responsibility of the Ugandan government to protect us. And for the local people to stop calling us names. Why should you call me black when you are black, too? If you call me a South Sudanese and I call you a Ugandan, it would not make sense. Let's call ourselves human beings. Or you introduce yourself to me, and I will do the same. That is a way of building friendships. Because if you were to cut me, I do not think my blood would be orange and yours red, no! We are all the same. It is just because we come from different origins and speak different languages, but we are all the same.



Theresa Nyalony Gatwang Riak, 19

I came to Uganda in 2007. Before that, my parents and I were refugees in Khartoum because of the civil war in the south. I started school in 2007 in Primary One. I was eight. Currently I am at Cavendish University studying information technology. My maternal uncle who works with government in South Sudan pays my school fees. That in itself is a problem because when you work with the government, other people see you as their enemy. As if that is not enough, Riak Machar is my grandfather, which qualifies us to be enemies of the government.

The situation in my country is terrible. Almost every day I hear reports about so and so being dead. These are sad stories. It is distressing. Life in Kampala is not that easy either. There is a belief that refugees who live in Kampala are well-off but that is not true. We rely on support from others. I have to wait for my uncle, for example, to send me money and when that does not come through, I have to go to the camps in West Nile to get food. That is a long distance!

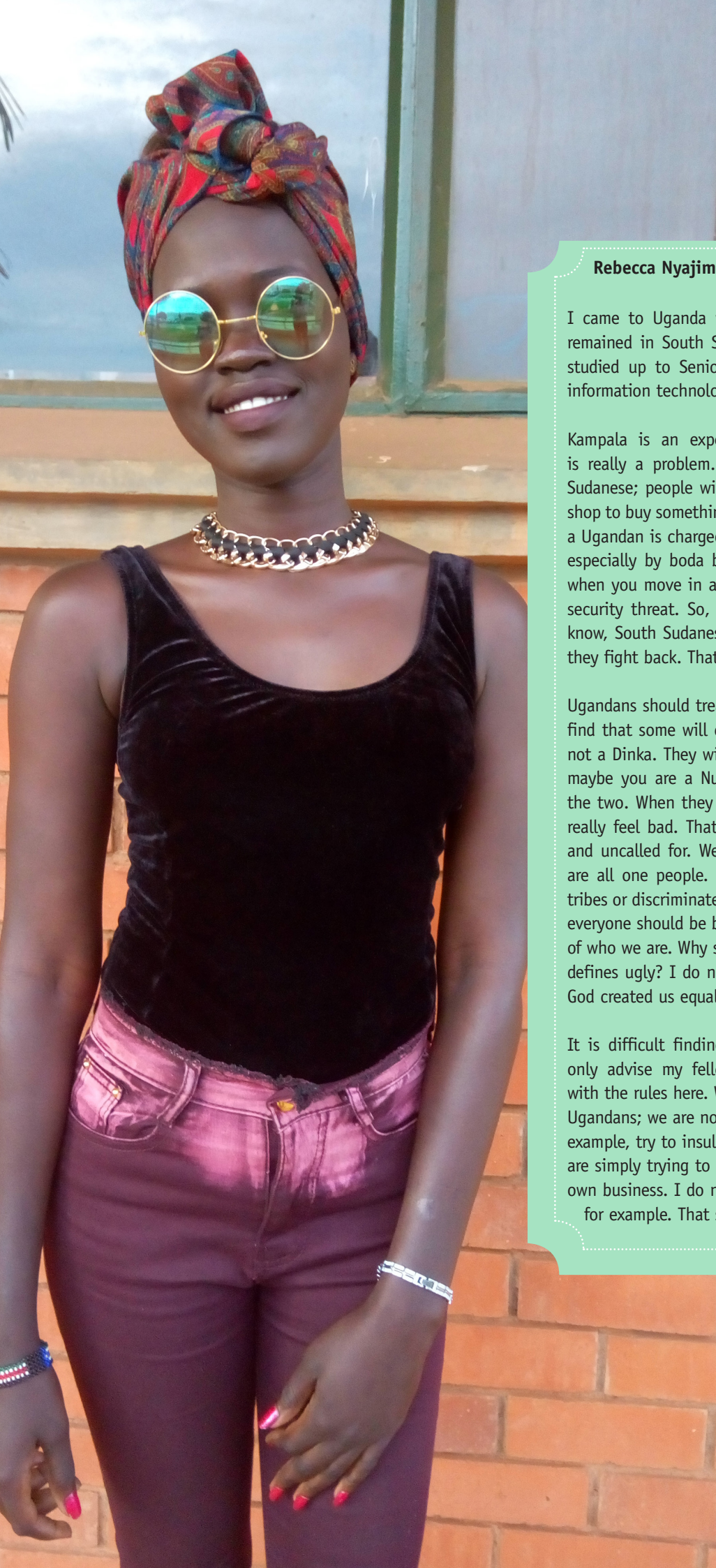
One can go for days without food. Yes, Uganda may be a paradise for refugees, but I will tell you refugees are suffering in Uganda. The reality is the people supposed to distribute food to refugees take some of that food for themselves or ask for money from refugees. I will not mention names. But what I will tell you is there is something wrong in the system.

There is discrimination. You will find a Ugandan and they will ask you what it is you are doing in Uganda, why you cannot go back to your country. Very few refugees can find work. People do not want to employ us. They claim Ugandans are mistreated in South Sudan – the reason we should not be treated fairly here. Yet there are Ugandans comfortably working in South Sudan.

The discrimination is also in schools; and when you try to make your case, they say violence and war are in your blood. Hosting refugees is a big challenge. Currently over a million South Sudan refugees are here, so I understand the challenge. Perhaps if it were South Sudan hosting such a big number of refugees, we would also be having similar challenge. But still, something positive needs to be done.

During campaigns, they told us that if a particular presidential candidate won, every foreigner was going to be forced to leave Uganda, so we lived in fear.

I would not build castles in the air. But what I think should be done is streamline food distribution centres to bring such centres closer to the people in the city because travelling to the camp to get food is cumbersome.



Rebecca Nyajima Manyang Gatwech, 20

I came to Uganda with my brother in 2007. My parents remained in South Sudan. My father later died in 2011. I studied up to Senior Four and enrolled for a diploma in information technology.

Kampala is an expensive city. For example, house rent is really a problem. The other problem is being a South Sudanese; people will always isolate you. If you went to a shop to buy something, they will charge you more than what a Ugandan is charged. We are also disturbed on the streets, especially by boda boda men. It is difficult because even when you move in a group, some people may regard you a security threat. So, some men will confront you and, you know, South Sudanese can be aggressive when disturbed – they fight back. That is what causes fights.

Ugandans should treat us well. They call us names. You will find that some will call you a Dinka when actually you are not a Dinka. They will yell at you, “Hey, you mudinka!” Yet maybe you are a Nuer, but Ugandans do not differentiate the two. When they call you a Dinka and you are not, you really feel bad. That is why some react. This is really bad and uncalled for. We are all black; we are all Africans. We are all one people. No one should call the other by their tribes or discriminate against you on the basis of colour. Not everyone should be brown, for example. We should be proud of who we are. Why should someone call you ugly? And who defines ugly? I do not think there are ugly people anyway. God created us equal.

It is difficult finding a solution to such instances. I can only advise my fellow South Sudanese to try to comply with the rules here. We cannot afford not to cooperate with Ugandans; we are not in our country. If boda boda men, for example, try to insult you, ignore them, for sometimes they are simply trying to play around with your mind. Mind your own business. I do not find myself in conflict with the law, for example. That said, home always remains the best.



Kuol Arou Kuol

I came to Uganda in 2008 to study. It was all well until 2013 when war broke out back in South Sudan, just two years after we got independent. That disrupted my education. My family members were displaced by the conflict, disrupting my only source of school fees. I did not have money to continue my education.

In 2014, I went and started living in a refugee camp in Koboko where I started working as a volunteer. That is where I got a sympathiser who offered to pay my school fees. He was my father's friend. He said I was a bright young man who deserved an education. That is how I returned to Kampala and resumed my studies. I graduated in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in procurement and logistics.

I have not yet got a job. I decided to enrol for another course in software engineering. Kampala is not the friendliest place to be when you are not working, when you do not have money and you are a refugee. Things are not easy to come by. You can get sick and simply lie in your bed with no medical help. It is a hard life to live. One time I was terribly sick and I did not have money to go to hospital. I stayed in my room for eight days. I tried calling my sponsor but calls to his telephone numbers were not going through. I stayed there helpless. Somehow, he called later and sent me some money. That is how I managed to get treatment.

My desire is to do something meaningful for my countrymen. Recently I started an organisation called Sports 64 where through sport I want to bring together the children of South Sudanese living in camps in Uganda. The war in South Sudan is tribal, so bringing together all children regardless of their tribes is significant. Sports 64 comes from the idea that we have 64 tribes in South Sudan, so we seek to bring together children from all tribes so they can sit, play together as brothers. Children should not inherit the hatred from the older generation. We want it to be inclusive. So far, we have managed to bring together 18 tribes.