

# COVID-19's Impact on Food Security among Urban Refugee Youth in Kenya: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the experiences of urban refugee communities, more specifically, the challenges young South Sudanese refugees living in Kenya face. We divert from the comprehensive examination of refugees in camps to focus on urban youth amid Kenya's refugee policy changes and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the support of South Sudanese community leaders, our study engaged 58 participants – 42 males and 16 females. Participants engaged in semi-structured discussions about food security and other daily challenges related to their urban refugee experience. This study draws on postcolonial feminist theory to contextualize the gender-specific dimensions of food insecurity, centering analysis on discussing historical power structures, migration patterns, urbanism theory, and geopolitical influences contributing to the experiences of South Sudanese urban refugee youth in Kenya. Study participants, irrespective of location, encountered corruption, limiting policies, and conflicting identity formation, with women specifically highlighting self-identity, dignity, and family as critical to supporting their resilience. Participants emphasized the impact of COVID-19 on community cohesion, particularly in shared meals. However, their agency was hindered by movement restrictions, invisible fences, or barriers exacerbated by unequal support and aid distribution. The research advocates for the formulation of clear African contextualized urban-based policies and migration systems that prioritize the needs of urban refugees, safeguarding their rights and upholding human dignity. Collaborative engagement with all stakeholders within local communities, especially refugee youth, is necessary to develop effective urban policies that promote stability, economic advancement, and social integration.

Keywords: migration, agency, sanctuary cities, gender, African urbanism

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## INTRODUCTION

Global food insecurity persists significantly above pre-pandemic levels, with over 700 million people worldwide experiencing hunger in 2022 (FAO et al., 2023). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent mitigation efforts exacerbated a global crisis of immobility, disproportionately affecting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, who experienced exasperated inequalities and increased vulnerability (Crush et al., 2021; FAO, 2021; Onyango et al., 2021).

Given these evolving trends in food insecurity and human mobility, scholars and communities have called for research to understand the full implications of COVID-19 on refugees, with a particular emphasis on understanding the unique challenges faced by different genders and ages in urban contexts (WFP, 2020; Crush et al., 2021). A substantial portion of the people experiencing food insecurity live in Africa, indicating the definitive prevalence of food insecurity in the region (UNCTAD, 2021). Considering the relationship between poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity, and gender as critical influencers of migration (FAO, 2021), examining these interconnected aspects in Kenya is crucial to addressing socio-economic and political factors from a gender perspective. Gender intersects with various aspects of migration, including access to resources, decision-making power, and exposure to vulnerabilities, with the COVID-19 pandemic intensifying gender disparities regarding economic livelihoods and food security. Our focus on Kenya is due to the increasing arrival of refugees from neighboring countries, including South Sudan (IHD, 2020). The enduring conflict in South Sudan has been detrimental to the community; prospects of repatriating to South Sudan are unattainable for many due to limited opportunity, extreme famine, and regional political instability and conflict (UNHCR, 2023).

This paper investigates the impact of COVID-19 on food security among urban refugee youth (19–32 years) in Kenya by focusing on South Sudanese refugees residing in Nairobi and Nakuru. We draw on postcolonial feminist theory, integrating race, gender, and colonization (Musingafi and Musingafi, 2023) to contextualize the gender-specific dimensions of food insecurity further and explore how urban policy can counter historical power structures, migration patterns, and geopolitical influences. This paper also builds on African urbanisms by critical African scholars to investigate the needs, challenges, and policy responses concerning urban refugee youth. We conclude by recommending the adaptation of a sanctuary cities framework.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION

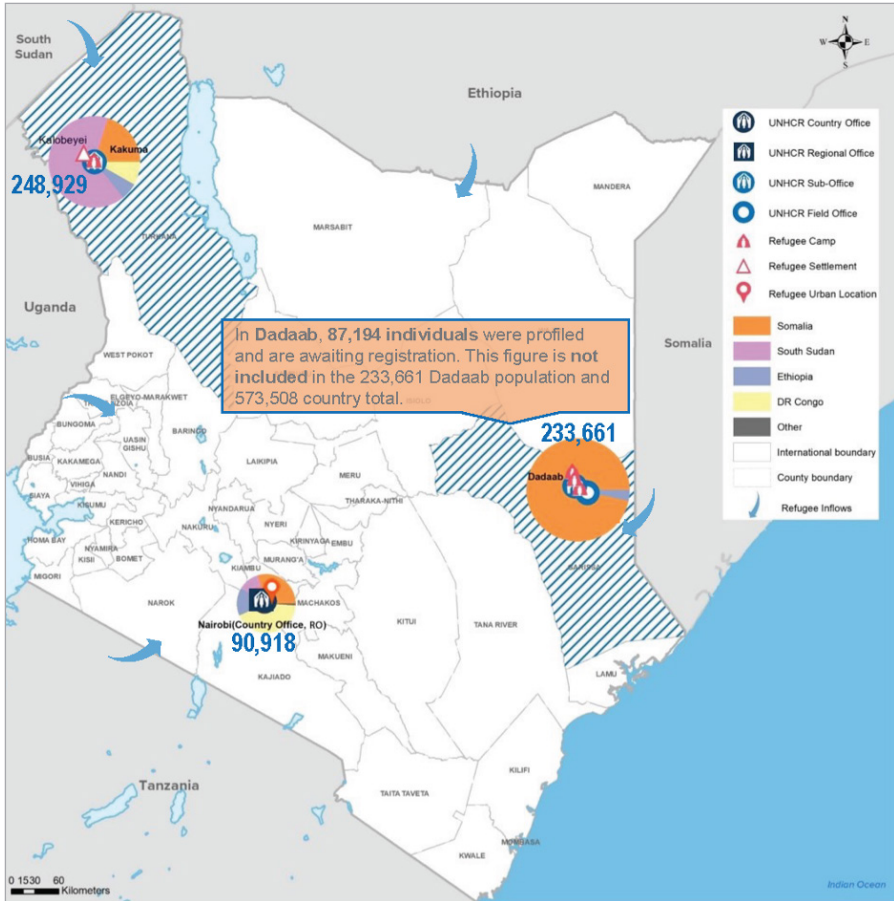
Kenya has a rich history of hosting refugees seeking safety from food insecurity, conflict, limited economic opportunities, and extreme climate conditions (WFP, 2020). The country's appeal is attributed to its centrality, available land, international networks, established migrant communities, and arable land (IHD, 2020). In Kenya, Africa's oldest and largest refugee camps are Dadaab and Kakuma, established in

1991 and 1992 respectively, home to refugees from Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (IHD, 2020). Thus, much of the literature on refugees in Kenya focuses on those living in camps (Pavanello et al., 2010; IOM, 2018; Malik, 2023).

In 2006, the Government of Kenya initiated the Refugees Act, which set a framework for refugees to register and remain in camps (IHL, 2006). Since 1991, Kenya has pursued a refugee encampment policy that limited their integration and access to opportunities outside the camps. Urban refugees were not spared from such exclusionary challenges, which were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic period. However, the Government of Kenya introduced the Refugees Act of 2021, intending to address ongoing challenges in securing the rights and protections for refugees and asylum seekers by making more explicit policies that protect their right to participate in various levels of the economy and social development (UNHCR, 2021). As these changes were implemented, the Government of Kenya announced the closure of the refugee camps on several occasions with a plan for local integration and resettlement (UNHCR, 2021). The United Nations Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) of 2016 calls for integrating and including refugees into the community. However, there are risks of closing the refugee camps, with significant impacts on the surrounding settings and host communities, likely resulting in increased migration to urban centers. Therefore, understanding gaps for urban refugees is timely.

Research indicates that when refugees settled outside the camps and moved to metropolitan centers, they encountered challenging circumstances and were without the same level of support as in the camps from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other organizations. Approximately 25% (90,918) of Kenya's total refugee population resides in urban areas, with most urban refugee youth living in Nairobi (UNHCR, 2021). This rate continues to increase annually (Onyango et al., 2021). However, these numbers are believed to be much higher, as many refugees still need to register (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Kenya, Refugees by Location, 2022**



Source: UNHCR Kenya – DIMA Unit, Nairobi (available on [Kenya Infographics and Statistics Package – 31 July 2023 by UNCHR](#))

In addition to the impending forced urban migration through proposed refugee camp closures, many refugees choose to live in urban spaces rather than camps. In contrast to the relatively confined environments of refugee camps, cities offer refugees independence and potential access to economic and educational opportunities. The refugees’ decision to reside in urban areas intersects with the concept of sanctuary cities, which promotes flexible and inclusive environments for migrants (Kassa, 2018). As much as a process as it is a goal, there is no single definition of what a sanctuary city is; therefore, the concept differs between regions. While cities like Nairobi and Nakuru serve as de facto sanctuary or refuge cities, they do not have formal policies and support systems akin to those in the United States and Canada, where sanctuary

cities implement migrant-friendly policies, such as providing municipal services, regardless of immigration status and limiting cooperation with federal immigration authorities (Kassa, 2018; Bauder, 2020). Despite the existence of policies and legislative Acts in Kenya, there has been difficulty translating these into actionable measures regarding the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Consequently, Kenyan authorities and refugees alike are unclear about refugees' rights, resulting in the inaccurate application of regulatory frameworks and misclassifications (IHD, 2020). This leaves urban refugees ambiguous without assistance or legal protection from government officials, the UNHCR, or other NGOs.

Therefore, urban refugees find themselves with a different level of support than they experienced in the camps (Omata, 2020), and urban realities may need to align with their aspirations. As "non-citizens," refugees have distinctive legal and administrative constraints that limit their ability to secure formal employment and freedom of movement despite provisions in the 1951 Refugee Convention (Omata, 2020). Consequently, urban refugees are vulnerable to exploitation, apprehension, or confinement and may have to compete for opportunities (UNHCR, 2021). Lack of stable income and food insecurity often compel urban refugees to accept any available food, regardless of personal preferences or religious dietary restrictions, sometimes skipping meals to feed their children (UNHCR, 2021). Persistent food insecurity in Kenya poses substantial obstacles to adequately addressing the population's nutritional and dietary requirements, affecting more than 60% of urban refugees (Onyango et al., 2021; FAO et al., 2023). In an environment where communities perceive competing for resources – particularly in a context already strained by unemployment and food insecurity – this dynamic can potentially lead to violence, resulting in the host community retaliating against the refugee group (Elfversson et al., 2023). Despite the longstanding presence of refugees in Kenya, inequality, economic impact, political factors, and sociocultural influences have escalated tensions (Betts et al., 2018).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As explained by the United Nations (UN), "Gender is a key organizing principle of society and is central to any discussion of the causes and consequences of international migration, including the process of decision-making involved and the mechanisms leading to migration" (IOM, 2018: 10). In reality, women and LGBTQ+ persons often find themselves in more marginalized, isolated, and vulnerable positions than men. Therefore, increasing understanding of international migration and food access through postcolonial feminist and African urbanism theories acknowledges various dynamics, expectations and relations that influence men's and women's urban migration experiences.

### *Postcolonial feminist theory*

Postcolonial feminist theory seeks to understand how (neo)colonialism is embedded within patriarchy and globalization, particularly contemporary realities of white settler colonialism (Kerner, 2017; Piedalue and Rishi, 2017). Postcolonial feminism is a “transnational and globally constructed form of critical race feminism” (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017: 549) that requires relational thinking about power and globality to assess and address North-South power relations and asymmetries (Kerner, 2017). The concepts of North-South paradigms are based on the historical legacy of colonialism. They are intrinsically embedded with gendered and racialized features that presume that the conditions prevalent in the Global South (i.e., poverty, corruption, and gender inequality) do not apply to the Global North (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Kerner, 2017; Piedalue and Rishi, 2017). This theoretical framework focuses on gender-related factors and the obstacles they pose to justice, equality, and well-being: postcolonial feminism calls for thinking about agency in more nuanced ways, beyond subversion and change (Kerner, 2017). The concept of “empowerment-as-information” is criticized in postcolonial feminist studies, wherein people are provided with information and knowledge under the guise of empowerment (Kerner, 2017; Bessa, 2019). “Empowerment” approaches may inadvertently burden people with the expectation to resist change-makers and challenge existing power structures. Despite being equipped with information, the structural barriers and entrenched systems surrounding them often remain unchanged, rendering them powerless to enact meaningful change in alignment with the prescribed empowerment model. By examining the historical power imbalances that continue to shape contemporary social and economic structures, this theory helps understand how urban refugees, especially youth, women and gender minorities, experience marginalization within urban environments.

### *African urbanism*

Future global urban expansion is projected to occur mainly in Africa and Asia, where public institutions and planning systems are least prepared to manage the demands of rapidly urbanizing regions (UN-Habitat, 2022). Africa is experiencing the highest urban growth rates, with projections indicating that by 2035, half its population will be urban dwellers, increasing to six out of ten people by 2050 (UN-Habitat, 2022). Alongside this trajectory, African cities have always been refugee reception cities, deepening socio-economic fragmentation, inequity, and exclusion; high rates of unemployment; increasing levels of urban poverty; and food insecurity. Scholars increasingly acknowledge the limited applicability of Global North theories in explaining urbanism in the Global South, reflected in the ongoing epistemological debates on the nexus between sanctuary cities and urban theory and practice in the region (Ernstson et al., 2014; Kassa, 2018; Tshimba, 2022). Moreover, the specificity

of African urbanism calls for a place-based innovation of urban planning and governance based on local knowledge production (Bellaviti, 2022).

African urban theorization is evolving, with emerging scholarship aiming to establish a theory and practice that is more meaningful and functional for African city-making processes (Nyiti, 2024). Batuman and Kiliñç (2024) argue that integrating urban refugees requires examining their connection through (1) identity: informality, imagination, and belonging; (2) place: transnational homemaking practices; and (3) site: navigating urban space. Within this context of African urbanism, this study aims to integrate an awareness of global diversity and universality to co-produce knowledge for progressive impacts on the urban refugee community, particularly South Sudanese youth.

## METHODOLOGY

Engagement with three focus group discussions, the study investigated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security among South Sudanese refugee youth aged 19 to 32 living in urban settings of Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. While the broader research focuses on food security, participants spoke about the importance of intersecting aspects of their lives that affect their ability to access services and programs; therefore, this article focuses on youth perspectives and stories related to their urban existence during and post-COVID-19.

We recruited the participants using an exponential discriminative snowball sampling method. With the support of South Sudanese community leaders, the research team conducted three focus group discussions with 58 South Sudanese urban refugee youth (42 males, 16 females) who had urban refugee status for Nairobi or Nakuru. The three focus groups comprised 28 men, 13 women, and a mixed group of 3 women and 14 men, respectively. All participants provided written informed consent. We used pseudonyms and altered any identifying information to mitigate potential risks and protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

The research team held the focus group discussions in December 2022, with each session being 60 to 120 minutes. We held all the sessions in an accessible community location in Nairobi, Kenya, and they were facilitated by a South Sudanese community leader. During the focus group sessions, the research team asked the participants open-ended questions regarding food security, including food availability. We enlisted – with participant approval – a Kenyan illustrator to observe and illustrate the key concepts and themes emerging from the sessions. The focus group discussions highlighted what food security meant to the participants, prompting a subsequent discussion about interventions and innovations with stakeholders to address food security challenges among urban refugees.

We transcribed the audio-recorded discussions, read the transcripts multiple times, and analyzed them using NVivo software. Following all ethics and safeguarding protocols, the researchers conducted community member-checking

to confirm understanding. The research team developed codes using inductive and deductive methods, drawing from the proposal, research questions, and focus group transcripts. We included South Sudanese community leaders and researchers in the design, conceptualization, and facilitation, and they provided insight into the contextual circumstances of urban refugees.

## RESULTS

This section examines the impact of COVID-19 on food security among South Sudanese urban refugees residing in Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. We identified three major themes across the sessions, regardless of location or gender – although intersectional factors did influence the impact of these issues – namely, systemic failures with resource allocation; safety and freedom; and identity formation. When organizations provided support, such as money or supplies, participants perceived it to be distributed unequally because of a lack of transparency between refugees and the organization. The participants often attributed these issues to their identity as “urban,” indicating they lacked the support their counterparts in the refugee camps were accorded. Participants explained how they strive for agency, often a core principle for moving away from the camp but were challenged by the context of Kenya’s policies. As indicated earlier, we use pseudonyms throughout the article based on how participants self-identified: Urban Refugee Men (URM) and Urban Refugee Women (URW).

### *Systemic failures with resource allocation*

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by refugees residing in urban areas, bringing to the forefront the difficulties in resource allocation within humanitarian systems. The participants spoke about the significant barriers urban refugees encounter in accessing necessities such as food, shelter, education, and health care. The challenges with resource allocation in urban refugee communities had a profound impact on their ability to meet their fundamental needs. Despite the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations, many urban refugees still experience food insecurity. By exploring personal experiences and accounts of urban refugees, there is an urgent need for more equitable and efficient resource allocation strategies to address the problematic levels of food insecurity.

The participants noted that urban refugees need support from organizations like the UNHCR, similar to those living in refugee camps. They spoke about organizations and wealthy individuals providing cooking oil, soap, maize, beans, and personal protective equipment; however, the government, along with local and international organizations still need to address this significant resource gap. Organizations such as the UNHCR were discussed negatively regarding the support offered to urban refugees. A woman shared that, “Being an urban refugee is not easy because we have to do everything for ourselves. The UN doesn’t support you.”



Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of support, particularly regarding food assistance and spoke about the frustration among refugees who rely on these entities and feel neglected. According to one respondent:

We don't have any support here in town. Our embassy never saw us. The UNHCR ... they do the assessment; they collect data that is going to be a benefit to them. But the refugees? There is nothing we can get (URW).

Participants noted a disconnect between the efforts of the UNHCR and the needs of South Sudanese refugees. Despite repeated requests for assistance and discussions about the challenges faced by the refugee community, they argued that there needs to be more tangible action or response from the UNHCR. Others felt that the Embassy of South Sudan in Kenya and the Government of Kenya should have a stronger response to meet refugees' needs. A participant shifted the responsibility from international agencies to the government, expressing concern about prioritizing citizens over refugees. He suggested that UN agencies should administer refugee services directly to ensure fairness and access to assistance:

The service that the UN provides refugees are handled by the government. And the government's priority, everywhere in the world, is to assist its own citizens. ... And there are few refugees that are involved in the management of the services that they offer. I think the best way for UN agencies is to be the one handling that service themselves, because if you give them to the national [government], the national's priority will come first (URM).

For many participants, the lack of systemic support meant they experienced hunger or could not afford to meet their basic needs. An urban refugee woman said, "I may look good, but inside, maybe I spent two to three days without food." The viewpoint of an urban refugee woman resonated with the experiences of many women responsible for their families' care, some who implemented meal programs to meet their needs:

It reached a time where we did not even have rent, and we had to have the landlord just shut our house, like close with everything inside it. We just went to sleep at one of the relatives. We're like 13 people in the same house. You can imagine that situation, right? ... You just leave the food to the young ones ... we normally have a program: if we eat breakfast, we are not going to eat lunch so that we eat supper (URW).

As primary caregivers, women shared the disproportionate effect of having to navigate the complexities of urban refugee life while also managing household responsibilities, as one respondent stated:

The kids go to school, but it is a challenge. I have to struggle up and down and find something for them to go to school. It is a big challenge. COVID-19 has challenged us ... I'm working to take care of our siblings, who are also being helped by family members. And that is how I struggled to make ends meet in Nairobi (URW).

The intersecting challenges of women urban refugees in Nairobi indicate that the daily pursuit of basic needs is intertwined with the uncertainty of survival:

Where you will get food or will you be alive tomorrow, you don't know. But it is God's grace that is the reason we are here today. Some families sleep without food for one or two days ... you have a hope, but the hunger is too much. But if you don't have hope – otherwise, what can you do? (URW).

While the participant finds solace in faith, it is essential to recognize that reliance on hope and resilience should not overshadow the urgent need for systemic change: urban refugees' struggles to meet their basic needs should not be normalized or accepted as a testament to their resilience. Instead, it points to systemic failures that perpetuate conditions of extreme poverty and food insecurity among vulnerable populations. The juxtaposition of hope against the backdrop of hunger serves as a reminder of urban refugees' situation. Despite their remarkable strength in enduring these challenges, their resilience should not be romanticized.

Without systemic support, many agreed that financial support came from cash remittances from family members, the local communities, other South Sudanese, and abroad, which was also affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given their reliance on external support to survive, participants shared their concerns that support before the pandemic decreased significantly and had yet to return to its previous level:

We suffer in silence here. We only get support from people who are relatives, maybe someone who is abroad or someone who is in South Sudan, working. To get even a proper meal is a problem. You don't die, you eat what you get; you can suffer; you will get diseases – because you're not helping the malnutrition (URW).

In contrast, a participant compared the positive support and services available to refugees in camps to those living in urban areas. Registered refugees residing in camps receive essential services, such as food and health care. While assistance disparities still exist, the participant shared that she is often left to support herself in the challenging urban environment:

If you're registered in the camp, there's food, there's free hospital, at least there's something you're given. But being an urban refugee, the only thing that

you're given is the status. They [the government] don't support you to support yourself (URW).

There is a disparity in support systems between urban refugees and those residing in refugee camps. This is primarily because refugees in camps are entitled to humanitarian aid and other support systems. However, during focus group sessions, participants indicated that the government tends to prioritize support for refugees within camps, possibly due to logistical reasons or a preference for containing refugee populations in designated areas. While registration as a refugee provides legal recognition, it does not guarantee access to essential services or support for self-sufficiency in urban areas. The UNHCR (2016) and other agencies have plans to scale up services to urban refugees. Still, the study participants were not aware of the proposed initiative (see UNHCR, n.d.) and certainly had yet to be consulted about their needs at the time of the study. In light of this reflection, placing the burden of self-sufficiency for refugees in urban areas is unjust and unsustainable. There is an urgent need to address the root causes of food insecurity and poverty, including inadequate access to resources, employment opportunities, and social support systems, which perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization among urban refugee populations.

### *Safety and freedom*

While safety entails protection from violence, discrimination, and persecution, freedom extends beyond the mere absence of harm to include the ability to exercise fundamental rights, such as freedom of movement, access to livelihood opportunities, and the autonomy to pursue economic endeavors. From navigating restrictive legal frameworks to overcoming socio-economic barriers, urban refugees deal with complex dynamics shaping their goals for safety and realizing their rights to freedom in urban environments.

From the onset of conflict in South Sudan to the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees have experienced complex obstacles in their pursuit of safety, stability, and autonomy during the asylum-seeking process and resettlement:

Life has been uneasy in South Sudan when the war broke out, up to today. Many people are suffering in urban centers. It's not easy for us people in urban areas, because there are so many murders happening, especially now; poor people have been murdered because Kenyans feel [poverty] as well (URM).

While there are shared issues among the focus groups, societal and cultural factors affect how each gender experiences challenges. While both men and women mentioned security as a challenge, women were particularly noted as being more vulnerable to kidnappings. However, the participants did not elaborate on who was kidnapping the women. Urban refugee women described a pervasive atmosphere of fear and mistrust experienced in their daily lives: "You just need to survive on your

own; you need to find ways to survive. Everybody's paranoid." For some URW, this fear was justified, as a participant described a dangerous theft where basic safety and security in urban spaces are far from guaranteed:

We had an event in town, and we went home ... [thieves] just took my phone. I just gave it to them and so that they walk away. I could have been shot. They're walking out with knives; they try to come behind you. It's very risky nowadays (URW).

Many of the URM spoke about a sense of community, solidarity, and generosity with their Kenyan neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic. They talked about coming together to share meals, support each other, and create a sense of home away from home. In contrast, a woman shared that "Kenyans are not that friendly. Okay, they're friendly but not helping ..." This is a notable difference from the strong community integration men experienced. An urban refugee woman shared that the reluctance of neighbors to interact with her out of fear reflects the lack of trust and social cohesion toward women within the community:

It was not easy to get assistance because everybody was scared. A neighbor might think you're getting to the house to give them [COVID-19] because they didn't know where you've been. Most people were isolated ... It was hard (URW).

Moreover, social dynamics are further complicated by bureaucratic regulations, which constrain refugees' freedom of movement and choice of residence. Participants spoke about the numerous bureaucratic barriers and challenges they face living in urban spaces and, in some cases, scrutiny and accusations of illegality by authorities. The restrictive nature of these policies limits refugees' access to alternative support networks, effectively confining them to specific areas and restricting opportunities for socio-economic advancement available in urban centers:

It became a real challenge because I am a refugee registered under the UN in the Kakuma refugee camp. Getting assistance here in Nairobi, as a refugee, it gets hard because we cannot be assisted unless we are in the camp (URW).

Urban refugees face limitations in exercising their freedom and pursuing self-sustainability in their host country. Despite the fact that the Refugee Act of 2021 entitles refugees to legal documents that they need to participate in income-generating activities, the participants spoke about challenges when attempting to open a business for economic self-sufficiency. Despite their desire to contribute to the local economy and support themselves, refugees often encounter legal and bureaucratic barriers that prevent them from doing so, as narrated by this participant:

In Kenya, we are refugees. Now, for example, if you try to open a shop somewhere to do your own business to sustain yourself, you can't do it in Kenya ... if there could be a way that can help South Sudanese to do their own business, it could be better for us (URM).

A broader pattern of exclusion and discrimination against urban refugees is demonstrated, denying them equal access to basic services and opportunities available to other members of society. Similarly, the inability to open a bank account deprives them of financial freedom, limiting their ability to manage their finances, save money, and engage in economic activities independently – reinforcing their dependence on external assistance:

There was an agreement of where the UN and the Kenya government had where refugees can open any bank account so that you can save. But now it got to a point when you're going there with your alien card. And they tell, they say like, "No, it's only for the Kenyan or foreigners." Refugees are not allowed in (URW).

Before their asylum-seeking journeys, many refugees held jobs and pursued careers in various fields. However, upon arrival in host countries, they often need help finding employment opportunities matching their qualifications and experience. Many refugees possess a wealth of skills and experience underutilized in their host countries. As urban refugees become more economically independent, they are better positioned to support local businesses, contribute to the tax base, and stimulate economic growth. Further, these initiatives help bridge social divides and promote social cohesion by facilitating integration and participation in host communities. Yet their success is contingent upon comprehensive support and collaboration from governments, NGOs, and local communities, who must work to address these barriers.

Adding to the challenges urban refugees face are bureaucratic barriers and residency requirements severely limiting their freedom to reside and seek assistance. These restrictions impede their access to essential services and support systems, exacerbating their already precarious situation. The denial of equal access to basic services and the imposition of restrictions on economic activities perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and discrimination against urban refugees. These barriers make it exceedingly difficult for them to achieve economic self-sufficiency, reinforcing the cycle of dependency. However, initiatives aimed at supporting refugees in using their skills and experience to support themselves and contribute to their communities have the potential to disrupt these current practices.

### *Identity formation*

Given the challenges associated with being an urban refugee, the question of why individuals would choose to leave the relative safety and stability of refugee camps remained. While these camps may provide basic safety and access to humanitarian aid, participants from the focus groups shared how refugees living in camps were perceived to have less autonomy than their urban refugee peers. Thus, for many refugees, the prospect of seeking a better life in urban areas, despite the accompanying risks and uncertainties, may offer more opportunities for education, employment, and social integration that are not readily available in refugee camps.

The participants shared the challenge that they, just as much as everyone else, want to live a life where they can achieve agency rather than being confined in a camp for the rest of their lives:

I just wanted to explore, you know? Just to be. As a refugee, it doesn't mean that you have to be in the camp. You also have to meet people, interact and expand your brain because you cannot be born as a refugee and die at 13. You don't know Nairobi, you don't know Nakuru ... You want to explore; you want to meet people, but then that status of being a refugee, your alien card – you just have to beg. I have friends who went to [country] ... they sent me money to go to university. And that's how I finished my university [qualification]. If they did not do that, I will be in the camp right now ... all my life in the camp (URW).

Concurrently, the urban refugees wanted to challenge ideas about how others perceive them in the context of receiving systemic support. A participant critiqued the prevailing notion that refugees must conform to a stereotypical image of helplessness to receive assistance from organizations:

You don't have to look like a beggar for somebody to help you. That's the problem with the UN and the rest of the world. They want to see refugees as refugees in the camp ... nobody will come and help you because you don't even look helpless. You have to look helpless. Like if somebody sees me dressed up like this, they don't think I'm a refugee because I don't want to look like one. And a refugee doesn't have to be in dirty clothes or out there in the street for UNHCR to come (URW).

The woman highlighted the conflicting dynamics between asserting her agency and accessing the resources and support she needs. Additionally, she exposed the inherent biases embedded within humanitarian aid systems that assess visible markers of vulnerability within preconceived notions of helplessness and dependency over the actual experiences of urban refugees.

An urban refugee man alluded to the power dynamics and structural inequalities embedded within the refugee experience. The authorities' refusal to recognize the presence of refugees in urban areas reflects a colonial mindset that seeks to control and confine displaced populations to designated spaces, perpetuating a hierarchical system that marginalizes certain groups based on their status and identity. He expressed himself thus:

The [authorities] told me that “You are a refugee, you are not getting in Nairobi, you are for a refugee camp, you are for Kakuma.” ... I feel that you, if you are in Kenya, you are entitled to be assisted (URM).

For many, their identity formation and sense of belonging in urban spaces are determined by how Kenyans or those in their communities perceive them; they are made to feel like outsiders in their communities. The experience of being questioned about their right to be in a specific location contributes to the stigmatization, systemic barriers, and discrimination refugees experience, as related by this respondent:

You show the [alien card], they will tell you, “Yes, you're a refugee, but you should be somewhere else, not here, around here. What gives you the permission to come and stay here as student?” ... even though they know who you are, an urban refugee ... It really disadvantaged refugees' progression here (URM).

Within refugee camps, individuals often find themselves confined to predefined roles and identities, such as being in a constant state of helplessness, primarily defined by their status as displaced persons. Beyond the economic opportunities, urban environments offer greater opportunities for self-expression, social interaction, and cultural exchange, allowing urban refugees to explore and redefine their identities beyond the confines of their displacement status. Thus, the decision to leave refugee camps and pursue life in urban areas can be understood as a proactive step toward identity reconstruction and self-affirmation in the face of displacement and marginalization. Moreover, the narratives highlight the intersectional nature of identity formation, as urban refugees navigate complex layers of identity, including gender, race, nationality, and displacement status, in exploring recognition and agency within the host community.

**Figure 2: Focus Group Responses and Recommendations**



Source: Illustrated by Sherald Elly, 2022

When discussing solutions to resource allocation, safety, and freedom challenges, many suggested solutions that supported refugees, providing them with greater autonomy. Suggestions included having the South Sudanese ambassador(s) and political leaders who are connected with or living in Kenya more involved with the urban refugee population and supporting refugee-led organizations in Nairobi to make it easier for refugees to access basic services (See Figure 2). Participants also suggested that it would be beneficial to learn how neighboring countries like Uganda support refugees in general, rather than just in emergencies. Funding small-business start-ups was also a suggestion that would increase the agency of refugees and allow them to afford food rather than rely on support, reinforcing dependency.

## DISCUSSION

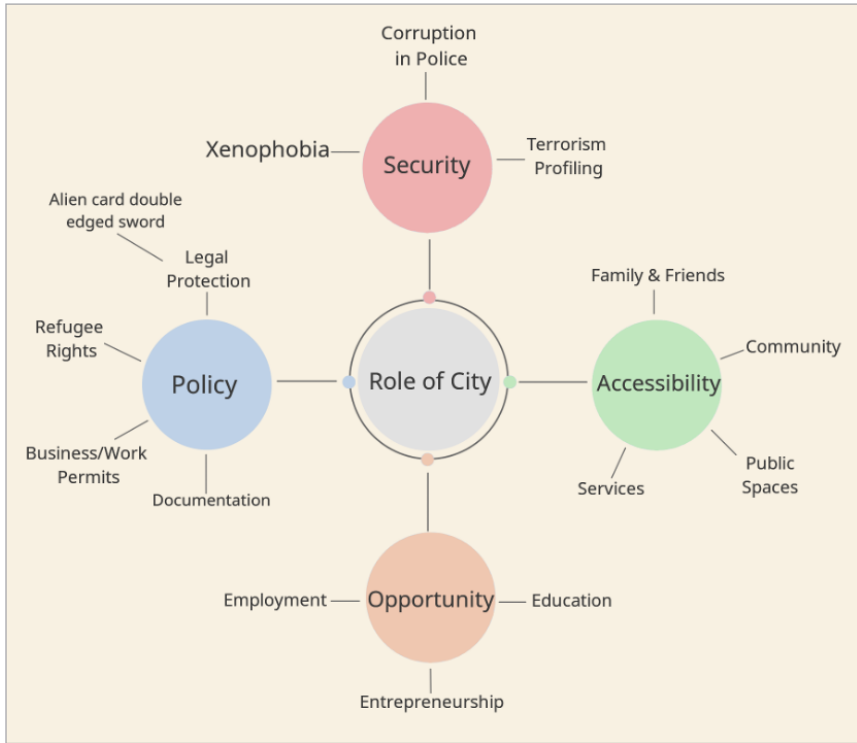
This study used postcolonial feminist and African urbanism theories to understand the experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Nairobi and Nakuru following the impacts of COVID-19 to identify areas for intervention and change. The importance of the intersecting and urban spatial nature of these issues became evident during the engagements with participants: food security has a severe impact on various dimensions of urban refugees' lives, including human dignity, social equity, and community well-being. The analysis emphasizes the systemic inequalities and policy-related structural barriers perpetuating food insecurity. Participants' narratives exemplify the complex socio-political dynamics affecting refugee experiences and varying agencies in urban settings.



Urban refugees are at the intersection of multiple power structures, including those embedded within their host communities, governmental institutions, and humanitarian organizations. While “empowerment” initiatives may aim to provide refugees with knowledge and resources to navigate their circumstances, they sometimes overlook the structural inequalities and systemic barriers that limit refugees’ ability to exercise genuine agency and autonomy. Urban refugees receive information or assistance from humanitarian organizations or government agencies that aim to “empower” them by providing knowledge about their rights, available services, or avenues for legal status. This approach may inadvertently reinforce existing power hierarchies and maintain the status quo for urban refugee youth without addressing the underlying power dynamics and structural inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization (Kerner, 2017; Bessa, 2019). This “empowerment” results in a gap between the information provided and the actual ability to access resources or exercise rights such as access to health care or education. Still they may face obstacles such as discrimination, language barriers, or lack of documentation when trying to access these services.

Similarly, they may receive information about legal pathways for obtaining residency or employment but encounter bureaucratic hurdles or hostile attitudes from authorities that prevent them from exercising these rights effectively. Thus, it is critical to consider the broader socio-political and urban spatial context (Alawneh and Mahbub, 2022) in which urban refugee youth navigate their lives. The following diagram (see Figure 3) illustrates critical sanctuary policy areas that emerged from the analysis of the focus group interviews.

**Figure 3: Emerging Sanctuary City Policy Areas**



Source: Conceptualized by Abbey Lin

This now brings the realization of the need to support urban refugees, particularly women, gender minorities, and youth, through using participatory planning that integrates concepts that may be more relevant in the localized African context and in harmony with the philosophy of ubuntu (humanity) (Bauder et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a need to reevaluate the urban role and inclusion of refugees living in cities. Emerging scholars on African urbanism highlight the city’s role as a refuge or sanctuary, referencing the contributions of urban refugee youth as co-producers of city spaces (Nyiti, 2024). While “sanctuary cities” are often used to describe policies and practices implemented by cities in the Global North to support vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers (Mascareñas and Eitel, 2019; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2020), rarely are sanctuary cities discussed or contextualized in the Global South, even though 85% of displaced people worldwide are hosted in the Global South (IRC, 2020), and the majority of displaced people worldwide live in urban spaces (IRC, 2022b). Urban municipalities can play a fundamental role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, mitigating exclusionary national policies to solve issues regarding integration, accommodation, work, and education and

reshaping the notion of citizenship itself (Bauder and Gozalex, 2018). Within this context of African urbanism, this study aimed at the co-production of knowledge with the aim of progressive impacts on the affected urban community – the South Sudanese refugees.

**Figure 4: Gender-Responsive Urban Refugee Policy Framework**



Source: Authors' own work

The pandemic revealed and exacerbated the fault lines in the refugee support system (Enns et al., 2024), highlighting a worsening of urban refugee economic status (Oyekale, 2022). It is critical to develop urban policies that reflect the insights of youth to address the risk of redrawing both visible and invisible boundaries around urban refugee populations. An adapted and contextualized sanctuary city framework could facilitate policies that give full effect to equitable socio-economic rights contained in the Kenya Refugee Act of 2021 (see Figure 4). In a recent unpublished presentation by IRC, a critical comment is that provision in the Refugee Act 2021 28(4) that states that “refugees shall be enabled to contribute to the economic and social development of Kenya” and “a refugee recognized under this Act shall have the right to engage individually or in a group, in gainful employment or enterprise, or to practice a profession or trade where he holds qualifications recognized by competent authorities in Kenya,” leaves too much room for interpretation (IRC, 2022a). Furthermore, there are still restrictions on where undocumented refugees can live, with many of the supports, policies, and laws not yet in line with the Refugee Act 2021. Kassa (2018) states that urban refugees use agency to overcome barriers and challenges, and concepts such as sanctuary cities strengthen and recognize the

agency of youth as co-producers of urban spaces and their insights for addressing challenges with an outcome of greater spatial justice for all residents (Enns, 2022).

As a form of a post-script, a new participatory phase of the research has been initiated, including urban refugee youth participants' access to a digital food social enterprise platform and ongoing engagement with political leaders and stakeholders to drive positive urban integration. The authors envision an urban future where refugees are recognized not as a burden but as valuable contributors to developing food-secure host cities, especially during periods of protracted conflict and intersecting crises such as pandemics, conflict, and climate change. William Kolong, a co-author, South Sudanese peace advocate, and focus group facilitator, shared the research study report (Enns et al., 2024) with officials from the South Sudanese and Kenyan governments, including the president's office in South Sudan. The study findings prompted immediate actions by the South Sudanese government to address some of the challenges related to documentation faced by South Sudanese urban refugees in Kenya (see Lin, 2024); a response that has the potential to be applied to other refugee groups and in different national contexts, particularly in a context of interlocking challenges or period of "polycrisis" (Janzwood and Homer-Dixon, 2022).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Historically, the UNHCR and the Kenyan government focused resources on refugees living in refugee camps, which leaves those who choose to exit the camps without much support and vulnerable to marginalization by local authorities. Before 2021, Kenya's 2006 Refugee Act required refugees to stay within camps. Still, with the proposed closure of the camps, the 2021 Refugee Act now moves away from encampments to more integrated "urban settlement areas" for refugees, including turning refugee camps into integrative refugee settlements, which poses the question of whether emerging urban structures are any different than restricting refugees within a camp (see Halakhe and Omondi, 2024). More research is required on emerging forms of containment and the continued limited agency of refugees in movement, support, and choice in urban residential locations (Leghtas and Kitenge, 2022). The concept of the city or urban communities as a camp is not new, and without a strong urban policy in line with a contextualized "sanctuary city," the walls or fences, albeit invisible, may pose an even harsher reality for refugees.

Furthermore, in Kenya, challenges such as corruption among local authorities and harsher national policies pose additional obstacles for urban refugees in these sanctuary cities (Kassa, 2018). However, integration can be strengthened through policies that help support positive experiences for migrants (Kassa, 2018). While urban sanctuary policies do not necessarily eliminate the illegalization of displaced people (Bauder, 2017), they can, if contextualized and resourced, enable refugees to cope better with their circumstances through a flexible combination of legal, scalar, and identity-formative aspects.

Finally, there is a need to listen to the stories and insights of those most affected by emerging policy and planning responses as critical in shaping more just urban structures and informing an urban framework for potentially addressing the complex, intersecting systemic barriers each urban refugee encounters. Integration of targeted support to shift the narrative from refugee support to refugee contribution is required in this period of “polycrises.” Urban refugee youth are already place-making and city-building, and local governments should look to invest in refugee youth-led organizations that have proven to be successful in similar contexts (see UNICEF, 2023; Enns and Kombe, 2023). For example, many women who participated in our research were prepared and equipped to establish a formal business to sustain an income. A simple shift to facilitate business permits more efficiently could make this a reality. Our study findings indicate the need and desire for a movement toward social integration within Kenyan communities where the benefits of urban refugees to larger society can be widely understood, and mutual respect can be established. Understanding the lived experiences of South Sudanese urban refugee youth in Nairobi and Nakuru can work toward building a foundation on which to design and implement policies and programs that protect and uphold refugee rights and promote full participation in an urban society.

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