

Women as Community Peacebuilders in Protracted Refugee Settings: A Mixed-Methods Study from Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda

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Abstract: Protracted refugee settlements are often portrayed as spaces of vulnerability, humanitarian dependency, and recurring conflict. However, less attention has been paid to the everyday community processes through which displaced and host populations negotiate coexistence and sustain social relationships. This article examines how refugee and host-community women contribute to community peacebuilding and social cohesion in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda. Using a mixed-methods design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, structured questionnaires, participant observation, and document analysis involving South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan host-community women and men. The findings indicate that participants perceived women as important actors in shaping community dynamics through informal practices, including caregiving and motherhood, information sharing and mediation, psychosocial and spiritual support, participation in community structures, and relationship-building across refugee and host communities. Participants associated these practices with trust-building, social cohesion, and the management of everyday tensions. However, the study does not measure direct peace outcomes or establish causal effects.

Women's community engagement was also shaped by gendered social norms, unequal access to education and economic resources, and limited recognition within formal humanitarian and peacebuilding structures. The article argues that understanding peacebuilding in protracted refugee settings requires greater attention to the informal institutions and everyday practices through which communities manage tensions and sustain social relationships. It contributes to scholarship on everyday peace and gender-responsive peacebuilding by demonstrating how women's context-shaped roles and relationships intersect with informal community processes in a protracted refugee-hosting setting. The findings underscore the importance of recognising women's informal leadership while addressing the structural constraints that limit their participation in formal peacebuilding processes.

Keywords: Community dynamics; community peacebuilding; everyday peace; refugee settlements; women; social cohesion; community resilience; Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing scale and duration of forced displacement have transformed refugee settlements into complex social spaces where displaced and host communities must negotiate coexistence under conditions of prolonged uncertainty. While humanitarian responses have traditionally focused on protection, emergency assistance, and service delivery, protracted displacement presents challenges that extend beyond material needs to include maintaining social cohesion, trust, and peaceful community relations. Refugee settlements are therefore not only humanitarian spaces but also dynamic social environments in which everyday interactions shape community resilience, conflict transformation, and sustainable peace. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that understanding community dynamics is essential for designing humanitarian responses that move beyond emergency relief towards strengthening locally driven

peacebuilding and social resilience (Donovan, 2023; Edler, Krause, & Segadlo, 2024).

Globally, forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with 123.2 million people forcibly displaced by the end of 2024 due to conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing public order. Despite increased voluntary returns in some contexts, millions of refugees continue to live in protracted displacement with limited opportunities for durable solutions (UNHCR, 2025). In such contexts, refugee and host communities often compete for scarce resources, including land, water, employment, education, healthcare, and natural resources, creating conditions that may generate social tensions if not effectively managed. (Dawa 2019) Yet, alongside these challenges, communities also develop local mechanisms that facilitate coexistence, rebuild trust, and reduce conflict. These informal processes, often embedded within everyday social interactions, remain significantly underrepresented in both humanitarian programming and academic literature, which continues to privilege institutional and formal peacebuilding

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interventions over community-driven approaches (Mac Ginty, 2021; Edler *et al.*, 2024).

Uganda provides an important context for examining these dynamics. The country hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world and the largest in Africa, with approximately 2.03 million refugees and asylum seekers as of June 2026, the majority originating from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan (UNHCR 2026). Uganda has gained international recognition for its progressive refugee policy, which promotes refugee self-reliance by granting refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, access to land for cultivation, and inclusion in national education and health systems. Unlike encampment policies adopted in many refugee-hosting countries, Uganda's settlement approach allows refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, access to land for cultivation, and inclusion in national education and health systems, thereby encouraging continuous interaction between refugees and host communities rather than physical separation (Government of Uganda, 2006; Government of Uganda, 2010; UNHCR, 2024).

This policy has been widely recognised internationally as a progressive model for refugee inclusion because it promotes refugee self-reliance while integrating refugee responses into local development planning. However, the rapid increase in Uganda's refugee population has placed considerable pressure on land, natural resources, public infrastructure, livelihoods, and social services in refugee-hosting districts, including Yumbe District in the West Nile region, where large refugee populations coexist with relatively resource-constrained host communities. These pressures have heightened the importance of strengthening social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and community-based peacebuilding as integral components of refugee governance and sustainable development (World Bank, 2022; UNHCR, 2024; World Bank, 2026; Dawa, 2018). Consequently, maintaining peaceful relationships, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting community-led peacebuilding have become increasingly important dimensions of refugee governance, humanitarian response, and sustainable community development. Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, established in 2016 following renewed conflict in South Sudan, exemplifies these complexities. Within a short period, the settlement became one of the largest refugee settlements globally, accommodating predominantly South Sudanese refugees alongside

Ugandan host communities. The rapid population growth increased competition over livelihoods, firewood, water, grazing land, and public services, while simultaneously creating new opportunities for social interaction and economic exchange. As this study shows, peaceful coexistence in Bidibidi has depended not only on humanitarian assistance or formal governance structures but also on the everyday actions of community members who continuously negotiate relationships, resolve disputes, and strengthen social ties.

Women occupy a particularly significant, yet often overlooked, position within community peacebuilding processes. The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000 marked a turning point in international recognition of women's roles in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, peace negotiations, humanitarian response, and post-conflict recovery (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2000). Since then, the WPS agenda has been strengthened through subsequent Security Council resolutions, including UNSCRs 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), and 2242 (2015), which collectively call for women's meaningful participation in peace and security decision-making, the protection of women and girls from conflict-related violence, and the integration of gender perspectives across peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions (UNSC, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). These commitments are reinforced by broader international normative frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995), and CEDAW General Recommendation No. 30, which emphasises States' obligations to ensure women's participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW Committee], 2013). Collectively, these frameworks have transformed global discourse by recognising women not only as those disproportionately affected by conflict but also as essential actors in building sustainable peace.

Despite these normative advances, implementation has remained uneven. Research consistently demonstrates that women's participation continues to be measured primarily through representation in formal peace negotiations, political institutions, and

humanitarian governance structures, while their contributions through informal community institutions and everyday peace practices receive comparatively limited scholarly and policy attention (Donovan, 2023; Tripp, Maiga, & Yahi, 2025). This emphasis on formal participation has resulted in a significant knowledge gap regarding how women contribute to peacebuilding within refugee settlements through the everyday practices that sustain social cohesion, strengthen community resilience, and facilitate peaceful coexistence. It is this gap that the present study seeks to address.

Existing scholarship has extensively documented the disproportionate impacts of armed conflict on women, including displacement, gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, increased caregiving responsibilities, and social exclusion (Sjoberg, 2014; Cockburn, 2001; D'Awol, 2011). Equally, a growing body of literature demonstrates that women frequently assume expanded social and economic responsibilities during conflict and displacement, becoming heads of households, caregivers, community organisers, and local leaders. However, much of this literature continues to conceptualise women either as victims of conflict or as participants in formal peace processes, leaving comparatively little attention to the everyday practices through which women sustain peaceful coexistence within displaced communities (Donovan, 2023; Tripp, Maiga, & Yahi, 2025).

Recent scholarship on everyday peace offers an important lens for understanding these informal processes. Rather than viewing peacebuilding exclusively through formal agreements, institutions, or externally led interventions, everyday peace highlights the routine social practices through which individuals and communities manage tensions, negotiate differences, and maintain peaceful relationships despite structural inequalities and ongoing insecurity (Mac Ginty, 2021; Edler *et al.*, 2024). These practices often occur through informal social institutions such as families, neighbourhood networks, faith communities, markets, savings groups, and local associations. Within refugee settings, where formal governance mechanisms are frequently constrained, these community-level interactions become critical for strengthening resilience and sustaining social cohesion.

This article builds on these emerging debates by examining how South Sudanese refugee and Ugandan host-community women contribute to community

dynamics in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. Drawing on a mixed-methods study involving qualitative and quantitative data collected from refugee and host-community women and men, the article demonstrates that women contribute to community peacebuilding through interconnected forms of everyday practice. These include caregiving and motherhood, information sharing and mediation, psychosocial and spiritual support, participation in community peace structures, and relationship-building across refugee and host communities. Collectively, these practices strengthen trust, facilitate conflict prevention, and reinforce social cohesion despite the structural challenges of prolonged displacement. These findings align with the study's original evidence identifying motherhood, information sharing, inter-community relationships, and psychosocial support as central mechanisms through which women contribute to peacebuilding in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement.

This article argues that understanding community dynamics in refugee settings requires moving beyond conventional portrayals of women as beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance towards recognising them as active producers of community resilience and everyday peace. In doing so, it makes three contributions to scholarship. First, it contributes to research on community dynamics by demonstrating how informal social practices shape peaceful coexistence in protracted refugee settings. Second, it advances refugee studies by highlighting the agency of both refugee and host-community women in strengthening social cohesion through everyday interactions. Third, it contributes to debates on gender-responsive peacebuilding by showing that sustainable peace depends not only on women's participation in formal institutions but also on recognising and supporting the informal community processes through which trust, cooperation, and collective resilience are continuously negotiated.

The following section reviews contemporary scholarship on community dynamics, everyday peace, women's informal peacebuilding, and refugee community resilience. The mixed-methods research design and methodology employed in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement are then documented, and the findings are examined in the diverse ways in which refugee and host-community women contribute to community peacebuilding through everyday practices. Finally, the discussion situates these findings within broader debates on community dynamics, gender-responsive peacebuilding, and refugee governance, and outlines

implications for humanitarian policy, community practice, and future research.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Dynamics and Everyday Peace in Refugee Settings

Contemporary peacebuilding scholarship has increasingly shifted from viewing peace as the outcome of formal political agreements towards understanding peace as an everyday social process negotiated through ordinary interactions within communities. This shift reflects growing recognition that communities affected by conflict possess their own capacities, institutions, and social practices that enable them to manage tensions and rebuild relationships despite ongoing insecurity. Rather than focusing exclusively on elite negotiations or state-led interventions, recent scholarship highlights the importance of examining how peace is continuously produced through everyday encounters between individuals, families, and community groups (Mac Ginty, 2021; Ware, Ware, & Kelly, 2026).

The concept of everyday peace has emerged as an important analytical framework within critical peace studies. It refers to the routine strategies that ordinary people employ to minimise conflict, negotiate differences, and sustain peaceful coexistence in societies affected by violence. These strategies are often subtle and informal, including acts of cooperation, reciprocal support, conflict avoidance, mediation, information sharing, and relationship-building. Rather than eliminating structural inequalities, everyday peace enables communities to continue functioning despite persistent social, political, or economic tensions (Mac Ginty, 2021; Longba'am-Alli, 2025; Friedman, 2026). This perspective is particularly relevant to refugee settlements, where displaced populations and host communities live together over extended periods while sharing limited resources. Humanitarian responses have traditionally prioritised service delivery, protection, and institutional governance. Although these interventions remain essential, they often overlook the informal social relationships that determine whether communities coexist peacefully day-to-day. Emerging research argues that sustainable peace cannot be understood solely through formal governance structures but must also consider the everyday interactions through which trust, reciprocity, and cooperation are continuously negotiated (Ware *et al.*, 2026). The emphasis on everyday peace complements

Lederach's (1997; 2003) understanding of peacebuilding as a long-term relational process. Lederach argues that sustainable peace depends on rebuilding relationships across all levels of society rather than concentrating exclusively on political settlements. While his work remains foundational, recent scholarship extends this perspective by demonstrating that everyday peace practices collectively contribute to an essential yet frequently overlooked dimension of community resilience in conflict-affected settings (Friedman, 2026). In other words, peacebuilding is a daily-life practice rather than a planned action.

Community Peacebuilding and Local Agency

The "*local turn*" in peacebuilding has fundamentally challenged assumptions that sustainable peace can be externally designed and implemented. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises local communities as active agents capable of developing context-specific mechanisms for conflict prevention, reconciliation, and collective action. Community peacebuilding therefore extends beyond formal peace agreements to encompass the social relationships, local institutions, and collective practices that strengthen resilience and facilitate peaceful coexistence (Donovan, 2023). This concept is very relevant to refugee settings. Within these communities, peacebuilding frequently occurs through informal mechanisms embedded in everyday social life. Rather than relying exclusively on formal governance structures, communities often draw upon locally embedded institutions, including religious organisations, savings groups, neighbourhood associations, women's groups, youth groups, traditional leaders, and community volunteers, to prevent violence, resolve disputes, and rebuild social relationships. Lederach (1997; 2005) argues that sustainable peace emerges from relationships that are nurtured within communities rather than imposed through elite political settlements. Similarly, Galtung (1996) conceptualises positive peace as extending beyond the absence of violence to include the social conditions that enable justice, cooperation, and harmonious coexistence. These perspectives suggest that informal community institutions play an essential role in sustaining peace, particularly where state institutions and humanitarian systems have limited reach.

African peacebuilding scholarship has also recognised the importance of local actors. Issifu (2016) argues that local peace committees constitute an

important but frequently overlooked mechanism for conflict prevention because they provide accessible, culturally legitimate spaces for dialogue and mediation. Likewise, Nwapa (1992, 1995a, 1995b) demonstrates that African women have historically exercised peacebuilding roles through kinship networks, women's associations, and traditional institutions that facilitate reconciliation and collective problem-solving. These informal structures frequently operate outside formal political institutions but remain central to maintaining social cohesion and resolving disputes at the community level. Evidence from refugee contexts similarly demonstrates that informal institutions often provide more trusted and accessible mechanisms for peacebuilding than formal governance structures. In Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, for example, women formed church groups, savings associations, peace clubs, and market networks that enabled them to provide psychosocial support, mediate family disputes, share information, and strengthen relationships between refugee and host communities (Dawa interview notes, 2018). These community spaces functioned as informal peace infrastructures through which women mobilised collective action and promoted peaceful coexistence, despite receiving limited recognition within formal humanitarian programming.

Recent empirical studies reinforce these observations. Research conducted in informal settlements in Kenya found that women frequently relied on informal support networks rather than officially recognised peace committees because these networks were perceived as more trustworthy, responsive, and socially legitimate (Edler, Krause, & Segadlo, 2024). Similarly, Donovan (2023) argues that locally embedded community institutions often possess greater legitimacy than externally designed peacebuilding mechanisms because they are rooted in everyday social relationships and shared community experiences. These findings suggest that community peacebuilding is shaped not only by institutional design but also by trust, reciprocity, and social legitimacy.

These insights resonate strongly with refugee settlements in Uganda, where peaceful coexistence depends not only on humanitarian governance but also on community-led initiatives that enable refugees and host communities to negotiate everyday interactions. Earlier work on conflict dynamics in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement identified competition over natural resources, livelihoods, and access to services as key drivers of tension between refugee and host communities, while simultaneously highlighting the

importance of locally driven conflict transformation initiatives in mitigating these pressures (Dawa, 2018). Building on this evidence, the present study argues that community resilience is strengthened through continuous social engagement and the everyday peace practices undertaken by women within informal community institutions. Rather than functioning as passive beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance, women emerge as active community peacebuilders whose informal leadership contributes significantly to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

For the purposes of this study, community peacebuilding refers to the locally embedded practices, relationships, and informal or formal community mechanisms through which people prevent or manage tensions, address disputes, maintain social relationships, and support peaceful coexistence within and between refugee and host communities. This definition distinguishes peacebuilding from social support or resilience alone by focusing on practices that participants associated with preventing tensions, facilitating communication, mediating disputes, rebuilding relationships, or enabling cooperation across community boundaries. Accordingly, caregiving, information sharing, savings groups, faith-based activities, and psychosocial support are treated as peacebuilding mechanisms only where participants linked them to these relational, preventive, or conflict-management functions.

Women, Peace and Security Beyond Formal Peace Processes

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was established through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2000. This landmark resolution, together with subsequent resolutions, including UNSCRs 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, and 2242, emphasises women's participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery. These international commitments are further reinforced by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), including its Optional Protocol and General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention and post-conflict situations. Since its adoption, the WPS agenda has generated substantial policy and scholarly attention to women's participation in peacebuilding. Despite these advances, however, implementation has remained uneven. Women continue to be underrepresented in formal peace

negotiations and decision-making structures, while grassroots forms of peacebuilding often receive limited institutional recognition. Donovan (2023) argues that contemporary peacebuilding has increasingly recognised women as agents of peace, although this recognition has not consistently translated into meaningful influence within formal institutions.

A growing body of scholarship therefore calls for an understanding of the WPS agenda that extends beyond women's formal political participation to include their everyday contributions within families, neighbourhoods, faith communities, and local organisations. Tripp, Maiga, and Yahi (2025) argue that women's local peacebuilding can transform communities through care, mediation, solidarity, and collective organisation rather than solely through participation in elite negotiations. Similarly, Friedman (2026) demonstrates how women's inter-communal care networks can function as infrastructures that sustain cooperation beyond the formal resolution of conflict. These perspectives also resonate with African scholarship recognising women's roles as caregivers, mediators, educators, and custodians of social relationships within communities (Cheldelin & Mutisi, 2016, p. 256). Together, these studies suggest that women's contributions to peacebuilding may be exercised through informal and relational spaces that are not always captured by conventional measures of political participation or formal peace processes.

A gender-sensitive analysis of women's peacebuilding must nevertheless avoid treating women as inherently peaceful or assuming that women's participation automatically produces positive peace outcomes. Women are not a homogeneous category, and their agency is shaped by the social, economic, cultural, political, and institutional contexts in which they live and act. Gendered responsibilities may create opportunities for women to mediate disputes, mobilise social support, exchange information, and sustain relationships, but these same social positions may also reproduce unequal expectations, constrain women's choices, or place disproportionate responsibility for community welfare on women. Women may therefore contribute to peacebuilding in particular contexts while also reproducing existing social norms or, under certain circumstances, contributing to conflict dynamics. The analytical focus, therefore, should not be on whether women are inherently more peaceful than men, but on how gendered social positions create particular opportunities, constraints, and forms of agency within specific contexts.

This study adopts this context-sensitive approach to examine how women's everyday roles and relationships shape their engagement in community peacebuilding in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. Rather than assuming that women's participation is inherently transformative, the study examines how participants understood women's contributions through caregiving, information sharing, mediation, psychosocial and spiritual support, and relationship-building between refugee and host communities. The study therefore approaches women's peacebuilding as situated, relational, and context-dependent, while recognising that these practices may support peaceful coexistence without necessarily constituting measurable peace outcomes.

Refugee Governance and Community Resilience

Refugee governance has increasingly shifted from emergency humanitarian assistance towards longer-term approaches emphasising self-reliance, resilience, and social inclusion. Uganda's refugee policy has become internationally recognised for promoting integration between refugee and host communities through access to land, employment, education, and public services. While this approach creates opportunities for shared development, it also requires communities to manage the social tensions associated with prolonged displacement. Recent scholarship argues that refugee governance should be understood not only as the administration of humanitarian services but also as the governance of social relationships. Sengul, Demir, and Sahin (2022) argue that refugee women should not be viewed solely through protection frameworks but also as participants in peacebuilding whose agency bridges humanitarian protection and community governance. Similarly, research on the gender-resilience nexus suggests that resilience is strengthened when peacebuilding processes recognise women's expertise, leadership, and community engagement rather than focusing exclusively on vulnerability (Aggestam & Holmgren, 2022). These perspectives suggest that effective refugee governance depends not only on institutional capacity but also on strengthening local capacities that enable communities to manage conflict, rebuild trust, and foster peaceful coexistence.

Informal Institutions and the Knowledge Gap

Existing scholarship establishes that everyday peace is produced through routine interactions and locally embedded practices through which people

navigate tensions, maintain relationships, and create spaces for non-violent coexistence (Mac Ginty, 2014, 2021; Ware, Ware, & Kelly, 2021). This literature has therefore moved beyond formal peace agreements and institutional peacebuilding to recognise the agency of ordinary people and the importance of hyperlocal social practices. However, everyday peace scholarship does not necessarily foreground the gendered organisation of these practices or the specific institutional spaces through which women exercise such agency.

Research on women and peacebuilding similarly demonstrates that women's contributions frequently occur at the local level through family relationships, community networks, mediation, social support, and other forms of informal engagement. At the same time, women's participation beyond immediate social relations can be constrained by institutional, economic, cultural, and social barriers (Justino, Mitchell, & Müller, 2018). This suggests that women's informal peacebuilding should not be understood simply as an alternative to formal peacebuilding, but as a form of agency shaped by the social roles, resources, relationships, and constraints within which women operate.

Refugee settings add a further dimension to this debate. Protracted displacement creates environments in which refugee and host communities interact around livelihoods, services, markets, social institutions, and community governance. Existing research on Bidibidi has documented tensions associated with resource competition, livelihoods, and access to services, as well as the importance of local conflict-management mechanisms. However, less attention has been given to how women navigate these refugee-host relationships through interconnected everyday practices and informal institutions. The question is therefore not simply whether women participate in peacebuilding, but how their everyday roles connect different social spaces and relationships within a refugee-hosting environment.

This study addresses this gap through a mixed-methods examination of South Sudanese refugee and Ugandan host-community women and men in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. Rather than treating caregiving, information sharing, mediation, psychosocial support, and relationship-building as separate activities, the study examines how participants understood these practices as interconnected forms of community peacebuilding. The study therefore contributes empirically by documenting how women's everyday

practices operate within a specific protracted refugee setting, and conceptually by examining these interconnected practices as an informal form of community peace infrastructure.

The study does not claim that these practices are unique to Bidibidi or absent from previous everyday-peace scholarship. Rather, it shows how established ideas about everyday peace are expressed through gendered social roles and informal institutions within a refugee-host community context. In doing so, the study brings together three dimensions that are often examined separately: everyday peace, women's informal peacebuilding, and refugee-host community relations.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory mixed-methods case study, informed by constructivist and participatory principles, to examine how refugee and host-community women contribute to community peacebuilding and social cohesion in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda. It enabled the integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence and provided both breadth and depth in understanding community dynamics within a complex humanitarian setting.

Combining multiple methods allowed the study to explore participants' lived experiences while also identifying broader patterns relating to women's participation in community peacebuilding. The research employed an exploratory design within a constructivist worldview, recognising that perceptions of peace, conflict, and community relationships are socially constructed and shaped by participants' experiences and interactions, incorporating principles drawn from action research. Rather than treating participants solely as research subjects, the study sought to engage refugee and host-community members as contributors to knowledge generation and reflection on community peacebuilding. The participatory component informed the design of community discussions and the subsequent validation of findings.

Study Site

The research was conducted in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe District, north-western Uganda. Established in 2016 following renewed conflict in South Sudan, Bidibidi rapidly became one of the world's largest refugee settlements, hosting predominantly

Table 1: Participant composition by data collection methods.

Method	Total	Women	Men	Refugees	Host community
Survey	94	44	50	60	34
Key informants	18	10	8	10	8
FGDs	42	30	12	10	32
Semi-structured interviews	12	8	4	8	4
Total	166	92	74	88	78

Table 2: Distribution of participants by study area and data collection methods.

Study area/zone	Survey	FGD	Interviews	Key informants	Total
Zone -1	20	3	3	3	29
Zone -2	20	3	3	3	29
Zone -3	20	4	2	4	30
Host community	34	32	4	8	78
Total	94	42	12	18	166

South Sudanese refugees alongside Ugandan host communities. The settlement is organised into five administrative zones comprising clusters and villages governed through Refugee Welfare Councils that parallel Uganda's local government structures. At the time of the study, the settlement hosted an estimated 285,000 refugees, making it an important site for examining community interactions in contexts of protracted displacement.

For this study, Zones 1, 2 and 3 were purposively selected as they accommodate multi-ethnic refugee populations and serve as zones of regular contact between displaced and host groups. Zone 1 also serves as the reception area for newly arriving refugees, creating opportunities to observe from inception the processes through which social relationships, trust, and community cohesion are negotiated in everyday life.

Participant Selection

The study used purposive sampling to recruit participants with direct knowledge or experience of community life, conflict, gender relations, and peacebuilding in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement and surrounding host communities. The study included South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan host-community members, women and men, and participants occupying different social and institutional positions, including community leaders, refugee leaders, local government officials, humanitarian

practitioners, religious leaders, and civil society representatives.

A total of 166 participants took part in the study: 94 survey respondents, 18 key informants, 42 participants in four focus group discussions (FGDs), and 12 semi-structured interview participants. Key informants were purposively selected based on their institutional responsibilities and knowledge of refugee governance, humanitarian response, protection, gender, and peacebuilding. Community participants were approached through refugee leadership structures, community leaders, women's groups, and other locally recognised community networks.

Participants were eligible if they were aged 18 years or older, were either refugees or members of the host community in the study area, had sufficient experience or knowledge of community dynamics, and provided informed consent. Individuals without relevant knowledge or connection to the study setting, those unable to provide informed consent, or those for whom participation presented significant safety or confidentiality concerns were excluded.

Participants were distributed across the selected settlement zones and host-community areas to capture variation in refugee–host relations and community experiences. The composition of the participant groups and distribution across study areas are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 presents the composition of the 166 study participants across the four data collection methods. Women constituted 92 participants, compared with 74 men, while 88 participants were refugees and 78 were from the host community. The distribution reflects the study's inclusion of both gender and refugee–host perspectives across the different methods, enabling the analysis to draw on diverse experiences of community peacebuilding and social relations.

The four FGDs comprised 42 participants, with group composition determined by gender, refugee/host status, and study objectives to facilitate open discussion. The use of surveys, FGDs, interviews, and key informant interviews enabled triangulation of participants' experiences and institutional perspectives.

Table 3: Distribution of participants by age.

Age category	Participants	%
18-24	15	9.0%
25-34	65	39%
35-44	55	33.1%
45+	31	18.7%
Total	166	100%

Table 3 presents the age distribution of the 166 study participants. Participants aged 25–34 constituted the largest age group, with 65 participants (39.0%), followed by those aged 35–44, with 55 participants (33.1%). Together, these groups represented 72.3% of the sample. Participants aged 45 years and above accounted for 31 participants (18.7%), while those aged 18–24 comprised 15 participants (9.0%). The distribution therefore provides representation across different stages of adulthood, although the findings should be interpreted descriptively and not as representative of all age groups in Bidibidi.

Data Collection

Data were collected using multiple complementary methods to enable triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** provided in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions of conflict, and understandings of women's peacebuilding roles. The flexible interview format enabled participants to discuss issues that they considered important

while allowing the researcher to probe emerging themes.

2. **Focus group discussions (FGDs):** were conducted with refugee and host-community participants to explore collective understandings of conflict, peaceful coexistence, and women's contributions to community life. Group discussions facilitated reflection on shared experiences while highlighting differences across gender and community groups.
3. **Key informant interviews:** generated institutional perspectives from government officials, humanitarian agencies, refugee leaders, and civil society organisations. These interviews provided contextual information on refugee governance, humanitarian programming, and the structural factors influencing women's participation in peacebuilding.
4. **Structured questionnaires:** were administered to refugee and host-community participants to collect quantitative data. The survey captured demographic characteristics and participants' perceptions of women's roles, barriers to participation, and community peacebuilding activities, allowing qualitative findings to be interpreted alongside descriptive quantitative evidence.
5. **Participant observation:** The researcher also employed participant observation, taking part in community activities and engaging directly with participants throughout the fieldwork process. This enabled observation of community interactions, leadership practices, and everyday social relationships that were not always evident through interviews alone. Field notes were maintained throughout the research to support interpretation of the qualitative findings.

Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed separately before being integrated during interpretation. Qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, observational notes, and documentary evidence were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Initial coding identified recurring concepts related to women's community roles, conflict prevention, social cohesion, informal leadership, and community resilience. Codes were then grouped into

broader themes reflecting participants' experiences of everyday peacebuilding. Integrating multiple qualitative sources enabled comparisons across refugee and host communities and strengthened the interpretation of the findings.

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations. These analyses provided an overview of participants' perceptions regarding women's participation in community peacebuilding and supported the interpretation of qualitative findings. Integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence facilitated methodological triangulation, strengthening the robustness of the study's conclusions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several measures were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Methodological triangulation was achieved through multiple data collection methods and diverse participant groups. The combination of interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, participant observation, documentary review, and institutional perspectives enabled the researcher to compare findings across different sources and strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Daily debriefing sessions with the trained research team also supported consistency in data collection and allowed emerging issues to be addressed during fieldwork.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through Durban University of Technology research ethics procedures, and permission to conduct fieldwork was secured from the Office of the Prime Minister, Yumbe District Local Government, and other relevant authorities responsible for refugee management. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Data were securely stored throughout the research process, and identifying information was removed during analysis and reporting. Particular attention was given to conducting the research sensitively, recognising that many participants had experienced conflict, displacement, and trauma.

Conceptualising Community Peacebuilding

This study understands community peacebuilding as a bottom-up process embedded in everyday

community life. Drawing on scholarship on everyday peace, community peacebuilding refers here to the everyday, locally embedded practices through which individuals, families and community groups prevent or manage tensions, facilitate communication, maintain relationships across social divisions, and create opportunities for cooperation and reconciliation in conflict-affected settings. This understanding is informed particularly by Mac Ginty's conceptualisation of everyday peace as the actions, communication and social practices through which ordinary people navigate everyday life in deeply divided or conflict-affected societies. Such practices may constitute important building blocks of wider peace formation, even when they do not resemble formal peace processes or institutional peacebuilding interventions.

The study distinguishes community peacebuilding from related concepts including social cohesion, resilience, coexistence and peace infrastructure. Social cohesion refers primarily to the quality of relationships and connections within and between groups; resilience concerns the capacity of individuals and communities to cope with and adapt to adversity; coexistence describes the ability of groups to live alongside one another without necessarily implying deeper transformation of relationships; and peace infrastructure generally refers to more sustained structures, institutions or platforms that support dialogue and conflict management. These concepts may therefore interact with community peacebuilding but are not treated as synonymous with it.

In this study, an everyday activity is considered relevant to community peacebuilding where it performs a conflict-relevant function. Specifically, activities are analysed as peacebuilding practices when participants report that they help prevent the escalation of tensions, facilitate communication between groups, mediate or manage disputes, strengthen relationships across social divisions, build trust and reciprocity, or create opportunities for non-violent cooperation and reconciliation. This approach prevents ordinary forms of social support from being automatically classified as peacebuilding and instead focuses on the mechanisms through which particular practices may contribute to managing conflict and sustaining peaceful social relations.

Accordingly, caregiving, information sharing, psychosocial support and savings groups are not treated as inherently peacebuilding activities. Their relevance to peacebuilding depends on how

participants describe their functions within the refugee and host-community context. For example, caregiving may constitute a peacebuilding practice where it creates opportunities for communication, mediation or relationship-building; information sharing may contribute to peacebuilding where it facilitates early communication around tensions or connects actors who can address disputes; and savings groups may have peacebuilding significance where collective economic activities create trust, reciprocity, cross-community relationships or spaces for collective problem-solving. The analysis therefore focuses not only on what women do, but on how and under what conditions these everyday practices are perceived to influence relationships and the management of conflict.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings relating to the first research objective: to examine the roles and capacities of women in conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda. The analysis draws on qualitative and quantitative data generated through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and participant observation. Rather than treating women as passive beneficiaries of humanitarian interventions, this study analyses their everyday peacebuilding practices as an important unit of analysis. This analytical lens enables a deeper understanding of how women exercise agency in preventing, managing, and transforming tensions and conflicts within refugee and host communities, while recognising that such agency is shaped by the social, cultural, economic, and institutional contexts in which women live and interact.

The findings indicate that participants associated women's contributions to peacebuilding with multiple interconnected social, cultural, and relational practices embedded in everyday community life. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: (1) motherhood and childcare; (2) information sharing, mediation, and community communication; (3) psychosocial and spiritual support; and (4) intermarriage as an occasional social bridge between refugee and host communities. The relative prominence of these themes varied across the quantitative and qualitative data. Motherhood and childcare, information sharing and communication, and psychosocial and spiritual support were more frequently reported, while intermarriage, identified by 10% of survey respondents, emerged as a less frequently reported but qualitatively significant form of

relationship-building across community boundaries. These findings suggest that participants understood women's peacebuilding contributions as extending beyond formal mediation processes to include informal, community-based practices through which communication, social relationships, and peaceful coexistence were supported.

The findings further indicate that women occupied a significant, although often under-recognised, position in everyday interactions within and between refugee and host communities. Across participant accounts, women were described as responding to family disputes, neighbourhood disagreements, and interpersonal tensions, sometimes intervening before conflicts escalated into wider community disputes. These roles were closely connected to women's everyday responsibilities, social relationships, and participation in community spaces. The findings therefore suggest that women's contributions to peacebuilding were context-dependent and embedded within the social, cultural, economic, and institutional environments in which they lived and interacted. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship on everyday peace, which draws attention to the routine practices through which individuals and communities navigate tensions and sustain non-violent coexistence in conflict-affected settings (Mac Ginty, 2014; Lederach, 1997; Richmond, 2011).

Quantitative findings complement these qualitative insights by showing the relative prominence of roles that participants associated with women's contributions to peacebuilding. Respondents identified four principal areas of women's engagement: motherhood and childcare (40%), information sharing and community communication (30%), psychosocial and spiritual support (20%), and intermarriage as a mechanism for reconciliation and social integration (10%). These percentages should be understood as participants' perceptions of the ways in which women contributed to peacebuilding, rather than as measures of the direct outcomes or effectiveness of these activities.

The qualitative findings provide further insight into how participants understood these roles as peacebuilding mechanisms. Importantly, the categories were not mutually exclusive. Women's caregiving responsibilities, for example, were described as creating opportunities for information exchange, emotional and psychosocial support, mediation, and relationship-building between refugee and host communities. Similarly, communication and

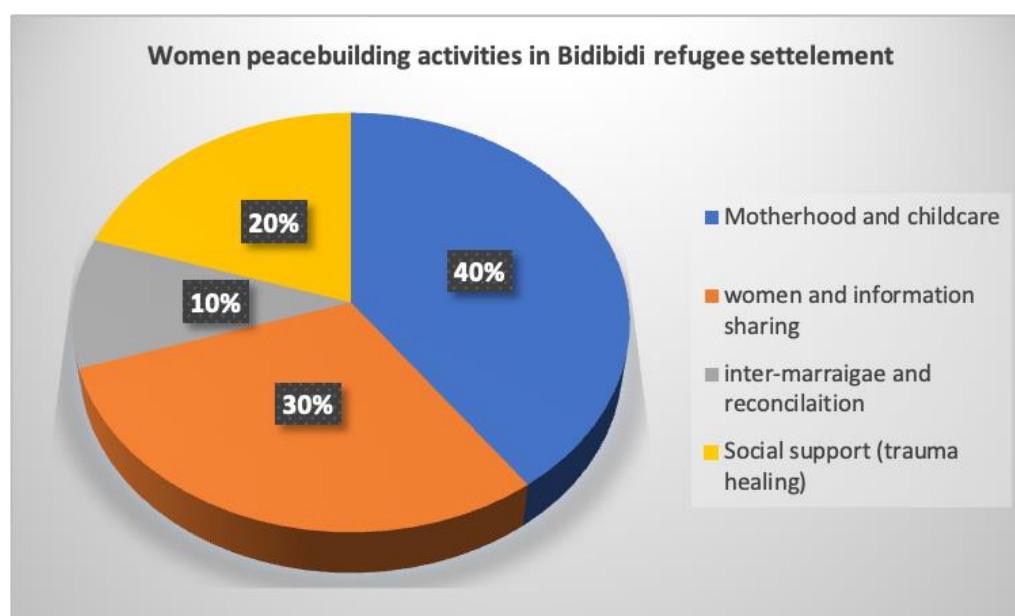


Figure 1: Pie chart showing responses (represented as percentages) on women's actions that led to peaceful coexistence by themes. (Source: own data).

information-sharing were reported as enabling women to identify tensions, connect individuals and households, and facilitate dialogue around emerging disputes.

Participants also associated women's psychosocial and spiritual support with processes of coping, reconciliation, and restoration of social relationships. Intermarriage was described less frequently, but where it occurred, participants perceived it as creating social and kinship connections between individuals and families from different community backgrounds. Given that only 10% of survey respondents identified intermarriage as a peacebuilding mechanism, this finding is better understood as an occasional but qualitatively meaningful form of social bridging rather than a widespread mechanism of women's peacebuilding. These accounts demonstrate how participants perceived such practices to contribute to peacebuilding; they do not, in themselves, establish a measurable reduction in conflict or demonstrate causal effects on peace outcomes.

Taken together, the findings indicate that participants perceived women's peacebuilding engagement as largely relational, preventative, and embedded in everyday community life. Rather than being confined to formal peace agreements or institutional mechanisms, women were reported to contribute through practices that may foster trust, facilitate communication, provide psychosocial support,

strengthen social relationships, and create opportunities for reconciliation. These findings highlight the ways in which women socially situated roles and relationships may create opportunities for everyday peacebuilding, while recognising that such roles are neither inherently peaceful nor uniformly experienced across women. Further outcome-level evidence would be required to establish whether, and to what extent, these practices result in sustained reductions in conflict or other measurable peace outcomes.

Motherhood and Childcare as Peace Infrastructure

Motherhood and childcare emerged as the most frequently reported way in which participants understood women to contribute to peacebuilding. Forty per cent of survey respondents identified motherhood and childcare as women's most important contribution to peaceful coexistence within the settlement. These findings reflect participants' perceptions of women's roles rather than a direct measure of peace outcomes.

Participants consistently described mothers as children's primary caregivers and important transmitters of social values, including respect for elders, cooperation, responsibility, and non-violent behaviour. One participant explained:

"In those days, women would be the ones taking care and training children with good moral especially in relation to respecting elders, women are left at home

as guards to take care of the home and the man knew the woman was there to keep the children and households safe, you did have to mind of what would happen if you went hunting and digging all day.” (Interview, 11 August 2018)

This account illustrates how participants understood women's caregiving responsibilities as extending beyond meeting children's immediate needs to include moral and social education and the maintenance of household relationships. The emphasis on teaching respect and appropriate social behaviour suggests a perceived pathway through which caregiving may contribute to longer-term patterns of peaceful interaction. In this sense, the relevance of motherhood to peacebuilding lies not in caregiving itself, but in the socialisation, relationship-building, and conflict-management functions that participants associated with women's caregiving roles.

This finding is consistent with Arabi (2011: 195) and Maina (2016: 192), who discuss women's caregiving responsibilities towards relatives and children during periods of war. The qualitative accounts in this study similarly indicate that participants viewed women's caregiving as particularly important during conflict and displacement, when women were often responsible for maintaining household continuity and supporting children and other family members.

The quantitative findings further illustrate the importance participants attached to these responsibilities during armed conflict. Sixty-two-point-five per cent of respondents identified securing household safety as women's primary role during periods of conflict, while others referred to providing shelter, managing family affairs, and supporting family survival. These findings indicate that participants perceived women's caregiving and household responsibilities as important forms of protection and social support during periods of insecurity.

The refugee–host dimension was also evident in how these caregiving roles were situated within community life. Refugee and host-community participants described caregiving as an important responsibility, but the circumstances in which women performed these roles were not identical. For refugee women, caregiving took place within conditions of displacement and prolonged uncertainty, while host-community women carried these responsibilities within established family and community networks. The settlement context nevertheless brought these

experiences into interaction, particularly where women from refugee and host communities met through markets, churches, savings groups, community meetings, and other informal networks.

These shared spaces extended women's roles beyond individual households. With support from implementing partners, women had established savings groups and peace clubs that provided opportunities to meet, encourage one another, exchange advice, and access psychosocial support. Women and girls also used women's centres to discuss community and peace-related concerns, while churches provided spaces for teaching, reflection, forgiveness, and discussions about peaceful relationships. For refugee and host-community women, such spaces provided opportunities for interaction across community boundaries and therefore represented potential bridging mechanisms through which information, support, and relationships could be exchanged.

The accounts also suggest that women's caregiving roles were not experienced independently of gender relations. While women were widely described as responsible for children, household care, and family wellbeing, men's accounts provide an additional perspective on how these responsibilities were understood within households. The participant quotation above, for example, reflects a gendered division of household responsibilities in which women were expected to remain responsible for children and household safety while men engaged in activities such as hunting and cultivation. This demonstrates that the same social roles that positioned women as important sources of care and socialisation could also reflect gendered expectations and constraints.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that refugee and host-community women shared several forms of caregiving and community engagement, while the circumstances and social networks surrounding these roles differed. Markets, churches, savings groups, peace clubs, women's centres, and community meetings created points of interaction through which women could move beyond household-level responsibilities and engage with wider community relationships. These practices can therefore be understood as perceived mechanisms of socialisation, protection, communication, and relationship-building, rather than as direct evidence that caregiving itself produces measurable peace outcomes.

Information Sharing and Mediation

A second major theme concerned women's role as information brokers and community mediators. Thirty per cent of respondents identified information sharing as one of women's principal contributions to peaceful coexistence. Participants explained that women's daily economic activities—including trading, farming, and participation in local markets allowed them to move freely across different parts of the settlement and interact with both refugee and host-community members. This mobility enabled women to exchange information, identify emerging tensions, and facilitate communication before disputes escalated into violence.

Participants described women as trusted communicators who maintained extensive informal social networks through churches, markets, schools, and savings groups. These networks enabled them to relay information between families, identify vulnerable households, and support mediation efforts within communities. Women leaders also participated in Refugee Welfare Committees, peace committees, and community dialogue initiatives, where they contributed to conflict prevention through awareness-raising and local mediation.

Although 75% of respondents reported that peace committees existed within their communities, many participants had limited knowledge of their membership, and women were often underrepresented, or their participation was poorly recognised. This suggests that women's contributions to mediation often occur through informal community networks rather than official peace structures.

Intermarriage and Social Cohesion

Participants identified intermarriage as an important mechanism through which relationships between refugee and host communities can be strengthened. Although only 10% of survey respondents identified marriage as a primary mechanism through which women contribute to peacebuilding, the qualitative accounts indicated that its symbolic and relational significance extends beyond its quantitative prominence.

Participants described marriage as creating kinship ties that can transform relationships between previously separate communities by establishing shared family connections and obligations. As one respondent explained:

“Marriage is an important institution in African culture as well as all cultures. In Africa, you do not marry an individual but the family, the clan and the tribe. If you had a conflict with another tribe or clan and your daughter gets married there, that would end the conflict because you become one family.” (Interview, 10 August 2018)

This account illustrates how participants perceived marriage as potentially creating social obligations that can encourage reconciliation and reduce hostility between families, clans, and communities. In this sense, intermarriage was understood not simply as a private relationship but as a process that can establish new forms of social connection across existing community boundaries. The finding is therefore relevant to everyday peacebuilding because participants associated marriage with relationship-building, the creation of shared interests, and the strengthening of social ties across groups.

However, participants also identified important limitations to intermarriage as a peacebuilding mechanism. Cultural norms among some South Sudanese communities, including Dinka and Nuer communities, were reported to constrain marriage across certain ethnic boundaries, while high bridewealth requirements could further limit the possibility of marriages between refugee and host populations. Intermarriage should therefore not be interpreted as an inherently peace-producing practice. Rather, the findings indicate that where such marriages occur across community boundaries, participants perceive them as creating opportunities for kinship, cooperation, trust, and longer-term coexistence between refugee and host communities.

Psychosocial Healing and Spiritual Support

The final theme concerned women's contribution to psychosocial healing and spiritual support. Twenty per cent of survey respondents identified psychosocial and religious support as a major pathway through which women contribute to peacebuilding. Participants described women as important providers of emotional care following conflict and displacement, offering counselling, encouragement, moral guidance, and practical support through churches, savings groups, women's associations, and informal community networks.

Participants also linked women's caregiving roles to the protection and socialisation of children and the

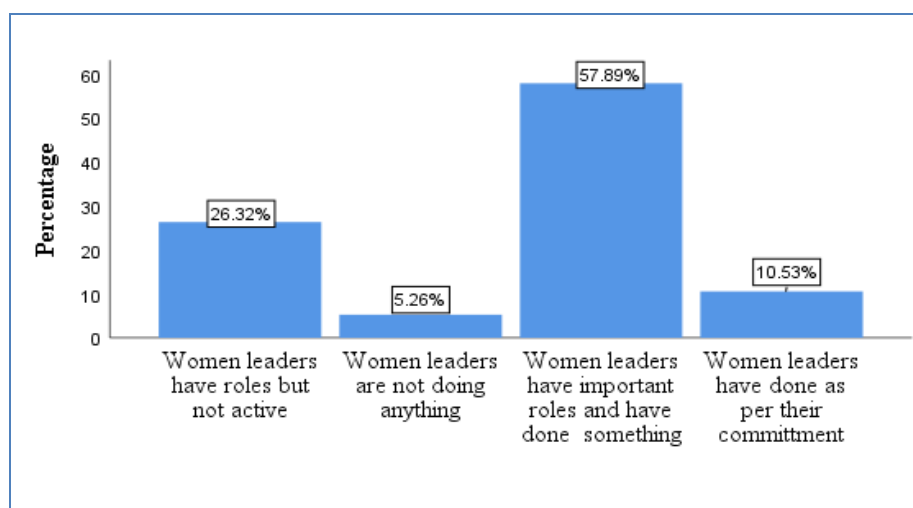


Figure 2: Bar chart showing responses on the role of women in peacebuilding in the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement.

maintenance of household stability. As one participant explained:

“In those days, women would be the ones taking care and training children with good moral especially in relation to respecting elders, women are left at home as guards to take care of the home and the man knew the woman was there to keep the children and households safe, you did have to mind of what would happen if you went hunting and digging all day.” (Interview, 11 August 2018).

This account illustrates how participants understood women's roles as extending beyond household care to include the transmission of values, moral guidance, and social norms that shape relationships within families and communities. In the context of displacement and conflict, such responsibilities were perceived as contributing to social stability and the maintenance of relationships.

Women also organised support groups where members shared resources, discussed common challenges, and provided emotional assistance to one another. Churches emerged as important spaces through which women promoted forgiveness, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence. Participants described these spaces as providing opportunities to address experiences of trauma, reduce social isolation, and strengthen relationships within and across refugee and host communities.

Psychosocial support also extended beyond emotional wellbeing. Women engaged in livelihood support, organised savings groups, referred survivors of gender-based violence to available services, and

mobilised community members around child protection and peace initiatives. These interconnected practices were described by participants as providing forms of emotional, social, and practical support that can strengthen individual coping and community relationships. Rather than treating these activities as direct evidence of peace outcomes, the findings demonstrate the ways participants perceived women's everyday caregiving, support, and community engagement as mechanisms through which social stability and peaceful relationships may be maintained.

Women as Community Peacebuilders

Across all data sources, women emerged as active community peacebuilders whose contributions extended well beyond domestic responsibilities. Participants described women as mediators, organisers of peace clubs, community mobilisers, caregivers, and leaders within informal and formal community structures. Although many of these activities remain undocumented, they constitute the everyday infrastructure through which social cohesion is maintained.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly recognised women's contribution to peacebuilding. Nearly 58% reported that women leaders played important roles and had made meaningful contributions within the settlement, while only a small minority believed women leaders were inactive. Participants explained that women frequently intervene in family disputes, encourage peaceful dialogue among neighbours, organise community meetings, and collaborate with Refugee Welfare Committees and humanitarian

organisations to address local conflicts. Women also demonstrated leadership through community-based organisations, church groups, savings associations, and peace clubs. These platforms enabled women to coordinate awareness campaigns on gender-based violence, child protection, peaceful coexistence, and conflict resolution. Several key informants noted that women leaders trained by humanitarian agencies had become important actors in alternative dispute resolution, trauma healing, and community sensitisation, despite receiving limited public recognition for their work.

The findings indicate that women play significant, though largely informal and often unrecognised, roles in peacebuilding within Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. Most survey respondents (57.89%) perceived women leaders as actively contributing to their communities, while a further 26.3% acknowledged that women held leadership roles but were constrained in their ability to act. Participants consistently described women as central to maintaining household welfare through caregiving, food security, child protection, livelihood activities, psychosocial support, and conflict mediation at the family and community levels. Women also foster peaceful relations between refugees and host communities through livelihood collaborations, barter trade, and community-based peace initiatives such as songs, drama, and awareness activities. These findings align with existing scholarship that recognises women's economic, social, and caregiving responsibilities as critical, albeit frequently invisible, contributions to peacebuilding and community resilience (Veldwijk, 2011; Berger, 2018; Mulamula, 2017). However, the findings also reveal the complexity of women's roles in conflict settings. While women are widely perceived as agents of peace, both empirical data and the wider literature demonstrate that they can also reinforce conflict dynamics through socialisation processes, support for armed actors, or household tensions arising from changing gender roles and resource scarcity. Focus group discussions highlighted how economic hardship and shifting power relations contributed to domestic violence, while interviews and historical evidence illustrate that women have, in some contexts, encouraged or legitimised violent practices, including cattle raiding and armed conflict. These findings underscore that women should not be viewed solely as either victims or peacebuilders but as complex social actors whose roles in conflict transformation are shaped by cultural norms, livelihoods, gender relations, and the broader political context. However, participants

emphasised that much of this leadership remains invisible because it occurs within households and community spaces rather than formal political institutions. Women's peacebuilding was therefore characterised less by official authority than by sustained community engagement and trusted social relationships.

Overall, the findings indicate that women's peacebuilding contributions are deeply embedded within everyday community life. Rather than operating primarily through formal negotiations or political institutions, women sustain peace through caregiving, mediation, social networking, inter-community relationship building, and psychosocial support. These informal practices collectively constitute a community-based peace infrastructure that underpins peaceful coexistence in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement; a requisite for sustainable peacebuilding.

DISCUSSION

This study builds on, rather than departs from, scholarship on everyday peace by examining how women's everyday practices are organised through gendered social roles and informal community institutions in a protracted refugee-hosting environment. Existing everyday-peace scholarship demonstrates that ordinary people use routine social practices to navigate tensions and sustain non-violent coexistence (Mac Ginty, 2014, 2021; Ware, Ware, & Kelly, 2021). The findings from Bidibidi support this perspective but add an important empirical dimension: participants described women's caregiving, information sharing, mediation, psychosocial support, community participation, and relationship-building not as isolated activities but as interconnected practices embedded in families, markets, churches, savings groups, and community networks.

The contribution of the study therefore lies less in demonstrating that everyday peace exists and more in showing how gendered everyday roles can connect different forms of social interaction within a refugee settlement. Women moved across household, economic, religious, and community spaces, creating opportunities for communication, support, mediation, and relationship-building between refugees and host-community members. These findings suggest that women's everyday peacebuilding can operate through the accumulation and connection of small relational practices rather than through a single identifiable peacebuilding intervention.

This finding is particularly relevant to protracted refugee settings, where formal humanitarian and governance structures coexist with informal systems of social organisation. Bidibidi provides a context in which displaced and host communities must continuously negotiate relationships around livelihoods, services, social interaction, and community life. The study therefore demonstrates how everyday peace is shaped by the particular social infrastructure of displacement: refugee and host communities do not simply coexist alongside one another, but interact through markets, households, faith communities, community groups, and informal networks.

Extending Community Peacebuilding Theory

The findings contribute to contemporary community peacebuilding scholarship by demonstrating that peace is sustained not only through formal governance mechanisms but also through informal community infrastructures. While community peacebuilding has traditionally emphasised local ownership and participation (Lederach, 1997; Paffenholz, 2015), this study illustrates that the everyday practices undertaken by women constitute an often-overlooked dimension of local peacebuilding.

Recent scholarship on everyday peace argues that ordinary people actively create peaceful spaces through routine interactions that reduce tensions and foster cooperation (Mac Ginty, 2021; Edler, Krause, & Segadlo, 2024). The findings support this perspective but extend it by demonstrating how women's everyday responsibilities—including caregiving, market participation, neighbourhood support, and faith-based engagement—collectively function as community peace infrastructures. These activities are not isolated acts of care; rather, they generate trust, reciprocity, and social capital that enable refugee and host communities to coexist despite persistent structural challenges.

This finding is particularly important because it shifts attention from peacebuilding as a series of externally facilitated projects towards peacebuilding as an ongoing social process embedded within everyday community life. In Bidibidi, women were not merely participating in peacebuilding initiatives designed by humanitarian organisations; they were actively producing the social conditions that allowed peaceful coexistence to emerge. Community peacebuilding should therefore be understood not simply as institutional intervention but as the cumulative outcome

of everyday social practices that strengthen relationships across communities.

Informal Peace Practices as Community Infrastructure

One of this study's central contributions is the conceptualisation of informal peace practices as community infrastructure. Participants consistently described motherhood, childcare, informal mediation, information sharing, inter-community relationships, savings groups, churches, and women's associations as mechanisms that prevented conflicts from escalating. These findings suggest that community resilience depends as much on relational capacities as on formal governance arrangements.

Motherhood illustrates this particularly well. Existing literature frequently conceptualises caregiving as a private domestic responsibility. However, participants viewed mothers as children's first educators, responsible for transmitting values of respect, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution across generations. In this sense, caregiving represents a form of preventive peacebuilding that shapes future community relationships rather than merely fulfilling household responsibilities. The study therefore broadens understanding of community infrastructure by recognising caregiving as a social institution that contributes directly to peaceful coexistence.

Similarly, women's participation in markets, churches, and savings groups created opportunities for information exchange, trust-building, and early conflict identification. Rather than viewing these activities as peripheral to peacebuilding, the findings suggest they constitute essential mechanisms through which communities maintain social cohesion during prolonged displacement. These observations reinforce recent arguments that informal institutions frequently possess greater legitimacy and accessibility than formal governance structures in fragile contexts (Donovan, 2023; Ware, Ware, & Kelly, 2026).

Rethinking Humanitarian Approaches to Women's Peacebuilding

The findings also reveal important limitations in contemporary humanitarian programming. Although humanitarian agencies operating in Bidibidi supported protection activities, peace committees, women's groups, and community awareness programmes, participants consistently reported that women's everyday contributions remained largely undocumented

and institutionally undervalued. Much of the work undertaken by women occurred outside formal project frameworks and therefore remained invisible in programme reporting and evaluation systems.

This institutional invisibility reflects a broader tendency within humanitarian practice to measure peacebuilding primarily through formal indicators, such as participation in committees, leadership positions, or organised dialogue processes. While these indicators remain important, they overlook the relational work that women perform daily within households and communities. Caring for vulnerable family members, mediating disputes between neighbours, organising church support groups, maintaining savings associations, exchanging information through market networks, and providing psychosocial support all contributed to peaceful coexistence, yet these activities rarely appear within formal peacebuilding metrics.

The findings therefore suggest that humanitarian actors should broaden their understanding of community peacebuilding by recognising and investing in informal community institutions alongside formal governance structures. Supporting women's community networks, strengthening local leadership, and documenting everyday peace practices could substantially enhance community resilience without requiring entirely new institutional mechanisms. Such an approach aligns closely with contemporary localisation agendas, which advocate recognising existing community capacities rather than replacing them with externally designed interventions.

Limits and Risks of Relying on Informal Women's Networks

While the findings demonstrate the importance of informal women's networks, they should not be romanticised or treated as substitutes for formal institutions. Informal networks depend on relationships, trust, social legitimacy, and women's ability to access and mobilise community resources. These conditions are unevenly distributed. Women may face restrictions related to gender norms, economic insecurity, ethnicity, age, disability, social status, or household responsibilities that affect who can participate, whose voice is heard, and whose interests are represented. Research on women's local peacebuilding similarly shows that women's engagement can be constrained by institutional, economic, cultural, and social barriers (Justino, Mitchell, & Müller, 2018).

The findings also suggest that informal networks can reproduce rather than challenge existing inequalities. Women's social roles may create opportunities for peacebuilding, but they can simultaneously reinforce expectations that women should absorb responsibility for caregiving, emotional support, mediation, and community welfare without corresponding authority or resources. The fieldwork further indicated that women cannot be assumed to be inherently peaceful; under particular circumstances, women may also reproduce harmful gender norms, ethnic loyalties, or conflict-supporting practices. Informal peace should therefore be understood as situated and contested rather than automatically transformative.

There are also practical limits to relying on informal networks in contexts of serious protection concerns. Informal mediation and community support cannot replace formal protection, justice, referral, or accountability mechanisms where these are required. This is particularly important in cases involving gender-based violence or other forms of serious harm, where confidentiality, survivor safety, professional referral, and formal accountability may be necessary. Informal networks are therefore most appropriately understood as complementary to, rather than substitutes for, formal institutions.

The implication is not to formalise every informal practice. Excessive institutionalisation could undermine the trust and flexibility that make some community networks effective in the first place. Rather, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors should recognise existing informal capacities while ensuring that women have access to resources, referral systems, protection mechanisms, and meaningful participation in formal decision-making. This approach places informal and formal peacebuilding in a relationship of complementarity rather than opposition.

Implications for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The findings contribute to ongoing debates surrounding the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, considerable progress has been made in promoting women's participation within formal peace negotiations and political institutions. Nevertheless, this progress often overlooks the informal community practices through which women contribute to peace daily.

This study demonstrates that women's peacebuilding extends well beyond formal participation. Refugee and host-community women exercise agency through community leadership, caregiving, mediation, psychosocial support, and relationship-building that strengthens peaceful coexistence across community boundaries. These findings support recent calls to broaden the WPS agenda beyond numerical representation towards recognising the multiple ways women shape peace within everyday social life (Tripp, Maiga, & Yahi, 2025; Donovan, 2023).

Importantly, the study does not suggest that women are inherently more peaceful than men. Rather, it demonstrates that women's social roles, lived experiences, and community networks position them to make distinctive contributions to community peacebuilding. The fieldwork also revealed that women may reinforce conflict under certain circumstances, including encouraging violence through ethnic loyalties or reproducing harmful gender norms within families. These findings caution against essentialist assumptions and instead support a relational understanding of peacebuilding that recognises women's agency as shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural contexts.

By positioning women as active producers of community resilience rather than passive beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance, this study extends the WPS agenda towards a more community-centred understanding of peacebuilding. It suggests that achieving sustainable peace in protracted refugee settings requires greater recognition of the informal institutions through which women negotiate coexistence, rebuild trust, and sustain everyday peace.

Towards a Community-Centred Model of Peacebuilding

Taken together, these findings suggest that sustainable peace in refugee settlements cannot be understood solely through formal governance arrangements or humanitarian programming. Community peacebuilding also depends on the informal relationships, practices, and institutions that enable people to cooperate despite displacement, trauma, and resource scarcity. Women's contributions illustrate how peace is continuously produced through everyday acts of care, reciprocity, communication, and solidarity.

This perspective expands current understandings of community dynamics by demonstrating that social

cohesion is not simply an outcome of effective humanitarian governance but is actively constructed through community members' daily interactions. Recognising these informal peace infrastructures provides both a theoretical and practical foundation for designing humanitarian interventions that strengthen existing community capacities rather than focusing exclusively on formal institutional development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how refugee and host-community women contribute to community peacebuilding in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda, through everyday practices within a context of protracted displacement. The findings indicate that participants perceived women as important actors in shaping community relationships through caregiving, information sharing, mediation, psychosocial and spiritual support, and relationship-building across refugee and host communities. Participants associated these practices with trust-building, social cohesion, and the management of everyday tensions. However, the study does not establish direct causal effects of these practices on peace outcomes. Women's engagement was also shaped by gendered social norms, unequal access to education and economic resources, and limited recognition within formal humanitarian and peacebuilding structures.

The study makes three principal contributions to scholarship. First, it contributes to scholarship on community peacebuilding and everyday peace by illustrating how gendered everyday practices are embedded within families, neighbourhoods, faith communities, markets, savings groups, and other informal community networks. Rather than suggesting that these practices constitute a distinct form of peacebuilding separate from existing everyday-peace scholarship, the study shows how established everyday peace practices are organised through women's social roles and relationships within a protracted refugee-hosting environment. The concept of community peace infrastructure is therefore used in this study to describe the interconnected informal relationships, practices, and community spaces through which participants perceived tensions to be managed and social relationships maintained.

Second, the study contributes to debates on community dynamics in refugee settings by highlighting the relational dimensions of refugee-host coexistence. The findings suggest that peaceful relationships are

negotiated not only through formal humanitarian and governance structures but also through everyday interactions in which community members exchange information, provide support, mediate disagreements, and maintain social relationships. The refugee–host context is particularly important because these practices occur across shared social and community spaces, while also being shaped by the different experiences and circumstances of displaced and host populations.

Third, the findings contribute to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) literature by drawing attention to forms of women's agency that extend beyond formal peace processes and institutional leadership. The study does not suggest that women are inherently more peaceful than men. Rather, it demonstrates how women's socially situated roles and relationships can create particular opportunities for community engagement, mediation, caregiving, information exchange, and relationship-building. At the same time, these roles may reproduce gendered expectations and place disproportionate responsibilities for community welfare on women. Recognising women's agency therefore needs to be accompanied by attention to the structural and institutional conditions that shape their participation.

The findings have implications for humanitarian policy and practice. Humanitarian actors increasingly emphasise localisation and community-led responses, yet informal forms of women's community engagement may remain insufficiently recognised within programme design, monitoring, and evaluation. The findings suggest value in recognising existing women's associations, savings groups, faith-based networks, community groups, and informal mediation spaces as important sites of community engagement. Such support should complement rather than replace formal protection, accountability, referral, and peacebuilding mechanisms, particularly in situations involving serious protection concerns.

The study also has implications for refugee governance. Social cohesion in protracted displacement settings should not be understood solely as an indirect outcome of service provision. Attention to the everyday relationships through which refugees and host communities interact can provide a fuller understanding of how coexistence is negotiated. Future programming could therefore incorporate indicators that capture informal communication, mediation, psychosocial and social support, relationship-building,

and women's participation alongside conventional institutional and service-delivery indicators. Such an approach would allow humanitarian actors to better recognise community-level processes without assuming that informal practices automatically produce measurable peace outcomes.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on a single refugee settlement in Uganda, and the findings should therefore be interpreted within the specific historical, cultural, social, and policy context of Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. Although some of the identified processes may be relevant to other protracted displacement settings, the study does not establish their prevalence or significance elsewhere. In addition, the study did not undertake a systematic comparison of women's and men's peacebuilding contributions, and conclusions regarding gender differences should therefore be drawn cautiously. The study also relies substantially on participants' perceptions and reported experiences and does not measure changes in conflict incidence or other direct peace outcomes. Comparative and longitudinal research could further examine how everyday peacebuilding practices vary across refugee and host communities, gender groups, conflict histories, and governance contexts over time.

Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of looking beyond formal institutions when examining community peacebuilding in protracted refugee settings. The findings indicate that participants perceived women's everyday practices including caregiving, information sharing, mediation, psychosocial support, and relationship-building as meaningful components of community life and peaceful coexistence. These practices should neither be romanticised nor treated as substitutes for formal peacebuilding and protection systems. Rather, recognising their contribution, while addressing the structural constraints under which women operate, can support more locally grounded, gender-responsive, and context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding in situations of protracted displacement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest. statement

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