

Increasing Access to Economic Empowerment Opportunities for Refugee Girls in Nairobi

Insights & Lessons
for Refugee Service Providers



MARCH 2019

RefuSHE

Since 2008, RefuSHE has served one of East Africa's most vulnerable populations: adolescent refugee girls and young women who have been orphaned or forcefully separated from their families. Many arrived in Kenya having fled war, kidnapping, rape, trafficking, unlawful detainment, and torture. With limited access to formal assistance in Nairobi for shelter, education, and medical care they often suffer from extreme poverty, as well as trauma from the physical and emotional scars of war, abuse, and exploitation. Since its inception, RefuSHE has provided direct services to over 3,330 refugee girls, young women, and children.

RefuSHE's holistic model of support provides opportunities for young refugee women to understand their human rights, develop skills, achieve economic independence, and become leaders in their own right. In RefuSHE's Artisan Collective, our social enterprise model, young women foster their leadership and business management skills by designing and producing unique hand-dyed scarves and textiles. Young women earn a monthly stipend that is partially derived from the sale of their designed products while gaining the confidence they'll need for future economic independence.

The Challenge

Due to shifting global attitudes and public policies, the likelihood of formal resettlement for refugees fleeing conflict and persecution is decreasing. In 2017, UNHCR registered 19.9 million refugees around the world; less than one per cent of these were formally resettled. The young women and girls that RefuSHE serves fled to Kenya, a significant host country of refugees fleeing conflict zones across Eastern Africa, in hopes of finding a life free from violence, persecution, or war. As formal resettlement outside of Kenya continues to decrease, they are now increasingly confronted with the challenges of integrating into local communities in Nairobi and other urban areas in Kenya.

In order to meet this new reality, RefuSHE must prepare young women for economic independence in Kenya, a country which does not grant refugees the right to work outside of designated camps. Obtaining the right to work in Kenya as a refugee can take years while waiting for refugee status determination and official documentation. Before an application for a work permit can begin it requires sponsorship by an employer, a process that is lengthy and an outcome that is not guaranteed. Given the low prospect of formal employment, young refugee women must prepare to financially support themselves in the informal business sector, which comes with significant risks and challenges.

The Opportunity

In December 2017, RefuSHE partnered with the Mastercard Foundation to expand our approach to livelihoods development for unaccompanied refugee girls and young women in Kenya. RefuSHE conducted an assessment to identify market opportunities and in-demand skills for the unique population we serve, and then used the assessment findings to design and implement new components to our economic empowerment programming.

The following five insights are the key take-aways and lessons learned from the one-year partnership with Mastercard Foundation.

INSIGHT 1

Economic empowerment programming with unaccompanied refugee girls and young women should be trauma-informed.



Many of the girls and young women RefuSHE serves have experienced high degrees of trauma in their home country or during their journey to Kenya. They continue to be at heightened risk of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, psychological and physical abuse, forced marriage, early pregnancy, domestic servitude, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among others. The legacy of historical and ongoing trauma is higher risk of depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other stress-related mental and physical health conditions.

The effects of trauma can create challenges to implementing livelihood programming for refugee populations. Reoccurring mental and physical illness can result in inconsistent attendance in class and training. The long-term emotional and cognitive impact of trauma makes it more difficult to adopt essential entrepreneurial skills like confidence and resilience – the ability to “pick oneself up and keep going” when faced with failure. A growing body of evidence in neurobiology and psychology indicates that traumatic experiences in the early years of life disrupt the ability to organize and remember new information, grasp cause-and-effect relationships, develop advanced communication and language skills, apply problem-solving skills, and make positive and realistic choices for gaining and maintaining their livelihoods. All of these are essential for success both in the vocational training classroom, as well as in the informal business sector in Kenya.

Rather than trying to hide these challenges from view or minimize them, organizations that serve refugee populations, especially unaccompanied girls and young women, should adopt a trauma-informed approach to livelihoods programming. Trauma-informed means designing approaches and implementing programs that take into consideration the physical, social, and emotional impacts of trauma. It is anticipating challenges to implementation that may arise from the impact of trauma and adopting plans, practices, and responses to those challenges that promote healing and resilience. This might mean:

- **Adjusting expectations of how quickly the desired change will take place.** Plan to incorporate more flexibility into the program design if inconsistent attendance is an issue. Establish longer timelines for achieving measurable results in skills development. When designing curriculum for vocational training, consider the need for repetition and more frequent review of material. Ensure there are ample opportunities for refugees to see the application of both soft and vocational skills that they're learning in the classroom with real world examples (see Insight 4 on Action Learning).
- **Ensure employees are aware of the symptoms of trauma and know how to respond sensitively.** Employees should share responsibility in identifying issues potentially arising from trauma and choosing a response that supports the healing of program participants. For example, at RefuSHE, our Case Management team, Psychosocial Counselors, Teachers, and Program Directors communicate any attendance or behavioral issues that arise and collectively implement a response that is grounded in an awareness of each participant's particular history and situation. It's important that new employees or consultants hired to deliver livelihoods programming are educated on trauma and how it manifests among the beneficiary population. Even the monitoring and evaluation team should be trauma-informed and understand how to collect data or success stories that don't unintentionally cause discomfort or trigger a relapse. The program delivery and M&E process should focus on supporting the care-giving team's ability to provide care that is unique and tailored to each participant's specific needs. It should also engage and empower participants to identify solutions and have a say in their own healing process.
- **Provide ongoing psychosocial support and career counseling alongside livelihoods training programming.** Creating the conditions for unaccompanied refugee girls and young women to become economically independent – and in a case like Kenya, to become successful entrepreneurs who can integrate into the informal business sector – requires a holistic approach that supports cognitive and emotional development in addition to vocational skills development. During implementation of the pilot program, RefuSHE hired a part-time career counselor to assist the girls to begin identifying their interests and strengths and how they might translate to entrepreneurial success. It's important to acknowledge that unaccompanied refugee girls and young women who have fled war, violence, or persecution may not have had the opportunity to form ideas about a stable or safe future and financial independence prior to participating in the livelihood or economic empowerment program.

These are only a few of many possible ways to integrate a trauma-informed approach to economic empowerment programming among refugee populations. It's critical that organizations incorporate a trauma mindset during the program design phase, as it carries budget implications, and that they communicate the nuances of working with a trauma-affected population to donors in order to manage expectations on timelines and results.

INSIGHT 2

Shifting the programmatic approach to meet declining global formal resettlement rates requires shifting the mindset of the beneficiary population.



RefuSHE's economic empowerment programming provides refugee girls and young women with business management, tailoring, and design skills that could be used to earn an income as they wait for resettlement, as well as provide them with transferable skills that could be used during their transition to a third country. As noted earlier, with the declining rates in resettlement in European countries, the US, and Australia RefuSHE has begun to shift its approach to deepen its programming that focuses on giving young women the economic survival skills they need for life in Kenya.

During implementation of the pilot career counseling activity, RefuSHE identified a related challenge: shifting the mindset of the girls and young women to envision a future in Kenya. When asked about their aspirations for the future during program surveys and counseling sessions, 60% of participants said resettlement outside of Kenya was their main goal. Program staff observed that the focus on resettlement prevented girls and young women from taking full advantage of the career counseling curriculum and action learning activities, and ultimately presents an obstacle to the efficacy of future business education and vocational skills training.

As organizations adapt economic empowerment programming to match global refugee resettlement trends, they must ensure their beneficiary population's expectations adapt with them. This requires clear and consistent messaging as refugees enter and progress through programming, and is the responsibility of all employees, from psychosocial counselors, educators, and leadership to provide that messaging in a nurturing yet realistic manner. Our findings also suggest the need to identify community role models - in RefuSHE's case, successful refugee women entrepreneurs - so that the refugees have real-world examples of how their future in the host country could look. These role models could also serve as mentors and action learning partners during and after the economic empowerment program.

Finally, in a post-program survey, more girls offered their reasoning for maintaining resettlement as their priority, noting the challenges of obtaining work/business permits and citizenship in Kenya (and with that the associated security concerns). This suggests the need for RefuSHE to continue its public policy advocacy efforts for a more supportive refugee policy and its participation in stakeholder meetings to enhance the inclusivity of vulnerable refugees as envisioned in the Comprehensive Refugees Response Framework (CRRF).

INSIGHT 3

Life skills are the foundation for economic independence in Kenya.



“I like the life skills they teach us. I think these lessons will help me prepare for my life out there. With more life skills classes my fear of graduating will be reduced.”

A market research study conducted by RefuSHE during the pilot strongly indicated that life skills are the foundation for a refugee’s successful economic integration into the community. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), life skills are defined as “abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.” RefuSHE’s alumni, other refugee women in the community, and partner organizations consistently mentioned that life skills were critical to enabling refugee girls and young women to adapt and thrive in the informal marketplace and other harsh conditions that they face living in Kenya as refugees. The market research identified four key categories of critical life skills:

- **Basic life skills**

Basic life skills are the building block to skills training. All organizations interviewed - including RefuSHE and other Mastercard Foundation partners - deploy basic life skills training at the very beginning of programming. The trainings typically cover self-confidence and identity, challenge gender norms, explain work readiness, set expectations for work ethic, and teach basic money management skills. The training significantly helps the young girls and women to heal and enable them to better participate more broadly during program implementation. It provides participants with a foundational level of comfort that allows them to be more open to freely sharing and talking about issues affecting them.

- **Networking, community, communication, and interpersonal skills**

From the market research, 70% of refugee adult women stated the importance of a local network and access to community resources in helping them thrive in the local communities, particularly through participation in a savings group. They emphasized that their networks provide them with both a financial and social safety net and that they found value in being able to discuss problems and receive assistance from their peers. Additionally, these networks provide ideas and partnership opportunities to function and thrive within the informal market. Thus, it is important that refugee girls and young women are taught to network, communicate, and utilize interpersonal skills to smoothly integrate into the local community.

- **Resilience and agility to cope and problem-solve**

“Life is hard [outside RefuSHE]” was a sentiment expressed by many interviewed during the market research. The research indicated that girls and young women need to possess resilience and agility to cope with stress and emotions and to effectively problem-solve. Refugee adult women emphasized that the refugee girls and young women have to work hard and pursue multiple income-generating activities at the same time and reinforced the need for a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility. This is advice that they impart to their own daughters, many of whom are the same age as the girls and young women at RefuSHE. One woman stated, “if you fail, you have to pick yourself up and keep going” while another said she was taught “you must have a plan A, B, and C. If A doesn’t work, try B. If not, then C.” Most community women shared experiences where at least one of their business ventures failed, and they had to start all over again.

- **Business skills**

Employment opportunities are limited for RefuSHE’s girls and young women as work authorization is rarely granted for refugees in Kenya. Thus, many will have to start small businesses to generate income. Market research indicated that business skills, such as budgeting, bookkeeping, customer service, marketing, and sales should be taught in order to increase the likelihood of success when launching businesses. As part of the Mastercard Foundation partnership, RefuSHE enhanced its business education training with a revised, more detailed curriculum that encompassed the new topics that were identified through the research. There was an increase in awareness and comfort across all identified business skills as a result of the curriculum changes. Classroom education was enhanced with action learning (see Insight 4) in order to help the girls and young women gain confidence through practical learning experiences.

“I would like RefuSHE to introduce mentorship programs or learning exchange sessions with professionals from various fields to equip us with better skills and knowledge.”

INSIGHT 4

Incorporate action learning into program design to develop competency and confidence for life skills and business education.



“I wish we could get an internship outside [of the Artisan Collective]. That will allow us to gain experience and learn how to work with other people.”

Action learning is a technique in which an individual or a small group applies learned skills to take action on a real-life problem and reflect on the results. Market research indicated that life skills training should include opportunities for students to apply classroom education in a real environment, such as site visits, internships/apprenticeships, or small exercises within the community. All peer organizations deployed some version of action learning and joint problem-solving techniques. Action learning gives participants of economic empowerment programming a chance to build confidence in their new skillset(s) and to set realistic expectations for integration into the local market and community. Discussions after the action learning exercises will allow participants to reflect on what they learned, learn from the experiences of others, and generate ideas for improved problem-solving.

RefuSHE leveraged a partnership with 4G Capital, a Base of the Pyramid financial and business services organization in Nairobi, to create action learning opportunities for program participants. The girls attended site visits to 21 of the organization’s customers to learn how different business owners create business plans, manage working capital, and keep business records. Later, they participated in a business plan competition, and nine girls that demonstrated high business acumen were selected for a one-month apprenticeship with some of the organization’s clients. These action learning opportunities all had cost implications, e.g. transport and stipends, highlighting the need for organizations like RefuSHE to allocate programmatic funds specifically to action learning.

INSIGHT 5

Individualized support and institutional partnerships are key requirements for the exit of unaccompanied refugee girls and young women from economic empowerment programming.

At the launch of the pilot, a survey of vocational preferences among program participants indicated a wide variety of interests and aspirations. Some girls are more interested in continuing their formal education while others are more focused on pursuing vocational training in specific trades including tailoring, hairdressing, and catering. Interviews with peer organizations and community members highlighted individuality, and the need to craft a personalized action plan for each refugee that takes individual preferences into account as well as skills, aptitudes, attitudes, and potential for success in the local market. It is important to provide guidance as a young woman prepares for her transition with additional support for several months afterwards. These findings prompted RefuSHE to hire a professional career guidance counselor on a part-time basis for the duration of the pilot program to provide career coaching and planning sessions with the girls and help them to identify viable livelihood opportunities based on their interests.

The findings also highlighted the need for RefuSHE to develop a robust pipeline of external personal and professional development opportunities and networks through which to channel alumni as they exit our programs, as it is beyond the capacity of our current budget to meet the wide variety of individual vocational training needs and career inclinations of each refugee girl and young woman in our care. Organizations like RefuSHE should dedicate concerted effort to developing partnerships with local service providers and companies that can offer young refugees opportunities in mentorship, apprenticeship, business incubation, startup capital, higher education, and skills training beyond what is covered in existing economic empowerment programs. These opportunities will inform the individual action plan for each refugee young woman transitioning into the local economy.

Over the course of the pilot program, RefuSHE was able to initiate partnerships with 4G Capital, mentioned above, as well as a sports-based skills training program and an engineering company, the latter resulting in a technical training opportunity for one of the young women. The program's part-time career counselor was responsible for cultivating these partnerships; however, RefuSHE learned that partnership development needs to be the responsibility of a full-time employee in order to create a robust pipeline especially in a context like Kenya, where refugees lack the right to work. Developing win-win partnership arrangements that do not put young refugee women at additional risk requires nuance, commitment, persistence, and dedicated attention.

Conclusion



Our partnership with Mastercard Foundation afforded us the opportunity to:

- Build out a research-driven improved business education curriculum
- Introduce career counseling into our economic empowerment programming
- Establish new vital relationships with the private sector and community entrepreneurs

RefuSHE gained invaluable insights during the implementation of the pilot project that will enhance the way we approach economic empowerment services for the young refugee women we serve. However, the success of our efforts to help these young women gain economic independence cannot be achieved alone. We need a strong ecosystem of donors and partners to bring their strengths and capacities to complement our support for young refugee women in Kenya, whether that be mentorship, job placement, vocational skills training, higher education, or funding. RefuSHE is always working to build and strengthen this eco-system and we are grateful for the opportunity to have had Mastercard Foundation be a part of it.



mastercard
foundation



RefuSHE

www.RefuSHE.com

MARCH 2019