UGANDA TODAY HOSTS OVER A MILLION REFUGEES, including more than 800,000 who have fled over the border with South Sudan. In the Bidibidi refugee settlement in northwestern Uganda, 87 per cent of the residents are women and children. The trauma of what they have experienced is always present in their minds.

Many women don’t know if they can ever return home. And even as they have left conflict behind, they continue to face violations such as forced marriages and rape. Vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that women have little say in decisions about the settlement, since men dominate 90 per cent of leadership positions.

The situation could be one of perpetual crisis, where well-being steadily declines, rights are eroded and recovery remains impossible. But that’s where UN Women’s flagship Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection (LEAP) programme steps in. It couples immediate life-saving responses with measures to build self-reliance and resilience so that women can improve their prospects now and into the future.

In 2018, through LEAP, UN Women assisted nearly 29,000 South Sudanese refugees as well as the members of communities that host them. Worldwide, LEAP operated in 33 countries reaching 235,000 women and girls.

Coordinated activities by UN and other humanitarian actors, and the engagement and empowerment of local women’s groups allows the programme to operate on the multiple fronts required to assist women caught in complex, long-term crises. Women start on the road to recovery through psychosocial support. They learn skills to earn income, such as through vocational training, and access start-up funds to launch small businesses. In healing themselves and providing for their families, they gain confidence and hope, and start to play more visible public roles, including as leaders of their communities.

Important protections for women and girls come through community dialogues aimed at preventing domestic violence and child marriage. The programme also provides assistance to respond to gender-based violence, including through emergency legal assistance that acts as both a response and a deterrent. In Bidibidi and other refugee settlements, an increased presence of lawyers and paralegals is a constant reminder to potential perpetrators that there is no place to hide.