Refugee women boost digital skills to thrive in business

By Isaac Nuwagaba

When Zawadi Magnifique fled Bukavu in the DR Congo, she never imagined that a smartphone would one day become her most powerful business tool.

For the past year, the food vendor at Bata-Bata Market in Ndejje has relied on WhatsApp to reach customers. But after attending a digital skills training in Kampala, the 26-year-old says she is ready to take her hustle to the next level using TikTok.

"I was only posting on WhatsApp," she says with a smile. "Now I have learned how to go viral on TikTok. I want to reach more people and grow my business."

Zawadi is among over 70 women vendors, mostly refugees from the DR Congo, who have been trained in digital marketing, social media promotion and digital payments.

The training, organised by Refugee Link, a local non-governmental organisation, in partnership with the Stanbic Business Incubator, was held on Monday at Refugee Link offices in Mengo, Kampala. It aimed to equip women entrepreneurs with practical skills to adapt to the city's increasingly digital economy.

For Zawadi, the training is already proving life-changing. With five years of business experience, she says formalising her enterprise has opened doors she never thought possible.

"Registering my business gave me confidence to approach banks and investors," she explains. "Now I can access loans and credit facilities that were previously out of reach."

Trainers said such empowerment is critical, especially at a time when many informal vendors are struggling to survive following enforcement operations by Kampala Capital City Authority.

Leon Kalonda, operations officer at Refugee Link, said the initiative is designed to help refugee women overcome these barriers and build sustainable livelihoods.

"We are thrilled to see these women embracing digital tools to boost their businesses," Kalonda said. "With the right skills and support, they can overcome challenges and achieve their full potential."

PHOTO BY ISAAC NUWAGABA

Anthea Ankunda, the Stanbic Bank digital boost project coordinator taking refugee trainees on the Chapchap business application during the refugee women workshop at Refugee Link offices in Mengo, Kampala, on Monday

Funded by the Mastercard Foundation, the programme also promotes digital financial inclusion by introducing participants to platforms such as Xente and ChapChap, which enable seamless payments and better business management.

Aaron Nsuna, a project officer and registrar of companies at the Uganda Registration Services Bureau, emphasised the importance of formalising businesses.

"Registering a business gives it a formal identity," he said. "It allows entrepreneurs to open bank accounts, access credit, and tap into new markets."

Uganda currently hosts more than 1.5 million refugees, according to UNHCR, many of whom are women engaged in small-scale trade but face limited access to financial services.

Beyond theory, the training offered practical tips on how to attract and retain customers online.

Digital marketing specialist Henry Baguma encouraged participants to fully optimise tools like WhatsApp Business.

"Ensure your business profile is complete and professional. Use images and videos to showcase your products, and send targeted messages that speak directly to your customers' needs," he advised.

Merveille Amani, a liquid soap vendor, said she has been relying on church networks to find customers, a strategy she now plans to abandon.

"It has been tiring and costly moving around looking for customers," she said.

"Now I will use my phone to reach more people at a lower cost."

Esperance Bushenyi, a fruit vendor in Rubaga, said she plans to focus on WhatsApp and TikTok to expand her market reach.