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**Final Research Report  
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**INTERSECTING RISKS, BARRIERS, AND RESILIENCE  
STRATEGIES AMONG WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS IN UGANDA: AN INTERSECTIONAL  
ANALYSIS**

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## Executive Summary

This qualitative study explored the complex ways in which multiple forms of discrimination come together to affect the safety, access to justice, and resilience of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Uganda. The research draws on 14 key informant interviews and one focus group discussion, carried out between August 25 and October 22, 2025, with over 20 WHRDs from urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. It examined how identities such as disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, age, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status overlap to create specific patterns of risk, discrimination, and resilience.

The findings show that risk does not simply add up but multiplies in ways that are deeply rooted in broader structures. These patterns unfold across six key areas: the blending of digital and physical threats, social stigma that controls bodies and voices, legal and institutional forms of violence, economic hardship that worsens other risks, resilience that grows through relationships and creativity, and failures in protection systems that ignore individual identities. These areas are brought to life through direct quotes from the interviews, rebuilt narratives, and connections to research on feminist security (Cullen & Manning, 2021), decolonial feminism (Tamale, 2020), and global studies on WHRDs (Front Line Defenders, 2024; AWID, 2023).

The study puts forward a framework for protection that is co-created with WHRDs and sensitive to their identities, based on feminist ideas of knowledge from lived experience (Harding, 1987) and decolonial approaches to ethics (Rutazibwa, 2019). It offers eight practical recommendations that emphasize designs led by WHRDs, dedicated funding, public education efforts, and changes to broader systems.

### Keywords:

- **Women Human Rights Defenders**
- **Intersectionality**
- **Digital Authoritarianism**
- **Resilience, Co-Creation**
- **Uganda**
- **Feminist Security**

## List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Form	Context/Usage in Report
AHA	Anti-Homosexuality Act	Refers to the 2023 Ugandan law criminalizing LGBTQ+ advocacy, amplifying risks for WHRDs.
CfMA	Centre for Multilateral Affairs	Lead research organization coordinating the study and analysis.
DPPA	Data Protection and Privacy Act	Uganda’s 2019 law guiding anonymization and ethical data handling in the study.
FGD	Focus Group Discussion	Data collection method: 1 session with 15–20 WHRDs on risks, barriers, and resilience.
HRD	Human Rights Defender	General term; often qualified as WHRD for women-specific roles.
KII	Key Informant Interview	Semi-structured interviews: 14 conducted with diverse WHRDs (45–60 mins each).
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer +	Identity marker intersecting with WHRD risks (e.g., criminalization under AHA).
NCHRD-U	National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda	Key stakeholder documenting HRD threats; cited in background and recommendations.
RQ	Research Question	Structured the analysis: 3 core questions on risks, barriers, and co-creation.
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights	Advocacy issue for WHRDs, linked to gender-specific risks and stigma.
UHRC	Uganda Human Rights Commission	Policy stakeholder recommended for leading WHRD Protection Bill advocacy.
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women	Donor/multilateral body for funding. Resilience Fund.
WHRD	Woman Human Rights Defender	Core focus: Women defenders with intersecting identities (e.g., disabled, rural).
WHRDN-U	Women Human Rights Defenders Network Uganda	Partner for psychosocial support, sampling, and regional hub implementation.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Contextual and Conceptual Framing

Uganda's space for civil society work has narrowed significantly since the early 2020s, shaped by laws that limit freedoms, increased monitoring online, and widespread social resistance. The Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 stands out as a major turning point. It not only punishes same-sex relationships with severe penalties but also treats efforts to support or advocate for affected people as acts of promotion, making basic work in health, law, and digital safety risky. This law has created fear around sexual and reproductive health rights, digital freedoms, and feminist efforts, as seen in reports of reduced activities and self-censorship (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

At the same time, the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act of 2022 has given the government more power to watch and punish online speech, using broad terms like offensive communication. The NGO Act of 2016, with its amendments, adds heavy administrative requirements, such as bank guarantees and yearly audits, which hit small groups led by women, young people, or sexual minorities the hardest (CIPESA, 2024). Shutdowns of the internet during elections and the use of spyware against activists show how control over information is becoming a tool of authority (Nanfuka, 2023).

In this environment, women human rights defenders—who work to protect rights through activism, writing, legal help, or online efforts face dangers that go beyond gender alone. These risks combine with other aspects of their lives, like disability or sexual orientation, to create unique challenges. For example, a rural defender with a disability deals not just with gender-based barriers but with a mix of physical limits and lack of access to services. This way of understanding risk—as something that multiplies rather than just adds up—comes from intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to explain how different forms of discrimination overlap. This study uses that idea, along with feminist views on security (Cullen & Manning, 2021), which see safety as something felt in the body and shaped by relationships, and decolonial feminism (Tamale, 2020), which critiques how old colonial ideas about gender still influence today's society.

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“the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act of 2022 has given the government more power to watch and punish online speech, using broad terms like offensive communication.”

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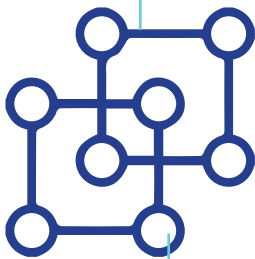
## 1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The study pursues three interconnected objectives:

1. To map the different patterns of risk, discrimination, and resilience generated by intersecting identities among Ugandan WHRDs.
2. To identify the structural, institutional, and social barriers that prevent marginalized WHRDs from accessing protection.
3. To co-develop context-specific, identity-sensitive protection strategies in collaboration with WHRDs.

These objectives are operationalized through three research questions:

4. How do intersecting identities produce distinct, different patterns of risk and resilience?
5. What institutional, social, and legal barriers hinder access to protection for marginalized WHRDs?
6. How can protection strategies be co-designed with WHRDs to reflect their lived realities?



### 1.3 Structure of the Report

The report unfolds in a logical sequence. It begins with the theoretical framework that guides the work. From there, it describes the methodology, including how participants were chosen and how data was handled ethically. The findings and discussion follow, organized into six key areas, with direct examples from interviews and connections to existing research. After that, the report discusses ways to co-create protection strategies. It then presents five narratives based on the participants' stories. The recommendations come next, followed by the conclusion. The report ends with references.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Intersectionality: From Metaphor to Method

Intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), helps explain how different forms of discrimination, such as those based on race and gender, do not exist separately but come together to create specific experiences of harm. Crenshaw used this idea to show how Black women were left out of legal protections because laws treated race and gender as separate issues. Later work by Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) built on this by stressing that intersectionality is about understanding power and how structures like laws and social norms work together to affect people's lives.

In this study, intersectionality served as a way to analyze the data. It helped code the information to see how risks combine, such as when disability and rural location lead to unique barriers in accessing justice. It also shaped the overall approach by placing value on the knowledge that comes from WHRDs' own experiences. For instance, a defender who is queer and works online faces not just gender discrimination but a mix of legal criminalization and digital harassment that is different from what a rural disabled defender might face.

In this study, intersectionality is operationalized as:

- **Analytical lens:** Coding data for **compounded risk** (e.g., disability + rurality = inaccessible justice).
- **Methodological tool:** Prioritizing **high-intersectionality participants**.
- **Epistemological stance:** Centering **WHRD standpoints as valid knowledge**.

For example, a rural disabled WHRD (KII-05) does not face two risks but a unique modality: physical assault at checkpoints, dismissal by police as "weak," and inability to travel to report. This **multiplicative logic** is the core of the findings.

### 2.2 Feminist Security Studies and Embodied Risk

Traditional ideas of security focus on state threats like wars, but feminist security studies shift the

view to how safety is experienced in everyday life, in the body, and through relationships (Cullen & Manning, 2021). This approach sees risk as something felt physically, such as through assaults or health denials, and shaped by social connections.

In Uganda, this means looking at how WHRDs' bodies become sites of control, like when a queer defender's work in health is seen as a crime. The study uses this framework to show how risks are not abstract but real and connected to daily life.

### 2.3 Decolonial Feminism and Internalized Patriarchy

Sylvia Tamale (2020) argues that colonial ideas about gender, such as strict roles for men and women, still influence Uganda today through laws and social practices. Decolonial feminism calls for breaking these patterns and recognizing local ways of knowing. It also points to internalized patriarchy, where women sometimes uphold the same systems that limit them, such as when senior feminists dismiss younger ones.

This perspective helps explain why some WHRDs face exclusion from their own communities or groups, and it guides the call for strategies that respect diverse experiences.

### 2.4 Global and Local WHRD Protection Regimes

Global standards, like the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (UN General Assembly, 1998), recognize WHRDs but often lack action. Reports like Front Line Defenders (2024) show attacks on WHRDs have increased, especially online. In Africa, AWID (2023) highlights funding shortages and internal divisions as major issues.

Locally, WHRDN-U offers rapid help, but it is limited by urban focus and donor rules. This study builds on these to propose better, more inclusive ways forward.



## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Study Design and Epistemological Stance

The research followed a qualitative approach that focused on understanding experiences in depth, guided by feminist ideas that knowledge comes from lived realities (Harding, 1987). This means the study valued WHRDs' perspectives as the main source of insight into the systems they face. It combined individual interviews for personal stories with a group discussion to see how ideas come together collectively.

The design allowed for flexibility, with early findings shared with some participants to validate and to check if the interpretations were accurate. This participatory way of working fits with decolonial ethics, which emphasize sharing power in research (Rutazibwa, 2019).

### 3.2 Participant Recruitment and Profiles

Participants were chosen purposefully to include those with overlapping identities, and referrals from trusted networks helped reach those in high-risk situations. The 14 interviews and group discussion involved a range of WHRDs, such as a rural defender with a disability fighting land grabs, queer trainers providing digital safety, a young mother creating podcasts, a mixed-race advocate facing ethnic barriers, a Muslim mentor working on leadership, and a security expert dealing with mental health challenges.

This variety ensured the study captured how identities interact in different ways, allowing for comparisons across experiences.

### 3.3 Data Collection, Ethics, and Trauma-Informed Practice

Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were held in English using in-person, phone, or secure methods to suit their needs. The group discussion took place in a safe space.

Ethics were central, with verbal consent recorded and participants informed about how their stories would be used. Interviews were handled sensitively, with pauses if needed. Transcripts were created with tools and checked by hand, and all details were removed for safety.

### 3.4 Analytical Process, Coding, and Reflexivity

The data was analyzed in stages, starting with reading everything closely, then creating codes, grouping them into themes, reviewing them, defining them, and finally writing about them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes focused on how identities intersect, such as disability and rural location leading to specific barriers.

In summary, data underwent six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as described:

- **Familiarization:** Full immersion in transcripts.
- **Initial Coding:** 200 codes (e.g., “doxing = eviction,” “child knocking during recording”).
- **Theme Development:** Codes clustered into six core domains.
- **Review:** Themes tested against raw data.
- **Definition:** Themes named and defined.
- **Reporting:** Themes woven into narrative discussion. An intersectional coding frame was applied: Primary Axis: Gender (all participants). Secondary Axes: Disability, sexual orientation and gender identities, age, ethnicity/religion, class/rurality. Compounded Codes: e.g., “disability + rural = inaccessible justice.”

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Digital-Physical Threat Continuum: When Online Becomes Offline

The boundary between digital and physical harm has collapsed for Ugandan WHRDs, creating a seamless continuum of threat enabled by legal criminalization, state surveillance, and community vigilantism.

WHRD-10, a queer advocate running safe SRHR spaces for trans women, described a cascade of violence triggered by a digital leak:

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***“We had a workshop. Invite shared in a trusted WhatsApp group. Someone screenshot, sent to police. That night, they raided my home. Said we were promoting homosexuality. The landlord evicted me—feared arrest. Neighbors torched my belongings. I ran to a sister’s house. She had pledged: ‘If you’re chased, our gate is open.’ But now I’m displaced. My existence is criminalized.” (KII-10, Sep 3, 2025)***

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This sequence of digital breach followed by state raid leads to community retaliation and consequently displacement which is not anomalous but systemic. The AHA 2023 makes this even more difficult by redefining care as crime and turning health workshops into high-risk zones. WHRD-02 echoed:

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***“Trans women can’t go to public hospitals. We have trusted nurses come to safe houses. But one photo online, and it’s over. We live like ghosts.” (KII-02, Oct 17, 2025)***

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This findings of digital-physical threats and violence aligns with Access Now (2024) study which documents a 300% surge in targeted digital attacks on WHRDs in hybrid regimes, 80% culminating in physical violence. The Computer Misuse Act empowers state surveillance, turning online advocacy into physical peril. Gendered misinformation further weaponizes this continuum. WHRD-12, a young mother-podcaster, experienced economic sabotage:

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***“I was recording an episode on deepfakes. My two-year-old knocked: ‘Mommy, hi!’ I kept it in—authenticity. Then a deepfake went viral: me soliciting. Sponsors pulled out. I couldn’t afford the data. Motherhood and youth equal to being dismissed.” (KII-12, Aug 25, 2025)***

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This algorithmic amplification of misogyny intersects with socio-economic precarity, silencing young mothers in digital spaces.

### 4.2 Social Stigma as Embodied Regulation: Norms, Stereotypes, and Internal Gatekeeping

Cultural and religious norms function as invisible policing mechanisms, regulating WHRD bodies, voices, and spaces.

WHRD-09, a Muslim leadership mentor, is confined to gender-segregated advocacy:

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***“I preach equality in sisters-only mosque circles. Publicly? They say women must be silent. My hijab is used to silence me. Faith becomes a cage.” (KII-09, Oct 22, 2025)***

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This gendered spatial control reflects coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2010), where patriarchal interpretations of religion are weaponized against women.

Within feminist spaces, internal gatekeeping reproduces exclusion. WHRD-12 faced intra-feminist ageism:

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***“Senior feminists say I’m too emotional, too young. My child interrupts—but motherhood is my lens. They want polished, child-free voices.” (KII-12, Aug 25, 2025)***

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This patriarchal residue echoes Tamale (2020), where urban seniority trumps rural youth or where senior feminists overlook younger ones.

WHRD-13, a mixed-race feminist, experienced ethnic exclusion:



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***“In policy rooms, they say I’m not Ugandan enough. My advocacy is foreign. But I was born here. Exclusion is epistemic violence.” (KII-13, Aug 25, 2025)***

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This racialized gatekeeping mirrors Spivak (1988).

#### **4.3 Legal and Institutional Violence: Criminalization, Tokenism, and Epistemic Erasure**

The Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 has redefined the very act of advocacy as complicity in criminality, creating a pervasive chilling effect that extends far beyond sexual minorities. WHRD-10, a queer health advocate, articulated this criminalization of care with chilling clarity:

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***“We run an SRHR house for trans women. Trusted nurses come in secret. But if you provide STI screening, you’re ‘promoting homosexuality.’ One workshop, one arrest. We’re not criminals—we’re healers. But the law says otherwise.” (KII-10, Sep 3, 2025)***

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This legal weaponization of health and safety work forces parallel systems—encrypted clinics, safe-house pledges, and underground networks—while exposing defenders to state violence. The Computer Misuse Act compounds this by enabling surveillance and prosecution of digital advocacy under vague clauses.

Institutional frameworks further entrench exclusion. NGO regulations demand bank guarantees, audited accounts, and district-level registration, systematically excluding small, rural, or queer-led collectives. WHRD-14, a civic platform founder, described the bureaucratic stranglehold:

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***“We amplify women’s voices online. But to register, we need UGX 5 million in a bank. Rural groups? Impossible. Masqueraders—big NGOs—take donor funds, do nothing, damage trust. We’re left out.” (KII-14, Sep 3, 2025)***

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This structural exclusion aligns with CIVICUS Monitor (2025), which rates Uganda’s civic space as “repressed”, with women-led organizations facing disproportionate scrutiny.

Tokenism in policy spaces constitutes epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988). WHRD-03, a young lawyer-in-training, recounted:

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***“We’re invited to Parliament consultations. Photos, smiles. But our input is ignored. We’re there for the donor report, not decisions” (KII-03, Oct 17, 2025)***

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This performative inclusion silences intersectional perspectives, reinforcing urban, senior, heteronormative dominance.

#### **4.4 Economic Precarity: The Invisible Multiplier of Intersectional Risk**

Poverty is not a background condition but a silent multiplier that amplifies every other risk. WHRD-05, a rural disabled land rights defender, cannot access justice:

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***“After the mob attack, I needed to report. Nearest police stations are two hours by boda-boda. No ramps, no money for fare. They said: ‘Weak ones don’t protest.’ I stayed silent.” (KII-05, Oct 17, 2025)***

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This economic + physical + geographic barrier creates total exclusion.

WHRD-12, the young mother-podcaster, lost income to online harassment:

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***“One misinfo wave—deepfake, slurs—and sponsors vanish. I can’t buy data. My child needs milk. Motherhood + poverty equals muted mic.” (KII-12, Aug 25, 2025)***

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Donor funding models remain urban-biased and projectized. WHRD-08 noted:

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***“Basket funds for HRDs go to registered Kampala NGOs. Rural, queer, disabled are ineligible. We survive on airtime tokens.”*** (KII-08, Oct 17, 2025)

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This economic gatekeeping mirrors AWID (2023) findings on systemic underfunding of intersectional WHRD work.

#### 4.5 Resilience as Relational and Generative Praxis

Far from passive survival, WHRD resilience is collective, adaptive, and generative a decolonial praxis of rebuilding safety from within.

- Safe-house pledges form a parallel protection infrastructure:

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***“If a trans woman is chased, our gate is open. No questions. We have a list—20 homes. That’s our rapid response.”*** (KII-10, Sep 3, 202)

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- Digital counter-infrastructures include low-data VPNs, voice-to-text reporting, and encrypted healing circles:

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***“We train on Signal, Proton. One breach, we pivot. Burner phones, code words. We’re ghosts—but alive.”*** (KII-02, Oct 17, 2025)

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- Narrative reclamation transforms trauma into testimony. WHRD-12:

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***“My child’s knocked I kept it in the podcast. Interruptions are my story. From the floodgates of ideas, I build bricks.”*** (KII-12, Aug 25, 2025)

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- Strategic evolution is embodied by WHRD-11, a former “loud fighter” who pivoted post-burnout:

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***“I used to shout in the streets. Got harassed—my dog leaped, bit the attacker. Now I code. AI detects misinfo. From teeth to tech. Resilience is reinvention.”*** (KII-11, Sep 3, 2025)

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This relational praxis reflects Audre Lorde’s (1984) rejection of the master’s tools—WHRDs are building new houses.

#### 4.6 Protection Failures: Identity-Blindness and Structural challenges

Existing protection mechanisms such as rapid response funds, legal aid, relocation—are structurally misaligned with intersectional realities:

- Geographic Bias: Kampala-centric services exclude rural defenders.
- Identity Exclusion: Queer WHRDs fear police complicity under AHA.
- Economic Gatekeeping: Eligibility favors registered NGOs.
- Temporal Lag: “Rapid” response takes weeks, not hours.

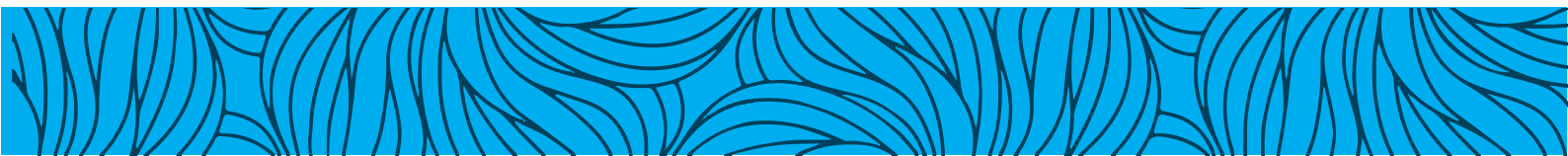
WHRD-06 summarized:

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***“They say ‘rapid response.’ I called during a raid. No answer. Three days later: ‘Fill this form.’ I was already evicted.”*** (KII-06, Oct 22, 2025)

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Front Line Defenders (2024) argues: protection fails when it does not center the protected.



## 5. CO-CREATIVE PATHWAYS: TOWARD IDENTITY-SENSITIVE PROTECTION

WHRDs reject benevolent paternalism and demand co-creation:

**“Stop thinking for us. Call us to the table from baseline to evaluation. We know our risks.” (KII-10, Sep 3, 2025)**

They propose:

- **Mobile Protection Units:** Legal aid, accessible transport, dialect interpreters for rural/disabled WHRDs.
- **WHRD-Specific Rapid Response Funds:** With childcare stipends, mental health support, queer-safe relocation.
- **Joint Awareness Campaigns:** To “sanitize” public perception and counter “bitter feminist” stereotypes.
- **Cross-Sector Training:** For police, lawyers, donors on digital rights and intersectional risk.
- **Funded Solidarity Networks:** With psychosocial funding and biennial check-ins.

This participatory vision aligns with decolonial security praxis (Rutazibwa, 2019).

## 6. FIVE HUMAN-CENTERED NARRATIVES

These narratives, drawn from the interviews, show WHRDs’ experiences in their own words. Full versions are in Annex A (to be provided upon request).

**Narrative 1:** A rural defender with a disability fights land grabs, facing attacks but finding strength in community support. She calls for mobile help.

**Narrative 2:** A queer trainer builds safe spaces but deals with raids from online leaks. She wants faster response systems.

**Narrative 3:** A young mother creates podcasts despite harassment, balancing family. She seeks funds with childcare.

**Narrative 5:** A Muslim mentor advocates in limited spaces, facing silence norms. She urges engaging leaders.

**Narrative 6:** A security expert uses tech after burnout, turning pain into tools. She proposes mental health hubs.



## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the risks WHRDs face, changes must come from listening to them and building systems that fit their needs. First, make WHRD involvement a standard part of all protection work. This means bringing them in from the planning stage to review, so strategies reflect real experiences. For example, donors and governments can set rules that require this, helping to avoid designs that ignore identities like disability or sexual orientation and gender identity. This step is key because, as the findings show, token involvement leads to failures, and true partnership can lead to more effective outcomes (Cullen & Manning, 2021).

Second, set up funds just for WHRDs that are flexible and consider their identities. These funds should cover costs like childcare for young mothers or safe moves for queer defenders. Donors can work with WHRDN-U to manage them, ensuring money goes to rural and marginalized groups. This addresses the economic barriers in the findings and helps build resilience, as seen in how some WHRDs already share resources (AWID, 2023).

Third, start campaigns to educate the public about WHRDs' work. Use radio, social media, and community talks to show how they help society, reducing stigma like "bitter feminists." Media partners can lead this, with support from government, to create a safer environment for advocacy (Tamale, 2020).

Fourth, improve rapid response to make it truly quick and include checks. This means answering calls within hours and investigating claims, with training for responders on WHRD issues. WHRDN-U can oversee this, fixing the delays seen in the study (Front Line Defenders, 2024).

Fifth, require training on intersecting risks for police, lawyers, and donors. This can include workshops on digital threats and how identities affect safety. UHRC can run these, helping to build trust and better responses (Cullen & Manning, 2021).

Sixth, invest in programs for young, rural, and queer WHRDs to build their skills. Mentorship and networking can help, led by groups like WHRDN-U, to address the gatekeeping in the findings.

Seventh, create networks with funding for support, including mental health. Donors can back this, allowing WHRDs to share resources and care, as in the safe-house pledges described (Lorde, 1984).

Eighth, hold reviews every two years led by WHRDs. Feminist organisations like WHRDN-U can coordinate this to check progress and adjust, ensuring long-term change (Rutazibwa, 2019).

These recommendations are based on the study's evidence and can lead to real improvements if implemented together.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The safety of WHRDs in Uganda is essential for a fair society, and this study shows how their risks and strengths must guide change. By moving to co-created systems, we can build a future where defending rights is protected, not punished.



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