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Policy Brief

Enhancing Protection for Women Human Rights Defenders in Uganda Intersecting Risks, Barriers, and Resilience Strategies: An Intersectional Approach



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Uganda face compounded risks due to intersecting identities such as disability, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), age, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status. This policy brief draws on qualitative research conducted in 2025, involving 14 key informant interviews and one focus group discussion with over 20 WHRDs from diverse backgrounds. The study reveals how risks multiply across digital-physical threats, social stigma, legal violence, economic precarity, and inadequate protection systems, while highlighting WHRDs' relational resilience.

Key findings underscore the need for identity-sensitive, co-created protection mechanisms. Recommendations include mandatory WHRD in program design, dedicated flexible funding, public education campaigns, and systemic reforms. Implementing these could foster a safer civic space, aligning with Uganda's commitments to human rights under international frameworks like the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Uganda’s civic space has contracted since the early 2020s, exacerbated by restrictive laws such as the Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA) of 2023, the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act of 2022, and the NGO Act of 2016. These measures criminalize advocacy, enable surveillance, and impose burdensome administrative requirements, disproportionately affecting marginalized WHRDs. WHRDs—activists, lawyers, journalists, and digital trainers working on rights issues—encounter risks that intersect with their identities, leading to unique vulnerabilities. For instance, a queer rural defender may face legal criminalization compounded by geographic isolation and economic barriers. Grounded in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), feminist security studies (Cullen & Manning, 2021), and decolonial feminism (Tamale, 2020), this research maps these patterns to inform policy.

The study aimed to:

- Map intersecting patterns of risk, discrimination, and resilience.
- Identify barriers to protection.
- Co-develop identity-sensitive strategies.
- Research questions focused on how identities produce distinct risks, what barriers hinder access, and how to co-design protections.

KEY FINDINGS

The research identifies six interconnected areas where risks manifest, drawn from WHRDs’ lived experiences:

1. **Digital-Physical Threat Continuum: Online threats rapidly escalate to offline violence. For example, a leaked WhatsApp invite led to a police raid, eviction, and community arson for a queer advocate (KII-10). Deepfakes and misinformation further silence young mothers and others, with a 300% surge in digital attacks culminating in physical harm (Access Now, 2024).**

2. **Social Stigma as Embodied Regulation:** Cultural norms police WHRDs’ bodies and voices. A Muslim mentor noted her hijab being weaponized to enforce silence (KII-09), while internal gatekeeping in feminist spaces dismisses young or mixed-race defenders, reproducing patriarchal exclusion (Tamale, 2020).
3. **Legal and Institutional Violence:** Laws redefine care as crime; providing health services to trans women is labeled “promotion of homosexuality” under the AHA (KII-10). NGO regulations exclude small, rural, or queer-led groups, and tokenistic consultations ignore inputs (CIVICUS, 2025).
4. **Economic Precarity as a Multiplier:** Poverty amplifies risks, preventing access to justice. A rural disabled defender couldn’t report an attack due to transport costs and inaccessible stations (KII-05). Donor funds favor urban NGOs, leaving marginalized WHRDs with minimal support (AWID, 2023).
5. **Resilience as Relational Praxis:** WHRDs build adaptive networks, such as safe-house pledges (“If you’re chased, our gate is open”) and encrypted digital tools (KII-10, KII-02). This generative approach transforms trauma into testimony, emphasizing collective reinvention (Lorde, 1984).
6. **Protection System Failures:** Existing mechanisms are identity-blind, urban-biased, and slow. “Rapid response” often arrives days late, excluding queer or rural defenders due to police complicity and eligibility barriers (Front Line Defenders, 2024).

These findings, illustrated through five rebuilt narratives (e.g., a queer trainer facing raids, a young podcaster battling deepfakes), highlight multiplicative risks rooted in structural inequalities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Without targeted interventions, Uganda risks further eroding civic freedoms, violating international obligations, and silencing voices essential for social justice. Marginalized WHRDs' exclusion perpetuates cycles of violence and underfunding, weakening national resilience against authoritarianism. Co-created protections could enhance security, boost donor efficiency, and foster inclusive development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges, the following eight actionable, WHRD-led recommendations are proposed:

No.	Recommendation	Target Actors	Rationale
1	Mandate WHRD co-creation in all protection programs from design to evaluation.	Donors, Government, NGOs	Ensures strategies reflect lived realities, avoiding tokenism (Cullen & Manning, 2021).
2	Establish dedicated, flexible WHRD funds with stipends for childcare, safe relocation, and no bank guarantees.	Donors, WHRD	Tackles economic barriers for rural, queer, and disabled groups (AWID, 2023).
3	Launch public education campaigns via radio, social media, and community dialogues to counter stigma (e.g., "bitter feminists").	Media Partners, Government	Reduces social regulation and builds public support (Tamale, 2020).
4	Reform rapid response systems for hourly responses, with trained investigators.	WHRD network, UHRC & other stakeholders	Fixes temporal lags and identity-blindness (Front Line Defenders, 2024).
5	Require intersectional training on risks for police, lawyers, judges, and donors.	UHRC, Professional Bodies	Builds trust and competence in handling compounded threats.

6	Invest in mentorship and skill-building for young, rural, and queer WHRDs.	WHRDN network, Feminist Organizations	Addresses internal gatekeeping and empowers emerging leaders.
7	Fund solidarity networks with psychosocial support and biennial check-ins.	Donors	Amplifies relational resilience like safe-house pledges (Lorde, 1984).
8	Conduct biennial WHRD-led reviews of protection mechanisms.	WOUGNET, CfMA	Ensures ongoing accountability and adaptation (Rutazibwa, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Protecting WHRDs is vital for Uganda's democratic future. By adopting these intersectional strategies, policymakers can transform risks into resilience, creating a society where defending rights is safeguarded, not criminalized. CfMA calls for immediate collaboration with WHRDs to implement this agenda.

For more details, contact CfMA at [info@thecfma.org (mailto:info@thecfma.org)]. Full report available upon request.

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