

**THE SHRINKING
CIVIC SPACE FOR
WOMEN, GIRLS AND
WOMEN HUMAN
RIGHTS DEFENDERS
IN UGANDA**

JULY 2023

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ACRONYMS

CBOs	Community-Based organizations
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
FBOs	Faith-Based Organizations
GBV	Gender Based Violence
HRBA	Human Rights Based Approach
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Persons
MPs	Members of Parliament
NGO Bureau	Non-Government Organization Bureau
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PDM	Parish development model
PLWHDs	People Living With HIV/AIDS
PWDs	People With Disabilities
RHU	Reproductive Health Uganda
SRHR	Sexual Reproductive Health Rights
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
STF	Straight Talk Foundation
UN	United Nations
URSB	Uganda Registration Services Bureau
WHRDN-U	Women Human Rights Defenders Network Uganda
WHRDs	Women Human Rights Defenders
WPI	Women's Probono Initiative

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Civil Society Organizations

These are community-based organizations such as community groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as labor unions, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.

Feminists

These are women who identify with the feminist theory and practice and work to ensure equal rights and access to resources and services for all women and girls are importantly. The term refers to all or any form(s) of identification as a way of life or a culture, as a political ideology and action, and part of a community group of women mostly engaged and concerned with women issues.

Feminist movement

Also known as the women's movement, the Feminist Movement refers to a series of social movements and political campaigns for radical and liberal reforms on women's issues created by the inequality between men and women. Such issues are women's liberation, reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

Feminist Organizing:

The efforts of women to explicitly challenge their subordination to men. Feminists are able to convene or gather, hold engagements, programs towards a specific feminist issue or agenda. This is done as a feminist collective for the Movement.

Human Rights Activists

Are the individuals, groups and bodies of society that promote and protect human, civil, and political rights and fundamental freedoms which are universal and recognized by the international community.

Online Civic Space

This is any digital space in which people are free to participate in governance, freely voice their opinions online or organize around issues that affect them personally and politically.

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs)

WHRDs are all women and girls working on any human rights issue ("women defenders" and "girl defenders"), and people of all genders who work to promote women's rights and rights related to gender equality. It also includes any civil society actors who may not self-identify as human rights defenders or those who work on non-traditional human rights fields (journalists, health workers, environmental activists, peacebuilders, private actors, development and humanitarian actors, etc.). It includes lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists, as issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are part of achieving gender equality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

WPI acknowledges and appreciates the immense contributions made by thought leaders, directly affected individuals, representatives of Civil Society Organizations that were interviewed. Their contribution validates our work and enables us to expand the influence of women and WHRDs to attain justice in our society.

WPI also appreciates all the development partners whose generosity, moral and financial support and belief in the work of the Women's Probono Initiative (WPI) led to the commencement of this information brief series and many others yet to come.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Information Brief provides an opportunity for women to take charge of their life stories while challenging the culture that women, their initiatives and their rights are defined and seen through the lenses of men.

The Women’s Probono Initiative (WPI) is an indigenous, non-profit, legal and advocacy organizations that promotes access to justice for women and girls in Uganda. It advances women’s and girls rights through awareness creation, research, knowledge sharing and legal representation. Therefore, evidence gathering and building through documentation is a core aspect of the work that WPI does. Without evidence, it would be impossible for WPI to support the women and girls whose rights have been violated to find justice. It is in the light of this that the project on “**Advancing Women’s Voice and Agency in Public Spaces in Uganda,**” is launching its first Information Brief series as one of the ways to pushback on civic space challenges that affect Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs).

The Information Brief provides an opportunity for women to take charge of their life stories while challenging the culture that women, their initiatives and their rights are defined and seen through the lenses of men. Specifically, this Information Brief documents the experiences and responses of women and WHRDs in Uganda’s closing civic space, and in so doing, amplifies voice and advances autonomy for WHRDs. The Brief also pays specific attention to sexual minorities and gender non-conforming voices that are often subject to inordinate institutionalized violence. These voices continue to challenge not only the actions of the state but, it’s very male-centric and nationalist foundation.

Specifically, this document aims to;

- a) Present evidence that the civic space for women and WHRDs is increasingly at risk of diminishing and WHRDs are targets of abuse because of the human rights work they are involved in¹
- b) Highlight the forms of oppression and evidence of gendered challenges faced by WHRDs.
- c) Propose policy actions and remedial measures that need to be addressed.

1 Safety and Security Guidelines for Women Human Rights Defenders in Uganda; UN Women, OHCHR and RDN; Solome Nakaweesi & Jackline Kemigisa; Spotlight Initiative; November 2021.

2. APPROACH

The research that informs this information brief was conducted through a purposive qualitative study of a selected number of respondents combined with reviewing literature from feminist scholarly publications, reports, WHRDs guidelines in Uganda, existing laws in Uganda, using a feminist methodological lens. When a feminist methodological lens is applied in a research context, it is primarily concerned with identifying the systemic causes and patterns of the politics of power and position, politics of the women and girls' bodies and their voices and how these aggravate patriarchy and the injustices against them. A feminist methodological lens therefore, allows for an exploration and "creation of spaces and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these deep-seated inequalities"². The feminist methodological lens also enables us to explore the various factors contributing to the lives and motives of women and girls as well as the intersection of the contributing factors such as age, location, literacy levels and income levels hence allowing for a documentation of gender differentiations.

In conducting this research, we collected evidence through in person, online and written interviews with a selected number of thought leaders from the Feminist movement in Uganda, directly affected individuals in Uganda and representatives of CSOs in Uganda particularly from the women's rights organizations.

Table 1: Percentage showing interviewed participants

	Target interviewed	
1	Directly Affected Individuals	100%
2	CSO's	40%
3	Thought Leaders	66%

The percentages in the table above represent the availability of the targeted interviewees plus the timing of the research.

A feminist methodological lens allows for an exploration and "creation of spaces and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these deep-seated inequalities".

² Parry, B. (2020). Feminist research principles and practices. In S. Kramer, S. Laher, A. Fynn, & H. H. Janse van Vuuren (Eds.), *Online Readings in Research Methods*. Psychological Society of South Africa: Johannesburg. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/BNPFS>

Confidentiality and limitations of the study

Due to the sensitive political environment at the time of the study, particularly when the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) has just been passed and tensions across the nation are high - the identities of the respondents of this study will not be revealed. This is to safeguard the lives of the respondents. Secondly, due to the time constraint and urgency to have this information Brief produced, almost a quarter of the respondents were not available to participate in the interview process.

We also noted that quite a number of respondents were apprehensive about sharing their views for fear of the repercussions that may arise as a result of the Anti-homosexuality Act.

Civic space in Uganda

‘Civic Space’ is a concept that has been defined differently by different actors. However, in simple terms it is the environment where civil society operates. It is also the space that allows them to freely organize and implement their programs.

³CIVICUS defines Civic Space to include the freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression. Two key global instruments that govern civic space are:

- a) **The 2030 Agenda**⁴ that commits Member States to create the conditions to promote inclusive decision-making, access to information and protection of freedoms of association, assembly and opinion, and the participation of all without discrimination, including marginalized and vulnerable populations, towards achieving the SDGs.
- b) **The UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space**⁵ urges global solidarity towards achieving safe, open and enabling societies, recognizing the role of the UN in protecting civil society from shrinking civic space, promoting and expanding inclusive participation, and enhancing civil society engagement with the UN, as well as the role of governments and their people.

3 <https://acme-ug.org/wp-content/uploads/Uganda-Civic-Space-Index-2021-NCHRDU.pdf>

4 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

5 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf

In Uganda, from the early 1980's – mid 1990's Civil Society Organizations (CSO's) were considered critical actors in development, and notably the 1996 Uganda Constitution. ⁶During that period, the number of registered NGOs rose from less than 1,000 to over 5,000 and they were recognized for their active role in holding Government accountable, as well as complimenting Government efforts at service delivery. CSOs also provided the much needed grassroots interventions, bringing the voices of the marginalized women, men, girls and boys to decision-making tables to inform resource mobilization and resource allocation, hence spearheading bottom-up consultative and service delivery processes. As a result, CSOs were included in national working groups, country delegations, consultative/mediation processes and humanitarian interventions.

However, as Uganda evolved from a one-party state to a multi-party state, the autonomy and vibrancy of Civil Society Organizations came under scrutiny. As the context changed, a number of CSO's evolved and new ones emerged shifting from a service delivery and needs based approach to adopting the "human rights-based approach to development".⁷

HRBA is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyze inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress and often result in groups of people being left behind. The shift from service delivery to human rights-based approach made it imperative for CSO's to educate citizens about their individual and group rights. HRBA also empowered citizens as right holders to exercise their social, economic and political rights, while holding the duty bearers accountable for responsive decision making and resource allocation. This trend of events led to an emergence of a variety of movements including; the feminist movement, the movement of People with Disabilities (PWDs), the movement of People Living With HIV/AIDS(PLHIVs), minority groups, Human Rights Defenders and Women Human Rights Defenders to mention but a few. This approach also led to demands for greater accountability from the state with obligations now becoming justifiable in the courts of law which turned the once friends into sometimes adversaries. All these movements were demanding for inclusion, accountability, fostering mechanisms and platforms for democratic governance and gendered participation in ongoing development processes. This more active and critical approach by CSOs led to some political actors questioning the relevance and role of CSOs in view of Opposition Parties and even accusing them of being "*political*".

The Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) seeks to analyze inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress and often result in groups of people being left behind.

6 REALITY CHECK 11 Civil Society in Uganda Broadening Understanding of Uganda's Civil Society Ecosystem and Identifying Pathways for Effective Engagement with Civil Society in the Development Process Published by: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung | Centre for Development Alternatives Authors: Michael Mugisha | Yusuf Kiranda | Michael Mbate
7 <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

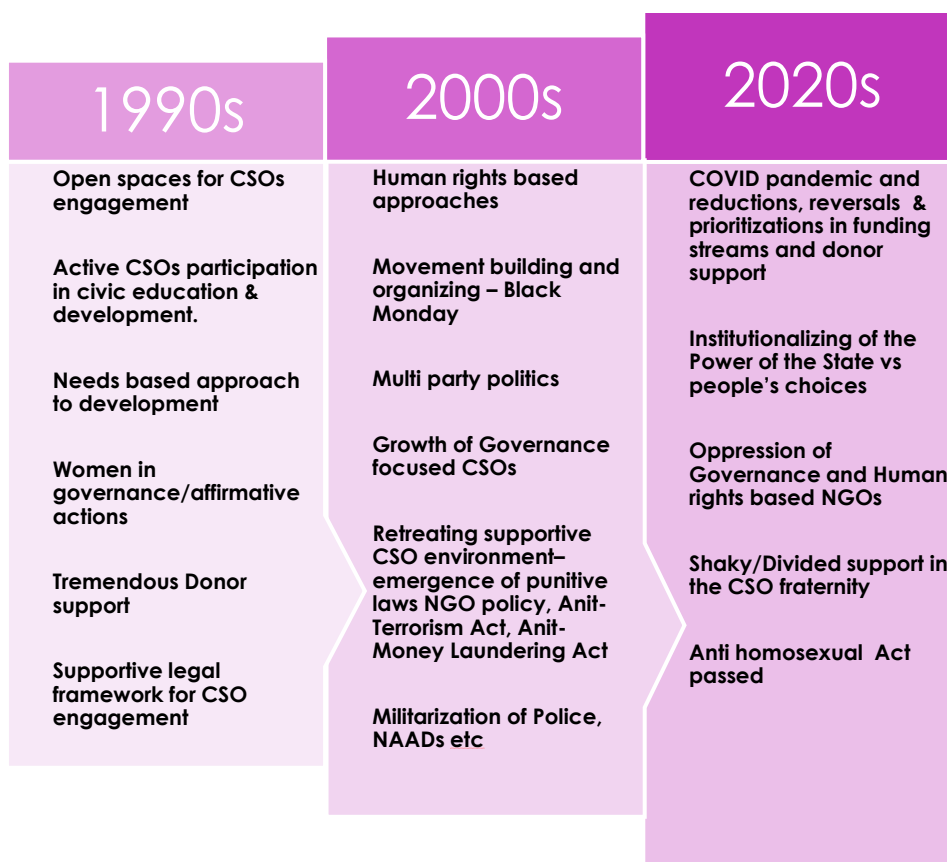


Diagram 1: Genesis of the shrinking civic space

Article 3 of the Constitution that provides that citizens have a right to participate in the governance affairs of their country through either their elected representatives or through civic organizations.

The increased restrictions on civic space in Uganda are reflected in both policy, legislation and practice. Whilst the overarching regulatory framework for civic space is Article 3 of the Constitution *that provides that citizens have a right to participate in the governance affairs of their country through either their elected representatives or through civic organizations*. In contrast though there are provisions in several other laws that undermine the sanctity of civic space. These laws that are mostly controlling in nature, repressive in action and do not promote freedom of expression and association, include:

- a) The Non- Governmental Act (2016)
- b) The Public Order Management Act (2013)
- c) The Anti-Money laundering Act; (2013)
- d) The Anti-Terrorism Act (2002)
- e) The Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill (2022)
- f) The Anti homosexuality Act (2023)
- g) The HIV Prevention and Control Act,
- h) The Data Protection and Privacy Act 2019.
- i) Uganda Registration Bureau's Act
- j) The Labour Unions Act

These laws have become more weaponized and aim to control and curtail the work of CSOs and much more the WHRDs.⁸ As a result, civil society organizations that once acted as “watchdogs” are now the ones “being watched”. The operating environment in Uganda has become hostile to civil society organizations and even worse for women’s rights defenders. This is in line with the *Safety and Security Guidelines for Women Human Rights Defenders in Uganda (Nov 2021)* that illustrates that the people and organizations most at risk from shrinking civic space and repression are human rights defenders. This is because they advocate for transparency, accountability and democratic governance; politically and socially sensitive issues like representing the interests of marginalized and vulnerable populations such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) persons.

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are women active in human rights defense who are targeted for who they are—because they are women as well as for what they do—because of their work defending human rights.

⁹Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are women active in human rights defense who are targeted for who they are—because they are women as well as for what they do—because of their work defending human rights. The only safe space where Women human rights defenders have always freely engaged is within the civic space. In a patriarchal society like Uganda where WHRDs often face terrible backlash civic space is the only safe space for them to operate. As the civic space increasingly shrinks – it means that the work of the WHRDs is even more threatened. The Women Human Rights Defenders Network Uganda (WHRDN-U) formed in 2017 came into being to form a common stand to fight against the risks and injustices that WHRDs face in demanding for justice. It has continued to highlight the level of violations towards WHRDs and they are on the rise across the country.

¹⁰Additionally, it is worth noting that there are other external forces that are contributing to the shrinking of civic space in Uganda, including negative media and publicity about the vibrancy of CSOs, and the shrinking of donor funding. Most WHRDs organizations solely depend on external funding for support and hence often labelled as the new face of neoliberalism¹¹. And as a result of this, it has been easy for their activities to get affected when their bank accounts were frozen, properties confiscated and ¹²deregistered by the NGO Bureau. Apart from this generally, ¹³Northern based development donors have reduced their funding support to CSOs and this too is an impediment to their work. This was a trend already evident even before the global recession ushered in by the COVID Pandemic but deteriorated further after the pandemic.

8 <https://www.mamacash.org/en/women-human-rights-defenders-network-uganda-1>; May 2023

9 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). *Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders* 2007. p.15. 2007. Web. January 2014 http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf2008/EN_Claiming_Rights.pdf

10 UNDP (2022). *Strengthening Civic Space and Civil Society Engagement in the HIV Response*. New York, UNDP.

11 NGOs, Social Movements and the Neoliberal State: Incorporation, Reinvention, Critique; Feyzi Ismail and Sangeeta Kamat; Volume 44, Issue 4-5; <https://doi.org/10.1177/089692051774>; Sage Journals; March 2018

12 <https://ngobureau.go.ug/index.php/en/news-and-notice/operations-of-54-ngos-halted>

13 Rethinking shrinking civic space in the Global Souths – how development donors contribute to the restriction of civil society in Jordan; Alena Sander; Pages 22-39 | Received 24 May 2022, Accepted 28 Jun 2022, Published online: 28 Jul 2022

3. WOMEN EXPERIENCES ABOUT SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Women human rights defenders are mostly vulnerable to gender-specific threats and violence from their families, communities and authorities.

This study found that women have varied experiences about of shrinking civic space, and that the severity of the experiences and/or impacts is dependent on the nature of work they are engaged in, how visible they are, and where they are located. The experiences of the women are captured in the categories mentioned below with examples. From the analysis the following seven (7) key categories of negative impacts of shrinking civic space emerged.

They have been categorized for ease of reference as below;

- a) Social isolation and stigma
- b) Emotional and mental distress
- c) Increased vulnerability to physical harm or violence
- d) Reduced access to resources
- e) Impediments for Self organising (off line and online)
- f) Legal and political restrictions

3.1 The social isolation and stigma

The testimonies and stories of the WHRDs are quite appalling. WHRDs and their institutions have been grossly affected at personal and mental health level. ¹⁴Women human rights defenders are mostly vulnerable to gender-specific threats and violence from their families, communities and authorities. For some of them - their mental health, personal safety and security has been compromised due to physical and sexual assault, discrimination, violence, imprisonment, evictions, expulsions, labeling or tagging, threats, retaliation, pressure and arbitrary actions by their families, communities and the authorities.

The affected WHRDs include;

- Women whose lives are Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Women, because they are considered to be engaged in abnormal activities.
- Women living in Poverty (Urban Poor women in Slums)
- Sex Workers
- Women in Rural Areas (Especially hard to reach)
- Women from ethnic minority groups for example Batwa, Karamajong.
- Women in prison.
- Women who do not conform to patriarchy.
- Women who do not conform to traditional perceptions of family and marriage - single women, single mothers, surrogate mothers.
- Women who decide what they want to do with their bodies.
- Women who advocate for rights and challenge narratives for example Electoral Democracy, Oil and Gas Natural Resources, Gender Based Violence.
- Women who stand out to be counted.
- Women and girls with disabilities.
- Women who belong to opposition political parties.

- Women and girls who have no access to services, no access to income, no access to justice, cannot participate in public spaces.
- Girls especially school drop outs and those expelled from schools for allegedly having Lesbian sex or participating in lesbian activities.
- Girls who are survivors of gender-based violence, early marriages and unwanted pregnancies.

The WHRDs alluded to the fact that the plight of the women and girls has worsened and unfortunately those capable of creating spaces to confront the injustices they face; fear to do so due to the rampant arrests, violence and evictions. In some cases, even politicians fear to associate with WHRDs because of the implications to their votes. A good number of WHRDs have lost funding and lost strategic partners due to the various restrictions imposed in the civic space.

To measure the extent to which the civic space has shrunk we asked the WHRDs to use a Scale of 1-10 where 1 means completely closed – no space at all, bloody, WHRDs hunted down, punitive laws, destructive spaces, individual and collective expression absent, total shutdown while 10 means – Absolutely open, supportive, thriving WHRDs, individual and collective expression, highly valued, total freedom, supportive laws, freedom of choice, constructive spaces, WHRDs feel needed.

As shown in the diagram below the WHRDs rated the state of the Shrinking space in Uganda on average was 2-3. Some of the WHRDs felt the civic space was close to nonexistent and controlled by those in power.

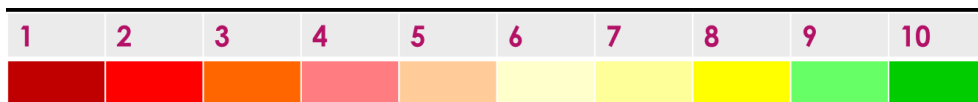


Diagram 2: Scale for shrinking civic space

They also noted that the civic spaces seem to be held by those with access to resources. They also noted a significant number of WHRDs had given up on advocacy and rather resorted to service delivery-based activities that do not attract political attention such as emergency and relief related work. One activist noted that ***“In the current situation; you cannot exist, you cannot collaborate, you cannot organize events, or relate. You cannot speak about civic space. We cannot express ourselves, yet freedom of expression is a given. You cannot erase us no matter the situation”.***

3.2 Emotional and mental distress

At mental health level – some WHRDs are being labelled as bewitched, isolated by their families and excommunicated by families and communities. The stigma associated with being a WHRD is too heavy for some to bear. In a society with a very weak mental health seeking culture and inadequate mental health facilities we predict that WHRDs may be prone to depression and other mental health complications. Particular attention ought to be given to the WHRDs in rural areas where mental health services are almost nonexistent.

3.3 Increased vulnerability to physical harm or violence

In terms of physical assault and violence, some WHRDs and activists have been brutally arrested in public for protesting against repressive Government laws. This has created terror and fear among them. Some have been labelled as members of the opposition hence making it difficult to do women's rights work. The WHRDSN-U in its statistical information from the Protection and Emergency Response Database January-March 2023 shows that *“GBV activists have received the highest threats seen at 18% followed by the LGBTQ, Land rights and Activists around the fishing communities at 11% and those experiencing less attacks and threats have been those working on environmental, Sexual Reproductive Health Rights and Anti-traffickers at 2%.”* This goes to show that the work of WHRDs is increasingly risky business.

3.4 Impediments for self-organising (off line and online)

The plight of the women and girls is very bad in light of the shrinking civic space because those that want to create spaces can't do it because of fear of arrests, violence, evictions. In some cases – even hotels cannot host events organized by Queer Women, and Lesbian advocates.

There are WHRDs facing language barriers due to lack of translation for those that cannot read English. The digital divide between rural and urban communities is a problem in the sense that it weakens moral support and solidarity among the WHRDs. Rural-based WHRDs have no access to information, and lack resources to engage online. There is a challenge of distance and so advocates and communities upcountry are further silenced. Increasingly, the collusion between fundamentalist religious groups, the state, religious institutions are taking over the civic space in the guise of protecting the culture and morals of society. It has also led to the demonizing of the Feminist Movement. Since Uganda is known as a Christian country the Church's role in targeting WHRDs is on the rise. One activist commented that **“Society hates women who do not conform”** therefore it is imperative for women to create their own spaces and platforms for protection.

The WHRDS noted that the space for online activism is shrinking and online hate speech is on the rise especially targeting WHRDs. The shrinking of online activism reduces the ability of WHRDs to spread information and raise awareness within society. The shaming and naming of members of the LGBTI community in public, the criminalization, stigmatization and de-legitimization of so-called WHRDs, justifying of the murder of the members of the LGBTI community and failure to bring the murders to book are all indicators of a repressive and non-responsive civic space.

The naming and shaming of members of the LGBTI community in public, justifying their murder, and failure to bring the murderers to book are all indicators of a repressive and non-responsive civic space.

Some of the laws like the Sexual Offences Act – trivializes sexual violence. The passing of the Anti-homosexuality Act has further put the WHRDs at risk and is likely to promote the prohibition of writing, protesting, advocating against any violations in this regard. The Anti homosexuality Act is criminalizing people’s lives, and is likely in the long run to deny health provision and housing for LGBTI community thus affecting their health and well-being. This means that the institutions that should protect them will not be able to do so.

3.5 Reduced access to resources

Some of the local NGOs lack resources to afford local advocates and legal representation. Some cannot register and be recognized by URSB because of the apprehension they have on words like “policy and advocacy”. It is only a few WHRDs like WPI and likeminded human right defenders like Chapter 4 that can publicly advocate or even have the resources to be protected. The others that WHRDS noted still speak out boldly include; The News Agency of Minority Africa; the French Embassy, The Transwomen – Network of Transgender stories to mention but a few.

The financial challenges faced by the WHRDs also constrains their ability to invest in robust and credible research that is representative and not biased. Women in the rural areas may not be able to communicate with likeminded networks, report or even inform research or access research information valuable for their livelihoods. It was noted that for WHRDs engaged in sex work – they struggle to afford services for safe sex and hence this exposes them to risk. They felt that the intersectionality of development and economic empowerment programs going on nationwide such as the SACCOs, Emyooga, Parish development model (PDM) etc often marginalizes them and denies them the opportunities afforded other women and hence renders them unable to meet the cost of protecting themselves from unsafe sex.

The incapacity to recruit and retain the right skilled staff members to write good fundable proposals and implement projects is also another challenge cited by the WHRDs. They said **“some of the good proposal writers are men, who do not understand and appreciate the challenges of women in the same way we do”**. As a result, they miss out on strategic funding opportunities.

From the research we confirm that WHRDs lack resources to attend online meetings held on Zoom or Twitter Spaces yet due to the insecurity it is the preferred mode of communication. However, due to the financial pressure some WHRDs cannot afford smart phones and hence miss out on some critical meetings.

In some of the responses, they do not even get to know about the meeting invites let alone understand the language used in communicating.

The financial challenges faced by the WHRDs constrains their ability to invest in robust and credible research that is representative and not biased

Government of Uganda is pushing more critical and outspoken civil society actors into a shadow realm where they face de-legitimization, persecution, prosecution and excessive control, with the precise aim of countering their work

3.6 Legal and political restrictions

Most WHRDs do not have the freedom to meet, to engage, recruit staff members or even to reassemble for an Annual General Meeting because of fear of being arrested. *One activist noted that “violations of human rights seem to have worsened, even with a Female Vice President, Female Prime Minister, Female Speaker of Parliament – the leadership for women is still viewed as tokenism and is not structurally changing the power dynamics affecting the wellbeing and protection of WHRDs and women across the nation”.*

Increasingly, the fear of the backlash against those demanding for the protection of WHRDs is on the rise. One activist commented *“We have witnessed discrimination to the level of family and politicians fearing to associate with us because they fear to lose votes. We have been pushed to the edge to a world without funding partners and strategic partners”.* A case in point is that even organizations like UGANET which offers shelters to youth (expelled from school) have stopped accepting those linked to LGBTI.

Additionally, the Government of Uganda is pushing more critical and outspoken civil society actors into a shadow realm where they face de-legitimization, persecution, prosecution and excessive control, with the precise aim of countering their work. When this happens, it sends a message of terror across the sector to the extent that some activists distance themselves and do not show solidarity whatsoever – for fear of being blacklisted.

The enforcement of prohibitive policies and practices imposes restrictions on the rights to freedom of assembly and association e.g. seeking permission to hold activities in rural areas, seeking permission from Police to hold a demonstration all indirectly restricting mobilization. The militarizing of the Police forces in the name of ‘public order’, is yet another indirect action to curtail the work of WHRDs. The recent scenario of women opposition MPs who were arrested and ‘rescued’ by the Speaker of Parliament shows the excessive brutality that Police exercises its authority over even Members of Parliament.¹⁵

15 <https://www.parliament.go.ug/news/6664/female-opposition-mps-petition-speaker-over-brutalization>

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The different stakeholders interviewed shared recommendations that gave a call to action to the following audiences: a) WPI and national CSO networks; b) Policy-makers.

4.1 Recommendations to WPI and national CSO networks

a) Level the playing ground

There is need to promote equal participation for all women at all levels so that their voices can be heard and their concerns addressed in the available common platforms. In order to do this the structures at the grassroots level need to be strengthened to tap into the ongoing work by the Spotlight Program.¹⁶ When handling women ensure all women are invited to the space to contribute and ensure the Transgender and Queer women are not left out.

Re-Define and popularize the agenda of the WHRDs within the¹⁷African feminist movement charter. It is high time they reflect on what has worked or hasn't worked in the¹⁸the Global Spotlight initiative. Uganda is one of the countries benefiting from this initiative.

b) Create more visibility for the work of WHRDs

- There is a need to magnify the work of WHRDs and invite well-wishers like donors and other key stakeholders to the discussion table.
- Utilise social media platforms such as podcasts, Tiktok, online platforms and more programmes that address women issues. Some of the programs could be similar to what the Straight Talk Foundation (STF) does. Straight Talk Foundation (STF) has since 1993 specialized in communication for development promoting the health and well-being of young people, vulnerable and marginalized communities, women and girls with special emphasis to adolescents.
- Infuse the Arts and Culture with WHRDs' activism. Use films/songs / Edutainment to create songs on gender-based issues. Reach a Hand – Uganda (RAHU) uses movies to pass on sexual reproductive health rights and economic empowerment related information and behavioral change messages to especially young women and men. Consider borrowing a leaf from RAHU and creating movies with Ugandan content with an aim of opening up their eyes to a world of possibilities. Use movies, poems, music apart from workshops – these are inclusive and allow more audiences to tap into the learning and media advocacy.
- Amplify the WHRDs' agenda within the broader Feminist movement. The feminist movement developed a charter that included all women including female sex workers, LGBTI among others. As feminists these are the principles that WHRDs ought to work with.

16 <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/spotlight-initiative-uganda>

17 The Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists was formed out of a movement building initiative known as The African Feminist Forum(AFF), a regional forum bringing together African feminist activists to deliberate on critical issues affecting the movement for collective action at regional and national levels

18 The global Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls is a United Nations initiative supported by the European Union and other partners

4.2 Recommendations to policy-makers

Uganda is not short of policies and the legal frameworks to support the work of WHRDs. The main concern is how the law and the institutions have been used to weaponize and paralyse the work of WHRDs. In order to protect the work of WHRDs,

- There is need to ensure that Human rights institutions such as the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Uganda Human Rights Commission are utilized to amplify the injustice that WHRDs face. These institutions ought to articulate the broader agenda, civic freedoms and women's rights irrespective of sexual orientation. For instance, these institutions in an ideal sense should highlight the flaws of the internet and restrictions therein as well as interrogate the way they are being used as instruments of backlash against WHRDs.
- The WHRDs and human rights institutions needs to keep an eye on the upcoming process of drafting a National Family Policy. It is likely to shrink the spaces for engagement even more. Regulating family space and the modalities in which culture, reproduction and wealth is managed and distributed is erasing all the privacy families still have. It is important to consider separating the state from religion to safeguard this space.

4.3 Other recommendations

a) **Enhancing spaces for solidarity and networking for the voice, protection and safety of WHRDs**

A paradigm shift is required to effectively analyse the prevailing context. WHRDs need to debate and think of more effective ways of organising and make visible the multiple and intersecting markers of social exclusion and oppression—gender, class, sexual orientation, age, nationality, ethnicity, and the myriad other identities around which social hierarchies are built. A fresh mapping of the “new hotspots of Patriarchy” in rural and urban settings needs to be unpacked—notably, in the domestic, reproductive, and intimate spheres.

The WHRDs need to continue engaging Lawyers, Members of Parliament, communities to equip community paralegals with – crisis response skills such as writing petitions, reporting cases etc. At the same time, have a roving team of advocates that directly caters for the unique challenges of the LGBTI community.

b) **CSOs space vs social movements**

More attention needs to be paid to those actors who are mobilizing collectively, who are genuinely challenging power and who face the most serious threats – to understand their ‘shrinking space’ with respect to those whose space is increasing. This ought to be done in a framework that recognizes that activists, and the wider social movements that they are part of, experience different levels of oppression and violence as a result of their particular identities and the wider struggles which they represent, such as combating violent misogyny.

In response to social movement organizing donors and well-wishers alike ought to align their funding modalities to accommodate social movement organizing. It is imperative of donors to create streams of funding that can accommodate individuals, loose coalitions and movements to reduce the risks involved in vesting all resources within one single organization.

We also need to take seriously the proposition that NGOs may not be the appropriate lens to look at the wider repression of social movements, and that securitization instrumentalizes CSOs to such an extent that it may one day permanently close the door on the spaces where real change is made. Hence the need to promote social movement organizing which is more organic and dynamic.

c) Personal healing

There is need for women to create their own spaces for therapy and healing. Considering the backlash, fear and terror that WHRDs are living under, actively unlearning the negative experiences WHRDs have gone through and creating safe spaces for venting and healing is critical.

d) Mentorship, coaching and cross generational learning

Mentorship and Coaching for Solidarity Fund raising; It is important to support WHRDs struggling to access funds with mentorship from the more mature and experienced CSOs with vast fundraising experience and networks. In so doing they will train the younger organizations on financial integrity and transparency, donor intelligence and donor relations, local philanthropy, democratic governance and administration.

The Ugandan networks should aim to become solution givers and change agents and discourage asylum seeking - which most people are now doing for fear of their lives. It is also important that WHRDs find creative ways of working with cultural institutions and religious leaders for solidarity building and solidarity agenda setting.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion it appears that for WHRDs to continue their work in an increasingly shrinking civic space there is need to;

1. Re-think the spaces for civic engagement. WHRDs ought to embrace intersectionality, organize differently – identify joint collaborations with those whose civic space is increasing such as the religious and cultural institutions.
2. Protect, preserve the WHRDs through promoting personal healing and therapeutic approaches – such as targeted psycho social support for WHRDs. Psycho social support needs to be expanded and made more accessible.
3. Actively and continuously document Women’s stories. Be more innovative and consider infusing the documentation of women’s lived stories through mainstream media, electronic media, online and social media and the creative arts. This will entail training WHRDs about more innovative social media avenues for communication and documentation.
4. Most of all intensify advocacy efforts against repressive policies and diversify fundraising for WHRDs work to sustain the momentum of their actions.

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