



Budgeting for Inequality

The Decline in Gender-Responsive State Spending for Socio-Economic
Rights in Ethiopia and Uganda

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

ANC	Antenatal care
AOE	Abstinence-only Education
ARRA	Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs
CBHI	Community Based Health Insurance
CBOs	Community-based organisations
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSOs	Civil society organisations
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
LTR	Lifetime risk
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoGLSD	Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development
MHC	Maternal health care
MMR	Maternal mortality ratio
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NSSF	National Social Security Fund
OWNP	One WASH National Program
OOP	Out-of-pocket health payments
PPP	Public-private partnership
PPDA	Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
SAGE	Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment of the Elderly
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SFP	School feeding programme
SHI	Social Health Insurance
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health rights
UHV	Universal health coverage
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNNGOF	Uganda National NGO Forum
UGX	Ugandan Shilling
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPE	Universal Primary Education
USE	Universal Secondary Education
VAWG	Violence against Women and/or Girls

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research paper provides in-depth analysis on how current state expenditure is increasingly undermining the key socio-economic rights of women and girls in the Greater Horn of Africa, drawing on the specific case studies of Ethiopia and Uganda. Though both countries have ratified several international and regional human rights treaties which underscore gender equality as a right, there is a broad gap between the commitments made on paper and the stark realities on the ground. In this regard, gender equality and the protection, promotion and fulfilment of key socio-economic rights for women and girls such as health, education, social protection and freedom from violence are frequently deprioritized. This is particularly evident in the context of growing militarization, shrinking civic space and rising anti-rights backlash prevalent in the region as a whole.

From this perspective, the core finding of this paper is that human rights frameworks alone are insufficient for securing women's emancipation under conditions of structural inequality. Instead, there is need for states to meaningfully embed these principles into every aspect of its service delivery, decision-making and budget allocation. Real change will ultimately require shifting from technocratic fixes to political reimagination – one where budgets become tools for liberation using gender responsive approaches, rather than as instruments of control.

Through the use of qualitative research methods in the form of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions as well as a desk review of relevant sources, this research puts forward the arguments that government spending must be rooted in the actual needs of the people, that heavy military spending undermines gender responsive budgetary commitments and should be examined alongside government gender policies and that, violence against women and girls reflects deeper economic and political systems in which their lives are often overlooked. Because women and girls are not made visible in policy decisions, governments struggle to respond effectively to their experiences and needs.

In addressing these overall actualities, this research concludes with recommendations for the Governments of Ethiopia, Uganda and states across the Greater Horn of Africa Region, feminist and human rights organizations, gender rights activists and communities in reimagining budget allocation for a stronger gender responsive approach, in realizing the socio-economic rights of women and girls as follows:

- **Strengthen Accountability Systems** – Feminist organisations must create enforceable metrics that make accountability in the budgeting process measurable and verifiable. Mechanisms must compel individuals and institutions to fulfil their mandates, ensuring equity moves beyond aspiration into practice.
- **Demand Budgetary vigilance** – Gender rights activists must build technical expertise to scrutinise budgets in detail. They must expose concealed allocations for social and economic rights and intervene with precise, evidence-based responses.
- **Forge Cross-Sector Partnerships** – Ministries, CSOs, and communities must align their agendas and co-design solutions. By working together, governments, experts, and communities can transform fragmented efforts into cohesive, rights-driven strategies.

- **Transform Dual Legal Systems** – Cultural conservatism and backlash persist because statutory systems are not given clear precedence when there is a clash with customary laws. Both systems must be recognised and harmonised in practice to ensure that women and girls' rights are upheld.
- **Build Genuine Collaboration** – Civil society and non-governmental actors bring resources, expertise, and innovation that governments often lack. Governments must commit to genuine partnerships that turn cooperation into meaningful, lasting change.
- **Elevate the Role of Feminist Organising** – Women's rights organisations must continue exposing human rights violations but also maintain constant engagement with the state. They must press for shared goals, sustained agendas, and mission-driven strategies that move beyond short-term projects.
- **Enforce Accountability in Gender-Responsive Budgeting** – Finance ministries may endorse GRB, but accountability remains vague. CSOs must intensify pressure to secure concrete enforcement mechanisms that guarantee substantive implementation.
- **Secure Greater Domestic Funding** – With external funding in decline and governments tightening restrictions on donors, women's rights organisations must demand that states allocate domestic resources to finance the implementation of human rights. Governments must not outsource their obligations; they must fund rights from national budgets and be held directly accountable. By insisting on domestic financing, CSOs strengthen accountability and close the loopholes that allow governments to shift responsibility.
- **Break Taboos** – Human rights organisations must lead initiatives that confront silence around culturally sensitive harms. Through evidence-sharing, public education, and success stories, they can dismantle stigma and build trust.
- **Reprioritise Expenditure** – Rights campaigns must expose how resources are siphoned into patronage networks and militarised functions. They must also design strategies that force governments to shift spending towards social infrastructure and services.
- **Challenge Donor Orthodoxy** – Activist organisations must push governments to prioritise local needs over IMF and World Bank conditionalities. They should expose how global fiscal policies fuel pushback on human rights and mobilise to resist them.
- **Enhance CSO Capacity** – CSOs must strengthen their role in knowledge production and thought leadership. They must generate research that informs legislative reform and connects governance transformation to human rights and equity.
- **Invest in Technical and Political Measure** – Governments must reform policies, improve governance, and demonstrate political will. They must cap waste, boost social investment, empower local governments, and enforce accountability at every level to make budgeting responsive to human rights.
- **Institutionalise Citizen Engagement in Budget** – Platforms such as budget barazas must be scaled nationally to empower citizens. Public education and capacity-building are essential so local voices can demand integration of human rights and gender markers at every stage of the budget cycle — planning, allocation, execution, and audit.

INTRODUCTION

Today, human rights cover an extensive range of economic, political, social and cultural domains, promising protection against harms as diverse as sexual violence, hunger, maternal mortality, poor sanitation, discrimination, and other forms of oppression. Yet, over the course of the past decade we have witnessed severe backlash against women's rights – evidenced most starkly by the withdrawal of resources from gender-related issues, contradicting the extensive protections and frameworks that have been constitutionally enshrined and ratified by nations across the globe.

This research paper explores the decline of gender-responsive state spending for socio-economic rights and its link to the rising anti-rights movement against women and girls in the Greater Horn of Africa (GhoA), through the lens of two case studies: Uganda and Ethiopia. The findings of this study, suggest that there is a fundamental tension between the 'spirit' of human rights law, and the lived experience of people seeking to actualise these rights. On the other hand, the anti-rights backlash is also indicative of implementation gaps in the legislative and policy domain, or of their inadequacy in responding to changing or emerging needs, demands and contexts in which women and girls eke out daily life. Furthermore, the existing data suggests gross underspending by states on social and economic rights. This study utilised a qualitative methodology drawing on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions as well as a desk review of relevant sources. In addition to interviewing stakeholders within the respective governments of these countries, community engagement was also prioritised.

This study identifies three main findings. First, it shows how social policy has become increasingly shaped by financial priorities under human rights based governance. As a result, government support is often guided by economic logic rather than people's actual needs. When austerity measures and non-social spending are prioritised, women's rights in particular become more fragile. Second, the study highlights the growing militarisation of public spending, where state security is prioritised over human security. It argues that heavy military spending undermines commitments to gender equality and should be examined alongside government gender policies. Third, the study shows that violence against women and girls reflects deeper economic and political systems in which their lives are often overlooked. Because women and girls are not made visible in policy decisions, governments struggle to respond effectively to their experiences and needs.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Uganda and Ethiopia are two East African countries with comparable political, social and economic profiles. Both emerged from protracted armed conflicts and political instability and both have adopted all major human rights mechanisms, as well as made significant attempts to institutionalise gender through a network of international commitments, laws, mechanisms, institutions, and actors that seek to make visible the demands related to gender inequality in society and the State (see Guzmán, 2001; Guzmán and Montaña, 2012). Both countries have also enjoyed significant international support yet continue to struggle with democratic governance. In both countries, an anti-women's rights backlash is manifesting after the decline of foreign funds, evidenced by the areas prioritised and deprioritised in socioeconomic allocations.

CASE STUDY I (ETHIOPIA)

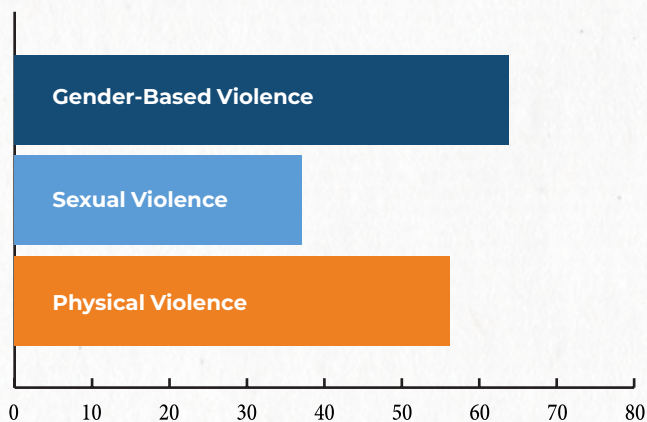
Context: State Expenditure and the status of women and girls in Ethiopia

Ethiopia, the second most populous nation in Africa with about 126.5 million people, is one of the fastest-growing economies in the region. Despite aspirations for lower-middle-income status by 2025, a per capita gross national income of US\$1,020 keeps Ethiopia in the category of poor countries. Young Ethiopians (under 30) comprise over 70% of the population and form the base of the labour market, which has informed the country's emphasis on the value of quality education for national development (Dereso & Kant, 2022). This emphasis eventually led to the expansion of education systems at all levels through rolling Education Sector Development Programmes over five-year periods, beginning in 1997 (Ambo et al., 2021). Implementing these programmes has produced major successes in terms of access to and coverage of education. However, the quality of education and equity for students with special needs, as well as those from pastoralist communities, remain in need of improvement (Dereso & Kant, 2022). It has been argued that with the expansion of the Ethiopian educational system, came a sustained deterioration in quality at all levels of education (Jiru, 2020).

Ethiopia's baseline proportion of total government spending on education is 23.7%, with education expenditure as a share of its GDP placed at 5.2% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). This is above the nationally appropriate spending targets for education that were recommended for implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 in its Framework for Action. On this basis, the country's progress is categorised as moving rapidly toward the SDG 4 benchmark on education spending. The Ethiopian government has been heavily investing in improving access to education, with measures ranging from abolishing school fees in public schools in 1995 and 1996, to doubling the budget allocation for schools since 2000 (Devonald et al., 2021).

Yet related health factors continue to undermine this progress in education in Ethiopia. The high incidences of diarrhoea, helminthiasis, and high mortality rates are associated with poor sanitation and water supply facilities (Aschale et al., 2021). Children of school-going age are particularly vulnerable, therefore the quality of environmental sanitation within schools is particularly important. The One WASH National Programme (OWNP) is a flagship government programme in Ethiopia aimed at achieving water, sanitation and hygiene results through policy and strategies (Wilson et al., 2018). It is supported by development partners, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and NGOs to address issues around water supply and sanitation. OWNP applies a multi-sectoral approach by bringing together the water, health, education, and finance sectors, and has been dependent on donor participation to ensure its progress (World Bank, 2023). The programme has in the past experienced budgeting and financing bottlenecks, including low allocation of funds from the government budget, and in some instances, a lack of budget lines in the national budget for certain phases (Wilson et al., 2018).

Another significant health concern in Ethiopia is the high prevalence of gender-based violence, with a particularly high rate experienced by female students. It was estimated that the lifetime prevalence of gender-based violence, sexual violence, and physical violence among female high school and college students in Ethiopia was 63.8%, 37.2%, and 56.2% respectively (Tantu et al., 2020). These cases are often ascribed to weak institutional administration, lack of comprehensive knowledge on sexual



and reproductive health problems, and substance abuse, among others (Kefale et al., 2021). Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) has been advanced by international organisations over recent years as a global policy to promote Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) and curb incidences of gender-based violence. Ethiopia is a signatory to key international human rights treaties, as well as the 'ESA Commitment 2013' by Eastern and Southern African Ministries of Education and Health, affirming their political will to ensure access to CSE (Le Mat et al., 2020).

Another domain of public response is social protection programmes meant to improve household resilience. Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programmes (PSNP), one of the largest in Africa, was launched in 2005 by the government in collaboration with a group of donors in response to chronic food insecurity. It was intended to end annual appeals for aid, since it was designed to run through several years to provide reliable transfers. The programme has been sustained to date, making regular transfers to food insecure households and building community assets through its Public Works (PW) arm. It is the largest public works programme in the world outside India and is considered a model for other social protection programmes in Africa (Hirvonen et al., 2022). The PSNP targets woredas that are chronically food-insecure, selecting beneficiaries through community-based targeting. The majority of the beneficiaries are engaged in PW projects to improve climate resiliency in exchange for transfers, while the remaining 15-20% receive unconditional direct transfers. The latter consists of households with members who are elderly, living with disabilities, or are headed by children.¹

The government's contribution remained constant at slightly over 4 billion birr (US\$70 million) a year between 2020-2023, accounting for about 18% of the total programme funding, with inflation reducing its real value. In 2024, rising costs and cutbacks from some international donors created a serious financing gap of about US\$195 million over the current phase of the PSNP (Taylor, 2024). As a result, most beneficiaries in the PW programme received assistance for only four months instead of six, and support to the most vulnerable was reduced to ten months instead of one year. The scaling back happened as Ethiopia's northern highlands were experiencing an extreme hunger crisis due to drought and prolonged conflict. In parts of Oromia and Amhara, PSNP activities were disrupted by conflict and insecurity, thus compounding the funding gaps (Taylor, 2024).

The recurrent budgetary allocation of 8% for the health sector is below the 15% Ethiopia committed to in the Abuja Declaration, while on the other hand, Out of Pocket Spending (OOPs) remain high, at 31% of total health expenditure (Tahir et al., 2022). Community Based Health Insurance (CBHI) was launched by the government in 2012 to provide financial protection against the cost of illness and improving access to health services for informal sector workers. By 2019 there were 8 million households (with

¹ The first phases of PSNP benefitted approximately 8 million people, with a budget of close to US\$ 500 million, in the period running from 2005 to 2015 (Abay et al., 2022). PSNP payments were in the form of food. At the beginning of the programme before adjustments were made for inflation, beneficiaries were entitled to three kilograms of wheat or maize per person per day, or its cash equivalent per day. The current phase of the programme began in 2021 with a budget of US\$ 2.2 billion over five years. In this phase the government committed to cover one third of the costs, with the remainder to be covered by international donors.

approximately 41.6 million household members) registered in the programme across Ethiopia (Wereta & Ahmed, 2024). This is a relatively low number, considering the majority of the country's working population is not engaged in the formal sector, and is therefore not eligible for Social Health Insurance (SHI), which is designed for formal sector workers. CBHI members in most regions are entitled to a full benefits package upon payment of an annual premium of 240 birr (slightly less than US\$5). Participation in the PSNP was found to increase the probability of CBHI uptake, as almost 64% of PSNP households are beneficiaries of the programme.

The Ethiopian government's policies on education and training aspired to achieve five institutional outcomes in the areas of access, quality, relevance, equity, and efficiency. Reasonable progress has been achieved in terms of access, with rising school enrolment and the construction of several new schools in rural areas. The net enrolment rate (NER) in primary education (Grades 1 to 8) increased from 22% in 1996 to 86% in 2015, however, enrolment in secondary education has consistently fallen below targeted rates (Ministry of Education Strategy Centre, 2018). Challenges to reaching the level of secondary school participation rates earmarked in the current Education Sector Development Plan, (ESDP-6), include: low capacity, low secondary school expansion rates, particularly in rural areas, conflict, and low transition rates from primary school, among others (MoE, 2021). Child labour is common in the Southern Region of Ethiopia, where girls in mostly rural areas are tasked with domestic work, while boys among lowland pastoralists are withheld from school to herd livestock (Syoum et al., 2020).

Despite the progress that has been made in improving access to water and sanitation in Ethiopia, approximately 60 million citizens still lack access to safe drinking water and over 112 million live without access to basic sanitation facilities (World Bank, 2023). In conflict regions, water scarcity is aggravated when communities are displaced and water systems are destroyed, exposing the population to communicable diseases. This situation highlights the status of universal health coverage (UHC) in the country, including weak financial risk protection and low access to quality essential health services. UHC is built on the concepts of population coverage, health service delivery, and reduction of OOPs, which is achieved through affordable primary health care.



Another indicator of the national health system's performance is the state of reproductive health. The high rate of morbidity and mortality in Ethiopia is connected to reproductive health issues, particularly for adolescents and youth in Ethiopia (Abraham et al., 2019). As outlined in Admassu et al. (2022), some of the key contextual factors that have led to this reproductive health crisis include: Ethiopia's high population of women married before the age of 18 (fourth-highest absolute number globally), along with the reality that **over 65% of married women aged 20-24** and **75% of married women aged 15-19** are not using any form of contraceptive, and just under half of Ethiopian girls between 15 and 24 have endured female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). Moreover, pregnancy before the **age of 18 is close to 22% percent**, and almost

64% of women and girls aged 15-24 believe wife-beating can be justified. These sobering realities indicate that even with a conducive policy environment, government and development partner efforts have so far been insufficient in meeting the desired objective of securing sexual reproductive health and rights for the adolescent and youth population of Ethiopia. This has been attributed, in part, to frequent restructuring of the ministry in charge of youth issues, insufficient allocation of government resources, poor coordination among relevant ministries and stakeholders, and lack of age and sex-disaggregated data across ministries (Admassu et al., 2022).

Rather than being integrated into the formal school curriculum, CSE programmes in Ethiopia are included as extracurricular activities and are dependent on international actors and NGOs. Many teachers are doubtful about the sustainability of the programme and would prefer it to be integrated into the standard curriculum. The impact of these activities is further complicated by the fact that NGOs operating in Ethiopia do not have the mandate to work on rights-based agendas. Therefore, CSE was crafted as an 'SRH' agenda, rather than as the global SRHR agenda. Despite commitments on paper, the policy on CSE has been strongly resisted by certain national actors who have branded it as an imposition of Western values. This controversy is fuelled by CSE being taught in mixed-sex classrooms, and the discussion of sexuality outside of marriage, both of which are deemed inappropriate within several cultural contexts in Ethiopia (Le Mat et al., 2021).

Maternal Health Care (MHC) is also an important aspect of reproductive health, including antenatal care (ANC), which is provided to pregnant women, to prepare them for labour and recognise certain warning signs in pregnancy and childbirth. In Ethiopia, it was found that only 32% of women had four or more ANC visits and 64% had at least one visit, while about 32% did not receive ANC at all for the duration of their pregnancy (Sisay & Mulat, 2023). The primary determinants associated with ANC dropout were distance from the health facility, place of residence, level of education, and age of the pregnant woman.

Although Ethiopia is a signatory to several international human rights instruments, a proclamation enacted in 2009 decreased the political space for civil society. It restricted foreign CSOs' participation in human rights and good governance, by limiting their funding to local CSOs to no more than 10% of the total budget. The revision of this legislation in 2019, which emphasised the need for CSOs to mainstream issues related to gender equality, children, the elderly, and people living with disabilities, was considered a positive step (Federal Negarit Gazette, 2019). However, in early 2024, international organisations expressed their concern over increased intimidation, harassment, and threats by Ethiopian security and intelligence forces against prominent Ethiopian human rights organisations which included the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), the oldest independent human rights organisation in the country (Front Line Defenders, 2024). Along with the other three organisations that were initially targeted, their range of work includes:

- Defending civil society participation in physical and digital spaces for the protection of human rights in Ethiopia, through working with individuals and communities;
- Advancing human rights protection in Ethiopia by reviewing human rights situations in the country; and
- Providing knowledge and skills support to human rights lawyers in Ethiopia.

In 2024, the Ethiopian Authority for Civil Society Organisations shut down at least 1,504 CSOs for failing to submit their annual reports (OMCT, 2024). These dissolutions were enacted under the revised Civil Society Organisations Proclamation, which mandates CSOs to submit an annual report detailing their main activities (Federal Negarit Gazette, 2019). The majority of the organisations shut down cited lack of funds for the heavy administrative work required to produce these reports as the reason for their non-compliance. Within the same year, two human rights organisations received suspension notices from the Agency for Civil Society Organisations, which oversees non-profit entities in Ethiopia. This decision followed suspensions of three additional rights groups, signalling an intensifying crack-

down on independent organisations (OMCT, 2025). The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) expressed its concerns and urged that the suspension be lifted. Similarly, fifty CSOs drawn from across Africa responded with a petition to the Ethiopian authorities, calling for a dialogue with the suspended organisations. The petition, which included a plea for intervention from the international community, decried hostile acts by the authorities against independent actors exposing systemic human rights violations in the country.

MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN POLITICAL RHETORIC AND FISCAL PRACTICE

A primary strategy adopted by the Ethiopian government to address women’s rights is the Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB). This strategy works on two levels simultaneously:

- i. **Mainstreaming and integrating gender considerations into all policies, programmes, and budgets across the board.**
- ii. **Implementing targeted interventions aimed directly at addressing particular gender inequalities.**

While progress is evident in mainstreaming, targeted interventions remain underdeveloped. Ethiopia excels at drafting strategies but struggles with execution.² Others note that at the level of local Ethiopian CSOs or women-led CSOs, the GRB agenda is the missing link. These organisations advocate for gender equality, eliminating gender-based violence, and other gender-related agendas, yet GRB is largely untouched, with almost no work being done in this area. This absence is in part due to a severe lack of understanding of what GRB is. In 2024, Union of Ethiopian Women and Children Association (UEWCA) reviewed the strategy documents and annual action plans for around 30 organisations. Nearly 75% of these organisations failed to outline GRB specifically both as an objective and as an activity. This indicates very weak implementation, engagement, and intervention. Work on gender equality requires simultaneous collection of data on rights violations and ensuring that this data informs GRB.³

Challenges also persist in implementing GRB at the district level. Many districts lack clear guidelines, and gender offices are often under-resourced or merged with other sectors. Political priorities, emergencies, and budget constraints also tend to sideline GRB. For instance, crises such as droughts or conflicts disproportionately affect women and girls, yet GRB is not prioritised in responses to such crises. Additionally, district-level reporting on GRB is weak, limiting accountability. Without dedicated gender units and clear reporting, tracking impacts on women remains difficult. These gaps hinder effective GRB implementation despite existing policies.⁴ Others see failure of gender budgeting to impact rights violations as being the result of failure of government to implement what is on paper. While the laws themselves are often well-written and inclusive, there is a lack of meaningful stakeholder engagement, especially with women. There are public budget hearings that are technically

.....
² Interview with Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)
³ Interview with Yonas – Head of Programs at Union of Ethiopian Women and Children Association (UEWCA) – CSO in Ethiopia.
⁴ Interview with Dr. Yohannes Damitew – Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist at Ethiopian Center for Development (ECD) (CSO)

open to the public, but public awareness is low: many in CSOs and citizens do not know they can participate. Even when public participation is encouraged, people often do not show up – partly because they have become disillusioned: “when you consistently don’t see results, it is easy to give up.”⁵ There is also a sense that public engagement is discouraged or made difficult, which limits opportunities for people – especially women – to influence decisions that affect them. Another issue is the lack of accountability. When poor decisions are made or laws are not followed, there are rarely consequences. This is a core problem across many government institutions: even with good policies in place, without proper enforcement and accountability, implementation remains weak.⁶

Even when public participation is encouraged, people often do not show up – partly because they have become disillusioned: “when you consistently don’t see results, it is easy to give up.”

Women’s rights organisations in Ethiopia also cite budgeting failures as a major barrier, with assessments showing that at sectoral levels, most gender directorates lack dedicated budgets. Where budgets exist, they are often insufficient and allocated inconsistently. In some cases, funds intended for these directorates arrive well after the fiscal year begins. Shockingly, in certain regions, the entire budget is only enough to cover planned activities for March 8 (International Women’s Day), indicating the tokenistic nature of these budget allocations. This reflects a serious misalignment between political rhetoric and fiscal practice. A true commitment to gender equality requires mainstreaming gender across all budget lines and programmes – not symbolic gestures.⁷ Furthermore, our respondents observed that the gender equality structures within ministries and government bodies are often weak, underfunded, and under-prioritised. These directorates are not fully institutionalised, and many suffer from poor coordination and lack of skilled personnel. As a result, their ability to drive meaningful change is severely hindered.⁸

War and conflict affect media coverage of women’s rights violations

In Ethiopia, media actors report that protracted conflict has direct implications for how media cover and represent gender issues and women’s rights violations, thus also influencing responses by state and various actors. While gender policy has gained attention in government dialogue, ongoing conflicts across the country are reversing progress. In several regions, school closures have pushed girls into early or forced marriages, cutting short their education. This is not just a setback for gender equality but also creates long-term consequences that detract from the country’s development. Another challenge arises from the tendency for stakeholder priorities to shift during times of crisis. When conflict dominates the national agenda, efforts to bring about social change are often sidelined, and key stakeholders will say, “Now is not the time.” Advocacy, especially for women’s rights, is framed as a luxury when people are in survival mode and donor focus shifts toward emergency aid. This shift also affects media coverage: with

“Now is not the time.”

⁵ Interview with Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Interview with Ato. Ayalew Ejigu – Executive Director at ODWACE (Organization for the Development of Women and Children in Ethiopia) (CSO)

⁸ Interview with Ato. Ayalew Ejigu – Executive Director at ODWACE (Organization for the Development of Women and Children in Ethiopia) (CSO)

constant breaking news, long-term issues like women's rights receive less attention. Media organisations, which often operate for profit, tend to follow public interest stories, and unfortunately, sustained systemic change does not grab headlines. Although women make up 51% of Ethiopia's population, women's rights are treated as optional rather than essential. Activist journalists have tried to address this by requiring media outlets to include programming on women and children as a condition for obtaining a license. However, these segments are the first to be rescheduled or cut when other "more urgent" events happen. As a result, important initiatives relating to gender issues struggle to reach the public. These programmes are viewed more as a licensing requirement than a responsibility and are often dropped whenever a new priority arises. This remains a significant challenge for journalists working on women's and children's issues.⁹

Under-prioritisation in resourcing for gender equity

In Ethiopia, officials admit that resource gaps exacerbate weak implementation of existing gender plans and policies. Even when policies prioritise inclusivity, funding and human resource allocations often lag. For instance, initiatives targeting people with disabilities or rural communities lack dedicated budgets or trained personnel. These gaps stem from a lack of genuine commitment to equity, perpetuating systemic marginalisation:¹⁰

From our ministry's perspective, resource allocation focuses on labour-intensive sectors, job creation, and skills training. For instance, when jobs are created, we aim to ensure equitable access. However, disparities persist. Women constitute only 36% of domestic job opportunities, despite higher unemployment rates among them. Similarly, Ethiopia has 25 million people with disabilities, yet they occupy less than 1% of formal jobs or training slots. TVET institutions, which train over 1,600 individuals annually, rarely accommodate people with disabilities due to inaccessible infrastructure and untrained staff. While frameworks like the Disability Resource Centre exist to address this, implementation is weak. Resource allocation often prioritises visible outcomes over inclusivity, leaving marginalised groups behind. In summary, while policies outline ambitious goals for equity, execution lacks depth. Structural barriers, attitudinal biases, and resource mismatches perpetuate exclusion. Closing these gaps requires not just guidelines but enforcement, accountability, and cultural shifts.¹¹

Furthermore, some of the Ethiopian CSO partners interviewed observed the slow uptake of CSO policy recommendations by government has hampered transformation and progress. For example, early in 2025 the Minister of Finance stated that the existing legal framework addressing gender-based violence is currently only a 'directive or guideline,' and emphasised the need to elevate it to the level of a formal proclamation, arguing that this would mark a significant advancement in policy development.¹²

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⁹ Interview with Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)
¹⁰ Interview with Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry)
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Interview with Yonas – Head of Programs at Union of Ethiopian Women and Children Association (UEWCA) – CSO in Ethiopia.

Limited public access to information regarding rights and entitlements

We asked officials in Ethiopia whether the public is aware of how resources are distributed, especially to protect and promote women's and girls' rights, and whether there is a transparent system in place showing the percentage of jobs or training opportunities allocated to women, youth, or persons with disabilities, as well as whether an accountability mechanism is in place. The response was that there are reporting mechanisms in place, including the quarterly publication of data on women's and girls' participation in job creation and training programmes. These reports are shared via media platforms, including social media. Additionally, every six months, various government departments host a Sectoral Forum where regional representatives and stakeholders discuss progress, and where media is invited to cover these discussions. Reports are also presented to Parliament, and parliamentary reviews assess sectoral performance including gender metrics. However, officials admit that while these processes exist, their depth and public accessibility remain limited.¹³ Others cite the absence of transparent structures in government institutions which forces CSOs to invest far more time, energy, and resources than they can afford. Moreover, the responsiveness of the legal system to survivors is very low, and police officers themselves can be perpetrators of abuse. They do not use a survivor-centred approach when dealing with cases of GBV, often causing secondary trauma. There is also the prevalent perception that the courts are not independent and show little interest in delivering justice for violations of women's rights.¹⁴

One of the biggest gaps lies in accountability, closely linked to the persistent lack of gender-disaggregated data. Without such data it is difficult to assess how policies like GRB (Gender-Responsive Budgeting) benefit women versus men.¹⁵ The obligation to collect reliable gender-disaggregated data that could expose rights violations also depends on government commitments to, and obligations under, international law. In Ethiopia, many international conventions are yet to be fully adopted and followed through with genuine commitment. One of the biggest gaps is accountability. The government has a duty to gather data and act on it, however, there continues to be a lack of follow through on this duty when it comes to gender issues. For example, school closures have led to increased rates of child marriage, yet the documentation of and response to this situation has been marked by a troubling lack of lack of urgency and attention.¹⁶ The result being a lack of data, which provides the government with an excuse not to act.

Patriarchal mindsets that resist change

Among the primary challenges faced in policy implementation are attitudinal barriers, capacity gaps, and budget constraints.¹⁷ On leadership and staff mindset, interviewees report that while leadership commitment has improved, ingrained conservative attitudes persist. For instance, some government employees dismiss gender integration, claiming decisions should be “based on standards, not gender.”

¹³ Interview with Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)

¹⁴ Interview with Bezawit Taye – 4th year Economics Student at Addis Ababa University; Recruitment and Mentorship lead at Yellow Movement

¹⁵ Interview with Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)

¹⁶ Interview with Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)

¹⁷ Interview with Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)

This contradicts declared policy mandates to address women’s needs explicitly. There is also complacency even among trained staff who, despite their familiarity with gender-responsive approaches, choose to adhere to outdated systems. At the same time, capacity and skill gaps also persist, as do technical shortfalls, with sectoral offices often lacking expertise to operationalise gender-sensitive frameworks. For example, extension services often fail to collect sex-disaggregated data, hindering accountability. And while capacity-building programmes (e.g., leadership training for key personnel) are regularly conducted, follow-through is inconsistent. There are also budgetary limitations, and insufficient allocation means that projects are rarely designed with gender-specific budget lines. For instance, agricultural extension training programmes lack dedicated funding to support the participation of women, making it impossible to measure impact. Alongside this constraint are rigid budgets – a limitation because pre-allocated funds resist reorientation toward emerging gender priorities identified during implementation.¹⁸ Others highlight tokenism and the need for attitude change as a basis for substantive inclusion of gender policies:

The primary challenge is attitudinal. There remains a significant gap in how deeply gender issues are internalised across sectors. For example, while high-level directives exist, translating them into actionable steps at lower structural levels is inconsistent. Follow-up and accountability mechanisms for implementation are weak, particularly in tracking outcomes for women and other marginalised groups. Another issue is tokenism: while policies emphasise participation, marginalised groups especially women are often invited superficially rather than being meaningfully engaged. Their contributions are undervalued, and their perspectives are sidelined. This reflects a broader societal mindset that fails to recognise their potential impact.¹⁹

Deliberate erasure of rights violations against women and girls

Progress isn’t being rejected outright – it’s just being pushed aside. Women’s rights and human rights, in general, are not getting the attention they once did. While some things are well-articulated in policy, actual implementation remains weak.²⁰

Research participants in Ethiopia spoke candidly about what they consider negligence by the state and other key actors in addressing women’s rights issues. For instance, on the topic of GBV, one actor stated:

As a woman and a member of society, I feel a deep sense of denial – like our existence and our pain are being dismissed. There’s a growing lack of faith in the government and its institutions. You see abusers walking free in the streets, while survivors are ignored or even blamed. That erodes trust in the system and fosters a dangerous sense of lawlessness. Survivors feel hopeless, while perpetrators face no real consequences. This sends the message that abuse is tolerated,

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¹⁸ Interview with Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)
¹⁹ Interview with Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry)
²⁰ Interview with Tirfe Emslaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)

which only encourages more of it. What we're witnessing now is deeply alarming – and it is not happening in distant places. It's right in front of us, even near law enforcement officers. I remember a woman who was murdered in court by her perpetrator while going through a divorce. That kind of incident shows just how far systems go to protect abusers instead of survivors. It's a sign of widespread despair and a chilling reality: people no longer feel anyone is responsible for their safety.²¹

Furthermore, sectoral planning ignores structural intersectionality of rights. Advocacy has managed to fuel change, but only in certain sectors and to certain extents. For example, as a result of sustained advocacy in Ethiopia's health sector, access to services has improved, including the provision of free care, however, in the justice sector, many issues remain ignored. Delays and denial of justice are still major problems.²² This sector-specific rather than intersectoral approach belies the intersectional ways in which rights deficits in one sector affect outcomes in other sectors, as well as the combined ways in which people experience rights violations.

Effect of anti-CSO laws

The Government of Ethiopia enacted a new law on civil society organisations – the Organisation of Civil Societies Proclamation No. 1113/2019 (CSO proclamation). The CSO proclamation replaced the proclamation of Charities and Societies no. 621/2009 (2009 proclamation). On paper, this new proclamation aims to create a more enabling environment for CSOs by removing restrictions on foreign funding and allowing CSOs to engage in lawful income-generating activities. It also establishes the CSO Authority to oversee the registration and monitoring of CSOs. However, in reality, the proclamation contains clauses that undermine the ability of CSOs to push for government implementation of rights-related policies. For instance, the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) says that many of the existing policies are outdated and require revision. Currently, new policies are being formulated to ensure they are gender-responsive and inclusive of the needs of women and girls – something that was largely missing in earlier policies. The Ministry is in the process of drafting a new regulation that will apply across all sectors to address gaps where gender issues are overlooked but are awaiting approval to begin implementation and are coordinating with the Ministry of Justice on this matter. While some components have been approved, they face numerous bureaucratic and logistical challenges such as overlapping mandates. The Ministry of Justice has pointed out that, based on our current proclamation, ministries are authorised to issue only directives, not regulations. This move means that key policy proposals from below are likely to collect dust on the shelves because key gender ministries can only guide the government, not implement on its behalf.²³

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²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Interview Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)

²³ Interview with Yihuna Worku – Gender Mainstreaming Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) (Government Ministry).

Disconnect between gender budgeting and practice / implementation

In Ethiopia, the extent to which gender equity considerations are integrated into budget planning, and how much priority is given to gender/women’s rights issues continues to fall short. Interview respondents report the perception that the government engages in a very superficial approach to gender – a mere box-ticking exercise rather than substantive commitment to addressing gender equity:

While staff are trained on GRB principles, implementation gaps persist. Our ministry has nine core programs, eight of which directly align with sectoral goals. Gender is technically embedded as a cross-cutting theme in all programs, but budget narratives rarely explicitly mention gender. For example, a training program’s narrative might vaguely reference “inclusivity” without specifying gender targets or resource allocations. Gender outcomes are only visible in outputs like the number of women trained, but not in budget line items. This ambiguity stems from the lack of a standalone gender programme with dedicated funding.²⁴

Furthermore, prioritisation for inclusion in national budgets is based on ‘urgency and impact’, meaning that the issues taken up by ministries depend on their own assessment of which issues matter, rather than reflecting voices from communities. In the words of a ministry official, “this gap becomes evident when you observe the disconnect between high-level strategies and local-level execution.”

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For example, the “50-50” principle is intended to ensure equity, but at the operational level where job creation activities are managed through decentralised structures like districts, implementation fails to address gender disparities. Job creation is supposed to integrate data from job seekers, the business ecosystem, and income opportunities. However, the existing environment lacks the necessary conditions to meet the needs of women. Budgetary gaps and structural inefficiencies exacerbate this. “While the strategy appears robust at the policy level, execution falters due to overlooked practical challenges.”²⁵

The framing of gender and women’s rights issues matters

Ethiopian government officials observed that achieving equality requires addressing two dimensions: Human Rights And Development.

Current efforts focus heavily on advocacy, which is critical, but insufficient for systemic change. To amplify impact, they argue that gender equality must be mainstreamed into all development agendas, not treated as a standalone issue. For example, recent studies like the one by NEWA on unpaid domestic labour, highlight how undervaluing women’s contributions undermines economic growth. There is need for data-driven approaches to quantify women’s roles in the economy and leverage this evidence to inform policies. Advocacy should evolve from framing gender equality as a moral obliga-

²⁴ Interview with Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry)
²⁵ Ibid.

tion to demonstrating its economic necessity. Structural reforms are, therefore, essential. This includes investing in infrastructure to support women’s participation, such as childcare facilities and safe workspaces. Budgets must align with gender commitments, and local institutions need capacity-building to implement strategies effectively. Only by addressing these gaps can high-level policies be translated into equitable outcomes.²⁶

Advocacy should evolve from framing gender equality as a moral obligation to demonstrating its economic necessity.

Lack of citizen trust and erosion of the social contract

A growing sense of alienation amongst some government officials emerged as a notable concern in several interviews. Discussions happen at higher levels, but without tangible outcomes, trust erodes quickly. When equitable resource distribution is absent, certain segments of society feel increasingly marginalised. This fuels distrust between institutions and communities. If commitments emerging from the top are not fulfilled, regression becomes inevitable. Initially, people may rally behind a policy if it feels genuine and actionable. But if implementation is weak or untested, disillusionment sets in. Rights violations that are gender-based or within families persist at every level. Without concerted effort to ensure policies reach the grassroots, respect for rights will continue to deteriorate, increasing the risks of reversing progress.²⁷ However, there are also grassroots initiatives that have emerged as a result of conscientisation, that seek to hold government accountable. For example, FOWODE Forum for Women in Democracy’s (FOWODE) VBC initiative has had some positive impact:

The Village Budget Club (VBC) are groups in villages that understand the budget, know how much is allocated, how much the budget is, how the national budget operates, how the sub-county budget works, how much the health officer receives, how much the school receives, and what it is supposed to be spent on. They also ask whether women’s needs and girls’ needs are taken care of in those allocations at the health centre. So, we’ve been implementing it for a number of years, and it has had very good results. The VBC has been running for long. It has worked nationwide, though it’s a drop in the ocean – but it works wonders. It’s a model that has empowered citizens to take charge of their own destiny and also hold their leaders accountable for implementing gender-responsive service delivery. So those have had an impact.²⁸

Harmful traditions and ignorance regarding existing laws exacerbate women/girls’ vulnerabilities

In Ethiopia, civic actors suggest that the lack of awareness among women regarding existing gender protections in the laws tend to render them more vulnerable to human rights violations. For instance, CTE told us that while they have organised more than 870 women in self-help groups in the Western

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²⁶ Interview with Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry)
²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ Interview with Director of Programs at the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE), Uganda.

Shoa region who have contact with governmental processes, the gap between the government and the community is still very wide. This gap includes the lack of knowledge about the laws, as well as the 'stickiness' of many patriarchal norms:

Forget framing new policies, that is a luxury, because as you go down you see that there is a lack of knowledge of even what the existing laws state. They just don't know what the existing laws even say. We are very behind as far as this understanding is concerned. "What do I say?" "Do we own it together?" Or even "It should go to my brother." "Because I am a girl it will go to my husband," are things you commonly hear. More than the existing laws, customary laws are more known and adhered to. So, there is a huge awareness gap.²⁹

Women in Ethiopia say there is a big gap when it comes to enforcing and protecting these rights. In some areas, like women's land ownership, awareness is much lower. In these areas customary beliefs still dominate, and many people think women should not own or manage land. So, while general rights awareness might be growing, it is uneven and shaped by tradition. Rural women coming to cities to process visas for jobs in Arab countries are often given contraceptives 'just in case they are raped.' This speaks volumes about the risks they face and how unprotected they are.³⁰

Governments indirectly benefit from whipping up sentiments from culturally conservative groups and communities in order to evade responsibility for addressing certain human rights and women's rights violations. For instance, in Ethiopia there was a prominent line of rhetoric asserting that policies promoting SRHR could not be supported because of the linkage with LGBT rights, – an area of human rights that remains a legal and cultural taboo in Ethiopia. This line of rhetoric effectively halted progress toward the implementation of any comprehensive sexuality education. In such cases, civic actors advocate for the need to ensure CSE materials are culturally sensitive and age-specific. Policies around safe spaces should also be implemented, since there are existing policies that say schools should provide safe space mechanisms for students, yet the follow-through on these policies is near non-existent.³¹

Political instability and donor dependency for rights coordination

Some CSO actors see opportunity for greater domestic involvement in rights issues amidst global and local developments that undermine donor support. For instance, in Ethiopia just two years ago during the Tigray war, due to ideological differences, the donor-dependent health sector experienced a significant setback. Many international donors withdrew support, particularly for family planning services, resulting in a 17.5-million-dollar budget deficit. "In response, a few organisations including ours, mobilised and brought together between 230 and 250

"In response, a few organisations including ours, mobilised and brought together between 230 and 250 Members of Parliament."

²⁹ Interview with Rahel Getinet - Program Manager in Community Transformation Ethiopia (CTE) - CSO

³⁰ Focus group discussion with members of Yitaweq Timret, a self-help group made up of women who support one another. The group uses *equb*—a traditional savings and loan system—to provide financial assistance within the association. Most members are older women, but the group also includes a youth wing focused on young women's advocacy

³¹ Interview with Ato. Ayalew Ejigu— Executive Director at ODWACE (Organization for the Development of Women and Children in Ethiopia) (CSO)

Members of Parliament.”³² CSOs in the Tigray region have been pushing the government to step in where donors have pulled out. With external funding no longer reliable, it became crucial for the government to make budgetary allocations from domestic sources. The CSOs presented hard evidence to parliamentarians and urged them to approve new budget allocations, which led to the Ministry of Finance assigning additional funding almost immediately, rising from around 50 million to 300 million annually. Global budget cuts including the stopping of USAID are also going to have a ripple effect on GBV cases and possibly even lead to stalling efforts to transform harmful traditional practices; including undermining research efforts and planned action need to meet national and global commitments. It is crucial, therefore, that the government pay attention to and work toward domestic resource mobilisation. This is necessary because the little funding and donations that are still being used to address human rights concerns are focused almost exclusively on humanitarian crises, rather than bolstering advocacy and human rights approaches, with a noticeable trend favouring climate change issues over issues relating to gender equity and violence prevention.³³

Government autonomy in relation to important technical processes is also in question. In Ethiopia, while there is a formal system in place for CSOs to engage with the government, some of these processes are mediated by external actors. For instance, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has a Girls’ Education Advisory Committee that meets three times a year. This committee includes all CSOs working on gender and girls’ education and serves as a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual accountability. But while the MoE chairs the committee, it is UNICEF that serves as the secretariat. The meetings provide space to present concerns, get feedback, and integrate recommendations from CSOs regarding ministry policies and practices, but it is unclear who ultimately drives the Committee’s agenda.³⁴

Lack of information, lack of awareness of rights, and weak trust among the general public

In the Ethiopian context, there is a lack of freedom to fully exercise or demand one’s rights from the government. Specifically, in the health sector, professionals tend to be more familiar with their obligations than their rights. While documents outlining these rights do exist, they are often inaccessible and even when accessible, these rights are rarely implemented in practice. For women working in healthcare, there is a noticeable gap in awareness around specific rights, such as maternity leave, sexual and reproductive rights, and access to health-related benefits.³⁵ Many within institutions are also unaware that official regulations govern sexual harassment and misconduct. The general public also lacks knowledge regarding who to approach when these rights are violated. Even where there is some awareness, trust emerges as an issue: people do not trust the policy or the mechanisms that are available to them because they do not hear stories of women before them going through those mechanisms and achieving justice. When it comes to female health care professionals in particular,

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³² Interview with Ato Ayalew Ejigu – Executive Director at ODWACE (Organization for the Development of Women and Children in Ethiopia) (CSO)

³³ Ibid. Ato Ayalew suggests further domestic resource mobilisation strategies that could fill in the donor gaps, including social entrepreneurs who can be engaged alongside the Diasporas investments; encourage local philanthropy and give incentives to the private sector to do more for the community and have in place a reward system either in tax deduction or give other benefits and incentives from the government.

³⁴ Interview with Eskinder – Women Children and Youth Department lead at Ministry of Education (MoE) (Government Body)

³⁵ Focus group discussion with three healthcare professionals in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

the burden and risk is particularly high because the social cost of acquiring those skills are often much higher for women, who do not report out of fear of losing their careers and livelihoods. Significant misconceptions about certain rights relating to marital rape, are also quite prevalent, leading many women to remain silent. The anti-rights backlash should be understood as functioning covertly through such silences. Moreover, the lack of information can drive certain rights violations back into the darkness and silence of the private sphere:³⁶

*As a community, we've become desensitised to rights violations. It's almost normalised, and people just stay quiet and endure it. I've met women who experience daily abuse from their husbands but genuinely don't know that it's illegal or that they can seek help. One woman told me she thought her husband had the legal right to beat her. That kind of misunderstanding is far too common.*³⁷

*Our national laws don't recognise it as a crime. Women often believe their bodies belong to their husbands and don't know they have the right to say no. Even if the law ignores it, international human rights standards say otherwise. Many women also don't know their rights within marriage—like the husband's legal obligation to support the family. They often only learn these things during a divorce process.*³⁸

Low levels of trust in the Ethiopian context have also resulted in decreased willingness among women to report or seek formal channels of redress. In a circular logic, public authorities might read this as a preference among women to address violations privately, when in reality, it signals a systemic failure:

*Most women go straight to the police—but honestly, I wouldn't recommend that, especially for cases involving gender-based violence. The police are supposed to be duty bearers, but they consistently fail women, and nothing seems to change. It's often more effective to start with community-based initiatives like our Yitaweq Timret Self-Help Group. We have connections, know how to navigate the system, and can support women with referrals and follow-up. Our networks are safer and more responsive than the formal system in many cases.*³⁹

Patriarchal mindsets also seem to hamper the formal structures of social service provision where women are concerned. In Ethiopia, women reported huge gaps in the ways survivors are treated within the justice system:

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³⁶ Focus group discussion with three healthcare professionals in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
³⁷ Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).
³⁸ Focus group discussion with members of Yitaweq Timret, a self-help group made up of women who support one another. The group uses *equ* – a traditional savings and loan system – to provide financial assistance within the association. Most members are older women, but the group also includes a youth wing focused on young women's advocacy.
³⁹ Focus group discussion with members of Yitaweq Timret, a self-help group made up of women who support one another. The group uses *equ* – a traditional savings and loan system – to provide financial assistance within the association. Most members are older women, but the group also includes a youth wing focused on young women's advocacy.

Courts are often not survivor friendly. Judges, especially male judges, come with deep gender biases. Their tone, body language, and decisions often reflect a lack of empathy. In many cases, their attitudes are just as harmful as the violence survivors are reporting. Even in health services, the treatment of women is often harsh. Nurses and midwives in government hospitals—where services are more accessible—can be incredibly rude, even to women in labour. I've seen them shouting at patients, glued to their phones while someone is screaming in pain. It's dehumanising. Women should not have to endure emotional abuse from service providers at the most vulnerable moments of their lives.⁴⁰

Tension between customary and formal (law) domains of daily life

Rights awareness is especially low in rural areas, although in urban settings populations do not seem to fare much better. Most people live according to customs and tradition rather than through an understanding of formal rights:

If we were to go into communities with a checklist of basic rights and ask people about them, I believe most wouldn't know more than the obvious ones—like the right to life. Formal knowledge of human and democratic rights is still limited.⁴¹

The most common strategy for women is to start by speaking with someone they trust—often neighbours or members of their community. These conversations help women understand their rights and possible courses of action. Many women turn to informal, community-based institutions for help—these spaces function by providing support and avenues for resolving problems outside the formal justice system. Women often rely on informal social networks—like chatting over coffee with friends or speaking to more informed housewives nearby—to learn about their rights and decide which course of action to pursue:

Some of them eventually come to our branch office, which represents the Ministry of Women and Children. We listen to their cases and refer them to appropriate institutions. If a woman wants to go to court, we connect her with the police. If she needs free legal aid, we refer her to organisations like the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA).⁴²

In some areas, women have an organised violence prevention group with designated focal persons. When a survivor reaches out to one of these focal persons or if the abuse is observed, the issue is discussed within the group, and a response is coordinated. This is one of the models that other communities could adopt as it ensures that cases do not fall through the cracks and that women are supported by a collective. Women who cannot afford legal or support services often take their complaints to these

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⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).*

⁴² *Ibid.*

community collectives. If the matter can be resolved through mediation, the internal committee steps in. If not, the committee provides referral letters explaining the complainant's financial situation so they can access services at no cost.

One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of accessible social courts. If these existed in every community, women could get justice more quickly and without the fear and confusion that often come with formal legal systems. Right now, many women lose hope halfway through the process—they simply give up on the system.⁴³

In the absence of a functioning and accessible justice system, women's associations step in to fill the gap, yet they can only mediate the process and connect those who seek redress with relevant actors of the state, because rights in a formal sense can only be claimed through engagement with the state.

For domestic workers, one of the main strategies is seeking help from our organisation, Andinet Ethiopia Association. Some women come to us after enduring extreme abuse—being beaten, starved, or left unable to walk—and we help them access shelters. These shelters provide temporary housing and, while their cases are being processed, opportunities to take training courses in skills like hairdressing or cooking. Medical care is also provided, including transport when needed.⁴⁴

Systemic issues in the follow-up on rights violations

Across various service sectors, respondents in Ethiopia found that the quality of responses women receive in interactions with relevant authorities varies widely across service providers, but a major issue lies in the effectiveness and willingness of those providers to resolve cases. Survivors often go to the police after experiencing violence or rights violations, but instead of acting, officers frequently redirect them to the Women and Children's Bureau, regardless of whether the case is criminal or requires legal intervention. This constant back-and-forth creates a "ping-pong" effect, where no institution takes ownership. The Women and Children's Bureau, for instance, cannot handle criminal cases or divorces – these fall exclusively within the mandate of the police and the courts, yet the police are increasingly unwilling to investigate such cases. Our respondents see this as apathy on the part of law enforcers, especially when it comes to violence against women and girls.

Cases involving women's rights violations rarely end at the first point of contact—they require referrals to other offices, experts, or institutions. Unfortunately, these referrals take a long time, and the process is discouraging and emotionally draining for women who have already endured violence. The system is inefficient, and most district-level service providers lack urgency, empathy, or even basic understanding of the severity of gender-based violence. Many women lose hope halfway through the process because they feel no one is truly invested in helping them. The core issue is a lack of training

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⁴³ *Ibid.*
⁴⁴ Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).

and accountability across the government system. Many of the staff placed in these critical roles – from police officers to judges – do not have the skills, awareness, or sensitivity necessary to handle cases involving survivors of gender-based violence. They treat these incidents like any other administrative matter, without recognising the trauma involved. Alarminglly the recruitment process for some law enforcement officers has prioritised quantity over quality, resulting in many officers that are unskilled, indifferent, and at times even abusive.

This disconnect is so stark that perpetrators no longer fear the police. In fact, when abused women tell their husbands they're going to the police, the men are unbothered. But if they say they're going to the Women and Children's Bureau, then suddenly the abusers panic. That says a lot about the ineffectiveness of police response and how deeply the system has failed survivors.⁴⁵

Challenging legal, environmental, and social hurdles

While there is a vast network of interlinking challenges that survivors face, one core issue that underpins all others is economic vulnerability. For many women, financial dependency is what keeps them trapped in abusive situations. Without stable income or resources, they are unable to leave harmful environments or pursue justice, even if they are aware of their rights. Poverty directly undermines the ability to claim and defend rights. Another deeply rooted challenge is cultural and social conditioning. Many women grow up in environments where violence and inequality are normalised, making it difficult for them to even recognise abuse as a rights violation. Worse, the people in institutions meant to protect women often share the same cultural mindset, having been raised in the same patriarchal society. This results in bias, apathy, or even hostility from those tasked with supporting survivors, making them part of the problem instead of the solution. There are also significant legal and structural gaps. The current criminal code and procedures are outdated and not survivor centred. The legal process is complex, intimidating, and rarely results in accountability: there is no real deterrence for perpetrators. Even in government budgeting, while gender mainstreaming is a known concept and funds are theoretically allocated, those resources are often reallocated to other areas with no accountability. This happens repeatedly and undermines any sustained progress for women's rights. Some institutions exist in name only and lack real function or impact. For example, the Ombudsman's Office is largely invisible, and people do not know what it does or how it helps. Political instability also plays a major role; constant shifts in power and policy create a confusing environment where responsibilities are unclear. Survivors and advocates are often caught in a cycle of referrals and inaction, with no institution willing or able to follow through. This “ping-pong” effect wastes time and erodes trust in the system.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).

⁴⁶ Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).

Corruption and prioritisation of profits over people

Even where there are public budget allocations to government hospitals or NGOs for the purposes of attending to maternity care, SRHR, and GBV, the perception among the healthcare providers interviewed is that the resources do not always reach those it was allocated for. In Ethiopia, community members report that while budgets appear substantial, the intended beneficiaries often receive only a meagre share – a little oil and flour – as funded material is sold back for cash. People are deeply disappointed, aware that huge sums are supposedly allocated, yet institutions have repeatedly failed to deliver. This fuels mistrust, as those in positions of responsibility divert resources for personal gain and improve their own lives at the expense of the community. There is no accountability framework. The system is also designed to keep those in need perpetually dependent rather than self-sufficient. There is no genuine impetus for long term solutions – people are only given temporary relief and kept in a cycle of dependency, as those in positions of authority benefit from the continued prevalence of these problems.⁴⁷

Another critical and underreported issue is the abuse happening inside Ethiopia's industrial parks—especially those operated by foreign investors, mostly from China, who are attracted by government incentives for foreign direct investment (FDI). Women working in these parks often live on-site in dormitory-style housing. Reports have surfaced of rampant sexual abuse, including rape, leading to pregnancies. These women receive no protection, no support, and not even a minimum wage. Thus far neither the labour ministry, nor the police, nor the courts have stepped in to prevent or respond to this exploitation. Even though research has documented these abuses, the government has continuously turned a blind eye, likely due to an unwillingness to jeopardise investment deals. This state of affairs makes plain that FDI is prioritised over the basic dignity and safety of Ethiopian women.⁴⁸

Lack of coordination between different human rights constituencies

Even where significant resources are allocated to rights issues, outcomes may fall short due to fragmented efforts resulting from lack of coordination between various rights constituencies. Government agencies, NGOs, and civil society often work in silos on overlapping issues. For example, multiple entities might address the same challenge independently, duplicating efforts while leaving gaps elsewhere. Better coordination and resource pooling could enhance efficiency. If stakeholders align priorities and consolidate capacities, even modest efforts could yield greater progress. As such, strengthening collaboration could reduce waste and amplify impact.⁴⁹ Some collaborations between CSOs in Ethiopia do exist, for example, groups such as Community Transformation Ethiopia (CTE) share their experiences with other CSOs as part of a coalition that includes different sectors, institutions, government offices, and schools.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Focus group discussion with three healthcare professionals in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁴⁸ Focus group discussion with members of Yitaweq Timret, a self-help group made up of women who support one another. The group uses *equb* – a traditional savings and loan system – to provide financial assistance within the association. Most members are older women, but the group also includes a youth wing focused on young women's advocacy.

⁴⁹ Interview with Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry), Ethiopia.

⁵⁰ Interview with Rahel Getinet – Program Manager in Community Transformation Ethiopia (CTA) – CSO

Subordination and underbudgeting for women’s rights work

In Ethiopia, the anti-rights backlash is also evidenced by government disinvestment in rights work. Interviewed government officials reported that there is an implicit – and sometimes explicit – assumption within government circles that most gender-related work will be handled by CSOs or development partners. This is a problematic mindset which creates a dependency and allows the government to underinvest in gender, assuming that development partners will fill the gaps. For instance, in many ministries, the budget allocated to gender offices is sometimes just 1 or 2 million birr, a shockingly low figure considering the scale of human rights issues and the number of people affected. So, while gender may be acknowledged in official documents, the actual financial commitment is often minimal and does not reflect government’s proclaimed commitment to gender equity goals.⁵¹ This is compounded by the prevalent impression that “the effectiveness of CSOs is largely due to their accountability to donors, who emphasise results and impact, particularly in gender equality. Donor-driven initiatives tend to come with strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks, which push CSOs to be rigorous and responsive in ways that government agencies often are not.” The prevalence of such narratives allows government to become complacent and evade accountability using inefficiency in comparison to CSOs as an excuse. This speaks to the lack of collaborative planning between CSOs and government stakeholders. CSOs often plan in accordance with objectives set by donors. In the planning process, gaps must also be identified by government stakeholders if plans are to be properly addressed. However, this rarely happens. At times, CSO plans and existing needs are incompatible, creating significant implementation gaps.⁵²

“the effectiveness of CSOs is largely due to their accountability to donors, who emphasise results and impact, particularly in gender equality. Donor-driven initiatives tend to come with strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks, which push CSOs to be rigorous and responsive in ways that government agencies often are not.”

Translating strategic and policy commitments to actionable plans

A core challenge lies in translating strategic and policy commitments into actionable plans. Even when awareness exists, implementation often falters due to entrenched attitudes and skill deficiencies at operational levels. Ethiopia has trained over 8,000 experts across all tiers of governance, from regional offices down to the kebele (local administrative) level, to address these gaps. However, a critical systemic challenge remains: the lack of enforceable accountability frameworks mandated by responsible institutions. The absence of a robust national accountability mechanism for equity-driven policies severely hinders progress. There is some promise, for example, gender considerations are now integrated into departmental budgets and workflows, with mandatory tracking of gender-disaggregated outcomes, such as participation rates of women versus men. Programmes that fail to meet these criteria face budget adjustments. To institutionalise these efforts, however, collaboration between the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Finance is critical to systematise frameworks for equity auditing, reporting, and compliance.⁵³

⁵¹ Interview with Eskinder – Women Children and Youth Department lead at Ministry of Education (MoE) (Government Body)
⁵² Interview with Netsebrak Tamene – Program Coordinator at the Young Women Christian Association Ethiopia (YWCA) (CSO).
⁵³ Interview with Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)

From an advocacy perspective, some government officials in Ethiopia observed visible progress, noting that more people and institutions now prioritise gender equality — a sign of advancement. However, measured against the scale of need and the time invested, significant gaps remain. They acknowledge that the emergence of more organisations advocating for women’s rights and the inclusion of gender considerations in legal frameworks are positive developments. Advocacy groups and civil society are driving change, yet systemic barriers persist. Legal frameworks now acknowledge gender, but translating this into tangible outcomes requires deeper structural reforms.⁵⁴

CASE STUDY II (UGANDA)

State expenditure and the status of women and girls in Uganda



Uganda’s estimated total population is 43 million people, 51% female and 49% male. The majority of the population (71%) resides in rural areas while 29% lives in urban areas. Overall, Uganda is one of the youngest nations in the world with about 74.2% of the country’s population under the age of 30, 22% aged between 31-59 years and only 4% aged 60 years and above (UNDP 2022: 4). The country has made some progress toward gender parity and narrowing gender gaps in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Uganda’s female labour force participation rates have historically been higher than those in other Sub-Saharan African countries, which tend to have higher rates than other developing regions. Women comprise 40% of all business owners – making Uganda one of seven countries in the world to come so close to achieving gender parity in the rate of entrepreneurial activity. Women also fare relatively well in financial inclusion: in 2019/2020, **49% of Ugandan women** had access to some form of financial service, compared to **57% of Ugandan men**. Yet, gender inequality remains one of the most pervasive forms of discrimination in Uganda (ibid).

Women in Uganda are still less likely than men to have access to social protection, since most social protection schemes in Uganda only cover formal sector workers, which only accounts for approximately 10% of the working population. The informal sector, which employs the majority of female workers, is excluded and left without pensions, health insurance, or maternity leave and protection. Furthermore, those few women with access to social protection schemes often become the primary support system for their families and dependents due to deeply entrenched beliefs about gender roles in the distribution of household care-work and responsibilities (Akina Mama wa Afrika 2019). While Uganda has a relatively high representation of women in political leadership, the women’s level of influence is not commensurate with their numbers. The high level of political inclusion of women is however not reflected in women’s economic empowerment initiatives, collectives, and other gender

⁵⁴ Interview with Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry)

integration efforts undertaken at the sub-national level in Uganda. Some of the critical structural barriers to gender equality in Uganda include entrenched norms and cultural practices which provide an alibi for violence against women and girls (VAWG) and exclusion of women from property rights and/or access. According to UNDP (2022), gender-responsive planning and budgeting is limited due to low technical capacity and lack of local revenue sources to identify, prioritise, integrate and implement gender issues in development and humanitarian contexts. Women’s rights organisations that have been instrumental in promoting women’s rights and gender equality, have been weakened by limited donor funding, staff turnover and national laws and regulations regarding their registration status, choice of intervention sites, implementation models, and targeted beneficiaries.

In recent years, the Ugandan government has enacted some educational sector reform that has improved access to education for girls. For example, establishing Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), along with a policy whereby female students receive an extra one and a half points in public university admissions processes, have all contributed to increase educational opportunity for Ugandan girls. Uganda’s baseline proportion of total government spending on education is 13.2%, forming 2.3% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). This falls below the minimum of 4% to 6% of GDP and 15% to 20% of public expenditure that should be allocated to education according to the Framework for Action to implement SDG 4.

Financing the institutional framework for gender mainstreaming has yielded limited results thus far due to several factors. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) plays a lead political and technical role in mainstreaming gender into government policy and programming, together with gender focal persons and units in different MDAs. While financing for gender equality has been institutionalised through the inclusion of a gender provision in the Public Finance Management Act, 2015, the government’s performance on gender and equity-specific interventions across financial years shows little progress in allocations. The MGLSD has consistently been allocated less than 1% of the national budget to cover its entire portfolio.⁵⁵

In relation to health, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in Uganda is 207 deaths per 100,000 live births, while the lifetime risk (LTR) of maternal death is about 10.2 (UBOS, 2024).⁵⁶ MHC is a key health outcome indicator, and is linked to the MMR of a country, since a significant proportion of these deaths are caused by either poor or inaccessible health services. A study carried out in Uganda, (Amwonya et al., 2022), established a positive correlation between the years a woman spends at school and the likelihood of utilising maternal health services. This varied by region, placing the onus on government to especially invest in infrastructure and security in underserved regions, with the goal of achieving universal access to good quality MHC services. The study also demonstrated that directing state resources to improve the quality of Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education is an investment in the country’s social and economic transformation.

Uganda provides minimal social protection to elderly people and persons with disabilities. The Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment of the Elderly (SAGE) is Uganda’s flagship social protection program, which commenced as a pilot programme in the financial year of 2015/16 across 15 districts selected by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) under the Expanding

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⁵⁵ DfID 2014. *Institutional Capacity Assessment of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development*. DfID, Kampala, November
⁵⁶ LTR projects the chances of a woman dying from maternal causes over the course of her 35-year reproductive lifespan, taking into account the probability of maternal death in each pregnancy.

Social Protection Programme (Aliowaku & Mawa, 2022). According to the National Population and Housing Census of 2024, Uganda's population of older persons aged 60 years and above constitutes 5% of the total population. On average, households headed by an older person included 4.6 members, while 13.3% of the older persons lived alone (UBOS, 2024). The SAGE is an individual grant for the elderly, aiming to enable them to access basic services and start income-generating activities.

Close to 50% of Ugandans in households with persons with various disabilities live in extreme poverty (less than US\$1.99 per person per day), with poverty in such households estimated at 31% compared to 28% in households without a person with disabilities (MoGLSD, 2023). Poverty among persons with disabilities is heightened by limited economic opportunities, the increased cost of living associated with having a disability, medical-related expenses, and loss of educational opportunities, among others.

In 2009, a tax incentive provision was repealed and replaced with a grant to fund start-ups by persons with disabilities organised in small groups to initiate and manage income generating activities (MoGLSD, 2023). After the piloting phase, the grant was implemented under two models, namely, the district special grant and the national special grant. The district grant was intended for groups of 5-15 members, investing in joint enterprises. Training was also required prior to receipt of the award, to equip the recipient groups with entrepreneurial skills and motivation. The national special grant, a better funded model, was launched for implementation alongside the district grant. Since its inception, the government financial commitment to the programme has increased from UGX 2.1 billion (\$575,000) in 2019/2020 to UGX 16.6 billion (\$453,000) within a span of four years (African Business, 2023). By the 2021/2022 financial year, the number of persons accessing the special grant had increased to 13,615, up from 1,455 in the previous financial year (Ojok and Mukasa, 2024). Notably, the increased numbers included a slightly higher proportion of women than men.

Education sector reforms in Uganda have been hampered by weak policy implementation, even though tackling youth unemployment – among the highest in Africa – is cited as a priority. Other contributory factors include corruption within the sector, as well as privatisation, which has resulted in both low- and high- quality schools (Tromp & Datzberber, 2021). The foremost reason for the limited impact of UPE on years of primary school attainment is that the increase in enrolment overwhelmed the existing infrastructure, negatively impacting quality of output. Added to this is the inability of parents to cover costs not catered for by the government. Since UPE led to enrolment by a large number of students from low-income families, they remain the most affected by its failure to achieve the intended results (Kan & Klasen, 2021).

Moussa & Omoeva (2020) found that UPE policies in Uganda, increased the total number of years of education attained by girls on average by approximately 1.4 years. The study demonstrated that child-birth and marriage rates during adolescence declined after the introduction of UPE. Indeed, just a one-year increase in schooling significantly lowered the probability of teenagers entering into marriage or cohabitation relationships by between 2.5% and 8.9%. Furthermore, because the 2018 sexuality education framework is school-based, teachers have an integral role in implementation. The framework's grounding in religious and cultural values limits the range of topics that can be covered to advocating for abstinence eschewing issues such as sexual diversity and family planning. Teachers too, are limited by challenges which vary from institutional, to sociocultural, and personal beliefs. They derive their approach to teaching sexuality education from their professional identity, which assigns them multiple roles including that of being an authority figure that upholds ethics and regulations (de Haas and Hutter, 2020). Consequently, sexuality education messages are crafted to promote abstinence, while instilling fear in learners about the consequences of going against this teaching. In abstinence-only

education (AOE), unmarried young mothers are portrayed as social deviants by teachers and school administrators, reinforcing existing stigma and projecting a gendered message of destroyed futures (Lewinger & Russell, 2021).

Implementation of sexuality education has also been hampered by formal and informal negotiations between the state and stakeholders, especially religious leaders represented through the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda. A desire to uphold cultural values espoused by the organisations that they represent has weakened commitment to the provision of comprehensive sexuality education. This is evident in the poor coordination between the relevant ministries and local governments, such that some local government officials as well as health workers, are unfamiliar with sexuality education policies (Ninsiima et al., 2020). The caution surrounding sexuality education is partly shaped by Uganda's political economy, viewed through the lens of its history with colonialism, the influence of missionary interventions, and reliance on international aid for certain health programmes (Moore et al., 2022).



Despite gains in previous years by government and development partners to invest in this youthful population, for example, curbing early marriages to keep girls in school, recent data indicate that its sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) goals need strengthening. This is to mitigate the risk of persistently high rates of adolescent maternity, which would be apparent if the downward trend recorded between 1995 to 2016 were to stall or reverse (NPC, 2022). Teenage pregnancy and motherhood, associated with high morbidity and mortality, pose a great risk to both mother and child. In Uganda it is estimated that **6.5% of adolescent girls** between the **ages of 10-19**, and **13.6% between ages 15-19**, have begun childbearing (UBOS, 2024).

This high teenage pregnancy rate is exacerbated by stigma and limited access to reproductive health services. The country's law is clear on the legal age of consent, what constitutes defilement (sexual intercourse with a person under the legal age of consent), and the minimum and maximum punishment for a convicted offender. Yet, enforcement is weak, particularly as parents, particularly those living in poverty, can be pressured to accept out-of-court settlements with offenders (Kyegombe et al., 2022). Some of the determinants of teenage pregnancies include child marriages, peer pressure, and low use of contraceptives. Adolescents, especially those in rural areas in Uganda, are not being taught to develop social and coping skills that would help them make good decisions, build their self-esteem, empower them with the knowledge to make safe choices concerning their health (Nabugoomu et al., 2020).

There is room for improvement in government efforts to provide social care infrastructure in Uganda, given that a large segment of the population resides in rural areas, where utilisation of services such as health care is still limited by access. For instance, the 2019/2020 Uganda National Household Survey reported that 38 out of 100 children between the ages of 3 to 5 were attending early childhood development facilities (UBOS, 2021). The biggest care burden for households with children is childcare, which significantly impacts women's ability to participate in paid work and contribute toward household income and emergencies. In Uganda over 90% of households, when faced with an ill household member, access health facilities. With about 70% of health facilities in the country run by government, families are sometimes compelled to incur out-of-pocket expenses (Guloba et al., 2024).

OOPs persist in Uganda, with at least 27% of the population facing catastrophic expenditure and likely to continue facing it in the future (Garcia-Diaz et al., 2024). Households headed by elderly women, coupled with health shocks, are particularly vulnerable, increasing health expenses and resulting in financial strain due to OOPs. A well-developed social protection plan plays an important role in ensuring access to essential health services for vulnerable groups in the event of illness or injury. The coverage of such initiatives in Uganda remains low, as SAGE covers only senior citizens above the age of 80, locking out older persons below that age as well as other vulnerable groups. Medical insurance is available only to those in formal employment, leaving those in the informal sector exposed. Underdeveloped credit and insurance markets, rampant unemployment, and high levels of irregular wage employment present a limited scope for insurance against risks at national level (Aliga et al., 2023). High poverty rates often drive families to unsustainable coping mechanisms such as high-interest borrowing, or ignoring illnesses deemed ‘non-critical.’

Uganda’s constitution and legal framework declare strong commitments to gender equality and women’s rights. The constitution not only recognises that women play a significant role in society and must be accorded “full and equal dignity of the person with men,” but also mandates state support for facilities and opportunities to help women realise their potential. This recognition is complemented by affirmative action to correct historical imbalances. Uganda has also ratified regional and international instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) and agreed to the Abuja Declaration (2001) committing 15% of national budget funds to health. In theory, then, Uganda has a strong rights-based framework for advancing women’s well-being – both in law and in budgeting. However, thematic analysis of interview responses from Ugandan policymakers, legislators, technocrats, and activists reveals that these human right commitments have serious shortcomings in practice. Across the data, multiple interviewees emphasise that budgetary realities and political power dynamics prevent formal rights from translating into substantive improvements in women’s lives. Drawing on over a dozen key informant interviews with legislators, civil society actors, technocrats, journalists, and legal experts, this study exposes the gap between rhetorical commitments to women’s rights and the fiscal realities that continue to marginalise them. The interviews also expose the ways in which militarisation and security are prioritised in national budgets, diverting significant resources away from social services. Together the interviews and the data reveal structural injustices, elite capture, and the commodification of rights in Uganda. The major emerging themes are outlined below:

The constitution not only recognises that women play a significant role in society and must be accorded “full and equal dignity of the person with men,” but also mandates state support for facilities and opportunities to help women realise their potential.

Budgetary politics and regime maintenance renders rights disposable

Interview data from multiple sources point to a central contradiction: Uganda’s Constitution guarantees socio-economic rights, and the government subscribes to international instruments like the Maputo Protocol and the Abuja Declaration, yet in practice budgetary decisions are dictated by regime survival. Rights – particularly those associated with health, education, and gender equality – are treated as disposable or contingent luxuries. Executive dominance and patronage politics greatly shape the budgeting process.⁵⁷ Interviewees across the board emphasise that real power lies with the ruling party leadership and President, not with ordinary

Progressive laws and policies are often “heavily influenced – even undermined – by the executive and the ruling party’s internal decisions.”

By the time budget proposals reach the full legislature, “the role of MPs (especially opposition MPs) is reduced to rubber-stamping decisions already made by the President and his inner circle.”

citizens or parliament as a whole. Progressive laws and policies are often “heavily influenced – even undermined – by the executive and the ruling party’s internal decisions.”⁵⁸ Some respondents told us that rather than issuing budget proposals based on evidence or participatory planning, the party caucus meets behind closed doors to decide the budget in advance. By the time budget proposals reach the full legislature, “the role of MPs (especially opposition MPs) is reduced to rubber-stamping decisions already made by the President and his inner circle.”⁵⁹

As a result, political ‘whipping’ ensures any genuine amendment is easily voted down, suggesting that the legislature has “effectively abdicated” its constitutional oversight function.⁶⁰ In this environment, procedural rights and ‘commitments on paper’ carry little weight. Even budgets framed as ‘human-rights-informed’ are quickly subordinated to regime priorities. Observers note that Parliament is essentially “a rubber stamp... weak in the sense that it is not allowed to do its work,” and that Uganda operates more like a military dictatorship, where true popular democracy is absent.⁶¹ This concentration of power means that human rights discourses which assumes a neutral, law-bound state are allowed little space for critique of realpolitik, and therefore often have limited traction in practice. Furthermore, Uganda’s annual budgetary allocations consistently prioritise defence, security, and State House functions. In the financial year 2023/24, for instance, the allocation for defence and security sector (Governance and Security) stood at 14.58%, compared to 18.15% for Human Capital Development, which encompasses health and education, sectors that directly advance women’s socio-economic wellbeing yet receive proportionally less.⁶²

⁵⁷ The executive branch holds the prerogative in initiating and determining the fiscal trajectory of the country. Parliament, while constitutionally empowered to scrutinise and make recommendations, does not originate financial legislation. Parliament can advise, revise, and often propose reallocations—but always within the parameters already defined by the executive and the resource envelope they provide.

⁵⁸ Interview with Hon. Ssewungu, Shadow Minister for Education in Uganda, representing the Kalungu West County.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Interview with prominent human rights lawyer and executive director, Uganda.

⁶² Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2024), *Citizen’s Guide to the Budget for FY 2023/24*, <https://budget.finance.go.ug/sites/default/files/National%20Budget%20docs/The%20Citizen%27s%20Guide%20to%20the%20Budget%20FY%202023-24.pdf>

Despite rhetoric about “economic development” benefiting everyone, respondents consistently report chronic shortfalls in health, education, and agriculture – the sectors that most directly impact women’s daily lived realities. The evidence is stark. Human Rights Watch notes that by 2021, Uganda was spending only about 4.9% of its national budget on health, far below the 15% targeted in the Abuja Declaration, a document officially endorsed by the Ugandan government. Similarly, the African Union’s Maputo Declaration (2003) and CAADP framework call for at least 10% of national budgets on agriculture, yet Uganda’s actual allocation hovers around 4%. These funding gaps have real consequences: long waiting times, depletion of medicines and medical supplies, dilapidated schools and clinics, poor infrastructure for agriculture, and high maternal mortality.

One interviewee bluntly noted that Uganda “can hit the 15% target of Abuja,” but this is pointless “if we have reckless drivers, the transport sector is not sorted out, [or] the sector may not be ready to absorb all the money.” One women’s health activist reported that despite some recent increases for maternal health, key line items (like ambulances) were stripped out of the final budget, and by some measures the 2024/25 budget still scored only about 66% on the official gender-and-equity compliance marker (barely above the 50% pass mark). An opposition leader likewise describes how citizens’ appeals for funding for gender equity initiatives get derailed by party machinations. Taken together, these testimonies reveal that formal promises of gender equality often collide with under-resourced social sectors. Allocations are frequently rerouted to military, infrastructure, or debt payments, leaving the social determinants of health ignored. This results in a persistent mismatch: laws or protocols may promise women and girls access to rights in education and health, but the budget allocations fall far short of those commitments.⁶³ There is a growing recognition that budgeting must go beyond compliance to deliver tangible, measurable outcomes. But constraints such as limited data disaggregation, weak accountability systems, and socio-cultural biases often dilute the gender responsiveness of public finance.⁶⁴

One interviewee bluntly noted that Uganda “can hit the 15% target of Abuja,” but this is pointless “if we have reckless drivers, the transport sector is not sorted out, [or] the sector may not be ready to absorb all the money.”

Participation Without Power: Technocratic Capture of Budgeting

From a gender perspective, participatory budgeting is especially vital, as it provides accountability to ensure that policies and budgets respond to gender equity demands. However, interview responses from budget officers and public policy technocrats suggest that Uganda’s budget process remains highly technocratic. While formal avenues for public input exist – such as budget conferences and consultations – these are largely superficial and linguistically or procedurally inaccessible to most Ugandans, particularly rural women.

*We have budget conferences and websites, yes – but who understands that language? Rural women are not in the room, and even their representatives are shut out.*⁶⁵

⁶³ Interview with Fatia Kiyingi, executive director of Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), Uganda.

⁶⁴ Interview with the Undersecretary for Budgeting, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Uganda.

⁶⁵ Interview with a Parliamentary Budget Office technocrat in Kampala, Uganda.

Others argue the budgetary process has become ‘an elite process’ – technical and exclusionary – where only a few insiders truly understand or influence allocations, and ordinary citizens (including women) rarely benefit from the formal channels.⁶⁶ Uganda has robust human rights provisions on paper and is party to many international protocols (from the Universal Declaration on Human Rights to CEDAW and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights). There are also gender equality and human rights principles enshrined in Uganda’s Constitution and laws. However, in practice, these commitments rarely serve as the primary driver for budget decisions unless they align with the Executive’s political and development priorities:

The budgeting process is typically technocratic and target-driven – focused on sectors and programmes – rather than explicitly rights-driven. For example, you will seldom hear a Minister of Finance say, “we are allocating X billion because of our obligation under CEDAW”. Instead, they might say “we are funding maternal health because it’s part of our health sector strategic plan” – which by extension supports women’s rights, but it’s framed as a development need rather than a rights obligation.⁶⁷

The national budget subsumes many social rights sectors within its ‘Human Development’ budget allocation. This failure to explicitly account for health, education, and social services and rights in budget allocations has direct implications for women’s rights and feminist campaigns, limiting their ability to hold the government accountable to progress in these sectors. Furthermore, it is more difficult to argue for increased allocations to a particular sector, since budget changes are generalised across multiple lines. The anti-rights backlash is both expressed in such budgetary erasure, and can also easily be denied by policymakers, thus requiring greater budgetary vigilance by women’s rights organisations in order to gather concrete evidence of ‘hostile’ budgets. Without this vigilance, unjust or discriminatory allocations remain hidden in plain sight, weakening the struggle for women’s rights and allowing governments to mask regression as neutrality.

Weak parliaments cannot defend human rights obligations

The legislative function of parliament is fundamental to the realisation of the state’s human rights commitments, through enacting laws, implementing international human rights treaties, and overseeing the executive branch. Yet, some respondents see parliament as a moribund structure for the promotion of rights:

[Parliament] is a rubber stamp...Parliament is weak in the sense that it is not allowed to do its work. It is physically and monetarily compromised by the regime, and it is not even allowed space to prioritise human rights issues in the debating or even in the appropriation of money – or even in the oversight function. So, this Parliament is as good as dead as far as human rights promotion is concerned.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Interview with Julius Mukunda, executive director of Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group (CSBAG), Uganda

⁶⁷ Interview with Mr Sulaiman Kiggundu, the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, Uganda.

⁶⁸ Interview with Eron Kiiza, human rights lawyer and executive director of Environmental Shield, Uganda.

There is also a widespread perception that Parliament’s role and independence is constantly undermined through military violence and from other forms of political manipulation, including bribery. Furthermore, caucusing within the ruling party has had a debilitating effect on the authority of Parliament, as the caucus usurps the decision-making function of Parliament. In practice, Parliament becomes little more than a dress rehearsal, while the real decisions are taken in the ruling party caucus, in which even the role of the Speaker is eclipsed by the party president. Opposition politicians also note the lack of substantive participation of parliamentarians in decision making, and an overall top-down approach driven by the executive branch:

In practice planning processes are heavily influenced – even undermined – by the executive and the ruling party’s internal decisions. Rather than evidence-based planning or broad consultation, we often see the NRM [National Resistance Movement] caucus (the ruling party’s members of Parliament) meeting behind closed doors to decide on legislation and budgets in advance. By the time proposals reach the full Parliament, the role of MPs (especially opposition MPs) is reduced to rubber-stamping decisions already made by the President and his inner circle. Our Parliament has effectively abdicated some of its constitutionally mandated role. As a legislator in the opposition, I have witnessed that by the time we debate bills or budgets on the floor, the ruling party majority has already been whipped into line – any genuine amendment or alternative proposal is easily voted down. This means political considerations (what the regime or the “big man” wants) often outweigh technical input or public interest. Moreover, implementation of policies that are passed into law suffers from poor coordination and oversight...In summary, while Uganda’s legislative process on paper involves Parliament, in reality it is informally driven by the executive branch and the ruling party’s agenda.⁶⁹

This prevalent view of parliament’s weakness as an avenue for enforcing rights ‘raises fundamental questions not only about the suitability of judicial checks on executive power, but also about the efficacy of this legal strategy in addressing any issue linked to deeply-held social, cultural, and religious structures and beliefs’ (Oloka-Onyango 2015: 28). Recognition of the political nature of the legislative process and environment in Uganda should be taken into account by human rights defenders when developing strategies to push for the realisation of rights.

‘raises fundamental questions not only about the suitability of judicial checks on executive power, but also about the efficacy of this legal strategy in addressing any issue linked to deeply-held social, cultural, and religious structures and beliefs’

Power lies in pushing for human rights from below

While CSOs are some of the most reliable actors advancing human rights-informed budgets, they are not immune to compromise and the politicisation of rights discourse. This reality places particular emphasis on the need to deepen the agency of the masses who directly benefit from human rights. Such agency may be expressed through protests, social media organising, constitutional petitions, direct action, and non-violent mobilisation – all alternative avenues for ensuring that popular voices are

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⁶⁹ Interview with Shadow Minister, Uganda.

heard. Those who support citizen action often argue for overwhelming politicians with popular protests and making clear that there is a political cost to non-compliance with the will of the people. Failure to act simply surrenders to the regime all the levers of intimidation, violence, and bribery that undermine the interests of the people. Reliance on parliamentary representatives to accurately convey the people's aspirations is limited when MPs are compromised.⁷⁰ Other strategies include public interest litigation, which must be applied without necessarily hoping to yield immediate results. Public interest litigation should be pursued alongside advocacy and other forms of strategic, bottom-up political resistance.

People have to know that every effort is needed – whether social, political, cultural, religious, and so on—and engage in all of them. The population must take politics seriously. They must take civic work seriously. They must know that it's important to bring on board cultural and spiritual leaders in the fight against common enemies – whether it be dictatorship, militarism, corruption, or the systemic denial of basic social services and amenities.⁷¹

Rights rarely function in a vacuum. The ability to address social and gender inequities through rights depends on the ability to articulate them within the social, political, and cultural environment which empowers rights. This means that the realisation of rights is a constant battlefield – a struggle between the state, civil society, and the people. In a highly militarised society, like Uganda, where human rights activism is repressed and activists are routinely subjected to persecution, the realisation of rights becomes dependent on the fluctuating whims of state actors. A weak social contract ultimately undermines rights and fuels backlash against anyone perceived as 'speaking against' the state.

Opaque military spending undermines rights in national plans and budgets

Legislative and policy processes in Uganda, are shaped, less by normative frameworks or participatory planning, than by a combination of political expediency, regime consolidation priorities, and reactive governance. Thus far formal instruments like the National Development Plans (NDPs), Vision 2040, and international commitments (e.g., the Abuja Declaration), often function as aspirational rather than determinative frameworks. In practice, policy formulation and implementation are driven by short-term crises, donor conditionalities, and national security imperatives rather than systematic evaluation of human development and rights needs. The budgeting and legislative processes are therefore susceptible to disruption by unforeseen global and regional dynamics, such as pandemics, geopolitical shifts, or internal security threats, which frequently override long-term planning objectives. Indeed, an examination of government appropriation shows that most of the money is appropriated toward public expenditure, public administration, and the presidency, with much less going to human development.⁷²

Moreover, the centralisation of power in the executive branch, the dominance of the ruling party's caucus, and the weakening of institutional checks, particularly Parliament, are key structural con-

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⁷⁰ Interview with human rights lawyer and executive director, Uganda.
⁷¹ Interview with human rights lawyer and executive director, Uganda.
⁷² Interview with human rights lawyer and executive director, Uganda.

straints. These dynamics diminish the role of participatory democracy and marginalise policy inputs from citizens and civil society actors. Consequently, while formal structures exist to inform and guide legislative and policy action, in reality, these are often bypassed in favour of informal, elite-driven processes aligned with regime interests rather than the public good. Thus, implementation of existing policies is often reactive, relying on improvisation rather than planned execution. Civil society's role, though potentially constructive, is limited by political restrictions, underfunding, and a shrinking democratic space. There is, therefore, a need for structural reforms that reconnect policy processes to rights-based frameworks and inclusive, evidence-driven planning.⁷³

Militarisation of national budgets also emerged as a barrier to the implementation of human rights objectives during interviews. As reported by a senior government official, social rights are often trumped by national security considerations:

Resource allocation is a delicate balancing act that seeks to optimise limited resources against competing national priorities. Several key considerations inform our allocations: First, we prioritise sectors critical for economic transformation and human capital development, in line with NDP VI. These include education, health, agriculture, infrastructure, and security. Second, sector performance, absorptive capacity, and the alignment of sectoral plans with national goals heavily influence budget ceilings. Then the emerging needs—such as disaster response, pandemic management, or electoral preparations—require reallocations. Finally, regional equity considerations also play a role. We use tools like the Marginalisation Index to guide equitable resource distribution, especially for underserved areas such as Karamoja or Northern Uganda. Of course, the reality is that our resource envelope is constrained by debt obligations, recurrent expenditures, and revenue collection shortfalls. Hence, while social sectors are prioritised, actual allocations may not always meet ideal thresholds.⁷⁴

This study also shows that executive priorities and patronage politics drive allocations of resources, much more so than humanitarian needs or human rights frameworks. A huge share of resources is consumed by sectors that solidify the regime's control – notably security, defence, and opaque expenditures. Classified security spending, for example, takes an inordinately large portion of the budget and is shielded from scrutiny. The defence and security sector (often under the umbrella of “governance and security”) was allocated roughly a quarter of the national budget this financial year, nearly matching what is spent on all education and health services combined. This reality reflects the regime's focus on its own survival and control. While security has its merits, consistently prioritising guns and secret funds over schools and hospitals, exposes a disturbing distortion of priorities. Moreover, the ruling party caucus often decides funding in line with what will maintain their political base. Money is funnelled into initiatives like the Presidential donations, constituency appeasements, or new programmes like the Parish Development Model – often launched with fanfare to win support, but without sufficient planning and social investment to make effective long-term change. Meanwhile, critical social programmes that might not yield immediate political rewards are neglected or undercut.⁷⁵

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⁷³ Interview with Eron Kiiza, human rights lawyer and executive director of Environmental Shield, Uganda.
⁷⁴ Interview with a public policy Technocrat at the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED)
⁷⁵ Interview with Hon. Ssewungu (Shadow Minister for Education), Uganda.

Feminist demands are overshadowed by technocratic language and proceduralism

There are recurring complaints from women and girls about how public resources are allocated. They rightly argue that the budget does not adequately address their needs or lived realities. For example, women point out chronic underfunding of maternal health and related services – a concern tragically underscored by frequent reports of mothers dying due to lack of basic medical care in rural areas. Girls in school have also voiced frustration that promises made to support them have gone unfulfilled. A notable case was the pledge to provide free sanitary pads to schoolgirls (to curb absenteeism), which was not funded due to ‘unavailable resources,’ leaving an important need unmet. Women entrepreneurs and farmers, especially in rural areas, complain that government economic programmes are hard to access. During a recent Women Parliamentarians Forum, rural women leaders highlighted cumbersome procedures that prevent them from benefiting from initiatives like the new Grow Program. There is also a perception of unfairness or even favouritism – for instance, questions have been raised about why only those with connections seem to benefit from certain scholarships or funds, while needy girls are left out. These grievances all boil down to women feeling that the allocation of public resources does not adhere to principles of transparency and does not sufficiently prioritise their rights and needs.

In response, the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED) has made efforts to engage with these concerns through policy and budget reforms – though these often fall short of expectations. The recent adoption of Gender and Equity Budgeting demands that every government agency must factor in the needs of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups when planning expenditures. In fact, under the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA, 2015), it is not possible to submit a national budget to Parliament without a certificate confirming it is gender-and-equity responsive. This has pushed sectors to start dedicating resources to issues like maternal health, girls’ education, and women’s economic empowerment. For example, the education sector reported efforts in recent budgets to keep more girls in school by building more secondary schools in remote areas (so that girls do not have to walk unsafe, long distances) and adding dormitories in some community schools. These steps have improved girls’ retention to an extent. Targeted programmes such as the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme have been rolled out – aimed at extending credit and skills trainings to women groups. And most recently, the Parish Development Model (PDM) requires that women participate in and benefit from parish-level investment funds. However, in reality, gender rights are the first to be shelved when other priorities emerge:

Often the Ministry’s explanation is that resources are limited, and trade-offs have to be made. For instance, when the education budget was tightened a few years ago to free up funds for road infrastructure, it was the initiative for free sanitary pads that got shelved as an “unfunded priority”. From a technocratic view, such decisions are made to balance competing national priorities – but to a young schoolgirl or a mother in the village, it understandably feels like their welfare was de-prioritised. We recognise that frustration. The Ministry now tries to involve representatives from women’s groups in budget consultations and to publicly communicate the rationale for our allocations. We also point to gradual progress (like more girls enrolling in school, or incremental increases in health funding), but we acknowledge these are baby steps. In truth,

these complaints have been a crucial mirror for us – they expose the gaps between our policies and the reality on the ground. Our job is to narrow those gaps so that women and girls feel the national budget genuinely works for them, not against them.⁷⁶

Poor accessibility and ineffective reporting mechanisms for human rights violations

While Uganda has a robust legal framework for human rights on paper, there are significant challenges in practice when it comes to guaranteeing those rights. One major challenge is the accessibility and effectiveness of reporting mechanisms for human rights violations. In theory, citizens can report abuses to the police, the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC), the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), or other authorities. In reality, many people – especially women, rural populations, and other vulnerable groups – find it difficult to report violations. There is often a lack of awareness about where and how to report. For example, women facing police brutality or an arbitrary eviction might not know that the UHRC can take up their cases. Even when they do know, logistical barriers, such as distance to offices, cost of travel, and the need to request time off work, impede reporting. The UHRC has regional offices, but they are not present in every district; meaning many survivors may have to travel far and incur expenses just to lodge a complaint.

Additionally, trust in the system is an issue. People ask themselves: ‘if I report, will anything actually come of it?’ Unfortunately, the responsiveness of key actors has been inconsistent. The police, who are often the first line for reporting crimes, sometimes discourage or mishandle complaints – particularly if the complaint is against fellow state agents or powerful individuals. There have been cases of people who tried to report torture by security operatives but were intimidated into silence. The UHRC and EOC, as semi-independent bodies, have a better track record of addressing issues like discrimination or abuse by officials, but they too have faced capacity and independence challenges. For a period in recent years, the UHRC’s tribunal work was completely stalled due to a complete lack of appointed commissioners. When such bodies are not fully functional, it directly impacts citizens’ ability to secure legal remedy, as cases pile up or hearings delay. Human rights activists highlighted that during one such gap, over 1 billion Ugandan shillings in compensation awards to survivors have remained unpaid since 2003 because the UHRC’s follow-through with these cases was hindered. That kind of backlog and non-responsiveness erodes public confidence. If a survivor hears that previous survivors have not seen justice or compensation, they may not bother to report their own case.

People ask themselves: ‘if I report, will anything actually come of it?’

Another challenge is political interference and the sensitive nature of certain rights violations. Violations involving security agencies (like unlawful detentions, torture, or even severe restrictions of freedoms of assembly) are often the hardest to hold accountable. Although Uganda has anti-torture laws and mechanisms for citizens to seek redress, in practice, security-related violations tend to be downplayed by authorities. Fear of reprisal is prevalent: some survivors of security abuse stay silent out of fear that reporting could invite further harassment. This means many violations go unreported

⁷⁶ Interview with a public policy Technocrat at the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED)

or under-reported, undermining access to justice and prevention of future abuses. The environment for human rights defenders themselves has become more hostile in recent years – NGOs have been shut down or accused of illegitimate activities, which has created an environment of increased fear amongst survivors. When key actors like government officials or security personnel are not responsive – or worse, are the alleged violators – it significantly impedes the guarantee of rights. Even in the social sphere (less politically sensitive rights), resource and capacity constraints pose challenges. For instance, guaranteeing the right to a fair trial is difficult when the judiciary is understaffed and courts are backlogged; a woman seeking justice for a sexual assault might wait years for a trial, which in effect is a denial of justice. Similarly, citizens can lodge complaints about negligence or denial of health services, but the Health Ministry’s limited responsiveness effectively negates the route to justice that the filed complaints are meant to follow.

Key actors often cite ‘resource constraints’ for not fully responding – which may be a genuine systemic issue, however it still leaves survivors without remedy. For example, the Ministry of Gender is tasked with enforcing labour rights (like protecting women from workplace exploitation), however, due to the low number of labour officers and insufficient funding for inspections, complaints by women workers are not met with timely action. Cultural and social barriers also present challenges in reporting and enforcing rights. Many women face societal pressure not to report domestic violence or sexual abuse – these issues can be stigmatising, and women fear being shamed or not believed. This means violations of women’s rights often stay hidden. The government has set up some gender-based violence reporting mechanisms (toll-free lines, etc.), but usage remains low due to stigma and lack of trust in follow-up. Ensuring women’s rights in such cases is challenging because it requires more than just the law, it requires changing the attitudes of police, medical officers, and judges who might harbour biases. Even where police are trained on handling GBV cases sensitively, reports from activists still suggest many survivors drop cases mid-way through due to frustration with the system and a sense of poor case management. Another challenge is that even when violations are verified and recommendations made; enforcement is weak. The UHRC annually makes recommendations to various state organs (for example, calling for prosecution of officers who engage in torture, or seek to silence survivors through payment of extra-legal compensation). Many of these recommendations have historically been ignored or severely delayed. For example, the UHRC has documented numerous cases of inhumane conditions within Ugandan prisons, and as year after year those conditions remain unchanged, the violations become entrenched. Ministries may pledge reforms, but without genuine political will and sustained public pressure, these promises are hollow and survivors are left to endure ongoing abuse and neglect.⁷⁷

Real spending vs budget projections

The PFMA 2015, institutionalised a Gender and Equity Budgeting mandate, whereby all Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) are obligated to demonstrate how their budgets address gender and equity concerns. In theory, this means programmes aimed at improving maternal health, girls’ education, women’s economic empowerment (such as the PDM), and protection services against

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⁷⁷ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.

gender-based violence receive deliberate attention during budget formulation. In practice, however, implementation challenges persist, especially as gender-sensitive planning has not been fully mainstreamed at any of the sectoral levels.⁷⁸

The PFMA requirement for a Certificate of Gender and Equity also means each sector’s budget should address needs of vulnerable groups. In practical terms, this prompts questions such as: are we funding maternal health adequately? Are there provisions for girls’ education and people with disabilities? Every Ministry, Department, and Agency must be assessed on these criteria, and those that score poorly must revise their Budget Framework Papers to be approved. This process, overseen by the Equal Opportunities Commission, has gradually sensitised planners to allocate resources more fairly, for example, ensuring rural water supply initiatives receive funding to better reach underserved communities, or that within the education budget, money is earmarked for girl-child retention programmes). However, these efforts barely scratch the surface, as one parliamentary budgeting officer explained:

The mere presence of a rights or gender framework doesn’t automatically guarantee large budgetary shifts. Often it results in relatively small adjustments or tagging of certain expenditures as supporting women’s empowerment so that the EOC grants the compliance certificate. The core allocations, however, still tend to be driven by macro-economic priorities (like infrastructure, or now debt management) and political considerations.⁷⁹

Finally, historical trends and incremental budgeting play a part in safeguarding rights. Often, the previous year’s budget figures serve as a baseline, with incremental increases or cuts. Social sectors have recurrent costs (like teachers’ and health workers’ salaries) that are predominantly fixed, such that new allocations often come down to incremental development spending, which is often small. External donor funding also informs resource allocation, for example, if a donor is already providing financial support for a particular issue, the government may allocate domestic funds elsewhere, which can skew the picture of total resources going to a particular sector. In sum, while Uganda’s official stance is to prioritise social welfare and uphold commitments (like the Abuja Declaration for health, the SDGs, amongst others), in practice the allocation of resources is tempered by debt obligations, economic growth priorities, and the push-and-pull of various interests. The result is that social expenditures, though rising in absolute terms, often remain below the levels needed to realise a minimum standard of citizens’ rights to health, education, and social protection.

Lack of transparency and access to information

Those working to promote equitable distribution of resources and influence policymaking encounter a number of significant challenges. First and foremost is lack of transparency and access to information. One journalist and researcher reported that he often encounters barriers and difficulties when seeking detailed budget information or resource allocation data for different regions or groups. While Uganda has legislation that regulates access to information, ostensibly promoting the free access of public information, in practice it can be difficult to obtain up-to-date, disaggregated data from gov-

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⁷⁸ Interview with a public policy Technocrat at the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED), Uganda.
⁷⁹ Interview with Mr Sulaiman Kiggundu, the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, Uganda.

ernment departments. Sometimes budgets are not broken down in a way that shows, for instance, how much is spent on women or on a particular marginalised region, making it challenging to assess gender equity. When information is scarce or withheld, it hampers the ability to pinpoint inequities and advocate for corrections. Activists rely on public documents like the Budget Framework Paper and Auditor General reports, but these are often dense and published late. Moreover, engaging with policymakers to get data can be met with defensiveness, as they may fear that exposing allocation disparities will bring criticism. This opacity is a major hurdle; “it is like fighting for fair distribution while blindfolded.”⁸⁰ Exacerbating this lack of transparency is the sharp increase in classified spending. For example:

“it is like fighting for fair distribution while blindfolded.”

Classified expenditures have grown massively (over 500% in six years) and are by nature opaque. They are audited in confidentiality and not debated openly, and Parliament and the public only see a single-line item. Critics rightly say that excessive secrecy in parts of the budget creates openings for corruption and siphoning of funds that should be providing critical social services. Ensuring budget transparency is therefore a human rights issue in itself (right to information, good governance) and a means to safeguard other rights by deterring misallocation. Another challenge is political prioritisation that sometimes favours short-term or elite interests over equitable human rights-based distribution. To put it plainly, there are times when resources are allocated in ways that benefit a few or address high-profile projects while neglecting basic rights for the many.⁸¹

The national debt constraint on realisation of rights



Uganda’s national budget is strained by many competing priorities, a large portion of the budget – nearly **47.9%** in the latest year – goes to debt servicing (about **34 trillion Ugandan shillings**), thus leaving little remaining to fund health, education, water, and other rights-focused sectors. The Ugandan government has never reached the **15%** health budget target indicated in the Abuja Declaration, but rather typically allocates approximately **7% to 8%**. At one point the portion of the national budget allocated to the education sector fell to only 11%. In the last few years, the health sector budget allocation was approximately 200 billion Ugandan shillings under the targeted amount, leading to a significant gap between health needs and service provision.⁸² Some civil society actors see Uganda’s debt trap as the real constraint on the realisation of rights:

Last year we spent 73 billion on commitment fees. Fines that we pay because we have not utilised the loans we acquired, because the structure is not prepared to absorb and execute these projects. So that puts a constraint on our money. So, instead of repairing these roads, the first call on the budget is debt service. That’s why, out of the 71 trillion we are planning for this financial

⁸⁰ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.
⁸¹ Interview with Mr Sulaiman Kiggundu, the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, Uganda.
⁸² Interview with a public policy Technocrat at the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED), Uganda.

year, we can only spend 43 trillion. The rest is already dedicated to debt servicing. We're in a trap. We are in a very strong — let's call it — debt trap. The other trap also is what they call debt rollover. And debt rollover means that the debt has matured today, but you don't have money to pay. The debt rollover last financial year was over 6 trillion. Now it's at 11 trillion for all the debts in the budget. These debts owed to ADB, IFC, Islamic Bank, etc. That's what informs allocations. Forget about the NDP. Forget about NTM. Forget about the budget that we are running on a daily basis. No, that is the underlying constraint – constraints that we are facing as a country to manage this economy. The inefficiency is so high that we are losing money.⁸³

In FY2024/25, out of a total 72 trillion Ugandan shillings, 34.3 trillion Ugandan shillings were used for discretionary spending (i.e. 'appropriated' by Parliament) while only 37.8 trillion Ugandan shillings were used for statutory obligations such as debt servicing. This shows how heavy the debt burden has become – interest and debt repayments now crowd out public spending on new programmes, with gender-related ones less likely to be prioritised. Alarming classified budgets have ballooned by over 500% in nominal terms in about six years, from 441 billion Ugandan shillings in FY2016/17 to about 2.77 trillion Ugandan shillings in FY2022/23. This indicates that a growing segment of government funding is being channelled into defence, military, and intelligence operations, often justified by 'security demands.' Such decisions are determined within the security apparatus of the Executive Branch, with Parliament having limited say (usually only the Speaker and a select subcommittee review those items in confidence). The prioritisation of these areas – human capital, infrastructure, and security – often comes at the expense of other social sectors. There are relatively smaller allocations to sectors like agriculture (despite the large portion of the Ugandan labour force employed in this sector) or social development programmes. Parliament does advocate for adjustments (for instance, it frequently pushes for more health or agricultural funding) but given the limited fiscal space after debt payments and wages, trade-offs are inevitable. The Executive Branch's dominance over budgetary decisions means its priorities largely carry the day.⁸⁴

Slow translation of formal compliance into actual outcomes

There has been a notable effort in Uganda to infuse human rights – particularly women's rights – into the planning and budgeting of social programmes. On paper, the commitment is quite strong. The National Development Plan III explicitly calls for integrating a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) into all policies and programmes. This means that when implementing a social programme (e.g. a poverty alleviation or healthcare initiative), officials are expected to consider principles like inclusion, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination. For example, NDP III includes an objective to "strengthen compliance with the Uganda Bill of Rights" and lists interventions such as translating the Bill of Rights into local languages and improving conditions in detention facilities. This reflects an understanding that development should advance the rights and dignity of the people. In practical terms, one of the clearest ways in which women's rights can inform resource allocation is through gender-responsive budgeting. As previously established, the PFMA (2015) mandates that the annual Budget Framework Paper and each sector's budget must obtain a Gender and Equity Certificate. This process requires ministries to assess how their spending plans address gender disparities and the

⁸³ Interview with Mr Julius Mukunda, the executive director of the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group, Kampala, Uganda.

⁸⁴ Interview with Mr Sulaiman Kiggundu, the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, Uganda.

needs of marginalised groups. If a ministry's plan ignores women's access to services or fails to budget for gender-based violence responses, the Equal Opportunities Commission can flag it as non-compliant.⁸⁵

Over the past several budget cycles, this has led to more deliberate inclusion of programmes benefiting women and girls – for instance, funding for maternal health supplies and girls' sanitation facilities in schools, often gets justified on rights-based grounds. The Director of Budget at the Finance Ministry noted that Uganda's legal framework on gender budgeting is meant to achieve the 'progressive realisation' of social and economic rights over time. Those objectives come from international human rights law (such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) – revealing that technocrats explicitly see budgeting as a tool to fulfil rights obligations gradually. When social programmes are rolled out, human rights considerations come into play, albeit unevenly. For example, Uganda's health policy emphasises equitable access – the idea that all Ugandans have a right to the highest attainable standard of health. This is reflected in initiatives like the removal of user fees at public health centres (a policy initiative over 20 years ago aiming to make healthcare accessible for the poor) and in commitments to specific targets like reducing maternal mortality. Because a woman's right to safe motherhood is recognised, the government and partners invest in training midwives and expanding emergency obstetric care. Another example is education: the right to education for girls has informed programmes to provide free primary education and lately, efforts have been made to keep pregnant teenagers in school rather than expelling them (a policy shift in line with girls' rights). These show that to some extent the rights rhetoric does shape programme design. However, the extent of influence is still limited by budget realities and social norms. While these pro-rights frameworks exist, the actual allocations often fall short of what would be required to fulfil basic human rights standards. For instance, the right to health would imply allocating sufficient funds to ensure quality healthcare for all, yet health funding remains quite low.⁸⁶ Some see these gender equity provisions as being tokenistic or merely cosmetic:

When you look at it and see the level of compliance...average compliance in 2023/2024 was 61%. Average compliance in 2024/2025 — the current budget — is 66%. So, the question that comes to mind is: why are we not having 100% compliance, which is the requirement, and which can be enforced by government? When you look at this it tells you that the gender equity compliance reports and annual advisory are perhaps cosmetic. It tells you that perhaps these institutions have the luxury of doing whatever they want to do. If truly gender equity compliance was critical and central to determining the allocation, we would see this compliance score at 90+ or above 80. The thing is, government has the power to do that.⁸⁷

Similarly, Uganda's commitment under the Maputo Protocol includes guaranteeing women's reproductive health rights, but implementation of related programmes (like provision of family planning or fighting maternal mortality) has been patchy when funding is inadequate or when cultural resistance is strong. Programmes that have strong advocacy behind them (often by women's rights organisations) tend to get more of a rights-based approach. A good example is the campaign against gender-based violence: thanks to women's rights activism, the government set up a special action plan on GBV, and

⁸⁵ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.

⁸⁶ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.

⁸⁷ Interview with Fatia Kiyingi, executive director of Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), Uganda.

there are now a few government-funded shelters and police family protection units. These efforts are informed by the idea that women have a right to live free from violence, and public expenditure is justified to uphold that right. However, while women-focused initiatives like the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) and PDM are laudable, funding levels remain very modest:

UWEP, for instance, was allocated UGX 32 billion in FY 2023/2024, less than 0.1% of the total budget. Moreover, disbursement delays and lack of capacity at the local level hinder effectiveness. There's a need to shift from tokenistic budgeting to transformative financing that addresses structural inequalities. This includes investing in unpaid care work, promoting land rights for women, and ensuring access to justice.⁸⁸

Uganda has institutionalised the consideration of human and women's rights into its budgeting process to a significant degree – arguably more than many countries, due to instruments like the Gender and Equity Certificate. This means implementation of social programmes can at least be evaluated against rights criteria. The challenge remains to move from formal compliance to actual outcomes. There are still cases where resource allocation does not fully match the rhetoric – indicating that while human rights guide the plans, they are only one of several factors, and many times political or economic trade-offs override human rights considerations.⁸⁹

Regime survival and consolidation over citizens' rights in budgetary allocation

Many CSO actors interviewed, expressed a firm belief that the rights of citizens are being subordinated to political interests, and that the NRM government's budgetary allocation is informed not by the grand policy frameworks to which they pay lip service, such as the National Development Plan (NDP), Vision 2040, or international commitments like the requirement for allocating at least 15% of the national budget to the health sector. Rather, "the preoccupation of the current NRM regime is power retention and regime survival, evidenced by the growing budgetary allocations to the military and classified defence budgets in order to deal with real or perceived enemies, as well as political opponents, the political class, and anyone who might be a roadblock to their power."⁹⁰ Such considerations produce what may be termed as a 'political budget' rather than an 'economic budget,' as these budgetary decisions are being driven by political objectives rather than socio-economic welfare for all. One key strategy available to human rights advocates is to seek intervention through the legislative and oversight functions of Parliament.

"the preoccupation of the current NRM regime is power retention and regime survival, evidenced by the growing budgetary allocations to the military and classified defence budgets in order to deal with real or perceived enemies, as well as political opponents, the political class, and anyone who might be a roadblock to their power."

⁸⁸ Interview with the Undersecretary for Budgeting, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Uganda
⁸⁹ Ibid.
⁹⁰ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.

MPs often raise constituents' issues on the floor of the House in the form of questions, motions, or debates. For instance, if a community lacks clean water or a regional hospital is under-equipped, their MP may table a question to the responsible minister during plenary or raise a Matter of Urgent Public Importance urging the government to intervene. This can elicit a formal response or commitment from the minister in charge, effectively putting the issue on record and pressuring the executive to act. Such public demands also feed into the budget process: Parliament's Budget Committee and sectoral committees scrutinise budget allocations to ensure they address on-the-ground needs that citizens voice. MPs might argue for more funds for a sector if they know their voters are discontent – for example, during budget debates, we've seen MPs push for additional health centre funding or rural electrification in response to petitions from their districts.⁹¹

The suggestion here is that an approach to human rights as political rather than merely institutional does offer some scope to push for change and greater investment in social and economic rights. This citizen participatory route, however, has serious shortcomings in militarised society where civilians are not spared from military courts, and where the voicing of legitimate social concerns can be perceived as a critique of the ruling regime and met with retaliation.

Legislative conservatism on certain rights for women and girls

Although Uganda has signed and enacted a draft of gender-related laws, many of these laws are being implemented, particularly at the grassroots level. For example, the Domestic Violence Act was passed over a decade ago, and yet awareness of the rights conveyed by the Act and usage of those rights by women in rural areas remains very low. This gap between codified objectives and implementation stems partially from lack of funding, which in turn leads to insufficient support shelters, training, and public awareness. Inconsistent enforcement of women's rights is another key issue. Although laws exist, police and magistrates often fail to prioritise domestic violence cases, leaving many perpetrators unprosecuted. The Maputo Protocol obliges Uganda to safeguard women's reproductive rights, but in practice, maternal health indicators, while improving, are still troubling. Maternal mortality, while reduced, is still above national targets, and unsafe abortion persists because abortion remains largely illegal and stigmatised). Due to internal political and religious opposition, as well as cultural conservatism, the government has resisted implementing some aspects of the Maputo Protocol – notably Article 14, which calls for reproductive health rights including safe abortion. As such, progress toward the implementation of women's rights is selective: culturally sensitive issues like marital rape, polygamy, and abortion lag behind. In fact, marital rape is not explicitly criminalised in Uganda, despite significant efforts to criminalise it via the Marriage and Divorce Bill, which has been stalled for years amid controversy. These gaps demonstrate that while Uganda has adopted some progressive laws, certain “taboo” issues are left unaddressed, denying women full rights and tacitly reinforcing cultural backlash.⁹²

The persistence of VAWG despite government investment in healthcare, further underscores this backlash. In 2024, the government increased funding for the Vote 151: Uganda Blood Transfusion Services by 52% and has given more attention to maternal health through programmes such as the Maternal and Perinatal Death Response and Surveillance (MPDR). Yet cases of defilement by the survivors' own

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⁹¹ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.
⁹² Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.

guardians rose from 972 to 1023, and cases in which the perpetrator was the survivor’s teacher rose from 169 to 190. Moreover, the number of cases of defilement of children aged eight or younger has doubled. Despite these alarming realities, advocacy for a National Sexual Education Framework by CSOs has received poor reception, with open opposition from religious leaders and government actors.”⁹³ Opposition to comprehensive sex education leaves young girls without access to critical information.

Austerity and Budgeting for Inequality

We found that Uganda’s budgetary choices are predominantly driven by macroeconomic constraints and crises, not by rights claims. Respondents repeatedly stressed that the country’s economy and fiscal capacity impose strict limits. For instance, even if the health budget were to reach the 15% Abuja target, the impact would be minimal without the basic infrastructure and staffing to absorb funds. Meanwhile, heavy debt servicing and security expenditures continue to swallow vast portions of the budget. CSOs and Parliamentarians lament that in vital sectors such as health, wage-related costs dominate, leaving little for capital investment or service delivery. The Budget Framework Paper and Medium-Term Expenditure Framework remain tethered to macroeconomic targets aligned with IMF and World Bank expectations, while human rights and gender equity are often relegated to vague appendices or gender certificates with no enforcement power. Gender-sensitive sectors remain chronically underfunded, exposing a dangerous blind spot in Ugandan national budgeting – one that sacrifices the rights and dignity of its citizens to the demands of fiscal orthodoxy.

Benefits of joint media exposure and CSO campaigns

Interviews with Ugandan journalists affirmed that the role of the media in Uganda, is similar to Ethiopia, in that it seeks persistently to expose human rights violations. Interview responses collectively revealed that women and girls most commonly complain about violence, dispossession, and lack of essential services – all of which are fundamental rights violations. The role of media is to provide a channel for their voices to be heard and to seek remedies. Such remedies range from legal assistance and mediation to media exposure and advocacy. Activists argued that individual complaints can lead to broader change: for example, widespread complaints about inheritance injustices helped drive recent legal reforms, while outcry over maternal deaths led to greater budget attention to maternal health. Each complaint addressed not only aims to resolve the issue of one woman but also exposes systemic gaps, pushing for stronger law enforcement and better implementation for all women and girls.⁹⁴

Interviewees considered the approaches of women’s rights organisations in Uganda to be highly impactful and continually evolving. They combine legal reform campaigns with on-the-ground empowerment, using evidence-based advocacy and strategic alliances to push for the implementation of rights. The passage of crucial women’s rights laws and policies – from the Domestic Violence Act to the recent succession and employment law reforms – many after long struggles – stands as evidence of their effectiveness. The ongoing challenge, however, is ensuring those laws are implemented. But even in that regard, these organisations must act as watchdogs, keeping pressure on the state to honour its commitments. Their lived experience and grounded expertise have been the driving force in moving women’s rights from paper to practice in Uganda.

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⁹³ Interview with Fatia, executive director of Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), Uganda.
⁹⁴ Interview with parliamentary journalist, Uganda.

Women and girls in Uganda employ a spectrum of strategies to lodge rights claims: formal mechanisms (EOC, UHRC, courts), political avenues (petitions, lobbying MPs, local councils), and public or indirect methods (media exposure, working through NGOs, amongst others). The effectiveness of each can vary, but often it is a combination of strategies that yields the best results. For example, a local complaint backed by a legal NGO and then publicised in the media can prompt a very robust state response. When one channel is blocked or slow, women will find another. This adaptability is itself a testament to their agency in claiming rights.⁹⁵ Some parliamentarians see a significant role for civil society as the vanguard for rights-based knowledge production and dissemination, but point to the limitations of a weakened civil society:

Civil society currently is a bit weakened. And the needs of survival, dread, has driven them into conformity. A conforming civil society can't lead this battle. But, for the space remaining of civil society, they can lead the intellectual conversation. Because what is also missing in civil society is capacity. You cannot underrate the fact that civil society has a lot of capacity in terms of outing knowledge on these issues. That's the space available for them. Because also in Parliament to some degree there is a lack of particular knowledge on these issues. So civil society needs to lead the knowledge conversation. Engage Members of Parliament. Engage district councils. Engage communities – the masses. That's where they can be useful, in terms of beginning the intellectual conversation that can inform, in the long term, legislative reforms that must be connected to the broader structure of governance reforms.⁹⁶

Others emphasise the importance of activist coalitions:

Women's rights organisations play a crucial role in highlighting gender disparities and advocating for policy changes. However, their efforts are often hampered by limited funding and political resistance. Greater collaboration between these organisations and legislators could enhance the impact of their campaigns and ensure that gender considerations are integrated into policy-making processes. It's also essential for these organisations to build coalitions and engage in sustained advocacy to hold the government accountable for its commitments to gender equality.⁹⁷

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⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
⁹⁶ *Interview with the former leader of opposition and member of the budget committee, Mathia Mpuuga in Kampala, Uganda.*
⁹⁷ *Interview with Hon. Ibrahim Ssemujju Nganda, MP for Kira Municipality and Shadow Minister for Finance, Uganda.*

Rights as Performance: A Crisis of Implementation and Domestication

Despite Uganda’s formal commitments to international protocols (Maputo, CEDAW, Abuja Declaration), interviews across sectors confirm that such commitments lack legal enforcement or budgetary backing. Rights are performed at international summits but domestically they are neglected almost entirely. “Uganda performs rights at global forums, but budgets them out at home. Gender budgeting is a checklist, not a commitment.”⁹⁸ Several interviewees highlight the gap between legal frameworks and implementation. Uganda has a web of legal commitments

“Uganda performs rights at global forums, but budgets them out at home. Gender budgeting is a checklist, not a commitment.”

–from its own Constitution and National Development Plans to regional treaties– but enforcement and follow-through are weak. For example, Parliament has passed progressive laws (such as the Domestic Violence Act, marital property law, and affirmative action quotas), yet these are undermined by lack of funding, lack of political will, and cultural conservatism. One MP noted that even when Parliament enacts new standards, the executive branch often fails to allocate the necessary budget or establish implementing agencies, preferring instead to stick to parochial party priorities and manifestos.⁹⁹ Similarly, our respondents point out that some parts of the Maputo Protocol (like women’s reproductive rights in Article 14) have been effectively sidelined through Uganda’s reservations and censorship of related laws.

As one human rights lawyer put it, there is often a contradiction “between the ideal and the reality”: the government will ratify international instruments and enshrine rights in law but then do “something different” when drafting the budget.

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Uganda’s legal and policy framework does acknowledge human rights and women’s rights on paper, but the translation of those rights into budget priorities and programme implementation is grossly inadequate. The extent to which rights considerations inform actual government action is unfortunately very limited. When it comes to the actual implementation and funding of social programmes, a rights-based approach is largely missing. Government decisions often treat social programmes as charity or political tokenism rather than obligations to fulfil rights. Take women’s rights: programmes addressing women’s specific needs (like maternal health, gender-based violence shelters, or girls’ education needs) receive paltry resources compared to the scale of the problem. A recent analysis of the 2024/25 budget showed that while big infrastructure projects and defence are heavily funded, the Community Mobilisation and Mindset Change programme – which among other things covers gender-based violence awareness and community development – received only about 0.07% of the budget, essentially crumbs. This indicates that initiatives meant to change social attitudes and support rights (often affecting women) are barely prioritised. Maternal mortality in Uganda remains troublingly high, partly because budget allocations to maternal and reproductive health are insufficient. Similarly, girls’ right to education is theoretically a priority under Universal Primary Education and other pro-

⁹⁸ Interview with a human rights lawyer in Kampala, Uganda.
⁹⁹ Interview with Hon. Ssewungum (Shadow Minister for Education), Uganda.

grammes, but in practice we see thousands of girls dropping out due to early marriage, pregnancy, or lack of sanitation facilities.¹⁰⁰

Others cite the failure to account for rights in the three major functions of the budget: its directive function (government budget directs resource allocation; its control function (control over inflation, development, etc); and the allocative function. The allocative function is tied directly to allocative justice, and it is here that government is failing its people most profoundly:

The whole idea of budgeting using methods of distributive justice – which would speak to a human rights-based kind of budgeting – has failed, because the implementation does not appreciate what these rights are about.¹⁰¹

Weak institutional structures lead to weak citizen participation

Citizens' voices and aspirations ought to be reflected within the budget – from the Budget Framework Papers to the discussion in Parliament.

Unfortunately, when you look at the freedom of expression... but there are many human rights objectives that the budget should advance—demilitarisation, for instance—but they are nowhere. They are not mentioned. They are not prioritised...We still have illegal detention following the Supreme Court pronouncement denying military jurisdiction over civilians, but it has not been respected. Compensation awards are not being paid – and those that are being paid are not paid in time. So, it's not a human rights budget. It's a budget for power retention, and human rights are secondary.

To be very clear, this regime is a very prominent violator of human rights, and it only pays lip service to their respect, protection, and promotion.¹⁰²

There is also a failure to properly fund human rights institutions. Whether it is the Human Rights Commission, the Judiciary, the IGG, or the Equal Opportunities Commission, all institutions that have a mandate to promote, respect, and facilitate human rights in Uganda, continue to be underfunded and understaffed, and Thus their objectives are directly undermined by the government.¹⁰³ Constraints imposed by the government on CSOs also limit their effectiveness:

Thanks to [women's rights organisations] there is greater awareness of women's legal rights, and some important laws and policies have been adopted. However, even they face an uphill battle in seeing rights fully implemented. Many times, the government will applaud these organisations

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¹⁰⁰ Interview with Hon. Ssewungu (Shadow Minister for Education), Uganda.
¹⁰¹ Interview with the former leader of opposition and member of the budget committee Mathia Mpuuga in Kampala, Uganda.
¹⁰² Interview with human rights lawyer in Kampala, Uganda
¹⁰³ Interview with human rights lawyer in Kampala, Uganda.

publicly but then starve their initiatives of funds or create bureaucratic hurdles (for example, the stringent regulations under the NGO Act can be used to stifle NGOs). My critique, speaking as an opposition leader, is not of the organisations but of the environment in which they operate. They are essentially trying to push a reluctant government to do the right thing.¹⁰⁴

In part because women are not directly solicited to participate in processes where public allocations are made, and in part because their triple care burdens limit their time and ability to participate, decisions around social infrastructure investments that affect women do not adequately reflect their needs, nor address their demands:

You will find that the PPDA, for example, has a UGX 10-million reservation at the local level and a UGX 30-million reservation at the national level for contracts to be given to women groups and other groups. But it's not enforceable. That's the problem. You don't have an enforcement mechanism, because the ministry will come and say, "We didn't get the women who bid for this," because they are not aware that actually these contracts even exist...By the time they come out in newspaper ads, they're done. It's just formality. It's a formality. So, there is still limited participation of women in the budget process. There is still less benefit of women in the budget outcomes. So, there is still need for conscientisation of women. But also, who is going to organise them? It's the job of government.¹⁰⁵

Affirmative Action as a Technology of Containment

Many respondents criticised a rights discourse overly focused on legal entitlements or policy statements without altering power or redistributing resources. Some explicitly frame the problem of budgeting by, arguing that it tends to ignore underlying inequalities. They noted that rights language is often used selectively – for example, state officials can cite their laws or the Abuja Declaration and Maputo Protocol commitments – but then refuse to implement them. They observe that it is pointless to proclaim international targets if there is no interest in implementing them locally.¹⁰⁶ Others argue that the regime's priorities lie elsewhere and that even civil society (the usual bearer of rights claims) has been "infiltrated" or co-opted.¹⁰⁷ From this viewpoint, formal human rights advocacy (including petitions, reports or donor-driven projects) is insufficient. Instead, real change depends on grassroots agency – on protests, social movements, and collective action beyond official channels. This viewpoint reflects a broader theoretical critique: a human rights approach can reify the state as a neutral rights-holder and still neglect the material conditions of poverty, patriarchy, and neo-colonial governance that constrain women's freedoms.

For example, women's rights NGOs like FOWODE (Forum for Women in Democracy) have pioneered budget literacy and advocacy, emphasising data on girls' education and maternal mortality to demand more spending on these issues. But even FOWODE's founder noted that simply mentioning "women" in plans does not suffice – budgets must be disaggregated and responsive to different categories of

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¹⁰⁴ Interview with Shadow Minister, Uganda.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Mr Julius Mukunda, the executive director of the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Mr Julius Mukunda, the executive director of the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group

¹⁰⁷ Interview with human rights lawyer in Kampala, Uganda.

women (urban, rural, disabled, young, elderly, etc.), something the state has largely failed to do. Interview respondents collectively suggest that the human rights discourse on its own cannot dismantle structural barriers, instead, this discourse must be coupled with redistributive political demands and systemic critique and reforms. While Uganda boasts some of the highest female parliamentary representation in Africa, interviewees consistently emphasised that these numerical gains have not translated into meaningful influence over redistributive policy or public spending. As noted by some respondents, female MPs often replicate patriarchal values or are too constrained by party hierarchies to make any real change.

Affirmative action has put women in Parliament, but not in power. They sit, but do not shape the budget. They serve patriarchy with lipstick.¹⁰⁸

The presence of women in Parliament has not managed to disrupt the gender-discriminatory logic of resource allocation. Women parliamentarians are often sidelined during budget negotiations, and gender-responsive budgeting remains largely rhetorical. This suggests that mere gender representation does not constitute a sufficient condition for the material realisation of rights, and in contexts where the structure and aspirations of the state are inimical to public interest and women's rights, representation merely serves as another mode of erasure of rights.

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¹⁰⁸ Interview with Fatia Kiyingi, executive director of Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), Uganda.

CONCLUSION

The thematic findings of this study point to a core insight: the human rights frameworks are insufficient for securing women's emancipation under conditions of structural inequality. First, this approach treats rights as individualised entitlements rather than social relations embedded in material structures. Second, it relies on the assumption of a rational, benevolent state—an assumption dismantled by nearly all interviewees in both country contexts. Moreover, many feminist scholars have long warned that fixation on recognition over redistribution can severely dilute justice. In Uganda as in Ethiopia, women's rights are recognised in laws and protocols, but denied in budgets, service delivery, and lived realities. Emancipation is not achievable through quota-based inclusion or budget-line increases alone. The interview data suggests the need for a fundamental transformation of how we think about budgeting and its link with human and women's rights. Rather than viewing budgets as technical documents or taking human rights as ends in themselves, a feminist political economy approach must reframe them as terrains of contestation and power, in which struggles over care, labour, dignity, and survival are fought.

As multiple interviewees in both contexts insisted, real change requires shifting from technocratic fixes to political reimagination – one where budgets become tools for liberation rather than instruments of control. Uganda's budgetary regime exemplifies the broader crisis of human rights discourse in the Global South: the gap between norms and reality, between promise and practice. While Ethiopia and Uganda may perform compliance with international protocols, they both fail to translate these performances into improvements for women and girls in practice. The thematic analyses expose this contradiction and offer a roadmap rooted in feminist political economy, for reimagining a budgeting process that prioritises human life over regime survival. These contradictions, if not addressed, eventually manifest as backlash, undermining the significant work being done by women's rights and feminist organisations, and placing them in a constant state of agitation against, rather than in cooperation with national governments.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings of this study, the following key recommendations are made for both Ugandan and Ethiopian stakeholders.

1. **Strengthen Accountability Systems** – Feminist organisations must create enforceable metrics that make accountability in the budgeting process measurable and verifiable. Mechanisms must compel individuals and institutions to fulfil their mandates, ensuring equity moves beyond aspiration into practice.
2. **Demand Budgetary vigilance** – Gender rights activists must build technical expertise to scrutinise budgets in detail. They must expose concealed allocations for social and economic rights and intervene with precise, evidence-based responses.
3. **Forge Cross-Sector Partnerships** – Ministries, CSOs, and communities must align their agendas and co-design solutions. By working together, governments, experts, and communities can transform fragmented efforts into cohesive, rights-driven strategies.

4. **Transform Dual Legal Systems** – Cultural conservatism and backlash persist because statutory systems are not given clear precedence when there is a clash with customary laws. Both systems must be recognised and harmonised in practice to ensure that women and girls' rights are upheld.
5. **Build Genuine Collaboration** – Civil society and non-governmental actors bring resources, expertise, and innovation that governments often lack. Governments must commit to genuine partnerships that turn cooperation into meaningful, lasting change.
6. **Elevate the Role of Feminist Organising** – Women's rights organisations must continue exposing human rights violations but also maintain constant engagement with the state. They must press for shared goals, sustained agendas, and mission-driven strategies that move beyond short-term projects.¹⁰⁹
7. **Enforce Accountability in Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)** – Finance ministries may endorse GRB, but accountability remains vague. CSOs must intensify pressure to secure concrete enforcement mechanisms that guarantee substantive implementation.
8. **Secure Greater Domestic Funding** – With external funding in decline and governments tightening restrictions on donors, women's rights organisations must demand that states allocate domestic resources to finance the implementation of human rights. Governments must not outsource their obligations; they must fund rights from national budgets and be held directly accountable. By insisting on domestic financing, CSOs strengthen accountability and close the loopholes that allow governments to shift responsibility.
9. **Break Taboos** – Human rights organisations must lead initiatives that confront silence around culturally sensitive harms. Through evidence-sharing, public education, and success stories, they can dismantle stigma and build trust.
10. **Reprioritise Expenditure** – Rights campaigns must expose how resources are siphoned into patronage networks and militarised functions. They must also design strategies that force governments to shift spending towards social infrastructure and services.
11. **Challenge Donor Orthodoxy** – Activist organisations must push governments to prioritise local needs over IMF and World Bank conditionalities. They should expose how global fiscal policies fuel pushback on human rights and mobilise to resist them.
12. **Enhance CSO Capacity** – CSOs must strengthen their role in knowledge production and thought leadership. They must generate research that informs legislative reform and connects governance transformation to human rights and equity.
13. **Invest in Technical and Political Measure** – Governments must reform policies, improve governance, and demonstrate political will. They must cap waste, boost social investment, empower local governments, and enforce accountability at every level to make budgeting responsive to human rights.
14. **Institutionalise Citizen Engagement in Budget** – Platforms such as budget barazas must be scaled nationally to empower citizens. Public education and capacity-building are essential so local voices can demand integration of human rights and gender markers at every stage of the budget cycle — planning, allocation, execution, and audit.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Yihuna Worku— Gender Mainstreaming Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) (Government Ministry).

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ANNEX 1: LIST OF KEY RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS/INFORMANTS

In Ethiopia:

1. Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)
2. Yonas – Head of Programs at Union of Ethiopian Women and Children Association (UEWCA) – CSO in Ethiopia.
3. Dr. Yohannes Damitew – Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist at Ethiopian Center for Development (ECD) (CSO)
4. Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)
5. Ato Ayalew Ejigu– Executive Director at ODWACE (Organization for the Development of Women and Children in Ethiopia) (CSO)
6. Tirfe Emshaw – Program Coordinator at Ethiopia Media Women Association (EMWA) (CSO)
7. Sewnet – Gender and Social Inclusion Expert (Ministry of Job and Skill) (Government Ministry)
8. Bezawit Taye – 4th year Economics Student at Addis Ababa University; Recruitment and Mentorship lead at Yellow Movement
9. Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)
10. Abduljelile Nasser – Senior Gender Expert at Ministry of Agriculture (Government ministry)
11. Yihuna Worku– Gender Mainstreaming Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) (Government Ministry).
12. Rahel Getinet - Program Manager in Community Transformation Ethiopia (CTE) – CSO
13. Focus group discussion with members of Yitaweq Timret, a self-help group made up of women who support one another. The group uses equb—a traditional savings and loan system—to provide financial assistance within the association. Most members are older women, but the group also includes a youth wing focused on young women’s advocacy
14. Eskinder – Women Children and Youth Department lead at Ministry of Education (MoE) (Government Body)
15. Focus group discussion with three healthcare professionals in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
16. Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).
17. Focus group discussion with members of Yitaweq Timret, a self-help group made up of women who support one another. The group uses equb – a traditional savings and loan system – to provide financial assistance within the association. Most members are older women, but the group also includes a youth wing focused on young women’s advocacy.
18. Focus group discussion held in Addis Ababa, with women actively involved in a community-based violence prevention initiative in their respective districts (woredas).
19. Interview with Netsebrak Tamene – Program Coordinator at the Young Women Christian Association Ethiopia (YWCA) (CSO).

In Uganda:

1. Parliamentary Budget Office technocrat in Kampala, Uganda.
2. Julius Mukunda, executive director of Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group (CSBAG), Uganda
3. Eron Kiiza, human rights lawyer and executive director of Environmental Shield, Uganda.
4. Hon. Ssewungu (Shadow Minister for Education), Uganda.
5. Mr Sulaiman Kiggundu, the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, Uganda.
6. Ugandan Member of Parliament and former chairperson of the health committee and current chair of the Finance committee.
7. Public policy Technocrat at the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED)
8. Parliamentary journalist, Uganda.
9. Director of Programs at the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE), Uganda.
10. Mr Julius Mukunda, the executive director of the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group, Kampala, Uganda.
11. Fatia Kiyingi, executive director of Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), Uganda.
12. Undersecretary for Budgeting, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Uganda
13. Mathia Mpuuga, former leader of opposition and member of the budget committee, Kampala, Uganda.
14. Hon. Ibrahim Ssemujju Nganda, MP for Kira Municipality and Shadow Minister for Finance, Uganda.



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