

**Oral Statement at the 85th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
(ACHPR)**

Item 7 : Special Rapporteur on the rights of women in Africa

International Service for Human Rights (53)

Speaker: Brenda Kugonza

Mr. President, Honourable Commissioners,

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Uganda are the backbone of civic space, standing up for communities, accountability, and human rights. Yet their ability to speak, organise and act is under direct and escalating threat. Governments, courts, police, businesses, extremist groups, and community actors are targeting women who defend rights — using harassment, criminalization, surveillance, and public shaming. Anti-gender movements and political backlash exacerbate these attacks, aiming to silence women and shrink civic space.

Let me share the lived realities of WHRDs in Uganda:

1. **Criminalization and Arbitrary Arrest :** (i) In 2025, journalist-lawyer **Agather Atuhaire** was arrested while covering a corruption story. She described her detention as terrifying — bright floodlights, shouted orders, and enforced silence that made her feel erased. Colleagues confirmed the arrest was intended to intimidate other women journalists preparing similar exposes (Daily Monitor). (ii) In a parallel case, eleven environmental defenders protesting the **East African Crude Oil Pipeline** (EACOP) were unlawfully arrested, pinned to the ground, separated, bundled into police vans, held overnight without counsel, and later humiliated by photos circulated online (BankTrack; International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). (iii) Another activist supporting political prisoners faced **cyber-attacks** on her email and social media; her friends withdrew support, fearing association with her work (Agora Center for the Rule of Law).
2. **State-Sponsored Harassment of WHRDs Supporting Political Prisoners** Ahead of elections, female journalists faced censorship and fear of arrest female investigative journalist reported newsroom briefings became exercises in caution: stories were red-flagged, and fear of arrest or license revocation made rigorous reporting unsustainable (according to Committee to Protect Journalists CPJ). (i) one woman activist critical of a military figure was accused of treason, defamed in state aligned media, and lost NGO partnership, leaving her fearful in her own home (Daily Express). (ii) Women defending detained opposition activists faced **online death threats and police surveillance**. One lawyer was followed after posting bail for political detainees (Chapter Four Uganda). Even community dialogues have become dangerous, one meeting was disrupted when soldier humiliated a police commander in public (The Observer).
- **Risks for LGBTQ+ and Gender Justice WHRDs: Following the Anti-Homosexuality Law** upheld in 2024, women advocating for LGBTQ+ persons — nurses, lawyers, shelter providers — faced raids, office closures, and sexualized threats. (i) A WHRD running a GBV shelter in Kampala went into hiding after being accused of “promoting of homosexuality” (Human Rights Watch; The Guardian). (ii) A rural WHRD reported being followed by unknown men and subjected to a bureaucratic inquiry after a fact-finding mission (WHRDN-U, Jan–June 2025). (iii) A refugee woman defender working with refugee women faced intimidation and administrative harassment when advocating for better food rations in Nakibaale settlement, causing volunteers to abandon projects out of fear of reprisals (United Nations in Uganda).

3. Militarization and Shrinking Civic Space

Women organizing **peace dialogues** and civic education sessions in Northern Uganda have been threatened following the reintroduction of military trials for civilians. (Human Rights Watch; Reuters; BBC).

A woman leading compensation campaigns for families displaced by the EACOP pipeline was warned, *"If you keep speaking, you will lose your land too"* (The Guardian). Such threats deter women from organizing and break community trust.

4. Environmental and Land Rights Defenders Under Attack

Women defending communities affected by large-scale land and oil projects face **eviction, intimidation, and repeated police summons**.

A feminist lawyer was labelled a "foreign agent," denied venues, and had her bank accounts restricted — creating unbearable professional and emotional strain (**Freedom House**).

5. Gendered Harassment and Online Abuse Digital harassment continues to silence WHRDs.: (i) A feminist lawyer criticizing military abuses faced online attacks and threats to her children's safety (Freedom Hive Uganda). (ii) A grassroots organizer leading an anti-GBV march received sexist threats that fractured her support networks, (iii) A feminist lawyer described being labelled a "foreign agent," denied venue bookings, and having her bank accounts restricted, creating crushing operational and mental pressure (Freedom House). (iv) An LGBTI rights defender was followed home and found slurs spray-painted on her gate after attending a courthouse hearing, showing how legal changes embolden community-level violence (Human Rights Watch; The Guardian).

6. Suppression of Student and Young Women Activists: Female student leaders protesting tuition hikes or police brutality were suspended and labelled **politically influenced** during demonstrations security officers with university authorise suppressed student activism. (Chapter Four Uganda; Human Rights Watch).

7. Isolation, Burnout, and Limited Protection Mechanisms: (i) WHRDN-U has documented rising **mental health strain and burnout** among WHRDs, especially in rural areas. (ii) One defender said, *"We defend others, but no one defends us when we are attacked."* Health rights defenders face arbitrary inspections after speaking out, and women in political leadership endure smear campaigns and threats (WHRDN-U; Women Probono Initiative).

Mr. President, Commissioners,

Between 2020 and 2024, the **WHRDN-U registry verified 260 attacks** against WHRDs in Uganda, including sexualized assault, online harassment, arbitrary detention, and public shaming. These are not isolated incidents but **a systematic effort to silence women and shrink civic space**.

We call on the African Commission to urge the Government of Uganda to:

1. **Reaffirm** the legitimacy and critical role of WHRDs, ensuring protection and accountability for violations by both State and non-State actors.
2. **Refrain** from criminalizing legitimate advocacy, and safeguard freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association for women defenders.
3. **Adopt** the draft Bill on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Uganda, ensuring it is gender-sensitive and aligns with international standards.

Protecting WHRDs is not only a legal obligation — it is a moral imperative. The future of democracy, human rights, and gender equality in Uganda and across Africa depends on it.

Thank you.