Examining the Effect of Shrinking Civic Space on Feminist Organizing Online, Particularly for Structurally Silenced Women in Uganda

Research Report | December, 2021

WOMEN OF UGANDA NETWORK

WOUGNET

APC
ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Our Voices, Our Futures

WOUGNET — **WOMEN AND ICTS**

WOMEN OF UGANDA NETWORK

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About WOUGNET

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) is a non-governmental organization initiated in May 2000 by several women's organizations in Uganda to develop the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. The organization envisions an inclusive and just society where women and girls are enabled to use Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) for sustainable development.

Acknowledgement

Executive Summary

The concept of shrinking civic space for structurally silenced women is a paradox that many women human rights defenders (WHRDs) do not discuss. Women human rights defenders like any other human rights defenders work in very narrow spaces in Uganda and this is even more worse for activists of structurally silenced women. Currently, there is increased shrinking civic space for WHRDs across the country where state and non-state actors use legal, administrative but also voice and use threats to shrink civic space for WHRDs and feminists for structurally silenced women. This in turn attempts to hinder the work and silence the voices of human rights defenders and civil society organizations.

This report highlights the study findings of a research that was carried out by Women of Uganda Network(WOUGNET) together with Association for Progressive Communications (APC) under Our Voices, Our Futures (OVOF) Project. The main objective of the study was to understand the effect of shrinking civic space on feminist organizing online particularly for structurally silenced women in Uganda. The study further sought to understand the situation of shrinking civic space for feminist organizing online in Uganda, identify issues faced by structurally silenced women with an aim to reform and/or develop policies for online and offline spaces. Additionally the study desired to understand the impact of shrinking civic space on digital technologies on structurally silenced women as well as to ascertain how structurally silenced women can meaningfully and strategically engage with treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) processes.

The study was conducted using a mixed method research approach where face to face interviews and focus group discussions were used to obtain information from respondents. The study population included; women's rights activists and women's rights organizations, feminist activists, young women rights' activists, other WHRDs and structurally silenced women like LBT and female sex workers, women human rights defenders and feminists for structurally silenced women. In terms of study areas, respondents were drawn from the districts of Kampala, Mbale, Gulu, Mbarara, Kabale and Kabarole.

Findings from the study show that civic space for feminist organizing online in Uganda is shrinking and 71.3% of the respondents interviewed mentioned that it is shrinking and 82% mentioned that LBT and sex workers human rights defenders are the category of structurally silenced women most likely to be silenced in online civic spaces.

The results also indicated that the state is the main organ responsible for shrinking civic space both online and offline and this was said by 89% of the women human rights defenders interviewed. Shrinking space was said to be done using tactics like internet shutdowns (70%), legislative restrictions like denial of fair hearing in court (39%), use of expensive surveillance on the work of WHRDs (35%), increasing taxes on the internet and social media use (19%) and arrest and intimidation (15%). Further findings showed that challenges faced by WHRDs while organizing on online spaces were mainly online sexual harassment (51%), and (41%) faced exclusion from online media like music, videos, photos, films. Results show that these challenges affect WHRDs by pushing them away from organizing online and 78%

said they have remained inactive online while 22% deactivated their online accounts. This was mentioned by WHRDs   that it limits their engagement online.

The study further revealed that   there is still a wide gap in involvement of structurally silenced women in feminist movement building and participation in Universal Periodic Review (UPR) meetings where 63% of women interviewed were not aware/did not have adequate knowledge on the international bodies and Universal Periodic Review process and how they should be involved while 73% of the women human rights defenders interviewed mentioned that structurally silenced women are less involved in movement building and peace building processes.

It was therefore recommended from the study that women's movements and WHRDs need to collectively engage all women human rights defenders and feminists including structurally silenced women activists in their different diversities to jointly advocate for protection and safe use of online civic spaces as well as strengthening women's movements and create partnerships to effectively run online civic spaces. The UPR and treaty bodies need to reach the grass root WHRDs especially those that represent structurally silenced women and raise awareness on the UPR and treaty bodies as well as involve them in the periodic reviews of Uganda.

The government and policy makers should ensure there are protective laws and policies/regulations that allow structurally silenced women to freely and safely use online civic spaces. The policies should allow room for reporting perpetrators of feminists and women human rights defender online. The study also recommends further in-depth research on the possible ways to push back against the shrinking of civic space, and innovative ways for women human rights defenders to organize effectively.

Acronyms

ACHPR:	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
APC:	Association for Progressive Communications
CSOs:	Civil Society Organizations
FGD:	Focus Group Discussion
FIA:	Financial Intelligence Authority
GBV:	Gender Based Violence
HRDs:	Human Rights Defenders
HRNJU:	Human Rights Network for Journalists Uganda
KII:	Key Informant Interviews
LBT:	Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender
LDU:	Local Defence Unit
LGBTI:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex
NGOs:	Non-Governmental Organizations
NHRIs:	National Human Rights Institutions
SGBV:	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SMS:	Short Message Service
SRHR:	Sexaul Rreproductive Health and Rights
UN:	United Nations
UPDF:	Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces
UPF:	Uganda Police Force
UPR:	Universal Periodic Review
VPN:	Virtual Private Network
WHRDs:	Women Human Rights Defenders
WOUGNET:	Women of Uganda Network

Definitions

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

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

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

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

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

Women Human Rights Activists: These are women who seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realization of economic, social and cultural rights while recognizing women's rights and the importance of the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Shrinking (Civic) Space: is as one where "state-sponsored or non-state actors' (place) restrictions on the fundamental rights of civil society" where It identifies those rights as the freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Silencing: is an action (verb) referring to being silenced, muted, suppressed, or muffled. Silencing includes any kind of act (or non-act) in which a person is unable to express themselves whether in online or offline spaces.

Structurally Silenced Women: Category of women that include; sex workers, LBT people, WHRDs, young women, those living in rural communities or from historically excluded counties and districts, and those across constituencies and identities.

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Introduction and Background

Shrinking space is defined as a violation of human rights, decreasing working environment, denial/ suppression of public freedoms, undue restrictions, inability to express oneself without ridicule, disdain and condemnation: Individual self-agency, freedom to challenge and express differences of opinion, silencing of voices and state capture and limiting citizens engagement, intimidation of human rights defenders, freedom to challenge and express differences of opinion[1].

In restrictive and even open civic space environments, women human rights defenders, as other minority groups such as the LGBTI community, tend to suffer additional layers of difficulties based on their gender as a result of patriarchal norms[2]. There have been several arrests and detentions of HRDs for engaging in human rights work including women human rights defenders. For example, on 21st June 2014, nine women human rights defenders were arrested in Cairo for participating in a peaceful protest against a law that was passed in 2013 that was against public meetings, processions and peaceful demonstration[3]. Additionally, in 2020, more Afghan women human rights defenders and activists were forced to flee or go into hiding after repeated threats[4].

In the contemporary world, increased levels of formal and informal measures that aim to restrict the work of women human rights defenders and structurally silenced women have helped to shrink civic space in countries around the world[5]. Shrinking space are limitations on the freedoms of speech, the press and assembly, limitations on the activities or financing of civil society organizations (CSOs), the detention of civic actors without due process, threats and intimidation[6]. Shrinking of civic space threatens structurally silenced women and women human rights defenders by reducing their ability to advocate for or exercise their freedom of expression, as well as advocate for their rights and of women in general.[7] Despite the fact that women human rights defenders carry out a large proportion of grassroots peacebuilding and development activities[8], some remain inaccessible to structurally silenced women because of the increased shrinking civic space. In countries characterized by pervasive gender inequality, civil society is one of the spheres in which women can organize, however CSOs continue to face challenges that threaten their existence and operation thus shrinking their space and deterring them from their important role in advancing for structural social change[9]. For instance, violence against women, corruption and human trafficking are widespread but the organizations and individual activists that draw attention to such abuses are routinely maligned by public officials. Restrictions on civic space seek to silence critical voices that are fighting for the rights of structurally silenced women.

Uganda, just like other countries on the African continent, is faced by rapidly shrinking civic space   and

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1 See:https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/WHRDEastAfricaReport.pdf

2 See: United Nations Human Rights(2017):Civic Space and Effects of Shrinking Space on Women Human Rights Defenders in East Africa:https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ Issues/Women/WRGS/ WHRDEastAfricaReport.pdf

3 See:https://awdf.org/african-feminist-forum-working-group-statement-in-solidarity-with-women-human-rights-defenders-arrested-and-detained-in-cairo/#:~:text= As%20the %20African%20Feminist%20Forum%20Working%20Group %20we,protest%20against%20the%20Protest%20and%20Public%20 Assembly%20Law.

4 See: https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109992

5 https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/session_report_no_15.pdf

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/WHRDEastAfricaReport.pdf

9 https://www.cipe.org/blog/2021/09/22/shrinking-civic-spaces-the-risks-and-implications-for-youth-activists-and-young-human-rights-defenders/

is characterized by targeted restrictions against dissenting voices. For instance, in 2012, activists for LGBT persons were arrested at a training venue for a skills building workshop for human rights defenders. In the same year, the then Minister of State for Ethics and Integrity shut down another capacity building workshop organized by LGBTI activists and sought to inspect training materials being used in a capacity building workshop for human rights defenders[10]. Shrinking of civic spaces tend to be heightened towards and during election times when WHRDs among other human rights defenders have most of their activities interrupted and others suspended over accusations of subversion and breach of regulations governing them[11].The interruption of human rights activities highlights a trend of violations of freedom of association and assembly in Uganda and subsequently closing civic spaces for WHRDs.

In order to understand the effect of Shrinking Civic Space on Feminist organizing online, particularly for structurally silenced women in Uganda, WOUGNET conducted a study in six districts in Uganda.

The Aim of the Research

This research aimed at informing stakeholders and policy makers on the situation of shrinking civic space for WHRDs and feminist for structurally silenced women such as LBT, sex workers, young women, and women living in rural communities as well as women in culturally excluded communities. Findings from this research will help in advocating for free and safe engagement in civic spaces for WHRDs and feminists for structurally silenced women as well as raise more awareness on the need to end closing of civic spaces.

The Objective of the Study

01 To understand online discourse and the situation of shrinking civic space for feminist organization online in Uganda.

02 To identify issues faced by structurally silenced women and suggest reforms for online and offline spaces.

03 To understand the impact of shrinking civic space on digital technologies on structurally silenced women.

04 To ascertain how structurally silenced women can meaningfully and strategically engage with treaty bodies and UPR processes.

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[10]See:https://defenddefenders.org/space-for-civil-society-shrinking-in-uganda-say-national-and-global-csos/#:~:text=Civil%20society%20space%20in%20Uganda%20is%20rapidly%20shrinking%2C,placed%20under%20excessive%20scrutiny%20by%20senior%20government%20officials.

[11] See:https://civicspace.youthlineforumug.org/2021/07/10/civil-society-concerned-about-ugandas-shrinking-civic-space/

Literature Review

Overview of Shrinking Civic Space

At a time when civic space is generally shrinking, digital transformation has opened new spaces online for mass mobilization of social movements, greater activism and engagement as well as continued advocacy for human rights and freedoms. Civil society organizations are joining forces in solidarity to make their voices heard and advance common goals across borders such as women's rights, violation of human rights and abuse of freedom through use of online platforms and with digital tools like cameras, drones, social media gatherings, satellite imagery among others[12]. At the same time, across the world, digital technologies are being exploited to silence, surveil and manipulate civil society, as well as to express extremist views or hate speech. Researchers from Africa Digital Network conducted a study in 2020 to compare digital rights landscapes across countries in Africa and found that in about 10 African countries including Uganda, Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia among others for the last 20 years or so, found out that online civic space has been shut down more than it has been opened. In their findings, they recorded 115 cases of shutting down online civic spaces mostly by national governments and of these only 65 were later opened[13]. When the government closes offline civic spaces, citizens respond to such repression by repositioning themselves on online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, SMS, use of VPN among others for civic participation. In retaliation, governments close these online civic spaces through internet shutdown, blocking of social media platforms as well as arresting some feminists organizing online. WHRDs, working on the continent, play a key role in the promotion and protection of human rights and have a special role in protecting the rights of marginalized and disadvantaged groups. The space which WHRDs work within is narrow and they are exposed to risks and threats due to the nature of their work – protecting women's rights. WHRDs face the same type of risks and threats as those encountered by their male counterparts and in addition also face specific gender based-risks. The trends of violations, threats, risks and constraints experienced by WHRDs include general violations and gender-specific violations[14]. Even though the attacks against WHRDs can be similar to those carried out against male human rights defenders, the consequences of the attacks are very different for WHRDs. The reason for this is that the work of WHRDs do not conform to the norms, the cultural or the religious stereotypes, and therefore constitutes a threat to the interests of the state, religious or traditional actors. Civic spaces for women human rights defenders to express views are essential for the functioning of societies. The year 2021 has been difficult for human rights defenders including those for women as they have faced restrictions to their work due to long-term trends regarding closing civic spaces and exacerbated by the ongoing global pandemic. For example, the right to assembly for human rights defenders is being limited under the pretext of the the COVID-19 pandemic measures. In extreme cases, civil society, activists, and journalists have been detained arbitrarily, tortured, and killed[15]. Civic spaces are even narrower for LBT and sex worker activists as they face many challenges and are more vulnerable.

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[12] Digital transformation and the future of civic space 2030, OECD, 2020.

[13] https://blackpolitics.org/african-online-civic-space-threatened/

[14] The Spaces for Women Human Rights defenders and LGBTQI activists in Liberia. A study on the situation of Human rights defenders in Libersi. Monteserrado and Grand Bassa, 2021.

[15] https://paxchristi.net/2021/12/09/shrinking-space-for-civil-society-2021-human-rights-day-statement/

In Uganda, significant issues have happened that involve action that shrink civic spaces both online and offline and subsequently shutting down voices of feminists and women human rights defenders. These include; arbitrary arrest or detention, serious restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, threats of violence, and unjustified arrests or prosecution of journalists, censorship, site blocking, and criminal libel laws; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, bisexual, transgender; the existence of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults among others.

Case Study of Shrinking Civic Spaces

Case Study 1: Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly
The government introduced new requirements that restrict freedom of expression online in February 2020, the Kampala High Court ordered the release of feminist and political activist Stella Nyanzi, an activist and academic, on the basis that she had been wrongfully convicted of harassing the President online, and that her human rights had been violated. She was released on 20 February, just days before she was due to complete the 18-month prison sentence she had been handed following her conviction. By the end of the year, she had been arrested and released at least three more times for organizing peaceful assemblies in protest at the government's COVID-19 restrictions.

In June 2020, the Electoral Commission of Uganda launched a revised COVID-19 election road map for the 2021 general elections, requiring that all political campaigning be conducted exclusively online, thereby banning public political gatherings. These regulations were applied more stringently against opposition candidates including women political candidates. In September, the Uganda Communications Commission ordered all online data communication and broadcast service providers to obtain licenses before posting information on the internet.
On March 26, the Constitutional Court nullified section 8 of the Public Order Management Act (POMA), which has been used by the Uganda police to block, restrict, and disperse peaceful assemblies and demonstrations by opposition groups, often with excessive force. The move came after the court ruled on a 2013 petition by civil society organizations challenging the law as being unconstitutional.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
On March 29 2020, community residents and police raided a Children of the Sun Foundation (COSF), a shelter for homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in Wakiso, outside Kampala. Police beat and arrested 23 adults, including shelter residents, and charged them with "a negligent act likely to spread infection of disease" and "disobedience of lawful orders." Twenty residents of the shelter were detained by police for over six weeks without access to lawyers for allegedly disobeying COVID-19 restrictions. In May 2020, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew the charges, and on May 18 2020, the Nsangi Magistrate's Court ordered the release of the 20 detainees. On June 15, 2020, a court ruled that the prison system's refusal to allow the 20 people access to counsel violated their rights to a fair hearing and to liberty. Uganda's penal code punishes "carnal knowledge" among people of the same sex with up to life in prison[16]. LBT persons faced discrimination, legal restrictions, harassment, violence, and intimidation. Authorities incited, perpetrated, and tolerated violence against LGBTI individuals and blocked some meetings organized by LBT persons and activists. On July 19 2020, local government authorities in Kyenjojo Town disrupted a meeting of LGBTI persons organized by the Western Uganda Faith-based Organizations Network, accusing it of breaching COVID-19 rules[17].

[16] https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/01/2021_hrw_world_report.pdf
[17] https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UGANDA-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf

In Uganda, despite the application of affirmative action in most sectors in a bid to raise the status quo of women, some women's rights have been underrated, ignored and trampled on and as such women's voices have been shut down. Some Acts and orders that focus on human rights have been passed but are seemingly put in place to limit public gatherings both online and offline. For example the Public Order Management Act 2013, does not favor full exercising of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, defines public meeting as only those for public interest potentially excluding critical meetings from the scope of the Act, establishes a de facto authorisation procedure for peaceful assemblies that is unnecessarily bureaucratic with broad discretion for the State to refuse notifications. Additionally, the Act prohibits public meetings, except those in Town Halls, between 7pm and 7am, grants law enforcement authorities broad powers to use force to disperse assemblies, with no guidance for alternative methods of managing public order disturbances, and criminalizes organizers of assemblies for the unlawful conduct of third parties[18]. Thus with such limitations women human rights defenders and feminists for structurally silenced women have been subject to arbitrary limitations on their rights to peacefully express themselves both online and offline.

Freedom of Speech and Expression

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But around the world, there are governments and those wielding power who find many ways to obstruct it. They are also active in digital spaces restricting the use of the internet and other online spaces by imposing high taxes on the internet and social media use making online spaces so expensive that people are unable to use them. Independent radio and TV stations are forced off the air if they host opposition candidates or individuals or criticize discriminative government policy. For many women human rights defenders, it is becoming increasingly difficult to exercise their rights to assembly, association and expression and the question is how we can protect civic spaces where activists' voices can be heard[19]. The mass violation of rights of women in Africa necessitated the creation of a legal framework that would unmistakably spell out their rights and advocate for protection of those rights by African states. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), better known as the Maputo Protocol, was 'birthed' in response to this call, and became the first women's rights legal framework for the protection of women rights in Africa. The Protocol aims to confront the continual discrimination, abuse and marginalization of women.

In its article 4, it enshrines the right for women to freedom of speech and expression in both public and private places. In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, civic space has been shrinking since the early 2000s – mirroring a global trend of restrictions being imposed on civil society organizations. Governments intimidate and arrest activists, and publicly criticize their advocacy work. They also promulgate restrictive policies, such as laws that curtail the foreign funding of domestic civil society groups, and resort to subtle ways of restricting civil society's operating space – for instance, via cumbersome isolated and sporadic government restrictions that silence civil society. The situation is even worse for women human rights defenders and feminists.

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18 https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/37331/Updated-Uganda-FoPAA-Analysis-Final.pdf

19 https://icscentre.org/2020/09/24/civic-space-is-shrinking-heres-how-we-can-protect-fundamental-rights/

In recent years in the wake of the fourth wave of feminism, the number of feminists and women human rights defenders has been steadily growing. Many individuals and those affiliated to some civil society organizations are currently active in monitoring and checking governments' behaviour in areas of women rights abuses. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression and the rights to give and receive information. This includes expressions both online and offline. However as women activists exercise this right and others, governments have reacted by cracking down on their activities[20]. Activists including women human rights defenders protest such restrictions and find creative ways of making human rights violations known – for example, via social media. However there has been a worrying decline in publicly voiced criticism recently as governments impose a large number of different restrictions, ones that render it difficult and indeed dangerous to expose government misbehaviour. The figure below show the most commonly violated rights for human rights defenders including women human rights defender and feminists[21].

Most commonly violated rights
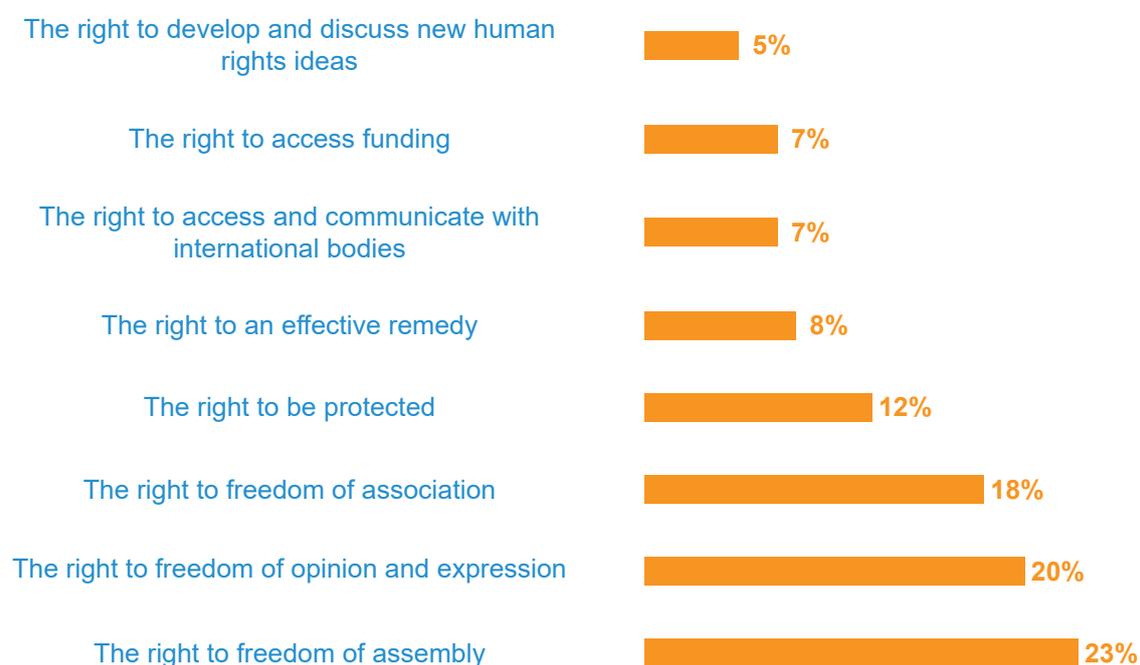
The rights considered in the graph are those stipulated in UN Declaration of Human Rights.

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20 Shrinking Civic space in Africa: When Governments Crack down on civil society. Smidt.H. 2018.

21 https://hrcug.org/publications/file/HRDs%20Report%202013.pdf

Case Study of Shrinking Civic Spaces in Uganda

Case Study 2: Freedom of Speech and Expression

Freedom of Press and Media including Online Media

Security forces subjected journalists and media houses to violence, harassment, deportations, and intimidation. On December 10, 2020, the Uganda Media Council (UMC) cancelled all existing accreditations for foreign journalists and required them to reregister within a week to be able to continue working in the country. On November 30, 2020, journalist Margaret Evans, working with the Canadian CBC News, reported that immigration authorities had deported her and her team after the UMC cancelled their accreditation. In response to Evans's comments that the government was avoiding outside scrutiny ahead of the elections, government spokesperson Ofwono Opondo stated the government reserved the right to admit or refuse admission to foreign persons, including journalists, and it did not need outside scrutiny to qualify its electoral process as credible. Opondo later added that Evans' team had violated provisions of their tourist visas and that they were welcome to reapply for a visa that allowed them to work as journalists in the country. The Human Rights Network for Journalists Uganda (HRNJU) reported in January ,that the UPF blocked journalists from covering opposition rallies, confiscated their recording equipment, and forcibly deleted the content.

On July 22, 2020,the UPF arrested five journalists working at Baba FM radio station, accusing them of inciting violence and disobeying lawful orders. On July 18, 2020, the journalists hosted opposition politician, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu commonly known as Bobi Wine on Baba FM for a political talk show. Police released the journalists on July 23 without charge. The HRNJU reported numerous incidents between April and August, 2020 when UPF, UPDF, and LDU officers beat, detained, and confiscated equipment of journalists covering implementation of the COVID-19 restrictions[22].

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22 https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UGANDA-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf

Censorship or Content Restrictions:

The government penalized those who published items counter to its guidelines and directly and indirectly censored media, including by controlling licensing and advertising, instructing editors to suspend critical journalists, arresting and beating journalists, and disrupting and ransacking photojournalistic exhibitions. Government officials and ruling party members owned many of the private rural radio stations and imposed reporting restrictions. Media practitioners said government and security agents occasionally called editors and instructed them not to publish stories that negatively portrayed the government. Journalists, under government pressure, practiced self-censorship. On August 1 2021, the UPF wrote to Victoria Broad Link radio in Jinja City and instructed it not to host the opposition Democratic Party President Norbert Mao for a talk show. The UPF letter stated that hosting Mao "conflicted with COVID-19 guidelines of implementing curfew." The UPF also noted in the letter, however, that the radio station could host Mao via a Zoom internet connection and only if the discussion topics stayed clear of politics[23].

Women's rights activists reported the government used the law to silence women and stop them from identifying their abusers online. On February 20, 2020, the UPF arrested university student Sheena Bageine, accusing her of cyber harassment and offensive communication after she posted the names of numerous men she alleged were rapists. The UPF released Bageine on February 21, 2021 without formally charging her[24]. Women who openly speak about sexual violence are not lauded; they are almost never believed or respected as valuable human beings with valid human voices[25].

With increased surveillance, online and physical threats and violence against activists, many women human rights defenders have come under attack, especially those advocating on behalf of structurally silenced groups of women and gender minorities. Human rights defenders have been attacked globally, and in 2019, about 212 activists for environmental and land rights were attacked and killed[26]. It has therefore now become evident that shrinking space is no longer a passing trend but a new norm that is a reality of these times and needs to be dealt with.

23 Ibid

24 Ibid

25 https://www.damemagazine.com/2017/10/24/we-have-always-silenced-women/

26 https://icscentre.org/2020/09/24/civic-space-is-shrinking-heres-how-we-can-protect-fundamental-rights/

Movement Building and Involvement of Structurally Silenced Women in Universal Periodic Review processes.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process which involves a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States. The UPR is a State-driven process, under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, which provides the opportunity for each State to declare what actions they have taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to fulfil their human rights obligations. As one of the main features of the Council, the UPR is designed to ensure equal treatment for every country when their human rights situations are assessed. The ultimate aim of this mechanism is to improve the human rights situation in all countries and address human rights violations wherever they occur[27]. Key stakeholders in the UPR include NGOs, NHRIs, human rights defenders, academic institutions and research institutes, regional organizations, as well as civil society representatives.

(a) Contributions to UPR Documentation by "Other Stakeholders", including Civil Society and National Human Rights Institutions

The UPR process provides for the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and regional mechanisms.

Civil society actors, NHRIs and regional mechanisms can submit written information for the report containing a summary of information submitted by other stakeholders, which is considered during the review.

Accredited stakeholders can also attend and observe the session of the UPR Working Group. Accredited stakeholders can also attend, and make oral statements, during the regular sessions of the Human Rights Council when the outcomes of the State reviews are considered.

The Universal Periodic Review is a unique Human Rights mechanism where each of the 194 UN Member States is peer-reviewed and examined on their entire human rights record every five years regardless of its size or political influence, under the same rules and supervision. Starting from 2006, there have been three cycles of review of the states and each state is required to respond to the recommendations made by its peers and also provide data on the implementation of previously accepted recommendations, including voluntary commitments.

The process remains cooperative and for that reason, this requires the full participation of the state under the periodic review.

Periodically reviewing the processes is important for advancing the realization of human rights at the national, regional and global levels. In that, it enables the bigger UN umbrella with its members to work hand-in-hand and be enlightened on each other's Human Rights situation to offer the needed assistance and learn some viable techniques from one another.

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[27] https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/upr/pages/uprmain.aspx

Despite the fact that the UN and Human Rights Watch Uganda submission to UPR 2016 clearly recommending to amend the Non governmental Organizations Act to ensure free association rights in compliance with international human rights law, particularly removing new criminal provisions for legitimate civil society work, this has not yielded any positive results thus resulting into continuous violation of human rights for different categories of people and structurally silenced women inclusive. Up to date concerns are still raised by different countries that subscribe to the UPR process as what Uganda plans to do to ensure rights of structurally silenced women are not violated. Some of the raised concerns include;

What steps and measures are the Government of Uganda taking to investigate the allegations of attacks on human rights defenders, the media, and others during and after the January presidential and parliamentary election period?

Will the Government of Uganda take legislative steps to provide protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, particularly when it comes to access to housing, education and health care?

◆ Which efforts will the government of Uganda undertake to eradicate harmful traditional practices against women, children, ethnic minorities, people living with HIV/AIDS and persons with disabilities?

◆ LGTB persons face discrimination and legal restrictions. The government proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill which, if enacted, will broaden the criminalization of same-sex relations. Could you please elaborate on the compliance of such treatment with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

◆ The government is not capable of avoiding assaults and provocations by self-proclaimed pastors. After the publishing of the list of alleged homosexuals by Uganda's newspapers and killing of David Kato, a Ugandan gay rights campaigner, the situation is worse. What concrete steps is the government going to take to avoid those provocations?

(b)Movement building among Feminists and Feminist CSOs

Globally, women's movements drive progressive social and policy change around women's rights. It is widely recognized that the presence of women's movements was the single most important factor in catalysing action to recognize and address GBV. Women's movements also mobilized collective action to shift attitudes and behaviours around GBV, challenge gender inequality at institutional levels, and advocate for creating environments that foster the achievement of women's rights[28].

However, more recently, there is widespread shrinking of space for women's movements and rights. Mainstream development and humanitarian organizations progressive social movements, including feminist movements, are not immune to discrimination and inequality.

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[28] Challenges faced by women in civil society in Africa; CIVICUS, 2011

However, more recently, there is widespread shrinking of space for women's movements and rights. Mainstream development and humanitarian organizations progressive social movements, including feminist movements, are not immune to discrimination and inequality. Internal power hierarchies can exist wherein privileged groups or members dominate the space and exclude the voices of gender diverse and marginalized women. When only privileged and powerful groups of women, such as those from the Global North and/or with other privileges, have unequal influence over agenda setting and action, the movement cannot represent or respond adequately to the needs of all women[29]. This can result in serious harm, for example, when white feminists and activists perpetuate colonialist mind-sets that further oppress and subordinate structurally silenced women. Feminist movements must explicitly confront internal hierarchies and inequalities to be genuinely inclusive and representative of diverse women. This means those with privileges must step back and engage in critical self-reflection across the movement, from individual activists to leadership and representation at the movement level. Feminist movements must amplify the voices of women who are historically marginalised and support women leaders from diverse backgrounds who actively drive changes in their own lives and communities. A major consequence of the shrinking space for women's movements is the dilution of the political and transformational dimensions of ending abuse of women's rights.

However there are already in existence feminist movements like Akina Mama wa Afrika that believe in the spirit of sisterhood and has built strong partnerships with women's rights organisations, networks and coalitions on the African continent and beyond to ensure that issues affecting women are prioritized and given due attention. Through networking and movement building, AMwA leverages on each organizations and/ or institutional strengths and resources to advance the rights and freedoms of African women that we could otherwise not have achieved if they worked in silos thus creating a collective voice and actions on issues that are critical to African women.
For example, AMwA engages in organizational development with a feminist perspective as part of feminist leadership and feminist movement building in Africa. This is mainly through: a series of organizational development interventions with selected women's organizations; publishing and disseminating African feminists' analyses of African women's experiences of and strategies to resist patriarchy; Oral Her-story of women of substance in Africa, write shops and production of a Leaders Journal highlighting issues and events significant to the African women's leadership struggle[30].

When diverse groups of women mobilize together, they are better able to lead change and garner widespread support. Inclusive feminist movements are comprised of diverse female leadership, which brings together different types of resources, creativity and the power to enable real and innovative solutions. The strengthening of existing organizations, enables grassroots and local civil society actors for women to continually develop and implement women's rights initiatives as social change occurs and contexts change. Feminist movements necessarily involve network- and alliance-building among women's organisations and other groups for coordinated and collective action. Collaborative networks allow for holistic action, building on expertise and specializations across individuals and organizations.

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29 Digital transformation and the future of civic space to 2030; Carothers T and Brechenmacher S, 2019

30 https://www.akinamamawaafrika.org/the-impact-of-ppps-on-gender-equality-and-womens-rights/

change. Feminist movements necessarily involve network- and alliance-building among women's organisations and other groups for coordinated and collective action. Collaborative networks allow for holistic action, building on expertise and specializations across individuals and organizations.

Knowledge-sharing is an essential part of strong feminist movements. Actors and organisations at all levels need to be able to disseminate, receive and learn from the knowledge generated across feminist movements. Both local and institutionalized forms of knowledge need to be widely accessible for the variety of women's rights actors to inform their strategies and work collectively towards progressive change. But when space is shrinking there will not be knowledge sharing, no strengthening networks within women and feminist movements. And thus women's movements will not be able to achieve their goals. Strong feminist movements mobilise masses of public support for advocacy, activism and making concrete political demands. Social movements have the power to shape public agendas and mobilize political will to demand institutional reforms. Feminist movements can and have influenced policy through a variety of mechanisms including lobbying, generating lawsuits, educating citizens, organizing protests, and establishing large forums or meetings for strategizing and collective action[31].

Case study 1: Akina Mama wa Afrika

In 2009, AMwA continued to coordinate and participate in Uganda and regional activities on the Maputo protocol. The organization produced and disseminated IEC materials on GBV/SRHR. Noting that the Government of Uganda ratified the Maputo protocol on the 22nd July 2010 with reservations, AMwA working as part of a movement on the implementation of the Protocol, continues advocacy and lobbying through different coalitions specifically the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) Coalition at Pan-African level and the Uganda Coalition for African Women's Rights (Women First) Coalition at national level.

The Protocol has thus far been ratified by thirty four (34) of the 54 African Union member states. The Coalition has committed itself to utilizing the platform of the African Women's Decade (2010-2020) to intensify efforts to compel African States to deliver on their commitments to women's human rights, through ratification of the Protocol, accelerating implementation through a multispectral approach, and prioritizing the promotion and protection of women's bodily integrity and dignity, as well as their participation in governance, peace and security processes and structures.

AMwA chairs the CSO Committee on SGBV in the Great Lakes Region, which comprises national, regional and international human rights organizations and international NGOs based in Kenya and Uganda. The committee mobilizes civil society organizations in the Great Lakes region to participate in deliberations leading summits of Heads of State of ICGLR Member States Special Summit on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV). And currently monitors and evaluates the implementation of the Kampala Declaration.

Coupled with this are coalitions and partnerships with structurally silenced women groups like sex workers and queer women with whom they have worked with to documents their experiences in fighting for human rights of women in their communities.

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31 Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), Feminist movement building: Taking a long-term view, Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet 10, 2018.

While some collective democratic progress has been made towards achieving gender equality and feminist peace building, many divisions lead to a growing number of undemocratic processes. The notion of intentional inclusion is crucial to frame the strategies to address the gender divide. There is a need to continue amplifying the women's movement building, providing alternative avenues for women's voices to be heard and focus on solidarity-building with civil society organizations (CSOs).

Feminists who attended a global conference in 2017 HLPF event entitled, "From Shrinking Spaces to Feminist Movement Building: Key Priorities on SDG 5 and 16 for Sustaining Peace" NOTED that civil society engagement in feminist collective building remains inconsistent. Still women's groups and NGOs have no possibilities to have meaningful participation in the follow-up process; there is no capacity-building to provide diverse women's groups, including those in rural areas, indigenous groups and others. Strengthening platforms including by supporting regional and national translations of platforms will be critical for ensuring women civil society's important role in localizing the SDGs for gender equality and peace[32].

Use all human rights recommendations including those of the Treaty Bodies, the Special Procedures and the UPR to identify groups left behind and promote sectoral policies with direct impact on the fulfilment of Human Rights and SDGs.

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[32] https://www.peacewomen.org/node/99384

Methodology

Study Design

The study utilized a mixed methods research where qualitative and quantitative data was collected. The method was used to confirm, cross-validate or corroborate findings such that one method supplemented the results of the other.

Study Area

The research was carried out in five regions in Uganda including Northern, Southern Central, Western and Eastern in the districts of Gulu, Kabale, Mbarara, Kampala, Kabarole, and Mbale. These districts were selected on the basis of a high population of structurally silenced women including LBT, sex workers, youth, and rural women among others.

Study Population

The target population was women's rights activists and women's rights organizations, feminist activists, young women rights' activists, other WHRDs and structurally silenced women like LBT and female sex workers. In order to achieve a comprehensive perspective of the shrinking civic space in Uganda and experience of feminist organization when it comes to online discourse. The eligibility criteria of each participant was that one had to be working with any feminist organization which were in charge of advocating for structurally silenced women.

Sample Size Determination

Quantitative Sample: The study targeted a sample size of 138 respondents that was determined using Leslie Kish formula for sample size determination. Purposive sampling was then used to select the final respondents from the WHRDs for structurally silenced women.

$$N= \frac{Z2PQ}{D2}$$

Where Z= Z score corresponding to 95% confidence level=1.96

P= proportion of women's rights organization is 10%=0.1%

Q= 1-P = 1-0.1=0.9

D=0.05

N= required sample

Hence, (1.96)² x 0.1 x 0.9/0.05 x 0.05

= 138 respondents.

Qualitative Sample: A total of 30 participants were purposively selected from the five regions of Uganda to participate in Key informant interviews. They included; cultural leaders/ representatives, women's political representatives' e.g. women councillors, youth leaders, young women (below 35yrs), University students, LBT and sex workers activists. Three focus group discussions of 8 participants each were conducted.

Data Collection Methods

Survey: Face to face interviews were conducted with eligible representatives from selected WHRDs. Data was collected using a questionnaire designed in google forms by a team of enumerators that were competent and experienced in both quantitative and qualitative research. Prior to data collection, training was conducted to ensure the whole research team understood the purpose of this study, its objectives, methodology, the tools for data collection as well as orienting them on principles and procedures of human subject protection.

Key informants and Focus-Droup Discussions: These were held with WHRDs and feminists for structurally silenced women via zoom and some were conducted in-person meetings.

Data Management and Analysis

Quantitative Data

Data analysis for quantitative data was done using STATA Version 14. Data that was collected from google forms totaled 138 responses and was uploaded and exported to Excel sheets and cleaned. Participant characteristics across the different variables were summarized and compared using descriptive analysis. Percentages were generated to describe different variables in line with the study objectives.

Qualitative Data

All key informant interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded during data collection, transcription was done and then open coding also involved reading through several times by two data analysts to come up with codes which were categorized into groups and later imported into Atlas.ti software, simple matrices that reflected frequencies and description of findings were also used and data was analyzed by thematic content analysis and quotations that formed themes that were inline with the study objectives and were used in writing the report.

Results

Distribution of Women Feminists by Selected Characteristics

More than half of the Women Human Rights Defenders and feminists that participated in this study, (54%) were aged between 18-29 years, while about 40% were 29-39 years. On education level, 46% of the study participants had acquired university education in terms of a Bachelor's degree, while 22% had acquired diploma education. 69% of those interviewed identified themselves as females, and they belonged to different categories of feminists and women human rights defenders that included women that fight for sex workers rights (25%), LBT rights (22%), youth rights (16%), social rights like the right to live free from violence, the rights not to be discriminated, own property(15%).

Age Group

18 - 29	54%
29 - 39	40%
Above 39	6%

Level of Education

Bachelors Degree	Diploma	Other
46%	22%	32%

Women Human Rights Defenders Categories

Sex Workers' Rights	25%
LBT Rights	22%
Youth Rights	16%
Social Rights	15%

Internet Use and Ownership of Digital Devices

Ninety six percent (96%) of the women human rights defenders we spoke to use the internet, and the majority (58.7%) use mobile phones, while almost a quarter(22%) use personal computers and a few of them (19.3%) use organization computers to connect to the internet.

96%
WHRDs use the Internet.

58.7% access internet on mobile phones.

22% access internet on personal computers.

19.3% access internet on organization computers.
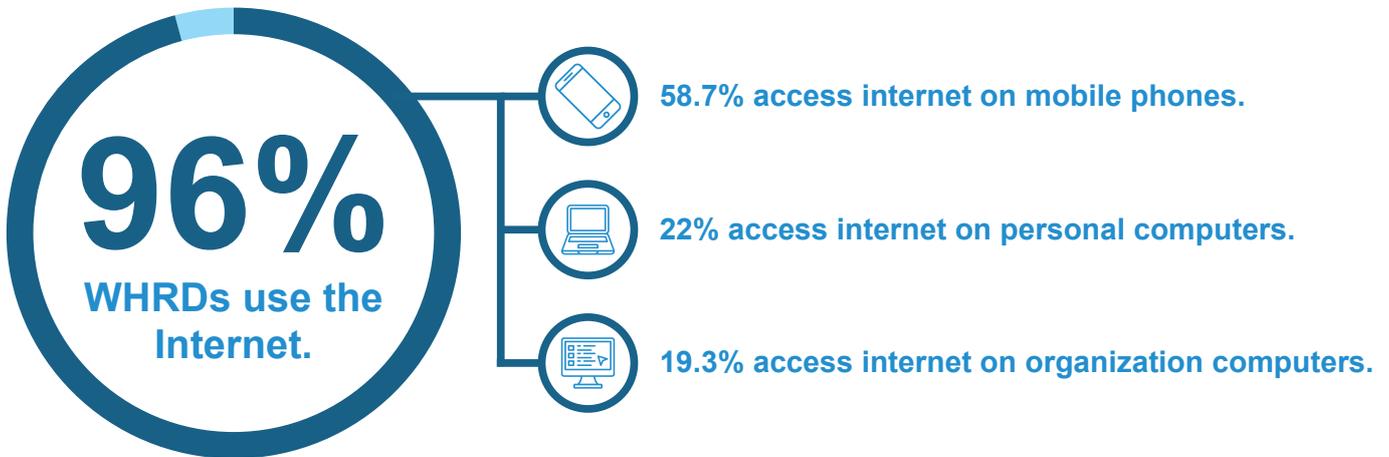
Use of Civic Spaces by Feminists and Women Human Rights Defenders

The results point out that 65% of women human rights defenders we spoke to engage in online spaces through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. A quarter; 25% said they use online media like music, videos, photos distributed on the internet, while 16% engage in online civic spaces through writing blog posts.

Overall online civic space engagements

Social Media	Online Media	Blogposts
65%	**25%**	**16%**

Findings further revealed that the type of platforms also were mainly dependent on the place of residence of the WHRDs where it was discovered that in the urban setting there was more use of the online civic space compared to the rural setting where there was more of radio talk shows), physical gatherings and meetings, holding conferences and workshops, door to door as one of the key informants mentioned:

> *Online spaces are mostly for WHRDs in urban areas, for the majority of women human rights defenders and the women we represent are offline, especially those of us in the rural areas. So most of us do our activism work offline because of internet challenges, thus at times we go in for face to face workshops, meetings, radio talk shows where we get a chance to express our concerns. We also use annual general meetings for feminist groups, conferences, and we consider such spaces even safer for us activists to do our work. - KII WHRD_Kabale*

Regarding the use of online civic spaces, majority, i.e., 65.4% of the women human rights defenders mentioned that they use these online civic spaces to advocate for women's rights as well as educate masses about feminism and women's rights, 20.6% use online civic spaces for documenting and reporting human rights abuses and violations against women and 13.8% mentioned using spaces for social networking e.g. on Twitter and Facebook, accessing news and information on women issues as well as build networks at national and global level. Similarly, participants we interviewed in focus group discussions reported the same that the same spaces are used to share information on human rights majorly focusing on women's rights:

WHRDs use of online civic spaces

Advocate for Women's rights 65.4%

Document & report human rights abuses 20.6%

Social Networking 13.8%
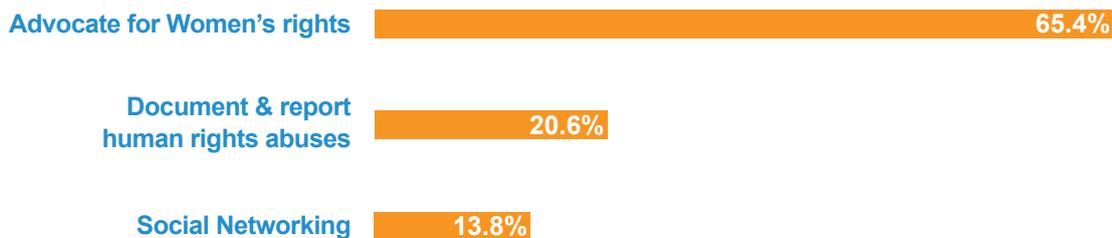
> *Most women human rights defenders use Facebook and Twitter and less of Instagram. Television and radio talk shows too are used to disseminate information about the protection and rights of structurally silenced women and other marginalized groups of women. Some record their voices and activities and share information on social media, use pictures of activities or whatever they want to do or are doing and then put them online like Facebook, YouTube and so if you go on their platforms you will see a lot of activities including videos. Some of them are from TVs where they engage us a lot on things on Women's Rights like Land rights, GBV, rights for widows.*
> *- (KII_WHRD Gulu)*

Status of Shrinking Civic Space for Feminists and Women Human Rights Defenders

When asked if civic space for feminist organizing online in Uganda is shrinking, 71.3% of the women human rights defenders mentioned that it is shrinking and 82% mentioned that LBT and sex workers human rights defenders are the category of structurally silenced women most likely to be silenced in online civic spaces. Others mentioned that are more likely to be silenced in online civic spaces included women in the media and journalists and women/feminists for political rights, 10% and 8% respectively.

Categories of shrinking online civic spaces

LBT and sex workers' rights

82% 10% 8%

Women in the media

Women in politics

One key informant who was an activist for sex workers had this to say about shrinking civic space regarding their category:

> *Many human rights defenders for sex workers are not fully involved in different spaces and sometimes they aren't even allowed to talk about their issues. The same applies to LBT. Most of them do not go online because we have tough leaders within our districts who keep following them so these activists do not share their activities online because they are being followed. And when it comes to our communities, because of our religious norms and beliefs and also cultural norms and beliefs sex workers and LBT are seen as people who are not responsible in communities. Such sentiments fuel stigma and discrimination in communities where sex workers and LBT live and work from. - KII_ WHRD_Kampala*

Furthermore, key Informant participants went on to explain that WHRDs in rural areas are also likely to experience more of the shrinking civic space as a result of their location compared to those in urban areas as one key informant explained:

> *I stand for the rural women and fight for their rights but my space is affected by not having the internet, not having data, not having smart phones and even access to news because even some do not have Television sets.   But even those who have some radios are the husbands to listen to because the woman will be in the kitchen or busy with other house chores as important information is passed on the radio. She is not listening to the radio most of the time because she does not own. - KII_ WHRD_Kabarole*

Additionally women human rights defenders we spoke to think that civic space in Uganda does not enable structurally silenced women to organize online and   89% of these women said that the government is responsible for the shrinking civic space both offline and online in Uganda for feminists and women human rights defenders. Participants from key informant interviews and focus group discussions similarly agreed that the state is largely responsible for shrinking civic space of WHRDs. They mentioned that the state looks at feminist organizations as opposition or as agents of foreign powers and shutting down organizations has greatly contributed to shrinking their civic space as many of them have had their hands tied and in a state of fear that has left majority of the other deterring from actively participating in human rights issues.

Respondents were further asked about the tactics that are used to shrink civic space in Uganda for feminists organizing offline and 39% mentioned legislative restrictions like denial of fair hearing, prolonged detention without court hearing as some of the tactics being used. 35% mentioned the expensive use of surveillance on work of human rights defenders by state and non-state actors while 15% mentioned arrest and intimidation. For online spaces, 70% mentioned internet shutdowns as a major tactic used to shrink online spaces for feminists organizing online while 19% mentioned increasing taxes on the internet and social media use.

Overall reported tactics used to shrink civic spaces

OFFLINE CIVIC SPACES		ONLINE CIVIC SPACES	
Surveillance	**Arrests**	**Internet Shutdowns**	**High taxes on internet**
35%	**15%**	**70%**	**19%**
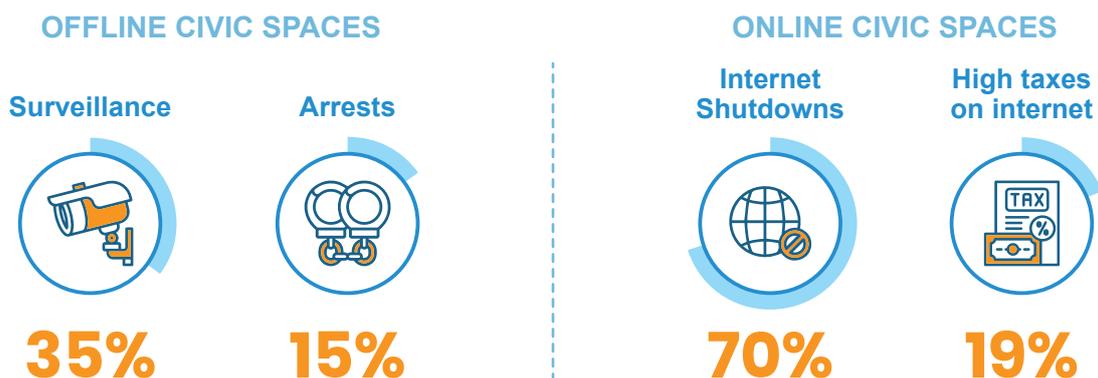
Other tactics used in shrinking civic space mentioned included introduction by the state of stringent procedures for CSOs where the feminist organizations subscribe to get registered as well as renew operation documents, which has seen many of them being shut down and others failing to register due to the bureaucracy surrounding these processes. It was further revealed that for any engagements that aims at bringing a number of people to either advocate or express their dissatisfaction one needed to get a public order management permission which at times has to undergo a lot of scrutiny for it to be offered this has left a number of activists to withdraw from their activism.

> *You find that if WHRDs have a gathering to advocate for some rights, by virtue of the Public Order Management Act they have to get permission from police to be able to do this. But also the content you are going to share with the people has to be looked at and if the police is not satisfied them end up blocking you from doing whatever you are going to do. And then, like lately they have kind of made it difficult for CSOs of human rights defenders to even register as an organization, and work. - KII_WHRD_Mbale*

Other tactics mentioned by focus group discussion participants include blocking funding for WHRDs and CSOs; the government has also created the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA) which demands for accountability of donor funds. FIA attaches most of the donor funds to money laundering and drugs hence coming against organizations by freezing their accounts as well as prolonging processes in opening bank accounts for some organizations of structurally silenced women among others. Here is what one of the FGD participants had to say:

> *There are a couple of tactics that are used to shrink spaces for feminists such that they are not able to operate, but also that describe the situation of the shrinking civic space. One is having limitations as feminist organizations or activists when trying to register to operate. This is in line with registering the entity and bank account. A Queer colleague of mine was denied at one of the banks in Kampala when she was trying to register the bank account of her organization. Such massive kinds of limitations continue to shrink our civic space and inability to operate. (FGD_ Kampala)*

Attacking WHRDs both offline and online was also mentioned as a tactic used in shrinking civic space for these activists. They are attacked because of issues they spoke against, rights of women they are advocating for, others have been jailed, or even fled the country for their safety as elaborated by one of the key informants:

> *Generally activism is silenced because you find that at some point you can be attacked for speaking certain things, either while online or openly either in the groups of people. So, somehow, you find that there are constraints and people are not free to speak. Much as we have freedom of association and those other rights in the constitution, they are just on paper and people are not really free to openly speak out anywhere about or share their views because they might be understood in a different way. So, you find that if somebody comes up to speak out; the likes of Stella Nyanzi they are arrested and charged in court and jailed. - KII_WHRD_Gulu*

Challenges faced by Feminists Organizing on Online Civic Spaces

Challenges faced by structurally silenced women while using civic space range from physical abuse, emotional abuse and social-economic abuse which have had an impact on their wellbeing and their activities in relation to activism for structurally silenced women.

Women human rights defenders we spoke to mentioned some of the challenges they face while organizing in online spaces and 51% mentioned experiencing online sexual harassment, while 41% mentioned they faced exclusion from online media like music, videos, photos, films among others.

> *Every day, there is rejection from the media. Another thing is rejection from the community. If you are an activist, especially from the LGBT community the rejection you encounter is doubled. Everywhere you go to share ideas no one wants to listen to you, there is disillusionment when you are rejected. - (LBT_ Activist)*

Further challenges noted were from the ever existing patriarchal society that feminists and WHRDs live and work in. Participants reported that male dominance over women has greatly affected the civic space or feminist where anything said is always looked as not making sense because the author is a woman. More so society respects views of women when they meet societal norms like being married, having biological children. Findings from in-depth interviews showed that when a woman activist does not present the above they are looked at as not being a right person to advocate and fight for structurally silenced women's rights. So this has seen some activists lose interest in activism.

> *If there is a community meeting, women are not given opportunities to speak about their issues. There is a lot of patriarchy. And if a woman talks about issues concerning maybe women in communities, they see you as a woman who doesn't listen to men or something like that. Traditional beliefs and norms can make the woman the second citizen not the first class the men are given the priority in terms of skills, access, ownership because women do not own most assets when she is at home the radio is for the family but the person who has it all the time is the husband unless if the husband is out so those are mostly the traditional beliefs and norms. - KII_WHRD_Mbarara*

More so participants also mentioned that continuous closure of online platforms like Facebook coupled with high taxes to access other online platforms has been directly leading to reduced online activity, advocacy using those spaces. Thus the majority of the activists who were using this platform for sharing their concerns as well as connecting with other WHRDs can no longer do that. Additionally, WHRDs noted that issues of losing a source of income like job loss, denial of employment opportunity, extorting money thinking that these structurally silenced women are being funded by donors.

In addition, if they are not sent away from their places of work, feminist have been threatened to have their contracts cancelled if they do not stop advocating for justice for the structurally silenced women.

> *Yes, at one time I was trying to help a married woman who was tortured by the husband to an extent that the so called husband poured kerosene in her private parts. This woman had no person to ran to and share her ordeal so while I was in the field I came across that woman she freely shared with me her whole story and the challenge I got along the ways was when I aired it out I was condemned by my boss as activists because the person who had tortured the woman was a rich businessman here in the city. So he went and met our boss and we were stopped from talking and pursuing that story ever since. So I could not go far because I was told to choose between the story and my job. - (KII _Journalists Kabarole)*

We further asked women human rights defenders and feminists how these challenges affect their presence online and they reported that these challenges push them away from using online spaces and they resort to using off-line spaces. Thus, 78% said they have remained inactive online while 22% deactivated their online accounts. This they said limits their engagement online yet digital advocacy is one of the forms they find most effective to advocate for women's rights, their access to online information is also limited and subsequently shrinking the space closes out many women human rights defenders, their voices cannot be heard and as well increases the digital divide between the structurally silenced women and mainstream women human rights defenders.

How these challenges have affected WHRDs online spaces

Inactive online accounts   78%

Deactivated online accounts   22%
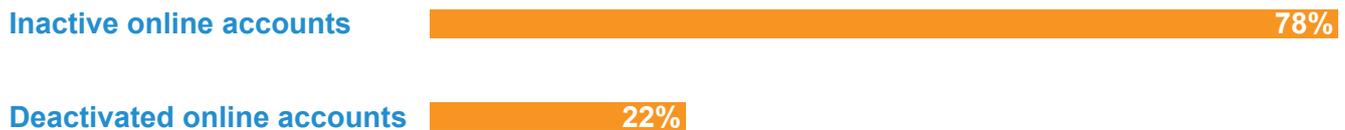
In terms of how women human rights defenders respond when their civic spaces are attacked online, 64% mentioned they deactivate their online accounts, while 20% mentioned they censor themselves in online spaces and 12% said they block perpetrators.

WHRDs response to online attacks

Deactivate online accounts   64%

Censor themselves   20%

Block perpetrators   12%
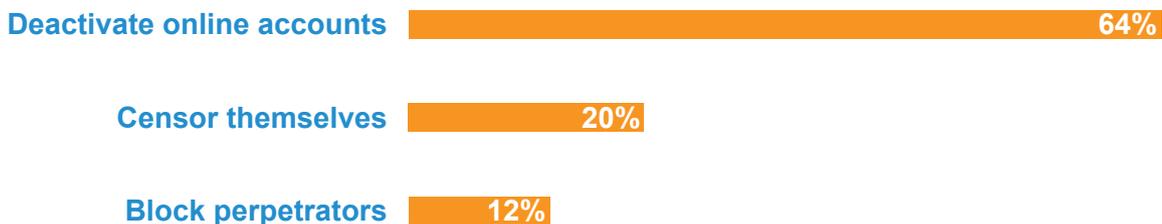
Other participants mentioned seeking social support from WHRDs that have lived the same experiences, using pseudo names, having objectives of the organization not in line with what it intends to do while registering organizations so that they are able to operate without being harassed and discriminated against.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Civic Space

In a bid to observe measures to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, there were several measures that were put in place by the government that included; restricted movement, gathering among others. Restricted movements implied that people were not working thus their income levels were affected which significantly limited their ability to subscribe to the internet and subsequently use it. This affected the online engagements for WHRDs and their ability to express and advocate online platforms. Physical civic spaces were equally affected since there could not be any physical engagements. More so COVID-19 saw a number of funders reducing the funding towards feminist groups and redirecting it to fighting the pandemic.

Additionally, most of the online platforms were crowded with COVID-19 related issues leaving out the issues that affect women, which created an information gap in regard to structurally silenced women.

On the other hand, the pandemic has made activists and structurally silenced women embrace online spaces more by using them for virtual meetings. However these are not as effective as the physical meetings because one can log in and not entirely focus on the proceedings of the meeting. Online civic spaces require one to have data. Most of the structurally silenced women lacked income sources hence not being able to afford data.

Movement Building and Participation of Structurally Silenced Women in Peace Building Processes

The results of this survey show that 63% of women interviewed were not aware/did not have adequate knowledge on the international bodies and Universal Periodic Review process and how they should be involved.

In this regard, 73% of the women human rights defenders interviewed mentioned that structurally silenced women are less involved in movement building and peace building processes, and they said this is because there has been limited engagement of structurally silenced women in these process, because the laws and policies for gathering and decision making limit their involvement as envisaged from the Section 8 of the Public Order Management Act. One participant had this to add on this issue:

> *Some women groups are there on their own. There is no platform however much we have formed associations. These associations, we run them on our own resources. For instance I was previously a woman councillor at the district we had all those groups up there but they would only be active during the women's day celebrations that is when we would come up to know who is who, then the associations bring their products and take it for sale, and other business women come out and talk, so all other women come up with certain documents and give them to you which is not here in Kabarole.* **- KII-woman councillor Kabarole**

Limited joint online activism among feminists and WHRDs was noted as affecting movement building. It was noted that there is lack of a forum that could bring all structurally silenced women under one umbrella online, participants reported that there was no joint online activism, in most cases activists do use their individual platforms and this does not allow strong advocacy on women issues as explained by one of the key informants we spoke to:

> *I think we still have a huge gap when it comes to online conversations because I see individual activists using their social media platforms to talk about women's issues but it's not like there is an online Platform where all women can come and discuss their issues. We still have a gap in it and I can recommend that this is something that we really need to work on. Then I can also talk about individual women who can use their platforms. They are also silenced, I can talk about my mentor Stella Nyanzi, she uses her social media platforms to talk about issues concerning her, issues concerning women.* **- KII_WHRD_Kampala**

The issue of not having responsible and accountable women in leadership is leading to the shrinking of civic space. Not collaborating / partnering with one another as feminists and activists is another issue responsible for the shrinking civic space. There is strength in numbers but not in uniting together to speak as one voice for structurally silenced women.

We then asked women human rights defenders how structurally silenced women can meaningfully and strategically engage with treaty bodies and UPR processes and they mentioned the following ways including the need to involve their representatives at all levels of movement building and periodic reviews, by sensitizing them and creating awareness to them about these processes. And on how to include mainstream feminist organizations like Akina Mama wa Afrika, Mifumi, to focus on issues of structurally silenced women in their work and advocacy. Women human rights defenders mentioned that this can be done through having partnerships and engagements with them and interesting them in issues of structurally silenced women. Such engagements can include advocacy, funding activities of structurally silenced women among others. One of the WHRDs from Mbale under KII had this to say:

> *There are some known organizations that have already been shared except Inside My Past Campaign a South African based organization which hosts different women to share their perspectives in the area of sexual and reproductive health rights through writing and also having live chats on Facebook. There is also the Urgent Action Fund which has some funding for these groups of people especially Organizations that look out for the psychological and mental wellbeing of silenced women. The African Women's Development Fund which focuses more on advocacy and creativity in seeing that the voices are heard is another safe space.* **- KII_ WHRD_Mbale**

The need for forums that bring together these structurally silenced women was also mentioned. If these are formed, it will help to bring out easy discussion on strength and weaknesses faced by these categories of women. The forum should be both online and offline at least the groups should meet once in a while to discuss and provide feedback on the previous deliberations.

It was revealed that other feminist organizations not understanding other structurally silenced women has also been noted to be another challenge to movement building and involving structurally silenced women.

> *Offline in some of the workshops, trainings and meetings with other human rights defenders they have no knowledge of the LBTs and sex workers, and so activists for these categories of women are put down/ silenced when raising their issues and concerns. This discourages the ones representing the LBTs and sex workers hence rendering them voiceless.*
> **- FGD_ LBT & SEX WORKERS**

Digital Hygiene

We asked women if they are aware of any digital safety and security practices used by feminists and women human rights defenders while organizing online and 53% mentioned they were aware while 47% were not. For those who were aware, they mentioned the use of strong passwords that are regularly updated and are not shared with other people, not sharing personal/private information that may later be used to troll the person, using updated anti-virus so as to reduce exposure to malware, using 2 step verification, using pseudo names and avoiding opening suspicious links. A few participants revealed that they had received training in digital safety mechanisms and these included use of strong passwords, respecting others online, not sharing digital gadgets, and switching them off when not in use.

Digital safety and security awareness

Aware	Not aware
53%	47%

However, there were participants that acknowledged that there is still a knowledge gap on how to appropriately use the available platforms to conduct activism.

> *I have been in a feminist space but the thing is we do not know how to use the internet effectively when do I post what do I post who do I post people on Twitter they don't know how to tag they do not know how to tag maybe they don't know how to use hashtag to retreat and all those kinds of things and when to do all those things people do not know how to get into media people do not know that usage of okay documenting those stories and put it out there so that whenever maybe somebody has to research about your work they know how to get you or whether you have a website or no Facebook page but you're out there we do not know we need education.*
> *- FGD participant _LBT FSW*

Low digital literacy levels among structurally silenced women greatly affects the use of the internet to express themselves and advocate for their rights. This leaves few feminists to carry the mantle thus having little influence in whatever they are advocating for, yet numbers do matter a lot. Coupled with is the language used to express oneself on the internet as well as in which most of the information is shared. English is what is majorly used and yet there are some women who would wish to access the information shared but this becomes a language barrier as one participant mentioned that local languages should be embraced in order for the structurally silenced women to utilize the civic space.

> *Maybe what else I really want to say is issues come around like internet within our community there is a lot of illiteracy among community members especially I'll talk on behalf of the sexual community where we have a lot of women who have not had the opportunity to be in school and it becomes very difficult if we are trying to shift for issues like of security like from physical to online engagement it becomes very difficult for them and we end up leaving them behind now like when we say we work with urban refugees in the sexual community where I work from so it was very difficult for them to chip in. - FGD LBT and SEXWORKERS*

Discussion

This study sought to understand the situation of shrinking civic space and its effect on feminists organizing online particularly for structurally silenced women in Uganda and as well as certain how structurally silenced women can meaningfully and strategically engage with treaty bodies and UPR processes.

Findings of this study showed that civic space is shrinking and more so highly for LBT and sex worker HRDs as structurally silenced women. This is in agreement with findings from a study conducted in Middle East and North Africa on shrinking civic space for WRHDs where it was also found out that civic space was being suffocated. Suffocating civic space for WHRDS[33]. Activists' civic spaces have been shrunk through blocking registration of their CSOs, restricting their funding, denial of fair hearing, prolonged detention without court hearing, and use of surveillance on work of human rights defenders by state and non-state actors, arrests and intimidation. Another tactic used in shrinking civic space that was mentioned was authorities restricting public engagements of WHRDs on the basis of the Public order management Act. Such acts need to be mitigated for WHRDs to remain effective.

On inclusion of structurally silenced women in movement building and engagement with treaty bodies and UPR processes, findings showed that structurally silenced women are not included in these processes. It is imperative for feminist and women's movements to have collective efforts from all levels and categories of women activists without leaving anyone behind for the achievement of women's rights.

[33]

Conclusion

For feminist and women's movements to lead efforts to address and end shrinking of civic spaces for feminists organizing online, there is need to ensure that local and national women's movements are funded and at the forefront of research, programming and decision-making.

Spaces for feminist movements are shrinking, particularly for structurally silenced women and so important issues need to be put into consideration for example of how WHRDs and donors can use their position and privilege to ensure structurally silenced WHRDs perspectives and viewpoints are considered in decision making and advocate for women's meaningful participation for women's rights.

Recommendations

We asked participants about what can be done to strengthen civic spaces for feminists organizing online and the following recommendations were given by participants:

To the Women's Movements and WHRDs:

- Sensitization of women human rights defenders and structurally silenced women on their rights online as well as how to protect themselves while using online platforms.

- There is need to collectively engage all women human rights defenders and feminists including structurally silenced women activists in their different diversities to jointly advocate for protection and safe use of online civic spaces as well as strengthening women's movements and create partnerships to effectively run online civic spaces.

- Carry out more digital rights sensitization and awareness campaigns to enlighten structurally silenced women and boost their self-esteem. Involve leaders both political, cultural and religious to understand the structurally silenced women.

- Stigmatization of structurally silenced women should be discouraged while ensuring that digital civic spaces are safe for them to interact, communicate and advocate for their rights.

- Through the creation of women's movements that will lead to collective growth and having a unified goal and strategic networks that can have one voice that can engage directly with other key stakeholders and advocate for the inclusion of structurally silenced women.

- CSOs on women's rights should come out to fight and condemn all forms of discrimination and abuse that feminist and women activists go through this combined with clearly understanding the concerns of the structurally silenced women was thought to be one of the solution.

- Women activists working in different aspects like legal, social, cultural, political among others need to come together to have a common voice to advocate for the rights of structurally silenced women.

To the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and Treaty Bodies

- There is a need to sensitize structurally silenced women on the existence of UPR and treaty bodies for them to fully participate in the process, more so have representatives from the different categories of structurally silenced women represented at UPR and treaty bodies.

- Those engaged in the UPR and treaty bodies need to come down to the grass root to interact with the structurally silenced women and get to understand their situation and create an avenue for an engagement.

To the Policy Makers and Government

- Women were further asked how civic spaces online can be made safe for feminists and women human rights defenders organizing online and most of them suggested.

- There should be protective laws and policies/regulations that allow structurally silenced women to freely and safely use online civic spaces. The policies should allow room for reporting perpetrators of feminists and women human rights defender online.

- Leaders need to sit down with people who are marginalized, get to understand them, know their concerns and see how they can help them be considered in policy making processes.

- Involve different stakeholders in different trainings so as to advocate for women's rights in the correct way. The stakeholders may include the law enforcers, local council, the media, politicians, legal teams and religious leaders.

- The police/ law enforcers should not torture but handle activists as any other citizen.