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# Civic engagement in Uganda: Outlining our gender-specific findings

LESSONS  
LEARNED

**Key words:**

civic engagement  
civic participation  
civil society organizations  
gender  
gender equity

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**Conflicts of interest:**

There are no conflicts of interest to declare for this study.

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**Abbreviations and acronyms**

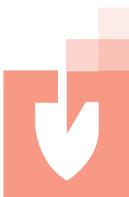
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organizations
<b>CBOs</b>	Community Based Organizations
<b>CMCP</b>	Community Messaging and Civic Participation
<b>NLP</b>	Natural Language Processing

# Table of contents

Introduction .....	4
Findings .....	8
Finding 1: More needs to be done to increase the participation of women in leadership positions .....	8
Finding 2: Women lack access to resources that are essential for civic participation.....	9
Finding 3: There is a divide between urban and rural female civic engagement behavior .....	12
Finding 4: Social norms and culture are barriers to female civic engagement.....	13
Proposed interventions .....	14
1. Effectively nudge female civic engagement .....	14
2. Provide resources for women to participate in civic activities .....	15
3. Develop different strategies to cater to key urban and rural stakeholders.....	15
4. Understand and leverage social norms on female civic engagement to increase participation.....	16
Implications for future research.....	18
References.....	20

## Figures

Figure 1: Gender distribution of civic engagement segments.....	9
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# Introduction

At Busara, we have been working with different Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania since 2015 to understand how communities engage with centers of non-political power (namely religious leaders/organizations, advocacy groups, and community based organizations). Through this engagement, we were looking to learn what drives civic engagement and how CSOs and activist groups can leverage behavioral knowledge to promote increased civic engagement and participation.

Civic engagement is a key component to achieving sustainable development. When communities are meaningfully engaged in discussions, decision making and the implementation of community projects, better project outcomes are likely to be achieved.<sup>1</sup> Meaningful community engagement creates opportunities for widespread acceptance of projects as people understand the importance and benefits of the project in improving their livelihoods. An empowered collective of men and women who understand what is going on in their communities become willing to work together in building their community to attain common goals.<sup>2</sup> Meaningful civic engagement is associated with increased trust in community governance and organization. Working together with the community improves communication and their understanding of what the centers of power (government, religious leaders, and CSOs/CBOs) are doing in the community and how they will be impacted by eliminating assumptions and rumors. Civic engagement also results in more innovative solutions to local problems as interventions are contextually relevant to the local problems and not driven by external priorities.

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1 PennState College of Agricultural Sciences. (Undated). Community Engagement.

2 Rijal, S. (2023). The Importance of Community Involvement in Public Management Planning and Decision-Making Processes. *Journal of Contemporary Administration and Management (ADMAN)*, 1(2), 84-92.

Women form the backbone of any community and their involvement in public and private spaces is instrumental in fostering meaningful community engagement. However, in many developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, women's meaningful participation in civic engagement consistently falls behind that of men due to social and cultural norms that impede women's participation in civic engagement.<sup>3</sup> The burden of their societal roles as wives and mothers takes a significant share of women's time which denies them opportunities to participate in forums of community participation such as community meetings.<sup>4</sup> In most communities in the region, men have power over women and in community meetings, women are not allowed to contribute to discussions resulting in male-dominance.<sup>5</sup> In some instances, development actors do not have a gender-agenda in their scope of work detailing how men and women will be involved in the project resulting in women being left behind.

When women are meaningfully engaged in civic engagement processes both in private and public alongside men, it contributes significantly to sustainable community development as the voices, needs and interests of both sexes are brought to the forefront and heard by centers of power/decision makers. The inclusion of women in civic engagement alongside men helps to foster a sense of citizenship where both men and women develop a shared sense of contributing to the future of their communities by shaping conversations and interventions that positively impact their communities and future generations.

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3 Konte, M., & Tirivayi, N. (2020). Women and sustainable human development. *Women Sustain Hum Dev.*, 2020, 2.

4 Fishman, P. M. (2019). Interaction: The work women do. In *Feminist research methods* (pp. 224-237). Routledge.

5 Tukahirwa, F. (2011). *Challenges to women's participation in community development projects in Uganda: A case of the Association of Uganda Professional Women in Agriculture and Environment in Iganga District* (Doctoral dissertation, Uganda Management institute).



Some of the reasons for the differing levels of civic engagement has been outlined in the previous research we have done.<sup>6</sup> These include that men tend to be more confident than women in making public contributions during meetings due to social norms on the participation of women. There are also differences in the types of meetings the genders participate in, with men tending to attend political meetings while women tend towards social-welfare meetings alongside a significant gender divide in men and women's contributions in meetings. Understanding these and other findings using a gender lens is instrumental to driving our future work in supporting CSOs to establish how they can use behavioral science to encourage meaningful participation of both men and women in civic life.

So far, our research has helped to map out the nature and scope of civic engagement and participation in Uganda. This has enabled us and our partners to understand the importance of including population segments which have low levels of civic participation, particularly women. Gender mainstreaming is a key component of project delivery as it ensures that the unique voices and needs of men and women are heard as a mechanism for CSOs and activist groups to strengthen their work with communities.

Evidence-based approaches to civic engagement enable CSOs to draw local knowledge and understand the barriers to civic engagement and in turn remedy the situation by developing practical and effective solutions.

## **Objective**

In this Groundwork we will reflect on past work we have done with CSOs since 2015 and establish the most significant learnings related to gender in civic

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<sup>6</sup> [Community Meetings in Uganda](#)

engagement and the implications of these findings on project design moving forward. Based on these findings, we develop recommendations for CSOs to enhance their strategies to reduce the gender gap in civic engagement both in Uganda and beyond.

## **Methodology**

We conducted a desk review of past project reports to identify gender-specific findings related to civic engagement in Uganda and conducted a thematic analysis to identify the most important trends. We reviewed a total of 16 reports, including a qualitative study on Religious leaders and behavior change in Uganda, a field experiment on [Using behaviourally informed communication to drive civic engagement](#), as well as a lab experiment on [Self-Efficacy as a driver of civic participation](#) to name a few. In addition, a review was conducted into existing secondary research around increasing gender parity into civic engagement in Uganda and the wider region.



# Findings

The findings from this study are classified into four main themes that emerged. Additionally, the insights are organized by various behavioral interventions that can address the existing gender gaps identified in past research.

## Finding 1: More needs to be done to increase the participation of women in leadership positions

A key policy of affirmative action that the Ugandan government has taken to increase the representation of women in elected positions has been to reserve one seat for female candidates per district, representing 27.6% of all 529 seats. However, in the 2021 election, women won only 5.6% of the 353 open seats.<sup>7</sup>

The research we conducted in Uganda included a segmentation of the Ugandan population by their level of civic engagement. Our research indicates that the proportion of female respondents (n=1,078) decreases as levels of civic engagement increase. Among those who do not participate in any civic activities (who we call “Disengaged”), 50% are female. In contrast, only 23% of those with the highest level of civic engagement (who we call “Committed”) are female, underscoring a substantial disparity in the pool of females who may potentially vie for leadership positions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gideon Too, Brenda Ogutu, Salim Kombo, Moreen Terer, Nelson Mugj, Charity Okaba, Alice Escande, James Kengah, Citizen profiles and civic engagement behaviors in Uganda, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Gender distribution of civic engagement segments (n=1,078)

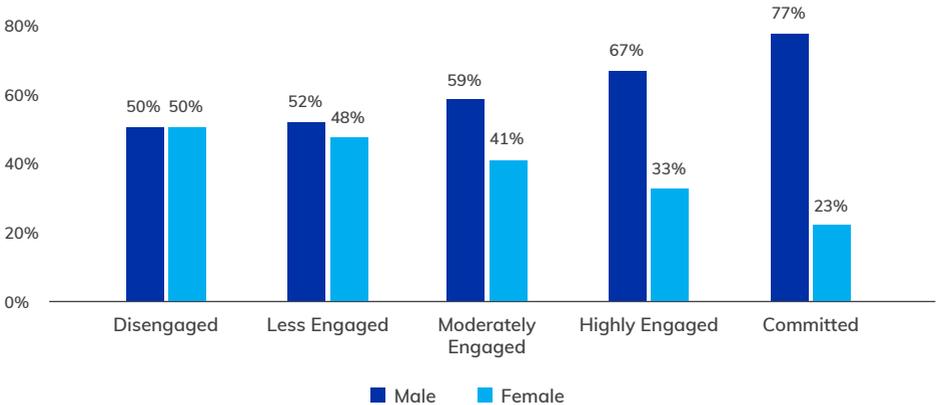


Figure 1: Gender distribution of civic engagement segments

We also find a significant disparity in the membership of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Our research on cooperatives in Uganda found that among the 997 cooperatives with gender breakdowns, 77% of members were male and only 23% were female (n = 859,465).<sup>9</sup> This again demonstrates a smaller pool of potential females who may potentially contest for leadership positions.

## Finding 2: Women lack access to resources that are essential for civic participation

Effective civic participation at the individual level has significant cost implications, both monetary and non-monetary. This is true everywhere in the

<sup>9</sup> The Uhuru Institute for Social Development, The Legal, Business, Ethical and Knowledge Status of Cooperatives in Uganda: A fork in the road. 2018.



world where competing priorities, opportunity costs and facilitation costs pose significant barriers to civic participation. These are even more pronounced in developing countries like Uganda where resource scarcity means that more people are under significant pressure to earn an income on a daily basis.

### **Women have a higher burden of care, leaving them less time for other activities, including civic participation**

A key resource for effective civic participation is time. In most family settings in Uganda females have to allocate a significant proportion of their time towards household, farming and childcare chores which means that many of them are unable to make time to attend community meetings.<sup>10</sup> Socialization for this skewed allocation of time towards household duties starts early, with gender differences being identified between children who look after their younger siblings, with the burden increasing for girls but decreasing for boys as they grow older (between age 13-17).<sup>11</sup> The effect of this gap compounds over time, leading men to be more comfortable and confident participating in civic activities. Overall, the increased burden of care places a heavier responsibility on women, leaving them with less time to participate in other activities, including civic activities.

### **Women have lower levels of education, which correlates with lower levels of civic participation**

Women in Uganda face challenges in political participation, including lower literacy and education attainment compared to their male counterparts.<sup>12</sup> In particular, males are more likely to complete higher levels of education

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10 James Vancel, Tom Wein, Ariana Keyman, Gideon Too, Community Meetings in Uganda.

11 Too et al., Contextualizing Moral Foundation Theory in Uganda. 2022.

12 Ibid., 67.

than females. There is also a significant gender gap in enrollment rates (for example, in some universities males outnumber females by a ratio of 8:2), which may create a unique context for socialization on attitudes towards different issues.<sup>13</sup>

Individuals who have a university education are also more likely to be aware of social issues affecting the community (such as environmental degradation) than individuals who do not have a university education. This is further supported by our finding that those who are disengaged from civic activities (namely they do not take part in any forms of civic activities) are most likely to have a primary school level of education but are also more likely to be female, young and single.<sup>14</sup>

### **Women face a significant challenge of information asymmetry on civic engagement**

Women in Uganda are less likely to be aware of community meetings. Moreover, most women in Uganda are also unlikely to be aware of what is discussed during community meetings.<sup>15</sup> In our study on community meetings, we found that only 10% said they knew of any public services related to local meetings. Men, in contrast, scored higher in both measures of awareness on community meetings. Of the community events which women are aware of and attend, most tend to be welfare meetings, while men tend to opt for political meetings.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the reason for this information asymmetry is structural. Research by GSMA has found that females in Uganda are 15% less likely to own a mobile

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 30.

16 Ibid., 18.



phone, which is an essential channel for communication on a variety of issues, including civic information.<sup>17</sup> As a result, women in Uganda are generally less informed than men about important issues that affect their communities and country. In an Afrobarometer survey, 40% of women answered ‘don’t know’ or ‘don’t understand’ when asked about their opinion on democracy.<sup>18</sup>

### Finding 3: There is a divide between urban and rural female civic engagement behavior

Our research has identified a significant gap in civic participation between urban and rural women. We find that women play a bigger role in rural community meetings than in urban community meetings, at least in Western regions of Uganda.<sup>19</sup> This is supported by respondents from Kibale and Kabale who indicated that the majority of women in rural districts attended most of the meetings. In addition, we also find that the narrative around female civic participation is often perceived as a concern primarily relevant to urban elites, which many rural populations feel disconnected from and regard as intangible.

This sentiment also holds true with regards to female rights. A study we conducted using Natural Language Processing (NLP) found that urban and rural elected representatives differ in speech patterns on the subject. This study found that urban representatives tend to reference political institutions while rural representatives tend to reference cultural institutions. Moreover, among urban representatives, the actors are exclusively men, while among rural representatives feminine pronouns seem to be present. In addition, while urban representatives speak generally about their constituents, rural

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17 Ibid., 18.

18 Ibid., 19.

19 Ibid., 18.

representatives make special mention of social and cultural units, and more explicitly mention the role of women.<sup>20</sup>

## Finding 4: Social norms and culture are barriers to female civic engagement.

The patriarchal structures of many Ugandan communities makes it difficult for females to have a voice or an opportunity to participate in important decision making processes. For instance, there is evidence to show that the culture where economic decision-making within the family is primarily entrusted to men is a contributing factor to domestic violence.

There is strong evidence that females are least likely to be civically engaged due to prevailing norms of female political participation and leadership in Uganda.<sup>21</sup> We find that social norms which negatively influence females civic engagement permeate to the highest levels of political decision making in Uganda. In our NLP study, we find that men negatively interact with women and the culture around them. For instance, there is disapproval or related sentiment on how cohabitation impacts “us” (either as MPs or as women). Moreover, we also found that rural representatives lean towards traditions and culture in their discourse, which may have effects on their political decisions.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 64.



# Proposed interventions

Based on the key findings mentioned above, the following have also been identified as potential interventions which can be leveraged:

## 1. Effectively nudge female civic engagement

### **Include information related to gender equity in treatments/interventions:**

Women comprise a significant portion of those who are not civically engaged, therefore treatments/interventions to increase civic engagement need to have a gendered lens.<sup>22</sup>

**Incorporate intrinsic self-efficacy interventions:** While the experiment we conducted on self-efficacy as a driver of civic engagement did not identify any demographic differences (including gender), it is significant to note that this experiment was conducted with a primarily urban and low-income population. Given the differences in rural and urban female participation in Uganda, there is scope to test self-efficacy as an intervention to increase civic participation with a rural sample.<sup>23</sup> Our most recent experiment testing the effectiveness of narratives on encouraging short term civic engagement behavior has demonstrated positive results as a way of encouraging self-efficacy.<sup>24</sup>

**Gendered lens to lived experience and civic engagement:** Civic engagement can be driven by a variety of personal motivations. These invariably differ by a variety of factors. A recent experiment in Uganda identified that exposure to street level repression by the police led to a strong response among female

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<sup>22</sup> Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, *Can Behaviourally Informed Communication Interventions Motivate Civic Engagement?*, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Samantha Horn & Ariana Keyman, *Self-Efficacy as a Driver of Civic Participation in Uganda*.

<sup>24</sup> To be published

participants and increased the probability of future participation in protests.<sup>25</sup> CSOs can use this finding to better target the kinds of females who may be more likely to be more civically engaged based on their lived experiences.

## 2. Provide resources for women to participate in civic activities

**Advertise civic activities directly to women and schedule them at times more conducive for female participation:** Strategies need to be developed to advertise community and public participation meetings in a timely manner so women can prepare ahead of time to express their opinions more confidently.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, scheduling community meetings in the afternoon may also make it more likely that women can make time for meetings after completing house chores.<sup>27</sup>

**Increase mobile phone ownership of women:** Increasing access to mobile phones through loan products or even subsidies will significantly increase the amount of information that women have access to, including about the most important issues which affect them and opportunities to have their voices heard on these issues.<sup>28</sup>

## 3. Develop different strategies to cater to key urban and rural stakeholders

**Develop gender advocacy message framing for rural and urban elected representatives:** For urban representatives, messages should be framed

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25 Ibid., 64.

26 Ibid., 20.

27 Ibid., 11.

28 Ibid., 68.



around preservation of cultural traditions, traditional value-driven norms, and make reference to similar countries that have made progress on women rights. For rural representatives, reference the preservation of rural social units, land inheritance, and religion. There is a need to use creative ways to drive women representatives' inherent beliefs.

**Develop gender advocacy message framing for rural and urban populations:** Our research has identified that there is a need for more interventions that specifically target to encourage more urban females to be civically engaged. At the same time, there is also a need to expand the issue of female civic engagement beyond a concern for urban elites to an issue that rural female population can relate to and have tangible influence on their day-to-day lives.<sup>29</sup>

## 4. Understand and leverage social norms on female civic engagement to increase participation

**Encourage female participation in community groups:** Women in Uganda care deeply about their communities, but often don't have the opportunity to provide input on important social issues that affect them. While entrenched systems of patriarchy may inhibit women from being able to share their opinions on these issues directly, they can nonetheless be encouraged to join other groups like cooperatives or savings groups which have an economic focus can serve as platforms for women to bring attention to issues, share opinions and grievances, which may serve to increase civic engagement.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>30</sup> Keyman, Horn, Wein, Wanjiku, Uhuru Phase 1: Civic Engagement and Cooperatives.

**Linking local issues to the feminist movement:** High-profile examples of feminist organizations and their work can serve to highlight the importance of issues which take place at the local level and encourage grassroots female civic participation.<sup>31</sup> Linking local issues to high profile national issues affecting women can also bring attention to issues at a local level.

**Collaborate with key stakeholders who shape and uphold social norms:** Social norms are often upheld or shaped by key members of communities and societies. In Uganda, religious and community leaders are key.<sup>32</sup> They may also benefit from understanding how different norms help or harm the communities they serve. Despite religious leaders having significant levels of influence, they also struggle to overcome social norms, and listed it as the most significant barrier to social change.<sup>33</sup>

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31 Ibid., 68.

32 Wanjiku, Wanja, Mwesige, Okaba, *Religious Leaders and Behavioural Change in Uganda*.

33 Ibid.



# Implications for future research

The findings from our work over the years show that women in Uganda face significant challenges to civic engagement. Some general challenges may affect the population in general, such as high levels of poverty, but which manifest in ways that have a more significant impact on women than men when it comes to civic engagement (such as lower access mobile phones and therefore lower levels of access to, among other things, civic information). Our findings have also demonstrated that there are significant geographic differences in civic engagement, such as between rural and urban populations in terms of the issues that women and society focus on, how womens' rights CSOs are perceived and how people in power articulate these.

Overall, these findings have a significant impact on increasing civic engagement of women in Uganda moving forward. Among these, we have highlighted the following as key:

**Focus on meaningful female civic engagement:** Civic engagement projects should be designed and analyzed with a gender-lens. A key focus of program design in this space has been on the quantity of female engagement rather than how meaningful this participation is. This needs to change. CSOs in particular should also be empowered to understand the influence and importance of gender in community participation and to look beyond gender representation which in most cases is used as a mechanism to “Tick a box”. This participation needs to be contextualized to what is most important.

**Behavioral interventions should be gendered:** Research, intervention design and testing should explicitly have a gendered lens in order to understand, design, test and scale interventions that work specifically to increase female civic engagement. Future research planned under CMCP which will look at

the influence of social networks, online and offline information ecosystems, the civic engagement cycle and social norms will all use gender as a key determinant for these studies. The findings will be used to inform our learnings over the years on what works to encourage civic participation of women.



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## About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

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## About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

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