

The human rights activists castigate Ugandan authorities for silencing the voices of aggrieved women through illegal arrests, abductions, and assaults. One lawyer says such actions damage Uganda's international reputation.

BY DAVID WALUGEMBE

While government policies continue to reference gender equality and affirmative action, Ms Agather Atuhaire, an activist in the civic space, argues that the lived experiences of several outspoken women tell a different story, one marked by fear, trauma, and unresolved human rights violations.

A lawyer and journalist, she is the executive team leader at AGORA, an online digital public square dedicated to promoting human rights, public accountability and social justice.

The recipient of the European Union Human Rights Defenders Award 2023 and the International Women of Courage Award 2024, believes Uganda has a long way to go in achieving gender equality, economic independence, and economic empowerment for women.

"Violence against women is at its peak, leading to deaths, imprisonment, and permanent scars. It does not make sense to keep celebrating Women's Day every year, yet many women continue to die innocently because of the regime's brutality," Ms Atuhaire says.

The lawyer adds that the continued imprisonment of women activists and Opposition supporters damages Uganda's international reputation.

"We have women like the National Unity Platform's (NUP) Olivia Lutaya, who was re-arrested after serving four years in prison, Doreen Kajja, who was violently arrested, Jolly Tukamushaba and Lina Zedriga, who first disappeared, only to surface in court weeks later," Ms Atuhaire notes.

She expresses dissatisfaction that despite the government empowering women in influential leadership positions, they have failed to advocate for the improvement of their fellow women, hence leaving no impact.

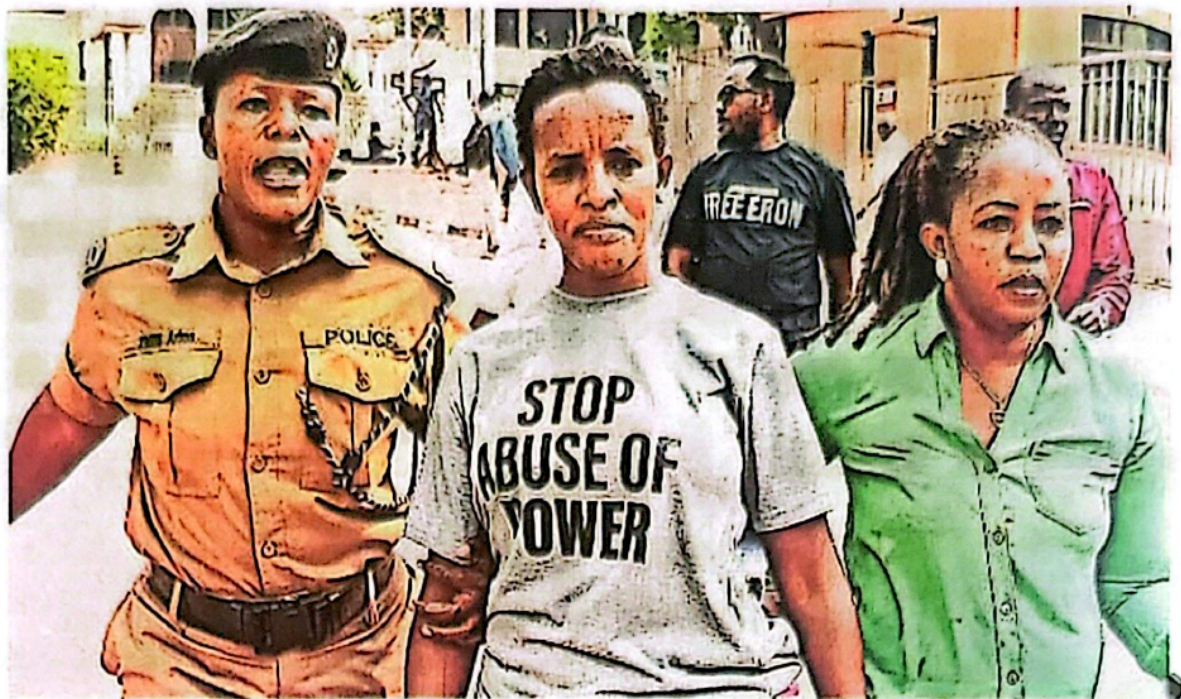
"The Vice President, Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament are women. Which power do they wield? Do they make decisions in these offices or are they there as fillers. They do not have the power and authority to influence policies that lead to the betterment of women," Ms Atuhaire adds.

The risks activists face

Since 2021, Ms Atuhaire's activism of exposing corruption at Parliament, abuse of power by the military, and human rights violations has exposed her to great risks, the most recent being her arrest in Tanzania where she had travelled to attend a court hearing of Tundu Lissu, the leader of the CHADEMA, Tanzania's leading Opposition political party.

During her detention, Ms Atuhaire says she was tortured and sexually assaulted.

"I was beaten on the soles of my feet for about 15 minutes, and today I live with the effects of that torture. I cannot walk long distances, I only wear medically prescribed shoes, and I cannot



Lawyer and human rights activist Agather Atuhaire (centre) is dragged by female police personnel to the Central Police Station after she was arrested near the High Court in Kampala City in 2024. PHOTOS/FILE

Activists fault govt over Women's Day priorities

Women in danger.

In Uganda, if you are a promoter of democracy and human rights, then you are a dangerous person to the government. I encourage women to continue defending the rights of others, believe in themselves and stand tall all the time. That is how we will create pathways for generations of women to come." — Sarah Birete, activist and lawyer

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stand or sit for long," she narrates.

The ever present danger reverberates in all sectors of her life. However, the risks do not deter the activist, who says witnessing or hearing about the pain of others drives her on.

Ambushed in the bedroom

Another lawyer, Ms Sarah Birete, the executive director of the Centre for Constitutional Governance (CCG) which has since been suspended by the government,

pins authorities for silencing the voices of aggrieved women through illegal arrests, abductions, and assaults.

Ms Birete says this has caused several women to withdraw from the civic space due to the risks associated with

human rights protection work.

On December 30, 2025, Ms Birete was arrested and charged with unlawful obtaining or disclosure of personal data, contrary to Section 35(1) and (2) of the Data Protection and Privacy Act.

BIRETE AND ATUHAIRE

Lawyer and activist Sarah Birete (pictured), was detained on December 30, 2025 after questioning the accuracy of the voter register to be used in the 2026 General Election. She was released on bail on January 28. Ms Agather Atuhaire, also an activist and lawyer who was detained with Kenya's Boniface Mwangi in Tanzania in May 2025 said Tanzanian security officers sexually assaulted them while in custody. They were detained after arriving in Dar es Salaam to attend the first court appearance of Tanzanian Opposition leader Tundu Lissu, who was facing treason charges.

The activist alleges that her children were assaulted during the arrest.

"About five men attacked me in my bedroom with two guns. I was taking a bath. Two of the men stood guard at the door of the open bathroom," Ms Birete recalls.

She adds: "The experience violated my right to privacy, dignity, and right to communicate since they confiscated my phones."

Against this backdrop, Ms Birete notes that several women face challenges of trauma, arrest of relatives, and physical and cyber surveillance, is not the case in the democratic governed countries.

"In Uganda, if you are a promoter of democracy and human rights, then you are a dangerous person to the government. I encourage women to continue defending the rights of others, believe in themselves and stand tall all the time. That is how we will create pathways for generations of women to come," she says.

Background

The International Women's Day (IWD) commemorates the achievements of women and promotes women's rights. In Uganda, the day was first celebrated on March 8, 1984, at State House Entebbe, and since then has been celebrated every year.

This year's celebration in Uganda is themed: Scaling investment to accelerate access to justice for all women and girls in Uganda, which calls for bold and strategic interventions towards a gender-equal future.

Women dominate Uganda's population with 51 percent (23,591,128), compared to men, who are 49 percent (22,314,289), according to the National Population and Housing Census 2024 report.

Globally, a recent world report by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) indicates that nearly a quarter (24 percent) of countries reported backlash against gender equality, undermining the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in 1995.

