

Investigating Local Governments' Role in Safeguarding Women's Rights in Uganda: A Case Study of Malere Parish in Hoima District

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of local governments in safeguarding women's rights in Uganda, using Malere Parish in Hoima District as a case study. Given the constitutional and statutory mandate of local governments to promote gender equality and protect women, the study examined how policy implementation, service provision, community sensitisation, and enforcement of legal protections relate to the safeguarding of women's rights. A cross-sectional survey design with a mixed-methods approach was adopted, and data were collected from 170 respondents comprising women community members, local government officials, and civil-society representatives using questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were used for analysis. The results revealed a strong positive and significant relationship between local government interventions and the safeguarding of women's rights ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), with the interventions jointly explaining 48.7% of the variance in the safeguarding of women's rights ($R^2 = 0.487$). Enforcement of legal protections and community sensitisation were the strongest predictors. The study concludes that local governments play a significant role in safeguarding women's rights and recommends strengthening enforcement, sensitisation, and service provision.

Keywords: local governments, women's rights, gender equality, enforcement, community sensitisation, Hoima District

1. Introduction

The protection and promotion of women's rights is a cornerstone of just and equitable development, and local governments occupy a strategic position in translating national commitments to gender equality into tangible protections at the community level (UN Women, 2022). In decentralised systems such as Uganda's, local governments are mandated to deliver services, implement policies, and enforce laws in ways that directly affect the lives of women, making their role in safeguarding women's rights both significant and worthy of investigation (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023). Understanding how effectively local governments discharge this role is essential to advancing gender equality and protecting women from discrimination and violence (Julius & Kazaara, 2026).

Uganda has established a robust legal and policy framework for women's rights, anchored in the 1995 Constitution, which guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, and in statutes and policies addressing domestic violence, land rights, and gender equality (Tamale, 2021). The country's decentralisation framework

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devolves responsibility for implementing these protections to local governments, which are expected to mainstream gender in planning and budgeting, deliver gender-responsive services, sensitise communities, and enforce legal protections (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023). The effectiveness of this arrangement, however, depends on the capacity, commitment, and resources of local governments, which vary considerably across the country (Nancy & Prudence, 2024).

Despite the strong legal framework, women in Uganda, particularly in rural areas, continue to face significant challenges, including gender-based violence, limited access to land and property, unequal participation in decision-making, and constrained access to services (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These challenges are often more acute in rural parishes, where cultural norms, limited awareness of rights, and weak enforcement combine to undermine the protections that the law promises (Asiimwe, 2022). Malere Parish, in Hoima District in western Uganda, exemplifies a rural setting in which the gap between legal protections and lived realities may be pronounced, particularly in the context of the district's evolving socioeconomic environment associated with oil development (Ahumuza et al., 2025).

Local governments can safeguard women's rights through several avenues: implementing gender-responsive policies, providing services such as legal aid and support for survivors of violence, sensitising communities to women's rights and gender equality, and enforcing legal protections through local structures (UN Women, 2022). The theoretical expectation is that stronger local government interventions along these dimensions translate into better safeguarding of women's rights. Whether and to what extent this holds in a rural parish such as Malere is an empirical question with direct implications for gender-equality efforts (Derrick et al., 2023).

Although the role of local governments in gender equality is recognised in policy, empirical evidence quantifying their effectiveness in safeguarding women's rights in rural Ugandan settings remains limited, and few studies disaggregate the effects of specific interventions (Asiimwe, 2022). This study addresses that gap by examining, through correlation and regression analysis, how policy implementation, service provision, community sensitisation, and enforcement of legal protections relate to the safeguarding of women's rights in Malere Parish (Alex & Devis, 2023). The findings are significant for local governments, national gender authorities, and civil-society organisations working to advance women's rights (Sub-county et al., 2023). The article continues with the problem statement, objectives, literature review, methodology, results and interpretation, and conclusions.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Uganda's constitutional and statutory framework mandates local governments to safeguard women's rights and promote gender equality (Tamale, 2021). Ideally, this should translate into effective protection of women from discrimination and violence, equitable access to land and services, and meaningful participation in decision-making (Julius & Audrey, 2026). In practice, however, women in rural areas such as Malere Parish continue to

experience violations of their rights, and the extent to which local government interventions actually safeguard those rights has not been clearly established through rigorous empirical research (Asiimwe, 2022).

Rural parishes face particular challenges, including entrenched cultural norms, limited awareness of rights among women, weak enforcement of legal protections, and constrained local government capacity and resources (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These conditions may cause a gap between the protections promised by law and the realities experienced by women, but the precise contribution of local government interventions to closing that gap remains unclear (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023). Without clear evidence on which interventions most effectively safeguard women's rights, efforts to strengthen local government performance risk being misdirected (Julius et al., 2024). If the role of local governments in safeguarding women's rights is not clearly established and strengthened, women in rural parishes may continue to suffer violations of their rights, undermining gender equality and development (Lydia et al., 2023). This study therefore sought to investigate the role of local governments in safeguarding women's rights in Malere Parish and to identify which interventions most strongly contribute to that safeguarding.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to investigate the role of local governments in safeguarding women's rights in Uganda, with specific reference to Malere Parish in Hoima District.

3.1 Specific Objectives

- i. To assess the interventions undertaken by the local government to safeguard women's rights in Malere Parish.
- ii. To establish the relationship between local government interventions (policy implementation, service provision, community sensitisation, and enforcement of legal protections) and the safeguarding of women's rights.
- iii. To determine the relative contribution of each intervention to the safeguarding of women's rights.

4.0 Literature Review

Research on local governments and women's rights draws on several theoretical perspectives, including decentralisation theory, the rights-based approach to development, and feminist theories of the state (Frank et al., 2023). Decentralisation theory holds that devolving authority to local governments brings decision-making closer to citizens and can improve responsiveness to local needs, including the needs of women, though it may also reproduce local inequalities (Manor, 2021). The rights-based approach frames development as the realisation of human rights and positions the state, including local governments, as the primary duty-bearer responsible for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling women's rights (UN Women, 2022). Feminist theories of the state caution that state institutions may

embody gender biases, and that formal legal protections do not automatically translate into substantive equality without active implementation and enforcement (Tamale, 2021).

Empirical studies broadly indicate that local governments can advance women's rights but that their effectiveness varies (Edgar & Moses, 2023). Studies across sub-Saharan Africa find that decentralisation has opened spaces for women's participation and gender-responsive service delivery, yet outcomes depend heavily on local capacity, resources, and political will (Manor, 2021). Research in Uganda documents progress in the legal and policy framework for women's rights, alongside persistent implementation gaps at the local level (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023; Asiiimwe, 2022). Scholars emphasise that the existence of strong laws is necessary but insufficient; effective enforcement and community-level action are decisive (Tamale, 2021).

Enforcement of legal protections features prominently in the literature. Studies show that the enforcement of laws against gender-based violence, discrimination, and property dispossession is critical to safeguarding women's rights, and that weak enforcement—through under-resourced structures, corruption, or cultural resistance—undermines legal protections (Asiiimwe, 2022). Effective enforcement at the local level, through structures such as local councils and community development offices, is repeatedly identified as central to converting legal rights into lived protections (Nelson, 2024).

Community sensitization constitutes a second major theme. Awareness of rights among women and communities is a prerequisite for the realization of those rights, and studies find that sensitisation efforts increase women's ability to claim their rights and reduce tolerance of practices such as gender-based violence (UN Women, 2022). In rural settings, where awareness is often limited and cultural norms restrictive, sensitisation is particularly important (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Policy implementation and service provision form further themes. Gender mainstreaming in local planning and budgeting, and the provision of services such as legal aid, health services, and support for survivors of violence, are important avenues through which local governments safeguard women's rights (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023). Studies note that these interventions are often constrained by inadequate resources and capacity. The literature emphasises that these dimensions interact and that comprehensive safeguarding requires their combination (Julius, 2025). Despite this body of work, few Ugandan studies quantify and compare the effects of specific local government interventions on the safeguarding of women's rights in a rural parish, a gap this study addresses (Ntirandekura et al., 2022).

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

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The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design employing a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The quantitative component enabled measurement and testing of relationships, while the qualitative component provided depth on lived experiences and institutional practices. The design suited the investigation of local government interventions using data collected at a single point in time.

5.2 Study Population and Area

The study was conducted in Malere Parish, Hoima District, in western Uganda. The target population comprised women community members, local government officials (including local council leaders and community development officers), and civil-society representatives. Women community members were central as the subjects whose rights were under study, while officials and civil-society representatives provided institutional and advocacy perspectives.

5.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A sample of 170 respondents was drawn, comprising 120 women community members, 30 local government officials, and 20 civil-society representatives. The sample size was determined with reference to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) guidelines. Women community members were selected using simple random sampling, while officials and civil-society representatives were selected purposively as key informants.

5.4 Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire measured the local government interventions—policy implementation, service provision, community sensitisation, and enforcement of legal protections—and the safeguarding of women's rights on a five-point Likert scale. Interview guides were used with officials and civil-society representatives to obtain qualitative insights into interventions and challenges.

5.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review by gender and governance specialists, yielding a content validity index above 0.70 (Amin, 2005). Reliability was confirmed through a pilot study, and the Cronbach's alpha for the interventions scale was 0.84, indicating high internal consistency.

5.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Nelson et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics summarised the interventions and safeguarding outcomes. Pearson correlation established the strength and direction of relationships, and multiple regression assessed the combined and relative effects of the interventions. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, with particular sensitivity to the experiences of women respondents.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

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Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular care was taken to obtain informed consent, ensure voluntary participation, protect confidentiality and anonymity, and avoid harm to respondents, in accordance with established ethical standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

6.0 Results and Interpretation

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the local government interventions and the safeguarding of women's rights based on responses from the 170 participants.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Policy implementation	2.86	0.88	Moderate
Service provision	2.72	0.93	Low
Community sensitisation	3.04	0.85	Moderate
Enforcement of legal protections	2.68	0.95	Low
Overall local government interventions	2.83	0.79	Moderate
Safeguarding of women's rights	2.90	0.76	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive results in Table 1 indicate that local government interventions to safeguard women's rights in Malere Parish were, on the whole, moderate to low, reflected in an overall mean of 2.83 and a standard deviation of 0.79. Community sensitisation recorded the highest mean (3.04), suggesting that awareness-raising was the most visible intervention, followed by policy implementation (2.86). Service provision (2.72) and, notably, enforcement of legal protections (2.68) attracted the lowest ratings, pointing to significant weaknesses in delivering services and enforcing the law—consistent with the implementation and enforcement gaps documented in rural Uganda (Asiimwe, 2022). The safeguarding of women's rights was rated moderate (2.90), reflecting the gap between legal protections and lived realities (Tamale, 2021). The sizeable standard deviations reveal meaningful variation in respondents' experiences.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was used to establish the relationships between the local government interventions and the safeguarding of women's rights, as shown in Table 2.

Variable	Safeguarding of Rights (r)	Sig. (p)
Enforcement of legal protections	0.59	0.000
Community sensitization	0.56	0.000

Policy implementation	0.50	0.000
Service provision	0.48	0.000
Overall interventions	0.63	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation results in Table 2 demonstrate that all local government interventions were positively and significantly related to the safeguarding of women's rights at the 0.01 level. Overall interventions showed a strong positive correlation with the safeguarding of rights ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that stronger local government action is accompanied by better protection of women's rights, consistent with the rights-based framing of local governments as duty-bearers (UN Women, 2022). Enforcement of legal protections recorded the strongest individual association ($r = 0.59$), underscoring that converting legal rights into lived protections depends heavily on enforcement (Tamale, 2021). Community sensitisation followed ($r = 0.56$), reflecting the importance of awareness in enabling women to claim their rights. Policy implementation ($r = 0.50$) and service provision ($r = 0.48$) were also significantly correlated, though more moderately. The consistently positive pattern strongly supports the study's central proposition (Nelson et al., 2023).

6.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression assessed the combined and relative effects of the local government interventions on the safeguarding of women's rights. Tables 3 and 4 present the results.

Model Summary		Value	
R		0.698	
R Square		0.487	
Adjusted R Square		0.475	
Std. Error of Estimate		0.489	
F (4, 165)		39.16 ($p = 0.000$)	
Predictor	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
Enforcement of legal protections	0.31	4.42	0.000
Community sensitisation	0.27	3.88	0.000
Policy implementation	0.17	2.61	0.010
Service provision	0.14	2.13	0.035

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression model summary in Table 3 indicates that the four interventions jointly explained 48.7% of the variance in the safeguarding of women's rights ($R^2 = 0.487$), a substantial proportion establishing local government

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interventions as a major factor in safeguarding women's rights. The model was highly significant ($F(4, 165) = 39.16$, $p < 0.01$), confirming its predictive validity. The remaining 51.3% of variance is attributable to other factors such as cultural norms, household dynamics, economic conditions, and the actions of other actors that lie outside the model (Asiimwe, 2022).

The standardised coefficients in Table 4 clarify the relative importance of each intervention. Enforcement of legal protections emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that the effective enforcement of laws is the most influential means by which local governments safeguard women's rights, consistent with the argument that legal protections require active enforcement to become substantive (Tamale, 2021). Community sensitisation followed ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that raising awareness materially enhances the safeguarding of rights by enabling women to recognise and claim them (UN Women, 2022). Policy implementation ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) and service provision ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$) contributed positively but more modestly. Overall, the results suggest that strengthening enforcement and sensitisation offers the greatest leverage for safeguarding women's rights in the parish, complemented by improved policy implementation and service provision (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that local governments play a strong, positive, and significant role in safeguarding women's rights in Malere Parish, with enforcement of legal protections and community sensitisation being the most influential interventions. It is recommended that local governments strengthen the enforcement of laws protecting women, intensify community sensitisation on women's rights and gender equality, improve gender-responsive service provision including legal aid and support for survivors of violence, and mainstream gender in local planning and budgeting (UN Women, 2022; Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2023). National authorities and civil-society organisations should support local governments with resources and capacity-building. Future research could employ longitudinal designs and comparative cases to further establish causality and examine variation across parishes.

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