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Policy Brief

Gendered Barriers in Uganda's Creative Sector: Insights and Policy Implications

Executive Summary

The creative sector is one of Uganda's most dynamic engines of socio-economic growth. It generates approximately US$576 million annually (equivalent to 3% of national GDP) and employs more than 400,000 individuals, representing 1.3 percent of the national labor force. Notably, young women, who form a large share of the sector's workforce, face entrenched gendered barriers that limit their full participation and advancement. This brief is based on evidence from a recent multimethod study involving 495 women creatives aged 15–35 years, which shows that gender inequality is woven into the everyday fabric of the sector. Women reported persistent pay inequities, restricted access to high-value roles, and exclusion from leadership positions in spaces dominated by men. Harassment, coercion, and unsafe working conditions were widespread, with many women describing sexual pressure, stigma, and the absence of trusted reporting systems. These challenges are reinforced by heavy unpaid care responsibilities that limit the time and flexibility required to pursue creative work. Women also face constrained access to the technical infrastructure, such as studios, creative workplaces, and equipment, needed to produce competitive work and secure higher-value contracts. Most workplaces remain gender-blind, lacking clear policies, protections, or structures that address risks and discrimination. These findings raise the urgent need for coordinated reforms that expand gender-responsive infrastructure, strengthen governance and representation, enforce fair pay and contracting practices, and establish trusted mechanisms to address harassment. Uganda's creative economy cannot meet its cultural and economic potential without removing the structural barriers that restrict women's safety, visibility, earnings, and long-term career progression.

While women constitute a growing share of creative workers, their ability to fully participate in and benefit from opportunities in the sectors remains constrained by unequal pay, unsafe work environments, limited recognition, and barriers to progression into leadership roles.

Introduction

Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) are a rapidly expanding sector in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), employing 8.2% of the workforce, the highest regional share in global creative employment.[1] In Uganda, CCIs generate approximately US$576 million annually (equivalent to 3% of national GDP) and provide employment to over 400,000 individuals.[2] Women and youth aged 15-35 drive Uganda's creative sector[3] as key producers, innovators, and cultural trendsetters, generating fresh content across music, fashion, digital media, and crafts. They strengthen the sector's economic and social impact by leading grassroots enterprises, adopting new technologies, and shaping contemporary cultural narratives. Despite its rapid expansion, the sector is characterized by entrenched gendered disparities that constrain women's engagement, career progression, and long-term retention within creative enterprises.[4]

This brief highlights key insights to inform policy and programmatic efforts to address gendered inequities in Uganda's creative sector

Purpose of this Policy Brief

This brief highlights key insights to inform policy and programmatic efforts aimed at addressing gendered inequities in Uganda's creative sector. It draws on findings from a recent multimethod study conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The study explored the dynamics, impacts, and challenges of gender-based inequities among 495 young Ugandan women creatives aged 15-35 years. Study participants were sampled from across diverse fields, including music, film and television, fashion and design, performing arts, visual arts, crafts, publishing, photography, gastronomy, advertising, digital media, gaming and animation, and cultural heritage/tourism.

Why Gender Equality Matters for the Creative Sector in Uganda

Gender equality is central to strengthening Uganda's creative sector because women constitute a significant share of its labor force yet face structural constraints that limit their full economic and cultural contribution. Evidence from studies on women creatives in sub-Saharan Africa shows that women play critical roles across visual arts, crafts, fashion, film and music ecosystems, but their work is often undervalued, informalized and poorly remunerated, undermining both sectoral productivity and livelihood security. Parallel findings from a recent scoping review indicate that young women face heightened vulnerabilities, such as limited access to digital tools, reduced mobility, and increased exposure to violence, that restrict participation in creative skills programs and entrepreneurial pathways.[5] These gendered constraints have long-term implications, as creativity-related learning, digital

1 Izugbara et al., Africa's Creative Goldmine; Afreximbank Research and University of Business and Integrated Development Studies, Estimating Potential Economic Contribution of Cultural and Creative Industries in Africa.
2 Burunde and Awak, The Creative Hustlers' Bazaar.
3 Caribou Digital, Uganda's Culture and Creative Industries in a Digital Age: A Landscape Review; Lucy Ilado, "Cultural Wealth, Budgetary Poverty."
4 PANAF, Challenges and Aspirations of Women in Uganda's Cultural Industry; Mastercard Foundation, "Africa's Creative Goldmine: Unlocking Growth Amid Gendered Challenges"; Handy and Rowlands, "Gendered Inequality Regimes and Female Labour…"
5 International Center for Research on Women, Scoping Review Report on Africa's Creative Sector.

literacy and cultural production are increasingly central to future employment opportunities. When women are excluded, the sector loses diverse perspectives and innovative capacity, weakening national aspirations for cultural preservation, job creation and inclusive economic growth. Addressing gender disparities in the creative sector is also critical for Uganda's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities). Advancing gender equality, therefore, strengthens the creative value chain by expanding talent pipelines, enhancing competitiveness, and ensuring that emerging creative economies reflect Uganda's social diversity. Addressing gender gaps is thus not only a matter of fairness but a strategic economic imperative.

Gender Inequities in Uganda's Creative Sector: Forms and Dynamics

The study by ICRW indicates that young women creatives in Uganda face multiple, interconnected gender-based inequities that constrain their participation, visibility, and earnings across the creative sector. These inequities manifest in different forms and include pay inequity and limited access to high-value opportunities or leadership roles, harassment, coercion, and bullying, heavy burden of unpaid care, limited access to critical male-dominated creative sector infrastructure, and gender-blind creatives workplaces and infrastructure.

Pay inequity and limited access to high-value creative sector opportunities or leadership roles

Many young women creatives interviewed in the study reported being underpaid compared to men, even when doing the same work. Thirty-six percent (36%) of women creatives reported personally experiencing gender-based pay disparities in their creative work, and 57% said they knew at least one woman in the sector who had faced the same. Participants reported pervasive pay disparities, especially film, fashion, crafts, and performance. Women noted that their bargaining power was often weakened by financial pressure, informality, and assumptions that they should accept "whatever is offered." As one Kampala actress explained, *"A man will say, 'I want UGX 200,000,' and refuse if it's not met. But as a woman, you may accept UGX 20,000 because you left your home with hungry children"* (IDI-Kampala, Actress).

Women also reported limited participation in high-value roles, including directing, production, studio engineering, and leadership positions within

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creative associations. These barriers limit women's visibility and advancement, even though they make up a significant share of the creative workforce. Several respondents reported that women are routinely bypassed for sector leadership roles on the assumption that men "fit" strategic roles better. One respondent reinforced this observation, *"...the creative sector is a male-dominated world because the society believes they have what it takes, and women always must play to the sentiments of the men in the industry. You'll find that all studios are run by men. I don't know of a studio engineer who is a woman, never seen one"* (KII-Kampala, Musician and policy maker). This pattern was strengthened by accounts of sitting in leadership spaces dominated by men, where women's ideas were often overlooked. These experiences reveal how unequal pay, limited authority, and exclusion from high-value opportunities combine to hold women back in Uganda's creative sector.

***"If our boss wants you (sex) and you refuse, he creates a situation that makes you quit"* (IDI-Kalangala, Dancer).**

Harassment, stigma, coercion and unsafe working conditions

Harassment emerged as one of the strongest and most damaging patterns affecting young women creatives in Uganda. Forty-two percent (42%) of women creatives reported experiencing gender-based harassment at work. Among them, 79% had received uncomfortable comments about their bodies, 73% had been subjected to sexual jokes, and 44% had been sexually propositioned or pressured into sex. Online harassment was also widespread, with 44% reporting having received inappropriate digital messages. Many described unwanted advances as routine and embedded in recruitment, production, and performance spaces. A Kampala dancer captured the power imbalance clearly: *"If our boss wants you (sex) and you refuse, he creates a situation that makes you quit"* (IDI-Kalangala, Dancer). Several creatives described working in spaces where men demanded sexual favors without any consequences. One actress noted: *"We have about four known cases of rape here, yet the rapists are still free because there is no one in the industry that can intervene or hold them accountable... Directors often give young girls roles only after raping them"* (IDI-Kampala, Actress).

Sexual propositions for work opportunities were common, affecting 44% of women, while 25% said they had been forced or pressured into sex. Several young creatives reported losing jobs after rejecting advances and highlighted the absence of any reporting channels that could protect them. Stigma also shaped women's experiences, with many performers, musicians, and dancers often labelled as "immoral" or "sexually available," making them easy targets for abuse. Women with disabilities described even higher vulnerability, noting that some collaborators demanded sex before allowing them to participate in projects. Across both physical and online spaces, harassment was described as pervasive, normalized, and deeply tied to unequal power, trapping many young women in unsafe and exploitative working conditions.

Heavy burden of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities

Many young women creatives noted that they had to combine creative work with other responsibilities such as childcare, cooking, and managing the home. Data showed that 64% of women creatives faced gender-related barriers linked to care responsibilities, and 25% reported having to forgo job opportunities because of childcare or domestic demands. Respondents' narratives revealed

that care work often determined whether they could attend rehearsals, take on long production hours, or travel for performances. Many noted that creative work frequently involves irregular schedules, late-night events, and travel—requirements that often conflict with the domestic expectations placed on women. They also repeatedly shared experiences of abandoning opportunities because partners or family members felt their work "takes women away from home." One actress explained: *"I don't have time. I have children. I have to cook for my husband, not to lose my family"* (IDI-Mityana, Actress).

Married women described a sharp drop in participation once they had children, even when they were skilled and recognised in their fields. Rural women faced even greater constraints due to limited transport, rigid norms, and lack of support options such as childcare. These pressures collectively reduced women's availability, limited their earning potential, and restricted long-term advancement in the creative sector.

Limited access to critical male-dominated creative sector infrastructure

Women creatives consistently reported limited access to the tools, spaces, and networks that shape visibility and income in Uganda's creative economy. Much of the sector's physical and technical infrastructure, such as studios, production houses, editing suites, music equipment, performance venues, film gear, and sound technology, were reportedly male-owned and dominated. Many women reported that men control entry into these spaces, decide who gets rehearsal time, and determine who receives technical support. As a result, women often operate from home or informal environments, which limits the quality of their output and their ability to compete for higher-value contracts.

There were also respondents who noted that producers and sound engineers prefer working with male performers, leaving women at the margins. Reportedly, male equipment owners sometimes demanded "friendship" or sexual attention before granting access. One young musician explained the gatekeeping simply: *"If you are a woman and you want to do a song, most producers want sex in return for releasing it"* (IDI-Gulu, Musician). Limited access also affects training. Men were also reported to dominate technical fields such as camera work, sound engineering, lighting, and digital editing, closing off higher-earning pathways. Without affordable and safe access to these critical infrastructures, many young women creatives remain stuck in low-income segments of the value chain.

Gender-blind workplaces and infrastructure

Women across the study described creative workplaces as largely gender-blind, with little recognition of the different risks, needs, and responsibilities women face. Many workplaces did not have contracts, codes of conduct, reporting structures, or basic safety guidelines. As a result, young women creatives had to navigate environments where harassment, unequal pay, and discrimination were treated as individual problems rather than organizational issues. Narratives indicated that studios, rehearsal rooms, production spaces, and performance venues in the country generally lack policies for safety, mobility, or privacy. There were widespread reports that formal protections for pregnant

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women, childcare support, and systems to address late-night scheduling were non-existent in many creative workplaces. One key informant described policies that directly penalized women, *"I once worked in an organization where contracts were issued to staff, but for women, there was a clause stating that you should not get pregnant. This is unfair because pregnancy is a woman's right, even if it may affect productivity for a period. Such restrictions are a serious issue for women in the creative sector"* (KII-Gulu, Artist).

Guilds and associations were also viewed as not doing enough to foster equitable and safe workplaces for women creatives, largely because they were often male-led or lacked effective mechanisms to enforce ethical practices. A key informant who is a leader in one of the creative associations mentioned, *"You know, the creative sector is dominated by men, so most times, they make decisions that favor them, without thinking about the women. And as women, if we don't stand up and get into those leadership positions, we can never get what we want. I find a lot of challenges, because I find myself sitting at a table with 20 men, and I'm the only lady"* (KII, Musician). These gender-blind systems leave women creatives with little protection and support, weakening their ability to build sustainable careers in the creative sector.

What these Findings Mean for Uganda's Creative Sector

Gendered inequalities are embedded in everyday practice, shaping who earns, who leads, and who advances in Uganda's creative sector. Pay inequities persist even when women perform the same work as men, and women are often confined to lower-value roles that reduce their bargaining power and long-term prospects. These patterns intersect with pervasive harassment, stigma, and coercion that restrict women's freedom to navigate recruitment, production, and performance spaces safely. Harassment is not only widespread but appears normalized, with few trusted systems for reporting or redress. Marginalized women creatives, including those with disabilities, emerging artists, and those residing in rural areas—experience heightened vulnerability to these inequities and their associated impacts. Their access to opportunities, roles, and employment within the sector is frequently conditioned by coercive or exploitative demands, further reinforcing structural disadvantages. These constraints produce an environment in which women's creative labor is undervalued, their safety is uncertain, and their opportunities for advancement are routinely undermined.

Structural barriers within households and sector infrastructure further narrow women's ability to participate and compete. Heavy care responsibilities shape women's schedules, mobility, and ability to accept opportunities that require long or irregular hours. Women also face restricted access to the male-dominated technical spaces that determine visibility and income, from studios to production houses and training facilities. These constraints push many women into informal or home-based work, where earning potential is limited, and quality of output is harder to sustain. At the institutional level, gender-blind workplaces lack the policies needed to manage risks, protect young women, or respond to exploitation,

The study's findings underscore the urgent need to address gender inequalities in Uganda's creative sector

leaving them exposed to unsafe conditions with little recourse. The combined effect of these pressures is a creative sector that relies heavily on women's labor but provides few protections or pathways for them to thrive.

Taken together, the study's findings underline the urgent need to address gender inequalities in Uganda's creative sector not only to improve the well-being and career outcomes of individual women, but also to safeguard the long-term vibrancy, professionalism, and economic contribution of the country's creative industry.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

The substantial contributions of young women to Uganda's creative sector, despite the persistent and deeply embedded constraints they face emphasize the urgent need for coordinated policy and institutional reforms. Such reforms must involve government, creative industry regulatory bodies, philanthropic and donor organizations, and grassroots actors to address, in a systematic and sustained manner, the structural drivers of gender inequality that shape the industry. Critical priority areas for prompt policy and programmatic response include:

Reforms must involve government, creative industry regulatory bodies, philanthropic and donor organizations, and grassroots actors to address, in a systematic and sustained manner, the structural drivers of gender inequality that shape the industry.

- The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in collaboration with creative guilds and associations, should; Expand gender-responsive creative infrastructure to address women's limited access to studios, production spaces, and safe work environments through investments in regional creative hubs, secure transport, childcare-friendly workspaces, and private facilities to mitigate safety risks.

- Strengthen governance and representation within creative-sector institutions led by MGLSD with oversight from bodies like the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). This should include setting gender parity targets, conducting regular gender audits, enhancing women's voice in decision-making, and enforcing clear accountability systems to improve oversight and reduce impunity for discrimination.

- Develop a coherent sector-wide response to reduce gendered pay gaps through coordinated action led by MGLSD. This should include enforcing transparent pay practices, written contracts that limit informal negotiation, these could be used as requirements for licensing, public procurement, and funding eligibility, alongside periodic pay audits conducted by mandated agencies or accredited bodies. In parallel, targeted investments should expand women's access to high-value roles through targeted training and leadership pathways.

- Adopting gender-responsive policies in creative workplaces and institutions that recognize the risks and responsibilities shaping women's participation through formulating clear codes of conduct, privacy provisions, pregnancy protections, and mobility safeguards, these can be achieved through coordinated efforts of Creative guilds and associations in collaboration with MGLSD.

- Implementing practical harassment mechanisms that creatives can trust, including confidential reporting channels and clear consequences for offenders. The MGLSD can coordinate these efforts while strengthening the capacity of guilds and associations to intervene in cases of abuse.

These measures will cultivate a creative ecosystem where women are protected, valued, and able to contribute fully to Uganda's cultural and economic landscape.

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Conclusion

Gender inequality in Uganda's creative sector is systemic, persistent, and embedded in everyday cultural, economic, and institutional practices. While women constitute a growing share of creative workers, their ability to fully participate in and benefit from opportunities in the sector remain constrained by unequal pay, unsafe work environments, limited recognition, and barriers to progression into leadership roles. Harassment, both physical and digital, functions as a critical mechanism of exclusion, reinforcing women's vulnerability and perpetuating a cycle of silence and underreporting. Addressing the gendered challenges facing women creatives in Uganda requires swift policy and programmatic action. This includes expanding gender-responsive creative infrastructure to improve women's access to essential resources. It also requires strengthening women's participation and decision-making in creative-sector institutions. A coherent, sector-wide approach is needed to reduce gendered pay gaps and enforce transparent pay and contracting practices. Creative workplaces should also adopt gender-responsive policies, and implement practical, trusted mechanisms for reporting harassment, including confidential channels and clear consequences for offenders.

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