

Women's Economic Empowerment and Access to Justice for Gender-Based Violence Survivors in Gulu District, Uganda

Davis Moses Okello¹, Rose B. Namara², Betty C. Mubangizi³, Robert Agwot Komakech²

¹School of Business and Management, Uganda Management Institute, Kampala, Uganda

²Institute Research & Innovation Centre, Uganda Management Institute, Kampala, Uganda

³Department of Public Governance, Faculty of Management, IT & Governance, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
Email: okellodm@gmail.com, rbnamara@umi.ac.ug, rosenamara@gmail.com, Mubangizi@ukzn.ac.za, kagwot@gmail.com

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Abstract

Access to justice (AJ) is crucial for gender equality and democratic governance. However, economic challenges and weak institutions still hinder survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in northern Uganda from exercising their legal rights. This study examined the association between women's economic empowerment (WEE) interventions implemented by ActionAid International Uganda (AAIU) and stakeholders' perceptions of access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District. The study adopted a quantitative research approach and employed a cross-sectional design. Of 186 questionnaires distributed to sampled GBV stakeholders, 148 were returned; following data-quality screening, 16 were excluded due to invariant response patterns or substantial missing data, leaving an analytic sample of 132. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The regression model was statistically significant and explained 20.9% of the variance in access to justice ($R^2 = 0.209$, $p < 0.001$). Sensitization and skills training were positively associated with access to justice ($\beta = 0.443$, $p = 0.001$), as was business start-up support ($\beta = 0.250$, $p = 0.014$), with sensitization and skills training showing a stronger statistical association. Although women's empowerment increased survivors' agency and their ability to afford justice-related costs, socio-cultural norms and deficiencies within the justice system continued to limit the full realization of justice for survivors. While economic empowerment is vital, it alone does not guarantee justice. Therefore, integrating livelihood support with legal empowerment initiatives and justice-sector reforms is essential to ensure meaningful access to justice for GBV survivors.

Keywords

Women's Economic Empowerment, Access to Justice,
Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Uganda

1. Background to the Study

Access to justice is associated with social and economic development and is recognized as a basic human right and a constitutional obligation of the state. However, billions of people worldwide face limited access to justice systems (Manuel & Manuel, 2018). Explicitly included in the targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda, access to justice is crucial to efforts that seek to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels” with a particular focus on SDG16 indicators related to the rule of law and justice for everyone (UN, 2015). Gender equality is also stressed in the same agenda as both a standalone goal (SDG5) and an essential element across all goals, stating that “achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls will accelerate progress across all” Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015; Ross, 2020). Thus, it's important to note that whether justice systems truly enable disadvantaged groups, especially women survivors of violence, to claim their rights, obtain protection, and secure remedies equally has significant implications for gender equality and broader development outcomes.

Access to justice can be life-saving for women who survive gender-based violence (GBV), influencing whether violence stops, where perpetrators are held accountable, and if women can find safety and begin recovery (UN Women, 2019-2020). However, access to justice remains challenging for women seeking justice for GBV worldwide. Barriers include distance to courts and quasi-judicial bodies, complex and costly procedures, long delays, limited legal aid, corruption, discriminatory attitudes, and inadequate or missing gender-sensitive services, including those for women with disabilities (Durojaye, 2020). Quantitative studies on rural women's access to justice in Bangladesh confirm these issues, showing how mistrust of formal systems, low legal literacy, unequal power dynamics, and high opportunity costs discourage women from seeking local justice (Sarker, 2022). Structural barriers present in developing countries are also evident in Uganda, where poor infrastructure, distance, costs, insecurity, and corruption hinder women and girls from accessing justice sector services (JLOS, 2016).

Northern Uganda, especially Gulu District, has a unique situation regarding gender justice. Although gender-based violence (GBV) is widespread across the country, conflict in northern Uganda caused extensive sexual violence, especially against women, with long-lasting effects on survivors' ability to access justice. Research from northern Uganda, including Gulu District, shows that survivors of conflict-related sexual violence continue to face social and health challenges,

stigma, strained family relationships, and difficulty accessing services long after the conflict ends (Woldetsadik et al., 2022). These issues prevent women from accessing justice. Trauma, stigma, and limited support from family and community may discourage survivors from reporting violence or seeking justice. Economic marginalization, which stems from GBV and acts as a barrier to justice due to the costs involved, remains a consistent obstacle for many survivors in northern Uganda.

Policy responses and programs have recognized both legal and economic empowerment as essential to women's access to justice. In fact, UNDP's definition of access to justice emphasizes that legal empowerment strategies enable marginalized individuals to exercise their rights by enhancing their ability to seek remedies, bridge formal and informal systems, and overcome ingrained biases (UNDP, 2004). In Uganda, women's access to justice is supported by a combination of government initiatives and civil society organizations that offer free legal aid, one-stop centers or shelter-based models that combine protection and psychosocial support, and economic empowerment programs such as skills development and business startup capital (ActionAid International Uganda, 2021). Despite these efforts, research on how economic empowerment affects justice-seeking behavior among GBV survivors in northern Uganda remains limited.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Uganda and development partners have implemented various legal provisions and programs over the past decade to combat GBV and improve access to justice (AJ) for survivors. While Uganda has endorsed international calls to classify GBV as a human rights violation and emphasizes the responsibility of states to prevent, eliminate, and punish violence against women (UN, 1993), many GBV survivors in Uganda still find justice increasingly difficult to access due to economic insecurity, corruption, and low legal literacy (JLOS, 2016; Ratuva et al., 2021). Previous research indicates that economic insecurity can limit survivors' ability to avoid unwanted contact with abusers, restrict their movement, transportation, and communication, and make it harder to obtain necessary support such as legal aid, counseling, medical care, safe shelters, and fair employment opportunities (Ditter, 2024). This issue is more severe in rural and post-conflict areas where women survivors face additional obstacles like transportation challenges and limited access to services. The challenges faced by women across Uganda are similarly highlighted in northern Uganda, as detailed in JLOS' Gender Mainstreaming Strategy, which states that discrimination, security issues, legal costs, and corruption all prevent women and girls from accessing justice services to report GBV, follow up on complaints, and receive timely redress.

In practice, Uganda's justice sector has worked to mainstream gender issues to better assist survivors of GBV. NGOs offer legal aid, shelters with support and psychosocial counseling, and programs focused on economic empowerment to address survivors' needs (ActionAid International Uganda, 2021; Durojaye, 2020).

However, gender-related barriers still prevent survivors from fully accessing justice, such as limited finances, lack of transportation, and cultural pressures. These obstacles discourage survivors in northern Uganda from reporting GBV and seeking case resolutions. Survivors may avoid filing a case, withdraw complaints, or hesitate to engage with police or lawyers because of costs involved in seeking justice—such as paying police for assistance, obtaining medical certificates, filing fees, transportation, childcare, and lost wages. The physical and financial burdens associated with pursuing justice continue to hinder GBV survivors from holding perpetrators accountable. Yet, limited information exists about how specific economic empowerment programs affect GBV survivors' justice-seeking behavior and their access to justice outcomes in northern Uganda, especially in post-conflict areas like Gulu District. Organizations such as ActionAid International Uganda have introduced skills training and business start-up capital to enhance women's economic independence. How these programs influence survivors' ability to assert their rights and seek justice against perpetrators remains unclear. Therefore, this study aims to assess the effect of women's economic empowerment on GBV survivors' access to justice in northern Uganda.

1.2. General Objective

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the association between women's economic empowerment interventions and stakeholder perceptions of access to justice for GBV survivors in northern Uganda.

1.3. Specific Objectives

- 1) To examine the association between sensitization and skills training and stakeholder perceptions of access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District.
- 2) To examine the effect of business startup capital and stakeholder perceptions of access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of Justice

This study draws on John Rawls's Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1999), a normative framework that conceives of justice as fairness. It states that social arrangements should protect basic liberties, ensure fair equality of opportunity, and focus on improving the lives of the least advantaged. Rawls (1999) describes justice as fairness in two parts; *first*, as a society's equal protection of everyone's basic liberties; and *second*, as organizing social and economic institutions to guarantee fair equality of opportunity and ensure that inequalities, such as wealth and status, benefit the least advantaged. For survivors of GBV, this means laws protecting their rights and providing redress should be effective not only in theory but also in practice, and should be accessible equitably regardless of income, social class, or stigmatization.

Rawls' idea of the original position and the veil of ignorance also suggests that justice institutions should be designed to operate independently of contingent identities such as gender, poverty, and social class. However, as previously mentioned, seeking justice often involves hidden costs related to reporting and pursuing claims, including transportation to justice facilities, documentation expenses, attorney fees, and the time and opportunity costs of filing claims and following up on cases (UNDP, 2004). In these ways, economic insecurity can prevent survivors from claiming their rights and maintaining their cases within the justice system. On the other hand, empowering survivors may promote justice-seeking behavior among women if increased resources improve their ability to overcome barriers. Scholarship on legal empowerment aligns with Rawlsian ideas by demonstrating how the poor and marginalized can achieve fairer justice outcomes when they have greater access to tangible resources, knowledge of their rights, and supportive networks within legal and justice institutions (Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor and UNDP, 2008; Maru, 2010). The capabilities approach further reinforces understanding of the link between women's empowerment and access to justice by emphasizing individuals' freedoms to pursue what they have reason to value, which serves as the standard for evaluating justice (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000).

In other words, women's rights matter only if women can achieve them through tangible results. With this in mind, the current study expects that WEE interventions will reduce financial barriers to accessing justice services, such as transportation, application fees, and interview costs; enhance survivors' agency and options for exiting abusive relationships; and increase social capital and awareness of justice services. These benefits are gained through women's participation in group-based savings (Maru, 2010; UNDP, 2004), member referrals, accompaniment to justice points, and collective confidence in navigating formal institutions. As noted above, participants' socio-demographic backgrounds may influence both their exposure to these barriers and their ability to engage with WEE initiatives, which could also affect the link between WEE and access to justice. Rawls' difference principle, therefore, provides a basis for focusing on GBV survivors with fewer resources.

2.2. Sensitization and Skills Training, and Access to Justice

Women's economic empowerment is increasingly recognized as a key strategy for advancing gender equality and inclusive growth, particularly when women face systemic barriers to access to resources, voice, and security (UN Women, 2024). Sensitization and skills development for GBV survivors are part of survivor-centered approaches aimed not only at improving livelihoods but also at increasing agency, reducing dependence on abusive partners, and expanding options for women and girls in violence-affected situations (UNDP, 2023; IDLO, 2010). These efforts are becoming more important for strengthening women's ability to assert their rights and seek justice when harmed (UN Women 2019; UN Women 2024).

According to Williams et al. (2022), training and education are also crucial for empowering women by enhancing their capabilities, critical awareness, and decision-making power. GBV sensitization and skills training in areas such as agronomy, vocational skills, and enterprise development can support justice-seeking by addressing three common barriers: (1) lack of information and confidence, (2) economic and mobility restrictions, and (3) difficulty navigating service referral networks. Sensitization raises women's awareness of their rights and available justice options, as well as the potential outcomes of reporting cases to police or other authorities. Greater awareness helps reduce fear and misinformation and challenges social norms that tolerate violence, which are two main reasons women often delay or avoid reporting GBV (UNDP, 2004; UN Women, 2022).

In line with insights from legal empowerment literature, Golub (2010) and Maru (2010) note that information alone may do little to empower survivors if not accompanied by supporting mechanisms, such as case workers, community paralegals, and accompaniment programs, which address the logistical challenges involved in helping clients realize their rights in practice. Skills programs can also lead to psychosocial benefits beyond material outcomes. Skill training may enhance survivors' confidence in their ability to effect change and build self-assurance. Benjaminsson (2014) suggests that through these processes, skill training may indirectly support justice-seeking efforts by enhancing survivors' agency to report abuse and their willingness to stay engaged with justice mechanisms. This hypothesis is supported by research on integrated social work programs that provide both skills training and psychosocial support to GBV survivors. However, both bodies of literature emphasize that sensitization and skills training depend on the broader context and institutional environment in which survivors navigate justice pathways. Patriarchal attitudes, stigma, institutional indifference, complex administrative procedures, and ineffective court systems may either facilitate or hinder survivors' ability to act on their new knowledge or use additional economic resources to pursue justice (UNDP, 2019; UN Women, 2022). While integrated GBV livelihood programs have been shown to increase uptake of support services among beneficiaries in other conflict-affected settings, few studies have documented these trends at the district level in Northern Uganda.

H1: Sensitization and skills training are positively and significantly associated with stakeholder perceptions of access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District.

2.3. Business Startup Capital Intervention and Access to Justice

Start-up capital remains a significant obstacle for women-owned businesses in many low- and middle-income countries, where enterprise development mainly depends on modest savings and informal credit rather than loans from formal financial institutions (AMFIU, 2022). Data from small informal enterprises indicate that most were established with minimal capital and did not access banks or microfinance during a single survey period, suggesting limited capacity to grow

or withstand shocks (CSA, 2023). Collateral constraints further worsen the challenge of limited formal credit access, creating extra barriers for women entrepreneurs, including difficult regulatory and business environments, weak contract enforcement and property rights protections, and gendered socio-cultural norms that reduce the returns women receive from capital investments or otherwise hinder the performance of women-led enterprises regardless of start-up funds (Gatewood et al., 2019; OECD, 2015; UNDP, 2019; World Bank, 2025). Start-up capital is also believed to improve GBV survivors' access to justice, especially through a resource-and-agency pathway: giving women more financial means to leave abusive partners, providing exit options, and helping them cover the direct and indirect costs of seeking justice (UNDP, 2004).

OECD (2015) notes that such economic assistance alone, however, rarely leads to meaningful justice gains when institutions are unjust or weak, and when accessing them entails risks or costly trade-offs for survivors. In these cases, Golub (2010) and Maru (2010) emphasize that interventions based on a legal empowerment framework can help women better understand their rights and navigate justice institutions by offering information, guidance, and enhanced accountability (Golub, 2010; Maru, 2010). UNDP (2023) also highlights that economic empowerment is most effective for GBV responses when combined with other services. Although start-up assistance is one part of Aid's programming for women's economic empowerment in Gulu District, little research has been done to determine if and how start-up capital specifically improves GBV survivors' access to justice in this post-conflict setting, and how it interacts with other parts of the program, such as sensitization and skills training. The current study seeks to address this gap, leading to the second hypothesis.

H2: Business start-up capital support is positively and significantly associated with stakeholder perceptions of access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research approach and employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the association between women's economic empowerment interventions and perceived access to justice among GBV stakeholders in Gulu District. The cross-sectional design was appropriate because data were collected from respondents at a single point in time (Creswell & Plano, 2018). While the survey strategy enabled standardized measurement of the study variables across the selected sample. This approach allows objective measurement of relationships between variables, hypothesis testing, and trend observation through rigorous statistical analysis. A purely quantitative approach was used because the study's primary research goal is confirmatory and deductive (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008), seeking to determine the extent to which the independent variables (sensitization, skills training, and business start-up support) predict the dependent variable (access to justice). The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design.

This design ensures replicability and transparency, which are hallmarks of scholarly rigor in quantitative inquiry.

The target population comprised 360 GBV stakeholders involved in GBV response, women's economic empowerment, and access to justice in Gulu District, including 23 AAIU staff, 8 district community services staff, 18 judiciary staff in the Gulu magisterial district, 135 local council leaders (LC II-III), and 176 SURGE women beneficiaries. A planned sample of 186 participants was selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling frame. Sampling combined purposive sampling for AAIU program staff, district community services staff and judicial officers due to their valuable insights on intervention design and implementation (Kothari, 2006; Saunders et al., 2015); cluster sampling of local council districts as clusters, with a lottery method for selecting leaders near SURGE participants; and simple random sampling of SURGE beneficiaries using Mobile IDs to reduce bias (Lohr, 2019). A total of 186 questionnaires were distributed, of which 148 were returned, yielding a return rate of 79.6%. During data cleaning, seven questionnaires were excluded because they showed extremely low within-response variability (standard deviation < 0.24), indicating invariant or systematic response patterns, while nine were excluded because they had substantial missing data on both predictor and outcome variables. The final analytic sample therefore comprised 132 questionnaires, representing 89.2% of returned questionnaires and 71.0% of the planned sample.

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire measuring respondents' perceptions of sensitization and skills training, business start-up support, access to justice, and socio-demographic characteristics. Because the analytic sample included programme beneficiaries alongside AAIU staff, judicial personnel, district officers, and local leaders, the intervention measures are interpreted as stakeholder assessments of the extent to which ActionAid provided these interventions rather than as evidence that every respondent personally received each intervention. Individual participation duration, intensity, and type of programme support were not measured consistently across all stakeholder categories; accordingly, the analysis does not estimate a treatment effect of programme exposure. The questionnaire contained demographic characteristics and measured women's empowerment, sensitization and skills training, and access to justice, using a four-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". This standardized format is essential for converting perceptions into numerical data suitable for statistical testing. Data quality was verified using CVI and checked for instrument adequacy. A calibration exercise with experts prior to data collection yielded a CVI score of 0.757, which is considered acceptable, as it exceeds 0.70 (Taherdoost, 2016). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales yielding coefficients between 0.723 and 0.881, averaging 0.788; values above 0.7 indicate internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS using descriptive and inferential statistics at 95% confidence levels. The analysis followed a two-step scholarly frame-

work, i.e., generation of descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize socio-demographic profiles and stakeholder perceptions of WEE interventions and access to justice. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether sensitization, skills training, and business start-up support significantly predicted access-to-justice ratings, controlling for other predictors. Regression coefficients are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal effects because of the cross-sectional design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Greene et al., 1989). Ethical approval was obtained from the Uganda Management Institute as required, with the approval letters and introductory documents presented to the gatekeepers. The study adhered to research ethics principles, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding deception (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018).

4. Findings/Results

This section presents findings from the 132 questionnaires retained after data-quality screening. All descriptive and inferential analyses therefore use $N = 132$. Because respondents were drawn from multiple stakeholder categories, the results are interpreted as stakeholder perceptions of women's economic empowerment interventions and access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District rather than as survivor experiences alone.

4.1. Response Rate and Respondent Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Of the 186 questionnaires distributed, 148 were returned, representing a 79.6% return rate. Following data-quality screening, seven questionnaires with invariant response patterns ($SD < 0.24$) and nine questionnaires with substantial missing data on both predictor and outcome variables were excluded. The remaining 132 questionnaires were sufficiently complete and suitable for statistical analysis, constituting the final analytic sample (Table 1).

Table 1. Questionnaire response rate.

Stage	n	Percentage
Questionnaires distributed	186	100.0
Not returned	38	20.4
Questionnaires returned	148	79.6
<i>Excluded: invariant response pattern ($SD < 0.24$)</i>	7	3.8
<i>Excluded: substantial missing predictor/outcome data</i>	9	4.8
Final total	132	71.0

Note: Percentages are calculated against the 186 questionnaires distributed.

Table 2 presents the background characteristics of questionnaire respondents

(n = 132). Variables include gender, age group, education level, marital status, and household or family size. These characteristics provide context for interpreting subsequent analyses of stakeholder perceptions of WEE interventions and of access to justice.

Table 2. Showing respondent socio-demographic characteristics.

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
21 - 25 years	23	18.0
26 - 30 years	45	34.0
31 - 35 years	21	16.0
36 - 40 years	11	8.0
Above 41 years	32	24.0
Total	132	100.0
Gender		
Male	42	32.0
Female	90	68.0
Total	132	100.0
Education Level		
Master's Degree	5	4.0
Bachelor's Degree	47	36.0
Diploma Holders	12	9.0
Other Qualification	68	52.0
Total	132	100.0
Marriage Type		
Traditional	55	42.0
Church	45	34.0
Co-habiting	32	24.0
Total	132	100.0
Family Size		
2 - 4	75	57.0
5 - 7	37	28.0
8 - 10	12	9.0
More than 10	8	6.0
Total	132	100.0

Source: Primary Data, 2024.

Table 2 shows that more female respondents (68%, 90) participated than male respondents (32%, 42). Having mostly female respondents aligns with the study's

focus on women's empowerment and GBV-related pathways to justice, although males could also provide comparative insights where relevant. It's important to note that respondents ranged from young people to older adults. Ages 26 - 30 were the largest group (34%, $n = 45$), followed by those over 41 years old (24%, $n = 32$), 21 - 25 years (18%, $n = 23$), 31 - 35 years (16%, $n = 21$), and 36 - 40 years (8%, $n = 11$). Generally, the respondents' ages span those likely currently in the workforce and older individuals with longstanding observations of how people seek justice and respond to GBV.

The results also indicated that most respondents had either 'other qualifications', that is, A-level, O-level, Certificates, and primary (52%, $n = 68$) or a bachelor's degree (36%, $n = 47$). Meanwhile, 9% (12) held a diploma, and 4% (5) possessed a master's degree. While this information would be useful for all respondents, the responses suggest that most participants were sufficiently literate to answer the questionnaire thoughtfully. Additionally, 42% (55) of respondents reported being in a traditional marriage, 34% (45) reported a church marriage, and 24% (32) reported living with their partner. Marriage structures can offer insight into household power dynamics and are therefore relevant to this study's context. Of the total respondents, 57% (75) had 2 to 4 dependents, 28% (37) had 5 to 7 dependents, 9% (12) had 8 to 10 dependents, and 6% (8) had more than 10 dependents. These responsibilities may worsen women's economic insecurity and hinder their ability to seek justice in practice, considering time constraints, mobility issues, and financial costs.

4.2. Sensitization and Skills Training

Table 3 presents stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which ActionAid International Uganda provided sensitization and skills training sessions to GBV survivors in Gulu district, including GBV awareness, family relations/positive masculinity training, agronomy skills, and livelihood and financial decision-making skills.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for sensitization and skills training.

S/N	Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	ActionAid provided knowledge on handling family relations	132	2	5	4.45	0.691
2	ActionAid provided knowledge on fighting GBV in the community	132	1	5	3.72	1.194
3	ActionAid provided knowledge on dealing with issues of positive masculinity	132	2	5	4.53	0.623
4	ActionAid provided training on improved agronomic practices	132	1	5	3.98	1.019
5	ActionAid provided knowledge on opportunities to invest financial resources	132	1	5	4.04	0.976
6	ActionAid provided knowledge on how to identify profitable ventures for income generation	132	2	5	4.15	0.977

Source: Primary Data, 2024.

Descriptive statistics for the sensitization and skills training domain ($N = 132$) show generally strong agreement that ActionAid provided essential knowledge and skills training to GBV survivors. However, responses vary more when specific topics within the domain are addressed. Respondents most likely agreed that they learned about positive masculinity ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.623$). The high mean and low standard deviation indicate a strong consensus that content on positive masculinity was received and understood. Similarly, respondents agreed that household conflict was addressed through GBV messaging, with knowledge on managing family relations ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.691$).

Furthermore, respondents agreed that the program improved their economic decision-making skills, including identifying profitable income-generating activities ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.977$) and recognizing investment opportunities ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.976$). These three means are more varied than the earlier ones, indicating diverse experiences with these topics. Respondents also likely received training on improved agronomy practices ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.019$). While this mean is generally positive, response variability is higher. The lowest mean involved knowing how to combat GBV within one's community ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.194$), which, although positive, indicates greater response variability. This suggests different levels of exposure or training regarding community efforts to address GBV.

4.3. Business Startup Intervention

Table 4 presents respondents' views on the extent to which ActionAid Uganda provided business start-up capital to GBV survivors in Gulu District.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for business startup intervention.

S/N	Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	ActionAid provided equipment as start up to GBV survivors in Gulu	132	1	5	4.22	0.876
2	ActionAid provided agricultural inputs to GBV survivors in Gulu	132	2	5	4.37	0.714
3	ActionAid provided additional monetary funding to GBV survivors in Gulu	132	1	5	4.23	0.905
4	ActionAid provided knowledge on business management	132	1	5	3.81	1.153
5	ActionAid encouraged GBV survivors to establish individual businesses	132	1	5	3.78	1.036

Source: Primary Data, 2024.

Descriptive results for items within the business startup support dimension ($N = 132$) show that participants mostly agreed or strongly agreed that ActionAid provided some form of business start-up support for GBV survivors in Gulu. Participants generally also agreed that ActionAid offered business development capabilities. The highest averages were reported for start-up inputs provided by ActionAid ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.714$). The low variability and high mean suggest participants were quite consistent in their experience of receiving inputs from ActionAid. Close follow-ups were reported for additional monetary funding ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.905$) and start-up equipment received ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.876$).

The results also showed that ActionAid's start-up package was substantial, and many received such material support. Support for enterprise start-up through "software" rather than inputs was slightly lower, but participants still agreed that ActionAid supported these aspects of business development. Business management knowledge had a mean score of 3.81 (SD = 1.153), and encouragement to start one's own business had a mean score of 3.78 (SD = 1.036). The greater variability in these two items suggests that participants did not experience these aspects of enterprise support equally or that some received more intensive training than others.

4.4. Access to Justice

Descriptive results on access to justice as understood by respondents in Gulu District are presented in this subsection. Access to justice is defined as the extent to which individuals, especially GBV survivors, can know their rights and seek their fulfillment through fair, timely, affordable, and reliable mechanisms and justice institutions to resolve disputes and access justice. This analysis therefore shows respondents' perceptions of the existence of rights, awareness of rights, the affordability and accessibility of mechanisms, the timeliness and effectiveness of dispute resolution, the neutrality and independence of institutions, and the ability of people to exercise their rights (Table 5).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics on access to justice.

S/N	Items	N	Mini.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	Granting comprehensive/equal rights to all is now possible	132	2	5	4.49	0.726
2	There is widespread legal awareness/literacy among people to use	132	1	5	3.73	1.217
3	There is an availability of accessible/affordable dispute resolution mechanisms for people to use	132	1	5	3.73	1.203
4	The dispute resolution mechanism used is timely	132	1	5	3.23	1.334
5	The dispute resolution mechanisms are effective/efficient	132	1	5	3.03	1.353
6	The dispute resolution mechanisms are impartial/corrupt-free/trustworthy for use by all	132	1	5	2.85	1.328
7	The legal institutions now provide access to justice	132	1	5	2.64	1.193
8	Individuals now have the ability to exercise/express their rights	132	1	5	2.59	1.217

Source: Primary Data, 2024.

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics (N = 132) on perceptions of access to justice. The results indicate that while some dimensions received notably high overall scores—showing consistent recognition among respondents of formal norms regarding rights—implementation varied as perceptions shifted from ideals to the conditions that foster justice. Respondents strongly agreed that everyone should and can be granted all rights (M = 4.49; SD = 0.726), but they were less optimistic about the conditions that support the realization of these rights. Scores were mod-

erate (“agree”) for awareness of rights and legal literacy ($M = 3.73$; $SD = 1.217$) and for the existence of affordable and accessible mechanisms for dispute resolution ($M = 3.73$; $SD = 1.203$), though considerable variability was observed in both areas.

In contrast, perceptions of the justice system’s performance were low; respondents only “agreed” that justice mechanisms resolve disputes promptly ($M = 3.23$; $SD = 1.334$) and remained neutral about their effectiveness and efficiency in dispute resolution ($M = 3.03$; $SD = 1.353$). Trust in justice mechanisms was rated even lower; respondents scored poorly on the neutrality of justice systems and the absence of corruption ($M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.328$). The least favorable responses concerned the actual enjoyment and exercise of rights; respondents disagreed that institutions provide access to justice ($M = 2.64$; $SD = 1.193$) and that they can exercise their rights ($M = 2.59$; $SD = 1.217$).

4.5. Multiple Regression

Multiple regression analysis was performed to test the study hypotheses by examining whether stakeholder ratings of sensitization and skills training and business start-up support statistically predicted ratings of access to justice. Multiple regression was chosen because it allows researchers to examine how two or more independent variables together predict scores on a dependent variable while controlling for the effects of other predictors in the model (Table 6).

Table 6. Model summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	0.458 ^a	0.209	0.197	0.64161	0.209	17.088	2	129	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Business Startup, Sensitization and skills training.

Regression results show that stakeholder ratings of women’s economic empowerment interventions were significantly associated with access-to-justice ratings. The model indicates a moderate positive relationship ($R = 0.458$), and accounted for approximately 20.9% of the variance in access to justice ($R^2 = 0.209$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.197$). In other words, sensitization/ awareness and skills training, and business startup support account for a notable part of the differences among respondents regarding access to justice, while 79% of the variance might be due to other factors not included in this model, such as institutional integrity, distance or accessibility to services and justice, costs or dowry, stigma related to GBV case reporting, case management procedures, and socio-demographic factors (Table 7 & Table 8).

The ANOVA results demonstrate that the overall regression model is statistically significant ($F(2,129) = 17.088$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the two predictors together improve the prediction of access to justice compared to a model without

predictors. Coefficient results indicate that each predictor has a positive and statistically significant association with access to justice. Sensitisation and skills training were positively associated with access to justice ratings ($B = 0.443$, $\beta = 0.312$, $t = 3.527$, $p = 0.001$). This means that a one-unit increase in the sensitisation and skills training score is associated with a 0.443-unit increase in the access to justice score, holding business start-up support constant. Business start-up support is also positively associated with access to justice ($B = 0.250$, $\beta = 0.219$, $t = 2.479$, $p = 0.014$), suggesting that a one-unit increase in the business start-up support score corresponds to a 0.250-unit increase in the access to justice score, while controlling for sensitisation and skills training. The standardized coefficients indicate that sensitization and skills training had the comparatively stronger statistical association with access-to-justice ratings.

Table 7. ANOVA^a.

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	14.069	2	7.034	17.088	0.000 ^b
	Residual	53.104	129	0.412		
	Total	67.173	131			

a. Dependent Variable: Access to Justice; b. Predictors: (Constant), Business Startup, Sensitization and skills training.

Table 8. Coefficients^a.

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.427	0.494		0.863	0.390
	Sensitization and Skills Training	0.443	0.126	0.312	3.527	0.001
	Business Startup	0.250	0.101	0.219	2.479	0.014

a. Dependent Variable: Access to Justice.

Therefore, H1 is supported, as sensitization and skills training are positively and statistically significantly associated with access to justice ($p = 0.001$). H2 is also supported, as business start-up support is positively and statistically significantly associated with access to justice ($p = 0.014$). This indicates that knowledge, awareness, and skills may be more critical than financial assistance in empowering survivors to seek justice.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Sensitization and Skills Training and Access to Justice for GBV Survivors

The study found a positive and statistically significant association between stakeholder ratings of sensitization and skills training and perceived access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District. This relationship suggests that knowledge-ori-

ented interventions may be relevant not only to livelihood development but also to the broader conditions that support justice-seeking, including recognition of violations, confidence, information access, mobilisation of support, and navigation of justice institutions. The finding is consistent with research indicating that expanding women's knowledge and capabilities can strengthen agency and the ability to claim rights, particularly where formal justice systems are difficult to navigate (Williams et al., 2022; UNDP, 2004).

The results also align with legal empowerment strategies that see meaningful justice as relying on having practical knowledge, self-confidence, and support to navigate institutions and complete often complex procedures (Golub, 2010; Maru, 2010). Rawls' theory of justice as fairness can also serve as a normative foundation for these ideas. By protecting basic liberties and prioritizing uplift for society's most vulnerable, Justice as Fairness stresses the importance of interventions that broaden survivors' options and opportunities to close the gap between rights on paper and their real-world implementation (Rawls, 1999). Sensitization and skills training help achieve this by enhancing survivors' substantive freedoms to act—an argument that supports other capability-based empowerment theories focused on meaningful choice, agency, and working toward valued life outcomes like safety and legal recourse (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 2009).

However, prior research indicates that patriarchal attitudes, household power asymmetries, stigma, procedural barriers, and weak institutional accountability can constrain women's ability to translate knowledge and economic resources into justice-seeking behavior (Rao, 2014; UNDP, 2019; CEDAW Committee, 2015; JLOS, 2016; UN Women, 2022). Thus, while the present quantitative findings are consistent with the proposition that sensitization and skills training are associated with more favorable access-to-justice perceptions, they do not establish that such training caused changes in survivors' behavior or justice outcomes.

5.2. Business Startup Capital and Access to Justice for GBV Survivors

The second research objective examined the association between stakeholder ratings of business start-up support and perceived access to justice for GBV survivors. Regression analysis showed a positive and statistically significant association, although the standardized relationship was weaker than that observed for sensitization and skills training. This pattern is consistent with the proposition that start-up funds, equipment, and other productive inputs may reduce financial constraints associated with justice-seeking, including transport, documentation, communication, and opportunity costs (UNDP, 2004). Rawls' difference principle also provides a normative basis for targeted support to disadvantaged groups by expanding practical opportunities to access protections that might otherwise remain out of reach (Rawls, 1999).

However, the statistical association between business start-up support and access-to-justice ratings should not be interpreted as evidence that financial support

automatically generates justice outcomes. Broader literature indicates that income and material resources do not necessarily translate into agency where women have limited control over household resources or where patriarchal norms constrain decision-making (Rao, 2014). Similarly, women's enterprise outcomes depend on contextual conditions such as land rights, market access, and institutional arrangements (Gatewood et al., 2019; OECD, 2015), while weak or discriminatory justice systems may continue to limit access despite improved economic resources (CEDAW Committee, 2015; UN Women, 2022).

Legal empowerment scholarship therefore emphasises that economic resources are important but may be insufficient without complementary mechanisms such as legal information, community paralegals, accompaniment, referral networks, and affordable legal aid (Golub, 2010; Maru, 2010). At the model level, the two WEE variables jointly predicted access-to-justice ratings, but much of the variance remained unexplained, underscoring the likely relevance of institutional timeliness, service availability, integrity, stigma, safety, and socio-demographic conditions. Overall, the findings support both hypotheses, with statistically significant associations: sensitization and skills training show the stronger relationships with access-to-justice ratings.

5.3. Conclusion

This study found that stakeholder perceptions of women's economic empowerment interventions were positively associated with perceived access to justice for GBV survivors in Gulu District. Sensitization and skills training showed the stronger statistical association, while business start-up support was also positively associated with access-to-justice ratings. These findings suggest that knowledge-oriented and economic-support interventions may be important components of broader strategies to strengthen access to justice. However, because the study employed a cross-sectional design and drew respondents from multiple stakeholder groups, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that the interventions caused improvements in survivors' justice outcomes or as survivor-specific accounts. A substantial proportion of variation in access to justice remained unexplained by the model, reinforcing the importance of institutional, socio-cultural, legal, and economic conditions beyond the empowerment interventions examined. Future research using survivor-specific samples, direct measures of programme exposure, and longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs would provide stronger evidence on how and under what conditions women's economic empowerment is related to justice-seeking and justice outcomes among GBV survivors.

The researchers recommend that AAIU, in collaboration with Gulu District leadership, strengthen community norm-change efforts by encouraging local cultural institutions, led by the Paramount Chief of Ker Kal-Kwaro Acholi, to review harsh traditional practices that block women from reporting GBV and seeking justice. AAIU should continue expanding efforts to engage men through lessons promoting positive masculinity, which can also increase male involvement in pre-

venting GBV. This approach has the potential to prevent backlash against women earners and address household decision-making dynamics that might discourage survivors from using their new skills. At the service level, AAIU and district stakeholders should strengthen their legal empowerment programs by raising community awareness and providing additional legal literacy training to survivors of violence about their rights. These efforts should ensure accessibility for women with limited literacy and streamline referral pathways to women's shelters, paralegal networks, and law firms, making these resources known to service providers. AAIU should also continue advocating for and building the capacity of JLOS stakeholders to implement practical reforms that reduce costs for survivors, such as subsidized legal services and counseling, simplified, survivor-friendly judicial procedures, and the prioritization of GBV cases, thereby increasing trust in justice institutions and ensuring timely, responsive support for women.

Author Contributions

Okello generated the data for and developed a masters dissertation which was supervised by Namara.

Namara generated and drafted the paper from the masters dissertation.

Komakech conducted and guided the quantitative data analysis.

Mubangizi did quality assurance, editing, re-writing some sections of the paper to ensure quality follow of arguments.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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