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Living as citizens, governed as foreigners: recognition strategies and intergenerational invisibility among abavandimwe in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This article examines 'unrecognised refugees' through the experiences of second- and third-generation abavandimwe: people of Rwandan descent born and raised in Uganda to forebears who fled successive waves of violence in Rwanda from 1959 onwards and who remained outside formal recognition regimes across generations. Drawing on qualitative interviews with second- and third-generation abavandimwe, Ugandan host community members, and selected government officials, we analyse how belonging and exclusion are produced through everyday social relations and state documentation practices. Conceptually, the article distinguishes everyday recognition, expressed through local acceptance, schooling, work, and community ties, from juridical recognition, expressed through nationality law, identity documentation, and naturalisation procedures. The findings show that intergenerational invisibility is actively reproduced when administrative encounters deny nationality claims, even for individuals who have lived in Uganda their entire lives, including cases where parents are absent or deceased. Everyday recognition enables participation in social life, but its protections collapse during legal and bureaucratic verification, especially when seeking national identity cards, passports, or mobility. By theorising this invisibility as a structural gap between lived citizenship and juridical recognition, the article contributes to debates on citizenship, statelessness risk, and intergenerational displacement, with implications for protection and durable solutions in protracted displacement contexts.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Opening vignette and the empirical puzzle

On a weekday morning at a district registration office, a young woman in her early twenties joins the queue to apply for the document that would make her life administratively ordinary. She was born in Uganda, raised in Ugandan schools, speaks the local language fluently, and has never lived anywhere else. Yet she arrives carrying more than forms. She carries a bundle of substitute proofs: a baptism card, school records, a letter from a local council chairperson, and the names of elders who can vouch that she has

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always lived here. When she reaches the counter, the encounter turns from routine administration into a question of membership. She is asked to explain her 'real' origin, to identify the nationality of parents who are no longer alive, and to produce ancestry evidence she does not possess. The request is framed as procedural rather than political, but it functions as a decisive test: without documentary lineage that satisfies the state's criteria, her claim to Uganda remains indefinitely pending.

The young woman in this vignette is one of the abavandimwe, a Kinyarwanda term meaning 'brethren' or 'kin', used by communities of Rwandan descent in Uganda to assert belonging to the same social and moral community as those they are addressing, rather than the status of recent foreigners. The term and its contested administrative reception are introduced more fully in Section 1.2.

> My grandmother was here, my mother was born here, and I was also born here and I grew up here. When I went to apply for the national ID, they told me, 'You are not Ugandan'. I asked them where I should go instead, and they said I should first prove where my parents came from. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 2)

This vignette captures the paper's empirical puzzle: how do second- and third-generation abavandimwe become socially present and locally recognised as Ugandan, yet remain administratively foreign when they seek citizenship-linked documentation? The problem is not simply bureaucratic delay. It is a patterned form of exclusion produced at the point where everyday belonging meets state legibility, and where citizenship is proven through lineage-based evidence rather than lived social membership. The paper not only diagnoses exclusion but also identifies strategic pathways for turning everyday recognition into juridical recognition.

Across many contexts, communities can be deeply embedded in a host state's economy and social life while remaining insecure in law. They work, participate in local institutions, and raise children who know no other home, yet lack secure, rights-bearing citizenship documentation. This condition has become more visible as displacement persists globally and as 'undetermined nationality' remains administratively unresolved for many populations. At the same time, the true scale of statelessness is widely recognised as difficult to measure because official counts depend on whether states identify, classify, and report stateless persons in the first place, meaning that statistical visibility is itself uneven and politically contingent (UNHCR 2019, 2025b).

Statutory non-recognition and administrative non-recognition should therefore be treated not only as humanitarian concerns, but as governance practices that shape the distribution of rights, mobility, and security within states.

To analyse this problem, the paper follows an organising distinction that remains analytically simple but empirically powerful: everyday recognition versus juridical recognition. Everyday recognition refers to social forms of belonging produced through schooling, neighbourhood ties, language, work, participation in religious and community institutions, and being 'known' locally. Juridical recognition refers to state-administered membership, expressed through nationality law, documentation regimes, registries, and the administrative procedures that determine who is recognised as a citizen. In many settings these two forms of recognition do not align, producing a space of partial inclusion that can stabilise social life while sustaining legal precarity. This misalignment is not accidental. It is sustained by governance

dynamics in which insecurity of status functions as a technique of rule. Deportability scholarship shows how the possibility of removal and the denial of secure status operate as instruments of control that discipline everyday life and limit claims to equal membership (De Genova 2002). Documentary regimes are central to this process because they determine how the state 'sees' persons and translates social existence into legible membership, with exclusion often enacted through evidentiary demands and paper-based classification (Torpey 2000, 5–25).

Uganda is a particularly sharp site for examining this puzzle because citizenship by birth is not simply a matter of being born on Ugandan territory. Rather, citizenship by birth requires that at least one parent or grandparent is, or was, a member of one of the 'indigenous communities' listed in the Third Schedule of the 1995 Constitution, defined as communities present within Uganda as of 1 February 1926 (National Citizenship and Immigration Control 2024; Republic of Uganda 1995;). This constitutional architecture creates a historical proof test: a second- or third-generation person may be Ugandan in lived experience but still be asked to establish membership through lineage evidence aligned to a colonial-era list. Where families lack stable civil registration histories, where parents are absent or deceased, or where records were never produced or were lost, the demand for ancestry proof becomes structurally unattainable. The practical consequence is that individuals who have never crossed a border can still be treated as foreigners in the only home they know.

The puzzle, then, is generational. It concerns not only the insecurity of first-generation persons whose legal position may be contested, but the reproduction of insecurity among their children and grandchildren. Statelessness is defined in international law as not being considered a national by any state under the operation of its law (United Nations 1954), and the risk of statelessness can arise 'silently' inside a state when long-settled communities are denied recognition in nationality law or are unable to prove eligibility for citizenship through documentation they cannot access. The intergenerational dimension is central: where citizenship is not automatically granted by birth on the territory and is instead tied to descent from an officially recognised national community, insecurity can be transmitted rather than resolved.

Comparative cases show that this is not unique to Uganda. Descendants of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, long-settled families excluded from Assam's citizenship registers, and Bidun communities in the Gulf each show how documentary nullification or escalating evidentiary demands can produce effective statelessness despite long-term residence (Albarazi and Kuzmova 2021; Beaugrand 2018; Bhat 2024; Deb 2024; Petrozziello 2025). These cases clarify the mechanism this paper examines in Uganda: the production of non-citizenship through evidentiary burdens that outstrip what long-settled families can realistically provide. Section 2.3 develops this comparative architecture in full, alongside the closest analogue, the vetting regime applied to the Nubians of Kenya.

The paper also treats the problem as one of implementation. Comparative research on 'irregularised but non-removable' residents in Europe and on administrative ambivalence in North Africa and Turkey shows that discretionary enforcement and delivery failures sustain precarity even where policy frames appear inclusionary (Carrera, Pőcze, and Jubany 2025; Norman 2020). This emphasis on delivery matters for the Ugandan context, where citizenship and documentation outcomes often turn on decisions made at

bureaucratic interfaces, including shifting evidentiary demands, informal gatekeeping, and the uneven willingness of local officials to accept community attestation as proof.

> We know these children as ours. They were born here, they went to our schools, and we have watched them grow up. When someone needs help, they come to us. But when they go to the government offices, they are told they are not Ugandan, and there is nothing that we can do about it. (Local Council official 1)

Framed this way, the paper advances a clear empirical and theoretical claim: intergenerational 'invisibility' is not merely inherited from parental status; it is actively reproduced through nationality architectures and documentation regimes that separate lived citizenship from juridical recognition. The remainder of the article proceeds in five steps. Section 2 situates the Ugandan case within debates on citizenship, statelessness, and intergenerational displacement, keeping the everyday versus juridical recognition distinction at the centre and locating the abavandimwe case alongside comparable architectures elsewhere in the postcolonial world. Section 3 details the interview-based methodology and the ethics of researching legally sensitive identities. Section 4 presents findings showing that hosts and officials operate on two distinct registers of recognition; that juridical doubt is triggered at documentation gateways through escalating and gendered proof demands; that participants navigate the resulting gap through substitution, brokerage, and strategic invisibility; that administrative doubt transmits across generations through inherited documentary deficits; and that these dynamics carry direct costs for education, employment, and mobility. Section 5 discusses what these findings mean for theorising citizenship and autochthony, before Section 6 concludes with implications for policy and durable solutions.

1.2. The abavandimwe: who they are, how they got here and why their citizenship is contested

The term *abavandimwe* is Kinyarwanda for 'brethren' or 'kin'. It asserts relational belonging: those it names claim to belong to the same social and moral community as those listening. Within Uganda, communities of Rwandan descent use it as a self-identifier to present themselves not as recent foreigners but as Ugandans by upbringing, language, and social embeddedness. Its use in recent public discourse, including presidential addresses (Uganda Broadcasting Corporation 2025), reframes a population often described administratively as *Banyarwanda* (Rwandese) and instead positions them as kin. The label performs the very recognition claim this paper analyses: it asserts insider belonging at the social level, prior to any verdict by the state.

The community's presence results from overlapping movements across decades. Borderland pastoral and labour mobility across the Rwanda–Uganda frontier predates the colonial border itself. Following administrative boundary adjustments around Ugandan independence, populations who had lived in contested zones were reassigned to Uganda, with concentrations in south-western Uganda. On top of this substrate sit successive refugee waves: violence between 1959 and 1962 around Rwandan independence produced major inflows, followed by further movements in the 1970s and early 1990s; the 1994 genocide prompted additional displacement, with many remaining permanently in Uganda thereafter (Walker 2011). Labour migration has continued throughout, often

invisible to formal records. The result is a community whose Ugandan history cannot be narrated as a single arrival. Some abavandimwe families trace residence to before the colonial border; others to the late colonial period; others to specific refugee inflows. Each history produces different paper trails, and none produces the kind of documentary evidence that contemporary Ugandan administration treats as authoritative.

The constitutional test that governs this is more subtle than simple ethnic exclusion. The Banyarwanda *are* listed in the Third Schedule of the 1995 Constitution as one of Uganda's recognised 'indigenous communities' (Republic of Uganda 1995). Citizenship by birth is granted to 'every person born in Uganda one of whose parents or grandparents is or was a member of any of the indigenous communities existing and residing within the borders of Uganda as at the first day of February, 1926' (Republic of Uganda 1995). The 1926 cut-off freezes a particular colonial moment and turns it into a permanent test of who counts as authentically Ugandan. For abavandimwe whose forebears were resident before that date, citizenship by birth is in principle available. For those descended from refugees who arrived from 1959 onwards, no amount of subsequent residence can satisfy the test. What this produces is a *temporal* test masquerading as an ethnic one: the community is named in the law, but families inside it are stratified by date into those whose belonging is constitutionally recognised and those whose belonging is constitutionally denied (Zakaryan 2020). For second- and third-generation abavandimwe attempting to evidence pre-1926 ancestry through colonial-era records that were never reliably kept for rural African populations, the test is structurally unmeetable.

The political context that activates this architecture is volatile. Ugandan–Rwandan relations move between alliance and tension, and the abavandimwe recur as an object of concern: during the 1982 expulsions, the 2011 cessation clause invocation for Rwandan refugees, and successive 'verification' exercises in which national identity cards have been confiscated or applications stalled. Public discourse alternates between treating the community as long-settled neighbours and treating them as a security or demographic concern. Where the political weather shifts, frontline implementers shift with it. A community whose belonging is contingent on executive mood has, by definition, no secure status.

Two registers of non-recognition structure the analysis throughout. *Statutory non-recognition* refers to the formal legal architecture: citizenship by birth conditioned on pre-1926 ancestry and historical barriers to naturalisation. *Administrative non-recognition* refers to what happens at the counter: demands for documents families cannot produce, deferral without written reasons, discretionary acceptance or refusal of community attestation, and gendered insistence on paternal lineage. The two operate together. Statutory non-recognition sets the legal frame; administrative non-recognition gives it daily effect. This paper's empirical contribution focuses on the second register: how administrative practice reproduces invisibility for second- and third-generation abavandimwe even where statutory pathways nominally exist.

2. Conceptual anchor and context

2.1. Intergenerational invisibility as a citizenship problem

Uganda's constitutional architecture provides a particularly clear setting for examining this. Under the 1995 Constitution, citizenship by birth is linked not only to place

of birth but to descent from a constitutionally recognised list of 'indigenous communities' regarded as existing and residing within Uganda as of 1 February 1926 (Republic of Uganda 1995). Contemporary government guidance reiterates this logic in operational terms: citizenship by birth requires that a person be born in Uganda and have at least one parent or grandparent who is or was a member of one of the indigenous communities listed in the Third Schedule (National Citizenship and Immigration Control 2024). In practice, this transforms many citizenship claims into a historical proof test. For second and third generations whose family histories may not be documented in ways that align with administrative expectations, the requirement is not merely demanding but structurally exclusionary, because the necessary evidence may be impossible to produce.

The wider significance of this puzzle sits within scholarship that shows how 'membership' is frequently administered through documentary infrastructures that both enable rights and create exclusion. Contemporary work on the politics of documents and citizenship dispossession demonstrates how states can mobilise documentary regimes and rule-of-law narratives to legitimise exclusions while presenting them as procedural or neutral (Bhat 2024). Related work on citizenship revocation and registration processes highlights how the burdens of proof can rupture ordinary lives and generate durable insecurity, even among long-settled populations (Deb 2024). These insights are essential for understanding intergenerational abavandimwe experiences because the core harm is often activated not through a singular dramatic event, but through repeated encounters with bureaucratic gateways where citizenship must be proven.

2.2. Everyday recognition and juridical recognition

This study notes that nationality, in international law, refers to the formal legal bond between an individual and a state, recognised externally between states (Manby 2018; UNHCR 2014). Citizenship is used here in the broader social-legal sense common in citizenship studies: it includes that legal bond but extends to the bundle of rights, duties, and recognised membership claims attached to it in practice, encompassing both juridical status and lived membership (Ng'weno and Aloo 2019). Statelessness, by contrast, has a precise legal definition under Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention as the condition of being 'not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law' (UNHCR 2014; United Nations 1954). The paper does not argue that all, or most, second- and third-generation abavandimwe are stateless in this strict legal sense, since such a determination would require formal assessment of Rwandan nationality law and its application to individuals of Rwandan ancestry born in Uganda. What the paper documents instead is a statelessness risk pathway, in which intergenerational documentary deficits and ancestry-based proof demands combine to produce conditions under which individuals may become unable to establish nationality in any state, and a related condition of administrative non-recognition, in which nationality claims are repeatedly deferred at administrative encounters regardless of whether they would, on full legal assessment, be determined stateless. UNHCR has consistently noted that statelessness and undetermined nationality are widely undercounted because many states lack mechanisms to identify stateless persons (UNHCR 2014, 2019). The empirical contribution of this paper concerns the second condition: a population whose juridical

recognition is structurally insecure and whose risk of statelessness across generations is real but not, in this study, formally adjudicated.

To keep the analysis anchored in interview data while maintaining conceptual clarity, the paper draws a distinction between everyday recognition and juridical recognition. Everyday recognition refers to locally produced belonging expressed through language, schooling, work, religious and community participation, and the routine fact of being 'known' as part of the social world. Juridical recognition refers to the state's formal attribution of membership, expressed through nationality law, registries, identity documentation, and the procedures through which bureaucracies render persons legible to the state. The analytical value of this distinction is that it makes visible a common social condition in which people can be accepted as insiders in daily life while remaining legally contestable at moments where citizenship becomes documentary.

This mismatch is well captured by scholarship on liminal and precarious legal status, which shows how partial inclusion can coexist with legal vulnerability and routinised harms such as exclusion from formal labour markets, exposure to discretionary enforcement, and reduced capacity to claim rights (Abrego and Lakhani 2015). In a related register, deportability scholarship emphasises that insecurity is not only a consequence of expulsion but a governing condition produced by the possibility of status challenge and removal, shaping everyday behaviour, claims-making, and self-presentation (De Genova 2002). While the intergenerational abavandimwe case is not reducible to deportation, the analytic point travels: administratively produced 'foreignness' can operate as an internalised constraint, particularly where documentary verification becomes a recurrent site of refusal, deferral, or suspicion.

Methodologically and stylistically, the paper follows Whyte and Vusso's (2025) approach of using a clear conceptual distinction to interpret everyday practice and institutional interaction, rather than treating law and policy as the primary story. Here, the everyday–juridical distinction performs the same function: it structures the reading of interview accounts from second- and third-generation abavandimwe, hosts, and officials, and clarifies why locally affirmed belonging can fail to translate into documentary recognition.

2.3. Comparative architectures of administrative non-recognition

The recognition gap analysed in this paper is part of a broader pattern in which postcolonial states administer membership through documentary and ancestral proofs that long-settled families cannot reliably satisfy. Reading the abavandimwe case alongside the comparative literature clarifies what is shared with other contexts and what is specific to the Ugandan constitutional architecture, and locates the paper within established scholarship on citizenship, autochthony, and documentary citizenship in Africa rather than treating the case as *sui generis*.

The closest comparator sits across the eastern border. Balaton-Chrimes (2014, 2024) shows how the Nubians of Kenya, descendants of Sudanese soldiers settled by the British colonial administration, occupy a structurally similar position to the abavandimwe: locally recognised and economically embedded, yet subjected to a 'vetting' process at the point of national identity card application in which proof of belonging must be reconstructed through documentary evidence and committee testimony. As with the

abavandimwe, the encounter at the documentation gateway is where social recognition is recalibrated against state expectations of ancestry, and where families without complete paper trails accumulate deferral and refusal. The Ugandan architecture is constitutionally codified through the 1926 cut-off in the Third Schedule, whereas Kenyan vetting operates through administrative practice; but the underlying mechanism, in which proof of ancestry is converted into a permanent gatekeeping rule for already-resident populations, is shared.

This mechanism has been theorised most influentially through the literature on autochthony. Geschiere and Jackson (2006) argue that autochthonous discourses, claims to belong 'from the soil', have proliferated across postcolonial Africa with the consistent effect of producing 'strangers' out of long-resident populations whose presence had previously been settled. The Ugandan constitutional architecture is, in these terms, a textbook autochthony framework: belonging is anchored to ancestral residence within a defined territorial and temporal boundary, and the test of authentic membership is the ability to perform that ancestry through evidence the state will accept (Bøås and Dunn 2013; Mamdani 2020). The 1926 test is not a neutral historical reference but a moving boundary in practice, activated against different communities at different political moments.

The descent-based exclusion produced by such architectures has been a sustained focus of the African citizenship literature. Manby (2018) documents how postcolonial African states frequently reproduced colonial classifications of belonging through nationality laws and practices based on ancestry, ethnicity, and indigeneity, while Ng'weno and Aloo (2019) argue that such regimes generate an 'irony of citizenship' in which constitutional protections for indigenous belonging simultaneously stratify the population into those whose belonging is recognised and those whose belonging is contested. The abavandimwe sit precisely in this category: their inclusion in the Banyarwanda listing in the Third Schedule is real but partial, because the temporal residence test stratifies the listed community itself. Such ancestral exclusion operates through documentary infrastructures that Dalberto and Banégas (2021) characterise as the 'documentary state', in which biometric registration and bureaucratic writing produce the citizen as a legible administrative subject while rendering others permanently doubtful where their documentary trail is incomplete.

A complementary theoretical resource is Spade's (2015, 73–93) account of administrative violence: the argument that legal architectures harm marginalised populations less through dramatic acts of explicit exclusion than through the accumulated daily operations of administrative classification. Participants in this study describe harm produced not through formal denial of citizenship but through repeated, technically procedural encounters in which proof is demanded, deferred, and re-demanded, and through the cumulative effect of these encounters on educational, occupational, and life-course trajectories. Naming this dynamic as administrative violence allows the analysis to register the seriousness of the harm without overstating its intentionality.

The pattern is not confined to Africa. Allerton (2017) shows how stateless and irregular residents in Sabah, Malaysia, occupy a similar position, and the National Register of Citizens in Assam, India, produces exclusion through historically demanding paperwork standards rather than any demonstrated foreign attachment (Bhat 2024; Deb 2024). European cases of irregularised but non-removable residents (Carrera, Pőcze, and

Jubany 2025) provide a further but less direct comparator, since those populations are typically positioned as recent arrivals rather than multi-generation residents. Jain's (2022, 239) account of 'manufacturing statelessness' is instructive here: it shows how states actively produce non-membership through administrative design choices rather than through any single legal declaration, a framing that matches how the Ugandan documentary regime works on the abavandimwe across encounters rather than through one decisive act of exclusion. Read across these literatures, the abavandimwe case is a specific instance of a wider architecture, distinguished by the constitutional embedding of a temporal proof test and by the political volatility that activates it.

2.4. Implications for integration and durable solutions debates

Finally, the paper situates intergenerational invisibility within evidence on the consequences of formal recognition. While the relationship between citizenship acquisition and integration varies by context, a robust body of research suggests that secure legal status can improve long-term integration outcomes and reduce vulnerability, partly by increasing access to formal labour markets, mobility, and institutional trust (Fouka 2024; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2017). In displacement settings, recent work on adapting citizenship and immigration regimes to mass displacement similarly emphasises the importance of predictable, rights-bearing documentation pathways that reduce discretionary gatekeeping and enable durable incorporation (Besserer Rayas, Finn, and Freier 2024). These insights provide a framing for the empirical sections that follow: the question is not only how exclusion is produced, but how the denial of juridical recognition shapes life chances for people whose everyday recognition is already firmly established.

> They did not refuse me directly. They said, 'Come back with your father's documents and a letter that shows your clan'. I went back three times. Each time they added something new. In the end, I missed the deadline for the university scholarship application because I could not get the NIN [National Identification Number] they needed. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 8)

> They told me, 'Without proof of your parents, we cannot process your national ID'. I left there knowing I could not apply for jobs that require an ID. I stayed with casual work because anything formal asks for documents I do not have. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 4)

3. Methods and research relationships

3.1. Research design, sites and participants

The study adopts a qualitative, interview-based design to examine how second- and third-generation abavandimwe experience, interpret, and navigate the gap between everyday belonging and juridical recognition. Qualitative interviewing is appropriate here because the central object of analysis is not only formal policy but the lived, relational production of recognition across households, communities, and bureaucratic encounters (Charmaz 2014; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009;). The design also aligns with refugee and forced migration scholarship that emphasises the importance of capturing

the perspectives of displaced and legally marginalised populations alongside those of host communities and state actors, particularly where membership and protection are contested in practice (Block et al. 2013; Jacobsen and Landau 2003).

Fieldwork was conducted in selected locations in Uganda where second- and third-generation abavandimwe are known to reside and where documentary verification is routinely encountered through education, employment, mobility, and identity registration. The study includes three participant groups. The first comprises second- and third-generation abavandimwe, defined as individuals born in Uganda to parents, and in some cases grandparents, who lacked formal refugee recognition and for whom Uganda is the only country of lived socialisation and belonging. The second comprises host community members and local leaders, including neighbours, landlords, employers, religious leaders, and Local Council representatives whose everyday recognition practices shape local inclusion and exclusion. The third comprises selected government officials and frontline implementers with roles in citizenship administration, documentation, security, and local governance interfaces. This three-part design enables triangulation across everyday social worlds and administrative infrastructures, avoiding an analysis that centres only law or only experience (Block et al. 2013; Fujii 2012).

3.2. Sampling and data generation

Sampling followed a purposive strategy designed to capture variation in generation, documentary status, and administrative encounter histories, supplemented by snowball recruitment given the sensitivity of the topic (Atkinson and Flint 2001). Within the abavandimwe sample, the study sought diversity across second- and third-generation status, documentary position (including those with and without birth registration, school records, attestation letters, and prior national ID or passport applications), administrative experience (those who had attempted to obtain documents, those who had avoided contact, and those whose applications had been delayed, refused, or informally redirected), and life-course position (late adolescents and young adults for whom documentation is activated through schooling and work transitions, alongside older adults navigating family registration and employment). Host and official participants were sampled to reflect different vantage points on recognition, including those who routinely provide informal attestations and those positioned at bureaucratic gateways where decisions about membership are operationalised (Lipsky 2010). Sampling continued until conceptual sufficiency, defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded limited new insights into the core mechanisms of recognition and non-recognition under study (Charmaz 2014).

Data were generated primarily through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate experiences of belonging, classification, and administrative encounter while enabling consistent coverage of key topics across interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interview guides were tailored by participant group but organised around shared domains: everyday belonging and recognition; documentary histories; key administrative encounters with national identity, passport, and security agencies; strategies of navigation; and perceived consequences for mobility, employment, and education. Given the topic's sensitivity, interviewing followed an approach attentive to relational interviewing and the politics of disclosure, recognising that what is said, withheld, or narrated

cautiously can itself be analytically meaningful (Fujii 2012). Where language interpretation was required, interpreters were briefed on confidentiality and neutral translation practice, and interpreter involvement was treated as part of the research relationship rather than as a purely technical step (Squires 2009).

Research with people whose nationality is contested can expose participants to legal, social, and security risks if identities are revealed or narratives linked to specific locations. The study adopted a do-no-harm posture with safeguards adapted to legally sensitive identities (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). Two principles structured these safeguards. First, anonymisation by design: names, precise locations, kinship identifiers, and institutional details that could permit deductive disclosure were removed or masked, particularly given that small or close-knit settings can enable deductive identification when narrative details are combined with documentation histories. Accordingly, participant descriptions are kept intentionally broad and quotations carry minimal identifiers. Second, minimal collection of identifying data: the study did not record document numbers, copy sensitive documents, or compile detailed demographic profiles, and treated demographic non-disclosure as a substantive ethical commitment rather than a procedural omission. Because contested nationality can generate heightened fear of institutional contact, non-participation and partial participation were treated as ethically and analytically meaningful rather than as missing data (Block et al. 2013; Clark 2008).

3.3. Positionality and reflexivity

Interviews about membership and recognition are shaped by power, trust, and participants' assessment of potential consequences, and the study treats research relationships as constitutive of the data rather than as a background condition. Reflexive practice included documenting how access was negotiated, how participants positioned themselves and the researcher during interviews, and how institutional settings influenced what could be said safely (Finlay 2002; Fujii 2012). This was particularly important in interviews with officials and local leaders, where institutional narratives of legality and security can structure accounts of who is eligible for documentation and why.

3.4. Analysis, rigour and limitations

Analysis proceeded through a thematic strategy combining inductive coding grounded in participants' accounts with concept-led coding derived from the paper's organising distinction between everyday recognition and juridical recognition (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). Initial line-by-line coding identified recurrent practices and meanings, including local attestation, document substitution, fear of verification, bureaucratic deferral, ancestry proof demand, strategic silence, and brokered access. These codes were then organised into two analytic domains: everyday recognition (social membership, local acceptance, informal proof, and everyday inclusion mechanisms) and juridical recognition (documentary demands, administrative categorisation, refusal or deferral, procedural gatekeeping, and pathways to formal membership). Mechanism mapping and triangulation across participant groups identified how specific mechanisms operate at the interface of social life and administration, and how intergenerational transmission

occurs, with attention to both convergent narratives (shared descriptions of proof demands) and divergent ones (different interpretations of legality, belonging, and risk) (Flick 2018).

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across participant groups, systematic memoing, and iterative comparison of cases that differed by generation, documentation history, and administrative outcome (Charmaz 2014; Flick 2018). Negative cases, instances where everyday recognition did translate into documentary success, were treated as analytically valuable for identifying enabling conditions and points of administrative discretion. Limitations include selection effects, since individuals most fearful of institutional attention may have declined participation, and the possibility that official accounts reflect institutional positioning rather than full disclosure. These constraints are typical in research with legally sensitive populations and reinforce the value of a cautious interpretive stance and transparent reflexivity (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007).

4. Findings and analysis

This section presents the findings through a sequence of empirical questions. Each question is answered by triangulating accounts from participants and is interpreted through the paper's analytic anchor: the divergence between everyday recognition and juridical recognition. This approach treats recognition as something produced in social relations and administrative practice, rather than as a static legal label (Brubaker 1992; Lipsky 2010). The findings are organised into five sub-sections that move from how recognition is produced and contested in two registers, through what triggers juridical doubt and how it is navigated, to how administrative non-recognition is transmitted across generations and what it costs in practice.

4.1. Two registers of recognition: community and bureaucracy

Hosts recognise abavandimwe as members of the social world through everyday markers of embeddedness, while officials disavow that recognition the moment documentation is required. The two registers operate side by side and produce the recognition gap that organises this paper's argument.

Participants described second- and third-generation abavandimwe as socially 'ordinary' residents, recognised through routine markers of embeddedness: language, accent, schooling histories, participation in churches or mosques, work trajectories, friendship networks, and kinship ties formed locally. These are not trivial indicators. They constitute what might be termed a practical citizenship, a lived membership produced through social participation rather than formal status (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Host narratives often framed belonging as a matter of everyday relational accountability: knowing someone's family, seeing them grow up, witnessing their work, or sharing reciprocal obligations.

> We have seen these children growing. They were born here, they studied with our children, they speak like us. In the village nobody asks them for papers, we just know them. (Host community member 2)

> I have seen this boy growing up . . . very happy young man . . . he is one of ours . . . I never see him as a foreigner because I have seen him from childhood. (Host community member 3)

This everyday recognition, however, was not always unconditional. Some hosts described moments when recognition became fragile, especially during periods of heightened political attention, rumours about 'foreigners', or localised security concerns.

> They are the reason why foreigners have won prominent positions in the governments . . . they tend [to] vote for foreigners like them. (Host community member 1)

In such moments, community recognition could shift from inclusion to surveillance, echoing research showing that belonging can be contingent, situational, and shaped by wider narratives of threat (Yuval-Davis 2011). Still, the predominant finding is that, in ordinary times, hosts' recognition practices prioritised social evidence over legal evidence, creating a locally stabilising inclusion.

Officials and local leaders, asked to justify recognition or non-recognition, articulated the two registers explicitly. Officials emphasised legality, procedure, and risk, framing documentary requirements as necessary to prevent fraud, protect national security, and preserve the integrity of citizenship.

> Citizenship is not simply about how someone feels or identifies. It is a legal status, and proper verification is necessary to ensure that official documents are not issued to people who are not entitled to them. (Government official 2)

Local leaders, by contrast, often emphasised lived history, proximity, and practical knowledge of residents. Where local leaders supported applicants, they tended to describe their role as certifying what the community already knows.

> I can write that this person grew up here, but sometimes they tell us our letter is not enough. They want things we cannot produce. (Local Council official 2)

The gap persists because the two registers privilege different forms of evidence as authoritative, and the state's dependence on documentary legibility, combined with frontline discretion, produces a setting where everyday recognition cannot reliably be converted into juridical recognition.

4.2. Where juridical doubt surfaces and what counts as proof

Juridical doubt surfaces at documentation gateways and is operationalised through lineage proof demands that long-settled families cannot reliably satisfy. The pattern is not denial but proceduralised exclusion: requirements that escalate, deferrals that compound, and proofs that are structurally unavailable to the families being asked to produce them.

Documentation gateways: attempts to secure national identity cards, passports, or other documents that require verification of nationality and lineage are the points where the recognition gap becomes visible to participants. These encounters are best understood as 'state moments', points where the state is experienced through the documentary requirements and discretionary judgements of frontline institutions (Lipsky 2010). For participants, the critical turning point was often a life-course transition: for example, completing secondary school, seeking formal employment, applying for travel, or facing a need to prove identity in a legal or administrative setting.

> At home everyone calls me Ugandan. But when I went for the national ID, they said, 'You are not Ugandan, bring proof of your tribe and your father'. I told them my father died. They said, 'Then you cannot continue'. Yet I needed the ID to travel with my friends to Mombasa. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 6)

> The national ID process became confusing for me. At first, they asked for my birth certificate, which I provided. Then they asked for my father's documents. I gave them his death certificate with his names, but they still said it was not enough. Now I do not know what they want anymore. I eventually gave up. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 5)

The pattern here is not simply refusal. Participants frequently described deferral, repetition, and moving goalposts. Officials might request additional letters, new witnesses, evidence of ancestry, or documents that participants could not plausibly access. This resembles what socio-legal research describes as proceduralised exclusion, where legal recognition is not openly denied but is rendered unattainable through escalating evidentiary demands and repeated administrative postponement (Bhat 2024). The effect is prolonged uncertainty that keeps individuals socially present but administratively suspended.

What officials demand as proof is not generic identity verification but a specific kind of evidence: lineage. Participants reported being asked to demonstrate ancestry consistent with state expectations about indigeneity, tribal affiliation, or parental origin. The proof demands described in interviews align with broader insights about documentary citizenship: states often treat documents as both evidence and instruments of governance, so the absence of documents can be read as a sign of non-belonging rather than a symptom of uneven civil registration (Brubaker 1992; Dalberto and Banégas 2021; Torpey 2000;).

Participants' accounts show how structural conditions make proof difficult across generations. When parents lacked documentation, children were more likely to experience late or partial birth registration, lack of a consistent paper trail, and dependence on substitute documents such as school records or letters from local authorities. These substitutes often carried weight in everyday recognition but could be dismissed in juridical recognition as insufficient.

> My parents did not have the documents they now ask us to produce, so when I tried to prove who I was, I had very little to show. I had school records and letters from the local authorities, but they told me these were not enough. It becomes difficult to prove yourself when the documents they want were never available to your family in the first place. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 9)

This is a classic street-level bureaucracy dynamic: policy and law provide a framework, but decisions are operationalised through frontline evidentiary practice, shaped by risk aversion, institutional incentives, and local discretion (Lipsky 2010). It is at this interface that intergenerational invisibility is actively reproduced. People are not only missing documents; they are caught in a system where the most valued proofs are those least available to families with disrupted or undocumented histories.

A distinctive dimension of how proof is demanded in this setting is its gendered structure. Although the constitutional and statutory framework is formally gender-neutral, administrative practice routinely treats paternal identity as the decisive route

through which nationality is verified, with maternal evidence relegated to a supplementary or insufficient status (Manby 2018, 2020). Many second- and third-generation participants in this study described being asked for a father's documents as the deciding proof, even where maternal evidence existed, where paternal documentation was structurally unavailable due to death, war-related disappearance, or contested identity, and where the mother was herself Ugandan-born.

> They asked me to provide evidence of my ethnic background and proof relating to my father. I explained that both of my parents had passed away, and they told me that without that evidence, my application could not proceed'. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 12)

> We must confirm the origin properly. If the father is not established, it becomes difficult for us to approve. The mother's information alone may not be enough for verification. (Government official 3)

The pattern observed here converts gendered legal cultures into documentary barriers. UNHCR's analysis of gender equality in nationality has documented how administrative practice around the conferral and verification of nationality produces statelessness risks where women's capacity to evidence or transmit nationality is treated as secondary or conditional (UNHCR 2025a; United Nations General Assembly 2023). For abavandimwe families whose male ancestors are deceased, displaced, or never formally documented, the gendered hierarchy of proof effectively closes the documentary route to citizenship even where the social and maternal evidence of belonging is unambiguous. The finding strengthens the broader analytic point: lineage proof regimes do not simply demand evidence of ancestry; they demand evidence of a specific kind of ancestry, traced through paternal lines that historical displacement and male mortality have made structurally difficult to satisfy.

4.3. Navigating the gap: substitution, brokerage and strategic invisibility

Participants navigate the recognition gap through a repertoire of three strategies: substitution of alternative evidence, brokerage through intermediaries, and strategic invisibility. None of these resolves the gap. The first two attempt to convert everyday recognition into juridical recognition; the third accepts the gap as a condition of survival, often at high cost.

First, substitution involves assembling alternative evidence when formal proof is unavailable. Participants described collecting letters from local councils, school records, baptism cards, testimony from elders, or other locally credible artefacts. This strategy draws directly on everyday recognition resources and attempts to translate them into juridical currency.

> I brought my PLE [Primary Leaving Examination] and UCE [Uganda Certificate of Education] certificates, my LC [Local Council] letter, even the church card, because those are the only things that show my life is here. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 4)

Second, brokerage involves seeking intermediaries who can interpret administrative expectations, connect applicants to officials, or provide guidance on 'what the office

needs'. Brokerage can be benign, but it can also expose people to exploitation, informal payments, or predatory gatekeeping. This reflects the broader literature on how documentation regimes generate informal markets for access and verification, particularly where procedures are complex and discretion is high (Lipsky 2010; Torpey 2000).

Third, strategic invisibility involves reducing contact with registration institutions, avoiding applications, or limiting movement to avoid exposure. This strategy resonates with insights from deportability scholarship: insecurity can shape behaviour even without actual removal, producing self-limiting practices that reduce risk but also reduce opportunity (De Genova 2002). In the Ugandan case, the behavioural consequence is not only fear of deportation, but fear of being marked as foreign, denied, or exposed to policing.

> I stopped going there. Every time you go, they ask questions that can put you in trouble. So, you stay quiet and continue with life. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 10)

4.4. Intergenerational transmission of administrative doubt

Administrative doubt transmits across generations through three mechanisms: missing parental documentation that weakens later registration, contested origin narratives that fail to satisfy ancestry tests, and the absence of authoritative kin who can certify lineage when state inquiry demands it. For third-generation participants, the paradox is sharper than for the second: their parents were also born in Uganda, so they experience exclusion not as a rupture from migration but as an inherited administrative condition.

> I never knew my father or mother. I'm told they died in the war. All I know for certain is that I was born here. But they still say we are not from here. So where are we from? (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 6)

> The only home I know is Uganda. I have never stepped outside Uganda in my life. What else can I be? (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 1)

The transmission mechanism observed here matches the pattern documented in comparative work on the Nubians of Kenya, where vetting committee demands for ancestral evidence accumulate across generations into entrenched administrative non-recognition (Balaton-Chrimes 2014, 2024), and connects to wider statelessness scholarship on how nationality insecurity persists through inherited documentary deficits (UNHCR 2019; United Nations 1954;). What the abavandimwe case shows distinctively is that the displacement involved is not primarily spatial. It is institutional: a long-term misalignment between lived membership and legal recognition that pushes younger generations into constrained futures despite deep rootedness, and that, read through Spade's (2015) account of administrative violence, accumulates harm through routine procedural encounters rather than through dramatic acts of exclusion.

4.5. Consequences for life chances

The consequences of the recognition gap are not confined to formal legality. They shape life chances. Documentation barriers translate directly into blocked educational

transitions, reduced access to formal employment, constrained mobility, and difficulties in financial services and property transactions, with the sense of injustice intensified by the mismatch between the social identity participants hold as Ugandans and the administrative denial they encounter. These findings are consistent with research showing that secure legal status increases access to labour markets and institutional trust, and that lack of status can depress long-term integration outcomes (Fouka 2024; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2017;).

> They told me I'm not Ugandan, but my whole life is here. Without an ID you cannot apply for jobs, you cannot travel, you cannot even explain yourself. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 11)

> My best friend from school is willing to support me financially so I can join her work in Oman. But I have been denied a national ID and a passport. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 13)

This is where the analytic anchor becomes most visible. Everyday recognition provides belonging and social participation, but it does not provide the stable rights-bearing platform that juridical recognition confers. The recognition gap therefore becomes a mechanism of intergenerational inequality. It creates a population that is socially integrated but administratively constrained.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that intergenerational 'invisibility' among second- and third-generation abavandimwe is best understood as a structured gap between lived belonging and juridical membership. Following Whyte and Vusso's (2025) concept-led argumentation, the discussion does not restate results; it uses the empirical material to clarify what the everyday versus juridical recognition distinction reveals about how citizenship is made and unmade in practice. The argument is developed in four sub-sections that situate the abavandimwe case within the comparative literature on citizenship, autochthony, and administrative violence in postcolonial states.

5.1. Belonging without membership: theorising the recognition gap

The recognition gap documented in this study is institutionally sustained, not incidental. It is produced by the combination of two mechanisms: an evidentiary regime that recalibrates recognition at the documentation gateway, and a street-level discretion that translates that regime into decisions about who counts. Read alongside the comparative literature, the abavandimwe case is a specific instance of a wider pattern in which postcolonial states administer membership through proofs that long-resident families cannot reliably satisfy.

A central insight is that everyday recognition does substantial social work. Host community narratives repeatedly described second- and third-generation abavandimwe as socially ordinary and locally accountable. This everyday recognition resembles what citizenship scholarship describes as 'acts' and practices of membership that are produced through participation, reciprocity, and local moral economies, rather than by formal legal status (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Yuval-

Davis 2011). Yet the study shows that such social membership does not reliably translate into rights-bearing citizenship when individuals enter documentation systems.

The empirical pattern is that the state encounter recalibrates the evidentiary regime. At the point of national ID or passport application, recognition becomes less about lived history and more about documentary lineage. This is where the analytic anchor matters. 'Everyday recognition' operates through social knowledge and proximity; 'juridical recognition' operates through registries, categories, and institutional risk management. The gap between the two is not accidental. It is reproduced by administrative routines that treat documentation as the primary indicator of eligibility.

The pattern is not unique to Uganda: as Section 2.3 set out, the closest comparator is the vetting regime applied to the Nubians of Kenya (Balaton-Chrimes 2014, 2024), where proof of ancestry is similarly converted into a permanent gatekeeping rule for an already-resident population. Ng'weno and Aloo (2019) describe this dynamic as the 'irony of citizenship' in postcolonial Africa, in which constitutional protections for indigenous belonging simultaneously stratify the population into those whose belonging is recognised and those whose belonging is contested, with the contested category disproportionately populated by historically mobile, displaced, or borderland communities. The abavandimwe sit precisely in this category.

The institutional sustenance of the gap is not only legal but operational. Citizenship is not determined only in constitutions and statutes; it is operationalised through street-level decisions: what counts as acceptable proof, whether local attestations are credible, whether a file is 'complete', and whether doubt triggers caution or accommodation. This is a classic Lipsky dynamic: frontline implementers make policy real through discretionary decisions shaped by workload, risk aversion, and institutional incentives (Lipsky 2010). The study shows that these discretionary choices have generational consequences, because small documentary inconsistencies can become fixed barriers in the life course of young adults seeking formalisation.

> Citizenship is legal. If we do not verify properly, we can give documents to the wrong people. We must be careful. (Government official 1)

Such reasoning is not simply individual bias. It reflects an institutional environment in which the cost of 'mistaken' inclusion is perceived as higher than the cost of exclusion. Read through Spade's (2015) account of administrative violence, this is the mechanism by which legal architectures harm marginalised populations less through dramatic acts of explicit exclusion than through the accumulated daily operations of administrative classification: the categories used to allocate documents, services, and recognition produce vulnerability for those whose lives do not fit standard administrative templates. This is also where De Genova's insight about deportability as a governing condition is useful, even though the present case is not reducible to deportation: insecurity is produced and sustained through the possibility of status challenge and the anticipation of adverse encounters, which in turn shapes behaviour, self-presentation, and claims-making (De Genova 2002). The study's evidence on strategic invisibility, avoidance, and reliance on brokers fits this governance logic. People learn that contact

bureaucratic systems can trigger vulnerability, so they delay applications, narrow mobility, or rely on intermediaries.

> I have decided to live my life 'undercover' . . . everyone in my community knows who I am and maybe one day the system will change and accept us as Ugandans with the full rights to documentation. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 5)

5.2. Documentary citizenship and the gendered hierarchy of proof

Documentary citizenship in this setting is structured not only by demands for ancestral evidence but by gendered assumptions about which lineage proofs count as authoritative. The combination produces a form of procedural exclusion that is particularly difficult for families with disrupted paternal documentation to escape.

The study's documentation encounters align with broader work on documentary citizenship and the state's dependence on papers as instruments of classification and control (Torpey 2000). Participants described being asked to prove 'origin' through parents, grandparents, tribe, or indigeneity. This is consistent with Brubaker's argument that citizenship is not merely a legal status but a set of institutionalised boundary-making practices (Brubaker 1992). In Uganda, this boundary-making is sharpened by constitutional criteria that link citizenship by birth to descent from listed 'indigenous communities' associated with presence in Uganda as of 1 February 1926, a framework reiterated in official administrative guidance (National Citizenship and Immigration Control 2024; Republic of Uganda 1995).

Analytically, the key point is that the 'proof' demanded is not simply personal identification. It is proof of genealogical fit within an authorised national narrative. The consequence is a form of procedural exclusion: citizenship is not refused through an explicit political statement, but through repeated requirements for evidence that is structurally difficult to provide for those whose families have weak civil registration histories, disrupted kin networks, or deceased parents. This echoes comparative scholarship on how document regimes can produce exclusion while presenting the outcome as procedural neutrality (Allerton 2017; Bhat 2024; Deb 2024).

The gendered hierarchy of proof identified in the findings has analytic implications that go beyond the abavandimwe case. Although citizenship laws may be framed in formally gender-neutral language, documentary systems often operate through social assumptions about lineage and 'true' origin, with paternal identity treated as the primary route through which nationality is verified. UNHCR's ongoing analysis of gender equality in nationality laws and statelessness highlights how gendered rules and practices around the conferral and verification of nationality can produce statelessness risks, particularly where women's capacity to secure, transmit, or evidence nationality is treated as secondary or conditional (UNHCR 2025a). Wider UN reporting similarly notes that discriminatory nationality outcomes are frequently shaped not only by statutes but by patriarchal legal cultures and administrative practice, where women's nationality or parental authority is treated as less determinative of a child's status (United Nations General Assembly 2023). The abavandimwe findings show how such gendered assumptions are converted into documentary barriers in practice, intensifying intergenerational vulnerability, and they align with broader African citizenship scholarship emphasising

that bureaucratic verification often functions through discretionary judgements about belonging and legitimacy, and that women and children can be particularly exposed where documentation systems privilege paternal lineage or require forms of proof that disrupted families cannot provide (Manby 2020).

5.3. Intergenerational transmission and statelessness risk

The intergenerational transmission of administrative non-recognition documented in this study is not a peripheral feature of the abavandimwe case but its analytical core. Read through the autochthony literature, what the case shows is how a constitutional architecture that anchors belonging in ancestral residence at a colonial-era moment converts displacement into permanent exclusion across generations, even where lived membership is unambiguous.

The intergenerational focus of this paper shifts the centre of gravity from 'refugee status' as a first-generation humanitarian category to 'citizenship insecurity' as an inherited life condition. Second- and third-generation participants emphasised that Uganda is their only home, yet their claims are destabilised precisely at the moment they seek the documents that allow adult life to become administratively normal. This is where the study links most directly to statelessness debates and to the literature on autochthony in postcolonial Africa.

The Ugandan constitutional architecture, which anchors citizenship by birth in ancestral presence within Uganda's borders as of 1 February 1926, is a textbook autochthony framework in the sense developed by Geschiere and Jackson (2006). Autochthonous discourses claim that authentic belonging derives from being 'of the soil', and they have proliferated across postcolonial Africa as a corollary of multiparty democratisation and decentralisation, with the consistent effect of producing 'strangers' out of long-resident populations whose presence had previously been settled (Bøås and Dunn 2013; Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Mamdani 2020;). What the abavandimwe case demonstrates is how such frameworks operate intergenerationally. The 1926 test is not a neutral chronological marker but a moving political boundary, activated against different communities at different moments, and the abavandimwe are presently among those most exposed to its activation. The autochthony literature also clarifies why such frameworks generate, rather than resolve, anxiety about belonging: the apparent self-evidence of ancestral claims masks a constant process of redefinition against new 'others' at ever-closer range. For abavandimwe families whose forebears arrived after 1926, no quantity of subsequent residence, language acquisition, intermarriage, or social embeddedness can satisfy the test, because the test is not really about residence or belonging but about ancestral presence at a moment fixed by colonial cartography.

Under international law, statelessness is defined as not being considered a national by any state under the operation of its law (United Nations 1954). Although not all participants can be assumed to be stateless in the strict legal sense, the study documents a clear statelessness risk pathway, in which the inability to secure nationality documentation produces durable vulnerability and constrained life chances, especially for those without meaningful ties elsewhere. UNHCR has repeatedly noted that statelessness is undercounted and often hidden within administrative practices and weak identification systems, which makes intergenerational exclusion especially difficult to see and rectify

(UNHCR 2019). The abavandimwe case illustrates how this risk is reproduced when documentary deficits compound across generations: lack of parental papers weakens birth registration, which then weakens later nationality claims, creating a cumulative chain of administrative doubt.

> My mother was born in this country, and so was I, yet we are still told that we do not belong here. If this is not considered our home, then where are we supposed to belong? (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 2)

> My parents were also born here, so I thought it would be simple. But they said my file was 'not clear' and told me to bring more evidence. Without the ID I cannot even own a mobile phone SIM card nor bank accounts, I cannot register some exams, and I cannot plan anything beyond the town. (Second/third-generation abavandimwe participant 13)

This intergenerational mechanism matters theoretically. It suggests that 'displacement' is not only a spatial condition but can also be institutional, lived through ongoing uncertainty and constrained mobility within a state. It also matters politically, because public debate around abavandimwe identity in Uganda has intensified in recent years, including high-level calls for clarity and guidance on citizenship status (Citizenship Rights Africa Initiative 2025; Uganda Broadcasting Corporation 2025). The findings help explain why such debates do not remain rhetorical. They translate into everyday bureaucratic outcomes, especially when frontline implementers treat these cases as high-risk or politically sensitive.

5.4. From recognition to credible pathways: strategic implications

The recognition gap is reformable, but only through an institutional translation mechanism that converts everyday recognition into juridical recognition consistently and accountably. Read through the African citizenship literature on legal architectures of belonging, the strategic challenge in the abavandimwe case is not to draft new law but to make existing law administratively accessible to populations whose documentary histories the existing law was never designed to accommodate.

The findings invite a strategic reading of citizenship recognition, not as a corporate analogy, but as a practical field of purposive action in which institutions and individuals manage uncertainty, legitimacy, and administrative risk. What emerges is an implementation gap: everyday recognition is widespread, yet the institutional pathway for converting that recognition into juridical membership remains discretionary, uneven, and difficult to navigate. In policy implementation terms, this is a familiar pattern. Where goals are politically sensitive and procedures are ambiguous, outcomes are frequently shaped less by formal rules than by how those rules are interpreted and enacted at the frontline (Lipsky 2010; Matland 1995). In this study, second- and third-generation abavandimwe respond strategically through avoidance, repeated application cycles, and reliance on intermediaries, while frontline officials often default to risk-averse evidentiary routines that protect the institution but externalise the costs of uncertainty onto applicants.

Manby (2018, 60), in her authoritative survey of citizenship in Africa, argues that postcolonial African states have repeatedly grafted descent tests onto colonial-era ethnic categorisations and that reform is most credible when it works with,

rather than against, the legal architectures already in place. Her analysis is directly relevant here: the route to credible pathways for the abavandimwe is unlikely to run through constitutional reopening of the Third Schedule, which would be politically prohibitive, but through standardising the evidentiary regime under which existing law is administered. This reframing matters because it locates the reform task in administrative practice, where it is implementable, rather than in constitutional politics, where it is not. A complementary administrative question is who delivers that standardised evidentiary regime. Manby and Bauböck's (2021) discussion of decentralising access to citizenship determination in the Global South is directly relevant: it weighs the trade-off between centralised processes that may be more consistent but less accessible to long-settled rural populations, and decentralised, locally administered processes that can widen access but risk reproducing exactly the discretionary unevenness documented in this study's findings. Any standardisation strategy for the abavandimwe case needs to confront this trade-off directly rather than assuming that moving documentation decisions closer to communities will, by itself, resolve the recognition gap.

A strategy-oriented policy response therefore requires more than calls for 'clarity'. It requires a credible pathway that aligns incentives across the institutions that jointly produce recognition outcomes and that reduces reliance on informal discretion. Strategic public management scholarship emphasises that workable strategies depend on specifying implementable objectives, clarifying decision rights across organisations, and building feedback mechanisms that allow systems to learn rather than merely defer hard cases (Bryson 2018). Applied to the present case, four mutually reinforcing strategic actions follow.

First, standardise evidentiary thresholds for long-settled second and third generations, including clear guidance on how community attestation, long-term schooling histories, and birth registration can be evaluated as evidence, rather than treated as inherently insufficient. Second, establish a coordinated case-handling route for contested or complex files so applicants do not face shifting proof demands across offices and repeated dead ends, a classic failure mode in fragmented implementation systems (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Third, introduce procedural safeguards and feedback mechanisms, including written reasons for deferral, clear timelines, and accessible review points, which make discretion more predictable and decisions more accountable. Fourth, resource and support frontline implementers: where caseloads are heavy and guidance is ambiguous, caution becomes a rational default strategy. Implementation research consistently shows that the discretion of street-level actors is not a residual feature but a central mechanism through which policy is made real (Lipsky 2010; Matland 1995).

These actions do not change the legal basis of citizenship. They change the administrative pathway through which law becomes accessible. In terms of this paper's analytic anchor, the strategic challenge is to design an institutional translation mechanism that converts everyday recognition into juridical recognition in ways that are consistent, reviewable, and realistic for those with disrupted documentary histories. Without such a strategy, intergenerational invisibility is likely to persist as an outcome of routine administrative encounters, even where social integration is already substantial.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined intergenerational 'invisibility' among second- and third-generation abavandimwe in Uganda as a patterned gap between everyday recognition and juridical recognition. The findings show that many interlocutors are socially recognised as belonging through language, schooling, neighbourhood ties, work, and local accountability, yet become administratively foreign at the point where citizenship must be verified through lineage-centred documentation. In this sense, the central issue is not only the absence of papers but the operation of proof standards that make citizenship difficult to evidence for long-settled families whose documentary histories are disrupted, incomplete, or non-existent (Bhat 2024; Brubaker 1992; Torpey 2000). The result is a condition of membership-in-practice without membership-in-law, in which young people who have 'known no other home' face recurrent deferral or denial when they seek national IDs, passports, or other citizenship-linked documents. Read alongside comparative cases of vetting and ancestral proof in postcolonial Africa, most directly the Nubians of Kenya (Balaton-Chrimes 2014, 2024), the abavandimwe case is a specific instance of a wider regional architecture in which descent-based citizenship tests stratify long-resident populations into those whose belonging is recognised and those whose belonging is contested (Manby 2018; Ng'weno and Aloo 2019).

Conceptually, the paper contributes to refugee and citizenship studies by theorising intergenerational invisibility as a governance condition produced at the intersection of nationality law, documentation infrastructures, and street-level discretion (Lipsky 2010). This extends debates that locate exclusion only in formal legal categories by showing how membership is decided in routine administrative encounters, where officials interpret risk, evaluate evidence, and determine whether local attestations can be translated into legal recognition. Such encounters are consequential because they concentrate the state's classificatory power at life-course moments when young people attempt to convert social belonging into rights-bearing membership through documents. Two further conceptual moves clarify what is at stake. First, the Ugandan constitutional architecture, which conditions citizenship by birth on ancestral residence within Uganda's borders as of 1 February 1926, is a textbook autochthony framework in the sense developed by Geschiere and Jackson (2006): belonging is anchored in ancestry at a colonial moment, and the test of authentic membership is the ability to perform that ancestry through evidence the state will accept (Bøås and Dunn 2013; Mamdani 2020). Second, the harm produced by such frameworks is best understood not as dramatic exclusion but as administrative violence, the cumulative effect of routine procedural encounters in which proof is demanded, deferred, and re-demanded, until a structurally unmeetable test produces population-level disadvantage (Spade 2015). Naming the dynamic in these terms allows the abavandimwe case to do analytic work for the wider literature, not only to be illustrated by it.

Empirically, the article also speaks to statelessness risk. While legal statelessness requires a determination that no state considers a person its national under the operation of its law (United Nations 1954), the study documents a credible risk pathway through which intergenerational documentary deficits and lineage-centred proof demands can keep people in prolonged administrative suspension (UNHCR 2019). The harms are cumulative: delayed or denied documentation restricts mobility, formal employment,

and educational transitions, and amplifies vulnerability to informal gatekeeping and exploitation, even where everyday integration is strong (Fouka 2024; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2017;).

A further contribution is to clarify that this is not only a legal or humanitarian problem, but also an implementation and strategy problem. The evidence suggests that recognition outcomes are shaped by institutional incentives and frontline risk management as much as by formal rules, which helps explain why uncertainty persists even where everyday belonging is widely affirmed. Implementation research indicates that when policy goals are politically sensitive and administrative guidance is ambiguous, frontline discretion becomes decisive and systems tend to reproduce delay and deferral rather than resolution (Lipsky 2010; Matland 1995). In strategic public management terms, the challenge is to build a credible pathway that translates everyday recognition into juridical recognition in a consistent, reviewable, and administratively workable manner (Bryson 2018). The reform task identified by this study is therefore not constitutional but administrative: it concerns how existing law is implemented at documentation gateways, not whether the law itself should be rewritten.

These findings have three practical implications. First, they underline the need for workable evidentiary pathways that recognise long-term residence indicators, community attestation, and the realities of parental absence or death, rather than relying primarily on lineage proofs that many cannot supply. Second, they point to the importance of consistent operational guidance and coordinated case-handling across institutions so that eligibility is not decided through shifting proof thresholds and discretionary deferral, a common failure mode in fragmented implementation systems (Matland 1995; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973;). Third, they suggest that durable solutions debates must take intergenerational documentation as a central problem: for second and third generations, the primary barrier is often not social integration but the inability to secure juridical recognition at decisive administrative gateways.

Finally, the article underscores a broader point resonant with contemporary refugee studies: displacement can be reproduced within states through institutionalised uncertainty, even when movement has long ceased. For second- and third-generation abavandimwe, the everyday–juridical recognition gap does not merely describe a tension between community and state. It constitutes a mechanism through which citizenship insecurity is transmitted across generations, shaping futures that remain administratively constrained despite deep rootedness. The mechanism is not unique to Uganda. It is shared, with local variations, across postcolonial states whose citizenship architectures combine constitutional commitments to formal equality with administrative regimes that allocate recognition through historically uneven evidentiary requirements, from the Nubians of Kenya (Balaton-Chrimes 2014) to stateless residents in Sabah (Allerton 2017) and the contested citizens of Assam (Bhat 2024). The strategic implication is straightforward: without implementable and coherent recognition pathways, intergenerational invisibility will continue to be reproduced as an ordinary outcome of administrative practice rather than an exceptional failure.

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Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments. Ethical approval was obtained from the Mbarara University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC) (Reference No. MUREC 1/7; approved on 6 September 2019), ensuring compliance with national and international ethical standards governing research involving human participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

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