

# Mpanga's experience in LEGCO

By Mary Karugaba

**A**t 83, Joyce Mpanga recalls vividly the events that led to Uganda's independence. While many women watched from the periphery, Mpanga is proud to have been among the first women, at the age of 25, to join the first Legislative Council (LEGCO).

Although not a political fanatic at the time, Mpanga was lucky to be nominated by a political party, UPC, that she did not even belong to. Mpanga says, when she was nominated, she had just graduated from the University and joined Makerere College School as a teacher.

"While at the University, I had gained popularity because I liked participating in almost every competition. Many people knew me including the governor who was interested in the students' activities," she recalls.

## What was LEGCO

As a way of preparing the Africans for self-rule, the British agreed that some Africans should be appointed to join the then LEGCO. It was the first national legislature in Uganda created by the British Colonial Government in 1920, about 27 years after the country was declared a



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British Protectorate.

Although it operated as a parliament, deciding on the issues of Africans, it remained powerless as most important matters remained in the hands of Her Majesty's Government back in London, UK. This also explains why the first members of the council were Europeans until 1945; 25 years after the LEGCO was set up.

By 1955 the membership of the council had increased to 60 and its meetings used to be held in Kampala City Council Chambers.

In the late 1950s pressure

continued to

mount for self-government in the protectorate which culminated into a string of constitutional amendments, including a provision for universal adult suffrage and direct elections for LEGCO.

All these happened in the holding of the first ever direct elections for the greater part of the protectorate in 1961, under the new Franchise law.

This election returned an African majority into the council. The Democratic Party (DP) led by Ben Kiwanuka, formed the majority party, while the Uganda People's Congress

(UPC), led by Apollo Milton Obote, formed the opposition.

## How she joined

According to Mpanga, after the elections, the governor demanded to know why there were no women in the LEGCO and asked DP and UPC to nominate a woman. Mpanga was asked whether she was interested in the position. Rather than getting excited, Mpanga was torn between taking up the position and a scholarship she had just received. Secondly, she did not know how her father would react at the news, given that Buganda had boycotted the elections. Mpanga's father was then Buganda palace administrator.

Mpanga consulted her friends and later her father gave her a go ahead.

"My father was surprised that they had elected me, a young girl, to represent others in the LEGCO. He said go for it," she recalls.

## Life in LEGCO

Given her background, Mpanga was used to being the only female member among the men everywhere.

"I was frightened at first. Most of my colleagues were old and experienced men. I wondered what I was going to say. But I quickly settled in with the help of Sarah Ntiro,

another female member of LEGCO," she says.

UPC appointed Mpanga shadow minister of education given her background.

"I remember my maiden speech was on the education budget, especially money allocated to girls and the disabled. One of my friend's father, Wilberforce Nadioppe from Busoga came and hugged me and said 'well done my daughter you spoke like a man,' she recalls.

Passionate about issues of women, Ntiro introduced Mpanga to the Uganda Council of Women who at the time wanted women issues represented in Parliament.

"I remember we tried to legislate for Indian marriage in Uganda; unfortunately majority of the members were male discussing issues of women," she remembers.

LEGCO, Mpanga says, continued to discuss issues of self-rule through committees and the plenary. The British had sent a committee chaired by John Wilda to collect views of how Ugandans wanted to govern themselves. Her stay in LEGCO was cut short as she had to travel to the UK for further education.

"The British never prepared us for independence. So many issues remained unresolved and it was assumed that they would be handled after independence. Unfortunately they never were. The unfinished businesses continue to cause problems to date," Mpanga says.

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