

AGGRESSIVE, CONFRONTATIONAL AND UNAPOLOGETIC CRITICS WAS THE



The last 30 years has seen women rise to big positions both in the public and private sectors

Activism now: The opportunities

By Gloria Nakajubi

The International Women's Day, as highlighted by the UN Women, is a time to reflect on the progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of their countries and communities.

Under the theme *Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women's rights*, the major focus of this year's celebrations is the role of activists in the women's movement. With a good number of women non-governmental organisations, under the umbrella body of Uganda Women's Network, the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association and a host of other loose associations, Uganda is a hotbed of women activism spanning three decades.

Aggressive, confrontational and unapologetic critics was the definition of activism decades ago. As Veronica Nakijoba, a lecturer at the School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University explains, that period was one of 'fire'. So brunt that at one point, prominent activist Miria Matembe called for the castration of men who defile young girls.

It was perceived as a battle between the male and females. Much as it drew the attention of some, others decided to shun the movement branding it a 'social rebellion'.

Social rebellion it was according to the experts for the movement was meant to undo what is socially acceptable behaviour and yet infringes on the basic human rights of women.

However, as years go by, activism as argued by associate professor Consolata Kabonesa, a gender specialist, the playing field is changing and the same strategies that were deployed years ago may not necessarily apply, but rather 'lessons to pick from'.

"The new environment provides women with a diverse playing field. But also, it comes with an equal measure of challenges that require women to boldly take the step," Kabonesa says.

Tapping into the dynamic environment, the



Women selling crafts. Women have been empowered economically and they now play a crucial role in the economy

DIFFERENT LIFE EXPERIENCES AMONG WOMEN HAVE PUT SOME AT A DISADVANTAGE

don argues that there is need to appreciate the changing demands. "There is a girl out there whose challenge is not accessing school,

but rather how to stay in school. The woman in the workplace is grappling with how to balance her other roles as a woman such as childbearing." Kabonesa explains, adding that the demands as were espoused under the early movement may not necessarily apply to the current era.

Increased participation in politics

The number of women in Parliament has increased over time from 18% in the 6th to the current 35%. Having more women MPs is believed to have increased the influence that women have on policy issues.

Based on the affirmative action policy, every district is assured of at least one female Member of Parliament. For the last two Parliaments, the house has been presided over by a female speaker; Rebecca Kadaga. This, as argued by the experts, is an opportunity for women to push for gender responsive

legislation, but also financial commitment to implement the policies and passed.

Equity beyond equality

The biggest argument now, according to the activists, is pursuing equity so that the women are able to reap the benefits of equality.

Gender equity puts into consideration issues of fairness. The different life experiences have put women at a disadvantage and, therefore, just telling them to go to school, for instance, may not necessary enable them access the education. Equity, therefore, goes to level the playing field.

The issues that women rights activists advocated for back then are almost becoming a given, according to Perry Aritua, the executive director of Women's Democracy Network, Uganda Chapter. Participation in politics and other spheres of life, according to Aritua, have been opened up but the

CORE DEFINITION OF ACTIVISM



Speaker Rebecca Kadaga with MPs Robinah Nabbanja and Nakabira Getrude Lubega. The last two terms of Parliament have been led by a woman

and challenges

argument now is whether the barriers that constrain women in achieving their full potential in those respective spheres.

The hashtag era

One of the most successful social media campaigns in the recent years has been the #MeToo. This followed the sexual abuse scandal that rocked Hollywood in 2017 with the unmasking of film producer and director, Harvey Weinstein.

Weinstein was accused of sexually abusing women in their quest for space in Hollywood. The hashtag, #MeToo was, therefore, used to bring out stories of abuse that different women had suffered. In just a few weeks, the hashtag is reported to have been shared over 12 million times and a number of big names lost their jobs. Social media, according to Kabonesa, is opening the space for, especially young people to push for the women agenda. "This is where the majority of the population (young people) are and these should be the target of any kind of activism."

The rural vs urban activist

Different social set ups according to the experts require tailor-made approaches for people to easily relate and own the campaign.

According to Nakijoba, who handles the paper on feminism, activism and civil society at Makerere's School of Women and Gender Studies, there is need to groom people from the communities for which activism is intended. "We are trying to transform the social fabric of society. And unless people relate with the message, they will reject it".

Information age

According to ICT usage statistics (2016) from the Uganda Communication Commission, women who used a mobile phone was at 57.2%, listened to radio (67%), watched TV (13.9%), used a computer (9.2%) and used Internet (6%). Therein lies a great opportunity for activism and considering that radio remains the most accessed media, it could as well provide the most appropriate platform for activism.

The information age, according to the experts, has also increased awareness on matters gender that have for long been

misinterpreted. "More people now appreciate that women's rights are but human rights. That is the starting point," Nakijoba says.

Individual initiative

Every opportunity, as argued by Jane Mpagi, the director for gender and community development at the gender ministry, requires people that step out and take advantage of it.

"Power is captured and not just offered on a silver platter. Every politician is trying to consolidate themselves in power. So women have to rise up and challenge those in power through the routes as provided for in the constitution. Show that you have the ability to occupy any space for no one is going to just offer it to you," she cautions.

Men as partners

Unlike in the past when the women movement was perceived as the 'women's thing', men have since joined and as explained by Andrew Bahemuka, the chairperson LC1 for Kisoro zone in Kisaasi, a city suburb, who is also a women's rights activist.

"Our role in this movement is to help other men understand that power can actually be shared. The biggest conflict has been the fact that women are demanding for their human rights and on the other hand, the men saw them as a threat to their power," he says.

He argues that previously gender-based violence had been tagged to such issues as alcoholism and poverty however with time, there is growing evidence that violence or the friction as seen between men and women is due to power relations and nothing else.

"We have come to a point where we appreciate that a woman can earn an income, own property and support the household. The discussion is homes now is which bills the wife or husband is taking up. It is the acceptance that we are partners and not competitors," Kisenbo says.

A number of women rights organisation have since made deliberate campaigns to recruit men as champions for women's rights. Through formal and informal engagements, men get to debunk the social constructs especially on gender relations and whether these are helping families and society achieve progress.

Confronting the challenges

Gender studies researcher Daudi Mpiima thinks women's rights activism has been depoliticised and largely turned into programmes and projects. This he says has taken the sting out of it that. The agenda-setting power that the activists exuded then can no longer be felt now. It is politics influencing activism and not the other way round.

"Activism is inherently supposed to highlight societal ills and push from positive and all-inclusive transformation with and ability to inspire," he says.

The diplomatic approach to demanding for the rights of women according to Nakijoba has unfortunately led to compromises. "The argument has since ceased to be about getting what rightfully belongs to the woman but rather what those in power can offer them."

She cites the example of the Domestic Violence Act (2010) which was an offer largely based on compromises. The Act according to the academic is being faulted by different

stakeholders especially the duty bearers such as police and judiciary who find it lacking when it comes to handling certain cases of domestic violence. "We are wondering whether it was a waste of time after all."

According to Nakijoba, activism has been reduced to asking for favors and not what rightfully belongs to the women. "No one is doing women a favor. We can say that now more girls are going to school and go silent about the fact that the dropout rate is still high," she says.

The role of the state

As highlighted by Associate Professor Sarah Ssali, who is also the dean of the School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University, 'the state which has a social contract with the citizens has the prime responsibility to ensure that each one of them enjoys their full rights.'

"The burden of uplifting the woman doesn't lie only with women but from everyone. The issues that constrain women empowerment are both individual, structural and environmental and there is someone at play at each stage," she says.



Matembe is one of the pioneer women activists



International Women's Day

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