



**“Ageism” as a Lens
for Critiquing Power,
Gatekeeping and Feminist
Representation in Uganda**

Femme Forte Uganda is powered by community, care, and collective action.

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Greetings!

We are a feminist movement-building organization dedicated to advancing economic, social, and political power for women. Through advocacy, innovation, and sustainable initiatives, we create opportunities for growth and leadership while fostering connections across generations to strengthen Uganda's broader women's movement.

We hope this publication inspires reflection, action, and solidarity as we work together toward a more equitable and empowered society for women.

The Femme Forte Team

Background

Ageism is an often-overlooked dynamic within Uganda's feminist spaces, even though it shapes how power, leadership, and representation are negotiated across generations. As the women's movement evolves, with older feminists holding long-standing institutional influence and younger feminists pushing new approaches to activism, tensions and misunderstandings frequently emerge. This reflection situates ageism as a structural issue within feminist organizing, and invites a conversation on how generational differences impact inclusion, collaboration, and movement-building.

On 18 July 2025, I had the privilege of being invited to join the inaugural Kimeeza edition of Femme Forte Uganda, under the theme, “Re-imagining Inclusion, Power and the future of Organizing”. I was looking forward to the opportunity to engage, at the same time, I was grappling with presenting, to the audience, a topic that would be relevant and also in line with the theme of the Kimeeza. I decided to present on one that has been on my mind for quite some time, and that is “Ageism”.

[World Health Organization](#) defines “Ageism” as the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age. Ageism affects everyone and therefore it can apply for those who are young, middle-aged and old. The consequences of ageism are far reaching; as they can be seen in policies aimed at addressing socio-economic and health challenges. For example, workplace policies that exclude older people or limit younger people’s decision making, patronizing behaviour towards younger or older people. These practices have the compounding effect of limiting agency for those who experience it as well as lead to internalized stereotypes about what a person can or cannot do at a given age.

Many [terminologies](#) have been developed, aimed at categorizing people according to their ages such as; the silent generation (born between 1925 to 1945), the baby boomers (between 1946 and 1964), generation X (between 1965 and 1980), Millennials (between 1981 and 1996/2000) and Gen Z (between 1997/2001 and 2012, Gen Alpha (2013-2025).

For the purpose of this discussion, I will group younger women into (18 to 35), middle aged women (between 35 to 50) and older women (from 50 onwards). I will focus on younger women (18 to 35) and older women (from 50 on-wards), as set out above. The middle age category can lie on both sides depending on how close they are to the subject of discussion. Of course, there is also the acknowledgement of the fluidity of age, where some people might not neatly fit into the set age group. Furthermore, a

lot can be said about age, especially in relationship to women, but I want to restrict my discussion of age in the context of inclusion in feminist spaces (politically, academically, economically and socially, if you will). I also recognize that some of these claims might not necessarily apply to all women under the particular age group, as there are often exceptions. In the context of this discussion, categorization is for purposes of a more streamlined review or analysis.

There is a recognition that women who are now in the older category, have been vital for the feminist movement in Uganda, having lobbied for several advances in line with protecting of women's rights and in a more general sense, gender rights. Their activism and advocacy has led to several ground breaking advancements on the political, socio-economic, legal and cultural level. Even though, we still have a way to go, one cannot dispute the impact of the women's movement on the advancement of gender rights.

Having said that, there are some critical nuances that are worth mentioning; One of which being the different perceptions of which issues to prioritize, among the different age groups. For some time, women who are now considered to be older, have pursued issues such as; capacity building aimed at transforming patriarchal structures and institutional reform; issues of equal pay, unpaid care work, retirement, reproductive rights, access to health care, in a more general sense. Contrastingly, while younger women might advocate for some of the similar issues, the forms of engagement might not present in the same way. For instance, younger people are more deeply involved in online activism and making use of online spaces (social media and digital platforms). The forms of engagement that are used, also tend to contrast, for instance, younger feminists tend to operate on platforms like Tik-Tok, Zoom, Instagram, online blogs, websites and X (Twitter). Older feminists may prefer in-person meetings or dialogues, printed newspapers, TV, radio etc. Bridging

this gap means teaching and sharing digital skills on the one hand, while preserving the value of in-person community organizing, on the other hand. In addition, when it comes to the work environment, younger women, are taking work 'burn out' more seriously that is centering, self-care, rest, mental health and drawing attention to the impact of multiple forms of labour on women and other marginalized groups. This might be perceived by the older feminists, as not taking work seriously, while the younger women perceive the older ones as glorifying or seeking to uphold a toxic and patriarchal kind of work environment.

Related to that, is the understanding of feminism among the different age groups. While some older women have been part of the gender equality movement, they might not explicitly refer to themselves as "feminist", due to the term's perceived western or elitist connotations, while the younger generation are more likely to proudly identify as feminist, with a strong emphasis on theory, language, and solidarity. This variance around language and labelling, can create mistrust or misalignment between the generations, making it harder to work together. Related to this, is the issue of respectability politics. Younger feminists often challenge the idea that activism must conform to societal norms (e.g., dressing modestly, adhering to bureaucratic work procedures). Older feminists may see these approaches as going against the set cultural expectations, causing breakdowns in communication between the age groups or generations.

Another critique, usually levelled at older women is the 'Stayism' notion. It is forwarded that, in their claim for representation, older women have actively lobbied to get into positions of power, be it political, education, civil society, etc. Once they get into these positions, they hold onto them as long as possible, thereby replicating the same tendencies that are predominant with patriarchal, African post-colonial and male dominated governments, that they are critical of. Stayism, mirrors and reenacts

patriarchal tendencies, which feminists have been critical of. That is to say, while patriarchy holds power over women, thereby subordinating them, once women get a grip on the power that they can get hold onto, they also hold onto it, creating a sort of hierarchy of power-men over women, older women over younger women, educated women over uneducated ones, among others.

Additionally, in holding onto these positions of power, the older feminists, end up 'Gatekeeping' career opportunities, promotion positions, funding opportunities, that would otherwise be vital for the advancement of younger women. This cycle is also perpetuated by development agencies that often prefer fully-established organisations that have existed for a long period of time, as opposed to the budding often informal organizations and associations established, by the younger women. By clinging onto positions of influence and power, they get in the way of younger women actively participating in the movement, thereby inadvertently hindering the feminist movement from moving forward.

Furthermore, in trying to draw parallels between stayism and the african political space, one would say that the refusal by many (not all) african leaders, most of them male, to relinquish positions of power has led to a situation of ["trapped youth hood"](#). "Trapped in youth-hood" generally refers to the feeling of being stuck in a particular stage of life, often adolescence or early adulthood, and struggling to move forward. It can encompass a range of experiences, including feeling limited by societal expectations, struggling with personal identity, or facing challenges in navigating life transitions. Stayism, very common in the African context, [traps the youth](#) (between the ages of 18 to 40) in an almost permanent space of stagnation. For example, by virtue of one's age (33 years old), one might be considered to be an adult in every sense of the word- yet one's inability to take on responsibility in the various aspects of their life, renders you them less autonomous over decisions in their personal

life but also over decisions in the public space. This state of “trapped youth hood” hinders some younger people, in this context, women from transitioning into adults in their full capacity.

Another element, that could be pointed out is the respect for elder syndrome. From the African perspective, the elder is often greatly respected. They are reverted to for sage advice, as they are often assumed to be repositories of information, that they have garnered over their years of existence. In turn, this information is passed on to the younger generation through a mentorship process that maybe lifelong. Respect for elders is a cornerstone in many African cultures but it can also be a challenging one to navigate especially for the younger feminists. Especially so, in instances, where young women challenge authority, by speaking out, disagreeing with decisions, or demanding fair treatment from older women, which may be perceived as being disrespectful. Rather than recognizing this as empowerment, it may be interpreted as arrogance, entitlement or disrespect. When it comes to the elder syndrome, the question to be asked is; at what point does the elder give reign or pass on the baton to the younger person? Differently put, at which stage, would one say that the younger, now holds good enough information to take the reins, of course permitting mistakes along the way? This would allow for a transition process, enabling the movement to deliberately open up to the younger generation.

Another connected issue is the one of internalised misogyny or intergenerational policing. At times, younger women have perceived older women as being enforcers of the very norms that oppressed them. They refer to this as “I suffered so should you mentality” where older women either consciously or subconsciously replicate systems of oppression, almost as a rite of passage, that negatively affect the younger women. Many older women grew up in societies where women’s roles were more restricted—focused on obedience, domestic duties, and endurance. On

the other hand, younger women are growing up in a rapidly changing world where traditional gender roles are being questioned. Thus, younger women have been seen as being more prone to openly assert their rights, demand equality, pursue education, careers, and refuse to conform to traditional roles. This can be perceived as “entitlement” by those who have had to silently endure hardships- a non-recognition of the sacrifices and paths paved by the older women. Additionally, as the world is opening up and some opportunities have seemingly opened up to younger women, that the older women were not privy to, at times, there is a sort of resentment and sadness, if you will, that arises when they see younger women boldly demand better lives, especially if they didn’t get to enjoy those privileges.

On the other side of the coin, are perceptions of older women towards younger women. On the whole, one could recognise the energy, sense of enthusiasm and life that has been injected into the movement as a result of having young women on board. Their creativity, innovation and the need to have a say or make a certain form of contribution to the movement is worth mentioning. With that being said, how are they perceived by older women?

Some older women feel that the younger generation wants “too much, too fast” without working as hard or enduring as many sacrifices. Furthermore, the energy and excitement of youth, is at times perceived as being allergic to sane and seasoned advice, wanting to undermine the progress of the movement, in the name of quick transformation and evolution. Related to this, is the feeling by some older feminists that younger women don’t take stock of and appreciate the sacrifices, the work done and the achievements by the former, in creating and sustaining the movement. They feel that the younger women, often take these achievements for granted, at the very least and at most, tend to undermine them or completely ignore them. One example of how

younger women are perceived to ignore the efforts of older feminists is by not carrying them forward or a generalized apathy to these gains. Another way that younger people enact ageism towards the older people, is by attaching an expiration date to the older women. They view older women almost as an expired replica with no more value left to add to the advocacy spaces. Some of these younger women go as far as pushing for the older women to leave the spaces, forwarding that they should retire.

Based on the observations above, how do we bridge the gap between the generations, in order to ensure that the gains on both sides, aren't lost, but carried forward? First of all, it is vital to recognize, that both groups have something of value to contribute to the movement. Their different areas of prioritization, are vital for moving the movement forward. Some of the ways the challenges or clashes raised above, can be addressed include; an honest self-critique of both age groups to recognize and intentionally work towards overcoming their biases towards another age group, identifying meeting points of collaboration, continued dialogue between younger and older feminists to build on the strength of each of these age groups, intentional building and nurturing of mentorship spaces and fora. It's also necessary to center marginalized voices across generations. Both generations should ensure that; less educated, those with disabilities, rural, less resourced, sexual minorities, feminists are heard and empowered, regardless of age. Lastly, the need to deliberately build inclusive coalitions. Cross-generational and mutually respectful collaboration on specific campaigns or political goals (e.g., reproductive rights, pay equity, antiviolen work) can remind everyone of their shared purpose. These collaborations should also make use of the different spaces, tools and channels of advocacy that are used by the various generations.

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