



# **‘In the Eye of the Storm’:**

## **THE FEMINIST ENCOUNTER, RESILIENCE AND CONTROL IN CONTEMPORARY UGANDA**



Reflective Paper  
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Presented at  
**THE KIMEEZA! FIRST EDITION**  
NAVIGATING THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION  
Femme Forte Uganda  
*July 18, 2025*



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This publication holds the full keynote address delivered at The Kimeeza 2025, convened under the theme “Navigating the Politics of Inclusion.” What a joy, what an honour, what a deliciously bold thing it is to return to it; now living on in digital form, still crackling with the energy of the room where it was first spoken.

In these pages, you will find not just a speech, but a provocation: a call to listen deeply, question lovingly, and commit audaciously to building inclusive futures rooted in accountability, not aesthetics.

We are deeply grateful to our keynote speaker, whose words continue to stretch our minds, feed our spirits, and remind us that feminist dialogue can be radical, mischievous, and transformative all at once.

To our panelists, moderators, co-conveners CREA, the entire Femme Forte Uganda team, and every voice that showed up in the room and online: thank you for sprinkling your fire, wisdom, and wonder into this moment.

**Penelope Sanyu**

Chief Steward

Femme Forte Uganda

## Background

In today's rapidly evolving social and political landscape, the concept of inclusion must become a focal point in discussions around equity, justice and societal progress. With elections coming up in Uganda, various oppressive laws including but not limited to the Anti-Homosexuality act, closure of civic operating space across East Africa, the rising femicides, unfair taxation regimes and many other vices pose a big threat to livelihoods, identity and organizing.

The Kimeeza (round table), convened by Femme Forte Uganda and CREA sought to delve into the complexities, challenges and transformative potential of inclusive practices across various domains. We sought to examine and dissect power dynamics, explore how different identities intersect and interact with inclusion dynamics, anticipate future challenges, evaluate the tangible impact of the already existing inclusive policies and highlight effective strategies and initiatives that enhance and promote inclusion in the face of the multifaceted setbacks.

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*When the solid ground is falling out from underneath my feet  
Between the black skies and my red eyes, I can barely see  
When I realize I've been sold out by my friends and my family  
I can feel the rain reminding me...*

In the eye of the storm, You remain in control ...

**(Stevenson, 2015).**

## **Introduction**

**I**n the eye of the storm by Stevenson hinges on faith to derive a sense of control of every situation. In its first stanza, Ryan Stevenson's 2015 song "Eye of the Storm" makes reference to once solid foundations falling from underneath our feet, under our watch, yet we can barely see. The song's reflections on disappointment from losing what we once held dear, leaving you in the eye of the storm<sup>1</sup>. In this paper I use 'the eye of the storm' as a metaphor to help us, the feminist movement, critically engage, understand and navigate contemporary realities. I deploy this metaphor, in the eye of the storm, not to paint a grim picture as such, but rather, to concretize the current realities of progress nested in backlash as well as resilience of the women's rights movement in Uganda.

Our realities as African women are that the written history begins with colonialism and so our struggle for women's rights seem to be predicated on experiences largely conditioned by the colonial experience. In the dominant narrative women's rights are constructed as a western notion, yet we have various leads into how women created and maintained social space in pre-colonial societies. For example, Uganda, as a variegated entity of different nationalities before colonialism presents a rather diverse picture of women's political citizenship. In more centralised contexts such as Buganda, Bunyoro and Ankole, there were explicit nodes for women's influence in society. In

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Mwiine A. and Ahikire J. (2025) 'In the Eye of the Storm': The politics of Uganda's Affirmative Action Policy and Pathways to countering the backlash, Research Report for IDS Sussex.

Buganda, the queen mother (Namasole) and queen sister (Lubuga) wielded considerable power through their lineage positions. Namasole, the widow of a deceased king who gives birth to the throne's successor exercised powers that resembled those of the Kabaka (Buganda King). Princesses had varied roles and powers therein. Away from the royal spaces, women played multiple roles such as spiritual leaders, in charge of rituals e.g. *apolon ka etale* in Teso, healers, foretellers and the whole dominion of the hearth, which was critical to a society, governed under subsistence modes of production. In Kigezi, clans, as according to Paul Ngorogoza, were traced to women. Accordingly each clan in Kigezi remembers the old women from whom it originates and the totem it observes<sup>2</sup>. Though not sufficiently documented, history also indicates much more overt influence for instance in the anti-colonial struggle in the early periods of colonisation. Notably, Muhumuza is documented to have led the Nyabingi movement in Kigezi (Southwestern Uganda) during anti-colonial struggles in Uganda between 1910 and 1930. Similar examples have been documented in West and Southern Africa.

At the level of general society, the gender division of labour in precolonial times was not as clear cut on the basis of public private spheres. In the politics of everyday life, the monumental institution of motherhood placed and continues to place women in intricate paces of power. We learn from Tamale<sup>3</sup>, for instance, that where there had been a blurred distinction between the private and public life providing fluid moments with women participating and playing leadership roles, colonialism created the rigid divide where women were relegated to the private sphere with the public constructed as the superior one- and identified as male.

Why bother with this rather ancient history so to say? Though not very well documented, this history alerts us to something very fundamental for our feminist encounter, which is, that what we normally refer to as traditional is by far an historical construction. Colonialism annihilated women's political citizenship, compromised their economic autonomy and made their bodily integrity a matter to be negotiated as opposed to a right. Majority of instances

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2 Ngorogoza Paul (1998) *Kigezi and its People*, Fountain Publishers, First Published in 1967

3 Tamale, Sylvia (1999) *When Hens begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers

of abuse we call African tradition as more of the composite product of colonization and varied changes of gender practice over time. Terms such bread winner and housewife are clearly located within the money economy of capitalism that tends to silence women's power and presence. We are now compelled to document progress in terms of women's share within the newly constructed reality (see table 1). And now we are here in these rearranged parameters and we have to re-weave our entitlements as women- politically, economically and socially and in a very fundamental way, re-order the non-tangible entanglements – the masculine standard engrained in the social fabric. What confronts us today in a sense, is that there seems to be relative progress but which is entangled with backlash, a recreation of patriarchy in national and global anti- rights politics and inherent cracks within the women's rights movement – hence situating us right in the eye of the storm.

## Where are we?

### On the tangible and the visible

From the 1940s when women in Uganda began the visible journey to creating a social movement against their marginalization, great milestones have been registered. Table 1 below indicates the key visible milestones in the contemporary period.

**Table 1: Women's Share in Selected key sectors in Uganda**

Category	Women's Share (approx.)
Parliamentary seats	34.1%
Direct constituency MPs	2.4% of seats; 14 women
Reserved AA women's district seats	146 seats
District chairpersons (LCV)	3.42%
Local government representation	45.7%
Full Cabinet Ministers	45%
Ministers of State	48%
Permanent Secretaries	50%
CEOs in Gov't agencies	38%
Ambassadors	38%
Registered Land	27%
Literacy	Female 76% male 84%

These percentages reflect real progress in view of the colonial/historical marginalization. For instance, the women's share of seats in parliament at 34.1 % put Uganda at the 49th position out of the 181 countries archived by the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU)<sup>4</sup>. The vice President, the Speaker of Parliament, Prime Minister, First Deputy Prime Minister are women. The 45% and 48 percent of cabinet ministers and state ministers respectively is no mean feat. In the private sector, a number of women occupy leadership positions and a number of them are leading civil society organisations (CSOs). Women leaders of women's rights organisations are also notably key actors in Uganda's civil society terrain on the national scene and globally. Literacy levels have continued to grow especially with the Post Beijing explicit notion of the focus on the girl child.

Despite these visible and tangible achievements there exists the ugly reality – the more things change, the more they remain the same – in the form of silencing, erasure and violence. And we have the reality of backlash – backlash understood as the multipronged forms of pushback, resistance, or negative reactions against women's rights gains, whether real or imagined<sup>5</sup>. While characterising backlash as global, Tamale also points out the contextual and complex character of gender backlash when she argues that “in Africa, when the backlash is placed against the backdrop of political monopoly, economic deprivation, poverty, violence, displacement, adjusting economies and globalization, the crisis multiplies tenfold”.<sup>6</sup>

## **What is the place of the women's movement in all this?**

In 2005 I conducted a consultation on the women's movement in Uganda and was intrigued by the relative consistency of negativity in what I termed as the first reaction (See box 1).

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4 <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>

5 Townsend-Bell, E. (2020). Backlash as the Moment of Revelation. *Signs*, 45(2), 287–294.

6 Tamale, S. (2006). African Feminism: How should we change? *Development*, 49(1), 38–41.

### **Box 1: A selection of 'first' reactions in Consultation Discussions, August, 2005)**

- How can I answer questions on something hypothetical, is there a women's movement in Uganda?
- Mm I don't know what to say
- Where is that women's movement and where is it administered?
- The women's movement in Uganda is not weak, rather it has overgrown
- We are in a kind of depression
- Sorry that I start with the negative. I feel sad about the women's movement
- I am not sure I am part of the women's movement. It is a club, I think
- The women's movement in Uganda is dead

My sense at that time was that clearly the expectation of many were that the women's movement should take the form of a more or less formal organization with clear programmes and impacts. Yet the women's movement, or what now I choose to term as the women's rights movement, is a variegated and layered social movement.

The women's rights movement has clearly grown and achieved notable milestones. Vivid too is that it is now facing new hurdles. Tamale reminds us that the neoliberal tenets of individualism and competition for profit intersects with donor-demands to the non-governmental organisations and government's tight control of non-governmental rights organisations hence the deep fractures and depoliticisation of women's movements – with many actors ending up in the 'business of women rights' rather than political activism for women's rights. Furthermore, and perhaps more profound is the fact that the terrain of contestation has moved into the doctrinal ring, doctrinal in a sense that issues such as bodily integrity, property rights and women's personhood tend to point the sword directly to the root of male



privilege. Issues such as girls' education and reserved seats for political participation (non-doctrinal) though relatively impactful in the long run, did not create the same panic and backlash. Evidently the rise of extreme conservatism, violence and the whole anxiety about the boy child are all predicated on the fact that the women's rights agenda has created a dent on male privilege especially where doctrinal issues are concerned. The realization that the doctrinal ring requires a different set of tools should now be on top of the agenda for the women's rights movement.

## **On the 'Gender Industry'**

When the concept of gender became popular in the 1980s and particularly the 90s, there was a great sense of energy and optimism. Finally, the term gender was to help interrogate power between men and women – beyond biology and the whole arena of identity creation- of masculinities and femininities. Then it quickly came to be adopted to mean men and women, largely as a depoliticised buzzword. The deployment of term feminism was abandoned and only expected to be deployed by the 'bad' women. Meanwhile the political potency of the term gender was being diluted along the way until it finally became an industry, largely of 'technical doing' as opposed to movement building.

At the weakest ebb of the gender industry comes the big bang by President Donald Trump's Executive orders of 2025. And with sling and stone akin to the David versus Goliath contest, the industry could be set to collapse like a pack of cards. The Trump shock wave has demonstrated that gender has increasingly become an amorphous, and an apolitical shell easy to crush or even worse still to be guilt tripped. Clearly there is urgent need for multidimensional efforts to rescue gender from this trap.

## **Contending with Backlash- the Global and the Local - As we distinguish between what has worked and what works**

In social movement building what works is not exactly the same as what has worked. What has worked is a composite of the desired and the possible in the circumstance. What works, is the ideal in terms of the ultimate vision of

the movement- in this case, gender transformation where women and men of the different categories enjoy their rights without Ifs or Buts. Let me use the example of the legislative process of Uganda's domestic violence (DV) law. Two things that are said to have worked are, one, working with men as champions of the law and two, the crafting of the issue as a development as opposed to a rights issue. These two strategies worked to get the law passed. But the question is, what is in the law and how has the aftermath rolled itself out? We see a process bedeviled by hollowing out and non-implementation. The so called male champions at the time of passing the DV law, it turns out are the biggest hurdles for women's rights, less than 3 years on.

The second example is affirmative action (AA) which has worked to increase numbers but beyond the curtain, is a ghetto and a recreation of male privilege and entitlement largely constructing women as clients as opposed to citizens.<sup>7</sup> AA pits women against each other and in the long run propagates the narrative about women as actors with inherent intrigue. NGOs that train women for political candidature are sometimes constructed as arming the enemy of some incumbent woman leader. These contentions threaten to divide, over-stretch and compromise women-centred strategic alliances that frame women's rights, equality and the gender justice agenda. As a historically discriminated social category, divisions amongst women actors are like fresh fodder to patriarchal oppression.

In the realm of legislative activism, what has sometimes worked is to lobby powerful actors (men) but in some cases this strategy can border with begging, further reproducing male dominance, as compromises are inevitable along the way. Following Naila Kabeer,<sup>8</sup> we need to be alert to the deficits of political expediency or instrumentalism (what is working as opposed to what works). When we make such compromises e.g. - from 'every woman should live a life free of violence, to fighting gender based violence is a good for development' and onto 'even men suffer domestic violence. We ought to be intentional. In many cases, social change is a complex process. It

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7 Ahikire, Josephine (2017): "'Please Daddy ...Give us some More' Recognition Politics and the Language of Special Interest Groups", in J. Oloka-Onyango & J. Ahikire (eds.) *Controlling Consent: Uganda's 2016 Elections*, Trenton: Africa World Press.

8 Kabeer Naila (1994) *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections of the measurement of Women's Empowerment*, in *Development & Change* Vol 30.

is inevitable to make compromises – but never sleep, slumber and snore in the Belly of the Beast!

## Resisting Erasure, Building feminist Knowledge

*Women world over are an incredible gender. They are the fulcrum of every family and influence everything a family should be...while we treasure the female gender, we must be careful that this wave of women emancipation does not affect our family values, especially family unity and respect between women and men...empowerment should not be used against men but should be complimentary...I have seen many young men out there who are not keen to walk down the aisle. They are afraid of women especially those that have benefitted from empowerment and become successful in their respective callings. This is understandable as an empowered woman can be intimidating to a disempowered man... (Isaac Walikagga in Daily Monitor Newspaper, March 15, 2024).*

Isaac Walikagga is an Advocate of the High Court (Uganda), a learned and well placed personality. What does this rather polished assertion stand for and what is the message to the feminist vision? Apart from being angry, how should one react to such assertions as the one above? Rita Aciro of Uganda Women's Network, has loudly sounded the following alarm bell:

*The people who craft the backlash organize, meet, think and strategize. As to whether the Women's Rights Organizations do the same to develop strategies to counter the backlash is still questionable (Rita Aciro, June 20239).*

Where do we locate the feminist voice? The discourse around women's rights seem to many, as sailing in a campus-less boat and there is a need to re-engineer the voice. What we call erasure, burnout, roll back, resistance, name it, is the different dimensions/shades of backlash. The path ahead is to be made by walking. The answer to this question requires a collective

voice- which could roll along the following lines:

## **The Path is to be made by Walking**

- Scenario building so as to keep afloat amidst the towering wave, in the eye of the storm
- Develop think tank and media watchdog imperatives and weave them within the women's right movement building, including continuous power mapping
- Documentation, archiving and popularisation of women's footprints
- Strategic alliances (non-episodic) across all fault lines- class/ generation and many other fault lines and multiple dimensions of our story
- Face the funding question with alternative modes of funding and doing
- Remain in control of the narrative- in the eye of the storm-no individual or collective should enjoy a sense of entitlement over another, develop the requisite language
- Young generation to retool and arm itself and be in the lead of the current contest
- Decolonise, Decolonise, Decolonise