

Our foremothers were not silenced, they endured

In this month, my thoughts have been unsettled, shifting between the progress we have registered and the setbacks that continue to unfold before us.

I found myself reflecting on the composition of the Odoki Commission of 1988, which undertook the demanding task of nationwide consultations and civic education to foster unity, reconciliation, and establish a framework for Uganda's governance and development. Of the 21 members of that Commission, only two were women; Dr Miria Matembe and Justice Mary Maitum. That reality alone speaks volumes about the context within which Uganda's constitutional debates on equality and women's rights were conducted.

I have read accounts of how these women, together with a handful of allies, pushed for the inclusion of provisions on equality, non-discrimination, and the dignity of women. The resistance faced by those advocating for these rights was far more intense than what many experience today. There were even plans by some men to violently attack them during a proposed demonstration at City Square. They survived only because they received that information in time and did not proceed with the protest. Even so, they persisted—firmly and repeatedly advocating for language that would safeguard these protections in law. Our foremothers were not silenced. They endured.

Across every sphere of human endeavour, science, the humanities, governance, innovation, education, religion, and the arts, there have been bold women who have carried the burden of resistance so that those who follow might walk a clearer path. This is despite historical narratives that have often sought to erase women's contributions or relegate them to the margins as mere footnotes.

I would particularly like to acknowledge younger women who courageously navigated the early days of social media and the in-

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Empowerment



ternet. At the time, online spaces were deeply hostile to women's voices. Many endured insults, ridicule, and even real threats simply for speaking out. Yet they persisted, helping to shape a digital environment that today allows other women and young girls to express themselves, organise, and take part in public discourse. I remember and honour individuals such as Edna Ninsiima, Godiva Akullo, Yvonne Mpambara, Rosebell Kagumire, Maria Alesi, Ophelia Kemigisha, Patricia Twasiima, Patricia Karungi, Isabella Akiteng, Marie Ainomugisha, Barbara Musimenta, Rebecca Kabejja, and Tricia Nabaye, among many others who helped open those spaces. Because of their efforts, many, sometimes unknowingly, now engage online with greater confidence and freedom.

Even today, many remain unseen and unrecognised, yet continue this important work, quietly but steadfastly, expanding space for women and girls to speak and participate on digital platforms.

In this women's month, I am grateful to all trailblazers, including those whose names we may never know, for paving the way. They took a stand for rights that we sometimes take for granted today.

Progress has never come without sacrifice. It has been driven by women willing to enter difficult spaces, speak when it was unpopular, and endure criticism so that the

voices of other women and girls could one day be heard more freely.

Remembering is important, and necessary. But remembrance alone is not enough. The legacy of every woman who has worked, whether achieving a small step forward or a major breakthrough, demands our continued vigilance. Three decades later, several reforms affecting women's rights remain contested and, therefore, unfinished.

One example is the proposed Marriage Bill 2024, which seeks to reform and harmonise Uganda's marriage laws. Among its provisions are clearer recognition of non-monetary contributions within marriage, protections for children, and guidelines on debts incurred before marriage. The Bill also attempts to address cohabitation and divorce procedures. However, women's rights organisations have raised concerns that certain provisions—particularly those relating to polygamy, the criminalisation of cohabitation, and conditions surrounding the use of a husband's name—could, if enacted, reinforce rather than resolve existing inequalities.

Similarly, Uganda's Land Act of 1998 sought to strengthen women's land rights by recognising spousal interests and protecting customary tenants. Yet significant challenges remain in implementation, largely because customary norms continue to influence property relations.

In rural communities, women's savings groups and agricultural cooperatives have also evolved into informal political spaces. Market women, small-scale farmers, and community leaders frequently organise around issues such as taxation, land access, and economic survival. While these forms of organising may not always feature in formal political histories, they play a critical role in shaping local governance and influencing policy debates.

We must approach with urgency the task of translating into practice the protections we often reference today.

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