

Buteme: Game must move beyond survival to growth

Hidden Edge. One of the biggest challenges, according to Koyokoyo, is the lack of structured development systems for young players. This must be corrected to get to next step.

BY FRED MWAMBU

As Uganda marked International Women's Day this month, few female voices in the country's sporting circles carry the experience and honesty of former international player and coach Buteme Koyokoyo. A pioneer in Ugandan women's rugby and a former coach of the Uganda Women's National Rugby Sevens Team, Koyokoyo has spent years both on the pitch and on the touchline watching the women's game grow. Yet, while progress has been made, she believes the sport still has a long journey ahead.

"Women's rugby needs to be a lot further than where it is right now," she says candidly.

Bonded. Together, Charlotte Mudoola and Buteme (R) have excelled at Black Pearls and with the Lady Cranes. PHOTOS/JOHN BATANUDDO

Missing pathways

One of the biggest challenges, according to Koyokoyo, is the lack of structured development systems for young players. She notes that while the senior women's league has grown more competitive, the foundation beneath it remains weak because there are very few age-grade competitions.

"There's not enough focus on age grade, so we don't really have players coming through proper pathways to the senior team," she explains.

As a result, many young players are pushed directly into senior competition without the technical or tactical experience required at that level.

"We may look good locally, but when we go internationally we get exposed," she says.

For Koyokoyo, strengthening school and youth competitions is the only sustainable way to build the future of the women's national teams.

Challenge of visibility

The scheduling of matches is another issue she believes is slowing the growth of the women's game. While Uganda Rugby Union has

tried to give women's matches better slots, Koyokoyo says many big fixtures are still played in isolation without the crowds that men's games attract.

She cites examples where major women's fixtures take place at empty venues simply because they are not aligned with men's matches.

"These are big games that could attract people into women's rugby," she says. "But when they're played alone, there are very few fans."

From her experience, the difference in atmosphere is clear when women play as part of a double-header with men's teams.

"People come for the men's game and end up watching the women too," she explains. "Many of them leave saying, 'women's rugby is actually interesting.'"

Koyokoyo believes scheduling women's matches later in the day, sometimes even after men's games, could improve attendance and visibility. "If fans come for some men's games at 2pm, they will stay

for a women's game at 4pm," she says. "When people see women playing exciting rugby, they want to watch again."

Sponsorship puzzle

Crowds, she adds, are also key to unlocking commercial support. "Women's sport is often described as not marketable," she says. "But sponsors don't want to invest where they see empty stands."

According to Koyokoyo, a vibrant matchday atmosphere would help demonstrate the potential of women's rugby to partners and investors.

"If sponsors see fans cheering and enjoying the games, they will realise this is something worth putting money into."

Breaking barriers in coaching

Koyokoyo also speaks from personal experience when discussing the challenges women face in coaching.

She spent four years leading the Uganda Women's National Rugby Sevens Team, a period she describes as rewarding but difficult.

"You can be there as a coach, but people are not comfortable with you there," she recalls. "Sometimes when you suggest something, it's brushed aside." She believes women need stronger institutional support to rise through the coaching ranks.

While she does not advocate for opportunities based purely on gender, she says female coaches often face harsher scrutiny.

"When a man makes mistakes he gets more chances," she explains. "But when a woman makes one mistake, people say this is why women shouldn't be in that position."

Because of that reality, Koyokoyo thinks it may still take time before a woman coaches a men's team.

"It has to start with coaching women's clubs first," she says. "And we still have very few women doing that."

Inspiration

Despite the challenges, Koyokoyo finds inspiration in women who have broken barriers across sport.

Her global top three include Kenyan middle-distance legend Faith Kipyegon, New Zealand rugby icon Portia Woodman-Wickliffe, and Ugandan trailblazing football coach Olive Mbekeke, who made history coaching Lugazi in the Uganda Premier League last season.

Closer to home in rugby, she singles out Charlotte Mudoola as her leading Ugandan female figure in the sport, alongside referees Rose Kanunyuzi and Asha Nakiyingi.

Looking ahead, Koyokoyo acknowledges that women's rugby has made strides locally but genuine growth will only come through better structures, stronger support systems and greater visibility.

The talent, she insists, is already there but what remains is creating the environment for it to truly flourish.

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Who is that girl? Helen Koyokoyo Buteme is a prominent Ugandan rugby coach and player known for leading the Black Pearls to multiple Uganda Women's Rugby Premiership titles, including a four-peat (2022-2025). She is a World Rugby Level 2 coach.