

The "Plus One" campaign is a beautiful, powerful reminder that the journey to equality is not a solo hike up a mountain but a group expedition. And for the first time in a long time, the map is being drawn by a powerful, supportive sisterhood and the men brave enough, and wise enough, to walk right beside them. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE.

Female ambassadors enlist male allies

They are diplomats, powerhouses, and heads of UN agencies. But this women's month, these incredible women are not just talking to each other. They are doing something radical; they are asking the men to step up.

BY STEPHEN OTAGE

A group of the most influential women in Uganda, the female ambassadors and heads of UN agencies accredited to the country, decided, collectively, to stop preaching to the converted. Each of these women leaders has formally recruited one influential Ugandan man to be her personal ally. Not just to give a keynote speech at a luncheon and then disappear. But to be a genuine, committed partner in shifting the culture, challenging toxic norms, and championing women's potential from the inside out.

The Danish Ambassador to Uganda, Signe Winding Albjerg, said she chose Jimmy Spire Sentongo, a Makerere University lecturer and activist for his witty, incisive, and often hilarious social commentary.

"In Denmark, we use humor and satire as a strong weapon to talk about the most difficult, most entrenched issues," she says. "When we decided to find male allies for this campaign, I knew I needed someone who could make people listen without getting defensive. Someone who could hold up a mirror to society and make us laugh at ourselves, and then, because of that laughter, be willing to change."

For his part, Sentongo was humbled by the invitation. But he is also the first to admit that his enthusiastic involvement is deeply personal.

"It is stupid for a man to think women's issues are not his issues," he says. "Every man was born from a woman. The women raise the children. If we want to know what kind of society we are building, what kind of men and women will lead it in the future, we have to look at how we treat the people building it with us right now."

He recently accompanied Ambassador Albjerg on a visit to a refugee camp in Adjumani. And says the moment that stuck with him, the one that cemented his belief in this work from the visit was when he saw a young boy, maybe ten years old, carefully and without any embarrassment, carrying a sanitary pad. Intrigued, he knelt down and asked the boy why he was carrying it.

The boy explained, with the simple clarity of a child, that he belonged to a club that teaches boys about girls' health, about menstruation, about the challenges girls face. He understood exactly what the pad was for and why it was important to support the girls in his life.

"That," Sentongo says, "is the world we should be building. If that boy can get it, there is hope for all of us men."

Power in the purse

Nwanneakolam Vwede Obahor, the UNDP Resident Representative in Uganda, is a woman who deals in tangible development. For her, the path to equality is not just paved with good intentions, but with economic independence and financial agency.

"Everything changes when a woman has her own money," she says. "She gains the power to make her own decisions. She can leave a bad situation. She can invest in her children's education. She can start a business. She can say no to things that diminish her. Financial power is the

foundation of all other freedoms."

So, who did she choose as her Plus One? Fabian Kasi, the managing director of Centenary Bank. Because what happens when you pair a woman dedicated to human development with a man who controls the levers of financial access? You get a direct pipeline to creating genuinely empowered women.

Building a network

This shift is not just about formal alliances between powerful individuals. It is about a fundamental shift in the very air these women breathe when they are together. Lisa Chesney, the UK Ambassador to Uganda, has worked in some of the toughest, most high-pressure diplomatic posts on earth, Afghanistan, Somalia. But even she was genuinely surprised by what she found in Kampala.

"I have never, in my entire career, met a

“

Economic independence.

We need men in these positions of economic power to not just see women as customers, but to actively open doors for them," she explains. "To design financial products that understand the unique challenges women face. To see women not just as recipients of aid, but as the absolute engine of the economy. When a woman earns, she spends on her family, on her community. It is the most effective investment you can make."

-Nwanneakolam Vwede Obahor, the UNDP Resident Representative in Uganda.

group of female diplomats so genuinely willing to build each other up," she admits, almost in a tone of wonder. "Usually, there is an undercurrent of competition. Here, we are complementary. We are stronger together than we are when competing amongst ourselves. It is a rare and precious thing."

This message of radical collaboration was powerfully echoed by Barbra Mulwana, a true titan of Ugandan industry and Chairperson of the Mulwana Group of Companies.

As the former head of the Uganda Manufacturers Association (UMA), she has spent her entire career in rooms overwhelmingly full of men. Her hard-won advice to the next generation of women climbing the corporate ladder is to turn men into allies.

"Do not dare burn the bridges with men," she says. "Make them your allies. When I was at UMA, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Finance, it was men at the top. Fighting them would have been pointless. Instead, I learned from them, I partnered with them. Women are natural collaborators."

We consult, we build consensus. That is our superpower. Use it. And for heaven's sake, build your own confidence from the inside out. No one is going to do that for you. With the internet, with all the information in the world at your fingertips, there is no excuse not to learn, to grow, and to always be ahead of the pack."

The "Plus One" campaign is a beautiful, powerful reminder that the journey to equality is not a solo hike up a mountain but a group expedition. And for the first time in a long time, the map is being drawn by a powerful, supportive sisterhood and the men brave enough, and wise enough, to walk right beside them.