

How Nassanga became the face of single motherhood

Winifred Nassanga did not become the face of single motherhood in Uganda because she had a grand plan or powerful connections or a fancy degree. It is because she lived the struggle. And then she refused to accept it.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

In Makindye, Kampala, they call her Mama Single Mothers because she has become the voice for thousands of women who have been invisible for too long.

Winifred Nassanga says she did not set out to become the face of single motherhood in Uganda. It happened because she had no other choice.

Before becoming the leader of 17,000 members, Nassanga was just another single mother trying to keep her children fed, clothed, and in school. She knew the weight of waking up with no money for school fees. She knew the desperation of watching a child go hungry because the hustle did not pay that day. She knew the shame of being looked down on by neighbours, by relatives, by a society that treats single mothers as failures.

"Single mothers are not weak," she says now. "We are the backbone of this country. We raise children, we farm, we trade, and yet we are invisible in policy."

The moment something shifted

Nassanga says things changed when she realised that her challenges were not hers alone. She also realised that continuing to fight in isolation was a problem. So she started small, getting a few women together to share survival tips such as how to stretch a meal, how to find casual work or how to keep going when everything felt impossible.

But then something happened. Those women started trusting each other. They started pooling resources. They started realising that together, they could do what none of them could do alone.

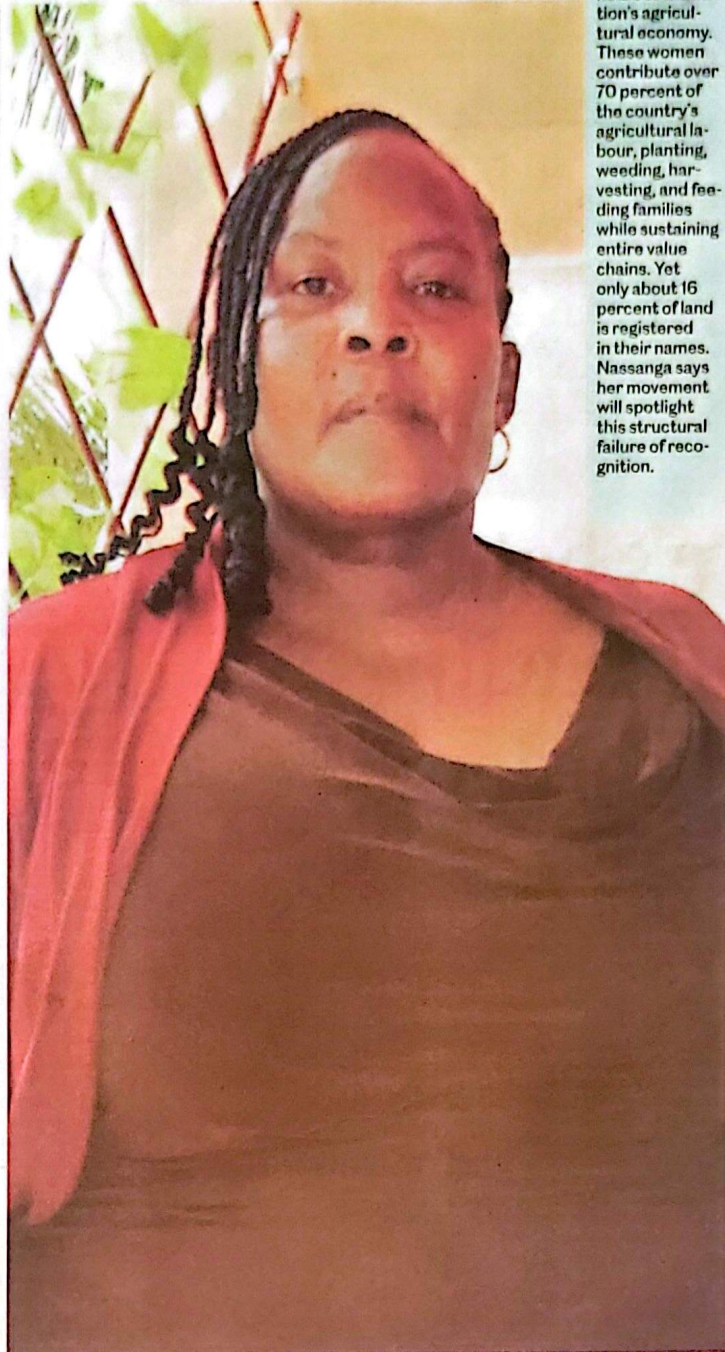
"We realised that one woman alone struggles," Nassanga says. "But 30 women together can buy land, start a business, even negotiate better prices."

That realisation gave birth to Makindye Single Mothers' Cooperative. It did not look impressive at first. Just a small group of women meeting in a cramped room, passing around a savings box, encouraging each other to show up one more day. But slowly, it grew. Ten women became 50. Fifty became 200. Two hundred became thousands.

Today, the International Network for Single Mothers Uganda Chapter has more than 17,000 members. Women who have organised themselves into parish-based units, pooling resources, sharing knowledge, and investing together.

The kitchen table philosophy

Nassanga says "When a mother is stable, everything else stabilises. Children stay in school. Families eat better. Communities grow."



Winifred Nassanga, the chairperson of International Network for Single Mothers Uganda Chapter. PHOTO/SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA.

communities grow."

She calls this the sovereignty of the kitchen table. The idea that the household is Uganda's most important production unit. It sounds simple because it is. But simple does not mean easy. Nassanga knows a stable mother needs assets. And assets mean land titles, access to credit, legal protection, and financial literacy. Without those things, a mother is just treading water.

"These are not just personal struggles," she says. "They are national issues. When a household collapses, the economy feels it."

The numbers she wants you to remember

Twenty two percent of Ugandan households are led by single mothers.

These women contribute over 70 percent of the nation's agricultural labour. But only about 16 percent of land is registered in their names.

NUMBERS

Behind the stark statistic that 22 percent of Ugandan households are led by single mothers lies a deeper contradiction at the heart of the nation's agricultural economy. These women contribute over 70 percent of the country's agricultural labour, planting, weeding, harvesting, and feeding families while sustaining entire value chains. Yet only about 16 percent of land is registered in their names. Nassanga says her movement will spotlight this structural failure of recognition.

Nassanga explains: "It means the people doing the work do not control the assets. And without assets, there is no access to credit, no investment, no growth."

She is not just complaining. She is diagnosing a structural failure.

And when she adds that single mothers reinvest up to 90 percent of their income back into their households, making them "the most efficient drivers of development" suddenly the conversation changes.

Single mothers are not a problem to be managed. They are an engine to be fuelled.

In 2025, Nassanga mobilised more than 10,000 women for a single rally in Makindye and Kampala.

"If you want to reach households, we are already there," she says. "We are not building from scratch. We are ready."

Following the peaceful rally, policymakers started calling. NGOs started asking for partnerships. That is when Nassanga knew she could grow her movement into something more.

Changing the narrative

But here is what Nassanga is most proud of. She has changed how Ugandan society sees single mothers. "People used to see us as victims," she says. "Now they see us as leaders."

Think about that. A woman who was once struggling to feed her children is now reshaping a national conversation. She tells her members something that has become a kind of anthem:

"You are already CEOs of your homes. Now become CEOs of the marketplace."

Nassanga is not done. She is no longer just asking for recognition. She is demanding structural inclusion.

"Single mothers must be planned for," she insists. "We cannot remain an afterthought."

She wants single mothers recognised as a distinct economic bloc. Targeted access to credit. Prioritisation in land reforms. Inclusion in industrialisation programmes.

"We are already organised," she says. "We have data. We have leadership structures. We have reach. What we need is integration."

She wants to replicate her Makindye model across all 146 districts of Uganda.

"We want every district to have this structure," she says. "No woman should be left behind because of where she lives."

The weight of being the face

Being the face of single motherhood in Uganda is not easy. Every day, women call her. Women who have lost their husbands. Women who have been chased off their land. Women who cannot afford school fees. Women who are thinking about giving up.

"We are not asking for handouts," she says. "We are building a launchpad."

That is the difference between Nassanga and so many others. She is not asking anyone to save single mothers. She is showing them how to save themselves.

What she has learnt

Here is what Nassanga will tell you if you ask her how she became the face of this movement.

She did not plan it.

She just kept showing up. She kept organising. She kept believing that single mothers were not victims, they were leaders who had never been given the chance.

"When women trust each other," she says, "they can build anything."

She proved it. One small meeting at a time. One woman at a time. One rally at a time.

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Strategy

We are not asking for handouts. We are building a launchpad—for ourselves, for our daughters, and for the generations of women entrepreneurs who will come after us. We are already organised. We have the data to prove what works. We have leadership structures that are democratic, accountable, and deeply rooted in our communities. We have reach that extends from urban centres to the most remote trading posts."

Winifred Nassanga