

From affirmative action to equal competition

Recently, I had the privilege of addressing distinguished women leaders from across the country at the Women's Convention 2026 held in Kampala. The gathering, organised by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, provided an important opportunity to reflect on how far Uganda has come in advancing women's leadership and, more importantly, to ask ourselves where the next frontier lies.

Uganda has made remarkable progress over the past decades in opening political space for women. Affirmative action policies have enabled many women to enter leadership through positions such as District Women Members of Parliament and other reserved seats in local government structures. These interventions were necessary and deliberate. They provided a platform that corrected historical imbalances and ensured that women's voices were represented in national decision-making.

Today, the results are visible. Women now hold significant positions across government institutions. In Cabinet, women occupy several key portfolios. Across the public service, women are increasingly visible in leadership and technical roles. At the community level, women are leading in local councils, civil society organisations, and economic initiatives that are transforming livelihoods. This progress should be celebrated. However, it must also challenge us to take the next step.

Affirmative action was never intended to be the final destination of the women's leadership journey. It was meant to be a bridge—a mechanism to open doors that had long been closed. The real measure of equality will come when women feel confident and prepared to compete for leadership positions on the same footing as men.

It is time for more Ugandan women to contest for constituency-based parliamentary

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Leadership**

seats, mayoral positions, and other elective offices traditionally dominated by men.

The truth is that leadership ability is not determined by gender. Women across this country have demonstrated competence, resilience and vision in every sector—from business and agriculture to public administration and politics. What we must now do is translate this capability into stronger representation in open political contests.

Women should not fear competition. Instead, we must prepare for it. One of the key ways to achieve this is through active participation within political parties. Political parties are where leadership structures are built, where candidates are nurtured and where critical decisions are made. Women must ensure that they are present, active, and influential within these structures.

When women organise themselves within parties, support one another, and build strong grassroots networks, they position themselves not just as participants but as serious contenders for leadership.

Another important factor is confidence. For a long time, many capable women have hesitated to run for office because politics is often perceived as a tough and male-dominated arena. Yet experience has shown that

when women step forward with determination and strong community support, they win.

Ugandan voters are increasingly recognising the value of inclusive leadership. Communities appreciate leaders who are accessible, responsive, and committed to development. Women leaders have often excelled in these areas because they remain closely connected to the everyday realities faced by families, farmers, entrepreneurs, and young people.

This connection is a powerful political strength. Beyond politics, economic empowerment must also remain central to the women's agenda. Government programmes aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs and improving livelihoods are helping many women gain financial independence and business skills. Economic strength often translates into stronger participation in leadership and public life.

But this is not a struggle that women must carry alone. Men must also recognise that inclusive leadership benefits society as a whole. When women participate fully in governance, policies become more balanced, communities are better represented, and national development becomes more sustainable.

The progress Uganda has achieved in advancing women's leadership did not happen by accident. It was the result of deliberate policy choices, strong institutions, and the courage of women who stepped forward to lead.

Now a new generation must carry this momentum forward. Our goal should not simply be to increase the number of women in reserved positions. Our goal must be to normalise women's leadership across every level of governance.

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