

BY JOSEPH BATTE

In Uganda's lively music industry – once a fortress of male voices dominating airwaves and stages – a cadre of female pop singers is shattering ceilings and rewriting the narrative. As of early 2026, with streaming platforms amplifying local talent globally, artistes like Sheebah Karungi and Spice Diana are topping charts, drawing millions of views and inspiring a new generation. Their rise is not just about catchy hooks; it is a testament to determination in a field riddled with gender biases, where women have historically faced unequal pay, harassment, and limited opportunities. Yet these trailblazers are proving that women's representation fosters diversity, tackles social issues through lyrics, and empowers communities economically, as educated and independent female role models encourage girls to pursue dreams beyond traditional roles.

Sheebah Karungi, often hailed as Queen Karma, embodies this shift. Born Samali Karungi on November 11, 1989, in Kawempe, Kampala, she was raised by a single mother amid financial hardships.

Having dropped out of school in Senior Two, Sheebah started dancing at the age of 15 to survive, joining the Obsessions group in 2006, before going solo in 2010. Her challenges were steep: initial maternal disapproval, industry turbulence, and navigating a male-dominated space where women often endure scepticism. Her achievements, however, shine brightly.

Her debut EP *Ice Cream* (2014) launched several hit songs; she acted in *Queen of Katwe* and, as a feminist, has built businesses whilst empowering young women through various initiatives. Today, with over 15 years in the industry, Sheebah's *Nenyanzi* Concert celebrates her journey, demonstrating how one woman's determination can spark widespread

change. Spice Diana, real name Hajara Diana Namukwaya, brings raw authenticity to the scene.

Born in 1996 and raised in Kampala's slums by a single mother following her parents' separation, she navigated neighbourhoods such as Mpererwe and Nakulabye. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in industrial fine art from Makerere University, she made her debut in 2014 with *Onsanula*.

Challenges abounded: financial struggles, a demanding industry that tested her resolve over a decade, and the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities. Her achievements include multiple award wins, hit songs such as *Siri Regular*, and international acclaim, establishing her as Uganda's leading female artist. Spice's story highlights how representation amplifies voices from the margins, turning personal pain into anthems that resonate across Africa.

Azawi, born Priscilla Zawedde on February 2, 1996, in Kampala, transformed her path from dancer to chart-topper. Orphaned at a young age, she joined a cultural troupe in 2005 to fund her university education, even performing in China.

After earning a bachelor of commerce from Makerere University, she began her career as a songwriter at Swangz Avenue. Challenges included academic setbacks arising from her dual pursuits and the search for an authentic artistic voice. Her achievements

IN A COUNTRY WHERE CULTURAL NORMS ONCE MARGINALISED WOMEN, THEIR BREAKTHROUGHS CONTINUE TO INSPIRE GIRLS, PROVING THAT REPRESENTATION IS NOT OPTIONAL.

include her debut EP *Lo Fit* (2020), her album *African Music* (2021) – which topped Apple Music charts for several weeks – collaborations with Sauti Sol and Konshens, and an invitation to speak at Forbes Women Africa. Azawi's ascent underscores women's role in blending genres and pushing Ugandan pop onto the global stage.

Veteran Juliana Kanyomozi, born in 1980, paved

the way for those who followed. Beginning her career as part of the duo I-Jay, she went solo and broke through with songs such as *Nabikoowa*. Her career has encompassed wide-ranging collaborations and promotion of Ugandan music beyond its borders.

Her most profound personal challenge was the heartbreaking loss of her son in 2014. Among her achievements, she became the first female artist to win the PAM Artist of the Year award twice (2008-2009), has

accumulated over ten awards, and continues to release soulful music such as *Eddiba*. Juliana's enduring legacy demonstrates how longevity in the industry inspires persistence in those who come after.

Rema Namakula, born in 1991, transitioned from backup singer for Bebe Cool to solo stardom in 2013, having been let go for pursuing her own ambitions. Her music is characterised by uplifting songs centred on love and life. Despite industry rivalries, she has achieved considerable success, with hits such as *Oli Wange* and *Katonotono* earning her awards for Best Female R&B Song.

Winnie Nwagi, born Winnifred Nakanwagi on July 20, 1989, in Namasuba, Kampala, overcame a difficult upbringing after being asked to leave her family home as a teenager. Her passion for music sustained her through her school years, and she persevered as a single

mother whilst establishing herself in the recording studio. Challenges included dropping out of formal education and enduring significant financial hardship. She was subsequently signed to Swangz Avenue, released the hit *Musawo*, and emerged as a runner-up in a prominent talent competition.

Lydia Jazmine, born Lydia Nabawanuka in 1991 in Mukono, began her career as a backup singer for Radio & Weasel and Bebe Cool. She relocated in pursuit of education and pursued modelling alongside her music career. Despite the complexities of navigating the industry, she has built an 11-year career, releasing hits such as *Masukka* and *You and Me*, and earning several award nominations.

The presence of the women has transformed Uganda's pop scene – once male-dominated – into an increasingly inclusive space. Through their music, they address issues such as domestic violence, female empowerment, and love, thereby influencing both policy and culture. Economically, their success through tours and endorsements creates employment and models financial independence, contributing to the reduction of gender gaps. As Sheebah has noted, music has been the engine behind 80% of her achievements. In a country where cultural norms once marginalised women, their breakthroughs continue to inspire girls, proving that representation is not optional – it is revolutionary.



Nwagi

Azawi

Spice Diana