

Lunch With the DM

Esther Nampala tells **Trevor Lutalo** how she is finding her feet in what is by any measure a bastion for men—the real estate sector in Uganda.

Over lunch with Esther Nampala at Molecule Lounge and Restaurant, it is a normal Monday with excess sunshine filtering through the leafy surroundings of Kololo. The restaurant is calm, measured, and almost unhurried. Nampala arrives a few minutes before our agreed lunch time, unflustered and composed. She is dressed in a crimson jacket layered over a white dress top, formal suit trousers, and heeled shoes. Her look is deliberate but not loud, professional, confident, and assured. Her neat natural hair completes the picture.

As she settles into her seat, it becomes immediately clear that Nampala is comfortable in leadership. There is an ease with which she speaks, listens, and responds. Her presence subtly fills the space. This is someone built for management and control, not through force, but through clarity and calm authority.

Nampala is the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and co-founder of Skyward Realty Limited, a real estate firm operating in Uganda's increasingly complex and competitive property market. By training, she is a statistician. By practice, passion, and persistence, she is now one of the women helping shape conversations around housing, affordability, and urban living in Kampala and its surrounding areas.

From numbers to neighbourhoods

"I have always loved real estate," she says with a soft smile. "Even as a child, I watched my dad do it. I was intrigued. I could see that it was a path to financial independence."

That early fascination never left her. Although she pursued statistics professionally, real estate remained a quiet pull in the background. Eventually, passion met opportunity. Together with her best friend, she co-founded Skyward Realty Limited.

"We started with almost nothing financially," she recalls. "But we had a shared vision and a deep love for the industry."

Those early days were far from glamorous. Nampala wore many hats, agent, marketer, administrator, negotiator. She learned the business from the ground up, gaining a practical understanding of every moving part.

"That hands-on experience shaped me," she says. "Becoming COO was a natural progression. I understood operations because I had lived them."

Today, that foundation informs how she leads. Decisions are data-driven, systems-focused, and people-centred perhaps a quiet nod to her statistical roots.

Navigating a bastion for men

Real estate in Uganda, like many sectors, has long been dominated by men.

Vertical living is no longer a choice, but the new normal



Esther Nampala, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Co-founder of Skyward Realty Limited. ILLUSTRATION/CHRIS OGON

environments for others."

At Skyward Realty, this has translated into deliberate mentorship and inclusion. The company actively supports women entering and growing within the real estate space.

"I am happy to see more women growing into different sectors of real estate under our wing," she says. "That is how we create jobs, independence, and long-term impact."

She believes progress is being made, but cautiously. "The doors are opening, especially in brokerage and property management. But in large-scale development, construction, financing, and boardrooms, they are still only ajar."

Access to capital and entrenched networks remain major hurdles. Still, she

believes the shift is being driven by hard economic realities. Uganda faces a housing deficit of approximately 2.4 million units, while urbanisation is growing at about 5.4 percent annually. Land, especially in and around Kampala, has become scarce and expensive.

"For the average Ugandan, who is mostly a middle- to low-income earner, buying land and building a standalone home is increasingly out of reach," she says.

Condominiums and apartments offer a practical alternative. Beyond affordability, they allow people to access shared amenities such as security, gyms, and recreational spaces, features that many could not afford otherwise.

Once affordability is addressed, return on investment becomes the next major consideration, particularly for buyers viewing property as a wealth-building tool. Lifestyle considerations such as aesthetics and premium amenities come later and mainly for higher-income segments.

"The market is built on affordability," she summarises. "Investment potential follows. Lifestyle is the premium layer."

This understanding, she says, is crucial for developers who want to build housing that actually sells.

Across the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area, organised estates both gated communities and managed apartment complexes are becoming more commonplace. Nampala believes they represent the future of housing in Uganda.

"They address many urban challenges at once," she says. "Security, infrastructure, community, and shared amenities."

However, she cautions that success depends on execution. Developers must get three things right: affordability, financing, and long-term management.

Breaking barriers.

"I am happy to see more women growing into different sectors of real estate under our wing. That is how we create jobs, independence, and long-term impact. The doors are opening, especially in brokerage and property management. But in large-scale development, construction, financing, and boardrooms, they are still only ajar," — Esther Nampala, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Co-founder of Skyward Realty Limited

"Building quality, affordable units for the average Ugandan is key," she says. "But we also need innovative credit solutions. Traditional mortgages are out of reach for many people."

She points to models such as rent-to-own as potential game-changers. Equally important is professional property management to maintain standards and protect value over time.

"If people lose trust in these estates, the model fails," she adds.

Aspiration vs income awareness

One of the biggest tensions in Uganda's housing market is between modern aspirations and income realities. Nampala believes the gap can be bridged with creativity.

"Developers need to minimise costs without compromising core quality," she says.

She suggests joint ventures with land-

continue to plague buyers. Her advice to investors, especially first-time buyers, is simple but firm: use professionals.

"Trying to cut costs by skipping expert guidance often leads to much bigger losses," she warns.

Due diligence is non-negotiable. This includes verifying ownership at the Land Registry, checking for encumbrances, and physically visiting sites with local leaders.

"An investment in professional guidance is an investment in peace of mind," she says.

Investing with limited capital

For those with limited capital, Nampala stresses the importance of clarity.

"Start with your goal," she advises. "Do you want long-term growth, steady income, or capital stability?"

Land banking, she says, is often the most accessible entry point for small investors, offering long-term appreciation even though it does not provide immediate income. Rental apartments, on the other hand, suit those seeking regular cash flow.

"There is no one-size-fits-all answer," she says. "The asset must match your timeline and objective."

Infrastructure as the value trigger

Infrastructure development, in her view, is the single biggest driver of property value.

"Where infrastructure goes, value follows," she says.

Improved roads, utilities, and connectivity attract businesses and residents, transforming previously overlooked areas. She points to places such as Nangabo, Mawule, Kiti, and Matugga as quietly positioning for growth.

"These are areas to watch," she says. "Not because of speculation, but because of access."

Sustainability: from luxury to logic

Sustainability and green building, once seen as luxuries, are slowly becoming practical considerations in Uganda's real estate market.

"Buyers are starting to pay attention to operational costs," Nampala notes. "Solar power, water efficiency, these things reduce monthly bills."

She highlights partnerships between financial institutions and developers that are promoting climate-smart, affordable housing, demonstrating that sustainability can be mainstream.

"It is still early days," she admits. "Only a small fraction of developers are embracing it fully. But the shift has started."

Legacy she hopes to leave

Deep into our meeting, the conversation turns reflective. What legacy does Nampala hope to leave behind?

"I want to see..."