

Four decades under President Museveni have brought gains for women in education and politics, but many still face violence, poverty, and slow legal reforms that have yet to deliver real change in everyday life.

BY BEATA MUWEMA

President Museveni was sworn in for his seventh elective five-year term in office last Tuesday, a tenure that will extend his rule to 45 years.

Since seizing power in January 1986, at the end of a five-year guerrilla war, Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) government has achieved notable gains, even as critics cite political repression and persistent poverty as evidence that those gains remain incomplete.

Among the areas where the NRM has received the most consistent praise is the advancement of women's rights. As Museveni begins another term, it is worth weighing the record on women's affairs against what still falls short.

Based on data by Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UboS), women now constitute a slight majority of the country's population, accounting for 51 percent, compared to 49 percent for men.

Affirmative action in higher education

Perhaps the most widely cited reform is the 1.5-point bonus awarded to female applicants at the university entry stage.

Ministry of Education and Sports records show that before 1986, female enrolment at Makerere, the country's oldest and largest university, hovered between 17 and 20 percent.

Technical training institutions, the enrolment was even lower, averaging less than six percent. The 1.5-point bonus, introduced in 1990, helped lift female enrolment to between 44 and 47 percent today.

Recent data from the 2023/2024 National Human Resource Survey by UboS, covering 2021 to 2023, indicates that women now dominate tertiary enrolment and completion across universities and affiliated colleges.

In 2023, of the 230,000 students enrolled at those institutions, 134,688 were female and 95,312 male. The trend has held steady, with 2022 registering 90,157 students, 161,804 of whom were female, while 2021 recorded 158,746 students, 94,365 of whom were women.

The Education and Sports ministry concedes, however, that girls remain under-represented in tertiary education overall, largely because fewer make it through the lower rungs of the school system.

The UboS data also shows that despite outperforming their male counterparts academically, women remain disproportionately concentrated in the informal sector once they leave education.

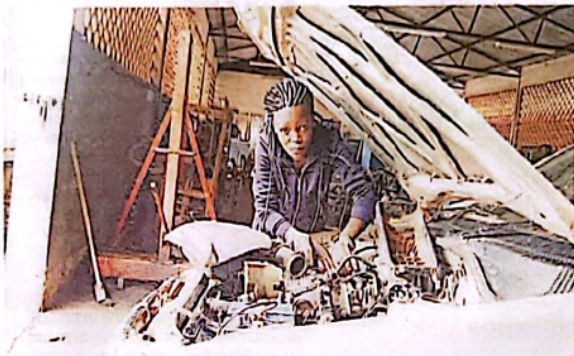
Greater political representation

The expansion of women's role in politics is arguably the most visible NRM achievement. Affirmative action policies created District Woman MP seats, lifting female representation from very low levels in the 1980s to more than a

Gains, barriers in uplifting women under Museveni



Women celebrate during President Museveni's last rally ahead of the 2026 General Election at the Kololo Ceremonial Grounds in Kampala on January 13. NRM has received the most consistent praise on the advancement of women's rights. PHOTO/COURTESY OF THE PRESIDENT'S X HANDLE



A student trains in car repair at Nakawa Vocational Institute in Kampala last year. The Education and Sports ministry concedes that girls remain under-represented in tertiary education overall PHOTO/FILE

third of Parliament today.

Women have also held senior posts across government, including the vice presidency, the speakership of Parliament, the premiership, ministerial portfolios, and leadership roles at major institutions.

Prominent figures in the outgoing Cabinet include Vice President Jessica Alupo, Speaker of Parliament Anita Among, Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja, Education and Sports minister and First Lady Janet Museveni, and First Deputy Premier and Minister for East African Community Affairs and former Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga.

The 1995 Constitution institutionalised affirmative action and entrenched equal rights for women.

Even so, not everyone is convinced the system is working as intended.

Ms Sarah Bireete, the Executive Director of the Centre for Constitutional Governance, argues that some politicians have grown too comfortable in seats meant as a stepping stone.

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Choices. You have to be proud of who you are to be able to have your own choices. I have seen women in the rural areas who are not as educated as we are and make their own choices. They will say 'no I don't want that. This is my land, I'm not going to give it to a man'. But I have seen educated women, when going to buy land and says the husband has to sign, but it's her land."

— Ms Jane Nalunga, the executive director of the Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI) Uganda

firmative action seats in perpetuity; these seats are meant to usher in women and expose them, and give them the capacity to run for general seats," she says.

She adds: "People should not occupy

them as if one woman is being empowered permanently. It should be a space for many women to get empowerment exposure and be able to spread to general or direct constituency seats, but also other spheres of society. Leadership should not be confined to politics."

Ms Jane Nalunga, the Executive Director of the Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI) Uganda, frames empowerment as a question of self-belief rather than statute.

"You have to be proud of who you are to be able to have your own choices. I have seen women in the rural areas who are not as educated as we are here, and make their own choices. They will say 'no I don't want that. This is my land, I'm not going to give it to a man'. But I have seen educated women, when going to buy land and say the husband has to sign, but it's her land," she says.

Economic and health programmes

Beyond politics, government-backed initiatives such as the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) and the Parish Development Model (PDM) have sought to widen women's access to credit and income.

Women's Savings and Credit Co-operative Organisation (Saccos) and village savings groups have proliferated in rural areas. Tougher laws on defilement and sexual offences, gender-responsive budgeting in some sectors, and improved maternal and reproductive health awareness round out the list of achievements the government routinely cites for its four decades in power.

Donor-supported programmes have expanded immunisation, antenatal care, and HIV/AIDS awareness. Uganda earned international recognition in the 1990s and early 2000s for reducing HIV prevalence through public awareness campaigns centred on women's groups and community mobilisation. Maternal mortality has fallen over the decades, though it remains high by global

standards.

Persistent challenges

For all the laws and campaigns, violence against women has not gone away. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, and child marriage continue to be reported at high levels, and enforcement of the law is patchy, especially in rural areas.

Critics say police response, access to justice, and victim support all fall short of what survivors need.

Similarly, reform in family law has been notably slow. For instance, the Marriage Bill 2024, which aims to recognise non-monetary contributions such as domestic work and raising children in property division, to criminalise child marriage with a 10-year jail term, to regulate divorce on the basis of an irretrievable breakdown of a marriage, and to establish a national marriage registry, has faced several challenges.

The Bill has encountered obstacles similar to those faced by previous attempts, namely the 2003 Domestic Relations Bill and the 2009 Marriage and Divorce Bill. Religious groups such as the Catholic and Anglican churches, oppose aspects such as no-fault divorce and the conversion of monogamous marriages, while Muslim organisations resist restrictions on polygamy.

Additionally, cultural resistance to recognising cohabitation has hampered progress. Nearly two years after its initial reading, the Bill remains stalled in a parliamentary committee.

But advocates believe these reforms are crucial to addressing gaps that leave women, especially in rural areas, vulnerable to separation, widowhood, and inheritance issues.

Economic inequality compounds the problem. Many Ugandan women remain stuck in informal, low-paid, and precarious work. In rural areas, they contend with limited land ownership, poor access to financing, a heavy unpaid care burden, and lower wages. Customary practices in some communities still disadvantage women in property inheritance and ownership.

Opposition activists and some women leaders accuse the State of suppressing independent women's movements and dissenting voices. Vocal female Opposition politicians, including Stella Nyanzi and Ingrid Turinawe, have clashed with State authorities over governance and women's rights.

Museveni's 40 years in power have, on balance, delivered real gains in women's political representation, legal recognition, and access to education compared to what came before. But Uganda still wrestles with deep social, economic, and institutional barriers, and critics argue that legal reform and high-profile appointments have not consistently translated into substantive change for ordinary women, particularly those in rural and low-income communities.

Government officials point to affirmative action, education, and economic empowerment programmes as evidence of progress.

Civil society groups, meanwhile, point to persistent violence, poverty, weak institutions, and political constraints as proof that the gap between policy and lived experience remains wide.