

Educationists honour Bitamazire

Although she left the ministry in 2011, her contribution to education reform continues to shape learning and human capital development in the country.

BY JANE NAFULA

Former minister of Education, Ms Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire, one of the most influential figures in Uganda's education sector, died on January 14, 2026, aged 84—just hours before the start of the 2026 general elections.

Although she left the ministry in 2011, her contribution to education reform continues to shape learning and human capital development in the country.

Prof Edward Rugumayo, now chancellor of Mountains of the Moon University in Kabarole District, says he first met Ms Bitamazire in 1974 while serving as Minister of Education during a visit to Tororo Girls' School, where she was headteacher.

He recalls being impressed by her leadership, which saw her become the first African to head the school.

Prof Rugumayo later recommended her for her first ministerial appointment in 1979 under President Godfrey Lukongwa Binaisa. At the time, Ms Bitamazire was a commissioner at the Teaching Service Commission, while Prof Rugumayo chaired the Uganda Consultative Council, the country's interim legislature.

"That was the first time Uganda had a woman in Cabinet," Prof Rugumayo said. "She was an excellent administrator, very hard-working, and a pioneer in the education sector."

She later returned to the Teaching Service Commission in 1980, again on Prof Rugumayo's recommendation. Then, he was serving as the chairperson of the Uganda National Consultative Council, an interim Parliament established in 1979, following the overthrow of the military regime.

Part of Ms Bitamazire's service at the commission coincided with the tenure of Mr Amanya Mushega as minister of Education between 1989 and 1998.

Mr Mushega remembers her as deeply committed to transforming Uganda's education system and steering it



Ms Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire, the fallen former education minister.
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away from colonial influences.

"She was involved in developing the Ssentenza Kajubi White Paper, which was implemented in 1997," he said. "That document laid the foundation for major reforms, including Universal Primary Education."

In 1999, Ms Bitamazire was appointed State minister for Primary Education, succeeding Mr Francis Babu. Her key task was implementing the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme.

The policy led to a dramatic rise in enrolment but also exposed severe shortages of teachers and learning materials. The excellent way in which

she handled these challenges earned her a promotion to full minister of Education and Sports in 2005.

Mr Mushega said they continued discussing education policy even after leaving office, including proposals to elevate Makerere University Business School (Mubs) into a fully-fledged university.

"One of her strongest beliefs was that education must be both relevant and of high quality," he said. "Without that, she often warned, the country would stagnate."

Although plans to elevate Mubs did not materialise, with the institution remaining a constituent college of

NAMIREMBE'S BIOGRAPHY

Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire was born on July 17, 1941, to the late Ssalongo Dezdelio Ssajabi and Ms Nalongo Rose Nasozi in Kibuga-Masakwa village in the present-day Butambala District. She was married to Mr Alfonse Bitamazire, with whom she had seven children. She joined Makerere University for a Diploma in Education in 1964. She later obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education from the same university in 1967 and a Master's degree in 1987. She served as head teacher of Tororo Girls School until 1974. From 1974 to 1979, she worked as a Senior Education Officer in the Ministry of Education and Sports. In 1979. Between 1980

and 1996, she served as deputy chairperson of the Education Service Commission. She was a member of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women from 1998 to 2001, a founding member of Forum for African Women Educationists, and a member of the Kajubi Commission, which reviewed Uganda's Education policy. Ms Bitamazire later returned to the cabinet as state Minister of Primary Education from 1999 to 2005. She was later elevated to full minister and served until 2011. Ms Bitamazire also served as the Mpigi District Woman MP between 2001 and 2011. Towards the end of her public service, the late Ms Bitamazire also served as the Chancellor of Uganda Management Institute, until 2021.

Makerere University, Ms Bitamazire remained actively engaged in education discourse.

Mr Mushega, now chairperson of the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC), said the commission consulted her in recent years at her home in Butambala District.

Ms Monica Monge, a member of the commission, recalls visiting her in 2024 despite her frail health.

"She emphasised the need to balance access with quality," Ms Monge said. "While she celebrated increased enrolment, she was concerned that learning outcomes had not improved sufficiently. That is why many referred to her as Mama UPE."

Ms Monge added that Ms Bitamazire remained a keen reader of education literature and newspapers, even pointing out some of these issues during their conversation.

Mr Nyombi Thembo, executive director of the Uganda Communications Commission, described Ms Bitamazire as an esteemed educationist in a tribute shared on X.

"In 2004, she handed over to me as State Minister for Primary Education after her elevation to full minister," he wrote. "Her guidance enabled me to manage the largest government programme of that time."

Mr Filbert Baguma, secretary general of the Uganda National Teachers' Union (Unatu), praised her consultative approach to leadership.

He recalls how the current Head teachers' Customised Performance Target evolved into the Head Teachers'

Customised Performance Agreement put the burden of learning outcomes on head teachers, leaving out all other stakeholders from responsibility for their roles.

This was unbalanced but Ms Bitamazire listened, bringing all the stakeholders on board.

"She believed in engaging all stakeholders before making key decisions," he said, citing reforms to head teachers' performance agreements that were revised after stakeholder input.

Mentor and nation builder

Ms Jessica Alupo, now vice president, who succeeded Ms Bitamazire as minister of Education in 2011, described her predecessor as a trusted mentor.

"She constantly advised me to lead with love and to seek God's guidance," Ms Alupo said.

Ms Bitamazire is widely recognised as one of the architects of Uganda's landmark education reforms, including Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), which expanded access to education for millions of children from disadvantaged families.

Representing President Museveni at her burial in Kibuga Village, Budde Sub-county, Butambala District, Ms Alupo said the late minister played a critical role in strengthening teacher training, professional development, and school infrastructure.

In recognition of her long and distinguished public service, President Museveni accorded Ms Bitamazire an official burial.