

On Uganda's single mother crisis

In Uganda's case, media reports on International Women's Day, March 8, predictably have prominent stories about 'the women who have made it possible.'

The trailblazers. The one who broke the ceiling or the firsts in fields previously headlined by men. The names that feature prominently are usually Cecilia Ogwal, Sarah Nturu, Joyce Mpanga, Miria Matembe, Dorcas Inzikuru, Specioza Wandira Kazibwe, Justice Julia Ssebuntinde, Winnie Byanyima, Joanita Kawalya Muganga, Namirembe Bitamazire, Linda Nabusayi Wamboka, Margaret Vuchiri, Rebecca Kadaga, Gladys Kalema Zikusooka, Dorothy Okello, and even Anita Among.

As is with most things in this country, the focus is mainly on those in politics and typically in the news in Kampala. Or the ones who hold public office in the various fields of public service, management, academia, and entertainment, which gives them a platform and visibility. It is these and others in that category who are credited for the achievements of and shaping the future of Ugandan women. This does not take anything away from them.

But neither does it limit the scope of the women who have had an impact on the present and will do so in the future of not only women but Uganda as a whole.

In Uganda, we typically categorise or identify women by their tribe, age, creed, colour (because some bleach), profession and apparently, very notably, their marital status. It is common for women to sign off as Abigail Proscenia Abwooli Onekalit (Mrs), to make it clear.

It separates them from the unmarried and the single mothers. Cultural norms value marriage and associate it with maturity, respectability, stability, and even morality. That is why many elders

press young people to get married (and bear children in wedlock). This is not always possible.

According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics report of 2024, the number of single mothers aged between 18 and 35 years rose from 20 percent to 30 percent.

Many times this cultural pressure hurriedly pushes young people into unions without due diligence and end up as single mothers. Of course, there are many other factors like death of a spouse, migration, the lack of sex education and knowledge of contraception, violence, rape/defilement that leave women with unplanned children. Men or even women wishing to move on in case of dissatisfaction in a relationship after children are born. This includes the men who cannot handle and abandon the responsibility of parenting to women.

Whatever the case may be. If 20 percent of the households of a country are led by women as single parents, they constitute a significant force that can't be taken lightly. The impact they have because of the proximity to the children has a very substantial bearing on the future of society and the country.

Anyone who has ever been a parent knows that bringing up children is a lifelong responsibility and is back-breaking work. Life can be tough in a home that has both parents. But the burden of financial pressure, the provision of emotional comfort and material well-being, discipline, and moral moulding is lighter in an ideal situation where both parents make a significant contribution by being in the lives of children.

Statistics from the USA paint a grim picture of fatherless homes. Almost a quarter of children live in fatherless homes. These children show a nine-time higher rate of dropping out of school than

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Nicholas Sengoba
Plainly speaking



those from a two-parent home. Ninety percent of people who end up homeless are from such homes. Eighty-five percent of children from such homes are likely to have disciplinary issues, which include violence, drug and alcohol abuse. About 80 percent of youth in prison grew up in fatherless homes.

Seventy percent of adolescent patients in drug and alcohol treatment centres are from such homes. Girls who do not grow up with their fathers are likely to associate with older males at an early age to fill the void. All these children are likely to end up in poverty.

The story from the US looks distant, but the case of an increase in drug and alcohol abuse, mental health challenges plus increase in HIV infection rates among young people aged between 15 and 25, just like cases of abortion, is food for thought. This does not in any way mean single mothers are incompetent or incapable of bringing up good citizens. Far from it. It is just that they are often over-stretched, sometimes having to work long hours or two jobs to make ends meet. This leaves very lit-

tle time to adequately attend to children, yet there is no complementary contribution from fathers. Almost every evening, while returning home, I meet women with baskets on their heads, babies on their backs, and usually a little child or two following them also with some package, as they return to their abode, probably from hawking or some menial jobs.

There have been stories of mothers leaving children alone in homes at night to go and work. When fires or floods kill the children, the woman is condemned. Yet we never ask about the whereabouts of the father.

Many times, children are left to society to guide and nurture them. The pressures and stress of life, bringing up children often on lunch time money drains them and impacts on their emotional well-being. Thus, the cup is almost empty to fill their young souls with anything of serious worth for their well-being.

The young people under the care of single mothers are the 'property' and future of our society. It is important that we give serious thought about helping in their nurturing to lift the burden from especially single mothers.

For instance, it is possible to create safe spaces like day care centres so that young mothers can complete school or acquire better skills to enhance their earnings. They may also receive an allowance like the elderly. It may come in kind to cover tuition, health, and rental expenses in decent environments.

We may even think of clubs and societies like the YMCA, where male figures mentor and guide, especially young boys.

Otherwise, as a country, we shall pay dearly for what now appears to be a problem for a few struggling single mothers.

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