

# Uganda: Stop selling out

Saturday 13 February 2021, by [AMENY Arao](#), [NYANZI Stella](#) (Date first published: 14 January 2021).

## **Ugandan activist and politician Dr. Stella Nyanzi challenges a new generation of women to take up the struggle for political freedoms and revolution.**

It is difficult to articulate the place and position of Dr. Stella Nyanzi, medical anthropologist and women's and LGBTQ rights activist, in Ugandan politics in the current moment. I view that place—as she articulates in this interview carried out by writer Arao Ameny—as critical of the office itself as an instrument of power, and the ways that power has been abused. Not only by those in office for decades, but also by women leaders, especially, who have been given a seat at the table. What Dr. Nyanzi articulates in this interview is important because it suggests that the women's rights struggle is largely incomplete, and will require the efforts of a younger generation to be fully enacted. Dr. Nyanzi, who emerged onto the political scene through her Pads4Gals campaign in 2017, is currently running for the office of Woman Member of Parliament for Kampala Municipality in the 2021 elections.

The emergence of several political movements in the last two decades shows the changing terrain of politics in Uganda, and simultaneously reveals the changing laws of Uganda with notable constitutional amendments that reflect a tightening hold on power, or what can be argued is the instrumentalization of the law in countering political activism in unconventional spaces. Thus, Dr. Nyanzi is concerned with the institutionalization of women by and large: “That is another form of women's participation in politics: that they may come and sit at the table, using whatever means, but when they get to the table, they forget the core values of women empowerment, feminist agendas, and they participate with those who oppress us through models of patriarchy and misogyny that must be combated.”

Recent activism has taken place in the era of social media, that is, after 2006, when Facebook first launched. Prior to this, Uganda was said to be “progressive” in multiple cases citing the 1995 Constitution, which made provisions for gender and women's education, among others. Similarly, Uganda's inclusive politics such as having a first woman Vice-President as early as the mid-1990s, has been lauded by various Western governments and international NGOs. Yet in recent years, the inclusive politics of the 1990s has appeared to be primarily benefitting the incumbent National Resistance Movement party, rather than effecting any real change amongst what Stella Nyanzi calls “the masses.” Dr. Nyanzi is attempting to forge a new working class-oriented politics.

That working class activism has taken place within unconventional spaces such as the entertainment industry or the university, and as such the music collective Firebase Crew is notable in the emergence of the “ghetto youth” movement in Kampala between 2000 and 2010, of which dancehall musician, Member of Parliament, and current Presidential hopeful Bobi Wine (Robert Kyagulanyi) is a proponent. There are also the various feminist and women's rights campaigns that took place in public spaces of Kampala streets; the LGBTQ Pride Parades which took place in semi-public gardens in Entebbe and elsewhere; and a growing youth movement in Uganda. This is important because according to census statistics, the majority of the country is below the age of twenty-five but its leadership averages above sixty. On the other hand, the increased influence of the Christian Evangelical Protestant church dominating not only spaces of worship, but corporate spaces as well,

has pushed its own agendas in the House of Parliament. These various movements have shaped recent politics in such a way that has prompted the government to aggressively counter the various youth, artistic, feminist, and queer movements.

The introduction of the Computer Misuse Act in 2011 is an example. Under this law Dr. Stella Nyanzi was detained and charged for cyber harassment after calling the president of Uganda a “pair of buttocks” on Facebook.

Similarly, other laws such as the Public Order Management Act targeted students protesting fee increments in the compound of Makerere University, and the Act was instrumentalized to shut down LGBTQ Pride Parades. The law was introduced in the aftermath of the Walk to Work protests in 2011, launched by long time opposition leader Dr. Kizza Besigye, and predominantly supported by the youth movements in the country such as the dancehall musicians and Lugaflow community. The Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2014, was introduced by Christian Evangelical Protestant politicians in the parliament of Uganda. By doing so, they hoped to use the law to enforce conservative Evangelical Protestant Christian values. This is contrary to the 1995 Constitution which provides that the Ugandan republic is not beholden to a singular religion.

Similarly, the Communications Act 2013, and the Anti-Pornography Act 2014, have targeted musicians, artists, theatre makers, and the arts industry at large. “These laws have been widely criticized for violating individual’s right to privacy on the internet,” notes a recent CIPESA study. The latest in these is the Excise Duty (Amendment) Act, 2018, known most commonly as the “social media tax”, which introduced a social media tax for Ugandan citizens.

In the following interview, Dr. Nyanzi locates herself within a broad range of women participating in Ugandan politics. She demarcates this field of participation through distinct groups: the group of elite “first women” who were appointed to office in the 1990s validated by the Yoweri Museveni regime; the second group of women who made their own way to the office through affirmative action, or family ties, or education privilege; the third group of women who use the office *not* to counter oppression but rather to *enable* those who are oppressed, suppressed, abused; the fourth group of women who are *not* in elite circles, and have a particular focus on women’s rights and cultivate an intimacy with the masses; the fifth group which consists of women predominantly outside of office in unconventional spaces of activism, consisting of majority young Ugandan women.

While this is narrated in the interview for purposes of her own rhetoric and how she places herself on the spectrum of Uganda politics at large, Dr. Nyanzi’s points are significant, such as mentioning the tendency of the Uganda government to rest on laurels of progressive inclusive politics, while the office itself is attributed mere symbolic power and financial capital. This implies that despite the 1995 Constitution and its provisions for women’s rights, it is still a major area lagging behind, as Dr. Nyanzi proved with her own Pads4Gals campaign.

The 2017 Pads4Gals campaign was aimed at school-going girls discouraged from attending classes for lack of menstrual towels or sanitary pads. In response to Dr. Nyanzi’s arrest on April 7, 2017, Amnesty International’s Muthoni Wanyeki issued a statement on April 10: “Lack of sanitary towels is one of the leading causes of girls dropping out of school in Uganda. Dr Nyanzi has led a campaign to ensure girls continue to attend school with dignity during their periods and, instead of commending her, the authorities have harassed, intimidated and now arrested her.”

In the following excerpt, I have transcribed an interview which took place via Zoom and Broadcast Live on Facebook on Friday July 24, 2020. Organized by writer Arao Ameny, it was advertised under the theme of “women in politics.”

**AA | How have women contributed to politics in Uganda and politics across the African continent? Do you think Ugandan women embrace your form of activism? I thank you for giving us that history lesson that you are drawing from a long line of African women who are using their body as a form of activism.**

**SN |** The idea that it is men who are visible; who are seen; who are acknowledged in writings about Africans in political (spaces) or political participation has to be redressed. Being an African scholar and academic, I cannot start the conversation without highlighting the urgency for more scholars of political science and political participation to write about women in politics. We must address this, because women have been participating side by side, or alongside—sometimes even (effectively) more than men in the politics of our country, and of our continent, ever since politics began. But I will go on to speak about Uganda—though I could talk about Africa more broadly—and the role of women in politics.

It is everywhere, whether historically or within the last 35 years of the Yoweri Museveni regime. I think that women must be looked at holistically. There's a spectrum of women's participation in Ugandan politics over the last thirty-five years. Under Museveni's presidency, there are women such as former Vice President Specioza Kazibwe; Winnie Byanyima (lawyer and former Executive Director of Oxfam), Cecilia Ogwal (businesswoman, Member of Parliament), and Miria Matembe (lawyer, lecturer, and Member of Parliament), who give or legitimize the rhetoric around dictator Museveni bringing women from the kitchen and into Parliament, or into State House, or into wherever it is that he brought them.

There is a corpus of women who legitimize the idea that women and society must be grateful for dictators and other authoritarian leaders shoving us into the limelight of politics. But do women have agency to enter politics on their own? Or must we be beholden forever to male patriarchs, and misogynistic dictators, to whom we are answerable for our political participation?

That is the first angle I want to look at, and I leave questions for those who want to engage more with the topic. Another group of women are those who have entered politics of their own accord, having been empowered by whichever forces in society, whether dictatorships like Yoweri Museveni or using the privilege of their family backgrounds, or using the education they obtained, or using affirmative action. They are women we've had such as Betty Kanya (Cabinet Minister of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development) in Kampala, who entered as an opposition activist and then was bought out. There are women such as Mama Mabira (named for her activism to save Mabira forest) who was in my political party, Forum for Democratic Change, and then was given a ministerial position to shut her up. There are women such as Rebecca Kadaga, who have come in through whatever route, and are participating with the authoritarian government that oppresses women; that abuses women's rights; that exists by being patriarchal, right? That is another form of women's participation in politics: that they may come and sit at the table, using whatever means, but when they get to the table, they forget the core values of women empowerment, feminist agendas, and they participate with those who oppress us through models of patriarchy and misogyny that must be combated.

**AA | Why do you think this happens? You gave a long list of people who are either bought out or who crossed over.**

**SN |** As a woman who wants to enter the Uganda parliament, that second class of women for me is interesting because I want to learn from their biographies as political actors. Why is it that having entered politics, having attained political capital to make changes for oppressed Ugandans, or for subjugated women--What is it that keeps them away? What is it that cuts off their power? Why is it that they yield after having entered? I don't have the answers, but I want to learn so that I will not

be like them.

## **AA | Thank you.**

**SN** | They are women whose examples we show up, and we teach, and we flag. But we teach about them by saying to younger women entering politics, “Do not be like Betty Kamyá” ...When you get to your position of power, remember to work for those who are oppressed.” Why these women do it, I am still studying. I am a late entrant into this race. But I am studying and want to understand what it is, and how can a woman do that?

The third layer of participation for me are women who become enablers. They are not working with, but right from the word, ‘go’, they enter politics to enable those who are oppressed, suppressed, and abused. Like Evelyn Anite Kajik (formerly State Minister for Youth, and currently Ugandan Cabinet), a brilliant woman. She entered politics through a proposal that Yoweri Museveni should become sole candidate, and she was rewarded. Brilliant woman, articulate woman. A woman with so much potential. Yet, right from the word, “go,” her participation in politics was polluted.

We have the Evelyn Anite’s. We have the Ruth Nankabirwa’s. We have the Justine Lumumba’s. We even have the Acheng Diana’s. They are women like that. Firebrands. Very powerful; with a lot of potential, and who decide right from the point of entry that they are not going to work for the masses. That they are *not* going to work against oppression. But they are just going to *empower* and *enable*. This is how women are participating. A whole array.

They are women, for me, who may be in the opposition, or who may be in the incumbent party, who may be wherever they are along the political participation continuum, but actually are working for Ugandans. They are working for the masses. They are working against the dictatorship. They are working against the oppressive regime of dictator Museveni. I can name a person such as Monica Omoding who is a National Resistance Movement Member of Parliament. She entered parliament through the incumbent, but we saw her actively working with comrades to oppose the removal of the age limit article in the constitution. These women are working, no matter where they are placed within politics. They entered political participation with the heart of the masses, the heart of the people, with the will to work against oppression.

I could also talk about professional women such as Edith Nakalema, or Jane Frances Abodo who is Director of Public Prosecutions in Uganda, that sanctioned a file against honorable Francis Zaake (Member of Parliament), who was beaten almost unconscious. She sanctioned a file for a man who had been tortured while in police custody, and I’m like, “what sort of woman are you?” These are professional women who have professional qualifications; who are elite; who are empowered, but are working against the masses.

I have brought to your attention local Ugandan examples--people who are living today, with you and I--to highlight that there is a whole range of political participation. I think that, for me, there are model examples who are not necessarily perfect, but women that I look up to, women such as Betty Nambooze. People such as Winnie Kiiza, who only recently retired. People such as Salaam Musumba. These are women who come from all shades.

Betty Nambooze is in the Democratic Party. Salaam Musumba is in the Forum for Democratic Change. Winnie Kiiza was in Forum for Democratic Change but is now retired. These are women we look up to and we say, “I want to be like her. She may not be perfect, but at least in everything she does, one sees that she’s motivated by the will to redress oppression and violation of human rights. She’s working for the people.” I was hoping to answer your other question.

## **AA | I was wondering if you think women of Uganda understand and embrace your form of activism?**

**SN** | I think what I was doing there was to highlight women's participation in local politics in Uganda. Now the question about whether women such as all of those I have highlighted, or talked about, or mentioned, understand the kind of activism I do? I would say yes and no. I would say there is a caliber of women such as the last group of women I talked about: those who are working for the masses; working against oppression; working against dictatorship—for me, women I look up to as my mentors. Those women surely must understand why I do what I do.

No wonder, when I was fundraising for sanitary pads, to challenge and contest and mock dictator Museveni, after he had failed in his promise to give sanitary pads to young girls, Betty Nambooze opened up Mukono district (her constituency) to me, and we distributed sanitary pads to over 1200 young women in school. She opened up space to us when many other politicians were saying, "Stella will not come (to give sanitary pads) because she has touched the hem of the garment of Yoweri Museveni with menstrual blood-filled hands. She has shamed our president."

I think that a very small corpus of women—for whom the fight for liberation of Uganda, against dictatorship—understand what I do and why I do it. However, the vast majority of women who have been compromised, who choose to serve the dictatorship, and authoritarian regime, those women challenge, contest, resist, rebuke, ridicule, shame what I do as an activist. For many women, there is a great cost to pay, to challenge the status quo, because they benefit from it. Their children benefit from it. Doing the sort of activism that I do, threatens to take away from one's status, or privilege, or wealth, or whatever it is they benefit from.

Even if they understood they would not be willing to take the extra mile. I want to say that there is a younger generation of women, who are very encouraging and they say, "Stella! Will you mentor us in what you do?" I think that breaking the convention has become a necessity for those of us who see that conventional means of engagement, and conventional means of activism do not serve us anymore, and perhaps the younger generation is more hopeful and enthusiastic. Maybe it is because of their naivety. Because, for them, there is hope. There is longer life for them to lead, and there is more time and energy for them to dream about liberation. The younger generation gets what I am doing. It is the more conventional, more conservative, greedier, more—I don't know what else to say—that do not understand, and if they do understand, they will insist on, posturing as if they do not understand, because they have a lot to gain from the status quo.

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**Stella Nyanzi**  
**Arao Ameny**

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**P.S.**

Introduction and transcription by [Serubiri Moses](#).

Africa is a Country

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