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### Feminist solidarity: how women are shaping the way we think about sex and politics in Uganda

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## **Feminist solidarity: how women are shaping the way we think about sex and politics in Uganda**

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The rise of the contemporary feminist movement and its subsequent engagement with gender equality and democratic politics calls for further investigation. This study is a contribution to this end. It raises debate as to how feminist influence towards the theorization, reconstruction and dismantlement of existing constructions of sex and politics in non-patriarchal ways frames our thought, debate and perception, as well as policy outcomes on the same. Herein, I explore the gains reached by the feminist movement in the mid-1980s into the 1990s that led Uganda to be celebrated as a model country in the bourgeois political science literature and among neo-liberal ‘development’ agencies, for its unique experience in relation to women empowerment, participation and representation. The main aspect of my argument is that these dynamics would not have occurred in their form or context in the absence of a concerted and focused impetus by women nourished by initiatives and networks around feminist themes and actions all over the country. I indicate, however, that while the feminist movement did have a visible and audacious development and impact on the changing position of women at the time, the gains then do not seem to be taking root now. Upon this, I provide points of reflection.

**Keywords:** feminist movement; activism; women; politics; Uganda

### **1. Introduction**

The achievements of the feminist movement in Uganda since the mid-1980s and especially after the early 1990s did not come about without a long struggle. Hailed as ‘one of the strongest mobilized societal forces’ and ‘one of the strongest women’s movements in Africa’, the movement was closely sutured with a myriad of socio-political-economic trajectories including, broadly speaking, coup d’états and violence that swept Uganda in the 1970s and 1980s; the National Resistance Movement (NRM)<sup>1</sup> regime’s (1985 to date) adoption of new generation policies propelled by the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and sustained by continued economic liberalization; women’s increased relative enthusiasm into the 1990s and their adoption of western-like feminist ideologies, strategies and styles; and lastly the emergence of second-generation feminist activism since the multi-party dispensation in 2006. Through a phenomenological perspective, my aim is to examine how women have organized inside and outside political parties amid these trajectories, questioned the complex character of the dominant forms of masculinity and shaped their own position in society. I present these debates from a feminist post-structuralist perspective.

While I acknowledge the imperative for theoretical and methodological frames of social movements, identity construction as well as critical women’s theories and assumptions of

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the feminist methodology, I do not seek to respond to the apparent complexities that they manifest. My choice for a pragmatic strategy is premised on just a few feminist issues that refute or justify accepted sociological generalization, fill lacunas in my own conceptualization or chart original theoretical directions. The point of departure from which I start, therefore, is one based on the premise that there is generally a level of consistency in the overall assumptions of what 'feminism' is about and what *feminists* as women of identity are 'doing' (through activism, for instance). As Mbire-Barungi, argues, 'fundamental commonalities can be found by looking beyond political rhetoric and focusing on the reality of women's lived experiences' (1999). Besides, I assume that the job of the sociologist would be to strip the formalities of feminism aside, in the interest of showing what is *really* going on. My aim is neither to develop a general theory, nor to aspire to develop a general explanation, but to contribute to our *understanding* of this problematique from a contemporary dimension in the African context.

It is this approach that makes the journey mapped out in this paper a rather short and less convoluted one. The section that follows the introduction presents a concise historical construction of the feminist movement with emphasis on its relation with the reality of changing women and the state throughout Ugandan history. However, it is not intended as a scholarly historical work on the topic, but as a broad sociological analysis to introduce the Western reader to the big forces in Ugandan history that provide a contextual frame-work in the evolution of the women's movement. The section that follows 'framing the debate' is an assessment of key issues of strengths and weaknesses in the contemporary spectrum, with emphasis on what the women say. While responses always varied, I came to the logical conclusion that I should employ rather different forms of analysis to make any sociological sense of these data. The final section presents after-thoughts and charts suggestions for the future. The next section takes the reader through a brief theoretical analysis.

## 2. Framing the debate

Contemporary feminism in Uganda, Africa was born as both a part of and an answer to modernity. It criticized the old paradigms of action and knowledge, while at the same time being influenced by them (Virginia 1992, 198). While economic growth 'enabled the expansion of opportunities for women, it was the liberalization of politics that helped women obtain positions in the political decision-making' (Zamfirache 2010). These trends were able to generate social and political streams and symbolic spaces upon which women capitalized to shape the way we think about sex and politics. It was upon this that the feminist movement surged.

Inspiration for a feminist praxis derives from the misconstrual of the notion 'feminism' which some writers still use to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe, women's activism from the late nineteenth century and also as attack on men. Arndt (2002, 1–3), for instance, cites Chinweizu, a Nigerian African cultural scholar and theorist of decolonization who says that

[f]eminism is a movement of bored matriarchists, frustrated tomboys and natural termagants; each of these types has its reasons for being discontented in the matriarchist paradise that is women's traditional world... feminism is a revolt in paradise; and the feminist rebels jeopardize the ancient matriarchist privileges of all women.

Of course, other writers have argued that African wo/men who sympathize with feminism are 'blind copycats of Western European feminists' who have allied themselves with the western outsider (Arndt 2002). Such accusations usually come with 'the insinuation that feminists deny their

African identity, their history and their specific problems, and are victims of the colonization of thought and consciousness' (Arndt 2002).

Consequently, it is not unusual to find women activists quite occasionally avoiding referring to themselves as feminists. In fact, some would rather describe themselves as 'gender activists' rather than 'feminist activists'. For them, gender is safe, feminism is threatening; and while gender can be accommodated and tolerated by the status quo, feminism challenges the status quo (Tripp 2000, 13–16). Khan (1999) cites a scenario where at a conference in 1998, a woman stood up proudly to announce, 'I have moved beyond feminism to gender'. Khan (1999), argues that while this might not apparently be wrong, the problem with the notion of 'gender' is that it can mean both men and women or either man or woman and largely ignores the specificity of women's oppression. This, thus, makes feminism a more ideal concept of application since it is 'located in the country's historical realities of marginalization, oppression and domination brought about by slavery, colonialism, racism, neo-colonialism and globalization' (Butegwa 1997). Besides, choosing to name oneself a 'feminist' places one in a clear ideological position and is imperative for achieving the movement's political motives, since as Tripp (2000) argues, the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply a political one too. What follows is an assessment of the radical strategies that women have adopted in their struggles for change in regards to the way we think about sex and politics.

### 3. The changing landscape of the feminist movement in Uganda

#### 3.1. *The rise of the contemporary feminist movement in the 1980s and 1990s*

The 1980s led to the emergence of quite a number of varied social movements in Uganda. Some were extremely violent in nature, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in northern region, while others entirely led and dominated by women such as 'Alice Auma Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement'<sup>2</sup> both of which were 'formed out of the realities in the Acholi land' (Royo 2008).<sup>3</sup> The contemporary feminist movement developed at just about the same time, albeit *within* the Museveni's NRM government as a reaction to women's frustration with sclerotic leadership and the slavish sycophancy of the middle ranks of their political parties. While it was largely the response to crises in the years leading up to 1985 which galvanized networks into spontaneous action in a new direction, (Tripp 2000; Tripp et al. 2008) the feminist movement was born in part as both a resistance to and an answer to this kind of exclusion and injustice at the time. Besides, the historical lack of interest that earlier political parties showed in promoting women's interests also prompted many women and feminists inside and outside Uganda to eventually leave these parties altogether, give a cautiously positive reception to the NRM's 'temporary' suspension of party competition when it came to power in January 1986 (Goetz 2002; Rubongoya 2006).

Many high-profile figures in the women's movement were subsequently appointed to posts in the public administration and the judiciary. President Museveni, for instance, appointed Joyce Mpanga as Minister for Women and Development in 1987. And by 1989 there were two women serving as ministers and three serving as deputy ministers in the NRM cabinet. Gertrude Njuba, a high-level combatant in the National Resistance Army (NRA), was appointed deputy minister of industry, Betty Bigombe was given the vital task of leading the project of pacification of the North and Victoria Sekitoleko became minister of agriculture. Museveni appointed two women lawyers in Miria Matembe and Mary Maitum to the Constitutional Commission, created a Ministry of Women in Development and conceded to the demand to create a seat for a woman at all levels of the now five-tier – village to district level – Resistance Council system (Goetz 2002; Tripp 2000). In 1994, Wandera Specioza Kazibwe was appointed Vice

President, becoming the first ever female to hold the position in an African country (Matembe 2000). From this composition, it is obvious that the activism rotated around nationalists and idealists. They aimed to expand women's rights and secure their full citizenship and equal participation in the political process. As Matembe, a feminist activist, recalls,

Women burst onto the political scene after the early 1990s, subsequently engaging in fundamental struggles against patriarchal control and exclusion, as individuals but also as collectivities of identity. This period was indeed the dawn of the Ugandan feminist movement as we know it now [ ... ] [W]omen as NRM cadres challenged endless barriers created by colonialists and by dictators, thereby shaping society's perception of politics and the women's role in it (2013 int.).

However, this period is considered the formative period of 'real' women's emancipation in Uganda not just because of women's participation *within* the NRM. Women played key roles outside the conduits of the NRM party, especially through the budding civil society sector at the time. Women had found that it was impossible to mount an effective struggle without building a broad-based movement (Tripp et al. 2008). Consequently, this period saw the emergence of 'urban feminist associations such as Action for Development (ACFODE), a small group of professional women' (Tripp 2003, 70). Other women's organizations such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT), Isis Women International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), Council for Economic Empowerment of Uganda in Africa, Uganda Chapter (CEEWA-U), Disabled Women's Network and Resource Organization (DWNRO), Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) among others were established as autonomous associations and partnerships with large memberships.<sup>4</sup> Through such organizations, the civil society played a key role in further strengthening and elevating women in their fight for the right to be seen, heard and counted.

Women during this time embraced the language and frame-work of liberal democratic institutions, interest-group liberalism and pluralist democracy (Arndt 2002).<sup>5</sup> And they used fashion, slogans, banners and symbols of identification to create feminist group identity during mobilization. That President Museveni made quick political capital with them by appointing urban women to very prominent positions in the early 1990s is not surprising at all. Most scholars argue that he was not immediately receptive of gender equity and equality (Goetz 2002; Matembe 2000; Tamale 1999). It was rather the resilience of a small group of urban women in the civil society that mobilized to lobby the Museveni soon after his take-over in January 1986. The group of women had demanded that women be appointed to leadership positions, arguing that women's support for (and even participation) played a crucial role to the success of his NRAs 1981–1986 guerrilla war.

By the mid-1990s, the feminist movement had become very active and vibrant, with quite some feminists playing an integral role in the process of drafting the 1995 Ugandan Constitution, which guarantees women rights to equality, freedom and security of the person, freedom from violence, the right to make decisions concerning reproduction, and the right to security and control over one's own body (Republic of Uganda 1995). The movement 'criticized the old paradigms of action and knowledge, while at the same time being influenced by them' (Virginia 1992, 198). It played a key role in challenging and transforming outdated and dysfunctional sexual divisions of labour, and developing new norms of social solidarity. But it was also able to generate social and political streams and symbolic spaces upon which women were engaged in processes of 'collective growth' that permitted them to challenge the diverse forms of subordination that affected them. This allowed women to develop their capacities, to take power and control over their own lives, their associations and their specific social, cultural and political context. For

instance, women also took part in countrywide efforts to educate their fellow women about the purpose of a Constitution and to gather views into memoranda in the mid-1990s (Tripp et al. 2008). In fact, it was becoming more and more apparent at the national level that the common cause of women's rights had united many women of diverse backgrounds, a precedent that had further been strengthened by the increase in the numbers of women in representative politics through affirmative action (Tanzam 2003; Tripp 2003). Their role in improving women's legal status was rather impressive as they increased mobilization by pushing to pass or amend laws to improve women's legal status. Indeed, it 'was widely acknowledged that no other group was as organized and cohesive as women's organizations when it came to making a concerted effort to influence the Constitution writing process' (Tripp et al. 2008).

The struggle against corruption was also quite a significant feature of the feminist movement at the time. Because of past gender-based exclusions from formal political and economic life, women, like other politically marginalized groups, had less at stake in maintaining the old order and subsequently have the potential for greater openness to adopting new incentive structures. It was therefore no accident that women like Winnie Byanyima emerged among the fiercest opponents of corruption and patronage politics (Tripp et al. 2008). Along with the anti-corruption stance, it is striking how often one found women politicians adopting an anti-sectarian position where others had politicized ethnicity, race or religion. Quite pro-actively, they were able to rise onto the political scene and engage in rather more fundamental struggles quite beyond mere patriarchal control and exclusion. Together, they were able to influence local and national economic, social and political spaces, while taking ownership of their society, with the aim of changing it for the *better*.

### 3.2. *New generation activism in the 2000s and beyond*

The 2000s witnessed a return to multi-partism, shifting the politics from the limitation of interest articulation and aggregation only within boundaries of the ruling NRM (Rubongoya 2006). In the multi-party dispensation, the emphasis on women's rights and empowerment began to wane, the NRM shifted into 'co-optive mode' (Rubongoya 2006). The autonomy that had previously been given to women's associational organizations in the mid-1980s which enabled them to push for pro-feminist legislative initiatives began to be *compromised*. Only then did it become apparent that 'the time between January 1986, to July 2005 had been a pivotal period in the women's movement – a period during which gains were made that would have been impossible to contemplate in a multi-party system' (Rubongoya 2006).

But not all was lost. A new generation of feminist activism emerged, markedly different from before. Whether out of desperation or necessity, women saw in this conclusive turn, an opportunity to re-brand the post-socialist and military-like feminist movement into a rather more dynamic force, leading to the dramatic adoption of new spaces, technologies, styles and strategies. During this time, women organized locally and nationally, and networked across the continent on quite an unprecedented scale. They started fighting for their claims to land, and for inheritance, and autonomy, and challenging laws and constitutions that did not uphold gender equality. As more spaces sprung up, popular political culture gradually became more accepting of female politicians. Consequently, new female faces and voices increasingly became seen and heard in ways not seen in the past.

While feminist women and activists emerged from all sorts of different corners independent of national political struggle, it was perhaps in the academy that they got even more entrenched. Through scholars such as Sylvia Tamale, Jackie Asiimwe-Mwesige, Josephine Ahikiire and Stella B. Ssali, the feminist movement became even more acclaimed and legitimate within institutional structures of academia. Feminists in the academia played a key role in reconceptualizing

core concepts of sex, power and politics while uncovering new empirical knowledge concerning the feminist discourse in the Ugandan context. They actively participated in studying specific empirical situations to deduce explanatory and ethical theories and conceptualizations grounded in the local context; and also wrote on specific feminist dilemmas in the country. By so doing, they were able to introduce theoretical content and empirical applications of feminist theory to ‘real’ local situations in regional politics. However, the challenge lay (and still does) in bridging the *gap* between feminist theory and activism.

The other space through which new female faces and voices increasingly became seen and heard in ways different from the past is the media. Through the media, feminist activism was played out, especially with budding feminists playing a more aggressive role in demanding their rights and freedoms in ways that were not evident in the early 1980s and 1990s. Media outlets, print, electronic and on-line, came to be used by women, in political party female wings and civic campaign groups as a way of sustaining their agendas. Especially new media networks such as *twitter* and *facebook* led to growth in scale on which young women were able to actively involve key players and play key roles in sustaining the movement within Uganda and abroad. Many feminists, pro-feminists and critics in contention remarked on a freethinkers’ group about the imperative of trends media to the feminist movement in Uganda,

Sites such as *facebook* and *twitter* in this country became an integral part of feminism – especially considering that the word was largely still forbidden in many circles and spaces. It was so encouraging to see dynamic conversations happening everywhere [ ... ] The Internet was opening up better channels for us. We were not isolated from one other. We were able to understand each others’ lives and support ourselves through sites like this, which for me is at the heart of feminist activism. (Namagebe 2013 int.)

In the 1980s they didn’t have what we have now (developments in technology). Developments in technology in the early 2000s enabled activism to thrive even over the social networks. What we had then had the potential of mobilizing resurgences of grassroots feminist activism both on-line and on the streets. (Namagebe 2013 int.)

While the media may not necessarily have led to the mobilization of resurgences of *grassroots* activism, it nevertheless facilitated the emergence of a newly exuberant and dynamic generation of feminist activism in Uganda. This way, feminist activism was able to provide a major force for change precisely influencing a number of social and political spaces including the political systems of power and domestic discourses on gender and sexuality. The movement was able to create new forms of feminist ‘activism’, whereby patriarchal and hegemonic structures that existed within the original culture dramatically disappeared, and men’s consequent demand to keep their *power* gradually declined. A growing movement of budding feminists was able to emerge, creating opportunities for change in informal politics through the civil society sector and academia in creative and flexible ways. By so doing, women feminists and activists did not necessarily belong to a political organization than was the case in the 1980s and 1990s for instance. Despite the odds stacked against them, women showed admirable resilience and engaged in struggles to keep their families together. They formed the majority membership within community organizations and social movements, and were able to develop a rich store of institutional knowledge over the years within the contexts in which they worked. Often times, they would be seen organizing as grassroots activists, feminists, women’s human rights defenders, academics and policy-makers to design the best strategic response to issues in real time.

All these were signs of new forms arising, spreading and becoming even more consolidated in Uganda’s society. And while such triumphs seemed small and scattered, together they played a

significant role in challenging the barriers created by colonization and dictatorships, and thus a great role in shaping the position of women in society. For instance, women were no longer required to be chaste, decent or modest. They were not expected to restrict their sphere of activity to the home, or even to realize their ‘properly’ feminine destiny in maternity. Aspirations and opportunities available to them dramatically increased, while their political participation and engagement fast expanded with women forging far more established links with their active involvement in public affairs and mobilizing wide coalitions in varied ways. It was increasingly becoming apparent that even the men, however grudgingly, were beginning to allow lee way for women’s rights into the public sphere, as older forms of domination and the tendency to constantly disregard women in the political arena were continuously being eroded (*The Observer* 2013).<sup>6</sup> It is my opinion that these dynamics would not have occurred in their form or context in the absence of a concerted and focused impetus by women nourished by their initiatives and networks around the key themes around which they advocated.

That is not to say, however, that the change in *position* of women cut across the board, or was experienced across the spectrum: the movement neither embraced, nor responded to issues of lesbian rights in any meaningful way. Women in both academic and civil society environments remained unbelievably silent about issues concerning sexual orientation, especially when they did not match with predominant heterosexist structures. Of course one of the reasons for this is that such grounds are very sensitive in a highly masculinist, religious and patriarchal society. Tamale, for instance, in her article ‘Out of the Closet’, narrates how she became the target of unbounded homophobic rants, bigotry and injustice shortly after she, in 2003 (from a section of the women’s movement), had suggested classifying homosexuals as a ‘marginalized group’ (2003).

In the article, Sylvia narrates her ordeal,

I had come out strongly in support of homosexuals and articulated my position in the national and international media. For this reason, I was caught in the eye of the homophobic storm, and became a ‘punching bag’ for the public to relieve its pent-up rage.

It is impossible to describe the depth of the ugliness, rage, revulsion, disgust and malevolence exhibited by the vocal homophobic public. The few voices in support of homosexual rights were drowned out by deafening homophobic outcries. Through radio, television, newspapers and the Internet, I endured the most virulent verbal attacks, including calls for the ‘lynching’ and ‘crucifying’ of Tamale. (Tamale 2003)

She argues that ‘the mainstream aversion to same-sex relations consequently reflects a greater fear’, which is a logical explanation as not many women would be willing to risk taking this path (Tamale 2003). Kiragu and Nyong’o, in their article on ‘LGBTI Organizing in East Africa’, affirm that individuals located within the feminist movement are ‘still struggling with responding to LGBTI issues and concerns’ (Kiragu and Nyong’o 2005). They argue that this is also because some women lack knowledge and capacity, while others are apparently heterosexist in orientation, homophobic at worst (Kiragu and Nyong’o 2005). Other reasons have to do with the tensions, divisions, resource constraints and the invisibility that is faced by the lesbian community in Uganda. These issues make lesbian concerns in Uganda entirely marginalized and disconnected from the broad feminist movement.

#### 4. The contemporary present

For more than a decade now, we have been witnessing a decline in the women’s social as well as a political and economic struggle from the mid-1980s and early 1990s, when it was a broad movement whose diversity of groups and ideas was a real benefit in the efforts to mobilize women of

identity in struggle. However, the ‘re-invention’ and ‘re-shaping’ of feminist strategies and styles in the twenty-first century, while shifting attention away from the paralysis into the 2000s, led the women’s movement into yet another confrontation: *whether or not* it was on the right track in its spectacle for social, political and economic change. Many seem to argue that it is not. In fact the widely held perception is that feminist activism which was once vibrant and provocative has totally lost concern with women’s conditions. An article in a local Daily cited a group of ‘girls, many of them corporates drawn from different career pools in their mid-20s’ (Okuda 2013),

[...] a group of vibrant, almost elite Kampala women actually think the feminism movement has lost track. They think it is time to start posing the hard questions, if only to salvage the original woman, who they argue gets lost in the emancipation labyrinth. (Okuda 2013)

In tandem with this perception is a widely held belief that the movement has largely become ‘pre-tentious’ and ‘fake’ (Mirembe 2013 int.):

Today’s feminist struggle, in today’s clothes, is all about how weak and helpless women are. It is all about what we cannot possibly *achieve* on our own as women. A number of budding self-styled ‘feminists’ that are emerging today are turning back the clock, and declaring themselves *victims* over and over again. This is for us [women] a disappointment. For them [young feminists], am afraid it might yet be a self-fulfilling prophesy. (Mirembe 2013 int.)

These responses point to the fact that the feminist movement seems to have lost track, which is probably why gains that were earlier achieved in the 1980s and 1990s are turning out to be short-lived. Some skeptics do believe that the movement has not achieved much since and has sort of ‘laid back’ with less traceable achievement over the last ten or so years. This account is mostly premised on claims that some of the major achievements of the feminist movement, such as gender balance, particularly affirmative action, were ‘not in themselves sustainable’ (Tarzarn 2003). However, it is also based on the Ugandan society’s reluctance and low tolerance to change – considering that it has been led by the same president for at least 27 years now. Indeed, ‘no change’ has been President Museveni’s NRM party’s slogan ever since its inception as a political party in 2005 (Tushabe 2008, 3–5). And the Constitution was amended in the mid-2000s to accommodate what Ugandans now see as life presidential terms (Tushabe 2008, 3–5) upon which he declared that no *other* Ugandan but himself has the ‘vision’ to run the country. This attitude is not only *condescending*, but it is also synonymous with misuse of ‘democratic power’ to bend rules and amend the Constitution for individual interests. But most of all, it reflects how the current Ugandan government is failing to practice a democracy that could potentially protect women from burdens of family, social and economic responsibilities.

Of course, this is partly because the feminist movement right from its onset had begun by outlining more radical principles and advocating a wholesale social reconstruction than those it had initially come to represent. While it later managed to evolve into a culturally concretized social movement with elaborate tenets and values intent on securing equality in an increasingly patriarchal society, the feminist movement is still perceived as a hegemonic enterprise and still possesses quite a number of critics. Consequently, it is resisted everywhere, media inclusive:

Apparently absolutely nothing was right or good before feminism came into the picture. Feminists and some of their advocates have questioned (and asked for change in) various aspects of a woman’s life and, when you consider these demands, you realize that religion, culture, family life and common sense were all ‘wrong’. Because feminism, femininity and all corresponding variables are, by their very nature, incomprehensible [...]. (Kisiki 2013)

Mirembe alludes to ‘feminist’ women who resist ‘feminist’ brands,

In the early 90s, when we named ourselves *feminist*, we were often looked upon as being *disloyal* by both men and women whose consciousness had been shaped and oriented through traditional notions of authenticity and difference. It was *un-African* to be feminist, let alone name oneself thus. Quite a number of feminists I worked with at the time often preferred to refer to themselves as gender activists ‘cause of the perceptions associated with feminism. Some of them still do. (2013 int.)

Indeed, this sort of ridicule and hate upon feminists and pro-feminists has recently been escalated by the myriad of mushrooming media spaces. In such spaces, it is common to find feminist women referred to as ‘frustrated’, ‘miserable spinsters’, ‘castrators’, ‘home wreckers’ and many other epithets (Ekwee 2006). Such things are often said to discredit ‘those lost, polluted women, who want to cause trouble with our women who are happy where they are’ (Ekwee 2006).

Yet one would expect the patterns in intimidation, harassment and resistance to women to give women more reason to build an even stronger movement of activism with the intention of changing society’s perceptions of women, it has instead weakened their spirits. The *few* feminist women who have remained true to the *cause* of the movement are not able to make any tangible progress. In institutions of the state such as the parliament, for instance, women feminists have difficulty in being taken seriously, or even being listened to. A case in point is when the horrendous ‘Anti-Homosexuality Bill’ (commonly referred to by many as the ‘Kill the Gays’ Bill) that proposes the criminalization of homosexuality was proposed and (re)tabled. Women parliamentarians and activists aligned themselves with the feminist and sexual rights movements, with the international and national queer movement, and sometimes with a cross-section of the feminist movement to exert wide and fervent opposition against the horrendous piece of legislation in vain. They rightly considered the Bill to be ‘synonymous with neo-colonialist opposition to sexual rights and freedoms’ in Uganda, and called it all sorts of names but legislators remain relentless in excluding such opinions and suggestions.

In the same vein, the ‘Domestic Relations Bill’, a crucial piece of legislation for Ugandan women, remains the longest running legislation in Parliament. The Bill, according to Von Struensee (2004):

addresses women’s property rights in marriage and women’s right to negotiate sex on the grounds of health, sets the minimum age of marriage at eighteen, prohibits [Female Genital Mutilation] and criminalizes widow inheritance. As a compromise measure, bride price will not be prohibited, but the payment of bride price will no longer be essential for the formalization of customary marriages, and any demands for the return of marriage gifts will be an offense. The bill criminalizes marital rape and provides for civil remedies, such as compensation and restricting orders. The grounds for divorce are equally applicable to both spouses and alimony is provided for. The [Bill] continues to exclude cohabitation from the presumption of marriage, but provides parties to such relationships with certain rights, including the right to register the fact of cohabitation and particulars of any monetary or non-monetary contributions made. A competent court may then distribute the property equitably in accordance with those contributions, and may do so even when registration has not taken place. Polygamy is also strictly regulated by guidelines that provide for the economic support of all wives. The bill also provides for equal sexual rights and establishes more equitable grounds for divorce. (Von Struensee 2004)

The bill, while an essential element in changing women’s position in society has had stiff opposition, especially from the men in parliament, hence the reason for its delay. Its most vocal advocates like Miria Matembe have had *entire careers* in politics pushing for the same but its passing is still not guaranteed (Association for Women’s Rights in Development 2013). Similarly, the

'Marriage and Divorce Bill', which has been on the agenda for the last 47 years, hit a snag at the beginning of 2013. The Bill (2009) sought reforms and consolidation of all laws relating to equal rights and protection in marriage and divorce. The proposed Bill sought to legalize cohabitation and sharing of property, and to provide for recognized types of marriages, marital rights and duties, and divorce. Beyond the details of the various versions of the Bill, however, the rhetoric both for and against the Bill is symbolic of a deep concern about the apparent state of the nation in regards to the way we think about sex and gender in society. And yet, the manner in which it has been treated so far is reflective of a contemporary defiance of the feminist movement, particularly in the political sphere (which is quite surprising given the kind of influence women possessed in the 1980s and 1990s).

As if to add insult to injury, the Minister of Ethics and Integrity Simon Lokodo early in 2013 re-tabled the 'Anti-Pornographic Bill' in Parliament, which was quickly nicknamed the 'Mini-skirt Bill' as it sought to restrict a range of practices and activities, including wearing of certain items of clothing.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the nickname given to the bill goes a long way in informing about why most Ugandans became more concerned about the *unsaid* rather than what was actually stated in the articles and clauses. But most importantly, that a whole public institution such as Parliament should be debating what women ought (or not) to wear consistently signals the one thing: the widely held belief (albeit, somewhat unconscious) that women's bodies are not their own. It is this unconscious belief and attitude, a design of a patriarchal system, which is often overlooked and yet extensively portrayed when parliamentarians and the public through social and electronic media deliberate upon whether or not to ban 'mini-skirts' in public spaces. An institution of state ought to know better how best to protect rights and freedoms of citizens.

By and large, come critics argue that this kind of behaviour – that is, using the law to regulate, restrict and dis-empower women – could in itself be the result of counteraction to their 'increased independence'. Such an argument makes logical sense since the more women are determined to demand sexual independence, the bigger the backlash against them is expected to be. But most of all, such attempts are most certainly meant to suppress women's assertion of their sexual rights and freedoms. This calls into question the NRM government's commitment to women empowerment. But it also calls into question the plight of women in the midst of increasingly patriarchal and unrelenting tendencies to women rights and freedoms. As Aminata observes,

Women haven't won, yet. Even now, we are losing our hard-won rights. The men still own everything. Women are still far more marginalized – be it representation in politics, engagement at senior levels of government or the civil service, rates of pay at the workplaces, [ ... ] they remain in a vulnerable state.

[ ... ] those in power are legislating away women's rights, dictating what women should wear – like how they can't wear miniskirts, criminalizing their identities, and maintaining a status quo in which *half* the population are invisible and hopeless. But that's not because men are failing us. It's because women are. We are failing our own selves (Ankore 2013 int.). (Mirembe 2013 int.)

Aminata's response is a widely held belief and it goes a long way in showing how much still needs to be achieved. However, for as long as they continue to push for such rights and freedoms, one can always expect even more structural sexist backlash and retaliation. Re-examining conventional (and even contemporary) efforts in the midst of global changes is therefore necessary for re-positioning women in particular and the feminist movement in general.

## 5. Afterthoughts

This paper sought to explicate directions for the sociological analysis of mutations in the feminist movement in Uganda, and how they help in our understanding the changing position of women in

society. Ultimately, the paper contributes to the current literature on women's social movements in the Global South. It indicates that while Uganda was, in the mid-1980s and the 1990s, celebrated as a model country in the bourgeois political science literature and among neo-liberal 'development' agencies, it has, for the last decade or so, 'hit a snag'. The gains *then* do not seem to be taking root *now*. The study recommends a thorough repositioning of women and re-examination of conventional (and even contemporary) efforts in the midst of global dynamics and challenges. Taken together, it is hoped that this paper will provide a starting point for further sociological examination and debate of the feminist movement and the place of women in society in the context of the Global South.

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### Notes

1. The NRM began as the political body associated with the rebel 'National Resistance Army' before Yoweri Kaguta Museveni came to power in 1986. The NRM is commonly referred to as the Movement, and is largely associated with right-wing conservative ideologies. Information on the austerity measures is propelled by SAPs.
2. On 2 January 1985, an Acholi woman from the north of the country called Alice Auma, who was originally one of the many local Christian mediums and healers, set up the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces in the Acholi region. But when Lakwena and 10,000 followers left the Acholi region heading for Kampala, they suffered a massacre and serious defeat to the east of Jinja, 80 miles from Kampala (The leader of the group escaped and fled to Kenya, where she lived in a refugee camp until her death in January 2007) (Royo 2008).
3. Both the LRA and 'Alice Auma Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement were inspired by the 'years of violence and abuse under the military regimes of Idi Amin, Milton Obote and, at that time, the NRA government of Yoweri Museveni (Royo 2008).
4. A few women are however concerned that many of these organizations that once existed as large partnerships and women memberships have recently turned into shrewd bureaucratic structures run by paid staff.
5. Of course, other writers have argued that African wo/men who sympathize with feminism are 'blind copycats of Western European feminists' who have allied themselves with the western outsider. Such accusations usually come with 'the insinuation that feminists deny their African identity, their history and their specific problems, and are victims of the colonization of thought and consciousness' (Arndt 2002).
6. It is not surprising to find men that 'have a sophisticated knowledge, an understanding cool and empathy towards women and their rights' (*The Observer* 2013).
7. The Bill, which defines pornography as 'Any cultural practice, form of behavior or form of communication ... or leisure activity ... that depicts a person engaged in explicit sexual activities or conduct ... erotic behavior intended to cause sexual excitement or indecent act or behavior intended to corrupt morals', leaves as much *unsaid* as it says.

### Notes on contributor

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