



# COMMUNICATING FOR WOMEN’S MOVEMENT BUILDING IN UGANDA – WHERE IS THE PROBLEM?

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The women’s rights movement has existed in Uganda for over 100 years. Although the progress was piecemeal in the first years, from 1985, and the galvanised existence of an enabling legal environment in the years thereafter, there was increasing recognition and appreciation that women’s rights were paramount for the development of the nation.

The movement promoted the equality of rights and opportunities for both sexes. There were evident fruits of peace-building, livelihoods improvement and political participation, among others. However, with the progression came mistrust, resistance to and misconceptions about the intentions and goals of the movement.

This could be attributed to sheer fear that a section of the population – women – was breaking free, free of the bonds that society had always placed on it. There were those who wanted to maintain the status quo. To this end, women’s rights activists were perceived as women who are angry about the existence of men and will do anything to usurp the position of men in society and families, and that women’s rights activists were bent on the sole goal of promoting and elevating the interests of women above those of men.

Other people, such as Ethan Musolini, a renowned motivational speaker, believes that mistrust and resistance to the movement is fuelled by the way the movement packages its message. He says, “I have heard some women’s rights activists who think men are evil beings

standing in the way of women’s dreams.”

According to Musolini, therefore, the problem is not only the message but the messenger as well. However, Perry Aritua, the Executive Director of Women’s Democracy Network Uganda, says that these activists come in different “types”, depending on whom you speak to. “There are those who might rub people the wrong way by the way they speak, which causes them to be misunderstood. But there are also those whose tone and message will easily be understood.”

Basically, a women’s rights activist is a person who believes in the political, economic, personal and

social equality of the sexes. Others have argued that it is the existence of the 'same' faces in the women's movement that seems to portray a communication problem with the movement. Margaret Ssentamu, the coordinator of Uganda Media Women's Association, explains: "women's rights activists say there is media fatigue but I always ask them whether we have recruited other women to speak to the media about the movement. Why does it always have to be the same people talking about things that affect women?"

The case of professionalism in communication has also been pointed out. Some women's organisations do not have professional communication officers, and those that do have not oriented such office bearers to the vision of the movement. "They speak but they do not communicate," Ssentamu argues, adding, "as a movement, we must understand the philosophy of the movement and how we should work with the media."

Working with the media also means working on the messages. The messages should not only target women, but be inclusive. "We have always focused on the girl child but where are the boys who are going to marry our daughters?" poses Ssentamu. "The boy child also needs to be appreciated and prepared, not to be condemned to the camp of oppressors." It is this inclusivity in the messages that will work to erode the suspicion and mistrust about the movement. The messages, for example,

that call upon women and girls to stand up for their rights should never ignore the role of men in achieving gender equality.

Anna Nkutu observes that in recent years there has been growing recognition that you cannot achieve gender equality without men. "Today, many programmes that work on gender equality, including those that tackle violence against women, have male engagement as one of the strategies," she notes.

"We have to coexist," says Ssentamu. "The way we package our messages has to change and be all-inclusive because it should be about social justice for all, not only women."

The message from the movement should embed and reflect the fact that the advancement of women's rights does not take away the men's rights. Rather, says Nkutu, "it is about both sexes being at a level where they can access equal opportunities."

It also calls for creativity. "When I am working at the grass roots I talk about equal opportunities, not women's rights," says Aritua. "You do not want a mere word to stop people from understanding the advantages of women having the same opportunities as men. As the women's rights movement, if the word 'women's rights' has been misunderstood, then we can look for a synonym - one word should not prevent us from achieving our main goal."



**PERRY ARITUA,  
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DIRECTOR  
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DEMOCRACY  
NETWORK UGANDA,  
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