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TITLE:

**CELEBRATING THE 2023 WOMEN'S DAY:
UNRAVELLING AND COUNTERING THE
BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER JUSTICE IN
UGANDA**

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Associate Professor Josephine Ahikire making a presentation at Centre for Basic Research on countering Gender Justice Backlash.

Celebrating the 2023 Women's Day: Unravelling and Countering the Backlash against Gender Justice in Uganda
by
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Summary:

While it is right and fitting to celebrate this year's Women Day, it is also important to understand the politics defining how the gains made by women are understood and appreciated, while being insidiously countered at the same time. There is need for a conversation about a backlash against gender justice that is unravelling in our eyes. More needs to be done to sustain gender justice agendas in the journey ahead. Voices in countering backlash must be intentional, strategic, enduring and needs support from all well-intentioned Ugandans – and this should be the agenda of this Women's Day of 2023.

Introduction

This Think Piece arises out of ongoing research under a five-year collaborative project coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Sussex, UK and funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), covering 7 countries, including: Uganda, Kenya Brazil, India Bangladesh, Egypt and Lebanon. As the world celebrates Women's Day, it is important to recognize that there is a global

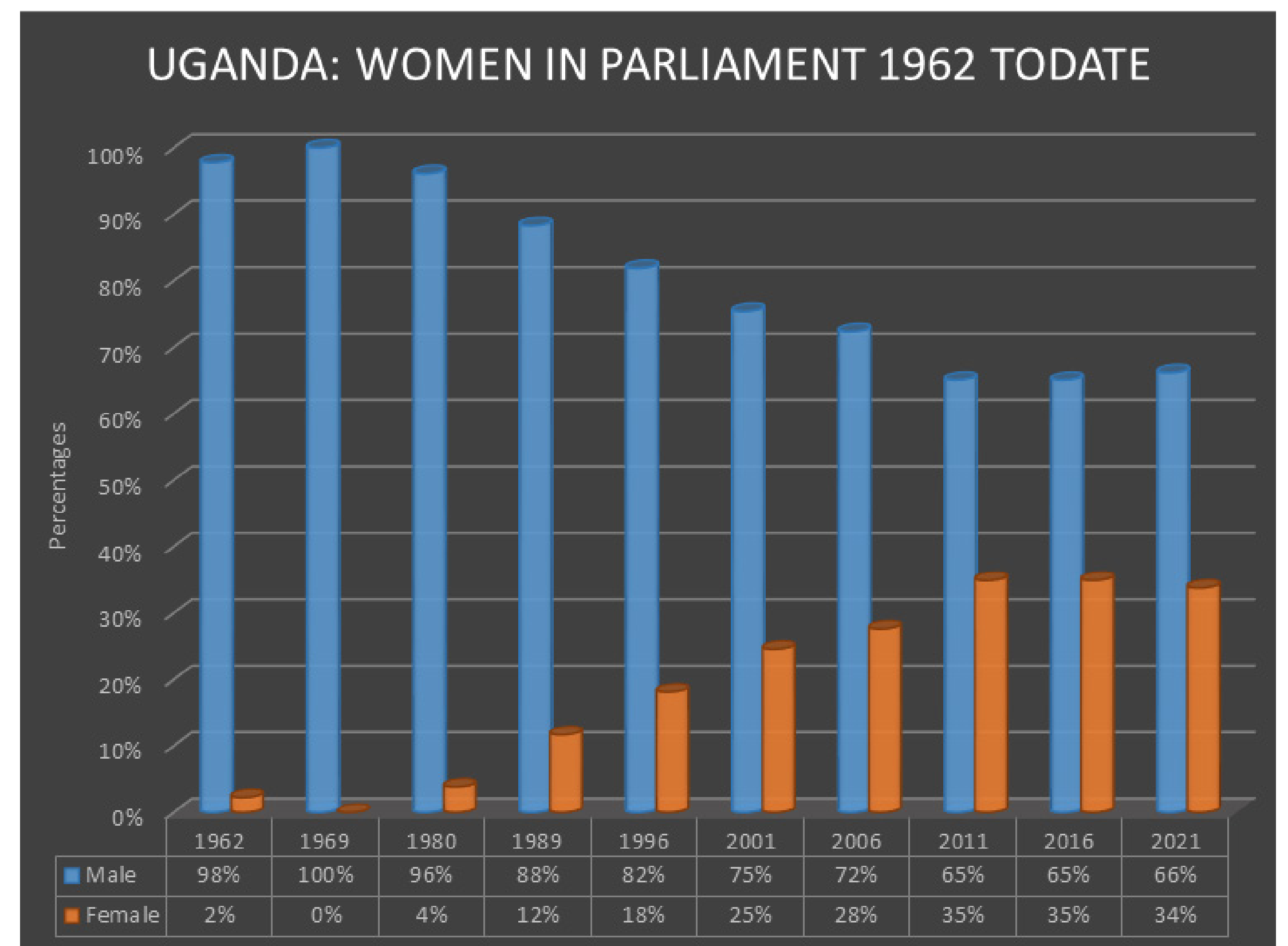
trend of backlash against gender justice, and hence a need to raise fundamental questions at a global level. Principally, the research programme is designed to generate knowledge needed to identify opportunities for women's rights actors and other gender justice defenders to counter the backlash and address the erosion of gender objectives withinglobaldevelopment to reclaim gender justice. This research programme is a strategic undertaking that seeks to generate new thinking, and building capacity across networks and strategic partnerships with women's and other human rights organizations, activists, academics and policy makers, regionally and globally. The overall impetus of the research activities in Uganda is to contribute to raising the bar on backlash so as to make it an issue for specific activism and programming on the part of the women's movement and the broader forces for social justice.

At the general level, Uganda is considered as having registered significant progress in promoting gender justice, equality and women's rights in the last 30 years. Considerable progress has been seen in women's collective advocacy for strengthening rights in marriage, inheritance of family property and political participation since independence. Reforms in the early 1990s provided an opportune moment to institutionalize gender equality in the country's constitution. The 1995 Constitution of Uganda which was hailed as one of the most gender sensitive in the region at the time, provided an opportune moment for women activists to carry out country-wide trainings, sensitizations and consultations with the communities to identify women's rights issues. Women activists made visible the debate on gender concerns in the constitution making process, their efforts evidently demonstrated through provisions on gender equality and women's rights in the

constitution. For example, the constitution outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex and also made specific provisions on the rights of women. In its Article 32, the constitution stated: "...the State shall take affirmative action in favor of groups marginalized on the basis of gender, age, disability or any other reason created by history, tradition or custom, for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them" (Republic of Uganda 1995). Naming women as citizens of an equal worth and recognizing specific contexts that rendered women and other marginalized groups were among the outstanding achievements of the NRM government reforms at the time.

This sense of optimism motivated a series of gender equity policy reforms in the immediate aftermath of the constitutional review and beyond. Consequently, the visibility of agendas that refer to the multiplicity of women's daily struggles and women's engagement in organizational spaces at local national and international levels have in a way pushed the social boundaries- what is recognized. Visible gains have been achieved in political representation in terms of women's presence in decision making structures the most significant being women's presence in the national legislature (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Women in Parliament: Uganda 1962-2021



Source: Uganda Parliament Watch, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (accessed on August 8, 2022)

In local Councils women constitute over 40 percent as a result of the constitutional provision that place a minimum of 30 percent for women at all levels. Also, there have been spillovers of Affirmative Action in the sense that women have been appointed in key positions even when there is no formal requirement of affirmative action. In local government for example, the idea of gender balance has brought out what we now see as the deputy/vice-ship syndrome. Often men are elected as chairs - of councils, committees and boards (the patriarchal attitudes have not been sufficiently undermined to the level of easily according women key leadership positions). But balancing then brings in a lot of women as deputies.¹ In other words, women have put the issue of inclusiveness on the agenda whatever the weakness and loopholes of that inclusion². Overall, there is increased education access, expanded opportunities across sectors and the significant visibility of the women's rights and gender equality agenda.

¹ In 1998 all chairpersons LC5 were male and 40 (90%) out of the 45 deputy chairpersons were female. In 2001 one woman, Josephine Kasya, of Kanungu District joined the exclusive club of LC 5 chairpersons while the female vice chairpersons dropped to 32% but still significant number, compared to other areas. For district Speakers, 8 out of the 56 are females while 32 (of 56) deputy speakers are female (Ahikire (2003)

² Loopholes in affirmative action for women are well known. The ghettoization of women, limited influence, amorphous constituencies are all issues that have been noted. (Tamale, 1999, UWONET 2003).

But this visibility of 'women's rights' has also created a moral panic- which is demonstrated by worries about 'the family' and about whether women want to rule their husbands. There is a clear shift in discourse – where the need to protect the family has re- gained ground (was there before) and gender equality is seen as a threat to society (especially to the institution of the family). There is a clear shift towards 're-traditionalization' in discourse and policy. There is a clear threat to the gender justice agenda.

The manifestation of backlash against gender equity /women's rights comes in the following forms:

(a) discursive challenge and shifts – 're-traditionalisation' and in the way pro-gender advocates are being reminded what their/women's place; (b) slow erosion of legal and policy gains made in the previous decades- especially given the foot dragging in implementation of the laws/ policies. The reality of pushback is that there is little room for women's rights organizations/ gender advocates to further expand the horizon for social justice (what can be debated) in policy spaces; and the threat of facing reversals in the policy arena, and reversals in norm legitimation processes is real. Backlash actors have forced certain egalitarian and inclusive policy reforms to be postponed, watered down, bureaucratically frustrated or out-rightly rejected. Backlash in this context is viewed as pushbacks, resistance, or negative reactions against women's gains, whether real or imagined. It's increasingly seen in subtle and organized efforts of pre-emptive moves to prevent progress as well as proactive opposition to progressive agendas.

At the general level, Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) often make observation of the reality of backlash. This comes up especially when they experience a push back in activism and lobbying for policy adoption on doctrinal issues around the institution of the family. And in many cases they express shock when there is resistance. We are now saying that women's rights actors ought to concretely understand and directly lobby against backlash, instead of being shocked by it. The approach of engaging WROs is, in a sense, focused on creating multiple spaces for collective analysis of the nature of the backlash and the strategies to counter it in the context of Uganda.

Understanding Backlash

While there is an emerging consensus that gender equality initiatives often trigger resistance and backlash, there are different conceptions on what constitutes backlash. Evidence of backlash indicates that this is about pushbacks, resistance, or negative reactions against women's gains in previous decades, real or imagined. While the concept backlash is not commonly used, there are discussions that point to 'resistance' in reaction to women's rights and gender equality whether the advance in equality is real or imagined. For instance, conversations on gender equality entail discussions on rolling back hard-worn gender equity gains, organized resistance emanating from the religious sector, traditionalists against gender reforms, and popular narratives on how women ought to pay attention to the private sphere in opposition to men. There are also discussions on resentment to women's political progress. A key example of these forms of resistance is women's entry into politics (in 1990s). As Tamale (1999) elaborately puts it women's entry into formal politics in large numbers

due to affirmative action was met with cultural resistance as women who were symbolically termed, in ominous ways, as “hen’s beginning to crow”. Other forms of resisting gender change manifest in form of inadequate implementation of pro-gender equity reforms.

Resistance to gender transformation has also been noted as gradual, informal and at times seemingly invisible while in other policy reform processes, it has been more intense especially when a reform questions traditional and religious doctrines.

Intense opposition to gender equity reforms has been noted particularly in cases around marriage, inheritance, ownership of property and sexuality matters – critical spaces of patriarchal privilege.

Figure 2: How do we identify Gender Backlash?

| Backlash strategy | Manifestations | example |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| Discursive | Stigmatise activists/ groups | Activists are frustrated at family |
| | retraditionalisation | Women should be home-makers/family is crumbling/ what about the boy child |
| | “Humour in agony” | Several In our parliament! |
| | Constructed daft sense | |
| Direct attack (physical/ institutional manifestation) | Violence | Direct attack against activists; online abuse |
| | Use regressive laws to limit activism | |
| | Dismantle/undermine institutions | |
| Subtle | Deliberate inaction/ foot drag | Non implementation of existing measures by state actors |
| | Hollowing out policies/ | Remove expansive measures in policy- for example stipulations on domestic violence |

Signposting Uganda’s Terrain of Backlash

- i) Backlash manifesting in popular culture – in songs, media Ads that re-center gender stereotypes that cast men and women in polarities, decry the empowerment of women and sympathize with ‘lost’ masculinity.
- ii) Inertia in policy making/implementation
 - Trivialization and obstinate posture of state actors e.g. dealing with parliamentarians where even basic concepts have to be explained over and over again. In addition, there is the perennial

hollowing out of policies – either at policy adoption or implementation stages.

- iii) ‘Re-traditionalisation’ – increasing resurfacing of debates we thought we had gone past
- iv) Exponential increase in raw abuse – resulting in teenage pregnancies, early marriages, domestic violence and more so the normalization and the response to it that puts blame on the girls (ref. 15 year old mother arrested for killing a three year
- v) ‘De-politicisation’ of feminist struggles – whether this is due to increasing NGO-isation, careerisms in women’s rights organization, the fear to be perceived/seen as radical.
- vi) The “turn to men and masculinities” is a critical wave that has to be cautiously understood. There are possibilities of voices emerging to sympathize with and lodge a reactionary claim to restore men’s ‘lost’ glory – what Kopano Ratele calls men’s consciousness rising – and this might be viewed as a backlash against progress registered by women’s rights campaigns.
- vii) Extreme homophobia and the reification of heteronormativity (eclipsing the intense injustice that exists within heterosexual relations).

What is to be done? Getting the Politics right

The pointers in this **Think Piece** is that there is a critical need to interrogate this pushback landscape and identify ways in which the women’s rights agenda can navigate and/or is navigating the backlash. Put differently, the women’s rights front is facing a higher order terrain when it is now moving into challenging the very structural bases of patriarchy, and there is need to identify nodes of opportunities for greater transformation. This requires massive mobilisation of existing energies as well as tapping the potential in the rural and young populations to enable the women’s movement to create more formidable political leverage to ensure

substantive citizenship for all women, consolidate gains and counter backlash. Key state structures such as the Parliament, Judiciary and civil service must be made to be accountable in concrete terms.

Getting the politics right is what the conversation should be about. It will also be about characterizing pockets of success and scaling up experiments to sustain gender justice agendas in the journey ahead. Voice in countering backlash must be intentional, strategic and enduring, starting this Women's Day of 2023.

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