



Press Statement in response to human rights abuses against three women over the weekend of 7th to 9th April, 2017

The National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda-NAWOU responds with concern to a series of actions over the last three days by State and Non-State actors that have abused women's human rights

On Friday evening, Dr. Stella Nyanzi, an activist and Research Fellow at Makerere University was arrested by Police. Nyanzi has been using her social media platforms to advocate for pads for girls and to critique the Government for abuse and wastage of state resources, among other things. Her posts have been described in some quarters as lewd and obscene. And yet this same public voraciously reads tabloids that traffic in similar language without much protest, a double standard indeed! Nyanzi has been charged with cyber harassment and offensive communication.

In a related incident, NTV news reporter, Gertrude Tumusiime Uwitware was kidnapped by unknown gun wielding actors on Saturday. Uwitware had previously received threats on Facebook after writing a blog post in support of Nyanzi's activism. It was reported that she was threatened, beaten, driven around blindfolded for hours, and then dumped onto the streets.

In another matter, a case of sexual harassment by a former employee of Aya Group against her former boss, Mohammed Hamid received notoriety but was overshadowed when State Minister for Labour, Employment and Industrial Relations, Herbert Kabafunzaki who was arbitrating it was arrested in a corruption sting operation. He was allegedly meeting in a hotel with the accused to receive a bribe to kill the case.

All these incidents reflect a nation no longer at ease with the status quo. In all these cases, the victims were denied basic rights and freedoms to free speech and to due process, all of which are enshrined in Uganda's Constitution. These actions are indicative of a State that is unwilling to listen to its citizens and intent on gagging opposing views. The Fourth Estate is a critical and indispensable part of our Democracy that serves to hold Government accountable and Government has the responsibility to provide protections and freedoms to ensure that this right to free speech is upheld.

Nyanzi raises issues that NAWOU and many Ugandans agree with; that girls' rights to education are infringed upon as they have to drop out of school because they have no pads

during their menstrual periods; and that the State has the obligation to provide a raft of social services and to create opportunities for its citizens to pull themselves out of poverty. NAWOU urges Government to reset its budgetary priorities to meet social service demands to ensure that their absence does not serve as a tool of discrimination, benefitting a few and disenfranchising the majority.

Although we applaud the State for the vigorous pursuit of corruption as happened in the case of the arrest of the Minister, we should not forget that a woman has brought sexual harassment charges against an individual with considerable wealth and power. She has already received death threats because of her actions. These allegations should therefore not be overshadowed by the corruption case as is already happening but be given the full weight of support on its own merits. The state should also give the complainant protection as a comprehensive investigation is carried out so that she can have her day in Court as is her right.

We remain unbowed by these acts of intimidation. Instead our vigilance to hold the State to account to uphold and respect its citizens' rights and civil liberties only gets stronger. Although the space for women to air their views has always been small, we shall guard jealously the gains that we have made to create and protect this space, and protest against any attempts to mute our voices. We stand in solidarity with these women and other women whose opinions are silenced daily. There is strength in numbers and we join them to say that we have reached critical mass and women shall remain silent no longer!

About NAWOU

The National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda is an umbrella of women's organizations consisting of district networks made up of Community Based Organisations, Faith Based Organisations, NGOs, and women's professional bodies.

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