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## Chapter 3

### **The Autonomy of Ugandan Women's Organizations: How it Matters in Creating and Maintaining a Dependable Democracy**

*Caroline Tushabe<sup>1</sup>*

#### *Abstract*

For African nations “independence” from colonial rule seemed a long-awaited time that would re-establish and/ or introduce democracy. In 1962 Uganda embraced “independence” from colonial rule with both arms. However, practices of poor governance, increased political instability and economic uncertainties slowly and steadily eroded women’s hard work which sustained the nation during the regimes of Idi Amin (1971-79) and Obote II (1980-84). When Uganda finally returned to democratic systems of government, quotas were reserved for women without any acknowledgement of women’s previous participation both in private and public spaces. Though there are now more women in government positions, the system of reserving quotas for women has camouflaged women’s prior struggles when people lived in sheer fear of political leaders and participated out of coercion, and when men fled into exile for fear of their lives leaving women to do it all alone. Uganda’s democracy must not see women’s contributions as virtues of nurturance and care, while men’s contributions are regarded as public and political baselines for democracy. This paper argues that the democratic ways by which women stepped in for the government to provide health care, education, credit, and sometimes roads ought to be adopted in building a dependable democracy.

A dependable democracy is democracy that holds all citizens accountable to it and to one another. It is a system of democracy that is structured in such a way that it provides accountability to all citizens. A dependable democracy is a space where citizens can discuss the possibilities of their communities. A dependable democracy is a decentralized process such that makes possible participation of all citizens from the grassroots level to the national level and does not require citizens to *prove* that they have rights before those rights can be *recognized* and *protected*. Rather, a dependable democracy guarantees freedom to all citizens to participate in a variety of ways including assessing the needs of their communities, working together to figure out how to meet those needs and to approach issues that arise on an equal basis. A dependable democracy empowers

citizens by developing a sense of ownership of what happens in their communities; it is at the same time a source of power and assurance to which the citizens can go. A dependable democracy mandates citizens to demand accountability from their chosen leaders.

Robert Dahl's (1998) discussion of democracy corresponds to the dependable democracy exemplified by Ugandan women's grassroots and national organizations. There are numerous definitions of democracy, but I find Dahl's definition more useful to my discussion of Ugandan women's contributions to nation-building and to creating a dependable democracy. Dahl elaborates on democracy as a system that gives people power to make decisions by engaging different processes including meetings and deliberations. His understanding of democracy is theoretically accessible and easy to apply from the grassroots level to the national level and focuses on five criteria that are crucial to democracy: effective participation; equality in voting; gaining enlightened understanding; exercising final control over the agenda; and inclusion of adults. These criteria make possible democratic participation. When one of them is violated, people will not be politically equal (p. 38). This paper will describe how these criteria fit with women's contributions to foreground a dependable democracy in Uganda.

The regimes of Amin (1971-79) and Obote II (1980-84) did not commit to the service, welfare, and interests of all Ugandans who were bound to the regime's decisions and policies. State governments were unable to provide for the citizens. Amin and Obote II did not protect individual and collective freedom. Unemployment was high and poor policies led to rapid deterioration of infrastructure. Immediately after independence in 1962 and through the leadership of Obote I, Mulago hospital and Makerere University were among the best in Africa. However, the regimes of Amin and Obote II executed poor policies that led to the rapid deterioration of social infrastructure. As a result, women became disproportionately responsible for filling the gap—providing healthcare, ensuring that schools continued to function—and in most cases they were the only providers of their families.

Ali Marie Tripp (2000) who has done extensive research in Uganda on women and politics observes that by 1984 women had taken full responsibility for these services and had become the sole providers of schools and healthcare, especially for the young and elderly (p. 111). Harsh economic and political conditions further delineated women's and men's roles and separated the day-to-day family struggle from political struggle as though mutually exclusive and inhabiting different political contexts. This separation concretized women's space as private while positioning men in the public sphere.

Women's activities, however, are both public and private. The demarcations between the family and the social and political make people oblivious to the fact that what happens in the "private" space where women actively participate and negotiate responsibility on behalf of the government is actually fundamental to the "public" space. For example, women made sure that teachers, nurses and doctors were paid, children were educated and the sick treated. Women's

contribution to society ought not to be simply conceptualized as virtues of nurturing and caring and limited to the privacy of the home, while men's contributions are regarded as public and political baselines for democracy. The ways women stepped in for the government to provide healthcare, education, credit, and sometimes roads enact what a dependable democracy and women's knowledge and power highlight possibilities for a dependable democracy in the bigger picture of Uganda as a nation.

Women's strategies to contribute to Uganda go beyond the virtues of nurturing and caring. They are goal-driven and core to combating social, political and economic problems. Women's strategies have often included 1) stepping in for the government to provide basic needs including healthcare, education for families and communities, credit, and sometimes road infrastructure; 2) autonomous organizing; 3) pressuring the government to constitutionally implement gender equality and to honor equal human rights; 4) transcending differences and organizing across societies, age, education, religions, and political parties; and 5) resisting cooptation by the government (Tripp, 2000; Tamale, 1999). These strategies give us possibilities to rethink democracy and to build a dependable democracy in Uganda because Ugandan women's strategies have played a fundamental role in the political, social, and economic stability in Uganda.

The infusion of women's knowledge and power as manifested in their activism provide ways of generating opportunities for stability, development, and equality in Uganda. Women have exhibited knowledge to *do* by sustaining the country through grassroots activism and through informal and formal organizations, but continue to be marginalized from instituting this power to build democracy within the government and the Constitution. For example, Ugandan women's rights activists have been trying to get a Domestic Relations Bill passed for over a decade. The Domestic Relations Bill also relates to health issues including STDs and HIV/AIDS. The Bill would protect women from rape, defilement and unwanted pregnancy. Unfortunately, unequal relations of power among different genders do not allow for women's needs, knowledge and power to be prioritized by the government. It would take the infusion of women's knowledge and power to redistribute power across a spectrum of citizens and communities thereby expanding services, decision-making power and the capacity to create vision and participation. Redistribution of power puts democratic responsibility in people's hands, and makes visible every person's contribution, especially women's to the nation. Furthermore, this infusion of knowledge and power creates inclusive policies and an inclusive democracy. To do this, however, we need to redefine "private" and "public" space and their assigned values of power. Seeing and valuing power in the spaces that Ugandan women have maneuvered via the machinery of their organizations to make things happen is critical to creating a dependable democracy.

Local level participation and decision-making is core to national level participation and decision-making. Women's active participation in their grassroots and national organizing are core to democracy in Uganda. They

struggled for and gave the nation something Ugandans can rely on. Women's organizations continue to be the main avenues through which women address day-to-day, family, social and political struggles, thereby providing social and economic services that the government cannot. If what Ugandan women know in their organizations, which demonstrate a dependable democracy, were fused with power at local and national levels, processes of democracy in Uganda would be greatly improved.

### *A Brief Look at the Political Circumstances of Uganda*

Growing up under the regimes of Amin (1971-79) and Obote II (1980-84), I remember the scarcity of basic human needs and people's fear of political leaders. Some Ugandans participated in state politics out of coercion, while others fled into exile or withdrew from government altogether (Mutibwa, 1992, p. 97). Women struggled to feed their children as most men fled into exile or spent days and nights hiding in bushes, forests and mountains. Families that were lucky enough to obtain some of their basic needs dug holes in house floors or in banana plantations to hide items such as containers of kerosene, bags of salt and sugar, bars of soap, syringes, and medicines. Money and business stocks had to be buried further away from the home since soldiers and police looted and killed indiscriminately. It was unsafe for citizens to keep such items in their houses. Secrecy in families and government became the order of the day.

Recently, Uganda's rapid development and transition to democracy have attracted extensive scholarly attention (Tripp, 2000; Leonard and Straus, 2003; Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Tamale, 1999; 2003). Uganda's short and chaotic history presents an opportunity for Ugandans to reflect on the significant and heroic contributions that have sustained our nation. Since Uganda got its independence in 1962, democracy in Uganda has meant electoral participation and representation. Unarguably, elections and the electoral process represent one of the most important processes of democracy in any nation. For Uganda, however, election participation has been the only activity by which women's power and influence are distinctly and widely recognized. Yet, participation in voting alone does not fully reveal the significant contributions that women make to Uganda's economic and social welfare and to democracy. In the name of democracy President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1996, and the Constitution was amended to accommodate what Ugandans now see as life presidential terms. This move reflects how the current Ugandan government is failing to practice a democracy that can protect equal human rights and ensure possibilities to provide basic needs to Ugandans. As long as our leaders continue to misuse "democratic power" to bend rules or amend the Constitution for their individual interests, women will continue to be burdened with family, social and economic responsibilities. The solution to Uganda's social, political, and economic problems is what most Ugandans are searching for—a dependable democracy.

There still persist considerable violations of human rights, freedom of public speech and expression of difference, and women's equal participation in politics. Because of their limited access to institutional power, women find themselves blocked from demanding accountability from the government. In the process, the government continues to overburden women such that almost every woman in Uganda must belong to some women's organization. It is in these organizations that the means to survive are negotiated. Too many organizations whose primary focus is to address day-to-day struggles point to how our nation's democracy is undependable, unable to make available social and economic possibilities for the citizens. However, the *what* and *how* in women's organization could provide building blocks for a dependable democracy.

The burgeoning number of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) indicates on the one hand, that our current system of democracy is working to the extent that it makes private organizing possible, but on the other, it indicates that the Ugandan government is unable to meet its obligations to citizens. NGOs also overshadow women's contributions, especially at the local level (Tamale, 2003, p. 4). Most women's organizations at the local level are not registered with the government and are thus not seen as organizations doing fundamental work. When NGOs collaborate with women at the local level they project themselves as "rescuers" of women from poverty. This overshadows local women's initiatives, accomplishments and visions. For example, more often than not, one will find that the government is more concerned about creating a secure environment for the functionality of NGOs than it is about creating more inclusive and effective policies that would open doors to all citizens' participation—politically, socially and economically. This does not help us create a dependable democracy. Having a dependable democracy that acknowledges women's work at all levels would give all Ugandans assurance and protection of their needs and rights as citizens.

Since colonization in 1860, Uganda has experienced a number of social, economic, and political changes. Between 1962 and 2008 Uganda has seen thirteen governments of which only five have been elected governments. Ugandans have experienced unspeakable terror, bloodshed, economic hardships, as well as social and cultural deterioration. Following Amin's coup of 1971, the political terrain alienated citizens from the government. The Obote II regime of the 1980s exposed Ugandans to severe economic and social hardships. Women's struggle to provide basic services to their families and communities intensified as resources became scarcer and women in particular were further alienated from the government and the state. But people's optimism for better lives was invigorated when President Museveni won the war in 1985 and took control of Uganda (Mutibwa, 1992, p. 181).

However, the war in northern Uganda that has persisted since 1986 displaced an enormous number of citizens, resulted in many deaths, and greatly increased poverty levels. This condition warrants no Ugandan to unashamedly utter the word *democracy* to the people of northern Uganda. There is more NGO presence in northern Uganda than there is government presence to assure the

people of freedom and democracy. The government's presence in northern Uganda is to protect NGOs so that they can do their duties. We need more than NGOs in northern Uganda and throughout the entire country so that both the government and the citizens can be equally accountable to each other and create possibilities for the five criteria of democracy that Dahl describes. Women activists provide a model for dependable democracy in that they show effective participation in their organizations, respect for equality, commitment to gaining enlightened understanding of their situations, needs, and employment of the right approach to the needs of their communities. Ugandan women have exercised control over the agenda in their organizing and have been inclusive of communities beyond ethnic, religious, party, and education boundaries.

### ***Women's Contributions***

The two decade war in northern Uganda challenges the meaning and reality of democracy in relation to life, rights and respect of humanity. This war has presented to women more reasons to commit to mobilizing and organizing themselves to provide social and economic needs which contribute to the political stability of the country. Ugandan women have negotiated and transcended differences of religion, ethnicity, and gender both at grassroots and national levels to meet political and socio-economic needs (Tamale, 1999, pp. 142-48).

Transcending differences has not come easy. Ugandan women belong to diverse social groups that have divided the nation and continue to do so. Determined to transform the face of politics in Uganda, however, women have collectively worked through dialogue and discussions of their experiences of leadership, oppression, and subordination, in order to generate support for one another and to combat antagonism from men. For example, Ugandan women politicians, including Winnie Byanyima, Miria Matembe, Rhonda Kalema, Betty Bigombe, and Cecilia Ogwal, who come from different societies, represent different districts, hold different political positions, and belong to rival political parties, came together in resistance to men's dominance to empower themselves and all women in women's organizations. According to Tamale (1992), these women advocated a domestic relations bill, affirmative action, rights for orphans and internally displaced people, education for girls, trade markets for women, and self-help projects for women and youth, while simultaneously pushing for women's ministerial positions and peace talks between the government and the rebels fighting in Northern Uganda (pp. 41-59). With their collective determination and vision and ability to transcend differences, these women have coordinated collaboration among women nationwide.

Three main forms of women's organizations highlighted in Tripp (2000) are central to creating a dependable democracy. I will discuss informal grassroots activism and then turn to two kinds of formal women's organizations: non professional and professional.

Some women's organizations were also in place during colonial days, initiated and sponsored by Christian missionaries and by wives of colonial administrators. According to Tripp (2000), such women's organizations included the Mother's Union for Protestant Women founded in 1906, the Catholic Women's Association (CWA) founded in 1959, and the Uganda Muslim Women's Society, all of which allied under the umbrella of the Uganda Women's League (p. 34). These women's organizations were faith-based and focused mostly on matters pertaining to appropriate housewifery, motherhood, home management, and good Muslim and Christian living. Christianity redefined motherhood and wife-husband relations. This in turn refocused Christian-based women's organizations to fulfilling women's calling as mothers and wives. The formal women's groups I will discuss below, Ekikwenza Omubi and ACFODE have instead created alternative possibilities and have prioritized autonomy from the government.

### ***Women's Grassroots Activism***

Ugandan women's strategies for local organizing encompass community improvement and social well-being. This informal kind of organizing is not institutionally considered a political organization and is one through which women organize themselves in their village communities to provide basic needs. These are the women we may never think of when we talk about development and social stability strategies. But we might talk about them when we think of the women who walk ten miles a day fetching water and firewood. I like to talk about these women because they are an incredible part of the citizenry that holds the poles on which Uganda boasts of democracy. I like to think of these women as the backbone women of all women organizing and political, economic, and social stability because they are the ones who tirelessly respond to the calamitous scarcity of basic services. Through their informal organizing, women made tremendous contributions to the nation during the regimes of Amin and Obote II. They stepped in for the government to provide basic needs and make economic decisions for self-sufficiency in extreme conditions of scarcity. Women provided healthcare, credit and roads in some places like Kanungu district, funded Parent Teachers Association (PTA) because the government was unable to cover salaries for teachers, and built schools. Women have endeavored toward inclusive organizing by coming together regardless of political party and religious affiliation.

### ***Formal Women's Organizations***

Formal grassroots and national women's organizations are registered with the government as NGOs. These women's organizations include, but are not limited to, Ekikwenza Omubi and Action for Development (ACFODE), which began shortly before and gained momentum immediately after the NRM government came to power in 1986. Ekikwenza Omubi and the informal organization are



comprised of grassroots women with varied levels of education. ACFODE is comprised of elite, highly educated and professional women. Some women's organizations were also in place during colonial days, initiated and sponsored by Christian missionaries and by the wives of colonial administrators. According to Tripp (2000), such women's organizations included the Mother's Union for Protestant women founded in 1906, the Catholic Women's Association founded in 1959, and the Uganda Muslim Women's Society, all of which allied under the umbrella of the Uganda Women's League (p. 34). These women's organizations were faith-based and focused mostly on matters pertaining to appropriate housewifery, motherhood, home management, and good Muslim and Christian living.

These Christian-based women's organizations focused on fulfilling what was believed to be their calling, for example, motherhood and housewifery insofar as the roles were defined by religion. The informal women's groups, Ekikwenza Omubi and ACFODE, have instead created alternative possibilities and have prioritized autonomy from the government. Tripp (2000) points out that throughout the regimes of Amin and Obote II the women's organization at the national level became closely tied to the governments, was aggressively blocked from initiating and pursuing the organization's agenda, and hence lost independent voice. Women's organizations like the ACFODE, which is organized at the national level, Ekikwenza Omubi, which organizes at the grassroots level, and the informal women's organizations in villages provide typical examples of how women have played a significant role in developing social and economic infrastructure of Uganda. They reflect women's commitment to economic development, social welfare and political stability.

### ***Ekikwenza Omubi Women's Organization***

Ugandan women continue to fight injustice at all levels as gender injustice has permeated all spheres of life from the family to the top government level. The Ekikwenza Omubi women's organization has had first-hand experiences in fighting gender injustice. Tripp (2000) notes that in 1991, when the Local Councils (LCs) in Jinja, mostly filled with men, heard that the Ekikwenza Omubi women's organization asked the government to let them take control of the health clinic project in Kitumba village, Jinja, they became furious and threatened to take control of the clinic themselves. Women in Ekikwenza Omubi realized that they "needed to control the clinic and that the community's healthcare needs would not be served adequately were they to let the male elders in the community take over the leadership" (p. 146). This Kitumba clinic project reveals how women constantly engage public responsibilities in private spaces. As far as women's contributions are concerned, there is no divide between private and public. The only difference is *what* is recognized and *who* recognizes it. Men's power has tended to reign at the expense of the community, a reason why "[Women] needed control of the process and the capacity to shape the clinic to suit the needs of the community" (Tripp, 2000, p. 141). Women

struggled not for power to control, but to meet the disparate and overwhelming health needs in the community. Such women's commitment to economic, social, and political improvement continues to make women more vulnerable than men to cooptation. We cannot continue to expect women to implement government programs without being included in platforms of decision-making.

### ***ACFODE Women's Organization***

ACFODE is one of the women's organizations whose community strategies epitomize a dependable democracy. ACFODE has made incredible achievements by pressing the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government to create a ministry for women, to ensure that every ministry has a women's desk and that there is women's representation in local government at all levels. More effort is needed to fully incorporate women's organizing strategies at the grassroots and national levels. ACFODE has also pushed for the rights of people with disabilities for whom five seats have been reserved in the parliament under Affirmative Action. ACFODE networks with women worldwide through organizations like the United Nations, through which other ways to redistribute power in many countries has been wrought. ACFODE's commitment to push for gender balance and disability consciousness in the development and governance of the nation is a fundamental step toward a dependable democracy.

The last two decades have seen more women in the parliament and other government offices, but the system of reserving quotas for women has camouflaged women's struggle to provide basic human needs and social services. The need for quotas is proof that Uganda has policies against gender equality, and filling those quotas means, for the government, that issues of gender inequality have been resolved. For example, in the Eighth Parliament (2006-2011) of Uganda there are 79 women representatives out of 334 representatives, while the Seventh Parliament (2001-2006) had 75 women members of parliament out of 304 members, the Sixth Parliament (1996-2001) had 50 women members of parliament out of 276 members.

Though the numbers show increased access to governmental institutions of power (and resources), they also reveal that women are still perceived as "outsiders" because of the obvious persisting gender imbalance between men and women holding parliamentary seats (Tripp, 2000, p. 68). Gender power imbalance still marginalizes women and affects women's organizations at grassroots and national levels by keeping women's abilities and contributions in the background. Lack of recognition and corroboration of women's contributions hinders women's equality with men in sharing power, and it reflects a significant missing link in creating and maintaining a dependable democracy in Uganda. Although it is true, as Tripp observes, that the NRM government has afforded Ugandan women relative autonomy in their struggle to alleviate poverty, illiteracy, and disease, women continue to struggle to maintain the autonomy of their organizations from the government (p. 69).

### ***Resistance to Cooptation: A Desire for a Dependable Democracy***

In her article, "The Politics of Autonomy and Cooptation in Africa: The Case of the Ugandan Women's Movement," Tripp (2001) observes that NRM tends to stall the agenda of women's organizations while asking them to give their support to the government's agenda (p. 116). In Ugandan politics, cooptation has yielded intimidation and loss of autonomy. The current Ugandan government has pressured, persuaded, and coerced women to support its politics with the intent that women forget their own concerns, including the welfare of the community. Cooptation in the Ugandan context forces women to pursue the government's agenda without assurance of equal participation both at the local and national levels (Tripp, 2001, p. 114). Similarly, Anne Marie Goetz and Shireen Hassim (2003) noted in their article "Introduction: Women in Power in Uganda and South Africa" that:

[The] process of cooptation of women's movement objectives may lead to some short-term concessions in areas that are less costly and less contentious—for example recognizing women's special needs in relation to childbirth and child rearing—while not necessarily shifting the basic gender inequalities in access to labor market (p. 9).

Cooptation can be a tricky position for women to entertain because it erases possibilities for building a dependable democracy. Cooptation may get some needs met in the short term, but it simultaneously creates long-term problems of gender power imbalance, sidelining women leaders, and marginalizing minority groups from platforms of decision-making. As Mutibwa (1992) warns, a government's inability to invest in its citizens benefits a few at the expense of the many:

...all Ugandans—including those of us who either through ignorance or backwardness allowed ourselves to be mere onlookers, indifferent observers of the games which the politicians and soldiers played—have a share in the responsibility for our country's agony. For too long, Ugandans have been mere observers rather than participants in planning of our destinies (p. 43).

"Planning of our destinies," participation in our country's welfare and being responsible as citizens must integrate all Ugandans' input, both men and women alike. Responding to the economic, social, and political needs begins right from one's own home and community to the national level because "true democracy is not restricted to the level of government but permeates all socio-political institutions, including the family" (Tamale, 2000, p. 3). True democracy is democracy that is dependable.

Women have lived dependable democratic ideals through their struggles to provide for their families and communities, to organize autonomously, to transcend differences, to push for equal human rights, and to resist cooptation

from the government. Thus democracy should not be conceived to end at electoral participation, but rather it ought to be practiced and instituted in families and communities to allow both men and women to participate equally in contributing toward the welfare of their families and communities. Therefore, all Ugandans must join the struggle to break resistance against women's push to fully participate in spaces of political power.

### ***Persistent Resistance to Incorporating Women's Strategies as Democratic***

Given the tremendous work women have done at local and national levels, they are still met with resistance. The prevailing divisions of labor based on gender differences are used to justify resistance to women, and the premise that they are mothers and thus only have a duty to provide for the elderly, the sick, and children is used to justify women's exploitation. Do women care for the sick children and the elderly because they are women or because they are human? What are they expected to do when men were and are physically absent from homes? Uganda's healthcare system was one of the best in East Africa until Amin became president of Uganda. As Tripp (2000) observes:

Government health facilities were well stocked with medications that were provided free of charge to users. With the disruptions of the Amin regime in the 1970s, the government health services deteriorated rapidly, medical professionals diminished in number and medicines became scarce. Today, voluntary, private and local healers are the main sources of healthcare in the country as a consequence of the decline in the government facilities (p. 145).

The political upheavals that sent most men to war and exile, allowed the men to be away from the home and from the responsibilities of the household. Confronted with the dire need for healthcare and the realities of meager services, women had to do something, not simply out of duty as mothers or women, but out of responsibility as citizens of their nation. This exemplifies women's commitment to building a dependable democracy.

Women's work, both at grassroots and national levels, challenges Ugandans to recognize and value the indispensable leadership and economic strategies pioneered by women. As such, men need to be open to women's abilities to lead by sharing power and resources equally with the women. Tripp's (2000) elaboration of how women have worked to identify leadership emblemizes the democratic ways in which women contend for support from one another and across different women's organizations. Women have recognized and valued the contributions each woman makes in the community through their diligent leadership in mobilizing the grassroots. As a result many women have been elected from the village level to the district level to represent women's needs.

Building from the bottom up mutually empowers leaders at the top and at grassroots level. Ugandans must continue to recognize the leadership qualities

that women bring to keep the community and the country functioning rather than selecting people simply because they are men or are rich. In this way, both the leaders and the people elected can take accountability more seriously.

Because women have been socially categorized as the gender unassociated with power and authority, demanding gender equality and recognition of their works yields enormous resistance. The ACFODE and other women's organizations have not been accepted as legitimate participants in the emergence of democracy in Uganda. There still linger beliefs that women should be limited in their political participation, access to power, authority, and resources as well as their involvement in social, political, economic development, and democracy. In her research Tripp (2000) found out that Mary Maitum who helped draft the 1995 Constitution had the following perception:

the greatest hurdle in liberating the Ugandan woman is not only in policy and laws or the Constitution—important as these are—but in the realization of society . . . that women are as important as men and must work together, side by side in the development of our country. Women and not the Government hold the key to their liberty and that of society (p. 68).

Women's rights to participate and lead lives as equal citizens should be respected. Without recognition of women's power and their work in society, women's efforts for liberation may easily stagger and that makes our democracy undependable. High-ranking government officials also exhibit blunt resistance and are reluctant to recognize the connection between Ugandan women's strategies in dealing with social and economic problems and building a democracy. For example, in her article, "Fanning the Flame of Feminism in Uganda" Tamale (2003) reports that President Museveni threatened to ignore women's demands for their rights saying that women needed to reduce their speed because he is driver of the vehicle (p. 5). The president has the power to decide whether, when, and how women will get what they ask for. Museveni's words promote discrimination against women and the devaluation of their contributions. Uganda needs a dependable democracy that distributes power to all in decision-making.

Women's work should be understood as the work of a dependable democracy and not housewifery. In her article, "Gender Trauma in Africa: Enhancing Women's Links to Resources," Tamale (2002) asserts that "the process of separating the public and private spheres preceded colonization but was precipitated, consolidated, and reinforced by colonial policies and practices" (p. 5). We cannot blame everything on colonialism, but at the same time, we cannot be blind to its influence on the separation of private and public spaces. Even so, Ugandans can see for themselves that women's work demonstrates the readiness and responsibility to maximize human potential for the present and future processes of democratic leadership and participation. The need for a dependable democracy is undeniably imperative in Uganda to liberating not only women but also men, young and old, illiterate and literate. We must espouse a dependable democracy to the Constitution to promote better

lives and democratic practices in families and communities. In her article, "Women and Politics in Africa: The Case for Uganda," Donna Pankhurst's (2002) analysis resonates with Tamale's assertions. Pankhurst's observes:

territories which came to be defined as states under colonial state were themselves usually composed of several distinct societies, with [comparable and] contrasting polity and interrelationships. Colonial governments normally intervened to [re] shape such polities. A common preoccupation was that of "tribal" identities and a common toll to promote the objectives of the colonial state was the manipulation of pre-existing ethnic identities in order to differentiate roles within socio-economic structures, commonly through ensuring distinct patterns of education, training and employment for different groups, and in some cases quite distinct forms of engagement with politics (p. 119).

Since colonization in 1894, Uganda has adopted policies and practices that encouraged men more than women, to join the army, attend schools, and become professionals, leaving their wives, mothers, and sisters at home to take care of children and the elderly. The framework that guided gender interaction and in which, for example, hunting, food gathering, gardening, and care of children and the elderly were carried out by both men and women, has shifted since colonial times. This shift significantly affected the nature and design of African and, in particular, Ugandan cultures. According to Pankhurst (2002), colonialism in Uganda, and Africa as a whole, exploited societal identities and manipulated gender identities (p. 119). Colonial education policies accelerated the distortion of the categories that could easily be manipulated through the process of promoting a new cultural ontology, through education.

Under such dynamics the private realm ceased to co-exist with the public sphere and a new form of domesticity, existing outside the recognized realm of production took over in Uganda. Tamale (1999) argues that land was communally owned in pre-colonial societies, but a tenure system that allowed for absolute and individual ownership of land took over, forcing African tradition to devalue collective ownership of property, thus limiting African women's access to and control over resources. Like many scholars, Tamale points out that distinct gender and sex roles became rigid under colonialism and have tended to remain stable ever since. The division of labor based on gender/sex differences has devalued Ugandan women's contributions to society making women's work appear to be merely the work of housewives and the fulfillment of their obligatory role of caring and nurturing. But we need to go beyond this belief. Women's work in their organizations exceeds "housewife duties." Tamale elaborates the Eurocentric perspective on gender and labor that makes at least two mistakes: it maintains that women and men have mutually exclusive gender roles and responsibilities; and it tends to make general statements based on an "outsider" perspective about Ugandan cultures, thereby distorting women's contributions to politics. For example, Tamale (199) asserts that "In pre-colonial Uganda, women had never been confined to the private or

domestic sphere . . . . Multiple responsibilities between and across spheres shaped their political history, the political/judicial spheres heavily depending on personal relationships that women could (and often did) influence” (as quoted, pp. 4-5). Tamale's attribution of the current gender differences to colonialism is a bitter pill to swallow for those who believe in naturalized gender differences.

Resistance to women's work as democratic at the grassroots level results from the degree to which gender differences have been naturalized. As Pankhurst (2002) shows, “the suffering experienced by women during these periods of economic and political turmoil [in the 1970s and 1980s] was intense and forced them to fall back on their own resources, rather than turn to the state for support in providing for their families” (p. 121). Such circumstances could not have allowed reflection on the relationship between women's work and democracy. People were too disrupted by inhospitable political, social, and economic conditions and had no “luxury” for reflection. But we can do that today and be more proactive in taking women's contributions more seriously as democratic contributions.

### *Conclusion*

I am advocating a “dependable democracy” for Uganda because the democracy we know has been treated, especially by politicians, as mere rhetoric with few and unreliable prospects for sustenance, prosperity, stability, and freedom. Reflecting on past and present economic, social, and political situations in Uganda, I have demonstrated that the existing form of democracy is limited in meeting Uganda's needs. Ugandan women's activism throughout the political turmoil that clouded the country for three decades deserves serious attention by Ugandans, especially if our goal is to live in a democratic government that is dependable. Staudt (1998) has argued that women's strategies that have been successful within their organizations should be mainstreamed into the government (p. 14). The challenge to this demand lies in the willingness and readiness of Ugandans to transcend differences and dialogue around common interests, unified visions, and the desire and commitment to break with the damage of the past just as women have done and continue do in their organizations.

Incorporating women's accomplishments on a national scale will greatly improve the conditions needed for a dependable democracy in Uganda. Incorporating women's knowledge and power also means making room for the five criteria of democracy, all at the same time. Doing so would empower women and also free men. Debilitations of illiteracy, disease, and poverty that affect both men and women would be alleviated to a greater degree. That would in turn bring about what Tripp (2000) calls *societal autonomy* (p. 87). Tripp describes societal autonomy as a tool that empowers citizens to demand accountability and transparency of the government in policy-making. Achieving societal autonomy may remain a dream if Ugandans do not emphasize, validate, and incorporate women's strategies in building a dependable democracy for

without it Uganda's economic, political, and social conditions will continue to stagger. We need to take Ugandan women's strategies seriously by incorporating them in designing and maintaining a dependable democracy. A democracy that is open to social transformation will restructure the government, the family and other social institutions, thereby working toward eliminating structures of oppression. A dependable democracy is needed to promote systems of equality, diversity and collective freedom. Uganda can transform itself by discontinuing the marginalization of women and their contributions. Let us build a dependable democracy.

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