

**GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:
THE ROLE OF CULTURAL LEADERS IN THE PROMOTION
OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS**

A PAPER BY
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PRESENTED AT
THE SIXTH AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT FORUM (ADF VI)
CONFERENCE ON: ACTION ON GENDER EQUALITY, EMPOWERMENT AND ENDING
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AFRICA

19-21 NOVEMBER 2008
UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE CENTRE
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

Your Excellencies,
Chairperson, AU Commission
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the organizers of this conference especially H.E. Jean Ping, Chairperson, African Union Commission, and H.E. Abdoulie Janneh, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Africa, for inviting me to this conference. I am confident that the exchanges here and the shared vision that will come out will greatly improve gender equality and women's empowerment and eliminate violence against women in Africa.

My remarks to this Forum are summarized under the title: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: The Role of Traditional Leaders in the Promotion of Reproductive Health and Rights.

I am a traditional leader by virtue of being Queen of Buganda Kingdom. With a quarter of the population of the country, Buganda Kingdom is the largest of the four Kingdoms in the Republic of Uganda. As respected Kingdoms with a strong interest in the well-being of their constituents, they are playing a major role in social and economic development.

As traditional leaders we recognize the existence of negative cultural practices that deny women their rights and, therefore work in collaboration with Government in addressing these negative practices through projects and programs that advance the rights of women and the girl child.

In Uganda, despite the gains made in human development that are attributed to existing gender responsive policies and legislation, the low cultural, social and economic status of women remains the key obstacle to the full realization of women's reproductive health and rights.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) there are two main pathways to giving women more say in reproductive health and rights. First, are interventions that increase women's bargaining power and reproductive choices in the household. These include improving women's access to education and entrepreneurship skills training, and women's expanded control over resources such as land and income from production. Second, are interventions that improve women's access to reproductive health services, including family planning.

Because traditional leaders are custodians of culture they have a very important role to play through support to these two pathways. *The ruling King - Kabaka Ronald Mwendwa Mutebi II* and I, play a key role in promoting sustainable development by influencing progressive behaviors and practices that are rooted in positive values and forward-looking traditions and norms.

Through the Nnabagereka Development Foundation, which I founded. I have supported programmes and projects in women's health and economic empowerment, youth vocational skills training and the education for the girl child. These compliment similar efforts by the Central Government of Uganda.

As a driver of change I have worked closely with campaigns that raise awareness around the pitfalls of cross-generation sex targeting the female youth in secondary and tertiary education

institutions. I have also supported sensitization interventions that advance positive social values and that empower young girls by building their confidence and self-esteem.

As a Goodwill Ambassador for the UNFPA, I have been involved in a variety of mobilization and advocacy activities, including seminars, workshops and rallies for traditional, women, youth, and other community leaders on early marriages, safe motherhood, family planning, prevention of STDs including HIV/AIDS, and Girl-Child Education.

Sexuality and reproductive health continue to be sensitive topics, but they are no longer taboo subjects for public discussion. This is due, in part, to the unwavering support of the traditional leaders who not only attend workshops but also encourage others. The involvement of top traditional leaders, in fact, is key to growing local acceptance of project objectives. The most tangible achievement is the marked increase in awareness of SRH and rights.

Currently, I am part of the Global MDG 3 Champion Torch Campaign and as a torchbearer, I committed to do something extra in support of gender equality and women's empowerment in Uganda.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen I wish to make the following recommendations to the forum:

One, that Governments and NGOs should partner with traditional leaders in promoting Reproductive Health and Rights and mobilizing people for positive response towards health projects. Relying on cultural leaders who would in turn work closely with other community leaders helps to ensure acceptance of a programme in the community.

Two, in order to accomplish any RH development task, the importance of involving traditional leaders should be recognized from the start. Soliciting the advice of traditional leaders in the design of a project ensures that the strategies and advocacy messages developed will be culturally acceptable.

And three, projects in Reproductive Health should work to eliminate practices while reinforcing the cultural dignity of the community. The projects should find ways of positively reinforcing local values and traditions.

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, culture influences sexual behaviors and practices that are at the heart of the Sexual Reproductive Health problems including the HIV epidemic in Africa and as such traditional leaders are central to social and economic advancement, including promoting sexual reproductive health and rights. Therefore, soliciting the support of traditional leaders can indeed help overcome obstacles SRH and Rights.

Thank you very much for listening.