

Women in Politics - Navigating Covid-19 & Their Role in Combating The Pandemic



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The paper provides feedback on the recent gains of Women In Politics in accelerating to top Leadership positions, how they can use the new positions to remain relevant, how they can positively contribute to the fight against COVID-19 and provides key recommendations on how Women in politics, Government, Civil society and key stakeholders can collectively join effort to fight the deadly COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Building on the gains of recently concluded 2021 Elections, women like their male counterparts have been sworn in to take up leadership positions and responsibilities, more women ran for office during the 2021 elections more than ever before across all political affiliations spanned from Directly Elected Members of Parliament, Women members of Parliament, directly elected councilors, Women councilors at Local Councils at District and parish level and special interest Groups. These victories have further seen women in politics rising

up to take up National Political Leadership roles as assigned by their respective political parties. Today, women hold 46% of local government positions, 33% of parliamentary seats and 43% of the cabinet positions.

Recently the Leading Opposition Party in Uganda, the National Unity Platform announced their shadow Cabinet, this saw the appointment of 36 % women to key positions. Women leaders in the same party have also been appointed to key Parliamentary Committees i.e.: Hon. Nambooze Betty, Chairperson Government Assurance Committee, Hon. Manjeri Kyebakutika, Deputy chief whip, Hon Lucy Akello ,Vice Chairperson COSSACE committee, Hon Flavia Nabagabe Kalule ,representative at the inter-Parliamentary Union and Hon. Aisha Kabanda representative at the Parliamentary Pension Fund.¹

On 8th June 2021 H.E the President of Uganda released the new cabinet list ,43% of the newly appointed Ministers were women ,Important to celebrate are the three women in Uganda that are occupying top positions in the country i:e:H.E Jessica Alupo, Vice President of the republic Of Uganda, Rt .Hon Robinah Nabbanja ,Prime Minister of Uganda and Rt Hon Anita Among Deputy speaker of the 11th Ugandan Parliament ² More women have also won speakership positions and key political offices at different leadership levels however the appointment and election of these women has also brought about negative criticisms from fellow women and the general public, a pull her down syndrome that most women appointed in high profile offices face.³

All these gains have come at an important moment for Ugandans and especially women who continue to disproportionately feel the social, economic and health harms of the coronavirus pandemic. Their gains also occur amid a long-overdue national reckoning of Gender inequalities that have challenged the status quo and permeated political narratives. Women in leadership are therefore poised to set the pace, direct and shape legal and policy frameworks

¹ <https://www.independent.co.ug/mathias-mpuuga-appointed-leader-of-opposition-in-parliament/>

² <https://theconversation.com/women-appointed-to-top-positions-in-uganda-but-feelings-are-mixed-162614>

³ <https://www.independent.co.ug/on-musevenis-new-cabinet/>

at all levels of government as the country recovers from a new wave of COVID-19 pandemic.

EXAMINING THE RELEVANCE AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

Through the NOWIP PRESS, several online engagements, interactions and discussions, NOWIP has gathered key information and feedback on how women in politics can remain visible, relevant and of purpose amidst Covid-19 and the lockdown. The feedback was shared through article and idea sharing with the NOWIP PRESS team, telephone interviews, group WhatsApp sharing and through a tweet chat that was held on the 9th June 2021. A number of responses on the subject matter were captured.

Women in Politics cautioned fellow leaders to remain visible during the lockdown by making use of radio, community radios and social media platforms to spearhead the COVID-19 sensitization campaign that is geared towards fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic, Women in politics gained digital and social media skills way back in 2020 under the E-WIP project funded by DGF, it is crucial that the women in leadership use the digital skills as an important tool for information dissemination on Covid-19 and its socio-economic effects. In addition, Women in politics were empowered to overcome cyber harassment as they relate on different social media platforms, they are now able to communicate effectively, design informative messages and IEC material a factor which has enabled them to remain relevant and visible in the wake of the pandemic.

As women in newly elected and appointed positions plan for their new leadership journey they should be mindful that the pandemic is wide spread, politicians are a vulnerable category and are prone to acquiring the virus since they are always interacting with their electorates, are more often in public places conducting sensitization campaigns and distributing COVID-19 relief items

amongst people whose COVID-19 status is not known. it has been noted that over 40% of the newly elected Members of Parliament are COVID-19 Positive.⁴

The COVID-19 crisis has proved that people's safety and wellbeing is determined by decision makers, both elected and unelected, Solving National Health emergencies like COVID-19 demands the best minds and concerted effort. The country needs to focus on strengthening the health system, revamping public - private partnerships in the health sector, embracing COVID-19 innovations on prevention and treatment and an all-inclusive COVID -19 Social-economic response plan. Women occupying leadership positions are key in fronting and predetermining proposed interventions and pushing for budget allocations, policies on COVID -19 funding, research and social safety nets.

With women in these key positions, subsequent decisions made will adequately address the hurdles women face. women's voices will be reflected at the decision-making table thus promoting gender responsive interventions. Women in leadership positions should advocate for optimal relief and recovery response without compromising women's rights and their safety. The COVID-19 Task force, Ministries, Departments, Agencies, Local Governments and decision-makers must include a gender perspective in all decisions. Gender-sensitive policies that recognize and respond to women's needs will be key in mitigating gender embedded risks that come with the lockdown.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

□ At a time when the Ugandan parliament is experiencing high COVID-19 positive cases amongst Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff ⁵A Special Parliamentary COVID-19 oversight committee should be commissioned to respond to the COVID-19 emergency crisis with an equal participation of male

⁴ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/covid-200-mps-staff-test-positive-3447682>

⁵ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/uganda-parliament-to-close-for-2-weeks-amid-covid-19-surge/2283210>

and female legislators, The nominees on this special committee should bear technical knowledge and expertise on the different sectors that are directly involved or affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The committee should be able to review COVID-19 wave one budget allocations and sectoral expenditures, carry out bench marks from other countries that have been able to curb the virus, review new budget requisitions, map red flag areas, review the Ministry of health COVID -19 response plan, timelines and the efficiency of the currently used testing kits and vaccine. The committee should be able to provide progress reports, address media on key findings, recommendations and key pertinent issues with practical proposals and a clear way forward.

- The Government and key stakeholders should provide clear and transparent data and information. Provision of disaggregated data by Gender and equity variables on current trend of infections and effects of the pandemic available will be key in informing Covid-19 National planning.

- Development of a national response plan that is specific to addressing specific needs of women, girls and other vulnerable categories during the COVID -19 Pandemic lockdown, the state needs to consider fulfilling, protecting and promoting human rights in this situation through inclusive and effective policy implementation.

- Increased visibility of women leaders in the fight against COVID-19, women in politics should share their success stories, initiatives and response plans to mitigate coronavirus and its impacts for other women to benchmark and implement these in their respective areas

- Balanced media coverage to capture the voices of women leaders and civil society Organizations advocating for the rights of women during the second COVID-19 lock down. Media is one of important agency to bridge every information from central to grass-root. Media houses in Uganda need to be objective and fair in providing information and prevent any life threatening, devastating, misleading facts or confusing statements. Media could be a

powerful tool to educate society as long as they provide all-inclusive, well researched accurate information to capture the attention of all citizens.

- Creation of virtual non-formal spaces to capture data, concerns and views of Uganda Citizens on the COVID-19 Pandemic to feed the development of a long term comprehensive COVID-19 Mitigation plan. The views and ideas may be captured and incorporated into the plan of the by the COVID-19 task force as additional strategies. It takes a political will from government to promote gender aspects in task force programs.

- Civil Society Organizations should participate in mitigating the effects of the lockdown by providing service and psycho -social support if the state doesn't provide any to the already vulnerable citizens.

- Continuous support to women in the labor market sector, women working in the agricultural sector, women in markets and women caring for the ill. Capturing their needs and voices, documenting their stories during the COVID-19 crisis will help support the situation analysis which will support the introduction of tangible solutions. This can be achieved by the efforts of Government and Civil society.

- Advocating for continued functioning of existing Gender task forces and committees at local level to scrutinize and support the government's COVID-19 responses, Gender task forces are also essential to guarantee an accountable institutional commitment to gender mainstreaming and, ultimately an efficient response to the pandemic.