

THE OTHER VOICE

It Matters too!



Mobilizing the Vote but Denied a Voice The Hidden Struggle of Women Voters in Sebei

By William Cheptok

As Uganda edges closer to another election cycle, women once again emerge as the invisible engine of political campaigns, singing, mobilizing, cooking, and canvassing votes, yet remain largely absent where it matters most: at the ballot and in leadership positions.

In the Sebei sub-region, which comprises Bukwo, Kween, and Kapchorwa districts, women describe an environment where political enthusiasm is quietly curtailed by fear, cultural expectations, and insecurity within the home. For many, the danger does not come from the polling station itself, but from what follows the disclosure of a political choice.

Kadijah Chebet, a well-known community mobiliser in Sebei, has witnessed this contradiction for years. She says women are indispensable during campaign periods, but their political agency often ends there.

"Women are very influential during campaigns. They

mobilize voters, prepare meals, and compose songs to promote candidates," Chebet explains. "But when it comes to voting or standing for office, many are stopped by their husbands, who accuse them of being disrespectful or acting against family interests."

In many rural communities across Sebei, deeply rooted cultural norms continue to define leadership and political decision-making as a male preserve. Open disagreement with a husband, especially in public or political matters, is often interpreted as indiscipline or defiance, leaving women with little room to express independent political views.

Harriet Wanyenze, a political influencer and civic educator in the region, says intimidation within households has undermined years of voter education efforts.

"I see men stay away during rallies but turn up in big numbers on polling day," Wanyenze observes. "Yet

many women disappear. This shows there is fear and intimidation behind the scenes. It is a violation of democratic rights, and women must be educated and supported to participate fully in the electoral process."

For some women, the fear is not abstract; it is lived daily. Agnes Chemutai, a mother of three from Kaplak Cell in Kapchorwa Municipality, says she has never voted according to her own conscience.

"My husband directs me on which candidate to vote for," Chemutai recounts. "Out of fear, I obey because he is the father of my children."

Younger women face a similar dilemma, often caught between political rights and parental authority. Abigail Chebet, a youth from Kween Parish, says some parents deliberately block eligible girls from participating in elections, citing fears of moral corruption or exposure to unwanted relationships during campaign ...Cont'd on Pg 2

INSIDE THIS EDITION

- How Women Vendors Turned 2026 Campaign Frenzy into Income ----- Pg 3
- The Women Rewriting Lango's Political Story Ahead of 2026 - ----- Pg 4
- CSOs Push Efforts to Digital-Based Gender Violence on Women in Elections ---- Pg 5
- Where Will You Be in the Week Ahead of General Election --- ----- Pg 8

ALSO INSIDE



Money Politics Lock Women Out; Female Aspirants Decry Rising Voter Demands in Rwenzori Campaigns Pg 4



Young Wakiso Woman FDC Candidate Opens Up on the Dark Side of Ugandan Politics Pg 4



West Nile Grapples with Debate Over Women Challenging Male-Dominated Political Seats Pg 4

EDITORIAL REMARKS

Welcome to our December Edition: Women, Power, and the High Cost of Political Participation

As Uganda enters the decisive stretch toward the 2026 General Elections, The Other Voice (TOV) December Edition turns its gaze to the shifting terrain of political participation, where opportunity, exclusion, courage, and contradiction collide, particularly for women.



Olive Nakatudde - Managing Editor

This edition traces how women experience and respond to an election season that is increasingly monetized and digitally hostile. 'In How Women Vendors Turned the 2026 Campaign Frenzy into Income', we spotlight informal sector women carving out survival strategies within campaign economies. In contrast, 'Money Politics Lock Women Out' exposes how escalating voter demands are pushing many female aspirants, particularly in Rwenzori, out of the race altogether.

Across the country, women are confronting power head-on. A young Wakiso district-based Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) candidate speaks candidly about intimidation and the hidden pressures of political life, while women in Lango and West Nile challenge deeply rooted norms that continue to favor male dominance in leadership. In Sebei, women voters remain central to mobilization efforts yet are sidelined from decision-making, revealing a democracy that values turnout more than voice.

We also turn to emerging threats shaping the 2026 landscape. Civil society organizations are escalating efforts to counter digital gender-based violence, an increasingly potent tool of political silencing during elections. As polling day draws closer, 'Where Will You Be in the Week Ahead of the General Election?' invites reflection on civic responsibility beyond the ballot.

Together, these stories ask difficult but necessary questions about power, access, and whose participation truly counts. Welcome to the December Edition of The Other Voice, reporting women's political realities with urgency, depth, and accountability.



Money Politics Lock Women Out; Female Aspirants Decry Rising Voter Demands in Rwenzori Campaigns

By Iddi Basaija: Female political aspirants in the Rwenzori sub-region are raising alarm over escalating monetary demands from voters, which they say are undermining their ability to compete fairly in the election cycle. Several affected candidates, the majority first-time contenders, argue that expectations for handouts and the high cost of campaigning are discouraging women and youth from meaningful participation in electoral politics.

Civil society actors attribute the trend to a culture of monetized politics that has been entrenched over time, largely by dominant political players. They warn that the growing expectation for candidates to hand out money has disproportionately disadvantaged women and young people, who often lack the financial muscle to sustain such campaigns.

One such aspirant is Katembo Fatima Kamama, the National Unity Platform (NUP) flag bearer for the Kasese District Woman Member of Parliament seat. Contesting for the second time after losing in the 2021 elections, Kamama says voter demands for money, often tied directly to promises of votes have intensified this election cycle.

Unlike her main rival from the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), Kamama notes that her party does not provide campaign financing, forcing her to personally shoulder costs such as radio talk shows, transport for her campaign

team, and hiring public address systems.

"NRM is giving money to our people, and everywhere you go, the electorate asks for money. We are trying to educate the masses to understand the value of their vote, but it's not easy because people are very poor," Kamama said.

She adds that while she has resisted many such demands, the financial pressure remains one of the biggest hurdles for female candidates. Kamama also questions how women of modest means are expected to raise the three million shillings required as nomination fees for parliamentary races without external support.

"The electorate assumes that whoever is contesting has money. The first thing when they see a candidate is, 'buy me water, I am hungry.' I think it's NRM that reinforced the thing of money, because they think when they give out money, people will vote for them." She added

Kamama partly blames the problem on limited civic education, arguing that many voters do not fully understand the power or secrecy of their vote. She recounts an incident where a voter pledged personal support to her but admitted he would ultimately vote for another candidate out of party loyalty.

"I have never at any time seen the Electoral Commission educating ... **Cont'd on Pg 4**

Mobilizing the Vote but Denied a Voice

Cont'd from Pg 1

periods.

"You are forced to choose between respecting your parents and exercising your right," she says. "When you are still dependent on them, respect becomes the only option."

Civil society organizations acknowledge that while voter education initiatives exist, their impact remains limited in the face of entrenched patriarchy.

Mark Cherop Cherirei, Programmes Officer at the Kapchorwa Civil Society Organizations Alliance, notes that suppression is often disguised as care and protection.

"Cultural practices that exclude women from meetings and decision-making spaces have demoralized them," Cherop explains. "Many fear losing their marriages if they assert their rights. Progress is being made, but it will take time."

Local government officials echo the call for sustained engagement. Kapchorwa District Community Development Officer Harriet Aseko argues that civic education should not be confined to election seasons.

"Women's understanding of democracy and electoral rights should not be seasonal," Aseko says. "Sensitization must be ongoing so that women can appreciate the value of their participation at all times."

As Uganda prepares for yet another election cycle, the reality in Sebei paints a sobering picture. Women remain the backbone of political mobilization, yet patriarchal pressure and security fears continue to reduce them to passive decision-makers. Until these underlying barriers are addressed, their voices will remain loud in campaign songs but silent in the choices that shape the nation's future.



CAPTION: Nezima Ocokoro, a candidate for Arua Central Division mayoral seat, during one of her campaigns

West Nile Grapples with Debate Over Women Challenging Male-Dominated Political Seats

By Sabir Musa: As the 2026 polls approach, a renewed political debate is emerging in the West Nile sub-region, where more women than ever before are stepping forward to contest elective leadership positions that men have long dominated. From parliamentary seats to mayoral offices, the growing presence of female aspirants is challenging long-held political norms and sparking conversations about gender, power, and leadership.

In the current electoral cycle, several women have declared interest in positions traditionally viewed as the preserve of men. Among them are Grace Freedom Kwiycwiny, contesting for Okoro County in Zombo District; Nezima Ocokoru, vying for the Arua Central Division mayoral seat; Phiona Onzima, seeking to represent Ayivu West Constituency in Arua City; Lenia Charity, contesting for Vurra County in Arua District; and Jackline Opar, aspiring to become Mayor of Nebbi Municipality.

Political analysts observe that gender is increasingly being weaponised during election periods to restrict competition, protect entrenched political interests, and preserve existing leadership structures. They argue that such tactics disproportionately affect women, many of whom face intimidation, ridicule, and gender-based attacks designed to discourage them from contesting mainstream political positions.

Peace Abaru, the Executive Director of Peace for Women West Nile, a community-based

organisation advocating for women’s rights, says the political environment remains hostile for female aspirants.

“We must deliberately give women opportunities to express themselves in political spaces,” Abaru said. “When you look at the number of women in political positions, it is encouraging. But hate speech and intimidation are forcing many women to withdraw instead of taking up their rightful space.”

Uganda’s 1995 Constitution, under Article 32(2), provides for affirmative action aimed at addressing historical gender imbalances in leadership. However, critics argue that while the provision was intended to empower women, it has at times been used to confine them to reserved seats rather than support their participation across all levels of leadership.

Across the West Nile, misinformation continues to circulate in some communities, claiming that women are unfit to lead. These views are often reinforced by cultural and religious narratives, which activists say are frequently misinterpreted and misused for political gain.

Women leaders and political aspirants in the region have strongly rejected such claims, pointing to their experience in public service, community mobilisation, and governance.

Nezima Ocokoru, a candidate for the Arua Central Division mayoral seat, argues that leadership should be judged on competence

and accountability rather than gender. She urged voters to focus on the policies and plans presented by candidates during campaigns.

“These positions are not ring-fenced to a particular gender but rather to people who are capable and meet the qualifications to contest,” Ocokoru said. She also called on the public to reject misinformation aimed at weakening women competing in open elective positions.

Similarly, Phiona Onzima, a parliamentary aspirant for Ayivu West Constituency, said underdevelopment in the area is a result of leadership gaps rather than the gender of those elected.

“For the past few years in Ayivu West, we have not had consultative leadership, and that is why the constituency has remained backward in terms of development and representation,” Onzima said. “If the people of Ayivu West come together and stand behind me, I will represent them effectively on the floor of Parliament.”

Civil society organisations have warned that persistent negative attitudes toward women in leadership risk undermining progress on gender equality and denying voters the opportunity to elect capable leaders. They caution that unless such biases are addressed, many qualified women may continue to be pushed out of competitive political spaces.

As the 2026 elections draw closer, the unfolding contest in West Nile is not only about who wins political office, but also about redefining leadership and ensuring that merit, not gender determines who leads.



How Women Vendors Turned 2026 Campaign Frenzy into Income

By Christopher Kisekka: For months, presidential and parliamentary candidates combed the country for votes in a heated campaign period. The air was thick with chants, flags, and political fervour.

Massive rallies drew thousands, transforming dusty grounds into seas of yellow, red, and blue. Beneath the spectacle of speeches and slogans lay a quieter shift: economic opportunity for some people, including women.

Women make up more than 51 percent of Uganda’s population and dominate the informal sector.

The campaign trail became a lifeline for many, boosting incomes and helping households cope with economic hardship. From vendors selling snacks to those dealing in party merchandise, women converted political energy into financial gains in a labour market where formal jobs remain scarce.

Uganda’s informal economy accounts for about half of GDP and employs up to 87 percent of non-agricultural workers. Women power much of this activity. During election seasons, the sector surges.

Campaigns create temporary booms. Foot traffic at rallies translates into sales, with traders reporting earnings two to three times higher than their usual daily amounts. ...Cont’d on Pg 6

Young Wakiso Woman FDC Candidate Opens Up on the Dark Side of Ugandan Politics

By Christopher Kisekka: Jorine Najjemba, a 20-year-old Senior Six vacist and Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) candidate for the Wakiso Woman Member of Parliament seat, defied expectations and challenged the status quo. But her journey into politics has been anything but smooth.

In an exclusive interview with *The Other Voice*, Najjemba shared her harrowing experiences of cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and the harsh realities of a male-dominated arena that she never anticipated when she decided to run for office.

Najjemba, from Nkowe in Wakiso, first made headlines in August 2025 when she picked nomination forms to run for president in the 2026 general elections. At the time, she was inspired by a desire to address youth unemployment, corruption, and inequality – issues that resonate deeply with Uganda's young population, where over 70 percent are under 30 years old.

“This abuse shows why we need more young women in politics.”

However, facing logistical and financial hurdles, she pivoted to the parliamentary race, securing her nomination on October 22, 2025, under the FDC banner.

“I wanted to be a voice for the voiceless,” she told *The Other Voice*, her eyes reflecting a mix of determination and weariness. “But I didn't know politics would expose me to such ugliness. “Uganda's political scene has long been fraught with challenges for women.

According to a 2022 report by Pollicy, an organ-

isation focused on digital rights, online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P) surged during the 2021 elections, with forms including offensive name-calling, sexual harassment, and threats of violence. The report documented how African women politicians, particularly in Uganda, face amplified abuse that discourages participation.

A 2023 CNN feature highlighted how Ugandan women leaders are targeted with hate speech under the Computer Misuse Act, which was amended in 2022 to include hate speech but has been criticized for inconsistent enforcement. [Rest of World reported](#) in 2021 that harassment often keeps women offline, limiting their visibility in a digital age where social media is crucial for campaigning.

For Najjemba, the bullying began almost immediately after her presidential ambitions went public. “As soon as my name was out there, my



phone started blowing up with unsolicited messages,” she recounted, fidgeting with her hands. “Strangers on WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook sending me explicit photos, propositions, and threats.”

“They call me 'naïve girl' or worse, saying I am too young, too pretty to be in politics, that I should stay home and get married.” She paused, her voice cracking slightly. “One message said, 'If you don't withdraw, we'll make sure you regret it.' It's not just words; it feels like they're watching me.” Cyberbullying is a pervasive issue in Ugandan politics, especially for women.

A 2025 Daily Monitor article noted that ahead of the 2026 elections, women politicians are increasingly staying offline due to fear of harassment. Ruth Aritua, a women's rights [...Cont'd on Pg 8](#)

Money Politics Lock Women Out

the masses on the do's and don'ts, even at this point, we still have people who don't know how to vote, personally, I have put an advert on the radio to educate people on what to do,” She noted.

Another female aspirant, running as an independent for the Kasese district parliamentary seat and who requested anonymity, says she has already spent more than 10 million shillings meeting individual voter demands and making local donations.

“The issue of money is serious, voters no longer want to listen to the manifesto's they are only interested in money and you will agree that most of us women come from a disadvantage background, we are either mothers at home or running small kiosk's but come up to seek political leadership, so our financial background are often weak compared to most men,” the candidate said.

In Fort Portal City, Karungi Gorrete, a female youth councilor aspirant for North Division, says she is equally overwhelmed by campaign costs. Although her seat is considered less competitive than parliamentary positions, she explains that free radio talk shows are often dominated by men vying for higher offices, leaving women with

little choice but to pay for airtime, which is especially expensive during election seasons.

With limited resources to organize large rallies, Gorrete has turned to media engagement as a more efficient way to reach voters. Still, she faces persistent demands for money.

She also highlights logistical challenges, such as the cost of travelling between communities, which further strain women candidates' budgets.

Similarly, Gladys Kabasinguzi, a contender for the Bunyangabu District Woman MP seat, says the political landscape has changed drastically. Unlike past elections, where candidates could win without heavy spending, she now feels compelled to invest in youth groups mobilising votes, especially through social media.

Under mounting pressure, Kabasinguzi notes that some candidates in the region have resorted to soliciting financial support from voters themselves.

These pressures, if you are not firm, you can easily give up but am happy that some of us are determined and resist pressures from the

electorate,” noted Kabasinguzi.

However, Robert Mitse, the Kasese NRM Administrative Secretary, argues that voter demands are partly driven by politicians who treat campaigns as investments to be recovered once in office.

He noted that this kind of mentality fosters culture of corruption, where public offices have become more of personal gain than serving the people.

Meanwhile, Kihumuro Ainebyona, a Programme Officer with the Governance, Human Rights and Advocacy Unit at KRC-Uganda, says civil society organizations are intensifying voter education campaigns to discourage bribery and vote-buying.

He warns that exchanging money for political support undermines the integrity of elections and locks out new and marginalized candidates.

As campaigns intensify across the Rwenzori sub-region, the growing influence of money politics continues to threaten the inclusivity and competitiveness of the electoral process, fueling renewed calls for civic education, enforcement of electoral laws, and reforms to level the political playing field.



The Women Rewriting Lango's Political Story Ahead of 2026

By Nancy Atim

Since Uganda's return to multiparty politics in 2006, open constituency elections have largely remained a male-dominated arena. Across the country, parliamentary seats appeared permanently attached to familiar names, well-funded networks, and entrenched patronage systems. Campaign posters faded and slogans changed, but leadership often remained the same.

In the Lango Sub-region, this pattern was particularly pronounced. Women were frequently confined to reserved seats or sidelined from competitive races, while open constituencies were viewed as an exclusive male preserve.

Cultural expectations, financial barriers, political violence, and structural inequalities combined to discourage women from directly challenging male incumbents.

As the January 15, 2026, general elections approach, however, that long-standing narrative is under visible pressure.

Preliminary figures from the Uganda Electoral Commission indicate that 128 women are contesting for directly elected constituency Member of Parliament seats in 2026, out of 353 open constituencies nationwide.

Overall, more than 2,700 candidates are competing for 519 parliamentary seats across all categories. While men still dominate numerically, the growing presence of women signals a deliberate challenge to entrenched political norms.

The Women Contesting Power

In Lango, interviews with female aspirants' reveal campaigns shaped by resilience, confrontation with patriarchal attitudes, and determination to redefine leadership beyond gender.

In Amolatar District, Collin Angwech, a businesswoman and café operator, is contesting for the Kioga Constituency on the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) ticket. She faces four male rivals, including incumbent Member of Parliament, Moses Okot Junior Bitek.

Angwech says her campaign has been characterized by intimidation and misinformation, with some opponents allegedly telling voters it is "not right" for a woman to compete against men in an open constituency. Rather than retreat, she has responded with civic education.

"The law allows women to contest for any position. Leadership should be judged by competence and vision, not gender," Angwech says.

Her campaign platform focuses on infrastructure development, poverty reduction, improved health and education services, and strengthening community representation in Parliament.

She points to tangible contributions she has already made, supporting schools, equipping health centres, promoting solar energy solutions, and strengthening women's savings groups as evidence of her leadership capacity.

“Leadership should be judged by competence and vision, not gender.”

Persistence after setbacks, former presidential aspirant. Dorothy Amolo, popularly known as Queen Dorothy, is contesting for the Oyam South parliamentary seat against seven male candidates.

In 2023, Amolo announced her intention to contest for the presidency under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) ticket in the 2026 general elections. This followed her withdrawal from the Oyam North by-election held to replace the late Rtd Col. Charles Okello Engola Mac-Odwogo, the former Minister of State for Labour and Industrial Relations.

She is now contesting as an independent candidate for Oyam South, a seat currently held by Gender Minister Betty Amongi Akena, who is contesting for Lira City Woman MP.

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In the 2021 general elections, Amolo came second with 14,883 votes, losing to Amongi, who secured 27,024 votes. She describes her renewed bid as "a big but bright challenge," saying her political experience positions her strongly for victory.

She alleges that disrupted rallies and character attacks reflect fear of her popularity rather than fair competition.

"Women sustain most households here. We are natural leaders. Fear, not ability, is what often holds women back," Amolo says.

She urges young girls to embrace failure as part of growth. "Be afraid of a person who has never failed. If you hire a driver who has never been in an accident, they don't know how to drive," she says.

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CSOs Push Efforts to Digital-Based Gender Violence on Women in Elections



CAPTION: Esther Afoyochoan, the Commissioner of Parliament speaking at the official Launch of the strategic plan.

By Arthur Wadero: Article 32 of Uganda's Constitution is tailored to, among other things, cure the imbalances amongst marginalized persons such as youth, persons with disabilities, and women. In so doing, the architects of the country's supreme law sought to push for justice, promote equality and also ensure that all persons play a fair role in the country's decision-making at all levels.

To this end, specific parliamentary seats were for such groups, key among them being the slot for the City or District Woman Representative across the country.

This has, however met a string of challenges as the majority of women who attempt to, for example, contest for Parliamentary seats outside women-MP-seats are mostly frowned at. Such low presence of women legislators in Parliament still stands pronounced as detailed in the Fourth Strategic Plan of Parliament.

"Regarding gender composition, the male MPs constituted the majority at 66%, while female Members accounted for 34 per cent. It is worth noting that the majority of the female MPs occupied affirmative action seats, with directly

elected women members constituting only 7.4%," the strategic plan launched at Parliament in September last year reads in part.

While delivering remarks on behalf of the Speaker of Parliament, Anita Among, the Commissioner of Parliament, Esther Afoyochoan, pledged that Parliament administration would undertake all necessary efforts to ensure that the plan is fully implemented. This includes offering more opportunities for women legislators across the political divide.

This has been a pronounced case in several election circles, something that prompted experts like Miriam Wanjiru, at the Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CFMA) devote efforts to remedy the situations responsible for the imbalance.

Experts at the CFMA outline drivers of such imbalances to include online platforms, telecommunications networks, and data systems, which in essence, facilitate civic participation and election administration.

Consequently, CFMA says, "this transformation also introduces material risks to material rights and electoral integrity." And this, once badly used, fuels the occurrence of a deep and wide presence of digital-based violence.

Like her counterparts at the same entity, Wanjiru has, since the start of full-blown political campaigns in November 2025, deployed approaches such as the Digital Rights & Elections in Africa Monitors toolkit (DREAMT). Wanjiru revealed that this kit would be deployed "as the common field guide for observers and monitors across and the pre-election, election-day, and post-election phases.

When asked, Rachael Babwetera-fashion designer at an outlet domiciled at Zainab

Arcade in Kampala lauded CFMA for the initiative to tackle gender-based violence which is largely pelted at female politicians.

"I hardly read newspapers or even watch TV news, and this leaves me with the option of following political events using Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) on my phone while at work," Babwetera said.

She added, "Since the campaigns started, I noticed that some people use the comments section on such platforms to demean female candidates. They are attacked because of the way they dress or articulate issues, and yet this rarely happens to men. I find it to be unfair."

Esther Namusoke, one of the political handlers and a member of the Steven Mayombwe who is vying to retain his seat as the LC3 Councillor for Luwafu in Makindye division, strongly supports such efforts devoted towards tackling digital-based gender violence.

"I feel like such initiatives should have happened before the start of the elections period so that people like me who directly handle matters on social media campaign platforms are well prepared," Namusoke said.

She added, "I am however, happy that such plans are now in place to help where entities like the Electoral Commission has not appeared."

Ongoing campaigns have witnessed several politicians take to digital-based spaces to canvas for political support as they popularize their manifestos. Such candidates include the National Unity Platform (NUP) presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu alias Bobi Wine and Abraham Luzzi who is contesting to become the Member of Parliament for Kampala Central.

How Women Vendors Turned 2026 Campaign Frenzy into Income Cont'd from Pg 3

One example is Nalongo Annet Namuli, 45, a trader from Zirowe in Luwero District. For weeks, she shadowed President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) campaign and turned rallies into her marketplace. Arriving early with her son, she set up a simple stall consisting of a table and a portable stove, selling fried chips, roasted chicken, sausages, and roasted plantains.

"I follow the President's schedule closely," she told The Other Voice at a Kawanda rally in Wakiso District. By 8:00 a.m., her spot opposite the main entrance buzzed with activity as buses unloaded supporters. Nalongo strategically avoided crowded interiors and positioned herself at exits to capture impulse buyers from the moving crowds.

"On a slow day, I make 200,000 Shillings. That is more than a week's earnings back home," she said.

The rapid turnover supported her family, paying for school fees and basic household needs. As the campaigns neared an end, she expressed concern.

"Once rallies end, business slows. We depend on these crowds for survival."

A second example is Aisha Nakiyimba, 38, from Kawempe in Kampala. She specializes in political party merchandise. She traveled to rallies of different candidates, including those from the NRM and the National Unity Platform (NUP), whenever crowds looked promising. Her stock included branded T-shirts, caps, flags, whistles, and badges.

"Election sales are sweet. It is once in five years, but it counts, and I could not sit back," she said during a Robert Kyagulanyi rally in Busiro North. With supporters chanting for change, her stock moved fast as people bought items to show their allegiance.

Nakiyimba reported daily earnings of 300,000 to 500,000 Shillings, far above her regular 100,000 Shillings. She attributed the surge in sales to the mood of the crowds and strong attendance. She said the profits from the campaigns provided a cushion. "This money helps me stock up for post-election slumps and educates my daughters."

The third example is Harriet Akello, 42, from Nyendo in Masaka City. As a beverage vendor, she follows multi-party events, selling bottled water, sodas, and local brews at rallies of the National Resistance Movement (NRM), Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), and National Unity Platform (NUP).

"Politics brings people together, and thirst," she said with a laugh during a gathering in Arua. Akello positioned herself near entrances, where long waits and hot weather drove up demand. She earned about 100,000 Shillings daily during peak rallies.

These women show how the 2026 campaign season extended beyond politics and created meaningful economic activity. Sustainability remains the key question. As rallies peaked, women vendors across Uganda reminded observers that in the marketplace of democracy, opportunity appears, but the challenge is to sustain it beyond the election day.



By Reacheal Wambuzi: The country is gearing up for the general election, where an estimated 21 Million voters are expected to cast ballots for their preferred candidates.

An estimated 70 percent of the voting population composes of largely youths, some of whom will be voting for their very first time.

Unlike the previous 2021 general election, which was characterized by restrictions in the movement of contestants due to the prevailing covid19 pandemic, this time round candidates have traversed different electoral areas, while marketing their manifestos for electorates to make informed decisions.

The presidential race, which attracted eight candidates seems to form most of the debate amongst electorates, with most of them formulating their political debates, before sharing insights on the other electoral positions.

The presidential candidates include; Mubarak Munyagwa of the Common man's party-CMP, Yoweri Museveni of the National Resistance Movement-NRM, Robert Kyagulanyi of the National Unity Platform-NUP, Nathan Nandala Mafabi of the Forum for Democratic Change-FDC, Mugisha Muntu of the Alliance for National Transformation-ANT, Robert Kasibante of the National Peasants Party-NPP, Frank Bulira, of the Revolutionary People's Party-RPP and Joseph Mbirizi of the Conservative Party-CP.

This general election will kickoff with the presidential and parliamentary elections on the 15th, January, 2025.

To a number of voters, the last week towards election enables them to develop a mental picture on who their leaders ought to be in the next five years, going forth.

Sylvia Nangobi is aged 19 years and she is a young voter, excited to cast her ballot for the very first time in her life.

Nangobi is working as a house help in Jinja city, which she says has enabled her not to only hear the news about the contesting candidates over radio, but equally watched them express themselves via television.

Nangobi thinks that, she has enough knowledge about credible electoral processes, following exposure to the different media outlets detailing their abilities, however, she is a voter in another district about 30 Kilometers away from Jinja city.

With her boss working as a businesswoman and opening shop everyday save for Sundays, Nangobi is skeptical on whether she will be granted leave to settle in her home district early enough and prepare for the general election.

Embedded in her plans is to seek leave from her boss on 09th, January, settle back to her electoral area on 10th the same month, as she settles for the general election expected in the preceding five days ahead.

Where Will You Be in the Week Ahead of General Election

Unlike, Nangobi, Mbabazi Kaune, a house wife says that, she will mobilize all her family members between the 10th and 11th, as they prepare to cast their ballots.

Mbabazi, who boasts of participating in the previous four general election cycles noted that, these processes have evolved overtime, prompting electorates to adapt accordingly. "I have been actively participating in general elections for the past 20 years, however, each one of them creates a pattern, much different from the other. These patterns comprise of heightened violence majorly meted by security forces against opposition candidates, followed by hostilities amongst neighbors. These changing patterns force me to focus more on keeping my family together throughout the ballot casting days, as a means of ensuring zero exposure to any manner of violence," she said.

Mbabazi entrenched that, her children are aged between 12 and 25, with three of them qualifying to vote, however, she plans to restrict them from participating in the final touches of the campaigns, which she expects to intensify between 10th and 13th, January, 2026.

This resolve, according to her is key in enabling children to tame themselves from election related excitement and in turn prepare to cast their ballots on 15th, January, 2025.

Mbabazi, who boasts of being a protective parent added, that, "stories of election related violence seem to be dominating the different media outlets in this last month towards and I don't want my children to be victims of this violence. Therefore, keeping them home with me is much safer than releasing them out, because these final campaign touches are highly ignited with emotions and you will never know when violent episodes will erupt,".

Sirina Kyakuwairi is a female councilor representing Mafubira ward at the Jinja city council, but she is the official agent of one of the parliamentary contestants in Jinja North.

Kyakuwairi said that, 10th and 11th, January, 2026 are key dates for her political camp to formulate final touches geared towards helping them to strengthen their grip with the people.

Kyakuwairi said that, 10th and 11th, January will be key dates for her to mobilize polling day agents, who are key in safeguarding their presumed victory. "For people like me, those two dates are called sleepless nights, because I have to identify polling day agents, process their forms and other logistical support. These preparations safeguard them from being influenced by our opponents," she said.

She noted that, they have been gathering contacts from their supporters, while traversing the different electoral areas during their campaigns and they have earmarked 10th to 11th, as days for conducting a call center, geared towards reminding them on the need to vote.

Kyakuwairi envisions intensified underground campaigns even during restricted areas as a means of consolidating support, from voters from being swayed away by their opponents.

According to the electoral commission guidelines, campaigns for both presidential and parliamentary candidates close in on 13th, January, where the 14th date will enable them to rest and prepare for the polling day.

Flavia Nakasi, the Jinja city returning officer noted that, this period formulates the last dates for the distribution of voter allocation slips. "We expect all voters to have collected their voter allocation slips between 10th and 11th, January, since they provide extensive knowledge about their exact polling stations," she said.

Nakasi also noted that, she will be stationed at her office 24/7, alongside the logistical team, preparing to receive the ballot papers for both parliamentary and presidential candidates alike.

Nakasi also noted that, this is the time when candidates and their official agents alike to access guidance from the electoral commission officers on the polling day activities, without infringing on the set constitutional laws and guidelines, governing the process.

Meanwhile, Paul Batambuze, the president of the Jinja city NGO forum noted that, these two days will mark the climax of their online civic engagements, geared towards addressing voter apathy.

According to available data, voter apathy has a realtime fact in Uganda's electoral processes since the early 2000's. Available electoral commission data dates the highest voter turn up in 1996, when the NRA fighters were seeking legitimacy after capturing power in 1986. In here, it is detailed that, out of 8.7 Million registered voters at the time, 6.1 Million turned up to cast their ballot, accounting for 72%.

This record however, dropped to 70% in 2001, where 7.5 Million voters turned up to cast their ballot, out of the 10.7 Million registered voters.

A voter clean-up was conducted during the 2006 general election, where 600,000 voters were wiped of the register, lowering the numbers to 10.1 Million, however, 7.2 Million turned up, which amounted to 69.2%. ...Cont'd on Pg 8



Where Will You Be in the Week Ahead of General Election

Cont'd from Pg 7

The Dark Side of Ugandan Politics Cont'd from Pg 4

advocate, was quoted as saying, "Many women are staying offline even though visibility in politics is crucial. They fear cyberbullying and harassment."

Womens Voices Now, in a recent piece, detailed how Ugandan women politicians endure demeaning comments and threats, often amplified by anonymous trolls. Najjemba's experience mirrors this: "I've had to block hundreds of numbers. Some even create fake accounts to spread rumours about my personal life, calling me immoral or questioning my motives. It's exhausting."

But the abuse isn't confined to the digital world. Najjemba described encounters with supporters and established politicians that crossed into sexual exploitation.

"When I knock on doors asking for support, endorsements, funding, advice, they see me as easy prey," she said.

"One senior politician, whom I won't name yet, invited me to a meeting and spent the whole time making inappropriate advances. He said, 'You're young and fresh; politics is give and take.' Others, even from my own party circles, hint that success comes with 'favours.'

Supporters at rallies grab my hand too long or whisper things that make my skin crawl. Everyone seems to want something from me, not my ideas, but me."

This pattern of sexual harassment is well-documented in Ugandan politics. A 2023 study by the Prevention Collaborative on online gender-based violence in Uganda revealed that many women close their social media accounts to avoid stigma,

with harassment including stalking and sexual threats. WAN-IFRA's 2020 profile of journalist Ruth Atim highlighted how reporting sexual harassment often goes unaddressed, a reality that extends to politicians.

Najjemba admitted these realities were a shock. "Before entering politics, I thought it was about debates, policies, and helping people. I never knew it was this predatory. In school, we learned about democracy, but not the underbelly - the sexism, the bullying. As a young woman, they underestimate me, but that naïveté they mock is what drives me. I've seen how corruption and poor governance affect my peers: no jobs, rising costs, and police brutality. I want to change that."

To cope, her family has stepped in. "My parents were worried sick," she said. "They hired a trusted relative to accompany me everywhere, to rallies, meetings, even door-to-door campaigns. He's like a bodyguard, ensuring I am not alone with anyone suspicious. Sadly, it has to be this way, but it's necessary."

This measure echoes broader calls for protection; a 2025 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) blog on technology-facilitated violence against women leaders in the Pacific noted similar issues globally, urging better safeguards.

Despite the ordeals, Najjemba remains resolute. "I'm not quitting," she asserted. "This abuse shows why we need more young women in politics to break the cycle. We need to push for stricter laws on harassment and digital safety."

The number of registered voters increased to 13.9 Million in 2011, however, 8.2 Million turned up to vote, accounting for 59.3%.

Voter turn drastically improved in 2016, where 10.3 Million people turned up to vote, out of the 15.2 Million registered at the time, accounting for 67.6%, however, the deficit of 4.9 Million Ugandans who never voted still shows the rate of voter apathy.

This trend however, decreased in 2021, where 10.7 Million voters turned for the presidential and parliamentary elections, accounting for 59%, despite registration of 18.1 Million voters.

With the figures of registered voters rising to an estimated 22 Million in the forthcoming general election of 2026, Batambuze said that, voter apathy might increase, which has largely informed their resolve to continuously leverage on the different social media platforms to sensitize voters about the importance of participating in the decision making processes, even when election day has drawn near.

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