



SILENCED VOICES: Stella Nyanzi

by Cathal Sheerin

Stella Nyanzi is Uganda’s most famous women’s rights activist; she is currently being held in Luzira Women’s Prison, where she awaits her next hearing. Nyanzi has been behind bars since her arrest in November 2018, and, if convicted on the charges against her, faces a one-year prison sentence. In June 2019, a judge refused her lawyer’s request that a key trial witness be brought before the court for questioning. That witness was Uganda’s president, Yoweri Museveni, the alleged victim of the crime for which Nyanzi is being prosecuted.



Stella Nyanzi

Illustration by Marine Young

Nyanzi, forty-five, is charged with “cyber harassment” and “offensive communication” under sections 24 and 25 of Uganda’s Computer Misuse Act. The charges are based on an extremely scatological poem that she wrote and posted on Facebook in August 2018 to mark President Museveni’s birthday. The poem criticizes the rampant corruption of Uganda’s ruling cadre and argues that the country would have been better off if the president had died at birth; also included in the verse are graphic descriptions of Museveni’s mother’s birth canal as a kind of fiery hell.

To non-Ugandans, this kind of language might appear offensive or, at best, bizarre. However, to most Ugandans, the motivation

behind this Facebook post was clear: Nyanzi, who teaches at Makerere University, Kampala, and who holds a doctorate in anthropology, was exercising “radical rudeness,” a traditional Ugandan tactic developed under British colonial rule to challenge the powerful.

Yet despite the existence of this colorful tradition, expressing opinion freely in Uganda—especially political opinion—can be a risky business. Under President Museveni, political opposition figures are sometimes detained and are frequently denied access to the media; critical journalists are arrested, abducted, and beaten by the security services. The Museveni government has even set up a special law enforcement team whose sole job is to trawl social media looking for any criticism of the government.

“Radical rudeness” has landed Nyanzi in jail before. In April 2017, she was arrested and charged with the same offences as in November 2018. This time, the charges were based on messages she posted on Facebook that described Museveni as “a pair of buttocks” and his wife Janet as “empty brained.” Again, Nyanzi wasn’t just name-calling for the sake of name-calling: she was expressing her deep frustration with the Ugandan government—specifically with Museveni and his wife—for failing to follow through on promises to improve the educational prospects of Uganda’s schoolgirls.

In 2016, the government had pledged to provide sanitary pads to schoolgirls (at least thirty percent of whom stop attending school when they start menstruating, leaving them at a severe academic disadvantage). The First Lady, Janet Museveni, was Minister for Education at the time. By 2017, the government had reneged on its promise, citing budget issues, and this both infuriated Nyanzi and drove her to take matters into her own hands. She launched the #Pads4girlsUg campaign, which crowd-funded the purchase and distribution of sanitary pads to one million girls in Uganda. Her campaign proved to be a spectacular success, with donations pouring in from across Uganda and abroad. She hit her target easily.

However, despite her success, Nyanzi also chose to vent her frustration at Uganda’s main power couple. She was arrested days later at a fundraising event at the Kampala Rotary Club.

When she appeared in court, Nyanzi used the opportunity to publicly highlight the president's policy failures in very angry language. A witness at the court hearing quoted Nyanzi's address to the judge: "Offensive communication? Who is offended? How long are Ugandans going to be silent because of fear... I am an academic, a poet, a writer. I use my writing metaphorically. I have called the president impotent, a rapist, a pathetic pair of buttocks. He lied to voters that he would provide pads, and Ugandans are offended that he is such a dishonorable man. It is we who are offended, not him."

Nyanzi pleaded not guilty. The judge denied her bail and sent her to a high security prison where she would spend the next five weeks. Nyanzi has since spoken publicly about her treatment in prison and the details are shocking. During her first few days behind bars, the prison authorities attempted to force her to undergo a psychiatric examination (which she successfully resisted); they also denied her access to her lawyer and to visits from her children. Her health suffered as a result of her incarceration: because the authorities denied inmates mosquito nets (arguing that prisoners might use them to hang themselves), Nyanzi contracted malaria and left prison in May 2017 in a frail condition.

While Nyanzi awaits her next hearing on the charges levied against her in 2018, her trial on the 2017 charges is yet to be concluded. Appeals calling for all charges against Stella Nyanzi to be dropped and for her to be freed may be sent to the following address:

Mr. Mike Chibita, Director of Public Prosecutions
Directorate of Public Prosecutions Workers House
Plot 1, Pilkington Road
Kampala, Uganda
Email: mike.chibita@dpp.go.ug

You may want to use this [sample letter](#).

Cathal Sheerin is a journalist, editor, and free-expression consultant, and has written this column since 2012. Maxine Young has contributed illustrations since 2014.