Opinion: Myths Thrive Gender-Based Violence

By Norah Owaraga

nowaraga@gmail.com

Wednesday, 4th April 2018

The Daily Monitor has apparently since deleted from social media its call to women who have suffered sexual harassment or gender-based violence to publicly share their traumatic stories in exchange for a chance to be the “lucky winner” and win a “luxurious bottle of wine.”

Presumably, the Daily Monitor deleted its call following an outcry from feminists. Nevertheless, the Daily Monitor call was for me a tipping point. It disturbed me to the extent that it has motivated me to finally write this opinion; an opinion that I have been meaning to write for a while now.

It is shocking that someone, or worse still that the entire editorial team of a daily publication of the stature of the Daily Monitor, was so insensitive as to offer women who have suffered sexual abuse and domestic violence the chance to win a “luxurious bottle of wine” in exchange for them reliving and then publicly sharing their experience of trauma.

To think, however, that the mentality that is behind the Daily Monitor call is a one-off case in Uganda, would be to deceive ourselves. In fact, a possible silver lining, if at all, is the call’s revelation of a particularly toxic mindset that a significant section of Uganda’s population has on issues relating to gender-based violence.

The purpose of this opinion, therefore, is an attempt to describe the distorted view of gender-based violence in Uganda; the myths that perpetuate that distorted view; and the resultant violence it unleashes, particularly on the women of Uganda. The rationale being: if we are able to consciously recognise it, we are more likely to call it out and to advocate against it; and better still to desist from perpetuating gender-based violence.

---

1 Ms. Norah Owaraga is a cultural anthropologist who holds a Master of Science Degree in Development Management from The Open University UK and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Communication Studies from Queen Margaret College (now Queen Margaret University), Edinburgh, Scotland. Owaraga is a politically active citizen - she is the first and currently the only female prime time Radio Political Talk Show Host in Uganda, hosting “Spectrum Extra”, on Friday evenings, from 7 pm to 9 pm, on Radio One FM 90; and she is a Humanist Blogger through her blog “The Humanist View.” Since April 2012, Owaraga is the Managing Director of CPAR Uganda Ltd, a Ugandan not-for-profit development organisation.
This opinion is located within cultural theory in which myths are understood (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008) as narratives which encapsulate and express beliefs and values that are shared by a particular cultural group; and which can be explained in terms of the needs that the myths meet in the reproduction and stabilisation of society.

Herein, the interest is Ugandan myths about how men and women should behave within Ugandan society in order that there is societal stability. If a Ugandan man or a Ugandan woman deviates from these Ugandan myths, then the consequence is societal ostracism; meaning, logically, that if Uganda society does not ostracise one for behaving in a certain way then that particular manner of behaving is accepted as the norm within Uganda.

Gender prescribes the norm for how a man and how a woman should behave in a particular society; therefore, it denotes culture – the process of socialisation and the learning of a pattern of behaviour that is either considered feminine (that which is assigned to and for the female) or masculine (that which is assigned to and for the male). Implicitly, gender denotes traditions and belief systems; de facto myths.

Gender, as a classification, is different from the classification sex which denotes biology – the nature of one’s sexual organs as assigned either to be female or to be male. One rarely changes their sex, as in one rarely changes the form of one’s sexual organ and so, unlike gender, sex is often considered fixed and unchanging world over.

Gender, however, unlike sex, is indeed as diverse as there are cultures in the world and it changes from one society to another and within the context of different myths - traditions and beliefs that one holds. That which is considered feminine in Uganda in East Africa may differ from that which is considered feminine in Ghana in West Africa; or in the United Kingdom in the global-west.

There are plenty of myths that are prevailing in Uganda; some of which are based on a misunderstanding of gender or on the basis of a deliberate distortion of gender. The more common misunderstanding or distortion of gender in Uganda is that which narrows the determination of gender to sex alone. A misunderstanding or distortion which consequently reduces gender to be determined by biology as opposed to locating gender within the wider context of culture as its determinant.

How we perceive gender is determined by myths - our learned traditions and beliefs. By distorting gender as though it is determined by biology as opposed to being determined by culture, the ideological justification for gender-based violence is established and is sustained. That ideological justification is patriarchy.

“The term ‘patriarchy’ literally means the ‘rule of the father’ (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008),” and in the context of this opinion, it denotes the manner in which Ugandan societies are structured in such a way that privilege the male at the expense of the female. Put another way, patriarchy, as it manifests in Ugandan societies, is a hierarchy that promotes male domination – male privilege, if you will; while at the same time promoting female oppression.

Take for example the scandal of the man who was elected by both women and men to represent them in The Parliament of the Republic of Uganda, a sitting member of parliament (MP), who had no qualms, whatsoever, publicly proclaiming that it is okay for a man to beat his wife; and he did so in the media, no less. In the minds of a majority of Ugandans, sadly, the only crime of that MP-wife-beater was that he, as an MP, publicly spoke about it in the media.
How else can one explain the fact that a self-confessed MP-wife-beater continues to hold public office? The MP-wife-beater was only asked to apologise for confessing in public that he is a criminal who beats women. He was not forced to resign from being an MP, a people’s representative. He still holds position in an institution whose members are referred to as “honourable.”

How is it that a self-confessed criminal was not barred from holding public office as a whole? He clearly supports the violation of human rights of at least 50 percent of Uganda’s population, the women of Uganda. How is he allowed to hold public office, how is he not ostracised?

Sadly, that particular MP-wife-beater is not alone. Many, many more Ugandan men have publicly confessed to being wife-beaters and or have made public proclamation in support of wife-beating. Rarely are wife-beaters in Uganda, self-confessed and otherwise known, subject to negative consequences, if at all. This means that the practice of wife-beating is an accepted norm within Uganda. It is normalised.

Wife-beating, in fact, is widely prevalent in Uganda. It is sustained because wife-beaters are not ostracised enough by their fellow Uganda men or even Uganda woman. Ugandan women, in fact, have been known to directly or indirectly support wife-beating – coercing women to endure abusive marriages.

Physical violence, such as wife-beating, however, is not the only expression of gender-based violence. There are non-physical forms of violence, such as: “injury by or as if by distortion, infringement or profanation”, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. By this definition, coercing women to endure abusive marriages is an act of gender-based violence that is committed by the one who coerces another.

The story of Mariam Nabatanzi Babirye as was told by a journalist, Godfrey Lugaaju, and published in the Daily Monitor on 23rd April 2017, titled: “At 37, she has given birth to 38 children”, provides a good basis to demonstrate the nature of gender-based violence in Uganda, particularly the kind that many are subconscious of. Nabatanzi is quoted by Lugaaju, for example, as having advised women that:

“There are no easy marriages; women should be patient because even our great grandmothers did not have a smooth one. They should be patient as there is always a lot to deal with in marriage.”

It is not surprising that Nabatanzi knows no better and is seemingly subconscious of how she is sustaining the myth of patriarchy. She herself was socialised to believe in that particular myth. Apparently, according to Lugaaju’s account, at age 12, Nabatanzi’s aunt, in collusion with Nabatanzi’s father, coerced her to marry a 40-year old man; an abusive man who throughout their marriage is humiliating and torturing her. Through it all, the humiliation and torture, nevertheless, apparently, Nabatanzi continues to copulate with her husband, as she was advised by her aunt.

“I carry these humiliations because my aunt advised me to always endure in marriage,” Nabatanzi is quoted as having testified. So at 37 years of age she has already borne 38 children with the man she was forced to marry while she was underage and who is abusive to her. Yes, Nabatanzi is “genetically fertile.” According to her account, as it was reported by Lugaaju, aged only13 years, barely a year in marriage, she gave birth to her first children, twins. Subsequently, it is reported, that after giving birth six times (each time in multiples of two or three or even four), she had 18 children; and she continued the pattern of delivering children in multiples until at age 37 she has 38 children, all sired by the same man, her abusive husband.
It is reported that Nabatanzi twice sought medical help to stop her from having children, but was told that it was not possible to stop her from having children without negative consequences to her health. It is difficult to believe that in this day and age it is not possible for medical doctors to stop a woman from having more children. A plausible explanation is that it is highly likely that the medical doctors from whom Nabatanzi sought help were disrespectful and dismissive of her. It would be interesting to know whether statutory laws of Uganda provide any recourse for Nabatanzi against the medical doctors.

Be that as it may, according to the statutory laws of Uganda, Nabatanzi’s aunt, her father and her husband committed a crime while forcing Nabatanzi to marry while underage. The act of coercing Nabatanzi, forcing her to marry an abusive man, who is nearly four times her age and coercing her to remain in the marriage is gender-based violence. Nabatanzi was most certainly emotionally violated and continues to be violated as can be deduced from her advice to fellow women to endure in abusive marriages. The abusive marriage in her mind and in the minds of many Ugandan women has been normalised, it is the norm.

Her husband, moreover, reportedly, only has his way with her - impregnates her, but does not participate in caring for her and their children. Nevertheless, and presumably, in keeping with her aunt’s advice, Nabatanzi always submits and satisfies her husband’s sexual urges. The act of submitting to his sexual urges is in itself a symptom of gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence in Uganda, however, does not only occur in the domestic realm, but the prevailing distorted view of gender in Uganda sustains a myth in Uganda which equates gender-based violence to domestic violence.

The New Vision, another Ugandan daily publication, a Government of Uganda owned publication at that, posted this cartoon on its Facebook page titled: “Cartoon of the Day.”

The explanation accompanying the cartoon was: “Pregnant school girls will be given at least one year of maternity leave under the revised government guidelines.”

Prior to the revised government guidelines, the previous government guidelines for handling school girls who got pregnant included the instant expulsion of the girls from school. The revised guidelines are, therefore, a progressive step forward. The same government guidelines, however, do not prescribe consequences against the boys or the men who made the girls pregnant; some of whom are possibly schools boys or school teachers. This is an example of gender-based violence that is sanctioned by public policy and practice; and therefore public gender-based violence.

It is baffling how Mr. Ras, the cartoonist, and the entire editorial team of The New Vision found it fit to originate and to publish a cartoon that makes fun of the suffering of young girls.
Genuine Ugandan feminists – men and women – find nothing entertaining or even educative in the New Vision “cartoon of the day”, but we are clearly the minority in Uganda. The cartoon is useful, however, in revealing and confirming the prevalence of a similar toxic mindset as was revealed by the Daily Monitor call. Patriarchy in Uganda is deeply internalised to the extent that many Ugandans are subconscious of endorsing, practicing and sustaining it in the oppression of women.

The insensitivity of the cartoon to the trauma and suffering of school girls who get pregnant at school is mind boggling. The cartoon seemingly does not recognise the girls as victims not only of public gender-based violence that is sanctioned by public policy and practice; but also, possibly, of sexual abuse; and of the failure of the state and society, as a whole, to prevent early pregnancies.

The statement: “Next we shall pile pressure on the govt to grant us our rights to live with our boyfies in dormitories”, assigned to the pregnant girls in the cartoon by the cartoonists and endorsed by The New Vision, is the epitome of male privilege. It is as if the cartoonist and The New Vision did not want the government to acquiesce to the demands of women that school girls whose education is interrupted by pregnancy should be allowed the opportunity to continue their education after giving birth.

The cartoon is laden with negative moral judgement that assigns blame to the girls for getting pregnant. It is as though the cartoonist and by extension The New Vision think school girls relish getting pregnant and will now demand to share school dormitories with boys, how insensitive. And then again, what about the fact that school girls sometimes get pregnant as a result of inter-generational sexual activity - that is to say they are made pregnant by grown-up men, their teachers inclusive, as media reports have indicated in the past.

Discrimination against Ugandan girls and Ugandan women permeates all sectors of Uganda. The discrimination is done, moreover, with a vile attitude that, for example, makes public and civil servants, women and men, to think that in execution of their public duty they are doing favours for women. The fact is public and civil servants are simply doing their jobs; jobs, moreover, which they are paid salaries to do; which salaries come from taxes which women pay, just as all other citizens do.

President Museveni, for example, has perfected the art of such self-praise by public servants. One of the major achievements that he claims that his longevity in the presidency has brought about is ‘improvement’ in the situation of women. Notwithstanding that it is the job of the president of Uganda to make the situation of women in Uganda better anyway, a deeper look into that which he considers an ‘improvement’ for women, leaves a lot to be desired.

There is in fact a school of thought that is convinced that the manner in which President Museveni is ‘improving’ the situation for Ugandan women, has had negative consequences on the women’s movement in Uganda. His style of working with women and addressing women’s issues can be best described as tokenism, as is asserted by some. The evidence, it is claimed, is clearly deducible from the quality of women that President Museveni chooses to be in his Cabinet and how he promotes ‘special’ initiatives for women.

In turn, it is argued, the manner in which women act in the presence of President Museveni or in executing their public office is symptomatic of their internalisation of an inferiority complex that does not permit them to hold The President and others holding public office to account. Women’s rights are human rights. Women are citizens in as much as men are citizens. Men’s rights are human rights, so why are public servants, including President Museveni, falling all over themselves and chest thumping that in execution of their public duty they are doing women favours?
The explanation is that, we, Ugandans, have normalised patriarchy. We need to decolonise our minds of the distorted view of gender that we hold, so that we may recognise gender-based violence and therefore be able to counter it. We need to understand the cultural and historical root causes of gender-based violence so that we can recognise it as a vice that is rooted in cultural beliefs, which we have the ability to change.

Otherwise, we are damned, as a nation, if we do not take seriously that toxic mindset that has taken root among us and that perpetuates gender-based violence in Uganda.