

WHAT VOTERS WANT: THE CASE OF

BY JOHN MUSENZE

In Matangacia village, Rigbo sub-county, Madi-Okollo district, there lives 21-year-old Jamirah Saidia, who is one week away from giving birth to her second child. Her hope for a safer motherhood lies in the hands of whoever becomes Uganda's next president.

Staying in a hard-to-reach area, Saidia has achieved only two antenatal visits throughout her pregnancy. The nearest health centre is many kilometres away, and each trip costs over sh25,000, an amount that she and her unemployed husband cannot afford.

"I last went to the hospital when I was five months pregnant. I don't even know the sex of my child. The traditional birth attendant tells me that I will give birth at the end of this month. I go to her often and she examines my belly and says the baby is fine," Saidia told *The Weekend Vision*.

Saidia's journey into motherhood began too early. She was only aged 15 when she became pregnant, a few months after the COVID-19 lockdown.

"When schools closed, I was in Primary Seven. My brothers complained that I was eating too much food since I wasn't studying. They stopped supporting me. I went to look for casual work, but I was scammed. Later, my family married me off to a man in Madi-Okollo main town. When I got pregnant, his family said I was too young and chased me away and I went back home," Saidia says.

After four years of struggling alone with her first child, Saidia's family arranged another marriage for her with the man responsible for her pregnancy. But this relationship, too, has been marked by hardship and abuse.

"He drinks alcohol and beats me. I don't even have clothes for the baby," Saidia says.

Her story mirrors that of many young women across West Nile, a sub-region struggling with teenage pregnancies, early marriages and limited access to healthcare.

Although the Ministry of Health banned the use of traditional birth attendants, many women in remote areas like Rigbo still rely on them.

"When I went to the hospital, they told me to buy medicine from a clinic. I had no money. At home, the traditional birth attendant



Speaker of Parliament Anita Among (second-right), Tororo Woman MP Sarah Opendi (centre), United Nations Population Fund gender and youth programme co-ordinator Laura Criado (left) and other officials look on as a child signs on a placard during the launch of the Parliamentary Forum to End Child Marriages and Teenage Pregnancies at Parliament in Kampala last year

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

The Government has, over the years, launched several programmes aimed at empowering girls and women.

Through the National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (2022/23-2026/27), the authorities are working with cultural, religious and community leaders to keep girls in school and protect them from exploitation.

The Children (Amendment) Act 2016 criminalises child marriage and sexual abuse, while the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Strategy seeks to improve women's access to reproductive health services and integrate gender-based violence responses into the community health programmes.

Under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) Government, initiatives like the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme, the Presidential Initiative on Skilling the Girl Child and the Parish Development Model have provided women with vocational training, start-up capital and market access to grow small businesses.

The 2024 National Population and Housing Census report indicates that 12% of Ugandans aged 15 and above are unemployed.

doesn't ask for payment, and it is where I am planning to deliver from," Saidia says.

Her wish toward the next president is simple yet profound.

"I want to get a skill. If tailoring or soap-making programmes were brought near us, I would join. We also need a health centre in our sub-county because mothers here give birth in their houses," Saidia adds.

During a recent Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) rally in Madi-Okollo, several women, who *The Weekend Vision* talked to shared similar struggles. Among them was Phiona Ababiku, 18, who came carrying her baby to listen to the presidential candidate, Nathan

Nandala Mafabi.

"Our hospitals are very far. My mother helped me deliver at home. I have heard of girls dying while giving birth, but others prefer

home delivery because walking to the hospital is too hard. Some people even say giving birth at home shows strength," Saidia says.

"The next president should make sure doctors come to immunise children in villages. Many husbands don't give their wives money for transport. And the Government should punish men who beat their wives by setting tough laws because, currently, men have more powers than us," Saidia says.

MAFABI'S PLEDGE

During his rallies in Madi-Okollo and Terego, Mafabi pledged to allocate 15% of the national budget to the health sector, if elected. Nandala held rallies at Matangacia village, Rigbo sub-county; Kam Kam trading centre and Leju town council in Terego district.

"The FDC government knows what people go through.

"Mothers are forced to buy drugs that should be free. We shall ensure hospitals are well equipped, doctors are well paid and all mothers receive care without paying a coin," Mafabi said.

He also promised to establish district-level skilling hubs to empower both the educated and non-educated youth.

"We can't talk about fixing the economy when young people have no jobs and skills. Every district will have a training centre with start-up capital and machines for graduates," he said.

IN NUMBERS

378,790

The number of teenage births recorded in 2021 by the Health Management Information System.

MUSEVENI'S MAGIC

On this year's Women's Day, President Yoweri Museveni, who is also the NRM presidential candidate, reaffirmed that these programmes aim at boosting women's participation in income-generating activities and empowering them to make informed life decisions.

Yet, for women like Saidia, these interventions remain distant dreams. The nearest hospital, training centre and opportunity all seem too far away.

As the country moves towards the 2026 elections, many voices, including Saidia's, are asking leaders to prioritise bringing services closer, protecting women from violence and giving young mothers a chance to rebuild their lives.

In 2021, Uganda experienced a surge in teenage births, with the Health Management Information System recording 378,790 births, a 7% increase over the previous five-year average. This contributed to a national teenage pregnancy rate of about 25% for girls aged 15-19, with the rates potentially higher during school closures caused by the COVID-19 lockdown. About 250 children under the age of 15 became pregnant monthly in 2021, and 34% of girls were married by the age of 18.

Under Museveni's skilling hub initiative, a total of 4,560 youth and women have been admitted



Saidia advocates the extension of health centres to Rigbo sub-county, Madi-Okollo district

YOUNG WOMEN IN REMOTE AREAS

to the 19 presidential industrial hubs across the country. The youth undertake a six-month vocational training course that gives them a head-start.

The new pledge is for the NRM Government to provide start-up capital for graduates from these skilling hubs, and also expand the types of courses offered. The construction of zonal industrial centres to improve vocational skilling, and the introduction of the university graduates fund to support graduates with capital, are the other promises that the NRM has tabled for the youth such as Saidia.

Museveni said the skilling is key to Uganda's economic transformation.

When he commissioned the Bunyoro Zonal Presidential Skilling Hub in Kiryana-Myebanyakalongo village, Kimengo sub-county in Masindi district, in March this year, Museveni described the initiative as part of waking up Africa from the economic slumber.

The Government's cause to establish zonal industrial hubs, Museveni said, is a catalyst for empowerment of youth and turning them into a productive human resource for the country.

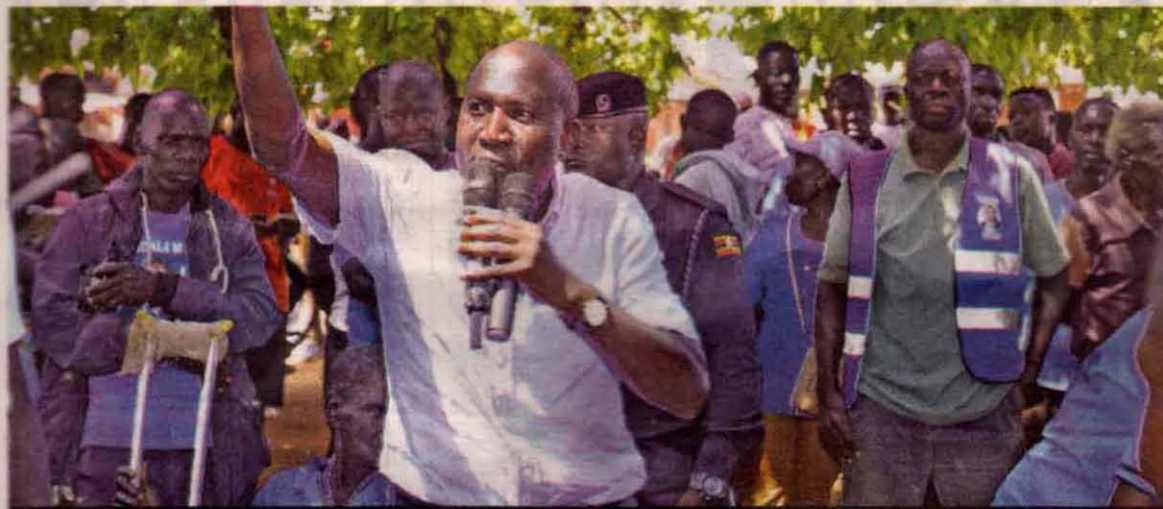
Citing the Kawumu tannery factory as a success story, Museveni said: "Previously, we were exporting raw hides, which were turned into shoes and belts abroad. Now, with Kawumu, we are processing our own leather, and the Bunyoro skilling hub is using it to make shoes. This is how we wake up as Ugandans."

To support the youth in self-employment, the President said the Government would inject funds into the district saving schemes to enable the young people borrow start-up capital for business ventures.

At the launch of Bunyoro skilling hub this year, the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni, said skilling the youth helps them to engage in gainful employment and also create employment for themselves and other youth.

"And so, as we commission this youth skilling hub, we cannot forget to thank God who made this initiative possible because unless He builds a house, we — the labourers — labour in vain," Mrs Museveni said.

The First Lady added: "Human capital development



Mafabi addresses voters at Matangacia trading centre, Luba parish, Rigbo sub-county in Madi-Okollo district recently. Some of the women who attended the rally sounded their wishes to get skills

is vital in our quest to evolve from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country. Therefore, the skilling of our young population remains a top priority. This is why every effort is being made to avail skilling opportunities in every part of the country as resources become available."

The First Lady added that skills development has the potential to trigger economic growth because of its ability to accommodate formal and non-formal training for the people.

"Those who drop out of formal education still have an opportunity to maximise their potential. In addition to the many opportunities that the Government offers through our formal education programmes in the technical and vocational education and training [TVET] institutions that are spread across the country, this presidential initiative provides an opportunity to the vulnerable youth in our communities who may not afford to

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attend the formal school system for various reasons," Mrs Museveni said.

"I believe as we continue on this path, the Government will be able to equip its human resource for a productive economy, as well as reduce youth unemployment in our country. For a country that is endowed with both human and natural resources, our focus should be to equip our human resource with the necessary skills in order to unlock our productivity as a

country," the First Lady said.

She also called upon all able-bodied Ugandans to take advantage of the opportunity provided to acquire the knowledge and skills to benefit themselves and their communities.

"With the enactment of the TVET Act 2025, the Ministry of Education and Sports will now be able to regulate programmes like these to ensure they benefit our people, but also align with the intentions of the Government," Mrs Museveni said.

KYAGULANYI'S OFFER

For Robert Kyagulanyi, aka Bobi Wine, the National Unity Platform presidential candidate, a radical overhaul of the country's education system is the answer to the cries of the people such as Saidia.

During his campaigns, Kyagulanyi has also pledged to introduce free education from primary to university level if elected president in the 2026 general election.

He said many Ugandan families are struggling to pay school fees, noting that his administration would ensure access to education for all.

Kyagulanyi said the burden of school fees has forced many learners to drop out of school, and pledged to provide free meals in all public schools. He also pledges to create 10 million jobs.

MUNTU'S TAKE

For Maj. Gen. Mugisha Muntu, the Alliance for National Transformation (ANT) presidential candidate, the answer to Saidia lies in the creation of avenues for them to access affordable credit facilities.

During his campaigns, Muntu has pledged to introduce Community Empowerment Funds, which he said would help women and youth access low-interest loans to start small and medium-sized enterprises.

MUNYAGWA

For Mubarak Munyagwa, the Common Man's Party presidential candidate, the answer to Saidia lies in empowering the youth for self-reliance. Munyagwa pledged to rollout skilling initiatives at every village level.

He also pledged to offer free education, meals and medical care to all school-going children.

"In my government, pupils will get free food at school, free medical treatment, and pregnant women will get free antenatal care," Munyagwa said during his campaigns in Pakwach district.

He also criticised the civil servants and government officials over what he described as "mismanagement" of public resources meant for education, healthcare and national development.

"This Government has a lot of money. However, this money is just stolen by a few people. The money we have in our country can take care of pregnant women and their babies," Munyagwa said.



L-R: Presidential candidates Museveni, Muntu, Munyagwa and Kyagulanyi carry a blend of promises to the citizens of Uganda