

Political Changes and Single Mothers in Uganda

Robert MUGEMA

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

There is no standard definition of a single mother that has gained widespread consensus among scholars. Therefore, this article will adopt Collins Dictionary's definition, which describes a single mother as a mother who has a dependent child or children and who is widowed, divorced, or unmarried, and who raises her children alone without any assistance from a partner.

Historically, single motherhood was an anomaly in African traditional societies, including Uganda, where it was not only rare but also socially condemned. Rooted in stringent cultural and moral codes, any deviation, particularly childbearing outside marriage, was seen as a form of social deviance. In these societies, fornication was viewed as taboo, and children born outside wedlock were often stigmatized along with their mothers. The repercussions for single mothers were severe: social exclusion, family disownment, and public shaming were commonplace. These deterrents functioned to uphold communal morality and protect the institution of marriage.

Nevertheless, over time, Uganda's sociocultural environment has gradually shifted. The once-hostile attitudes toward single mothers have softened, owing to the work of women's rights movements, civil society organizations, and changing global norms around family structures.

Recent demographic data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics indicates a significant upward trend in the number of single mothers, rising from 20% in 2020 to 30% in 2024, with the age group of 18-35 years taking the lead. This increase demands a thorough interrogation of its root causes. While some scholars, policy makers, and media experts have attributed the surge primarily

to cultural practices such as early marriage and polygamy. However, these cultural practices have existed for a long time, and therefore, a closer examination of this trend seems to be necessary to reveal a more complex interplay of other factors.

Objective of the Study

The above-mentioned background of Uganda's socio-political transformation kept in mind, this paper seeks to examine the extent to which factors other than cultural factors influence the increasing number of single mothers in Uganda. In particular, this study focuses on political factors with more emphasis on political debates on major incidents to illustrate how single mothers became a political constataion. In doing so, the article aims to uncover how colonial policies, post-independence political instability, government reforms, and legal frameworks have shaped family structures and women's roles in Ugandan society. Thus, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and encourages a rethinking of policy responses and social interventions.

Literature Review and Significance of the Study

The rising number of single mothers in Uganda has attracted significant scholarly attention, with researchers investigating a range of factors contributing to this demographic shift. This section presents diverse perspectives from existing literature, examining the cultural and political dimensions underlying the increasing prevalence of single motherhood in Uganda.

A predominant strand of research attributes the rise in single motherhood to cultural practices, particularly those surrounding early and forced marriages. Bantebya, Muhanguzi, and Watson (2014) conducted a detailed study on the cultural practice of compelling adolescent girls into marriage, revealing multiple motivations underpinning this phenomenon. Respondents highlighted concerns about preserving family dignity by ensuring girls marry as virgins, thereby avoiding premarital sex, which is heavily stigmatized in Ugandan society. Premarital pregnancy was regarded as taboo, leading families to encourage early marriage as a means of protecting the family's social reputation.

Furthermore, biological factors intertwined with cultural interpretations were cited; some parents marry off their daughters early due to perceptions that

their physical maturity, influenced by genetic body structure, warrants early marriage. The practice of bride price was also significant, as many parents viewed early marriage as a strategy to gain material benefits, which incentivized forced unions.

However, these marriages were often unstable and short-lived, contributing directly to the increase in single motherhood. Bantebya et al. (2014) vividly illustrated how entrenched cultural values can shape family dynamics and marital outcomes. Yet, they did not fully explore the broader socioeconomic conditions that drive parents toward such decisions, including poverty, educational limitations, or lack of alternative social safety nets. Their focus remained largely on cultural imperatives without integrating the intersecting economic pressures that compel early marriage.

Similarly, Amone (2020) investigated polygamy among the Acholi people in northern Uganda, underscoring the cultural foundations of marital arrangements which seem to have contributed to single motherhood. Polygamy was socially esteemed, with men having multiple wives perceived as symbols of wealth and status. Children born from such unions were valued both socially and economically, securing physical and food security for families in a communal land tenure context. Polygamous men's ability to establish multiple households was intertwined with land acquisition strategies, whereby constructing a hut on communal land signified ownership.

However, Amone (2020) pointed out the gendered vulnerabilities within this system. The traditionally high mortality rate among men, due to economic activities such as hunting and warfare, meant that many women became widows or single mothers. This historical pattern of male mortality inherently contributed to increased single motherhood in polygamous communities, suggesting cultural practices cannot be examined in isolation from demographic and economic realities.

Ahaisibwe (2017) extended this cultural analysis by exploring evolving family structures in central Uganda. Her findings indicated that the historically dominant family forms, including polygamy, have been challenged by shifting social norms and human behaviors. Practices once culturally unacceptable, such as teenage pregnancy, premarital pregnancy, child abuse, and domestic violence, have become more socially normalized, resulting in a broader acceptance of non-traditional family units. Consequently, single-parent families are increasingly

visible and socially recognized, often coexisting alongside polygamous households. This cultural evolution underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of family forms in Uganda today.

While many scholars emphasize cultural drivers, others argue that political factors have a more profound influence on the rise of single motherhood. Issues such as political instability and conflict further compound these issues. Nibbe (2024) details the prolonged civil wars in northern Uganda since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) ascended to power in 1986. Initiated by spiritualist movements and sustained by armed rebellion, these conflicts led to forced displacement and the establishment of government camps, severely disrupting economic life. The resulting humanitarian crises, including poor sanitation, starvation, and high mortality, caused widespread family disintegration. Many men perished or disappeared, leaving women as *de facto* heads of households. Nibbe's work underscores how political violence and displacement are critical yet often overlooked factors in the rise of single motherhood.

From the critical point of view, the above literature reveals a complex interplay of cultural and political factors influencing the increase in single motherhood in Uganda.

This review identifies a tendency in some scholarship to essentialize culture as the primary cause, sometimes neglecting the broader structural and historical contexts. Conversely, other studies expand the analytical lens to include political economy and women's agency, offering a more nuanced understanding. Therefore, since the existing literature pays less attention to historical and political incidences in relation to the increasing number of single mothers, this paper critically examines the extent to which political factors have contributed to the increasing number of single mothers in Uganda and how single mothers became a political constataion. It asks: To what extent do political forces, in conjunction with cultural practices, drive this demographic trend? Addressing this question requires an interdisciplinary approach that recognises politics as embedded within and responsive to wider societal changes.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the **feminist political economy perspective**. It provides a critical lens through which to understand the intersection of

governance, law, gender, and economic change in shaping the rise of single motherhood in Uganda.

The feminist political economy perspective situates gender relations within the broader structures of political and economic power. It interrogates how historical and contemporary governance, policy reforms, and economic systems reinforce patriarchal norms and produce gendered vulnerabilities (Folbre, 2015). The author considers that the study of single motherhood in Uganda requires a structural outcome of political instability, economic liberalization, and shifting gender roles.

There are a few rationales for why this theory is valid for the analysis of single motherhood. First, feminist political economy highlights several dynamics. It highlights how economic systems and policies are deeply gendered, emphasizing the unequal power relations that shape access to resources, labor, and decision-making. It critiques the way mainstream economics often ignores unpaid care and domestic work largely performed by women, despite its central role in sustaining economies. It also underscores how globalization, structural adjustment policies, and neoliberal reforms disproportionately disadvantage women, particularly in the Global South, by intensifying poverty and limiting social protections. At the same time, feminist political economy draws attention to women's agency, collective organizing, and resistance within economic structures, arguing that a more just and inclusive economy requires recognizing and valuing both paid and unpaid labor, challenging patriarchal institutions, and addressing the intersections of gender, class, race, and global inequality.

By using this framework, the paper shows that women's increasing role as single mothers is not only a reflection of cultural shifts but also a consequence of economic and political structures that redistribute risks and responsibilities along gendered lines.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, historical-political research design. Rather than relying on surveys or statistical modelling, the study adopted an interpretive approach, situating single motherhood within Uganda's broader

historical and political transformations.

In terms of data sources, this research relied exclusively on secondary data, which was systematically gathered from a wide range of sources to ensure both historical depth and contemporary relevance. These included:

Archival and Legal Texts: Key documents such as the Divorce Act of 1904, the Parliamentary Elections Act (2005), and the Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2009 were examined to understand how legislation has historically structured gender relations and contributed to family breakdowns.

Government and Statistical Reports: Data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024) was used to provide demographic evidence of the rising prevalence of single motherhood. This served as the quantitative backdrop against which political and legal transformations were analyzed.

Scholarly Literature: Peer-reviewed articles, books, and dissertations provided theoretical and empirical insights into cultural, political, and economic forces shaping Ugandan family life. Key contributions included works on polygamy, early marriage, colonial taxation, political violence, and neoliberal reforms (e.g., Bantebya et al., 2014; Amone, 2020; Asiimwe, 2018; Ssenyonjo, 2007).

Media and NGO Publications: Reports and journalistic accounts were incorporated to capture contemporary perspectives on political repression, women's empowerment initiatives, and grassroots responses to family disruption. Organizations such as the Single Parents Association of Uganda (SPAU) and Uganda Women's Network provided valuable contextual insights.

Reliability and Validity

To strengthen credibility, the study used **source triangulation**, drawing on multiple types of documents, legal texts, statistical reports, scholarly literature, and media accounts. This reduced the risk of bias associated with relying on a single category of evidence. Historical continuity was maintained by situating each political development within Uganda's broader trajectory of colonialism, independence, and contemporary governance. Furthermore, the study employed critical discourse analysis to interrogate the power dynamics embedded in legal texts and political debates, ensuring that findings reflected both the explicit content of policies and their implicit socio-political consequences.

Ethical Considerations

Although this research relied solely on secondary data, ethical standards were observed. All sources were properly cited, avoiding plagiarism and misrepresentation. Politically sensitive material, particularly accounts of violence and displacement, was handled with care to respect the dignity of victims. The analysis was conducted with academic neutrality, avoiding partisan bias while maintaining a critical stance on governance, gender inequality, and social justice.

1. Colonial Disruptions through judicial systems and economic policies, their impacts on family structures and single motherhood.

Political and economic policies, such as the colonial-era policies and contemporary neoliberal reforms, have significantly destabilized family structures, particularly in ways that disproportionately affect women and exacerbate the prevalence of single motherhood. Tuck (2006) critically examines the legacy of British colonial rule in Uganda, emphasizing how seemingly administrative policies, such as taxation, were wielded as tools of social engineering. One of the most illustrative examples is the introduction of the hut tax, a levy imposed on each dwelling. In a precolonial context where polygamy was both socially accepted and economically viable, each wife in a polygamous household typically resided in her own hut, maintaining a level of autonomy and fulfilling distinct familial roles. However, the hut tax imposed an economic penalty for this traditional arrangement, making it financially burdensome for men to sustain multiple households. As a direct consequence, many men were compelled to either abandon some of their wives or send them back to their natal families to reduce the tax burden. This policy, though fiscal in intent, had deep social ramifications. It fractured extended family units, weakened the economic and emotional stability of women and children, and institutionalized abandonment, thereby laying an early structural foundation for single motherhood in Uganda. Tuck's analysis reveals how colonial governance did not merely exploit local resources but also reshaped domestic life, eroding the indigenous systems of family cohesion.

The Divorce Act of 1904 and Its Impacts on Uganda's Marriage System

The *Divorce Act of 1904*, enacted during the colonial era, was one of the earliest attempts to legislate personal relationships in Uganda. However, based

on the content of the Act, it seemed to be inherently patriarchal and biased in favor of men. It codified unequal grounds for divorce, whereby men could dissolve a marriage based on a wife's adultery alone, whereas women had to prove adultery coupled with additional offences such as cruelty or desertion. This legal asymmetry entrenched gender inequality and left women legally vulnerable, often trapped in abusive or dysfunctional marriages. For those who did manage to divorce, the lack of legal protection in matters of child custody, alimony, or property division left many women as *de facto* single mothers, frequently without social or economic support.

Ssenyonjo (2007) provides a critical examination of the Divorce Act, exposing its deeply entrenched gender inequalities and colonial underpinnings that have had lasting consequences for women in Uganda. One of the sections he analyzes is Section 26, which addresses the division of property upon divorce. This section gives disproportionate power to the husband by allowing him to claim ownership of all property belonging to his wife if he wins the case. Conversely, the wife is not granted any right to claim her husband's property, even if the court rules in her favor.

Consequently, the only legal remedy available to the wife in such cases is a modest monetary fine imposed on the husband, purportedly for her upkeep. However, this fine is often negligible and fails to reflect the economic losses, emotional labor, or unpaid domestic work contributed by the wife throughout the marriage. This imbalance reinforces the economic subordination of women and leaves them financially insecure upon divorce, with little to no legal recourse for recovering matrimonial assets.

Ssenyonjo also critiques Section 3 of the Act, which mandates that a husband accusing his wife of adultery must name a co-respondent, usually the man who allegedly engaged in the affair. This co-respondent is then required by law to compensate the husband for the violation of his marital rights. This provision effectively reduces women to the status of property, where any violation of the marital contract results in financial restitution to the husband, as though damage had been done to his personal asset. Alarmingly, the Act does not afford the wife the same right: if her husband commits adultery, she is not entitled to name the woman involved nor seek compensation.

Beyond these sections, the Divorce Act's foundational flaw lies in its failure to reflect the sociocultural realities of Ugandan society. The Act, a colonial

import from the United Kingdom, was crafted with the Western legal system in mind and was designed to apply exclusively to formal civil marriages that were registered and certified by the state.

However, in Uganda, according to Isiko and Isabirye (2023), the vast majority of marriages occur under customary arrangements, especially in rural areas where access to formal legal institutions remains limited. These forms of marriage were not recognized under the Act, meaning that spouses, especially women, in such unions were denied access to legal protections in cases of separation or divorce. This exclusionary legal framework disenfranchised women in customary marriages, rendering them invisible within the formal justice system and leaving them without support in times of marital conflict.

As a result, many women found themselves forced into informal separations with no legal safety net or economic compensation. These women, often left with the sole responsibility of caring for their children, were pushed into single motherhood by default, not by choice. The state's failure to intervene or offer adequate social welfare support for these women further compounded their vulnerability. Rather than serving as a tool for justice, the Divorce Act became an instrument of marginalization, normalizing male dominance in marriage and offering no meaningful protection for women. (Amaso, 2016). The long-term consequence has been the institutionalization of inequality and the legitimization of conditions that facilitate the rise of single motherhood across Uganda. By failing to adapt to Uganda's plural legal system and by upholding patriarchal norms, the Divorce Act contributed significantly to the systemic disempowerment of women, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities.

2. Political violence and instability in the post-colonial era and its impacts on social and economic systems in relation to the increasing cases of single mothers.

Since gaining independence in 1962, Uganda's political landscape has been marked by instability, characterized by frequent coups, civil unrest, and violent regime changes. These political upheavals have had far-reaching social consequences, including a significant increase in the number of single mothers. The persistent volatility within the political environment has directly and indirectly disrupted family structures, often through the loss of male partners in armed conflicts and state-led violence.

The removal of King Muteesa II and the subsequent rise of President Milton Obote in October 1963, who governed with the backing of military force and Western allies, set a precedent for militarized political rule. Obote's regime was widely criticized for poor governance, sparking resistance movements that culminated in violent confrontations. These conflicts resulted in substantial male casualties, leaving many women widowed and solely responsible for their families.

In addition, the ascension of President Idi Amin in February 1971 further exacerbated the situation. His authoritarian leadership was marked by brutal repression and extrajudicial killings, which included a significant number of military and judicial officers who were in support of the previous government, and those who favored the rule of law, such as Ben Kiwanuka, as clearly described by Keatley (2003). Many Ugandan men who opposed or were perceived as threats to his regime were killed, thereby increasing the number of women forced into single motherhood.

Another significant conflict in Uganda's post-independence history that followed President Amin's reign was the Bush War (1981–1986), which eventually brought President Yoweri Museveni to power. This conflict, particularly the atrocities committed in the Luweero Triangle, resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Ugandans, the majority of whom were young men (Boyd, 1989).

These mass casualties left numerous women as single mothers, burdened with the responsibility of raising children alone in an environment lacking adequate social support.

Another protracted conflict with grave implications for family stability was the civil war in Northern Uganda. Initially sparked by the spiritual leader Alice Lakwena, who mobilized resistance under the belief that President Museveni would retaliate against the north for crimes associated with Obote's leadership, the conflict evolved into a long-standing insurgency under Joseph Kony, her cousin and the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) (Nibbe, 2024). According to Shackel and Fiske (2017), the total population of displaced people resulting from these conflicts was 1.84 million. The Ugandan government responded by forcibly relocating northern populations into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, a measure aimed at undermining rebel support.

However, the camps became zones of humanitarian crisis, plagued by

inadequate sanitation, limited access to food, and widespread disease. Nibbe (2024) reports that mortality rates in these camps exceeded 1,000 deaths per week, many of whom were men. The loss of male heads of households further increased the number of single mothers in the region. Additionally, Shackel and Fiske (2017) contend that displacement not only precipitated family fragmentation but also had enduring gendered consequences even among households that later reunified. Their findings indicate that many men, upon returning from the camps, turned to excessive alcohol consumption and exhibited reduced economic productivity, thereby shifting the primary burden of household provision onto women.

3. Government Policies, Laws, and Social Transformation through State and Partner Institutions and their impact on single motherhood

Economic policies

In the post-independence period, Uganda underwent a series of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and neoliberal economic reforms largely influenced by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Asimwe (2018) explores the long-term consequences of these policies, arguing that they have deepened socio-economic inequalities and destabilized familial bonds, particularly among the working and lower classes. The liberalization of markets and privatization of public services, while intended to stimulate economic growth, have often prioritized multinational corporations at the expense of local industries and subsistence economies. These reforms have exacerbated poverty, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, where the withdrawal of government support for basic services such as health, education, and agricultural subsidies has left many families economically vulnerable. For women, this vulnerability is intensified by patriarchal norms that continue to limit their access to land, capital, and employment opportunities. Asimwe identifies a direct link between this economic marginalization and the rising rates of domestic violence, marital instability, and family disintegration. Consequently, financial hardship has led to conflicts within households, with men abandoning their responsibilities due to unemployment or disillusionment. Women are then left to care for children alone, often without legal or financial support. Thus, neoliberalism has not only restructured Uganda's economy but

also undermined the sustainability of the nuclear family, particularly by increasing the burden on women, who are often forced into single parenthood as a survival strategy.

The Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2009

In response to growing criticism and advocacy from civil society, legal scholars, and gender rights activists, the *Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2009* was introduced to harmonize and modernize Uganda's fragmented matrimonial laws. The bill sought to provide a unified legal framework governing all forms of marriage, including customary, religious, and civil unions. Key provisions included equitable grounds for divorce, recognition of cohabitation and property rights, regulation of bride price, and protection of women's rights during and after marriage.

Despite its progressive intent, the *Marriage and Divorce Bill* sparked widespread controversy and failed to pass into law. Prominent religious leaders such as Pastor Martin Ssempe, Sheikh Shaban Mubaje, Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), the Roman Catholic Church, and cultural/traditional leaders such as the Bugisu cultural elders, Karamoja elders, and Lango cultural elders opposed various aspects of the bill, particularly those perceived to undermine traditional family structures or promote "Western" values. The recognition of cohabitation as a legitimate form of marriage and the outlawing of mandatory bride price were among the most hotly contested provisions.

Religious leaders strongly opposed the Marriage and Divorce Bill on two principal grounds: its recognition of cohabitation and the perceived ease of obtaining a divorce. From a religious perspective, cohabitation is contrary to the teachings that uphold formal marriage as a sacred institution. Additionally, the facilitation of divorce undermines the sanctity of marriage vows, which emphasize lifelong commitment. In most religious traditions, marriage is considered a divine union, as reflected in the belief that "what God has joined together, let no man separate." Couples pledge to remain together "for better or worse, till death do them part." As such, religious leaders viewed the bill as a direct threat to core religious doctrines and moral values, leading to widespread resistance within religious communities.

Traditional/cultural leaders also expressed significant opposition, arguing that the bill promoted Western values that conflict with indigenous cultural norms.

A particularly contentious element was the proposal to make bride price optional. In many Ugandan cultures, the bride price is not only a customary gesture of goodwill and respect but also a means of strengthening inter-family bonds. It serves both economic and symbolic functions, demonstrating the groom's commitment and securing mutual respect between families. The return of the bride price in cases of separation further acts as a deterrent to divorce, thereby promoting marital stability. Therefore, making this practice optional was perceived as an erosion of cultural identity and familial structures. Many traditionalists interpreted the bill as an attempt to replace African values with Western ideologies, which contributed to their strong opposition.

Political debates also surfaced, with several Members of Parliament questioning the bill's legitimacy based on its research methodology. Muzira (2013) notes that critics argued the bill reflected foreign interests and disproportionately represented elite and corporate women, neglecting the voices of rural and peasant women who form the majority population. These legislators claimed that the bill's framing lacked inclusivity and failed to reflect the lived realities of most Ugandan women.

Another source of contention was the bill's focus on property rights and the equitable sharing of assets upon separation. Critics argued that the bill placed excessive emphasis on material division rather than on promoting marital stability. In particular, the clause advocating equal property sharing was unpopular among male MPs, many of whom are in polygamous unions. They feared that such provisions would not align with their socio-cultural and personal interests, potentially leading to legal and financial complications. When these MPs went for consultations with their constituents, most of them did not put in efforts to ensure that their constituents clearly understood the contents of the bill, as Burgess and Campbell quoted one journalist to have said:

"It may be that male MPs deliberately spread lies and misinformation about the Bill. Perhaps the fear of the Bill emanated from the top, who used the people at the bottom, lied to them and made sure they would protest the Bill for them. Ugandan media fell for the lies and purveyed them unfiltered." (Burgess & Campbell, 2015, pp.53)

The most decisive opposition came from President Yoweri Museveni and his cabinet ministers, who publicly denounced the bill. The president contended that the legislation threatened both family cohesion and cultural traditions by

rendering the bride price optional during and after marriage. Burgess and Campbell quoted a radio broadcast report where President Museveni openly uttered how his parliament cannot pass bills that are against the will of the masses, as they quoted:

“President Museveni has vowed to block the passing of the MDB, saying that a harsh, bad or insensitive law that tramples on the fundamental human rights of citizens or affects their harmonious co-existence will never be passed by his parliament.” (Burgess & Campbell, 2015, pp.52)

He further argued that the bill’s property-sharing clauses were inadequately researched and might encourage opportunistic behavior among women. President Museveni also emphasized the absence of widespread public consensus and expressed concern over the possible societal disruptions the bill could trigger. Given the dominance of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) party in Parliament, the president’s position carried considerable influence. His public disapproval and active campaigning against the bill led to its eventual shelving.

The legislative impasse surrounding the bill has perpetuated legal uncertainty and social instability, especially for women in informal unions. The lack of legal recognition and protection for cohabiting partners means that, upon dissolution, women often lose access to marital property or child support. This vulnerability contributes significantly to the rise of single motherhood, as women are left to raise children alone, often without financial or emotional support from estranged partners. Furthermore, the bill’s failure to pass reinforces patriarchal norms that disempower women and sustain gender-based injustices in family settings.

Collectively, the *Divorce Act of 1904* and the failed *Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2009* reflect Uganda’s complex intersection of law, culture, and gender politics. While the former institutionalized inequality under colonial rule, the latter’s failure to reform existing legal gaps continues to disadvantage women and fuel the growing phenomenon of single motherhood. Legal stagnation, combined with shifting social dynamics such as urbanization, economic independence, and changing gender roles, has resulted in an increasing number of Ugandan women bearing the primary responsibility of parenthood without legal or institutional support. The continued absence of a comprehensive and gender-sensitive matrimonial legal framework, therefore, remains a critical factor contributing to the prevalence of single mothers in Uganda today.

4. The present-day political crisis, non-democratic elections and public health systems following the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on single motherhood.

The 2020–2021 presidential election period stands as a contemporary example of how political violence continues to erode family units. The government's suppression of opposition activities included the arrest, harassment, and, in some cases, extrajudicial killings of opposition figures and their supporters. A prominent incident was the fatal shooting of Yasin Kawuma, the driver of opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi (popularly known as Bobi Wine), during a by-election event in Arua. His death left behind a widow and several young children.

The broader election period from January to late February of 2021 was marked by mass arrests, the prolonged detention of political activists without trial, and widespread state violence. Ashaba and Werner (2021) argue that the government used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to restrict civil liberties and consolidate power, employing excessive force that disproportionately affected men. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant public health crisis worldwide, and Uganda responded with one of the strictest lockdowns on the African continent.

At the onset of the pandemic, the government imposed a total lockdown, suspending all economic activities and restricting movement across the country. Citizens were prohibited from leaving their homes, even to procure essential supplies, unless permitted under very limited circumstances. While these measures were intended to curb the spread of the virus, they also unveiled a profound intersection between public health policy, political authority, and social vulnerability.

For many Ugandan families, particularly those living in poverty or working in the informal sector, the lockdown brought severe economic hardship. A substantial portion of the population lacked the financial means to stockpile food and other basic necessities. Although the government promised relief aid, these efforts were marred by logistical failures and allegations of corruption, leaving many families without adequate support.

In the absence of meaningful state assistance, individuals, especially men, felt compelled to defy the restrictions in search of food and survival for their households. These attempts were often met with brutal enforcement; many men were arrested, detained without trial, or even killed by security forces.

Consequently, numerous women were left as the sole caretakers of their children, either temporarily or permanently, depending on the fate of their spouses or partners. This tragic disruption of family units played a direct role in the rising number of single mothers during and after the pandemic period.

Moreover, the government's response to the pandemic was deeply intertwined with political calculations. The lockdown created an environment in which presidential powers were expanded significantly, enabling President Museveni to consolidate control over public life. Under the pretext of public health, political gatherings were restricted, yet the enforcement of these regulations was applied selectively. While the ruling party was able to organize and conduct its political activities with minimal interference, opposition parties faced severe repression. When opposition leaders attempted to hold rallies or engage with the public, their meetings were often violently dispersed by military and police forces.

The suppression of political opposition during the pandemic had violent consequences. A particularly notable incident occurred in November 2020, when opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi (commonly known as Bobi Wine) was arrested in Arua, sparking widespread protests across Kampala and other urban centers. Security forces responded with excessive force, using live ammunition and tear gas to disperse demonstrators. The resulting violence led to the deaths of approximately 40 civilians, the majority of whom were men, according to an Al Jazeera news article. These events left many women widowed or without partners, creating yet another wave of single motherhood caused not by relationship breakdowns, but by state-sanctioned political violence.

Furthermore, opposition campaigns such as those held in Kalangala led to the arrest of more than 100 supporters, many of whom remain incarcerated years after the elections concluded. These mass arrests disproportionately affected young, politically active men, removing them from their roles as partners, fathers, and providers within their families. As a result, their female partners were left to shoulder both economic and parental responsibilities alone, often in communities already strained by poverty and insecurity.

Therefore, the link between political repression and the rise in single motherhood during this period is significant. It illustrates how state policies and political violence can have unintended yet far-reaching social consequences. The

loss or incapacitation of male partners, whether through death, imprisonment, or forced disappearance, contributed to a demographic shift in family structures. Women were not only left without emotional and financial support but also had to confront the socio-economic burdens of raising children alone in a highly uncertain and unstable environment.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of single motherhood in Uganda has evolved from being a socially condemned anomaly to a widespread reality, shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, economic, and legal forces. This study has demonstrated that the rising prevalence of single mothers cannot be explained solely by cultural norms such as polygamy and early marriage. Rather, it is deeply rooted in colonial disruptions, discriminatory legal frameworks, decades of political violence, neoliberal economic reforms, and the failure of family law reforms such as the Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2009. These dynamics reveal how governance structures, legal stagnation, and structural inequalities have converged to create conditions that normalize and reproduce single motherhood as both a survival strategy and a consequence of systemic vulnerabilities.

Importantly, political instability and state violence have created widows and fractured families, while neoliberal reforms have strained household cohesion by exacerbating poverty and unemployment. Taken together, these forces highlight that single motherhood in Uganda is not a marginal social problem but rather a manifestation of structural inequities embedded within the political economy and legal order.

Addressing the rapid increase in single motherhood, therefore, requires multidimensional and gender-sensitive policy responses. Three interlinked strategies are critical:

Empowering girls and women through education, expanding access to quality education at all levels, is essential for delaying early marriages, reducing teenage pregnancies, and enhancing women's economic opportunities. Policy efforts should prioritize keeping girls in school through targeted scholarships, menstrual health support, and community sensitization programs aimed at challenging harmful gender norms that devalue girls' education.

Expanding reproductive health services and family planning, Universal access to

comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services must be strengthened. Expanding family planning programs, increasing access to modern contraceptives, and integrating reproductive health into community health systems can reduce unplanned pregnancies that often push young women into single motherhood. These services should be coupled with nationwide awareness campaigns that engage men and communities in responsible parenting and reproductive decision-making.

Strengthening women's access to justice and legal protections; Legal reforms remain urgent. The revival and modernization of the stalled Marriage and Divorce Bill should ensure equitable property rights, recognition of cohabitation, and protection of women and children in all marital arrangements, including customary unions. In addition, the state must invest in gender-sensitive justice systems by expanding legal aid, supporting community-based dispute resolution mechanisms, and protecting women from violence and abandonment.

In conclusion, Uganda's rising number of single mothers is a political and legal issue as much as it is a cultural one. Effective policy responses must therefore go beyond moralistic and cultural narratives to address the structural conditions that perpetuate single motherhood. By prioritizing education, reproductive health, and legal reforms, Uganda can move toward not only reducing the vulnerabilities that create single mothers but also empowering women to participate fully in the nation's social and economic transformation.

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Abstract

Political Changes and Single Mothers in Uganda

Robert MUGEMA

This article critically investigates the growing phenomenon of single motherhood in Uganda, arguing that its causes extend far beyond cultural traditions to include significant political, legal, and economic transformations. While traditional explanations focus on early marriage, polygamy, and evolving gender norms, this study emphasizes the impact of colonial legacies, state-led political violence, institutional reforms, and legislative shortcomings. Drawing on Uganda's turbulent political history, from the Colonial era, post-independence conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and the COVID-19 lockdown and contested elections, the paper demonstrates how political instability, displacement, and male-targeted repression have left many women as de facto single mothers. It further explores how legal frameworks like the Divorce Act of 1904 and the stalled Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2009 institutionalize gender inequality and exacerbate family breakdowns. Additionally, the empowerment of women through state and NGO programs, while fostering independence, has unintentionally contributed to family dissolution. The article concludes with various policy recommendations such as empowering girls and women through education and training, expanding reproductive health services, and strengthening women's access to justice and legal protection.