



# USING THE MEDIA TO ADVANCE THE RIGHTS OF GIRLS AND WOMEN: **THE STORY OF A YOUNG MALE JOURNALIST**



Brian features on the Women Deliver global list of '15 journalists, 15 voices for girls and women' and is described by Women & Girls Hub as 'one of Africa's leading women rights crusaders'. He has extensively reported on and advocated for women's health and rights. He established the Brian Mutebi Dream Scholarship Fund, the first scholarship scheme in Africa for survivors of gender-based violence and teenage mothers. In 2015, he was named Commonwealth Young Achiever by the Commonwealth Youth Council UK. And for his comprehensive reporting on and advocacy for family planning and reproductive health, particularly concerning poor and vulnerable women like women living with disabilities and those in hard-to-reach areas, he won the 2016 '120 Under 40: New Generation of Family Planning Young Leaders' global contest organised by the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, U.S.A.

**M**y name is Brian Mutebi. Mine is a story of a male champion for women's rights. I have devoted a significant part of my professional life promoting gender equality and women's health rights in Uganda. I am a women's rights campaigner who, through insightful and well-researched articles in the media, have brought to national and international attention issues affecting girls and women that would otherwise be ignored. These include women and girls' education, health, and violence against women.

My work began with a real-life experience. I grew up in a community where domestic violence against women was rampant and acceptable. I witnessed first-hand the struggles teenage mothers go through when my own cousin was rejected by her own family when she conceived at age 16. She was condemned and harshly treated. Sometimes she was denied food and instead her portion was given to us, the boys. But out of compassion, my other sister and I would secretly give her a portion of our food. I wished I had my own house where I could shelter her. But I was a little boy, about nine years old. There was not much I could do.

However, later in my professional practice as a journalist, I encountered a situation that reminded me of my cousin's experience. In September 2013, at the height of the armed conflict between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) forces and the M23 rebels, Uganda witnessed a big influx of Congolese refugees. As a journalist then working with the Daily Monitor newspaper, I was invited to Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Kamwenge district, Western Uganda, by UNFPA and UNHCR to report on the settlement activities. Of the 48,718 Congolese who had fled their country into Uganda, over 70%

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of them were children, many of whom were teenage mothers. Instead of being children, many children were forced by circumstances to be mothers. Instead of books, they carried babies. I was moved.

This time, unlike when I was 9 and I helplessly watched on as my cousin sister suffered terrible consequences of becoming a teenage mother, as a journalist, I realised I could use the power of the pen to fight for their cause. First, on 26 October 2013, I published a Congolese refugee girl's letter to the UN Secretary General. In the letter, Zawadi Chantal, 13, called upon Mr Ban Ki Moon together with Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni and his Congolese counterpart, Joseph Kabila to work to bring about peace in the Congo. Then on 16th November the same year, I published a big feature story on the girls' struggles in an article, 'At Rwamwanja, girls struggle to remain girls'. I had started my advocacy for girls' and women's health and rights.

The article contributed to mounting pressure on the Congolese government to engage the M23 rebels in peace talks. This was after peace talks in Kampala had failed to yield substantial results. East African countries and UN agencies intensified efforts to bring about peace in the Congo. The UN Secretary General called on the Congolese government to engage in direct peace talks with the M23 rebels. In November, peace talks were held in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. The guns went silent.

This concretised my belief in the power of the pen, and how the media is such a powerful advocacy tool. I have since run successful advocacy campaigns in the media in Uganda highlighting the plight of women, girls and other vulnerable children. I travel to even the most remote and hostile places to pick a story I can write about if I am convinced my endeavours will bring visibility to a seemingly invisible problem. I have played a key role in highlighting issues around commemorative days like the International Day of the Girl Child, International Women's Day, Safe Motherhood Day and the International Day of the Midwife, among others. I have captured voices of women in refugee settlements; those affected by female genital mutilation, sexual violence, and between 2013 and 2015, I was at the forefront of reporting on 'Let Girls Be Girls', a campaign aimed at investing in preventing teenage pregnancy in Uganda. I have been on airwaves of over 10 radio stations, five TV stations and four newspapers in the country in addition to being active on social media. My vocation and calling is to use the pen to take up the case of girls' and women's rights.