

When Will the Rights of African Women Be Considered Human Rights?

by Joyce Nsubuga

Dans cet article, l'auteure nous raconte l'histoire d'une femme qu'elle avait engagée pour prendre soin des ses enfants après que cette dernière ait été forcée d'abandonner ses propres enfants afin de gagner sa vie. L'auteure nous parle des efforts qu'elle a fait pour retrouver ces enfants et les réunir à leur mère et, par le fait même, elle nous sensibilisent aux droits des femmes africaines.

I first met Faisi Kubonaku at a colleague's house early in 1979. As soon as my colleague opened the front door, she shouted for Faisi to come and relate all that had happened during the day while she was at work. She was asked to report on how each of the three young children had fared, including a three month old baby who had recently been diagnosed with sickle cell anemia. Did Faisi give the baby her medication? How much milk had she taken at the first feed, second feed, third feed ... and more? Had she taken the children on a walk? Had she washed all the clothes that were left in the hall way? It seemed as if the questions would never stop. Indeed they would not have stopped except that after about 20 minutes the baby cried as he awakened in pain from a sickle cell crisis.

As I was the physician in charge of pediatrics at the hospital, my colleague had asked me to come and have a look at the baby who was running a fever. When the baby cried, I asked my colleague to hurry and pick him up because, as I told her, his cry was quite shrill, and I feared cerebral in nature. This alarmed her and sent her rushing to him. The truth is that I wanted to give Faisi a break from the questions. I greeted her softly in the local dialect and thanked her for all the work she had done during the day. She was quite surprised by my approach.

I wanted to know more about the short, dark, very timid, and frightened woman who was trembling on her knees. Where did she come from? Why was she working as a house-girl at her age, which was quite advanced for this kind of occupation? Could she be like my *senga*¹ who had been in a very abusive marriage because of her infertility?

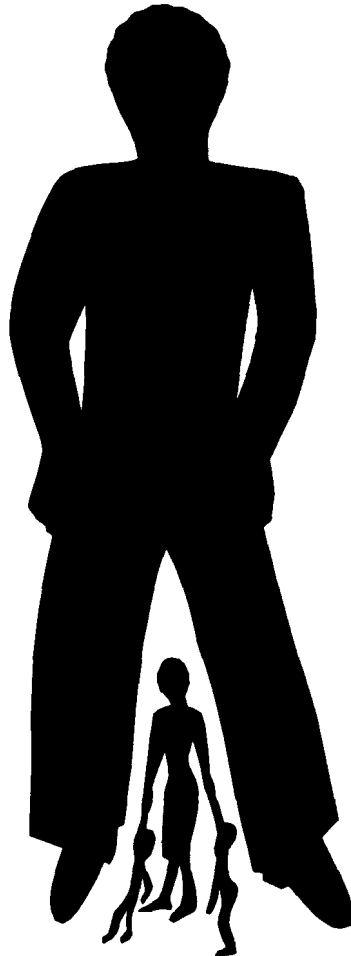
Senga had been "stolen" by her nephew from her husband and brought to stay with us early in our marriage. She had cared for our first born baby and lived with us in the main house. She shared everything we had. My *senga* was not a servant and most people who did not know our backgrounds knew her as my close relative, although we could not be relatives for we came from different tribes. Faisi could be like *senga*. How could I learn about her background? Could I help her? I resolved to try.

My colleague's anxiety disappeared after an exhaustive physical examination revealed that the baby's fever was a result of the sickle cell crisis and that his cerebral status was fine. Quite unexpectedly, she began telling me about Faisi, indicating that as she had come from deep in the village, Faisi was illiterate and could not even read street names. She was not fit to be her house-girl. Faisi never did anything well and the children were suffering at her hands. She was eating a lot of food, and did not deserve to sleep in the small servant's room at the back of the house. My colleague intended to replace her with a smarter house-girl. I ventured to ask her whether she could let me have Faisi. She said I could have her any time but she was no good and definitely, since I was a physician, my family needed someone more presentable, someone who could talk to the important visitors who came to our home.

"Maama" Faisi came to live with us in the middle of 1979. Her name has remained Maama Faisi to this day.

She became a beloved mother to my children and a sister, advisor, and very close friend to me. This is her story and that of her children, particularly, the late Cissy Namale, her oldest surviving daughter.

Faisi did not attend any school (either public or church) and was married off by her father at the age of fourteen. She had had ten pregnancies in ten years and carried eight to full term. She gave birth to her babies in the banana garden at the back of her house under the supervision of her stern mother-in-law. She had two miscarriages. Four of her newborns died during delivery and one lived only for a few hours. Three babies—Cissy Namale, David



Beverley Deutch

Lubaale, and Nabirye—"who were good and small" survived infancy and childhood. It is most likely that they had starved inside her womb and therefore easily passed through her small pelvic bones without injuries.

Faisi was considered unprofitable by all of the local community and by family standards. Due to her many and closely spaced pregnancies she was small, weak, and sickly. She could not work in the fields allotted to her by her husband. Most of her children had not lived long enough to work in her place, and she had only one son among the surviving children. Her husband abused her, beating her frequently and taunting her for her misfortunes. In the end her husband forced her to leave her children and return to her parents' home.

Faisi refused to marry another man whom her father selected. Indeed, she had no wish to get married again and go through the same experiences. With the help of her brother, she escaped from home to Jinja, the largest town in the region. Her brother coached her on how to look for domestic work and that is how she ended up at my colleague's home.

It took Faisi some weeks to believe that she could be free with me and my family and share every activity she wished. Her excuse was always that she did not eat this or that, or that she was more comfortable sitting on the cement floor than at a table. However, as time went on, especially when she observed how "African" my husband and I were, she loosened up and became a cheerful member of the family. She enjoyed playing with the children of her new "un-Europeanized" friends.² She was surprised that despite two high paying professional jobs, we were keen for Faisi to show our six- and four-year-olds how to clean the house, wash up the dishes, and do other chores.

Maama Faisi did not open up to me about her past until about four months after she came to stay with us. Talking about her marriage and her children was painful but I kept on asking. At her age, almost all the women in her tribal group would have "marriage-age" daughters (who would be, in other words, in their mid-teens). She told me her horrifying story and sadly informed me that she was not allowed to return to her husband's home to see her children.

I encouraged her to get back to the village and at least ask one of the women living there about her children's welfare. When she did, her findings were disheartening. In tears, Maama Faisi related her sad discoveries to me and my husband.

Cissy, who was the oldest, was then thirteen. Her father had already begun negotiating with his friend in the same village for his friend's son to take her in marriage. The son had money as he worked at the asbestos plant. The woman told Faisi that her husband had asked for a large dowry from the working young man. Cissy had never gone school.

David, who was eleven, had been in school for a year but his attendance was irregular as he was sickly. He was usually sent home because his father had not paid the

school fees. Nabirye who was eight at the time, was also sickly and very thin. Most likely, she would die like the other children.

I resolved to help her get the youngest child, if not all the children. My husband drove Maama Faisi to her children's home. As he was a teacher, he could ask the father for the children. No, the father said, his children would not leave him. Why, he asked, wasn't it enough that Patrick (my husband) had married Maama Faisi? The only child he would allow to go was the small and fragile Nabirye who would die anyway. Patrick and Maama Faisi brought Nabirye back with them. But neither Maama Faisi nor I could rest until the other two children were allowed to join their small sister.

After six months I decided to return to the village with Maama Faisi in a hospital van with a red cross painted on its side. I wore my white coat to add to the importance of the trip. I told Maama Faisi's husband about my search for some young people to work on one of my wards. I wondered whether he could let me take Cissy and David. I would pay them well. Moreover, they would be working for the government. Well, David was available and could go with us but Cissy had already left with her husband. She was someone's wife and he no longer had responsibility for her. My heart sank. How could he marry off a fourteen year old girl without letting her mother know?

After settling in, David related to us how his sister had gone off crying to her new husband. She was a third wife and he was much older than her. As she was the newest and youngest of the three wives, the husband decided to take Cissy to the town where he worked. In other words, she was the "job" wife. This meant working very hard to keep the husband happy, relaxed, and clean at all times. She had to keep a beautiful one-room house for her husband to entertain his friends. She had to make the local brew, *malwa*, for her husband and his friends. She had no garden and had to humbly ask her husband for money to buy everything, including food items which she could have grown herself had she lived in the village. She conceived and gave birth to a baby boy.

In December 1982, I returned home for lunch and found Maama Faisi crying. She told me that Cissy, whom we had found and visited several times, had lost her husband. We immediately made arrangements for Maama Faisi and David, who was then in school, to go to her. Cissy, at seventeen, was already a widow with a one-year-old baby. Without a husband, she had no means of support as she was not working. On the other hand she was now used to living in town and would not return to the village. She feared being forced into another marriage by her father. She decided to make it on her own.

I told Maama Faisi that we could help Cissy start over again. However, before any plans could be implemented, Patrick, my husband, was murdered in February 1983 by the Obote II regime. I was forced to flee the country with my children. Maama Faisi stayed in my home with David and Nabirye.

On learning about Cissy's death, I contacted David, who now has a diploma in agricultural mechanization, and asked him to tell me all about the sad event because we wanted to assist. This is what he wrote to me.

My elder sister, Cissy Namale, lost her child with her first husband who died while you were still here. She never got another straight man. She found a Muganda man, Mr. Mukalazi Kato of Tororo and had two children with him. Their names are Denis Mubiru aged twelve and Rita Namubiru aged ten years. She then lived with Mr. Ocho of Busia, a Mudama, and had Davis Ocho who is now eight years old. Later, she had Jofrey Kasangwa, who is now four years old, with a Mr. John Kasangwa, an army officer. Mr. Kasangwa returned to Ruanda and it is believed that he died during the fighting. At the moment, Jofrey is being cared for by Mr. John Mwesigwa, also an army officer, who was my sister's most current husband. He lives in Tororo officers mess. She died while delivering his baby.

My family has adopted Cissy's four children who will live in our home in Uganda with Maama Faisi, their grandmother. There is no question Cissy was Maama Faisi's daughter.

But, there should be many questions asked and answers must be found soon. At a minimum, answers are needed to the following questions: should African men treat their daughters as personal property to do with as they wish? Should African girls be married so young? Should African mothers not be consulted—indeed be fully involved—in decisions involving their daughters? When will all African women have access to counselling, education, and contraception? When will African girls be considered as equals with boys when it comes to education and other rights?

In all, when will the rights of African women be considered human rights?

Joyce Nsubuga is a Ugandan-Canadian who came to Canada with her family in 1984. She has a Masters degree in health sciences from the University of Toronto and works as a community health consultant with the Public Health Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Health. She works with African immigrant women in Toronto and returns to Uganda periodically to help disadvantaged women's groups organize and carry out community health projects. She was awarded the 1994 Community Award for New Immigrants by Skills for Change, a Toronto-based non-profit organization.

¹Senga is the title of a paternal aunt in local dialects.

²Most of the highly educated Ugandans adopted English ways—behaviours, attitudes, and language—in their day-to-day lives. A few, like my husband and I, continued to follow our tribal culture and traditions. Hence we remained "African" in our way of life, while many others had become "Europeanized."

SHARRON CHATTERTON

A Voice for Dolly

The mushroom shades of dawn are in the window.

You asleep, a girl sixteen,
a broken mouth now fanged
bouquet of hair, its armful
thrown against the pillow,
supine upon the bed
against the brown of skin
the bones a matchwood broken,
in the sheath.
No longer girl.

In your father's photographs,
that famous lens,
the man who reached beyond his breed,
photographer who took the race,
forgot you
leaving all your kin
to follow in the smoke.

In your father's photographs,
you are a girl,
as fragile as the deer,
all eyes, demure
a girl grown slender in the name
as tightly bred, peripheral
as at the mission school.

Pregnant at twenty two
eleven children, six now dead
and thirty years of beatings
disfiguring your head,
you count their names on broken hands,
your painted nails
lineworkers for their bread,
who hang now at the hem,
a binary alive or dead
no rhythm in the noughts
and crosses of their battery.

This hotel room holds out the years,
this sleep, necessities of day.
As I keep watch,
a daughter in the heart,
the taupes of dawn
untie the grey,
your hair a drift,
your mouth,
An Elder's mouth.

Sharron Chatterton lives in Teslin, Yukon Territory. Her poetry has been published in literary journals since the '70s.