

Yes, We Can curb accidents

Feature

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In 2007, Milly Nanyonga was a sprightly young woman in the first year of her science degree course at Makerere University.

Then disaster struck. Nanyonga was involved in a car accident, the scars of which she will live with for the rest of her life.

"After getting the accident, the doctors informed me that my legs were badly damaged and needed to be amputated," Nanyonga says, struggling to hold back tears.

She lost both legs, and a whole year of her studies. According to the police, road accidents claim over 2,000 lives in Uganda annually. This is equivalent to 34 sixty-seater buses full of people crashing with not a single survivor. It is estimated that 32 people out of every 100,000 Ugandans get injured annually in road accidents, making Uganda's road network one of the most unsafe in the world.

However, there isn't always much attention paid to preventing accidents or aiding victims. Usually officials talk tough after a major crash, but the words seem to get forgotten almost as soon as the victims are buried. The Yes We Can Alliance (YWC), formed in 2008, is one NGO that has been trying to draw attention to road safety. YWC offers free training to drivers and traffic police officers, sensitizes the public and provides counselling and even financial support to deserving victims.

One recent campaign at Kawolo hospital in Buikwe district aimed at sensitizing the public about their responsibilities to help avoid accidents and support victims. In attendance were local residents, medical staff, patients, police and political leaders, among others. It was before this gathering that the wheelchair-bound Nanyonga narrated her heart-wrenching story. She was introduced to the meeting by Brian Mugabi Iga, YWC's executive director, who urged the government to always deliver what it promises.

On learning that the government had committed some money for renovating Kawolo hospital, Iga said the official had got their priorities upside down.

"How can a government start painting the hospital when it lacks vital necessities like the stretchers, surgical gloves, and bandages?" he said.

Iga argues that in a bid to reduce accidents, reckless motorists should lose their driving permits.

"Giving them fines isn't enough because the person can pay the fine and [walk free], only for you later to hear that the same person has caused an accident ahead," he said.

District Police Commander Carolyn Akoth blamed most accidents on drivers and careless boda boda riders.

"They are always impatient and don't want to follow their lanes," she said. "They also have a tendency of signalling to one another in a way of informing them that traffic officers are a head, but this is bad."

The officer had just told of how Lugazi's accident rates had fallen, when three accident victims were brought in from different spots – a man who identified himself as Derrick Muwanguzi and a boy and a woman who were unconscious. At the end of the event, Kawolo's patients smiled as they received consumables like bread, juice and mineral water from YWC's Iga.

Such help comes in handy especially to recuperating people. But after the hospital, some accident victims, like Milly Nanyonga, can face more serious challenges. Nanyonga eventually returned to school and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mathematics and computer science, but struggled to find work.

"Wherever I went to apply for a job, they couldn't give me, maybe because I am lame," said Nanyonga, who moves with YWC, giving hope to survivors.

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