

Introduction to Helen Kanzira Lecture
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The Helen Kanzira Lecture is an annual lecture on sexual and reproductive rights in Africa, held within the framework of a consortium of 13 African universities that present the Master's programme in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa (HRDA). The University of Pretoria, where I am based with the Centre for Human Rights, and the University of Nairobi – this year's hosting institution – are part of this network, which stretches from Ethiopia (Addis Ababa University) in the east to Senegal (Universite Gaston Berger) in the west.

Helen Kanzira was a graduate of the HRDA programme. She studied towards and obtained the degree in 2000, the first year the programme was presented. This makes her one of the 'pioneers' -- the first of a group of around 30 bright African minds, that would over the next 21 years grow into a formidable network of human rights professionals making a difference across Africa, and internationally.

After completing the programme, Helen returned to Uganda, where she applied her knowledge and skills to advance human rights. Sadly, and far too early, she passed away in 2007, due to complications from child birth. While we then and now mourn her untimely loss, we honour her memory – her vibrancy and humanity -- through this lecture.

The inaugural Helen Kanzira Lecture was held in Pretoria, at the UP, in 2011. After three years of taking place in Pretoria, the hosting of the lecture started rotating among the HRDA partners. Over the last decade, it had taken place in West Africa (Ghana (2016), University of Lagos, Nigeria (2020)), in Southern Africa (Eduardo Mondlane Mozambique (2017) and University of Venda, South Africa (2018)), and in Uganda (Makerere University), in East Africa, the region to which it now – in online format – returns.

With an annual theme focused on a contemporary aspect of women's sexual and reproductive rights, Annually, the lecture provides an opportunity for taking stock, for reflection, and to set priorities. It is a constant reminder – a recurring wake-up call – that maternal mortality can almost always be prevented; and that women's sexual and reproductive rights should be prioritised in policy making and implementation.

We should recognise that much has been achieved since Helen completed her studies in 2000. The maternal mortality rate – the number of deaths per 100,000 births – in Sub-Saharan Africa has decreased from around 870 at that time (2000) to around 530 in 2017. But this is still far below the aim of 70 set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3). On the normative plane, many advances have also been made, particularly in Africa. The Maputo Protocol – with its clear commitment to sexual and reproductive health rights in article 14 -- was adopted in 2003 and entered into force in 2005. Today, 42 states are party to the Protocol. Having ratified it in 2020, Kenya is among these states. Article 14 of the Protocol became the basis for the first two General Comments adopted by the African

Commission on Human Peoples' Rights. The Commission also in 2008 took the important step of adopting a resolution on maternal mortality, highlighting the urgent need for state action and accountability. Notably, this resolution precedes – and influenced -- the adoption of a similarly focused resolution by the UN Human Rights Council, in 2009.

We have been privileged and honoured that seasoned experts in the field have over the years been able to present this lecture. Retired President of Ireland and High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson gave the first lecture. She was followed by Dr Navi Pillay, another former High Commissioner for Human Rights (in 2012). Other lecturers include the First Lady of Mozambique, Dr Isuara Nyusi, and the President of the South African Supreme Court of Appeal, Justice Mandisa Maya.

To the Dean of the School of Law, University of Nairobi, and her team: Thank you for taking the initiative of hosting this year's Lecture, and for your dedicated professionalism in setting it up. The theme on which the Lecture focuses is indeed very relevant and timely. We very much look forward to this, the 2021 Helen Kanzira Lecture.