"Ensuring Democracy & Social Justice in the World of Work"

PLA

PLATFORM FOR LABOUR ACTION

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A LEGACY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, ONE CASE AT A TIME

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When Shafic left the streets for a hairdressing course, he wasn't just learning a trade—he was reclaiming his future. For years, he had survived on scraps and informal jobs, part of the invisible army of child labourers in Uganda. Then he met the team from Platform for Labour Action Uganda (PLA). After receiving vocational training and mentorship, Shafic opened his own chair in a community salon. Today, he not only supports his siblings, he commands a quiet respect in his neighbourhood. He is one of thousands of lives changed by an organisation that believes justice is not a luxury, but a right— lives like Sharon's, a young girl who went from washing clothes for survival to running her own tailoring business.

Founded in 2000 by three women lawyers moved by the silent suffering of domestic workers, PLA has grown into a high-impact organisation that would go on to transform communities, restoring dignity, rights, and hope where none had been before. Its work lies at the intersection of legal aid, livelihood, and human dignity.

For 25 years, PLA has quietly built one of Uganda's most consistent and community-rooted responses to exploitation, child labour, and income injustice. Its focus? The people most likely to be left behind—domestic workers, casual labourers, children in gold mines, street vendors, and market women. Early on, PLA made its mark by offering legal aid to women workers and partnering with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to conduct Uganda's first major study on domestic child labour. By 2003, the organisation had joined the National Steering Committee on the Elimination of Child Labour, working closely with the Ugandan government to develop frameworks to shape the national child protection policy.

As the years progressed, so too did PLA's scope. From offering legal aid to domestic workers, PLA evolved into a multi-dimensional organisation that merges social justice with empowerment. Recognising that people needed more than court victories, PLA introduced vocational skilling and financial training into its programming. As one founder, Ms Lilian Keene Mugerwa, puts it, *"If you're offering work around vulnerability and human rights, you need to know that human rights won't put food on the table. Your programme is likely not to succeed, or be sustainable, if you don't have an economic or livelihood component built into it."*

Between 2014 and 2023, PLA supported more than 57,000 individuals to claim their rights and recovered over UGX 2.98 billion (approx. $800,000) in unpaid wages, compensation, and property claims. In the last 5 years alone, PLA has supported over 1,700 people— many of them children withdrawn from labour — to acquire vocational skills like hairdressing, tailoring, and soap making. At least 650 vulnerable children were kept in school through tuition support and scholarly materials.

Impressive as they are, the numbers only tell part of the story. The heart of PLA's work beats in places where no one is watching: in a rural mediation meeting where a widow reclaims land lost to corruption; in a dusty trading centre where a market vendor trained by PLA is elected to represent her peers; in the silent relief of a child allowed to return to school.

Jane Ochan, a retired teacher, recovered her unpaid pension with PLA's help and started a business. Isaac Atim, once cheated of his salary, used his recovery to open an agro-supply shop. In markets, women found agency through PLA's leadership training, and one widow reclaimed her land after 37 years, thanks to a PLA mediation team. This blend of justice and restoration is what makes PLA's model powerful: it moves people from survival to self-reliance.

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In a country where policy change is often slow and donor cycles unreliable, PLA has quietly shaped national conversations. For instance, PLA helped bring Uganda's Industrial Court back into operation. It championed labour amendments that now allow mid-term access to pension savings for workers above 45, and contributed to reforms that recognise domestic workers and casual labourers in Uganda's Employment Act. Its research on the domestic work sector now informs government policy.

When Uganda signed a bilateral labour agreement with Saudi Arabia that risked undermining worker protections, it was PLA that publicly questioned the terms, forcing the government and media to pay attention. When civic space shrank and funding became volatile, PLA leaned on the credibility it had built in communities to continue delivering vital services with less. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many services ground to a halt, PLA pivoted to radio and mobile outreach to educate and protect migrant workers from human trafficking. It has endured funding losses, government indifference, and regulatory delays— and kept showing up.

Its most enduring legacy, however, is its ability to listen. Most of its programmes are shaped by the lived experiences of its clients. From business coaching for legal aid beneficiaries to forming Uganda's first Domestic Workers Association, PLA has shown what happens when development is not delivered to people, but built with them.

Now, as the organisation celebrates its silver jubilee and looks forward to a golden jubilee, PLA aspires to scale its impact and strengthen its community structures for sustained transformation. In the words of its Executive Director, Grace Mukwaya, *"When PLA turns 50, I want it to stand as a living institution—not just an organisation that responded to labour issues, but one that redefined what justice means for the working poor. Whether I'm here or not, the work must continue being rooted in the spirit of fairness, dignity, and courage that built it. Our task now is not just to do the work, but to make it visible."*

PLA deserves greater support for its work. The needs are immense. There are still many children working in mines, and millions of workers are still denied pay, voice, and recourse. In Shafic's story, and thousands like him, we see not just recovery, but reinvention. We see what justice can look like when it's local, patient, and deeply human. And we are reminded that with the right kind of support, small organisations can leave large footprints—footprints wide enough to carry dreams like Sharon's, who now sews not just clothes, but hope into her community.

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