

Hon. Tumwebaze Frank Kagyigyi  
Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development  
Hon. Peace Regis Mutuuzo  
Minister of State for Gender and Culture

Plot 2, Simbamanyo House  
P.O.Box 7136 George Street  
Kampala, Uganda

Hon. Gen. Jeje Odongo  
Minister of Internal Affairs

Plot 75, Jinja Road  
P.O. Box 7165 / 7191  
Kampala, Uganda

**Re: Harassment and Investigation against Oscar Ssenyonga and LGBTQI+ Artists in Uganda**

Dear Mr. Kagyigyi, Hon. Mutuuzo, and Hon. Odongo,

PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) and Freemuse call upon the Ugandan government to drop all ongoing investigations against dancer and choreographer Oscar Ssenyonga for organizing the *Tuzinne Festival: Where Human Rights Dance* on 15 November 2019 at the National Theatre, as well as to revoke the media ban against Mr. Ssenyonga and to drop any potential investigations against the 70+ other performers at the Festival.

We condemn the use of excessive force, including the use of teargas and beatings, by members of the Ugandan Metropolitan Police during the raid and the confiscation and destruction of performers' equipment. We believe that the event and its organizers were targeted because of their peaceful participation and organization of a cultural event, hosting dances and a fashion show that authorities claim "promote perverse behavior" because it featured LGBTQI+ performers.

According to attendees, participants, and the festival's organizers, the *Tuzinne Festival* was raided and shut down, with many performers physically attacked, by Ugandan police despite the fact that no one violated any laws or regulations. The wholly unfounded attacks specifically targeted the festival's fashion show, which featured trans women models. For the past three years, the *Tuzinne Festival* has provided a platform for traditional and contemporary dancers in Uganda and across Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as LGBTQI+ and/or disabled dancers, a stage to perform their work.

ARC and Freemuse are also concerned by reports that the Ugandan Communications Commission issued a letter on 6 January 2020 threatening to cancel and withdraw official licenses from any media channels and stations and local bloggers that interview Mr. Ssenyonga or host him for any public gathering. Mr. Ssenyonga, the Artistic Director of the *Tuzinne Festival* and Managing Director of Mambya Dance Company, is an accomplished dancer and choreographer who empowers Ugandan dancers and trains young entrepreneurs in the field of performing and visual art.

This is the first time the *Tuzinne Festival* has been targeted, but it comes at a time of heightened threats against both freedom of expression and LGBTQI+ rights in the country. Ugandan authorities have cracked down on the LGBTQI+ community, particularly ramping up in October 2019 after the Ethics and Integrity Minister Simon Lokodo said that parliament [planned](#) to introduce a bill criminalizing the “promotion and recruitment by gay people.” Although the bill was ultimately dropped, police have on several occasions targeted LGBTQI+ activists. In October, police arrested 16 activists from Let’s Walk Uganda, an organization that works to empower LGBTQI+ youth. Days before the *Tuzinne Festival*, police [raided](#) Ram Bar, a well-known LGBTQI+-friendly bar. These threats have only continued under the guise of public health concerns; on 29 March, Frank Mugisha, Executive Director of Sexual Minorities Uganda [reported](#) that 20 members of the LGBTQI+ community were detained after Ugandan police raided their shelter, accusing the individuals of “violating coronavirus-related social distancing measures.”

Freedom of artistic expression and the rights to cultural life and equal treatment are crucial components of a functioning and vibrant society. They are protected under the Constitution of Uganda, which states that “every person shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression” and “every person shall have the right to culture and similar rights.” Additionally, cultural and artistic freedom is guaranteed under articles 9 and 17 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, articles 19 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, all of which Uganda are party to.

Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) at PEN America and Freemuse call upon the Ugandan authorities to immediately drop all investigations against Oscar Ssenyonga and the other *Tuzinne Festival* performers and to revoke the media ban against Mr. Ssenyonga. The Ugandan government must uphold and promote the human right to freedom of expression to enable artists like Oscar Ssenyonga to create art without fear.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Artists at Risk Connection  
PEN America

Freemuse