

# **Breakdance Research Spotlights Girls' Role in Uganda's Hip-Hop Movement**

## **Female breakdancers challenge gender stereotypes, study finds**

A new study by Dr. Mabingo Afladaniels, Head of the Department of Performing Arts and Film, has revealed the significant yet often overlooked role of female breakdancers in Uganda's growing hip-hop culture, challenging long-held perceptions that the physically demanding dance form is exclusively male.

The study, titled "Shifting Marginalities, Decentering Breakdance Masculinities: B-Girls in Breakdance Scenes in Kampala City," examines how girls and young women have navigated and reshaped spaces traditionally dominated by men within Uganda's breakdance community.

Speaking in an interview about the research, Dr. Mabingo said the study was motivated by the limited visibility of female voices in both the history and scholarship of breakdance despite their contribution to the dance form's development.

"Female voices are not as visible when you track the history of breakdance," he said. "My research sought to create a platform where the world would come to know and understand the place of female members of our society within dance forms such as breakdance."

## **Research explores girls' participation in breakdance**

According to Dr. Mabingo, breakdance emerged from the broader hip-hop movement that developed among disadvantaged youth in New York's Bronx borough in the 1970s. While the dance style eventually spread globally, including to Uganda, women's contributions have largely remained underrepresented.

The study focused on female breakdancers in Kampala and examined how they negotiate social and cultural stereotypes that often characterize breakdance as a masculine activity because of its physically demanding moves, including freezes, power moves, top rock and down rock.

The research found that female dancers have successfully challenged these perceptions and established themselves as equal contributors to the dance form.

## **Nsambya Youth Sharing Centre identified as hub of Uganda's breakdance movement**

A significant part of the research was conducted at Nsambya Youth Sharing Centre, which has served as a focal point for Uganda's breakdance movement since the early 2000s.

Dr. Mabingo said the centre became the home of Breakdance Project Uganda, a youth-led initiative that helped popularize breakdance among young people from Kampala's urban and peri-urban communities, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The facility provided a space where young people could practice breakdance, graffiti, emceeing and other elements of hip-hop culture.

“It became a movement,” Dr. Mabingo said. “There is a very strong historical link between the proliferation of breakdance in Uganda and East Africa and the Nsambya Youth Sharing Centre.”

### **Study highlights identity, leadership and social impact**

Among the key findings, the study established that female breakdancers strongly identify themselves as legitimate breakdance practitioners and reject the notion that they belong on the margins of the art form.

The research also found that breakdance has empowered female dancers to use their bodies as tools of creativity and innovation while challenging restrictive gender norms.

Dr. Mabingo noted that many participants described breakdance as instrumental in their personal growth and leadership development.

The study further revealed that female breakdancers often undertake additional personal training and self-directed learning to improve their skills, demonstrating a high level of commitment to the art form.

Researchers also found that many of the dancers have extended their influence beyond performance spaces by working with prisons, orphanages, disadvantaged youth and communities recovering from conflict.

### **Research calls for greater recognition of arts in policy and education**

Dr. Mabingo said the findings carry important implications for both policymakers and educators.

He argued that creative arts remain underrepresented in policy discussions despite their growing contribution to youth development, employment and community transformation.

“We need a pivot towards centering the arts and leveraging the power of the arts to contribute to our transformation,” he said.

The researcher also expressed concern over the growing emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at the expense of creative disciplines.

While acknowledging the importance of STEM education, he argued that arts education is equally vital in shaping identity, culture and social cohesion.

“A science society without music and art is a society without a pulse,” he said.

### **More research needed on creative arts and urban development**

The study also points to opportunities for future research on urban youth culture, creativity and economic transformation.

Dr. Mabingo called for more interdisciplinary studies linking the arts with urbanization, youth culture and social change, as well as quantitative research to measure the economic contribution of the creative sector.

He noted that Uganda's creative ecosystem supports a wide range of livelihoods, including performers, promoters, designers, venue managers and event organizers, yet little statistical data exists to demonstrate its full economic impact.

Beyond policy and academia, Dr. Mabingo emphasized the need to involve artists and practitioners in decision-making processes.

He argued that practitioners possess valuable experiential knowledge that is often overlooked in research, planning and policy formulation.

"We need to involve people who experience things because they understand the needs and conditions on the ground," he said.

### **Self-funded project reflects long-term commitment**

Dr. Mabingo disclosed that the research was self-funded and began in 2016 while he was pursuing doctoral studies.

He said he personally financed fieldwork over several years, driven by a desire to document emerging urban youth cultures that were receiving little scholarly attention.

The publication on female breakdancers is the second major output from the broader research project and has since informed additional studies examining the relationship between art, urbanity and culture in Uganda.

The researcher said the project has expanded his own academic interests beyond dance education into broader areas of gender, urban culture and artistic practice, while contributing new knowledge about the role of women in Uganda's evolving breakdance scene.

**By Jane Anyango, Peninah Nalubega and Andrew Twahirwa**