

LANGUAGE VARIANCES IN DEFINING YOUNG WOMEN IN NORTHERN UGANDA HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

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Abstract: This paper, which focuses on formerly displaced communities in post-conflict northern Uganda, discusses the variance between the way formal institutions view young women’s identities and how young women see themselves. Based on a qualitative study that used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, findings indicate that the infantilizing and victimizing language adopted by these institutions does not reflect the identities of young women in the post-conflict setting. These women argue that terminology such as “child mother” and “child soldier” is disempowering, denying them the prestige of adulthood yet disassociating them from childhood. The intersecting nature of their perceived identities hinders their access to humanitarian assistance targeted specifically to children or adults, since they are not recognized as clearly belonging to either group. The use of the term “child mother” effectively penalizes young women for engaging in adult (sexual) behaviour, while denying them the adult status that mothers are normally accorded. This article argues that sustainable post-conflict reconstruction, with efficient access to and use of humanitarian assistance, demands insitutional adoption of contextually inclusive language that recognizes young women’s professed identities and is reflective of local experiences and realities.

Keywords: Uganda, language, identity, intersectionality, humanitarian assistance, child mother, peace building

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Since gaining independence in 1962, Uganda has been engulfed in a series of violent conflicts (Mutibwa, 1992). The northern region of Uganda has been characterized by civil war involving various rebel groups since 1986, leading to chronic poverty, disease, and high HIV infection rates, and poor social services in the areas of education, health, and infrastructure development (Mulumba & Namuggala, 2014). The more than two decades of armed civil violence under the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against the government of Uganda that began in 1987 were especially destructive (Dolan, 2009). The LRA rebellion has been characterized by extreme human rights violations in the form of sexual abuse and physical torture, as well as economic and psychological trauma. Unlike the earlier episodes of civil unrest that plagued Uganda into the 1980s, this rebellion was exceptional in that it strategically targeted the civilian population (Dolan, 2009), the majority of whom were women and children (Machel, 2000). In order for the government to ensure the protection and security of the civilian population, much of the local population — over 1.8 million people (IDMC, 2012) — were confined to displacement camps. The war and eventual displacement disrupted social norms and exacerbated gender inequality (Kinyanda, 2010).

Following the declaration by the president of Uganda of a post-conflict phase in 2008, internally displaced persons (IDPs) — such as former rebel recruits and abductees — began returning home. While this has been a continuous process, most IDPs had returned home by 2012. The government of Uganda recognized that resettlement processes need to be based on principles of social justice and gender equality. Implementation, however, has not always reflected these principles. Although it is a well-known global challenge, violence against women and girls is more pervasive in traditional societies where it is shrouded in patriarchal ideologies and hence may be seen as socially acceptable, especially in situations of war and displacement.

Forced displacement is a critical contemporary worldwide issue, the impact of which affects all the United Nations sustainable development goals¹ (SDGs). Globally, by 2015, there were an estimated 38 million IDPs (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2016). Forced displacement is closely linked to armed conflict within states. It is more prevalent in the global South, especially Africa, than elsewhere. Africa hosts at least 20.3 million forcibly displaced persons (6.3 million refugees and 14 million IDPs; Abebe, 2019). Besides IDPs, armed conflict results in local, regional, and global disturbances engendering violations of basic human rights (Dolan, 2009); crucially for this study, these include sexual and gender-based violence.

¹The SDGs are: (1) no poverty, (2) zero hunger, (3) good health and well-being, (4) quality education, (5) gender equality, (6) clean water and sanitation, (7) affordable and clean energy, (8) decent work and economic growth, (9) industry, innovation, and infrastructure, (10) reduced inequalities, (11) sustainable cities and communities, (12) responsible consumption and production, (13) climate action, (14) life below water, (15) life on land, (16) peace, justice, and strong institutions, and (17) partnerships for the goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).

Most displaced people live in global regions with the highest levels of poverty and inequality (IDMC, 2016), whilst protracted displacement has become the norm in many areas suffering sustained conflict, with some existing in a cycle of perpetual crisis (Zetter, 2014). Forced displacement continues to steal the childhoods of millions of Africans; as has been seen in Syria, the presence of such conflict can potentially result in a “lost generation” (Relief Web, 2013). In such situations, violence in all its forms is normalized, if not explicitly condoned (Bukuluki, 2013).

Child labour, defined by the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour [IPEC] as “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development”² (IPEC, 2019, para. 2), is ubiquitous in conflict situations. Young people have been conceptualized doubly as the primary victims of, and as actors in, the LRA rebellion (Cheney, 2007; Dolan, 2009).

A key challenge for young people in Africa, and Uganda specifically, is unemployment. Uganda’s national unemployment rate is estimated at 9.2%, while the youth (18–30 years) unemployment rate is 13.3% (Kempner, 2020). Unemployment is always worse in war-torn regions due to the breakdown of infrastructure and services (UNCDF, 2021). The literature further demonstrates that there is a generational variance in the understanding and appreciation of employment: while the older generation tends to take a pre-conflict perspective that acknowledges as work only certain types of labour, such as agriculture and communally beneficial activities, the younger generation has different notions (Namuggala, 2017). Some young people are engaged in work (e.g., sex work, sports betting, dancing for pay) that has traditionally been despised as immoral and disrespectful, if not outright criminal (Namuggala, 2017). As a result of the differentiated constructions, both the older generation and the formal institutions have framed these youth as lazy and idle (Namuggala, 2017).

While communities encounter numerous challenges in reintegrating IDPs due to the breakdown of social structures and the loss of former sources of livelihood, the challenges are exacerbated by some of the terminology adopted in the post-conflict phase, especially as used by the humanitarian agencies working to help communities resettle (Book, 2020; Greene et al., 2017). Young women, given their gender and age, face unique challenges and, for those with children, the agencies’ use of language has been particularly discomfiting by undermining their sense of belonging to the adult category of mothers. Such terminology further blames young women for engaging in sexual behaviour — traditionally an adult domain — and thus creates a sense of shame in them. In northern Uganda, sexual violence resulted in rape, early pregnancies, and early and forced marriages, giving rise to the widespread use of terms like “child marriage”, “child-headed household”, “child mother”, and “young mother”, which in themselves have had a negative impact on the lives of young people.

² Note that IPEC’s definition specifically exempts many contexts of child employment that are viewed as benign, such as helping out in the family business.

This paper elaborates on how the vocabulary used in the process of accessing humanitarian aid and assistance contributes to and exacerbates gender-based violence. We therefore recommend use of more inclusive, and less victimizing and stigmatizing, language.

Language and Identity Formation

While the entire civilian population of northern Uganda was affected by the war, children and young people were among the most directly affected, as rebels targeted them for abduction and recruitment (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2013). Consequently, more than 25,000 children (both girls and boys) were abducted to serve in the LRA (Buss et al., 2014). Young girls were kept as servants to be forcibly married as remuneration to those with rank within the rebel group (Beber & Blattman, 2010).

We argue that the language adopted in post-conflict humanitarian frameworks exacerbates the existing marginalization of these young people. This paper engages the perspective that motherhood is a marker of adulthood. Language plays a key role in defining people's identity. It can contribute, for instance, to forging or breaking social ties (Dieckhoff, 2004). Belonging to particular groups can create a sense of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel, 1979). As such, one's identity may be reconstructed in relation to other members of society (Norris, 2007). As young women in northern Uganda forge an identity, it is unsurprising that they resist, and work to decolonize, key concepts advanced by reconstruction programs that only minimally reflect the lived experiences of the local population.

Various conceptualizations have been adopted to characterize children and distinguish them from adults (Huntington & Scott, 2020). Due to social construction, children have been conceptualized as vulnerable and thus in need of constant protection and guidance by their elders (Cheney, 2007; Liebel, 2012). These understandings, however, sometimes contradict or misrepresent local realities and experiences. Consequently, they are perceived negatively as offensive and degrading by those to whom they are applied. The mismatch between social constructions of children and how young people perceive themselves is worse in war-affected areas (Namuggala, 2018).

Who Are the Young People?

The phrase “young people” in this paper refers to both children and youth. There is however, variance and contestation when it comes to the terms in which youth should be defined. For the United Nations, a youth is a person aged between 15 and 24 years³; for the African Union, the range is 15 to 35 years⁴; in Uganda, it is 18 to 30 years (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2017). While these numeric definitions provide a starting point for categorizing young people, they are limited in multiple ways. First, the adoption of a numeric definition is largely anchored in the dominant Western mindset (Namuggala, 2018), which downplays the role of sociocultural

³<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>

⁴https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033_-_african_youth_charter_e.pdf, p. 3.

perspectives reflected in functionality and relationality (Morrow, 2011). In the global South, there are also challenges relating to issuance of birth certificates; for instance, due to experiences like conflict and displacement, some individuals are unaware of or pay no attention to their birth date (Morrow, 2013; Namuggala, 2018). This paper instead adopts a holistic approach that encompasses all these criteria for assessing development (age, functionality, and relationality) to conceptualize young people as comprising both those who self-identify as young people and those society identifies as young people. While experiences of all young people in situations of distress are worthy of attention, this paper is particularly centred on young women in northern Uganda's post conflict reconstruction.

Girlhood in Post-Conflict Situations

Girlhood is a cross-cultural construct that is shaped by race, class, ability, sexuality, and settler society contexts (Jiwani et al., 2006). Young women's resistance to the concepts imposed by reconstruction programs is expressed in the language they adopt regarding their identity formation in post-conflict reconstruction. Identity formation is a complex and dynamic process URHthat can be disrupted by destructive factors, such as violence against women and girls — a globally acknowledged problem (Green, 2018). Even post-conflict, complex brutal cultures of violence against women and girls persist. We contend that even when the intent is to minimize such violence, the language adopted by restoration programs can end up reinforcing discrimination against young women and girls. It is critical to note that degrading language of the type that fails to accord young women any social status and privilege is socially constructed, accepted, reinforced, and propagated since it is engraved in normalized patriarchal structures. Women often internalize such constructions and sometimes are complicit in such violence and labelling; for instance, women sometimes encourage early and forced marriages (UBOS & ICF, 2018, pp. 71–72; UNICEF, 2015, pp. 47–49). Men who internalize such constructions demand that women comply with them. Young women, however, in post-conflict settings in northern Uganda have established a new wave that resists such construction by deconstructing linguistic usages that infantilize them and downplay their agency. Such resistance is informal and unstructured, but nevertheless widely practised by young people; it is seen, for instance, in their disregard of programs that use stigmatizing language.

Understanding the ways that girls contribute towards their own self-identification and empowerment requires both interrogating conventional and dominant ways of knowing and knowledge and acknowledging girls as valid knowers who can efficiently define themselves based on their everyday lived realities. It is thus important to rethink what constitutes girlhood (Palacios, 2019), especially in situations of distress like forced displacement, encampment, return, and resettlement. Girlhood in situations of distress stretches beyond gender and age to reflect interconnectedness with marital status as well as with motherhood, level of education, and social justice systems.

Girlhood and Agency

Young people — especially young women — are faced with several challenges as the discussion above reveals; however, they continue to shape the social environments in which they reside. They can reconfigure exclusion into inclusion (Christiansen et al., 2006). This paper demonstrates how young women contribute to defining their lived realities through deconstructing homogenizing language and representation. Such language depicts young mothers as no more than victims in need of help; they are further presented as having low levels of morality and integrity.

Agency can be expressed in different forms, ranging from bargaining and negotiation through deception and manipulation to outright resistance (Kabeer, 1999). This article concentrates on agency that emerges from a context of group-based oppression (Abrams, 1999) — agency expressed in the form of resistance and defiance that young women adopt to challenge the terminology used by reconstruction programs. We particularly draw on critical consciousness and consider both individuals' awareness of their own status and the strategies they advance to positively change their lived reality. Critical consciousness further involves resistance against oppressive social and political structures as a step to advancing status (O'Hara & Clement, 2018). In northern Uganda, one way the oppressive structure is constructed and manifested is through the use of language.

Sexual Desire and Pleasure

In northern Uganda, under the guise of protection, social structures including humanitarian agencies have stigmatized and thus problematized adolescent girls' sexual activity, pleasure, and desire, framing young women who are sexually active as “morally decayed” and so a problem to society (Logie et al., 2021). Both social policy, which preaches abstinence, and law deter sexual activity among young people (de Haas et al., 2017). Since young women are socially expected to be sexually inactive, their access to and use of reproductive health information and services is not facilitated; they have difficulty accessing reproductive health services involving birth control measures, including condoms, since birth control is viewed as pertaining only to married couples (de Haas et al., 2017). While Ugandan social mores, influenced by religion and culture, generally regard abstinence as the ideal, it is an unrealistic one for girls born into situations of displacement, since the majority have been exposed to sexual encounters early in life (Namuggala, 2018) in the form of rape and defilement or through following sex-based strategies for survival such as sex work and early marriage (Mulumba & Namuggala, 2014). In the post-conflict setting, where social standards and expectations relating to abstinence exist, but are in practice unattainable, young adults indulge in sex secretly, which limits their informed decision-making. In many cases, the fact of sexual activity comes to light only when a resulting pregnancy forces the choice of motherhood or abortion. Since abortion is in most circumstances a crime in Uganda (The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, ch. 4, art. 22), most young women carry their pregnancies to term and are described as “child mothers”. Those young women who do attempt abortion generally use unsafe methods with a high risk of health complications (Namuggala, 2009).

The terminology adopted by humanitarian agencies, especially “child mother”, emphasizes the unique position that young mothers occupy as well as their roles and responsibilities in challenging social environments. It is the consequences of this intersectional position, which denies young mothers a place in either the adult or child categories, that young women resist.

This paper problematizes some terminology used to describe young women in northern Uganda. However, due to the paucity of available vocabulary, we ourselves continue to use “girls” to refer to young women throughout the paper, albeit with a clear understanding of its limitations to the context under study. In the paper, unless otherwise stated, “girls” refers to “emancipated” young women in the study area.

Methodology

This article draws on a larger qualitative cross-sectional study (unpublished) conducted in 2018 in the Soroti district of northeastern Uganda: specifically, in Soroti municipality (urban) and Soroti county (rural). In Soroti municipality, the northern division was considered, focusing on the Kichinjaji and Usuk cells. For Soroti county, Katine, Tubur, and Arapai subcounties were considered. The study explored conflict-related sexual violence among young people in post-conflict situations who lived among the returned communities; it included both males and females who self-identified as young people, irrespective of their numeric age. The participants for the larger study were purposively selected from a list of names (the sample frame) provided by local council leaders and civil society organizations operating in the area. The sample frame included young people in and out of school, those born in displacement, young mothers, and heads of households.

From this list, the sample for the present study was selected. The selection criteria included formerly displaced young women who had endured sexual harassment and were willing to participate. Fair distribution across urban and rural sites was also considered. The above process led to the selection of 108 participants who matched the inclusion criteria. The study was grounded in Sandoval’s (2000) “methodology of the oppressed”, which she described as “a set of processes, procedures and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (p. 69); one goal of her methods is to enable differential social movements by challenging the naturalness of dominant ideology and language.

The study set out to examine the young women’s experiences using qualitative methods of data collection that included interviews and focus group discussions. In order to understand and interpret the data, rigorous thematic analysis was used following a deductive approach focused on the research objectives. However, unanticipated new themes were also appreciated. Interview transcripts were closely examined and coded. Common themes reflecting patterns in the form of ideas, opinions, and experiences relating to identity, girlhood, motherhood, sexuality, employment, and child labour were identified. Based on these themes, detailed thematic analyses of responses was conducted. Responses relating to particular specified themes were grouped together and

analyzed in detail. This facilitated realization of interconnections between themes and variations among them, and yielded significant insights into the dynamics of sexual oppression in the population under study.

Ethical considerations: The study observed key ethical principles including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, along with other ethical requirements for research approval. A certificate was issued by the Makerere University School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee. Participation was entirely voluntary and an informed consent process was used. Confidentiality was observed: only the core research team had access to the data collected. For anonymity, personal identifying data were kept separate from the findings in order to avoid associating findings to any individual.

Theoretical Grounding

Our study adopted an interdisciplinary perspective encompassing feminist, indigenous, conflict, and peace studies. Feminist epistemologies acknowledge that reality is always under construction by social actors, is context-specific, and accommodates diverse and contradictory knowledge (Alcoff, 2006). Specifically, we turned to feminist theorizing that focuses on margins (hooks, 2000), self-identification (Collins, 2000) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). There is no single feminist approach to armed conflict, but feminism provides an alternative perspective on the dominant, masculinized understandings of armed violence (Sjoberg, 2013). That perspective centres on the lived experiences and voices of previously marginalized groups (especially women and girls) while acknowledging their multiple standpoints (Sommers, 2007), and appreciates women's agency. A feminist perspective can uncover hidden gender power relations in the gender-neutral approach that is often taken in defining war, peace, violence, and reconstruction, and that is reflected in the language adopted in such situations. Feminism, however, cannot provide a sufficiently nuanced examination of violence if it does not also draw on an indigenous perspective. Indigenous epistemologies aid contextualised understanding of traditional perceptions of violence.

Results

The results of the study demonstrate the participants' defiance and resistance towards the naming and labelling language frequently used by governmental institutions and humanitarian agencies like non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to define young women. The results are based both on the one-on-one interviews conducted with the young women and on focus group discussions.

The Social Construction of Girlhood in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda

In exploring the experiences of young women who have suffered conflict-related sexual violence, it was noted that certain conceptualizations adopted by reconstruction programs were perceived as disrespectful by young people. This was reflected in terminology adopted by such programs that ignores, due to biases of age and gender, young people's capabilities, agency, and

choices. In emphasizing protection of young people, these organizations take a view of youth and childhood that is largely anchored in numeric age, but in post-conflict situations like northern Uganda, age-based standards are not necessarily applicable. The terminology used by these organizations further affects young people's identity within society by establishing forms of control and surveillance, and categorizations demarcating the forms of association into which young women fit. For instance, young women with children are referred to as "child mothers" and "young mothers"; if married while under age, it is considered "forced", "under age", or "early" marriage. These usages amount to institutionalized marginalization against young women, manifested through universalistic language that informs conceptions of entitlement and belonging. Girls have to struggle through multilayered forms of victimization constructed at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels. We agree with Palacios (2019) that "heteronormative, Euro-Western white perspectives of girlhood constitute another form of violent confinement from which [girls in the global South] must free themselves" (p. 281). One participant noted:

When giving support, the organizations follow the age of a person, which is okay but now how many of us don't know our age — several. Parents don't record dates when a child is born. We end up restricted by things we have no control over. If one really wants to take part, then you "forge" your age to reach what the organization requires.

Another elaborated the dissonance caused by programme labelling:

They [NGOs] call us young. But are we young? What do adults face that we don't? If I can have a child safely, then why call me a young/child mother? Anyway, for me it makes me feel disrespected, as if I don't know what I can and cannot do with myself.

While the participant clearly pronounces her agency, the NGOs do not acknowledge it. The labels and language the humanitarian agencies apply are largely part of a construct of the Western world that doesn't necessarily represent the sociocultural attributes of human growth and development in global South settings like post-conflict northern Uganda. It certainly doesn't fit in the local community context where motherhood automatically translates into adulthood irrespective of numeric age. As the above quote highlights, the participant sees motherhood as a marker of adulthood, and feels that NGOs deny girls adult standing simply because of their numeric age. This exacerbates marginalization in the form of poverty, insecurity, and limited decision-making powers, as well as limiting access and use of available social services.

Motherhood as a Marker of Adulthood

In 2016, about 25% of female adolescents aged 15 to 19 in Uganda were either pregnant or already mothers (UBOS & ICF, 2018, p. 89). In a recent national survey covering a 7-year period, adolescent girls accounted for a significant proportion (12.8%) of maternal deaths (UBOS & ICF,

2018, p. 310). In part these reproductive health challenges are rooted in gender and social norms that encourage large families, early child marriage, teenage pregnancy (Ninsiima et al., 2018), and limited access to youth-friendly reproductive health services. Although the concept of “child motherhood” is intended to accord protection to young mothers, findings indicate that young women reject the vulnerability it implies, with its connotations of immaturity, immorality, and incapacity on the part of the mother. In most cases these are single mothers, engulfed in poverty, and entirely dependent on parents and guardians. A 17-year-old single mother explained that:

If they think you are below 18, you are considered [a child mother] ... being identified like that means you had a child at the wrong time, it is a mistake. When they call for meetings, they start teaching how to avoid pregnancies, and sex generally. It is like we are a burden to everyone, yet like other mothers we take care of our children to the best we can.

Agency is a relational concept and intersects with relationships. It constitutes a key aspect of self-determination and self-direction (Abrams, 1999). As shown in the above quote, young women demand inclusion and acknowledgement of their capacity in taking care of their children. Such acknowledgement would recognize their agency and capture the values that give meaning and purpose to their lives.

In Uganda, access to productive resources like land is difficult for single women. For example, men alone are traditionally considered to have the right to access, use, and control land (Dimova, 2022); women can access land only through relationships with males such as husbands and fathers. To challenge the term “child mother”, girls self-identify as “women”, which is socially empowering for it accords them access to productive resources including land (especially as wives), and the opportunity to be involved in decision-making. To reinforce their social status as women, they explicitly identify themselves as mothers using their children’s names. For instance, “Maama Maria” would signify “Maria’s mother”. Such titles disregard age and daughterhood status and emphasize instead the young women’s new roles as mothers. In general, the roles and responsibilities that motherhood brings are common to all mothers irrespective of age. Age thus becomes less crucial than motherhood in creating a sense of identity and belonging. Instead of feeling guilty for their early pregnancies, these mothers embrace their new identity as mothers, disregarding negative connotations and blame. They expect to be supported and mentored to fulfil the collective responsibilities that come along with the new status they have attained.

Childhood and Functionality

In conflict and post-conflict environments, children are inevitably involved in what are socially regarded as adult roles and responsibilities (Namuggala, 2018). Children are, for instance, recruited (either voluntarily or through conscription or abduction) into fighting forces (Namuggala, 2018), where they are actively involved in roles such as fighting, spying, and looting, but also in morally degrading practices like rape and sexual violence against both other children and adults. Despite such roles, when the conflict ends children are again treated as innocent and vulnerable by

adults and institutional frameworks and thus are expected to accept being protected by them. Formerly displaced young women emphasized that continuing to place them in the childhood category was intended to discredit their contributions during situations of violence, and limited their participation in conflict resolution processes. One participant, who was 21 years old and pregnant with her second child when this study was conducted in 2018, had returned home in 2011:

I was abducted and spent some years with the rebels before we escaped. We were sexually used and I even have a child from the bush. You don't know what I went through, it's a lot and then upon return, they want me to behave like I am innocent [i.e., naïve]! I am not innocent at all. And for me I don't accept that.

The participants thus actively resisted naming. They organized themselves to demonstrate that they are not simply victims but rather are agentic and resilient, and deserving of being credited as such. The involvement of these young people in armed forces, commonly referred to as “child soldierhood”, needs to be acknowledged.

Resettlement Age Discrimination

In order to encourage an end to armed conflicts, institutional frameworks take steps to persuade armed forces to accept a ceasefire and begin the peace-building process, including compensation of rebels and provision of return packages to the displaced populations. Children in northern Uganda did not receive return packages, however, despite having been actively involved in the conflict as combatants (Machel, 2000). Young people who are former soldiers, as reflected in the infantilizing language used towards them, have not been considered for compensation because they are expected to be dependent on adults — on parents or guardians. Resettlement has largely targeted household heads, who are generally expected to be male and adult. Traditionally it is men who are heads of households who have access to and control over land. The impetus to grant compensation to men (and male youth) is partly due to a desire to allay the security concern they present, since they could easily return to the fighting zones and threaten the realized peace (Chabal et al., 2005). Former young female combatants, on the other hand, are perceived as victims and thus accorded less influence in communal development, yet their roles in the conflict were similar to those of males and adults (Blattman & Annan, 2009). In order that communal development take their needs into account, the younger generation advocates for their rightful positioning as leaders and decision makers. Since formal structures deny them space to express themselves, the young generation informally resists, and even at times sabotages, approaches from sociocultural and formal institutional levels. The lack of young peoples' involvement in resettlement strategies that target them is evident in the following statement from a single mother of three (who seemed around 25 years old) who was uncomfortable with the proposal that she go back to formal school as part of a resettlement strategy, when she was more interested in options that would bring in income, such as vocational training:

We all went through hell. Working with the forces is not easy but what do we get? Nothing. They want us to return to school. Were the adults told to go back to the

farms? Or they were supported to do what they wanted to do? I see most young people trying with school but it doesn't make sense to me. School should be for those who want it and give options to us who don't.

Notions of Employment

Government programs such as the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan⁵ (PRDP) have concentrated on agriculture, yet, due to their experiences during displacement and encampment, youth lack the skills and motivation required to become actively involved in agricultural production (Namuggala, 2017). This is exacerbated, especially for young women, by limited access to and control over productive resources like land. Youth instead opt for “quick money” jobs, including hawking, sports betting, sex work, “boda boda” (operating a motorcycle taxi), and street dancing. Much of this work is done in the evening and at night. As a result, adults who do not see the youth working during the day mistakenly assume that they are idle. Older adults can also find some of the work inappropriate. For instance, the costumes of female dancers may violate dress codes, revealing what culturally are regarded as private areas, including the thighs and breasts. The youth, however, feel that in fact they work hard and, most importantly, are earning an income. One female dancer noted:

We are neither lazy nor idle. That's what they think [because some sleep during the day] but it's not true. We work, even in the night. We need to be supported socially and financially so that we can progress in what we know and can do.

In our focus group discussions and interviews, the younger generation advocated for safety measures to be put in place to cover the activities from which they earn a living. For instance, hawkers are often mistreated by the police, through confiscation of their property, having to pay bribes, and spending nights in police cells. Instead, the hawkers could be provided with security and trained in how to save, and how to access credit facilities in order to obtain loans.

Child Labour

Despite attention to the topic in the form of international, regional, and national debates and frameworks focused on child protection, child labour is still deeply entrenched, particularly in situations of conflict and displacement, and in post-conflict settings where livelihoods, and survival itself, are constrained. Some of the children who have been orphaned or left unaccompanied take on adult roles and responsibilities including headship of households. To fulfil their new roles, children become involved in income-generating activities such as hawking, operating road-side businesses, taking in washing, working as housemaids, porters on construction sites, or casual labourers on farms (Namuggala, 2018). Formal frameworks discourage and criminalize such work, yet many children have no other viable options for meeting their basic everyday needs: they either get involved as active agents or starve, since for them adult provision

⁵ <http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/research/uganda/results/transitioning-to-peace/prdp>

and care are negligible. In contexts like post-conflict Uganda, child labour needs to be decriminalized and regulated so that young people who are struggling to earn a living can benefit from formalized arrangements. To fully meet the need, these would have to ensure not only a regulated safe working environment, but also the necessities of survival — food, clothing, shelter, and access to basic services like education and health. One roadside worker said:

I have worked since I was around 7, I would sell polythene bags to customers on the street. I had to because we had to survive. I worked alongside my aunt's stall. Later, I got involved in selling fruits, especially mangoes, on the streets. Then a friend told me about a house help job. House help is good because you are assured of food but the workload is too much. I tried but it was hard so I returned back on the street.

Young people support each other in finding employment, especially through social networking. As a strategy to get and retain such jobs, they charge less than older workers do. In interviews, youth explained that to minimize negative connotations in their search for employment, they don't talk about their childhood status (in terms of age) but rather emphasize their responsibilities, such as being household heads.

Child-Headed Households

Conflict and displacement bring famine, poverty, disease, and insecurity. Living under these conditions disrupts social networks and cultural frameworks that support the adoption of abandoned or orphaned children. In the absence of those mechanisms, some children inevitably find themselves heading households due to the death or disappearance of parents and guardians. Although their situation is superficially similar to that of other households in the community, households designated “child-headed” cannot participate fully in communal activities, including decision-making. They are considered to be of less value than “normal” households and thus to present an extra burden on the community. Where such families are female-headed, gender inequalities intersect with age disparities, making it doubly hard to access and use services. Despite the agency and effort such households put in to survive, they are considered vulnerable and dependent:

It is like we don't do anything for good for the community or ourselves. Whenever leaders talk about families headed by young people, it is in the negative, asking adults to help us. Help is good but when someone thinks about it and not leaders begging on our behalf. Yet we work hard to survive independently.

Young people in such circumstances feel that their efforts towards survival are not acknowledged or respected. Labelling some households as child-headed results in “othering” — a process “through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship (Crang, 1998, p. 61) — and hence a downplaying of their contributions to the community. It was clear from participant statements that such households headed by those socially defined as children would benefit from

more positive language that acknowledges their agency and capacities. Although no consensus emerged on how they wished to be described, many of the young people interviewed for this study felt that their households could provide good learning opportunities for the design of reconstruction programs, refuting hegemonic notions equating childhood with vulnerability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Gender inequality is a pervasive threat to sustainable development and has negative impacts on our collective ability to meet human rights obligations. While the language and naming used by NGOs and governmental institutions comes from a genuine desire to help young people, it can carry negative connotations in local populations. By adopting locally sustainable approaches and familiar language and terminologies that informally work to the benefit of youth, young women are effectively advocating for a change in language practices. Initiatives intended to benefit young people should involve them at all stages, and use terminology that young people are comfortable with.

The term “girlhood” is a colonial legacy that privileges Euro-Western theories of normative, linear child development, which have continued to be imposed upon indigenous girls. It is a word that not only emphasizes universalistic progression to growth and development but also social surveillance and control in regard to sexual desire and behaviour, especially for young females. Similarly, the term “child motherhood” attempts to explain “abnormal” sexual encounters: children are not expected to be sexually active, let alone become mothers. In that respect, some recommendations are suggested below.

As shown by the participants’ statements, language has created mental prisons for young Ugandan females through institutionalized control. While motherhood is treasured in theory, the age at which it happens and the marital status of the mother set boundaries as to whether it is welcome in practice. Civil society organizations need to adopt more inclusive and gender-responsive language that reflects the ways youth identify themselves, rather than imposing labels that reflect the views and interests of donors and the international community. Identity construction through language creates “othering” categories, which need to be continuously deconstructed. When we use language that not everyone in the community is acquainted with, we create an insider–outsider culture that promotes othering (Richard, 2019) and affects identity and belonging, and hence agency. Language is critical in building relationships and trust across differences, whether they are gender-related, generational, or cultural. To achieve this, the terms used must be based on lived realities and experiences.

Anti-bias education that supports key dimensions of human difference, including language, gender, culture, and age, should be embraced. Schools can promote a more inclusive language through messages on communal communication platforms like radios, and communally engaging activities like poems, music, dance, and drama. This will raise sensitivity about victimizing and marginalizing forms of communication, hence promoting participation.

Humanitarian strategies that specifically rely on certain categories — for instance, child mothers, former child soldiers, child prostitutes — end up reinforcing victimization and isolation within the community. When the general community disassociates itself from child soldiers, for instance, it adversely affects their ultimate reintegration. In conclusion, it is important that survivors are treated in a holistic and integrative framework within general community programs.

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