

Language and Identity Formation: Young Women Resisting negative labeling in Northern Humanitarian Setting

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By

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Abstract

Formerly displaced young women challenge infantilizing and victimizing language adopted by humanitarian and government institutions. Girls argue concepts like "child mothers" and "child soldiers" are disempowering and denying them access to socially attributed prestige to adulthood yet disassociates them from the childhood. The intersecting nature of their identity thus hinders accessing humanitarian assistance. Due to identity crises young women miss out on assistance targeting either children or women. The concept child mother blames young women for involving in adult (sexual) behaviour. Motherhood is a collective identity, which comes along with roles, responsibilities and expectations. Young women thus involve in informal activism to refrain from problematizing and blaming language. Based on a qualitative study, this article argues that efficient access and use of humanitarian assistance and sustainable post-conflict reconstruction demands self-definition through language. Contextually inclusive language reflective of local experiences and realities must be adopted. Key words: language, resistance, intersectionality, humanitarian assistance, child mother, mothering and peacebuilding.

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Introduction

Forced displacement is a critical contemporary worldwide issue; the impact of which affects all the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Globally, by 2015, there was an estimated 38 million internally displaced persons (IDP) (IDMC, 2015). Forced displacement has been highly linked to armed conflict within states yet little has been done about resolving such conflicts. The situation is more prevalent in the developing world especially Africa. Africa hosts at least 20.3 million forcibly displaced persons (6.3 million refugees and 14 million Internally displaced persons) (Abebe, 2019). Besides IDPs, armed conflict results in local, regional and global disturbances including refugees, and violations of basic human rights most crucial for this study being sexual and gender based violence (Dolan, 2009).

Most displaced people live in global regions with the highest levels of poverty and inequality (Guterres and Speigel, 2012), whilst protracted displacement has become the norm in many areas suffering sustained conflict, with some states existing in a cycle of perpetual crises (Zetter, 2011). Forced displacement continues to steal the childhoods of millions of Africans resulting into a lost generation (Relief Web, 2013). Children in Africa are born into a generation where possibilities of attaining decent lives are negligible (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh, 2006). Children, especially girls have suffered enormously in the form of abductions experiencing sexual abuse, child soldiering and mutilation. Young people have been conceptualized doubly as the primary victims and actors in the LRA rebellion (Chinney, 2007; Wessel, 2009).

Since independence, Uganda has been engulfed in a series of on going violent conflicts (Mutiibwa, 1992). The northern region of Uganda has been characterized by civil war since 1986 which has culminated into chronic poverty, disease and high HIV infection rates, and poor social services in the form of education, health and infrastructural development (Mulumba & Namuggala, 2014). This especially follows over two decades of armed civil violence under the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against the government of Uganda (GoU) (Dolan, 2009). The war has been characterized by extreme human rights violation in the form of sexual abuse, physical torture as well as economic and psychological trauma. Unlike other civil unrests in Uganda, the LRA rebellion was exceptional for it strategically targeted the civilian population (Dolan, 2009) majority of whom were women and children (Machel, 2000).

Specifically, in a gendered way, while the entire civilian population was affected, rebels widely used abduction and recruitment of children and young people (McDonnell & Akallo, 2007; Spitzer & Twikirize, 2013). Consequently, more than 25,000 children (girls and boys) were abducted to serve in the LRA (Buss, Lebert, Rutherford, & Obijiofor, 2014). Young girls were specifically kept as servants to be forcibly married as remuneration to those with rank within the rebel group (Beber & Blattman, 2010). This understanding of young girls as sex objects seems to be continuing in the post-conflict situation hence the need to examine it in detail as this study proposes. Language exacerbates the already marginalized category through reinforcing victimization and vulnerability.

Following the declaration of a post conflict phase in 2008 by the president of Uganda, internally displaced persons (IDPs) refugees and former rebel recruits and abductees have been returning home. While entire communities encounter numerous challenges, young women, given their gender and age

face unique challenges resulting from the breakdown social structures and sources of livelihoods. Challenges are also related to the language adopted in the post conflict phase especially by the humanitarian agencies working to have communities resettled. Such language has turned out victimizing, infantilizing the young women, but also blaming and labelling them from the social cultural perspective.

The GoU recognizes that resettlement processes need to be based on principles of social justice and gender equality. Implementation however, does not always reflect these principles. Although it is a known global challenge, violence especially against women and girls is more pervasive in traditional societies since it is engraved in socially acceptable behaviour. This paper focuses on language use and adoptability as a contributor to GBV is exacerbated in access to humanitarian aid and assistance. In northern Uganda, sexual violence resulted into early and forced marriages, early pregnancies, rape consequently leading to labelling terminologies like child marriages, child headed households, child mothers and young mothers, which negatively impact the lives of young people.

Despite all challenges, young people continue to shape social environments in which they reside. They reconfigure exclusion and inclusion (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh,2006). This paper demonstrated how young women contribute to defining their lived realities through deconstructing homogenizing language and representation.

Childhood, Identity and Belonging

Understanding childhood from a Global South perspective is not an easy task (Abede & Ofosu-Kusi, 2016). Experiences and every day realities informing notions of childhood in the south are contextually different from the developed world (Namuggala, 2018). Despite glaring gaps and contestations, childhood is universally conceptualized based on numeric age drawing on the Euro-Western frame (Kendall, 2008; Morrow, 2011). Such standardized understanding disregards the context specific realities, which inform childhood in a Global South (African) setting. It is therefore critical to appreciate that there are multiple versions of childhood(s) (Liebel, 2012) and emphasizing one over others results into resistance (Namuggala, 2018). In situations of distress, childhood status informs the level of protection as well as participation (UNICEF, 2016). Humanitarian agencies however, given their sources of funding continue to apply universalistic understandings during implementation of programs.

While problematic, dominant frameworks provide a starting point for understanding childhood. They inform identity formation of not only children but also parents, grandparents, uncles and all other population categories children relate with.

Methodology

This article draws on a larger qualitative cross sectional study conducted in Soroti district of north eastern Uganda that explored conflict-related sexual violence among young people in post-conflict situations. The study was grounded in the “methodology of the oppressed”- “a set of processes, procedures and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (Sandoval, 2000: 69) hence enabling differential social movements by challenging the naturalness of dominant ideology and language. The

study used qualitative methods of data collection including individual in-depth interviews and, oral stories.

Theoretical Grounding

The study adopted an interdisciplinary perspective encompassing feminist, indigenous, conflict and peace studies. Feminist epistemologies acknowledge that reality is always under construction by social actors and, is context specific and accommodative to diverse and contradictory knowledge (Alcoff, 2006). It focused on centering margins (hooks, 2000), self-identification (Collins, 2000) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). There is no single feminist approach to armed conflict, but feminism provides a new approach to the dominant, masculinized understandings of armed violence (Sjoberg, 2013). This new approach centers the lived experiences and voices of previously marginalized groups (especially women and girls) while acknowledging their multiple standpoints (Sommers, 2007). A feminist perspective allows uncovering hidden gender power relations in the gender-neutral approach especially in defining war, peace, violence, reconstruction and, language adopted in such situations. Feminism solely, however cannot provide an entirely nuanced examination of violence if it does not adopt an indigenous perspective to provide context specific meanings. Indigenous epistemologies aid understanding traditional perceptions to violence. Basing on the preceding theoretical and methodological approaches, the study yielded the following results demonstrating deviance and resistance to the naming and labelling language used to define young women.

Girlhood in Post-conflict Situations

Girlhood is an international construct that has everything to do with race, class, ability, sexuality and other social contexts (Jiwan, Steenbergen & Mitchel, 2006). Young women's resistance is engraved in language that informs identity formation in post conflict reconstruction. Identity formation is a very complex and dynamic process especially in situations involving violence against women and girls, which is a globally acknowledged problem (WHO, 2013). It is however, more of a challenge in the developing world and may be exacerbated during situations of emergencies such as armed conflict (McKay, 2004; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Even when such crises officially end, complex brutal cultures of violence against women and girls persist. Important for this paper however, is that even the language adopted by those intending to minimize such violence ends up reinforcing discrimination against women and girls. Critical to note is that degrading language is socially constructed, accepted and tolerated since it is engraved in normalized patriarchal structures. Women often times internalize such constructions and sometimes act complicit to such violence and labelling for instance by encouraging early and forced marriages (Uganda Demographic Health Survey, 2011). Young women, however, in post-conflict settings in northern Uganda have established a new wave that resists such construction through deconstructing language that infantilizes and down plays their agency.

Understanding the way girls contribute towards their own self-identification and empowerment requires 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 victimizing situations 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 motherhood, levels of education and social justice systems.

Girls/young women in post-conflict environments learn to manoeuvre strategically within the social set up to attain and sustain their agency amidst externally defining operating humanitarian frameworks. Such frameworks established forms of control and surveillance, and the categorizations that demarcate the forms of associations in which girls fit. Such institutionalized marginalization against girls manifests through universalistic language, which informs entitlement and belonging. Girls have to struggle through multi layered forms of victimization constructed at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and structural forms, which work in an interrelated manner. I agree with Palacios (2019) that “heteronormative, euro-western white perspectives of girlhood constitute another form of violent confinement” from which girls in the developing world must free themselves. One participant noted;

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 mother? Anyway for me it makes feel disrespected, as if I don't know what I can and cannot do with my self.

The labels and language the humanitarian agencies apply is largely a construct of the western world, which doesn't necessarily represent the social cultural attributes of human growth and development in developing regions of the world like post-conflict northern Uganda. Like the above quote highlights, motherhood is a marker of adulthood, which NGOs strip girls off basing on their numeric age. This exacerbates marginalization in the form of poverty, insecurity, limited decision making powers as well as access and use of available social services.

Sexual Desire and Pleasure

Under the guise of protection, social structures including humanitarian agencies have stigmatized, victimized and thus problematized adolescent girls' sexual activeness, pleasure and desire. Female children who are sexually active have been framed as a problem to society since they are termed to be morally decayed. While abstinence would be the ideal, for children born in situations of displacement, it is practically difficult since majority are exposed to sexual encounters early in life (Namuggala, 2018) in the form of rape and defilement, sex for survival (sex work, early marriages) (Mulumba & Namuggala, 2014). Due to unattainable social standards, young adults indulge in sex secretly. This hinders access to reproductive health information since they are assumed to be innocent. The negative perceptions connoting adolescent sexuality and desire make it hard for young women to access reproductive health services involving birth control measures including condoms. Birth control is expected to be a service rendered to married couples. Sexual activeness is ascertained in most cases when situations are already out of hand in the form of pregnancies resulting into motherhood or abortion. Since abortion is a crime in Uganda (The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda) most young women carry pregnancies to full term and are thus described as “child mothers”. Those that attempt abortion use unsafe methods including the use of detergents like “Omo” and “Nomi” which results health complications (Namuggala, 2009). Humanitarian agencies observe that language elaborates the unique position that young mothers occupy as well as their roles and responsibilities amidst challenging social environments. Girl in situations of forced displacement have consequently become profiled and used as catchment category

for continued funding since they are framed as subjects in desperate need of care and support. Girl resistance towards universalistic approaches, informal as it is, contests external (international), state control and surveillance against the young generation especially the girls.

Child Motherhood

About 25% of adolescents age 15-19 in Uganda have begun child bearing (UDHS, 2016). Adolescent girls also account for a significant proportion of maternal deaths in Uganda annually. Some drivers of these reproductive health challenges are rooted in gender and social norms that encourage large families, early child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and limited access to youth-friendly reproductive health services. Although it's intended to accord young mothers protection, findings indicate that young women dread the vulnerability the concept "child motherhood" embeds. It carries connotations of immaturity, immorality and incapacity for the mother. Such mothers are in most cases single mothers, engulfed in poverty and entirely dependent on parents and guardians.

If they think you are below 18 you are considered one...being identified like that [child mother] 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.

To challenge these, girls self-identify as "women", which is socially empowering for it accords them access to productive resources including land (especially as wives), and can get involved in decision making. To assume this social status, they strategically identify themselves with their mothering identity using the children's names for instance "Maama Maria" to refer to Maria's mother. Such titles disregard age and daughterhood status and brings out young women's new ascribed roles as mothers. Motherhood comes along with roles and responsibilities some of which are collective to which young mothers ascribe.

Childhood and Functionality

In conflict and post-conflict environments, children are inevitably involved in what is socially termed adult roles and responsibilities (Namuggala, 2018). Children are for instance recruited (either voluntarily or through forced conscriptions and abductions) into fighting forces (Namuggala, 2018). Such children are actively involved in various roles including fighting, spying, looting but also morally degrading practices like raping and sexual violence against fellow children but also adults. Despite such roles, upon end of conflict, children continue to be treated as innocent and vulnerable and thus expected to be protected by the adults and institutional frameworks. Formerly displaced young women emphasize that evoking their childhood category is intended discredit their contribution during situations of violence. It further limits their participation in conflict resolution processes.

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, its a lot and then upon return, they want me to behave like I am innocent! I am not innocent at all. And for me I don't accept that

They thus actively organize to demonstrate that they are not entirely victims but rather agentic and resilient and such credit needs to be accorded. Critical for according credit is the involvement of young people in armed forces, which is commonly referred to as child soldier hood.

Child Soldiering

In order to encourage end of armed conflicts, institutional frameworks take steps to persuade armed forces to cease-fire. Amongst the steps taken is compensation of rebels, provision of return packages to the displaced populations as a way of encouraging the peace building process. In northern Uganda, despite the fact that children had been severely involved in the conflict as combatants (Machel, 2000), they did not receive return packages. Young people who are former soldiers, due to the infantilizing language used towards them have not been considered for compensation since they are expected to be dependent on some adults as parents or guardians. Resettlement has largely targeted household heads who are not only largely understood as men but also adult. Culturally it is such men that have access to and control over land. Men (and male youth) further create a security threat since they can easily return to the fighting zones and distort the realized peace (Chabal, Engel & Gentili, 2005). Former young female combatants are thus perceived as victims and thus less influential in communal development yet they play similar roles as males and adults (Blattman, & Annan, 2009). The young generation thus advocates for their rightful positioning of young people as leaders and decision makers if their needs are to be incorporated. Because they lack space in formal structures to express themselves, the young generation informally resist and at times sabotage approaches from socio-cultural and formal institutional levels.

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

There is a generational variance in understanding and appreciation of employment. While the elder generation only acknowledges pre-conflict constructions of work including agriculture and communally beneficial activities as work, the young generation has a different approach that appreciates different notions towards work. Some young people are engaged in work that was previously despised, at times considered criminal while other times immoral and disrespectful (Namuggala, 2016). Such forms of work include sex work, sports betting and dancing for pay among others. As a result of the differentiated constructions, both the older generation and the formal institutions have framed the youth as lazy and idle. Government programs for instance the Post Recovery Development Program (PRDP) have concentrated on agriculture yet youth not only lack skills, and motivation but also land to be actively involved in agricultural production. Given their experiences during displacement and encampment, the young generation lacks the required skills and interest for instance for farming and animal rearing. This is exacerbated by limited access to and control over productive resources like land especially by young women. They instead opt for quick money jobs including hawking, sports betting, sex work, boda boda

and street dancing. Much of the work the youth are involved in is in the evening/night which makes them appear idle during the day from the perspective of the adults. One noted;

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

The younger generation thus advocates for safer measures to facilitate the activities from which they earn a living. Instead of being mistreated for instance by the police, the hawkers may be provided security and training on how to save and access credit facilities in terms of loans.

Child Labor

Child labor refers to work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and is harmful to physical and mental development. Such work is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and also interferes with their schooling (IPEC, 2019). In situations of conflict and displacement, and in post-conflict settings, child labor is inevitable as livelihoods and survival are constrained. Children are sometimes orphaned or left unaccompanied hence take on adult roles and responsibilities including headship of households. To fulfil their new roles, children get involved in various income generating activities including hawking, road side businesses, housemaids, washing clothes for pay, working on construction sites as porters and casual laborers on farms (Namuggala, 2018). Formal frameworks discourage and criminalize such work yet children have no viable options to meeting basic everyday needs. Given the context, children either get involved as active agents or starve since adult provision and care is negligible. Child labor thus deserves to be contextualized and children who are struggling to survive be provided with formalized arrangements to ensure a regulated safe working environment for their survival in terms of 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 along side 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 networking. They further charge less compared to the older workers as a strategy to sustain such jobs. To minimize negative connotations, they noted that in their search for employment, they don't talk about their childhood status (in terms of age) but rather emphasize their responsibilities for instance as household heads.

Child headed households

During conflict and displacement, social networks and cultural frameworks that support adoption of desolate children are broken. This is due to poor living conditions including famine, poverty and disease, insecurity and uncertainty. Amidst the hard survival conditions, some children inevitably head households due to death or disappearance of parents and guardians. Such households encounter similar

or at times worse off situations compared to all other households in the community. However, when these households are labelled “child headed”, it hinders their participation in communal activities including decision-making. They are considered less of “normal” households and thus considered an extra burden to community. Where such families are female headed, it doubly complicates the situation due to gender inequalities intersecting with age disparities in access and use of services. Despite the agency and effort such households put in to survive, they are considered entirely 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 things about it and not leaders begging on our behalf. Yet we work hard to survive independently.

The younger generation feels their efforts are not acknowledged. Labelling some households as child headed positions results into “othering” and hence downplaying their contribution to the development processes.

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 portrays a fundamental inter-relational cause, it creates negative connotations locally. Since young women cannot effectively advocate against such language, they adopt local approaches that informally work to the benefit of the young population.

Girlhood continues to come off as a colonial legacy that privileges euro western theories of normative/linear child development, which have continued to be imposed upon indigenous girls. Such language is one way of emphasizing universalistic progression to growth and development but also social surveillance and control in sexual desire and behaviour especially for the young females. Child motherhood for instance attempts to explain restrained (abnormal) sexual encounters. Children are not expected to be sexually active or at its worst become mothers. In that respect, some recommendations are suggested below.

Language creates imaginary prisons for the young females through institutionalized control. While motherhood is treasured, the age at which it happens sets the boundary as to whether it is welcome or not. The implementing partners need to adopt a more inclusive and gender responsive language that also reflects the way youth and rural communities identify themselves rather than imposing a language and labels that reflects the views and interests of the donors and international community. Other scholars observe further that familiar and representative language needs to be adopted. When we use a language that is not acquainted to everyone in the community, we create an insider/outsider culture (Weaver, 2017). This affects identity and belonging, and hence agency. Language is critical in building relationships and trust across differences i.e. gender related, generational and cultural. To achieve this, lived realities and experiences need to be at the centre of such representation.

Sexually active young people cannot easily access reproductive health services. This is because they are not socially expected to be sexually active. The younger generation for instance has difficulty in accessing condoms and birth control services. While some health centres are clearly labelled as having youth-friendly services, the health professionals maintain a negative attitude towards youth access and use of some services. Attitudinal change is therefore critical for the health service providers in order to be accommodative of youth reproductive needs and concerns, be supportive and less judgemental to non-conforming youth in terms of social and religious expectations of abstinence till marriage.

Anti-biased education that supports all dimensions of human differences including language, gender, culture and age should be embraced. Appreciating diversity would address stereotypes and discrimination against the different identities. Schools can take up 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 on victimizing and marginalizing forms of communication hence promoting participation.

In conclusion, it is also important that victims are treated in a holistic and integrative framework within general community programs because strategies that specifically point to categories for instance child mothers, former child soldiers, child prostitutes end up reinforcing victimization and isolation within the community. The general community disassociates for instance with child soldiers hence affecting reintegration within the community.

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