



“Say no to bad touches”: Schools, sexual identity and sexual violence in northern Uganda



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of schools in the formation of sexual identities and incidence of sexual violence in the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda, a conflict and post-conflict setting. It reflects three years of participant observation and in-depth interviews with 187 women, and primarily draws on interviews with 17 teachers in five primary schools. The evidence shows how the experience girls have in school builds a paradoxical paradigm with irreconcilable dimensions. Girls are charged to take control of their bodies and sexuality. Simultaneously, they are scripted into feminine sexual identities that reinforce subordinate gender roles where violence is an ever-present possibility. Boys learn masculine notions of sexuality that emphasize paternity and customary exchanges while consent is downplayed.

The study highlights the burden of responsibility often placed on both educators and girls through emphasis on their agency and power. This occurs without due acknowledgment for how these are constrained, particularly in extreme settings such as conflict and post-conflict contexts. It calls for programs to ensure engagement with structural constraints, broader focus on gender relations and specific attention to boys and violent expressions of masculinity.

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1. Introduction

As one enters the compound of a primary school in northern Uganda a series of messages are presented—little signposts dotting the landscape within green spaces, along paths, hanging from trees, and painted on walls (Fig. 1).

Signposts encourage moral, healthy behavior and desirable qualities in a good student. Some urge their students to ‘avoid bad touches’ and admonish them that ‘virginity is good for health’.

The ‘talking compound’ is a policy encouraged by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and the signs are a common feature of most primary schools, whether co-ed, boys or girls. However, the differences in message emphasis are often striking (Figs. 2 and 3).

Girls’ schools are particularly well covered by signs admonishing sexual control. From this, one might expect that girls are generally the initiators of sex and can exercise agency to give or withhold consent. These assumptions are often not borne out by the evidence in Uganda, as demonstrated by my previous study of sexual violence in the Acholi sub-region (Porter, 2012, 2013). Muhanguzi (2011) documented a lack of female sexual autonomy amongst secondary school students in Uganda. Mirembe and

Davies (2001) observed prefect elections (amongst other school activities) in a secondary school in Uganda and found that they acted to reproduce gender relations. Their insight is relevant to how the ‘talking compound’ works as well: for boys, the emphasis is on academic ability and personality; for girls, it is on moral self-expression and sexuality.

Schools are widely held to be ideal sites of transformation for women’s empowerment. Schools are thought to have potential to rework the gender status quo (Manchanda, 2001). The idea of education as a panacea has been promulgated in development discourse (Vavrus, 2003). Educating girls in particular is often discussed as the key to peace (Buck and Silver, 2012) as well as the cure to a variety of other societal ills such as high rates of fertility, sexually transmitted diseases and poverty (Heward, 1999; King and Hill, 1993).

Although the extent to which this is actually case is debated, schools are understood as places where ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and ‘undoing gender’ (Deutsch, 2007) takes place (Stromquist and Fischman, 2009). The effect of gendered schooling on boys and girls is the subject of a growing body of literature internationally (Acker, 1994; Gordon, 1998; Measor and Sikes, 1993). Epstein and Johnson (1998) go so far as to say that schooling is knowing what it means to be a boy or girl in school. In this article, it is understood that schools are gendered places where sexual and other identities are developed, practiced and actively produced.

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Fig. 1. Signpost in girls' school, Acholi sub-region, Uganda, 2013.



Fig. 2. Signposts at girls' schools.

In my ongoing work on gender and sexual violence in northern Uganda, the role of schools has often come up (Porter, 2012, 2013). Schools were mentioned when the women in my research talked about early sexual experiences, how they learned about sex, and their own ideas of what distinguishes appropriate sex from sexual transgression. These findings indicated that a closer look at the role of primary schools was essential to better understand gender dynamics in locations where sexual violence occurs and how schools might better engage with these issues.

Other ethnographies of gender in education have explored what is happening to gender relations in the context of schools in conflict and post-conflict settings. Critics point to ways that schools re-produce and mirror power imbalances in the societies around them and in some cases contribute to violence (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; World Bank, 2005). Studies have shown some of the ways, through schooling, that girls are made subordinates of boys through both formal and informal control of girls (Longwe, 1998; Holly, 1989; Lees, 1993). In Uganda, the study by Mirembe and Davies (2001), mentioned above, concluded that schooling enhanced the gendered power imbalance instead of providing a supportive environment for challenging wider social and sexual practices. Seminal works of ethnography in other parts of Africa have also complicated the 'education as panacea' trope. They paint a varied and rich picture of ways in which girls' agency is constrained in schools and communities as well as many ways in which they carve out larger spaces for themselves. This is done by leveraging dominant discourses of education and assumed future marriage to pursue their educational and life goals (Bledsoe, 2005; Vavrus, 2003; Stambach, 2000).

Despite the critiques and nuanced pictures that scholars have offered there is an enduring belief (or hope?) evident within scholarship and policy that schools are key sites of transformation. Perhaps nowhere is this more poignant than when schools stand as somewhat lonely beacons of hope in societies emerging from decades of widespread destruction and violence. In extreme settings such as the conflict and post-conflict context considered here, there is the further normative proposition that moments of conflict and social upheaval present opportunities for re-working gender norms, particularly those which foster violence (Maclure and Denov, 2009). Maclure and Denov (2009) note the paradox of reconstruction and transformation in schools in post-war Sierra Leone indicating how social context limits the function of education to enhance the rights of girls and women. A central debate is what role schools are playing or can play to further more just and less violent gender norms in conflict and post-conflict settings.

This article is about the role of schools in the formation of sexual identity and the incidence of sexual violence in situations of war and post-conflict recovery. It looks at these issues in the context of

the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda. The study provides a portrait of how sex is represented in a school setting, particularly outside of formal lessons. It examines how this translates into learning about sex, the formation of sexual identities and young people's expectations around sex.

The article centers on the following key questions: How do children learn about sex (inside and outside the classroom)? What role do schools, particularly teachers, play in this? How do schools re-produce and/or challenge prevailing norms of feminine and

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