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Ethnography, applied theatre and stiwanism: Creative methods in search of praxis amongst men and women in Jinja, Uganda

Abstract

This article critically reflects on a long-term intergenerational project combining ethnographic and social science research methods and Freirean-inspired applied theatre in a long-term participatory process working alongside men and women in search of a 'plenitude of praxis': strengthening and promoting an urban community's capacity to unite across social barriers in recognising systemic injustices and inequalities, and challenging these through community-led interventions in pursuit of common social justice outcomes. It reflects on the successes, complexities, and failures of an approach rooted in African feminism, and in particular stiwanism, in a context of entrenched urban poverty in Jinja Municipality, Uganda.

Introduction

This article explores the creative work pioneered by anthropologist Katie McQuaid and theatre-maker Jane Plastow in Walukuba – a working-class neighbourhood of Jinja Municipality in Uganda. Our project used ethnographic and social science research methods to develop knowledge about a community and then integrated these insights into a Freirean-inspired approach to community participatory theatre. We reflect here on our methods and the insights generated in seeking to engage men and women of all ages in a process of dialogic circular action and reflection – what Freire (1970) termed *conscientizaçåo* – to achieve a 'plenitude of praxis': strengthening and promoting a community's capacity to recognise local social injustices and challenge these through community-led interventions. We conducted ten months' work combining social science and participatory arts techniques in 2015, and two months in 2016, involving a group of 30-60 people drawn from a variety of ages, ethnicities and educational backgrounds. Bringing the young and old together, we held two intergenerational performance events in 2015, and one in 2016.

This article rejects any notion of simple 'progress' in a community project, in our writing, or in the thoughts and actions of those we work alongside. We question the often linear

narratives of 'success', behaviour change and 'empowerment', given in many accounts of development and community theatre projects, and instead interrogate an experience that has been complex, nuanced, and even frustrating at times, as apparent 'progress' is multiply and serially complicated and riven by contradiction. We demonstrate the imperative of long-term involvement if one is to make meaningful engagements, and even more when working alongside a community that has long internalised ideas of gendered and class inferiority. Key to both our approach and our argument is an intersectional feminist approach rooted in the insights of African feminism, and particularly the notion of 'stiwanism' developed by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1995). These build upon and contest Western concepts of feminism in favour of an understanding that equality for women in society can only be found when common cause is made with the oppression suffered by all in society, including men. It allows for the intersection of gender with many other forms of social difference, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic class, and faith; thus allowing a community to reflect on – and respond to – wider inequalities. Such a feminist approach allowed us to engage with a whole community, working on gender equality as part of a broader transformative approach aimed at challenging systemic inequalities, and generating – *within* a community – new frames of engagement that seek to enhance inclusivity. In a context of entrenched urban poverty, poor access to education, high unemployment and endemic violations of women's and children's rights, uniting a poor urban community in pursuit of common social justice outcomes is critical in developing praxis.

An African feminist approach to praxis

In this project we understood praxis to be about empowering men and women to look critically at the status-quo and being able to imagine it differently. The methodology we used in bringing together men and women of all ages was strongly influenced by, and highlights the continuing significance of, African feminisms generated in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Stiwanism, womanism and nego-feminism all demand equality for women but within frameworks that argue that African men have also suffered oppression and that all African people need to work together for mutual freedom and empowerment (Alkali et al, 2013). In this way we understand "the ideology of women has to be cast in the context of the race and class struggles which bedevil the continent of Africa today; that is in the context of the

liberation of the total continent" (Nnaemeka, 2003:366). The broader local, regional and continental context is central to any gender transformative approach. As Kuenyehia (1994:430,422) highlights, the whole discourse of international human rights becomes irrelevant to African women unless it addresses socio-economic conditions of African countries which invariably affect African women and children. To respond to, and be responsive to, women's needs, there needs to be a re-characterisation of human rights. Gender equality cannot be sought without recourse to the wider landscape of inequalities and social injustices within which rights violations are normalised and accepted as the status-quo; nor can it be achieved by working with women alone.

African feminism is thus a movement which combines racial, sexual, class and cultural dimensions of oppression to produce a more inclusive brand of feminism through which women are viewed first and foremost as human rather than sexual beings (Steady 1996:4). It follows, then, that African feminism, as argued by McFadden (1997), is a form of political praxis that evolves from political, economic and social conditions that shape African women's lives. Feminism in this iteration is a:

> critical force for our transformation. We must have the courage to name ourselves in new ways, to reflect the new locations and new agendas we bring to national and global struggles, to create solidarity platforms through which we can contest, celebrate and envision our new directions, to interrogate and challenge ageism and the privilege and authoritarianism associated with it… In many ways the African Women's Movement reflects the crisis wrecking the broader society around us (ibid).

Perhaps most resonant for us is the notion of 'stiwanism', introduced by Ogundipe-Leslie (1995: 214) to articulate feminist consciousness "in an African context". 'STIWA' is an acronym for "Social Transformation Including Women in Africa", and is thus "about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa" (ibid. 229-230). With this act of invention, Ogundipe-Leslie in her call to "[b]e a 'Stiwanist'" wills into being a new social order based on gender, class, and racial equality (Jita Allan 1995). As she argues:

> Women have to participate as co-partners in social transformation. I think that feminism is the business of both men and women anywhere, and in Africa. I think that all men need to be progressive feminists, committed to a socially just society, wherein a woman can realize herself to her fullest potential, if she so chooses. The right to choose, for me, is the definition of liberation, "freedom," if you like… The feminist agenda everywhere in the world must

> include men and mobilise men in order for us to attain a more successful completion of the work of humanizing society (Ogundipe-Leslie 1995:230)

It is within such a notion of humanizing society that our approach sought traction, engaging both men and women – initially separately, but ultimately together – to seek a transformation of their society, to develop the ability to imagine a more just world, and to begin the work of recognising – and thus aiming to transform – the structures that limit its inception. This has to, in line with Ogundipe-Leslie's stiwanism, be a united effort. We thus purposively engaged with both men and women as essential partners, be it taking on poor waste management or discussing HIV/AIDS stigma. This allowed space for acknowledging the diversity amongst the men and women we worked with, alongside the intersecting oppressions they experienced.

Our first – and continuing – task in this process was the creation and nurturance of a non-hierarchical space in which all members – and particularly women as those usually marginalised in community debate – had time and space to contribute, and in which experiential knowledge was valued. Democratising the space and repeatedly reinforcing that everyone had something of value to say regardless of gender, age, class, ethnicity, faith, disability or educational background, was extremely challenging for some, cautiously liberating for others. For many women this provided a chance to tentatively experiment with new ways of expressing themselves and contributing to wide-ranging discussions, affirming their individual and collective struggles and insights across a range of subjects. We endeavoured to arm all our participants with the tools not only to express themselves, but to realise that their knowledges and opinions were equally valid, thus recognising, naming, and tackling head-on culturally embedded normative beliefs in the inferiority of certain groups, particularly women. Ours was an exercise in attempting to dismantle the traditional power and privilege of the patriarchal voice – for both women *and* men – by forging and promoting new forms of community voice. Our approach privileged a slow, processual and integrated approach, where power normativities could be questioned within a wider project as the community sought to unite against external threats to their wellbeing and livelihood.

Walukuba

Jinja Municipality, in the Eastern Region of Uganda, is a centre of industrial production, on the north shore of Lake Victoria, by the source of the Nile. Jinja has a population of around

83,500, with a daily in-flow estimated to fluctuate between 100,000 to 400,000 people (JMC 2009), exerting huge pressure on already crumbling services and infrastructure. In the face of both post-independence and post-industrialisation and post-Idi Amin's expulsion of the Asian community in 1972, there is extensive urban and industrial decay (Byerley 2011:486). Much of Jinja occupies the original colonial footprint. Literally on the wrong side of the railway tracks a workers' council-owned estate was built in the 1940s and '50s and subsequently enlarged by factory owners building accommodation for their workers. This is Walukuba. Originally designed as a series of one-room dwellings in low blocks of four for single men, post-independence, post-Amin and post-good council management, Walukuba now houses some 17,000 residents, most living as families in these same, now largely decaying, single-room dwellings[1]. In recent years the council agreed to a right-to-buy policy for residents, but the process of acquiring ownership is both complex and corrupt. Walukuba hosts a cosmopolitan population from across Uganda, with many migrants seeking escape from rural hardship or family breakdown to the often illusory opportunities presented by an urban economy. Some work for little more than £1 a day on 12-hour shifts in local factories; many more are involved in the informal economy. The estate houses everyone from university graduates to numerous child-headed households, and many have little or no education because money for schooling can be hard to find in a society where the average woman has more than five children[2] (UBOS, 2016).

Our project

Our work was conducted as part of a wider comparative AHRC-funded project – INTERSECTION[3] – under their Care for the Future Programme. McQuaid lived in Jinja continuously from January to November 2015, Plastow came briefly at the beginning and returned for two intensive months of theatre creation in June and August, and we engaged Baron Oron, an experienced Ugandan community arts facilitator, to help us with the early theatre work. We had identified Walukuba[4] as a potential focus for our arts work before arrival. As a relatively contained community and one of the most deprived areas of town, it promised an opportunity for sustained engagement. We got permission to work in Walukuba and to make use of a community centre compound from local government officials before hosting a community meeting to recruit members.

From January to June, McQuaid – who had undergone preparatory community arts training – and Oron worked with Walukuba residents on a regular weekly basis. The group was asked how it would like to divide itself[5], electing to work in three groups: separate groups for younger men and women (aged 14-35) and a mixed group of the 'older generation' (aged 30-60). Each person self-defined which group they thought they would best belong to, and the groups each met for two hours a week, using participatory arts and theatre exercises to stimulate action-based focus group discussions. Broad discussions about the environment soon transformed into communal explorations of socio-cultural, familial, economic, urban and natural landscapes, and related social inequalities and injustices. Weekly each group undertook the same exercises in order to maintain parity of experience, and unlike many research or 'development' projects, participants came on a purely voluntary basis. Attendance has fluctuated throughout the project but a core of over 30 has worked throughout, with some 60 people involved in our first community performance.

From the outset we instigated the praxis of a sustained cycle of action and reflection as a means for all involved to gain increased critical understanding of the factors that both constituted and constrained their community (Freire, 1970; Wallerstein, 1987). We facilitated activities that fed into detailed discussions, which built upon each other, leading into the next activity, and further discussions, as we slowly pushed beyond purely material concerns that structured daily life – lack of latrines, scarcity of jobs, appalling working conditions in Jinja's factories (International Labour Office 2010: 539-540), rising costs of food – to more nuanced and self-reflective subjects. We combined our participatory arts techniques and discussions with confidence-building activities and the nurturing of communication skills. One young participant spoke of how this process awoke for him the "life skills of critical thinking which I can pass on to the next generation". For a community who had never been taught to think critically this meant, he continued: "looking at issues and he gets the disadvantages, the advantages, and decides well on which, because some people they have not got that, they go with any idea, anything!"

This long-term weekly group engagement, and later the performances, enabled connections to be made between individual and collective experiences, provoking moments of brittle clarity and startling insight, but also frequently engendering dissonance. The 'messiness' of generating both creativity and critical thought is, we argue, productive, in that it forced us – and our participants – to repeatedly confront and discuss

peoples' beliefs and assumptions about identity and gender. For example, the flippant dismissal of young women's opinions by two older men in an October workshop – after nine months of engagement – provided the opportunity for the group to readdress their core principles of inclusivity and mutual valuing. It also underscored that women being present, and even contributing to discussion, is not a good enough marker enough of meaningful change – to engage a community in praxis is altogether more complex.

As we have explored elsewhere (McQuaid and Plastow 2017) it is inevitable when facilitating a series of workshops there is a certain degree of agenda-setting, raising important questions about power. Indeed we would argue that a totally blank sheet can be disempowering, and that it is easier to create meaningful debate when participants have a framework in which to think and operate. Our framework was initially decided by the themes of social and environmental justice the wider project was working with. What we did was to offer a series of starting points. If participants then took these in unexpected directions that did not totally move away from the overall conception of the project we were happy to support expanding thinking. So, while people were concerned with overtly environmental themes like swamp degradation and illegal tree felling; we also had extensive sessions that explored local beliefs about relationships, witchcraft, contraception and education. As the process developed and participants became more confident expressing themselves in this alternative and democratic social space, they claimed increasing charge of agenda-setting and in current work they absolutely decide topics to be pursued in creative, dialogic and activist programmes.

The Community Promenade Performance

Figure 1: One group voting on the most pressing community 'issues' for our first community theatre event. Photograph by Katie McQuad.

In June 2015 Plastow returned to work on our first performance: a series of pieces exploring the greatest concerns of our groups to share with the wider Walukuba community. Having listed all the social and environmental issues raised in preceding workshops each group engaged in a three-round voting process, as seen in Figure 1, to isolate the issues they thought were most important, until we ended up with six areas of primary concern. From these we worked to devise scenes, first separately, then together, to share experiences and make a number of intergenerational pieces. Our work from this point onwards was intergenerational and inter-gender, forging important

intergenerational relationships otherwise difficult to establish outside of the family. This first performance, on the community football pitch, had no over-arching 'message', unlike the vast majority of NGO-funded or state-sponsored performance work (see Gould & Marsh 2004). Rather in eight sections of a promenade performance the audience of around 450 saw – among other topics – young men rapping about swamp degradation, older women debating family planning options, older men debating HIV testing and disclosure, and the whole community excoriating corruption in the police, the council and members of parliament. We used drama, poetry, song and dance and invited audience participation along the way. We were experimenting with breaking down the dominant pedagogy that there must always be an absolute right and wrong, that community arts always have to have a message, and that 'experts' could provide answers. Instead we aimed to engage a community in debate and critical reflection. As we will discuss below, we had mixed results.

Speaking to Power

Our second production took place in August of the same year. Responding to the mood on the ground we moved into a more activist position, making theatre that sought to speak, not just to a community, but also to those in positions of power over it. We made three short plays of 15-20 minutes, to perform for key policy and decision makers, and to allow participants to engage them in discussion. One piece explored intergenerational knowledge exchange in pursuit of environmental sustainability. Drawing on extensive interview material and observation, we made a verbatim piece exploring the multiple oppressions of women in Walukuba; and responding to community concerns about land (in)security we made a play demonstrating the absurd convolutions and corruption involved in acquiring a land title.

On 18th August 2015 these plays were performed at a venue in the centre of Jinja. The event was attended by council officials, head teachers, church leaders, local government, police, representatives from the ministries of land and gender, media, theatre and gender academics from Uganda's pre-eminent university, Makerere, and representatives from CBOs and NGOs. Over the day we showed each play and invited attendees to engage in roundtable discussions, deliberately mixing stakeholders and participants in each group before systematically sharing the results and recommendations of the ensuing vibrant discussions. The indisputable fact that our plays were based on the lived experience of

those who performed them and who were then present in discussions meant that the stories they told could not be discounted or written off as exceptional or exaggerated, engaging all present both intellectually and emotionally.

By the end of the day we had promises – later fulfilled – from various participating organisations to share information about rights and recourses to justice with our participants. The management committee of Jinja Municipal Council requested a performance of the plays on gender inequality and land ownership– see Figure 2 – resulting in a discussion led by project participants during which politicians and technocrats butted heads, and leaders pledged to our participants that they would serve them better. The Municipal Town Clerk explicitly commented on the power of performance, on how "the true suffering and pain" embodied in performance guaranteed leaders could no longer ignore reality. Policy-makers expressed surprise at the suffering faced by women "in Uganda today", citing how the play "moved" them. As Barber (1984) writes, '[e]mpathy has a politically miraculous power to enlarge perspectives and expand consciousness in a fashion that not so much accommodates as transcends private interests and the antagonisms they breed". These events provided not only space for discussion and reflexivity about a range of critical issues troubling residents, but also enabled participants to make experiences usually invisible to policy-makers inescapably visible. Embodying such issues on stage caught and demanded attention to a normally marginalised community. As one older woman participant later reflected:

> Drama communicates more than words because when you're just speaking someone can easily look at you and walk away, and they go. But when they're watching something and you're acting, they can easily think so much and try to analyse the situation, and they get what you're communicating.

Figure 2: The women's play being performed for Jinja Municipal Council's Management Committee in November 2015. Photograph by [Author 1].

As a result of their work building both 'power within' and 'power with' (Rowlands, 1997) our participants decided to draft a constitution and embody themselves as a formal Community-Based Organisation called 'We Are Walukuba' (WAW). In November 2015 they registered at both divisional and district levels, aiming to continue using creative arts to promote sustainable development and environmental conservation. This has become a socially radical group emboldened by their engagement horizontally with community members at the grassroots, and vertically with policy-makers and local leaders, and by an

understanding of the need for new forms of organisation. Committed in principle to intergenerational and gender equality that remains difficult to enact in the everyday, every quarter a new organising committee of four people were to be elected: an older and younger woman and an older and younger man[6].

"After suffering? You endure!": Working with Walukuba's Women

Walukuba has many single mothers, teenage pregnancies and women with poor educational attainment. Women must navigate the challenges of raising multiple children amidst the unceasing grind of urban poverty, negotiating rising living costs, weak healthcare, poor infrastructure, and growing competition over the little available land for subsistence farming. Girls struggle to attain the most basic level of primary education, with barriers including domestic duties, low family income, the prioritisation of male or older siblings, and early marriages and pregnancies catalysed by poverty. We were frequently told that girls "are visitors in their father's home", as upon marriage they join their husband's clan, often fuelling the precarity of their position should the marriage break down; and women are often occluded from inheriting land, although this is slowly starting to change. The Busoga region, and Uganda more widely, is fiercely patriarchal, with men long established as heads of both household and community, and occupying the lion's share of local government and council positions (see Sorensen 1996). This was not a place that had heard of stiwanism. Patriarchy dominated all our early interactions; evident in the custom of women kneeling to greet men, near-endemic levels of domestic violence, and it was not uncommon to hear the view that men, having paid bride-price, 'owned' their wives. Polygamy is a widely accepted practice in this part of Uganda, and it is not uncommon for women to be abandoned in favour of younger wives.

Many women were quick to point to the progress made in women's rights under Museveni's regime, and whilst there has been substantial progress, the experiences of the women we worked with demonstrate the need for much more action. As one young woman in Walukuba exclaimed, "to be a Ugandan woman here? It's all about suffering. And after suffering? You endure!" Whilst many women readily acknowledged their individual and collective suffering, their oppressions were also more insidious. Their subjugated position in Ugandan society and relegation to the domestic realm, meant they often felt unable – even unworthy – to contribute to discussions on topics dealing with more than everyday life, and on many occasions deferred to any men present. Patriarchal ideology

not only excluded women's voices, but was simultaneously internalised by women. As Elizabeth[7], one young woman explained after working with us for over ten months:

> Women are regarded as inferior people who can't do anything, but I think it came from those days of our *Jjajas* [grandmothers] and the regulations that they had… that a woman is supposed to keep quiet when a man was talking and then a woman was supposed to regard a man as someone is, can I say a God, what? Just to praise him, to say nothing when a man talks, give him whatever he asks for, even if you do not like or you like it.

This manifested itself in varying ways. Over the first two months' of workshops, we faced huge difficulties in engaging our youngest women participants (aged under 20). It was not only in discussion; within a whole range of tasks, from drama skits to image theatre, poetry and song, the young women held back and struggled with any tasks requiring creativity or imagination. Even Baron, with two decades of experience in working with rural women on the challenging subject of domestic violence, had never before encountered young women so unable or unwilling to contribute.

To take a particular example, in one workshop all groups were asked to create a 'tree of life' using image theatre – representing a sustainable society in the form of a tree; what makes it grow, what makes it strong, what fruits it bears. The younger men and older participants produced incredibly imaginative scenes. Indicative of the higher status bestowed by age, a group of older women created a tableau in which a girl child began at school (the roots), was inspired by her teacher (the trunk) to become a Minister (the branches) who resisted corruption to become President (the fruits). When they animated the image it became clear that it was inspired by strong emerging Ugandan women role models, such as the Speaker of Parliament. This sketch invited heckles and hilarity from the older male participants, crying out "where are the men?" However, the younger women really struggled with the task, producing four almost identical sketches of an actual tree. Such a literal interpretation of a task requiring allegory was something we saw repeatedly amongst the younger women, and particularly those who were least educated.

Concerned, we instigated a new recruitment drive, approaching local youth leaders to invite young women they knew to attend. Some reported that many young women would not be allowed to attend by their husbands, or would be too busy with domestic work to commit to two hours each week. However, in the weeks that followed we welcomed several women in their mid-twenties with varying levels of higher education. This markedly transformed the group, and very slowly the youngest members, aged 14-18,

started to participate. This highlights a key attenuating factor in the subordination of women – not just age, but education – itself a marker of social class. These new members, who had often gone to considerable lengths to attain their education, were feisty, opinionated and eager to push against gendered barriers. One had completed qualifications in plumbing to demonstrate how Ugandan women could do anything men could do, yet repeatedly faced sexual harassment and withheld payment because she was a woman; and another held aspirations of setting up her own IT consultancy firm to train local young women. Bringing together the two groups of women demonstrated how important introducing role-models and fostering supportive relationships amongst girls and women from different backgrounds could be.

Our identities as women (of two different ages and one as a mother), as highly educated, and as intersectional feminists committed to promoting social and environmental justice necessarily impacted on participants in ways both evident – for example many women seeking our advice and support in relation to issues such as livelihoods and domestic abuse, and the perception of some of the older male participants of whether we challenged their authority or not – and in ways we cannot be fully aware of. Reflecting the embedded and sustained nature of the project, we did both consistently work to minimise distance and perceptions of superior status by participating in exercises, debates and the sharing of relevant personal experiences.

Love, Money and Modernity: Encountering Contradiction

Negotiating a place in contemporary Ugandan society could be most difficult for young women who tread an uneasy line between conforming to the 'traditional' and aspiring to the 'modern,' as any challenge to entrenched perceptions of tradition taps into nationalist discourses of "the loss of culture" and are all too easily equated with immorality. These factors often engendered highly charged conflicts in women's understandings of their identities and roles. Across the generations there was a pervasive belief amongst the women we worked with that whilst women were in need of liberation, they must also adhere to the constraints of highly constrictive gendered cultural codes, such as kneeling, wearing long skirts instead of trousers, and acknowledging men's right to voice and authority. Women would police each other as much as men. The same women who spoke out in discussions to denounce their subordination would often, in the same conversation, also voice their belief that men should be the 'breadwinners' and provide for all economic

needs. We wanted to examine and unpick such palimpsests of understandings; to uncover how power works, revealing the cultural practices and understandings that exploit and oppress women and men.

Love and Money was the most experimental part of our first performance and represents something of a productive failure. It was a playlet scripted by Plastow to bring together a range of issues that men and women had raised in workshops in relation to issues of romance, marriage and gendered expectations of sexual relationships. It drew upon McQuaid's ethnographic research and sought to air some of the contradictions expressed in gender stereotypes and normative attitudes to relationships between men and women[8]. Below we list some of the conflicting statements we frequently heard from men and women about relationships:

i. Men are – and should be – the head of the household

ii. Men are promiscuous by nature.

iii. Men can – or should – marry more than one wife and have more than one family.

iv. Men often abandon wives and children

v. Men are expected to provide for *all* the needs of their wives and children

vi. Young women have concerns about starting relationships with young men because they do not yet have assets to be able to provide for all their needs.

vii. Young women prefer older men with better jobs and assets.

viii. Sugardaddies are a great danger in luring young girls away from school into relationships and pregnancy.

ix. Women expect to keep any money they earn for themselves.

x. Women expect to tolerate violence, domestic abuse and drunkenness.

xi. Women respect men and kneel to them.

xii. Women cannot rely on men and must seek economic independence.

xiii. Women seek education so that they can be more independent.

xiv. Women defer to men's ideas and opinions because religious and 'tribal' custom says that women are men's helpers and men are 'supposed' to be in charge.

xv. Women must undertake all domestic and child-rearing chores, helped only by girl children.

In many cases men and women held many of these views simultaneously. In discussions we observed how people had difficulty recognising either the incompatibility of many of their beliefs and statements, or how these could be perpetuating disempowerment in either themselves or others. This was particularly the case for some young women such as Viola, the woman plumber, who would frequently exclaim how she wished "to prove us ladies can do anything!" She was adamant that women must be "change agents" and "economically vibrant", and thoroughly approved of our theatre work, explaining how "you can come out as a young lady to the community to show what you are, the freedom and the rights you have in your community… as a transformed lady". However, in one of many vociferous discussions on the contentious subject of bride-price, Viola, whilst critical of men's roles in the family and marriage, was quick to uncritically defend what she called her "culture" – she was a member of the Tooro tribe from Western Uganda:

> I disagree somewhere being that it's bad. It's not bad because we found this issue there, a man is the head of the family! That means if he has brought you from your home to his home, and has paid the bride price, of course he owns you… In actual sense the way something should be done: a woman is supposed to take care of the family, like caring for the children, washing, cooking, washing clothes for the husband, even caring for the people in the family. Then a man is supposed to give the needs within the family, buying basics needs within the family, but besides that, I think a man does not do anything.

Viola's complex, contradictory imaginings of gendered roles through her oscillation between reproducing and resisting gendered domination highlights the complex relationship and tensions between women's 'self-understanding' (Kabeer, 1994) and recognition of how normative gender roles and practices such as bride-price can reproduce inequality and injustice. It also serves to highlight an inevitable tension in feminist action research between the normative liberal beliefs of the researcher about resisting gendered oppression, and local complex workings of gendered power outside of advanced liberal democracies, which we return to in more detail below.

Love and Money sought to highlight how certain gender roles could be interpreted through the lens of injustice by using role reversal to subvert hegemonic norms. Our protagonist, seen in Figure 3, was thus a woman who sat around at home expecting her husband and son to do all the chores, and who regularly went out, got drunk, beat her partner and

practiced polyandry with another family installed elsewhere in Walukuba. Her son, forced to drop out of school to allow her sister to attend (in a reversal of the commonplace son-preference), fell prey to a 'sugar mummy' who quickly abandoned him. When the abused husband finally stood up to his wife she simply abandoned him and disappeared off to her second family, rendering her husband and son destitute. Plastow had 'borrowed' the idea of gender reversal from a play made in Eritrea during the liberation war in the 1980s (Plastow & Tsehaye 1998), where, in a similarly patriarchal culture (but in a war situation where a third of the front-line fighters were women) many plays had been written to challenge patriarchal attitudes. Working with real-life experiences drawn from our research, she wrote, then brought the play to our participants for discussion. What did they think? Did it reflect reality as they saw it? What did they make of the 'gender-bending'?

Figure 3: *Love and Money*, a play written by Jane Plastow. Photograph by Katie McQuaid.

Participants had no problem with the situations presented, agreeing that they all reflected commonplace realities. However, the reversal of gender roles was not so simple. While some, notably amongst our younger men, 'got' the device immediately and thought it both funny and thought-provoking, many others, probably the majority, found it impossible – however much we explained and discussed – to get beyond the literal. So while one young man spoke of how the play made him realise for the first time just how unfair the commonly accepted gender roles were and how he would bring up his own future sons to share in household duties; and another said he would think carefully about how he treated his future wife; others – both men and women – said the play showed how dangerous it would be to give power to women who would demonstrably abuse their position. One older man was appalled: "when women have the money they act in this way!" Whilst we prefaced the community performance with a careful explanation, when the play was shown and discussed in front of the community there was a similar divergence of views. What we had hoped was an obvious fiction, demonstrating the injustice of some male behaviour, was nothing like so apparent to many of our audience. Without accompanying and repeated discussions deconstructing the play with our cast, similar mis-interpretations would have rested. We outline our semi-failure here to highlight the imperative need to continuously cycle action and reflection in seeking new ways to embody and interrogate inequalities.

Conclusion: Diversity, agency, and unity in search of praxis

Before McQuaid's departure from Jinja in November we held many discussions with our participants about the project, reflecting on normative subjugation – or "shyness", as many referred to it – of women's voices. Two participants, women in their twenties, explained:

> The time we came here, maybe some of us were shy, we could not talk or air out something, but now you see she is saying something, I also get touched and I am like 'no! I have to challenge her!' It gave us some power in us, it empowered us you know. Sitting together? It has never happened. We are sitting together, and we are sharing with more of your parents, more of your little sisters. It was something unique that has empowered us to look different.

The second added:

> I think what makes us unique is that we are encouraged to do things that we thought that we can never do. Like if I see she is doing such and such a thing and maybe also in my life I wanted to do it, but I was really like, can I start it? Can I really do it? But then when we came together and I see she is doing it, my other sister is doing it, another person is doing it, then I am undermining myself that I cannot. I am encouraged that I can do it and be successful. So we have got that belief in ourselves that we can carry on and that we can be successful.

These responses emphasise the importance of the unifying and intergenerational dimensions of a stiwanist approach in bringing together diverse women and men in common cause to understand and challenge existing power relations and wider inequalities across intersecting social differences; and demonstrates Gita Sen's (1997:2) proposition that "[e]mpowerment is, first and foremost, about power; changing power relations in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives". Our new community space forged connections that continue to endure today.

In feedback sessions our women participants repeatedly reported on how they believed their lives had changed: they now felt they had stature in their communities, were less isolated, had increased knowledge and confidence, and new purpose in working to achieve "community development". They had learned, one woman explained, to "not despise myself". She explained:

> First of all I am not educated so I would think about myself not being so important, and also am old and poor. These things made me despise myself. But when I came to the group, you

> people made me understand by putting us together with the youth, young and old, I also feel like I am now important to the community.

At 44-years-old, she was now, she continued "confident". It is hard to overstate the lack of self-esteem and confidence many of these women had in the early months of working together. Another woman, Christine, aged 59 and equally uneducated, has been a stalwart of the group from the beginning. She was extremely nervous but elated to be nominated for her first prominent role in a play on environmental responsibility we developed in March 2016. She was anxious about learning her part, but the rest of the group supported her, and her delight and enhanced sense of self-worth as a result of succeeding in her task was palpable. She also highlighted an increased sense of control over her life:

> I've learnt how to make my own decisions, no-one forces me to do something that I don't want to do… I also developed my confidence because last time when we were presenting the drama people started commenting that Christine has also started acting, she's like a young girl right now so we believe she will be learning a lot of things… I felt so good that I was also on stage presenting something to the people because I used to despise myself.

These women are notably supported by more educated women with whom they have made common cause. At times they literally act as interpreters, translating into English and writing reports explaining group ideas and actions. The intergenerational solidarity amongst adult women across educational divides has been inspiring and is a reported source of strength amongst our participants. Christine reflected on how the project had worked in:

> bringing together the educated and uneducated, you love us all equally and that's what I love from you people, because you want the educated to learn from the uneducated and those ones who are also uneducated to learn from the educated, which is very good… you have given us room to share and educate one another.

This demonstrates further the potential of a stiwanist approach if we explicitly pursue solidarity within communities across entrenched social barriers such as age, ethnicity and class. As Angela explains: "what makes this group unique is that the group doesn't look at linguistic differences like what happens in other groups where you find the Acholis alone, Basoga alone, or Baganda."

Batliwala (1993) defines power as having two central aspects – control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs,

values and attitudes). If power means control, then empowerment is the process of gaining control over one's life (Sen, 1997:2). By working together these women had developed relationships across diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds that allowed them to expand their horizons and extend their possibilities for harnessing agency over certain conditions of their lives. Here the key tenet of stiwanism – working together as a community to challenge inequalities for the good of all – had apparently applied. In realising their own potential and value women were thus (at least) part way along the path to recognising their lack of control over both ideology and resources in Walukuba and imagining ways these could change. However, a recent incident demonstrates how this process is far from smoothly progressive.

A month after our Speaking to Power event, McQuaid tasked the group with identifying new community issues they wanted to address with the arts. Splitting into smaller groups, one led by a woman in her twenties declared they would like to make a play addressing girl children in the community. This would present ideas to:

> Educate girls on how to go with life, how to do work in the home, tell her on how to dress in a decent manner, telling girls how men deceive – how men give girls money, but they lie, she is impregnated and he is running away. We teach them behaviours in a certain way, and they wait until the right time to get married.

Before McQuaid could respond, one woman justified that it was a "big problem! If the girl children could be brought together and sit and we say girls are supposed to do A, B, C, D." All the other women in the group voiced their immediate agreement, along with the older men who muttered familiar adages about "losing culture". Interestingly, it was two younger men who spoke up in opposition: one to argue that participants' work should be "letting girls know they can do what we do, to empower and uplift them". Another agreed, advocating for an approach concerned with "self-esteem, with valuing ourselves" and "those skills of thinking, responding and reacting". The discussion thus re-directed internally, the sub-group refocused their efforts on designing a performance concerned more with mobilising girls to recognise and report on local dangers, and less with disciplining their behaviour. This example, along with Viola's contradictory statements highlighted in the section above, reveal how tensions can arise for the feminist facilitator using participatory methods amongst a community in which women often occupy subordinated and subjugated positions, and in which participants frequently oscillate between reproducing and resisting their own domination.

It necessitates a critical examination of both the dilemmas posed by the normative liberal assumptions of the feminist researcher; particularly – in the words of Saba Mahmood – "that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them" (2005:5); and a creative means of recognising women's agency "beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy" (ibid. 6). As feminist researchers we must be aware of, and negotiate, a productive "tension within feminism attributable to its dual character as both an analytical and a politically prescriptive project" (ibid. 10; see also Brown 2001; Butler 1999; Mohanty 1991; Rosaldo 1983; Strathern 1987, 1988). In our case we consciously worked to maintain commitment both to Freire's *conscientizaçåo* – simultaneously safeguarding a space for men and women to freely raise their concerns and interests through participatory arts and discussion without constraint nor prescription to the dominant/submissive binary to which liberal feminists are often seduced – and strengthening participants' capacity to understand the complexities of, and challenge and subvert, gendered inequalities and discriminatory practices.

Inspired by our approach, one of our younger male participants began to direct the efforts of his breakdance youth group to "celebrating the girl-child", targeting local schools with dance-based interventions to transform local attitudes to women and to campaign for increasing girls' opportunities. That our project convinced young men of the need to challenge gender inequalities more easily than it did the women only shows how deep-rooted is many women's interiorisation of their subordination, and how interventions must be both time- and resource-intensive to allow space for researcher and participant alike to explore and understand the complex dynamics of power around gendered identities and practices. Meaningful engagement and change is a slow process.

Prologue: Women rise and men decline?

What you would notice if you attended a WAW meeting in early 2017 is that by far the majority of attendees are women aged 20-59. A significant proportion of the core remaining participants are women with minimal education, such as Christine, Angela and Mariam, who have reported feeling empowered, more valued and more valuable as the result of their engagement with the group. At present, however, there are only a handful of regular male attendees; a core group of committed middle-aged men and some teenagers.

Prior to this our adult male participants have fallen roughly into two groups. In the first instance we worked alongside up to a dozen young men; some still in school, some unemployed, but all committed to one participant's almost daily breakdance sessions. They had their own scene in the first show – a rap and breakdance about swamp degradation – and a number participated in other elements of the first and following plays. Some of these young men were a great asset to the group. They quickly identified and articulately discussed issues of inequality across gender and age, and several told us that their experience of working on scenes such as the playlet *Love and Money* had changed their ideas about gender roles. However, after the Speaking to Power event, many stopped attending. Why? Partly, we think, the global image of urban cool meant it was going to be difficult to keep our young men on board. Some barriers to group solidarity are not specific to Walukuba, Uganda or even Africa. In almost any culture it would be hard to find groups of aspirational young men who wanted to spend time with a staid group of their elders. Critically, group membership furthermore offered no access to money. As our section on *Love and Money* above demonstrated, young men face high expectations of making and accumulating assets for their families. Many of our younger male participants were forced to stop attending as they sought work in the factories and elsewhere. As one 49-year-old man explained in April 2016 of why "we are seeing very few male members":

> You see in our culture here, men are going to go and look for what to eat, we are in a bad state, we are looking for what to eat. So most of our men are money-minded and secondly, the ladies we have are the people who usually stay at home and who are facing the real problems.

What he draws our attention to is one of the key facets of women's subjugation we sought to challenge: the normalisation of women's relegation to the domestic realm. As one participant, Mariam, reflects:

> I think the women are most active because they're always at home, they don't have any work to do, they don't have jobs and they also want to learn, but the men are always having long day works, like some work in the factories and come back very late.

More insidiously, and challengingly to the concepts of men and women working together informing ideas of African feminism, was our problem of getting older men and women to work together as equals. Our original group contained a substantial group of half a dozen older men, some of whom as local chairmen had been very helpful in mobilising

participants to join the project in the first place. However, this group, having been raised to uphold patriarchal culture, simply assumed that their voices would be the most significant. Theirs were identities forged in traditionalism, authority and the rightful hierarchy of men over women across all levels of social and political life, from the predominance of men in local political administrative positions to being heads of the household. When it came to making decisions about when the group would meet or rehearse, this group of men would often state their ideas and expect – and get – others to acquiesce. Their authority was so unquestioned that it took time for us to realise that apparent group decisions were in fact often controlled by the older men, and even when nominating other participants to lead on a decision, they would volunteer what they thought might be expected from this group of men.

When women first started to openly challenge the concept of a male-centred world, as in the example of the tree sketch of a girl's life leading to the presidency, the first reaction was often mockery. When discussions really started to expose gendered inequalities and show and state that they were absurd and unfair, as with the first reading of the *Love and Money* play, these men began to get angry, and at one tense meeting over this script a number of older people, both men and women, walked out at the affront to their world view.

These men were quite used to women being on committees and in community groups. Museveni's government has repeatedly encouraged better representation of women in a wide range of forums. But these women are not encouraged to challenge dominant male views, and are absolutely not intended to wrest control of an organisation from those men. In April 2016 members of WAW held a vote to elect signatories for the organisation's bank account, and for the next incoming management committee positions. For both it was agreed that men and women and older and younger generations should be represented. Prior to this time such votes had been public. Dominant men such as David; a village-level political leader, business-owner and family head, had put themselves forward and been elected. This time some of the women asked for a secret ballot. David received only one vote – his own – and he has not attended the group since. His is the most extreme example but other men have more quietly stopped being regular participants. Those who do remain are men whose life experiences have in some cases led them to appreciate women more than is the norm, men who have decided that their passion for community action is more important than any male authority.

Stiwanism, womanism and nego-feminism argue that the historic oppression of African people means that they need to make common cause, rejecting all inequalities – including gender inequalities – to transform life for people. Men need to work with women for the ultimate good of all. This is a fine ideal. Reflecting on our experience shows, however, how it elides the problem that for those currently in power – however small that power is – and sometimes *because* that power is so small – asking them to work for the communal good by voluntarily ceding control is unlikely to be perceived as being in their interest. Without ever stating it as such, through the way it is run and the actions it takes, We Are Walukuba is advocating a social revolution where patriarchs and elders are seen as equals to youth and women, and many men as a result have quite logically walked away. Why should they engage with an organisation that requires them to cede power? A few women have also left when they found they could not dominate. In order for these concepts to develop they, and organisations such as WAW, need to find ways of helping more men – and women – to do the most radical thing of all, to give away power in order to find the strength of their common humanity. That's a big ask.

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Notes

[1] For excellent historical analysis of the production of space in Walukuba and Jinja more widely, see Byerley 2005.

[2] Despite the much-lauded Universal Primary Education policy in Uganda, primary education is rarely 'free', with added costs for uniform, school materials, food, exams and so on, often rendering schooling prohibitive.

[3] INTERSECTION is a comparative research project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/K006215/1] working in Jinja in Uganda, Sheffield in the UK, and Nanjing in China, exploring intergenerational justice, consumption and sustainability, through an innovative combination of social science and arts-led methodologies.

[4] See Byerley 2005, 2011, 2013.

[5] Plastow's previous experience had shown that in many African societies women have difficulty in speaking openly in front of men, and younger people feel inhibited in discussion with elders (Plastow 2004 & 2007).

[6] This practice was abandoned in early 2017 due to logistical challenges. At time of writing there is now one woman acting as a co-ordinator to ensure continuity of organisation and approach.

[7] We have changed all names to protect the anonymity of our participants.

[8] Homosexuality was a subject never raised in any group discussions.