Militarism, Marginalisation, and HIV Stigma Among Ugandan Men

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Abstract

Ugandan masculinities in the 21st century are informed by complex, intersecting issues defined majorly by systems of patriarchy, militarism and public health. This essay will focus on how these systems interact to produce marginality among Ugandan men, and consequently the perpetuation of a climate of gender-based oppression. Particular focus will be given to the cases of hegemony, militarised masculinity, HIV stigma, and notions of reputation and respectability.

Key words
Masculinities; Uganda; Militarism; HIV Stigma; Gender Roles; Hegemony; Patriarchy; Sexual Violence

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Introduction

This essay will explore the construction and interaction of masculinities in Uganda, with a focus on two pressing issues in the region. Firstly, militarised masculinity and its perpetuation of violence, and secondly, HIV stigma and its impacts on men's interaction with HIV services. Ugandan conceptions of masculinity are based on the notion of 'natural' hierarchy and male superiority, and thus tackling gender equality in the region requires a deeper approach than simply amending formal inequality, such as women's property rights, etc. (Wyrod, 2008). Hegemonic/dominant masculinity is tied strongly to the breadwinner identity and enacting "responsible fatherhood", the masculine ideal of the provider, is the primary means of obtaining masculine capital for Ugandan men (Wyrod, 2008, 804).

Hegemonic Masculinity

In terms of gender equality, participant studies and gender workshops revealed a distinct fear in men in advocating for something, such as equality, that reduces their power and sense of manhood (Wyrod, 2008). Ideas of natural and inevitable male/female categories prevail in the country, which serve to maintain patriarchal power structures and thus female subordination (Wyrod, 2008). Hegemonic masculinity functions to uphold male dominance and legitimise female subordination throughout society (Elliott, 2016). Through engagement with hegemonic masculinity, Ugandan men enjoy "most freedom and access to economic and political power" (de Boise, 2015, 324). More recently, developments in women's (political) empowerment have challenged hegemonic masculinity (Wyrod, 2008). This has led to the emergence of a new variant of masculinity that incorporates aspects of women's rights, whilst retaining traditional male authority (Wyrod, 2008). Human rights in the region are heavily influenced by local understandings of "proper" enactments of masculinity/femininity (Wyrod, 2008, 803).

Militarised Masculinity & Violence

In Uganda, embodied masculinity is heavily influenced by ongoing structures of violence and conflict, creating a distinct militarised form of Ugandan masculinity (Tapscott, 2018). Young men are heavily influenced to partake in violent activity in a climate where standards of manhood are defined "by the state's hegemonic and militarised form of masculinity" (Tapscott, 2018, 120). Consequently, a dynamic of two masculine identities: "civilian masculinity and militarised masculinity" emerges in this context (Tapscott, 2018, 120). Militarised trainings sponsored by the Ugandan government employ disciplining tactics to create a hierarchy between the two masculine identities that reinforces the superiority of militarism and, consequently, gendered violence that encourages the

uptake of the "Crime Preventer" role (Tapscott, 2018, 120). This acts as a tool of state governance by controlling access to money, violence, and women (Tapscott, 2018). Tapscott emphasises the dichotomy of "military men and feminised society" created by militarism's dominating and protecting agenda (Tapscott, 2018, 121). This has the dual function of subordinating non-military/civilian men due to their approximation to femininity, as well as encouraging Ugandan nationalism among young men, via the association of "warrior-hood with manhood" (Tapscott, 2018, 120). The centrality of this form of masculinity for obtaining masculine capital is, however, in direct contradiction with the masculine ideal of breadwinner and responsible fatherhood, as military/militia work is often informal and unpaid, challenging their ability to support their families economically (Tapscott, 2018). Yet, men continue this humiliating line of work in the hopes of eventually achieving upward mobility into governmental positions (Tapscott, 2018). Hence, militarism can be regarded as an "economic and socio-cultural strategy" to regulate the lives of men in Uganda, as opposed to simply a means of legitimising violence and political hierarchies (Tapscott, 2018, 135). To tackle the legitimation of state violence and militarised masculinities in Uganda, huge political and bureaucratic transformations are required, so as to transform the status quo of gender relations and reduce the sway of the military in everyday life (Tapscott, 2018).

The legitimisation of state violence and militarism also has immense impacts on the proliferation of sexual violence in Uganda (Schulz, 2018). The exertion of sexual violence as a means of asserting political and sexual dominance, in and out of conflict situations, is a prevalent issue in the region (Schulz, 2018). Acts of sexual violence, such as sexual torture and genital mutilation, towards both men and women, are "deliberate and systematic" as weapons of war (Schulz, 2018, 1109). Male-on-male sexual violence can be seen as a means of victimising, feminising, subordinating, and disempowering the survivor, whilst building the perpetrator's sense of "power, dominance and hyper-masculinity" (Schulz, 2018, 1110). In Ugandan society, male victims of sexual violence are seen to have lost their male status, with victimhood directly threatening one's gender identity, as well as their sense of respectability (Schulz, 2018). This is directly linked to the notion that sexual violence is something done to women, and thus when done to men, victims are emasculated, feminised and 'homosexualised' (Schulz, 2018, 1117). The usage of sexual violence against men in Ugandan communities communicates the strength of heteropatriarchy in the region, as 'reducing' men (via sexual violence) to the status of women is the highest form of violation and subordination (Schulz, 2018).

HIV

A key issue in Uganda relating to the realm of masculinity is HIV stigma and how it shapes men's uptake of treatment, as well as how it impacts their daily experiences of masculinity. The struggle among Ugandan men to participate in HIV testing and treatment, as well as disclosing their HIV status can be associated directly with HIV stigma stemming from "context-specific notions of masculinity" (Rudrum et al., 2017, 228). There is a distinct lack of discussion of heteronormativity and masculinity regarding HIV-prevention strategies, and thus harmful societal and cultural stereotypes and perceptions are reaffirmed in health services (Rudrum et al., 2017). In the context of contemporary homophobia in Uganda, HIV is heavily stigmatised and associated with homosexuality, thus preventing men from accessing HIV testing and disclosing relevant information to healthcare practitioners (Rudrum et al., 2017). Socially ostracised men are thus further marginalised in the healthcare sector, as the intense fear of homophobia and HIV stigma act as barriers to inclusion (Rudrum et al., 2017). One study, however, found that promoting leadership opportunities in HIV services, which facilitates the attainment of masculine authority and respectability, was a positive means of encouraging male participation (Mburu et al., 2014).

Another barrier for Ugandan men in accessing HIV treatment and services is the reluctance to adopt the sick role, which directly challenges the dominant masculine ideal of the self-reliant breadwinner (Mburu et al., 2014). Being involved with long-term care is seen to contradict the prevalent masculine ideals of physical and mental strength, independence, and economic productivity (Mburu et al., 2014). HIV stigma is seen to contribute to feelings of "shame", "powerlessness and a loss of respect", threatening Ugandan hegemonic masculinity (Mburu et al., 2014, 5). Sick status and physical frailty impact men's ability to work, directly impacting their social responsibility and expectation to earn and provide for their family, which is a means of affirming their masculinity (Mburu et al., 2014). Mburu's study concluded that social constructs of masculinity which positioned men as economically responsible for their families both intensified their sense of HIV-related shame and prevented the disclosure of their HIV status to loved ones (Mburu et al., 2014). The potential for continued economic participation can be seen as an encouraging factor for the uptake of treatment and thus, notions of "revived masculinity" post-treatment are seen to be contingent on men's ability to return to generating income and providing for their families (Mburu et al., 2014, 6).

In reviewing the literature on Ugandan masculinity, a clear dynamic is revealed between reputational and respectable masculinity (Siu et al., 2022). Reputational masculinity is associated with risk-taking behaviours such as having many sexual partners and partaking in violent behaviour, versus respectable masculinity which values the fatherhood role and

economic responsibility (Mbonye et al., 2022). Respectable masculinity is seen to be endorsed by wider society, whilst reputational masculinity is more commonly endorsed by (younger) men (Siu et al., 2022). Thus, a shift from reputational to respectable masculinity can be seen to correspond with the shift from youth to adulthood (Siu et al., 2022). Here, we can see how reputational masculinity heightens men's risk of obtaining HIV through risky sexual behaviour, and how reputational and respectable masculinities reduce the likelihood of men accessing HIV treatment, due to a perceived loss of reputation and respect in admitting to a positive HIV status (Mbonye et al., 2022). In discovering their HIV status, increased feelings of "anxiety and powerlessness" are said to develop a precarious masculinity among men (Mbonye et al., 2022, 6). This sense of precariousness leads to a fluctuation among Ugandan men between reputational and respectable masculinity, as a response to this period of instability (accessing HIV treatment) (Mbonye et al., 2022). The perception of healthcare spaces as feminine is also noted to contribute to men's reluctance in engaging with HIV treatment and services (Mbonye et al., 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of masculinities is highly relevant to the pressing issues of militarism and HIV stigma in Uganda. Patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity have firm footholds in Ugandan societal structures and as demonstrated, have detrimental impacts on everyone in the community, even the men they are thought to serve. Militarised masculinity, as explored, promotes the widespread use of physical and sexual violence as a means of subordinating women, marginalised men, and political opponents (Schulz, 2018). Reputational and respectable masculinities are particularly visible through the exploration of HIV stigma, and how that stigma impacts men's willingness to access treatment and disclose their status to loved ones (Mburu et al., 2014).

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