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Security sector reform in Uganda: a critical-feminist analysis of defense and police reform, patriarchy and militarization

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ABSTRACT

Post-conflict security sector reform (SSR) has a mixed track record. A case in point is Uganda, where large-scale reforms were implemented with the goal of improving efficiency, professionalism, and civilian oversight. The Ugandan security sector is nevertheless widely known for politicized and excessive violence. Based on extensive fieldwork in Uganda and deploying a critical-feminist lens, this contribution shows that this is the case because reforms interacted with the political, historical, and social context. Particularly important here is how patriarchal gender relations and militarization interacted with SSR. This contribution finds that they shape what is thinkable and feasible in SSR and, in turn, are reinforced by reforms. As a result, SSR in Uganda disenfranchised already marginalized groups while reinforcing authoritarian and militaristic tendencies as well as patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations. For this reason, this contribution calls for a critical-feminist, emancipatory approach to analyzing SSR.

KEYWORDS Security sector reform; gender; critical-feminist; militarization; Uganda

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Introduction

In February 2020, during an interview in Uganda's capital Kampala, a Ugandan women's rights activist told me:

Our constitution is very clear on the role of the army, the role of the police. It says they should be non-partisan, they should be professional, they should protect and serve ... But they're partisan! Because, when you look at the way they treat the opposition and the way they treat the ruling party, they have broken all the rules.¹

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Another women's rights activist explained:

The language that is used to silence women in opposition is violence. If I'm a woman and I have seen the police grab another woman's breasts and squeeze them or strip them naked, what is it telling me? Do not cross the line.²

A security sector expert shared this assessment on gendered dynamics in security and justice:

In Uganda ... the best thing that could happen for you, is to be a ... heterosexual, Christian man. ... when you interact with police or security agencies and you fit this profile, you might have trouble with access to justice, but you'll have the least trouble.³

These interview excerpts reveal that (1) Ugandan security actors interact violently with citizens and are highly politicized (Bareebe 2020; Kagoro 2019) and (2) patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations and intersectional discrimination and marginalization influence how security sector institutions interact with citizens (Messerschmidt 2024).

The 2021 elections and the COVID-19 pandemic showcased how both play out in times of crisis. Throughout the election cycle, repression increased and formal and informal security institutions arrested, killed, and abducted opposition members (Wandera 2021). COVID-19 lockdowns were violently enforced, shining a spotlight on the policing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people, with those in shelters being scapegoated for spreading the virus.⁴ With the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023), these policing dynamics intensified even further (HRAPF 2023). More generally, Uganda's COVID-19 response was extremely militarized, with the military encroaching on civilian roles and spaces (Khisa and Rwengabo 2024). This was the case despite extensive security sector reform (SSR) programs intended to increase professionalism, respect for human rights, accountability, and efficiency.

Reforms started in the late 1980s, when armed conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) was still ravaging northern Uganda, and have been ongoing since then. These reforms are largely nationally owned but are financed and supported by (mostly) Western actors (Lautze 2008; Mushemeza 2008). However, rather than leading to justice and security for all members of the Ugandan society, SSR has reinforced authoritarian, repressive, marginalizing, and discriminatory dynamics. This contribution shows that this is the case because of the interaction between the various reforms and the social and political context in which they have been implemented. In Uganda, two factors are particularly relevant in this regard: militarization and patriarchal, heteronormative gender relations. The research question that this contribution answers is the following: How did patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations and militarization interact with SSR in Uganda?

Militarization, here, denotes a process of performing a militaristic belief system and maintaining and reinforcing its relevance and power within the security sector and more broadly in politics and society. This militaristic belief system, or militarism, “celebrates and places the army (and martial activities) above any other political process” (Twagira 2016, 814). Both are related through the process of bleeding: militarism “distressingly ‘bleeds’ across formal boundaries: militarism is a force that is not contained by military institutions, but one which seeps into much more fundamental aspects of social and cultural life” (Teaiwa 2011, 2). This process is inevitably gendered (Enloe 2015; Hearn 2012). Asking how gender relations, militarization, and SSR interact thus means asking how gender relations and militarization influence what is thinkable and feasible in SSR, how reforms were planned and implemented, and how the results were perceived. SSR can, in turn, either reinforce or weaken militarization and reproduce or erode patriarchal norms and ideals. The article argues that, through interactions with militarization and gender relations, SSR in Uganda created winners and losers along gendered, intersectional, and political lines and reinforced societal and political power differentials in the shape of patriarchy, heteronormativity, militarism, and authoritarianism.

Specifically, I investigate how (1) community policing and (2) defense reform, as two major aspects of SSR in Uganda, interact with militarization and gender relations. It does so for three reasons: First, community policing and defense reform address institutions that are present in citizens’ everyday lives, not least because the Ugandan regime relies on the military and police for governance, control, and repression (Kagoro 2016; Khisa 2019). Second, international actors have been playing crucial roles in these reform processes, especially in defense reform and assistance, enabling me to illustrate the effects (which in this case are negative) of such international engagement. Third, both aspects have become standard ingredients of SSR – albeit not in the exact same way as in Uganda – making the findings of this analysis informative for other cases in which peacebuilding includes SSR.

The next section situates the article and its contributions within the broader picture of militarization, gender relations, and SSR, as well as the relevant literature on SSR, with a specific focus on gender and SSR. In the third section, the article’s critical-feminist perspective and methodology are introduced. The fourth section considers the historical, political, and gendered context of SSR in Uganda, community policing, and defense reform. An in-depth analysis based on over 70 interviews with Ugandan interlocutors reveals a disjuncture between the declared goals of reforms and their results. Rather than improving accountability, respect for human rights and civilian oversight, both aspects of SSR reinforced authoritarian rule, militarization, and patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations. For women, gender and sexual minorities, and the political opposition, this manifests in

further marginalization, criminalization, oppression, and violent repression. The article's conclusion outlines the value of deploying a critical-feminist lens for analyzing interactions between SSR and its context, in this case, gender relations and militarization within *and* beyond the security sector in Uganda.

Situating the contribution: SSR and its discontents

As part of international post-conflict peacebuilding, SSR entails reforming security and justice institutions like the police, the military, and the judiciary. Two generations of SSR can be distinguished. The first is characterized by international actors deploying a legal and technical approach to reform state institutions with the goal of improving efficiency, accountability, and democratic oversight. Doing so, they often transplant reforms and ignore local contexts (Schroeder, Chappius, and Kocak 2014, 214–215), glossing over ulterior interests, for instance regime maintenance or geopolitical motives (Jackson 2018, 3; Sedra 2018, 52) and ignoring the colonial roots of many of the institutions under reform and their own part in creating and maintaining them (Bagayoko, Hutchful, and Luckham 2016, 6).

Second-generation SSR emphasizes local ownership and includes informal security and justice institutions (Jackson 2018, 6). Local ownership means domestic actors are in charge of the design and implementation of reforms. This, however, raises important questions: which domestic actors are involved? Who benefits from the resulting politico-institutional settings? And how do these settings perpetuate or challenge inequalities (Bagayoko, Hutchful, and Luckham 2016, 16; Gordon, Welch, and Roos 2015, 2)? Including informal security actors is supposed to achieve sustainable results by bringing all relevant actors on board (Sedra 2018, 59). Yet, frequently, informal actors provide security preferentially on the basis of their traditional, local, religious or ethnic allegiances (Martin 2013, 153). Discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, or other identity markers might be perpetuated as a result (Bagayoko, Hutchful, and Luckham 2016, 15–16; Meagher 2012, 1077).

Ugandan expertise informed how this contribution engages with literature on SSR, militarization, and gender relations beyond the Ugandan case. Two quotes illustrate the principle. The first is from a Ugandan women's rights activist commenting on legal reform in Uganda: "It's about power, ... it's about a perceived threat to those that have been enjoying life within the patriarchal system."⁵ The first part of the literature review shows that SSR has thus far generally failed to balance the scales of power in favor of women and marginalized groups. The second illustrative quote is from a security sector insider, who shared this opinion on SSR in Uganda:

It's turning the wheel in the same direction it has been turning all this time. Because it is working very well for the establishment. So why reform? Why go for democratic control of your armed forces by civilian authority? Why [reform] the role of the military in the politics of Uganda? It's a dictatorial state projecting itself.⁶

Based on the above, the second part of the literature review examines how the Ugandan case speaks to other cases in which SSR interacts with militarization and the gender relations this entails, and, as the quote highlights, the role of military regimes in these processes. Critical-feminist questions about second-generation SSR include what security means for different people and what achieving security for some might mean for others. Therefore, this contribution embraces a critical conceptualization of security, one which centers the "everyday lived experiences of security" (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016, 1186). To understand these experiences, an "interscalar approach" (Purdeková 2025, 4) is deployed. This approach involves an analysis of how international peacebuilding paradigms and geopolitical considerations, as well as national state security and regime-maintenance interests, shape people's and communities' everyday experiences of security and vice versa, and how all this is gendered.

Considerations of gender entered SSR in a general sense in the early 2000s. Gender-SSR (or GSSR) has mostly focused on enticing women to join the security sector and on incorporating women's interests in planning and implementation (Valasek 2008, 4). Critical research has found that GSSR "remains tokenistic, failing to achieve real change" (Myrntinen 2019, 1). It does not question militarism and often merely adds women into existing systems, reproducing gendered power structures (Clarke 2008; Kunz 2014). As Olonisakin emphasizes: "On the surface, actors have changed and spaces have been expanded ... , but in reality, the interests and structures that sustain the status quo remain entrenched" (Olonisakin 2011, 26). Accordingly, security tends to remain not people-centered, but centered on men in positions of power (Olonisakin and Okech 2011, 2).

However, contributions that move beyond classical GSSR and holistically examine gender relations argue that SSR has the potential to transform (Quest 2022; Wilén 2020) or reinforce gender relations (Duriesmith and Holmes 2019; Gordon 2019). These findings point towards the necessity of a critical-feminist analysis of SSR in Uganda. The insights gained in this way are relevant for global discussions about SSR, as two developments indicate. The first is the re-emergence of military coups d'état on the African continent. Since 2020, 11 African countries, most of which had previously undergone SSR processes, have experienced military takeovers or attempted takeovers. These coups are, at least partially, the result of dissatisfaction with non-military governments, as well as the belief that the military can do better, often resulting in popular support for the coups (Ibrahim 2022, 9; Odigbo,

Ezekwelu, and Okeke 2023, 651). Therefore, the question how SSR and militarization interact is highly relevant for these and other militarizing (and patriarchal) cases.

Second, contributions on illiberal peacebuilding point out that liberal peacebuilding does not always result in liberal or peaceful outcomes for everyone affected by it (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018). In many cases of illiberal peacebuilding, the military or militarism play a major role. Hence, peacebuilding in a militarizing context, often following a military victory in intrastate armed conflict and reinforcing authoritarian rule, is not a rarity. Cases in point are Rwanda (Duriesmith and Holmes 2019), Angola (Soares De Oliveira 2011), Cameroon (Lefort-Rieu 2024), Democratic Republic of Congo (Massey 2022), Sri Lanka (Subedi 2022), and Colombia (Rodriguez 2018). The Ugandan case is thus not an outlier in the bigger picture: in contexts where powerful military or militaristic institutions have a say in politics, they also have a say in peacebuilding, internationally (Henry 2024; Iñiguez De Heredia 2021) and within the state that experienced armed conflict. This contribution shows that this is inevitably a gendered and intersectional process. The case of Uganda highlights that not paying attention to how militarization, gender relations, and SSR interact has undesirable consequences in terms of reinforcing patriarchal, heteronormative gender relations and militarization.

Paying attention: a critical-feminist approach to analyzing SSR

Critical feminism is not a standalone theory. Generally, critical-feminist research analyzes and critiques patriarchy, gender injustice, power relations, and domination and disavows the ideal of value-free research (Mama 2011). This contribution's critical-feminist perspective consists of three aspects. The first is a normative ideal. While SSR cannot singlehandedly abolish patriarchy and heteronormativity, it can, at least, not make things worse for those marginalized or oppressed. Instead, SSR should transform gender relations within the security sector, between the security sector and society, and within communities. Here, the term "gender relations" refers to how the multiple masculinities and femininities that co-exist in a given context interact and are interdependent. Gender relations are not static but performative (Butler 1990), and one form of masculinity (and, relatedly, femininity) is usually hegemonic, that is, it is the "currently most honored way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 831).

The second aspect of this perspective is an intersectional understanding of power and marginalization (Crenshaw 1991; Salem 2018) that pays attention to the diverse experiences and voices of the marginalized and oppressed. For instance, a human rights lawyer told me:

Whereas women in Uganda find it a challenge to access justice ... , it is worse for a woman who is an LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex] person ... What if she was LGBTI and also a [person with disability]? ... A woman politician might find it hard to access justice. But it might be harder for a woman politician who is in opposition. ... or worse, ... for a woman who is a formerly abducted child.⁷

Such statements indicate which voices are sidelined and who is marginalized, thus informing further interviews and their analysis. This contribution specifically centers gender, sexuality, and political affiliation, not because other identity aspects are unimportant, but because these emerged from the interview data in relation to defense reform and community policing.

The third aspect of the critical-feminist perspective is an emancipatory research imperative. That is, it requires revealing and criticizing power relations from the global to the community level and writing on the side of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. This necessitates taking seriously the voices of people who are often ignored in or excluded from practical and academic discussions about justice and security yet have experiences of (in)justice and (in)security that differ significantly from those of more powerful people (Bagayoko, Hutchful, and Luckham 2016, 16; Gordon, Welch, and Roos 2015, 16): women in all their diversity, LGBTQI+ people, the political opposition, anti-militarist and pacifist voices, ethnic and religious minorities or socio-economically disadvantaged people. This contribution's methodology is informed by all three aspects of the critical-feminist perspective.

At the core of the analysis are over 70 qualitative interviews conducted in Uganda in early 2020 and early 2022, in Kampala and neighboring districts, and in Gulu in northern Uganda. The two interview locations enabled me to understand diverse experiences of conflict and security as well as SSR, the roots of which lie in colonial regional and ethnic divide-and-rule tactics and their complex legacies (Kibanja, Kajumba, and Johnson 2012). The capital, Kampala, is the economic and political center of the country, where national and local security dynamics are clearly evident and, sometimes, are more pronounced than in rural areas and smaller cities. Also, people from all regions and working in diverse fields live and work in the capital, and people with diverse geographic, socio-economic, political, ethnic, religious, ideological, and cultural backgrounds co-exist. Gulu, by contrast, was at the geographic center of the armed conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government, resulting in marked differences in its conflict heritage and security dynamics.

I spoke to diverse interlocutors, many of whom are usually not asked about or heard from in discussions on SSR, to hear manifold perspectives: feminist, LGBTQI+, sex work and political activists, human rights lawyers, journalists, members of and experts on the security sector, government and opposition politicians, experts on gender relations and sexual and reproductive health/

rights, donor country representatives, and people involved in peacebuilding and SSR. These participants shared with me a broad spectrum of opinions, ideals, and beliefs about gender relations and about militarism and politics. I identified interview partners through snowball sampling and based on their expertise in the relevant research areas (for example, security and justice provision, feminism, gender relations, armed conflict and human rights) or based on their apparent positionality within gender relations, for instance their work as LGBTQI+ and sex work activists. All my interview partners have dual expertise, one related to their work or activism, and one related to their lived experience of gender relations in Uganda. Accordingly, depending on who they were and their specific area of expertise, I asked them about their work or activism, their experiences with the security sector and armed conflict, and about their lived experience.

The interview data exhibit a diversity that is also present within the Ugandan society generally: With each hegemonic position and belief comes a plethora of counter-voices and dissent, some of which I quote here, as well as active resistance, with many of my interview partners being part of that resistance.⁸ I coded the interviews inductively, paying particular attention to gender and security sector practices, ideas, and beliefs. Going back and forth between interviews, codes, and themes, and often using further empirical material, for instance, media reports, press statements, and academic literature, I then sorted the codes into storylines that emerged out of the interviews. Interweaving these storylines, I reconstructed how aspects of SSR interacted with aspects of the political and social context, specifically militarization and gender relations. One pertinent example is the value ascribed to guns, their role in Ugandan history and politics, as providing power and serving as a symbol of masculinity, and how all this shaped SSR while simultaneously being reinforced by it. The next section presents the results of this process, focusing on the historical and political context of SSR, patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations in Uganda, community policing, and defense reform.

SSR, militarization and patriarchy in Uganda

After the National Resistance Army (NRA) under Yoweri Museveni took power militarily in 1986, armed resistance sprung up, mostly in the northern part of the country. Most notoriously, the LRA fought against the government until 2008. In 1995, the NRA rebranded itself as the National Resistance Movement (NRM), with its military arm becoming the UPDF. Despite these changes, the president, ruling party and even parts of the security sector leadership today are the same as those who were engaged in armed conflicts throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. SSR in Uganda was largely a nationally owned process and involved state and non-state security and justice actors.

However, diverse Western donors were also involved. The following section analyses the militarizing and gendered historic and political context of SSR in Uganda to then show its interaction with SSR.

The historical and political context: power through the barrel of the gun

The military plays an important role in Ugandan politics. As an expert on history and politics in Uganda pointed out, since British colonization, state power has mostly been won on the battlefield: “The gun is the one to give power ... It is a gun keeping armies in office, not votes.”⁹ Since 1986, the NRM has claimed a right to rule based on militarily “liberating” Uganda.¹⁰ A security sector expert explained, “if you’re a politician and you have the military badge on your chest, it really goes a long way in building your legitimacy, what people see as your right to rule.”¹¹ The NRM also emphasizes that they are the only ones able to maintain peace and security¹² through military might: “If you’re going to say ...: ‘We have the army ... in our hold’, ... that is threatening because we know what the army does.”¹³ In 2020, a year before the last general elections, an opposition politician told me: “People know the army is loyal to President Museveni ... If Museveni is defeated through an election next year, many Ugandans are very doubtful whether there would be a peaceful handover of power.”¹⁴

Upon taking power, the NRM also relied on military training for civilians to instill the belief that military violence was a legitimate means and the gun an integral tool for establishing peace.¹⁵ This effort was also intended to re-frame guns from being “an instrument of terror” to “an instrument of politico-military liberation,” as journalist Philip Matogo commented in the newspaper *Daily Monitor* on October 4, 2020. A former LRA combatant explained what holding a gun meant for him: “I can condemn you to death. I have a gun. ... I was at that level, at the judge of High Court. ... I felt so big, yet a young boy.”¹⁶ According to a security sector expert, through joining the security sector and holding a gun, people generally “feel better, safer.”¹⁷ This is linked to ideas about masculinity. As a journalist remarked, for “somebody to be masculine, to be seen as strong, ... in this country, you must have a gun.”¹⁸ While guns empower those holding them, they take power from those they are pointed at. Decades of armed conflict taught people that “when people with guns come, ... you’re supposed to submit because otherwise you will die,”¹⁹ with submission having a feminine connotation, as the next section shows. Relatedly, those proficient at handling guns, using violence, and even killing are closer to hegemonic masculine ideals (Decker 2014, 43). Interestingly, many interview partners – whether critical of or loyal to the regime – agreed that the UPDF has “a

degree of professionalism” in using military violence as “compared to the previous army.”²⁰ An interview partner who observed the consecutive post-independence militaries stated that the UPDF does not

rush into action. ... going out and killing people, rampant like it used to happen during Amin’s time, no, it is not happening now. That doesn’t mean that this never happened ... , they killed people to come to office. But if you compare, ... the UPDF has done better.²¹

Many people rank the UPDF highest among security sector institutions, acknowledging their professionalism and proficiency: “Without a doubt, the UPDF enjoys the most respect.”²²

To summarize, militarization in Uganda is all encompassing and ongoing. Its impact on Ugandan politics and society, and the high value that is ascribed to military institutions, violence, artifacts, and power through progressing militarization, speaks to previous findings on this process in other contexts (for instance, Kelly 2013; Levy 2016).

Patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations

Hegemonic and binary ideals of masculinity and femininity are intertwined with political and military ones, and these have co-evolved over the last 39 years of NRM rule. They manifest and are reproduced in diverse discursive and material performances within families, communities, the security sector, and politics. The findings speak to insights from other militarizing and patriarchal contexts (for instance Mama 1998; Teaiwa 2011) and, based on my interviews, can be summarized as follows: For someone to conform to masculine ideals, they must be assertive and aggressive: “To brag, to speak loudly, to talk down on people, they say, ‘That’s being a man.’”²³ Conversely, showing vulnerability and emotions means “you’ll be acting like a woman, and you’re weak.”²⁴ A female police officer spoke of a “toxic socialization processes” and shared her experience with men experiencing domestic violence: “We call them in the office, they even broke down and cry. ... When they go out, they become more aggressive.”²⁵ The corresponding feminine ideal is to be submissive and soft-spoken. A women’s rights activist explained: “They say: ‘Women, submit! ... Be stupid, accept everything, do not question your spouse, he’s the leader, wherever he leads, go! Whatever he demands.’”²⁶

Relatedly, men are supposed to defend and protect women, children, and property.²⁷ Women, conversely, are expected to be in need of protection.²⁸ This ideal of militarized masculine figured in the formation of armed opposition in northern Uganda, according to an interview partner from the region. He recounted that the current regime had embarked on retaliatory violence against the former regime’s alleged supporters:

We didn't go to war because we hated Museveni ... [or] to take over power. We went to war to defend our mothers. ... if you rape my mother, you have disgraced my origin ... if you attack my parents and ... my children, you attack my manhood.²⁹

A journalist explained that today, many Ugandan women have come to see the NRM as their protectors, a situation the regime benefits from and reinforces: "If you look at the voting patterns of this country, women largely vote for Museveni. Because ... he has decided to portray himself as our protector."³⁰

The regime presents itself as a "muscular state,"³¹ that uses the military as an ideally masculine institution to protect the population.³² Those not conforming to hegemonic gender ideals are routinely identified as enemies to the patriarchal, heteronormative social majority, often for political gain. One example of this is the criminalization of LGBTQI+ Ugandans. Even though the first anti-homosexuality legislation was imported by the British in the colonial Penal Code, within the last 30 years, homophobia has regained political salience. The NRM regime has repeatedly used the issue to distract from socio-economic mismanagement (Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015; Tamale 2013, 39), with LGBTQI+ Ugandans going from overlooked to criminalized and becoming the target of repression and discrimination; these efforts culminated in the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023. According to a human rights lawyer, it had become, "politically expedient to be homophobic."³³ An lesbian, bisexual and queer women's activist outlined how local politicians would nowadays side with the "community of heterosexuals" because they were "people looking for votes ... [a]nd they go with the numbers."³⁴

Similarly, while the NRM had co-opted the women's movement in the nineties,³⁵ more recently, a "new energized phase of radical feminists" who do not "take prisoners"³⁶ has emerged. They go further in their demands for self-determination, sexual and reproductive rights, and systemic change. Museveni reacted by using militaristic language to mark them as enemies, claiming that they "pollute our women emancipation movement by introducing elements of mercenarism in marriages" (*Daily Monitor*, February 22, 2015). This demonstrates the complex yet close relationship between gender relations and authoritarian rule.

Summarily, historical experiences and the current politico-military setting in Uganda are characterized by militarization and intertwined with binary, heteronormative, and patriarchal gender relations. The following sections demonstrate that both influenced SSR with respect to what was thinkable and feasible, how reforms were planned and implemented, and the role played by international and national actors. SSR, they show, reinforced those militaristic and patriarchal ideals, and through them oppression, marginalization, and even criminalization, rather than contributing to democratic oversight, respect for human rights, accountability, transparency, and, eventually, demilitarization.

Community policing

Community policing is an Anglo-Saxon policing model in which the police come to know people's "concerns from regular everyday contacts, and act on them in accord with the community's wishes," invoking an unrealistic image of "stable, consensus-based and homogenous neighbourhoods" (Fielding 2005, 460). Despite its being unrealistic, community policing is a staple Western export. The United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) invest especially heavily in creating community policing structures in transitional societies, believing that this increases stability and economic development, and thus protects their economic and geopolitical interests. Community policing exports usually include "watch schemes, police community forums, and problem-solving policing. That basic model is fashioned in the West for easy implant" (Brogden 2005, 65).

In the late 1980s, the UK supported the introduction of community policing programs in Kampala, according to a high-ranking police officer, to increase mutual understanding between the police and communities and thereby improve service delivery.³⁷ At the same time, the UPDF started recruiting civilians into informal paramilitary groups, called Local Defence Units (LDUs), to protect villages against the LRA.³⁸ Despite their poor training and inadequate compensation, LDUs "were often sent into battle" (Tapscott 2016, 696). Using this strategy, the Ugandan government was able to comply with donor requests to decrease military spending, while "de facto augmenting the Ugandan army" (Janmyr 2014, 210).

In 2007, the government published the first Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda. The document explicitly merges the two security strategies: community policing and the deployment of paramilitary forces. It plans for "local community-based forces," also referred to as LDUs, to support the military and police, especially in northern Uganda (Government of Uganda 2007, 51). Tellingly, the plan does not outline what qualifies paramilitary groups with rudimentary military training for civilian policing functions. Nevertheless, the practice was born of engaging informal paramilitary groups in policing and calling it "community policing." Throughout his tenure (2005–2018), then-Inspector General of Police, Kale Kayihura, recruited "crime preventers" as a nationwide community policing initiative (Kagoro 2019, 42). While my interview partners agreed that they are generally undertrained, the little training they do receive includes military drills and promotes military values (Tapscott 2016, 704). A journalist explained that the crime preventers turned into a force for voter intimidation: "I don't think it had much to do with keeping law and order, it had much to do with elections."³⁹

Using community policing to influence elections was, according to Jude Kagoro (2019, 42), "a phenomenon not forecasted by the SSR benefactors." Before the 2021 elections, recruitment efforts focused on LDUs rather than

crime preventers. A northern Ugandan security sector analyst stated that during armed conflict, LDUs were defending people against the LRA, “but now you would wonder why you need a Local Defence Unit when there’s no conflict.”⁴⁰ This is even more questionable, seeing that LDUs are openly paramilitary in character, unlike Crime Preventers, who were officially recruited for policing purposes.⁴¹ According to an opposition politician, young men join LDUs because “they have that eagerness of using the firearms. ... You know, having a gun within our country ... you feel like the king. You’re above all.”⁴² LDUs, a paramilitary outfit in looks and behavior, “people with guns, who are barely trained” and “not really accountable to anybody,”⁴³ enforced the first COVID lockdown in early 2020 violently and without accountability. In the process, they violated the rights of members of the political opposition in the run-up to the 2021 general elections and violated the rights of LGBTQI+ people, the latter mainly for political clout. Later, these units engaged in the 2021 general elections with extreme violence.⁴⁴ Yet, by early 2022, they had already taken a backseat in the security landscape. According to a member of the public administration, once the elections were over, the LDUs had fulfilled their purpose. They could, however, easily be reactivated.⁴⁵ As a human rights lawyer explained, the LDUs were “amorphous” and had “been created and disbanded so many times.”⁴⁶ To summarize, there is a clear continuity from recruiting and training paramilitary forces during armed conflict to recruiting militarily trained informal community policing forces during times of peace. Their names and attire are different, their tasks and paramilitary character are the same. What does this tell us when considered against the background of the literature on gender, militarization, and SSR?

First, community policing principles – engaging all members of the community in dialogue with the police and acknowledging their needs and policing the community in a democratic and accountable style – contradict the masculine and militarized ideals outlined above. When gaining power and maintaining security through military might and violence are normalized and merge with hegemonic masculine ideals, communication and cooperation are not valued highly in security sector institutions. Being aggressive and, if necessary, violent, however, is a tried and tested way of not only gaining and maintaining power, but also masculine status within families, communities, society, and politics.

Second, community policing assumes a homogeneous community, which does not exist. Hence, community policing institutions operate according to hegemonic ideas of social and political order, in the process oppressing powerless groups, among them political opposition and marginalized communities. This did not stop international actors from pushing for community policing, leaving marginalized and oppressed members of the Ugandan society to bear the costs.

Third, for the regime and security sector, (para)military groups and tactics are efficient and effective for maintaining social and political order. Accordingly, military violence is seen as equally legitimate in civilian policing as in military combat. This further normalizes the presence of military units and the use of military tactics and artifacts. Especially in urban settings, the population has become accustomed to informal paramilitaries as part of security landscapes. In times of crisis, these groups are ideally positioned to enforce social and/or political order. Hence, community policing has contributed to the ongoing militarization of public space.

Defense reform

In the early 2000s, the Ugandan government, supported by Western donors, embarked on a defense review process to assess the status quo and needs of the defense sector, which was supposed to inform subsequent SSR. International donors had planned for a review of the entire security sector, yet according to one of my interview partners who was involved in the process, “Museveni narrowed it down.... Because, according to him, defence was the pillar of the security sector,”⁴⁷ to the exclusion of other security sector institutions, like police and intelligence services. This reflects the (strongly gendered) elevated status of the military in Ugandan society and politics.

International actors supported the defense review process for three reasons, none of them selfless. First, according to the same interview partner, especially “the British government was trying to get inroads back into the security sector.”⁴⁸ Second, they and other donors like the World Bank and the European Commission had just “started providing the GoU [Government of Uganda] with direct budget support” (Hendrickson 2007, 31) and wanted to avoid shifts in budget allocation. Third, and officially, they hoped for “improved transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the use of defense resources” (Hendrickson 2007, 31). The Ugandan government’s priority, by contrast, was to raise defense spending to improve its military capabilities through weapons acquisitions and by improving the conditions of service (Hendrickson 2007, 30).

The government’s review process led to the 2004 Defence White Paper, which states that “approximately 18 times the current Defence Budget” (Government of Uganda 2004, 32) was necessary for the military to reach the desired state. Based on the review, SSR should address professionalization, military equipment, and the recruitment of intelligence operatives and auxiliary forces (Government of Uganda 2004, 34). Despite claiming to oppose increases in Uganda’s military spending, Western actors have and continue to invest heavily in the Ugandan defense sector. They do so because they perceive Uganda as an anchor of stability,⁴⁹ and Museveni as

somebody they can rely on in the volatile Great Lakes Region. For instance, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs finds that multilateral military support “has proven to be effective” and that “Uganda’s ongoing deployments ... have demonstrated willingness and capacity to deploy armed forces to enhance regional peace and security” (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). The US, European Union, and UK, similarly, provide technical and financial support to the UPDF (Congressional Research Service 2019, 2; Fisher 2012, 417).

Human rights activists and opposition politicians have continuously criticized this Western support to the UPDF, and in so doing demonstrate the political dimension of interactions between SSR, militarization, and gender. For example, opposition members of parliament accused the French ambassador to Uganda of aiding “one of the greatest violators of human rights” in Uganda and accused him of providing the training in skills used to torture citizens, especially the political opposition (*The Observer*, May 17, 2022, see also *The Independent*, February 14, 2022). This, however, seems to be an acceptable bargain for international actors and shows that they share the belief that military violence is the supreme solution to diverse regional and national problems, demonstrating that militaristic ideas influence reform decisions not only on the national but also on the international level. On the flip side, this support allows the UPDF to depict itself as an ideally masculine protector of the state and the Ugandan regime as the above-mentioned “muscular state.” Both imageries are informed by the militarized and gendered ideals outlined above and, simultaneously, reinforce them. Hence, defense reform was successful from the perspective of the regime and international actors interested in regional stability, but a failure for the political opposition.

In summary, international and national actors initially had conflicting goals concerning defense reform, both informed by post-colonial and militaristic ideas of security and international, regional, and national order. For the Ugandan regime, the idea that the military is an ideally masculine institution that has professionalized and perfected the use of violence and its primacy over other security sector institutions makes prioritizing it in reforms and increasing defense spending an obvious step. Justice or police reform, both more relevant to citizens in their everyday lives, or investing in health or education, do not have priority.

International donors justified their support by citing a desire to decrease defense spending and influence the review results, even though their declared goals did not align with the Ugandan government’s. Concurrently, donor interest in having a strong and stable ally in the region trumped their interest in increasing transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights. Rather than taking dissenting and oppressed voices seriously and acting accordingly, international donors increased their support and spending on the Ugandan defense sector. Simultaneously, the primacy of

the military and increased defense spending further elevated the military in the public's perception. All this reinforces the belief that the military is a heroic, capable institution deserving of reverence and able to handle non-military issues of all sorts. It also reinforces hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity within institutions and society, especially the binary between masculine protector and feminine protected outlined above.

Conclusion: the emancipatory potential of SSR

This contribution took as its starting point the observation that the Ugandan security sector is politicized, militarized, corrupt, and inefficient. This is the case despite large-scale and long-term SSR undertaken with the official goal of improving accountability, efficiency, and civilian oversight. A critical-feminist analysis that takes seriously the voices of those oppressed under conditions of patriarchy and other marginalized groups reveals that, in the Ugandan case, what is feasible and thinkable in SSR is heavily influenced and steered by patriarchal gender relations and militarization as relevant aspects of the political, social, and historical context. On top of not achieving the envisioned results, this meant that SSR ended up reinforcing patriarchal, heteronormative gender relations and militarization in the shape of military violence, authoritarian governance, and the primacy of the military in society and politics.

Community policing in Uganda is one example of how reforms interacted with the national context in a way that undermined and hollowed out international and national actors' declared goals – to increase respect for human rights, democratic oversight, professionalism, and efficiency within the security sector. In the process, authoritarian, militaristic, patriarchal, and heteronormative policing and societal gender ideals are reinforced. The defense review was another case in which the declared goals of SSR were impossible to reach due to how the context of militarization and patriarchy interacted with reform efforts. This example also demonstrates that national, regional, and global post-colonial and geopolitical contexts can derail reform efforts: international actors were concerned with militarily supporting an ally in the region while national actors focused on regime maintenance. Both put their respective goals above improving the performance of the security sector institutions under review and being reformed.

These findings show that a critical-feminist analysis that includes usually silenced or ignored voices (such as human rights activists, the political opposition, women in their diversity, and the LGBTQI+ community) and an intersectional understanding of power can indeed make visible interactions between SSR and the social and political contexts, in this case, militarization and patriarchal, heteronormative gender relations. This is, however, a complex undertaking. Second-generation SSR may already feel like

“wandering through the woods with neither map nor compass” (Jackson 2018, 50) due to the increased complexity of local ownership and the inclusion of informal actors. Listening to typically unheard voices and approaching SSR with emancipatory aspirations leads to local ownership and the inclusion of informal actors, creating even more complexity rather than offering simple solutions. Further research can and should center other aspects of identity, such as class or ethnicity, to better understand the complex and intersectional workings of the political and social context.

This, I believe, is one of the most important contributions that this critical-feminist perspective on SSR can make to SSR research, and even peacebuilding research more broadly: it does justice to the immense complexity of the social and political contexts in which SSR takes place. This complexity is not limited to national political dynamics and actors; it extends to the international, national, institutional, community, and even individual levels. At all of these levels, gender relations and militarization manifest, meaning that they all shape what is thinkable and feasible within SSR and are simultaneously influenced by reforms and their outcomes.

Hence, and this is the second crucial contribution, taking a critical-feminist lens with emancipatory aspirations and an intersectional understanding of gender and other power relations reveals the diverse influences on SSR. It also exposes how SSR produces winners and losers along gendered and political lines, as well as along the various intersections between them. Taking this approach helps us move away from romanticizing international peacebuilding as well as local ownership and informal actors, and towards taking seriously the voices of those who usually have no say in either. In the examples analyzed above, these are sexual and gender minorities, women, and the political opposition. In other aspects of SSR in Uganda, and in other cases, those voices might be from different groups. A critical-feminist analysis of SSR helps identify these groups and centers their experiences of reform programs and their outcomes.

Notes

1. Interview with women's rights activist A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
2. Interview with women's rights activist B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
3. Interview with security sector analyst B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
4. Interview with LGBTQI+ activist A, January/February 2022, Kampala; Interview with LGBTQI+ activist B, January/February 2022, Kampala.
5. Interview with women's rights activist A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
6. Interview with a security sector insider, February/March 2020, Kampala.
7. Interview with human rights lawyer A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
8. Numerous contributions outline the practice and theory of activism and feminism in Uganda. See, for instance, Tamale (2006) and Nyanzi (2014).
9. Interview with expert on history and politics, February/March 2020, Kampala.

10. Interview with security sector insider, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with local opposition politician, February/March 2020, Gulu; Interview with security sector analyst, February/March 2020, Kampala.
11. Interview with security sector analyst B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
12. Interview with journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with journalist, February/March 2020, Gulu; Interview with lawyer and human rights activist, April 2022, online.
13. Interview with women's rights activist A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
14. Interview with local opposition politician, February/March 2020, Gulu.
15. Interview with journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala.
16. Interview partner 1 (I1) in interview with a former LRA combatant (I1) and a former disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration practitioner (I2), February/March 2020, Kampala.
17. Interview with security sector analyst, February/March 2020, Gulu.
18. Interview with journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala.
19. Interview with security sector analyst, February/March 2020, Gulu.
20. Interview with journalist A, February/March 2020, Kampala; see also Interview with an expert on history and politics, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with security sector analyst, February/March 2020, Gulu.
21. Interview with an expert on history and politics, February/March 2020, Kampala. The interview partner refers to Idi Amin's regime (1971–1979) and Milton Obote's second regime, in which the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA, 1979–1985) was the official Ugandan military.
22. Interview with security sector analyst A, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with security sector analyst B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
23. Interview with women's rights activist A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
24. Interview with women's rights activist B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
25. Interview with high-ranking police officer A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
26. Interview with women's rights activist B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
27. Interview with a peacebuilding practitioner, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with an expert on history and politics, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with a journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala.
28. Interview with a journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with an intelligence operative, February/March 2020, Gulu; Interview with journalist A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
29. Interview with an expert on history and politics, February/March 2020, Kampala.
30. Interview with a journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala.
31. e UPDF highest among security sector.
32. Interview with a security sector insider, February/March 2020, Kampala.
33. Interview with security sector analyst B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
34. Interview with a human rights lawyer B, January/February 2022, Kampala.
35. Interview with a queer feminist activist, January/February 2022, Kampala.
36. Interview with women's rights activist B, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with a journalist and women's rights activist, February/March 2020, Kampala.

37. Interview partner 1 (I1) in an interview with two feminist (I1 and I2) activists, February/March 2020, Kampala.
38. Interview with high-ranking police officer B, February/March 2020, Kampala.
39. Interview with a security sector insider, February/March 2020, Kampala; Interview with security sector analyst C, February/March 2020, Gulu.
40. Interview with journalist A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
41. Interview with security sector analyst C, February/March 2020, Gulu.
42. Interview with security sector analyst A, February/March 2020, Kampala.
43. Interview with a local opposition politician, January/February 2022, Wakiso.
44. Interview with human rights lawyer B, January/February 2022, Kampala.
45. Interview with human rights lawyer B, January/February 2022, Kampala.
46. Interview with a human rights ombudsman, January/February 2022, Wakiso.
47. Interview with human rights lawyer B, January/February 2022, Kampala.
48. Interview with a security sector insider, February/March 2020, Kampala.
49. Interview with a security sector insider, February/March 2020, Kampala.

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