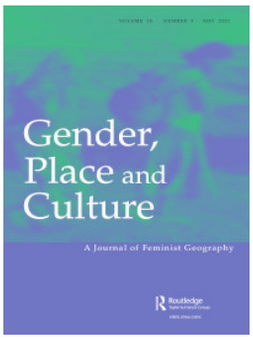

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Katie McQuaid, Robert M. Vanderbeck & Lillian Mbabazi

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'Girls have powers': using research-led arts to connect policymaking with girls' lived experiences in Uganda

Katie McQuaid[a], Robert M. Vanderbeck[a] and Lillian Mbabazi[b]

[a]School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [b]Department of Music, Dance and Drama, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

ABSTRACT

This article offers new methodological directions for generating difficult-to-capture evidence on the hidden dimensions of young people's lives in challenging circumstances. We explore how research-led applied arts can advance participatory methodologies to bridge the gap that often exists between participatory research engaging girls meaningfully within the research process, and knowledge exchange processes that connect policy-making with their lived experiences. We demonstrate how this innovative approach, embedded within a girlhood studies framework, amplifies the voices of those marginalised by gender and age in urban settings. It co-creates the (safe) spaces, resources and tools to recognise, explore and intervene against systemic inequalities and injustices. Research-led applied arts provide mechanisms for messaging girls' concerns and perspectives in a non-threatening manner directly to those with the power to address them. Such situated knowledge exchange is crucial if we are to sustainably challenge inequitable gender regimes in ways that respond directly to the everyday challenges faced by girls in developing contexts.

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Applied arts; participatory methods; Uganda; urban; youth

They say I am wasting their money, go and marry/When I want them to say 'you have a bright future'/They say I must go and get water at night/When I want them to say 'you cannot be abused'/They say girls have big breasts/When I want them to say I am clever/They say prepare the food well or I will beat you/When I want them to say 'you are a hard-working girl'/They say go and look for where to sleep/When I want them to say they love me to be their child at home/They say I must go and dig [crops] during school/When I want them to say 'you can go to school, learn, finish and get a job'/They say I am a prostitute/When I want them to say 'you girls have powers'.

Excerpt from verbatim poem '*Girls have Powers*', Uganda, March 2017

CONTACT Katie McQuaid k.r.v.mcquaid@leeds.ac.uk School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

Introduction

In this article we critically reflect on a programme of action research conducted in Jinja, Uganda with a cohort of 54 girls (aged 10-16 years) attending a government primary school. We do so in order to set out new methodological directions for socially-engaged participatory research that aims to better understand and sustainably challenge inequitable gender structures in ways that respond directly to the everyday challenges faced by girls in developing contexts. This reflects the need for feminist methodologies that can bridge the gap between participatory research that brings girls and stakeholders into the research process, and processes that connect policy-making with young people's lived experiences, fears and priorities.

We advance key agendas in creative and feminist geographies by offering new ways to open up the hidden dimensions of girls' lives in challenging circumstances, and adopt research-led applied arts processes that can directly engage policy- and decision-makers in the systemic injustices and inequities shaping girls' lived experiences. As such, our work extends the recent 'return' towards creative geographies, responding to calls for 'socially engaged art practices' (Hawkins 2011, 465; see also Hawkins 2013), as part of what Richardson (2015, 627) terms 'a new genre of public social and cultural geography'. It offers, in the process, an innovative contribution to the rapidly growing body of research on children and youth that documents a diversity of trajectories and lived experiences across developing contexts. It recognises the need for spatial sensitivity, asserts that young people should be considered as social actors in their own right, and challenges researchers to adopt empowering, ethically-sensitive methodologies (O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015; Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Honwana and De Boeck 2005).

In the first section we introduce our research context in Uganda. After a brief methodology section, we draw on creative data to outline our conceptual approach to girlhood. We then demonstrate how bringing together ethnographic and applied arts methodologies within a girlhood studies framework can open up opportunities to access the embodied, emotional and lived experiences, aspirations and concerns of girls, and connect these with the broader socio-spatial context. We explore how Freirean-inspired applied arts co-create the (safe) spaces, resources and vehicles for participants and stakeholders to recognise, explore and intervene against norms and practices that are inequitable and put children at risk.

We then turn to investigate the role research-led applied arts can play in connecting policy-making with children's lived experiences. Drawing on the example of a child-led performance-intervention, we explore how applied-arts offer 'possibilities for transcending the representational limits of academic discourse by offering subjects more authority over the representation

of their voices and speaking' (Mattingly 2001, 449). This is especially critical, we argue, among girls who are frequently denied narrative authority whereby their voices are not heard and stories do not get told (ibid.). In the process, as Leavy (2009, 131) argues, 'performance-based methods can bring research findings to life, adding dimensionality and exposing that which is otherwise impossible to authentically (re)present'. We demonstrate how research-led arts open up new spaces of possibilities that are also 'space[s] of appearance' in which girls have the ability to influence how their identities are represented (Arendt 1959, 178). In this way, 'the excluded … put forward their claim to speak for themselves' (Žižek 2004, 69); and in the process 'make visible the power relations that inform the shaping of representation' (Richardson 2015, 619).

Research in context: Jinja, Uganda

Jinja has been the site of longer-term ethnographic and arts work conducted in Jinja by McQuaid (2015–2019). It is a small and slowly re-industrialising city in the Busoga sub-region of Eastern Uganda. Located on the northern shore of Lake Victoria and at the source of the River Nile, Jinja hosts a population of around 80,000 people (UBOS 2016). We located our project in Walukuba/Masese Division, a marginalised slum neighbourhood to the north-east of Jinja's central business district. The site of former worker's estates constructed in the 1940-50s and rapidly urbanizing wetlands, Walukuba/Masese is home to around 17,000 people housed in a mixture of accommodation, from a minority of newly constructed homes with electricity and flushing toilets, to a majority of insecure permanent and semi-permanent houses in which eight or more people can share one-room dwellings with limited access to electricity, water and latrines.

Urban services are poor, with no domestic waste collection or street lighting, crumbling roads, and an underserviced health center. Land is increasingly congested, and despite a right-to-buy scheme for sitting tenants, issues of tenure are mired in corruption, exclusion of women, and bureaucracy resulting in many residing in insecure accommodation. Women- and youth-headed households are common, and a significant majority of Jinja's residents are involved in the informal economy. As we explore below, girls' experiences of widespread urban poverty – which as one group of students (aged 11-12) put it, translates into 'no school fees; having no father and mother; defilement; no sanitary pads; no food at home; no [scholastic] materials' – intersect with a complex of broadly operating socio-cultural norms to manifest in gender inequalities.

The school in which we sited our research is similar to many of Jinja's government primary schools: under-resourced and over-subscribed. The girls

we worked with came from one class – Primary 6 – which had a total of 98 students sharing one classroom. While working at the school we observed how the management struggled with resources, including challenges to meet catering needs, pay utility bills, and more concerningly remunerating teachers. Despite Uganda's Universal Primary Education initiative, which aims to provide free schooling, students must meet often-prohibitive costs including fees, uniforms, exercise books and stationary, examinations and compulsory revision lessons, and any school trips or sporting events. Young women students, for instance, also have to pay for sanitary-wear if they are menstruating (see Jewitt and Ryley 2014; MacLean, Hearle and Ruwanpura, 2020). In many cases parents/guardians struggle to pay, with fees frequently arriving late and/or in small increments. This leads to students being regularly 'chased' home until fees are fully or partly paid.

Creative mixed-methodology

Our work represented a partnership between the University of Leeds, Makerere University, Jinja Municipal Council and one government primary school in Walukuba/Masese. The project was based on original aims, questions, and a methodological approach developed by McQuaid and Vanderbeck (joint-PIs) that evolved from their prior collaborations. McQuaid led and conducted fieldwork in Uganda in close collaboration with Mbabazi. The field team constituted an all-women collaborative partnership between UK and Ugandan researchers, including a local community activist from Walukuba/Masese. All team members were experienced in working with young people and using applied arts. All authors contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the field data. McQuaid led the writing of the manuscript with significant intellectual input and contributions at all stages from Vanderbeck and Mbabazi.

Building on existing work combining arts and social science methodologies to better understand and challenge urban inequalities (McQuaid et al. 2018; McQuaid and Plastow 2017), this project was conducted over nine months in 2017. We invited all the girls in Primary 6 – the penultimate year of primary school (with no major examinations to prepare for) – to work with us, resulting in a total of 54 participants aged between 10-16 years. Due to the precarious nature of girls' schooling, interruptions to and repetition of classes are common, creating large age differentials within year groups. We employed a creative mixed-methodology, situating visual, material and creative outputs alongside each other to allow multiple perspectives to layer up throughout the project. We focused on generating evidence from 'above' (national, regional and local policymakers and institutions) and 'below' (day-to-day experiences and practices), establishing relationships with local

stakeholders, while simultaneously building the capacity of girls to engage in knowledge production through creative expression.

The project was composed of two phases. In the first phase (February-April 2017) we focused on data collection. This centred around three creative arts-led workshops a week with the girls. We were allocated slots in the school timetable, our workshops taking the place of frequently-cancelled extra-curricular activities including sport. Workshops were conducted in a mixture of English, Luganda and Lusoga – the dominant languages spoken in Jinja – alongside sign language to include two deaf participants.

Findings from workshops were situated alongside short pre-project surveys on key project themes conducted with all participating girls. We conducted 18 stakeholder interviews (including with council officials, school governance, senior teachers, police officers and non-governmental organisations); and focus group discussions with head- and senior-teachers from all 20 government primary schools. Our observations of creative workshops and formal and informal interactions with participants and stakeholders were recorded and shared within the team through field notes. Reflective discussions and stakeholder interviews were recorded and transcribed; and visual material and creative outputs were photographed and filmed for later analysis.

In the second phase (July-December 2017), we facilitated workshops every fortnight to work with girls on using this evidence to develop a series of three creative research-led performance-intervention events. These aimed to provoke engagement between girls and key stakeholders and policymakers, and co-develop interventions to support girls in attaining a quality uninterrupted education, and build local capacity to recognise, report and challenge inequitable norms and practices. These events – the first of which is discussed in detail below – were accompanied by work with national and regional education officials and teachers to develop and disseminate new tools for promoting inclusive and supportive learning environments and more proactive safeguarding. We conducted regular monitoring and evaluation sessions to reflect on what girls had learned and how – or if – girls and stakeholders were applying this knowledge in different spheres of their lives; and to refine our approach through altering and/or improving our methodologies.

Aware of the ethical implications of situating our research in a site where educational content, delivery and environment can perpetuate and generate gender inequities (see Jones 2011, 385; Sommer 2010, 523), we paid particular attention to maintaining ethical practice. We developed key referral mechanisms in case participants confided threats to their safety. We strictly adhered to standards of informed consent and confidentiality, including repeated discussions with participants about the aims, limitations, and

implications of our research and intervention activities. We ensured girls understood participation was voluntary and they were welcome to join in, leave or not attend as they desired. However, due to the novelty of the methods – there were no creative activities in the curriculum – nearly all P6 girls present in school each day would participate. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used in the analysis.

During phase one we closed workshops to teachers in order to create an alternative *and safe* space within the school, in which girls felt they could speak freely and 'discriminatory activities, expressions of intolerance or policies of inequity' were actively barred (Hunter 2008, 8). Despite a national ban on corporal punishment, our participants reported high levels of physical and emotional abuse from teachers – including beatings with sticks and public shaming and teasing – which made them wary of trusting teachers. In the second phase we increasingly involved 'senior woman teachers' – as the post is locally known – so as to facilitate a new working model of teacher-student interactions, establish a 'girls' club' in which girls could continue to meet and safely discuss key concerns and opportunities, and build the ongoing capacity of teachers across the city to engage constructively with girls' concerns. A key element of this process was developing recognition among adults as to how socio-cultural norms manifest in systemic injustices.

'I Want them to say "you are a hard-working girl"': putting Ugandan girlhood in context through girl-centred research

A girl bends almost double, her arms swishing in a sweeping motion, another rubs her hands between imaginary clothes sodden with soap. Another kneels and bows her head to appear humble at the feet of imagined visitors, while one mimics balancing a jerrycan of water on her head. Others mime playing with a baby, preparing food, washing plates, plaiting hair, collecting firewood and swinging a hoe into sun-baked soil. Only one girl is absorbed in an imaginary book, while another disturbingly lies on the floor as another arcs her arm violently to mime a caning. The facilitator claps her hands twice and there is a brief moment of chaos as girls brush against each other to assume new positions. This time there is barely any movement as girls collect into small groups to enact a series of tableaux. They create scenes in which they are attentive students in class, teachers confident at the front of classrooms, doctors, a pop singer, and the final two groups wrap their arms around each other to symbolise – they explain – loving familial relationships.

Girls were invited to reflect on the differences between the two scenes – the first illustrating what it is to be a girl in Jinja today, the second, how they would like it to be – and what might cause them. Discussion

highlighted their perceived lack of recognition and value from parents and teachers, distant relationships with parents and foster-carers, and prohibitive levels of domestic labour. Over the course of the project girls spoke regularly of how parents 'leave children to act as housemaids'. Housework itself was routinely depicted and discussed with pride, something girls enjoyed to do well, but was also presented as a significant barrier to homework and exam revision.

Of key concern in their embodied explorations were the power relations structuring the contexts in which domestic labour arose as an issue. For many these contributed to an overall feeling of neglect and lack of self-worth. As 65 percent of our participants reported in our pre-project survey, Ugandan culture valued boys more than girls. This was perhaps most evocatively captured in an exercise to write mock news reports on urgent issues for a local television station. While most groups chose to focus on the dangers of adolescent pregnancy, one 'newsreader' gravely reported: 'in this world boys are considered as most important people in the future and educated more than girls!' This was reinforced, many argued, cumulatively across multiple scales. As Sandra(age 14) put it in the reflective discussion, it arose in: 'impact from home, impact from school, impact from church. They bring down the woman. Our community do not recognise women as leaders'.

Despite a strong women's movement focused on land tenure, marriage laws and political representation, Ugandan women are still routinely excluded from decision-making, and a significant proportion of girls have limited access to develop the literacy and skills with which to improve their lives (Hayhurst 2014; SDG Gender Index 2019). Studies reveal significant patterns of child marriage, early sexual relations and child-bearing, violence and abuse, although in contrast to our work, most research to date has focused on rural areas and/or secondary schools (see Muhanguzi, Kyomuhendo, and Watson 2017; Bell and Aggleton 2012). However, as elsewhere, while a strong gender and development lobby has brought the issue of gender inequality into the mainstream, this has largely translated into a narrow focus on achieving gender parity. Hence, socio-cultural norms underlying and maintaining gender inequalities at the root of such trends persist (Harper and Marcus 2018).

Deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies create and maintain a hegemonic gender hierarchy, which situates women and girls as inferior to men and boys, and constructs heteronormative norms of masculinity and femininity that construct men as active and dominant and women as passive and submissive (Ochieng 2003; Tamale 2003). This dominant patriarchal milieu privileges masculinity and seeks to control and suppress women's sexuality, which results in meek and subservient behaviour for girls (Muhanguzi 2011). These intersect with dominant intergenerational hierarchies that place

decision-making powers in the hands of adults. Gender and age hierarchies intersect across private and public spheres to construct unequal power relations between both men and women, and children and adults. As future women girls are regarded as inferior and subservient to men (and boys), yet as children they are expected to be subservient to both men and women. This positions girls in a doubly marginal social position at both the scale of the household and wider society.

To better understand how these socio-spatial forces (and violences) proscribe girls' agency and opportunities, and how they come to be normalised (Seymour 2012), our work adopts a 'girlhood studies framework' (Cobbett 2014, 313). This foregrounds girls' perspectives and experiences through recognising girlhood as a distinctive life-course stage (Skelton 2002). A feminist girlhood studies approach can thus attend to how girls perceive of and navigate both their girlhood as well as broader contextual factors that impact on their lives in rapidly changing socio-economic contexts (Jewitt and Ryley 2014; MacLean, Hearle and Ruwanpura, 2020).

In applying a girlhood studies framework to an applied arts action research process, we set out to investigate the role creative expression can play in exploring and foregrounding the 'processes, decisions and events that shape the world girls perceive, interpret and act upon' (Ansell 2009, 204). This collaborative approach in turn highlights the multiple and diverse ways in which gender is continually (re)produced and experienced (Nayak and Kehily 2013). In doing so, it combines three key approaches to performance that have been of interest to geographers: 'performance and identity; the embodied or experiential qualities of performance; and the relationship between performance and the everyday' (Rogers 2014, 774). As Pratt and Kirby (2003) argue, theatre provides a rich site for blurring the line between context, text and embodied practice. When embedded within a feminist methodology applied arts offer new ways to connect girls' experiences, perceptions and capacity to act to a complex web of broadly operating socio-cultural relations, processes and norms. Through girls re-presenting their self-authored and place-based life worlds 'on stage', the research process can provoke engagement and debate on how these lead to systemic inequalities.

'I Want them to say I am clever': creative knowledge co-creation

Creative workshops drew on the tradition of Freirean applied theatre, developed for use in situations of discrimination and exclusion to stimulate discussion of issues and relationships of key concern and bring about changes in power relations (Freire 1973; McQuaid and Plastow 2017; Boal 1979). Workshops aimed to be 'participatory and experiential' and thus blurred

boundaries between 'training to do' and 'doing' (Thompson 2005, 28). Led by a skilled arts facilitator, workshops began with theatre games designed to permit play and build confidence, stretch imaginations, physically warm up bodies, and promote positive and trusting group dynamics. Games were followed by brief group discussions about the workshop's chosen focus, for example future 'dreams', to set the scene before embarking on creative activities.

Creative activities sought to engender critical and dialogic cycles of (creative) action and (critical) reflection. Visual (drawings, maps), textual (poetry, letter writing, song, creative writing) and performative (role-playing, image theatre, drama) activities were used to explore and embody individual and collective experiences and perspectives. Creative outputs – poems, drama scenes etc – were then used to stimulate (usually small-group) discussions in which girls could share personal experiences and/or constructively challenge what had been represented. The composition of these changed each workshop to promote solidarity across age and other factors of difference, and were a mixture of self-selected and facilitator-selected.A key technique, borrowed from applied theatre, was to invite all participants to take on the role of storyteller. Once a group had performed, other participants were encouraged to explain what they saw, with facilitators welcoming each version in turn and insisting each and every story be equally heard (Thompson 2005). In this way girls could interpret the scene in front of them, drawing on – and articulating – their own experiences and observations. Creative expression was then used to explore how alternative outcomes could have been achieved.

'Storying' as Fleishman (2016, 198) terms it, is the process of 'composition, construction, playing, performance, listening, watching and responding'. This gives participants the space and opportunity in which to raise their own concerns and reflect on their own agendas, especially those that run counter to dominant narratives. 'Storying' thus allows multiple perspectives to arise through creating an 'emotionally engaging and politically empowering spatiality' Hyams (2004, 111). Applied arts in this way provided a powerful framework within which girls were empowered to explore and understand their lived experience from different angles, take risks, explore potential solutions to their problems and communicate their knowledge and learning to others, while generating a culture of solidarity aimed at leading to collective empowerment (see: Johnson et al. 1998).

This process was, however, not immune from conflict, and it could – especially in early workshops – often be challenging to ensure creative expression did not translate into a 'theatre of admonishment' (Thompson 2005, 136). While workshops created an alternative social space, suspended from the rigour of everyday life and didactic discipline of lessons, they were

simultaneously embedded within the broader socio-spatial landscape of the slum. In their storying we could observe – and later address – how social norms and conflicts played out not just in girls' lives in their interactions with adults or with boys and men, but also between themselves. They illustrate a complex matrix of power relations and value judgements at work, which include, for example, age and class. Intergenerational hierarchies are reproduced within schools, where due to the frequency of interruptions in schooling, just one year-group can host an age-range of six to eight years. We saw evidence of this in our early workshops when girls would separate themselves between the 'young ones' and 'big ones', and being from one 'camp' could induce ridicule from the other. 'Big ones' in particular were targeted as they were often from the poorest households, forced to miss or re-take school years, and frequently marked out by their height, physical development or well-worn uniforms. We raise this here to highlight not only the heterogeneity of one cohort of girls – a group riven by differences in personality, background, and social status – but to underscore the importance in participatory work of creating spaces in which social divides are allowed to rise to the surface in order to be recognised and (gently) challenged as part of an ongoing project to recognise (multiple forms of) inequality and build social cohesion and solidarity.

'I Want them to say they love me to be their child at home': voice and creative expression

We now turn to reflect on how applied arts offer new ways to understand how girls perceive, experience and negotiate the gender and generational structures and material contexts that shape their lives. Drawing on an example from a creative workshop, we explore how applied arts allow the ethnographer to focus closely on '*how* people talk as well as *what* they say, and on interpreting layers of meaning in a text and the connection between them' (Ní Laoire 2007, 379), to reveal more hidden dimensions of girls' lives. Yet how can creative expression be mobilised to give voice to those so used to being 'silenced and marginalised by mainstream public culture' (Mattingly 2001, 450)?

In Uganda not only is softly spoken passivity – or 'being shy' as students put it – a prized attribute in girls, but overt discussion of violence, negative emotions and sexual activity is stigmatised. Expectations of submission and respect for elders have the effect of limiting girls' ability to make their own decisions, advocate for themselves, seek support from violence, and negotiate their sexuality. It also silences them, as gender and intergenerational structures act to shrink opportunities for girls to narratively explore their lives. In our pre-project survey, 93 percent of our participants reported feeling that girls were not listened to at home, school, in the community or in

relationships with boys/men. This offers an ethical dilemma to the researcher who seeks to use applied arts to engage girls who have varying degrees of confidence and who can actively struggle with reconciling cultural norms toward the value of shyness. Furthermore, it is important to recognise the time it can take for activities evoking the imagination to resonate.

As in our earlier work, we embedded our applied arts within a research process that was long-term and immersive. In this way, we could cumulatively open up a 'safe' and playful space in which participants could explore their lives and generate potential solutions to problems. A key factor here was including a diversity of forms of creative expression, which offered a range of verbal (acting, singing, discussion) and non-verbal (drawing, image theatre, creative writing, mapping) techniques for articulating lived experiences. Through this variety of tools girls – regardless of their confidence and linguistic and literary ability – could performatively, vocally and/or textually explore and articulate ideas, experiences and emotional responses from various angles. This allowed the concerns of less and non- vocal girls to be directly included in and influence findings. This inclusive approach was critical to building trust and confidence in both the most reserved girls and those whose disabilities would ordinarily occlude them from narrative-led activities. There were of course those who never grew comfortable with performance, and the structure of working in small groups allowed these girls to contribute to 'storying' before then opting out of any performance.

Creative outputs opened opportunities for new stories to emerge, highlighting key concerns neglected or marginal to initial discussions. Through dramatic techniques and characters girls could experiment with different forms of expression and voice, exploring and considering relationships and conflicts from a variety of different angles in their daily lives. Girls could thus bring to the fore hidden dimensions of everyday life, reflecting on the emotions they generated, and then try out new ways to negotiate difficult situations and conflicts.

To illustrate how, we will briefly outline one example. In the third week we facilitated a workshop (number eight) to examine the barriers girls perceived to their education. In the initial discussion, as in the pre-project surveys, girls drew attention to what were predominantly economic barriers (no money for school fees, meals or uniforms, sanitary pads or 'scholastics'). Yet when they broke into small groups to create short dramas to show examples of how these issues played out in their lived experience, the scenes revealed a different dimension:

1. A mother holds a cane high over a girl cowering on the ground and screams loudly: 'you are old, you don't go back to school, I will cane you!'

2. A couple of girls stop sweeping and mopping to speak to their mother: 'Mummy we want to go to school!' The mother interrupts them abruptly and gestures them away angrily, shouting: 'no, I have no money!'
3. A mother and father scold their daughters. The father stands to one side, while the mother gestures violently, shouting: 'stay at home! You must do the domestic work!'
4. A girl stands alone and crying, she holds schoolbooks and the jumper under her school dress indicates she is pregnant. Others look on, some are sad and seem to be crying, while others point and laugh.
5. A mother and father loudly shout 'get out of my home' whilst kicking a pregnant girl who stumbles away.

These scenes represented the first of many examples of girls making visible their key concerns about neglect, perceived precariousness of their positions in the household, and problematically distant (and often violent) relationships they experienced with their mothers or other senior household women (a significant minority of girls lived with foster-carers). Problematic maternal relations came to be a dominant frame through which girls performed other forms of exclusion. When taking on the roles of adults, they chose to depict mothers as dominant and vocal characters, often busy, tired and struggling to manage scarce resources, using 'harsh' voices and abusive behaviours; frequently acting to restrict girls' capacity to act on their own decisions and aspirations. 'Mamas are harsh. They push them [girls] away', Robinah (age 11) commented when interpreting these scenes. Indeed, in our survey less than a quarter of girls could remember a time in which any adult had spoken to them in a way that was supportive, encouraging or 'kind'.

Through their use of multiple voices, body language, and facial expressions, girls offered direct insight into the significance of the (failed) maternal relationship – which girls found difficult to articulate in discussions – and how these are shaped by a complex web of intersecting patriarchal gender and generational relations, material constraints and social hierarchies (see also Waite and Conn 2011, 124-6). This acted to increase the visibility of, and link, the situated humiliations, legitimations and structural violence girls face that become a normalised part of the moral order (Bourgois 2001; Das and Kleinman 2000; Seymour 2012). In this way, 'dramaturgy leads us off the stage and into the social realm' (Fleishman 2016, 196).

Through these activities, girls were encouraged to experiment with different ways of responding to, and seeking to resolve, inequitable, risky or problematic scenarios and relations. In role-playing and letter-writing exercises following the workshop above, for example, girls would appeal to their mothers for love and praise; an evocative example being the *Girls have Powers* verbatim poem, composed using quotes from these activities.

Applied arts here offers a moment of experimentation in which girls could act out different possibilities, and – through role-plays and dramas – performatively reconfigure their perception of what constitutes 'reality' in terms of how life could be lived and experienced (Blencowe 2013, 41; see also Turner 1983, 233-4). Through this we could gain insight into ways girls had already developed strategies of resistance and solidarity, and how these were built upon through the research process. In response to the example above, girls explored how they could navigate difficult maternal relations. These included finding 'allies' within their extended families and neighbourhoods. Such allies could (subtly) intervene when mothers acted against their interests, for example when refusing to buy sanitary pads, sending girls to the market after dark, or refusing to allow time for homework. Other strategies included engaging in income-generating activities, often through youth groups or religious associations. These could enable girls to buy a re-useable sanitary pad or new exercise book, but also allow them to contribute to household income.

As in Leach's (2006, 1136) work, girls appreciated the opportunity to gain 'valuable skills of communication for use with both adults and peers and increased self-confidence'. In the project's second phase we focused on how these opportunities and performative experiments were intersecting to translate into a wide range of new strategies. These included, for example, scenes in which girls evoked recent examples of warning friends to 'please, be careful while you walk to school, say no for sex'; refusing 'a man to give gifts for sex'; giving advice to others 'to not fight in class'; helping friends 'to tell her do not be shy for yourself'; no longer fearing to put a hand up in class to answer a question. They also included acting as allies – in one example a participant 'found a girl was in her periods and she so scared to go to the senior woman teacher to ask for help', so she accompanied her. As girls increasingly recognised, explored and articulated the constraints of gender norms, they also began to performatively explore how these could be agentively exploited. A repeated theme arising in later workshops was how 'behaving well' could be weaponised. In purposively taking on socio-cultural norms of girlhood (being submissive, quietly spoken, not answering back, kneeling to greet elders and so on), girls could 'please' their mothers. This often earnt them the freedom necessary to pursue their studies, visit with friends, and other activities they perceived as gateways to escaping the same gender norms.

As it was for Richardson (2015) and Mattingly (2001), it is impossible for us to truly understand what the research means for those that we interacted with. However, girls repeatedly and dynamically stated that they had gained in confidence as a result of the process and performances. 'I realise now that girls have powers' Grace (age 12) reported in September 2017, whilst Victoria (age 15) said: 'I now have confidence in my heart'. This supported observations in our fieldnotes and in follow-up discussions with teachers and parents of

increased academic performance, confidence, self-esteem and communication skills over and beyond the project lifetime. While girls could certainly have been telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, the statement of belief is itself powerful. As Thompson (2005, 155) notes of the difficulty of linking performance to social change, a 'sense of belief in the worth of what you are doing is a motor of commitment to the project or change and the binding agent between a person and their participation'. Girls 'seemed to have found a power within their performances [and process] that in itself was change' (ibid. 160).

However, if research-led applied arts processes represent a 'space of appearance' (Arendt 1959, 178), in which girls and researchers are brought together in specific moments to performatively explore and enact new ways of being, disrupting hegemonic power relations, they are also transient. As Arendt continues: 'Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever' (178). Any 'space of appearance' in this way is thus 'temporary and fragile, and it must be continually recreated through the actions and speech of individuals who have come together to undertake some common project' (Fleishman 2016, 197). The challenge for participatory applied arts processes, therefore, is how to maintain momentum towards social change beyond the project lifetime in the face of long enduring structural constraints. Regardless of our efforts, girls still had to contend with household poverty, predatory men, everyday precarity, and an embedded socio-cultural construct of girls as 'shy' and 'less important than boys'. Similarly, while working to set up a structure within the school to sustain our newly created 'girls' club', the material restraints and overwhelming workloads of teachers did not translate into a positive prognosis. As Rogers (2014, 778) points out, 'there are limits to performances' revolutionary potential'. This raises three key concerns. First, the importance of a slow and careful approach to participatory work to empower young people; secondly, the importance of grounding applied work in local contexts in order to sustain structures to outlast encounters with researchers; and thirdly, an urgent need to bridge the gap between bringing children into the research process to reveal hidden dimensions of their lives, and processes that connect these lived experiences with policy-makers and local stakeholders who have the power to redress the exclusions shaped by broadly operating socio-cultural relations and norms. It is to this we turn in the final section, drawing on the example of our first research-led performance-intervention in April 2017, named by our participants as 'Girls' Awareness Day'.

'I Want them to say "girls have powers"': creative stakeholder engagement

Patience (age 12) was a high-achieving student. We first encounter her in school, raising her hand to answer questions and receiving top marks for a

test. We then follow her (emotional) encounters at school, home and walking to and from school. Patience experiences the shame of boys and girls laughing at her soiled school uniform when she begins menstruating and has no money for a sanitary pad, forced to run home while trying to hide the stain. She also faces the pain of neglect when her mother shows little interest in this predicament, forcing her to stay home from school; the isolation of having to juggle numerous domestic tasks at home while her brothers play loudly and mockingly around her, the repetitive jangle of their song listing endless jobs she must do around the home. There is additional fear of being pursued by a male neighbor who tries to tempt her into a sexual relationship by offering her money for school books. She notes the anguish of over hearing how a decline in her parents' material circumstances triggers discussion of her marriage so they can receive bride-price; the frustration of her protestations not being heard; and finally, the hopelessness of the impending marriage as she is surrounded by girls in black and red singing and dancing a traditional Busoga grieving song.

There is a pause before people begin to clap and the 46 girls and 14 boys of the cast (aged 11-16) emerge from 'backstage' (white sheets strung across the hall) to take their bows in front of an audience of parents/guardians, teachers, local cultural and religious leaders and policymakers including from the police and regional education authorities (in the second phase we invited boys from the same class – P6 – to join a couple of creative workshops before taking part in our performance. During our first run-through of the script, a number of boys had strong emotional reactions to the experiences being portrayed, with two reduced to tears, expressing how they found the drama shocking. Stephen's (aged 11) words – 'for me I did not see before' – highlight the power of emotive performance in foregrounding normalised gender practices) The play had been preceded by two verbatim poems (*Girls have Powers* and *We will open up the Parliament*) and concluded with a song (*Girls' Anthem*). The audience were then invited to work in small groups to discuss the performance, identify any problems they had witnessed, link these to wider socio-cultural practices and norms, and co-design interventions on how to tackle them. Interventions were then shared and discussed as a whole group, with a final 'web of commitment' exercise conducted, to capture individual and collective pledges to action. Follow-up interviews (17 in the month following the performance, and 15 seven months after the performance) sought to explore whether/how these had been enacted among teachers, parents/guardians and other participating stakeholders. Girls led two further performance-interventions of poetry, song and interactive drama addressing the same themes, including on the school's speech day at the end of the school year to reach parents who might not voluntarily attend a girls-led event.

The audience reacted strongly to the performance of real-life experiences and teachers and parents/guardians in particular spoke of realizing the role they could play in – to quote one group of parents – 'preventing cases that disturb the girl child'. This, they argued, included protesting against forced marriage, being vigilant to sexual harassment and child abuse, and being aware of the opportunity cost to girls of intensive domestic labour. Their most emphatic reactions, however, centred around the depiction of neglect, a central issue to girls as we saw above. As one man reflected, it was 'time to listen to their daughters'. One mother instructed her fellow participants: 'listen to your children, talk to them, you are teachers at home, let them give time to their children, encourage that girl, show you love her. If you don't give time and you come and now you are harsh to them, this is where they problem is now coming'. In nearly all the follow-up interviews, adults focused their concerns on 'this thing of neglect'. Speaking about the performances, one woman said: 'it taught us parents we should care for our children and we should love them and listen to our children, we are the elder – we think we cannot listen, but we must listen'. One father reflected on how it 'awakened us from our sleep. Where father doesn't listen, it is a carefree home. You see a man doesn't listen to women, or even boys. This play encourages people be even social in the home. We talk to them [girls] freely and we do listen to their problems, we sit with them'.

With support, girls had co-developed Patience's play. Everything that happens to Patience had been drawn from the direct experiences of our participants, with the exception of the forced marriage, which they had observed happening to numerous former schoolfriends and neighbours. They had been chosen during a series of story-writing workshops to foreground issues girls identified as the most urgent. The use of theatre allowed girls to portray the emotional register of everyday socio-spatial relations to generate 'an emotive mapping of stories that describe connections of people to other people and to places' in a way that could reveal 'the emotions that exceed the text' (Aitken 2015, 104,111). It offers audiences access to 'a sensuous realm that is imagined, lived, performed and contested' (Pinder 2005, 285). Neglect, poverty, forced marriage, sexual violence, domestic labour are all represented, making these 'ordinary' dimensions of everyday life notable, indeed problematic, through the very act of remaking them on the stage.

Embodying hidden dimensions of girlhood through performance empowered girls to first articulate and then deploy their stories as a political practice to facilitate localised initiatives that cross generational boundaries. In other words, they re-configure and challenge local patriarchal constructions of girlhood. In this way, the performance-intervention carves a space that is both political, but also non-threatening, from which girls are empowered to message their concerns directly to an audience of those with the power to

enact change, presenting their perspectives on social problems and inequalities.

As Pratt and Kirby (2003, 19) found in their applied theatre project with a nurses' union, 'to tell stories in the context of a play seemed safer'. Research-led arts offered girls 'safe spaces' within which to 'tell their stories and articulate counter-narratives' (Ní Laoire 2007, 373). Research-led performance can thus act 'as struggle, as intervention, as breaking and remaking, as kinesis, as a sociopolitical act' (Conquergood 1998, 32). There is risk in performance, however, when 'disrupting the social order, and proposing a new way of speaking and acting and of being together' (Fleishman 2016, 200). The transgression of social norms of 'shyness' and the social critique of parental relations represents something of a risk in a social context structured by hierarchy. In an attempt to mitigate this risk, rather than making *what to do* the centre of the performance, with girls transgressing social boundaries to direct audiences on how to behave better and what to do differently, the performance instead creates opportunities for audiences to see life through the lens of a girl and make their own interpretations and courses of action. Through avoiding individuation, issues are messaged in a collective and non-threatening manner. The performance thus locates change in the 'macro', situating the possibilities for change not in the personal actions of the girls, but in the audience; among adults who traditionally hold more power and narrative authority from which to act and enact change.

Conclusion: 'I want them to say "you have a bright future"'

Research-led applied arts offer a means to make visible the private realms of young people's lives, including the discussions, negotiations and interactions that constitute everyday power relations, revealing a shifting cast of family, community, friends and teachers who populate worlds that are often hidden from the researcher. Applied arts provide girls with the tools to explore, articulate and highlight difficult and contentious subjects beyond the limits imposed by more narrative techniques. New participatory (and child-led) feminist methodologies can, in this way, advance understandings at multiple scales of how power relations embedded in socio-spatial orders create (and often leave unchallenged) a complex of everyday violence and threat compounded by urban poverty from which girls have limited options and safe spaces in which to seek refuge and remedy.

As we have demonstrated in this article, research-led applied arts can further extend participatory methodologies and feminist geographies to bridge the gap that often exists between participatory research that brings girls into the research process. Hence, via the research itself, knowledge exchange processes that connect policy-making with their lived experiences get

enacted. It provides a new framework for transcending the limits of text through creating embodied and emotionally nuanced re-presentations of 'reality' from the perspective of girls, *led by girls*. Parents, teachers, local leaders and decision- and policy-makers alike are propelled into an immersive world (re)configured by those whose voices are rarely considered. Research-led applied arts thus serve to both state a principle – the need to stand against what is constructed in this 'space of appearance' as injustice – and offer room for dialogue, linking child to adult in a powerful relationship through the act of searching for solutions and the building of momentum and discourse around change (see Thompson 2005). In this way, research-led arts can be both political and collaborative, working with those frequently marginalised and silenced to pursue social change (see Mattingly 2001).

Evidence-based performance connects girls directly with policy- and decision-makers in an embodied process that renders visible the socially constructed patterns of gendered violence and inequality that operate as if invisible. In this way research-led arts can serve as tools for both social critique and transformation, targeting social norms and linking these to structural and historical barriers to girls' wellbeing. Bringing girls fully into the research and knowledge exchange process recognises them not only as co-investigators – or indeed as having 'powers' – but as competent and complex social actors who can play an active role in seeking to transform inequitable social norms, relations and practices. Such transformative research processes are crucial if we are to sustainably challenge inequitable gender regimes and power structures in ways that respond directly to the everyday challenges faced by girls in developing contexts.

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Notes on contributors

Katie McQuaid is Senior Research Fellow in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. Her research interests are focused on gender and sexuality, local perspectives on climate change, (inter)generational relationships, and human rights in informal urban settings. Her work creatively combines applied arts and feminist ethnographic methodologies in participatory action research.

Robert Vanderbeck is Professor of Human Geography and Head of the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. His research interests are focused on issues of social difference, identities, relationships, and contemporary processes of social and legal exclusion. He has particular interests in the geographies of children and young people; intergenerational spaces and relationships; and religion and sexuality in the public sphere.

Lillian Mbabazi is Lecturer in the Department of Performing Arts and Film at Makerere University, Uganda. Her research and applied practice are focused on young people and children, with particular interests in drama in education and theatre for development. She has led projects focused on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, girls' education, refugee youth, youth and governance, and intergenerational women's theatre.

ORCID

Katie McQuaid http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4919-2958

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